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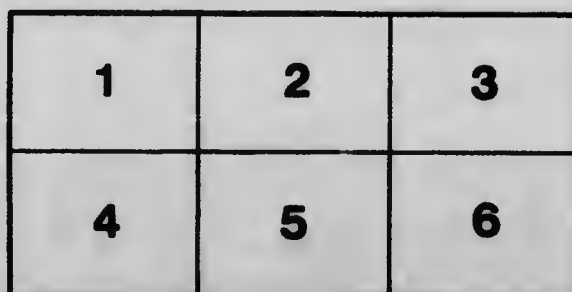
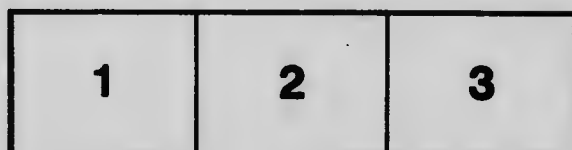
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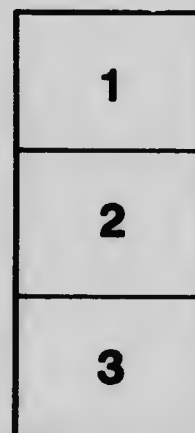
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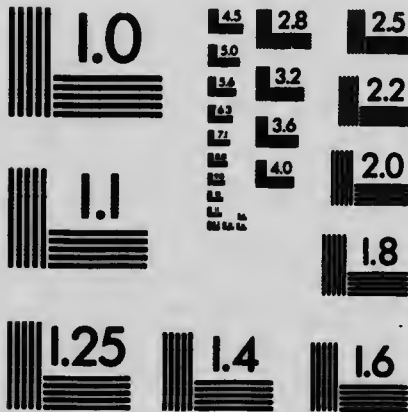
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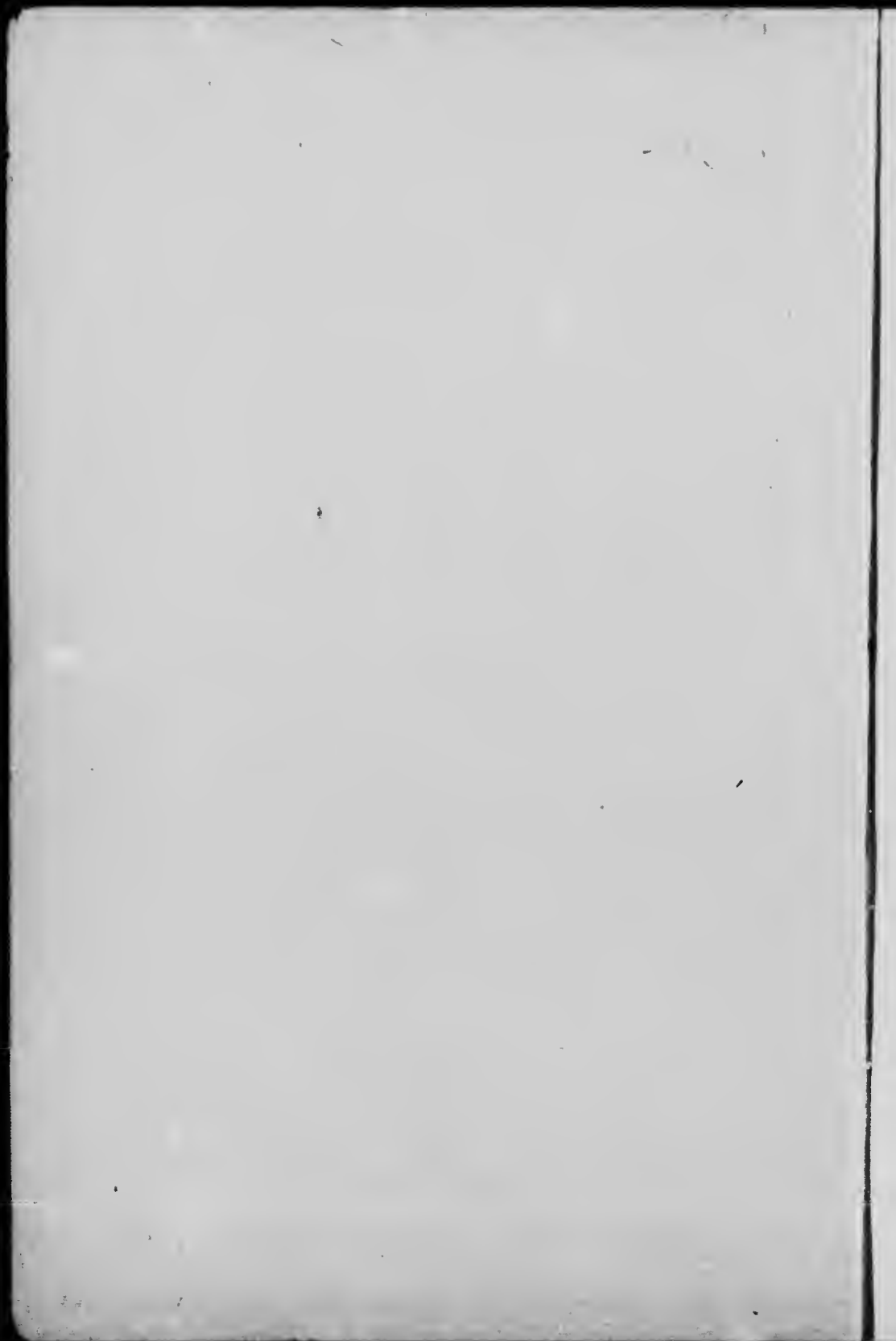
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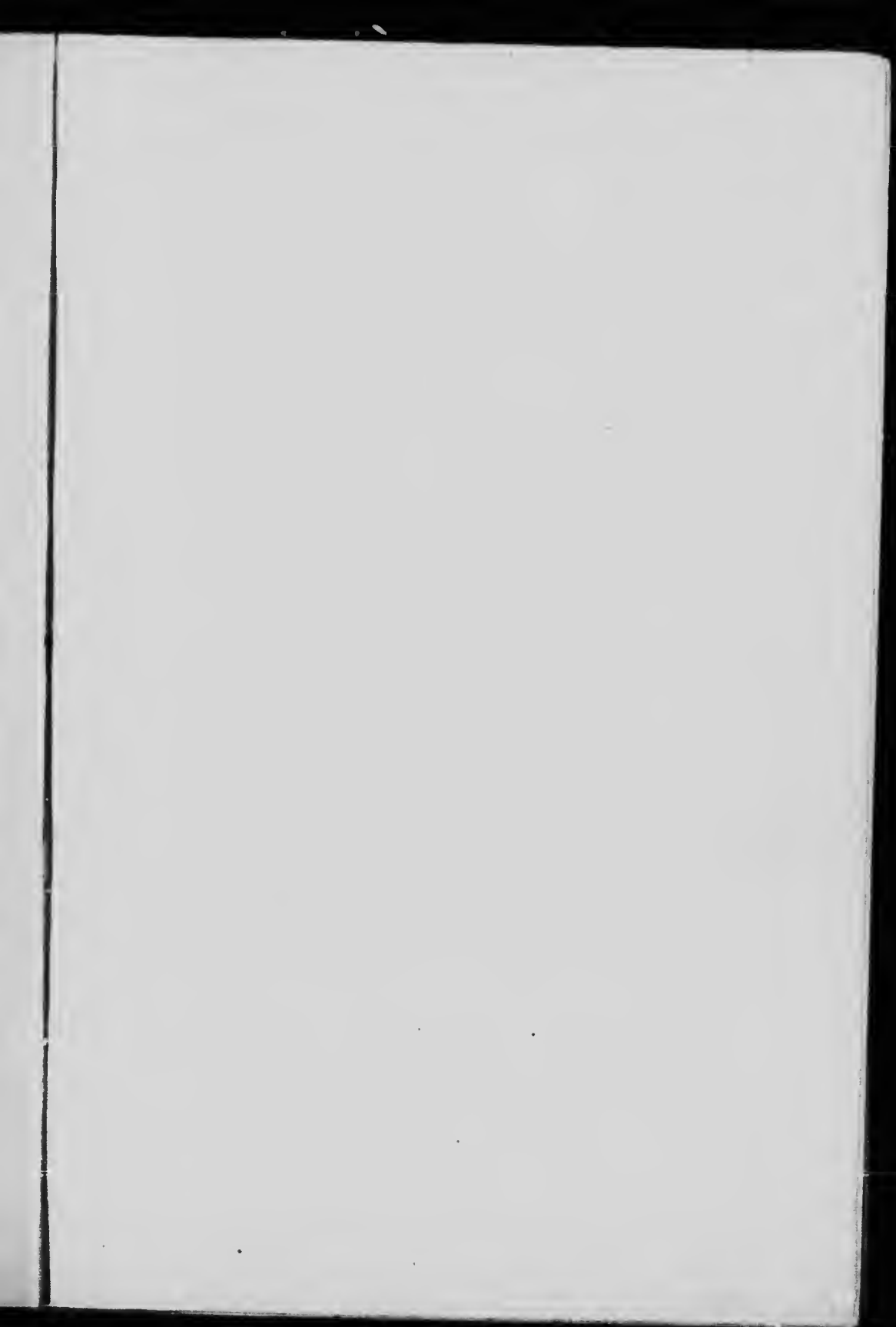
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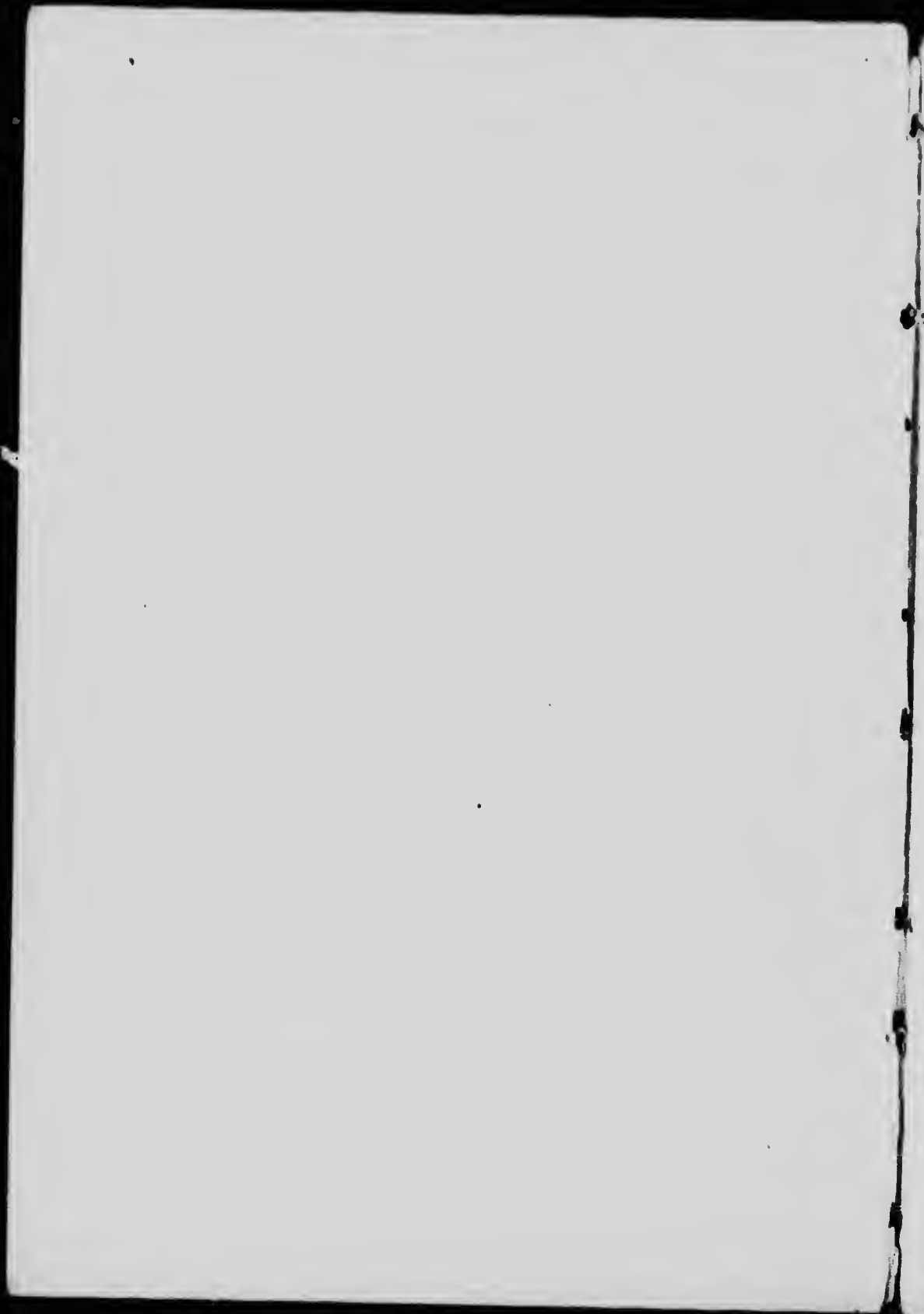
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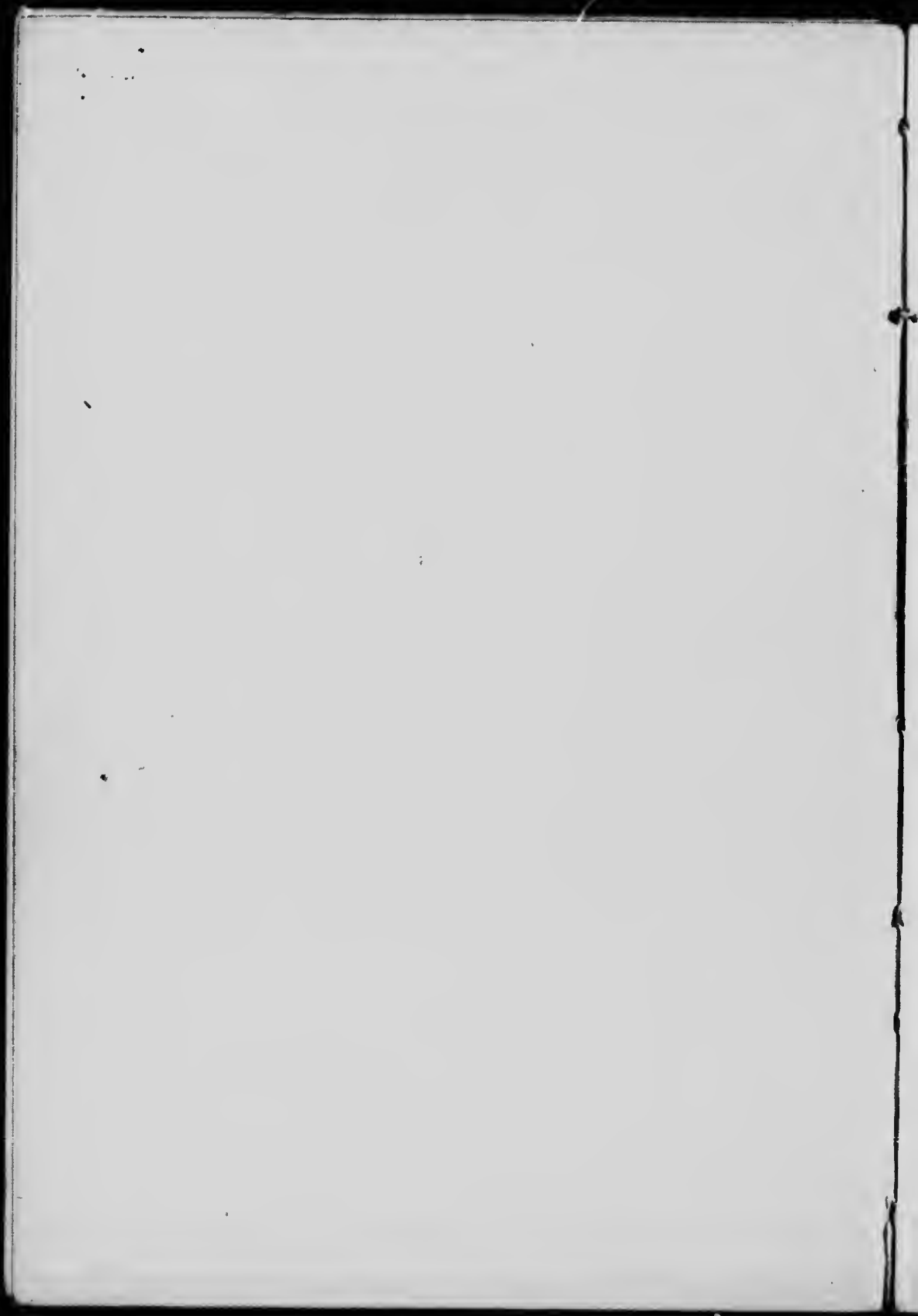
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THE RAIN-GIRL



847.

THE RAIN-GIRL

A ROMANCE OF TODAY

BY
THE
AUTHOR
OF

"PATRICIA BRENT,
SPINSTER"

Patricia Brent, Spinster

McCLELLAND & STEWART
PUBLISHERS : TORONTO

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TO
THE RAIN-GIRL

You who know will understand,
You who see on either hand
Tragedies that seem to say,
"Light o' love," and "Lack-a-day."

Spring but tarries for an hour,
Summer sheds her golden shower,
Then autumn with her amber horn,
Gathers all ere winter's born.

You who know will understand,
You who see on either hand
Tragedies that seem to say,
"Light o' love," and "Lack-a-day."

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE ROAD TO NOWHERE	II
II. "THE TWO DRAGONS" AND THE RAIN-GIRL	26
III. LOST DAYS AND THE DOCTOR	46
IV. THE CALL OF THE RAIN-GIRL	63
V. THE SEARCH BEGINS	74
VI. LORD DREWITT'S PERPLEXITIES	85
VII. LADY DREWITT SPEAKS HER MIND	99
VIII. THE HEIRESS INDISPOSED	111
IX. THE PURSUIT TO FOLKESTONE	122
X. LORD DREWITT ON MARRIAGE	134
XI. THE MEETING WITH THE RAIN-GIRL	148
XII. THE THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES	165
XIII. A QUESTION OF ANKLES	183
XIV. THE DANGER LINE	195
XV. LONDON AND LORD DREWITT	213
XVI. THE NINE DAYS ENDED	223
XVII. DR. TALLIS PRESCRIBES	240
XVIII. THE DELUGE	252
XIX. THE MORNING AFTER	265
XX. LADY DREWITT'S ALARM	278
XXI. LORD DREWITT: AMBASSADOR	294

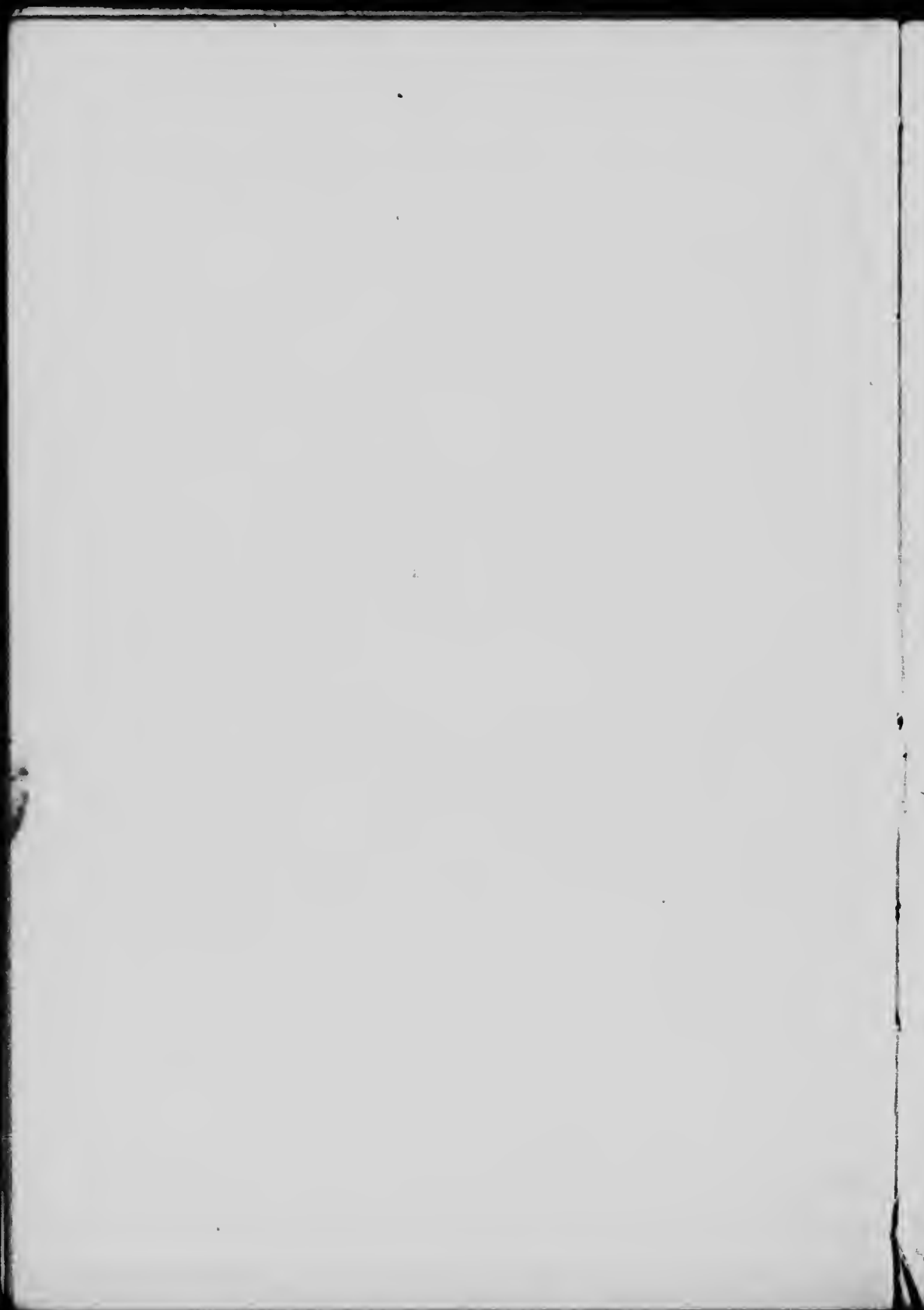
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OF

THE RAIN-GIRL



THE RAIN-GIRL

CHAPTER I

THE ROAD TO NOWHERE

NATURE discourages eccentricity!" The ridiculous words rang in Richard Beresford's ears as he stalked resolutely along the rain-soaked high-road. They seemed to keep time with the crunch of his boots upon the wet gravel. The wind picked them up and, with a spatter of rain, flung them full in his face. The pack on his back caught the last word and thumped it into his shoulders.

"Nature discourages eccentricity!"

Where he had read the absurd phrase he could not remember, probably in some insignificant magazine article upon popular science. That, however, was no excuse for remembering it, and upon this of all days. It had not even the virtue of being epigrammatical; it was just a dull, stupid catchpenny phrase of some silly ass desirous of catching the editorial eye.

As he plodded on through the rain, he strove to

confute and annihilate the wretched thing, to crush it by the heavy artillery of reason. Nature herself was eccentric, he told himself. Had she not once at least sent snow on Derby Day? Did she not ruin with frost her own crops?

"Na - ture - dis - cou - ra - ges - ec - cen - tri - ci - ty!" crunched his boots.

"Ec-cen-tri-ci-ty," pounded his pack.

"Tri-ci-ty," shrieked the wind gleefully.

Confound it! He would think of other things; of the life before him, of the good pals who had "gone west," of books and pictures, of love and tobacco, of romance and wandering, of all that made life worth while. It was absurd to be hypnotised by a phrase.

No; the moment his thoughts were left to themselves, they returned precipitately to the little Grub Street absurdity. It clung to him like a pursuing fury, this nonsensical, illogical and peculiarly irritating phrase.

"Nature discourages eccentricity!"

He strove to recall all the eccentricities of Nature of which he had ever heard. Confute the accursed thing he would at all costs.

It was by way of fat women and five legged sheep that he eventually stumbled across his own family. In spite of the rain and of his own detestably uncomfortable condition, he laughed aloud. Every relative he had was eccentric; yet heaven knew they had not lacked encouragement!

From the other side of the hedge a miserable-

looking white horse gazed at him wonderingly. Truly these humans were strange beings to find matter for laughter on such a day.

Yes, his relatives were eccentric enough to think him mad. There was Aunt Caroline, for instance, who rather prided herself upon being different from other people; yet she had married a peer; was extremely wealthy, and as exclusive as a colony of Agapemones. No one could say that she had been discouraged.

The thought of Caroline, Lady Drewitt, brought Beresford back to his present situation, and the cause of his struggling along a country road in the face of a south-westerly wind, that threw the rain against his face in vicious little slaps, on the most pitifully unspring-like first of May he ever remembered. Again, the day brought him back to his starting point: "Nature discourages eccentricity." In short, Lady Drewitt, the weather and the phrase all seemed so mixed up and confused as to defy entire disentanglement.

The weather could be dismissed in a few words. It was atrocious, depressing, English. Ahead stretched the rain-soddened high-road, flanked on either side by glistening hedges, from which the water fell in solemn and reluctant drops. Heavy clouds swung their moody way across the sky, just clearing the tree-tops. Groups of miserable cattle huddled together under hedges, or beneath trees that gave no shelter from the pitiless rain. Here and there some despairing beast lay down in the

open, as if refusing to continue the self-deception. The tree trunks glistened like beavers; for the rain beat relentlessly through their thin foliage. In short, the world was wet to the skin, and Richard Beresford with the world.

His thoughts drifted back to the little family dinner-party at Drewitt House, and the bomb-shell he had launched into its midst. It was his aunt's enquiry as to when he proposed returning to the Foreign Office that had been the cause of all the trouble.

His simple statement that he had done with the Foreign Office and all its ways, and intended to go for a long walking-tour, had been received with consternation. He smiled at the recollection of the scene; Lady Drewitt's anger, his cousin, Lord Drewitt's lifting of his eyebrows, the snap in Edward Seymour's ferret-like little eyes, Mrs. Edward's look of frightened interrogation directed at Lady Drewitt, and her subsequent endeavour to mirror her aunt's disapproval. It was all so comical, so characteristic.

He had found it impossible to explain what had led up to his decision. He could not tell Lady Drewitt and the Seymours that the trenches had revolutionised his ideas, that a sort of intellectual Bolshevism had taken possession of him, that he now took a more detached and impersonal view of life, that things which had mattered before were not the things which mattered now. They would not have understood.

He could not explain that "out there" everything had taken on a new value and new standards had been set up, that in a flash the clock had been put back centuries; food and life alone had mattered. A few yards away Death had lain in wait to flick them out with a disdainful finger, and every man, some consciously, others instinctively, was asking himself the great riddle—Why?

Instead of endeavouring to explain all this, Beresford had contented himself by saying that the War had made a difference, had somehow changed him, made him restless. He had been purposely vague, remembering Lady Drewitt's habit of clutching at a phrase as a peg for her scorn and ridicule. He had been conscious of making out a very poor case for himself, and mentally he cursed his cousin, Lord Drewitt, for his silence. He at least must have understood, he had been through it all.

Lady Drewitt listened with obvious impatience. At last she had broken out with:

"Richard, you're a fool." The words had been rapped out with conviction rather than acrimony.

"Logically I suppose I am, Aunt Caroline," he had replied, as he signalled to Drewitt to circulate the port in his direction.

"What are you going to live on?" Lady Drewitt demanded. "You've no money of your own."

"Perhaps he proposes to borrow from you, Aunt," Lord Drewitt had said, as he lighted another cigarette.

Lady Drewitt ignored the remark.

"But, Richard, I don't understand." Mrs. Edward Seymour had puckered up her pretty, washed-out face. "Where are you going to, and what shall you do?"

"He wants to become a vagabond," snapped Lady Drewitt, "tramping from town to town, like those dreadful men we saw last week when motoring to Peterborough."

"I see;" but there was nothing in Mrs. Edward's tone suggestive of enlightenment.

"It's the war," announced Edward Seymour, a peevish-looking little man with no chin and a forehead that reached almost to the back of his neck, who by virtue of a post at the Ministry of Munitions had escaped the comb of conscription.

Lord Drewitt screwed his glass into his eye and gazed at Seymour with interest.

"Don't be a fool, Edward," snapped Lady Drewitt; and Mrs. Edward Seymour looked across at her husband, disapproval in her eye. It was hidden from none that the Seymours were "after the old bird's money," as Jimmy Pentland put it. It was he who had christened them "the Vultures," a name that had stuck.

"What do you propose to do when you have spent all your money?" Lady Drewitt had next demanded.

"In all probability," said Lord Drewitt, "he will get run in and come to us to bail him out. Personally I hate police-courts. I often wonder why they instruct magistrates in law at the expense of hygiene."

Lady Drewitt had looked across the table with a startled expression in her eyes. It had suddenly dawned upon her that unpleasant consequences to herself might ensue from this rash determination on the part of her nephew to seek his future happiness amidst by-ways and hedges.

"It seems to me——" began Edward Seymour, in a thin, protesting voice.

"Never mind what it seems to you," said Lady Drewitt, whereat Edward Seymour had collapsed, screwing up his little features into an expression of pain. Mrs. Edward had caught him full in the centre of the left shin with the sharply pointed toe of her shoe.

At Drewitt House Mrs. Edward's feet were never still when her husband was within range. Lord Drewitt had once suggested that he should wear shin-guards, Mrs. Edward's methods of wireless telegraphy being notorious. Sometimes she missed her spouse, as other guests knew to their cost. Once she had landed full on the tibia of a gouty colonial bishop, whose language in a native dialect had earned for him the respect of every man present, when later translated with adornments by one of the company.

"If Edward had spent days and nights in the trenches," Lord Drewitt had said, as, with great intentness, he peeled a walnut, "he would understand why Richard shrinks from the Foreign Office."

"It would be impossible," Beresford said, "to set-

tle down again to the monotony of a life of ten till four after—after the last four years."

"Unless, of course, you happen to be a fountain," Lord Drewitt had interpolated, without looking up from his walnut.

"I said it was the war," broke in Edward Seymour, looking triumphantly across at his wife, emboldened by the knowledge that his legs were tucked safely away beneath his chair.

"And what do you propose to do?" Lady Drewitt had demanded, with the air of one who knew she had propounded a conundrum to which there is no answer.

"Oh," said Beresford airily, "I shall just walk into the sun. You see, Aunt Caroline," he said, bending forward, "I've only got one life and——"

"And how many do you suppose I have?" Lady Drewitt had demanded scornfully, snapping her jaws in a peculiarly unpleasant way she had.

"I repeat, Aunt Caroline," he had proceeded imperturbably, "that I have only one life, and rather than go back to the F.O. I prefer to——"

"Seek nature in her impregnable fastnesses," suggested Lord Drewitt, looking across at his cousin with a smile.

"Impregnable fiddlesticks," Lady Drewitt had cried derisively, "he will get his feet wet and die of bronchitis or pneumonia."

"And we shall have to go down to the inquest," said Lord Drewitt, "and lunch execrably at some

local inn. No, Richard, you mustn't do it. I cannot risk our aunt's digestion."

Lady Drewitt always discouraged the idea that life contained either sentiment or ideals. To be intangible in conversation with her was impossible. She admitted of no distinction between imagination and lying. To her all extremes were foolish, optimists and pessimists being equally culpable. She pooh-poohed anything and everything that was not directly or indirectly connected with Burke (once she would have admitted "*L'Almanach de Gotha*"). Burke to her girlish eyes had always been the open sesame to happiness.

As for the Seymours, they were merely Lady Drewitt's echoes. Lord Drewitt had once said they reminded him of St. Paul's definition of love.

As Beresford smoked his own cigarettes and drank Lady Drewitt's excellent port, he was conscious that there were a hundred and one reasons that he might have advanced to any one but his aunt. It would have been foolish to tell her that within him had been awakened a spirit of romance and adventure, that the wanderlust was upon him.

She would merely have said that he must see Sir Edmund Tobbitt, her pet physician, and have forbidden him to use German words in her presence.

"And how do you propose to live whilst you are pursuing your ridiculous Nature, exposing yourself to all sorts of weather?" Lady Drewitt had next demanded.

"Well, I've got nearly two hundred pounds,"

Beresford had replied, "and by the time I've sold my books and things I shall have fully another hundred."

"You're going to sell everything," gasped Mrs. Edward Seymour.

"Yes, all but the clothes I wear and an extra suit I shall carry with me," Beresford had smilingly retorted, enjoying the look of consternation upon his cousin's face. "When I leave London there will not remain in it a shilling's worth of my property."

"Richard, you're a fool." Lady Drewitt seemed to find comfort in the phrase. "Your poor dear mother was a fool too. She——" Lady Drewitt broke off suddenly and gazed searchingly at her nephew.

"When did this ridiculous idea first take possession of you?" she had demanded, with the air of a counsel for the prosecution about to make a great point.

"I've been a vagabond all my life," he had confessed with a smile. "I've never been really respectable, you know."

Lady Drewitt's jaws had met with a snap. Lord Drewitt gazed at her with interest. Neither he nor Beresford had ever permitted themselves to be overawed by their aunt. They were the only two relatives she possessed who were not ill at ease in her presence.

"You're Irish," she continued relentlessly, addressing Beresford in a voice that savoured of accusation.

"Half Irish," Beresford had corrected.

"I remember now," there was a marked solemnity in her voice, "a week before you were born, your poor dear mother was greatly frightened by a tramp who had managed to get into the garden."

"Then," Lord Drewitt had said, "Richard must not be blamed. Like Napoleon, he is clearly a man of destiny."

"But," said Edward Seymour, screwing up his face as was his wont when asking a question, "I don't see why being in the trenches should make Richard want to become a tramp."

"You wouldn't, my dear Teddy," Lord Drewitt had said softly. "You see it's an A1 question and you are a C3 man."

Mrs. Edward had flashed a vindictive look at Lord Drewitt, then with a swift change of expression she turned to Lady Drewitt.

"Perhaps now that Richard knows how—how it would pain you, Aunt Caroline, he won't——"

"Don't be a fool, Cecily," snapped Lady Drewitt; whereat Edward Seymour had looked across at his wife with a leer of triumph.

That night as they had walked away from Drewitt House, Beresford had explained more fully to Lord Drewitt what had led up to his decision to cut adrift from the old life.

"My dear Richard," he had said with a sigh of regret, "I wish I had the Aunt's courage and your convictions."

Beresford smiled at the thought of that evening.

He paused to light his pipe. He looked about him, hoping to find somewhere a break in the clouds giving promise of fine weather—for the morrow. No; Nature's frown showed no sign of lifting. It was as if she had decided never to attempt the drying up of this drenched and dripping landscape.

He turned once more and faced the wind and rain. His thoughts returned to his family. He had always been something of a problem to them. As a standard by which to measure failure, he had been not without his uses. He had passed through Winchester and Oxford without attracting to himself particular attention, enviable or otherwise. He had missed his cricket "blue" through that miracle of misfortune, a glut of talent, and he had taken a moderately good degree. He had come down from Oxford and the clouds, loving sport, art, literature, and above all beauty.

Mrs. Edward Seymour had once remarked plaintively to Lady Drewitt that it seemed so odd that a man who had nearly got his cricket "blue" should be fond of roses and wall-papers, poetry and skylarks. "It seemed," she ventured to add, "not quite nice." Whereat Lady Drewitt had besought her not to be a fool; but to remember that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton. Mrs. Edward Seymour had gone away sorely puzzled as to her Aunt's exact meaning; but not daring to enquire.

Coming down from Oxford, Beresford had been shot unprotesting into the Foreign Office, which he

had accepted as part of the enigma of life until that fateful August 4th, 1914, when he had enlisted.

That was four and a half years ago, and now, having thoroughly earned the disapproval of his aunt, he had turned his face to the open road, a vagabond; but a free man. The blue sky would be above him; he had pictured it all, the white flecks of cloud swimming across the sun day by day, and the winking of the stars by night. There would be the apple and the plum-blossom, the pear and the cherry. There would be the birds, the lowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep. Then there would be the voices of the haymakers, the throb of the mowing-machines and the rumble of the heavily laden wains, as they grumbled their way to the rick-yard. The night sounds, the sudden whirr of a frightened pheasant, the hoot of some marauding owl, the twitter of a dreaming thrush; he had realised them all, expected them all—everything but the rain.

He had foreseen rain, it is true, the storm, the flood even; but they had always presented themselves to his mind's eye with himself safely quartered in some comfortable old inn.

"Nature discourages eccentricity."

Nature was discouraging him by flooding the earth on the first day of his adventure.

"I wonder what Aunt Caroline would say if she saw me now?" he muttered.

He laughed aloud at the thought.

Suddenly he stopped, not only laughing, but

walking, and stood staring in astonishment at a gate that lay a few yards back from the roadside.

In an instant Lady Drewitt, Nature, eccentricity and the weather were banished from his thoughts. Nothing that his imagination was capable of suggesting could have caused him more astonishment than what he saw perched upon this gate giving access to a wayside meadow. Had it been a griffin, a unicorn, or the Seven-Headed Beast of the Apocalypse, he would have accepted it without question as the natural phenomenon of an abnormal day.

It was not a griffin, a unicorn, or the Beast of the Apocalypse that he saw; but a girl perched jauntily upon the top bar of the roadside gate, meditatively smoking a cigarette. She seemed indifferent to the rain, indifferent to the wretchedness of her surroundings, indifferent to Beresford's presence, indifferent to everything—she was merely a spectator.

For some seconds he regarded her in astonishment. The trim, grey, tailor-made costume, knapsack, tweed hat with waterproof covering—he mentally registered them all; but what struck him most was the girl's face. Nondescript but charming, was his later verdict; but now his whole attention was arrested by her eyes. Large and grey, with whites that were almost blue, and heavy dark lashes, they gazed at him gravely, wonderingly; but quite without any suggestion of curiosity.

For nearly a minute he stood staring at her in astonishment. Then suddenly realising the rude-

ness of his attitude, he slowly and reluctantly turned to the wind and continued his way.

"A rain-girl," he muttered. "I wonder if she knows that Nature discourages eccentricity?"

CHAPTER II

"THE TWO DRAGONS" AND THE RAIN-GIRL

DINNER will be ready in ten minutes, sir." The waiter led the way to a small table on the right-hand side of the fireplace, in which burned a large fire surmounted by a log that crackled and spat a cheerful welcome.

"Empty!" remarked Beresford as he looked round the dining-room.

"It's the weather, sir," explained the waiter in an apologetic tone, as he gave a push to the log with his boot; then, after a swift glance round to satisfy himself that everything was as it should be, he withdrew.

Beresford shivered. The day's wetting had chilled him. What a day it had been. "The Two Dragons" was a godsend.

As he warmed himself before the fire, he mentally reviewed the events of the day, and came to the conclusion that there had been only one event, the girl on the gate.

For the past two hours her eyes had entirely eclipsed that absurd little phrase that had so obsessed his mind earlier in the day. It had been a strange day, he mused, a day of greyness: grey sky,

grey sheets of rain, a grey prospect before him, and then that girl's grey eyes. They had seemed to change everything. They were like grey fire, seeming to blot out the other greys, as the dawn makes the stars to pale.

It was to him a new experience to find a girl monopolising his thoughts. The habit of a lifetime had been to place women somewhere between dances and croquet. He had flirted with them in a superficial way, they had amused him; but they had never bulked largely in his life. Tommy Knowles of "the House" had once said that there was little hope for a country composed of men such as Beresford, who placed runs before kisses, and saw more in a dropped goal than a glad eye.

He seemed to have had so little time for girls. There had been games to play, books to read, pictures to see, and such a host of other interests that women had been rather crowded out. Somehow they never seemed to strike an interesting note in conversation. It was invariably about the plays they had seen, the band that was playing, the quality of the floor upon which they were dancing, common friends, or else gush about George Bernard Shaw, or Maeterlinck.

He fell to wondering what Aunt Caroline or the Edward Seymours would have thought of her. They regarded him as mad because he preferred the open road to the Foreign Office; but if they were to see a girl sitting on a gate in the rain, smoking a cigarette with apparent enjoyment, they would in

all probability question, not only her reason, but her sense of delicacy.

The Rain-Girl (as Beresford mentally called her) obviously possessed character; but why was she tramping alone upon an English high-road, particularly when the heavens were drenching the earth with cold and cheerless rain? It was a queer thing for a girl to do, queer beyond analysis or comprehension. What would she have done had he spoken to her? In all probability have snubbed him; yet surely two strangers might pass the time of day upon the highway, even though they were of opposite sexes.

It had been an absurd sort of day, Beresford decided, and the sooner it were blotted from his memory the better; still he would like to see her again. Then he fell to speculating as to which direction she had taken.

Would dinner never be ready? Again he shivered, in spite of the heat of the fire. He would be all right, he told himself, as soon as he had eaten something. That waiter was a liar. More than a quarter of an hour had elapsed since he had promised dinner in ten minutes. He rang the bell. A few seconds later the door opened.

"Will dinner be long?" he enquired from where he stood facing the fire.

"They tell me it is ready now."

He span round with automatic suddenness, and found himself gazing into the same grey eyes that,

for the last two hours, seemed to have occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of all else.

"The Rain-Girl!" The words seemed to come involuntarily. Then he added in confusion, "I—er—beg your pardon. I—I thought it was—I had just rung, I——" Then he lapsed into silence and stood staring.

"I quite understand," she said, with a smile of perfect self-possession, as she approached the fire.

Yes; it certainly was the Rain-Girl; but how changed. Her dusky hair, which grew low down on her forehead and temples, was daintily dressed, and she looked very slim and shapely in a simple gown of some nondescript colour between a brown and a grey, which clung in simple folds about her. As she stood holding out her hands to the warmth of the fire, he recovered from his surprise. Obviously the curious happenings of the day were not yet ended.

Deciding that it was embarrassing for two people to stand at the same fire without speaking, Beresford retired to his table just as the waiter entered with the soup. Seeing the Rain-Girl, the waiter hurried across to the table on the other side of the fireplace and withdrew the chair invitingly. She seated herself with a smile of acknowledgment.

She was evidently not inclined to be sociable, Beresford decided. Surely two people dining alone in the same inn might exchange a few common-places; but she seemed determined to discourage any attempt towards friendliness. All through the

soup Beresford chafed at British insular prejudice. What good had the war done if it had not broken down this foolish barrier? Here were two people alone in an inn-parlour, yet they were doomed to dine at separate tables. He was piqued, too, at the girl's obvious indifference to his presence, a fact of which he had assured himself by surreptitious glances in her direction.

As the meal progressed, he became more and more incensed at her supremely unreasonable attitude. What right had she to consign him to a dull and tedious dinner? Surely the day had been a miserable enough affair without this totally unnecessary insistence of mid-Victorian prejudice and the segregation of the sexes. It was absurd, provincial, suburban, parochial, in fact it was most damnably irritating, he decided.

What would she do when the meal was over? Draw up to the fire, go to the smoking-room, or clear off to bed? Could he not do something to precipitate a crisis? But what? If he were a woman he might faint; but he could not call to mind ever having read of a hero of romance who fainted, even for the purpose of making the heroine's acquaintance. He might choke, be seized with a convulsion, develop signs of insanity. What would she do then, this self-possessed young woman? Ring for the waiter most likely.

Gradually there became engendered in his mind a dull resentment at her attitude of splendid isolation. She evidently preferred solitude, enjoyed it

in fact. He would indulge her by going to the smoking-room as soon as he had finished. In spite of this decision, he continued to watch her covertly, noticing how little she ate. He himself was eating practically nothing; he had no appetite. Had they both caught a chill? What was the waiter thinking as he took away plates containing food little more than tasted? It was like a Charles Dana Gibson picture, but for the absence of the little cupid with an arrow fitted to his bow.

It was ridiculous.

Beresford pushed back his chair with some ostentation and walked towards the door. She had spoiled the soup, rendered insipid the fish and made detestably unpalatable the joint—in short she had spoiled everything. He would take coffee in the smoking-room, there was a large fire there and—it was strange how thoroughly chilled he was. Yes, he would clear out, perhaps she would breakfast early in the morning and take her departure before he was down. At the door he turned slightly to get a glimpse of her table. No, she had not even looked up.

He closed the door and, walking across to the smoking-room, threw himself into a comfortable chair by the roaring fire, rang for coffee and proceeded to light his pipe and smoke the Rain-Girl out of his thoughts.

Presently the waiter entered with the coffee, as Beresford judged by the click of crockery. The man placed a table in front of the fire on Beres-

ford's left; then, putting upon it the tray, he quietly withdrew.

Yes, coffee would be good on a night like this, Beresford decided as he turned to the tray, where, to his surprise, he found two cups.

"What the——" then he suddenly realised that his late companion at dinner, who was not a companion at all, was probably also taking coffee in the smoking-room. Here was a fine point of etiquette, he decided. There was nothing for it but to wait. He was curious to see if this linking together of their coffees would cause her to unbend. Fate was taking a hand in the affair.

It was obviously impossible to pour out his own coffee and leave her the remainder. Should he ring for the waiter? No, the coffee should act as master of the ceremonies and bridge the gulf between them. Placing the coffee-pot and the milk-jug on the hearth, he waited, substituting a cigarette for his briar, lest its rich, juicy note might prove unmusical to feminine ears. For ten minutes he waited. Had the waiter merely made a mistake in bringing two cups instead of one? Possibly at this very moment she was enjoying her coffee in the dining-room. After all perhaps there was only enough for one. Leaning forward, he picked up the coffee-pot, lifted the lid and peered in. It was full.

As he raised his eyes from the contemplation of the contents of the coffee-pot, it was to meet those of the Rain-Girl gazing quizzically down at him.

He started back, nearly dropping the coffee-pot, and managed to scramble to his feet, coffee-pot in hand, conscious that he had flushed as if caught in some illicit act. This girl certainly had a curious habit of appearing at odd and dramatic moments.

"I was looking to see if it was coffee for one or coffee for two," he explained.

She looked at him gravely, obviously a little puzzled; then, catching sight of the two cups upon the tray, she smiled.

"How stupid of him," she said, "and you've waited?" Her eyebrows were lifted in interrogation.

"I was just investigating," said Beresford; feeling more at ease now that he was able to explain. "It was a sort of game. If there was enough only for one, I would ignore the second cup; if for two, I would wait."

She smiled again and sank into the chair on the opposite side of the fire, holding out her hands to the blaze.

Beresford stood looking down at her, the coffee-pot still in his hand.

She seemed entirely to have forgotten his presence. She certainly was a most amazing creature, he decided; but that was no reason why he should be done out of his coffee.

"Do you take it black or with milk?" he enquired in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I'm so sorry," she cried, looking at him with a start, "I—I——"

He smiled down at her and proceeded to fill the cups. "Did you say black?"

"Please."

Lifting the tray and turning round he found her eyes fixed upon him. With a smile of thanks she took a cup and dropped into it two lumps of sugar. She was still regarding him with serious eyes.

"Didn't you pass me on the road this afternoon?" she asked as he resumed his seat.

"With reluctance, yes."

"With reluctance?" she repeated.

"I wanted to know why you were sitting on a gate on such a day, apparently enjoying it and, frankly, I've been wondering about it ever since. May I smoke?" he concluded.

She smiled her permission as, opening a bag that hung from her wrist, she drew out a cigarette-case. "But why shouldn't any one want to sit on a gate in the rain?" she queried as he held a match to her cigarette.

"I don't know," he confessed, "except that no one seems to enjoy the rain just for the rain's sake."

"That's true," she said dreamily. "I love the rain, and I'm sorry for it."

"Sorry for it?"

"Yes," she replied, "so few people find pleasure in the rain. I've never heard any one speak well of it in this country. Farmers do sometimes, but——" she paused.

"There's generally either too much or too little," he suggested.

She nodded brightly. "In some countries the rain is looked upon almost as a god."

"I suppose it's a matter of whether it gives you vegetables or rheumatism," he said as he lighted a second cigarette.

She looked up quickly; then, with a little gurgling laugh, she nodded.

"In any case I like to sit and listen to it," she said, "and I love tramping in the rain."

Beresford regarded her curiously. What a queer sort of girl and what eyes, they were wonderful. Behind their limpid and serious greyness there lurked a something that puzzled him. They held wonderful possibilities.

"Personally I think less of the rain than of my own comfort," he confessed.

"Auntie always says that I'm a little mad," she said with the air of one desiring to be just. "Sometimes she omits the 'little.' "

"That's rather like my Aunt Caroline," he said, "she holds the same view about me. She calls me a fool. It amounts to the same thing. Directness is her strong point."

"I suppose we all appear a little mad to our friends," said the Rain-Girl with a smile.

"Aunt Caroline's not a friend, she's a relative," he hastened to explain.

The girl smiled as she gazed at the spiral of smoke rising from her cigarette.

"I'm always a little sorry for outraged relatives," she said.

"I'm not," with decision. "Because they've got no tails to wag themselves, they object to our wagging ours."

"But hasn't the last four years changed all that?" she asked.

"You can walk down Piccadilly during the Season in a cap and a soft collar," conceded Beresford, "but that scarcely implies emancipation."

"I don't agree with you," she said smilingly.

"But a change *en masse* doesn't imply the growth of individuality," he persisted. "If all the potatoes in the world suddenly took it into their heads to become red, or all the cabbages blue, we should merely remark the change and promptly become accustomed to it."

"I see what you mean," she said, and he noticed a slight twitching at the corners of her mouth. "You mean that I'm a red potato, or a blue cabbage."

He laughed. This girl was singularly easy to talk to.

"I'm afraid I'm something of a red potato myself," he confessed. "It's only a few days ago that my aunt told me so. She expressed it differently; but no doubt that was what she meant."

"Oh; but I have to bleach again in a few days," she said. "Within a week I have to meet auntie in London, and then I shall become afraid of the rain because of my frocks and hats." She made a *moue* of disgust; then, catching Beresford's eye, she laughed.

"Do you live in London?" he asked, grasping at this chance of finding out something about her.

"We're going there for the Season," she said, "to a hotel of all places."

"May I ask which?" inquired Beresford, seizing this opportunity with avidity. "I know most of them," he added lamely.

"The Ritz-Carlton." She shuddered.

"I've always heard it quite well-spoken of," he said with mock seriousness.

"Ugh!" she grimaced. "I so dislike all that; but auntie insists."

"She is conventional?" he suggested.

"As conventional as the suburbs. I'm supposed to be with friends in Yorkshire now," she added with the smile of a mischievous child. "If she could see me here, she would take to her bed with an attack of nerves. Poor auntie! Sometimes I am quite sorry for her," and again the little gurgling laugh belied her words.

"I'm afraid you have convicted yourself," he said. "If you had the courage of your convictions, you would go tramping and let the world know it."

"No," she said; "it isn't that; but during the last four or five years I've given auntie such a series of shocks, that she really must have time to recover. First I went as a V.A.D., then I drove a Red Cross car in France and—well, now I must give way to her a little and become a hypocrite."

"No doubt that is where you got your ideas re-adjusted."

"Readjusted?" she repeated, looking at him interrogatingly.

"In France," he said. "We all had time to think out there."

She nodded understandingly.

"I suppose it was being pitchforked clean out of our environment," continued Beresford, "and making hay with class distinctions. I went out from the Foreign Office. For some weeks I was a private; it was a revelation."

"Yes," she said dreamily, "I suppose we all felt it."

"You see out there the navy for the first time in his life asked himself why he was a navy."

"And the man from the Foreign Office why he was a man from the Foreign Office," she suggested.

"Yes," he smiled, "and I doubt if either was successful in framing a satisfactory answer. Everything was one vast note of interrogation. A new riddle had been propounded to us."

"And you came back looking for an *Œdipus*."

"Yes," he assented. "I on the open road, others in the workshop and office. The politician knows nothing about reconstruction, because he can view it only from the material standpoint."

She nodded her head brightly in agreement. "No one seems to understand. Everything's so mixed up."

"I suppose it's because until the war no one ever had a chance of finding out anything about any but his own class. Over there the labourer found the

lord a sport, and the lord found the labourer a man just l'ke himself. Oh, it's going to be what a little cockney in my section would have called 'an 'ades of a beano.' "

Beresford shovelled some more coal on the fire. He seemed unable to get the chill out of his limbs.

"And you," she asked, "are you tramping for long?"

"For ever I hope."

"For ever! That's rather a long time, isn't it?" she questioned.

Beresford then told her something of his determination to cut adrift from town life and its drudgery, and to see what the open road had to offer. He told her of the protests of his relatives; of the general conviction that he had become mentally unhinged, probably due to shell-shock. How every one had endeavoured to dissuade him from the folly upon which he was about to embark. He told her that in the disposal of his effects he felt rather like a schoolboy destroying his kit.

"But your books?" she said. "What did you do with them?"

"Ah! there you've put your finger on the weak spot," laughed Beresford. "I had meant to give away a few and sell the rest; but somehow I couldn't do it, so I had them done up in cases and stored away. I paid two years' storage in advance."

She nodded approval and understanding.

"You will see that I'm really a very weak character after all."

"And you will be walking month after month," she said dreamily, "with no thought of the London Season, or Scotland, or wintering in Egypt. I wish I were you," she added.

"But surely you could break away if you wished it?"

"It's not so easy for a girl," she replied, "and—and—oh, there are so many considerations. No," she added with a sigh of resignation, "I must be content with occasional lapses, and I don't really know that I'm a true vagabond," she said a little regretfully, "I always have to carry a comfortable frock with me," glancing down at herself, then looking up at him with a quizzical little smile. "That is in itself a sign of weakness, isn't it?"

"Only if you persist in labels," he replied. "You are dreadfully conventional."

"I!" she cried in surprise.

"Yes; you will insist on classifying every one according to appearances and accepted ideas."

"I don't understand," she said with a puzzled expression.

"Your idea of a vagabond is that of one who washes seldom, changes even seldomer, and spends the evening in hob-nailed boots by the inn fireside."

"I suppose you are right," she said laughing. "It's very difficult to get away from labels."

"Do you believe that Nature discourages eccentricity?"

"I—I'm afraid I've never thought about it," she said after a short pause. "Why?"

"Because that ridiculous phrase has been running in my head all day," he replied, shivering again slightly. "I wonder if the rain came as a rebuke to me for throwing over everything."

She nodded, signifying that she understood.

"It's rather queer," he went on, "but I had never thought of possible drawbacks to bucolic freedom."

"You do now, though," she suggested with a mischievous upward glance through her lashes that thrilled him.

"I seem to believe in nothing else now," he added. "I don't possess your veneration for the rain, I prefer skylarks. Besides," he went on, "I like to lie on my back in a field and forget."

"I know," she said eagerly, "I've often wanted to live in a caravan, then you get everything. The night sounds must be so wonderful."

"You cannot be a vagabond if you carry your house with you," he objected.

"Just as much as those who use other people's houses—the inns," she retorted. "I suppose it's really impossible to be a vagabond other than at heart."

"It's impossible unless you can glory in dirt and personal uncleanness."

"What a horrible idea. Surely there can be clean vagabonds."

"What opportunity has a tramp to wash? There are only the streams and the rivers, with the chance of getting run in for disturbing the trout or polluting the water. Besides, without soap you cannot

wash properly, and I've never heard of a vagabond who carried a cake of soap with him."

"I do," she laughed, then after a few moments' pause she added, "You reason and analyse too much for the open road. I being a woman accept all, and glory in my inconsistencies."

"And incidentally get as many baths, hot or cold, as you want."

She nodded.

"No," he continued, "the nomadic habit gets you dubbed a dangerous lunatic. I suppose I'm a dangerous lunatic, because I cannot find content in a dinner, a dance, or a crush, with a month's holiday in the summer and, as my cousin would put it, working like a fountain from ten till four."

"But does it really matter what we do, provided we can justify it to ourselves?" She looked up at him eagerly.

"Would not the Philistines regard that as a dangerous philosophy?"

"I don't think I should ever want to run away from things," she said dreamily; "that is monastic. It has always seemed to me a much greater achievement to live your own life in the midst of uncongenial or unsympathetic surroundings."

"You don't know Aunt Caroline and the Foreign Office," said Beresford grimly.

"Oh! but," said the girl, "my auntie's just as conventional as can be. You see," she continued seriously, "to be an idealist you must be unconscious of being one. Do you understand what I mean?"

"You suggest that it may become a pose."

"Yes," she said, nodding her head eagerly.

"You might sacrifice the ideals to the idealism. It's like religion that teaches you to find God in a church, whereas you should be able to:—

Raise the stone and find me there,
Cleave the wood and there am I.

I so dislike cults and societies," she added inconsequently.

"You make me feel as if I were being lectured."

"I'm so sorry," she said hastily. "I didn't mean——"

"Please go on, I think I like it."

"But we are wandering from vagabondage," she smiled. "Don't you think that Thoreau and Jeffries were vagabonds?"

"Frankly I don't," he said with decision. "They were sentimentalists. The nearest to perfect vagabonds that I can recall among writers are Walt Whitman and George Borrow. Whitman is alleged to have had all the characteristics of the vagabond. Have not controversies raged about his personal cleanliness? As for Borrow, he could outwit a Jew or a gipsy."

"And cheat a girl's love for him," she suggested.

"Love and vagabondage are contradictions."

"Contradictions!" she cried, opening her eyes wide. "I don't agree with you," she added with decision.

"A vagabond has only one mistress, Nature," said Beresford quietly.

"Then I'm not a vagabond," she said.

"The wood and the glade have only one music for the vagabond, the pipes of Pan," he continued.

"You would introduce the guitar."

"I should do nothing of the sort," she cried indignantly. "As a matter of fact I used to play the concertina."

"The what?"

"The concertina," she repeated demurely with downcast eyes.

Beresford stared at her in astonishment, not quite sure whether or no she were serious.

"You see," she said, "I couldn't play anything else, and sometimes I wanted to remind myself of—of——" she broke off.

"You could have sung?" he suggested.

"Of course I could," she said quietly, "but you've never heard me sing, and now I must be going to bed," she said. "Perhaps——" she hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Perhaps I shall see you at breakfast."

"Thanks so much," he said eagerly. "I shall be up early," and in his mind he had come to the determination that his way should be her way if she would permit it.

"Good night," she said as she rose, and with a friendly smile walked towards the door.

"Good night, *au revoir*," he said meaningly, as

he opened the door and she passed out with a nod and a smile.

"A concertina!" muttered Beresford, as he returned to his chair, "and what eyes."

He rang the bell, and when the waiter entered, ordered a double brandy. He felt chilled to the bone in spite of the fire. When the waiter returned he drank the brandy neat, shivering again violently.

"Oh, hang it!" he muttered angrily. "I'll go to bed."

Surely there never was so fantastic an ending to so fantastic a day. Wooing Pan with a concertina!

"She's mad," he muttered, "mad as a spinning dervish."

CHAPTER III

LOST DAYS AND THE DOCTOR

IT was ridiculous to endeavour to force a side-of-beef through so small a door; but was it a side-of-beef? No, it was a bed. Why not take out a feather? Was it really a feather-bed? Why should a feather-bed wear a print-dress, a white apron, cuffs and a cap? Of course it was a woman. Beresford gazed fixedly at the figure in the doorway. Yes, it was unquestionably a woman; but why was she there, looking down critically at him lying in bed? Did she want him to get up? He closed his eyes wearily. His head felt very strange.

Presently he opened his eyes again. Yes; it certainly was a woman, and she was looking down at him.

"Who are you? Where am I?" he murmured as he gazed vacantly about the room. "What has happened?"

"Hush! you mustn't talk," was the response.

When he looked again there was only a white door with yellow mouldings occupying the space where the woman in the print-dress had stood. She herself had vanished. It was so stupid of her to

run away when spoken to—so like a woman, too, to baulk a natural curiosity. What did it all mean? Why had he thought the woman a side-of-beef, then a feather-bed? What was she there for? Why did he appear to be floating about in space? Why did his whole body feel numbed, yet tingling?

Suddenly he remembered the previous day's adventures, the Rain-Girl, the dinner, Pan, and the concertina. He must get up at once, or she might be gone. He must see her again. He struggled into a sitting posture, then fell back suddenly. He had no strength. What did it all mean?

The door opened and the woman in the print-dress reappeared.

"Where's the Rain-Girl?" he demanded before she had time to close the door behind her, "and what's the time?"

"It's eleven o'clock, and you must lie still, or you'll become worse."

The woman's voice was soft and soothing. For some minutes he pondered deeply over the impenetrable mystery of her words. "Worse!" Had he been ill? It was absurd; yet why was he so weak? Eleven o'clock! Where has his shaving-water?

"What is the date?" he suddenly demanded.

"You must be quiet and not talk," was the reply.

"I must know the date," he insisted.

"It's the eighth of May, and you've been ill and must rest. You're very weak." The nurse bent over him and fussed about with the pillows.

"The eighth of May! Where's the Rain-Girl, Pan, the concertina?" he enquired faintly.

"Hush! I shall get into trouble with the doctor if I allow you to talk," she said. "You must sleep now, and we will talk when you are stronger."

"Nature discourages eccentricity, did you know that?" he muttered apathetically, as he closed his eyes.

The nurse regarded him curiously. He did not appear to be delirious; yet what he was saying was—— Sick-nursing, however, produces its own philosophy, and she settled herself down to read until the doctor should arrive.

A lengthy period of silence was broken by Beresford.

"Would you very much mind putting aside your book and answering a few questions?" he asked in a feeble voice.

With an air of professional resignation, she lowered the book on her lap.

"You really mustn't talk. If you do I shall have to go out of the room. Now you don't want me to get into trouble, do you?" Her tone was that one would adopt to a child.

Beresford lay still, trying to think; but his brain refused his will. The nurse had returned to her book and read steadily on, deliberately disregarding the two or three tentative efforts her patient made to attract her attention. His voice was very faint, and she pretended not to hear. The doctor had said he was not to talk, and she was too good a

nurse to allow imagination to modify her instructions.

When the doctor arrived an hour later, he found his patient restless and irritable. Seeing this at a glance, he sat down by the bedside, placed a cool, strong hand upon his head, and began to talk. The effect was instantaneous. Beresford lay quiet, and the drawn lines of irritation upon his face relaxed.

"Had rather a bad time. Pneumonia brought on, or hastened, by that wetting you got. Delirious when they found you the next morning. Then we had to fight for you, and here after seven days you've come around. That was what you wanted to know, eh?"

Beresford smiled his thanks.

"And the Rain-Girl?" he questioned, "the girl who was here and played the concertina. Has she gone?"

The doctor smiled.

"I know, I saw her. Grey eyes and a manner half-demure, half-impertinent, wholly maddening. Yes, I met her on the road."

Beresford smiled appreciatively at the doctor's description.

"You're the best man's doctor I ever met," he said. "Do women like you?"

The doctor threw back his head and laughed loudly, causing the nurse, who had just left the room, to wonder if he were mad.

"I'm supposed to be a woman's doctor," he replied.

"Then you are in for a big success," said Beresford faintly. "Who are you?"

"Look here, you must let me talk. I'm James Tallis, practising at Frint as a first step to Wimpole or Harley Streets. The girl went away, so don't worry about her. Such eyes ought to be gouged out by Act of Parliament. They were intolerable. Now I'm off. Don't fidget, don't worry, don't ask the nurse questions, and I'll try and tell you everything in time. I'll run in again to-morrow, and we'll have a longer talk. 'Bye."

Beresford stretched out his hand, which Tallis took, at the same time feeling his pulse.

"Don't give me drugs, just talk when you can," he said weakly. "Of course you're only a dream-doctor. If not you're mad." With that he lay back, tired with the effort of talking, and the doctor with another laugh left the room, whispered a few words to the nurse in the corridor, and whisked out of the hotel.

Was there ever such a crazy, topsy-turvy world? Beresford's mind was a chaos of absurdities. He had flown from the commonplace, and landed in a veritable Gehenna of interest. Within thirty hours of setting out, a modern Don Quixote, plus a temperament, he had encountered more incidents, pleasant and unpleasant, than most men have any right to expect in a decade. It was absurd, ridiculous, insane to overload a man's stomach with adventure in this way. It was like giving beef-steak pudding to some poor devil with gastritis. Perhaps

after all he would be forced to return to London in search of quiet. The country was evidently packed with adventures too monstrously anti-climatic for him. And he fell asleep as a protest against the obvious mismanagement of his affairs by fate.

On the morrow the doctor came again, chatted for a quarter of an hour, then, like a breeze on a hot summer's day, departed. The nurse was negative: she was uncongenial, uncompanionable, uneverything.

On the second day the proprietor came to see the patient. He was a little man with a round figure and a round smile. He entered the room as if it had been a death-chamber, approached the bed on tip-toe, and smiled nervously. As a landlord he was all that could be desired. He would meet his guests at the door and welcome them as a good host should. He would enquire after their comfort, and in the mornings ask if they had slept well. He would gossip with them cheerfully if they showed themselves inclined for talk, and he personally superintended the kitchen, having once been a chef. In short, he strove to combine all that was most attractive in modern comfort with the best traditions of the old coaching days.

In a sick-room, however, the landlord of "The Two Dragons" was out of place. Rich in tact and amiability, he was bankrupt in all else. He spoke in a hushed whisper, sat on the extreme edge of his chair, and coughed nervously from time to time, raising the tips of his fingers to his lips. He was

smiling, he was bland; but Beresford was thankful when he rose to go, promising to come in on the morrow.

The Rain-Girl continued to monopolise Beresford's thoughts. What had become of her? Where was she now? Should he ever see her again? To all these questions there was no answer, at least no answer that satisfied him.

During those dreary days of convalescence he chafed under the "dire compulsion of infertile days." Outside were the trees, the birds, the sunlight, with an occasional sudden rush of rain, followed by the maddening scent of moist earth. He fumed and fretted at the restraint put upon him, not only by the doctor; but by his own physical weakness. He longed for the open road once more.

The monotony of it all, of being a hotel-invalid; it was intolerable. The events of the day, what were they? Breakfast, the arrival of the morning paper, a visit of ceremony from the landlord, lunch, the doctor and tea—and, finally, dinner. Sometimes the doctor would spend an hour with him in the evening.

The nurse was an infliction. In herself she was sufficient to discourage any one from falling ill. She had neither conversation nor ideas, she whistled as she moved about the room, or else she talked incessantly, now that her patient was convalescent. Sometimes she appeared to talk and whistle at the same time, so swift were the alternations.

The landlord—a man rich in that which made a

good landlord but in nothing else—exhausted his ideas within the space of five minutes. With great regularity he entered the sick-room each morning at eleven, at eleven-five he would take his departure, more genial, more amiable, and more obviously good-hearted than ever. The doctor was the most welcome visitor of all; but he was a busy man.

"If the microbes of this neighbourhood were only sociable," he would say, "I might spend more time with you. As it is they're wanderers to a germ, and get as far as possible from each other before descending upon my patients. The result is that I am kept rushing from place to place with phial and lancet, sedative and purge, all because of the nomadic habits of these precious bacilli."

These unprofessional visits from the doctor Beresford looked forward to as intellectual oases in the desert of his own thoughts. He had endeavoured to emulate Xavier Le Maistre; but he had to confess to himself that *Voyages Autour de ma Chambre* were impossible to him, so there remained only the doctor.

One evening towards the end of the month they sat chatting beside the bedroom fire, Beresford wrapped in a heavy dressing-gown borrowed from the landlord. They had been talking of the war and the social upheaval that was following it.

"It was all so strange coming back here," said Beresford, "a lot of the fellows remarked upon it. Somehow or other we didn't seem to belong—we didn't seem to fit in, you know. When I came back

on leave I noticed it particularly. I would go to a restaurant, hear the talk and laughter, listen to the music; yet twenty-four hours previously I—oh! it was all wrong, and is wrong, and will continue to be wrong," he broke off irritably.

"I know," said Tallis quietly.

"You were out there?" queried Beresford.

"For more than a couple of years, one part of the time at an advanced dressing-station."

"So you know," said Beresford with interest.

Tallis nodded, puffing methodically at his pipe.

"The strange thing is that some knew what was the matter with them, others were just like animals who were ill and couldn't understand it. You've seen a dog look up at you as if enquiring why it can't enjoy things as it used to?"

Tallis nodded again.

"Well, that's what some of the men reminded me of," continued Beresford, "especially those who had come back from leave. God!" he exclaimed, "it was an unequal distribution of the world's responsibilities."

For some time they smoked in silence. Presently the doctor bent towards the grate and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Talking of responsibilities," he said casually, "reminds me of my own. What's the next move after convalescence?"

"The next move?"

"You'd better try Folkestone."

"Folkestone!" cried Beresford, "I'll be damned if I do. I'd sooner go to—to——"

"Well, it'll probably be a choice between the two. I'd try Folkestone first, however, if I were you," he added drily. "It'll brace you up."

"But it's going back again——" He paused and regarded the doctor comically. "You see," he continued, "I've cut adrift from all that sort of thing. I escaped from London, and now you want to send me to a seaside-town—abomination of abominations. I won't go. I'll see the whole idiotic Faculty damned first. I've been free, and I won't go back to the collar. I know you think I'm a fool," he concluded moodily.

"No, merely an idealist," said Tallis, puffing imperturbably at his pipe.

"Where's the difference?" growled Beresford, petulantly.

"There is none," was the quiet reply. "What'll happen when your money's exhausted?" was the next question. Beresford had already told Tallis of what had led up to his adventure. "I take it that your means, like other things, have their limitations. What'll you do when the money's gone?"

"Oh, anything, everything. If fate sends me pneumonia on the first day of my adventure, on the last she'll probably send me——"

"A great desire for life," interrupted the doctor calmly.

Beresford sat up suddenly. "Good Lord!" he burst out. "How horrible! What a fiendish idea."

"Nature has an odd way of paying off old scores. She's a mistress of irony."

"And you appear to be a master of a peculiarly devilish kind of abominable suggestion," said Beresford irritably. "I thought you a dream-doctor at first—you're a nightmare-doctor! Do you think that Nature is a coquette, who appears to discourage a man in order to strengthen his ardour?"

After some hesitation the doctor replied:

"No: she's logical and even-tempered. There's nothing wayward about her: she represents abstract justice. Treat her well and she'll treat you well; abuse her and she's implacable. My professional experience tells me that if she ever deviates from the strict path of justice, it's on the side of clemency."

"Damn your professional experience," snapped Beresford, then he laughed.

"But what are you going to do?" persisted Tallis.

"You're as bad as Aunt Caroline. She always wants to plan a destiny as if it were a dinner."

"But that does not answer my question."

"It doesn't," agreed Beresford, "because there's no answer. When the time comes I shall decide."

They smoked on in silence, and Tallis did not again refer to the subject. The conversation, however, remained in Beresford's mind for several days. The conspiracy against him seemed widespread. Why had there always been this curious strain in him, a sort of unrest, an undefined expectancy? Was he in reality mad? Was he, indeed, pursuing a shadow? In any case he would prove it for himself.

He was not to be deterred by this ridiculous, level-headed sawbones with his sententious babble about Nature, justice and clemency. It was true he had been unlucky enough to get pneumonia. Other men had done the same without the circumstance being contorted into an absurd theory that the whole forces of the universe were being directed against them.

Then there was the Rain-Girl. Why had he been so detestably unlucky as to fall ill on the night of meeting her? She was a unique creature, and those eyes! She had charm too, there was something Pagan about her, and her wonderful gurgling laugh; but she had said he was all wrong, and she certainly had nothing in common with Aunt Caroline.

Each day his determination to see the girl grew stronger. She had cast a spell over him. She had fascinated him. She cared for the things that he cared for. He *must* see her again. He *would* see her again—but how? At this juncture he generally lay back in his chair, or bed, and gave up the problem until he were stronger and better able to grapple with it.

Once there had come over him an unreasoning anger at her heartlessness. Knowing that a fellow-guest at the hotel was ill, even if only with a chill, a strictly humanitarian woman would have been touched by pity; but were women humanitarian? Had she heard he was ill? In a novel she would have stayed, nursed him back to health, and he would have married her.

This line of reasoning invariably ended in his laughing at his own folly in expecting an acquaintance to act as if she were an intimate friend, and wanting real life to approach the romantic standard of the novelist. That had been the trouble all along. He had asked too much of life.

She was so wonderful, that Rain-Girl. She was a tramp; yet carried with her a soft, feminine frock and had once played the concertina with which to woo the great god Pan! How astonished Olympus must have been at the sight. Why did he want to see her again? Why did life seem somehow to revolve round her? Why, above all, oh! why, a thousand times why, did her face keep presenting itself to his waking vision? In dreams she was paramount, that was understandable, but——

"When a man has a few hundred pounds between himself and the Great Adventure, it's better for him not to think about a girl."

"On the contrary, my dear fellow, it's just the moment when he should begin to think seriously about her."

Beresford had unconsciously uttered his thoughts aloud, as he stood at the window, watching the sun through the pine-wood opposite, and Tallis entering unheard, had answered him.

"Now it's you who are the idealist," smiled Beresford.

"If a doctor has an eye for anything but a microbe, he'll recognise that love is a great healer.

Don't look for health in a phial or a retort; but in an affinity."

"Drewitt says that an affinity is like a hair-shirt; it enables you to realise the soul through the medium of the senses."

"That's a very poor epigram. Some day you'll discover it for yourself." Tallis drew his pipe from his pocket and proceeded to fill it from Beresford's pouch that lay on the table.

"I suppose," remarked Beresford presently, "that there's nothing, no law, convention or unrepealed statute in the Defense of the Realm Act by which you can insist on my going to Folkestone."

Tallis shook his head and proceeded to light his pipe.

"Then I shall go to London," announced Beresford with decision.

Tallis puffed vigorously at his pipe; but made no comment.

"I said I shall go to London," repeated Beresford.

"You did."

"Then why the devil can't you say something about it?"

"There's nothing to be said," was the smiling retort. "May I ask why you have come to this decision?"

"I'm sick of the country. It's—it's so infernally monotonous," he added somewhat lamely.

Tallis nodded his head comprehendingly.

"Why on earth can't you say something?" snapped

Beresford. "You know you think I'm an ass, why on earth can't you tell me so?"

"You might let me know your address when you get settled," said Tallis, ignoring his patient's petulance. "I'd like to keep in touch with you."

"I shall stay at the Ritz-Carlton," announced Beresford, covertly watching Tallis to see the effect of the announcement upon him.

"The Ritz-Carlton," repeated Tallis, without any show of surprise. "I believe they do you rather well there," he remarked quietly. "I suppose she's going to stay there."

"She! Who?" Beresford started up and looked across at Tallis in astonishment.

"The girl with the eyes."

Beresford laughed. "It's no good trying to keep anything from you," he cried. "She's going to stay there, and I must see her again. What has happened I don't know; but she seems to have changed the whole universe for me. How it's all going to end, God only knows," he added gloomily. "All I know is that I must see her again. The thing is when can I start?"

For a few minutes Tallis smoked in silence, obviously thinking deeply, at last he spoke.

"I think perhaps you're right, Beresford. It will have to be London. It would be no use your going to Folkestone in the flesh, if you were in London in the spirit. I think a week or ten days might see you fit to travel, provided you take care."

"Oh! I shall be ready before then, now that whistling-jackass has gone."

"The whistling-jackass?" queried the doctor quickly.

"The nurse. How you can expect any one to get well with that girl about the place, I can't conceive. She did nothing but whistle and talk."

"Did she?" It was obvious that Tallis was making a mental note of the nurse's weakness. "Yes," he continued, "in ten days, or a fortnight at the outside, you'll be fit to travel, provided you take care."

"And what exactly does taking care imply? Does it mean a hot-water bottle and a chest-protector, goloshes and Jaeger underwear?" demanded Beresford irritably.

"You will be weak and easily fatigued. Don't overtire or over-excite yourself, be careful of your diet, keep off spirits and take a good red wine, and generally go slow for a little time," said Tallis professionally.

"But I won't go to Folkestone." There was the note of a rebellious child in Beresford's voice.

"So I understand," said Tallis. "By the way, I shall be running up to town in July, and I'll look you up."

"I wish you would," said Beresford heartily. "I don't want to lose sight of you either. You're such a comic sort of devil, although why you should conceive the diabolical idea of dragging me back resisting to this world I can't conceive. You're just as bad

as that colonial Tommy, who risked his own life, and jolly nearly lost it too, merely that I might be involved in the further trouble and expense of living."

CHAPTER IV.

THE CALL OF THE RAIN-GIRL

TO-MORROW," remarked Beresford, as he lay back in a hammock-chair upon the inn lawn, "I set out for the haunts of men."

Tallis, who had called in after dinner for a smoke, did not reply immediately; but for fully a minute sat pulling meditatively at his pipe.

"Any criticisms?" enquired Beresford with a smile.

"That depends on how you propose to go," was the reply.

"Oh, slow, say ten miles a day."

"That's helpful," said Tallis drily.

"Helpful? What the deuce do you mean?"

"I shall know where to have the ambulance."

For a moment Beresford did not reply, then he laughed.

"You certainly are the most extraordinary fellow I ever met," he said. "So you think I can't walk ten miles?"

"You'll collapse before you reach the third mile," Tallis replied, with the air of a man making a simple statement of fact.

"What!" cried Beresford, sitting up straight in his surprise. "Am I as bad as that?"

"You're just weak and want building up," was the reply.

For some time the two men continued to smoke in silence.

"I suppose the war cheapens human life," said Beresford irrelevantly.

Tallis looked across at him; but made no comment.

"I noticed out there," continued Beresford, "that men new to the game seemed so different from those who had been at it a year or two."

"In what way?"

"They seemed more vital. They were interested, curious. They asked all sorts of what seemed to us old hands stupid questions." He paused, and Tallis nodded his head comprehendingly.

"Then they would gradually become absorbed in the atmosphere of fatalism that seemed to grip us all. It was very strange," he added, half to himself.

"What about the cheapening of life?"

"It's a bit difficult to express," said Beresford slowly, "but somehow or other I seem to feel that the old idea of the sacredness of human life has gone for ever as far as I am concerned." Again he paused and for some seconds smoked in silence, then he continued whimsically, "Take an exaggerated case. Before the war if a man had——"

"Stolen from you the girl with the eyes, shall we say," suggested Tallis gravely.

"Well, that'll do," he laughed, "I should probably have wanted to knock him down; now I should kill him. Why?"

"Merely a psychological readjustment of your ideas of crime and punishment," said Tallis.

"No, that's not it," said Beresford musingly. "It goes deeper than that. Before the war, killing was an unthinkable crime, now it's little more than kicking a man downstairs. In other words this generation has pricked the bubble of the sacredness of human life."

"I suppose that's it," said Tallis, as if reluctant to admit it. "But——"

"That doesn't settle my little hash, you mean?" Beresford interrupted.

"Your little hash will settle itself, my son," replied Tallis with a smile, "unless you're a bit more reasonable," he added.

"I was coming to that. I seem to have lost the will to live. It's odd," Beresford continued musingly, "but when things worry or irritate me, I seem instinctively to fall back on the——"

"Hari-kari idea?" suggested Tallis.

"That's it," he nodded. "The way out. Why is it?"

"Liver."

"Oh, rot! If it's liver, why didn't I notice it before the war?"

"Nerves and liver do make cowards of us all," said Tallis sententiously. "Anyhow, don't hurry off from here."

"Very well, I'll put off the start until Monday. Let's see, that'll be June 9th."

Tallis nodded approval.

"You and my host and the nurse and the whole blessed boiling of you have assumed a pretty serious responsibility," continued Beresford. "You've dragged me back resisting into this world of vain endeavour, and I'm not sure that you haven't done an extremely injudicious thing; but that's your affair, not mine."

"What about the girl?" enquired Tallis.

"I ought to be annoyed with you," continued Beresford, ignoring the question, "as a man who has been forced to eat a meal he didn't want and is then asked to pay for it. You've literally hauled me back to earth by the heels; but as I say, that's your affair, not mine."

"Well," said Tallis as he rose and pocketed his pipe, "life always was a funny sort of muddle; but Kaiser Bill has added to its difficulties. I'm not at all sure that we doctors don't do more harm in saving people than in——"

"Killing them," suggested Beresford.

"Letting them die as they deserve," concluded Tallis quietly. "So long," and he strolled across the lawn into "The Two Dragons," leaving his patient to his thoughts.

Beresford found himself looking forward to the day of his emancipation with all the eagerness of a schoolboy anticipating the summer holidays. The past few weeks had resulted in an entire readjust-

ment of his ideas. The open road no longer seemed to attract him. Hitherto it had appeared the only thing that mattered; now into all his plans and projects the Rain-Girl seemed to precipitate herself.

Try as he might, he found it impossible to develop a scheme for the future from which she was excluded. A few weeks previously his one idea in life had been to get away from the London that jarred so upon his nerves. He could not breathe in its heavy, smoky atmosphere, he had told himself, and he had longed for the quiet of the countryside, where he could think and, mentally, put his house in order. Now everything was changed. Why? It seemed to have become a world of "Whys."

Convalescence to him could not mean the going away to some quiet spot where his health might be completely restored. It meant a definite and active campaign in search of this girl; yet he had seen her only twice. It was all so strange, so bewildering. Time after time he asked himself what she had thought of his conduct in not keeping the implied appointment for breakfast. Had she decided that he had forgotten, or overslept himself? He had learned that it was nearly eleven on that unfortunate second of May before his condition was discovered by the chambermaid.

Of course it did not matter to the Rain-Girl, he told himself. By now, in all probability, she had forgotten his very existence; but for himself, well, find her he would, even if he had to search London as the girl in history had done for her lover. He

could not remember who it was; thinking fatigued him excessively these days. Upon one thing he congratulated himself, he possessed a clue in the name of the hotel at which she was to stay.

When at last the day of his emancipation came, Beresford found himself as excited as a child upon the morning of a school-treat. Soon after dawn he was gazing out of the window to assure himself that the weather was not about to play him another scurvy trick, such as it had done on the first day of his adventure. With a sigh of content he saw that the s'y over the pinewoods opposite was blue-grey and cloudless. He returned to bed thinking, not of the weather, but of the Rain-Girl.

Soon after breakfast Tallis called to bid him good-bye.

"Now, young fellow," he said, "no tricks. Remember you are weak, and won't be able to stand much fatigue. If you set out to walk ten miles a day, or anything like it, your little worries and problems will settle themselves; but don't do it. I'm frightfully busy, and inquests are the devil."

"You've got a cheerful way of putting things," said Beresford drily.

"I've discovered that it's no use putting things to you in the normal way," replied Tallis with a smile. "To say that you are pig-headed is unfair to the porker. Remember," he added, warningly, "three miles at the outside to-day; I doubt if you'll want to do more than two."

"Oh, rot!" cried Beresford. "Look here, I'll give

you two pounds for every half-mile I do under three, and you give me one pound for every mile I do over."

"No," said Tallis, shaking his head, "that would be compounding a suicide. Your will might carry you on for four miles; but you'd finish the journey on a gate."

"You're as gloomy as a panel-doctor during an epidemic," laughed Beresford. "That's the worst of you medicos, you do everything by rule of thumb. You say certain things have happened and consequently certain other things must grow out of them as a natural sequence. You make no allowance for the personal equation."

"I've made a great deal of allowance for your personal equation, my son," replied Tallis grimly, "otherwise I should long ago have certified you insane."

"Why, I'm a perfect epic of sanity compared with you," protested Beresford. "Look how you used to scandalise the nurse by the way you talked to me when, according to all the rules of the game, I ought to have been left quiet."

"And which soothed you the most," enquired Tallis quietly, "being left alone to your thoughts, or told what you wanted to know?"

"Oh, it answered all right, of course."

Tallis shrugged his shoulders.

"It's too bad," laughed Beresford, "here have you dragged me back to life again, and now I'm bullying you. It's been ripping having you about.

God knows what I should have done if you hadn't been here," he added as he rose and stretched himself.

"Well, don't break down again," said Tallis, "and above all things go slow. Let me hear how you get on and—if you find her."

"Right-o," he gripped the doctor's hand, "and now, like Dick Whittington, I'm off to discover London town."

He shook hands with the proprietor, and thanked him for all he had done and, with the good wishes of the whole staff, turned his head northwards in the direction of London, conscious that before him lay an even greater adventure than the one he had sought on that unforgettable first of May.

It seemed as if Nature, conscious of having failed him once, was now endeavouring to make amends for her lapse. Birds were fluting and calling from every branch and hedge, as if it were the first day of Spring. The trees, vivid in the morning sunlight, swayed and rustled gently in the breeze; the air, soft as a maiden's kiss, was heavily perfumed. It was a day for love and lingering.

As he walked slowly along the high-road drinking in the beauty of the morning, Beresford recalled with a smile Tallis' warning. Ten miles would be a trifle on a day such as this, he decided. Still he would take no undue risks and walk slowly, loiter in fact.

He had lost thirty-eight days. It was now June 9th. It was strange how a man's ideas could change.

A month ago there had been nothing he desired beyond the open road; now his face was turned London-wards. Why? Again that inevitable "Why."

The country-side was evidently no place for a man who would seek quiet and a day's delight. It seemed capable of providing a veritable orgy of incident. George Borrow was right after all.

After half an hour's sauntering, he was glad to rest on a wayside stone-heap. There was plenty of time, he told himself, and no need to hurry. Again, it was pleasant sitting by the road-side, listening to the birds and watching the life of the hedges. He had become conscious of a strange lassitude, and a still stranger inclination on the part of his legs to double up beneath him. His head, too, seemed to be behaving quite unreasonably. There were curious buzzings in his ears, and every now and then a momentary giddiness assailed him. What if Tallis should prove right after all, that he really was totally unfit for more than a mile or two?

As if to disprove such a suggestion he rose and continued his way, telling himself that as he became more accustomed to the exercise, these little manifestations of reluctance on the part of his legs and head would disappear.

At the end of three hours he had covered about two miles. The rests had been more frequent, and the distances covered between them shorter. It now became too obvious for argument or doubt that he was in no fit state for the high-road. In a way he

was not sorry, although it was undignified to have to confess himself beaten. Still London was calling as she had never called to him before, not even in those nightmare-days in flooded trenches during 1914. After all perhaps it would be wiser to take train and run no risks. Tallis had been very definite about the unwisdom of over-exertion.

The sight of an approaching cart decided him. As it drew almost level Beresford hailed the driver, a little, weather-beaten old man with ragged whiskers and kindly blue eyes, asking if he would give him a lift.

The man pulled up and invited him to jump in, explaining that he was bound for Leatherhead.

As he climbed into the cart, Beresford was conscious that it meant surrender; but he was quite content.

Thus it happened that at half-past three on the afternoon of the day he had set out from "The Two Dragons," Beresford found himself at Waterloo Station, with no luggage other than his rucksack and a walking-stick, wondering where he should spend the night. He had taken the precaution of booking a room at the Ritz-Carlton; but he was not due there until the following Monday. In any case he could not very well turn up without luggage and in his present kit.

Having sent a telegram to Tallis telling him of the accuracy of his lugubrious prophesies, Beresford hailed a taxi and drove to the Dickens Hotel in Bloomsbury, where he was successful in obtaining a

room, owing to the sudden departure of a guest called away to the death-bedside of a relative.

That night he slept the sleep of the physically exhausted.

The morrow and the remainder of the week he devoted to shopping. He found that an hour in the morning, with another hour in the afternoon, after he had been fortified by lunch, was as much as he could stand. His tailor was frankly pleased to see him, and tactfully dissimulated the surprise he felt. In the matter of expedition he achieved the impossible. By the end of the week Beresford found himself completely equipped with all that was necessary to enable him to proceed upon his great search.

On the Monday morning when he drove from the Dickens Hotel to the Ritz-Carlton, he was conscious of two things, a thrill of anticipation and the blatant newness of his luggage.

CHAPTER V.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

AS he stood hesitating at the entrance to the dining-room of the Ritz-Carlton, there flashed across Beresford's mind the memory of the rain-soddened assembly-trench packed with men in whose hearts there was a great curiosity, and in whose eyes there was something of fear. All were striving to disguise from each other their real feelings, and were determined to go over the top as if accustomed to it from childhood.

Beresford recalled his own sensations, the feeling of emptiness at the pit of his stomach, the rather unreasonable behaviour of his knees, and an almost childish desire to strike matches in order to light a cigarette that was already burning cheerfully. Eliminating the cigarette episode, he experienced all the other sensations during the momentary pause on the threshold of the dining-room of the Ritz-Carlton. Then he took the plunge and entered. The *maitre d'hôtel* conducted him to his table and, with a feeling of genuine relief and thankfulness, Beresford sank into the chair held back for him, and proceeded to study the menu as if his life depended upon it.

Now that he was actually on the eve of what he had looked forward to for the last six weeks, he felt an unaccountable nervousness and hesitation. For some reason he could not understand, he kept his eyes straight in front of him instead of singling out the Rain-Girl from the other guests. She was there, he knew, because she had told him that her stay would last the Season. What was he to say to her? Would she recognize him and, if so, would she acknowledge him?

He was so absorbed in his own thoughts as to be unconscious of the arrival of the *hors d'œuvres*. A discreet cough on the part of the waiter, bending solicitously towards him, brought back his wandering attention to the business of the moment.

As he helped himself he swiftly envisaged the guests on his left. She was not there. For some minutes his gaze did not wander from that part of the room. Now that he was on the eve of finding her, he seemed almost afraid to do so. He wanted to retain as long as possible the delicious feeling of suspense. It was only by a supreme effort of will that he controlled himself sufficiently to scrutinise his fellow-guests, first quickly, then slowly and with method.

By the time he was half through the fish, it was becoming increasingly clear to him that the Rain-Girl was not in the dining-room. In spite of the growing conviction that she was not there, he now became almost feverish in his anxiety to discover her beneath some disguising hat.

When at length he was satisfied that not even the most fantastical effort of the modiste was capable of concealing the head of the Rain-Girl, Beresford was conscious of a feeling of intense disappointment, almost of despair. What if she had gone away? She might be ill, or possibly her aunt was ill and they had been forced to go abroad. What a fool he had been to build so confidently on that one hint, the name of the hotel at which she was to stay.

Suddenly his eyes fell on the untasted glass of burgundy before him and, remembering Tallis' advice, he drank it at a draught.

Of course she was lunching somewhere with friends. He would in all probability see her at dinner. People could not be expected to take all their meals in their hotels, as if they were staying *en pension* at Margate or Southend. Really he was becoming a little suburban, not to say provincial, in his ideas.

As the meal progressed the cloud of depression lightened, and by the time that he had finished the second glass of burgundy, he had explained to his entire satisfaction the absence of the Rain-Girl from lunch.

After the meal, he took a short walk around Bond Street, Regent Street and Piccadilly. He then spent half an hour in the Park, placing himself behind a tree lest he should be recognised by some of his acquaintance, who would carry the news of his return to his family. What a splendid thing it must be not to have a family. Then he walked slowly up

Piccadilly, determined to take tea at the Ritz-Carlton, in fact he had already decided never to be absent from any meal.

In the lounge he went through the same process as at lunch, striving to penetrate the creations and camouflages of Paquin and Louise.

No, she was not there. He would wait until dinner-time when, unmodified by millinery, Nature might more easily be studied.

After tea he strolled once more down to the Park, loitering about by the Stanhope Gate until nearly seven o'clock. As he drove back to the hotel, he was conscious of a great weariness both physical and mental.

Dressing leisurely, it was half-past eight before he entered the dining-room, feeling in a modified form the same thrill he had experienced at lunch-time. On this occasion he immediately proceeded to investigate his fellow guests; but although he scanned the women at every table in the room, there was no one he could even for a moment mistake for the Rain-Girl.

This time burgundy, although the same as he had drunk at lunch, failed to dissipate the cloud of depression that descended upon him. Something had obviously happened. She was not staying at the Ritz-Carlton. In all probability he would never see her again. No doubt the aunt, of whom she had spoken, had developed nerves. Damn aunts! What possible use were aunts in the economy of things? There was his own Aunt Caroline, for instance. She

had been about as useful to him as a mastodon harnessed to a brougham. Possibly she had gone for another tramp, the Rain-Girl, not Aunt Caroline.

Possibly—— he sat up suddenly at the thought. She might be ill. He had got pneumonia, perhaps she had got it on the following day. Perhaps the symptoms took longer to manifest themselves in women than in men. How was he to find out? First, how was he to find out whether she were in the hotel or not? He could not very well go to the manager, or one of the clerks, give a description of her, and ask if she were staying there. They would in all probability look upon him with suspicion as an undesirable. It was all very tantalising and tormenting.

As the meal progressed, Beresford began to find a hundred reasons why the Rain-Girl had not been present at lunch, tea or dinner. She might be spending the day on the river, or motoring. Possibly she had been away for the week-end, and had not returned in time to come down to dinner. After all breakfast would prove whether or no she were in the hotel. People did not generally go out to breakfast, unless they happened to be friends of the Prime Minister. He would wait until breakfast.

Yes, that burgundy was undoubtedly a good, sound wine, the second half-bottle seemed to be even better than the first.

That night Beresford slept soundly. In his dreams he covered what appeared to him to be the whole range of sub-conscious absurdity. Everything

he saw or encountered seemed to turn into the Rain-Girl, or from the Rain-Girl into something else. The camel from "Chu Chin Chow," which he had encountered in the streets, suddenly dissolved into the Rain-Girl. The next thing he knew was that he was endeavouring to ride the camel through the revolving doors of the Ritz-Carlton, with the hall-porter striving to bar the way, and a policeman trying to pull it out by the tail. Then in the Park it was the Rain-Girl who came up and asked for his penny and, instead of a ticket, she gave him a cup of coffee. Again, he was riding on an omnibus when he saw the Rain-Girl in a taxi beside him. Dropping over the side of the 'bus, he threw his arms round her, only to find that it was his Aunt Caroline, who was telling him not to be a fool.

Beresford awakened with a dazed feeling, conscious that something had happened, something disappointing; but unable to determine just what it was. Suddenly he remembered the incidents of the previous day, and his failure to find the Rain-Girl. Once more he was conscious of an acute feeling of depression; but after his bath, and as he proceeded to dress, the clouds again seemed to lift, and he became hopeful.

At breakfast, however, another disappointment awaited him. There was no sign of the Rain-Girl. He lingered over his meal as long as possible in the hope that she were breakfasting late. He became conscious even that the waiters were regarding him a

little curiously. It was not usual for the guests to remain at the breakfast-table for two hours.

When at length Beresford rose, it was with the firm conviction that the Rain-Girl was not staying at the Ritz-Carlton. In spite of this he loitered about the hotel until noon, when he took another stroll up Piccadilly and along Bond Street, and through the most frequented thoroughfares of the West-End.

Perhaps she was away for a long week-end, he told himself, and would be back to lunch. She might even be confined to her room with a chill. At this thought he smiled. The warm, mellow sunshine seemed to negative all possibility of any one contracting a chill.

As he wandered through the streets thinking of all the things that could possibly have prevented her from being at three consecutive meals, he found himself becoming more hopeful, and looking forward to lunch-time as presenting another chance of a possible meeting.

Suddenly a thought struck him, so forcibly in fact as to bring him to a standstill. Had she and her aunt a private suite of rooms in which their meals were served? That was it. Therein lay the explanation of why he had not seen her. She was just the type of girl who would dislike a hotel dining-room, he told himself, in fact she had implied as much when speaking of the London Season. Had she not said how much she disliked it, and how she

yearned for the quiet of the country? What a fool he had been not to think of it before.

He returned to the hotel with a feeling of exhilaration. A new optimism had taken possession of him. He was no longer entirely dependent upon the dining-room, in fact that was least likely to bring about a meeting with the Rain-Girl. At the same time its possibilities must not be under-estimated. No doubt occasionally she would lunch or dine there for the sake of variety, possibly when entertaining friends, to whose preferences she would naturally defer. Yes, he must continue his search. It would not do to be discouraged during the first twenty-four hours. She was spending the Season in London; about this she had been quite definite. She was also going to stay at the Ritz-Carlton; here again she had left no room for doubt.

The chances of anything having intervened to prevent this arrangement being carried out were comparatively remote, certainly not sufficiently tangible to discourage him in the prosecution of his search. He would leave nothing to chance, he would go to all the public social functions he could, walk in the Park, stroll about the streets. He would go to Westminster Abbey on Sunday—a good idea that; she was just the sort of girl who would love the Abbey, attend first nights, in short do the very things from which a few weeks ago he had precipitately fled. The one thing he would not do was to renew old friendships. If he did his time would no longer

be his own, and he was determined to devote every minute of the day to his search.

The days he continued to spend in aimless wandering along Piccadilly, Pall Mall, the Haymarket, and the Park, looking into every face he met, now quickening his pace to overtake some likely girl, now slowing down to allow another to pass. He felt sure that the police had him under observation. It must, he decided, appear all so obvious.

Several times he jumped into a taxi and instructed the driver to follow some other taxi or car. The first time he did this he was conscious of a feeling of embarrassment; but the man's sang-froid convinced Beresford that there was nothing unusual in the procedure. Once he found himself at Richmond before discovering that his quarry was not the Rain-Girl. On another occasion he stopped the man when half-way to Beckenham. It was a curious thing, he decided, that every girl in a car or taxi who bore a sufficiently striking resemblance to the Rain-Girl to mislead him, seemed to be bound for a far-distant destination.

On one occasion, as he was standing at the corner of Bond Street, preparatory to crossing, a taxi darted out into the stream of Piccadilly traffic. He caught a momentary glimpse of the occupant, which sent his heart racing. Tumbling into an empty taxi he gave the man his instructions. The next moment his vehicle had come to a standstill with a grinding of tyres. The other taxi had stopped ten yards down

Piccadilly, and the girl was paying the driver. It was not the Rain-Girl.

For his own satisfaction Beresford measured the distance of that drive, which had cost him half a crown. It consisted of exactly thirty-eight paces, thirty-one and four-fifth yards. This, he decided, must be the shortest drive on record.

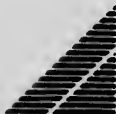
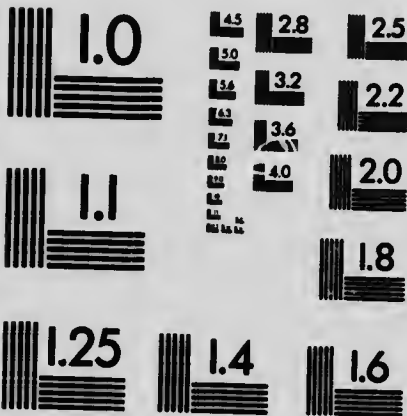
It was fatiguing work, both mentally and physically, this eternal and uncertain pursuit, and he was always glad to get back to the Ritz-Carlton for lunch, tea or dinner. Every time he entered the dining-room, it was with a slight thrill of anticipation. Some day he would perhaps see her sitting there, and know that the search was ended.

His hopes would wane with the day, and when night came and dinner was over, he would tell himself what a fool he was, how hopeless was the quest upon which he, like some modern knight-errant, had set out; yet each morning found him eager and determined to pursue what he had now come almost to regard as his destiny.

Not only was there his search for the Rain-Girl; but he had always to be on the look out to avoid possible friends and acquaintance. Once he had caught sight of Lady Drewitt in her carriage, on another occasion he had avoided Lord Peter Bowen only by dashing precipitately into an A.B.C. shop. How he escaped he could never be quite sure. He had a vague idea that he pretended to have mistaken the place for an office of the boy-messengers, or boy scouts, he could not remember which; but



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judging from the look on the faces of two young women behind the counter, he rather thought it must have been the boy scouts.

It was during the evening of the day of this last adventure that he asked himself whether or no he were altogether wise in neglecting his acquaintance. Possibly the Rain-Girl knew some one he knew. Why not put a bold face on things and let people know that he was back in town? Tell them frankly that the country was too episodic for a man unprovided with a long line of bucolic ancestors. They would laugh, the men would indulge in superficial jokes at his expense, and the women would look at him a little pityingly, as they always looked at Edward Seymour. Why any one should want to pity Edward Seymour seemed difficult to understand. Those who merited pity were the poor unfortunates who had to live or associate with him.

Yes, in future he would look out for old friends rather than avoid them. He would run round and see his cousin, Lord Drewitt. The one thing he would not do, however, was to call upon Aunt Caroline. That would be like firing at a water-spout, a deliberate invitation to trouble.

CHAPTER VI

LORD DREWITT'S PERPLEXITIES

ON the afternoon of the following day Beresford found himself setting out upon a subsidiary quest, the discovery of the friends and acquaintance that hitherto it had been his one object to avoid. Whatever his own state of mind, the day at least was perfect. June had spread her gayest gossamer over Piccadilly. The sun shone as if in a moment of geographical forgetfulness. Pretty women and well-tailored men streamed to and from the Park, whilst the roadway was a desperate congestion of traffic, controlled by patient optimists. Here and there an ampty sleeve, or a pair of crutches, acted as a reminder of the war, which otherwise seemed countless centuries away.

It was like a day from a society novel, where it never rains when the heroine wears her best frock. It was an unreal, artificial, fantastical, and hitherto unprecedented day. From Bond Street to Knightsbridge, not an umbrella or a mackintosh was to be seen, nevertheless it was June in London.

Beresford sauntered idly down Piccadilly in the direction of Hyde Park Corner, enjoying the warmth and admiring all that was to be admired.

Into the tin pannikin of the old blind man outside Devonshire House he dropped a shilling. It was clearly a day for silver largesse, for light and love and lingering. He smiled at the thought of the absurdity of his own position. Something like one hundred and twenty pounds stood between him and absolute destitution. What would the passers-by think if they knew,—Lady Tanagra Elton, for instance, who had just driven by? What would she say? What would——?

"Hullo, Drew!" he broke off his speculations suddenly, as a tall, fair-haired man was about to pass him.

Fixing his monocle in his right eye, Lord Drewitt gazed at his cousin with expressionless face.

"My dear Richard," he drawled, "I invariably cut the family skeleton during the Season. Ghosts I never acknowledge, even in August, when my social standard is at its lowest ebb."

Beresford laughed, linked his arm in that of his cousin and turned him westward.

"Anyhow, you've got to take me into the club and give me a barley-water," he said.

Although different in temperament and character in about as many ways as two men can differ, Beresford and his cousin had always been on the best of terms. Lord Drewitt's pose of frank cynicism, softened by a certain dry humour, was to Beresford always amusing.

"To give a man a title and two thousand a year on which to keep it out of the mud," Lord Drewitt

would say, "is a little joke that only the Almighty and the Aunt are capable of appreciating."

In spite of his expensive tastes and insufficient income, Lord Drewitt had repeatedly refused pressing invitations to join the Boards of quite reputable companies. On one occasion, when a very obtuse financier had doubled his original offer of five hundred a year for "the most inconspicuous tax upon your lordship's time," Lord Drewitt had lazily asked him if he had ever played in a 'varsity match at Lord's. The puzzled city man confessed that he had not.

"Well, I have," was the reply, "and you learn a devil of a lot of cricket in the process, more than you can ever forget in the city."

Lord Drewitt had greatly offended his aunt, Lady Drewitt, when on one occasion she had suggested that he might go into the city, by saying, "My dear aunt, it has been said that it takes three generations to make a gentleman. I am the third Baron Drewitt."

For fully a minute the two men walked westward without speaking. It was Drewitt who at length broke the silence.

"I understood, Richard, that you had forsaken the haunts of men in favour of sitting under hedges and haystacks."

"I had to give it up," said Beresford with a self-conscious laugh. "I found the country is for the temperamentally robust."

Drewitt turned and looked at him, but made no comment.

"There's too much incident, too much excitement, too many adventures for a man accustomed to the quiet of town life," continued Beresford. "If you really want to be alone you must be in London."

"I believe that has been said before," remarked Drewitt drily, as they climbed the steps of the Diplomatic Club and passed into the smoking room.

With a sigh Drewitt threw himself into a chair.

"Where are you staying?" he enquired.

"At the Ritz-Carlton."

Drewitt merely raised his eyebrows and, beckoning a waiter, ordered whiskies-and-sodas.

"What's she like?" With great deliberation he proceeded to light a cigarette. Presently he raised his eyes and looked enquiringly at Beresford over the flame.

"You impute everything to a wrong motive——" began Beresford.

"A woman is not a motive, my dear Richard," interrupted Drewitt; "she's an imaginative extravagance of Nature, like a mushroom, or the aurora borealis."

"You expect," continued Beresford, ignoring the interruption, "that every man is capable of making an ass of himself about some woman and, naturally, you are never surprised when he does."

"The surprise generally comes when I meet the woman," was the dry retort. "What does the Aunt say?"

"I haven't seen her yet," Beresford confessed.

"There are only two sorts of men in the world, Richard," said Drewitt after a short silence. "Those who make asses of themselves and those——"

"How is she," interrupted Beresford.

"Who, the Aunt?"

"Yes."

"At the present moment she is much occupied with a project by which I shall become the legal protector of a lady's freckled and rather shapeless charms and, incidentally, the guardian of her estate, amounting to I forget how many million dollars."

"Noblesse oblige," laughed Beresford.

"Noblesse be damned," murmured Drewitt evenly. "The situation is not without its embarrassments," he added.

"But surely you can decline," said Beresford. "You have your two thousand a year."

"Two thousand a year is just sufficient to embarrass a man who otherwise might have carved out a career for himself, in accordance with the best traditions of the novel. With nothing at all I should have got into the illustrated papers as a romantic figure in London Society; but with two thousand a year——" he shrugged his shoulders and, with great deliberation, extinguished his cigarette in the ash-tray beside him.

"There is always hope, Drew, 'Unto him who hath shall be given.'"

"Precisely," replied Drewitt, "unto him that hath two thousand a year shall be given Aunt Caroline

for all time. She has, however, a peculiarly discriminating nature. She recognises the inadequacy of two thousand a year to keep up the title of the barony of Drewitt."

"Some day she'll give you a little out of her own fifty thousand a year," suggested Beresford.

"My dear Richard," Drewitt drawled, "there is an obvious bourgeois trait in you. The Aunt is a woman of originality and imagination. She does much better than that. She collects and hurls at me all the heiresses for continents round. Such figures, such faces, such limbs, exist nowhere outside the imagination of a German caricaturist. Sometimes they have attached to them mammas, sometimes papas, which merely adds to the horror of the situation. I suppose," he continued resignedly, "it is due to the rise in democracy that the accent and waist-measurement of wealth should be as obvious as the Chiltern Hills."

"But surely there are some heiresses with attractions, Drew," suggested Richard.

Drewitt shook his head in profound dejection.

"None, my dear Richard, none. Even if there were, there would always be the relatives. Why is it," he demanded plaintively, "that we are endowed with relatives?"

"That's where birds and animals have the best of it," said Beresford, watching an impudent-looking sparrow on the window-ledge. "They don't even know their relatives."

"That, too, would have its disadvantages," said

Drewitt gloomily; "if we didn't know them, we might adopt them as friends, and only find out our mistake when it was too late."

"But why trouble about marrying?" asked Beresford. "You can rub along fairly well on two thousand a year."

"Rub along," retorted Drewitt in a voice that contained something of feeling, "I can rub along: but I have to marry and produce little Drewitts for the sake of the title. I can't go round with a barrel-piano, I should be bound to catch cold; besides, I have no sense of rhythm."

Beresford laughed at the expression of unutterable gloom upon his cousin's face.

"To throw a man upon the tender mercies of the world as the third peer of a line is a shameful and humiliating act."

Drewitt gazed reflectively at the cigarette he had just selected from his case. Striking a match, he lighted it with great deliberation.

"All titles," he continued, "like the evening papers, should begin at the fourth issue, and then there might be a sort of final night edition, after which the line would become extinct."

"But how——" began Beresford.

Drewitt motioned him to silence.

"There would be some virtue in being the seventh Baron Drewitt," he explained. "A seventh baron might have traditions, a family ghost, a picture gallery of acquired ancestors. These are the things which make a Family. No family should be admitted

to Burke without a ghost, one that walks in clanking chains, although why ghosts should choose these unmusical accompaniments I've never been able to discover. Then there should be a thoroughly disreputable ancestor, or ancestress, generally called Sir Rupert, or Lady Marjorie, and finally a motto that shall foretell the happening of something when something else takes place."

He sipped his whiskey-and-soda with an air of deep depression.

"The Drewitts have no ghost, nothing more disreputable than myself, and the nearest thing to a family motto that we can lay claim to is the trade mark of the far-famed Drewitt Ales, a ship on a sea of beer above the thrilling legend:

"I see it foam
Where'er I roam."

Richard," he said, leaning forward and speaking earnestly, "that is what keeps me back. I've just realised it. It's that damned motto.

"The Aunt's latest scheme," he continued after a pause, "is concerned with one Lola Craven, reputed to have well over a million inherited from an uncle who undermined the constitution of the British Empire by producing New Zealand mutton, which found its way over here in a frozen state. I tasted the stuff once, I actually swallowed the first mouthful," he added.

"What is she like?" asked Beresford.

"Probably like the mutton," answered Drewitt; "they descend upon me with such rapidity that I cannot get the taste of one out of my mouth before another is produced. Ida Hopkins was the last, she of the freckles. Her shapelessness, my dear Richard, was really most indelicate. She bulged wherever she should have receded, and receded everywhere she should have bulged."

"And what did Aunt Caroline say?" enquired Beresford.

"Oh, she said quite a lot about saving the title, and the woman who was content with her place by the fireside. I pointed out some of Ida's physical imperfections, and suggested a photographer's dark-room in preference to the fireside; but the Aunt said that if I wished to be indelicate, I had better go; so I went, and Ida has taken her gross inequalities to another market. It's all very tame and tedious," he added.

"What's Lola Craven like?" asked Beresford.

"I haven't the most remote idea. She has one advantage, however, she's an orphan, with only an aunt attachment."

"Lola Craven is also a much better name than Ida Hopkins."

"When you marry," said Drewitt, "you don't live with a visiting-card, you have to live with a woman. That's what makes marriage so infernally uncomfortable. But tell me about yourself."

Beresford outlined the adventures that had befallen him, making no mention, however, of the

Rain-Girl. When he had finished Drewitt regarded him with interest.

"There is one thing I have always liked about you, Richard, you're an ass; but you don't seem to mind other people knowing it. Most of the asses I have met endeavour to camouflage their asinine qualities with lions' skins. Is it indiscreet to enquire what you propose to do?"

"I shall carry on to the extent of my finances," said Beresford with a smile.

"And then?"

"Oh! I may enter for the Ida Hopkins stakes."

"You might, but I'm afraid it's no good. Ida's out for plunder, she will sell her charms only for a title, and you have nothing more attractive than a D.S.O. and the reputation of being mentally a little unequally balanced, at least that is what the Aunt would tell her. In any case I wouldn't recommend Ida."

"Why?"

"Even if you could accommodate your ideas to her figure and its defiance of the law of feminine proportion, you would find her freckles a source of constant worry. They are like a bewildering bedroom wall-paper to an invalid. You have to try and count them, and of course you lose your place and start again. When I first met her they so fascinated me that I could do nothing but stare at her, and she blushed. Heavens! that blush. It was the most awful thing I have ever encountered. I felt that it must inevitably be followed by a violent perspiration.

I fled. No, Richard; give up all thought of Ida. Why, even now I live in daily terror lest some man I know may marry her and ask me to be best man. Now I must be going. I'm due at the Bolsovers' at four o'clock, and it's already half-past five."

Both men rose and walked towards the door.

"By the way, is it absolutely necessary that you should stay at the Ritz-Carlton?"

"Absolutely," with decision.

"Ah, well! you're an interesting sort of ass, Richard, I will say that for you. I'll see that you meet Lola. Sometimes these heiresses like a fool without a title just as much as one with, and it would please the Aunt to keep her in the family. Good-bye."

Drewitt hailed a taxi and drove off, Beresford turning westward. He had refused his cousin's invitation to lunch on the morrow, determined to be free of all engagements. He turned gloomily into the Park, crossed the road and sat down upon a vacant chair. In a novel the Rain-Girl would drive by in a car or carriage, bow to him half shyly and with a blush. He would start up and she would order the chauffeur or coachman to stop. He would be introduced to the aunt, invited to lunch and——

"Oh, damn!"

Beresford stabbed viciously at the gravel with his stick, and glared savagely at an inoffensive little man with grey mutton-chop whiskers, who looked amazed that any one could be profane on so perfect a day.

"Beg pardon, sir; but 'er Ladyship would like to speak to you."

The voice seemed to come suddenly from nowhere. Beresford turned to find Rogers, Lady Drewitt's first footman, at his elbow. He looked beyond Rogers and saw Lady Drewitt herself seated in her carriage, examining him attentively through her lorgnettes. With her was Mrs. Edward Seymour.

Beresford walked slowly and reluctantly towards the carriage. What cursed luck, he told himself, to run up against Aunt Caroline so early in his adventure.

Caroline, Lady Drewitt, was the widow of the second Baron Drewitt of Tonscombe, who had died at the age of fifty, leaving to his lady an enormous fortune and to his nephew, Philip, the title with two thousand a year. The first Baron had gone "upstairs" by virtue of the famous Drewitt Ales, and a profound belief in the soundness of Tory principles and legislative inspiration.

Lady Drewitt took it as her mission in life to see that "the family" behaved itself. Whenever a Drewitt or a Challice—Lady Drewitt was a Challice before her marriage—got into difficulties the first thought was, what would Lady Drewitt think? but this was as nothing to the morbid speculation as to what she would probably say. She had a worldly brain and a biting tongue. She never strove to smooth troubled waters; but by making them intolerably rough frequently achieved the same end.

As Beresford approached, Lady Drewitt continued to stare at him with uncompromising intentness through her lorgnettes.

"What is the meaning of this, Richard?" she demanded in level tones as he reached the side of the carriage.

"That's just what has been puzzling me," said Beresford, smiling across at his cousin Cecily. "I think the weather people call it the approach of an anti-cyclone. For June in London it's really——"

"Don't be a fool, Richard. Why are you in London?"

"My dear Aunt, it's June and I am a Challice. We Challices all gravitate towards the metropolis in June just as the cuckoo gravitates—— What is it the cuckoo gravitates towards, Cecily?" he enquired, turning suddenly to Mrs. Edward.

"You said that you were going to sell all your——"

"Duds," suggested Beresford helpfully, as Lady Drewitt hesitated. "I did." He enjoyed Mrs. Edward's scandalised look.

"Then how is it——?" again she hesitated.

"I bought more. My tailor seemed quite pleased," he added as an afterthought.

"But why are you in town, Richard?" burst out Mrs. Edward, unable longer to restrain herself. Her tone seemed to imply that Beresford's being in London was an offence against good taste.

"The bucolic life was too much for me, Cecily. You would be astounded at the bewildering manner

in which adventures descend upon the would-be vagabond and recluse."

"Where are you staying?" demanded Lady Drewitt, with the air of one not to be trifled with.

"At the Ritz-Carlton."

"The Ritz-Carlton!" Lady Drewitt's lorgnettes fell from her nerveless hand and her jaw dropped.

"A little bourgeois perhaps," admitted Beresford, "but it's really quite respectable."

"You will come and dine with me to-night, Richard." There was grim determination in Lady Drewitt's tone.

"I'm afraid I cannot, Aunt Caroline, I——"

"Then lunch to-morrow."

"As a matter of fact I am engaged for all meals for the next six weeks." Beresford had determined not to risk missing the Rain-Girl by either lunching or dining away from the Ritz-Carlton.

Lady Drewitt continued to stare.

"If I may run in to tea one afternoon," he suggested.

"To-morrow, then, at four." Lady Drewitt's jaws closed with a snap.

With a smile and a bow Beresford lifted his hat and strolled away, feeling that there were compensations in a life that permitted a man to refuse two invitations from a wealthy relative.

Lady Drewitt drove home, and beside her sat Mrs. Edward, who had just remembered with a sigh of misgiving that she and her husband were dining that night with their "dear Aunt Caroline."

CHAPTER VII

LADY DREWITT SPEAKS HER MIND

AS Payne threw open the door on the following afternoon, Beresford thought he detected a look of sympathy upon his features, and he mentally decided that the first-footman had narrated in the servants'-hall the conversation in the Park of the previous afternoon.

"Well, Payne, how's the rheumatism?" he enquired.

"It's been a little better lately, sir; I've taken to drinking water."

"Good heavens! with nothing in it?"

Payne shook his head and smiled sadly.

"We shall hear of your starting a temperance hotel next," said Beresford, as Payne led the way to the morning-room.

"God forbid, sir," he said fervently; then, throwing open the door, he announced Beresford.

"What is the meaning of this, Richard?" demanded Lady Drewitt, before Payne had time to close the door behind him.

"The meaning of what, Aunt Caroline?" asked Beresford, as he seated himself.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," said

Lady Drewitt grimly. "Why are you in town?"

"I've had pneumonia, and the doctor ordered me to Folkestone, so——"

"Then why didn't you go there?" demanded Lady Drewitt uncompromisingly.

Beresford racked his brains for some reason he could give as to why he had not gone direct to Folkestone.

"You see," he began hesitatingly, then with inspiration, "I had to come to town to get some clothes." He looked down at his well-groomed person.

"You don't want clothes at Folkestone in June," snapped Lady Drewitt.

"Men do, Aunt Caroline," said Beresford; "it's only the seaside-girl who does without."

"Don't be indelicate." Then after a pause she continued, "You come and tell me you are about to become a tramp, and the next I hear is that you are living at the Ritz-Carlton. I want to know what it means."

"To be frank, Aunt Caroline, it means that the country-side was too exciting for me. It requires a constitution of bronze and a temperament of reinforced concrete."

"When you see your way to talk sense, Richard, I shall possibly be able to understand you." Lady Drewitt folded her hands in her ample black silk lap and waited.

"I doubt it," said Beresford pleasantly. "As a matter of fact I entirely fail to understand myself."

"You are my sister's only son."

He recognised the grim note of duty in his aunt's voice. As he did not reply she continued:

"And it is my duty to——"

"Couldn't we leave duty out of the question," he suggested, "at least for the present?"

"I demand an explanation, Richard," continued Lady Drewitt inexorably.

"There's very little to tell," said he. "I started out on my adventure, and at the end of the first day I got pneumonia. That meant five weeks spent at 'The Two Dragons,' with a sort of musical-comedy doctor and an insane nurse. Incidentally it cost me well over fifty pounds. I then decided that the country was too exciting for me, so I came back to town for a rest."

"But why are you staying at the Ritz-Carlton?"

"It does as well as any other place," was the response, "although I must confess that in poaching eggs they are not inspired, but then I never liked eggs; still, their *bisque à l'écrevisse* leaves little room for criticism."

"What does it cost you there?"

"I really haven't been into the financial aspect of the affair," said Beresford. "I should say roughly from twenty-five to thirty pounds a week. It's really quite moderate as things are."

Lady Drewitt gasped; but recovered herself instantly.

"And you have about two hundred pounds left," she said, making a swift mental calculation.

"One hundred and twenty-five pounds three-and-sixpence-halfpenny, to be strictly accurate," responded Beresford. "I take stock of my finances every morning. I should add, in justice to myself, that I owe not any man."

"So that at about the end of four weeks you will be——"

"Impoverished, but as the Season will be over and——"

"What do you propose to do?" demanded Lady Drewitt.

"As a matter of fact," he said candidly, "I don't propose to do anything in particular. I'm just drifting."

"How are you going to live?" Lady Drewitt was not to be denied.

"I hadn't thought of it."

Lady Drewitt was clearly nonplussed.

"You can't live without money," she announced presently.

"Need we dot all the 'i's' and cross all the 't's'?" he enquired smilingly. "I might try a barrel-piano with a ticket on it announcing that I am a cousin of Lord Drewitt and nephew of Lady Drewitt."

"Don't be a fool, Richard," was the uncompromising response. "Do you expect me——" she paused.

"On the contrary," he said quietly, "I have never expected anything of you, Aunt Caroline. That is why we have always been such excellent friends."

LADY DREWITT SPEAKS HER MIND 103

For a moment Lady Drewitt eyed Beresford severely.

"I shall have to consult Drewitt and your cousin, Edward Seymour," she announced.

"I beg of you not to," he said. "Poor Drewitt is fully occupied in dodging the heiresses you hurl at his head, and as for Edward, I never could place any reliance in the opinion of a man with extravagant tastes and no chin. Besides, he is an echo of his wife, who is a reflection of you."

"What do you mean?"

"They neither of them have a will of their own," said Beresford, "and always reflect your opinions."

"I shall consult Drewitt," announced Lady Drewitt.

"I'm afraid it's of no use. I consulted him myself yesterday afternoon."

"And what did he say?"

"He suggested that I might take a sort of reversionary interest in the heiresses that were produced for his approval. He thought I might begin on Miss Ida Hopkins; but he was frankly pessimistic. He doubted if I could refrain from trying to count her freckles."

"Don't be flippant, Richard." Lady Drewitt was annoyed. "You have your career to consider. You are young."

"But I was a failure at Whitehall," he added.

"If you don't like the Foreign Office," persisted Lady Drewitt, "why don't you do something else?"

"There is so little open to a man with all the limitations of a university education."

"I'm afraid you're lazy." Lady Drewitt's tone implied no doubt whatever.

"No," said Beresford evenly, "I don't think I can be accused of being lazy; it's merely that I don't want to do anything. I'm tired of all this praise lavished on industry. I shall be just as happy in the next world as those inventive geniuses who first conceived screw-tops for bottles, or the sock-suspender. I——"

"You are talking nonsense."

"I'm afraid I am," was the smiling retort.

"You have already thrown up an excellent appointment for no reason whatever."

"On the contrary, Aunt Caroline, I threw it up for a very excellent reason. I wanted to develop my soul."

"Fiddlesticks."

Beresford shrugged his shoulders.

"I confess I had reckoned without pneumonia," he added.

"I told you that you would catch cold, or something of the sort," said Lady Drewitt with unction.

"You did, Aunt Caroline; I give you every credit for pre-vision."

"And now you come back to London, spend your money buying new clothes and in expensive living, and at the end of a month you'll be a beggar."

"Impoverished was the word, aunt. One can be impoverished without begging."

"But how are you to live?"

"I didn't say I was going to live. I might possibly die artistically of starvation."

"Why don't you go to the colonies?" demanded Lady Drewitt.

"I have never been enthusiastic about the colonies," he replied. "I dislike Australian wines, Canadian cheese, New Zealand mutton, and in France it was a South African who saved my life. Then to add insult to injury the authorities gave him the D.C.M. No, Aunt Caroline, the colonies no more exist for me than they do for the Kaiser."

"Then what are you going to do?" persisted Lady Drewitt.

"Frankly I haven't the foggiest idea," he admitted, as Payne entered, followed by Rogers with the tea-tray, which he proceeded to place beside Lady Drewitt. For a few moments there was silence, during which Payne and Rogers withdrew. "No sugar, please," said Beresford, as Lady Drewitt poised a lump over his cup.

"If you would go to the colonies, Richard, I might be prepared to——"

"Give me your blessing, exactly, Aunt Caroline," interrupted Beresford suavely. "I have, however, made it a rule ever since we have been acquainted to value your good opinion more than your largesse."

"What do you mean?"

"You are too shrewd not to appreciate that wealth has strange and devious influences. It causes to flow the milk of human kindness, it makes one's con-

temporaries strangely tolerant, it permits the possessor to say things that would otherwise not be tolerated. In short, it does quite a lot of things. No, I have never expected your wealth, nor do I want it. Your advice, like greatness, is thrust upon me; but I prefer to meet you on equal terms."

For a moment there was a strange look in Lady Drewitt's eyes, as she stared fixedly at her nephew.

"You're a fool, Richard," she said with decision. "You always were a fool; but——"

"I am at least an honest fool. I must have another one of those cream cakes," he added. "You see a man with only four weeks of social life can eat anything. He hasn't to think of his waist-measurement."

Lady Drewitt regarded him with a puzzled expression.

"I shall have to see Drewitt about you," she announced.

"He is too fully occupied with his own concerns. When we discussed the reversionary interest in his heiresses, he asked me what I had to give in return, and I had to confess that all I possessed was a temperament. No woman wants a husband with a temperament, at least, she's not prepared to pay for it."

"I shall speak to your cousin Edward Seymour," announced Lady Drewitt with decision.

"I assure you it will be of no use, Aunt Caroline. With that long fair moustache of his, Edward always reminds me of a dissipated and diminutive

LADY DREWITT SPEAKS HER MIND 107

Viking. There are, however, always Drew's heir-esses," he said as he rose. "If you will put in a good word for me, say that I'm tame, with no particularly bad habits, don't like cards, seldom take cold, and am as domesticated as a foundling cat, I feel I have a chance." He held out his hand, and Lady Drewitt extended hers with reluctance.

"Richard, you're a fool," she announced with almost vindictive decision. He smiled, bowed and closed the door behind him.

"Payne," he remarked as the butler opened the door for him, "there are worse things in life than rheumatism;" and he went down the steps leaving Payne to digest the remark.

As Beresford walked along Curzon Street he saw the Edward Seymours approaching; their mission was too obvious to require explanation. They were calling on Lady Drewitt to hear the result of the interview with her prodigal nephew.

"Well," sneered Edward Seymour in the tone he invariably adopted to Beresford, "have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Immensely, thank you, Edward," was the smiling reply. "It always does me good to hear Aunt Caroline talk of you."

"Talk of me." There was eagerness and anxiety in Edward Seymour's voice, as he looked sharply at Beresford, and then apprehensively in the direction of his wife.

"What did dear Aunt Caroline say about Edward?" enquired Mrs. Edward sweetly.

"I'm afraid——" began Beresford, then paused. "I'm afraid I couldn't repeat it before you, Cecily."

Mrs. Edward looked at him sharply. Into Edward Seymour's eyes had crept a look of vindictive malice.

"It's only his lies," he said to his wife. "He's jealous of me."

Beresford looked him up and down appraisingly. The little man squirmed under the smiling scorn he saw in his cousin's eyes.

"Yes," said Beresford, "I think that must be the explanation. Good-bye," and lifting his hat he passed on, feeling refreshed as a result of the encounter.

With something like trepidation Edward Seymour followed his wife into Lady Drewitt's morning-room. It was always an ordeal for him to meet his aunt. She never hesitated to express her supreme contempt for the husband of her favourite niece.

"Dear Aunt Caroline," gushed Mrs. Edward. "We've just seen Richard. I'm afraid he has been worrying you."

"Sit down, Cecily," she commanded; and Mrs. Edward subsided into a chair. "Don't fidget, Edward," she snapped, turning irritably to her nephew.

Edward Seymour started back from the album he was fingering, as if some one had run a hat-pin into him.

"Make him sit down and be quiet, Cecily," said Lady Drewitt complainingly. At a look from his wife Edward Seymour wilted into a chair.

"What did Richard say to you?" demanded Lady Drewitt.

"He didn't say anything, Aunt Caroline," began Mrs. Edward tactfully, "but——"

"He was very rude to me," interrupted Edward Seymour peevishly.

"What did he say?" demanded Lady Drewitt, fixing her uncomfortable nephew with her eye.

"It was his manner," Mrs. Edward hastened to say. "His manner is always very—very rude to poor Edward."

Lady Drewitt gave expression to a noise suggestive of a horse clearing its nostrils of fodder-dust.

"He's mad," muttered Lady Drewitt half to herself; "but he's got the real Challice independence."

"I'm afraid he worries you a lot, dear Aunt Caroline," said Mrs. Edward, alarmed lest out of the kindness of her heart Lady Drewitt should take a too generous view of Beresford's shortcomings.

"He doesn't worry me nearly so much as Edward does fidgeting," snapped Lady Drewitt, fixing Edward Seymour with her eye. "Why on earth do you bring him with you, Cecily?"

Mrs. Edward threw a warning glance at her husband, then catching her aunt's eye she smiled at him indulgently, much as if he had been a favourite dog whose removal from the room was under discussion.

For half an hour Mrs. Edward strove to extract from Lady Drewitt what had taken place during her interview with Beresford; but without result.

Lady Drewitt was not without shrewdness. Cecily Seymour was useful to her as a target for her arrows of scorn; but she possessed no illusions as to the nature of her niece and nephew's devotion. The uncompromising independence of Beresford, although it angered her, at the same time commanded her respect. She was a woman, and the strong masculine personality of Beresford appealed to her in spite of herself. She demanded subservience; yet scorned those who gave it. She strove to break spirits, all the time instinctively admiring those that refused to be broken.

As the Edward Seymours took their leave Lady Drewitt said—

"Cecily, don't bring Edward again, he fidgets too much."

On the way home Mrs. Edward made it clear to her lord that if Aunt Caroline failed in what they hoped she would not fail, it would be entirely due to his constitutional inability to keep still.

"I'm sorry," he said miserably.

"You're not, you do it on purpose," she retorted in a tone which convinced him that on the other side of their front-door there awaited him tears, and yet more tears.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEIRESS INDISPOSED

RICHARD, I require moral courage," said Drewitt, lazily, as he crumpled up into a basket-chair, which squeaked protestingly beneath his weight, "and if the funds will run to it, a whisky-and-soda."

Beresford beckoned to the waiter and gave the order. Hoskins had telephoned earlier in the day to say that Drewitt would be calling at the Ritz-Carlton about nine.

"I'm bound for the Aunt's," continued Drewitt a few minutes later, when, fortified by the whisky-and-soda, he proceeded to light a cigarette. "There we shall meet the latest aspirant to my hand and what might be called 'the trimmings.'"

"Lola Craven?"

"The same. Incidentally you accompany me. It has been said, I believe, that romance brought up the nine-nteen. We shall in all probability be a few minutes late."

"But why on earth do you want me? I haven't been invited."

"It's a dinner-party, Richard, and the Aunt never desires poor relations at dinner-parties. At a crush,

or a tea, it doesn't matter, they can be pushed on one side, like a dubious oyster; but at dinner they must to some extent establish themselves in the general eye."

"But why do you want me to go with you?" persisted Beresford.

"I require moral courage, Richard, and your clothes are newer than mine. Apart from that, for a poor relation you are really quite presentable."

"Thanks," said Beresford drily.

"For another thing I want a setting."

"A setting!"

"The Aunt is rather obvious in her choice of men. For instance, to-night she will have a wonderful collection of undesirables. They will either have no hair on their heads, or hair all over their faces, like retired naval officers—celibate, of course. They are bound to be old and dull."

"But why the——" began Beresford.

"One moment," Drewitt raised a protesting hand.

"She desires that I shall have no rival to my charms. That is why I'm taking you. I want to demonstrate to all whom it may concern that I can shine, even in the presence of another presentable man."

"Aunt Caroline won't like it," said Beresford dubiously.

"As she never likes anything, your presence will not cause any deviation from the normal."

"But I thought you said it was a dinner," said Beresford.

"It was and is; but I gave a miss in baulk to the

meal. I cannot stand the Aunt's dinners. I told Hoskins to telephone that I had swallowed a fish-bone, or a stud, I've forgotten which. I shall know when I get there."

"But what the deuce do you want me to do?" asked Beresford, puzzled to account for his cousin's insistence on his presence.

"Nothing, my dear Richard, just what you are always doing in that inimitable and elegant manner of yours. You will merely act as a foil. The Aunt arranges these things rather badly. She fails to understand that if you like fair men, you like them more by virtue of the presence of a dark man, even if he happens to be an obvious fool."

"Thanks!"

"Not at all," was the reply; "you and I probably are the two most obvious fools west of St. Stephen's."

"I'll go if you wish it, Drew; but I'd rather not. Where Aunt Caroline is concerned I'm rather——"

"A homœopathist, exactly. I quite sympathise with you. To-night, however, I shall take it as a kindness if you'll weigh-in," and he rose to indicate that the time of departure had come. "I enjoy your conversation, Richard, I enjoy it intensely; but I cannot afford it at nearly a penny a minute. My taxi is waiting," he explained.

They drove the short distance to Curzon Street in silence.

By the hum of conversation that greeted them as

they walked upstairs, Beresford judged that it was a dinner-party of considerable proportions.

"Lord Drewitt, Mr. Richard Beresford," bawled Payne, as if determined that his voice should beat down the volume of sound that seemed set on escaping from the room. Lady Drewitt was standing near the door. As they entered she turned and sailed towards them.

"Are you better?" she demanded with uncompromising directness.

"Much, thank you," replied Drewitt, with a smile.

"I sent out for another."

"Sent out for another!" she looked at him suspiciously. "Payne said your man telephoned that you had a slight heart-attack."

"Ah! was that it? I thought I had swallowed a sleeve-link, the symptoms are so similar. By the way," he added, "I made Richard come with me, I'm getting a little concerned about his spending his evenings alone in London."

Lady Drewitt gave Beresford a look that told him all he had anticipated; then, turning to Drewitt, she said, "I want to introduce you to Mrs. Crisp; Miss Craven is indisposed."

"It is not for the lamb to protest," he murmured as he followed, leaving Beresford to amuse himself by a contemplation of his aunt's somewhat clumsy strategy in her selection of guests, most of whom were middle-aged or elderly.

A moment later he felt a hand upon his arm and

Drewitt was leading him to the other end of the room.

"Please remember that I brought you as moral, not as military support, Richard," he said. "Moral support is always in the van. You are a civilian now. You have ceased to be a soldier."

Lady Drewitt was talking to a little white-haired woman of vast volubility and rapid change of expression. She had hard eyes, and a skin that in tint reminded Beresford of putty.

Lady Drewitt introduced Drewitt, and added Beresford as if he were an afterthought. She was obviously annoyed by his presence. Mrs. Crisp turned to Drewitt and proceeded to deluge him with short, jerky sentences, her words seeming to jostle each other as they streamed from her lips. Sometimes the first letters of two words would become transposed, with rather startling results.

"So unfortunate, Lord Drewitt. My niece has a severe headache. Quite prostrate. She stripped in the street in Piccadilly. Such a dangerous place you know. Every one was so nice about it. A clergyman with black spats and such delightful manners. Long ones, you know, right up to the knee. He was most sympathetic. I think it's a tooth; but the doctor says it's an over-active brain. I want her to have it out. My dear father always did. He hadn't any when he died. We buried him at Brookwood. Such a dreadful journey. I remember I lost my handkerchief, and I had such a cold. My dear mother followed him in a year." Having

drenched her hearers with her verbal hose, Mrs. Crisp smiled, then continued, "You must meet her. She goes away to-morrow. I want you to come to breakfast. Mr. Quelch is coming. He's so psychic. I love breakfast-parties." The last few jets were directed solely at Drewitt.

At the mention of the word "breakfast," Beresford glanced across at Drewitt, who had probably never been out to breakfast in his life. He usually rose in time for lunch, provided it were a late lunch; yet without the flicker of an eyelash he was telling Mrs. Crisp that he feared he had a breakfast engagement for the morrow.

"Who with?" demanded Lady Drewitt, suspiciously.

In a moment of misguided loyalty Beresford dashed in to the rescue.

"With me, Aunt Caroline." He wondered why Drewitt flashed at him a reproachful glance.

"Then you come too," broke in Mrs. Crisp, acknowledging Beresford's presence for the first time. "You'll enjoy Mr. Quelch. He's so fond of porridge, so am I. We have it every morning. It always reminds me of bag-pipes. Such dreadful things. They play them while you eat it in Scotland. Or is it haggis? It made me very ill when I was in Edinburgh. Mr. Quelch loves it. Such psychic qualities." Mrs. Crisp trailed off into staccatoed superlatives relative to the merits and virtues of Mr. Quelch, as if he had been a culinary *chef d'œuvre*, at the same time leaving in the minds

of her hearers the impression that the porridge as well as Mr. Quelch was possessed of psychic qualities.

"I'm afraid it's a breakfast-party," lied Beresford glibly. "I have asked some friends to meet my cousin, some Americans," he added, thinking to impress Mrs. Crisp by giving to the engagement an international flavour.

"So wonderful," burst forth Mrs. Crisp, "they really think they won the war. Everybody seems to have won the war, except of course the Germans. Such nice people. Americans I mean. So psychic. Mr. Wilson, too, I hear he means to be Emperor. Mr. Quelch likes Americans. He says, I forget exactly what it was. It was very clever. They live on such funny things, grape-fruit and ice-water, and divorce costs hardly anything. So nice for the servants. I mean the grape-fruit and ice-water. So you'll explain, Mr. Berry, won't you?"

Mrs. Crisp turned to Beresford with what she probably meant to be an arch look. "You will, won't you?" To Drewitt she continued, "I'll take no denial. Lola would never forgive me. She would be so disappointed. I hate disappointing her. This morning I promised her soles. They hadn't any. So annoying of them. Do you like soles, Lord Drewitt?"

"With me it is a matter of spelling."

"Oh, I see. I can't spell either. Isn't it strange. I always spell lose with two 'o's.' "

"I invariably spell camel with one hump," said Drewitt gravely.

"How amusing. I thought men could always spell. They're so interesting, I think. Camels I mean. I saw one in *Romeo and Juliet*, or was it *The Luck of the Navy*?"

"*Chu Chin Chow*," suggested Beresford.

"Ah! was it? So psychic it seemed. I love camels. You know they can go for years without water. So remarkable. I should like to keep a camel. I love pets. Have you ever kept anything, Lord Drewitt?"

"Only a taxi once. I kept it for six hours. I forgot it was there——"

"And the men are so rude," continued Mrs. Crisp. "The other night one said dreadful things. I forget what they were. Most profane he was. You can't stop them. The men I mean, not the taxis. But I'm told they're getting better. There are more of them about. There's bound to be the ping of the swendulum. But you will come to breakfast, won't you?" Mrs. Crisp smiled a porcelain smile, whilst her hard little eyes glanced from one to the other, as if seeking a smouldering ember of hesitancy on which to turn her verbal spray.

"I'm sure Richard will excuse his cousin," said Lady Drewitt with a smile; but in a tone that Beresford recognised as final. "I will call for Philip myself," she announced.

"How good of you," cried Mrs. Crisp. "I didn't dare to expect it. Breakfast-parties are so rare.

They're wonderful. I always think we are at our best in the morning. They say Mr. George Lloyd governs the country at breakfast. Such an appetite I'm told—and what charming manners. So tactful with the Labour Members. I always tell Lola they're more important than morals. Manners I mean, not the Labour Members. You'll love Mr. Quelch, Lady Drewitt. He's so gifted. So psychic. Don't forget half-past eight. We always breakfast early."

Beresford looked at Lady Drewitt. She certainly did not inspire confidence in her power to love anything or anybody as she stood there, a grim figure determined to achieve her ends. The thought of Drewitt being at his best at breakfast was amusing.

Beresford found himself wondering what Lola Craven was like. It would be worth a fortune, he decided, to marry a niece of Mrs. Crisp, no matter how great her attractions. He never remembered to have met so strange and bird-like a creature. Her round eyes were entirely devoid of expression, beyond a glint, and her face moved as if controlled by steel springs. Added to this was her unrestrained flow of words. Whatever she might be, no one could withhold his sympathies from Lola Craven upon the possession of such an aunt.

For the next half-hour he chatted with acquaintances among the guests, confident that Drewitt would get him away as soon as he decently could. From time to time he caught a glimpse of him still

engaged with Mrs. Crisp, she in conversation, he in calling up all his reserves of good-breeding to simulate interest. Presently he found himself standing quite close to him.

"And now," he heard Drewitt say, "I must take Richard home. He is really an invalid, and has to be careful of the night air. You see he set out to get near to Nature; but found her an extremely chilly damsel, and contracted pneumonia."

"You are quite right, Lord Drewitt," streamed Mrs. Crisp. "I had a brother once who caught cold after bronchitis, although he always wore goloshes. Such splendid things. Americans call them 'rubbers.' Always reminds me of whist. He was gone in a week. You can never be too careful, Mr. Berry," she added, turning to Beresford.

"And now, Mrs. Crisp, I really must take him away," and leaving Mrs. Crisp still in full cry, they went in search of Lady Drewitt.

As they made their adieux, Lady Drewitt once more stated her intention of calling for Drewitt on the morrow at a quarter-past eight. They passed out of the Belle Vue and turned down Piccadilly. For some time they walked in silence.

"Death with some men is a supreme stroke of diplomacy," murmured Drewitt at length, "with others it is an unsporting act of evasion. I have known cases even when it might have been described as an indulgence; but with Mr. Crisp it was unquestionably an act of self-preservation."

"If the fair Lola insists on Auntie living with you,

Drew, I'm afraid you are in for a thin time," said Beresford. "Possibly she could be fitted with silencers."

"I'm wondering," said Drewitt, disregarding the remark, "what I am to say to Hoskins?"

"What about?"

"He's been a good servant," continued Drewitt sadly, "and if——"

"Oh! about to-morrow," Beresford laughed.

"If I were to tell him suddenly and without proper preparation that I intend to rise to-morrow at seven, it would in all probability prove fatal. I am really greatly concerned as to how to break the news to him."

"Why not get up without him?" suggested Beresford.

"Get up without Hoskins!" Drewitt looked at his cousin as if he had suggested attending a *levée* in a sweater. "Get up without Hoskins!" he repeated. There was pained reproach in his voice.

"Well, anyhow, you're in for it."

"Richard, have you ever seen a man break down?"

"Out there——" began Beresford seriously; then, seeing the drift of Drewitt's remark, added, "Don't be an ass, Drew."

"I see you haven't, then we had better say good-night here;" and Drewitt hailed a passing taxi, whilst Beresford walked slowly back to the Ritz-Carlton.

CHAPTER IX

THE PURSUIT TO FOLKESTONE

ON the morning following the meeting with Mrs. Crisp, Beresford was strolling down St. James's Street, still engaged upon the everlasting search, and speculating as to what had happened at the breakfast-party arranged on the previous night.

The idea of Drewitt and his Aunt Caroline going out to breakfast possessed an aspect of novelty and humour that appealed to him. He could see Drewitt finding in that meal a subject of complaint for months to come. In a way he pitied Hoskins. He could picture Drewitt keeping his man busy for the rest of the day in bringing fresh relays of coffee, and listening to his opinions on the mental capacity of those who allowed their gregarious instincts to triumph at the beginning of the day. Drewitt had always preached the doctrine that there should be no social intercourse before lunch.

Beresford paused at the bottom of St. James's Street to allow the stream of traffic to pass. Suddenly his heart started pounding with almost suffocating vigour. There in a taxi that was swinging round the curve was the Rain-Girl—alone. Beside

the driver was some luggage. She was going away. In a flash he realised that this was his supreme opportunity.

With the wild look of a hunted man, he glanced about him. All the taxis were full. He could not hurl from one of them its occupants, and by threats make the driver follow that in which the Rain-Girl was seated. He could not ask some one to allow him to enter their vehicle, and instruct the driver to follow another taxi. They would think him mad. There seemed nothing for it but to follow on foot, to run for it.

The picture of a man in a top hat and morning-coat tearing down the Mall in pursuit of a taxi was bound to arouse comment, he told himself; yet there seemed nothing else to do. With a wild dash he got between two vehicles, his intention being to cut through St. James's Palace and thus save a corner. No doubt the Rain-Girl was making for Victoria. What irony of fate that he should be in the one spot in London where a taxi was most difficult to obtain!

Just as he was about to dive to the right, a taxi came out of the gates by St. James's Palace, bound northwards. It was empty. Dashing across to it he hailed the man.

"Swing round and drive to Victoria like hell, and I'll give you a sovereign."

Beresford jumped in as the man swung his vehicle round, amidst a perfect deluge of curses from a brother of the wheel, whose off mudguard he

missed by a quarter of an inch. Beresford jammed his hat on the back of his head and, leaning out of the window, proceeded to urge the man to his utmost speed.

"What about the speed-limit, sir?" demanded the Jehu out of the corner of his mouth.

"Damn the speed-limit," yelled Beresford, causing the sentry pacing up and down outside St. James's Palace to stop suddenly and stare.

"Yes, that's all very well," grumbled the man.

"I'll pay fines and everything," said Beresford, "drive like hell."

Round the bend the man swung his cab into the middle of the Mall and let her rip. Beresford changed from the offside to the nearside, striving to get a glimpse of the Rain-Girl's taxi. Apparently it had disappeared. Had she gone in the other direction? For a moment he hesitated. Should he stop the man and turn back? Yet why should she be coming this way if she were not going to Victoria, or at least in that direction.

He strained his eyes and leaned far out of the window to see the other vehicles as they swung round by the Queen Victoria Memorial. Unconscious that he was attracting to himself the attention, not only of the occupants of the taxis he overtook, but of the passers-by, Beresford continued to watch and to despair. She had gone. Disappeared into thin air. What luck, what rotten luck! Probably she had gone away for——

Suddenly he withdrew his head and plumped him-

self down on to the seat, and with his stick nearly broke the glass in front of him. The man looked round as if he had been shot. Beresford motioned him to ease up. There a few yards in front of him was the Rain-Girl's taxi, which had been obscured by a large car.

When the man had slowed down, Beresford put his head out of the window.

"Follow that taxi with the girl in it," he said.

"Right-o, sir," said the man with a wink.

Beresford leaned back, conscious for the first time of the strain of the last few minutes. He felt weak and giddy, and recalled Tallis' injunction to avoid anything in the nature of excitement. Avoid the Rain-Girl! He laughed. At last he was on her track. Where she went he would go. He watched her taxi as one hypnotised.

As it approached Victoria Station he saw the driver turn and make an enquiry, then he swung out to the left and made for the South-Eastern Station, Beresford's man keeping about twenty yards behind. As his taxi drew up, the Rain-Girl was just getting out of hers. Yes, there was no room for doubt, it was she. A porter was hurling her luggage on to a truck and apparently counselling haste. She was late, obviously.

Immediately she had turned to follow her porter, Beresford jumped out and, handing the taximan two one-pound notes, followed her, leaving the man inarticulate.

Yes, there was undoubtedly reason for haste, the

porter was dashing along, the Rain-Girl keeping up with him. As she went she fumbled in her bag, obviously for her ticket. How well she walked, he decided. She passed through the barrier, the guard was looking in her direction shouting. In his hand was a green flag ready to be unfurled.

Making a dash for the barrier, Beresford shouted something about it being a matter of life or death that he should catch that train. He pushed a note into the ticket-collector's hand, dashed through and had hurled himself into a first-class compartment just as the train began to move. With a feeling of relief he noticed that the compartment was empty.

As he leaned back panting, more from excitement than loss of breath, he was conscious of a feeling of triumph. His search had not been in vain. Somewhere in that train was the Rain-Girl. He would watch carefully at each station, and where she left the train he would leave it. What luck, what astounding luck! Would she recognise him? What was he to do if——

"Where for, sir?"

He looked up suddenly. A guard was looking down at him from the door leading into the corridor.

"Er—er——" he began, then paused. "I haven't got a ticket. I only just caught it as it was. I told the collector I would pay on the train."

"Yes, sir, where for?" asked the guard, bringing a receipt book out of his satchel.

Where for! Where was he for? Where on earth was the train going to? There had been no time to enquire. He could not say that he was going as far as the Rain-Girl went, the man would in all probability have him put out at the next station as a lunatic. Suddenly he had an inspiration.

"All the way," he said casually.

"To Paris, sir?" interrogated the man.

To Paris! Was she going to Paris? What on earth should he do in Paris with not so much as a tooth-brush? It was bad enough to be travelling in a continental train in a top hat and a morning-coat——

"Did you say Paris, sir?" enquired the guard.

Beresford nodded. If she got out on the way he could do likewise. It was always possible to terminate a journey at an intermediate station. Suppose she were going to stay with friends at a small French town, or at some station between London and Dover, or Folkestone, whichever way the train went. Sometimes these trains stopped at odd stations, he told himself. What on earth should he do on a country platform in a top hat?

"Did you get your luggage in the van all right, sir?" enquired the guard civilly.

His luggage? Oh, damn it! Why were people so infernally interested in the affairs of others? Why should it be assumed that because a man was going to Paris he required to carry luggage? All that was necessary could be bought there, surely?

What on earth was he to tell this man? Then he decided to risk telling the truth.

"I'm afraid I haven't got any luggage, guard," he said, looking up with a smile and handing the man five one-pound notes. "Keep the change," he said casually.

"Thank you, sir," said the guard, still standing half in the carriage, as if Beresford's remark required some explanation.

"I saw a friend coming by this train and——" he hesitated.

"I understand, sir," said the man without the flicker of a smile. "If I can help you, sir," he added significantly, "perhaps you would like to take a walk through the train and see if you can find her."

"Her!" There was a vast fund of humanity in this guard. Beresford looked at him.

"If you tell me what she is like, sir, perhaps I can find out where she's going. I've got to examine all the tickets."

"What a brainy idea," exclaimed Beresford, looking up at the man in admiration. "She's dark, and she was wearing a long, browny-grey sort of coat, you know."

The man nodded.

"And——" he hesitated. "What the devil did she have on her head?"

"A hat, sir?" suggested the guard.

Beresford looked up and laughed. "I'm blessed if I know what you would call it, guard. It was a round thing, browny-grey too, with some yellow on

it like a candle-snuffer, you know, the hat I mean."

Again the man nodded comprehendingly. He was a most unusual guard, Beresford decided.

"I'll be back in about twenty minutes, sir," said the man, and he disappeared.

Beresford lighted a cigarette and, putting his hat and stick on the rack, leaned back and smoked contentedly. This was indeed a day of happenings. Not only had he found the Rain-Girl; but he had stumbled across an official who clearly ought to have been in the diplomatic service. . The Foreign Office was notoriously lacking in diplomatists. Tact was as little likely to be found there as in a nagging wife; yet here was a man, an ordinary guard on the South-Eastern and Chatham Railway, who combined the discretion of a Lord Chesterfield with the tact of a rising politician. It promised to be a wonderful day.

Presently the guard returned and, with perfect composure of feature, informed Beresford that there were two ladies answering to his description, one was bound for Folkestone, and the man rather thought that this must be the one, and the other for Boulogne.

"So I had better change your ticket, sir?" he suggested.

This man was indeed a paragon, not only of discretion, but of economy. Beresford handed him the slip.

"Make it out to the station I get out at," he said, "and keep the difference for yourself."

"Thank you, sir," said the guard gratefully. "And now, would you like to see the ladies?" His tone was that of a landlady inquiring if a potential lodger would like to see the rooms.

"See them!" repeated Beresford dully. Then he added quickly, "of course; yes, guard; but—but——"

"I'll point out the compartments, sir. I don't think you need be seen," he remarked, anticipating Beresford's objection.

"Right!" he said as he rose and followed the guard along the corridor.

Presently he paused to let Beresford come up with him. "One of them's in the third compartment of the next carriage at the further window," he whispered.

Beresford nodded, conscious that his heart was again pounding like a hammer.

"It's the Folkestone lady, sir," added the guard.

Again Beresford nodded and proceeded along the corridor. When he arrived at the third compartment he was almost too nervous to look in. A glance sufficed to show him that it was, indeed, the Rain-Girl sitting at the further corner, gazing out at the bricks-and-mortar that was now giving place to green fields.

Beresford nodded to the guard to indicate that the search need not be proceeded with. The man indicated a compartment of the same carriage in which the Rain-Girl sat.

"Perhaps you'd like to sit here, sir," he said. "I'll fetch your hat and stick."

Until that moment Beresford was unconscious of having left them behind him; but then there was no need to remember anything with so able a henchman.

Once more he threw himself down into a corner-seat, and, when the guard had carefully, almost reverently, placed his hat and stick on the rack above him, Beresford found himself faced with the problem of what he was to do on arriving at Folkestone. Obviously the first thing was to secure a vehicle, preferably a taxi, and instruct the driver to follow the Rain-Girl. Once he had discovered where she was going, he could decide upon his course of action.

At Folkestone he was one of the first to leave the train. He had no difficulty in securing a taxi. His request for the hood to be put up seemed likely to produce trouble, the man was obviously of the opinion that his fare was a lunatic; but the promise of double fare mollified the Jehu's grumblings, and achieved Beresford's object. Out of sight he sat and watched. Presently the Rain-Girl emerged, followed by a porter. She, too, chose a taxi, which a minute later drew out, and Beresford instructed his man to follow it.

At last he felt that he had achieved his object. Nothing short of some unforeseen accident could now intervene. He hoped the tyres of his vehicle were all right, and that the man had an ample supply of petrol. As the taxi turned on to the Leas,

Beresford decided that the Rain-Girl was going to the Imperial. As a matter of fact there was nowhere else for a taxi taking that direction to go. His own driver, taking his instructions literally, drew up within half a yard of the Rain-Girl's vehicle. Beresford cursed him under his breath, and strove to squeeze himself out of sight. The man evidently appreciated the situation, as he showed no surprise at Beresford's not alighting.

Having opened the door of the Rain-Girl's taxi and handed her out, the hall-porter lifted down her luggage and placed it on the ground beside him. He then came to Beresford's vehicle and was about to open the door when Beresford leaned forward.

"Can I have a room?" he enquired.

"Yes, sir, I think so, if you'll enquire at the office."

"I want you to enquire for me. Perhaps you'll ask the clerk to come and speak to me," and he handed the man a half crown.

"Certainly, sir," and the man ran up the steps, reappearing a minute later followed by a dark little man, perfect in dress and deportment.

Beresford explained his requirements.

Yes, everything could be arranged to monsieur's entire satisfaction. When would monsieur want the room? That night? Certainly, and would he take dinner? He would. A deposit? It was not necessary. Monsieur insisted? The man shrugged his shoulders to imply that he took the two one-pound notes merely as a concession to monsieur;

a for himself, well—— "Back to the station? Oui, monsieur," and with a word to the driver the taxi swung out from the drive, and Beresford once more had cause to congratulate himself upon his luck.

Everything seemed to come quite naturally to him now. He would return to London for some suitable clothes, be back in Folkestone that evening, and then——

CHAPTER X

LORD DREWITT ON MARRIAGE

WHILST Beresford was on the way to Folkestone with such expedition as the South-Eastern and Chatham Railway could muster, Lady Drewitt was driving back to Curzon Street with Lord Drewitt seated beside her. On his face was the look of deep depression of a man who has been torn from his bed some six hours before his normal hour for rising. Arrived at Curzon Street, Lady Drewitt marched straight to the morning-room and seated herself in her customary chair, whilst her nephew wearily dropped his unhappy body upon one opposite.

"Well!" She folded her hands in her lap with an air of grim expectancy.

"My dear aunt," he said wearily; "it can never be well with a man who has two thousand a year and expensive tastes."

"If you depended upon yourself, you would have only your expensive tastes without the two thousand a year," was the retort.

Drewitt glanced at her with interest.

"You are becoming almost epigrammatical," he said with a lazy smile, the first that had broken through his mask of suffering that morning.

"Well!" repeated Lady Drewitt.

"You drag a man from his early and innocent slumbers long before the streets are fit to receive him, precipitate him into taking an unaccustomed meal, hurl at him an heiress and a man of voracious appetite, dubious linen and psychic proclivities, and then you say, 'Well.' " Drewitt shuddered.

"I am quite prepared to wait," announced Lady Drewitt with resignation.

"So am I, so why precipitate me into breakfast-parties and marriage," protested Drewitt. "Deacon Quelch, what a horrible name!" he murmured. "It sounds like treading on an egg."

"I want to know what you think of Lola Craven?" Lady Drewitt was not to be diverted from her object.

"I never think of any women I have not met at least half a dozen times, and most women bore me at the third encounter. May I smoke?" he enquired plaintively.

"No, you may not," was the uncompromising reply.

Drewitt smiled a smile of weary resignation.

"I want to speak to you seriously," said Lady Drewitt, with a slight indrawing of her lips.

"My dear aunt, you are always speaking to me seriously," replied Drewitt easily. "You do nothing else, and your unvarying theme is marriage. It gets a little monotonous, I confess," he added with a sigh.

"I have my duty to consider," announced Lady Drewitt. "You must marry."

"Marriage, my dear aunt, is like the tint of one's pyjamas, an intensely personal affair. One person's happiness is achieved by spots, another's by a monotone, suggestive of dungaree overalls; personally my taste runs to stripes of delicate tints. You, on your part, may prefer——"

"Don't be indelicate, Drewitt. I was talking about Miss Craven, not—not night-wear. There is the title——"

"There is, indeed," agreed Drewitt mournfully. "I am never permitted to forget it. If I go to a hotel it means a hundred per cent. on the bill, and if I dine at a restaurant, it means half-a-crown instead of a shilling to the man who takes my hat, with at least five shillings to the waiter. No wonder democracy is abroad."

"You cannot complain of her appearance," announced Lady Drewitt.

"I never have," was the reply. "Democracy is the only hope of the House of Lords. It——"

"I was referring to Miss Craven," said Lady Drewitt severely. "Are you going to marry her?"

"Was I expected to propose at breakfast?" he asked innocently.

"Do you like her?" Lady Drewitt had a habit of ignoring her nephew's flippancy. At first she had endeavoured to combat it; but the discovery that she was invariably discomfited had caused her to change her tactics.

"Money inverts the natural order of things. It is the woman who selects, just as with the birds of the air," he sighed dolefully; "besides, Miss Craven seemed far more interested in Mr. Quelch than in me. You see I am not psychic, merely rheumatic, probably the legacy of the early Drewitts, who gloried and drank deep of their own productions."

"Interested in that man!" Lady Drewitt seemed to sit a little more upright in her chair. There was surprise in her tone.

"That was the impression I received."

For a few minutes Lady Drewitt seemed to ponder.

"It's your air of indifference," she announced at length.

"My dear aunt, can you imagine me making love? Can you see me spreading my handkerchief upon the carpet, going down on one knee, striking an attitude, and at the same time the left portion of my upper anatomy, and declaring that life holds nothing for me if the beloved does not vouchsafe to me the honey of her lips and the balance at her bank?"

"Don't be a fool, Drewitt."

"No, it's not that," said Drewitt, "the fault lies elsewhere. I'm afraid I could never seriously contemplate marrying Miss Craven for her money," he continued gravely. "She has personality and charm; they always command my respect."

"Then marry her for her personality and charm," said Lady Drewitt sarcastically.

"There is of course that," he said rising; "but

somehow I think that when Lola Craven marries, it will be for love."

"Fiddlesticks," snapped Lady Drewitt.

"I quite agree, my dear aunt, the terms are synonymous; but young women are extremely self-willed in these matters. I'm inclined to attribute it to beauty-competitions and insufficient clothing."

"Then what are you going to do?" demanded Lady Drewitt, rising with a rustle of silk and a ruffled temper.

"I scarcely know," was the reply. "You see, aunt," this with an engaging smile, "you have a tendency to be precipitate. I am not Dante, nor is Miss Craven Beatrice," and with this Drewitt took his departure, leaving Lady Drewitt puzzled as to his meaning.

Half an hour later he was seated in his favourite chair, smoking a cigarette. When Lord Drewitt found that the burden of life oppressed him, he invariably returned to his flat and ordered Hoskins to make coffee.

"Hoskins," he remarked, as his man placed the coffee before him, "I often wonder why you don't demand half my income."

"Half your income, my lord!" exclaimed Hoskins, in surprise, looking too cherubic and beneficent to demand anything. He was a round-faced, fresh-coloured, chubby little man, with the expression of a happy boy.

"Because you know that I should have to give it to you. Without your coffee, Hoskins, I could

never continue the unequal struggle with existence."

"I'm quite satisfied, my lord, thank you," said Hoskins, with customary literalness.

Lord Drewitt replaced his cup and, turning, surveyed his servant with deliberation.

"With everything, Hoskins?" he enquired incredulously.

"Yes, my lord, I think so."

"How weird," exclaimed Lord Drewitt. "You had better join a trade-union as a corrective. It's not natural. It's infernally unnatural, and it may lead to—to anything. From wife-murder to—to——"

"But I'm not married, my lord," said Hoskins hurriedly.

"I didn't say whose wife," said Lord Drewitt irritably. "God knows there are enough wives about."

"Yes, my lord."

"Suppose I were to get married," Lord Drewitt helped himself to another cigarette, which he lighted with great deliberation.

"Yes, my lord."

"Don't say 'Yes, my lord' in that colourless sort of voice, man, as if you didn't care."

"I beg pardon, my lord," said Hoskins contritely.

"Suppose I were to get married, what would you do?" Lord Drewitt leaned back with the air of a man who has given utterance to the worst that can befall him.

"If your lordship had no further need for my

services," he began, "I suppose I should have to——"

"Need for your services, I should want coffee every fifteen minutes of the day and night. No, by Jove! like the Emperor Charles and his chickens, I'd have it prepared every five minutes. You regard marriage far too lightly, Hoskins."

"I hope not, my lord," this with something approaching feeling in his voice.

"That's better, that sounds more human. Now, suppose there were a Lady Drewitt in this flat. She would be sure to want you to do her hair or something at the very moment I required you."

"Do her hair, my lord!" he exclaimed anxiously.

"Yes, thin ginger hair, it would be, or else man-
icure her spatulated finger nails, or lace her stays,
or clean her shoes. You don't seem to understand.
There's a terrible destiny brooding over this flat."

Instinctively Hoskins looked up at the ceiling.

"You and I rub along very well together, Hos-
kins, thanks to your coffee and my equable temper;
but a Lady Drewitt would play the very devil with
us. Don't you realise that?"

"Now that you come to mention it, my lord, I'm
afraid that it might be—might be a little difficult."

"A little difficult," Lord Drewitt sighed. "It's
a deadly menace. Now I want you to do something
for me."

"Yes, my lord."

"If at any time you hear that I have become en-
gaged to be married," Lord Drewitt spoke slowly

and impressively, "I want you to poison my coffee."

"Poison your coffee, my lord!" he cried, startled out of his habitual calm.

"Not at once," Lord Drewitt hastened to add. "Not immediately you hear the news, because better councils might subsequently prevail; but say on the wedding-morning, just as you are handing me my lavender trousers. It would be so effective in the newspapers. 'The third Lord Drewitt dies just as he is about to assume his wedding-trousers.' 'Assume' would sound better than 'put on.' One puts on ordinary bags, Hoskins; but one 'assumes' wedding-garments."

"But lavender trousers are not—not worn now, my lord."

Lord Drewitt looked up reproachfully.

"Lavender trousers are always worn. They are Victorian, and appear in every novel and play that ever was written, or ever will be written. Good heavens! how are you to know that it's a man's wedding-day unless he indicates it by his extremities? No really nice girl would feel that she was married without lavender trousers. They are conventional, imperative, *de rigueur*. Women have protested against various parts of the marriage service; but never against lavender trousers. I'm quite convinced that this convention is responsible for the limited number of full-dress Scottish marriages. There is not the same glamour about lavender kilts. Why, I cannot conceive."

Lord Drewitt handed his cup to Hoskins.

"You promise to poison me then," he said, looking up appealingly, "you promise on—on your hope of an allotment?"

"I'll think it over, my lord."

"A broken reed," cried Lord Drewitt, as he sank back in his chair. "Just like the rest, you are a broken reed." He paused to light a cigarette. "Have you ever thought of marriage, Hoskins?" he inquired.

"No, my lord," was the hesitating reply, "that is, not seriously."

"Ah! you are the child of your generation. Your tendency is to think lightly of serious things. Do you know the meaning of love, honour and obey?"

"I—er—think——"

"Showing conclusively that you don't," continued Lord Drewitt. "A wife loves her freedom; her husband honours her cheques; and she obeys the dictates of fashion. Hoskins, I warn you against marrying."

"Thank you, my lord."

Lord Drewitt looked at him sharply; but his cherubic expression was devoid of any suggestion of guile.

"There is no necessity for you to marry," Lord Drewitt continued. "There is no title, the world will go round just as well without any little Hoskinses, and you have enough for your immediate needs."

"Thanks to you, my lord, I have," he said gratefully.

"Then avoid women, at least avoid marrying them," he added as an afterthought.

Hoskins looked uncomfortable and fidgeted with his feet.

"I recognise the signs, Hoskins. You are keeping company with some young female. Now, don't deny it."

He did not deny it; but his fresh-coloured face took on a deeper hue.

"I can see," remarked Lord Drewitt with a sigh, "that my coffee is threatened from two different angles: your weakness about women, and Lady Drewitt's determination about the title. Tell me about it, Hoskins. I can bear it," he said easily.

"It was only in case—in case——" "Well, my lord, you have so often talked about getting married that I thought——"

Drewitt looked at him pityingly. "So that if I do a thing that all the great minds of the world are agreed is damn silly, you must go and do the same thing."

"Well, my lord, it would make—it would make a considerable difference," pleaded Hoskins.

"It would," agreed Lord Drewitt, "a considerable difference. Now, leave me. I'm not at home to anybody. No, I shall not require lunch. Say that I am in a mood of Socratic contemplation."

"Yes, my lord," said the man obediently as he left the room.

When some hours later Beresford entered, Drew-

itt was still seated in his chair, idly turning the leaves of a book.

"Behold, my dear Richard," he said, gazing up lazily, "the two most unfortunate men in London. You faced by poverty, I by marriage. The great Negative and Affirmative of contemporary existence."

Beresford dropped into a chair and helped himself to a cigarette from the box on the table, which he proceeded to light.

"I'm just off to Folkestone," he said casually, as he blew out the match and placed it on the ash-tray beside him.

Drewitt screwed his glass into his eye, and examined his cousin's morning clothes and silk hat with deliberate intentness.

"Sartorial originality, Richard, is bound to win in the end," he remarked. "I would suggest the addition of dust-coat and race-glasses."

Beresford laughed. "Oh," he said casually, "of course, I shall run in and change first."

"It must be delightful to be a creature of impulse," said Drewitt; "and how did you find out that she was staying at Folkestone?"

Beresford stared at him blankly. "Who?" he cried.

"What is the present state of your finances, Richard?" enquired Drewitt, ignoring the question.

"Oh, about a hundred pounds."

Drewitt nodded meditatively.

"I should propose whilst you still have some

worldly goods with which to endow her," he remarked casually.

"You are almost as bad as Aunt Caroline," said Beresford. "You're always thinking of the morrow. For my part I'm going to have a good time so long as the funds last, and after that——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"It's always a mistake to live to the extent of our resources," remarked Drewitt casually.

"I've never regarded you as an economist."

"That, my dear Richard, is because you always take everything so literally. To you economy means the saving of money."

"And to you?"

"It might mean anything, from early morning tea to treasure in heaven."

"What the deuce are you driving at?"

"If a man takes everything the world has to offer," continued Drewitt evenly, "he will sooner or later find himself morally bankrupt, with nothing to look forward to as a comfort for his old age. Now I have reserved two things for my euthanasia, early morning tea and marriage."

"Marriage?" exclaimed Beresford.

"I was about to add, Richard, when you rudely interrupted me, thus I have before me a comfort and an experience. I have forgone early morning tea all my life, taking coffee instead, which I prefer. I would have done the same with turtle soup, only I thought of it too late; personally I regard turtle soup as much over-rated."

"And marriage?" queried Beresford.

"Most men marry for a woman to live with, I shall marry for a woman to die with. That reminds me, this morning I met Lola Craven."

"I wanted to know how you got on."

"You come then to gloat over a fellow-creature's misery," said Drewitt reproachfully.

Beresford laughed, he was in a mood to laugh at anything.

"To tear a man from his natural environment, Richard, shows both brutality and a sad lack of half-tones. I am at my best when taking coffee from the hand of the admirable Hoskins; but to tear me from my proper setting six hours before what our cousins would call 'the scheduled time,' and plunge me into the unaccustomed experience of breakfast is an outrage, nothing less."

"Poor old Drew," laughed Beresford.

"Add to it Mr. Deacon Quelch, and you reach a degree of frightfulness, Richard, that would terrify the most hardened. I wonder why I was given Aunt Caroline?" he mused.

"What was she like?" enquired Beresford.

"The same as always, wise and worldly."

"I mean the girl."

"Lola Craven," said Drewitt deliberately, "is a girl that no man with any self-respect would ever marry for her money."

"Is she——?" began Beresford.

"Freckles, physical inequalities and general lumpiness," continued Drewitt, ignoring the half-

uttered question, "a man may marry because of what is behind them; but not a girl like Lola Craven. You must meet her, Richard, also Mr. Deacon Quelch. He is unique, from the dubiety of his linen to the voracity of his appetite."

"I must push off," said Beresford, rising. "By the way, don't tell Aunt Caroline my address."

"Better not give it to me," said Drewitt lazily, extending a hand. "But knowing your ingenuous character as I do, Richard, I assume that it will be the most expensive hotel in the place."

CHAPTER XI

THE MEETING WITH THE RAIN-GIRL

I

AS Beresford entered the dining-room of the Imperial at Folkestone, he was conscious that for him the whole world had changed. To-night he would meet the Rain-Girl again. His heart was hammering against his ribs, his throat seemed to contract and his muscles relax. There was a curious buzzing in his ears. Did people feel like that when they were about to faint? What a sensation it would create if he were suddenly to collapse. Tallis had warned him against excitement.

The approach of the *maitre d'hôtel* steadied him a little. Beresford murmured his name and was led to a small table laid for one—he had stipulated for a table to himself. With a supreme effort he took himself in hand and looked round the room. Heavens! what luck. There she was sitting at the next table, alone. He was thankful that her back was towards him.

He ordered a cocktail to steady his nerves, conscious that his hands were trembling with excitement. He noticed that the other diners had almost finished

THE MEETING WITH THE RAIN-GIRL 149

their meal. The train had been late, and he had taken his time to dress. It was nearly nine o'clock.

He wished the buzzing in his ears would stop, and that his heart would not behave quite so ridiculously. That bout of pneumonia had obviously taken it out of him. Would the cocktail never come?

With thankfulness he saw the waiter approaching. Suddenly the man started to whirl round, three or four tables seemed to join in. Had the lights gone mad, the buzzing in his ears, the——

Beresford opened his eyes wearily and looked about him. "The Rain-Girl," he murmured and, closing them again, he sighed his content.

"He's delirious, poor fellow," some one murmured.

"Shall I have him taken to his room, madam?" enquired the *maitre d'hôtel*.

"No," said the Rain-Girl decisively. "Let him remain here, and ask the others to go to their places."

Reluctantly the crowd of diners retreated to the background. Some returned to their tables, others, too curious to be denied, stood watching Beresford's recumbent form as he lay on the dining-room floor, his head pillowed on a hassock, the Rain-Girl kneeling beside him.

Presently he opened his eyes again and smiled up at her. She returned the smile.

"What have they been doing?" he asked faintly,

as he caught sight of the ends of his tie, which had been undone.

"You fainted," said the girl gently. "Now lie quite still and you'll feel better presently."

"I remember," he said, "I——"

"You mustn't talk," she said with a business-like air of authority.

"I shall be all right in a minute," he said. "Tallis said I mustn't get excited. You know, I got pneumonia that day and—and I was ill for a long time. That is why I didn't turn up to breakfast," and his voice trailed off faintly.

"Will you please stand back there?" he heard the Rain-Girl say to several people who had approached; then as he opened his eyes again she bent down and whispered, "Will you tell me your name? It's—it's a little awkward."

"Yes, isn't it?" he said quizzically. "Beresford, Richard Beresford."

She nodded. "And now," she said, "I think you might have a little of this brandy," and with that she lifted a glass to his lips.

He drank and a few seconds later, with a deep sigh, raised himself to a sitting posture.

"I'm—I'm most awfully sorry," he said, looking from the girl to a little group of guests a few yards away.

"You had better not talk," she said as she beckoned to two of the waiters. "Lift Mr. Beresford on to his chair," she said; then she added, turning

THE MEETING WITH THE RAIN-GIRL 151

to him, "What a strange meeting. I had no idea you were staying here."

Several of the other guests now approached.

"I only arrived to-night," he said, quick to grasp her meaning. "I'm just getting over pneumonia," he added for the benefit of the other guests. "When did you come?"

He was rapidly regaining control of his faculties.

"This morning," she replied.

It was obvious that the little group of guests and waiters were drinking in this short conversation, quite unconscious that it was for their especial benefit.

"And now," said the girl, "I should advise you to go to bed. I will order something to be sent to your room."

"But——" began Beresford weakly.

"When the nurse commands obedience is best," she smiled.

With murmured thanks Beresford rose and, assisted by the *maitre d'hôtel*, walked slowly from the dining-room out into the vestibule, where several groups of guests were standing discussing the incident.

That night he spent in wakefulness. For hours he lay tossing restlessly. Hitherto his one object had been the finding of the Rain-Girl. He had been like Japheth in search of a father. Had Japheth ever thought that the success of his undertaking might involve him in embarrassment? What had

he done with his father when he found him? Did he actually find him?

In spite of the feeling of exhilaration at the successful issue of his quest, he was conscious that he had come to a mile-stone, and that there was no sign-post to indicate his future course. Hitherto he had given no thought to the future, had never seemed to be able to see beyond the second meeting with the Rain-Girl. Now he found his mind a seething whirl of questions. Where was it all going to end, and what was he to do when his money was exhausted? He reproached himself as an impulsive fool for—for—oh, everything. What was his object? The whole thing was nothing short of a mid-summer-madness. What would Tallis say? What would Aunt Caroline think, or say, if she knew? They were not imbued with the same reticence as Drewitt. They would comment, the one laughingly, the other with the caustic worldliness of a Mrs. Grundy.

Still he had met the Rain-Girl, and she had seemed to pick up the thread where they had left it in the smoking-room of "The Two Dragons." At least he had before him further meetings. There was that compensation, unless—— What if she were to leave early in the morning? What if he should be ill again? What a fool he had been not to give instructions as to when he was to be called. Surely she would not go without assuring herself that he was better.

Then with a strange revulsion of feeling he

THE MEETING WITH THE RAIN-GIRL 153

cursed himself for being such a fool as to faint. He had never fainted before. It was all her fault.

This girl seemed fated to upset everything he planned. What right had she to come into his life at so psychological a moment as the first day of his freedom? He had given months to the thought of cutting himself adrift from old ties and restraints. Then in a flash she had destroyed everything—she and the weather. The open road and the wayside hedge no longer beckoned to him. The thought of hour after idle hour spent lying on his back listening to the lark had now passed like an opium vision. The smell of the earth, the heat of the sun and the lazily drifting clouds, all seemed to belong to something beyond him, something far away. He was—yes, he must be light-headed.

It was nearly five o'clock when eventually he fell asleep and dreamed that he had just arrived at Folkestone and discovered Lord Drewitt and the Rain-Girl paddling.

2

The next morning Beresford was awakened by a feeling that some one was looking at him. He opened his eyes to find the chambermaid gazing sympathetically down upon him.

"Are you feeling better, sir?" she enquired solicitously as he opened his eyes.

"Yes, thank you," he replied, then memory flood-

ing back upon him: "What's the time?" he demanded.

"It's just past eleven, sir."

"What?" cried Beresford, starting up in bed, only restrained from throwing his legs out by the girl's presence.

"Just past eleven, sir," repeated the girl, gazing at him with all the tenderness of a woman for an invalid, especially a good-looking man invalid.

"Good heavens! Here, clear out, my good girl," he cried. "I must get up."

"You'll find the bath-room the second door on the right, sir," she said. "I've brought your shaving water," and with that she disappeared. Beresford threw himself out of bed, tore on his bath-robe and, snatching up his sponge and towels, made a dash for the corridor. Never had he bathed with such expedition as on that morning.

Returning to his own room he found waiting at the door a little dark man in a black frock-coat.

"I hope you're feeling better this morning, sir," he said, with a smile that radiated tact and understanding. "I'm the manager."

"Oh! I'm all right again now, thank you," said Beresford, with a laugh as he entered the room. "Come in," and the manager followed him. "It's very kind of you to enquire," he continued, "and I feel I owe you an apology for the disturbance I created last night in the dining-room."

"Not at all, sir," said the manager sympatheti-

cally, "we were all very sorry indeed that you should be ill."

"I shan't do it again," said Beresford confidently. "I had pneumonia some time back, and the doctor told me to take care, and—and—well, I had rather a strenuous day yesterday."

"If you would like your meals served in your room——" began the manager.

"No, thanks, I'm all right now," and with that the manager took his bowing departure, leaving Beresford greatly impressed by the courteous methods adopted by the management of the Imperial.

With swift decisive strokes he shaved, all the time the razor seeming to keep time to the unending question, "Has she gone?" He prayed that he might not cut himself. He preferred to meet her unadorned by sticking-plaster.

He was engaged in brushing his hair when a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," he cried.

A moment after a waiter entered with a breakfast-tray. Beresford stared at him.

"I didn't order breakfast in my room," he said.

The man looked at him surprised.

"No, sir?" he interrogated. "I was instructed to bring it up."

"By whom?"

"By Mr. Byles, sir, the *maître d'hôtel*."

"I didn't order it," said Beresford. "Anyhow, it's rather a good idea," he added, conscious that he was feeling very hungry; he had eaten nothing since

the previous morning's breakfast, except a lightly boiled sole that the Rain-Girl had caused to be sent to his room.

By Jove, that was why he had fainted! Suddenly he remembered that he had gone the whole day without food. With a nod he dismissed the man and, a moment later, lifted the covers from the two dishes and gazed down at them. In one were boiled fillets of sole and in the other an omelette.

"It's the Rain-Girl for a dollar," he cried joyfully and, drawing up a chair, he proceeded to eat with the appetite of a man who has eaten practically nothing for twenty-four hours.

The food was good, the tea was stimulating, and once more life had become a thing of crimson and of gold. It was strange, he argued, how a good meal changed one's mental outlook, and now—what? He paused as he lighted a cigarette. What was he to say when he met her? With a shrug of his shoulders he walked towards the lift.

"Are you better?"

Beresford turned swiftly on his heel. It was the Rain-Girl in a white linen frock and a panama hat. He was just crossing the hall wondering where he should begin his search, when she had appeared from apparently nowhere.

"Thanks to you; I am quite well again." Then with inspiration he added, "I'm as right as rain." She smiled. "Did——" he hesitated for a moment, "did you order my breakfast?"

She nodded.

THE MEETING WITH THE RAIN-GIRL 157

"I knew it must be you," he said. "Thank you so much for all you have done," then he added hastily, "I'm better; but I don't think I'm quite well enough to dispense with the services of a nurse."

She flashed him a look from under her lashes, then she laughed, that same gurgling little laugh that had so fascinated him in the smoking-room of "The Two Dragons."

"Do you think I'm strong enough to be taken for a walk?" he asked, "or had I better have a bath-chair? Of course, I should gain more sympathy in a bath-chair, with you walking beside it," he added whimsically.

"But I'm not going to walk beside your bath-chair," she said, obviously a little puzzled at his mood.

"Then I'm afraid it will have to be a walk. Please continue your good work," he added as he saw her hesitate. "I want to explain things to you and—and I promise I won't be a nuisance if you will give me half an hour."

"I wasn't thinking of your being a nuisance," she said, "only that——" she hesitated.

"But you do," said Beresford.

"Do what?" she enquired, looking up at him in surprise.

"Know me."

"How clever of you to anticipate my thoughts."

"That's always a woman's thought when she hesitates on the brink of the unconventional."

"Well, you may come into the garden and sit down," she said leading the way.

Beresford followed, conscious that every head in sight, male and female, was turned as she passed. Entering the hotel gardens, she led the way to a seat shaded by a large elm. For several minutes they sat silent. At the other side of the lawn two girls and a man were playing an indolent game of croquet. The tap-tap of the balls seemed to add to the languor of the day. Beresford sighed his content. Of course it was all a dream; but even from a dream it was possible to extract a passing pleasure.

"You know I got pneumonia," he said casually, conscious that as a conversational opening it bordered on the abrupt.

"Please tell me," she said, turning towards him. "I'm so sorry."

He then explained how his stay at "The Two Dragons" had been protracted from a single night into six weeks. He told of Tallis and the landlord, touched on the grim irony of fate and finally added—

"But what worried me most was that you should think I had——" then he stopped suddenly, conscious of his tactlessness in referring to the implied appointment made that evening in the smoking-room.

"I wondered what had happened," she said, looking straight in front of her. "I never thought—that you might be ill."

"Then you must have thought I had forgotten."

"But why not?"

"I'm sorry," he said regretfully.

"It does seem rather horrid of me—now," she admitted, slightly stressing the word "now," "but I didn't leave 'The Two Dragons' till nearly eleven and——"

"Thank you," said Beresford simply.

"Why did you give up your tramp?" she enquired irrelevantly.

"Why did you give up yours?" he countered.

"I had to go to London."

"So did I."

"But I thought you had left London for good," she persisted.

"So did I."

"Yet——" she paused.

"I was tramping exactly one day," he said, filling in the blank.

She nodded; but her eyes continued to interrogate him.

"Then I had to return to London," he repeated.

"I had arranged to be in London on May 5th," she volunteered.

"And I had arranged never to be in London again." He smiled at her obvious bewilderment.

"But if you had arranged never to be in London again, why——?"

"Did I return?" he finished the sentence for her.

Again she nodded.

"Have you never done anything that you cannot explain to yourself?" he questioned.

"I'm afraid I'm always doing those sort of things," she admitted with a laugh.

"Well, that's why I came to London, something drew me back again."

"How strange," she said seriously.

"Not at all. Some day perhaps I'll tell you what it was."

He longed to enquire why she was in Folkestone alone, instead he asked—

"How did you find the Ritz-Carlton?"

"Oh, at the last moment auntie decided that she liked the Belle Vue better, so we went there."

Beresford felt that he wanted to laugh. The grim humour of the situation appealed to him. Here had he been living expensively at the Ritz-Carlton for the sole purpose of meeting the Rain-Girl, while she had gone to another hotel not a hundred yards distant. He had considerably curtailed the period of his adventure by the reckless expenditure of his limited resources, and all in vain. Surely Fate was a mistress of irony.

"It—it was a little embarrassing last night," she said hesitatingly.

"I've never fainted before," he said a little shamefacedly. "I'm so sorry, and you were most awfully kind."

"You see I've been a nurse, a V.A.D."

"If you had not been there they would probably have poured the soup tureen over me, or cut off my trousers at the knee, or some such thing as that."

THE MEETING WITH THE RAIN-GIRL 161

People have a tendency to do the most insane things on such occasions."

"I didn't know what had happened," she said, "until I felt my chair being pulled from under me."

"Pulled from under you!"

"Yes, you'd got hold of the leg of my chair, and seemed determined to pull me down on top of you." Then suddenly she laughed. "It was really very funny. One man brought a soda-water syphon, and somebody suggested burning feathers under your nose, as if everybody carried a bunch of feathers about with them to—to——" and again she laughed.

"Don't you think we might have a little walk," he suggested. "Gentle exercise is good for the debilitated. I'll promise not to faint."

She turned and looked at him critically.

"And," he continued, "if I do, I won't bring you to earth with me."

"Very well," she said rising; "on those conditions I'll agree."

They turned out on to the Leas and walked slowly in the direction of Sandgate. Beresford inhaled deeply the warm air, fresh with the scent of the sea. Never in his life had he felt so at peace with the world as on this dream-morning; for, of course, it was all a dream. Was the Rain-Girl really walking with him, even in a dream? He turned to assure himself of the fact, and found her looking up at him. Involuntarily he smiled and saw the answering smile in her eyes.

"I was thinking," she said.

"So was I."

"I was thinking," she continued, "that you are either the most indifferent or the most incurious man I have ever met."

"Am I? Perhaps I am," he added, "indifferent to all except the present, incurious as to everything beyond the range of my vision."

"The proper thing," she said after a further period of silence, "was to ask why. When a woman accuses a man of not being curious, it always means that she wants to tell him something."

"Does it?"

She nodded. Her nod seemed to establish an intimacy between them.

"Then will you please tell me something?"

"You make things so—so difficult," she said crinkling her brows and looking straight before her. "You don't avail yourself of conversational openings." She turned and smiled up at him.

"Please why am I the most commonplace and ordinary of men?" he enquired.

"I didn't say that," she laughed. "I said you were either the most indifferent or most incurious of men."

"Please tell me why?"

"Well," she replied, "you have never expressed the least curiosity as to who I am."

"But you're the Rain-Girl." He held his breath, wondering how she would receive the reference to the name he had given her.

A little gurgling laugh reassured him.

"But my godfathers and godmothers do not know me as——" she hesitated slightly, "as the Rain-Girl."

"Thanks to the beneficent decrees of Providence, our godfathers and godmothers never know us as we are."

She nodded agreement.

"If you choose that I shall know who you are you will tell me."

"Then you don't know my name?" She looked up straight into his eyes.

"Not the G.G. name."

"The G.G. name?"

"The godfathers' and godmothers'," he explained.

Again she laughed, seemingly amused at the contraction.

"Well, my name is——" she began, then hesitated.

"Yes," said Beresford.

"Lola Craven."

"Lola Craven!" He stopped abruptly and stood looking down at her, the picture of blank astonishment. "Good Lord!" he ejaculated.

"Why, what's the matter?" she enquired, looking at him in wide-eyed surprise.

Then he laughed, knowing now beyond all doubt that it was a dream.

"Shall we sit down?" he said at length.

They walked a few steps to a seat overlooking the sea and sat down. Surely this was the craziest of crazy worlds, he decided. Here was the Rain-

Girl turning into Lola Craven. An heiress on a gate. What would Drewitt say? Of all the weird, fantastical, incomprehensible——

"I beg your pardon." Suddenly he became conscious that she was looking at him as if waiting for some explanation. "You see I've heard a lot about you."

"About me?"

"Yes. Lady Drewitt is my aunt, and Drew, that is, Lord Drewitt, is my cousin."

"Ooooooh!" she said slowly, surprised in turn.

"I wonder if that is why the manager came up to ask how I was," he said half to himself.

"You wonder if what was why?" she asked, apparently unconscious of any violence to syntax.

"Well, he certainly wouldn't have been interested in me for my own sake; but as a fr—— an acquaintance," he corrected, "of Miss Craven, he might ——" He stopped suddenly as if conscious of a change in his companion. A shadow seemed to pass over her face.

"I wish——"

"Please just go on being the Rain-Girl, will you?" he asked simply.

She looked up, smiled a little sadly, and then nodded.

"I think we had better be getting back," she said, and there was something in her tone that caused Beresford to curse wealth, heiresses, convention and all that went to build up the fabric of civilisation and progress.

CHAPTER XII

THE THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES

I

ON returning from their walk on the Leas, Lola had gone straight to her room, and had not entered the dining-room until Beresford was half-way through lunch. The sudden change in her manner had puzzled him; but he was determined that she should have no cause to feel that he was taking advantage of what, after all, was a chance acquaintance.

His own meal finished, he left the dining-room, and a few minutes later the hotel. That afternoon he spent in strolling about the town, taking the opportunity of ordering some red roses for Lola. Returning about six he went to his room, feeling unaccountably tired. Lying down he slept until nearly eight o'clock, and again he was late at dinner. When half-way through his meal Lola had risen and, bowing to him with a friendly little smile, had left the dining-room and he saw her no more that night. He noticed that she was not wearing any flowers.

Later on in the smoking-room a number of men approached, enquiring if he were better. He was

a little surprised at this solicitude, and also at the friendliness they manifested. He was not altogether pleased that his mishap should be regarded as a conversational opening.

He recalled the manager's solicitude that morning, and it suddenly dawned upon him that his acquaintance with Lola Craven was responsible for his present importance. From various scraps of conversation he overheard, it was obvious that the arrival at Folkestone of the heiress whom the illustrated papers had combined to make famous, was a social event of the first magnitude and importance.

He noticed that the other guests would cease their conversation to gaze at her as she passed. Her entry into the dining-room caused a hush in the hum of conversation. Mr. Byles, the *maitre d'hôtel*, would fidget about the entrance until she came down, then lead the way to her table and, for the rest of the meal, hover about in the neighbourhood with an eye so hawk-like in its penetrative intensity, that the waiter in attendance upon her would make mistakes. This was Mr. Byles's opportunity. He would swoop down, annihilate the underling with a glance, purr at him with restrained intensity, make good the damage, smile tactfully and withdraw.

From where he sat, Beresford had watched this little comedy. He also gleaned considerable amusement from the interest of his fellow-guests in Lola Craven; who herself seemed quite oblivious of the sensation her advent had created. The married men regarded her with surreptitious and hopeless admi-

ration, disguised by feigned indifference. They had perforce to listen to their wives' views upon girls staying unchaperoned at hotels.

The single men looked on her with open admiration, and eyed each other with covert suspicion. Suddenly there had been kindled in their hearts the flame of romance, the roof that sheltered them also sheltered the famous heiress. Their emotions soared high into space.

None had ever met an heiress before. In the minds of all there was a dim idea that beauty and wealth were never to be found roaming together. To them the word "heiress" called up visions of plain features and shapeless bodies. Possibly that was why the thought of marrying an heiress had never suggested itself to them. Here, however, was Providence frankly playing into their hands.

Beresford was struck by the ingenuity displayed by various of the male guests in endeavouring to get to know Lola. Some were gentlemen; but many were merely opportunists. One little man, who looked like "Our Mr. Something-or-other," was particularly assiduous. One day when walking just in front of Lola he deliberately pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket, and with it fluttered a one-pound note. Lola walked over the note as if it had not existed, and the little man, after an awkward pretence of having discovered his loss, had turned and retrieved it.

On another occasion he had burst unceremoniously into a telephone-box occupied by Lola, and

proceeded to apologise as if there were a counter between them; but Lola continued with her telephone conversation, and again he had to beat a retreat.

Another man of mature years and over-mature complexion seemed to be in a perpetual state of having lost something, which he suspected was in Lola's neighbourhood. Yet another invariably carried his hat in his hand. Beresford suspected that his object was to slip it on a chair just before Lola sat down. After all, when you have sat on a man's hat, it is a little difficult to refuse to receive his apologies!

The Thirty-Nine Articles, as Beresford dubbed them after a careful count, resorted to every possible form of device to scrape an acquaintance with the heiress. The one thing they did not do was to take the plunge. There was something in Lola's manner that awed them. There was a reserve and dignity about her bearing that was unmistakable, and instinctively the Thirty-Nine Articles recognised it, a circumstance that increased Beresford's unpopularity.

For a time Beresford lived in an atmosphere of reflected glory and the offer of unlimited hospitality. As soon as he showed his face in any of the common-rooms, men seemed to hurtle through space and demand that he should drink with them. Cigar and cigarette-cases were thrust upon him, men challenged him to billiards, sought his company for strolls, invited him to bridge, suggested the theatre, a bathe or an hour's fishing. He found it all very bewildering.

ing. At first he had been at a loss to account for his amazing popularity; but the requests for an introduction to Lola soon convinced him that it was not for himself alone that his company was sought.

On the second day Beresford had seen Lola only for a few minutes as she was passing through the lounge. She had stopped to enquire how he was, and he noticed a marked difference in her manner. It set him wondering if he had seriously offended her, and if so what he had done.

On the third day he did not see her either at breakfast or lunch, and she was late for dinner. He was conscious of becoming irritable under the strain. He had deliberately snubbed two or three men, whose overtures were both obvious and annoying. He lingered over his dinner, determined to follow her as she left the room. Gradually the dining-room emptied. Lola rose and, instead of walking towards the door, came over to his table.

"There's no need to ask if you are better," she said with a friendly smile, as he rose hurriedly.

"I'm not; I'm very much worse."

"Worse?" She raised her eyebrows in interrogation.

"My nurse has neglected me," he said whimsically, "and I have been grossly rude to three fellow-guests in consequence."

"Neglected you?" she repeated, "but——" she paused.

"I don't want to be a nuisance and take advantage of your kindness," he said seriously, as they walked

towards the door, "but if you can spare an hour or so occasionally, it will hasten your patient's recovery."

"I can hardly come and insist on talking to you, can I?" she asked, looking up at him frankly.

"Will you come in the lounge now?" he asked.

She nodded and led the way to a quiet corner, where they seated themselves.

Beresford ordered coffee, then picked up the thread of conversation where it had been interrupted.

"Yes, you could," he said.

"Could what?" she enquired.

"Insist on coming up and talking to me."

"But——" she began.

"I'm your patient, and you've neglected me horribly."

"But I don't understand. If you had wanted——" She broke off, then added, "I have been here all the time."

"But you have been evading your responsibilities," insisted Beresford smiling. "Suppose I had followed you about like a lost dog, you would probably have regretted your Samaritanism."

"But isn't there something between the two?" she asked.

"Suppose you tell me how many hours of the day you can tolerate me," he said; "in other words, ration me."

She smiled. "I thought you were avoiding me," she said quite frankly.

"I avoiding you?" He looked at her incredulously.

lously. There was something in his tone that brought the colour to her cheeks.

She nodded. "I did really. I should have liked to talk to you. I'm alone here, you see. I suppose you wonder why?" She looked up at him suddenly.

He shook his head.

"It's really through you."

"Through me?"

"Yes, what you said at Frint," she replied brightly. "Don't you remember saying that one should have courage in one's unconvensions? Well, things had reached such a point I felt that if I spent another day in London I should have to scream, so I got a doctor I know to prescribe Folkestone for a week. I telegraphed to an old governess to meet me here, and when I arrived there was a telegram from her saying she had rheumatism, and—and I decided to stay on. Auntie would be ill if she knew, especially as I refused to bring my maid," she added with a laugh.

Recalling his one experience of Mrs. Crisp's conversation, Beresford found himself able to sympathise with any one whose fate it was to live in perpetual nearness to her.

"In all probability my reputation is in tatters by now; that is, among the other guests," she said with a smile.

"And you imply that the responsibility is mine?" She nodded.

"But aren't heiresses a law unto themselves?"

She glanced across at him quickly, as if seeking some hidden meaning in his words.

"No one can be a law unto themselves," she said quietly.

He then proceeded to tell of the embarrassments arising from his acquaintance with her.

"I could smoke like a chimney, drink like a fish, and live like the proverbial lord," he explained, "and all for nothing. Such is the power of reflected glory."

She laughed, only half-believing him.

"But there's another side to the picture," he went on. "It's more difficult to retain than to win popularity. I shall have to work for it."

"Work for it?" she queried, looking up at him with puzzled brows.

"The proffered smokes will fail and the drinks will cease unless I do what is expected of me, introduce to you the whole gang."

"Mr. Beresford!" she cried. "What an absolutely horrible idea."

"You needn't be alarmed," he hastened to assure her. "I have no intention of doing anything so foolish."

"Foolish!"

"There are exactly thirty-nine unattached males staying here," he explained. "I've counted them very carefully. They range in age from seventeen to seventy. Assuming the equal rights of man, this would mean that I should speak to you once every

fortieth day, whereas I hope to do so forty times each day."

"You are really almost as absurd as Lord Drewitt," she laughed, colouring a little.

"You must be kind to me," he continued, "or I shall let loose the whole horde upon you. Within three days I shall be the most unpopular man in Folkestone. Those who have urged me to smoke cigars and cigarettes will wish to stab me. Those who have asked me to drink at their expense will suddenly develop into potential Wainwrights and Neal Creams. I shall never dare to drink with any one for fear of being poisoned."

"I wonder why men are like that?" she said, with a far-away look in her eyes.

"I want to make a compact with you," he said.

For some minutes neither spoke; she continued to gaze straight in front of her with dreamy intentness. Beresford smoked contentedly.

"A compact?" she queried presently, turning to him.

"If you'll come for a walk every morning, I'll promise not to introduce anybody to you."

For a few moments she appeared to be debating the suggestion, her head a little on one side, a smile in her eyes.

"Of two evils choose the lesser," he suggested. "I'm only one, they are thirty-nine."

"Very well," she laughed, "I'll agree; but you must keep them from being annoying."

"I'll buy a machine-gun, if necessary."

"I hate men," said Lola, apparently addressing a sparrow that had perched upon a bush just in front of her.

Beresford smoked on in silence, feeling that the remark required no comment from him.

That morning he had waited for her in the hall, and they had set out together for a walk on the Leas, Beresford conscious of murderous looks from others who had also waited.

"I suppose that was a very rude remark," she said, turning to him with a smile.

"Not at all. When I think of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Masculine Faith at the Imperial I can quite sympathise with you."

"What a good thing the number isn't forty." She looked up at him from beneath her lashes.

"It may be before long," he said imperturbably, "but the Fortieth Article is determined to enjoy the present."

"Why do you say it may be?"

"*Vide* Aunt Caroline," was the retort. "She would be astonished at your being able to tolerate my company for half an hour."

"Why?"

"Well, Drew and I always seem to get on her nerves. We speak a different language, and in reality live in a different world from hers."

"And yet you are so dissimilar?"

"We are as different from each other as each

individually is different from Aunt Caroline. Drew poses as having eliminated all emotions from his nature."

"And you?" she interrogated.

"I have eliminated all but emotions," he said, looking at her with a smile.

"And yet Lord Drewitt is—is——" she hesitated.

"As emotional as a theatrical-star ousted by an understudy," he suggested.

"But you said he was unemotional."

"I said he posed as being unemotional."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's a bit difficult to explain. For instance, suppose you were upset in a boat. Drew would go in after you, bring you out, and then probably manage to convey to you that you were not looking your best, and had better go home and have a tidy-up."

"Then I shall never fall into the water when Lord Drewitt is about," she said gaily. "I should want my rescuer to—to——"

"What?" he asked with interest.

"Well, I suppose I should want him to look down at me anxiously to see if—if I were still alive."

"Yes, with the water dripping from his nose and ears."

"Mr. Beresford!" she cried reproachfully, "I think that you and Lord Drewitt between you would kill romance."

"How can a man afford to be romantic? There is poor Drewitt with his title and two thousand a year, as he would tell you quite frankly, and I,

without a title and with not so much as two pounds a year. No, romance is only for the wealthy."

"Romance has nothing whatever to do with money," she said gravely. "Romance is merely a love of the beautiful."

"The emotionally beautiful," he corrected.

"Yes, the emotionally beautiful," she agreed, fixing her eyes on the red sail of a boat far away in the distance.

"The poor man cannot afford to be emotional. It would lose for him his friends, his job and his chances in life."

"But why doesn't Lord Drewitt do something?"

"Do something!" he repeated. "What is there for him to do?"

"Couldn't he work?" she suggested.

"At what? Peers can't work. He might drive a taxi; but Aunt Caroline would raise Cain."

She remained silent for some time, then turning to him shook her head, as if unable to make a suggestion.

"Proper allowance is never made for the rise of democracy. Drew and I are the products of our age. Drew's profession was that of being a peer, whilst I was precipitated into the Foreign Office. Then came the war, and everything got mixed up again, and I——" he paused.

"And you?" repeated Lola, looking up at him.

"I'm at a loose end."

"But aren't you going to work?"

"What can I do? I could be a clerk at three

pounds a week; but that would be worse than the Foreign Office, which at least is quite a decent club. I could live in Peckham and come up each day by a tram, with linen a little more frayed each year, and clothes a little dingier. No, I'm afraid I lack the courage to face such a fate."

"But what are you going to do?" she persisted; then a moment after added, "I'm sorry, it's horribly rude of me to be so persistent."

"Not at all," he said, gazing straight in front of him. "I'm going to enjoy what I can enjoy, and—and not bother about the deluge, which is inevitable. Louis XIV built palaces on bogs, and was quite happy about it; I shall rear castles on sand, and be still happier."

"I don't understand." She puckered her brows.

"Shall I tell you?" he asked, smiling at her mystification.

"Would you mind? I should awfully like to know."

"I can go on as I am for two or three weeks more. I'm going to squeeze every drop of pleasure out of these few weeks, and not bother about what happens after."

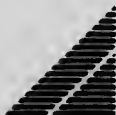
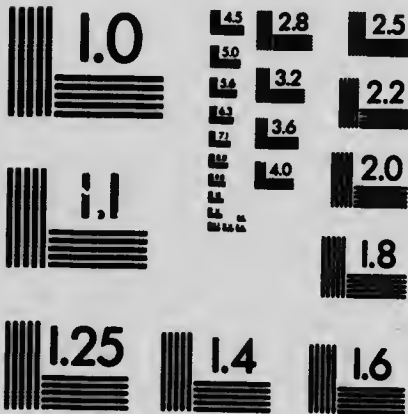
"But," she persisted, "what are you going to do then?"

"You are almost as material as Aunt Caroline," he smiled. "Why cannot you be romantic? I once knew an artist who married a girl when all he possessed in the world was four pounds eighteen shillings and threepence, he was very insistent upon



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the threepence, and a drawerful of pawn-tickets. That was a splendid act of romance."

"Yes; but romance must be——"

"No it must not," he insisted. "Romance must be just its mad, capricious, inconsequent self."

"But you must have something in mind. What is to happen after the four or five weeks?"

"Aunt Caroline suggests the colonies; both Drew and I regard the colonies as an Imperial asset and nothing more. We love them from afar. They produce splendid fellows—we've fought with them; but for all that we prefer our own country, just as they prefer theirs."

"But what have you to live for? There seems ——" she began.

"Three or four weeks' good time, a walk a day with you, and the privilege of keeping off the Thirty-Nine Articles," he smiled.

She looked at him gravely, then shook her head, as if entirely unable to comprehend his attitude.

"I don't understand you in the least," she said at length, "and I don't think any one else does, either."

"What makes you say that?" enquired Beresford.

"I was talking to Lady Tanagra Elton a few days back about Lord Drewitt, and your name came up, and——" she paused.

"And what?" enquired Beresford, knocking the ashes out of his pipe on the heel of his boot. "Do not spare me."

"Well," said Lola, with a smile, "she said that you were 'a dear boy, but quite mad.'"

"God bless her for the first part of her judgment," he laughed; "Tan is one of the jewels of the human race."

"She seemed charming," agreed Lola.

"I must warn you against her, however," he said with mock-seriousness.

"Warn me?"

"She's a born match-maker. She's always marrying her friends off and——" he paused dramatically.

"And what?" she enquired.

"They're always the right pairs. Tan never makes a mistake."

"I really don't understand you," she said after a long pause, "or what you are going to do when——" she hesitated.

"Oh, there are many ways of shuffling-off," he smiled.

"Suppose——" she began, then hesitated.

"Yes, suppose——?"

"Suppose you meant something to someone else, and that your shuffling-off, as you call it, would pain them, perhaps more than pain them, what then?"

"If you refer to Aunt Caroline, I can assure you that you are wrong," he said, with a laugh that even to himself sounded unnatural.

Lola flashed him a reproachful look, but said nothing. For some moments she remained silent, her head turned away.

"I'm sorry," he said contritely; but still she averted her head.

"Please don't be cross with me," he said, bending

towards her, conscious of a delicious thrill as his shoulder accidentally touched hers.

A moment after she turned, and he saw that her eyes were moist.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said again, "I——"

"Isn't it stupid of me," she smiled an April smile; "but——" she paused, then a moment afterwards continued, "you and Lord Drewitt seem to be men that should have a lot in front of you; yet you both talk—you talk so—as if nothing mattered, as if life were just like a theatre, and when the curtain dropped that was the end of everything."

"And isn't it?" questioned Beresford.

"We don't know, any of us."

"A man's destiny is determined by his forebears, and he is moulded by his environment," said Beresford.

"Unless he makes his own environment," she suggested.

"It's easy for you to say that. You have before you the means of satisfying every wish."

"Have I?" she asked dreamily; then as if coming back to realities, "Are you sure?"

"Haven't you?"

"Just change places with me in your imagination," she said, "and find womanhood represented by the feminine equivalent to the Thirty-Nine Articles."

"I apologise."

"And now I think we had better think about lunch," she said with a smile.

They walked back to the hotel without exchanging a word. At the entrance were grouped some of the Thirty-Nine anxious lords of creation.

When Beresford reached his own table in the dining-room, he found seated at it a little man with a dark moustache, a greasy skin, and a general atmosphere of One-of-Us about him. The man looked up and smiled. Beresford bowed coldly, as he recognised one of his most persistent would-be hosts, a man who had invited him to take anything from a whisky-and-soda to a high dive in his company.

Beresford sought out Mr. Byles, who smiled with servile tact and rubbed his hands.

"There's someone sitting at my table, Byles," he said; "I'm going upstairs. I shall be down in five minutes. You will find me a table to myself as I arranged."

"I'm very sorry, sir," said Byles, "but we're so full up."

"You will do as I say," said Beresford coldly, "or I shall report the matter to the management. By the way, the seat that Mr. Gordon previously occupied is still vacant," he added over his shoulder as he turned towards the door, conscious of a look of hatred in Byles's eyes.

When he returned to the dining-room his table was unoccupied, and the man with the dark moustache and the moist complexion was darting glances of hatred in his direction. Beresford wondered

whether or no Byles had returned the handsome tip that was to procure for Mr. Gordon the covered seat. Evidently it was intended to be a stepping-stone to an introduction to Lola.

CHAPTER XIII

A QUESTION OF ANKLES

PLEASE may I come and talk to you while you finish breakfast?"

Beresford had almost concluded his own meal when Lola entered the room, the ever faithful Mr. Byles in attendance. Later he had stepped across to her table.

"I started this morning feeling like a boy scout," he continued; "like several boy scouts, I might say," he added, as he dropped into the chair to which she motioned him.

"A boy scout!" She looked up from a piece of toast she was buttering.

"I simply yearned to make every one happy. I was most aggressively eupeptic."

"Is that why you came over to talk to me?" she enquired without looking up from her plate.

"I'm always doing good deeds for you," he said reproachfully.

Her eyes questioned him.

"I keep from you the Thirty-Nine Articles."

She smiled and nodded.

"One morning," he continued, "you will look across at my table and see my chair empty."

"How do you know I shall look across?" she challenged, darting him a look from beneath her lashes.

"You are merely interrupting the story," he said severely. "One morning you will look across at my table and find it empty," he repeated. "Later in the day there will be a great disturbance when my body is found weltering in its own blood. Heroes of romance always welter in their own blood," he added.

"Heroes of romance!" she repeated with uplifted brows. "Are you one?"

"I am the hero of my own romance," he retorted; "but you interrupt me. I had just got to where I was weltering in my own blood—the victim of the Thirty-Nine Articles."

She laughed.

"And ever afterwards," he proceeded, "I shall share with the Roman sentry, Casabianca and Jack Cornwell their laurels for devotion to duty."

"I should have preferred to be regarded as a pleasure," she said demurely.

"It's my duty to protect my pleasure," he retorted quietly.

"But you were saying you felt like a boy scout——"

"Like several boy scouts," he corrected. "I felt as Ulysses must have felt when he saw them dragging the wooden horse into Troy, or Leonidas at Thermopylæ, or Mr. Lloyd George when he heard that Mr. Asquith had been defeated at East Fife;

in other words, I felt extremely well and happy. Then I suddenly caught sight of a girl at the table by the window, and it made me——" he paused.

"Was it love at first sight?" she asked quietly.

"And then," he continued, "I found this fair world was not so fair. Nature had suddenly administered a cold douche in the shape of a pair of calves that terminated suddenly in shapeless feet."

"Whatever do you mean?" she cried, laughing.

"Merely that like Godfrey Elton, I'm very sensitive about ankles."

"But what have this girl's ankles to do with you?" She crinkled up her brows in a way she had when puzzled.

"They spoiled my breakfast," he complained, "and I'm afraid they're going to spoil the whole day for me."

"You are funny," she smiled. "I don't understand you in the least. I always thought that Englishmen were unapproachable in the morning; but you are more ridiculous in the morning than during the rest of the day."

"Imagine the state of mind of a woman conscious that Nature has left her like an unfinished symphony," he continued. "She must tremble every time she opens a fashion paper, lest some readjustment of the surface of exposure shall betray her."

"But we are not all Greeks," she suggested.

"A woman doesn't require to be a Greek to be conscious of Nature's inexplicable oversights in modelling," he retorted.

"I decline to discuss anatomy so soon after breakfast," she laughed as she rose. "I shall be about ten minutes," she threw at him over her shoulder as she walked towards the door.

Beresford sauntered through the vestibule, and stood smoking on the hotel steps watching the sparkle of the sea.

Presently Lola joined him and they set out in the direction of Hythe. For some time they walked in silence; Beresford sucking moodily at his pipe.

"Is anything the matter?" she enquired at length.

"Everything's the matter," he grumbled. "What right has Nature to produce anything so appalling as that poor girl?"

"Oh, I see," she said.

"Thick ankles, no taste in dress, sandy hair, sand-coloured eyelashes, spectacles. Shapeless, hopeless and alone."

"But——" began Lola.

"If you want a more comprehensive list of feminine disabilities," he continued, "you are insatiable. Such people are a challenge to religious belief." There was a note of gloomy indignation in his voice.

"But perhaps she's happy," suggested Lola.

"Happy!" cried Beresford. "Would you be happy if you were in her place?"

She shuddered slightly.

"What right has Nature to give you all that she has given you, and deny that girl all she has denied her. How can she have a good time?"

She looked at him swiftly. He was in deadly earnest.

"Perhaps she doesn't mind," she suggested tentatively.

"Doesn't mind?" he cried. "What woman doesn't mind being unattractive? Imagine what she must feel when she sees you."

Again she flashed at him an enquiring look; but there was nothing in his face suggestive of a compliment.

"You have all she lacks," he continued, "and it's all—it's all—oh, absolutely rotten," he finished up, ejecting the ashes from his pipe by knocking it vigorously upon the handle of his stick. Then a moment later catching her eye he laughed. "I suppose I'm on my hobby-horse," he said.

"But why bully me?" she asked plaintively.

"Was I bullying you?" he said. "I'm dreadfully sorry; but such things render me capable of bullying the Fates themselves. You see I was just cataloguing that poor girl's disabilities when you came into the room, and it made me feel a selfish beast."

"But how?" she asked.

"Don't you see I ought to be trying to give her a good time instead of——"

"Giving me a good time," she suggested avoiding his gaze.

"Letting you give me a good time," he concluded. "Oh! let's sit down, perhaps I shall get into a better humour if I listen to the larks. Yet it makes me murderous when I think of those old ruffians in

Rome who considered larks' tongues a delicacy."

"Don't you think you would be better if I left you alone?" she suggested, as he dropped down upon the grass beside her.

"Good heavens, no!" he cried, looking across at her. "What an awful idea."

"But you seem so——" she hesitated.

"Well, I'll forget those utilitarian ankles," he smiled.

"I want to talk to you," she said hesitatingly. "Seriously," she added, as he smiled across at her. "Has it ever struck you that everything ends?" She kept her face averted.

"It has." He plucked a strong-looking blade of grass and proceeded to use it as a pipe-cleaner.

For some minutes there was silence.

"I said it has," he repeated, looking up from his occupation.

She still kept her eyes fixed upon a little clump of grass with which she was toying.

"You've been very nice to me," she began in a low voice.

"I have," with decision.

She looked up quickly. "Are you laughing at me?" she asked simply. There was in her eyes just a suspicion of reproach.

To Beresford she seemed to possess the power of expressing her every emotion without the necessity for speech. Her eyes, he decided for the thousandth time, were the most wonderful ever bestowed upon woman.

"I was not," he said in reply to her question.

"But you are not being serious, are you?" There was the simplicity of a child in the look that accompanied her words.

"Must I be serious?" he asked, pocketing his pipe and taking out his cigarette-case.

"Pleeeeeease."

Again there was silence, during which Beresford lighted a cigarette.

"I just wanted you to know," she said.

"That I had been nice to you?"

She nodded.

"Thank you."

"I don't like men," she began, and then hesitated.

"As a conversational opening to set me at my ease——" he began with a smile.

"Now you are not being serious," she protested. "What I wanted to tell you was——" again she paused, "that—that—you have been so different from the others."

"Shall we take all that for granted?" He smiled across at her a friendly, understanding smile.

"Oh yes, let's," she cried with a sigh of relief; "I have been wanting to tell you only I—— Of course, it seems silly, doesn't it?"

"Does it?"

"Now," she continued with a great air of decision, "there's the other thing."

"Is that serious also?" he asked quizzically.

She nodded vigorously.

"I'm afraid I'm going to be very rude," she cried

with a sudden change of manner. The rapid alternations of her moods always charmed him.

"To preserve the balance?" he suggested, "you have my full permission."

"And you won't be cross?" she queried a little anxiously.

"I promise to combine the patience of Job with the restraint of William the Silent."

"Suppose——" she began, then paused.

"Suppose what?"

"Suppose you thought I was going to do something very—very foolish, what would you do?"

"Envy the happy man."

"Oh, please be serious," she pleaded with a slight blush, biting her under-lip to hide the smile that his retort had called up.

"Listen to that lark." Beresford lifted his eyes in an endeavour to discover the bird from which came the flood of song. "Suppose you were to ask him to be serious," he suggested. "I'm too happy to be serious."

"But you are not——" she hesitated.

"Still, I'll promise."

"You know you worry me."

"Worry you?" Suddenly for Beresford the lark ceased its song, and the sunshine lost its joyousness.

"I mean I'm worried about you."

"For that re-arrangement of words I thank you."

"Please," she pleaded.

"I thought you meant that I was a nuisance. If

"I am you will tell me, won't you?" The earnestness of his manner was unmistakable.

"Please don't be foolish," she said reproachfully. "I know it's impertinent of me; but I wish you would tell me about yourself, about——"

"About myself?" he queried. "I've told you all there is to tell."

"I mean about the future," she persisted.

"Like the mule, I have no future."

She turned her head aside, and mechanically began to pluck blades of grass.

"You see," she began, her head still averted.

"I'm sorry; but I don't."

"You're most horribly difficult to talk to," she said, screwing up her eyebrows.

"But you said——"

"You promised to be serious, please—pleeease be nice."

Be nice! Did she know that she was tormenting him, that she was maddening, that she was irresistible in that porridge-coloured frock—that was the nearest he could get to the actual tint—and that floppy sort of hat with orange ribbon, and her grey suede shoes and stockings? What an ankle!

"I'll be as serious as my situation," he said, seeing reproach in the eyes she turned to him. "Honest Injun."

She smiled and nodded at the childish phrase.

"You were talking the other day——" she said, then stopped.

"Why not blurt it out," he suggested.

"Well, it hurts me to hear you talk as if nothing matters, as if life——"

"'Life is a watch and a vision, between a sleep and a sleep?'" he quoted.

"Yes; but Swinburne meant it beautifully, not as something to be got rid of. When I was a kiddie," she continued inconsequently, "I used to tear my pinnies when anybody offended me."

"And you regard me as wanting to tear my pinny," he continued gravely.

She nodded, with a flicker of a smile. "You're not cross with me?" She looked at him anxiously.

Why not end it by telling her everything. Instead he heard himself saying:

"I suppose it was really self-pity that made me sorry for that girl with the ankles."

"I once read somewhere," she said gravely, looking him straight in the eyes, "that we are all of us influenced to some degree by every one we meet. I wish——" she stopped.

"You wish that you could influence me to turn over a new leaf and become a sort of New Year resolution."

She looked at him reproachfully.

"It's easy for a woman to preach the gospel of content, particularly when she has all that makes for content. You would probably suggest the colonies, or America, thinking of *The Silver King* or Andrew Carnegie, or——"

"Please don't, you are hurting me."

Both the words and the tone were so simple that

he stopped abruptly. She turned aside. He could see her lower lip was indrawn.

"Forgive me," he said contritely, "I'm all jangly to-day. It's that girl's ankles," he added whimsically. "I didn't want to be serious; but you would make me, and now you're angry."

Her head was still turned from him. What a brute he had been, and how sensitive she was.

"Lola, please forgive me."

It was the first time he had used her name. It slipped out unconsciously. He thrilled at the sound. She turned, tears dewing her lower lashes. Then with a sudden movement she sprang up.

"Now we must be going," she cried with a sudden change of mood; "I do nothing but eat, sleep and sit about. You know," she said turning to him with a smile, "we women have to consider our figures, and you're helping me to ruin mine."

Beresford followed her, his mind in a whirl at the sudden change in her mood.

For the rest of the morning she was in the highest of high spirits. She insisted on scrambling down to the water, and soon succeeded in getting both her own and Beresford's feet soaked.

"Look!" she cried, drawing back her skirts to show the darker line just above her ankles where the water had reached.

"I'm just as wet, and a lot more uncomfortable," he replied lugubriously, as he looked down at his brown boots discoloured by the sea-water. "I hate walking in wet boots."

She laughed gaily, then a moment after darted off like the wind.

"Let's run," she cried over her shoulder.

Beresford started after her, conscious of the absurd figure he must appear stumbling through the shingly sand after this fleet-footed creature.

Presently she dropped down suddenly, he almost falling over her.

"That was good," she panted, looking up at him with burning cheeks and sparkling eyes. "I feel like a mad thing this morning. What do you think of me?" she challenged.

"I think I would rather not say," he said quietly as he sank down beside her, and she turned and for some time sat looking out to sea.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DANGER LINE

I

OF course," said Lola, as she trifled with her teaspoon, "I ought really to have gone back to town as soon as I found that Miss Brock could not come."

"You unquestionably ought," agreed Beresford, as he indolently tossed crumbs of cake to a couple of sparrows.

She glanced at him swiftly, then dropped her eyes.

"That's not what I wanted you to say."

"I know," he said with a laugh. "Well, why didn't you go back to town?"

"I suppose because I didn't want to." She gave him a look from under her lashes.

They were sitting in the garden of an old inn having tea. Lola had expressed a wish for an excursion inland, and Beresford had hired a car.

It was an old-fashioned spot surrounded by an ivy-covered wall. The back of the house was obscured by a trellis covered with crimson-ramblers. A few fruit trees disputed with currant and rose

bushes the possession of the garden. It seemed as if Nature had been permitted to go her own way, without either help or hindrance from man.

In the centre of the garden was a sundial, moss-green from exposure to the weather, the base overgrown with grass and some sort of weed-like creeper, whilst from above the lattice-windowed inn, a chimney reared its long neck and smoked lazily into the blueness of the sky. Birds were twittering and dropping on to the grass, seizing the crumbs of cake that Beresford idly tossed to them, then, as if suddenly realising their daring, they would speed away to devour their plunder in safety.

As the days passed, Lola and Beresford had drifted into the habit of spending all their time together. There had been no plan or arrangement; it had just happened. They still sat at different tables in the dining-room. She had not invited him to take meals with her. She was thinking of the proprieties, he decided. He was conscious that they formed the topic of conversation at the Imperial. The Thirty-Nine Articles had frankly thrown him overboard, and either ignored or glared at him.

During their walks and excursions together, Lola had told him much about herself. How she had lost her mother when a few months old, and her father, who died of a broken heart, three years later. An uncle in New Zealand, whom she had never seen, had assumed responsibility for his brother's child.

A little more than a year previously he had died, and she had inherited his vast fortune.

Just as war broke out her guardian had arranged for Mrs. Crisp, her mother's sister, to become her "dragon." Beresford gathered that there was no very great sympathy between Lola and her aunt.

There was a sadness in her voice when she spoke of her uncle. Apparently he had misogynist tendencies, and had refused to see the niece for whom he had provided. He would neither allow her to go to New Zealand, nor would he himself come to England. He was a man who lived entirely for his work.

In return Beresford told what little there was to tell about himself. How his mother had died when he was born, and his father had been killed in the hunting field a year later. Up to the time of his leaving Oxford, a cousin of his father's had acted as guardian. The fact that neither had known their parents seemed to constitute a bond between them.

"In my case, you see," Beresford remarked with a smile, when he had concluded his little autobiographical sketch, "the fairy uncle was missing."

As they sat in the inn garden, both were thinking of the approaching end of their holiday.

"I must go back to-morrow," she said. "More tea?"

"May I come, too? and yes, please."

For a moment she looked at him with crinkled eyebrows, her fingers on the handle of the teapot. Then she laughed and proceeded to fill his cup.

"You're very literal," she said, as she handed it to him.

"Am I?" he asked, selecting with great deliberation a lump of sugar, and holding it poised over the tea until it was slowly discoloured.

"You would make a very trying——" she broke off suddenly and dropped her eyes.

"But you haven't answered my question." He pretended not to notice either her embarrassment or her flushed cheeks.

"Didn't I?" Her gaze was fixed upon a black cat that was making a great business of stalking a sparrow.

"You're merely trying to gain time."

"Am I?"

"You know you are."

"Why should I want to gain time?" Her gaze was still on the black cat which, having raised its bird when fully four yards away, was looking about expectantly like Elijah in the desert—for more birds. "Why should I want to gain time?" she repeated as Beresford remained silent. She still avoided his eyes.

"Possibly to spare my feelings," he replied, watching her closely.

"Or save my reputation," she retorted.

"Is it as bad as that?"

"What, my reputation?" She stole a glance at him; but finding his gaze upon her dropped her eyes instantly.

"No, the situation."

Again she was looking at the black cat.

"You have compromised me most horribly at the hotel," she said reproachfully.

With great deliberation Beresford rose and walking over to where the black cat was striving to return to the primitive bird-stalking ways of its progenitors, sent it clambering up the ivy and over the wall by the simple process of making a wild dive towards it. With equal deliberation he returned to his seat and, catching Lola's puzzled gaze, smiled.

"Why did you do that?" she enquired.

"I resent all rivals to your attention, be they the Thirty-Nine Articles or one solitary black cat," he replied, offering her a cigarette.

She shook her head, and he proceeded to light one himself.

"You are absurd," she laughed a little self-consciously.

"If your finances were reduced to the equivalent of about two weeks of ease and pleasure," he replied, "you, too, would be inclined to husband your resources."

"Am I a resource?" she flashed, then seeing him smile and, realising the implication, she began to search nervously in her bag.

"It's there," he said, pointing to an absurd dab of cambric that lay on the table beside her.

She looked up and, meeting his eyes, laughed.

"I think it will be better not," she said, toying with her handkerchief.

"To be a resource?" he queried.

"Of course not," she laughed. "I was answering your question."

"Which one?"

"How trying you are, and it's so hot," she protested, fanning herself with her handkerchief. "The one about returning to London, of course. Besides," she added with feminine inconsistency, "the doctor ordered you to stay here."

"Not indefinitely," he objected.

"But you've only been here a week."

"This is the ninth day of my wonder."

"And consequently the last."

He looked across at her, startled in spite of himself, as she sat, looking deliciously cool and provokingly pretty, in a little toque of brilliant colouring above an oatmeal-coloured frock.

"Somewhere in the lap of the ages I shall rest the better for the knowledge that once in my life I had a good time." He smiled at her gravely.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, looking at him with startled eyes. "It sounds so—so——" she broke off, unable to find a simile.

For fully a minute he continued to smoke without speaking. At length he said, disregarding her question—

"Hasn't it been said that we never know when we are happy?"

She nodded.

"I have been happy for the last few days," he continued, "and I have been conscious of it every moment of the time."

She made no reply; but continued to toy with the lace of her handkerchief.

"Rain-Girl," he said quietly, "you have been a ripping pal, I——" he broke off as she looked up. There were tears in her eyes.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," she said in a low voice, none too well under control.

"Like what?"

"About—about—— Oh, I'm ridiculous!" making a vicious little dab with her handkerchief at a tear that toppled over the brim, and ran down the side of her nose. "You know what I mean," she said accusingly a moment later.

"Do I?" he asked calmly.

"Yes, now, don't you? Oh, please, *please* try and be different." There was eager pleading in her voice.

"There's the leopard and his spots," he suggested smiling.

"Please be serious, Mr. Beresford."

The use of his name seemed to bring him back from the shadowed pathway of his thoughts.

"I can't be serious if you are formal and call me 'Mr. Beresford' in that reproachful way." His eyes challenged, "It makes me feel like the Fortieth Article."

She laughed.

"I would sooner fall back into the nameless void of the last eight days than be 'Mr. Beresford' on the ninth."

"Well, will you?" She looked at him, her head slightly on one side.

"Will I what?" he queried.

"You really are the most provoking person I ever met," she cried in mock despair.

"That's exactly what Aunt Caroline says," he remarked easily. "Only she puts it more pithily. She just says, 'Richard, you're a fool.'"

"But you *are* rather trying, you know, aren't you?" She looked at him smilingly, her head still a little on one side, as if desirous of coaxing from him the admission.

"And if she gets still further exasperated," he continued, "she adds, 'You always were a fool.' My folly has become something of a family tradition. Even Drew frankly confesses that I'm a fool, although, out of the kindness of his heart, he modifies it somewhat by adding that he regards me as a pleasant sort of fool."

"I wish I knew when you were serious." She regarded him with a comical expression of uncertainty on her face.

"Never, if I can help it;" then suddenly leaning towards her, he said, "Yes, I'll be serious now. I'm serious when I tell you that I've been happier during the last nine days than in all the rest of my life before. I'm serious when I tell you how I value your comradeship," his voice shook a little. "I'm serious when I tell you that it has meant a lot to me to be taken on trust, as you have taken me. You have been splendid, Rain-Girl, more splendid than

I thought it possible for any woman to be. You are just wonderful."

He smiled right into her eyes, and she looked down quickly.

"I've finished now," he said lightly. "I'm not often——"

"Please don't." The words came from her lips almost in a sob.

"I'm sorry." He leaned across the table, and for a moment laid his hand on hers. "What is the matter?"

"Oh, I'm just silly, that's all," she cried, jumping up. "Why, there's the kitten back," and she pointed with her parasol to where the black cat was once more engaged in the everlasting self-deception that she was a great hunter of birds.

"Now let's go," she cried gaily, moving towards the gate.

They drove back to Folkestone in silence, both conscious of disappointment, Beresford with himself for having even momentarily forsaken his entrenched position of reserve; Lola with something that she was unable to define.

"And I'm not to receive an answer to my question?" he enquired quizzically as he handed her out of the car at the entrance of the Imperial.

"I'll tell you after dinner," she smiled, "whilst we are walking on the Leas. There will be a glorious moon to-night," she added as, with a nod, she left him with the conviction that the afternoon

would in all probability prove as nothing to the evening.

As he went up to his room to dress, he decided that he would take no wine at dinner.

2

As Beresford entered the dining-room that evening, Mr. Byles was hovering about, obviously waiting for Lola to make her appearance, he decided. To his surprise, however, the major-domo approached him smiling and rubbing his hands.

"I've taken the liberty of using your table this evening, sir, as you are dining with Miss Craven," he said in the mellow, unctuous tone that he had adopted to Beresford since their little passage at arms over Mr. Montagu Gordon, whose Scottish name found so startling a contradiction in his nose.

Thrilled at the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* with Lola, Beresford nodded his acquiescence and, with an indifference he was far from feeling, walked over to her table and took the seat opposite that she usually occupied. He was conscious that every eye in the room was upon him, particularly the feminine eyes. Why hadn't she told him that he was to dine with her this evening? Possibly it was a sudden whim. He was elated at the prospect. His previous qualms vanished. Nothing mattered now. There was just this delirious happiness, and then—the deluge. What of it? It was wonderful to be alive!

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Lola approaching, conducted by the inevitable Mr. Byles. She was dressed in a simple black frock with a bunch of red roses at her waist. With a thrill he told himself that they were those he had sent her on the previous day.

"What do you think of me?" she enquired when Mr. Byles had taken a reluctant departure, having assured himself that everything was as it should be.

"Is it permitted to say?" asked Beresford.

"I'm afraid I'm in a mad mood to-night," she cried as she unfolded her napkin.

"And I am the sauce that is served with your madness?" he questioned.

She laughed.

"And you?" she demanded.

"More sober than usual," he replied with a smile.

She made a little *moue*.

"You see it will preserve the Aristotelean mean," he continued, as he helped himself to *hors d'œuvres*.

"The Aristotelean what?" she questioned, looking up from a sardine she was dissecting, with great daintiness, he thought.

"The *via media*."

"Would you mind coming down to my intellectual level?" she asked demurely.

Beresford laughed.

"Well?" she said, "I'm waiting."

"For?"

"You to come down from the classical clouds."

"Shall we say striking the balance," he sug-

gested, "the middle way between your too much and my too little?"

"Am I too much?" she queried.

"For the women, yes, for the men, no. You see there are thirty-nine of them." Then seeing a shadow pass across her face, he hastened to add, "I didn't mean that about the women," he hesitated: "May I say it?"

She nodded.

"You look so radiant and happy," he added half to himself, "that——" he stopped dead.

"More wonderful than on a gate?" she challenged.

"Nothing could be more wonderful than that," he said gravely, declining the wine that Mr. Byles was about to pour into his glass.

Seeing him refuse she looked across with elevated brows. He removed the inhibition, Mr. Byles depressed the neck of the bottle and the wine creamed into the glass.

"Why?" she queried, nodding at his wine glass.

"Shall we say to preserve the Aristotelean mean?" he questioned quizzically.

Again she made that intimate little *moue* that set his pulses throbbing.

"I'm in a mad mood to-night," she cried again.

"You've already taken me into your confidence on that point."

"Have I?"

"It's probably due to a sense of sex isolation." He looked at her mischievously over his soup spoon.

"A sense of——?"

"Every woman in the room disapproves of you," he said. "In other words, you are in a state of splendid sex isolation, feminine sex that is."

"I don't mind," she laughed.

"On the other hand," continued Beresford, "the male sex is with you to a man. That merely aggravates the situation."

For some minutes they ate in silence.

"If I were at the evening of the ninth day of my only wonder——" She paused to see if he understood.

"I think I follow you through the labyrinth," he smiled.

"I should be more excited," she concluded a little weakly.

"More excited than what?" he asked mystified.

"Than you are." Her eyes challenged him.

"Unless you immediately withdraw that remark," he said warningly, "I shall insist on your feeling my pulse."

"I withdraw," she added hastily. "I'm so glad I'm not a cow," she cried presently, as with a sigh she placed her knife and fork at the "all clear" angle.

"So am I," he said quietly.

"So are you!" she repeated with a puzzled expression.

"Glad that you are not a cow," he explained.

"Why?" she challenged.

"Well, you see," he said gravely, "I should only

be able to rub your nose, and you would soon get tired of that."

"How absurd you are," she cried. "I certainly should get tired of it. Besides," she added inconsequently, "you would rub the powder off."

"But it was the cow's nose."

"You said my nose."

"Temporarily leaving the question of whose nose for a later discussion," he said, "may I ask why this expression of satisfaction at the august decrees of Providence?"

"It would be so monotonous," she objected.

"But I take it that even cows have their moments," he suggested.

"Oh, you don't understand," she cried with mock impatience.

"I think I do," he said quietly. "But it has been better said elsewhere, has it not?"

"Elsewhere?"

" 'I thank Thee that I am not as other men are,' " he quoted, and then added, "for 'other men,' however, read 'cows.' "

"Oh!" There was consternation in her voice. "Did it sound like that? How dreadful."

"You have every justification."

"Please don't."

"I'm very sorry," he said, recognising the genuine entreaty in her voice. "Before coffee comes I want you to drink a toast with me."

"A toast?" she repeated, her eyes sparkling. "Oh, please tell me what it is."

"Otherwise you could not drink it."

"Pleeeeeease," she entreated.

"It is to a certain gate on a Surrey high-road," he said gravely, raising his glass.

"Oh——!" There was disappointment in her voice. Then with a laugh she raised her glass and drank.

Later, as they were about to rise from the table Beresford said:

"But I haven't yet thanked you for asking me to dinner."

"I didn't ask you," she said rising and picking up her handkerchief. "I instructed Byles to put you here."

He bowed humbly. "May I ask why?" he enquired.

"Because it's the ninth day of your wonder, and now I'll go and get my cloak," and she led the way out of the dining-room, Beresford following, exhilarated by the sensation her every movement seemed to create among the other guests.

3

The moon had not yet risen. There was no wind; the night was very still. Occasionally a shout or a laugh would stab the oppressive silence, seeming to add to its density. Here and there a sudden point of flame showed the whereabouts of some man lighting a cigarette or pipe.

"You haven't yet answered my question about to-morrow," said Beresford.

She did not reply. After fully three minutes' silence he reminded her that he was still waiting.

"I'm so sorry," she said with the air of one collecting her thoughts. "You see——" she hesitated.

"Your reputation," he queried.

She nodded.

"But——" he began.

"And then it's also the tenth day," she said mischievously.

"Please let me arrange everything," he said with the air of a boy asking to be allowed to handle a gun.

"Very well," she sighed. "My reputation be on your head."

"And I may arrange the time of the train and everything?"

Again she nodded, then a moment after said:

"You have me at a disadvantage. I can't argue on such a night. Now let's wait and watch for the moon." They were sitting on their favourite seat facing the sea. "I don't want to talk. Oh, that was terribly rude," she added; "but you understand, don't you?"

For answer Beresford touched her hand, then withdrew his quickly.

In silence they sat watching a patch on the horizon faintly flushed with yellow. Presently above the cloud of mist there slowly rose a dull globe of

orange that began laboriously to climb the sky, heavy as if with weeping.

"It looks as if it were afraid of something that it knows it will see," said Lola in an awed voice.

Beresford felt her arm touch his shoulder. Was it accidental? he asked himself. With a feeling of exaltation he noticed that she did not withdraw. He made a slight movement, severing the contact as if by accident. He waited breathlessly. Yes, her arm had touched his shoulder again. She—she——

Something wild and primitive seemed to spring into being within him. Something of the age when men fought for their women and carried them off by brute force. Why did he not carry off this girl? Why was she sitting there beside him if she were not prepared to be carried off? Why did he not clasp her to him and pour incoherent words into her ears, smothering her with kisses, inhaling the sweet perfume of her? Women such as she were won in a riot of physical mastery. She was no mate for the drawing-room wooer. No one would understand her as he had understood her. Other men would——

Suddenly there came the thought of the Thirty-Nine Articles and he laughed, a short, odd laugh, which seemed to strike the soft night air like a discord. She started, turning to him with eyes dilated a little.

"What—what is the matter?" she enquired with a quick indrawing of breath.

"I was thinking of the Thirty-Nine Articles," he replied in a voice that he failed to recognise as his own. "Shall we go back?"

Without a word she rose and they walked towards the Imperial. Was it his imagination, or did her steps really lag? She appeared listless, so different from what she had been at dinner. It was absurd. He was in a mood to attribute all sorts of causes to simple actions. In suggesting that they should return to the hotel he had deliberately stabbed himself, and the pain of it maddened him. Still the Challice pride had triumphed.

There was no doubt about the listlessness with which Lola climbed the steps to the hotel. At the foot of the stairs she turned, and in a tired voice bade him good-night—where was that little intimate smile that he had come to regard as his own most cherished possession?

He went out once more into the night and walked and walked and walked, returning when the birds were twittering their greetings to the dawn.

CHAPTER XV

LONDON AND LORD DREWITT

HOW am I going to explain you to auntie?"

"By Jove! I hadn't thought of that."

Beresford's look of consternation was so obvious that Lola laughed.

"I might add," she proceeded mischievously, "how am I to explain travelling back to London with you in a reserved compartment? It's—it's——"

"I know," he said. "I was thinking of that, only I didn't say it."

"Didn't say what?" she asked, genuinely puzzled.

"What it was like."

Her face crimsoned and, turning her head aside, she became engrossed in the landscape streaming past the window.

"You haven't told me what I'm to say to auntie," she said presently, still looking out of the window.

"Couldn't you say that I saved your life whilst bathing, or plucked you from a burning hotel, or that you ran over me when motoring, or——"

"That I came across you in a lunatic asylum," she suggested scathingly. "If I had been nearly

drowned the newspapers would have got hold of it, and the Imperial couldn't have been burned by stealth, and if——"

"Enough," he laughed. "I apologise. Why not tell her the truth?"

"The truth?" she queried.

"I grant it's the last thing that one usually thinks of. Say that I fainted in your arms in the dining-room of the Imperial and——"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she laughed. "Seriously though," she added a moment later. "I think it would be the best plan."

"To say that I fainted in your arms?" he asked innocently.

"That going to the assistance of a fellow-guest who had fainted," she continued severely, "I found that he was a cousin of Lord Drewitt."

"And nephew of Lady Drewitt, don't forget that," he said hastily, "or Aunt Caroline would never forgive you."

"I'll remember," she nodded.

"And having dragged me back resisting to this world," he continued, "you might add that you neglected me in a land where foster-mothers were not."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Only of your neglect during the early days of my convalescence."

"Suppose it got to be known that you and I were travelling up to London in a reserved compart-

ment?" Lola looked at him. "What would people say?" she demanded reproachfully.

"The worst without a doubt; but what they would say would be as nothing to what they would think. It's not really reserved, you know," he added, "merely the result of the constitutional venality of railway guards."

"But you don't consider my reputation."

"You have allowed me to consider little else for the last nine days," was the calm retort.

"Well, you must come to lunch to-morrow and explain to auntie, and bring Lord Drewitt. We'll invite Mr. Deacon Quelch. He's auntie's pet medium. It's so funny to see Lord Drewitt look at him." She laughed at the recollection.

"I think Drew mentioned that he had met Mr. Quelch," said Beresford drily, recollecting Drewitt's description.

"Now you won't forget," she said. "Two o'clock to-morrow, and above all discretion."

"Do you think I'm likely to forget?" he asked pointedly, "the luncheon, I mean."

"You might faint again," she suggested demurely, "or—or——"

"Or what?"

"Or go away," she glanced at him swiftly.

Somehow her simple remark seemed to bring back to him the full realisation of his position. A week or two and he would be faced by—— He shook himself as if to drive away the thought.

"Why did you do that?" she asked curiously.

"Why did I do what?"

"Shake yourself like—like——"

"A little devil had settled on my shoulder and was whispering unpleasant things into my ear," he explained with a smile.

"You are funny." She looked at him appraisingly. "You are funnier than any one I have ever known."

"*Pour s'amuse la reine,*" he smiled.

"I wish I understood you," she said, still regarding him with gravely intent eyes.

"And you think I should wear better understood?" he queried.

"You're not like——"

"The other Thirty-Nine Articles. *Grace à Dieu!*" he laughed.

"I can see it's no use," she said with a sigh. "You won't be serious."

"I dare not."

The tone rather than the words caused her to look at him quickly; but he was smiling.

The train was now rushing into bricks and mortar. To Beresford the greyness of the unending lines seemed reflected in his own thoughts. It was getting very near the end—the end with a capital "E." Still it had been wonderful, and he was not going to complain.

Nothing more was said until they drew into Victoria Station, and then only the commonplaces about luggage and a taxi. He secured a porter, retrieved Lola's luggage from the avalanche that was de-

ascending upon the platform from the guard's van, and finally secured a taxi.

"Thank you very much indeed for—for everything," she said with a smile as she held out her hand.

"You will let me see you sometimes?" he pleaded.

"But I thought you were going away," she said smiling.

"Oh, 'the bird of time has still a little way to flutter,'" he quoted as the taxi jerked forward.

"To-morrow then," she cried.

He lifted his hat and turned to the business of securing his own luggage and another taxi.

At the Ritz-Carlton he found that the letter he had sent from Folkestone cancelling his room had miscarried, involving a still further drain into his already sadly depleted capital. These gradual inroads into the limited balance of his days were becoming disturbing.

By six o'clock he had discovered and taken a small furnished bachelor flat in St. James's Mansions, Jermyn Street, had transferred there from the Ritz-Carlton, and was on his way to call upon Drewitt.

As he was shown in by Hoskins, he found Edward Seymour just about to take his departure.

"Behold, my dear Teddy," said Drewitt, lazily waving his hand towards Beresford, "the personification of a spirit of romance that no Cervantes could have killed."

Edward Seymour looked from Beresford to

Drewitt, blinking his eyes like a puzzled owl, then feeling that the surest defence lay in offence, he turned to Beresford.

"I suppose you've been spending money again," he sneered.

"No, Edward," said Beresford with a smile, he felt he could afford to smile at everything to-day, "as a matter of fact the taxi-man brought me for nothing."

"Have you ever read *Don Quixote*?" enquired Drewitt of Edward Seymour.

He shook his sandy little head. He always felt at a disadvantage with Drewitt.

"That would explain my allusion, Teddy. Now you must run away to Cecily, or she will think you are lost. Give her my love, and tell her I shall dispute the will." The smile which accompanied these words robbed them of some of their sting.

"I'll tell Aunt Caroline that you're back," said Edward Seymour to Beresford as he walked towards the door.

Beresford nodded as the door closed behind him.

"That's just the sort of thing that dear, amiable, sweet-natured little Teddy would do," said Drewitt.

"Richard, before you plunge me into the maelstrom of your adventures, I beseech you to ring for coffee."

Beresford did so.

"No, Richard, not a word until I am fortified. Three times this week have I seen the aunt, twice been buttonholed by Sir Redman Bight, the club

bore, in addition to being invited to join the Board of the Auto-Balloon Bus and Tram Car Syndicate, I think that was its name. It has really been most exhausting. By the way, did you ring twice?"

Beresford nodded.

"Thank you for remembering that twice means coffee. You might have rung three times, which means——; but never mind, that is a purely domestic matter."

After a pause Drewitt continued, "London's exactly where you left it, Richard, incidentally where Lola Craven left it also. She has not been heard of or seen since that breakfast. Heavens! that breakfast—and—and her aunt. Her conversation made me feel like rose-blight subjected to a patent spray-exterminator. I have never encountered anything like it." A look of complete misery overspread Drewitt's features. "I'm positively afraid to enquire of Hoskins how much I owe for coffee. It must be a prodigious amount. Ah! here it is," as Hoskins entered with a tray and proceeded to fill the two white and gold cups, which he handed to Drewitt and Beresford.

"What I most admire about you, Richard, is your capacity for the unexpected. You leave London for all the discomforts of the country-side, from damp beds to mosquitoes, your loving family hears nothing of you for eight weeks, then suddenly you reappear, clothed in a manner that is a direct challenge to Solomon—the king, I mean, not the Piccadilly florist. You then proceed to behave in a manner

that is eccentric, even for you, Richard, who in yourself are a sort of mental jazz-band. Now for your story, I can bear it."

In a few words Beresford told of the "accidental" meeting with Lola Craven at the Imperial, and that he had accepted an invitation for Drewitt and himself to lunch on the morrow. He refrained from mentioning that Mr. Quelch would be present.

"Impossible, quite impossible. To-morrow I am lunching with—let me see, who is it? I know it's somebody uncomfortable, because I have been looking forward to it with dread."

"To-morrow you are lunching with us, Drew," said Beresford quietly.

"Since you put it so persuasively," he said drily, "I cannot of course refuse. Perhaps you will ring the bell once, that means that Hoskins' presence is required."

Beresford did so, and a moment later Hoskins entered.

"Hoskins," said Drewitt, "I am due to lunch with somebody or other to-morrow. It doesn't matter with whom. Just say that—that—well, just make my excuses in your usual inimitable manner."

Hoskins bowed and withdrew.

"Richard, you are keeping something from me." Drewitt reached for a cigarette and proceeded to light it.

"And you, with your customary discretion, will not press the matter," said Beresford with a smile.

"Perhaps you're right. When a man makes a

peculiarly transparent sort of ass of himself, he is usually too conscious of the fact to require outside comment. By the way, the Aunt has been enquiring about you."

"About me?" queried Beresford.

"Yes. I think I unduly alarmed her by an indiscreet reference to a possible inquest upon your remains. Perhaps one or two ill-advised references to the cheerless and unhygienic qualities of coroners' courts were responsible. What she will say when she learns that you have been cutting the ground from under my feet at Folkestone, I haven't the most remote idea."

"Don't be an ass."

"Richard," continued Drewitt, "I have a foreboding. Like the estimable Cassandra, I feel a perfect tenement-house of foreboding. With your romantic disposition, 'Lola Craven's fascinating personality and your high sense of honour and integrity, we have a situation that Sophocles would have welcomed with tears of artistic joy."

"You are talking a most awful lot of rot, Drew." Beresford was conscious of a surly note in his voice.

"How much money have you got?" Drewitt leaned forward slightly, the bantering note had disappeared from his voice.

Beresford looked across at him curiously.

"I've given up taking stock of my resources."

For fully a minute there was silence, broken at length by Drewitt.

"Richard, there are a few hundreds at the bank unclaimed by my hysterical creditors, if——"

"Thanks, old man," said Beresford quietly as he rose. "I shall be all right," and he gripped with unusual warmth the hand that Drewitt extended to him.

"You're in the very devil of a mess, Dickie," he said quietly. "I'm always here when you want me."

Beresford drove back to Jermyn Street to telephone to Lola that Drewitt would be able to lunch on the morrow. He felt strangely lonely without her. For the last week he had been constantly in her company, and now suddenly she had been lifted clean out of his life. There was the whole evening to dispose of, and the following morning until lunch-time. He might go to a theatre, it was true; but what object would there be when his thoughts would be elsewhere than with the performers?

Arrived at Jermyn Street, he got through to the Belle Vue, and held the line for nearly ten minutes whilst they were searching for Lola. Eventually a message came that she was not to be found, and with a vicious jab he replaced the receiver. Three times he rang her up, and three times the message was the same. Finally he sat down to write a note and, having spoiled a number of sheets of note-paper, folded and placed in an envelope something with which he was entirely dissatisfied. It was impossible to write to the Rain-Girl with all sorts of barriers and restraints intervening.

CHAPTER XVI

THE NINE DAYS ENDED

YOU'RE just in time to prevent Hoskins from undermining my taste in dress," said Drewitt, who, garbed in a wonderful silk dressing-gown of an eccentric pattern of black and white, was lolling back in a chair.

Beresford had arranged to pick him up on his way to keep the luncheon engagement with Lola.

Hoskins smiled with a deprecating air that plainly said, "You know his lordship's little way, sir!"

"He wants me to wear this tie," holding out a black poplin tie with white spots, "with these trousers," indicating the trousers he was wearing, black with thin white perpendicular lines.

"Well, why not?" enquired Beresford.

"There are some men," said Drewitt, looking reproachfully at Beresford, "so supremely oblivious of their social obligations as to be capable of wearing spotted trousers with a striped tie. You see, Hoskins," he continued, turning to his man, "I'm to meet Mr. Deacon Quelch, who is psychic. Now it's impossible to tell what might be the effect of a sartorial indiscretion upon a highly psychic mentality. You follow me?"

"Not exactly, my lord."

"There must be much comfort in a pose," said Beresford.

Drewitt took a cigarette from the box, lit it, smiling at his cousin over the flame.

"Realities are uncomfortable bedfellows, Richard," he remarked. "Have you ever studied the night-side of London?"

"A bit," acknowledged Beresford.

"Can you imagine what it would be on lemonade and dry ginger-ale?"

"So your pose is to you what alcohol is to vice?"

"My finished demeanour as a man of the world," corrected Drewitt, "is to me what drink is to immorality. It prevents me from getting tired of myself. And now for Mr. Deacon Quelch." He passed out of the room, reappearing a few minutes later ready for calling.

"Now, Richard, I am, as good old Sir Thomas says, 'ready to be anything in the ecstasy of being ever.' I hope you are always careful in crossing the road," he said, as he took the hat and stick Hoskins handed to him.

"Crossing the road, my lord?"

"I mean that you take no undue risks. Remember, Hoskins, your life is not your own. It is inextricably linked up with my destiny, the link being your coffee. Now, Richard, I am at your service."

As they were about to enter the Belle Vue, they were conscious of a strange figure just in front of them.

"Mr. Deacon Quelch," murmured Drewitt, in a low voice.

Beresford nodded, and they entered just behind Mr. Quelch.

As they waited while their names were taken up, Beresford and Drewitt sat watching the figure of their fellow-guest. He was a curiously furtive-looking creature, rather above middle height, with bulgy boots, baggy trousers and a shapeless frock-coat. On his head he wore a top-hat that had worn itself to a frenzy of despair, its glossiness no longer amenable to anything but liquid persuasion. His tie was a voluminous dab of black, and his waistcoat a combination of green and purple, with a broad, black braid border. His cuffs started forward hysterically from the sleeves of his coat, and had obviously to be kept in place by the wrists being carried at a definite angle. He looked hungry and obsequious. Apparently he did not remember Drewitt, as he made no sign of recognition.

A flurry of skirts and a stream of talk announced the arrival of Mrs. Crisp. Lola followed a few paces behind.

"Ah! here you are. All arrived together. Dear Mr. Quelch. How charming of you to come. Lord Drewitt, and Mr. Berry. Lord Drewitt, Mr. Deacon Quelch. You ought to know each other. How stupid of me, you've met." She trailed off into a string of interjections; Drewitt and Beresford turned to greet Lola, and the party walked towards the dining-room.

Lola's frock reminded Beresford of the dense plumes of smoke from the chimney of a newly-stoked furnace. A touch of colour was supplied by a row of orange beads round her neck. Her movements, the carriage of her head, her general bearing were——

"And how is your chest, Mr. Berry?" Mrs. Crisp suddenly turned her jet upon Beresford. "Have you tried camphorated-oil? So good for a cold. I always use it, and liquorice too. Rubbed in night and morning. Oil, I mean, not the liquorice. We've missed her so much, haven't we, Mr. Quelch. Yes, you sit there and you here, Lord Drewitt," indicating the seat next to Lola, "and you next to Lola, Mr. Berry."

"Why will people make life ugly with camphor, eucalyptus and peppermint?" said Lola to Beresford with a *moue* of disgust.

"And flannelette," interpolated Drewitt. "I had a great-aunt who spent half her money and all her time in making flannelette garments for harmless negroes. It's such an impertinence."

"Are you serious?" asked Lola, turning to him doubtfully.

"The negroes were," said Drewitt. "I believe those garments produced a revolution."

"You are laughing at me," she said reproachfully.

"To place flannelette garments upon limbs that hitherto have been gloriously free is," continued Drewitt, "as bad as——"

"I see," she laughed.

Beresford took little part in the conversation. He was accustomed to having Lola to himself, and found it difficult to reconcile himself to sharing her with others. Mrs. Crisp fascinated him. He had never met any one of such undammable loquacity. Words streamed from her lips as water from a hose. A chance word would send her off at a tangent. Sometimes he found it difficult to control his features as, in her haste, she occasionally transposed the initial letters of two words, as, for instance, when complaining of the off-hand manner of one of the porters, instead of describing him as she intended as "nearly rude," she informed Drewitt that he was "really nude."

"You must come to one of our séances," she cried to Drewitt. "I've never known any one like Mr. Quelch, so psychic."

Drewitt screwed his monocle into his eye and gazed at Mr. Quelch with grave interest, as if he had been a specimen of some unknown fauna. Mr. Quelch fidgeted under the scrutiny as, by a dexterous movement of the backs of his hands, he readjusted his cuffs, which had slipped down.

"Are you interested in psychical research?" enquired Lola, looking from Beresford to Drewitt.

"I'm afraid," said Drewitt, "that I'm too preoccupied with the substance of this world to have time for the shadow of the next."

"But think, Lord Drewitt," cried Mrs. Crisp, "you can talk to all your friends who have passed over. Only the other night my dear sister came.

She was drowned. It was such a comfort. So fond of the water. She was quite a famous digh-hiver. So embarrassing, you know. The costume I mean. I should blush all over."

"I am afraid I could not take the risk," said Drewitt. "One is at such disadvantage with a spirit. Fortunately in this world people have the grace to say behind your back what a spirit would most likely say to your face."

Mr. Quelch shook his head dolefully, as he laid his black moustache affectionately upon a spoonful of white soup.

As Lola continued to chat with Drewitt, Beresford found his thoughts slipping back to the days at Folkestone. She seemed so different here from the gay, irresponsible girl he had known during the last three or four days of their stay.

"Suicide is a harsh name for a disinclination to wear something that we have grown out of," he heard Drewitt say.

He looked across. Drewitt was toying with a saltspoon, whilst Lola was engaged in crumbling a piece of bread between her fingers.

"Such a dreadful thing, suicide," burst in Mrs. Crisp. "A man died in my bath at Brighton. At least, the bath I used. Thrut his coat one morning. So thoughtless for others. Some people read in them. So bad for the books, and they are so cross at the libraries if there is a page or two missing." She turned to Mr. Quelch and proceeded to spray him.

"But surely you don't think we have a right to take our own lives?" asked Lola, turning to Drewitt.

"If any one gave you a hat that didn't suit you, would you wear it?" enquired Drewitt.

"Nooooooo," she said hesitatingly.

"Then why should you continue to wear the mantle of existence when it doesn't fit?"

"But life is so different," she protested. "It's not ours to dispose of."

"Suppose Richard put a rhinoceros in your bathroom, would you hesitate to have it removed because it was not yours to dispose of?" Drewitt looked at her with a smile.

"How absurd," she laughed.

"That," said Drewitt, "is a feminine confession of defeat."

"Schopenhauer says that when the sum total of misery exceeds the sum total of happiness suicide is inevitable," said Beresford, who had been listening with interest to Drewitt's exposition on the ethics of suicide.

"Never quote Schopenhauer to a woman, Richard," said Drewitt. "If she's heard of him she doesn't like him; if she hasn't heard of him she won't know whether he's a Bolshevist or a German helmet."

"But," said Beresford, turning to Lola, "do you mean that when a man sees all that he most desires in life quite out of his reach, that he must go on making the best of things?"

"Certainly," said Lola, with decision. "He should try and win what he wants, work for it."

"Do you see that little waiter over there?" asked Drewitt, indicating a curious little man with bulging eyes and a receding chin.

Lola nodded.

"Suppose he were to fall violently in love with you, Miss Craven," he continued. "Suppose that you became absolutely necessary to him, and inspired his every thought and action. He saw you in every soup-plate, you got mixed up with the fish, flavoured the entrée, crept into the roast. Suppose he were prepared to become a Napoleon of waiters for your sake. What——"

"Oh! but that is so absurd," she laughed.

"But just now you said that a man must try and win what he wants."

"Oh, but I didn't mean——" she paused.

"When you make a statement," smiled Drewitt, "you must always be prepared to have it carried to its logical conclusion. The waiter is the logical conclusion of your statement, that all have a right to aspire to any and everything."

"But we have rather wandered away from suicide," suggested Beresford.

"On the contrary we are now approaching it," continued Drewitt. "The little waiter spends every moment that is not occupied in collecting tips in showing his devotion to you, and endeavouring to obtain the object of his desires, your hand, Miss

Craven. Life has ceased to mean anything to him without you. You follow me?"

"I don't," she confessed. "I feel absolutely giddy."

"There are only two courses open to the waiter: one is to gain his ends, the other is to fail to gain his ends. If he fails, then you would deny him the soothing alternative of suicide."

Beresford waited eagerly for her reply; but Mrs. Crisp burst in upon them.

"I've just remembered," she cried; "it was at Bournemouth, not Brighton. So relaxing. It was the year that girl ran away with a man in a car over a cliff. So romantic."

"I wonder why you always speak as if nothing mattered," said Lola, looking up at Drewitt, her head slightly on one side, her eyebrows puckered.

"Do I?" He gave her a friendly little smile that he kept for his particular friends and intimates. "Perhaps it's because I'm devoid of romance."

"But are you?" she asked seriously.

"When I read Malory or Froissart I endeavour to picture myself touring the country on a cart-horse with a long pole, like an exaggerated boy scout, engaged in the rescue of forlorn maidens and the destruction of fire-eating dragons. I confess I cannot see myself doing it."

"But you approach everything from the ridiculous aspect," she said smiling. "Those stories always thrill me."

"Because you don't see their artificiality," he

replied. "You see only the handsome and gallant knight seated on a swift charger, risking his life; but when you remember that knights were sometimes plain, that their horses were heavy, lumbering creatures, and that their combats were no more deadly than a football-match or a glove-fight——"

"Please don't," she laughed. "You would strip romance from a honeymoon."

"To me a honeymoon is as unromantic as a German dinner," continued Drewitt. "It's the stripping of the tinsel from the idol. It is intimacy that ruins marriage, intimacy and carelessness."

"Carelessness?" she queried.

"Yes," replied Drewitt, polishing his monocle with great care. "I've heard of men selecting for a honeymoon a place that involved a sea voyage. The risk is criminal."

"I wish I weren't so stupid," she said in mock despair. "What risk?"

"The risk of your adored one having a queasy stomach."

"Oh, please don't," she protested. "What a dreadful expression."

"As the boat gets further from land, the beloved grows greener and greener, until at last she makes a bolt——"

"Stop! Oh, please, stop!" cried Lola.

"I'm sorry if I have undermined your belief in the romantic," said Drewitt, "but there are certain facts in life that must be faced."

"I'm afraid you'll never see a woman with a lover's eyes."

"On the contrary," he replied, "I should see her always with a lover's eyes. In an east wind, I should resent the redness of her nose, in the summer, the flaming patch on the front of her chest, symbolical of the kisses of June. Imagine, Miss Craven, what must be the feelings of a Romeo when he discovers that his Juliet has a bilious attack, or the agony of a Pelléas when he finds that Mélisande wears false teeth, or again, think of the emotion of an Abelard on hearing that Héloïse has chilblains."

Lola laughed; but before she had time to speak Mrs. Crisp broke in—

"Such dreadful things, Lord Drewitt. I have them in the winter. Mr. Quelch has them also. Don't you, Mr. Quelch? I've tried everything. They're really most painful. Somebody once told me it was eating too much meat. And it's so difficult to get. I believe vegetarians never have them."

"Vegetarians never have anything, Mrs. Crisp," said Drewitt, "except babies, shapeless clothing, and garden-cities."

Mrs. Crisp laughed. Her laugh was a thing of startling suddenness. Half closing her eyes and depressing her brows, she gave the impression of one about to burst into tears. Beresford dreaded her amusement; it was so depressing in its expression.

"Do you believe in romance, Mr. Quelch?" enquired Lola, looking across at the medium, who had been singularly quiet throughout the meal, devoting

himself to the more serious occupation of eating.

Mr. Quelch shook a gloomy head.

"There is no romance in heaven," said Drewitt. "That is why marriages are made there."

"Romance as you understand it," said Mr. Quelch, looking at Lola. "No; the great romance is on the Other Side."

"The shady side," suggested Drewitt; but Mr. Quelch again shook his head with an air of settled gloom, as he proceeded to attack the *pêche Melba* before him.

"Oh, dear!" said Lola, "everybody seems to be either gloomy or cynical. There's auntie and Mr. Quelch half in the other world, and Lord Drewitt and Mr. Beresford trying to prick every bubble in this. Poor me," she cried in simulated despair. "I feel like a child who sees its toys being destroyed before its very eyes. You make me feel I shall never have a beautiful idea or feeling again."

"My dear Miss Craven," said Mr. Quelch, swallowing a lump of ice in such haste that his Adam's apple darted about wildly, "my dear Miss Craven."

Drewitt gazed across at Mr. Quelch, who had once more become engrossed with his *pêche Melba*.

Beresford pictured Mr. Quelch dashing after Lola on the sands at Folkestone as he had done a few days previously. He smiled.

"Why are you smiling, Mr. Beresford?" she asked. "Won't you share the joke with us?"

"Richard is a joke unto himself," said Drewitt, unconsciously coming to the rescue. "He's the only

ass in London who is conscious of his ears. Aren't you, Richard?"

"You speak as if you were really fond of the species," she smiled.

"I suppose I am," admitted Drewitt. "I always have to stop and rub the muzzle of a donkey whenever I see one."

A moment later she turned to Beresford and murmured,

"I think it must run in the family; don't you remember the other day you wanted to rub my muzzle?"

"Rub your muzzle!" he repeated, as if not quite sure that he had heard correctly.

"Yes," she laughed. "When I said I was glad I was not a cow."

Before Beresford had time to reply they were drawn once more into the general conversation.

"We'll take coffee in the ginter-warden," cried Mrs. Crisp. "So pleasant. I love music. You must come and talk to me, Mr. Berry. I've seen nothing of you. Now, Mr. Quelch."

Once in the winter-garden, Mrs. Crisp seemed to forget her desire to converse with Beresford, who sat watching the others talk. Lola made several ineffectual efforts to draw him into the conversation; but Mrs. Crisp continued to ignore him, devoting herself to Drewitt and Mr. Quelch.

A sudden hush in the talk seemed to remind her of Beresford's presence. She moved over to where he sat.

"I've just been scolding Lola," she said, lowering her voice and with an artificial smile; "so indiscreet of her. Most indiscreet. What must they have thought at the hotel. I'm very cross with her. She should have come back at once. Poor Miss Brock. Such a great sufferer. She has it so badly in her legs."

What it was that Miss Brock had so badly in her legs Beresford was not to know, as Mrs. Crisp broke off to fire a short burst at Mr. Quelch. A moment later she turned once more to Beresford.

"And I blame you, Mr. Berry." Again Mrs. Crisp turned upon him an automatic smile of immaculate dentistry. "You should have sent her home. She's so wrong-stilled. What must the servants have thought? And the papers? Such odious people. Journalists, I mean. I hope she didn't bathe."

"I'm sure——" began Beresford, his head in a whirl.

"So dreadful," she continued without waiting for a reply. "So lacking in refinement. You never know when there's a tan with a melescope. Odious creatures. I'm sure the Queen would disapprove. I'm told they sit there all day. The men with the telescopes, I mean. So sweet and gentle. Such a mother. Fancy bathing with strange men. She ought to have been more careful. Lola, I mean."

"But," interpolated Beresford, "Miss Craven didn't bathe."

"I mean staying down there with you. Mr.

Quelch was shocked. I hardly liked to tell him. He's so sensitive. I remember once——" Mrs. Crisp was interrupted in her reminiscences by Drewitt rising to go. She turned upon him full of regrets, gush and assurances that she was certain he was psychic.

As he was shaking hands with Lola, Beresford managed to tell her that he felt a relapse coming on, and asked if she would spare him an hour or two.

She shook her head, a little sadly, he thought.

"I'm in disgrace," she pouted, "and I must be nice to auntie to make up for Folkestone." She gave him a mischievous glance. "I've been having such a lecture on the proprieties."

That was all. No word of when he was to see her.

"I don't know which I most dislike about Mr. Quelch," said Drewitt, as they passed down the steps of the Belle Vue, "his name, his moustache, or his accent. I like cockneys; but not in frock-coats," he added.

Beresford smiled vaguely; but made no reply.

"I wonder," continued Drewitt, as they walked down Piccadilly, "why it is that all men with generous moustaches seem to have a passion for thick soup." Then after a pause he added, "Those with dark moustaches apparently prefer white soups, whilst those with light moustaches select the darker fluids. It's interesting."

But Beresford was not listening. He was thinking of the void he had just discovered in his life.

Hitherto he had been aware that the end was inevitable; but without actually visualising it. He had frequently thought about the time when everything would be—well, ended; yet somehow he seemed now to realise for the first time facts as they were. This, then, was the end. Folkestone had been just an episode, a nine days' wonder. She——

"That's the third time you have failed in your social duty, Richard," said Drewitt, reproachfully, as he lifted his hat. "That was Lady Peggy Bristowe."

"Damn Lady Peggy Bristowe!" snapped Beresford petulantly.

"Certainly, if you wish it;" and Drewitt relapsed into silence.

"I'm sorry, Drew," said Beresford with a laugh.

"I was afraid she might not approve of you, Dickie," said Drewitt, in a tone that caused Beresford to look at him sharply.

"She! Who?"

"The aunt," was the reply. "Aunts are the very devil; camels are love-birds in comparison," he added as he hailed a taxi. "Now I'll leave you. I've promised Bowen to explain to Lady Peter why vegetarianism seems to encourage polygamous instincts among its votaries," and with a wave of his hand Drewitt entered a taxi and drove off.

Yes, that was it, Beresford mused as he continued down Piccadilly. Mrs. Crisp disapproved of him and he was to be dropped—he was being dropped. Had not Lola refused to see him? Had not Mrs.

Crisp's attitude been entirely devoid of cordiality? Had not——? It was all over. He had been a fool to come back to London. He should have turned resolutely to the open road, and have tried to forget her. It was all due to that idiotic something in him that he had never been able quite to analyse nor understand. Anyway, it was too late now. After all, what did it matter?

He walked on aimlessly, following the path of the least resistance. When at last he looked about, he found himself in unaccustomed surroundings. On asking where he was of a tired little man in a still more weary-looking frock-coat, he was told Pimlico. The man regarded him curiously, as if to be in Pimlico without knowing it were unusual. It seemed to take Beresford quite a long time to disembarass himself of Pimlico, and to reach a spot near Victoria Station where he found an empty taxi.

Late into that night he sat, before him a sheet of paper on which were written a few figures. He was face to face with a problem—THE problem. There was still a week or two left, however, he decided, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and prepared for bed.

CHAPTER XVII

DR. TALLIS PRESCRIBES

FOR hours Beresford had been sitting looking straight in front of him. It was past noon; yet the breakfast-things still lay on the table, just as the porter had brought them up three hours before. Twice the man had entered to clear away, only to be sent away by a curt shake of the head. The coffee was cold in the pot, the eggs and bacon lay a sickly-looking mess bound together by a grey film of chilled fat.

On the corner of the table lay a pile of money, notes, silver and copper. Was it only that morning that he had counted it with eager fingers and tingling pulses? Eleven pounds four shillings and three-pence.

The figures seemed to have burned themselves into his brain. For hours he had sat watching them. They were everywhere. They stared back at him from the opposite wall, they blinked at him from the ceiling, the clock ticked them into his ears, and they had eaten themselves indelibly into his brain.

Did sailors feel like that when adrift in an open boat with the water-cask empty? He wondered. Presently his gaze left the opposite wall and lighted

on the telephone instrument. For a second the flicker of a smile relieved the shadows. That was the link with Lola. But was there a link with Lola now?

Eleven pounds four shillings and threepence!

It meant that the end was very near, was here, in fact. The shock of the discovery had numbed him. What a fool he had been. It was strange, though, how fate seemed determined to eat into his rapidly vanishing resources. There had been the expense of staying at the Ritz-Carlton, whilst Lola was at the Belle Vue. Such rotten luck, then——; but why trouble to build up the whole fabric of misfortune? From somewhere at the back of his mind he recalled a favourite phrase of the little cockney in his section, "Any'ow, that'll settle your little 'ash, ole son." That was exactly what was about to happen. His little hash was on the eve of being settled.

Slowly out of the chaos of his disordered thoughts was being constructed the Great Determination. It was as if an anæsthetic were being administered. That little tube of morphia tablets he had brought back from France seemed to be for ever dancing about in his thoughts. At first he had struggled against it; but gradually he had been overcome, until now he was almost reconciled to the inevitable. The will to live was dropping from him like a garment. Everybody had a right to decide for himself. Had not a coroner said as much publicly, and he was the

high-priest of sudden death? Temporary insanity, that was what they called it, temporary——

Again his eye caught sight of the telephone. With a quick movement he caught up the receiver and, without pausing to think, gave the number of the Belle Vue. He would tell Lola everything. She would understand. He would work, yes, work and carry-on.

A minute later he replaced the receiver upon its rest with a jar. She was still away. She had gone away—to avoid him.

During the previous fortnight he had telephoned time after time—always to receive the same reply, that Miss Craven had gone away for a few days, or that Miss Craven had not returned. He had written twice; but again no reply. It had really been a nine days' wonder, he had told himself a dozen times, and this was the end.

What he had done during that fortnight he did not know. He was conscious of having gone out from time to time for meals; but for the rest, he was afraid of leaving the place, lest in his absence a message should come through from Lola. The porter had come to regard him curiously, so persistent had been his enquiries as to whether or no the man had received and forgotten some telephone-message he felt sure she must have sent.

He had given instructions that letters were to be taken up to him immediately. He seemed to live in a constant state of expectation. The telephone-bell caused him to start violently, the sound of the

porter's key in his lock would bring him to his feet with a suddenness that sometimes disconcerted the man. For a fortnight he had been living on the unsubstantial diet of hope.

There was no doubt about it; Lola was determined to drop him. It was Mrs. Crisp, he told himself, she was responsible. It had been a fortnight of torture, a fortnight that had brought with it the conviction that for him, Richard Beresford, nothing mattered but the Rain-Girl.

A ring at the telephone caused him to start violently. He snatched up the receiver.

"Dr. Tallis! Yes, show him up."

A minute later he was shaking Tallis cordially by the hand.

"What luck," he cried. "I'm awfully glad to see you."

He was conscious that Tallis was regarding him critically.

"You're not exactly a credit to me, young fellow," he said as he dropped into a chair with a sigh of content.

"I slept badly last night," Beresford explained in self-defense. "I've—I've been to Folkestone —" he broke off suddenly.

"Folkestone!"

"Yes, you recommended the place, didn't you?"

"You found her then?" he said, looking up with interest.

"Found who?" enquired Beresford, with simulated indifference.

"Tell me about it," he said quietly, and before he knew what was happening, Beresford found himself telling the story of his encounter with Lola in St. James's Street and what had ensued.

"And now," he concluded bitterly, "she's dropped me, dropped me into the bottomless pit of——" He look across at Tallis, the picture of hopeless despair.

"I'm beginning to think you were right," he said. "I ought not to have tried to drag you back."

Beresford shrugged his shoulders.

"And now, what's the next move?"

"The deluge," replied Beresford with a short laugh that caused Tallis to look at him narrowly. "I've just been taking stock of my finances. There's exactly eleven pounds four shillings and threepence. I put it off day after day, and it's come as a bit of a shock. Still," he added reminiscently, "there was Folkestone."

"I'm not sure, young fellow, that I ought not to hand you over to the nearest policeman as a dangerous lunatic," said Tallis. "What the devil's going to be the outcome of this business I'm hanged if I know." His tone was not so flippant as his words.

"The outcome, my dear Æsculapius, is that for once in my life I have had a rattling good time."

"And now?"

"There's always that little tube of morphia tablets that I brought home from France," he said with a laugh.

"So that's the present state of the temperamental

DR. TALLIS PRESCRIBES

barometer," said Tallis as he proceeded to stuff tobacco into his pipe-bowl from the jar on the table.

For some time the two smoked in silence. To Beresford Tallis was always a soothing influence. He seemed to possess the faculty of forgetting the other fellow's existence until spoken to.

"I'm the very deuce of a mystery to myself," Beresford said presently with a wry smile. "Somewhere I suppose there's a kink in me."

"You're probably passing through the *sturm und drang* of romance," said Tallis. "It's the Renaissance strain in you coming out."

"I wonder," murmured Beresford meditatively; then after a pause he added, "You see, Tallis, no girl ever really meant anything to me before. I seemed always to regard them in a detached sort of way, just as Drewitt does. This is—— I wonder if you understand?"

Tallis nodded as he gazed into the bowl of his pipe. Suddenly it struck Beresford that what made Tallis so easy to talk to was that he always appeared to be absorbed in something else, generally his pipe. It was much easier talking about such things to a man who did not persist in looking at you.

"I seem always to have been waiting for something to happen." He paused and looked across at Tallis a little apologetically.

"The latent spirit of romance."

Beresford looked at him sharply.

"Go on," said Tallis, catching his eye, "I'm serious."

"I suppose that was it. I could never have got— have got to care about any of those I met at after-noon-teas, or dinner-parties, and as for the——"

"Fluff," suggested Tallis, as Beresford hesitated.

"Well, as for them," he shrugged his shoulders.

"But look here, I'm talking the most unwholesome rot."

"My dear man, you are merely succeeding in being a self-conscious ass," said Tallis casually, as he dug into the bowl of his pipe with his penknife.

"As a matter of fact, for the first time since we've been acquainted, you're beginning to talk sense." He paused, folded up his knife and replaced it in his pocket.

"We medicos find romance in unaccustomed places," he continued a moment later. "It's a seething spirit of unrest. Every one seems ashamed of it. I've discovered it in the most extraordinary environments. With you it's a case of the Dream-Girl."

"The Dream-Girl?" repeated Beresford.

"Every mother's son of us knows her; but she seldom materialises. When she does it's generally as a sort of Lorelei."

"You're a queer sort of fish for a doctor," said Beresford with a smile.

"We never admit of the feminine equivalent to the Fairy Prince," continued Tallis, "yet at first we all have a Dream-Girl in our minds, later she's blotted out; but that's not our fault, it's theirs— some of them," he added as if as an afterthought.

For some time they continued to smoke contentedly.

"It's strange you should have mentioned that," said Beresford, at length. "I've often wondered if——"

"What's in you is in the rest of us, only most of us are not so honest about it. Wasn't it Oscar Wilde who said that we men are all in the gutter; but some of us are looking at the stars. You're looking at the stars, Beresford, that's all."

"I suppose you're right," said Beresford a little doubtfully.

"With you it's the spirit of romance," continued Tallis quietly. "If you had lived a few centuries earlier, you would have gone about the country on a horse with a ten-foot pole asking for trouble. You would have been a disciple of Peter the Hermit, and every other uncomfortable person who preached the high-falutin'. The only trouble is that you won't face facts."

"What facts?" demanded Beresford, almost aggressively.

"Well, for instance, that you're head-over-heels in love with this girl and you're afraid to tell her so. You expect her to make the running."

"Don't be an ass."

Tallis relapsed into silence again. Several times Beresford looked across at him; but he appeared to have forgotten everything but his pipe, at which he pulled contentedly.

"Do you seriously expect——?" began Beresford,

when it had become obvious that Tallis was waiting for him to continue the conversation.

"No, I don't," was the calm retort.

"Then why——" began Beresford.

"Because I've known you long enough to be convinced that you're incapable of doing what to any one else is the most obvious thing in the world."

"You don't know her."

"I'm beginning to suspect that you don't either," was the dry retort.

"She was just good pals with me at Folkestone, because I was a sort of watch-dog," said Beresford reminiscently. "Since then she has dropped me—gone away," he added.

"She's probably become self-conscious owing to auntie having given her a wiggling. You can always trust a woman to know how to touch another on the raw. A high-spirited girl suffers a good deal when told that she's made herself cheap. In all probability that's what her aunt managed to convey."

Beresford shook his head gloomily. Tallis merely shrugged his shoulders.

"You didn't see the way she looked through all those fellows at the Imperial," he said, as if determined to convince himself of the hopelessness of his position. "It used to wither them, all except that Jew chap with the Scotch name. He was too moist for anything to wither."

"Well, are you going to ask her to marry you?"

"Good Lord, no!" cried Beresford, sitting up as if the idea had startled him.

"Well, there's a lot to be said for celibacy."

"Don't be an ass," growled Beresford. "You know I don't mean that."

"Sometimes it's a little difficult to discover exactly what you do mean," said Tallis with a smile.

"She thinks me different from other men——"

"She always does," drily.

Beresford walked over to the fireplace and, with unnecessary vigour, proceeded to knock the ashes out of his pipe. Returning to his chair he reached for the tobacco-jar.

"I don't want her to think——" he began as he proceeded mechanically to fill his pipe, then he stopped.

"That you're after the money," suggested Tallis.

"Couldn't you somehow manage to convey to her that she, and not her millions, is 'the goods'?"

"No, I can't, and what's more, I won't," snapped Beresford irritably.

"That ten-foot pole again, young fellow," smiled Tallis. "You're going to sacrifice your only chance of happiness for an abstract code of honour. Well, it's your funeral; but I'm sorry. What's it to be?"

"There are always the tablets," said Beresford grimly.

"Yes, there are always the tablets; but somehow I don't think that would be the way to her heart."

"What do you mean?" demanded Beresford quickly.

"I think she's of the strong-man school, the see-it-through-at-any-price, nail-your-colours-to-the-mast order, the little-midshipmite-business, you know. She's the sort of girl that would never hear the name of that splendid chap Oates without a half-thought prayer. There are some like that," he added casually, as he pocketed his pipe and, selecting a cigarette from the box, proceeded to light it.

"You're not going?" asked Beresford, as Tallis rose and stretched himself.

"Yes, I'm afraid I must toddle, my son."

"Don't go for a minute. You were saying——?"

"Merely that you are making a mistake," was the smiling reply. "But as yours is a nature peculiarly adapted to the making of mistakes, there's nothing unusual in that. There are three courses open to you and, of course, you choose the wrong one."

"Three?" interrogated Beresford.

"Marry the girl, clear out, and the tablets. You'll end by clearing out, although you think now it'll be the tablets."

Beresford looked at him for a moment, then laughed.

"Have another whisky-and-soda," he said.

"No, thanks," said Tallis, "I really must be off."

"You don't understand," said Beresford, as they walked towards the door.

"I understand this much, that like all idealists you are obsessed by the thought of material obstacles. Well, good-bye, and the best of luck. If I

can do anything—— By the way, there's a pal of mine, a ship's doctor. He's sailing quite soon. I'll ring him up. He'll get you a passage as purser or something. Here, I'll write down his name."

Tallis drew a pencil from his pocket and wrote on the back of one of his own cards:—

"Dr. Henry Seaman,
S.S. *Allanmore*,
East India Docks."

"Thanks," said Beresford, taking the card; "but I don't think I'm cut out for a purser."

"No, don't ring for the lift, I'll walk down. 'Bye," and with a wave of his hand Tallis was gone.

Beresford closed the door and returned to his pipe and chair, and the never-ending riddle, THE FUTURE.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DELUGE

WHEN a man is thinking epics it is difficult for him to compose an ordinary letter. Beresford leaned back in his chair frowning. For fully an hour he had been engaged upon the unequal struggle. On the table before him lay a number of discarded sheets of note-paper. Some broke off suddenly at the second line, others ran to the end of the first page, whilst one had actually turned the corner and showed two lines written upon the second page.

Had ever man such a letter to write in all the world before? Why write at all? Just because he had behaved like an ass, there was no need to make a fuss about it, as if it were a reduction in his golf-handicap; yet he must tell her, at least——

"Damn!"

With a great air of decision he seized the pen and, snatching a clean sheet of paper from the rack, wrote:—

"Dear Rain-Girl."

Then he paused. That was where he always paused. There were innumerable sheets of note-paper on the table that testified to the fact. He

bit the end of the pen. He felt like a man with an impediment in his speech, who all his life had been striving to say "good-bye"; but had never been able to get beyond the preliminary "gug-gug."

He added a comma after "Girl," then he made a slight alteration in the tail of the "R"; finally he got going.

For five minutes he wrote slowly and laboriously, then picking up the letter he read it deliberately, only to throw it down in disgust. It was difficult to strike the medium between the flippant and the sentimental. He had a horror of appearing like the heroine of a melodrama bent on secretly leaving home, who for five minutes stands in a draughty doorway bidding good-bye to the furniture. No, there must be no self-pity in anything he wrote to Lola.

After all, what did it matter how he expressed himself? All that was necessary was to tell her that he was going away, and that in as few words as possible. Once more he selected a sheet of note-paper, this time with an air of grim determination, and proceeded to write slowly and without hesitation:—

"It's the end of the holiday, Rain-Girl. In a few hours I am going away—ever so far away. Good-bye; even a midsummer madness must end. It has all been rather wonderful.

"R. B."

With great deliberation he reached for an envelope, folded and inserted the note, stuck down

the flap and addressed it. Then, leaning back in his chair, he sighed his relief.

For the next half-hour his pen moved rapidly over the paper. Letter after letter was written, read and approved. He was engaged in putting his house in order.

He found himself regarding everything with a strange air of detachment. It was as if it all concerned another rather than himself. Lola had gone out of his life—nothing really mattered now.

It was futile to indulge in vain regrets. There had been a time when he felt that Fate had played him a scurvy trick in bringing Lola into his life at a time when she could mean nothing to him; but that was past. Now he was able to regard everything in its just relation to his own destiny.

It was strange how easily the mind seemed to adjust itself to new conditions. He remembered how in France his first instinct had been one of fear, then had come indifference, a soul-numbing fatalism, finally caution, a sort of gun-shyness that had come with the full realisation of the awfulness of it all. Would the same mental processes manifest themselves now? He was certainly in the indifferent stage. It would be horrible if, at the last moment, he were to hesitate. No, he must cut his loss and clear out.

"Dropping down the river on a nine-knot tide." Somewhere he remembered having read the line. He had been struck with it at the time, now it possessed for him a very special significance. At half-

past six on the morrow he would be "dropping down the river on a nine-knot tide."

That morning he had been down to the docks and arranged everything. He had signed-on aboard the *Allanmore* as assistant-purser outward bound for Sydney. It was all through Tallis. What a splendid fellow he was. Dr. Seaman seemed to expect him and had arranged everything.

He looked at his watch; it was half-past four. Rising, he picked up his hat and went out into the sunshine. Just why he did it he could not have said. He strolled along Regent Street, smoking a cigarette and enjoying the warmth. Opposite Gérard's he encountered Edward Seymour, gazing about him with the air of a dog that is to be called for. Beresford recognised the symptoms. Edward Seymour was shopping with Mrs. Edward, and had been left outside.

Seymour nodded in his usual off-hand manner. Beresford decided that he looked more than ever like a sandy ferret.

"Edward, you ought to meet Mr. Deacon Quelch," he said. It was always amusing to spring irrelevant remarks upon Edward Seymour, who would take a parliamentary candidate's promises seriously.

"Who's he?" demanded Seymour, "and why ought I to meet him?"

"His happiness, like yours, Edward, is linked up with the other world."

Edward Seymour screwed up his face, with him

always an indication that he was puzzled. At that moment they were joined by Mrs. Edward.

"D'you know Deacon Quelch?" he asked, following his unvarying rule of appealing to his wife for guidance.

Mrs. Edward turned to Beresford, of whom she was always suspicious.

"I was merely telling Edward of the joys of the hereafter," he explained, "when Aunt Caroline has gone there, that is, and he is left with what she couldn't take with her."

"Why don't you get something to do, Richard?" Mrs. Edward felt safe in carrying the war into the enemy's country.

"But isn't the Ministry of Munitions closing down?" he enquired innocently.

Mrs. Edward flushed.

"What are you doing here?" she asked quickly.

"I'm going to buy some flowers," said Beresford. He had just been struck with the idea of sending Lola a parting gift.

"For Miss Craven, I suppose," sneered Edward Seymour.

Beresford smiled. "Good-bye," he said, and lifting his hat he entered the florist's shop.

The flowers ordered and paid for, Beresford continued his stroll, choosing thoroughfares where he was least likely to encounter friends or acquaintance. Finding himself at Baker Street he decided to spend an hour with the squirrels in Regent's Park. It was very difficult, he decided, for a man to know

how to occupy his last day in England. He felt like an excursionist who has come south to see the final of the football cup, and finds himself landed in London at three a.m., whereas the match is due to start at three-thirty p.m.

At half-past six he was back at his chambers. For half an hour he glanced over the newspapers he had brought in with him, and then proceeded leisurely to dress. By a quarter to eight he was ready. Picking up the letters he had written, his gloves and stick, he walked down the stairs rather than ring for the lift. Giving the porter the letters and half-a-crown, he told him to have them stamped and posted. He then strolled slowly along Jermyn Street in the direction of the Ritz-Carlton, where he had booked a table for dinner.

Sometimes at the thought of Lola a passion of protest would surge up in him; but he had by now reasoned himself to a state of almost ice-cold logic. That morning he had settled matters once and for all as far as his future was concerned. The Challices were noted for their grim determination. His great-uncle, the Admiral, had been known as "Bulldog Challice," and in the Peninsular war old Sir Gilbert Challice had fought one of the most remarkable and tenacious rearguard actions in history, an action that had drawn grudging praise from Napoleon himself.

Yes; he had made up his mind, and he was going to see things through; at least, the old brigade of

Challices should not have cause to feel ashamed of a mercenary descendant.

The dinner was excellent, the temperature of the burgundy perfect. The *maitre d'hôtel*, himself, supervised the service, and when at half-past nine Beresford rose from the table, he was conscious of a feeling of artistic content. Yes, he would run into the Empire. It would bring back memories of the old Oxford days, and those illicit excursions to London.

He was not particularly interested in the performance; such things, as a rule, rather bored him. He waited to the end, even for the pictures. As he passed out and joined the crowd moving slowly westward, he found himself wondering what Aunt Caroline would say, what the Edward Seymours would say to each other and to Aunt Caroline. What would old Drew think?

He at least would be a little sorry, he——

"All right, sir, I'll move on."

Beresford had almost fallen over a bundle of rags huddled upon a doorstep.

"Here, hold out your hand," he cried, struck with a sudden idea. Putting his hand in his pocket he drew out all the loose silver and copper he had and dropped it into the grimed and shaking hand that was extended. Then he passed on, conscious of a splutter of thanks behind him. He was not the only one up against things.

What would Lola think? Would she be sorry; would she——? He gritted his teeth. Here had

been the danger-point all along. Time after time she had presented herself to his thoughts, and he had shut her out. Once let her in, he realised, and that would be the end—the wrong end. As he reached the entrance to his chambers, for some reason that he was unable to explain, he turned and looked first up and then down Jerrold Street. Yes, he was glad the tablets had not won.

He pushed open the door.

"There's a lady to see you, sir."

The porter had approached unseen. Beresford looked blankly at his expressionless face. For a moment he was dazed.

"I showed her up, sir. She could not wait down here——"

"Showed her up where?" asked Beresford. Even he was conscious of the strange note in his voice, suggestive of surprise and curiosity.

"In your sitting-room, sir. She's been here nearly two hours." The man moved automatically towards the lift and Beresford followed. "She wouldn't give a name, sir," he added, as the lift stopped with a jerk.

A lady to see him. Of course, it was either some stupid blunder on the part of the porter, or else it was a dream. Ladies did not call—— The porter crashed open the gate.

Beresford passed on to the outer door of his flat. A lady in his sitting-room. Wasn't it Drewitt who had said something about a rhinoceros being in

Lola's bathroom? Suddenly he found his pulses beating wildly.

Lola! Was it—— With trembling fingers he took out his keys and fumbled to get the outer door open. Why was he so awkward, he who a moment ago had been calmness personified? Would the wretched key never find its way in and the door open? Ah! that was it. Closing the door quickly he took three steps, threw open the sitting-room door and there——

It was Lola!

He stood staring at her, his jaw dropped, unconscious that his hat was still on his head.

She rose from the big chair in which she had been sitting. How pale and slight she looked. He noticed that in her right hand was a letter. Yes, she was wearing the same black frock she had worn at Folkestone and—yes, red roses, too. He noticed that her cloak was lined with some tint of amber, or was it orange? Then suddenly his faculties returned to him with a rush. With a swift movement he threw his hat, stick and gloves on to a chair.

"Lola!" It was a sob rather than a greeting.

Suddenly there had come back to him with overwhelming force the realisation of what he had planned to do. He was like a man who has just realised that he has passed through some awful danger. It was the reaction. It was the great will to live, and going away would have been death. Where had he heard that before? Yes, he remembered, Tallis had prophesied it.

"Lola!"

At the cry she had merely held out to him a letter. Mechanically he took it. It was the one he had written that afternoon and told the porter to post.

"How——" he began.

"I—I came back suddenly." Her voice was almost a whisper. "I felt that something——"

She was swaying slightly. How deathly pale she was. She was going to faint.

With a swift movement he clasped her in his arms.

"Oh, my dear, my dear!" he whispered passionately, and the only reply was sobs that seemed to tear and rend her whole body.

"But why, why did you——?" She looked at him, her lower lip quivering.

"Wasn't it better than becoming the Fortieth Article?" he asked quizzically.

A slight smile flickered across her face. She was lying back in the big leather-covered arm-chair, Beresford kneeling beside her.

"It was so—so unfair," she said.

"Unfair?" he repeated.

"Yes, to—to your friends; but you won't now?"

The look of fear was still in her eyes.

"Don't let's talk about it, Rain-Girl," he said steadily.

"But we must talk about it," she persisted. "We must. Promise me?"

He was silent.

"Promise me," she persisted, leaning forward and putting her hand on his shoulder. "Give me your word that you won't?"

"You don't understand."

"I do, oh! I do," she cried. "Oh, you must promise, you must. I felt that something was the matter. I—that is why I had to come back. You must."

The first emotional tension somewhat relaxed, Beresford found himself wondering what was to happen. Suddenly he remembered the letter.

"How did you get my note? I told the man to post it to-night."

"It was brought round by hand," she said.

A whirr from the mantelpiece caused him to look round. The clock was about to strike twelve.

"Lola, look at the time. You mustn't stay here."

"I shall have no reputation now," she said with a wan smile.

"I'll take you back to your hotel."

She shook her head.

"Dearest, you don't understand." He shook her in his eagerness. "You can't stay here, it's twelve o'clock."

"I know," she said quietly.

"But don't you understand?" he persisted.

"Ummmm," she nodded her head.

"Please get up and let me put your cloak on, I'll take you round——"

She shook her head decisively.

"But——" began Beresford, and then paused.

"Not until you promise," she said quietly.

"Promise," he repeated dully.

She nodded.

For fully a moment he was silent, then in a very quiet, restrained voice he said, "I promise, Lola, to do nothing until I see you again."

"Honest Injun?" she asked, sitting up.

"Honest Injun," he repeated, then they both laughed.

"But I've signed-on as assistant-purser," he said whimsically.

"Signed-on!" she repeated with widening eyes.

"Well, it's really a sort of wangle," he explained.

"I shipped as assistant-purser. Tallis arranged it, Lola!"

"Oh!"

She drew back from him into the furthest corner of the chair behind her, covering her face with her hands.

"Lola, what is it; what's the matter?"

"Please, please go away," she moaned, still shielding her face with her hands.

"You must tell me," he persisted. "What have I said; what have I done?"

"I—I thought you were——"

Suddenly light dawned upon him.

"You thought I was going to——" he hesitated.

She nodded, still with her hands before her face.

"My God! and that is why——?" he began.

"Oh! what have I done? what have I done?" she moaned.

"Listen, Rain-Girl," he said quietly, kneeling beside her. "That might have been the way out, but for Tallis. I told you about him."

Gently he drew her hands away; but she still averted her face.

"Don't you see what I——" she began, then suddenly she drew in her lower lip as if to still its quivering.

"You must go home now," he said gently, "and I must see you in the morning."

"But—but——" she began.

"Promise you will let me see you in the morning," he said. "You will?"

"Yes," she whispered faintly.

Very docilely she permitted him to place her cloak upon her shoulders and then walked to the door, still with averted eyes.

"Please—please try and understand," she whispered.

For answer he lifted her hand to his lips and they went out together.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MORNING AFTER

LIKE the summer sun, Lord Drewitt retired late; but as a corrective rose later. He preferred to give the weather an opportunity of definitely establishing itself for the day. In his opinion none but a demagogue could take pride in early-rising in town or city.

"There are only two reasons why a man should rise early in London," he had once remarked, "breakfast and exercise. I take neither."

It was nearly twelve o'clock on the morning following Beresford's endeavour to determine his own destiny, that certain movements of the bed-clothes and murmurs from the pillow warned Hoskins that his master was reluctantly preparing to face another day. He became alert and watchful.

After fully five minutes of muttering and movement, Lord Drewitt raised himself upon his elbow and looked about him.

Hoskins took a step forward.

"Hoskins, I believe you do it on purpose." He dropped back wearily upon his pillow.

"Do what, my lord?" enquired Hoskins in a voice so thin as to be almost a falsetto.

"Look so infernally cheerful," murmured Lord Drewitt wearily. "Why is it?"

Hoskins radiated good-nature and happiness, as he raised his hand to smooth his already smooth fair hair, a habit of his.

"I suppose it's because I have nothing to worry me, my lord," he said, dodging into the bathroom and turning on the water, re-entering the bedroom a moment later.

"I wonder what you'd be like if you had two thousand a year, a title, and all the heiresses in two hemispheres hurled at your head."

"I should make the best of it, my lord," he replied.

"The best of it! Good heavens, man! how can you make the best of it?" demanded Lord Drewitt, as he sat up and proceeded wearily to stretch his arms behind his head. "How could you make the best of a woman with the face of a horse and a figure like a Rubens Venus?"

"I was reading the other day, my lord, that it's all a matter of digestion."

"Then you shouldn't read those damned cheap magazines. Wait until you are expected to marry an heiress. You will then find out that digestion has nothing whatever to do with it. You're getting sententious, Hoskins; you're getting confoundedly sententious. I've noticed it coming on."

Hoskins eyed his master imperturbably. He was accustomed to these morning monologues. Among

his associates he referred to them as "His lordship easing off a bit."

"Don't you know——" demanded Lord Drewitt as he slowly and reluctantly swung his legs from beneath the bedclothes and sat on the edge of the bed. "Don't you know that all progress, material and intellectual, arises from discontent?"

"Yes, my lord, I believe so," said Hoskins, "I'm putting out that new morning-coat and vest for to-day, my lord."

"Hoskins, you're hopeless." Lord Drewitt rose and proceeded once more to stretch himself. "Here am I discussing higher ethics, and you can't rise to giddier altitudes than morning-coats and vests. You've probably been reading Carlyle."

Hoskins smiled good-humouredly, and Lord Drewitt disappeared into the bathroom, where for the next quarter of an hour his monologue was accompanied by splashings and the rushing of water.

"I remember," he said, reappearing and slipping into the dressing-gown that Hoskins held out for him, "you once said that life held compensations. I know of only one, your coffee," and he seated himself at the small breakfast tray beside the bed. "It's the only thing that preserves intact the slender thread of my life."

Hoskins beamed upon his master.

"I think it was William Blake who said that a man's soul is expressed in his work. Your soul, Hoskins, demonstrates itself in your coffee. I can forgive almost anything, even your damned opti-

mistic expression of countenance, when I drink your coffee. Here, take them away, I don't like them put on my tray," he indicated the pile of letters that lay beside his coffee cup.

Hoskins took away the offending letters and placed them upon the dressing-table.

Lord Drewitt was possessed of a constitutional aversion from opening letters. "My executors have my sympathy," he had once remarked; "they will also have the bulk of my correspondence—unopened."

"There's a letter from Mr. Beresford, my lord; it's marked 'Immediate.' "

"You know I always refrain from opening letters marked 'immediate' or 'important,'" said Lord Drewitt reproachfully. "It means that they are immediate or important only to the writers, and not to the recipients. Your knowledge of the world should have taught you that. You may open it, however, and read it to me."

Hoskins opened the letter and read:—

"DEAR DREW,

"I'm off soon after dawn to-morrow, and I'm going to the colonies, perhaps further, who knows? You might tell Aunt Caroline. Sorry I hadn't time to bid either of you good-bye.

"Here's luck to your nuptials.

"Ever yours,

"R. B."

"Nuptials! damned offensive term," muttered Lord Drewitt, then a moment afterwards, as if suddenly realising the purport of the letter he added, "Further than the colonies. What is further than the colonies?" he demanded, turning to Hoskins.

"There's nothing further than Australia, my lord."

"Isn't there? That shows you're an atheist. Here, hand me those trousers," and Lord Drewitt proceeded to dress.

Suddenly his mind had become alert, there was something in the letter that puzzled him, particularly taken in conjunction with the general trend of Beresford's recent remarks about the future.

With unaccustomed celerity he performed his toilet. Hoskins had never known him more quick or decisive in his movements, and marvelled at his unaccustomed silence. As a rule, during the process of dressing, Lord Drewitt reached the culminating point of his "easing off"; but to-day he was silent, his only remark being to tell Hoskins to order the porter to ring-up for a taxi.

Lord Drewitt's habitual air of boredom had vanished. In its place was a look of definite purpose, with something suggestive of anxiety.

When eventually he drove up to St. James's Mansions, he discovered just in front of him a very small boy with an extremely large parcel swathed in thin brown paper.

"Mr. Richard Beresford," piped the lad.

A porter came forward and took it from him.

"Here, be careful," said the boy, "they're flowers;" but the man did not appear to hear, having suddenly caught sight of Lord Drewitt.

"Mr. Beresford in?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord. Perhaps you'll step into the lift, my lord, and I'll take you up."

The porter followed with the parcel.

"I suppose Mr. Beresford is in?"

"Yes, my lord," said the porter. "He has only just finished breakfast."

Lord Drewitt was well known to the porter, who had instructions always to show him up without any preliminary announcement. The man therefore opened the outer door of the flat with his key, and announced the visitor, at the same time laying the parcel upon the table, after which he withdrew.

For a moment the two men gazed at each other, then with a sigh Drewitt sank into a chair opposite his cousin.

"I have often wondered," he remarked, "how you manage to live without Hoskins."

Beresford did not reply; but pushed across the cigarettes to Drewitt, who selected one with great care, lighted it, and the two continued to smoke in silence.

"Lunching anywhere?" enquired Drewitt.

Beresford shook his head and proceeded to undo the parcel.

With great care he opened out the sheets and exposed a magnificent shower-bouquet of white and clove carnations, tied with broad myrtle-green rib-

bon. He had telephoned to the florist's to send them to his chambers instead of to the Belle Vue.

Drewitt looked across at his cousin as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a man to send himself an elaborate bouquet. Selecting another cigarette, he proceeded to light it from the one he had only partially smoked. As he turned to throw the discarded cigarette into the fireplace, the door opened and the porter announced—

"Miss Craven."

At the sight of Drewitt, Lola started slightly, with a quick indrawing of her breath.

For a moment she stood looking from one to the other. Suddenly her eyes fell upon the flowers.

"How delicious," she cried, then turning to Drewitt she enquired mischievously, "Did you bring them, Lord Drewitt?"

"It is a time-honoured custom between Richard and myself," said Drewitt, "never to call upon each other unaccompanied by elaborate bouquets of this description. I was just asking him to lunch with me. Will you join us, Miss Craven?"

For a moment Lola looked irresolute, then turning to Beresford, said—

"Shall we, Richard?"

Beresford started at her easy use of his name.

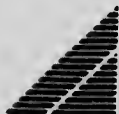
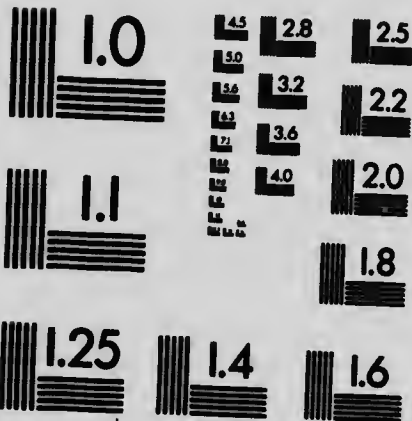
"You see," she added, as if forcing herself to get the words out, "it will be something of a celebration. We—we are engaged." She was gazing fixedly at the flowers, her cheeks a-flame.

"I—I——" began Beresford, firmly convinced



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that this was the most ridiculous dream that had ever descended upon him.

"Then I shall take no refusal," said Drewitt evenly, giving no outward sign of the chaotic state of his brain under these repeated hammer-blows of surprise. "I have to go round and see my tailor, and on the way I'll engage a table at the Ritz-Carlton. If I'm a little late, don't wait. You understand, Richard? I shall withhold my congratulations till then."

As he turned towards the door Lola looked up.

"You—you are the first we've told," she said a little tremulously.

With a smile in which there was nothing of cynicism he held out his hand.

"You'll be very happy," he said. Then after a pause added, "when you've educated Richard; but he has excellent taste," allowing his eyes to wander on the table, "in flowers," and with that he left the room.

For fully a minute the two stood looking at each other. It was Beresford who broke the silence.

"Lola, what have you done?"

"I——" she looked about her a little wildly. "I suppose I—I've proposed to you." Then she laughed, a strange, mirthless laugh.

Beresford stepped across to her and led her to the chair just vacated by Drewitt. "Sit down, Rain-Girl," he said gently; "I don't understand."

He had once more gained control over himself.

"You—you don't seem at all pleased," she swal-

lowed in a way that suggested tears were not far distant.

"Why did you tell Drew that?" he asked. "You know it's not true."

"It is, it must be, it——" She stopped suddenly and raised her eyes to his as he stood looking down at her. "Some one saw me leave here last night."

"Good God!" he cried aghast.

"And—and so I've had to save my reputation at your expense." Her voice was unnatural, hysterical.

"Who was it that saw you?" demanded Beresford almost roughly.

"Sir Alfred and Lady Tringe; they were driving past as we were standing waiting for the taxi."

With a groan Beresford sank back into his chair.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"I didn't want to worry you," she said nervously.

"Perhaps they didn't see you," he said hopefully.

"They did," she said with averted eyes. "Their taxi stopped to allow mine to draw up, and I saw Lady Tringe point us out to Sir Alfred. It'll be all over London by dinner-time." She looked at him from under her lashes as he sat, his arms hanging down each side of the chair, the picture of despair.

"I'm sorry; but—but I had to do it. Are you very angry?" she asked tremulously.

"Angry! I?" he enquired dully.

He tried in vain to remember all he had told her the previous evening. The knowledge that she had not received his letters, or his telephone messages

had been responsible. The sudden reaction had unbalanced him. Little had been said of the coincidence of two letters failing to reach her. Both had felt instinctively that the responsibility lay with Mrs. Crisp.

"Please—please don't be angry with me," she said, and a moment later she had slipped from her chair and was kneeling beside him. The touch of her seemed to reawaken him from his trance. With a swift movement he caught and crushed her to him.

"Don't, for God's sake, Lola, don't. You—Oh, my dear." He bent down and kissed her passionately.

With a little sound of content she clung to him. Suddenly he became rigid. "Don't you see that it's utterly—that it's quite impossible—it's——"

"Don't you think you might get to like me in—in time," she enquired archly.

"Lola, don't you understand? I've nothing, literally nothing to offer you. If Drewitt doesn't turn up, I can't even pay for the lunch. I haven't the price of a cab-fare. I had my pocket-book stolen last night. I only discovered it this morning. I'm down, down and out," he concluded with something of a sob in his voice.

"And yet you could buy me those wonderful flowers," she said.

She leaned forward and buried her face in the carnations. Beresford watched her. Everything was coming back to him. Slowly the realization was being forced upon him that Fate was really taking

a hand in the game. Why should the porter have a friend at the Belle Vue? Why should that friend call in to see him soon after Beresford had handed the man his letters to post? Why should the eyes of the man from the Belle Vue happen to fall upon Lola's letter, and, above all, why had he offered to take it back with him? Again, why had Lola given up her stay in Surrey and motored back to London? Then there was—— He jumped up and began to pace the room.

"Don't you see what I am doing?" She rose and snuggled into the corner of the chair he had just left.

"What you are doing?" he repeated, stopping in front of her.

"Yes," she faltered. "I'm—I'm throwing myself at your head and—and——" she flashed him a tremulous glance, "and you won't help me, not a little bit," she drew in her lower lip, then a moment after, covering her face with her hands, she huddled up in the corner of the chair.

In an instant Beresford was on his knees beside her.

"My darling; oh my dear!" he murmured, striving to pull away her hands. "You know, you must know—you do understand, don't you? Can't you see how impossible it is, how—how——" he stopped miserably.

"You've—you've compromised me and now you humiliate me," she sobbed, her hands still shielding her face.

"My dear—Rain-Girl—Lola—please don't——"

He paused, incoherent in his anguish. "Oh, please—please don't, Rain-Girl." Again he strove to remove her hands, but without success. She merely turned her head further from him.

Beresford looked about him wildly, as if seeking for inspiration or assistance. What was he to do? What——?

Suddenly she removed her hands—she was laughing, yes, laughing right into his eyes.

In his astonishment he sat back on his heels and stared, unconscious of the ludicrous figure he cut.

"Oh, you do look so funny," she cried hysterically. "Please get up."

Slowly he rose, his dignity a little hurt, then seeing two tears trickling down her cheeks, he seated himself on the arm of the chair and drew her to him.

"My dear," he said gravely, "I'm—I'm—all—oh, everything's so muddled up. I don't know where I am—why I am. Sometimes I think I'm mad—I suppose I am really."

She looked up at him, a tired little smile softening the drawn, weary look of her face.

"I'm so tired, Jerry," she said, "I haven't slept a wink, not a little, teeny one," she added with a momentary flash of playfulness. "Please be nice to me. It's been very hard," she murmured; "so hard to make you like me." She closed her eyes wearily.

"My darling."

Beresford crushed her fiercely to him.

"My darling," he repeated, and bent and kissed her hair.

Then in a torrent of words he told her everything. How he had come back to London to find her, how he had gone to the Ritz-Carlton expecting to see her, how he had tramped about the streets on the chance of encountering her, how he had pursued her to Folkestone and, finally, how he had welcomed the way out that he now shuddered to contemplate.

"My dear!" she said when he had finished. "Oh, my dear!"

CHAPTER XX

LADY DREWITT'S ALARM

I THINK my pride was hurt." Lola looked across at Beresford with a faint smile. "You see," she continued, "auntie was very cross with me and she said things about what men think of girls who—who——" she broke off.

"But why did you go away without a word?" he asked. "I thought—oh! it was hell, just hell."

"My dear!" Her eyes contracted as she looked at him, and he saw tears in their depths.

"Don't you think that you might have rung me up the next morning?" she asked gently.

"After the luncheon?" he queried.

She nodded.

"I did; but you were out."

"Auntie has gone away. I'm afraid I have been very ungrateful; but I had to—to say something after those—those——" She looked across at him helplessly. "Auntie vows she will never speak to me again," she added.

Beresford strove to disguise the relief he felt at the news that Mrs. Crisp was to go out of Lola's life. To change the subject he suggested that they should call on Lady Drewitt that afternoon and tell her their news.

"Oh! yes, let's," she cried eagerly, her eyes sparkling.

"But who's to pay for the lunch?" he asked gloomily. "Drew has evidently forgotten us, and I literally haven't a penny. I had five pounds in my pocket-book."

Her eyes danced with fun.

"You've got to begin living on me, Jerry," she cried.

"Don't!" There was something in his voice that caused her mood instantly to change.

"Oh, my dear!" she cried, "you mustn't feel like that."

For some moments there was silence, Beresford gazing gloomily at the end of his cigarette, she watching him anxiously.

"Why do you call me Jerry?" he asked at length, looking up and smiling at her a little wanly, she thought.

"I've always called you that in my own mind," she said. "Ever since I was sitting on that gate and you laughed."

"But why?" he persisted.

"I don't know," she shook her head vigorously. "You'll learn never to ask me why," she added, with a swift upward glance from under her lashes. "I'm the maddest creature that ever was, once I let myself go." Then with a swift change of mood she burst out, "Oh, Jerry, do try and understand me! No one ever has, and don't, please don't, ever hurt me." She looked across at him with eager, pleading eyes.

"You see," she added, "I don't understand myself, not the weeniest bit in the world."

He smiled, still unable to realise the strange jugglings of fate by which he had become possessed of this wonderful creature. A few hours previously he had almost consigned himself to the Great Adventure; now he was about to embark on what promised to be an even greater adventure. It was all too strange, too mysterious, too bewildering for a man's brain to assimilate in a few short hours.

"Now," she cried, "go and get your hat."

"I can get it as I go out, Rain-Girl," he said.

"Go—and—get—your—hat," she repeated, emphasising each word.

"But——" he began.

"Jerry!" This in such a comical tone of admonition that, laughing in spite of himself, he rose and walked towards the door.

Swiftly Lola beckoned the waiter, paid the bill, and was at Beresford's side just as the man was handing him his stick.

Turning, he looked at her and suddenly realised why it was that he had been sent away.

"Rain-Girl," he whispered, "I think we shall be very happy when—when I get used to it."

"Am I as bad as that?" she enquired. "It sounds like a new pair of boots."

"Will you stand me a taxi?" he asked.

And then she knew she had won.

In the taxi neither of them spoke. Beresford was still dazed by the rapidity with which events had

succeeded one another. He was conscious of a desire to get away to some wind-swept moor where he could think things out for himself. A few hours ago Lola had seemed to him as far away as the stars; now owing to one of fate's strangest freaks, she was his. He felt as a navvy might feel on having thrust into his arms the crown jewels of England. What would he do? Probably stand and stare at them in open-mouthed bewilderment. Perhaps—— He caught Lola's eye upon him.

"It's no good, Rain-Girl," he said, "I can't realise it."

"Realise what?" she questioned.

"It, everything. This is not a real taxi," he continued. "You are not a real Rain-Girl. I am not a real I. I'm just like the navvy."

"Like the what?" she asked with puckered brows. He explained the allusion.

She laughed.

"Is that why you suggested Lady Drewitt?" she asked. "I think she'll be good for you, Jerry."

At that moment the taxi swung in towards the pavement and drew up with a squeak. Beresford got out.

"Tell him to drive to the Belle Vue," said Lola.

"But——" he began looking at her in surprise.

"No," she said, shaking her head with decision. "I'm not coming in. Lady Drewitt will bring you back to earth."

For a moment he hesitated, showing the disappointment he felt, then conscious that the door of

Lady Drewitt's mansion had been thrown open by the watchful Payne, he gave the taxi-driver the address, lifted his hat, and walked slowly up the steps.

"Her ladyship at home, Payne?" he enquired in a voice that convinced the butler he was unwell.

"I'll enquire, sir," said Payne, and he disappeared in the direction of the morning-room.

A minute later Beresford was apologising to Lady Drewitt for so early a call.

"Sit down, Richard," she commanded. She was always at her best in the morning-room, Beresford thought, sitting upright in her chair like an Assyrian goddess, an expression on her face as implacable as that of Destiny. "What is it?" she demanded.

"Personally I think it's a dream," he said as he took the chair on which Lady Drewitt had fixed her eyes.

"What is the matter with you, Richard?" To Lady Drewitt, all deviations from the normal were suggestive of illness.

Suddenly some spirit of mischief took possession of him.

"Well, Aunt Caroline," he began hesitatingly, "I'm afraid I've got myself into——"

"What have you been doing?" There was both anxiety and asperity in Lady Drewitt's tone.

"Well, it's rather serious," he began; "I'm afraid you'll——"

"What—have—you—been—doing?" demanded

Lady Drewitt, in a tone suggestive of the great restraint she was exercising over her emotions.

"I hardly like to tell you," he temporised, seeing in his aunt's eyes fear, fear lest he, Richard Beresford, had done anything that would compromise her and the family.

"Richard, I insist on your telling me what has happened."

"I'm going to get married," he said.

"Married!"

What it was that happened Beresford was never quite able to determine; but Lady Drewitt's figure seemed to undergo some strange convulsion, causing her chair to recede at least two inches and she with it. Never had he seen surprise manifest itself so overwhelmingly. She sat staring at him as if he had suddenly changed into a camelopard or a four-winged griffin.

"You see," he began apologetically, "I'm twenty-eight and you are always urging Drew to marry."

"Going to get married!" repeated Lady Drewitt, as if she had not yet properly realised the significance of the words. "Who—who are you going to marry?" Again there was the note of fear in her voice.

"She——" he began with simulated hesitation, "she's a girl I met on a gate."

"Met on a what?" almost shouted Lady Drewitt.

"Oh, a gate," he repeated evenly. "A thing that opens and shuts, you know," he added, as if to admit

of no possibility of misunderstanding. "It was the day I got pneumonia."

Through Lady Drewitt's mind there flashed the thought of some designing country girl, who had entrapped her nephew. Probably she had helped to nurse him, had heard who he was and, convinced that his aunt would see he was well provided for, had determined to marry him.

"Who is she?" With an effort Lady Drewitt regained her self-control, "and what was she doing on a stile?"

"It was a gate," corrected Beresford. "It led from the high-road into a meadow and——"

"What — was — she — doing — on — a — gate?" Lady Drewitt was not to be denied.

"She was smoking a cigarette," he explained, "and it was raining. That's what struck me——"

"But what was she doing there at all?" Lady Drewitt drew in her lips until nothing but a thin, grey line was visible.

"She was tramping," he explained, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for a girl to do.

"A tramp!" cried Lady Drewitt, the full horror of the situation seeming to dawn upon her. "A tramp!"

"It was rather a coincidence, wasn't it?" he smiled.

"You're mad, Richard," she cried, "you've always been a fool; but now you're mad." She snapped her jaws with an incisiveness that made him shudder. "It must be put a stop to."

"Put a stop to," he repeated vaguely. "What must be put a stop to?"

"Your marrying a tramp."

"But I don't want to put a stop to it, and," he added as an afterthought, "you might get to like her."

"Like her!" Lady Drewitt spoke in italics.

"Perhaps it's destiny," he ventured with resignation.

"Fiddlesticks."

"But——"

"I tell you, Richard, I will not allow this marriage."

"But suppose she were to insist. You see, she's rather fond of me, Aunt Caroline."

"If she attempts to sue you for breach-of-promise, the case must be compromised." Lady Drewitt spoke as if that settled the matter.

Beresford smiled at the thought of Lola suing him for breach-of-promise.

"They couldn't fix the damages high," continued Lady Drewitt, irrevocably pursuing her own line of reasoning. "You've got no money."

"As a matter of fact I was going to ask you to lend me two shillings for a taxi-fare," he said gravely; "I literally haven't a penny."

"And yet you propose to marry. Are you mad, Richard? Are you really mad?" She leaned forward slightly as if to enable herself to determine with greater certainty whether or not her nephew had entirely lost his reason.

"I'm sorry that you disapprove of my marriage," he said meekly. "I've always tried to please you."

"You've done nothing of the sort, and you know it."

"I've always tried to please you," he continued imperturbably; "but I've always failed."

"You have." She nodded her head grimly.

"I felt that I ought to tell you. I'm sorry if it annoys——"

"You've done nothing but annoy me ever since you were born," was the angry retort. "You were a most tiresome child. Your poor, dear mother would insist on giving you the most unhealthy toys."

"Unhealthy toys?"

"Yes, Noah's Arks and things with paint on them, and you licked off the paint and were always horribly ill afterwards."

"I suppose that's what's the matter with me now," he murmured. "I've been licking off the paint from the conventional ideas of happiness, and it's made me horribly ill."

"Don't talk nonsense," commanded Lady Drewitt. "What are you going to do?"

"Marry her, I suppose. I see no way out of it."

For a full minute Lady Drewitt regarded him suspiciously.

"So," she said at length, a note of triumph in her voice, "you are already regretting your folly. Was it through this girl that you came to London?"

"I'm afraid it was." He gazed down at the point of his cane.

"Where are you staying now?"

"To-night I'm afraid it will be Rowton's Lodging House, if I can borrow sixpence from Drew."

For a moment Lady Drewitt gazed at him irresolutely, then reaching across to a table at her side, she turned the key in the drawer and opened it. From inside she took a case containing one-pound notes, selected two and held them out to Beresford.

"No, Aunt Caroline," he said, shaking his head as he rose, "although it's very good of you. Perhaps when I'm married you might stand godmother——"

"Richard!" There was such poignant horror in her voice that he felt a little ashamed of himself.

"I'm afraid I must be going now," he said.

"I want to know where I can find you?" There was a note in her voice that convinced him she was evolving a plan to save him from Lola's clutches. "I shall telephone to Drewitt."

"He knows."

"What did he say?"

"He made some remark about marriage being the reckless assumption of another man's responsibility."

"Where shall you be staying?" Lady Drewitt was not to be diverted from her purpose.

"St. James's Chambers in Jermyn Street will always find me," he replied.

Lady Drewitt continued to gaze at the door long after it had closed behind her nephew, whom she was convinced was mad.

"Payne," said Beresford, as the butler came out

of the pantry, "how is your rheumatism, and will you lend me sixpence?"

"Will I lend you sixpence, sir?" repeated Payne, in astonishment.

"I asked you two questions, Payne. How is your rheumatism, and will you lend me sixpence? You merely repeat the second; that is very feminine."

The butler regarded him with a startled expression.

"The rheumatism, sir, is—is a little better to-day, and——" From his trouser-pocket he drew out a handful of silver and hesitatingly extended it.

Selecting sixpence Beresford pocketed it with great deliberation.

"Now a pencil and a piece of paper," he said, "only be quick, because I'm in a hurry."

Payne trotted off to the pantry, re-appearing a few minutes later with the required articles.

Beresford wrote: "I.O.U. the sum of sixpence, Richard Beresford."

"That," he remarked, handing the paper to Payne, "is as good as a banknote. You can distrain upon my estate, or make your claim against my executors, administrators or assigns. Thank you, Payne."

Just as Beresford turned to the door that Payne proceeded to open for him, he was conscious of Lady Drewitt coming out of the morning-room. She had obviously heard his last remark.

At the corner of Curzon Street Beresford hesitated. Lola had told him that she would not be back at the Belle Vue until late. He therefore decided

to call in at the club in the hope of finding his cousin. On entering the smoking-room he discovered Drewitt in the clutches of Sir Redman Bight, who was explaining to him in great detail why woman could never become a determining factor in political life.

In his cousin Drewitt saw the straw at which the drowning man is supposed to clutch. With a muttered apology to Sir Redman, he crossed to where Beresford stood.

"Richard," he said, as he reached his side, "if ever you require anything of me, even unto half my possessions, remind me of this moment."

Beresford led the way to the further corner of the room.

"The dental-chair, foot-and-mouth-disease, rabies, and universal suffrage, all have their place in life's chamber of horrors," murmured Drewitt, sinking into a chair, "but Sir Redman Bight——" he broke off.

"Never mind about Bight," said Beresford.

"In this club," continued Drewitt, "every man seems to have a theory upon something or other. Only yesterday I was talking to Sir Damville Brackett, at least Sir Damville Brackett was talking to me, and as far as I could gather, his view appeared to be that the real cause of the present labour unrest is directly traceable to golf, and the fact that both players do not use the same ball as in footer. He really was quite interesting about it. But of yourself, Richard?"

Beresford proceeded to outline what had taken

place. By the time he had finished the waiter had brought the two whiskies-and-sodas Drewitt had ordered.

"By the way," said Beresford, as he replaced his glass on the table at his side, "why didn't you turn up at lunch?"

"There are occasions, Richard," drawled Drewitt, "when you are as obvious as Streatham Common, or a Labour M.P."

"I see," nodded Beresford, "but I hope you realise that you left Lola to pay for the lunch."

"As bad as that?"

"I hadn't a sou on me."

"It's always a mistake to try and help young lovers," said Drewitt with resignation.

"I had to borrow sixpence from Payne to get here," said Beresford. "I gave him an I.O.U. for it."

"My dear Richard." Drewitt leaned forward with interest. "I wish you would tell me how you got here for sixpence. I've never been successful in getting anywhere for sixpence, although I frequently try. Once I tried to get from Piccadilly to Victoria by omnibus, and got to Hampstead for fivepence; but as it cost me four shillings for a taxi to get back, I couldn't really consider that a fair test."

At that moment a page approached, telling Drewitt that he was wanted on the telephone.

"Page," he said, looking at the boy reproachfully, "haven't I repeatedly told you that I'm never here?"

"Yes, my lord," piped the boy, looking up into

Drewitt's face with a pair of innocent blue eyes, "but the lady told me to come and tell you that she was Lady Drewitt."

"Page, such ingenuousness is wasted at the Diplomatic Club, you were meant for the Church," and with a look of reproach at Beresford, he walked towards the door, followed by the grinning page.

For nearly a quarter of an hour Beresford smoked contentedly, pondering over this new phase in his affairs. When at last Drewitt returned, he sat for fully a minute regarding his cousin.

"Richard," he said at length, "you have achieved what I've been striving after for years."

Beresford looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"For the first time in her existence the aunt is experiencing real anguish of soul, and you are the cause. I congratulate you."

Beresford smiled; but made no comment.

"Incidentally she informed me that you are about to contract an alliance with a gipsy. I assured her that I would endeavour to dissuade you, as I already possess all the mats, brooms and wicker-chairs that I require, much as I should like to encourage you in your new vocation."

"What did she say?" enquired Beresford lazily.

"She said things, Richard, that should not be allowed to pass over even a private-line connecting a woman's club with the Suffragette Headquarters. She stripped life of its adornments, attacked Lloyd George and the Kaiser with marked impartiality. She deplored the rise of democracy and the payment

of M.P.'s. She reproached Nature for her obsolete methods in providing for the continuance of the race. She held up to the open light of day your iniquitous conduct in proposing to marry a road-girl. She implied that I was responsible for your determination, stating in clear and unambiguous terms that I exercise an evil influence upon you. She suggested that no man could know me without wanting to marry a road-girl, tramp or whatever it was she had in mind."

Drewitt paused to sip his whisky-and-soda. With a sigh of weariness he continued:

"She asked me if she were expected to keep you and your wife to-be, together with any infantile complications that might arise out of the union. I assured her that I was not in your confidence to that extent. Then in a voice that caused the wire to throb she asked who was to keep you and your vagabond wife; the expression is hers. Personally, I disclaimed any such intention, pointing out that it would be neither delicate nor decent for a peer of the realm to keep another man's wife. It was at this juncture that she accused me of coarseness and a lack of that refinement which, as far as I could gather, forms the most attractive bait for unsophisticated heiresses."

Drewitt paused to light a cigarette and once more sip his whisky-and-soda.

"At last," he continued, "I had to remind her that this was the Diplomatic Club, where no one ever speaks his mind or conveys facts except in a form disguised beyond all recognition. Finally, she or-

dered me to seek you out and restrain you. Now, Richard, speaking as man to man, and as friends, not to say cousins, how do you think I had better proceed to restrain you?" Fixing his glass more firmly in his right eye, Drewitt leaned back in his chair and surveyed Beresford.

"I think I'll push off now, Drew," he said, laughing as he rose. "By the way, I'm dining with Lola at the Belle Vue to-night, why not come?"

"I've been ordered to dine at Curzon Street; but I'll run in on my way back to the club," he replied. "I think I'll come with you now. I can see old Sir Redman has got his eye on me."

At the door of the club they parted, Drewitt turning west and Beresford walking up Piccadilly in the direction of Jermyn Street.

CHAPTER XXI

LORD DREWITT: AMBASSADOR

I

I THINK you have been very cruel, Jerry." Lola looked at Beresford reproachfully, then suddenly turned her head aside, conscious of a twitching at the corners of her mouth.

They were sitting in the winter-garden of the Belle Vue after dinner, and Beresford had just finished telling her of his call upon Lady Drewitt.

"Cruel!" he repeated uncomprehendingly. "How cruel?"

"Don't you see what it would mean to her if ——?" she broke off.

"But she hasn't got to live with you," he protested.

She lowered her eyes, and a faint blush stole into her cheeks.

"It was cruel," she said quietly; "it was very cruel and—and——" Again the corners of her mouth twitched in spite of her efforts to control them.

"I know what you were going to say," he cried boyishly.

"No you don't."

"Yes I do. Will you bet?"

She nodded.

"How much?"

"Five pounds."

"Right."

"What was it, then?" asked Lola.

"That I left Aunt Caroline to liquidate my I.O.U. to Payne."

She opened her bag and proceeded to count out five one-pound treasury notes.

"Rain-Girl, don't."

She looked at him keenly, startled at his tone, and saw the hard, set expression in his eyes.

"But it was a bet."

"Please don't," he said earnestly; "at least, not yet. I know it's stupid; but——"

She looked at him with smiling eyes.

"You see," he went on hurriedly, "Drew sent me round fifty pounds this afternoon."

"Very well, then, to-morrow I shall go round to Aunt Caroline and apologise for you."

He looked at her quickly, there was something oddly intimate in the use of the words "Aunt Caroline." She seemed to be drifting into her new relationship with astonishing ease. He envied her this quality. For himself, he felt that if he were to live for centuries, he could never live down the humiliation of marrying a woman with money.

"Shall we go on the river to-morrow?" he asked irrelevantly.

"Oh yes, let's," she cried, clapping her hands.

"Lola," he remarked severely, "you're behaving like a school-girl."

"Am I?" she asked, her vivacity dropping from her; then a moment after she added, "I suppose it's because I'm so happy. Oh, I'd forgotten."

"Forgotten what?"

"We can't go on the river to-morrow; I shall be calling on Aunt Caroline."

"Look, here's Drew," cried Beresford, jumping up. He had caught sight of Drewitt being conducted towards them by a page. Having shaken hands with Lola he sank into a chair.

"Yes, Richard," he said, "you have interpreted me aright—coffee. How I wish Hoskins were here."

Whilst they were waiting for the coffee they chatted upon general topics. When Drewitt had fortified himself with two cups he turned to Beresford.

"Richard," he said, "have you given a full, true and particular account of your interview with the Aunt to-day?"

Lola's smile answered the question.

"Then," said Drewitt, turning to Lola, "I must ask you what sum you will require to release Richard from his engagement?"

"What sum!" She looked at Drewitt in amazement.

"I've just returned from dining at Curzon Street," said Drewitt; then turning to his cousin added, "Richard, you owe me an apology for that dinner."

It was one of the most uncomfortable I have ever eaten. The atmosphere of crisis seemed to have penetrated even to the kitchen. The sole was overdone and the quail wasn't done at all, and the Aunt's views upon romantic attachments were positively indecent."

"Hadn't you better begin at the beginning?" suggested Beresford quietly.

"The Aunt seemed anxious that I should begin before the beginning," he replied, "hence I am here for the purpose of settling with Miss Craven the amount she will accept to release you, Richard, from her clutches." He looked across at Lola. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes dancing with amusement. "By implication I was given to understand that the responsibility for your *faux pas*, Richard, rested mainly with me."

"With you!" repeated Beresford, as he looked up from lighting a cigarette.

Drewitt inclined his head. "If I had sought to exercise a better influence upon your early and callow youth, the Aunt thinks that this would not have occurred."

"Has it not occurred to her that possibly Richard might—might not want to be freed?" asked Lola.

"Nothing so transcendently romantic would ever strike a member of our family," said Drewitt, shaking his head with conviction. "With the Aunt marriages are made in heaven, after satisfactory enquiries have first been made on earth," he said.

"Do you think that you have been altogether tactful?" asked Lola demurely.

Drewitt looked at her for a moment reproachfully.

"I did what I thought would be best for Richard," he said wearily. "I even quoted verse, something about kind hearts being more than coronets, and she stopped me as if it had been Rabelaisian. I was relieved, as a matter of fact, for I never could remember the next line. I then went on to explain that the two things a man must choose for himself are his trouserings and his wife, they being the things he sees most of, but she was only scandalised."

"And you left her in the belief that—that I—I——"

"Was a female vagabond," said Drewitt, filling in the blank. "Richard had set the ball in motion, it was n. t for me to interfere with the Aunt's plans."

"I think you've both behaved abominably," said Lola with conviction, "and I don't wonder that Lady Drewitt——" She paused as if in search of the right expression.

"Thoroughly disapproves of us," suggested Beresford.

She nodded her head vigorously.

"Most of the trouble in this world," said Drewitt, "proceeds from people jumping to conclusions. If a man dances twice with a girl in one evening, her mamma looks him up in *Who's Who*, or sets on foot enquiries as to his position or stability. But I

mustn't dwell upon these trifles," continued Drewitt. "I have to report to the Aunt to-night by telephone the result of my interview with Richard. I'm supposed to obtain the lady's address and proceed post haste and forbid the banns."

"I shall go and see Lady Drewitt to-morrow afternoon," said Lola with decision. "I think you've both treated her horribly, and I'm very cross about it."

"But, Lola," began Beresford.

"It's no good," she said, shaking her head but smiling. "I'm very cross."

That night Drewitt telephoned to his aunt the astounding news that the young person, as she called her nephew's fiancée, would call upon her on the following afternoon. Her first instinct was to refuse to see the girl; but wiser counsels prevailed, and Payne was instructed accordingly.

2

"I feel as if the whole world has turned topsy-turvy. Auntie has thrown me over in despair and gone to Yorkshire, Mr. Quelch has already probably filled the niche he had reserved for me in the other world, and——"

"To add to your misfortunes I am going to marry you," said Beresford with a smile.

Her eyes answered him.

Beresford had striven to disguise the genuine relief he felt at the disappearance from his horizon of

Mrs. Crisp. What had actually taken place Lola would not tell him; but he was aware that he had been the bone of contention. He was already beginning to make discoveries about Lola. She could keep her own counsel. What had happened at her interview with Lady Drewitt he could not discover. His most subtle and persistent questions she met either with a smile or an obvious evasion. All he could gather was that the interview had, from Lola's point of view, been eminently satisfactory, and that L. Beresford, had been forgiven.

"I don't understand you, Lola," he said, digging his stick into the turf at his feet; they were sitting under the trees in the Park opposite the Stanhope Gate.

"I'm afraid you'll find that you have married a very curious person," she said wistfully; then with a sudden change of mood, "You won't mind my being myself, Jerry, will you?" She looked up at him, anxiety in her voice. "I'm an awful baby really," she continued. "I wonder if you'll like me when you know the real me."

"Beggars mustn't be choosers," he said lightly.

For a moment she looked at him gravely.

"Jerry," she said, "that hurts just a weeny, little bit."

"My darling, forgive me," he whispered as he bent towards her. "I shall get accustomed to it in time." There was just a suspicion of bitterness in his tone.

"I've—I've got a confession to make," she whis-

pered shyly, drawing in her under-lip and refusing to meet his eyes. "I couldn't tell you before; but I think I can now—now that there are a lot of people about." She glanced up at him, then dropped her eyes again immediately.

"It's about that—that night at—at your rooms." Her voice trembled a little.

He nodded. There was a pause.

"What I told you about Lady Tringe was——" she hesitated and flashed a look at him from under her lashes, "was a fib," she went on hurriedly. "She wasn't there at all, and nobody saw me. Look! there's Lord Drewitt," she cried, clutching him excitedly by the coat-sleeve, as the figure of Lord Drewitt appeared crossing the road from the Stanhope Gate. "Oh! go and fetch him, do."

With his head in a whirl Beresford did as he was bid, returning a minute later with Drewitt at his side.

"I have just had the refreshing experience of seeing the ungodly vanquished, the Philistine smitten, and the biter bit." Drewitt shook hands with Lola, then sank into a chair.

For nearly a minute there was silence.

"Please remember," said Lola, "that I'm a woman, Lord Drewitt, and curious."

"As we are to be cousins, Lola, I think——" Drewitt smiled.

"I shall call you Drew, then," she said. "We're waiting," she added.

"I've been to the Aunt to announce the failure of

my mission," continued Drewitt. "I postponed it until this afternoon, just as I always keep an olive to flavour my coffee. I confess I had been looking forward to the interview. Even Hoskins this morning noted my unwonted cheerfulness and enquired if I were unwell. You must meet Hoskins, Lola, he and Providence between them are responsible for me. Providence for my coming, Hoskins for my being."

"But——" began Lola.

"Hush!" warned Beresford. "With Drew silence is the only extractor."

Drewitt looked reproachfully at Beresford. A moment later he continued.

"I left the Aunt at the parting of the religious ways," he announced.

"Whatever do you mean?" cried Lola.

"Hitherto she has always shown herself a good churchwoman, blindly accepting the decrees of Providence, provided they did not interfere with her own plans," he added. "To-day she is asking why I and not her dear Richard inherited the barony of Drewitt and all its beery traditions."

Lola looked from one to the other, and then laughed.

"When I arrived the Aunt was explaining to the Vultures—I should explain, Lola, that the Vultures are Edward Seymour and Cecily, his wife—how she had always felt that Richard would be saved by the Challice independence. Richard will explain these little family details to you later," he smiled. "As

for me, I can do little or nothing without Hoskins.

"Teddy, that is, Edward Seymour," he explained, "was so ill-advised as to suggest that the Aunt had not always regarded Richard with such favour. Then it was that she turned and rent him, slew him with the jawbone—— No, that would not be altogether complimentary to Richard. She told him that if he had half Richard's brains, he would try to do something for himself instead of waiting for her to die. She was almost *Æschylean* in her grandeur. Poor Teddy literally wilted, and Cecily burst into tears; but as Cecily invariably bursts into tears at the least possible provocation, that was not remarkable."

Again Drewitt paused, then looking at Beresford, he said casually: "By the way, Richard, you are to be raised to my financial status; the Aunt insists on allowing you two thousand a year, conditional on your good behaviour."

Beresford looked at him in a dazed manner, then he suddenly flushed a deep red and looked across at Lola, who, however, was busily engaged in digging holes in the turf with the point of her sunshade.

"She regards your marrying Lola as a proof of your subtlety and commercial acumen. She——"

"Please——" Lola glanced up at him pleadingly.

"It's all right, Lola," smiled Beresford. "It makes a bit of difference. I shan't have to come to you for everything."

"It was the two thousand pounds that laid out the Vultures," continued Drewitt. "They felt just as

the rest of the family must have felt when all that veal was wasted on the prodigal."

"I think it very good of Aunt Caroline," said Lola, "and I like her."

Fixing his glass in his eye Drewitt gazed at her with interest, as if she had made a most remarkable statement.

"But what about Edward?" queried Beresford.

"Teddy was sublime." A flicker of a smile passed over Drewitt's countenance at the recollection. "He was subjected to what I believe is scripturally described as 'whips of scorpions,' in my opinion an entirely inadequate form of punishment. His little soul was extracted from his body and dangled before his nose. He was held responsible for himself, for Cecily, and by implication for my own shortcomings. He was asked what he had done in the war, and why he hadn't done it. Why he had married, and why he had no children. I pointed out to the Aunt that the morality of the observation was a little loose; but she ignored me.

"He was told that he was depraved and demoralising, although poor Teddy would not demoralise a three-inch lizard. He was held responsible for the German vacillation in connection with the Peace Treaty, and for the shortage of high-explosive shells in 1914. In fact, there was nothing evil the Aunt was able to call to mind that was not either directly or indirectly ascribable to what she gave us to understand was a world-wide catastrophe—the coming of Teddy.

"Teddy wilted and visibly shrank beneath her invective, whilst Cecily continued to cry quietly to herself. She reminded me very forcibly of Peter —"

"Peter who?" asked Lola.

Drewitt turned reproachful eyes upon her. "Surely, Lola, you are not a Free Thinker?"

Lola laughed and shook her head.

"She reminded me of Peter. She seemed to want to convey the idea that she had never previously even heard of Teddy; she was disowning him. Then came the supreme moment, pregnant with drama. Suddenly he sprang to his feet, his mouth working uncannily, little points of foam at the corners. I wished that Cecily had brought him on a lead. Locking about him wildly, he planted himself in front of the Aunt, and looking up at her and almost crying, he spluttered—

"'Damn your money, and you too. Keep it. I don't want it. Take it to hell with you,' and then he disappeared.

"Personally I think he went through the door; but I cannot say with any degree of certainty, the exit was so dramatic."

Beresford whistled.

"And what did Aunt Caroline say?" asked Lola.

"She said nothing," said Drewitt; "but from her looks I gathered that Teddy will have a sporting chance of at least some of her money."

"You mean——?" said Beresford.

"I mean that I'm going to engage the services of

an old company-sergeant-major of mine, and reinforced him with a few choice specimens of Billingsgate. It is obvious that the Aunt is susceptible to rhetoric—when suitably adorned," he added as an afterthought.

Drewitt turned to Lola and smiled. For some time the three sat silent.

"Excuse me a moment, will you, Lola? There's Ballinger, and I want to ask him about that place in Scotland."

Beresford had jumped up, and with a smile and a blush Lola inclined her head, and he strode off in pursuit of a little fair-haired man with the strut of a turkey.

"Only once in a blameless life have I ever ventured upon unsolicited advice," said Drewitt reminiscently after a pause. "In a moment of mental abstraction I advised a man who was complaining of loneliness to take a wife. He took me literally, and the husband of the lady took half his fortune as damages."

"Is this a confession, or merely an anecdote?" enquired Lola demurely.

"Neither," was the reply. "It is autobiography, and history is about to repeat itself." Drewitt paused and looked at Lola with a little friendly smile that he kept for his special friends. "Richard is an ass."

Lola stiffened slightly. She looked straight across at him; but Drewitt was examining the knuckles of his left hand.

"But," he continued, "he's rather a lovable sort of ass."

Lola smiled at him with her eyes.

"I'm fond of Richard, Lola," continued Drewitt, "and my indiscretion is in advising you to be a little careful about money matters."

"Money matters!" she repeated, screwing up her eyebrows with a puzzled expression.

"Your happiness depends on Richard's capacity to earn money for himself. Make him do something, go into politics, write books, become a paid agitator, anything, in short. At the moment he's as sore as a vanquished heavy-weight. It will help his self-respect. Now I've done," and once more he smiled across at her.

"Thank you, Drew," she said, "I understand. You——"

"Hullo! what are you two up to?" cried Beresford, who had approached unseen.

"My dear Richard, we've just been discussing the length of your ears and the loudness of your bray," said Drewitt quietly.

THE END

