

**CIHM
Microfiche
Series
(Monographs)**

**ICMH
Collection de
microfiches
(monographies)**



Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions / Institut canadien de microreproductions historiques

© 1996

The copy filmed here has been reproduced thanks to the generosity of:

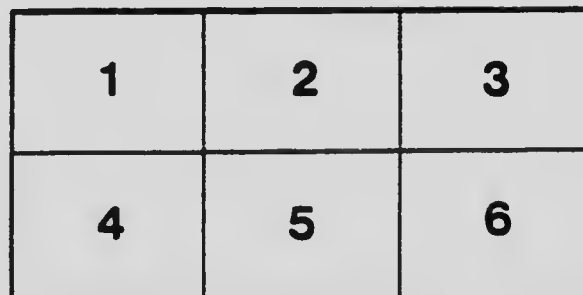
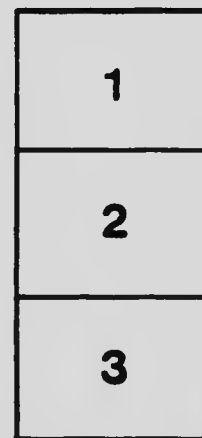
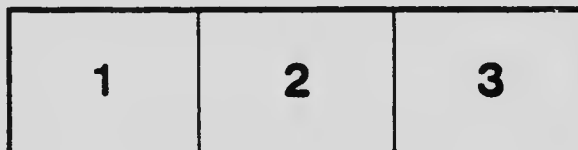
National Library of Canada

The images appearing here are the best quality possible considering the condition and legibility of the original copy and in keeping with the filming contract specifications.

Original copies in printed paper covers are filmed beginning with the front cover and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression, or the back cover when appropriate. All other original copies are filmed beginning on the first page with a printed or illustrated impression, and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression.

The last recorded frame on each microfiche shall contain the symbol \rightarrow (meaning "CONTINUED"), or the symbol ∇ (meaning "END"), whichever applies.

Maps, plates, charts, etc., may be filmed at different reduction ratios. Those too large to be entirely included in one exposure are filmed beginning in the upper left hand corner, left to right and top to bottom, as many frames as required. The following diagrams illustrate the method:



L'exemplaire filmé fut reproduit grâce à la générosité de:

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Les images suivantes ont été reproduites avec le plus grand soin, compte tenu de la condition et de la netteté de l'exemplaire filmé, et en conformité avec les conditions du contrat de filmage.

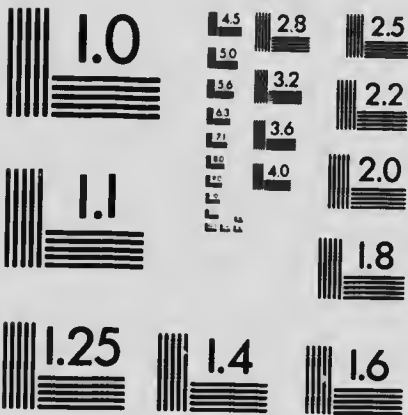
Les exemplaires originaux dont la couverture en papier est imprimée sont filmés en commençant par le premier plat et en terminant soit par la dernière page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration, soit par le second plat, selon le cas. Tous les autres exemplaires originaux sont filmés en commençant par la première page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration et en terminant par la dernière page qui comporte une telle empreinte.

Un des symboles suivants apparaîtra sur la dernière image de chaque microfiche, selon le cas: le symbole \rightarrow signifie "À SUIVRE", le symbole ∇ signifie "FIN".

Les cartes, planches, tableaux, etc., peuvent être filmés à des taux de réduction différents. Lorsque le document est trop grand pour être reproduit en un seul cliché, il est filmé à partir de l'angle supérieur gauche, de gauche à droite, et de haut en bas, en prenant le nombre d'images nécessaire. Les diagrammes suivants illustrent la méthode.

MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax



Woodcock

THE LOVE-LOCKS OF DIANA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Each in Crown 8vo, cloth gilt

**EDWARD AND I AND MRS.
HONEYBUN.** **THIRD EDITION.**

Times:—"A delightful and lover-like young couple. A very genial tale."

Daily Telegraph:—"Every reader of this story will be thoroughly entertained by it. It is a charming, lively, and human piece of work."

Globe:—"A gay little farce. Lighter and pleasanter reading could not be desired."

THE MULBERRIES OF DAPHNE

Times:—"Daphne's doings are most enjoyable."

Black and White:—"A sparkling study of human nature."

Literary World:—"The story is told with that gay humour and sense of good fellowship to which Kate Horn has already accustomed her readers."

THE WHITE OWL

Catholic Times:—"A novel to be read and enjoyed."

Literary World:—"A thoroughly delightful story, full of humour, above the level of most everyday novels."

Irish Times:—"Miss Horn has a keen sense of humour. A delightful story."

Scotsman:—"A thoroughly wholesome, well-written novel, and will make an interesting and profitable companion."

THE LOVE-LOCKS OF DIANA

8

KATE HORN

AUTHOR OF "THE SWEET OF THE YEAR," "EDWARD
AND I AND MRS. HONEYBUN," "THE MULBERRIES OF
DAPHNE," "THE CORONATION OF GEORGE KING,"
"THE WHITE OWL," ETC.

TORONTO
THE COPP, CLARK CO., LIMITED

1912

PR6015

065

L62

1912

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

Dedication

TO

HÉLÈNE

A WOMAN TO WHOM FORTUNE

HAS BEEN KIND

THE Author desires to say that the persons, scenes,
and incidents described in this book are purely
imaginary, and have no basis in personal experience.
Of their inherent truth the reader will judge.

KATE HORN.

August, 1911.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. FAIRIES	9
II. LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS	37
III. FOUR LETTERS	61
IV. THE AWAKENING	68
V. THE FINGER OF FATE	97
VI. VANITY FAIR	119
VII. THE DANCE	142
VIII. ILLUSION	158
IX. IN THE CATACOMBS	175
X. REMORSE	193
XI. CALYPSO	216
XII. THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES	237
XIII. "THE VOICE OF THE GRINDING"	259
XIV. THE VOYAGE	283
XV. A SPIRIT IN PRISON	300
XVI. EXPIATION	320
XVII. IN EXTREMIS	334
XVIII. THE END	342

PROEM

“Oh, where are you going, with your love-locks flowing,
And the west wind blowing, along the narrow track?
This downward path is easy; come with me, an' it please you,
We shall escape the uphill, by never turning back.”

C. G. ROSSETTI.

THE LOVE-LOCKS OF DIANA

CHAPTER I

FAIRIES

"Oh, where are you going, with your love-locks flowing?"

"THERE are elves in these trees, and fairies too, Dickie," said Diana in a whisper. "If we make-believe very hard, we can see them—life is full of make-believes, you know—just as I have to pretend my name is Dinah, by answering to it when I am called, instead of Diana, who was a goddess years and years ago, and was the most beautiful creature in the world."

"Don't talk what I can't understand," said Dickie Lepel fretfully. "Are there really and truly elves and fairies anywhere, Dinah, or are they only make-believes, like lots and lots of things in life?"

They were curled up under the old ruined wall in the shadow. Before them, across the ragged, untidy garden, the broad Maltese noonday sunlight lay like a flame that scorched and hurt and drew the colour from the world and the light from the eyes. All the hotel was wrapped in its midday siesta, and there was neither sound nor movement from under the vine

trellises. It was like the Enchanted Palace of the Sleeping Beauty of the Wood, and Diana was not slow to see it. In the hall slept the coatless waiter, with a spoon yet in his hand, and beyond him an open kitchen door betrayed the cook bowed down over a saucepan, clad in little else beyond his virtue—lo! and that was not a mighty robe.

Mrs. Harding slumbered in her private sitting-room beyond the bar—thank the fairies for that, since her hand was sometimes heavy, and often uncertain in its direction, after her midday meal, Diana remembered with a little shiver. Up in the shuttered room of the top storey, cool and whitewashed and bare of all but the most necessary furniture, the guests in the 'Cosmopolitan' slept pleasantly enough under their mosquito curtains, to wake when the sirocco had died down and the listless air was cooled. The guests had, most of them, come off the big transport lying at anchor in the Quarantine Harbour far up the creek.

Something had gone wrong with her machinery, and while the necessary repairs were going on, the homeward bound passengers had escaped from their narrow cabins and stifling berths, to the big room of the Sliema hotel, that had once been a palace when the island was ruled by knights in golden armour.

Dickie was one of the travellers, born and bred in India—a jaded, petulant, lovable child of five years old. There are many things that the English folk have to suffer for their sovereignty overseas. And one of the burdens of the white man who guards the frontiers and the heart of India is to see the woman

he loves grow jaded and white, and the pale children—loved as passionately as those ruddy ones who play always on English nursery floors—go from him, to forget father and mother in the house of a stranger.

To every man who marries in India, this thing comes. But in his heart, every man says to himself over the cradle of his first-born: "A miracle will happen; this thing will not be." But the miracle never happens.

And so Dickie was coming home, with parents who had snatched a short leave, to begin a very different life in a very different country to India. For it was the life of the unloved and the unwanted. No one ever wants children but their own parents. To other people they exist merely as sources of wealth, sources of trouble, sources on which to vent irritation and annoyance. No one ever loved passionately a little Anglo-Indian child committed to his or her care, for you cannot buy love for sovereigns as you buy bread and butter and roast meat.

Something of this Diana knew, as she held Dickie Lepel in her arms again the patched bodice of her black gown, and perhaps for that reason the unloved exile in Malta loved the child to whom also the word 'home' was about to become an unknown quantity. But just this moment, when the world of Malta was asleep, was the golden hour of make-believe, when these two young things had the world to themselves and re-created it after their own desires.

There is but little difference in reality between the

mind of nineteen and the mind of five, and there was none on that afternoon when Dickie Lepel crept away from his sleeping ayah and found Diana Ponsonby, the hard-worked hotel drudge, in the garden. He did not guess that she had led for three years the life of a pariah dog in an Eastern city, for to him, at the moment, she was an enchanted princess, with delicate hands and gold-shod feet. He did not see her work-roughened fingers, her broken, shapeless canvas shoes. There were neither stains nor patches in her black serge gown, and the faded sunbonnet, that had once been blue, seemed to him like a crown lightly resting upon the ruddy glory of her hair. He knew that she was lovely, for his eyes told him so; and if she lived in the dirty kitchen out of sight by day, hard at work, at any rate she slept at night in an attic high up in the roof under the stars, and that lent her a halo of romance.

"Truly and truly, there are fairies in the garden, Dickie," said Diana solemnly. "Be quite still now, and you will see them, for they only come out when every one is asleep; and they only show themselves to people who love them and whom they love."

Dickie snuggled back contentedly into the exquisite curve of the shoulder against which he leaned. His white, freckled face screwed itself up into an expression of the deepest interest; his red-rimmed eyes, tired of gazing at the sun over trackless Indian plains, found refreshing coolness in the mystery of tangled orange and pepper trees that formed a grove at one end of the garden.

To few eyes is it given to behold Malta as an oasis in the desert, but then, Dickie had never seen England with its level coolness of plain and hill, its purple moors in the summer, its grey distances in the autumn, when heaven and earth hang together on the horizon in a pearly storm light; its mist of rose and white fruit blossom when the year is at its spring.

There had been rain to wash the leaves of the oleander trees and the caper tendrils on the walls. Diamond drops still lay in the waxen chalice of an arum, on the heavy scented orange blossom, but sirocco rain has no sparkling freshness, it is only the tears of a sullen sky weeping for its sins.

"Look!" said Diana again, and there was a thrill in her voice that sent Dickie's shivering little cheek covering down into its nest again with delicious fear. "Here they come!" said Diana, half believing the history herself, thrilling with the awe of her own creative power.

"Up the airy mountains, down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting, for fear of little men:
Wee folk, good folk, trooping all together,
Green jacket, red cap, and white owl's feather,"

she quoted mysteriously, and Dickie, in his mind's eye, saw the fairy troop and heard the horns of elfin-land ring in his ears.

The shadows came and went along the wall, and the green lizards scuttled out and back again. But Dickie saw the elves in pointed caps, and heard the cry of little Bridget who was spirited away for seven years long.

"Oh, Dinah!" he sighed; "do you see the fairies every day? I wish I lived with you."

"If I did not see them I should die," cried Diana, with sudden passion. "If I did not see them I should die."

There was just this one hour in the day she could call her own—in which she was free of the shrill voice of Mrs. Harding, of the dirty drudging tasks that fell to her lot in the private hotel—and, if it were not for that hour, she would pray that death might take her. There was just this one hour in which Diana Lavalette Ponsonby forgot Dinah the slave, and imagined exquisite fairy fancyings that saved her life and her reason.

"Diana, why don't you go away from this place like little Bridget, and live in fairyland for always?" said Dickie, suddenly looking at her. "Why do you stay here and wear ugly clothes and clean the knives when Carlo is too lazy, and dust the rooms and do the mending? Is it because you are afraid of 'when she came back again her friends were all gone'?"

"Oh, Dickie, Dickie! I have got no friends. I have not a friend in the world but you; and you are going away to-morrow."

The cry of anguish torn from the young heart, let loose what had been pent up within Diana for many a long day, and Dickie was frightened at the tempest in the summer woods.

"It can't be true, Dinah, darling; it can't be true," he stammered, rolling up his handkerchief into a tight

ball and wiping away the tears that trickled down her cheek. "Oh, don't cry, Dinah."

The habit of a lifetime, self-control had become second nature to her, and she checked her emotion at once.

"Dickie—darling little boy—I didn't mean to cry," she said, catching him close to her heart. "It is only sometimes, when I remember that once I had a mother and father like other people, that I am obliged to cry a little. But we won't think about it; we will only remember that I am Cinderella, and that some day a prince will come in a big glass coach and carry me off to live in a palace."

"May I be the footman standing on the back of the coach?" clamoured Dickie eagerly; and in the agreeable discussion that ensued as to the best colour for the liveries of Cinderella's servants the time slipped pleasantly away.

"Did your father tell you those beautiful stories? Was he a prince?" said Dickie eagerly, when the charms of a beccafico's nest in the fig tree by his side had been carefully investigated, and the brown birds, flying in and out in petulant terror, had settled down to their duties again.

"My father?" A look of white pain crossed Diana's face. It was as though from afar off she had heard the chime of faintly remembered bells ringing across a river. Her father had been everything to her. He had leaned on her in trouble; he had demanded her sympathy in joy, with a certainty that she would never withhold it; and yet his life had been

a failure. Drink in his youth, the white scourge of consumption in later life, had proved his unwritten history. He had been requested, with as much politeness as is consistent with the traditions of the Army, to leave a service which he did not adorn. The regiment had not regretted him—perhaps it was the worst part of Diana's suffering as she accompanied him from place to place, that he made no friends, that she herself was his only intimate: no one wanted or regretted him; and yet, Henry Lavalette Ponsonby was his own enemy, for his youth had been full of chances, and his life might have been a splendid procession to the grave.

Every man-child, laughing in his mother's arms, holds within him the germs of a Wellington, a Nelson, a William Pitt, a Darwin, or a Michael Angelo. Temperament or deliberate carelessness kills the germ of success before it buds.

It had been the love of gay company, the selfishness of a mind that had no thought but for itself, that had ruined Captain Ponsonby's career. If success is sometimes selfish, the delicate drifting of failure is far more selfish; and, child though she was, Diana had watched the grave of her hopes with agony. They had been left stranded in Malta—the pair of them, father and daughter—when the Stewart Highlanders had taken their departure for Egypt, with bagpipes squealing and kilts flying. A game of cards—a quarrel after mess—Diana hardly knew what had occurred, but the authorities needed an excuse, and Henry Ponsonby's company had another captain.

Her father had declared that it was useless to leave Malta, since his pension could not support them in England; and so they had drifted to the 'Cosmopolitan' hotel, where he had struck up an acquaintance with the proprietors, and through them with the manageress, Jane Harding. But he had died in an attic, with only his daughter to comfort his last hours; and his death had been no easier with the consciousness that he had left her penniless and friendless in a world that is a difficult one for beauty and poverty.

Her mother had died when she was born. She knew nothing of her father's family beyond the fact that they had quarrelled with him when he had married out of his station in life. Jane Harding paid for her father's funeral, and therefore it was essential that Captain Ponsoby's daughter should work off the debt and accept the only home open to her.

Ah, me! But what a home! Hard work and abuse for her daily portion; blows where other girls would have had kisses; a life spent in superintending the work of others, which in that household meant the doing of everything herself.

For two years she had worked for Jane Harding, early and late, rising in the morning to the sound of her shrill voice, sleeping at night in the stifling attic under the roof, with the torrent of abuse that had been her good-night portion still ringing in her ears.

"No; my father was not a prince. He was--an officer in the Army, like yours."

"I 'spect he was really a N.C.O.," said the officer's

son patronisingly. "You see, if he had been a captain, you would have worn nice clothes."

Diana drew her shapeless shoes under the threadbare hem of her gown, and her fine lips quivered a little. "You see, Dickie, baba, the bad fairy came to my father's christening, and—and—laid a spell upon him," she said; "and somehow, life isn't a true fairy story after all, Dickie, baba, because the good fairy never took off the evil charm at all."

Silence fell in the shaded corner of the garden, and the little child turned his head away. There were shadows closing in so close and thick about his own path that the point of the leading shadow nearly touched his heart with a grim message: Separation—loneliness—tears.

Ah! exiles should have no children, since the sorrow presses on the hearts of the young generation who come into their inheritance of tears all too early.

"Were the bad fairies at my christening and yours too, Dinah?" he said, in a whisper.

"A bad fairy is at every one's christening, Dickie; but she isn't very often allowed to influence the child's life. The good fairies are stronger than the bad ones always in the end; remember that, Dickie."

"Always—always, dear?"

There was an expression in the girl's face, exalted for the moment into something unearthly, that arrested the child's attention. He was too young to realise her beauty, but the charm that was hers, even in those unpromising surroundings, caught him in its unfailing grip, since he was a man in the making.

"Yes—always." She held to the faith of childhood, unspoiled even by the impossibilities of her surroundings. In the end life must work out for the best—life and fate, and the thing that one calls self—since God is above all.

"Dinah, you are very pretty, aren't you?" said Dickie, stroking the warm ivory of her cheek with a thin brown hand. "If you had nice frocks, you would be every bit as pretty as my mother."

Diana lent a thought to the pinched white face of Mrs. Lepel, faded long before her time, lined and dried and artificial of complexion after long residence in India. But the loyalty of childhood is unswerving, unassailable, and so to her little son, alone in all the world, Hester Lepel was a beautiful woman.

But the beauty of Diana Ponsonby was undisputed. The good fairy of her baptism had bestowed upon her hair of the ripe colour of the chestnut, with the ivory complexion belonging thereto; eyes of bewildering blue, that had something of the shade of the violet in their tender depths; and above all, the dower that more deeply concerns every woman—such charm of personality, that, when looking at her, shabby gown and pitiful array of the boarding-house drudge were forgotten in the glorious possibilities of what such girlhood might be, set about with fitting surroundings. Her slender hands and feet were of the most admirable type, and the filbert nails and tapering fingers had been proof even against the work of the kitchen and the still-room.

"I am glad you think me pretty, dear," she said softly. "I am afraid Mrs. Harding doesn't."

"Lots of people does, though, Dinah," said Dickie eagerly. "You know, when Captain Bruce and Mr. Arkwright came up to dinner last night, they talked lots about you, and my mummie said 'Hush!' and was rather cross; I don't know why."

Diana flushed hotly. She knew why; and many a time had she had reason to wish she had been born unbeautiful, since the womenkind of the men who looked at her, and looked again, and yet again, resented such interest often both practically and forcibly. It was a poor inheritance to have no money and more looks than other people, but some day perhaps she might find a use for her beauty. There were dim visions of radiant possibilities within Diana's mind; but the future was not in Malta, since the island to her was unbearable. She remembered Richmond, with its cool river, its green woods in early spring, less impressively suburban before the summer trippers turned the place into a nightmare. Her highest aspiration was a vague, nebulous little home, where she might rest and eat and clothe herself and think beautiful thoughts. There were of course wider spheres of action, in which place and power played their part, but she was too tired now to think of anything but rest. So little would have contented her. A little love, a little tenderness—such as is the meed of girlhood; but of all this she was bereft by inexorable fate.

"Dickie, baba! Dickie, baba!" Chundra the ayah came hurrying out of the house, in search of her nursling. Diana could see her white-garmented

figure scuttling along in the sunlight across the patch of lawn, with the anxious gestures of a motherly hen.

"You must go, darling," she said, pushing the child from her, for she knew that her attentions were unwelcome in the eyes of Mrs. Lepel, who, being an Anglo-Indian *mem-sahib*, was aristocrat to the finger tips; and in her brief but necessary interview with Diana had treated her with the languid indifference of the ruling class to the slave.

Diana was dimly aware that the difference lay on the other side. A miniature or two and a necklace in her drawer upstairs, jealously guarded from the prying eyes of Mrs. Harding, had made her feel it possible to endure the insolences of the missionary's daughter with admirable equanimity.

Dickie, now clinging to her with frantic feet and arms, a hedgehog ball of determined wilfulness, was no son of his mother, but rather of the silent, wiry little Indian officer who was his father, and whose smile had warmed the heart of Diana when he had met her in the hotel passages with the child in her arms.

"I won't go to her. Come with me—Dinah—Dinah!"

Chundra was a mass of white waving draperies and expostulating silver-ringed arms, but Dickie struck her in the centre of the silver breast ornament that clasped her gown, and she subsided into helpless submission.

"She says mother is going out for a carriage drive and wants me to go, too," said Dickie contemptuously, extracting this pearl of information from the waste of mouthing Hindustani.

“Then go with her, my darling child ; go,” said Diana persuasively. “The island is a pretty place in the cool of the afternoon, and you will perhaps see the fairies dancing in the Grand Harbour.”

“But I want you to come with me, too !” Dickie was stamping on the ground in bewildering anger, and the ayah, suddenly silent, looked at Diana curiously. In those proud, beautiful eyes lay the indomitable spirit that had ruled India in the past, and would hold it till the English nation went the way of the Greeks and Romans and lost their sovereignty of the world.

“Dickie—hush ! I will take you to the door, if you are a good boy and do what Chundra bids you. I cannot drive with you ; it is foolish to ask such a thing.”

Dickie subsided into penitence, and, holding the girl's hand, walked back to the house, where already the sleeping palace had awoke. But it was no prince who had pushed back the thorn hedge and broken the charm—only a short thick-set man, with a red face and dark hair and eyes, who stood on the veranda, smoking and talking to Captain Lepel. His grey suit and slouched felt hat were admirable of their kind, and the tie-pin, signet-ring, and studs, had about them an air of repressed wealth and material enjoyment that was written large upon him from his sleek hair to the top of his varnished boots. His restless dark eyes had marked Diana before she observed him, and he stepped to the entrance.

“Hulloa, my boy ! How are you ?” he said, with a great appearance of cheeriness.

Major Felix Cassell was no lover of children, and while his hand sought Dickie's, his eyes marked the lines of Diana's young figure, the lift of her adorable chin.

"Goin' out with your governess, eh?"

"She isn't my governess—she's just Diana, my friend," said the child quickly, with the loyalty of his youth.

"What a nice friend to have!" said Major Cassell, with a smile; and Diana disengaged herself from the child's grasp without a word.

Her face flamed like the sunset sky under the man's glance. She felt as though his keen eyes were attempting to read the very secret of her heart. She was ashamed of her gown—her shoes—her work-worn hands. But as she stood there dimly guessed, from the change on the man's face, something of the charm of her beauty that rode superior over every outward impression. For the laughter died from his eyes as her own glanced at him disdainfully and passed on, leaving him as a thing beneath contempt.

"Let me pass, please!" she said, and Cassell fell back, blocking the door no longer, with a muttered apology; and Diana swept into the house with beating heart and tearful eyes.

Something in her life had changed; she knew not what it was, but it seemed to her that this man's look had opened to her a new vista in life. She seemed to herself for a moment to stand on the threshold of an avenue that was very dark at the beginning, but opened into a blaze of brilliant light seen through parting trees at the end.

There was some purpose in life she had not guessed at as yet, and recognised now only very dimly. It was the purpose that underlay that glance of admiration, and she wondered whether it belonged to Major Cassell alone, or whether that same purpose was not in the heart of all the other men in the world. It was something that touched her very closely—something that was personal in its demand; and Diana wondered and trembled. Her father had kept her a child in all knowledge of love; Jane Harding was anxious to do the same, lest she should learn her own value, and get ideas in her head and leave the hotel. Through much that was difficult in her life, Diana had passed with unseeing eyes, gaily as one of the grey squirrels in Regent's Park, dowered with the heart of a child in which tragedy has no place.

Life for her was a fairy dream, in which the songs of the angels played a strange part, when the magic music died. She had had no friend but her father in the difficult years that lay between childhood and girlhood, and she had developed late. There was within her sometimes a longing for something she could not analyse—something that was wider and more full than the lonely self-centred existence that was hers in her hours of freedom. She wanted a friend—she was conscious at least of that imperative need—but to whom could she turn to fulfil the conditions of friendship? There was no one in her life or surroundings for whom she cared at all, since it had been Jane Harding's object to keep her very much away from chance acquaintances, recognising her value in the house. The child for

whom she had grown to care very deeply during their few days of intimacy would go out of her life for ever in a short time. Indeed, even if he had remained at the 'Cosmopolitan,' it was very doubtful whether his mother would have much longer permitted an intimacy that was not a creditable one to her narrow point of view.

The long passages of the hotel would have been empty at that season of the year, had it not been for the transport's broken propeller; but now, as Diana hurried along them to her own room, a waft of patchouli and a rustle of silk skirts coming towards her roused a sudden hope in her heart. She must find a way of escape from this hateful life before another year was over. Mrs. Lepel was a woman, and therefore must possess a heart; she was a mother, and therefore must have pity for all motherless children.

"May I speak to you for a moment?"

Hester Lepel, coming down the white-washed passage on her way to the waiting *carozza*, lifted her light blue eyes at the arresting words. She wore a dust-coloured 'dhirzi' made serge gown and sun helmet, and her face was the same colour as her gown, with a spot of bright rose colour in each cheek, and she was buttoning a pair of country-made gloves, bought from the glover that morning in Strada Forni, on to her freckled hands.

"Do you want anything?" she said coldly. The wonderful beauty of the girl's face struck at her shrivelled heart with a sense of dismay. If she had owned such eyes, such lips, life would have presented itself before her in a series of triumphs, but she hated Diana for possessing them.

"Mrs. Lepel, I shall not have another chance, perhaps; but I love Dickie so much—and you see what my life is here. Oh! for the sake of pity, take me with you to England—in any capacity! See—I would work my fingers to the bone for you; I would not ask you for wages; I would do all your housework, if you would give me freedom."

Hester Lepel's pitiless eyes passed over the girl's whole self in contemptuous narrow-minded review, and, under her gaze, Diana felt the hot blood surge upwards from feet to head in a shivering scorch of shame.

"I think you don't know what you are talking about," said the sharp voice clearly. "You are not at all the sort of girl I should like to have in my house."

Despair made Diana dull of wit, and she caught at the thin arm in the smart tucked muslin blouse. "Oh, Mrs. Lepel, take me to England for the love of God! If you don't want me as a servant yourself, I could get a situation somewhere else, and I would do anything in the way of work. I have no money of my own, and I don't know anything of my relations, but when my father died and left me here, he told me to go back to England as soon as I could, and he gave me an address there of—of some one who was a relation and would help me; but when I wrote to her, there was no answer to my letter. Can't you see what my life is here with Mrs. Harding? Have pity on me and help me, or I believe I shall go mad and die. Other girls of my age have happy homes and people to care for them, while I have—no one."

The passionate torrent of her words ceased when she realised the expression on Mrs. Lepel's face.

"Let me pass, please; I am in a hurry," she said, with a little laugh that made Diana's blood run cold. "You would make an excellent actress, I should think. Mrs. Harding was telling me all about you this morning, and I have given orders to my ayah to keep my little boy in his own quarters till we leave the island, for I don't care to risk that he should be contaminated by your laziness and ingratitude. Mrs. Harding gave you a home when you were friendless and starving, and this is how you repay her! Such girls as you always drift to the bad at last, and indeed they deserve nothing better."

She went down the corridor with a shrill laugh, and Diana fell against the wall and let her pass. She waited until the rustling of Mrs. Lepel's gown died away upon the stones, and then, like a blind thing, she crept away, putting up her hand to still the trembling of her lips.

"What did she mean?" said Diana to herself. "What did she mean? I cannot understand why she should hate me so. What have I done to her?"

It was not possible she should realise the fact that the overwhelming jealousy of a woman, who had never known what it was to be either beautiful or successful, had torn itself free from all restraint. Mrs. Lepel's friends had smiled at Diana, and therefore no words could be harsh enough wherewith to reprove her, no malice too cutting to wound and hurt and crush to the ground with shamed despair.

It is dreadful to see a young thing cry, to whom laughter should be the natural expression of daily thought. To have sorrow for meat and tears for drink comes later, but to a girl of nineteen grief should be a sealed book.

When Diana cried, her face did not become un-beautifully swollen and patched, like that of other women, but the tears slid from her eyes like diamond drops, and hung sparkling on her lashes, so that the lovely blue of them seemed to be like violets washed in a shower, or a May sky after a tempest.

She was going straight to her room, along the passage, whitewashed and bare, and up the long flight of stone steps, crying as she went, for it seemed to her that after Mrs. Lepel's words there was no room for hope or happiness again in all her life, since she had shut the door on both of them.

"Oh, Mother, Mother!" she sobbed, as she went. She could hardly remember her mother, who had died when she was a child, but in trouble that most sacred name rises to the lips of every child born of a woman, since mothers are made to comfort.

It was the most pitiful thing to see this young thing, ill-fed, ill-clothed, the drudge of a harsh household, weeping for despair in that desolate place. The sight would have made the angels weep, since their ministry is one of love, and Diana had had no one to love her for many a long day, and now she had been told that she was not worthy of love.

There were steps behind her on the stone floor, and she turned quickly round to face Major Cassell, breath-

less with hurried pursuit of her. She looked so lovely and so much afraid, that his eyes looked at her only for a moment, then dropped furtively to the floor.

She stood in a patch of sunlight, and her hair glittered like a web of silk sown with gold threads. He imagined her well dressed, perfumed, and manieured, and, for the life of him, he could imagine no prettier creature, independent of the one great fact of her life, which he alone in Malta knew.

"I came after you—to apologise for anything I may have said to you, Miss Ponsonby. But I am sorry to see you are in trouble. You are Miss Ponsonby, I think? Miss Lavalette Ponsonby, whose father was in the Stewart Highlanders?"

His voice was so kind that it fell on Diana's sore heart like oil upon a wound. "Yes; that is my name," she said, her breath catching every now and again with a sob, like a child in trouble. "But why are people so unkind? Mrs. Lepel was rude to me, and I had done nothing to hurt her."

"Mrs. Lepel is a jealous cat," said Felix Cassell, delighted at this small show of confidence. "Can't you understand, my dear Miss Ponsonby, that every woman is inclined to be jealous of you, and every man wants to—well, to be nice to you?"

"Oh no!" said Diana, with swift passion. "It can't be true—it can't, indeed!"

Major Cassell was enjoying himself. He had never met a girl so absolutely guileless before, and, according to the result of his own inquiries, so absolutely friendless. He determined to enlighten her ignorance so

gradually that he might watch the bud unfold petal by petal, and blossom into a rose that should be sweet for him alone. For was not its sweetness laden with the chance of such a fortune as comes to a man once in his lifetime, and Major Cassell thanked his lucky stars that had kept him a bachelor till now.

"Oh, but I can assure you that is the reason for Mrs. Lepel's annoyance," he said again. "No one cares for her, because she is like one of those brown beans that the horses eat in their forage: she is all withered and dried up and ungracious, while you have the face of a peach, and eyes that are true Irish—put in with a smutty finger—eyes that would look away the heart of any man!"

Diana's face of annoyance told him that he had gone too far, and he hastened to retrieve the ground he had lost.

"Dear Miss Ponsonby, do forgive me," he said. "I know I am talking a good deal of nonsense, but I really want to make you look happier, for I cannot bear people to be miserable; life is too short, and I suppose I am—too kind-hearted; and besides all that, I was a friend of your father's in his early youth, and I knew his mother and father."

Now that Diana came to look at him Major Cassell was not nearly so disagreeable as she had imagined at first. He was fat and red, and his hands were ugly in shape, while his eyes were not exactly trustworthy; but there were enough grey threads among his black hair to reassure her that he was old enough to be her father, and he seemed to be very kind-hearted after

all ; and kindness is all the world to a woman, just as a caressing hand is everything to a dog.

“ Oh, how wonderful that you knew my father and my grandparents ! ” she said, with a little sob. “ I cried because I was all alone in the world, and Mrs. Lepel frightened me, and there seems to be no future for me, ” she added quickly. “ But now, if you know my grandfather, perhaps you can make him forgive me ; and I will go to him and entreat him to give me a home. ”

“ There is a golden brilliant future for every beautiful woman, ” said Major Cassell oracularly. “ Some one said, once upon a time : ‘ Happy is the nation that has no history, ’ but I believe that the woman who has none is an unenviable being. But your future can never be concerned with your grandfather, since he will not hear your name mentioned. Now don’t begin to cry again, my dear Miss Ponsonby ; I am sure that you have a very brilliant future before you, as I said just now. ”

“ I don’t want anything brilliant or great, ” said Diana ; “ I just want to be happy. ”

“ And I feel so sorry for you, ” returned Major Cassell, “ that I am going to turn over in my mind what I can do to make you happy. I don’t think it will be difficult, somehow ; but if I can make you smile and look joyous, without all the old women in Malta putting out their tongues and falling over their feet in a hurry to be jealous of you, will you let me do it ? ”

“ Oh yes, ” said Diana, with a little sob ; “ I *must* be happy ; it is my right. ”

"It is the right of every man, woman, and child, born into this world," he said stoutly; "and you must snatch your happiness with both hands, only I want to ask you to trust me—if I can show you the way to it. I am old enough to be your—your father, my dear Miss Ponsonby, so that surely you might feel that I am your friend and well-wisher."

"I do—I do!" said the girl, quite unnerved. "I am sure that you would never be unkind to me."

"That indeed I never should be," said Felix Cassell, so fervently that Diana was moved to give him her little trembling hand.

"I do trust you," she said.

"Then, will you meet me to-morrow close to the Artillery General's garden at Floriana?" said Cassell hastily. "If we say at three o'clock in the afternoon, there will be no one to spy upon us; and I have a great deal to say to you about your grandparents," he concluded.

"I—I will think about it," said Diana hesitatingly. "I am sure you mean to be very kind, but it is difficult for me to get away—sometimes."

"Dinah!" called a sharp voice; "Dinah; I want you quick—sharp!"

"It is Mrs. Harding," said Diana, her face paling; "I must go."

"Poor child; good-bye for the present." Major Cassell gave her hand a slight pressure and turned away, hurrying down the side passage, and so down a rustic staircase into the garden.

His words had warmed Diana's sore heart, in spite of

the fact that she was a little afraid of him—a little bewildered—though she was sure that he meant to be kind. She was so accustomed to harsh words that Cassell's attention was like healing balm to her, and she had unconsciously forgotten her instinctive aversion to him.

She went up to Mrs. Harding's room with a lighter heart, and there a rough hand pulled her through the door and banged it after her.

"Who were you talking to outside?" said Jane Harding, working herself into a rage. "I won't have you make friends with people; I have told you that scores of times!"

Diana drew herself away from the ugly clutching hand, and there was a new dignity about her that dismayed Mrs. Harding.

"Don't touch me like that," she said; "and for the future, please remember that I shall make friends where I choose."

It was a passionate effort for freedom that she was making, this poor lark in the cage, beating her soft breast against the wire bars

Jane Harding's bed-sitting-room, with its shabby printed Indian cotton curtains and hangings, its muslin beetle-wing mats, its shabby books and gaudy pictures, was only a type of Jane Harding herself. She was an unwholesomely fat tall woman, with a white face and a long nose. If she had possessed good looks, they had departed long ago, and the relics of them remained only in a patch of artificial red on either cheek, and a line of pencilled black under her lashes. Her shifty eyes fell

now before Diana's determined glance, for her mind was so evil that she could imagine nothing but wrong and wickedness, where none existed. Her fat hands pulled at her muslin gown with a nervous gesture, and Diana noticed once again that the wedding-ring she wore had embedded itself in her finger.

"You have treated me so badly," went on Diana, taking courage from the unwonted silence, "that I am going to order my own life for the future, and go back to England when I can, and as my father wished me to do."

The brave voice, the poor, brave, child-like eyes, touched Jane Harding not at all. She hated Diana with the hatred of the evil for the good, of the light for the darkness.

"Your father!" said the shrill voice suddenly. "Do you know what your father was? Do you know what you are? Your father drank and gamed himself to death, for it was in his blood, and you will go the same way!"

Diana shrank away, suddenly afraid, suddenly with fear, and Jane Harding followed up her advantage and sprang at her with swift fury.

"Oh, I shall never be satisfied till I have dragged you down in the mire, where I have been, and you are nearly there now, from all I can hear! Oh yes: your puling baby ways, your beseeching eyes, and all that nonsense about you that kitchen work hasn't killed, point to that way; and I'll help you along it gladly enough, for your father——"

"Don't speak of my father; don't take his name on your lips," said Diana, suddenly white and tense.

“Why, your father was as bad as they make 'em, from crown to sole—— Here! do you want to read a letter or two for yourself, about him? I found them and kept them; they'll tell you what he was; and I expect your mother was the same before him——”

“I won't listen,” panted Diana, with lifted head.

There was a portrait of her father over the chimney-piece—the dear weak face and delicate smiling mouth; so like her own, so terribly like her own.

“It is not true—it is not true!”

“So I am a liar, am I?” said Jane Harding; and suddenly she caught up a stick that stood in the corner of the room and struck blindly at her, holding her down with one arm. There was no sound in the room, save her breathing and the dull thud of the stick, for Diana would not make a cry, in her pride and despair.

The furious rain of blows ceased at last, and Jane Harding staggered back and sat down on the sofa, her passion exhausted, while Diana stood up. Her arm was hurt and cut where her sleeve was torn; the stick had bruised her cheek from ear to chin, in a blue ridge, where the fury of the woman had caught at her face. Diana had such horror and fear in her eyes as they had never known before, but she moved stiffly to the door to make her way to her own room. And Jane Harding, lifting herself up from the sofa, spat out inarticulate words at her, as she passed, that she dimly understood.

“Go the way your father went—go! Go! or I'll turn you out in the street to die!” And Diana, looking at

her through her tears, saw the hypocritical mask of everyday life, that had for a moment been lifted from that evil face, fold down again and chase the cruelty from the eyes. And covering her face with her hands, she hurried by to her own room under the roof.

At the very moment that she closed her door behind her, Felix Cassell was reading for the hundredth time a letter from a friend in England, in which one paragraph ran as follows: "If you can find anywhere in Malta, Henry Lavalette Ponsonby's daughter, I believe that her grandfather is ready to accept her as his heir, though he would not have the word breathed in public. An obstinate old heathen he is, but as rich as Cræsus or Midas, or any of those old heathen Johnnies."

And when Cassell had refreshed his memory, he re-read and then sealed his reply to the communication.

"How I wish I could help you to find little Miss Ponsonby. I have done my best, but there is no trace of her in the island."

For, as he said to himself, 'I may as well secure some of the good things of life for myself, without sharing them with half the meddling solicitors in London'—which is Philosophy!

CHAPTER II

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

"A very perfecte knighte,
He never yet no villainie ne saide."

DAY was dying slowly in the west when Diana lifted herself up from the attic floor, on which she had flung herself after bolting the door. She had heard her name called in the house impatiently, but had paid no attention to the voices; she wondered whether ever again she should pay any attention to them. Every nerve in her body, every thought, was in shocked revolt, and she had beaten her poor aching head against the bare boards in pitiful despair that had no room for reasoning thought.

Presently she sat up and loosened her gown, lifting her bruised swollen limbs with little shivers of pain. She dragged herself over to the cracked mirror, and tilted it up to get a better view of herself. Her cheek was dark and discoloured, and her soft round arm was bleeding; and it was the sight of the blood on her white skin that loosened the tight band of agony round her heart, and made her sane once again in pitiful weeping.

"Oh, how it hurts!" she said to herself, crying with the passionate grief of a child longing for its mother and for the comfortable haven of that mother's breast. "What shall I do?"

She looked round her low-ceiled attic, bare of furniture save for its narrow bed, a broken wash-stand, an orange chest on which stood the looking-glass and her few toilet things, the battered black trunk that had once belonged to her mother. Everything of intrinsic value had gone to the pawnshop long ago, and little personal trifles, merely pretty and valueless save for association, Jane Harding had annexed with a grasping hand. But there remained one thing of which no one had robbed Diana, since she would have fought like a tiger for its possession, and she looked at it now as she stood up, straight and slim as a white branch of privet, in the centre of the room. Her talisman was a necklace of pearls, to which was attached her mother's wedding-ring and the miniature of a woman's face in a gold frame. The pearls were warm and white as her own skin, and the face of the woman in the locket was the face of Diana herself. On the rim of the gold was engraved: "*Althea Lavalette—elle avait la joie de vivre dans son cœur ;*" and if this smiling, radiant Althea of the miniature possessed the *joie de vivre*, her granddaughter, bruised and ragged, possessed it in a still higher degree, and in spite of every obstacle in her path.

The necklace had been taken from the breast of her mother as she lay dead, and Diana would have starved sooner than have parted with it. Every milky pearl seemed to her to be full of the spirit of that mother whom she so dimly recalled; and if she guessed anything of their value, it was never with any thought of parting with even one of those round warm beads that

some day she would be able to wear outside her gown upon the collar of some pretty dress.

She washed her bruises now, and perfumed them with some faintly sweet essence that had belonged to her mother; then unlocking the shabby trunk, sorted out various garments that had been worn by Mrs. Ponsonby, and that were too fine and delicate for everyday use. She had darned every garment with her own fingers, and some of them were almost thread-bare, but they felt soft to her skin as she cast her everyday coarse calico from her like the slough of a serpent. She brushed her beautiful hair and coiled it round her head, then twisted about it a Spanish lace scarf, well darned but fine of texture. There was a white muslin embroidered gown that fitted her slender person like a sheath, the last remaining pretty dress in the trunk, and since there were no shoes to match the silk stockings, Diana slipped on a pair of gold-toed Indian slippers, heavy with embroidery, and covered her work-worn hands with a pair of white gloves that she took from a blue paper smelling faintly of camphor.

It seemed to her dazed senses that she was decking herself for some sacrifice—preparing herself for a new and desperate step in life that had been growing within her like a germinating seed for a long time. Only she must get away to think it over alone; she must go up across the harbour to the corner of the Barracca Garden that hung over the sea, and there she knew at this time of the evening she would be alone, and she could puzzle over Jane Harding's words to her and decide for herself what she should

do, and how she should escape from Mrs. Harding's clutches.

Only this thing she knew, that she would never return to the 'Cosmopolitan'—never again. There were three pictures in her room, and she wished she could have taken them with her, to aid in her decision.

A miniature of her father in uniform; a pastel figure of her mother, with a gauze scarf twisted about her head and shoulders, giving her the air of a Romney portrait; the third, a painting of the Madonna and Child, and something in the face of the Madonna appealed to the girl's loneliness now, as few pictures had ever done before.

She had bought it before her father died, paying for it with one of her rare half-crowns, and it was with her still, in spite of the life that had driven her from pillar to post, through a world that had been full of surprises for her.

These three fragments of colour adorned the bare whitewash of her attic walls, like brilliant mosaics set in the dirty floor of a mosque. She stood for a moment under the Madonna when she was dressed, white and slight and perfumed, ready as it were to go out to meet a sweetheart, but with no mind for any lover's kisses.

Like Jephthah's daughter, she was going out to bewail herself upon the mountains; and then the moment and the decision would come to her, even if it were to end on the rocks, far far below the balcony.

She wrapped herself in a shawl, for fear lest any one should see her unaccustomed finery, and laid a trem-

bling hand on the frame of the picture. "O Mother—Blessed Mother," she said, "I have got no friends; it would be better for me if I went out of life altogether, only I do not see my way clearly; but, Mother—you will help me!"

She could not take the portrait of her own mother with her, since it was too large, but the miniature of her father she fastened round her neck and pinned under her gown, with some strange fancy that it should go down into the deep water with her, if the final decision was one of pale despair.

She escaped unseen by the same side-door that had given egress to Felix Cassell, for Jane Harding was sleeping off her excitement on the couch in her room; and since there was a bottle and glass beside her on a table, the Sicilian waiter, who had looked in on her for a moment to ask a question, knew that the dinner must be cooked that night without her supervision.

There were times when the woman could not bear to feel Diana's innocent, limpid glance upon her; some days when she craved to drag her in the dust, and to see her evil-minded as she herself was.

And yet, again, there were other days when Jane Harding was afraid of Diana's uprightness, and when she bewailed the loss of her own, with a dumb fury that left her beaten and exhausted.

Diana went out into the cool evening, unchallenged. She knew by the look on the housemaid's face as she passed her in the passage that something was guessed in the house as to the scene of that afternoon, and she shrank aside without a word to Paulina. There

would have been more pity for her in the hotel if Diana had been less proud, but in her stern despair she had always shut herself close away in the innermost recesses of her own heart, and had allowed no one to guess what she was suffering. But the barrier was down now, and she was ready for confidence—only not with Paulina, who laughed at her patched clothes.

“Salvo! *Ahi*, Salvo!” the Maltese woman shouted, as Diana went up the garden. “Dost thou see her shoes with gold on the toes? She goes out to meet a lover! *Ahi!* but they are clever, these English women. She must have hidden those things up in her room. *Lu!* she has a white dress—the rag woman!”

“Thou art jealous of her eyes, blue as the sky, and of her cheeks, pink like the almond blossom,” said Salvo, the cook, who had a poetic soul when he was not gambling that very soul away, dicing in Strada Mercanti.

“Oh, thou owl-faced—thou lizard-legged!” shrieked Paulina at him, in petulant anger; “I could not be jealous of a creature who receives beatings instead of bread and butter, and kicks instead of kisses, and whose clothes are the laughter of all who behold her!”

“*Ahi*, Paulina,” mocked Salvo, as he laid the red-hot poker across the caramel pudding to crisp the sugar; “if thou hadst her face, thou wouldst have lovers by the score to give thee clothes instead of buying them thyself.” Which shows how deeply Diana was misunderstood in the household.

But she had no thought of it as she hurried down

the steep white steps to the ferry where the little steamer rocked and whistled, tied up to the landing-stage with a rope that creaked as the boat swung. She had her penny ready for the journey, and drew the shawl close about her face, sitting in the stern of the boat, hoping that she would pass unrecognised by any one. The strong sunlight on the harbour turned the water to a glittering sheet of light, but the sirocco wind kept it a level calm, without the ripple of a wave.

Diana walked up the Marsamuscetto steps, where the beggars sat and whined, eaten up with disease, blind, and lame. The grey wall of the ramparts above her were purple with caper blossom, and green with delicate sprouting ferns. The hot street beat waves of fœtid heat at her as she hurried up into Strada Forui. The big arched entrance to the underground town of Valetta, where the lowest grade of Maltese lives in dirt and squalor, did not interest her as it would have done another day. There was a little brown baby toddling across the road, adorably round and pretty, but Diana did not stop to chatter to it in Maltese as yesterday she might have done. But like a hunted hare, neither drawing breath nor looking round her, she hurried along to the Barracca Garden.

There were not many people in the hot street at that hour. The younger members of the Garrison were playing tennis in the Ditch, and the senior Majors and Colonels were reading their papers in the cool Club House. One or two fat shopkeepers were sitting on the pavement, with hands placidly folded across their portly persons, or calling across the street to

their friends some ponderers joke that had neither end nor beginning. There were kiosks of flowers at every street corner, counters laden with roses and narcissi and stalks of brown asphodel, branches of rosy oleander, great stems of arums with their waxen cups, earthenware 'bombolas' covered with trailing maidenhair, sprays of orange blossom tied up with strips of green bass. Diana cast no look at them, for in a short time she would be beyond the reach of flowers, and even now the oleander reminded her of her father's funeral, for she had cast a branch of the glowing flowers into the dark grave, and it had glorified the deal coffin.

She slid into the little iron balcony that overhung the Grand Harbour, leaving the Square and the Auberge de Castille behind her. She sat down on the narrow bench, sighing with relief to find it deserted, and put off the shawl from her head and shoulders. Her arms hurt and smarted with pain. She was bruised in every limb and broken in the spirit of her, and she sat there helpless and without the power of thought.

"I will wait till the sunset gun sounds from St. Angelo," she said to herself, "and then I will go down to the quay when the last bugle for 'Retreat' has gone. Perhaps one of the passenger boats will give me a free passage to England if I ship as stewardess; and if not, there is always the peace of the sea--and it will not hurt much."

The sun was dropping in the west, and the red flame of the round orb seemed as if it must hiss and burn when it touched the rim of the sea.

"Bang!" Every rock and wall echoed back the crash of the gun, and it quivered through every nerve in Diana's body, so that she rose to her feet, with this electric tingling in her veins. As if with one accord, two triumphant bugles took up the melodious call for 'Retreat,' and presently the whole island swayed with melody.

There is something in a bugle-call that stirs every emotion of the human soul, and often though Diana had heard the call, it stirred her now. From the farthest peak and crag of Malta and Gozo, from old grey barrack, from the staring new buildings beloved by the Engineers, bugles and trumpets fought with each other for the mastery, so that the air was full of haunting, appealing music.

The authorities had not given her father a military funeral—Henry Ponsonby had been hastily thrust underground, since he had been no ornament at any time to his regiment—but Diana would have one in his stead, for the trumpets of the island would play the 'Last Post' over her head as she left it.

In the barracks around her the officers were dining, and at the Castille it was guest night, so that the Artillery band was playing in the courtyard, while the young men were eating turtle soup and roast goat above. Diana's feet beat in unconscionable time to one of Souza's marches as she walked to the railing. How steep it was, and how the rocks below would tear and crush her delicate limbs if she were to fall over!

Out of the cloud of confusion that wrapped her senses she could see her father's face—nebulous, indis-

tinct ; not as he had been in later days, but as he was in the first early days of her memory—and she thought that he beckoned to her. She could feel his hand upon her arm.

“Father !” she said, with a little sob, and sprang forward, only to find herself caught and held by a strong arm.

“Good heavens !” said a young and earnest voice. “What on earth are you doing ? How dare you try and throw away your life like this ? Do you realise that if I had not come here to-night, you would probably have been lying broken into pieces, horribly, at the foot of the rock ?”

Diana tore the shawl from her face, and flung herself down by the seat in a passion of revolted tears.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I was not going to die ; I was only miserable. I—I want to escape from the island, and I can’t, because I have no friends and no money—just nothing.”

She was trembling in every limb, sick and faint, now that the tension of the past hour was over, and presently her rescuer stooped down and lifted her in his strong arms on to the seat.

“Look here ! you know sitting is every bit as cheap as standing ; and if any one came round here it would look so bad to see you like this. People get into an awful hash of trouble sometimes, you know, and then something comes and puts everything right again ; and it seems, somehow, as if it must be an angel out of heaven to help them. I say, do stop crying, and think of what I am saying.”

Diana looked up obediently into the face above her, and checked the violence of her tears.

"I suppose I ought to thank you, but I can't yet," she said brokenly. "I think I never meant to do anything but just look over the railing, but perhaps I turned rather dizzy——"

"Well, if I hadn't warned off mess to go to the St. Aubyns' for supper and an attempt at a carpet dance, history might have been altered," said the young man, settling himself down at her side on the narrow bench. "Look here! Couldn't you and I go through the whole thing together and make out if it is all as bad as you say? Sometimes another person can show up the happiness that—that—— Oh, I say, I can't go on preaching to you; let's talk."

Now that she could steal a glance at him she saw that he was a pleasant-looking young man in the green mess uniform of the Westminster Rifles. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with brown hair and moustache, and eyes that looked out so leniently at the world that they never saw the evil in it that lurks in every corner. He had the firm, kindly mouth of the man who has fought with strong impulses and has conquered them, and above all, he had a heart that was very pitiful to sorrow and very honourable in his dealings with men and women. His mother had set before him a high standard of womanhood, and therefore every woman was set upon an exalted throne in his sight. And so it came to pass that every woman unconsciously showed to him her best side,

since to betray his faith would have been to outrage the purest instinct of the human soul.

"Perhaps I ought to introduce myself first," he said, looking at her for an instant in amazement to find her so beautiful. "My name is Jem Burne, and I am a captain in the Westminster Rifles; and now, have I earned the right to hear something about yourself?"

Diana glanced at the strong brown hands lying upon his knee, at the tall, well-drilled figure, the square shoulders. Here was a man, young and strong and god-like—he could hardly have been more than eight-and-twenty—and he was looking at her with the friendly, straightforward glance that she had dreamed of as being possible between man and woman.

He asked for nothing but confidence and friendship, and in his eyes there was nothing of the bewildering incomprehensible meaning that haunted the glances of the men she met at the hotel.

"I am Diana Ponsonby," she faltered; "and I am very unhappy. You ought to have left me alone; it would have saved you a lot of bother if you had just passed by on the other side like the people at the 'Cosmopolitan' do!"

"Good heavens! I am not that sort! But don't begin to cry again," said Jem Burne, much troubled. "I can't bear to see a woman cry, my dear Miss Ponsonby. You know things can't go on being bad always; there must be a turn for the better very soon. Perhaps while you are tampering with despair, out here on the Barracca, the thing that had gone

wrong at home was putting itself right by itself. I am sure that I know lots of stories about people who were frightfully poor, and then just at the last minute a cheque came, and they had just been going to fling themselves to the lions, or do something equally silly."

He had his eye upon her, watching, for he was afraid that she might faint, and he was not sure what to do with a fainting woman.

"It could never be right," said Diana. "My father and mother are dead, and I live with a woman who is cruel to me."

Captain Burne looked at her more closely, and suddenly turned her face toward him, and the touch of his hand sent a thrill through her.

"Who hurt your cheek?" he said sternly.

"She hit me—this afternoon—with a stick—and it caught my cheek," Diana faltered.

"May God punish her as she deserves for that foul cut, whoever she is!" said Burne suddenly and violently, and the girl shrank back from the look on his face. "No—I beg your pardon, Miss Ponsonby, but physical cruelty to a woman or child makes me mad for the moment," he continued, fighting back his self-control. "I believe, if I met that woman now, I should shoot her. Why do you go on living with her?"

"Because I have nowhere else to go; but she will not do it again: I should call in the police and make a scandal," said Diana, with sudden conviction that she was speaking the truth.

By a few judicious questions Burne had the whole of her history in his hands, and he sat silently thinking over the whole matter, with his hands clasped on his knees.

“By sheer bad luck I am going on leave to-morrow for two months,” he said; “but when I come back again I believe I shall have some solution to offer you. Look here! will you just go on quietly living over there and make the best of things, and not try to do anything so foolish and wicked as you were contemplating to-night, in spite of all your protestations to the contrary?”

“I will try,” said Diana. “Perhaps it will be easier, now that I know you are a friend. It is so dreadfully difficult to go on living from day to day, if no one cares what you do.”

Captain Burne turned and looked at her keenly. “I should like to be a friend,” he said gently—“a real chum, I mean, and help you. Perhaps my mother will have some solution of the matter to offer—at any rate, I will ask her. I wish heartily I was a rich man, but I am just as poor as the proverbial church mouse.”

“I think that poor people are much nicer than rich ones,” said Diana eagerly.

“Only they have less power in their hands,” he said, “and are not able to help other less fortunate people.”

“Rich people never do help others,” cried Diana. “It is just those who have money who never trouble to ask themselves what the poor want. If you go

about the world with your eyes open, you will find out for yourself that it is always the poor who help the poor."

She had risen to her feet, for she knew she must return, and he rose also, carefully wrapping the shawl round her shoulders."

"I'll tell you what we will do," he said suddenly. "I will drive you back again to Sliema in a carozza—it is not fit for you to go back over the water alone;" and Diana, feeling faint and bewildered after her emotion, consented readily enough. "Stop a moment," said Jem Burne, again thoughtfully; "I am sure you are hungry. We will take a little supper with us and eat it in the carozza."

It was a plan so entrancing and so absolutely child-like that Diana clapped her hands in glee. She waited on the Square, while Jem hurried into a restaurant, returning with a small bottle of champagne and some sandwiches and cakes wrapped in a parcel. It was all like the shadow of a dream—this handsome young Rifle officer, the jingling bells on the horse's head, the white cushions of the carozza, the grinning bare-footed driver, the clear blue vault of heaven, powdered with the frosted silver of the stars. The wine was powerful nectar, and tingled through her veins like liquid fire, making her see life through happier spectacles. The sandwiches and cakes were food fit for the gods—ambrosia in very truth—and Burne laughed as he watched her.

He had been careful to fasten the oilcloth curtains of the carozza firmly on her side, as he did not wish her to be recognised by any of the passers by. With

her eyes shining and sparkling with joy, her cheeks flushed with happiness, she seemed a different being to the girl he had found on the Barracca, and he looked at her with amazement, then entered into the spirit of her pretty fooling.

"You are the fairy king," she said gaily. "We are both in fairyland—you and I."

Jem Burne laughed good-naturedly. He was glad that the drive was not a long one, and yet curiously strangely sorry, for this girl affected him as no woman had done before, and the perfume that hung about her gown, the golden light of her hair, the shadow of her long black lashes on her cheek, made his heart beat faster than usual.

Diana, on her side, was merely the gay elusive spirit of the night, with no shadow of anything but child-like innocent joy to mar the perfection of the moment. She reached out a hand to him, and he took it quietly.

"Oh, it is delightful to feel that I have a friend at last who really cares what becomes of me," she said. "It makes life almost bearable."

Jem Burne pressed the little hand that lay so confidently in his. "We must take up our friendship where we lay it down when I come back from leave," he said. "And perhaps some very nice people will come to the hotel in the season, and will make friends with you. I am sure if any kind woman understood about your position she would try to help you."

Diana shook her head. "It is the women who are always unkind," she said mournfully. "The men are always sympathetic."

"It is rather difficult to explain," said Burne hurriedly, "but I think it would be better to make friends with women always, instead of men."

"But you are not a woman," laughed Diana mischievously; "and here we are—you and I—quite as friendly as if we had known one another all our lives."

Captain Burne swallowed a sandwich crumb the wrong way and choked, and when he had recovered himself, the difficult question of the relative values of friendship was no longer under discussion, and he was glad of it.

It was dark when they rounded the Quarantine Harbour, for in the South darkness descends with surprising rapidity when once the sun has set. The Mediterranean lay like a quiet sheet of blue, heaving like the gentle breathing of a little child, under the stars, and the white Transport shone like a gleaming mass of lights from stem to stern under the ramparts. The quiet of the night lay upon them like a Benediction, and Jem, looking at Diana, saw that her eyes were shining through tears.

"Oh, please don't cry," he said again, for he felt in a strangely dangerous mood. He wanted to kiss this girl—to take her in his arms—to comfort her with love, but he told himself he was a dishonourable fool, and, holding his impulse in check, it passed.

Diana checked the carozza at the end of the street for fear of courting observation from any one at the hotel, and they both stood together under the stars, hand in hand.

“Good-bye ;” said Burne, a little hoarseiy. “Good-bye for two months.”

“Good-bye—and how can I ever thank you for tonight ? I think I must have been mad,” said Diana, with a little shiver.

“Diana—Miss Ponsonby,” said Jem, leaning forward and speaking very fast, “I wonder—I wonder if you would not misunderstand me—if you would let me kiss you. I should like to feel somehow that, since I saved your life, I might be the first man to kiss you on your lips.”

“It is very little you ask of me,” said Diana, lifting her lovely face to his, “when I owe you everything.”

It was a kiss such as Eve might have given to Adam in the garden when the world was young, and yet Burne thrilled in every nerve as he touched reverently her soft lips. He knew instinctively that no lover had kissed them before, and it seemed to him that it was a sacrament, binding them together in a bond that could never be broken again to the utmost end of eternity.

He stood looking at her as she went swiftly and lightly up the hill like a white shadow, and then he re-entered the carozza and drove back to the supper-party in Valetta, with a grave purpose that grew in his mind as every hour drew on, and killed the laughter in his eyes.

Diana entered the hotel, and went upstairs slowly. Jane Harding was watching like a spider at her door, and came out upon her.

“Wherever have you been, Dinah ? And play-actin’

too, in those clothes! Why, you look no better than you should," she said angrily. "I have been looking for you everywhere; I won't have you gallivanting like this."

Diana looked at her, curiously aloof in her manner, strangely far away from the 'Cosmopolitan,' its sorrows and its joys.

"Don't touch me, Mrs. Harding," she said. "I went out to-night to do away with myself, I believe; but I found a friend at the last minute, who saved me in spite of myself."

"A friend?" said Jane Harding, amazed. "What do you mean by a friend? You have not got any."

"I have now," said Diana, with a little thrill of triumph in her voice. "What I am telling you is quite true; and if you treat me badly again, I shall complain to the police. I know now what to do."

She looked at Jane Harding's face. Every coarse, sullen feature seemed to be filled with malicious hatred of her. She was holding a lamp above her head, and its light threw into relief her shapeless figure and ugly gown.

"You and your friends," she said, gasping for breath, with a curious catch in her voice. "You and I shall have to have an explanation together. What should people make friends with you for, except for what they can get out of you? People don't make friends—as you call it—without a cause; there ain't such a thing as love given for nothing. The womer will make friends with you—if they do—because you can look after their children for them, or trim their h. ts

or mend their stockings; and the men—why, the men will make friends with you, Dinah, just because—because your skin is fresh and your hair is soft! Don't tell me, Dinah, you weren't kissed to-night, for I can see the kiss on your lips!" She shrieked the last words at her, with a hand on her shoulder, gripping her suddenly, trying to turn her to the light. But when she saw the livid bruise on the young cheek the woman fell back as though she had been shot.

"D'd I do that to your face, Dinah?" she said. "Don't look at me like that—you have got your father's eyes; don't look at me like that!" and quite suddenly Diana found herself alone, with the closed door between herself and Jane Harding.

A conviction came upon her that she would be free from persecution henceforward. The words Jane Harding had spoken slipped from her mind like water through a sieve. She did not understand them, and therefore they troubled her not at all. Only in a vague way she knew that Tem Burne's kiss that night had been free from any taint or stain, and the knowledge invigorated her.

Her room looked so bare and desolate that she changed her mind and went out into the balcony that led from the second floor of the hotel above the garden, and sat down on one of the iron chairs. She did not remember that the Lepels' rooms led off the veranda until she heard the patient voice of Captain Lepel from within.

"You are always grumbling, Hester; and I'm sure I don't know why. I do all I can to try and please you,

and I believe an angel from heaven would not satisfy you to-day."

"I am sure I am a very unlucky woman," said Mrs. Lepel, sobbing. "Everything goes wrong with me. I did want that necklace in the shop in Strada Reale to-day. Mrs. Nugent has got one just like it, and her husband has not so many rupees a month as you have."

"Mrs. Nugent has no Dickie," said Captain Lepel wearily; "and I thought we agreed that every rupee was to be saved for him?"

"Oh, it is well known that you never think about me," cried Hester Lepel. "Girls like the creature with the auburn hair in the hotel attract you. Go and amuse yourself and spend the money you hoard up—spend it on her!"

Diana heard the man sigh, and the slow, continuous sobbing of the woman as she flung herself face downwards on the bed; and then the window opened and shut, and by and by Captain Lepel came round and stood beside her. She heard his quick breathing in the starlight, and quite suddenly he put out his hand and gripped the iron railing in front of him.

"I hope you did not hear what she said, for indeed, Miss Ponsonby, Hester did not mean it; she is only a bit tired—a bit out of sorts. I don't know how it is; but I expect it's just because poor little Dickie has got to be left behind—poor little man—and poor Hester!"

Diana was touched by the gentle patience of the man, by the loyalty that could make excuse where none had seemed possible.

"Oh, don't think about it at all," she said. "I know

poor Mrs. Lepel must be very unhappy at losing Dickie—just as I am.”

“You see,” he said steadily, with his eyes upon the moonlit garden, “Dickie is so trusting; and if we place him with any people who will make him unhappy, we shall have betrayed that trust.”

“I wish I could have gone away with you as his nurse and taken charge of him for always!” cried Diana impulsively. “We could have lived for very long in the country—just he and I; and I could have bought him and made his clothes.”

Captain Lepel looked at her drearily in the moonlight. “It could never be done,” he said, in the same hopeless tone. “Hester would not like it; and—then you could not live alone, you know.”

“Why not?” said Diana boldly. “I am not afraid of tramps.”

Captain Lepel laughed tonelessly, but there was no mirth in him. “Look in the glass,” he said, “and don’t propound foolish riddles—yes, my dear Hester, I am coming.” And without another word he went back to his wife’s room to argue patiently and carefully over the movements of the next day, till he was exhausted by the folly of his wife’s outlook on life.

“I can’t do any more,” he said wearily. “I can’t do any more to make her happy; men are so helpless.”

But Diana went straight upstairs, bolted the door, and took off her pretty gown.

“It must be this dress that makes people kind to me,” she said tremulously. “It never was like this before. I—I never thought that I was pretty!”

But she did not know that the last few hours had lighted a lamp in her eyes that even tears could not put out:

"Three men to-day," she said, "have looked at me with the same kindness in their minds—Major Cassell and Captain Burne; and now, Dickie's father."

She tilted up the cracked looking-glass and wedged it firmly with a book, and then stood looking meditatively at herself.

"Am I pretty?" she said. "Oh yes, I think I must be."

She slipped off her gown and twisted round her shoulders an old chiffon scarf that draped her like a veil. The bruises upon her arms were hidden by the gauze, and she turned her face so that she could not see the mark on her cheek. She was beautiful, and even her eyes were compelled to acknowledge it. From head to foot she stood there, beautiful as Aphrodite rising out of the sea-foam, innocent eyed as Diana, the divine uncaptured huntress. The room was glorified by her beauty, since otherwise it was bare and sordid. Quite suddenly there broke from the very heart of her—this 'golden throned' Diana—a blush that stained her rosy pink, and she bowed her head on her hands, flushing and trembling.

"I think—I think—I am beautiful," she whispered. "Oh! I never knew it before."

She would never be quite the same again, now that the knowledge of her own worth had shaken her from her serenity. It seemed to her an amazing thing that

she might have a face that might set the world on fire, like Helen of Troy.

As she sat there on the ground, shrouded in her mist veil like a creature of another world, there came a fumbling touch at her door and a hand tried the lock, but the bolt held. Like an arrow she sprang into bed and put out the light, afraid for her life.

Through the keyhole a woman's voice called warily, "Diana, are you asleep? I thought I saw a light a moment ago"; but since she did not answer, Jane Harding's steps died away up the corridor into silence. And then at last Diana realised that she must take up the same dreary round again on the morrow; but she could never more be the same again, since death had been very close to her that night—and love too; for Jem Burne's lips touching her own, had waked the woman in her heart. And the moon looking in at the window, saw a child-woman weeping alone, because knowledge had come to her, and the longing for the ideal that knowledge brings in its train.

CHAPTER III

FOUR LETTERS

LETTER NO. 1

From Mrs. Ethel Vavasour Bloggs, 1,000, Excelsior Mansions, Regent's Park; to her brother, Major Felix Cassell, The Westminster Rifles, Valetta.

DEAR FELIX,—

I am just miserable. I don't feel as if I had ever known what happiness was—and business is beastly with all these old cats wanting wigs and figures, and me working day and night to supply them! The shop will really go all right, I think, after a bit, with a little card-playing thrown in; but oh, dear Felix! my mouth waters when I read your letter of all the fun you are having out in Malta! Do be a nice kind boy and let me come out to you and have a spree.

Don't say I am your sister; do let me be your cousin, and call myself the Baroness Von Poppenheim and bury the Bloggs, though poor, poor Septimus was so nice over the name, and did not mind one bit my dropping it and calling ourselves Vavasour. But now he is dead, poor old dear, and that hateful, hateful old father-in-law of mine will only pay me that £50 a year on the understanding that I tack Bloggs on again! Do encourage me to throw aside the shop and to come out to Malta as the handsome Baroness, your cousin. Oh, Felix! if you knew for one instant

how we women wanted to masquerade sometimes—a real bit of fun and nothing to pay in the end! I can carry the whole affair through beautifully, for you know that I have the 'grand manner'; and Bertha, who is the cleverest woman in London, shall come out with me and make me look ten years younger every day. Say Yes, dear Felix, to

Your affectionate sister,

ETHEL VAVASOUR (BLOGGS).

P.S.—You know, after all, Felix, I have had a very poor time of it in life, and you have had a very good one. Just think of it all, old boy, and you won't consider me unreasonable, I know! All the money had to go to put you into a smart regiment, because you were a clever boy; and when I married Septimus Bloggs I was supposed to be very lucky to have found any man, even a hypochondriacal one, with a permanent cough and an interest in a retired pawnbroking business, to marry me. Then, it was really hard luck that he should have died in three years, and left me dependent on his father and you. But I really believe the worst blow to me was when my godfather, old Baron Von Poppenheim, left you all his money, and nothing to me except his photograph and a paste necklace, because I had not upheld the credit of the family by marrying a man, I suppose, without a pedigree. If you will give me a good time, my dear Felix, I believe that I can settle down to my dull existence again quite comfortably, and I will do anything for you in return to show my gratitude that you ask of me. A woman can't say

more, can she, Felix? And you know that I am rather good-looking still! E. V. (B.).

P.P.S.—Do let me forget that poor Septimus was ever mixed up with that tiresome disappearance of Lady Storahorne's jewels, and that he actually was suspected of stealing them, only fortunately the right thief turned up and haled poor old Sep. out of the shadow of Portland. It is bad enough to be a convict for what you have really done; but if you are a convict innocently, it is the back of beyond; and I am sure Septimus had not the pluck to steal a kitten, let alone a diamond tiara! E. V. (B.).

LETTER No. 2

From Major Felix Cassell, The Westminster Rifles, St. Elmo Barracks, Valetta, Malta, Nov. 20th; to his sister, Mrs. Ethel Vavasour Bloggs (Baroness Von Poppenheim, Beauty Specialist), 1,000 Excelsior Mansions, Regent's Park, London.

DEAR ETHEL,—

Many thanks for your letter. I shall hope to see some of the five hundred that I lent you back before the end of the year. You were eager enough about the coin when we agreed to throw in our fortunes together, but I don't remember that you supplied much beyond your usual stock-in-trade—your face and your tongue and your excellent maid. Life out here is very expensive, and for mere interest's sake, one must do a bit of racing, and ponies are getting as dear out here as diamonds—good ones, I mean. This

summer has been hotter than hot, and I have not been able to come home, thanks to you, my dear Ethel, and the beauty specialist establishment—or is it the home for lost hair or lost figures? You were so sure of succeeding—so jolly certain that every one would patronise your nursing home till the creditors put the bailiffs in. Your bonnet shop was worse than foolish in its management; and as for your boarding-house for single ladies, that was a disaster. I think you ought to do much better in your pretty little flat, with a few select old ladies and old gentlemen who want to grow hairs on their silly old heads, and complexions on their silly old cheeks, and a pretty girl or two to sell the powders and the perfumes. I have got the very girl for you out here—a girl with a face like a flower and a figure like a sylph, who would make all your fallals sell like hot cakes! She is a drudge in a private hotel here, with no pretty gowns to cover her pretty self, and no shoes to cover her well-shaped feet. She is aristocrat to her finger-tips, and she wants to get away from her present life, and dislikes me very heartily. Come out and make friends with her, Ethel—you and the admirable Bertha; make her think that out of the blackness of her life has flashed a marvellous friend to lift her to realms of bliss, and persuade her that I am charming, rich, and young.

I can run you here easily enough as you suggest for a bit as my cousin the 'Baroness Von Poppenheim,' as we have a temporary Deputy Governor with a face like a sheep and the mind of a tabby-eat, and a Deputy Governor's lady who is given to good

works, and preaches on a tub in the middle of the courtyard at San Antonio Palace. You might occupy the same tub as the amiable and beautiful Baroness. I subscribe to the 'Friendless Girls' Helpers Aid Society,' and to the 'Protestant Young Women's Tea Fund,' and so we go gaily on. But you might incidentally manage to arrange one or two strokes of business in the island by recommending Mrs. Vavasour Bloggs as a marvellous beauty specialist, and I will sow the ground to start with, and treat Lady Lukin to various histories of the dead-and-gone Baron Von Poppenheim before he so mysteriously gave up the ghost in Arcadia or Servia or Montenegro, wherever the melancholy event took place—only I do wish his real name had not been Bloggs.

When you have secured Diana Ponsonby, I shall take first leave and spend it in or near Excelsior Mansions. So make haste, and bring out an extra supply of clothes; and that you may have the means to do so, I am sending you a generous cheque. You want a good saleswoman in the business, my dear Ethel, for the receipts have not been satisfactory for the last two years. Try my plan for the next few weeks, and write to Burton & Willoughby and tell them I will finance you a bit longer; only remember, I am to have the first chance of making love to the charming saleswoman, because—well, to tell you the truth, I am in love with matrimony for the first time in my life. I will take rooms for you out here. Come after Christmas.

Your affectionate brother,

FELIX CASSELL.

LETTER No. 3

A LETTER FROM FAIRYLAND

*From Diana Ponsonby, 'Cosmopolitan' Hotel, Malta;
to Dickie Lepel, The Old House, Bendlesham,
England.*

DEAREST LITTLE HEART OF A FAIRY LAD,—

I don't know whether this letter will ever reach you. I ought to have directed it to Fairyland, but I did not know how many stamps to put on the envelope. Just fancy! Such a beautiful thing happened to-day--among all the unbeautiful ones—a nice old lady called me into her room, and spoke to me so sweetly, and gave me a whole sovereign for myself to spend. She has come out here to nurse her son, who has fallen from his pony at polo and been badly hurt, but she was so nice and kind, with her grey hair and her gentle eyes; and she told me she was sorry for me, and that if only she were a rich woman she would take me home with her to England.

But oh, Dickie, perhaps if other old ladies are equally generous, I may be able to save enough money to run away to England by myself, and then I shall come and look for you, and we will live in fairyland together—just you and I, with no other horrid grown-up people to spoil our pleasure. In fairyland, Dickie, the sun always shines, and no one is poor or unhappy, and the birds sing all day long. You and I, darling, will make our way there very soon, and I shall be Cinderella after the Prince has fitted her with the glass shoe; and

you shall be the Prince, and we will be happy ever after, as it says in the story book. For me there will be no more knives or shoes to clean, and for you, there will be only happy waiting till your father and mother come back from India.

Always your loving

DIANA.

LETTER NO. 4

From Dickie Lepel, The Old House, Bendlesham; to Miss Diana Ponsoby, 'Cosmopolitan' Hotel, Sliema, Malta.

DERE DINAH,—

Mrs. Heap has a red nose and looks like a witch. I think she is one. I do not like Mrs. Heap. Mrs. Heap has got some chickens in an incubator and they brake their shells every day. I think some day a fairy will hatch out, but Mrs. Heap says there aren't any fairies, only she is a beast, and Mary Jane says she is a lyre, too. There is another girl here—littel like me—we have to ete fat, and Mrs. Heap has cut off Molly's hair so as she needn't brush it. Do come quick. I don't like being here.

Your affect

DICKIE.

So spun Atropos, weaving at her loom—fashioning the web of many lives; and when Christmas came, the web was well begun, but still she wove and wove—and wove—

CHAPTER IV

THE AWAKENING

“Where the apple reddens, never pry,
Lest we lose our Eden, Eve and I.”

THE ‘Cosmopolitan’ Hotel had a continuous rush of visitors that autumn, for no apparent reason; and Jane Harding was kept so hard at work that she had little time to notice a change in Diana. Since the night when she had realised something of what it meant to have beauty and to be quite alone in the world, she had awoke to the seriousness of her position, and had taken a new place in the household. The Maltese servants felt it, and Pauline crossed herself when Diana looked at her with eyes that had in them the courage that knowledge brings in its train.

She had fought one battle with Jane Harding, the results of which were apparent to-day in the neat gown and shoes that she wore; for she had told the mistress of the hotel that she would work no more for her unless she gave her money to buy a tidy outfit for herself; and with a dismayed conviction that Diana meant what she said, Mrs. Harding had handed her out reluctantly two golden sovereigns. Of the wonders that minute sum had effected it was hard to

speak, but the becoming result of the new blue serge gown, neat shoes and gloves, and close-fitting hat were due to her own clever fingers. Occasionally she wished that some one could see and admire the gown, but the visitors to the hotel that early December were all tourists, who had no leisure for anything but the racing round from point to point of interest, in the fatiguing hurry that is born of a limited return ticket and a sense of duty, and it was doubtful whether they even realised the existence of Diana Ponsoby.

The Lepels had left Malta the day after Diana's awakening to the reality of life, and she had kept out of their way. But Dickie had pursued her to the fastnesses of her own room, and had wept at parting with her; and the soft touch of his childish lips on hers had washed away the fear that all night long had consumed and shaken her. She had promised to write to him, and had fulfilled that promise already long ago, and the crumpled scrap of paper bearing his English address, written in his round, baby handwriting, was treasured by her as one of her dearest possessions.

She had not seen Major Cassell since her interview with him in the hotel; and although he had religiously kept the tryst at Floriana, he had poured out his annoyance to the arum lilies alone for ten minutes when he found that she did not come. He had caught sight of her once in church at the Parade service, but long before the troops drew up on the square to dismiss, she had vanished. She haunted him, waking and sleeping, with an uncomfortable power he could

not understand. He had never felt like this about any woman in his whole long course of experience with the weaker sex, and he was convinced that it was not entirely the fact that she had golden prospects that affected him.

His letter to his sister had been prompted by an almost overpowering desire to marry Diana as soon as possible, but there was strong presumption within him that he could not compass that desire without the help of a woman, and his sister—or the Baroness Von Poppenheim, as she would be known in Malta—owed him so much, and was so completely one with him in mind, that she would forward his plans in every way. It was however important that she should know nothing of Diana's birth or prospects, since Major Cassell was convinced that a secret shared with a woman might as well be blazoned in the open square at once, and long ago he had learned the value of silence.

It was early December, and the hour of the market in Valetta. Strada Mercanti was seething with a little crowd of cooks and fatigue men, who had come in to buy the provisions for the day for hotels and private houses; and since it happened to be fashionable that year to attend the market, Major Cassell had brought some friends with him, and they were wandering from stall to stall together—Mrs. Anson, the wife of the Superintendent Chaplain of Hospitals and Forces in Valetta, and her daughter Molly, a chattering, rosy-faced English girl, just released from school life. They were such eminently respectable

friends that Cassell prided himself on the fact of their acquaintance. He had been introduced to them at the Palace the night before, where he had been dining with the Governor, and, on the principle that a man is known by his friends, he hastened to improve the acquaintance into intimacy.

Major Cassell was one of the most sought after bachelors in the island, being supposed to be far richer than the majority of soldiers, and, as such, an eligible *parti* in the eyes of every mother who knew him. He knew admirably how to make a little money go a long way, and having always an eye to the main chance, profited on every occasion that suited him to make a parade of friendship and generosity. He looked well on horseback, and though he did not himself play polo, yet his ponies were always at the service of the junior officers of his regiment, so that he won popularity easily enough. He was a *persona grata* in the Deputy Governor's household, because it paid him to keep on good terms with the A.D.C.'s; and he was always ready to talk science with Sir Abraham Lukin, and charitable works with Lady Lukin; and his name always headed her subscription lists for the societies in which she was specially interested, since he professed himself deeply absorbed by the question of woman's work in the world.

Major Cassell made up for his enforced generosity by running a private little gambling club in Valetta, known only to a select few, and financed partly by himself and partly by another gentleman of his acquaintance, who made friends with the mammon of

unrighteousness by lending money at a ruinous rate of interest to impecunious subalterns, and thereby enabled himself to drive tandem and to belong to the smartest set in the island. There had been the chance of a little scandal a few days earlier, connected with a game of baccarat and a desperate boy, but this had all been hushed up very comfortably, and Major Cassell was a little more attentive to Lady Lukin and her friend, Mrs. Anson, in consequence.

"Good heavens! What a crew of people!" said Mrs. Anson uneasily. "I really feel as if some of these bandits would pick my pocket."

She was a stout, grey-haired woman, in a black gown and jetted toque, and she owned an air of immaculate hardness that was carried out by her black eyes and her thin lips.

But her daughter Molly was as pretty and vivacious as a robin, with her dark colouring and hair, her round figure, her chattering tongue.

"Oh, mummy, dear, it is quite delicious, isn't it, Major Cassell? It is all so new, and—oh, dear! just to think that a month ago I was mugging away at that horrid school in Folkestone! Look at that box full of bits of silver, mummy, dear!" and Molly Anson, in an ecstasy was leaning over a deal box full of silver buttons and spoons and trifles that must have been collected in several quarters of the globe, and brought to Malta at different times.

Mrs. Anson looked on, smiling, while Major Cassell made a hasty choice of half a dozen filigree Gozo buttons and presented them to the girl.

"A little fairing, Miss Anson," he said, pleasantly enough, though Molly's mother read a variety of flattering meanings into the words; "and I hope that Mrs. Anson will accept this handle for her umbrella"; and by the delightedly conscious manner in which the gifts were received he was assured that he had not failed in the effect he was anxious to produce.

The Valetta market is a brilliant sight in December. Great yellow and green gourds, chocolate-brown eggplants, flame-coloured persimmons, and globes of golden oranges, made delicious mosaics of colour against a grey background. Heaped-up hampers of narcissi and roses scented the air, and the flowers that had come over from Gozo and Sicily that morning in the green lateen-rigged boats, seemed to have brought with them a perfume of green islands set in an azure sea, that made the world forget the grey walls of Malta and the dusty streets.

"Let us come this way," said Jane, suddenly diving into the crowd and skilfully eluding Mrs. Anson towards a stall on which the spoils of the day were arranged in more or less picturesque confusion. Oysters and flat fish, distorted arms of octopus, filleted shark and dog-fish, with the excellent king of the Mediterranean, the 'Grand Master,' were all laid out for sale; and the best pieces were disappearing rapidly into the baskets of cooks and stewards. For, at that moment, the keen eyes of Major Cassell had seen Diana Ponsonby come into the market, and it was in pursuit of her that he had started so rapidly away.

Jane Harding had discovered that the girl had the

knack of purchasing the day's marketings far more cheaply than any Maltese cook had ever been able to do, and therefore it was that she sent her in pursuit of bargains, with a limited sum in her pocket on which to provide the hotel with food for the whole day.

Perhaps it was the beauty of the young face, perhaps the charm of Diana's manner, but certain it was that even the Governor's Palace was not better provided with choice viands than was the table of the 'Cosmopolitan' Hotel.

It was not yet nine o'clock, but Diana had been up for some hours, for there was a great deal of work to be done for Jane Harding. Her face looked a little thin and tired, but she carried herself with the same fearless dignity as Diana of old might have done traversing the woods and plains of Olympus.

"Buon giorno, Signorina," said the brown-faced Maltese fruit-seller, lifting her a handful of oranges. "Buy these to-day, Signorina—very good fruit from Gozo—very good fruit from Palermo."

"Buon giorno, Salvo," said Diana, smiling; "you said your oranges were good yesterday, but my signora said they were poor and bad, and had been boiled." She balanced a blood orange on the palm of her hand, considering it meditatively.

Cassell saw with quick eager eyes that her hands had become far more white and delicate, and more carefully tended than before. Her gown, too, was neat and fitted her well, and he noted with pleasure the tones of her well-modulated *trainante* voice.

"Who is that remarkable looking girl?" said

Mrs. Anson uneasily. "Surely her hair is not natural?"

She had observed Cassell's glance in Diana's direction, and resented it.

"That girl is a Miss Ponsonby—I wish you would let me introduce you to her, Mrs. Anson," said Major Cassell hurriedly. "She is the daughter of an officer in the Stewart Highlanders who died in Malta and left her penniless. She is a sort of lady-help in an hotel over the water, kept by an Englishwoman, and not too kindly treated."

"Does Lady Lukin know her?" said Mrs. Anson, visibly stiffening in every limb.

"Er—no, but I am hoping to interest Lady Lukin in her."

"Then I can't see how you can expect me to know any one whom Lady Lukin does not know," said Mrs. Anson again, very loudly; "and besides that, I don't like her appearance."

She moved resolutely away, and at the same moment Diana looked up. She saw with grave eyes, and comprehended the little scene with all the quickness of a sensitive nature, and her wounded feelings were expressed in her bow to Cassell. In old days she would have met these women on equal terms—might indeed have been one of the leaders of society herself—and now they would not know her. Her hand trembled and she turned away, a tear falling on the fruit she held.

So Major Cassell was kind after all, and had wished to introduce her to some ladies of his acquaintance.

Perhaps she had not been kind in refusing to meet him in the Gardens, as he had asked her to do.

She was feeling grateful towards him; and when he came across to her and stood at her side, she smiled tremulously up at him.

“Good morning, Major Cassell,” she said.

“I am so sorry, Miss Ponsonby—I am afraid you must have heard what Mrs. Anson said. Women are cats—gregarious cats who hunt in crowds, and I should like to tie a firebrand to her tail and set her loose in a yard full of petrol.”

Diana laughed, as he had intended she should do, and he laid his hand for an instant on the bunch of roses that she held, and as if by accident touched her wrist with his strong brown hand.

“You were very unkind to me, Miss Ponsonby,” he said again. “You never came to Floriana at all; and I waited there for half an hour.”

“I was too busy to come that day,” said Diana, with a pleasurable feeling that she had secured, without an effort, attention that the little dark vivacious girl in the red gown would have given a great deal to win. She glanced at him from under her long lashes—poor, pretty, innocent lamb that she was, in the clutches of so wary a wolf. She knew nothing of the wide estates of Sir Peregrine Ponsonby, her grandfather, nor of the fact that she was the next heir to all his possessions.

Jane Harding had laid no hand on her since the night of her adventure, and had treated her with a sullen civility, so that her crushed spirit seemed to have

revived in some measure, and she felt the need of all young things for excitement.

"Will you drive out with me this afternoon, Miss Ponsonby—to the far side of the island? I have to go there on business, and the air would do you good. I will take some tea with us, and we will make it into a picnic."

"Oh, I should like it," said Diana, with a quick breath of pleasure. "We could be back in good time, you say?"

"Dear me, yes—at any time you like," he returned, trying to keep the eagerness out of his face and voice.

"I will ask Mrs. Harding to let me go," said Diana suddenly. A passionate desire for pleasure, for affection, for all the beautiful things that make up girlhood had arisen within her, and her heart clamoured for her girlhood's rights as it had never clamoured before.

"I will meet you at the Ferry," he said; "and you will not fail me this time?"

He left her with a quickened pulse, for Diana had the power of rousing within those who knew her an exceeding interest. She possessed the fatal power of charm that draws a man straight to a woman as a needle to a magnet, and Major Cassell knew that he would never now be satisfied until he had won her promise to be his wife.

He rejoined Mrs. Anson and Molly; and seeing that the aigrette on the jet toque of the chaplain's wife was quivering with anger, he set to work to soothe her ruffled feelings as speedily as possible.

"Miss Ponsonby's poor father was an old friend of

mine," he said mendaciously, "and so I feel a natural interest in her."

"If she had been a desirable character," returned Mrs. Anson with a sniff, "her relations would never have left her stranded here. Ponsonby is a good name, too. Do you remember that old Sir Peregrine Ponsonby at Farnfield, Molly? His place was one of the sights of the neighbourhood."

"I know nothing of her relations," said Cassell hastily. "And, by the by, Mrs. Anson, a cousin of mine is coming out to stay in Malta very shortly, and I shall be so glad if you and your charming daughter will be kind to her. She is the Baroness von Poppenheim. Her husband, years ago, was a handsome attaché to the Court of Beneventura. He is dead now, and she has lost her—her child, too; and she alternates between London and her lovely place in Arcadia."

"We shall be delighted to call on her," said Mrs. Anson, pleased and flattered. "Molly, dear, we must remember to be very prompt in calling on the Baroness. Is she a Protestant, Major Cassell? I do hope so, and then the Chaplain Superintendent will be delighted to call with us."

"Oh yes," said Cassell solemnly. He would have declared her a Buddhist with the same ease that he pronounced her of Mrs. Anson's creed, for the fact was that he knew nothing of his sister's opinions at all.

There was a malicious satisfaction about Felix Cassell as he left the Ansons at the door of their flat in Strada Sta. Lucia. He had already begun to pave the way for the success of his sister's visit, and it might

even be that Molly Anson, plump, pretty little partridge as she was, might be led to become a warm friend of Diana's, without troubling to ask the foolish questions concerning her birth and position that were evidently exciting her mother's brain.

The best of Ethel was that she could behave like a Baroness when it was necessary, and Lady Lukin, being an amiable nonentity, would believe whatever he told her. And since the A.D.C's were more or less negligible quantities, there was not likely to be any unpleasantness if such an impossible thing should happen as that any portion of the truth should leak out! and therefore, for a few weeks at least, the desire of his sister for a position in good society would be granted, and while she was play-acting, he could be love-making.

"What a delightful man, my dear Molly!" said Mrs. Anson, with a little sigh, as she stood taking off her gloves in her bedroom, peeling the tight kid backwards over her fat hands. "And I hear he is so rich, too, with a lovely place in Devonshire. Some one said that everything he touched turned to gold. I am sure I wish he would touch you, dearie; your father and I are just crippled for want of money in this expensive place."

"Oh mummy, dear, he is not a bit nice to look at—all chunky and red, and not a bit like that lovely Captain Allardyce, with his dear duckie little moustache."

"Molly, you are a hopeless fool!" said her mother grimly. "One is worth every bit of two thousand a

year, so people say, and the other hasn't as many pennies as he could put into his helmet comfortably."

"But I know which I like best," said Molly obstinately; and when Mrs. Anson had sustained a heated argument with her as to the iniquity of allowing oneself to like the wrong man, they went off together to morning service at the Garrison Chapel, where Mrs. Anson proclaimed the Litany at a pace so fervent that she prevented even Lady Lukin from playing more than a very feeble second-fiddle.

It was perhaps a curious coincidence that although Major Cassell was intending to drink afternoon tea at Berzebuggia, he should have found it necessary to tell a good many untruths as to his engagements for the afternoon, and to have to assure his servant that they were going to drive in exactly the opposite direction; but so passing strange are the ways of men, that no doubt he was alive to all the mishaps that might possibly occur on an expedition so unconventional. The tea, too, was an affair of some importance, and presented all the features of an elaborate feast, with everything to please a young palate; but since the hamper was discreetly hidden under the seat of the dogcart, no one was the wiser.

His position, as he saw it, was one both of a difficult and a delicate nature, for he wished to marry Diana, and yet he could not be openly engaged to her until her position was more assured, since in that case he would lose the prestige of his own position in the island.

Diana was waiting for him as he drove up to the Ferry with his smart mare, gay in her silver-plated

harness. He managed a horse well, and was supposed to possess the best turn-out in the island ; and all this, Diana realised in one glance, as she sprang up to his side as lightly as a feather, while the groom let go the mare's head and jumped at the back seat like an acrobat.

Jane Harding had given her grudging leave to spend the afternoon out ; but as she had said nothing beyond the usual sullen words of permission, Diana had no idea whether or no she was curious as to how the afternoon was to be spent. But when she had gone gaily away to prepare for the drive, she did not guess that Jane Harding looked after her with her white face twisted out of all semblance of womanhood, and shook her fist after her.

"Go the way your father went, you puling pretty-faced chicken !" she said. "Go the way your father went ; and may I be there to see it !"

Major Cassell, in his Harris tweed driving suit and thick Cape gloves, looked at his best ; and the green Hungarian hat that he wore, with the bird's plume in it, seemed to Diana to be very becoming to him.

He did not look at all sinister now, and she thought that she must have mistaken his expression, for he met her eyes quite pleasantly, with none of the hard calculating shadow behind the outward expression that had once made her afraid. There was no reason why a girl should not have an agreeable friend to drive her to picnics ; other and happier girls owned such friends, and went on such expeditions, she knew, and just for once she was going to copy her more fortunate sisters,

and take the good the gods had sent her, with both hands spread wide to receive it.

"I have brought a cloak with me, for fear you should be cold," said Cassell, when they had clattered through Sliema and were out on the San Antonio road beyond the town. It was a cloak of exquisite blue cloth, lined with grey fox fur, with deep collar and cuffs of the same rare peltry. Diana pressed it against her cheek and delighted in the luxurious warmth of it; and when she slipped it over her shoulders the fur framed her face warmly. Cassell noted with approval the warm red gold of her hair and the pure colouring of the oval face, into which the wind was bringing a warm flush. The little tendrils of her hair, blown in delicious love-locks over her forehead, would have made an artist rejoice. But the heart of any mother would have gone out in tender pity to this girl-woman, who in her youth had had so weary a way to travel and so many things to learn before she came into her kingdom.

Cassell was too clever to offer to give her the cloak, for fear of spoiling the ease of their present intimacy, but he was also clever enough to play upon her love of beauty and the gentleness of her nature.

"All the girls I know have pretty coats and frocks; it is a shame that you should not have them also. Diamonds would suit you so admirably—in your ears and round your neck, like dewdrops on a cornstalk."

"I don't want diamonds when I have eyes to see this scenery," said Diana quickly.

Fair and sunlit, the winter world of Malta lay before them, fresh as an English spring day. A gregala had

blown itself out, but the sea still raced inland with white unaccustomed foam-capped breakers that ringed the round of the island as far as the eye could see. If stifling heat and dust and church bells be the verdict pronounced by the traveller on a Maltese summer, no one but a man with no sense of beauty could refuse admiration to the golden December world that unrolled itself before Diana's eyes as they drove up hill and down dale, past stone village and domed church, by fields of clover-gemmed grass, and green orange groves lush and fresh after the rains.

"I have never been so far across the island, though I have lived in Malta for five years," said Diana.

Cassell looked at her, and touched 'Selima' with his whip to hurry the speed. The girl was playing with the filigree clasp of the cloak, and her gaze was fixed upon the sea line far ahead. He wanted her to look at him, for her eyes fascinated him. No one had eyes like Diana; the black pupils seemed so definite, and yet the blue of the iris around them was of a melting softness. He was almost sure, too, that the whites had a shadow of blue in their clearness; and if he measured the lashes that made a shadow on her cheek, would they be an inch in length before they curled up at the tips in so adorably tangled a fashion? What a wife she would make with all that money behind her, and how fortunate he was to be first in the field!

"Five years! What an eternity of misery! You ought to have the same number of free golden years of happiness to make up for your suffering."

Diana looked at him gravely now, and he saw that

her glance was as fearlessly frank as that of a fawn looking out from the green hollows of a wood ; indeed, he had once seen that same questioning look in the eyes of a roe-deer that he had shot when he was a young man in the Rockies.

"I was happy while my father lived," she said quietly. "We had always travelled about together, I never left him."

Cassell had gleaned by judicious questioning of old inhabitants some of the truth concerning Henry Ponsonby, but he gave him the credit of having kept all doubtful knowledge from his daughter, little guessing of the love that had kept the broken man from despair, and had been to his life as the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

"Have you never thought of leaving the 'Cosmopolitan' Hotel, and your drudgery there?" he said. "Perhaps you do not realise what a future might await you in the world, with charm such as you possess?"

Diana flushed a little at the unaccustomed compliment, which sounded very pleasantly in her ears.

"I think every day about escaping from Malta," she said, with a little shiver; "but I am like a mouse in a trap, looking through the bars."

"You ought to be the trap in which to catch the unwary mice. Has no one ever told you that it would be impossible to resist your demand in anything, Miss Ponsonby?"

In all her sorrowful girlhood no man had ever spoken to her with such a depth of meaning in his voice. All

the coquetry of her womanhood woke at the words. Just for this one afternoon she would bask in the sunlight of this man's attention, resolutely pushing her old life away, just as her rough serge dress was hidden under the fur cloak.

"You seem to have a very good opinion of me, though you know so little," she said.

"I know that you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," said Cassell eagerly. "I know that the man who can install you in his life—in his heart—so that he may see you always, will be the happiest man in all the world."

Diana smiled a little, well pleased. She was coming into her kingdom now, and perhaps, after all, this man held the key of the gate to it.

"I wish you would tell me how to get away from the 'Cosmopolitan,'" she said impulsively. "There must be situations I could get in England. I could be a governess or a companion if I knew how to set to work to get such a post."

"I think you would make an admirable companion," said Cassell.

"I could look after an old lady and her parrots and poodles, and be very kind to them," said Diana, with a little ripple of laughter.

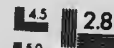
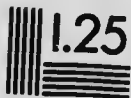
Cassell leaned forward and laid a strong hand for an instant on her slim fingers. "You could look after a man who is not old, and be his happy wife," he said, under his breath.

Diana looked up, startled for a moment. "I do not wish to be married," she said breathlessly, resenting



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



1.50

1.56

1.63

1.71

1.80

1.88

1.96

2.04

2.12

2.20

2.29

2.38

2.47

2.56

2.65

2.74

2.83

2.92

3.01

3.10

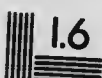
3.19

3.28

3.37

3.46

3.55



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

the cold calculation of his manner that repelled her. "Please do not talk like that."

Major Cassell saw that he had blundered, and was annoyed with himself for mentioning the object of his desires too quickly. She was not ready for love-making yet, and he bit his lip.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly; "only the sure haven of marriage always seems to me to be the most natural abiding-place for a woman."

But since the dogcart was hardly a place for a discussion on love, he turned the conversation into quite other channels, and by-and-by Diana was chattering easily of the books she had read and the flowers she loved. She had grown up as naturally as the daisies in the field. No one had taught her much concerning the experience of life, but instinctively she knew a great deal that was quite foreign to his own mind, so that the perfume of her delicate nature hovered about the rougher individuality of the man like a mist veil over a marsh.

All that he heard only excited his interest and his wishes, but failed to touch his pity, since he possessed none. He was one of those men who desire the best for themselves, and care nothing whether, in gaining it, they destroy the happiness of the gentle natures who minister to them. He gauged Diana's character, delighting in its fineness with the satisfaction of a connoisseur. His experience had not brought him in contact with such women before, save once only, but upon that drama he would not willingly reflect; and he anticipated the results of his drive with a

keenness that whetted his pleasure in the excitement of teaching Diana to care for him as her husband.

The valley whither they were bent was a green spot at all times of the year, where maidenhair hung from the rocks, and giant ferns rose to meet it from the bed of a cool stream that trickled down the gorge to the sea. There was a house in the valley, kept by an Italian woman who cultivated a plot of ground and provided hot water for picnic parties in the season, and it was there that Cassell drew up and left the dogcart, lifting Diana down with a firm grip that made her realise his strength. He bade the groom have the dogcart ready for their return drive in an hour's time, then turned up the valley.

"Don't you hear how the gulls are calling your name?" he said, as they walked down the green path together; and the girl laughed. Up in the blue vault of the sky the gulls were wheeling, circling above the silver track on the sea where a shoal of fish were drifting shorewards. 'Di-ana-Di-ana' they were calling, and the girl picked a handful of asphodel stalks and flung them seaward over the edge of the cliff.

"Come and sit down for a few minutes here in the sunlight," said Cassell, taking her arm and drawing her down to a rocky ledge at his side. The ravine ran sheer down to the water below them, and they could see the Mediterranean breaking on the rocks in a spatter of foam and spray.

The girl yielded to his hand—perhaps she hardly observed his touch, for she was lost in a daydream of

her own once again. The fairies had not danced for her since Dickie Lepel had gone away, but to-day they were about her everywhere, and when Cassell spoke she put her finger to her lips.

"Hush!" she said. "Look at that little fairy below there, with the red cap; he is beckoning to me out of that clump of maidenhair."

Cassell followed her mood for the instant, amused and interested in spite of the disbelief in his mind.

"And here are we two humans sitting, watched by fairy eyes—perhaps another Oberon and Titania," he said; "but after all, I would rather be a mortal man, since the fairy family have to live out among the flowers—come rain, come shine."

"And I would far rather be Titania," laughed Diana. "Life is so much more beautiful when it is full of delicate imagination."

"I would rather be sitting here by you than by an elusive fairy woman," said Cassell. "Diana, I don't believe you know how charming you are, or how much I—I am in love with you!"

Slim and straight as a young sapling the girl stood up.

"Please don't talk like that," she said. "I don't like it; you—you frighten me. How can you be in love with me, when you have only seen me a few times?"

"Love is not measured by hours," he said; "it comes suddenly. Why, I never wanted to marry any one till I saw you."

"Please say no more; you have spoilt the fairies," returned Diana regretfully.

He saw that she was in earnest, and rose too, sullenly enough.

"She whom I love is hard to catch and conquer—
Hard, but oh the glory of the winning, were she won"—

he said to himself, as he followed her up the path, luring her back to ease and speech with the cleverness of a man of the world.

She was unsuspecting of his real motives as yet, and he must beguile her so that her blind eyes should not see the trap until her foot was in it. He could of course eventually persuade her that it was the most natural thing in the world for a man in his position to fall in love with a girl in hers; and even if she thought his love dictated by pity, why, mere gratitude would compel her to return it.

They pursued their way in occasional silences back to the house where Signora Parati had laid tea ready for them, with all the delicacies that the hamper contained spread out in an orderly row.

Cassell had provided so thoughtful a meal of all that was agreeable to a young palate that Diana's eyes sparkled with pleasure.

She had often gone hungry to bed—so often been compelled to eat the scraps that the boarders in the hotel had left on the dishes, that this food seemed nectar and ambrosia to her. *Pâté de foie gras*, cakes covered with sugar icing, crisp Hungarian rolls, and fragrant coffee covered the table. There was a jar of cream, with honey to accompany it, and a slender

emerald green glass flask filled with some rare golden liquor crowned the feast.

"Now you shall have coffee such as you have never tasted before," said Cassell; "only go into that room and take off your hat first, so that you may look more domestic and more fitted to take your place at the head of the table."

He nodded towards an inner room, and Diana, entering, found it meagrely furnished with a couch and table and a couple of chairs. But there was a looking-glass on a stand, decorated by a muslin curtain, and everything was spotlessly clean, even to the lava floor. Diana tossed her hat on to the sofa and set her hair straight, with a casual glance at her unwontedly brilliant face in the glass. She could hear Signora Parati's little children singing at their play at the back of the house, and she would far rather have joined them than have gone back to Felix Cassell. What a mad, merry play they were enjoying, spinning round in the sun, their brown legs and arms awhirl, singing their broken little patois song as merrily as crickets under the hearth! Her heart was full of the children when she returned to the sitting-room, and their spirit was in her dancing eyes.

"Oh, do let us have one or two brown babes in to feed and pet," she said impulsively. "The woman of this house has such a big fist full of them out in the garden, and I don't suppose that one of them has ever tasted sugar-cake."

"They will none of them taste our feast," said Cassell, with a laugh. "Do you imagine I brought

these things for charity, Miss Ponsonby—save and except that charity means love ? ”

The green flask was empty of half its contents, and there was an aroma of Chartreuse in the room and in Diana's coffee, and she put the cup down with a gesture of dislike.

“ I can't drink it,” she said ; “ and you are not kind about the children.”

“ Oh, but you must drink it, Diana ; it is nectar—fairy drink. And besides that, it will make you a hundred times prettier, and your eyes twice as bright ; ” but Diana pushed it steadfastly away.

“ I do not like it,” she said, for there were memories within her heart of her father, that hurt and stung her—memories of which he was absolutely unconscious.

Cassell delighted in her society, and gradually his chair edged nearer and nearer to the head of the table, where she was ensconced in state.

“ You must keep to your own corner,” Diana said at last, feeling her power.

“ I can't keep away from you, Diana, you see,” he said, his face changing a little as his eyes fell upon her glowing face.

He watched her nibbling daintily at her cake, crunching the sugar under her firm white teeth. She was so perfect in her health, her wholesome perfection, that he felt she would make a most presentable wife, even without her grandfather's fortune. The exquisite shape of her, the length from shoulder to heel, the pure Greek of her features might have well tempted an artist to admiration. But then, Cassell

was no scholar in any subject save the purely material side of life, and therefore no vision of the proud maiden huntress, chaste as the moon in heaven, came up before him. To him was the wish for personal advancement, while to Diana came only the impulse of coquetry, seeing that the game was unequal in comprehension. The mischief of life flashed through her veins now, and she rejoiced to see Cassell's irritated face, as she laughed at his attempts at love-making, and mocked him in her silver voice. He was an uninteresting elderly man in her eyes, and she rashly let him see it now, since the barrier of cold control was down.

"We must be careful not to be out too late for fear the red-capped men are hunting; and you know what happens if we cross the fairy ring," she said lightly. "I might escape, but they would hold and keep fast any one as old as you; and you would have white hair before they let you come back again."

"Don't talk nonsense, Diana; all that fairy rubbish is so silly."

He was trying to capture her unwilling fingers, but she was too nimble for him.

"Oh, I forgot; you are too old for fairy stories," she said, with a catch in her breath, for something in his eyes made her afraid, since they reminded her of Jane Harding.

"There is one fairy story I am never too old for, and that is love," said Cassell angrily. "Go and get your hat, Diana, and we will drive home again; I can't keep the mare waiting in the cold."

Her hair was ruffled when she stood before the glass again, and she smoothed it out and twisted it afresh. One coil of shining copper lay on her shoulder when the door opened and Cassell came into the room. She saw his face, and was too frightened to cry out, for it was the face of a hunting wolf who scents his prey near at hand, and for one instant she closed her eyes, sick and faint with deadly inexplicable terror.

"You have got to give me an answer before we drive home," he said. "I have asked you to marry me, and I expect an answer. Don't you realise what a very lucky girl you are? Come, now, don't be silly, but say Yes, and let us kiss and be friends; and we will drive home and tell everybody, and I will buy you an engagement ring in Strada Reale."

He had his hand round her soft wrist now, and he was pulling her towards him. Ah! coward that he was, to take her out and then insult her with his offers of marriage when she desired none of him.

She was afraid he was going to kiss her, and she swung round and struck at him with all the force of her young arm. Jem Burne's kiss had not given her this sensation of anger and fear; and though she was no match for Cassell in strength, yet she caught herself free, like a young panther struggling blindly for the possession of her proud freedom. Then, like an arrow, she sped through the door and out into the falling dusk. She heard his voice calling her name, but fear gave her wings, and she knew that he was no match for her fleetness.

At the entrance to the valley a carrozza was rumbling

leisurely back to Valetta, and she hailed it with a desperate hand, for she could not contemplate the drive home in Cassell's company, after such a scene.

The Maltese driver, in his blue linen blouse and bare feet, was huddled up on the seat, singing at the top of his lusty voice one of the weird minor chanties of his race: '*Ahi-ahé il mio tesoro e morte.*'

It was Giovanni Battista Caruana, a Maltese boy to whom she had been very kind a few months earlier. He had cut his foot with a piece of glass outside the hotel, and she had bound it up for him and washed it clean and spread it with soothing ointment, so that it got better very quickly.

"Giovanni—Giovanni Battista!" she cried now, breathlessly.

The quick trotting little barb was checked, and the brown face peered down at her.

"Ah! it is the English miss!"

"Drive me to Sliema, quick!" said Diana. She was hatless, with ruffled hair and white terrified face; and with all the quickness of his race the lad understood. She sprang into the carriage and fastened the curtains tightly round her, while he whipped up the horse, and Cassell, arriving a moment too late on the scene, stood looking after them in speechless anger.

He had evidently spoiled his chances with Diana now, he realised. Why could he not have been slower in his methods, more careful not to alarm her? His own affairs were in a very doubtful position, and at his age there were not many young heiresses who would not laugh at his pretensions.

"You may ride away now," he said, slowly and deliberately. "You may think you are driving out of my life, but you are not, Diana; and because of this—because of to-day—I will never rest until I have made you marry me, and then made you regret it!" And with this amiable resolution on his lips he went back to Signora Parati's house to fetch his dogcart and his amazed groom, whose mind revolved slowly round Diana's disappearance until they reached Valetta.

That night the little naked Parati children had a feast such as they had sometimes dreamt of when they had eaten too much gourd and polenta. They licked out the *pâté de foie gras* pot and scrambled for the sugar crumbs, while their father finished up the contents of the green flask that gave visions—oh, the most beautiful!—and made the eyes bright. Signora Parati had to content herself with the leavings of the plates; but then, wives and mothers have to be content with the fag-ends of life and enjoyment, if they play their part well.

Diana cried helplessly all the way back to Sliema, and Giovanni Battista scrambled down from the box when they reached the summit of the rock that intersects Malta like a spine. He preterded to be very busy with the curtain, but he was really very unhappy, because of Diana's tears.

"Listen, Signora," he said; "listen!"

Far and fair and unearthly in their sweetness came the bugles of Malta once again, sounding from generation to generation as the sun dropped into the sea.

In every British possession all over the world this same chain links itself in golden sound, and Diana smiled faintly.

Giovanni Battista plucked out of the hedge a big bunch of rosy clover, and threw it on to the opposite seat, with a flash of white teeth. He could not comfort her, and he was mutely sorry, like an animal, but he could drive her faster than any other driver in Valetta, and not take a penny in reward, since the carrozza was his own; and this was Giovanni Battista's meed of love—to pour out, to expend all that he could give, and to expect nothing in return.

Diana had smoothed her hair and tied her scarf about her head before she alighted from the carriage at the hotel gate. Under the street lamp she turned her face to speak to the little Maltese, and Jem Burne, fresh home from England, coming up on the opposite side of the road, saw her. His mother's terrified warnings concerning unsuitable and designing females were still ringing in his ears, and still powerful enough to prevent him from crossing the road to speak to her; but into his mind flashed the words of Odysseus to Nausicaa, as he glanced at her: "For never did I yet behold one of mortals like to thee, neither man nor woman. I am awed as I look upon thee. In Delos once, hard by the altar of Apollo, I saw a young palm tree shooting up with even such a grace."

CHAPTER V

THE FINGER OF FATE

"Joy is born from sorrow's night,
But grief is the safer in God's sight."

It was February in the island of Malta, a month of golden sunlight, golden winds, and golden fruit. Valleys of asphodel, narcissus, and maiden-hair fern; gardens of arums, well watered by their artificial trenches; fields of roses and trumpet-flowers—made the whole rock blossom into a veritable Garden of Eden. And the Baroness Von Poppenheim, waking from a languid sleep after a night of revelling, wondered why she had ever been content with life in the shop in Regent's Park, when such possibilities of enjoyment lay open before her, and no more than a four days' journey between Victoria Station and the Grand Harbour.

Life was already presenting itself in a series of triumphs. Her brother had told her that the garrison of Malta, bored to tears that winter by two successive scares of plague and enteric fever, was the most gullible in the world; and she was glad now that she had believed him.

"To succeed in Valetta, my dear Ethel," he had told her, with a laugh, when he had discussed her journey a few weeks earlier over the Beauty Establish-

ment in Excelsior Mansions, "a woman has only to be good-looking and well dressed, and to insist on a few smart friends at home and abroad. You had a husband once, eh, my dear Ethel, and why, as you truly say, could he not have been old Baron von Poppenheim? You know something of the court of Beneventura, and of the life of an attaché there, for you once went to stay with my mother there, and spent a month in her shooting-box on the Bosphorus; that will be enough for a certain section in Malta; and if we are careful, the others will take you up and you may climb to the top of the tree, for old Lady Lukin, who rules the roost just now in Olympus—otherwise the Governor's Palace—is very inane; and if you pretend to be fond of Girls' Clubs, and speak vaguely of Beneventura, she will admit you to her inner confidence, though it would be a very different matter if the Duchess were back again.

"I should not have advised your taking such a step, my good sister, if you and I were not the cleverest people on the face of the earth;" and she was very glad to-day that she had taken the step, although at the time she had only replied, in a thoughtful voice:

"Oh yes, I am very fond of Girls' Clubs, as you know, Felix;" and the little gilded room had echoed to their amusement. But the clever Felix Cassell had been very careful to lay no stress on his love for Diana, for Ethel seemed to be doubtful of any woman who had neither money nor position, and he was not inclined to confide the identity of Sir Peregrine Ponsonby to her ears.

Ethel Vavasour Bloggs, whose title of Baroness von

Poppenheim was easily assumed and as easily put off again, stretched herself in bed and opened her full lips in a leisurely cat-like yawn. Her mouth was certainly a large one, but that has its advantages when one is fond of good living; and her teeth were fine and white, though divided curiously in front, like two sharp little fangs. But the exquisite complexion, like milk and roses, the pencilled brows, the hair of pale gold, had been put off with the white satin gown of the night before, and the Baroness had crept into bed, the unattractive woman, with hair turning grey and faded cheeks, whom only her maid knew by heart after the gaieties were over.

The discreet green blind, flapping against the window, now admitted through a lifted corner a broad streak of sunlight, which crept in and stole up the quilt to the hand that lay there, and instinctively the Baroness slipped it into the embroidery out of sight. Careful attention, manicuring and bleaching, could not change the outline of those tell-tale hands. White and useless they were, no doubt, and admirably kept, but the fingers were thick and square, and could only have belonged to a woman of the people who owned neither birth nor tradition to lift her from the dull corner of society in which her lot was cast. Her window looked out into the garden of the little hotel in Sliema, where she had taken rooms, as she said languidly, because every corner in Valetta was full. She was arranging to take a furnished flat in Strada Mezzodi within the next few days, but for the present the 'Cosmopolitan' suited her admirably.

She jerked the blind aside now impatiently, for the mist of green leaves pleased her to look out upon. Pepper trees, rose-pink oleanders, glossy green lemon and orange bushes, where scented blossoms and golden globes of fruit hung together, made a cool outlook, and the Baroness wriggled into her blue satin dressing-gown and propped herself up higher on her pillows to enjoy the view. She rang the bell for her early morning chocolate and her maid, for it was already nine o'clock; and when Bertha Fox appeared, her mistress greeted her with unwonted eagerness.

"Here, Bertha! Who is the girl in the hotel who wears a black gown and a green baize apron, and who has hair like the inside of a cleft chestnut?"

"The hotel is full," said Bertha morosely; "how can I possibly tell?"

Bertha Fox was a poor widowed relation of the Bloggs' family, and Ethel's right hand in the shop, and as such, incidentally, she had been concerned with the affairs of Felix Cassell and his sister for some years in an intimate fashion.

"Then make it your business to find out," retorted the Baroness irritably; "and don't stand staring there, Bertha. I believe she is the girl my brother told me about, and that her name is Ponsonby. Go at once and see, Bertha, and don't look more like a white owl than you can help! If Felix had not been an idiot, he would not have allowed himself to have gone on manœuvres just now. And yet, I don't know but what it is lucky, if the girl dislikes him as much as he says! I think he wished me to introduce myself, but I can't

imagine why I have not seen her before, since I have been here for three days. Mind, I don't want him to fall in love with her, for she hasn't a penny; but at the same time, she wouldn't be bad in Excelsior Mansions as a living advertisement for our Copperline Hair Improver!"

But Bertha Fox was gone without waiting for the completion of her mistress's involved speech.

Major Cassell had taken a month's leave a day or two after his disastrous expedition with Diana. He had felt that he must be absolutely out of sight and sound of the girl, since she had an influence over him that he could only describe as extraordinary. He thought of her day and night, and racked his brain to find some excuse for apology and further intimacy. That he had offended her past forgiveness he had not the least doubt, since a note of apology that he had sent her on the following day had been returned to him unopened; and when he met her in the street she had turned her back upon him with a face of stern contempt. He had therefore departed for England to arrange the visit of the Baroness von Poppenheim, his sister, with the minuteness of detail that had expended itself even upon the smallest item of expenditure in the Regent's Park Beauty Establishment.

For more years than she would care to confess, the Baroness had done her best to make both ends meet, and had hitherto failed disastrously. Now she was vaguely contemplating the possibility of combining the Beauty Establishment with a roulette club, to which members should be introduced and tempted

to come again by her charm of manner; but since that charm was fading now into the commonplaceness of middle age, it had become evident that further attractions were necessary if the place under any conditions were to remain a financial success.

It is perhaps unnecessary to dilate upon the fact that in the blood of some men gambling is an inherent vice. There is a section of society who can no more exist without the excitement of high play than others can exist without the excitement of drink. The love of gambling is hereditary, and passes from father to son with fatal certainty; and hand in hand with the vice go many others in the long catalogue of human frailties.

Henry Ponsonby had inherited the passion from his father, although the stronger character of the elder man had prevented the moral downfall that had been the inevitable sequence of the career of Diana's father. Diana herself might have in her blood that same taint, but as yet she had had no chance of testing such hereditary failings.

Bertha Fox returned, after a few moments, with the same inexplicable expression that she had worn when she went out.

"Her name is Diana Ponsonby," she said; "she is Mrs. Harding's lady-help."

Some years ago Bertha Fox had been an attractive girl, but now, marriage, widowhood, and poverty had turned her into an unattractive woman, with one spark of resentment always smouldering alive deep down in her heart against the man and woman who had compassed the ruin of her life. For long ago the small

fortune that had been Bertha Fox's portion had been entrusted to Felix and his sister, and now appeared to have been irrevocably lost. True, it had only been £500, but with that capital she might have set up an establishment of her own, and have had her child with her, instead of keeping Susie in the country and being crushed up herself in an attic under the sloping roof of Excelsior Mansions. But since silence was bread and butter to her, and food and clothing to Susie Fox, aged twelve years, now being brought up in the country by a childless couple who adored her, Bertha Fox kept silence.

The Baroness took another chocolate from the silver box by her side, and crunched it with her sharp teeth. "Then she is the girl who hates Felix," she said to herself. "That is the one admirable part of her disposition. If she had loved him, I should have hated her. I can't afford to let him marry any one but an heiress with a handle to her name. What are you waiting for?" she added aloud sharply to Bertha. "Go instantly, and ask Miss Ponsonby to come and see me. And if you mention the name of Felix Cassell to her, you will find yourself in Queer Street for the season."

Bertha Fox looked at the woman who had married her cousin. If it be true that faces are the index of character, and that features are fashioned by the mental food on which the mind is supported, the heart of Bertha Fox must have had bitter herbs for its portion. Grief had dried up every youthful tint of her face, and dimmed her dark eyes. Her hair, grey and faded, was coiled away under a neat white cap like that of a hospital nurse, and her mouth was closed so tightly

that it seemed as if she must consider words as precious coins, allowing very few of them to escape through the narrow slit that was her mouth.

"I have been quiet enough for a long time, Ethel," she said suddenly—"or 'Baroness,' if you prefer it—but I'll be quiet no longer. What do you want with the girl? She bound up my finger for me yesterday, and spoke as sweetly to me as a little singing bird. But I don't suppose that she has got a brass farthing to bless herself with. What are you going to do with her?"

The Baroness turned over on her elbow and surveyed her cousin with insolent surprise.

"Does not the immaculate Bertha Fox permit me to take any interest in any one beyond herself? We want a new assistant in Excelsior Mansions, and I want a companion more amusing than yourself. The girl must look after her money if she has any, and herself too, as your Susie will have to do some day."

Bertha set her lips more firmly together, but not even the Baroness guessed that the mention of Susie was like a dagger in her heart.

"Susie will have me always. Yes, you may look like that, but I was an idiot when I let you have that money, Ethel, for it was all that I had for her. When I go down to see them all at Wendover Farm, there isn't one of them that doesn't envy me for being a lady-partner in business in London; and they little know that I spend every penny you give me on Susie, and that I am no better than your maidservant!"

"Some day, perhaps—who knows?—you will get all your money back with interest," said the Baroness

carelessly ; but under her words lay an accent of cruel indifference that Bertha recognised only too well.

"I'll go to her now," she said slowly ; "only promise me one thing—you'll not let Felix make love to her and marry her and make her miserable. Her eyes are like my Susie's—just a little."

The Baroness looked at Bertha and laughed. For just the space of one instant there had been a moment of distinct danger between the two women. But it was over now, and Bertha was the submissive maid once more.

"Oh, I'll keep her away from my brother fast enough. Do you suppose that I want him to fall in love with her ? He shan't have a chance to marry her while I am above ground ! Why, Lady Florence Helsham would have had him a year ago, only unfortunately her old father found out that he had made a lot of money by playing cards, and Lord Hovenden has no vices !"

For the short space of a heart-beat Bertha Fox held Ethel's shifty eyes steadily.

"Why," she said slowly, "I've seen many men but never one that was so out-and-out selfish as your brother, Ethel ; he hasn't one kind feeling in his mind except for himself. I suppose that he has killed them all by thinking nothing but selfish thoughts, though sometimes I believe he must be mad, because he is so eaten up with his own self-love."

"He is good enough for me," said the Baroness curtly. "Just make me presentable now, please, and then fetch in the girl. I know that you don't like

Felix, because years ago you thought he was in love with you ; but I can't help that."

And Bertha Fox, who had given herself one foolish day into her Cousin Ethel's power, long before she had married her husband, bewailed once again the day that she had shown Mrs. Vavasour Bloggs two sentimental notes and a few withered violets ; and in silence set to work, and with a few touches transformed her into a pretty young woman once again ; then discreetly lowered the blind.

But outside the door in the passage, Bertha Fox paused for a moment and wrung her hands. "Poor little thing ! Poor little bird !" she said to herself. "But maybe, for all that I have seen of Mrs. Harding, she'll be better off with us, because I shall be there, and she reminds me of Susie. But what a fate—if they mean her to marry Felix—what a fate !"

Diana came in from the garden with the freshness of the south wind upon her. She had been feeding the pigeons, and one of them was still sitting on her shoulder, pressed against the lovely round of her cheek—a mass of opal and violet feathers, with bright shining eyes.

The last few days had been unusually trying for Diana, for she had been ill. A touch of influenza had kept her a prisoner to her room, and there had not been any one in that big household to nurse her.

She had realised in her hot and feverish hours how very lonely was her life, and the depression that is natural to the complaint was proof against even her bright young spirits. But she was well again now, though pale and thin, and only the horror of her great

loneliness remained with her. She had been with her father when he died, but she would have to die alone, if death came to her in the hotel, since she was friendless.

The shadow of these thoughts lay in her eyes when she came into Ethel's room, and the shadow of other thoughts from the mind of the woman in the bed leaped upwards to meet her with the same ultimate result in the encounter.

"What a pretty pair you are!" said Ethel languidly; "you and your pigeon; only, I am not fond of beasts or birds. Open the window and let it fly, my child." and Diana, with a caress, set the bird on the window sill, and he flew away.

"Sit down by the bed," said the Baroness, patting a chair with one ringed hand. "I want to talk to you. Do you know how pretty you are, and how lonely you make me feel when I look at you?"

"You are very kind," said Diana, flushing a little; "but why are you lonely?"

She looked round the hotel bedroom she knew so well, but which the Baroness had changed beyond recognition. There were delicate silk hangings and cloths everywhere, with ivory and silver toilet accessories, and delicate perfumes and essences. There were glimpses of beautiful gowns and shoes and delicate scarves thrust away in cupboards, and a fur mantle over a chair, and there were shoes of every colour and material, with stockings to match, laid out for her choice.

This was the life to live, where people wore fine clothes and laid softly, and ate and drank delicately.

"Oh, my dear child"—Ethel sighed a little and cast her eyes up to the ceiling in a vain attempt to force tears—"I am particularly lonely. I have no sister or daughter or any one belonging to me, and I thought when I saw you in the garden, how happy I should be if I had any one as pretty and as sweet to live with me: but no doubt you have your own happy home which you could never leave?"

"I have got no home; I have got no money; I have got no friends." Diana's lips opened and shut mechanically. "I am a servant in this hotel, and if Mrs. Harding cast me out to-morrow, I should have to die in the street."

It was perhaps the stimulus of her illness that impelled her to such violent speech, but it served its purpose with the Baroness and gave her the opening she desired.

"Oh, my dear child," she said, clasping her hands, "why don't you come and live with me as my companion and friend? I would dress you so prettily, and make you look such a dream; and Bertha should do your hair; and we would be as happy as the day is long."

Diana whitened to the lips, for the shock of joy was so overwhelming that she hardly knew what to say. All about her the world reeled in ruin and chaos, and she thought she must have misunderstood the wonderful words.

"I—I don't understand," she said faintly. "I—I don't know what you mean."

"I mean what I say." Ethel sat up in bed and took Diana's hand. "Will you come and live with me, you pretty little thing, and be my sister?"

The girl's innocent eyes had not realised the fact of the artificial complexion, the unnaturally curled hair: she only knew that the Baroness was an uncommonly pretty woman, and that she looked like a miniature painting in outline and colouring. To have the chance of becoming this pretty woman's sister, seemed to Diana to be the most wonderful thing in the world. She drew a long breath, and, to her horror and dismay, burst into involuntary weeping.

"Don't you want to come to me?" said the Baroness petulantly. "I wish you would not cry like that; you make me so unhappy, and I wanted so much to make you happy."

Diana checked her tears with an effort. Oh, if you knew how happy I felt, you would be surprised! I don't know what to do to thank you; I want to go down and kiss your feet in gratitude. Oh, if you will be kind to me, I will love you with my whole heart, and I will work for you—I will do everything for you!"

Ethel laughed a little, and, reaching out her hand, rang the bell.

"Well, that is all settled," she said easily; "and now we will have Bertha Fox in, and she shall make you look beautiful before I get up, and you are to say nothing to Mrs. Harding. I will interview her, because I expect I can prevent anything unpleasant for you; and I have got to tell her that I am moving into a flat in Valetta at the end of the week. You are not to go back to your work any more, nor to your own room. I shall give you a room near me, and look after you from this moment. Here, Bertha,

for goodness' sake give this child some brandy—she is going to faint.” And Ethel, who had begun the whole affair in a selfish mood, felt inclined to finish it with affection that was genuine enough in its impulse.

The brandy made Diana choke, and she was conscious that Bertha was touching her with very tender hands, that seemed strangely kind and motherly for so stern-featured a woman. But when she was better and the trembling of her limbs had ceased, the Baroness seemed anxious to interview Jane Harding, and Diana was bundled into the inner room, with Bertha Fox in charge of her.

“So you are coming to live with us?” said Bertha, at last, as she moved about the room, putting together with a careful hand a whole outfit of clothes. She had her back to Diana, who was lying on the sofa, and the girl thought she detected an undercurrent of resentment in the speech.

“The Baroness von Poppenheim has asked me—it is so good of her. Yesterday I was in despair over the future, and now I feel so happy; but I will try not to be a trouble to any one,” she answered meekly.

“Perhaps you would be happier here as you are,” said Bertha hurriedly. “London is a tiring place for girls sometimes.”

“It could never be so lonely as Malta,” returned Diana. “I have no one but the pigeons here to talk to.”

“Well, anyway, they are safe friends,” said Bertha Fox, with such amazing bitterness that Diana lay still, wondering what trouble had upset the maid that day with such completeness. But she was too happy

to care very much, and presently lay still, wrapped in one of Ethel's quilted silk dressing-gowns, and listening to the murmur of low voices through the door, until drowsy content wrapped her in a warm mantle.

The summons to the Baroness von Popper's bedroom found Jane Harding in no very kindly mood. She had been seriously annoyed by the fact of Diana's illness, and was in a seething condition of annoyance against the whole world. And when she stood looking down at the woman in the pink silk bedgown, the Baroness asked herself, with a little shiver, whether she was not doing a very meritorious act in releasing Diana from such a tyrant.

"Mrs. Harding," she said, playing with a little fan that shielded her from the pitiless stare of the hard eyes in the fat white face, "I am going to take Miss Ponsonby to live with me as my companion. I want to know what her wages are, so that I may compensate you for the loss of her services by a month's payment, which I believe is the correct thing to do."

"Oh, indeed, my lady," said Mrs. Harding. "This is very sudden."

"I have been looking out for a girl to live with me for some time. I am a lonely woman, and—and I think Miss Ponsonby remarkably beautiful."

"It is not often that ladies—not as young as they were—are particular about the beauty of their companions," said Mrs. Harding deliberately. "Maybe you have some other plans for her future, my lady?"

There is a freemasonry in selfishness that gives an insight into the hearts of those concerned, and reminds

the critic forcibly of the fashion in which important intelligence reaches the bazaars in India and the East, long before those in authority have cognizance of the truth. In some such fashion did Jane Harding realise the atmosphere of self-seeking that underlay the luxury of this woman's surroundings and dissect it with her pitiless eyes.

"Whatever motive I may have," said Ethel quickly, "has nothing to do with you!"

She drew towards her a purse, through the green silk meshes of which the gleam of gold was seen, and Jane Harding's eyes brightened.

"I suppose you would like to know something of Diana's history?" said the woman again. "It's not pleasant hearing."

Ethel intimated loftily that such was her wish; and taking up a turquoise encrusted gold smelling-bottle, held it to her nose, for the interview had tried her powers of dissimulation not a little.

"Captain Henry Ponsonby, her father, was a good-for-nothing officer, and he had nothing but debts to leave behind him, and not a penny-piece of any value; he never even paid my bill. But he told me while he was here that his people were rich country folk somewhere in the south of England, only he would never give his father's name or any details as to his family. He told me once that they had quarrelled when he married Diana's mother, who had no money at all, but was just a curate's daughter, or something of that sort, though she only lived a short time after the wedding. Anyway, Henry Ponsonby was one for drink and card-

playing, and I expect his daughter is the same, though I've done my duty by her and kept her from them so far—though what is bred in the bone must come out in the flesh."

The Baroness nodded, and pushed five sovereigns towards Mrs. Harding. "Then Miss Ponsonby is mine from to-day," she said; "she will sleep in the little room off mine to-night, and I will hire another one for my maid."

Jane Harding picked up the gold slowly and bent forward over the bed. "I am glad to let her go," she said through her clenched teeth. "I hate her! I hate every bit of her! and I shall be glad if she is unhappy, my lady. I should never lift a finger to prevent it, for you don't look like a woman who would make any one happy." And before the amazed and indignant Baroness had recovered from the shock of the words, Jane Harding had disappeared with the money in her hand, and it took a long application to the smelling salts at Ethel's bedside before that lady recovered the equanimity of which she had been so unexpectedly deprived.

It was arranged that Diana was to be dressed afresh from head to foot in her new friend's room, and under her keen scrutiny. She was perfumed and massaged by Bertha Fox, standing up like a statue of Diana the woodland nymph, sweet and lovely, under the eyes of the woman on the bed, who was weighing every point in her face with the intentness of a connoisseur gauging the value of a piece of china, for she had great hopes now that the Beauty Specialist business might be a success with this example of girlhood as a recommendation.

“You are certainly very pretty, Diana,” Ethel said, with a sigh, at last. “I think your hair is quite the latest fashion in colour in London; you are a lucky girl.”

There was something in the face of Bertha Fox that comforted Diana not a little as to her future happiness, for Bertha's hard eyes bore in them a protecting admiration that was almost maternal. But Diana knew her happiest moment when the exquisitely fine muslin and lace garments were fitted upon her. There was a rustling grey silk petticoat, too, and over everything a crêpe gown of delicate ashen grey, with buckles of glittering paste. There were grey suède shoes with the same buckles, matching the gown so exactly that they must have been made for the very purpose; and finally there was a glittering comb that looped up the masses of her hair and held them in position in some wonderful fashion, manipulated by Bertha's clever fingers.

When she was manicured and perfumed and powdered, the Baroness laughed merrily. “Cinderella—! You are Cinderella, you pretty thing, taken out of the ashes and put into an ashen gown!”

She had accomplished what her brother desired, and at the same time the fresh wonder of the girl's beauty filled her with a certain very genuine satisfaction, for she loved pretty things about her. She could disguise her feelings and simulate others as well as any actress on the stage, for her life was one long drama, though deep down in the bottom of her heart she felt a little sore at the beauty that was so simple and so absolutely natural. The fox who has lost his tail preaches the

advantage of taillessness to all the other foxes in the world, but his missionary efforts are dictated by the same regret that assailed the 'Baroness von Poppenheim' when she regarded the finished perfection of the girl she had adopted. She might declare to her clients that it was impossible to detect improved hair and complexion, but Diana's beauty, as God made it, put her own artificiality to the blush.

"No one would recognise you now," she said with a little sigh; "and this afternoon we will go and write our names in the book at the Palace; and to-night, perhaps, I will take you to the little informal supper and dance at the Westminster's mess; and besides that, we must go and see about our flat in Strada Mezzodi."

"What a lot of delightful engagements!" said Diana, with a little sigh of pleasure. "Only, please Baroness, I don't want to enjoy myself entirely—I want to help you."

"That will all come in good time."

The face on the bed could not vary in its exquisite colouring, but just for an instant Ethel Vavasour felt a pang of shame stir her shrivelled heart in the face of so much gratitude. Whether Diana were to marry Felix, or whether she were to become saleswoman in the shop in Regent's Park, life was bound to be very different from what the girl now expected. She imagined herself the adopted daughter of Baroness von Poppenheim, but some day she would have to be told that she was a shop-girl and no more, in the service of Mrs. Vavasour Bloggs, though Ethel would avert the evil day as long as possible.

"Don't you know any one here at all, Diana?" she said at last, when they were sitting together at a dainty little lunch in the privacy of their own apartment, since it was manifestly impossible for Diana to join the table d'hôte without considerable discomfort.

"No; I have had no chance," the girl answered. "I have met, however, two of the Westminster's officers. One I like very much, and one I do not like at all."

The eyes of the Baroness narrowed over the rim of her champagne glass: "Will you permit me to ask the names of these fortunate young men?"

"The one I like is called Captain Burne, and the other—the other is a Major Cassell."

The Baroness interposed quickly. "You must not say anything against him, Diana. He is a curious person, I know, but he is my—my cousin. How has he offended you?"

"Major Cassell has offended me very much; he frightened me by making love to me, and asking me to marry him."

The Baroness laughed loudly. "Good heavens, my dear child! you will have to get used to that sort of offence, I am afraid. But I will tell Felix to be very careful in his dealings with you."

"I would rather not see him if it were possible," said Diana, with tremulous lips. "I don't want to offend you, because he is your cousin, but really—he is a very foolish man. I should think that it would have been quite easy for him to understand that I did not want his offer of marriage without his persisting in forcing it upon me!"

The Baroness laid her hand upon the pretty mouth.

"Hush! hush!" she said playfully; "and let me assure you, Diana, that your dislike is good hearing to me, because I care enough for Felix Cassell to have great ideas as to his future wife."

If anything in Diana's attitude could have made her more acceptable to her new friend, it was the fact that she disliked her brother. Life had brought many hard places to Ethel since the day when she discovered that she was not exempt from the troubles of life where poor Septimus Vavasour Bloggs was concerned. The knowledge of her husband's folly in business matters had been very difficult to bear at first when that knowledge was fresh, but she had kept a brave front to the world, and had done her best to make money enough to keep them both, until death relieved her unexpectedly of a heavy burden. She had been a pretty, attractive woman then, and Felix Cassell had been a moderately good-natured brother, when it was in his interest to be one, so that the link forged between brother and sister was strong enough to stand many a rub at the time.

"Oh, Baroness," faltered Diana, "you are far—far too good for him. You must not care for him, or his interests too deeply."

All the sisterly anger in Ethel's body flamed to her face. "Good gracious me!" she said tartly; "you had better speak of what you understand and not of things of which you are totally ignorant! However, we won't talk about Felix; but just tell me if I look nice in blue, or shall I wear my chocolate gown? I

want people to think we look like sisters, Diana, dear, only you are so much younger and prettier than I."

"Oh!" cried Diana. "No one could think ever that I am as pretty as you. Why, you are charming altogether."

"Little flatterer," said the Baroness, well pleased, tapping her on the shoulder. "Wait till you find yourself the belle of the next Palace dance, and then tell me if I have not the right to be proud of you."

And later, when Diana, dressed in most becoming smoked fox furs and a grey velvet hat to match, looked at herself in the long glass, the radiant vision reflected back to her eyes astonished her not a little.

She was so tired and overwrought when she came back from her drive that she pleaded to be allowed to go to bed instead of to the select little party at the Westminster's mess; and when she lay back on her fine frilled pillows, surrounded by the few treasured possessions that had belonged to her own little room upstairs, she wondered whether any girl had ever been so marvellously fortunate as herself.

When Ethel Vavasour Bloggs came back in the small hours of the morning from the scenes of her gaiety, with her brother's last whispered message in her ears—his last persuasions in her heart—she rustled into Diana's room and stood over the bed with shaded candle looking down at her. In her sleep Diana smiled, for perhaps the angels who had watched her at her prayers guarded her in her slumbers, and the Baroness turned hastily away.

CHAPTER VI

VANITY FAIR

“The clattering bells and the motley wear
Of the people who throng thro' Vanity Fair ;
The hearts that ache they are swept away,
For whatever happens, the world must be gay.”

SOCIAL life in Malta had woke up with a vengeance, and the last P. and O. boat had brought out a contingent of the gayest people and the smartest frocks. Into the vortex the Baroness von Poppenheim, cousin of the popular Major Felix Cassell, had been surely drawn. A word dropped here and there, a clever innuendo, a confused memory of a foreign court, had convinced every one of the correctness of her position ; and it needed only a casual observer to note the charms of her person. It seemed, too, that she had plenty of money, for her cousin spoke vaguely, and she very definitely, of the way she intended to entertain her friends in the new flat in Strada Mezzodi. It was important that the dining-room should be big enough to dine eight people, and that the drawing-room should make a carpet dance possible on occasion ; and every man and woman of any importance in the social world hastened to call upon her.

It is only necessary in that merry little island to be

able to contribute to the gaiety of the nations who throng there, to be an assured social success. There are very few people in the world who like you for what you are : it is generally for what you can give them ; and Malta is no exception to that rule.

The A.D.C. who was in Cassell's debt exerted himself to the utmost, and the Baroness was not only asked to the first Palace dance, but also to one of those intimate little tea parties beloved by Lady Lukin, where to eat a halfpenny bun and have half an hour's conversation with a short-sighted elderly woman who cared for nothing but Girls' Clubs and Chopin's music, people schemed and plotted and fell foul of each other in their haste to be invited.

It had been decided, after long and earnest consultation, that Diana was not to make her *début* into the world until the evening of the first dance at the Palace. She had been weak and languid since the day that she had become a part of the household of the Baroness, and Bertha Fox had been nursing her back to health. But a general impression had been gained as to a fair and delicate girl who had been seen driving once or twice in the Baroness's victoria ; and a few cleverly dropped hints as to the discovery of an old friend's daughter under dramatic circumstances, and of a new beauty who was to set the heart of every young man in the island beating very rapidly, prepared the way for Diana's successful appearance. Lady Lukin had heard the whole story ; had interviewed Diana in her pretty room in the flat in Strada Mezzodi ; and had approved of the great kindness of the dear

Baroness, who never forgot an old friend or saw a young thing in trouble without hastening to set that trouble right.

"My dear Baroness, you and I have the same instincts," she said, stopping to pat Ethel's hand on her way out to her carriage. "Now, you must try and make that sweet child forget the valley of humiliation through which she has passed, and if I can do anything to help her, believe me I shall be only too glad to do so. Sir Abraham remembers meeting the father once in Gibraltar; it has been a terribly sad history altogether, and the Colonel of the Stewart Highlanders told him then that the love of gambling was inherent in the Ponsonby family. It really is terrible, my dear Baroness, to reflect upon the many households, both high and low, that are wrecked by that vice. You are such a sweetly sympathetic person, and so interested in my schemes. How I do wish you would give a little address next week on the vice of gambling, to my Girls' Club. Sir Abraham and I do our best to discourage any card-playing for money in our set, and I should really like the girls of a lower social strata to realise this, and to understand the iniquity of wasting money in so heinous a fashion."

The Baroness von Poppenheim pressed the great lady's hand ever so slightly, and her lips still smiled. "Dear Lady Lukin, how much I wish I could do this for you, but I am so stupidly shy over any public speaking. I should like to come to your meeting very much, however, and perhaps I could do a

little good by talking privately to one or two of the girls."

"You are always kind," said Lady Lukin, as she stooped over a table of photographs. "Dear me—I see you have the dear King of Arcadia's photograph! Where did you know him?"

"My poor husband was one of his gentlemen-in-waiting," said the Baroness, feeling for her pocket-handkerchief. "I felt his death very much."

She had bought the photograph in question in Regent Street the day before leaving London, and with inimitable cleverness had written an inscription across it in a foreign handwriting. "To the most charming of women—from the most grateful of kings—Adolphus Ernest," looked remarkably well, though the dead king would hardly have known it for his own scrawl. There were a few other photographs, principally of royalties, that had been treated in the same fashion, so that the drawing-room in Strada Mezzodi was a galaxy of fashion and propriety.

"Dear me—dear me," said Lady Lukin sympathetically. "You are so young to have lost so much."

"I don't care to talk about those days," murmured Ethel, weeping carefully into a morsel of cobwebby lace and muslin. "I don't care to remember all my griefs. Forgive me, Lady Lukin, if sometimes I appear to be heartless; but if I sit still to think of all I have lost, I feel sometimes as if I should go mad. I must be gay and try to forget, especially now that I have so sweet a girl dependent on me."

"Indeed you are a good woman," said Lady Lukin, with deep sympathy. And since no one had ever paid her the compliment of supposing her in any way to be connected with excessive goodness, the 'Baroness von Poppenheim' felt all the delight of an explorer who has succeeded in setting his foot at last in the desired country.

"Diana—Diana," she said, when she had bowed the Governor's wife to the door, "just imagine how popular you are going to be. Here are grapes for you from the Palace, and Lady Lukin insists on your being well enough to accompany me to the dance to-morrow night. Here is a note from Mrs. Anson, too, begging me to bring you to tea, as she thinks that you and her daughter are about the same age. Really, you are a very fortunate girl!"

Diana's room was at the end of the corridor, and the window opened upon a balcony that gave a view of the sea and the curve of shore and bay beyond Ricasoli; and in a chair the girl was lying with folded hands. The tension of her nerves having relaxed after long strain, it seemed that a certain delicacy, inherent in her constitution, would not immediately allow her to recover the shock of change, scene, and condition, and she was content to lie in the sun and watch the gay life surge by her in the street below. Bertha Fox was her companion, and an extraordinary love had sprung up, like a fair flower in the wilderness, in the heart of this sour, taciturn woman for the girl who was dependent upon her. The Baroness was not quite sure that she approved of the intimacy, and

had determined already that morning, before Lady Lukin's visit, to rouse Diana and to take her out into society before she was many hours older. And now she stood looking down on the slight figure in the chair, with the appraising glance of a merchant setting out his wares for sale in the sun.

"Come, get up, Diana, and choose your frock for to-morrow," she said. "I will allow you one more day of invalidism, but to-morrow life will begin for you, because to-morrow you will have been with me for one whole week, and I really think I have been very patient."

There was just a faint undercurrent of bitterness in the smooth voice, and Diana sprang to her feet.

"I am quite well—really—only it was just a stupid weak feeling that kept me back. Tell me if there is anything I can do for you."

The Baroness drew her to the edge of the balcony, and together they looked down into the street. Felix Cassell and Captain Burne were crossing the road, and Ethel laughed a little triumphantly.

"Here is your *bête noire*, my dear Diana," she said; "only I suppose you won't object to him, now that he is accompanied by your friend?"

She recognised the wisdom of the serpent that had induced Cassell to bring his junior captain to the flat, but she was astonished at Diana's vivid blush. The two men crossing the street looked up at the balcony, and saw the two graceful women standing there. The white serge gown that Diana wore was set off by the

black silk and jet of her companion, and the slight figure, with its yielding grace, was only rendered more lovely in comparison with the stiffly boned and laaced woman at her side.

"There is nothing like youth after all," said Major Cassell to himself; "even unformed youth."

Life to Felix Cassell was presenting itself just then in a series of ludicrous tableaux. He was laughing at Malta society in his sleeve, while all the time he was encouraging every man and woman in it to run like sheep after his sister's dinners and cigarettes and excellent company. There were times, when Cassell was alone, that he laughed with satisfaction over the complete comprehensiveness of his joke, but there were times also when in the solitude of his own room he allowed himself to indulge feelings that had brought him so close to the edge of insanity that it would need but one push to send him over the brink.

The two men stood waiting for their hostess in the pretty drawing-room when Ethel came in with Diana. Houses are furnished in Valetta on the same pattern, but Ethel had thrown the trail of her personality over everything, in the shape of gaudy hangings and embroidered Indian screens and fans, hired from the big shop at the corner. Jem Burne's eyes went from the vase of roses on the table to the face of Diana Ponsonby as she came in, and rested there in sudden satisfaction. There was something about the exotic personality of the Baroness von Poppenheim that repelled him, but there was everything about Diana's gracious charm to attract, and he

wondered whether any girl had ever been so unconsciously sweet before.

It required all Felix Cassell's equanimity to endure the cold greeting vouchsafed him by the girl he had so much annoyed, and to whom he was so extraordinarily attracted, but he had confided his scheme to clever hands, and he knew Ethel too well to distrust her discretion now. But while Burne sat down by Diana, he had to content himself with the next chair to his sister—a position that did not tend to increase his good temper.

"This is very delightful," said Jem Burne earnestly; "and very unexpected to meet you here like this."

"Please, Captain Burne," said Diana, leaning forward and speaking very rapidly, "will you forget about that time we first met. I don't want to cease being grateful to you for what you did for me, but I want never to remember what I suffered that night. There are things that you can sponge away from your memory, and I want to efface this—entirely. I want to begin to live now, and to bridge over the days that are past between my unhappy girlhood and my happy childhood; and this is the bridge."

"I quite understand what you mean," said Burne gently. "It shall be as you wish. We will talk of the past no more."

He was glad that there was a link to bind them together, even so tragic a one as the remembered incident on the Barracca when he had saved her from despair. He felt sure that the tie would be a

lasting one, for he wished her to feel that if ever again she was in trouble he was in the background as a rock of defence. He hoped that she had forgotten his kiss, and wondered how he had ever dared to touch her lips when he looked now at her charming serene face. That week of quiet and rest and good feeding had done what Ethel had expected for the girl, and now as she shook off her languid manner, and grew animated with brightened eyes and laughing lips, Ethel felt that she had been a clever doctor.

Cassell, watching her from behind the discontented shelter of his curved hand, felt that he would have to wait his time very cautiously and bait his trap very cunningly to catch his victim again. The bait for the present would be Jem Burne, but Ethel was clever enough to steer him into the background when his work was done; and there would be no danger of a pretty idyllic romance where she was the manager of the situation.

Watching the girl very carefully, he came yet again to the same conclusion he had arrived at long ago—that Diana was the very girl for the future Mrs. Cassell. She was so fresh and innocent that she would never understand the real meaning of the word love; and she would marry him out of gratitude before she had been three months in Ethel's company.

"I say, Burne, isn't young Hawtrey on guard, to-day? If so, we might go down and see him and take Miss Ponsonby," said Major Cassell, coming forward at last with a careful smile. "That is to say, if she

and my cousin would care about it. It would be a new experience for both of them."

Jem Burne noticed the white look on Diana's face. Five years ago she had been the pet and plaything of the Scotch regiment to which her father belonged. No entertainment had been complete without her; she had received her invitation to the Main Guard whenever it was furnished by the Stewart Highlanders, and when all this had come suddenly to an end with a shock of earthquake, she had suffered silently in remembering.

"Don't you want to go, Miss Ponsonby?" he said, in a low voice. "Perhaps you are not strong enough yet?"

"I will tell you everything afterwards," said the girl, nodding bravely at him as she went to put on her hat. "Or perhaps you can find out for yourself the reason why I held back for a moment when I tell you that 'sorrow's crown of sorrows is remembering happier days.'"

Then Jem Burne understood.

The boy subaltern who was doing his first guard in the gloomy rooms over the Square was delighted to welcome his guests, and in an instant a messenger was despatched to fetch ices and cakes from Bisazza, the confectioner below the Palace. Though his eyes lingered on Diana's lovely face, yet he was impelled by his *esprit de corps* to escort the Baroness round the rooms, explaining the signatures and the drawings on the walls to her, and enjoying her staccato shriek of surprise when she discovered the skeleton brooding over his pallet bed.

"I wish I was a subaltern again," said Major Cassell drily. "They take life so seriously, and their work as such a very genuine effort. Here's Hawtrey, I'll be bound, who never goes a yard away from his sword and gloves, and trembles lest a field officer should visit him, and, like the trump of judgment, find him unprepared! I say, my boy, I see the Governor's carriage coming out of the Palace gate."

Hawtrey, pale with anxiety, caught up his gloves and clattered down the narrow stairs as though every step would be his last.

"By Jove!" said Cassell, "I believe he is going to turn out the guard to the Palace cook; but luckily he's got a smart sergeant in charge of him, dry-nursing him into an officer of parts, poor little chap! I'll chaff his head off when he comes back again."

Diana moved out resolutely on to the balcony over the Square. "I can't bear to hear Major Cassell always laughing at people," she said indignantly. "He always enjoys a joke at some one else's expense. I often wonder if he has ever loved or revered any one in his life."

She spoke with such repressed bitterness that Burne looked at her in amazement. "I think you are a bit hard on him, Miss Ponsonby," he said. "He has always been just to me, and a man can say no more."

There is an *esprit de corps* between men of the same regiment that very properly binds them together into one consolidated mass of interests and loyalties, and in no regiment did this feeling exist more strongly than

in the minds of the younger officers of the 'Westminsters,' who, although they could not blind their eyes to the unpopularity of their senior major, at the same time refrained from discussing him.

He had not thought it advisable to take any of his immediate circle into his confidence as to the fashion in which he spent a good part, at least, of his time ; and if any one had informed Jem Burne that the senior major of the regiment was the keenest gambler in Malta, he would have given him the lie direct.

Diana shook her head a little, but said no more ; and after a moment, Jem took up the parable again.

"You see, in life, Miss Ponsonby, there must inevitably be people whom we do not like, but it does not follow that they are not desirable, does it ? Because a man spends his time on betting on the rain-drops that run down the window, it does not follow that he would be ready to cut a throat or rob a till, does it ? The betting is not desirable, but hurts no one beyond himself, and is probably indulged in from sheer boredom. I do not gamble myself, but I do not shut the man who does out of the Kingdom of Heaven."

"I was not thinking of gambling," said Diana, in a low voice. "He is a man you cannot *trust*."

Burne looked at her thoughtfully. Under the curved brim of her hat the shadow lay upon her face, but he could see the wonderful curl of her lashes, the upward tilt of her adorable chin.

"I hope he has not offended you, Miss Ponsonby," he said ; "but as we are discussing our neighbours

please let me tell you that I do not much trust the face of your new friend the Baroness von Poppenheim. I know nothing about her except—surely, Miss Ponsonby, she—I mean—her complexion is not natural?”

He had chosen his criticism of her companion badly if he wished to succeed in impressing her, for Diana laughed merrily.

“Surely there is no law against painting your face, Captain Burne, though it is very rude of you to suggest that the Baroness does such a thing. She is naturally so pretty that I think every excuse should be made for a woman whose beauty is on the wane. Of course she does not mean any one to know that she—she improves her looks just a little now, and I do not think it is generous of you to refer to it.”

Her warm defence of her friend made Jem Burne smile, well pleased with the manifestation of her loyalty to the woman who had befriended her. “I am sorry,” he said penitently, “only believe me, I did not mean to hurt you. The woman in Malta whom I should have liked to be your friend I will take you to see some day. She is the best woman I know, except my mother.”

“Who is this paragon?” said Diana, with mischievous eyes.

“She is a Mrs. Stafford, whose husband commands the ‘Pembrokes.’ She is charmingly pretty and well dressed. She never says a word against any woman that can be accounted unkind. She goes to church and does not boast about it, and she is beloved by all

the women in her husband's regiment ; all the subalterns and the middies who have the privilege of her acquaintance take their joys and sorrows to her, sure of sympathy ; and finally, her own husband and babies adore her."

"I should like to know Mrs. Stafford," said Diana suddenly.

"That is fortunate, because she asked me to bring you to tea on Sunday," said Jem Burne, smiling at the brilliance of his strategical move. The girls of his acquaintance would not have been so anxious to make the acquaintance of Mrs. Stafford, since they preferred to be considered paragons themselves, and not to bow down to such virtue in others. His mother had told him, in one of those agitating conferences he had endured at home, that if Mrs. Stafford approved of Diana, she could reassure herself that there was nothing to prevent her son's acquaintance with so dangerous a female.

"Then will you take me with you, if the Baroness allows it? I shall look forward to Sunday," said Diana ingenuously. "Now tell me about your mother."

Jem's face changed a little, for, to a good man, his mother is kept like a pearl of great price in his heart. "About my mother?" he said, with a touch of hesitation. "What about her?"

Over the gleaming white Square, he looked across to the whiter Palace, across the windows of which the emerald green shutters were closely barred. To and fro moved the sentry, in and out of a patch of sunlight, and Jem looked back again at Diana.

"My mother is the best woman in the world," he said. "I do not know whether you would call her beautiful or no, but to my mind she has a perfect face. She is not very strong, save in her love for me, which prevents me from doing any wrong in her eyes—which sometimes I think is a pity."

He broke off abruptly, for Diana's eyes were bright with sudden tears.

"I wish I knew her," she said. "If my mother had not died, how different my life would have been."

They were so close together, he and she, that it may be forgiven Jem Burne if he forgot for a moment they were not alone.

"I want you to know her," he said. "I told her all about you when I was home on leave."

The unsuspecting innocence of Diana never guessed that Mrs. Burne had jumped at once to the conclusion that Diana Ponsonby must be an adventuress in pursuit of Grey Lady Court and its master, and Jem was far too tender of heart to suggest any state of unwillingness on the part of his mother to receive her.

"I think there can be nothing worse than for a girl to lose her mother," said Diana again tremulously. "Sometimes, when I am not thinking of fairy stories resolutely to make me forget how sorry I am, I try and remember my mother, and think I can recall her soft hands, and her voice that never scolded me—never spoke with anything but silver sweetness."

"And it is so strange," said Jem again, "that just at the time when you love your mother most in your life perhaps, is the time when other people find her least

attractive—when age is beginning to touch her hair and mellow her heart.”

By every means in her power the Baroness had attempted to keep Cassell inside the guard-room, for she hailed the growing intimacy between Diana and Captain Burne with a gladness born of anxiety for her brother's prospects in life. But Cassell at last broke impatiently loose from her restraining chatter.

“You can prattle away to the boy here,” he said impatiently. “I see Mrs. Anson and her girl coming; and, by Jove! the sweet Molly would bore me to-night to tears.”

Mrs. Anson had spied from the street a party on the Main Guard, and knew that the ‘Westminsters’ were on guard. Mr. Hawtrey, who was an admirer of Molly's, waved a white gloved hand in shy greeting, and they loomed across the Square.

“Any one at home?” said Mrs. Anson, with heavy playfulness.

“Somehow,” said Felix Cassell, in a whisper as he strolled up to Diana, “I am guilty of wishing that that stout uninteresting person might stick in the stairs like the meat in a sausage skin! When a woman gets to that age—the age, I mean, of shining fatness and switchback figure—she ought to be smothered!”

“What would your wife say, if you possessed one, to hear your remark?” said Diana severely. “And pray, what about yourself when you reach the corresponding age of commonplace fatness? Would you like to think of yourself as being smothered at no very distant date, Major Cassell?”

The anger and astonishment written plain upon the face of his senior officer caused Jem Burne to turn suddenly and convulsively away. He had not been admitted to the private history of the feud between Diana and Cassell, but he felt that the girl had been too cruel.

"I owe you one for that, Miss Ponsonby," said Cassell, under his breath, "and I shall not forget it. A shrewish tongue is a dangerous possession for any woman, and you will realise it some day."

But Diana had moved away from him, and with a beating heart was pretending to occupy herself with arranging the roses at her waist, while the Ansons became absorbed in the group. Mrs. Anson was still talking as she came up.

"I wish to goodness that they would make the staircases of these places less dark and dirty! Molly, there's a whole cobweb on your hat—get Major Cassell to brush it off for you—he is so clever. What! is that the Baroness? Dear me! And what is this romantic history I have heard from Lady Lukin? And is this the young lady? Ah, my dear Miss Ponsonby, you must be everlastingly grateful to the claims of old friendship!"

She had taken Diana's hand in hers and was looking into her face, her own beaming with smiles. No one would ever have imagined that she had met Diana before, in the market among the fish and flower stalls. The slight figure in the white cloth gown with the silver belt, the sweeping feathers of the hat, the soft white fur that framed the delicious oval of her face—

here was a dangerous beauty to be propitiated now as a favourite of the higher powers that be. Lady Lukin had pronounced her opinion upon the romantic conditions surrounding the friendship between the Baroness and her protégée, and therefore Mrs. Anson was quite ready to approve of her.

"How do you do?" said Diana, blushing like the dawn, conscious of those hard appraising eyes upon her, that seemed as if they would read every secret of her young heart. The bruises upon her delicate skin, that Jane Harding's blows had left there, seemed to tingle, and Mrs. Anson ended her remarks suavely.

"I do congratulate you, my dear—I do indeed—on your escape from so unpleasant a situation. Molly, come here and make friends with Miss Ponsonby. I believe you are the same age; and really, I can see many points of resemblance between you."

Molly Anson disengaged herself from the cobweb and Major Cassell's hands, with a school-girl giggle. "Good gracious, mamma! I can't call her Miss Ponsonby; I shall have to call her Diana. Isn't she pretty and dainty? Why, I have been wanting a girl friend for ages: girls are either too busy here to make friends with other girls, or they think you want to catch their young men; but you won't think that, will you, dear?" and Diana found herself being enthusiastically kissed by a plump short little brunette in a red gown, with pretty pouting lips and dancing dark eyes, and the pertest little retroussé nose possible. She thought Molly adorable, and so apparently did Mr. Hawtrey, for he hung on the step behind her, balanced

on one foot, smiling feebly and unbuttoning his pipe-clayed gloves, till he overbalanced himself and fell back with a crash into the room, whereupon Molly laughed as if it was the best joke in the world.

"Diana can't quarrel with you about any young men," said the Baroness, unfurling a scarlet parasol, against which her ripe gold hair and vivid complexion seemed to take on a paler hue. "She has not got any admirers yet, because she has not been about anywhere. This is her first party of pleasure since she came to me,"

"And all Malta will very soon be raving at her feet—won't they, dear?" said Molly; and suddenly she put her arms round Diana's waist and kissed her.

The girl turned pale and trembled a little, then, conscious that all eyes were upon her, she pulled herself together. "Thank you, dear Molly," she said, in a low voice; "I do hope that we shall be friends." It was the first time for so long that any woman had wished to care for her spontaneously, that she felt grateful to Molly for restoring her self-respect. "It is so nice to be loved."

Happy gushing little Molly Anson would have drawn her new friend at once into a corner away from the men, to talk over the hundred and one things that schoolgirls love, but her mother was too quick for her. She had not brought her eldest daughter out to Malta at great expense, leaving six younger ones behind her in England, to allow her to sit in a corner and chatter about clothes and bonbons. Far other work had Molly to do, and before five minutes were

over, Mrs. Anson had beckoned her out with a stern hand.

"Do listen, Molly. Here is Major Cassell propounding the most delightful plan; he wants you to join a week-end party he is making, to Gozo. Who are you asking, Major Cassell? The Baroness, of course, and Miss Ponsonby and my Molly and yourself and Captain Burne and Mr. Hawtrey? Delightful, I am sure, and you are engaging the whole hotel at Rabato, so that you may be able to ensure a comfortable state of affairs? Ah, dear me! what it is to be rich! Yes, of course Molly shall come, my dear Baroness; she will be only too delighted that you should honour her by asking her; and I am sure she wishes the manœuvres were over, as I do, so that you might start at once."

"I am afraid it cannot be for another week," returned Major Cassell pleasantly enough, edging away imperceptibly towards the door. "The Baroness will tell you all our plans later on. Ethel, I must go back now; I promised Feun to meet him at the Club," and Felix Cassell was gone, with one backward glance cast almost reluctantly at Diana.

The girl enticed him—drew him, with coils of steel, so that he thought of her waking and sleeping. There was a trick of pathos about her mouth, a little catch of the upper lip between her pearly teeth that made the lower one look like a rosy cherry with the dew upon it.

Waking and sleeping—waking and sleeping, Cassell had long ago lost all control of his emotions, save outwardly. He did not realise that this mental

condition had been slowly growing upon him since he had suffered from sunstroke in India fifteen years earlier. He had gone on sick leave then, and had vanished from sight for the space of a few months. The doctors had asked his relations if there was any trace of insanity in his family, and his relations had answered firmly and furiously in the negative. They knew, and one other doctor knew, that far away, hidden in the heart of a private country asylum, a poor old man had raved out his life in a padded cell. The poor old man was Cassell's father, but there are some skeletons that are never allowed to emerge from the decent obscurity of the family cupboard, and insanity is one of them.

The setting sun was shining upon Diana Ponsonby's tall slight figure, turning the ruddy copper masses of her hair to tawny gold. The weakness that she had inherited from her forefathers was not one to offend the eye or to affect the radiant health that was her portion. The spirit of her ancestors shone in her sparkling eager eyes and in the vivacious charm of her manner. She had never been tempted to sin, as her father had sinned; for she had never been thrown in the way of the gambling habit as yet. Cassell knew something of her father's history, and with open eyes he was intending to thrust her straight into the very heart of temptation; therefore on him would rest the onus of responsibility, so far as her future was concerned.

He was not sorry for her, as he looked back at her from the street, where she stood with Molly chattering

at her side. He was only bitterly sorry for himself, and bitterly impatient over the delay to his hopes.

“Oh, you dear thing!” said Molly, snuggling up against Diana like a happy young kitten. “How delicious it will be to have you for a friend, and how adorable it is of the Baroness to ask me to her weekend party, and without mamma, too—because then I shan’t have to make tracks for Major Cassell all day long. Diana, I think he has a nose like a bottle-nosed whale, don’t you? and his eyes look as if they were starting out of his head when he wears such tight collars round his short neck. I know; he is like the wolf in Red Riding Hood when he looks at girls. ‘All the better to eat you with, my dear,’ he says in his fat voice.”

But Diana did not wish to talk about Felix Cassell, and Molly wandered off, like a bee in quest of honey, in search of other topics of conversation; and Diana listened to her, well pleased to learn how foolish and how innocent girlhood might be, as personified by the character of Molly Anson.

“What are you laughing at, Diana?” said the ‘Baroness von Poppenheim’ crossly, as she lay curled up on the sofa after dinner that night, smoking her ninth cigarette. “If you have got a joke, pray share it, because nothing bores me so much as the crackling of thorns under a pot—which is the mirth of fools.”

Diana looked up penitently. “Dear Ethel, I am so sorry,” she said, “It was horribly rude of me, but Molly Anson said to me to-night such a silly thing—‘I am just so happy, I could burst like a soap-bubble

now I have got you for a friend ; and if I did burst, all my prismatic colours, which would be reflections of your copper-coloured hair and your blue eyes, would float all over the world and reproduce little Dianas everywhere.' ”

“She is very enthusiastic is Miss Molly,” said Ethel, with an indulgent smile. “Take my advice, Diana, and make all the women friends you can in the world—even before the men, because, if you get the women against you, you may just as well shut up shop.”

“I hope every one will like me,” said Diana quickly.

“My dear, looking at your face and figure, I should say that it was extremely unlikely,” returned Ethel drily. “Ring the bell for Bertha, and we will go to bed early, to get ready for to-morrow’s dissipation.”

CHAPTER VII

THE DANCE

"I have clung to nothing,
Loved a nothing—nothing felt
Or seen, but a great dream."—*Keats*.

"I AM frightened, Ethel," said Diana suddenly. "Supposing no one—no one at all—asks me to dance?"

They had arrived, with a clever dramatic sense, at the right moment in the evening at the Palace, for the crowd of guests had all crushed into the ball-room, and their arrival coincided with the second extra waltz. The ladies' dressing-room was empty, save for the prim English maids who belonged to the Governor's household, and who, in spite of having uncloaked two hundred ladies, could not resist a glance of admiration at the present recipients of their attention. Ethel was dressed in black, of a filmy description that set off her yellow hair and white skin. Her brilliant paste ornaments passed in the eyes of Lady Lukin's guests for the family diamonds of the von Poppenheims; and she wore an Order on the breast of her gown, of rubies and emeralds, that had an Arcadian or a Beneventura history, connected

with a dead king who could not rise to contradict it. Her black gown had been a touch of genius, for it served as a perfect foil to Diana, who was to astonish Malta that night with her loveliness.

She stood now in the middle of the room, dressed in a shimmering gown of silver that rippled where the light fell upon it, as though it was a cleft opal. She wore her own string of pearls round her neck, and Ethel had exclaimed in wonder at the beauty of them, and at the cleverness that had hidden them from Mrs. Harding's eyes. The clasp was a wonderfully intricate affair, with initials entwined in small diamonds on a blue enamel heart. Her little feet, in their silver shoes, were eager to dance, and yet shy of attempting steps that she had not practised for so long and might perhaps have forgotten. Excitement had brightened her eyes and brought unwonted colour to her cheeks, and the Baroness, looking critically at her, drew a long breath of satisfaction.

"I think somehow that you will have plenty of partners," she said. "Come along, dearie."

Ethel was clever enough to know that should she fail to impress the social world by her own appearance, the chaperon of a successful beauty would be always in demand, and to-night Diana looked like a white lily, and her timidity lent her an additional air of stately dignity that completed the impression of the lily.

Holding her silver-spangled fan very firmly in her hand, she stepped along the slippery gallery and out into the hall where the men were waiting, lounging

about in their brilliant uniforms among the figures of the old knights in armour. In the distance the band was playing one of Strauss' dreamy waltzes, and her feet seemed to beat out the tune in answer to the strings. The old life of long ago was calling to her, and the little feet that had walked so dreary a way of late were set once again on a primrose path of dalliance.

Men were waiting for their favourite partners, besieging the programmes of the pretty women. Mrs. Stafford had a little crowd round her just inside the ball-room door; and there was Molly Anson, rather red and shy, in white muslin, with an attendant 'middy,' in a tall white collar, close at hand. Mrs. Anson was hustling her along like an anxious hen, for she had not brought her out to Malta to dance with midshipmen, and Diana was sure, by the tremor of her aigrette, that she was informing her daughter of this fact in an undertone.

They were in the big reception-room now, and Diana was shaking hands with a thin white-haired man with an Order on his breast, and then with a shadowy grey-haired woman with fine diamonds and pathetic eyes, and knew that she was admitted into society once again by the touch of their hands. She could hear Sir Abraham Lukin say, in a husky whisper, to the attendant A.D.C.: "What a pretty girl!" and she could see the A.D.C. bending forward with his lips close to the Deputy Governor's deaf ear, ready with a slight outline of her history. Then she had passed on in the wake of the triumphant Ethel, who was dexterously avoiding all the eyes she did not

wish to see, and as cleverly meeting glances that seemed to her desirable.

Plain girls, standing in rows like slaves in the market, were waiting for men to ask them to dance, with a consciously nervous air as their pretty dashing sisters were whirled away by a varied succession of scarlet-coated men. Diana thought for one instant of panic that she might perhaps become one of the waiting multitude, as she moved with her chaperon close to the dais where the gilded chair of state stood in the ball-room, and waited in silence. The light from the crystal chandelier above her head fell on her gown and turned her to a glittering, shimmering figure of stars and mist, and quite suddenly she realised that every eye was upon her.

“They are all remembering Jane Harding and the ‘Cosmopolitan’ Hotel,” she said bitterly to herself. “They are all saying: ‘What right have these feet, that have trodden the way of shame and cruelty, to stand here; or those hands, that have worked like a slave in washing floors and beating up eggs, to hold a fan?’”

At the thought she lifted her beautiful head in sudden pride, for she did not know that every man was asking his neighbour for some one to introduce him to this paragon among women. She could have caught up her shining gown and run away out of the ball-room at the top of her speed; she could have sunk to the ground and shed bitter tears of shame for the old memories that hurt and stung as cruelly as Jane Harding’s stick had done; but she looked instead into

the face of Major Cassell, smiling pleasantly enough at her side.

"I did not see you at first," he said. "I have brought enough partners to fill your programme three times over, Miss Ponsonby, only you must let me have the supper dances and the extra," and Diana yielded up her programme thankfully, and saw him write 'F.C.' in his neat careful script. "I must congratulate you on your gown," he said, with an approving glance that he veiled quickly. "I have heard half the room asking your name already."

Oh, delightful man! The shadows of the unhappy thoughts fled from Diana like evil fairies under the wand of a magician, and she laughed happily.

"Don't you know that you are the success of the evening? And are you not aware that my hair is turning grey in the effort to pick out the most desirable partners from a throng of young men eager to dance with you?" he said, and treasured her glance of gratitude.

After all, Major Cassell was very kind; he had been waiting for them; he seemed to know every one in the room. Dowagers in velvet and diamonds beamed upon him; sparkling eyes asked him for dances; busy A.D.C.'s, in their black coats with bright blue facings, all had a word for him; and Diana warmed towards him suddenly.

Jem Burne arrived late and her programme was full, but she had kept a dance for him and gave it with a little toss of her head and a laugh as he begged her for a second.

"You ought to have been earlier," she said, feeling her power pleurably.

"The delay was quite unavoidable," said Jem sadly. "I had to see the colonel on mess business;" and she crossed out the initials against the next dance, and gave him the second that he asked for, with a sudden sense of wonder at herself.

Cassell had watched her closely as she stood at Ethel's side. He had secured partners for his sister as well, although there was little difficulty as to choice, for the fame of the Baroness's hospitable intentions and amusing wit had been bruited about the island.

"Our plan is working well, my dear Ethel," he said. "The intoxication of admiration is going to your head like wine. How will you ever face Excelsior Mansions again?"

He turned as an A.D.C. came up and laid a hand upon his arm.

"My dear fellow, the Governor wants you and your friends for the Lancers—the Royal ones, you know. Introduce me to Miss Ponsonby."

The A.D.C. did not say that old Sir Abraham had declared: "By Jove, Matwin, fetch me that girl in silver; she shall dance opposite to me. I like to look at her; and, I vow, I won't dance with old Mother Hathaway to-night. Give me the Baroness who has a sense of humour and a sharp tongue, and bury Admiralty House and the Dockyard!" and therefore, Mercury, with winged heels in the shape of Captain Matwin, had flown to do the august bidding.

So Diana owed this honour, too, to Felix Cassell!

He was careful to impress it upon her with glance and whispered word. She would be the most envied woman in the room that night; she was extraordinarily lucky to start with such good friends. She went back to the august circle on his arm, noticing as she went how popular a man he seemed to be, since he knew every one. Money is power; audacity is strength in society; and Diana was learning her lesson that night. Jem Burne was not in the Royal Lancers; and if she had been only known to him, she would not have earned those envious glances from the watching men and women as she took her place among the elect few and smiled at Sir Abraham, who danced like an elephant waltzing.

“Brilliant sight, eh?—brilliant sight,” said Sir Abraham gallantly, as their hands met in the first figure. “Pretty faces, eh? but none so pretty as yours, Miss Ponsonby, or as your gown, either.”

Diana laughed, and gave him an upward glance through her long lashes—a glance that she was just learning from the result of observation, only other women had not the same long curled black lashes. Her little silver slippers skimmed along by the side of Sir Abraham’s awkward gouty toes, and Cassell watched her from his place by the side of one of the Maltese judge’s wives among the select sixteen. How wonderful she was, taking her place in the world again as though she had never left it! How well she danced, too, with the daintiness of a fairy; and how pleased old Sir Abraham was with her, as he cocked his head round like a courting turkey!

Cassell answered the remark of the judge's wife with some abstraction, but as she was fat and red, and Diana was white and slim, there was perhaps small wonder in the abstraction.

It is extremely doubtful whether Felix Cassell had ever learned even to spell the word love, although he was attracted so strongly by Diana Ponsonby. The feeling he experienced now was spelt in twelve letters, and most men call it self-interest, but Diana knew nothing of this.

She was handed on to the dais for a few moments by an enthusiastic A.D.C., and stood talking to the Governor and delighting him with the fresh innocence of her mind.

"She's about the prettiest thing that has been out here for a long time, eh, Lady Lukin?" said Sir Abraham, with a pleased intonation to his wife. "I am not so sure about the Baroness myself; her looks are just a bit too remarkable. I don't intend to come off in the wash, eh? But the girl is a beauty."

"Oh, my dear Abraham, the Baroness has been most kind and generous, and has promised to speak to the girls at our next Club meeting," said Lady Lukin, much shocked.

"Bless the girls!" said Sir Abraham explosively. "I know a woman of the world when I see one, my dear; but then we must make great allowances for foreigners, as you know."

It was Cassell's lot to hear these remarks, and he moved away with a touch of uneasiness. He was not afraid that Sir Abraham was in any way suspicious

of Ethel's credentials, but he must warn her to be extremely careful to make no slip in her behaviour. It was also evident that Diana was rising in value as an asset in the eyes of the social world, and therefore it would be well to secure a firm hold over her, since, if his own grasp on society failed, she must help him to retain it.

"My dear Abraham!" said Lady Lukin, in pale disapproval; "I do *not* approve of strong language."

But Sir Abraham had turned his deaf ear to his wife, and sometimes it is very convenient to possess a deaf side.

The band played dance after dance through the long brilliant evening, that wore itself away slowly enough to Cassell. The bridge points in the card-room were not tempting to him, and he had smoked more cigarettes than he cared to reflect upon in the snug A.D.C.'s room before the supper extras began. Now and again he had returned to the ball-room to watch Diana dancing, light and elusive as a ray of moonlight. He had done his duty by the matrons of any importance also, and had exchanged a few words with his radiant sister; but all the evening the thought of the supper dances possessed him like a background of delight. He was going to put his arms round Diana—he was going to dance with her—and there was much that he had to tell her, for unless he made his claim to her generosity good, she would be escaping from his influence. The note on which he must dwell to-night was gratitude for favours conferred; there were other notes on which he might linger later if

Diana's power grew too strong for him, or there were definite signs of rebellion.

The night was a rare joy to Diana. She had not dreamed that life could contain such exquisite moments. Her dances with Jem Burne had caught her up into the seventh heaven, and indeed all the men who had been her partners had seemed to choose charming things to say to her. She had been complimented on her dancing by the Governor's staff, and if her head was a little turned by these attentions, there was nothing at which to be surprised. Burne had introduced her to Mrs. Stafford, and that lady had talked to her for half the length of a dance, and had won her young heart entirely. There were children in Mrs. Stafford's household, and Diana was to be made free of the nursery whenever she wished for a romp; and finally, with a smile the two women parted, torn asunder by conflicting partners, but Diana had a new adoration in her heart.

"She is charming," she said, with a little sigh, as she stood sipping lemonade at the buffet. "I like her restful eyes—I think she has peace within her, as well as happiness without."

"Mrs. Stafford has her troubles, too," said Jem, in a low voice, "only she never speaks of them. Her eldest boy is slowly dying of some obscure wasting disease that originated with a fall from his nurse's arms as a baby. Much of her day and some of her nights are spent by his spinal couch, but she never forgets her duty to her husband's position, or to Stafford himself."

"She is a dear," said Diana, with conviction; "and when I talked to her, I felt good somehow."

It was not in the scheme of Ethel's duty, as laid down for her by Felix Cassell, to allow friendships with a Mrs. Stafford, or idyllic tête-à-têtes with a Jem Burne, and Ethel was at her elbow, on her brother's arm, as she stood there.

"My dear Diana, you have torn your gown; let me take you to my brother's room," said the Baroness, and Diana felt herself swept away by gentle force and detained until the enticing strains of a "two-step" brought her out again to find Cassell at the door.

"My dance, I think?" he said to Diana savagely, conscious of the fall in her face. "We will dance a little and then go down to supper."

"Perhaps our steps will not suit," said Diana perversely.

This heavily built, red-faced man, shorter by half an inch than herself, was hardly an ideal partner after the tall handsome rifleman with whom she had been dancing. There had been a naval officer, too, with a face like an Apollo, and he had wanted this very dance that she was now to waste on Cassell.

"Oh yes, I think our steps will suit admirably."

There was just the same note in Cassell's voice that had once frightened her before as he swung her round. His arms about her waist seemed to paralyse her. His breath, so close to her cheek, filled her with annoyance, but he danced admirably, and she was too just to deny it.

"With a little more practice," said Cassell, skilfully steering her into the passage, "you would dance quite nicely, Miss Ponsonby."

There was a cool deliberation in his speech that took Diana's breath away. Once again she felt like an animal trapped in a cage, beating helpless hands against the bars, calling out on a pitiless heaven to help her.

"You ought to be very grateful to my cousin for the chance she has given you of such pleasure that you would never have dreamed of enjoying otherwise," continued Cassell gravely.

"Oh, I *am* grateful—I *am* grateful." The fluttered breath came sobbingly between the rosy lips, and Major Cassell, with astute skilfulness, turned in the direction of the supper-room, and secured a little table by the window that opened into the courtyard. He ate very little himself, but the champagne was excellent, and he plied Diana's glass and plate, and watched her eating, like a fluttering bird.

"You and Miss Molly Anson are carrying off the laurels of the evening, I believe," he said deliberately, when the menu was nearly exhausted. "But your gown is far and away the prettiest in the room. I thought it would be when I designed it."

"You thought it would be?" faltered Diana. "How did you know about it?"

"I both designed and paid for it," said Major Cassell slowly. "Shall we come and sit out for a bit and talk it all over?"

Like a girl in a dream Diana rose and put her hand

on the green coat sleeve in silence, and they passed out through the crowded room.

"By Jove! is Cassell caught at last?" said one handsome young subaltern to his partner. "A case of Beauty and the Beast apparently."

"She is a lucky girl," said Mrs. Anson, with sincere annoyance; "but then, those quiet, innocent-looking young women are more subtle than any one thinks; and I was convinced the first time I saw her that Miss Ponsonby was a minx."

Cassell went up the corridor and turned out to the right into a garden court that had been roofed over for the night, and was lighted only by fairy lamps at discreet intervals. Screens were dotted about here and there, and behind each screen a murmur of voices made itself heard. Diana caught a glimpse of a pink frock in very close juxtaposition to a blue and gold uniform, and started back with a little cry of dismay.

"If you will follow my directions, I will bring you to a safe sitting-out place where we shall disturb no one," said Cassell suavely; "and please note that I do not expect you to share my chair."

But his seat was very close to her own when they sat down behind the black screen with its flight of golden swallows, and Diana sat up very straight and held her fan gripped so tightly in her white-gloved hand that one of the slender sticks snapped.

"Don't do that," said Cassell again softly. "It is extravagant of you, for the fan was an expensive one."

"Why did you—why did you buy the things for me," said Diana, in sudden desperation, "when you

knew that I would not have taken them had I known you were paying for them?"

"I suppose," said Cassell, with supreme slowness, "that it is impossible for me to regret anything in which I may have offended you? Ah, yes—I can see as much by your eyes; anyhow, you will give me credit for a profound pity for your condition—a pity deep enough for me to entreat my cousin to befriend you, and to send her a big cheque to cover the expense of your gowns. Ethel loves you for yourself now, but I know that one word from me as to any attitude of base ingratitude on your part would vex her very sorely—would, perhaps, change her own attitude towards you. She might find—that she had no need of a companion—in England."

The half-concealed threat in his words took away her breath for the moment, but every instinct within her rose and rebelled against his attitude.

"I am not ungrateful," she said faintly; "but you are wrong to talk like this to me. I am not entirely helpless; I could get a situation as governess or companion now."

"You mean, since you possess the outfit with which my cousin has provided you—Ethel has been a stepping-stone to your ambitions?"

"I would pay her for them. Every penny I earned should be given to her till the debt was wiped away."

"You could do that certainly; but," said Cassell again, with fine deliberation, "you have now tasted the delights of conquest and admiration; how would it appear to you if you had to adopt another position,

and that one of servitude? Do you suppose that governesses or companions are invited to dances at the Palace or anywhere else? Do you suppose that you would receive the same consideration that you enjoy now? And do you know that your outfit cost more than a hundred pounds? How do you know, if Ethel turned you out to-morrow, disgusted by your ungrateful attitude, that the whole of Malta would not turn their backs upon you? Do you suppose that the mothers of girls plainer than yourself would hold out a helping hand to you?"

Diana lifted her hands to cover her eyes, and burst into sudden tears. There would be nothing but the 'Cosmopolitan' Hotel and the tender mercies of Jane Harding before her, for ever and ever. And she was afraid to contemplate such a future. She would far rather die than go back to the old life again.

"Don't cry," said Cassell suddenly. "Don't cry, Diana; I can't bear to see it!"

She checked her tears at his words, and felt swiftly that the grip of her power over this man revived her.

"You are so beautiful and so much admired, Diana," said Cassell. "Will you not be friends with me—I ask for nothing more—and remain as the belle of the Malta season, with new gowns for the asking, and every wish gratified before it is expressed? Won't you do this, Diana? I am asking nothing of you in return but just gratitude and forgiveness."

It seemed so easy to be friends with this man—to be ordinarily grateful to him, ordinarily polite—when by

so doing a veritable Pandora's box of beautiful clothes and happy days would be hers for the asking.

"I am very grateful," she said, with a pathetic catch in her breath. "I am sorry I seemed to be otherwise; you are very kind to me."

"Then," said Cassell, taking her hand, "I ask nothing more than that you should be generous to me."

The twilight of fairy lamps that was about them prevented her from seeing his face, but she thought that he smiled curiously.

"Oh, I will—I will," she answered, and sat silent for a moment.

He was touching her hand, and a strange magnetic sensation seemed to pass from him and throb through every nerve of her being from head to heel. Diana shivered a little. He had awoke in her a strange feeling that attracted her towards him, and yet frightened her with this undercurrent of unknown emotion. She had endured his touch passively; she had forged a new link in the strange chain that bound them together. And although no other word passed between them, a new and wiser Diana Ponsonby passed out into the ball-room five minutes later on the arm of Felix Cassell.

CHAPTER VIII

ILLUSION

"Imagination is the one window in the prison-house of the flesh, through which the soul can see the proud images of eternity."

"WELL, I suppose they married and lived happily ever afterwards," said Diana, with her head on her hand, looking earnestly away through the nursery window.

It was the future of Cinderella that was under discussion by Mrs. Stafford's nursery party in the gloomy colonel's quarters in Floriana. The Sunday tea-party was continuing its levity downstairs, but Diana had been inveigled away by Jack and Jill, and she was now sitting by the invalid Roland's side, with his hot hand in her palm, weaving fairy stories for the beguiling of his dark hours. He had never felt so interested, never felt his pain less than at that moment, and the brilliance of his eyes, the eager look of his parted lips had delighted Mrs. Stafford when she paid a brief visit to the nursery.

Diana had learned for herself the sorrow that compassed the life of the woman who always gave a smile to the world. Roland, twelve years old, with his white face and twisted back, was the dearest possession she owned, and she was to lose him before many months

were over. The doctor had signed his death-warrant, and even now there were many days when he had to be kept under morphia, and when his mother could not smile. Like the Spartan boy with the fox under his cloak, Mrs. Stafford went about her daily round, and not even her husband was allowed to guess the sorrow that was her portion day and night. Jack and Jill, the handsome twins, healthy, yellow-headed children, did not hold the same place in her heart, for a mother loves that which needs protection and care far more passionately than the hardy denizens of the home.

“Oh, but what a dull ending!” cried Roland, panting with eagerness. “Just to get married! Didn’t the Prince have any more adventures? And Cinderella might have had another visit from the fairy godmother, and perhaps got taken to fairyland. Oh, how dull!”

There was an unexpected laugh from the door, and Diana rose to her feet, blushing deeply.

“You are a regular heretic, Roland,” said Jem Burne, with mock gravity. “Now I should call matrimony one of the most exciting adventures of human life, with plenty of unexpected corners in it and blank walls. What do you think, Miss Ponsonby?”

“I don’t know that I ever lent it a thought,” said the girl gravely. “But, Roland, if you will think out the whole subject of Cinderella’s adventures and tell me your views upon them on Sunday, I will try what I can do to weave them into shape.”

“But on Sunday you will be at Gozo, and Captain Burne, too. Oh dear, what a pity!”

"I am afraid I can't agree with you, Roland," said Jem Burne. "It is going to be a very happy visit, somehow, I think, and we will bring you back something from the island to cheer you up."

"I shall call it the island of sorrowful sighs; and if you read your Homer, you will find out why," said Diana suddenly. "Ask mother to tell you what Ulysses did, and about the nymph Calypso—I wish I could remember the words in the 'Odyssey.'"

"You surprising person!" said Burne, under his breath. "Do you mean that you are Greek-learned? You always told me you knew nothing."

"I know nothing that is of any importance to me," said Diana gravely. "Once, when my father had gone to the West Coast of Africa where I could not possibly follow him, I was left at home in England with a very old clergyman and his wife, who are now both dead. For one year he taught me in the way that Ruskin tells us true education lies, for I learned nothing at all that could in the future be of any commercial value to me, but what I principally read with Mr. Moon were the two books of Homer and all the writings of Ruskin, and I was only twelve years old; but I never forgot what I had learned, though afterwards there was not much time to keep it up."

Diana was talking more to herself than to her companion, for her mind had bridged the space of the seven years, and she was a child again in the quiet of the country rectory where no excitement ever came, where she saw no new faces, and where her father's letters were the only landmarks of the passing days, and

where, between the Bible and Homer, her simple thoughts had been thrown into a land of straight living and honourable impulses, and thus nourished for future days of darkness when there should be no light within her, save that which those two books had shed unconsciously.

Burne watched her curiously. "All this time I have never guessed that you were a learned young lady," he said. "I like somehow to think of you reading your Homer instead of modern French novels—it corresponds with my idea of you."

"I am the most ignorant person," said Diana, with a little laugh. "I know nothing but useless knowledge. Now, if I could speak French or play the piano well, how different life would be!"

"Then you would be just like the ordinary girls of everyday life, who use their French for making the acquaintance of modern literature, and their piano for playing the last comic opera music. You would not be Diana the woodland nymph—the elusive creature of the woods and groves."

"How silly you are!" said Jill Stafford decidedly. "You always spoil things, Captain Jem. We didn't want you in the nursery to-day. You send away the fairies when you talk to Diana; she lives with them always."

"Poor Jack and Jill! Your mother sent me to take the fairy bringer away; she says it is time for us to go home again," said Burne solemnly; and amidst a chorus of disapproval Diana vanished, with solemn promises as to future meetings, the children clinging to her till the last moment.

“You certainly are the most delightful person in a nursery,” said Mrs. Stafford, as the girl bade her farewell. “I wish I had found you before the Baroness.”

Diana looked at her wistfully. Mrs. Stafford, graceful in blue and gold, with her restful background of sombre Italian furniture, seemed to her to be a very desirable friend, and yet there were moments now when Diana, fresh from some new social triumph, would not have hailed the prospect of being a nursery governess with any thrill of rapture. She had found for herself the delights of freedom, and before she forfeited that again, many waters must flow under the bridge.

Ethel was an apt teacher in the training of young girls. She knew every shade of Diana's character to a nicety, and played upon her impulses with the cleverness of a Kubelik on his instrument. She recognised the crucial moment for flattery; she knew just the instant when absolute freedom was necessary, or when a caress would bind Diana's grateful heart closer to her. And Diana responded by unconsciously absorbing the train of thought desired by her teacher, and like a supple willow tree was easily bent into the shape necessary for that clever schemer's purpose. A young mind is so easily bent and twisted into the shape that its leader wishes, and Ethel and her brother, among all the sins for which they would have to answer at the Day of Judgment, would have no worse record to show than the wilful attempt to soil the integrity of a heart that had known no stain before; and therefore it was that with perfect truthfulness Diana looked at Mrs. Stafford

and said, with a touch of sadness, "I am very fond of children, but perhaps I should not have had enough patience to be with them always."

"No; your social talents would be lost in the nursery, unless it was your own," said Mrs. Stafford, with gentle banter, and Diana laughing, bade her farewell.

"But don't you intend to go home, Miss Ponsonby?" said Captain Burne, as Diana paused and hesitated at the corner of the Granaries.

"I think that I will go to the cemetery," said the girl softly. "I did not go there last Sunday."

Burne understood without a word that she wished to visit her father's grave, and turned at her side. "Would you allow me to go with you?" he said gravely. "Believe me, I should feel it an honour."

All that gossip could say of poor Captain Henry Ponsonby, Burne had heard repeated in the past week, and very little of it had been to his credit, but at least he had owned the power to hold his daughter's heart, and therefore could not have been as black as malicious tongues would have painted him.

Diana looked up into his face, and he saw that her lips were quivering. "I should be so glad if you would come with me," she said; "and I think father would have been glad, too, that—that—a soldier like you—came and stood over his grave, because no one ever visits it but me."

There was a kiosk of flowers still open in the Square, and Burne paused and filled her hands with roses—buds and blooms of purest white, and deep red like the

heart of a martyr. "We must not go empty handed," he said; and she thanked him with a smile.

There had been no attempt to beautify Henry Ponsonby's grave in any way, and the grass had grown long and unkempt under the trees that shadowed the mound. Diana had brought what flowers she could, and in rude fashion had scratched upon a piece of slate, fashioned like a cross, her father's name and the date of his death. She had written there also a text, and Jem felt a lump in his throat when he read it: "There shall be no more tears."

No one but Diana knew the secret of that death-bed, just as no one but Diana had really loved and believed in Henry Ponsonby to the utmost end of all things. Once a brave soldier, he lay there put away in a forgotten corner of the cemetery, and out of kindness men were silent when his name was mentioned, since there was little to say of him that was good—and men are kind where the dead are concerned.

Diana knelt very simply by the grave, and began to lay her roses down one by one till the grass was starred with light and perfume. Burne watched her in silence, for there are moments in life when even the commonplace and the disagreeable are rapt into greatness, and when those moments come to women as beautiful as Diana, they bear their impressions of sublimity.

"I wish I could have put up a stone to his memory—a little cross," said the girl, hurrying to get in front of her tears, with a sobbing catch in her breath, "but they cost so much; and when I have left Malta, there

will be no one to lay fresh flowers over him. There is a Maltese cab-driver whom I can ask, and who is grateful to me because once I helped him when he was hurt—perhaps he will sometimes remember. You see, I am going away to live with a rich woman in her beautiful country house, and I shall feel as though I had left my dead far away in very lonely poverty.”

“I will ask the keeper of the cemetery to-day, and he will tend the grave for you; I know him,” said Burne mendaciously, feeling in his pocket for the available amount of his small change. He was rewarded for his untruthfulness by the brilliant smile that lighted up Diana’s face and drove back her tears.

“Thank you—oh, thank you,” she said. “How good you are! And I believe if the dead know what is going on about them, father will thank you, too. Somehow I can talk to you about things that lie very deep down in my heart, and that I have never felt able to express before. Father and I were so much to one another—always. I knew that he was weak—that he was in some things not very wise perhaps; but he was never wicked—oh, believe me, he was never wicked, whatever people may say.”

Her very earnestness appealed to him with the conviction of her innocence, even if it could not establish in his mind that of the dead man. “I do believe you,” he said. “I am sure that any man who called you his daughter could never be wicked,” and so Henry Ponsonby was white-washed truthfully and untruthfully at the same moment, and if he, being dead, could have heard his daughter’s words, it would

have been the most bitter moment of his reckless life, since to realise that it is too late to earn the good opinion of those we love is to begin the dreary alphabet of remorse.

Diana and Burne came out of the cemetery side by side. There were surging at the man's lips words of love that he kept back with a great effort, since he felt that this was not the moment for them. With all a man's exquisite sense of fitness he had planned to ask Diana to be his wife on the following day, when he was to be Ethel's guest at a lunch-picnic at Citta Vecchia. To-day he would be taking Diana at a disadvantage, since old memories had softened her too deeply. She might refuse him out of sheer surprise, or accept him out of bewilderment. He feared that she was not ready for his love as yet, since the unconsciousness of her glance had never failed when she met his eyes. His mother would be very sad if he married Diana, for Mrs. Burne had great ideas for her son's future wife; but he knew her well enough to be sure that she would put aside all private feeling in view of his happiness should that be concerned, and he had no doubt he could persuade her that such was the case. Diana's father might have been a scamp, but a man does not marry his father-in-law; and he would find Diana's other relations and compel them to acknowledge her. Her position, too, as the Baroness von Poppenheim's adopted daughter gave her a pleasant status in society that his mother would be certain to appreciate.

It seemed to him to-day that a quiet understanding

existed between the two of them, and that he was no mere impetuous young man pleading for her love, but a quiet calculating individual who had weighed the future in the balance and found it, if a little short in weight, at any rate, the only future for himself.

They had crossed the drawbridge before the *Porte des Bombes* before Diana spoke again, and it appeared as though she were struggling with thoughts that were quite alien to his own, so that he had done wisely in supposing that she was in no mood for love-making.

"Captain Burne, you will think me very foolish, I am afraid, but can you tell me why my father left his regiment so suddenly? I have never troubled about it before—it seemed somehow to be all part of a life where he and I were always together, with the whole world against us; but I think to-night that I should like to know the truth."

They were passing under a lamp in the street at the moment, and Diana turned her earnest eyes upon his face. She was so lovely in her youth and in her confidence that Burne felt his heart beat more quickly, but dismay stilled his sense of love as he realised the full nature of her demand. There had been a reason why Captain Ponsonby had been obliged to leave the *Stewart Highlanders*, and that reason had not been unconnected with the mess accounts. But Jem Burne, with a passionate sense that in this case at least the innocent should not suffer for the guilty, shut deaf ears to any memory of rumours that might have assailed them.

"I believe," he said deliberately, "that your father

had never got on well with his commanding officer. I know heaps of cases of the same description; men have to be so full of tact nowadays—so full of hypocrisy, perhaps—or they are landed in the scrap heap. The motto of every soldier ought to be to-day: 'Make friends with the mammon of unrighteousness, or otherwise with the powers that be.'"

He had committed himself so gaily, so easily to the lie, that Diana, believing him thoroughly, drew a long breath of relief.

"Oh, how glad I am that there was never really anything—anything definite. You do not know how happy you have made me."

It had been worth the deception, Burne told himself, seeing the leap of gladness in her eyes.

"Now, how foolish I have been not to ask you before—to have tormented myself, just because of a chance word that I remember my father having let fall. If I had only asked you sooner, I should have been spared a great deal of trouble; but somehow, when I knew that your regiment and the 'Stewarts' had been together in Cairo, I felt too frightened to ask you."

"How strange that you should feel frightened of me," said Burne hastily.

"And I have woke sometimes in the night, when things always seem at the worst, and have imagined that here lay the reason that I had no friends. And you know, too, what silly things girls fancy. I thought that I should never have a home of my own—that I could never marry any man if I was going to bring a stain to his family."

The innocence of her talk touched him deeply, for he knew that she had forgotten to whom she was speaking.

“How foolish of you!” he answered cheerily; “and you have been tormenting yourself with a perfect bogy of impossibility. Take my advice and think no more of such follies; weave your old childish thoughts of fairy-story life and fill your mind with them, for they drive out all those troublesome and false ideas, and remember—Diana——”

Up in Strada Mezzodi there was a little crowd of people hurrying home to dress for dinner, and they were no longer alone, but she looked up surprised at her name on his lips, and read something in his face that frightened her for the moment. She was not prepared to meet love just then, and almost unconsciously she put out her hand to thrust it away from her.

“Don’t tell me anything more now,” she said faintly. “I don’t feel as if I could bear anything serious to-night.”

They were close to the door of the flat now, and she hurried forward and rang the bell.

“We shall meet to-morrow,” he said, with an effort to regain his self-control. “We are all going out to Citta Vecchia, I believe.”

Diana’s eyes shone in the twilight. “What a lovely expedition it will be!” she said gaily. “Do you know I have begun to think that I have quite misunderstood Major Cassell—he seems to be always thinking of what will please people. He really planned

the picnic to-morrow because I told him that I had never seen the catacombs up at Citta Vecchia."

For just the space of a heart-beat Burne wished that he had never held even a passing brief for Felix Cassell. Young love thrives apace on jealousy, and Cassell had the entrée to his cousin's flat, and could therefore see Diana at any time.

"Yes, he is good-natured," he answered drily, and Diana, with a girl's sense of mischief restored to her by the knowledge that the man who admired her was jealous for no reason in earth or heaven, recognised the note in his voice.

"Oh, I quite admire Major Cassell now; I quite love him," she said, with an exquisite ripple of laughter in her voice, and nodding good-night to him she ran indoors, while Jem went to the Club, consumed with a burning sense of jealousy that followed him far into the night, pursuing him through every mouthful that he ate or drank, lying down with him in his bed and haunting him in his rising up again. He knew Felix Cassell's character too well to care to hear his name taken so lightly on Diana's lips, and he wished that he had not been rash enough to praise him to her in the early days of their acquaintance.

The torment of his soul relieved itself in a letter written at dawn, written only to be torn up again and consigned to the flames, but being written, bringing a certain relief to his feelings.

Dawn brought the triumph of the male to him—the sense of power that is so invigorating, and he rose early and went for a gallop on the Marsa, returning

a new man, with every evil force subdued within him by the dew of blessing that like a sacrament awaits the worshippers of nature before the world is awake.

Diana went upstairs to the drawing-room where she expected to find her hostess, and since she was not there, she pursued her into the haven of her own room thoughtlessly enough. On the threshold of the open door she paused, with the glare of a brilliant lamp in her eyes, dazzled and confused. A card-table stood in the centre of the room, and around it were seated Ethel and Cassell and two other men whom she had never seen before. A little pile of gold lay by each player, and there was about the four faces something so strained and tense, something so unlovely, that Diana gave a little cry of alarm.

It was upon this dramatic entrance that Ethel flung down her cards and took the cigarette from her mouth. "We did not expect you home so soon, Di," she said, with a forced laugh. "We understood that you were supping with the Staffords."

Diana hesitated whether to enter or no, and Cassell pushed the table aside with a queer glitter in his eyes. "I must go outside and get a breath of fresh air on the balcony," he said. "Surely you two have had enough of this game?"

He jerked an impatient head towards the two young men, and his sister took her eye from him. "We will join you in the drawing-room, Felix. I will put away the cards."

Cassell threw open the long window on to the balcony, and stepped out with Diana. "Don't say

that you are very shocked," he said. "Both Ethel and I were reluctant to play to-day, but Seton and Heffernan are passing through on the *Sudan* to India, and came and hunted us up and tempted us to break the Sabbath."

"I don't think that I am very easily shocked," said Diana gravely. She had felt the pain of the contrast between the peace of the outer world and the garish brightness of the inner, when she had first entered the flat, but now she began to think that perhaps her attitude had been exaggerated. "Actions that seem wrong to some people seem quite right to others, of course; and I certainly am not fit to set myself up as a judge."

Through the silence came the ting-tang of the garrison chapel bell ringing for service, and it seemed to Diana as if the sound answered some question in her being.

"I do not think it is right to play cards on Sunday; in fact, I think it very wrong," she said, with sudden conviction.

Cassell looked at her sideways. "I think that you do not know how much I would give to gain your good opinion," he said slowly. "If I thought that it would please you in reality, I would promise never again to touch a card on a Sunday."

"I have no right to demand such a promise from you."

Diana's face was grave, for she had much to think of and to question in her heart. Cassell saw his advantage and pressed it home.

"If you knew what my life had been," he said,

“without any example of goodness to follow, without any encouragement to persevere in straight living, you would perhaps feel some sympathy with me. A good woman seems to me like a star, beckoning always onward and upward; but good women are few and far between to meet with.”

Cassell was a clever man, and experienced in the ways of womanhood. This appeal had served his purpose once or twice before, and it was going to serve him again now.

“I am sorry for you; I wish I could help you,” said Diana, with sudden sympathy; and again he was clever enough not to take advantage of her melting mood at the moment. But he could congratulate himself that night on a further advance in her favour; and since his sister recognised every alternating mood in his nature, she bore no good-will towards Diana for her more lenient attitude. Her own designs for her future sister-in-law were divided between Molly Anson and Lady Lukin’s niece, Miss Ferney, who possessed a good fortune of her own, though she was clever enough to disguise her real feelings from her brother. But when the two women were alone together at last, she turned to Diana with a sudden snap of annoyance.

“I did not know that you were a flirt,” she said. “I am surprised at you.”

Diana looked at her in helpless dismay. Above the black and gold tea gown the face of Ethel showed hard and cruel, and her strong white teeth were set in her lower lip, like the snarl of an angry dog.

"I don't know what you mean," stammered the girl.

"Oh yes, you do, you——" The words that must inevitably have snapped their friendship died on her lips before they were voiced, at the sight of the bewildered face.

"Well, I declare to goodness if I don't think you are as innocent of such wiles as a babe in the nursery, and I am silly to think it of you; only when every man looks at you and looks again, it sets me wondering."

"Oh, Ethel, do believe me," said Diana, with a sob; "I don't want any men about me—I don't indeed."

"What about Captain Burne, eh, Diana?"

The girl looked up and down again, and the Baroness read the truth in the happy flush on her cheeks.

"Aha! Confess now you are in love with your good-looking young Jem Burne."

"Oh no, no!" cried the girl, shrinking from the truth, so nakedly displayed before her. "Oh no, no!"

But Ethel the 'Baroness' went to bed happy, for the veil had been drawn from Diana's eyes for the moment, and she had read her heart. Felix was safe; and so was her own financial future.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE CATACOMBS

“ Her eyes
Had such a star of morning in their blue,
That all neglected places
Broke into music.”—*Tennyson*.

CITTA VECCHIA—‘ a city on a hill that can never be hid ’—lies upon a ridge of rock that intersects Malta like a spine in the very centre of the island. The sun in its setting turns the rugged outline of the cathedral to flame and gold, and in its rising makes a lambent opal city of dreams out of the jumble of buildings that form the town within the city gates. The flat plain that lies spread out before and behind stretches to the sea, and on the day of the picnic given by the Baroness von Poppenheim, the white foam-capped breakers raced shorewards to hurl themselves against the stony beach, only to retreat again, drawing the pebbles after them with a hungry suck of sound.

It was a grey morning of damp-laden wind, but since the rain itself actually held off, there was no question as to the postponement of the picnic, and before mid-day Mrs. Anson and Molly, with an attendant sub-lieutenant and a hopeful Mr. Hawtrey, drove up to

the trysting place, where Jem Burne and Major Cassell were already waiting.

The arrangement of the couples had caused Ethel some moments of anxious thought, but she had solved a problem threatening complications by taking Diana herself in a victoria, with a pair of quick-trotting chestnut barbs, and leaving her remaining guests to follow in their own order. Therefore it came to pass that Cassell drove Molly, and Jem Burne had to be content with Mrs. Anson, while the half-dozen remaining men and maidens sorted themselves with much mirth and a great expenditure of useful scheming.

Felix Cassell started in an ill-humour, for the arrangements were hardly to his taste, but Burne made the best of things, and determined that he would drive Diana back to Valetta at any cost. He endured, with his usual cheeriness, the conversation of Mrs. Anson, who after a vain attempt to discover the amount of his income and the extent of the estate that belonged to him, left him severely alone. Grey Lady Court was too dear to his heart to enlarge upon in discussion, save to one woman; and the fact that a large portion of his income belonged to his mother for her lifetime did not tend to make him more than a second string in the thoughts of clever Mrs. Anson.

"Molly must do better for herself, with all her sisters at home," she said sagely; "and anyway, the drive will give every opportunity for a little understanding with Major Cassell, even if she acts afterwards like the silly thing she is and wastes the

day with young Hawtrey or the sub-lieutenant with a face like a spoon."

Cassell was not so amenable in his anger, for Molly had irritated him of late by her ceaseless chatter, and the image of Diana had become an obsession that seemed likely to master him body and soul. The sight of her, as she had driven away with Ethel, waving her hand gaily, had disturbed his mental equilibrium, for he had never imagined a picnic that should not begin and end with her companionship, and he spent the first few moments in abusing his sister very heartily.

Diana, in a brown woollen gown, with a little coat and cap of some fur that caught the same tawny light as her hair, was prettier than ever; and since gloves and shoes and stockings were all of the same rare copper colour, these turned her into a chestnut in colour from head to heel. She wore roses pinned in her coat—tawny William Allen Richardsons that he had chosen to match her colour scheme, and had sent her, with the dew fresh upon them, that morning. But he had imagined pinning the roses in position himself, and his hands had already felt in imagination the warm down of the fur, and he had smelt the delicate perfume that was part of Diana herself mingling with the strong scent of the skin. He remembered once strangling a cat that had flown at him in anger, and he thought that touching Diana's coat would have given him the same queer thrill of triumph that had then run through his veins like wine.

"Major Cassell, why are you beating your poor horse?" said Molly at last. "He is going very fast, and

he could not help it if he did not like passing that donkey with the gourds in the cart."

"All the things that belong to me have got to do exactly what I wish, or I beat them into obedience," said Cassell grimly.

"Well, I am jolly glad I don't belong to you," cried Molly, with her schoolgirl pout. "I should be frightened out of my life the first time I wanted to go my own way, and I certainly should want very often to do what *I* wanted and not what *you* wanted."

Cassell crossed whip and reins to his left hand, and laid his right on Molly's wrist, where it lay on her lap. "If you belonged to me—if you were this horse that I drive every day—I should jerk your mouth like this with an iron bit, and I should hit you with a cutting whip if you disobeyed me."

"Good life!" said Molly, much alarmed. "You hold me like iron in your dreadful grip. Take your horrid hand away from my wrist, and don't do that again."

Cassell laughed suddenly, and the crack of his mirth was like a discordant note upon a violin. Molly was absolutely refreshing in her healthy-minded scorn, and he shifted the reins again, still laughing.

"You would want more breaking in than I should care to undertake," he said again. "You would be an obstinate little pony, and I don't envy any man the task."

"You are not called upon to consider the subject at all," said Molly, tossing her head in black offence. "I am thoroughly glad that I have nothing really to

do with you, because I don't think honestly that you are at all a nice man."

Cassell saw that he had gone too far, and with sudden realisation that Molly was Diana's friend, he hastened to apologise. "Do pray excuse me," he said. "To tell you the truth, I have a very bad temper, and something put me out before we started this morning. Life is not all smooth, you know."

"People can make it rough or smooth by their own behaviour," said Molly, still indignantly; "and I'd just as soon drive with an unchained tiger as with a man who talks like you do."

The robust fearlessness of Molly Anson was like a breath of cold air on a hot atmosphere, and Cassell realised that he had lost hold of himself temporarily—a condition of things that caused him sincere annoyance. There were times when this happened consciously, and deep in his mind lay always the predominant fear lest he should lose hold on sanity and never again regain it. He knew that this lay within the realms of possibility, and he was in a fashion grateful to Molly for her vigorous onslaught.

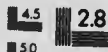
"The tiger is very sorry," he said, with as good a grace as he could command, "and promises to offend no more," and Molly was graciously pleased to accept the apology.

It was a long drive, and many times before they drew rein at the foot of the hill that wound up into the town, Cassell had cause to abuse Molly in his heart for her schoolgirl foolish chatter. She told him what she had been accustomed to have for high

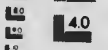


MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



5.0



4.5
5.0
5.6
6.3
7.1
8.0
9.0
10
11.2
12.5



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

tea at school, and what trouble her mother had with the Maltese cook who had taken the money to pay the weekly books and then gambled it away in pitch-and-toss at the corner of the street, which necessitated a hurried flight to Sicily on the part of Giovanni Battista Scieluna. She told him how long it had taken her parrot to learn to talk, and how she hated teaching in Sunday-school, and how much nicer sailors were than soldiers. Finally she ended by reciting to him a large portion of the "Hunting of the Snark," a poem which appealed not at all to her companion, since he had no imagination; and Cassell said to himself, as he lifted her down from the dogcart at the end of the journey, that if all young girls were like Molly Anson he would pray to be delivered from the bonds of youth.

The guests of the Baroness were collected together in an empty villa at Citta Vecchia that had been lent to her for the day by a Maltese acquaintance. It was a merry meal, well cooked and served, with none of the sandwich hardships of an English picnic, for Ethel's servants, soft-footed and deft-handed, waited on her guests. Jem Burne had secured a seat by Diana, but since Cassell was on the other side, any confidential talk was out of the question, but he seized a moment's opportunity to ask her to walk with him to the catacombs when lunch was over, and she gave a pleased assent.

When two people, each in love with the other, are seated close together, a magnetic sympathy seems to communicate like an electric current between their

two souls and bodies, and link them together in one perfect whole. Burne knew that he loved Diana, and Diana acknowledged to herself that the presence of this man at her side made the day sweeter to her. Strange silence fell upon the two of them—the prelude of a self-conscious awkwardness that made each everyday act of civility seem marked with something specially significant. There is perhaps an angel of the God-given gift we call love, who, winging his silver way down from heaven, shields his votaries under a beneficent wing. For impossible as it may seem, Burne and Diana melted away when lunch was over, without being observed by either Cassell or their hostess. And when the quick eyes of Ethel at last perceived their absence, her clever wits were sharp enough to keep her brother amused till the lovers were out of sight.

Ethel would have disliked Diana if she had so much as lifted a finger to attract Felix Cassell; for she had just learned that Molly Anson would inherit £5,000 from her aunt as a settled portion that could not be altered, and she had Mrs. Anson's authority for the announcement. Of course £5,000 was not a fortune, but it would be better than nothing; and Felix was so silly. What made the whole affair more satisfactory, was that the money was to be paid on the wedding-day, and Ethel thought she saw her way towards working on her brother's good nature and securing a few hundred pounds for her own use. Therefore she exerted herself to keep Felix in Molly's society at the present moment, since when

once Diana was engaged to Burne, Felix would probably turn at once to pretty Molly to heal the wound in his heart.

Cassell, satisfied with food and drink and with the excellence of a good cigar, stirred himself at last to find that the two young people had disappeared, and that they were not in the outer room where the rest of the party were dancing to the strains of a small mandolin band.

"Where are they, Ethel?" he said angrily, returning to her. "Why! if I thought you had connived at their disappearance—if I thought this was a scheme on your part, I'd make it hot for you."

"I know nothing about it, Felix," she said, in a frightened undertone. "I expect they are seeing the sights with Mrs. Anson."

"Why," said her brother with a frown, "the Anson woman is in the other room! Tell me where they have gone."

"I think—I don't know—they may perhaps have gone to the catacombs. Don't—don't look at me like that, Felix;" and, as he flung away, his sister went back to her guests, with tears in her eyes. Her grey velvet gown, with its turquoise-studded belt, her little toque of forget-me-nots with its spangled veil, were all of the very smartest style that the Rue de Rivoli could produce, but they did not console her, since in her heart she was uncertain what she should do if her brother had a scene with Diana. Her part was a very difficult one to play, but it would not help her to contribute to the failure of her picnic, and after

all she had seen her brother angry before, and as soon appeased; and the next moment she was dancing with Maurice Hawtrey, who thought her one of the most beautiful women he had ever met.

When Burne said to Diana "Come!" the whole world seemed to turn into a fairyland of promise. Citta Vecchia was beautiful enough, but frescoed and painted by attendant love, it shone like the palace of a dream.

"We are going to the catacombs," said Jem, and his voice was not very steady; but if he had said to her that they were to lead a forlorn hope together in the teeth of the enemy's guns, she would have answered as meekly: "Yes, Captain Burne."

All night long he had been waiting for this supreme moment when Diana would be alone with him, and between them only the knowledge of their mutual love. It seemed to him now that he had not slept all night, nor desired sleep. God had spoken to him in the darkness: "She is thy woman—put out thy hand delicately and take her;" but the taking was too exquisite for definite imagination.

Now that he was here alone with her, with the fresh wind in their faces, his throat became parched and speech impossible. Who was he to dare to imagine that this could care for him? She was the prettiest, daintiest woman he had ever seen, with the soul of a little child; and what was he? Better than many men of his own age and position perhaps, but far below the standard of the man who should aspire to Diana Ponsonby. And it was his very humility

that made him desirable in Diana's eyes, so that the last shade of fear was lifted from her heart.

As they went down the narrow crumbling steps into the underground catacombs, the rain that had been threatening all day came down in a steady drizzle, and Burne's last anxiety was relieved.

"We shall have the place to ourselves," he said.

"No one else will venture out in such weather."

"Yes," said Diana, shyly enough.

They paid their entrance money and dispensed with a guide; and after they had studied the miraculous figure of St. Paul, that is supposed never to diminish in size in spite of the chipping of innumerable tourists with iconoclastic desires, they went on into the darkness beyond, with their candles. There were very few passages open, and Burne was not anxious to risk his life as other men had done in striving to find the path down to Valetta that had been cut out for Christians in old days of persecution.

"Sit down here," said Burne, wishing that his voice did not sound so harsh and abrupt. "I—I think that we will not walk any farther."

There were two diverging paths culminating at the pillar at the base of which they stood, and in the semi-darkness they sat down side by side. The streak of light from the opening slanted almost to their feet, and Burne took Diana's candle from her hand and put it out.

"There is light enough for what I want to say to you—Diana." The hand that had taken the candle dropped it, and took the little trembling

fingers instead. "Oh, Diana, you know what I want to say. I love you so dearly, my darling—I love you and I want you for my wife."

Diana sat still, trembling exceedingly.

"Oh, Diana, can't you give me any hope? Little girl, I love you so—your sweet, sorrowful, tender soul—your beautiful lips—your heart of gold: I want them all for my own."

Diana turned to him and put her other hand into his, so that he held both. "I do trust you," she said with a little sob, "only I am not good enough to be your wife. I—I think you ought to marry some one who has never worked as I did—like a maid-of-all-work in an hotel. Perhaps there are people who may bring this up against me in days to come, and against you, too. Are you sure you will never be sorry that you married me?"

"Honest work is no disgrace," said Burne hotly. "I love these little hands the more in that they have toiled; and I want them to know, dear, sweet little hands, that they shall never know a day's sorrow or toilsome labour if they give themselves to me."

Diana turned her head away from him. "But—your mother—she would not like you to marry me: she would not think me good enough for you."

"My mother? Why, all that any woman has a right to ask of her son, is that he may bring her a daughter without a stain upon her dear name, and you are a daughter of whom any mother might well be proud, Diana."

His hands were so gentle and yet so irresistibly

strong that she could not resist him any longer. She was like a boat upon the strong current of a stream, swept downward towards a safe shore that otherwise it could never have reached. He saw her eyes, her blushing cheeks at last.

"Diana, tell me you love me," he said, with his lips at her ear pleading—commanding. "You cannot love me as I love you, but I should be content just with a little share of your heart at first."

"Oh, I love you," said Diana suddenly. "I am so frightened because I love you so much," and all in a moment she was gathered into his arms and crushed against his shoulder.

She lay against his heart, listening to its quick beating, sure that it beat true with love for herself. This place, sanctified by the prayers and tears of a bygone age was so holy that the very air seemed to fall upon them with a blessing of peace. Every need and hope that had been lacking so long in Diana's life was now rounded and perfected in the haven of her lover's arms. She had never dared to think that such happiness could exist. Earth and heaven, time and space, seemed to pass away when he kissed her; and all the air about them was filled with silver-throated angels singing a pæan of love.

"Jem, there is one thing," she whispered; "don't let any one know our secret. Please let us keep it to ourselves—till—till—after we have been to Gozo."

"But I want every one to know that you love me," said Burne tenderly; "and besides that, it would not be fair to the Baroness to keep her in ignorance."

"I will tell Ethel—oh yes, I will tell her—but I will ask her to keep it a secret for a little time. You don't understand what I feel. Love is so wonderful a thing that it seems as if other people would profane it if they knew and spoke of it."

"Oh, you wonderful Diana!" said Burne. "Half the girls of my acquaintance would run like cats in pursuit of the first woman they knew to tell her if a man mentioned marriage in their ears. But you are not a girl, but an incarnation of the goddess Diana, fair and shy and chaste as the great huntress herself."

"Then you will not tell any one?" said Diana quickly.

"You know that all your life long you will lead me by a silver string," said Jem Burne. "No; I will not tell." And in the dusk of the cave he sought her lips, and, finding them, closed them with a kiss.

Something stirred in the darkness behind them and they sprang apart.

"Oh, Jem, what is that?" said Diana tremulously. "Do you think that any one could have overheard us?"

"No," said Burne stoutly; "it is only a rat. I expect there are dozens in these dark passages." And when Diana fled to the door he followed her, protesting that she lacked one saving grace of womanhood, and that was courage.

They looked back into the unpierceable gloom behind them, as they came out into the rain, after that blissful half-hour, but there was nothing to be seen beyond a shiver of dancing golden dust flakes, like a screen between them and the inner recesses of the cave.

"Jem, I want to go to the cathedral for a few moments," said the girl. "It is quite close to the Villa Raisuli, and you can go straight back there and tell Ethel where I am."

"And ask her to let us drive back together," said Jem triumphantly. "Oh, you are a pastmaster of craft, sweetheart; but why may I not see the cathedral also?"

"Because—because I want to be alone—just for a few moments to realise everything. I am so afraid that I shall wake up and find it all a dream." She clung to his arm for the moment in a panic of apprehension. "If I found it was not true that you loved me—I should—I should—oh, Jem! you remember where you found me the first night we met?"

Burne took her hands in his, for he was suddenly afraid of the tense look upon her face when he remembered the past.

"Diana, I gave you back your life on that night; you belong to me for ever, now that you have given it to me to-day. Promise me that no thought of despair shall ever enter your mind again—promise me that, or I will not let you go."

"I promise; you may trust me." And it seemed to Burne as if Diana faded away from him like the spirit of love itself, for she sprang up the steps and away, while he followed more slowly through the narrow winding streets.

As they had stood there in the shining aperture of the cave entrance, they were so visible to Cassell, crouching low in the hollow of an arch that had once been the

grave of an early Christian, that he could have shot them both with unerring precision if he had had his gun within reach. His fingers felt for some weapon to kill and hurt ; in vain sifting all the loose dust and sand about him in his endeavour to find a jagged stone to fling at one or other of the happy, smiling faces. When he had followed them in he had not imagined that he could suffer like this. It had been so easy to track them, since the passages of the catacombs were double and ran parallel the one to the other. But now he wished—he wished that he had never been a witness of their love-making, for the memory of it stung and hurt him like a poisoned wound. With laughter and singing in their hearts they had passed away up the stairs, and he was alone with the black night of revolted passion within him. He drew farther back into the catacombs, where he was sure that he would be unheard and unseen, for the darkness seemed to make things easier, since it was his natural atmosphere.

Had he spent quite an intolerable sum of money on Ethel's Maltese venture to be fooled like this ? Why, even the clothes on the back of the girl he cared for so horribly had been paid for by himself ; and now she had promised Burne to marry him ! Every day he had rejoiced over the thought that one day he should have her for his wife, and now the thought had become an obsession. He remembered her fair beauty now—her delicate colouring, the perfume of faint violets that always seemed to hang about her person.

“ What shall I do ? How shall I separate them ? ”
His passion got the better of him, and he rolled in the

dust, cramming his coat sleeve into his mouth to stifle the sound of the hoarse screaming voice that did not seem to belong to him at all. "Curse her—body and soul! Curse him for a smooth-faced pertinacious fellow!"

Why, his fingers itched to be at Burne's throat, strangling him, or clawing the life out of the girl as a raccoon does to the dog it hates. He was mad, and he knew it, and gave the reins to his insanity, since the solitude gave him the chance of relief. All the devils in hell were about him, screaming and mouthing and pointing at him; he was one of them—devil-ridden by the force of his own evil passions, to which he had given way all his life.

When control and sanity returned after a time, and he found himself smothered with dust and straw, a mere animal crouched in the dust, he picked himself up and stilled the shivering of his limbs by one mighty effort.

What was this idea that was hammering at his brain with pitiless insistence, seeking entrance? Burne had spoken of shame; Diana had spoken of fear and an honourable name. What was the idea? He could not get hold of it somehow, but light was dawning from somewhere: light was dawning—or was it darkness?

He picked himself up slowly out of the dust and groped for his hat. It did not take long to shake himself into cleanness and sanity once again; and when he had the grip of himself, thought came more easily. There was something he had to say to Ethel—some train of ideas that was gradually working out in his

mind. He had in the first moment of his excitement felt inclined to kill Ethel, since she must have helped to betray him. But he remembered that women were always schemers—always traitoresses—unless a man kept the upper hand over them; and before night Ethel should be so thoroughly frightened that she would do everything he wished without hesitation. He knew the vulnerable side of her character so well that he could play upon her feelings with the accuracy of a typist upon a machine. He would threaten to leave her penniless and stranded, if she did not help him to retain his influence over Diana. He had paid his sister very highly for what she had failed to perform; and now, when he thought it over, he was not even sure that she had done her best to keep Diana dependent upon the pair of them.

And so, nursing the anger in his heart that he seemed to feel against all the world, he went back to Villa Raisuli, and leaving word with his sister's butler that he was unexpectedly summoned back to Valetta on business, but would call on her late that evening, he drove back to barracks at a hand-gallop, flogging his restive horse along the straight road until he had reduced him to submission and a lather of terrified sweat.

His return to his quarters was not calculated to allay his annoyance, for he found that the English mail was in, and two urgent letters awaited him. One was from his firm of stockbrokers, who informed him that disaster awaited him, since the gold mine in which the greater part of his fortune was invested had suddenly

ceased to produce any results, and they therefore awaited his instructions. The other was from his friend the solicitor in London who was working on behalf of Sir Peregrine Ponsonby, and whom he had assuaged with soothing words during his last short leave at home.

“DEAR CASSELL,—

“Sir Peregrine Ponsonby informs me that he has unimpeachable intelligence that his granddaughter is alive and in Malta. He is therefore despatching an agent within the next few days to find out the truth for him. I give you this previous information, as the young lady is worth discovering, for old Sir Peregrine is a very rich man, and this girl is heir to everything.”

Bah! he could read no more. He had made a muddle of the whole affair as usual, and Ethel had been worse than useless. He must make Diana promise to marry him, or spirit her away and feign ignorance before the silly old man's agent came out to make a fuss; and behind his locked door Felix Cassell gave the rein to his temper until he was exhausted.

CHAPTER X

REMORSE

“Would we through our years,
Love forego?
Quit of fears or tears?
Ah! but no—no—no.”

IN the cathedral at Citta Vecchia there is among the side chapels one dedicated to the Madonna, in which is hung a picture of the Annunciation never surpassed in modern art. Pure and gentle, the Woman blessed among all women waits for the angel's message, and it was under this picture that Diana sat for a few quiet moments of reflection and contemplation. There was no one but an old fat priest in a greasy cassock to see her that afternoon, for the rain was falling smartly, and the Maltese had lighted their fires and remained indoors, so that the Duomo was empty.

Diana sat in the chair, with her hands folded in her lap, and her face upturned was so absorbed in devotion that she could see nothing beyond her own thoughts. It seemed to her that she was entreating the Madonna for grace to be gentle as She herself. It seemed to her that she was lifted above the silver background of the picture, the tawdry hangings of

the altar, the tinsel setting of the chapel, and that grace flowed to her in a shaft of clear light that went straight to her heart. Happiness was to be hers ; she had been unconsciously praying for it every moment of her life, and she had achieved it now with hands wide open. She was one of the women who, unknown to themselves, expect much out of life, and enjoy happiness with every nerve of their being. She realised this now completely, and all the delicate tendrils of her starved nature crept out into the sunshine of Jem's love, since she was sure that here, by God's grace, was the one man for her.

"Ave Maria gratia plena." Here was a blessing for her also waiting somewhere—the blessing of a quiet, happy life. She had endured sorrow almost before other girls had learned what tears meant ; she had probed deep into distress, always with this consciousness of the possibilities of a deep joy within her. All her life her heart had seemed to be like a stream pent up by moss and heather in a moorland valley. Some kindly hand had removed the obstructing substance, and the stream welled out crystal clear.

"Ave Maria." Jem's protecting love wrapped her like a shield—would thus envelop her night and day, and her soul was one prayer of thankfulness.

As she came out of the Duomo she passed the old priest, seated by his confessional box, and there was something in her rapt face and unseeing shining eyes that told its own story. She was not of his faith, perhaps, but he raised a blessing hand as she passed, for her face was like a ray of sunlight ; and she lifted

the curtains and went out, unconscious of the benediction.

Dancing was still going on when she reached the Villa Raisuli, and she slipped in among the guests unnoticed by any one but Ethiel, who beckoned her to her side.

"So I hear that you have been making hay while the sun shines, eh, Diana?" she said, trying to look into the shy eyes. "Captain Burne looked so painfully happy, that I charged him with the crime before he confessed it."

"Oh, you are not angry?" whispered the girl. "I could not help it."

"Angry? I am delighted, of course, as long as you are happy, child, and so long as the young man can support you. Do you know I think you are doing a wise thing, though for many reasons it will be better to say nothing of your plans till we are in England again."

Mrs. Vavasour Bloggs was speaking with a little hurry of words, as though she were guilty of some unexpressed indiscretion. She remembered her brother's face when he had gone out an hour ago, and she knew that if Diana were not at all costs removed from him, her own hopes for his marriage would be more than vain, for by long experience she knew that he was not to be lightly turned from any purpose on which he had set his heart. A word to Jem Burne—a hint—would be enough to procure a speedy marriage; and once another man's wife, she guessed enough to be sure that Diana would have lost her hold on her brother's fancy.

Ethel plumed herself on her generosity as she watched Diana's flying feet, for she was already planning to send the girl down to Wendover Farm with Bertha Fox, out of his way, until her marriage, and so break up any intention of introducing her to the shop in Excelsior Mansions, for she supposed, with some truth, that Burne's mother would prefer a daughter-in-law with no taint of business upon her. Ethel called it generosity, and no doubt her heart was touched by Diana's charm and innocence; but since Bertha Fox had once declared that no power beyond self-interest ever moved her cousin in her daily life, it was much to be feared now that the impulse stirring her to assist the young lovers was dictated by selfishness alone.

They lingered at Villa Raisuli until the rain ceased and the stars came out. There was a young moon that night, lying low in the east like a frosted silver bow, and the voice of the sea clamoured insistently round the island, beating at the rocks, murmuring in the deep caverns that run under the mushroom-shaped coral ridge we call Malta. It was a night to remember—a night to be printed on the mind in lines of gold—for the whole air was singing and ringing with the love songs that are made up of the joy of the whole earth.

Diana, driving with her lover, her cheek upon the rough tweed of his arm, sang with the night: "Break out into singing, Oh, ye desolate places of the earth. Break out with a loud voice, For love is lord of all." And since joy and sorrow are inexplicably blended in

this life of ours, the healing balm of the night brought tears to the girl's eyes.

"Why, you are not crying, my heart?" said Burne, quick to hear the little catch in her breath.

"I am too happy—too happy; I am afraid," said Diana, clinging to him.

And though he kissed the tears from her long lashes, he could not charm away the fear from her heart.

Once he had woken in the short brilliant night at Genoa with a tremor of the same melancholy about him. Down below in the courtyard a mandolin was sobbing out a love song to the night, accompanied by a man's wild passionate tenor notes, and the mandolin and the unknown singer had held the very spirit of unrest that swayed him now at the sight of Diana's tears.

"Heart of gold," he said now, low in her ear; "little heart of gold, trust me in everything, and you will keep your happiness." And since he was so strong and so sure of himself, Diana took heart and forgot the warning voice of the sea.

Those who dined at the 'Westminster' mess that night had cause never to forget the strange behaviour of the second in command of the regiment. Major Cassell, in his place at the head of the table, ate very little, but his glass was never empty. He had the air of a man who is harnessed to control by one slender strap, and now and again, as he sat crumbling his bread with his square fingers, he broke into a snap of laughter at some threadbare mess-room joke that was

out of all proportion to the interest of the story. There was a savage note, too, in the mirth, that held a warning that his neighbours were not slow to recognise, and indeed, the only man whose composure was absolutely undisturbed was Jem Burne, who saw and heard nothing beyond the voice of his own heart and the claims of the very excellent dinner provided by the mess cook.

It was the regimental guest night, and outside, in the St. Elmo Square, the band of the 'Westminsters' was playing. For some reason or another the bandmaster had chosen the gayest of all masculine songs, 'The Yeoman's Wedding,' with its clatter of horses' feet, its hurry of impatient lover riding to his happiness over the hills.

Major Cassell half rose from his chair and sat down again. The voices of the bandsmen took up the gay chorus under the windows :

"Through the valley we'll haste,
For we've no time to waste,
For it is my wedding morning."

Burne looked up with a smile, and caught Major Cassell's eyes fixed upon him with a malevolence of hatred that he could not understand. Cassell leaned across to him significantly.

"Are you responsible for the band programme, Captain Burne? I wish you would tell Meaby not to play that d——d rubbish."

The eyes of the two men met, with a challenge in them like the shock of two charging bulls, and under

the clear steady gaze of the younger man Cassell's wavered and sank, and the incident was over.

It was when the after-dinner mirth was waxing fast and furious that Major Cassell slipped away to the flat in Strada Mezzodi and his interview with his sister. Ethel had been expecting him all the evening, and had been glad when Diana went to her own room at an early hour, with an excuse of fatigue, for then she could give way to the anxiety that half distracted her. She walked about the room, awaiting her brother's arrival with uncontrolled anxiety. The way had seemed so plain to her at first, like the clear shining of a village in the hills seen through a certain rarity of atmosphere when rain is threatening. But now she could see nothing clearly, because Felix had flung down the challenge to her, and she did not know whether bodily fear or self-interest prevailed. She knew the truth, with full certainty of conviction five minutes later, when the butler opened the door and dropped the curtain once again behind him to admit her brother himself in mess uniform. He always looked his best in the close-fitting green rifle jacket, with the thin line of scarlet at the throat and cuffs that distinguished the 'Westminsters'; but Ethel knew that he was very angry, by the look in his eyes.

She stood quite still, with her hands clasped tightly, the one in the other, her mouth half open in a rush of stemmed apologetic words, her face pale under the rouge. He came forward and caught her by the wrist.

"You need not trouble to excuse yourself, Ethel,"

he said ; " you planned the whole scheme ; you tried to make Diana Ponsonby get engaged to young Burne."

" Don't, Felix," she said quickly. " Don't speak any more in that tone ; you frighten me."

" So you thought you would play your own hand and not mine ; you thought that you would scheme and bargain and take my money and pander to my wishes and make up to the girl and pretend to be going to help me to a dainty wife, and all the time you were beekoning on Jem Burne with the hand you hid behind your back. You knew Diana loved him, and you knew that he was going to ask her to marry him, and so you threw them together—you kind sister—you whited sepulchre ! "

He flung her from him with such violence that she almost fell to the ground, and caught at his arm to support herself.

" Don't, Felix—don't ! I never thought of such a thing ! " she said hoarsely, with a sob.

" Don't I see through you—every bit of you," he sneered again. " Don't I know that you want me to marry the Anson girl, or that ugly young woman at the Palace ? But I tell you now, that if Diana marries Jem Burne, I will never see or speak to you again ! Don't you know that I love her little finger infinitely more than I ever loved any one in the world ? I shall leave you to pay your own bills or to be turned out into the street by your creditors if you won't play my game ! "

" Felix—Felix—all these years—have you forgotten them ? When we were children together ; when I

nursed you through the smallpox in Belgrade, when no one else would come near you; when I gave you all the money I had in the world that time when you were awfully hard hit as a subaltern; and now, just because you are in love with a pretty face and I want you to marry a woman with some money who will help you on in life, you turn on me like this! Oh, Felix, it *is* hard!"

Cassell pushed her hand contemptuously away from his arm. "Bah!" he said; "I don't want to marry any one but Diana."

"And what about me, when you have married a woman without a penny?" said Ethel incautiously.

If you want me to help you in the future with a penny you have got to help me now. I never felt for any woman what I feel for her; and even if I never marry her, I shall be more content if she does not marry Burne, with his smooth, smiling face! Burne, with the pretty manners and the light heart! Burne, the lady-killer, the good little boy who goes to church, and only plays bridge for mess points!"

The contempt of his voice, the look upon his face, showed how deep a hold his insane dislike had taken in his heart, and Ethel shrugged her shoulders.

"We can't prevent the thing now," she said. "Diana will never give him up, and she has a protector in Jem Burne who will put us in an awkward position if you try any of your nonsense with her. Don't you see for yourself that the girl stands in a different position to the helpless creature whom we took away from the 'Cosmopolitan' Hotel?"

"I see everything," returned Cassell impatiently; "but you are an idiot, Ethel, if you have not thought of fifty ways by which we can part the two of them; and when you once get Diana away to London, the rest will follow easily enough."

"But Diana has a tremendous amount of determination," she said.

"So I am to understand that you have ceased to care whether I go on financing the Beauty Shop or not?" he returned, with a clever break in his voice. "You and I made a good show together; I wonder how you will get on alone, without my society—and without my money?"

"Felix, you would never leave me altogether?" The thought struck her now for the first time, and as he glanced at her where she stood twisting her hands together in an agony of indecision, he knew that he had played the winning card.

"I should leave you entirely," he said slowly. "Break every old association with you, chuck the service and settle down respectably at Heron Vale, and marry a girl in the county. Take your choice now. I would have nothing to do with a sister who kept a shop and had associations with Portland Prison then!"

Ethel put up her hands to her face, pale through its rouge. "You know that I could never endure it," she said. "You know that I will do what you wish."

"Now you are talking sense," he said approvingly. "You and I are too old allies, Ethel, ever to quarrel

if we continue to play cleverly into one another's hands, and I saw to-day in Vaglietti's window quite a nice little rope of pearls that you shall have if you are my successful partner again."

"What am I to do?" said Ethel quietly.

"Where does Diana sleep? Is her room next door to this, and does her balcony run parallel to the one outside this window?"

"Yes," said his sister, quite at a loss for his meaning.

"She was outside, I believe, moon-gazing when I came in—with the folly of young love," Cassell continued with a sneer. "I suppose she could overhear anything that was said by us on the veranda, now that the street is still, and that you could collect your scattered wits enough to sustain an intelligent conversation with me on the subject of her father's delinquencies?"

A faint light of comprehension dawned in Ethel's eyes.

"Do you mean to say that you are going to blacken her father's memory, so that Diana may think that she has no right to marry an honest man? Well, Felix, you are going too far!"

"And if she does not overhear our conversation, you will have to go to her room when I am gone and tell her yourself."

"Oh, Felix, I can't!"

"Why, men and women such as you and I should have no consciences," said Cassell contemptuously.

"Come, Ethel."

He opened the window noiselessly, and they stepped out together on to the balcony. The exquisite stillness of a Malta night had succeeded rain and wind, and the stars were shining over the island like little lamps in the blue vault of heaven.

From far away came the sound of the 'Westminster' band playing 'God save the King'; and 'Last Post' rang out from every barrack and fort with unearthly sweetness.

To Diana, kneeling in her balcony on the other side of the thin partition, the night was very holy, very calm. She had heard 'Last Post' sounded over many a grave as she travelled about with her father, and it had been the last most exquisite pain of all that to him had not been accorded the saving grace of a military funeral. He had been put away in the ground as though he had never worn the king's uniform, and Diana had hungered for the solemn pathos of the bugle call across the open grave.

She was thinking of her father now, wondering dimly as she knelt there as to her relations in England, whose names had never crossed her father's lips, save in the last agony of death, when he had spoken his mother's name and stretched out unconscious arms to a mother in heaven. Of his father he had never spoken, nor had she asked him anything of his home, and the faint memories of her own mother had been marred by the reluctance with which her father had recalled her name. They were to live in the present, he told her constantly; there was neither past nor, as it appeared, future for him; and she had been

content to have it so. The sketch of his home, the necklace, the portrait, had all been found among his few possessions in his despatch box, and Diana had taken them before Jane Harding had had time to collect her wits sufficiently to lay claim to anything belonging to the dead man.

It was of her unknown relations that Diana was thinking now, as a good woman will think when the man she loves is in question. Burne brought her a clear family record, an honoured roll of reputable names, and she wished to do the same; and she set her mind to work, thinking and planning how best she might discover those of her relations who would make her position of some consideration in the eyes of the world. There had been no letters among her father's possessions: she remembered the day when she had seen him burning a little pile of them—a few days after they had left the regiment and drifted to the hotel and Jane Harding. She recalled his white drawn face as the fire crackled over the last thin sheet, and she had recognised it as the *débâcle* of his life. She recalled the thin misery of his face. "There, that is all over, Di, my girl," he had said. "Never bother about the past and what can't be helped. A short life and a gay one for me; and now let us drink to the health of the future," and he had drunk it in brandy, and she in ginger-beer.

But now she wondered why he had spoken so bitterly of the past. There was a picture—an old-fashioned water-colour sketch—in her possession, of a Tudor house and quaint old garden, and under it

was written 'King's Haven,' but more than that she could not tell. But to-morrow Jem Burne should see all her relics and should advise her how to get into touch with her relations once again. Perhaps she might find that her birth was equal to that of the man she had promised to marry, and then she could face his mother without any sense of inequality between them.

She rose from her feet to go back to her room to bed, but lingered an instant dreamily, and before she realised it, had caught her own name in a sentence that spelt disaster.

" . . . Freude, habe Acht,
Sprich leise, das nicht der Schmerz erwacht "

for grief had awoke for her once again.

" Poor Diana, you had better tell her," said Cassell's voice, distinct and terribly clear. " I believe young Burne is attached to her ; and before matters come to a crisis, she or he must learn the truth, and it had better be she herself."

" Poor Diana ! " The voice of Ethel was perfectly steady. " Poor child ! Of course Captain Burne's mother would not be in the least likely to sanction her son's marriage under the circumstances ; but are you sure your story is true ? "

" My dear Ethel, all the regiment knows it—the ' Westminsters ' as well as his own lot. To begin with, Captain Ponsonby was expelled from school for a series of misdemeanours upon which we need not touch, and it took all the influence the family possessed to

pitchfork him into the Army at all. Of his career in the Army we have ample proof, and it is a wonder that the smash did not come sooner; and then, his wife was no help to him in any way."

"Who was his wife?"

Diana held her breath to listen.

"Why, you must have been out of the world indeed never to have heard the scandal of the Ponsonby marriage. I believe she was originally a barmaid, but mercifully, for his sake and the sake of the regiment, she did not live long."

"Good heavens! Why, of course Diana must be told. And what was the final catastrophe?"

"Henry Ponsonby robbed his own regimental mess of two hundred pounds. They would not prosecute him, because they were unwilling to wash their dirty linen in public, but they told him to go; and that is the reason why Diana was stranded in Malta, for he drank himself to death in a very short time, though I don't believe that the poor child ever guessed it."

"How can I tell her?" Ethel seemed distracted with grief, and Diana loved her for her sympathy.

"I would far rather she knew the truth than that Burne knew it. Of course I am responsible for the honour of the regiment, but Diana will tell him, and he must choose for himself whether or no he prefers to send in his papers. You see, I never imagined that things had gone so far between them till to-day."

The voices died away in a trail of decreasing sound as Cassell and his sister left the balcony and closed the window behind them.

So it had come at last—this bitter falling of trouble. The remorseless edict that the visitation of the sins of the fathers shall be upon the children had gone forth as it goes forth *in secula seculorum*.

Down to the very earth Diana's bright head was bent, till it lay in the dust. Her hands, clinging unconsciously to the cold rail of the balcony, kept her from fainting by the chill of the iron that had in very truth entered into her soul. She was shamed—disgraced—outlawed from respectability. Fate had sent her forth with a brand upon her forehead, so that all mothers and sons, seeing her, should take warning and pass by on the other side. She was not fit to enter any respectable family, since the fact that she had done so would blot out the fair fame of her own children and children's children. Never now could she seek out her father's relations, for to do so was to court disaster and to bring a rebuff upon herself, for it was evident that they could want none of her. She was as much a disgrace to her own relations as she would be to the family of the man she was to marry.

And yet, through her overwhelming despair, no shadow of blame attached itself in her thoughts to her father; he had expiated his sins bitterly and entirely. She knew now what the despair of his death-bed had meant—those moments in ebbing life when he had stood face to face with his own past, and had realised what might have been. She remembered now that it had taken a long application to the rim of a tall glass that had never been very far out of his reach, before he was cheerful again. But until now she had never

connected that glass with any danger to health or life; and now she knew that he had drunk himself to death.

A great and boundless pity filled her for the man who had been her father, swamping every other sentiment within her for the moment. She remembered the dear grizzled head, the reckless handsome face, the eyes that had never looked at her but with tenderness and love. He had kept her free, so far as it was possible, from all knowledge of evil; and she thanked him now passionately for his shielding care. She could never blame him for anything, since father and daughter were inextricably blended together in a bond that even death could not sever; and she seemed to hear his voice now calling to her out of the shadows: "Take heart, little Di. Snatch all the happiness out of life that you can. A short life, but a merry one."

She lifted herself slowly from the ground as her bedroom door opened, and she saw Ethel reluctantly entering the room, with a face full of conflicting emotions.

"Oh, Diana," she said, and paused, since speech was impossible to her at the moment. Selfish, unkindly woman as she was, she still retained within her something of the affection of a woman's heart, battered though it might be almost beyond recognition; and at the sight of the young stricken face, speech left her.

"You need not tell me anything," said Diana, steadying herself by the iron rail. "I was in the balcony here, and before I could get away I heard everything that Major Cassell said to you about—my

father. I suppose it was necessary that I should know, but I think—I think my heart is broken!”

“What are you going to do?” said Ethel, not daring to offer consolation—not daring even to touch this young shivering thing who was in such sore trouble.

“I shall tell Jem Burne myself—in my own time. I shall tell him after we have been to Gozo. Even you and Major Cassell would not grudge me a few days of happiness. And see, it will be all over in a week—youth, happiness, and everything!”

“Diana, I will tell Felix that you are going to tell Captain Burne the truth. It will be unnecessary for me to fix time or place; he shall not interfere with you, and therefore you can always remember that to me you owe a few days’ happiness.”

Diana paid no heed to her words, that seemed like the voice of the sea beating on a distant shore.

“I know now,” she said, “why Major Cassell thought I was a woman whom he could vex with impunity. I see now that all affection for me is grounded in pity; and it hurts—it stings me!”

“You are taking it all too hardly, Diana,” said Ethel, gaining a little courage from the girl’s attitude of unquesting belief. How much of her brother’s story was true, she could not tell, and at first she had been frightened by the tangle in which she found herself inextricably involved. She was at least convinced that some lies were mingled with a substratum of veracity, but she was not here to help Diana or even pity her. “You are a foolish girl to care so much. You have got

good looks, and there are plenty of other men in the world besides Captain Burne. Pluck up your spirits and make your own future."

Diana looked at her. There was something indefinitely hard and unkindly about the face of the Baroness that the girl had never observed before. The light of the lamp fell upon the glittering jet tea-gown and the sparkling stones at the white full throat; but it threw also into relief the harsh outline of the rouge on the cheeks and the pitiless lines that even constant massage could not obliterate from round the handsome eyes.

"Oh, how can you talk like that!" she said. "You can never have known love if you stand here and say these things to me! Don't you know that love lasts for ever and ever? But I suppose you don't even understand what my words mean."

"Don't be so foolish, my dear girl. Come inside and let me put you to bed. Why, you are as cold as ice—and in that thin gown, too!"

Ethel had laid her hand on the girl's bare arm, and Diana shivered away from her touch.

"Please go and leave me now. You can't do anything for me but keep silence. I shall have my few days of happiness—and afterwards will come darkness and despair—only I need not think about them yet. Oh, if you are a woman, let me have my hour of happiness to remember!"

"It will only make the parting much harder for you," said Ethel, turning to the door, with a sudden sense of relief that she had been spared a scene of tears and reproaches. This still, pale girl, white as

her gown, was not the tearful love-sick maiden she had expected to find, and she shrugged her shoulders contemptuously as she thought of the story she would weave for the delectation of her brother on the following day. He should know how well she had fulfilled her duty, and should be told of the excellent advice she had offered Diana. Ethel had often been told that her histrionic powers exceeded those of most actresses on the English stage, and her dramatic version of Diana's love affair would be worthy of the divine Sarah herself, and might perhaps coax a cheque out of her brother's pocket, and she was once again sorely in need of money.

"I am not going to think about the parting—yet," said Diana breathlessly. "I am going to live—like a butterfly—in the present; and then, perhaps, he will find that he cannot exist without me."

Ethel looked curiously at her, and opened her mouth to speak, but in the face of such hope, such love, found no words, and left the room with a sense that the victory lay with Diana and the humiliation with herself.

Bertha Fox was waiting for her cousin on the threshold of her room when she came at last. "You are very late," she said, grumbling, as she followed Ethel in. "How do you expect me to get up early in the morning when you keep me up to long past midnight every day?"

"What an ill-tempered creature you are getting to be, Bertha! Do hold your tongue!" said Ethel peevishly. "I am sure I often wish I had brought

any one but you with me, only I did not know what to do with you while the flat was shut up."

Bertha Fox busied herself in silence with preparing her cousin for bed. It was an ignominious performance—this peeling the youth and colour from the faded woman of five-and-forty, and to-night Bertha performed her task with grease and unguents, grimly enough. Ethel, watching her in the glass, resented the fashion in which she handled the golden hair, flinging the transformation roughly on the dressing-table, brushing out the thin, colourless locks underneath with no gentle hand. Bertha was careless, too, with her removing of paint and enamel, and Ethel grumbled loudly at her.

"What have you been doing to Diana?" said Mrs. Fox at last, turning with the brush in her hand. "She would not let me in just now, and I could hear that she was crying. You and Major Cassell were making up some plans to-night, I am sure, knowing the two of you as well as I do."

The daily mask of the respectful maid had been cast aside, and the two women, in the silence of the night, stood facing one another in the true relation that each bore to the other.

"What right have you got to say that to me?" said Ethel, fencing with words. "You make me very angry with your impertinence, Bertha."

"Can't I see into your heart, Ethel? Don't I understand the make of you even better than I did the first day I found you out? Why, you care for nothing but money and soft living, and your brother

is the same; but Diana Ponsonby has the heart of a child and the gentle mind of an angel. Your brother need not think that he is going to marry her, for I shall have something to say to him."

The thrilling contempt of the woman's words stung Ethel to helpless rage. If Bertha Fox had not been absolutely indispensable to her life in Excelsior Mansions, she would have driven her out of her service that night, but it would be dangerous to quarrel with her, since so much depended on silence.

"Do go away before I tell you what I think of you," she said, stammering in her anger. "Because then we might never be able to meet again—and that would be awkward; at present I feel that I dislike you intensely."

Bertha looked at her contemptuously. "You will feel different to-morrow," she said steadily, "and I expect will ask my pardon, Ethel; for though I have never said it before, you owe me a great deal more than you can ever pay;" and with this last parting arrow from an overlaid quiver Bertha Fox shut the door quickly behind her and went to her own room.

Ethel stood for a moment by the dressing-table, still and silent in thought. Then, slowly and reluctantly, her eyes were drawn to the mirror, as steel to the magnet. Once she had been a fresh pretty girl; now the face that met her eyes was that of a middle-aged woman, with a skin dry and pale, faded hair and eyes, and the unmistakable stamp on every feature that a self-seeking life such as she had led brings in its train. The pitiless mirror flung back at her the

realisation of the truth that she spent her life in avoiding. She was growing old; she had known a life of trouble; and she hardly knew how she was going to face her creditors on her return to England.

“God! God!”

There had never been any God in the life of Ethel Vavasour; but now, in the face of despair, there came to her lips the unconscious cry of the poor human to the Immortal Whom no single careless mortal denies when he comes face to face with stern reality. She dropped her face to her hands, and shut out the sight of herself. Years ago she had learned a little French song, and the words came back to her now:

“Sabine, un jour
A tout vendu. Sa beauté de Colombe
Et son amour
Pour le collier du Comte de Saladagne,
Pour un bijou——
Le vent qui vient à travers la Montagne
Me rendra fou.”

“Poor Sabine—poor Sabine!” she said to herself, and her voice broke on tears, for she was sorry—and she was too tightly bound in the meshes of the net of circumstance ever to extricate herself.

CHAPTER XI

CALYPSO

"The goddess Calamity is delicate—her feet are tender—her feet are soft, for she treads not upon the ground, but makes her path upon the heads of men."

No one but Bertha Fox saw Diana from the night of her interview with Ethel until the whole party met upon the deck of the Gozo-bound steamer on the morning of the much-talked-of week-end party, for which Cassell was paying and for which his sister received the credit. Diana had much to think of, and she felt that she must be alone; and since Bertha gave out that she was suffering from a severe headache, Ethel shrugged her shoulders and left her alone, for she was touched both by pity and shame.

A note came up every day to the flat in Strada Mezzodi, with a bunch of roses or nareissi, and Diana sent her love in return, and once a little note, with two violets enclosed for sweetness. "Keep our secret till I give you leave to speak of it," she wrote in her tremulous hand. "Oh, Jem, keep our secret, for my sake, dear." And Cassell thought, as he looked across the table at Burne and saw him graver than usual, that

Burne knew. He waited the outcome of this knowledge that he saw mirrored in the face of Diana on the deck of the *Tortosa*.

A little perversion of the truth, a little piecing together of petty gossip into a mighty whole, had made a criminal out of the dead Ponsonby. And now he was hardly certain himself whether the greater part of the story were true or false, but he was ready enough to swear to its truth as an old acquaintance of Diana's father, if Burne challenged him. He had also to reflect upon the fact that it was quite possible that the young man would insist on marrying Diana at all hazards, and refuse to brand her with her father's sin. But in that case Major Cassell had small doubt that he could find even surer means of separating them; and even while he was pleasantly discussing the arrangements for the trip with Jem himself, his soul was planning the blackest wrong against him that ever the heart of man conceived.

But when he met Diana on the *Tortosa*, and looked into her beautiful eyes, he recognised a challenge in them that had something of defiance in its expression. Her beauty was the same, but there was an indefinably sadder note about it that marred the perfect youth. Jem Burne saw nothing, however, beyond the natural result of her continued ill-health, and going over to her, he greeted her as though she were the only one among the whole crowd he wished to see, and by degrees the little knot of people in their immediate neighbourhood walked away and left them alone together.

"My darling, you have been ill—you are looking thin and pale," he said anxiously. "Perhaps you are not fit to come on this week-end picnic, for I don't suppose we shall find the hotel an abode of luxury."

She let her hand rest in his for a moment, that seemed to her only far too short. "Oh, Jem, I am so glad to see you again," she said, with a little flutter in her throat. "The days have seemed so long." She spoke hurriedly, with her eyes fixed nervously on the corner of the boat where Cassell and his sister were standing.

Burne so placed himself as to shield her from the inquiring gaze of Molly Anson, who, gaily clad in a tartan gown of green and scarlet, was fluttering about at Maurice Hawtrey's side, like a brilliant foreign bird.

"Every moment of the day I have thought about you," he said in a low voice; "but the Baroness has been very kind to me in letting me come and talk to her about you now and again."

So Ethel was on her side after all. She would be no party to separating the two lovers—perhaps indeed she was anxious for their happiness, although it must be secured at the cost of future sorrow. It was quite possible that Jem Burne might know her father's history, and not consider it serious enough to part them. She would be foolish not to enjoy happiness while she could, even with this bitter knowledge in her heart, and Diana smiled brilliantly up at him. "Every one is kind," she said, "and Bertha, the Baroness's maid, is kindest of all, for she could not have

nursed me more tenderly if she had been my own mother."

"I must see this delightful person and give her a present. What would she like to have, do you think, heart of my heart? Though I do not know exactly why I should reward her for waiting on the loveliest, most enchanting woman in the world."

Diana leaned back against the hard wooden seat with a sense of delicious comfort. She was a good sailor, and the fact that the sea was running high between the Maltese islands did not disturb her at all, although Molly Anson's cheerful tones melted into silence, and her rosy colour into a settled melancholy pallor.

"Do look at Hawtrey," said Burne at last. "I don't want to be unkind, Di, but I believe he is going to be 'sieklied o'er' with the same east of sensations as Miss Molly, from pure sympathy, in another moment. How delightful of the Baroness to ask four people to her party whose interests run entirely in pairs! I hope she feels amiable towards her eousin."

Diana glanced towards Cassell, who was being held by Ethel in vivacious conversation, while Bertha Fox hovered in the background with her dressing-bag. There was an air of forced merriment about Ethel that Diana had first perceived when the two women greeted one another in the early morning. The fact that she was to have freedom of care and expense for three whole days had filled her with an audacity of delight that had displaced any other feelings within her. Her long-desired time of enjoyment and position was

scarcely fulfilling her anticipation, for she was even more than usually troubled by adverse circumstances. But to-day she had dared fate to do its worst, and, with the defiance still shining in her eyes, had thrown anxiety to the winds and had gone out to meet her guests as determined as was Diana herself to enjoy the present moment.

“Oh yes,” said Diana, looking back again to her lover; “the Baroness is feeling very amiable towards her cousin.”

“And that is more than Cassell feels towards her at the present moment. Look, Di, he wears almost a savage look. The fact is that every member of the party wants to be talking to you, and I wonder you are not vain instead of the most humble flower that blows.”

Diana laughed, and the laugh did her good, for it made her see life in more normal proportions—as an existence where half the apparent evil is in the imagination alone, and where a healthy mind passes scathless through dangers that would daunt a morbid soul. “Perhaps Major Cassell wants to help poor Molly,” she said, “and does not realise that the kindest thing to do is to leave a sea-sick person severely alone.”

“I did not come to Gozo to talk of or to any one but you,” said Jem Burne; “and if you will be so kind as to make a place for me by your side, you will see that I have got a variety of things to say that may perhaps interest you to hear.”

“Dullness is quite an unpardonable sin,” said

Diana, with lips quivering to a laugh, "and if you display any sign of it, I shall have to consider seriously the re-making up of my mind, so please amuse me."

They were alone on deck for the moment. Molly had been taken below by Bertha Fox, and Ethel had asked her brother to escort her into the chart-house for a time. Her complexion was hardly warranted to stand the rough and tumble of a north wind blowing sand and spray, and even Cassell himself was not feeling very comfortable, so that he was not unwilling to act a brotherly part.

"I have not kissed you for a very long time," whispered Burne in her ear. "Turn your lips to me, Diana, my queen, and let me learn paradise from them."

And Diana, content to give herself to joy so far as it was possible for even a brief space, turned towards him with a little sigh, and their lips met.

The short voyage ended in a difficult landing from small boats on to a steep verdant shore, and it was probable that out of the seven persons of the party two only enjoyed it.

"Diana, you are like a nymph coming back after a long absence to Calypso's island," said Burne, as he lifted her ashore. "You are all dewy freshness and delight, because you are coming back after long absence to your own place."

"Only Calypso and Ulysses are gone," said Diana.

"Calypso lived and loved here, and her spirit still haunts the island. Perhaps she is coming down to

meet the goddess Diana with singing and laughter in the midst of her attendant nymphs."

"Burne, if you have quite done romancing, perhaps you will try to be of some practical use with the baggage," said Cassell savagely, as he passed them with the two ladies clinging to his arm. "Miss Anson, if you would only make up your mind that you do not feel the motion of the sea any longer, you would be perfectly well."

"But I can't," moaned Molly hysterically. "All the land seems to be going round and round and hitting me in the face."

Cassell was understood to mutter the desire that the blow would be a disfiguring one, as he passed the girl on to young Hawtrey and shouted at the Maltese sailors who were carrying the boxes ashore. Somehow—perhaps Bertha Fox best knew how it was done, for she grinned from ear to ear sardonically at Cassell's angry face—one carrozza laden with light luggage and containing Diana and Jem, separated itself from the others and drove off up the hill into Rabato with furious 'arrahs' and 'pestis' from the brown driver, who had the face of an old Phœnician.

Gozo—a green jewel of an island—lies lonely as a cloud in the Mediterranean, known to few people and hated by the soldiers who are exiled there away from the main garrison. The fertile, well-watered hollows are filled with trellised vines and set thick with fruit trees, and above the olive and fig bushes the birds were calling. All along the road to Rabato, the little town on the hill, emerald green and nut-brown lizards

flashed in and out of the grey wall crevices, and Diana, looking out between the curtains of the little carriage, caught sight of the cathedral built on its precipitous cliff, standing, a mark between sea and sky, with the sun turning the glass of its windows to points of glittering flame.

She was the old Diana once again, now that Cassell was no longer within sight of her. She drove, with her hand locked in that of her lover, gay as a child, responsive to the light and the sun as a nymph of the woods and fields, dancing in and out of the gloomy bare hotel rooms when they reached their goal at last, with delight at the novelty of her surroundings.

For one instant there rested on the heart of Jem Burne a shadow, faint and small as a man's hand, when he met the change in her face as Cassell entered the hotel hall. It was like the shrinking of a frightened child from the whip, and the wondering fear that shadowed her eyes for an instant had something in it of knowledge that shared the lightness of her innocence.

Cassell brought back in his train the old fear, the memory of her father's sins, the stain they had left upon her own life, and she fell suddenly silent while the rooms were arranged, and Molly was consoled with soda-water and a hard biscuit, and the menu of the luncheon now cooking in the kitchen was amended and increased. Cassell was a tyrant at heart, and in five minutes he had every servant in the hotel flying before his face for clean linen and fresh flowers, and

his complaints as to the bareness of the furniture rang loud and clear through Rabato, long after the ladies had dispersed to their rooms.

But when they all met at the lunch-table an hour later, and found themselves the only guests in the hotel, every one seemed suddenly to be infected with a spirit of gaiety that communicated itself even to the melancholy waiters and the long face of the proprietor peeping at his guests from behind a ragged curtain. Cassell himself led the merriment, adding indeed to it by the contents of the wooden case of champagne that he had brought from the St. Elmo mess. He pledged the party collectively and individually, and it was only his sister whose face stiffened a little as she remembered how closely his uproarious mirth was always allied to anger.

A wagonette and pair of horses was ready waiting for them at the hotel door when lunch was over, for Cassell was always an excellent master of the ceremonies, and had arranged that they were to drive round the island and visit the Grotto of Calypso on their way home. There was to be no more opportunity for dalliance in couples that day, for the whole party was to keep together under his eye, and even Ethel had no courage to withstand his arrangements. But it was Diana and Jem Burne, against whom the scheme had been laid, who perhaps felt the least disturbed by it. Between two engaged lovers there is a unity of purpose that consoles where individual speech is impossible. And Jem and Diana were quietly conscious of

each other's love even while they were prevented from expressing it openly.

Molly Anson had recovered from her indisposition, and had no eyes for any one but Hawtrey, while it was doubtful whether either Cassell or his sister had any knowledge of the beauty of the scene through which they were passing. But to Diana this was an enchanted land, where Calypso still reigned Queen of Love.

They drove at a leisurely pace through the afternoon world of Gozo, where the lace workers sat at their doors, pausing from their restless bobbins at the sight of the strangers, to laugh and chatter over an event that broke the monotony of the winter months. The deep embrasure of a doorway lent a glimpse of weavers at work at the bright blue linen stuff that is the island wear. Gardens set with prickly-pear bushes and rose-pink almonds were interspersed with groves of bamboo stalks and Indian corn, through which streams of water flowing made a pleasant sound. One woman, with an enchanting brown face, turned to smile at Diana, and the girl saw that her lap was filled with mauve, white, and green bunches of caper flowers. And when at last they reached the gigantic Phœnician stone blocks piled on each other in the form of a tower, and called 'The Tower of Giants,' they were glad to pause for their picnic tea in the shelter of the ruins.

"Come and help me, Diana," said Cassell, with a peremptory note in his voice that she could not resist. He was superintending the unpacking of the hamper while Burne and Ethel were boiling the kettle.

When Diana, in her pale grey gown with the turquoise rosette in her hat, came over the grass towards him, Cassell looked up and his face changed. Light and graceful as a wood nymph, she had the elusive charm of a spring day about her, and Cassell looked away again and busied himself with the hamper, lest she should see the trembling of his hands.

"Do you want me to help you?" she said, resolutely cheerful. "How lucky we are in our afternoon!" She was appealing to him with pretty timid eyes that asked him to be generous—entreated him to spare her, since she was so happy, and life so short.

"Diana, a few days ago I told my sis—my cousin, I mean, to inform you of some details of your father's career. Did she do so?"

A fluttered whisper at his ear breathed "Yes."

"It hurts me to tell you this: it hurts me to suggest such things; but standing in the position that I do towards Captain Burne, as senior officer, I must ask you if he is aware of the same information. I can see that he is in love with you, and you must understand that he must fully appreciate what he is doing in paying you his attentions. Believe me that this topic is a most difficult and painful one for me to pursue, and I am aware that you must necessarily misunderstand and perhaps misjudge me."

The paternal air, the attempt at judicial consolation, sat but ill upon him, and Diana hardened her heart. If he had been a different man—if she had believed and trusted in him—she might have given him her

confidence and asked his advice, whereas, now, she was convinced that his object was to separate them without due regard to inclination or justice.

"I was happy," she said to herself. "I will be happy a little while longer." She looked away at the sea, then back again at Cassell's immovable face.

"Captain Burne knows everything," she said faintly, and prayed that God might forgive her the lie.

Cassell picked a spray of fern and examined it closely. "I thought as much. But—it is not my intention that you shall marry Captain Burne," he said deliberately; "and when I make up my mind to do a thing, it is done."

Diana flung round at him with fine scorn. "Your intention!" she cried. "Who made you an overseer to dole out happiness to me by the teaspoonful? Oh yes, I know your selfishness! So long as such men as you are happy, you care for no one else; but why have I not as much right to joy as you have—why have I not as great a right?"

Cassell laughed grimly. "Oh, you have the same right," he said; "but you have got to have your happiness in my way, or not at all. And the reason is that you belong to me—you were made for my helpmeet in the ages of the past when you were a wood nymph and I was a satyr."

Diana stared at him in amazement. There dawned upon her mind no dim realisation of the truth that his brain was unhinged, for then she would have

appealed to her lover to protect her. But that Cassell was in a vile temper, she had no manner of doubt at all. "You don't know what you are saying," she said contemptuously; "and till you have more command over yourself, I must ask you not to speak to me."

That was the word he had been looking for—command over himself. When he had none where she was concerned. A phrase once heard came dimly now back to his ears: 'A danger to the community.' He would be that before long, but he must make his hay while the sun shone. At fifty years of age his father and his grandfather before him had both been shut away from the world in snug barred houses surrounded by high walls, where they could be no danger to any one. But they had enjoyed their meed of pleasure before that age, just as he was enjoying it now; only, every time he lost even a semblance of self-control it became more difficult to regain it.

Diana was beginning to realise this now, and perhaps it was Jem Burne who had put such a thought into her head. But he would get even with them both—if not by fair means, by foul. Yes, by foul means.

He rejoined the rest of the party before his laugh was over; it still lingered on his lips, although no one but Diana noticed the slight change in him, and she greeted his milder mood with vast relief.

She had revolted openly as she had never thought of doing before, and the strength of that memory

gave her courage. She had told the lie that would give Burne to her for a few more hours. If he knew the tragedy of her father's life already, Cassell would realize that there could be no necessity for him to take it upon his shoulders to inform him. She was riding at anchor in a safe harbour for the present, in spite of Cassell's threatening words.

They drove on again in the clear afternoon light, with the strange sense of unreality about them that is never stronger than in an island peopled with shadows. 'Life is too big to pass for a dream,' but sometimes it stands for a drama, and we for the actors who play our little parts as well as we can and then pass off behind the scenes. Diana was one of the shadows, vague and nebulous as Ulysses and Calypso. Even now across the sounding sea she saw the outline of a Greek galley topping the horizon—or was it a fisherman's boat with a rabbit skin set erect at the stern, with pricked ears for luck?

"Jem, is it really true that I am here alive?" she whispered to him, as she gave her lover her hand to climb the stile that led across the cliffs to the Grotto of Calypso. "Are you sure that I am not a shadow, the substance of a dream, and that the nymph is not the reality, waiting for Ulysses until the end of time?"

"You are no shadow, thank God," said Jem Burne heartily. "You are a very substantial reality to me, Diana—the very soul of my soul."

Out on the cliff the air was fresh and cool, laden

with spices from the African coast that lay so near at hand. Purple sea beat under gaunt beetling cliffs in the solitude, and overhead the gulls swooped and screamed. Under their feet the caves that run round the Xlendi side of the island were brilliant with colour—scarlet, emerald, and blue—lined with coral, seaweed, and shells, and dim with the mystery of winding passages and legendary mermaids who haunt the shores and sing in the evening light when the sun is dropping westward over the desert.

An old guide had followed them from the village, and coming along with faltering steps he attached himself to Diana's side until Burne dismissed him with a silver coin that brought a blessing down upon his head.

"Listen," he said, lingering for an instant. "Can you hear the bells under the water, Signorina? You have the heart that understands; you have the eye to see what we are too deaf to hear. Listen, Signorina! There was a wall there, to keep out the Turkish ships—the sea has swallowed it up. Ramleh is a little place of fishermen now; the glory of Gozo has departed; but, Signorina, if you can hear the bell, it brings good fortune after ill-luck—it brings you a warning and a blessing. Signorina, listen!"

He held her wrist with an earnest hand, and far away, faint and sweet, Diana heard the chime of bells ringing under the sea. The old man read the truth in her face and laughed.

"When you are far away, Signorina, you will

remember what old José Maria told you; is it not so?"

"I shall remember," said Diana, looking into the dark eyes of the old man at her side, whose features were pure Phœnician in outline. "You are only another shadow like I am, only you are out of the past," she said earnestly, and the old guide understood her and nodded in reply.

"You understand, Signorina," he said. "You will see Calypso dancing among the caper blossoms, as I have done when I was young."

"What the devil is the old brute doing?" blustered Cassell, as he came up to where Diana was standing ankle deep in feathery grass. "Take your dirty hand off the lady's wrist and get away!"

José Maria seemed to shrink together like a swaddled mummy. "I go—I go, Signor," he whined, but Diana, looking round at him, saw the withered old hands lifted in a strange cabalistic gesture that seemed to blot out Cassell's heavy figure, and to annihilate him from the landscape entirely with its malevolence of intention.

"You have no right to speak like that to my old friend, Major Cassell," said Diana indignantly. "He was talking to me about his past."

"He was far too familiar," sneered Cassell; "and I don't know what Captain Burne was thinking about to let him touch you—these fellows are horribly dirty. You will have to come to me for protection after all, you see, Diana."

The girl looked round at her lover, and at the sight of his grave face her eyes fell guiltily. There seemed

to be a link between Cassell and herself that gave him the right to speak to her in that almost familiar fashion, and it was impossible either that Burne could understand or that she could explain.

Like a man's hand a shadow had risen between them; light and impalpable it was true, but none the less a shadow for all that, and Diana felt a sob rise in her throat as she realised how impossible it was that her lover should comprehend, and even how undesirable.

"Shall we explore the grotto?" said Burne, with absolute composure. "The afternoon is drawing in, and we shall be benighted perhaps, for you know how suddenly the dark descends here."

He passed Cassell as though he did not see him, and Diana followed in silence, but in the archway above the broken steps he paused.

"You must not allow Major Cassell to speak to you in such tones," he said sternly. "You must not allow it for an instant. He might misunderstand your attitude."

He was afraid to speak plainer for fear lest Diana should be angry. He was afraid to give her any hint as to Cassell's real character, and yet, if he had realised her position, that moment would have saved a very age of regret. There had been a lack of respect in Cassell's manner that had both vexed him deeply and vaguely alarmed him, and he waited for her to defend herself from a causeless suspicion. But in the darkness he heard nothing but a faint sob that tore at his very heart strings.

"Diana," he said, dismayed, "don't cry! Oh, my darling, what a brute I must have been to make you cry!"

The voices of the rest of the party sounded far away in the distance, and he put his arms round her and drew her closely to him, and held her to his breast in a very passion of love.

"I am not exactly crying," said Diana faintly, "only I am so miserable when I do not please you, because then I feel that I shall never be able to satisfy your mother. Is she—is she very particular, Jem?"

"She thinks my wife must be perfection in body and mind; and that she and hers must be above reproach," said Burne thoughtlessly. "She is like a cat with one kitten, I always tell her: jealous and untractable if any one suggests the fact that her offspring's fur is not perfect of its kind. There, Diana, are the tears gone?"

They were gone now—burnt up in a flame of fire that scorched the softness from her eyes. She could never marry Jem Burne—never, never! because his mother would not cease to reproach her with her own family history. But nevertheless she would be happy now for these two days, and before they were gone something might happen to arrest the sword of Damocles that hung above her, suspended by one single thread. Perhaps Jem would be caught so effectively in the snare of her affection that he would never be able to let her go again whatever happened, and in that case she would be strong enough to withstand every slight that she might have to endure on the part of Jem's mother.

She would make up to him so ardently for any loss that he might have suffered in consideration in the eyes of the world. Her arms would cure grief and wounded pride, her kisses blind him to everything but her love. There was only one thing to fear, and that was lest Cassell should tell him the whole story of her father's sin, with all the additional detail that malice could dictate. But there would be time enough to prepare for disaster when it was looming upon her at close quarters.

"Oh, Jem, do let us forget all the hateful things in life—all the disappointments and the troubles—and let us only remember that we are young and happy."

Her voice thrilled to a note of such tremulous joy that it was like the singing of the wind on the wires of a harp, and it seemed to Burne that all the place about him broke into sudden music.

"Darling, I remember nothing more," he said, and hand in hand they went down the winding broken flight of steps that led into the heart of the cave.

There were dark hollows in the rock grotto that were perhaps once rooms when the world was young. Stalactites hung from roof and walls, and green and scarlet lichen stained the stone with frescoes in which they dared to read the history of Calypso. There had been a royal water-gate for the barge of Ulysses at the foot of the stairs, but time had loosened the rocks, and they had fallen in a mass to block the way. No alien feet might set themselves in the prints that the light-footed Calypso had worn away as she went down there day after day to meet her lord. Ulysses had

sailed away from her amorous dalliance, and had left her stretching deserted arms to the south wind, her feet upon the coral rocks that seemed to her as red as her heart's blood.

But Diana did not dare to think of Ulysses, since he had left his love—since he had left her.

Those few delicious moments in the darkness of the grotto were all too short; they were moments to remember when the lamp of joy had gone out and both were in darkness. There are such periods in life, and we recall them sometimes with smiles, sometimes with bitter weeping. But if it were not for these green gardens, most lives would remember only their Calvarys. And in the days of darkness that were so near at hand, Diana had the memory of these kisses, these embraces, to guide her.

When Cassell joined them with his sister, he had recovered his temper, and they were engaged in laughing at Molly Anson, who had the impression firmly fixed in her mind that Calypso was a female Charon who kept the ferry of the Styx.

"This was the toll-bar, my dear Molly," said Ethel lightly. "But she could not have been overburdened with passengers if her room was as draughty as this."

"Oh, Calypso, Calypso! why did you slip so?" said Cassell; and young Hawtrey and Molly greeted this brilliant sally of wit with loud laughter.

"I can't bear it," said Diana quickly. "Why do people turn all the poetry to prose?" and slipping past the others into the open air it seemed to Burne that the shadow of dancing nymphs followed her,

mocking her with airy gestures, enticing her with imploring hands, laughing at her, beckoning her back until the light died and they vanished into the darkness with dancing and laughter.

With dancing and joy Calypso of old had gone forth, but her return had been with weeping and silence—with weeping and the noise of many feet of deserted women down all the ages of eternity.

CHAPTER XII

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

“Look in my face : my name is Might Have Been ;
I am also called No More ; Too Late ; Farewell.”

THE great nave of the Duomo at Rabato was pricked here and there with lights, for men were working late to relay the pavement before the Festa of San José di Ferrara, or some such forgotten saint.

After a day of picnicking at Xlendi, Cassell had planned to visit the cathedral by way of completing the island sight-seeing. There is an illuminated missal chained to a desk in the building that dates back to the time of Clement VIII., and it was this relic that Burne was anxious to see, since his tastes were decidedly antiquarian. The quaint cowled figures blazoned on the parchment, the kneeling gold-winged angels, the saints with their emblems of martyrdom, were among the most beautiful of their kind, and Burne lingered over each leaf jealously. The grey walls rang to the clank of hammer and crowbar, and there were yawning depths in the chancel where graves had been disturbed, and the musty smell of the dead hung over everything like a pall.

Diana, wandering like an uneasy spirit from fretted

pillar of the nave to carved chancel tomb, had been followed all the afternoon by Cassell with the unflagging pertinacity of a panther. Burne had had no chance to be alone with her, and in answer to his urgent demand to make their engagement public, she had refused in so agitated a fashion that he had been left sore and wondering. Between them lay a tiny rift, so small that it might with a kiss have been healed, but that day there were no kisses, but only a smiling Baroness and a resolute Cassell to prevent them at every turn.

Burne could see Diana now in her white gown, with the dark hollows of the cathedral behind her throwing her restless figure into relief, and he laid down the missal he held and stepped out of his seat. The giant notes of the plain-song headings for cantori and dccani swam across his vision, and it seemed to him as only part of his dream that, as he reached her, Diana flung up her arms with a cry that rang through the building, and that Cassell sprang forward, catching her in his arms as she fell in a dead faint.

"Good heavens! What has happened?" he said roughly; then saw and realised with a sense of sick disgust. The chancel was a veritable scene from the Inferno, with ghoulish heads peering up above the pits into which the floor had been excavated. Each pit was an ancient grave, and held a lantern to light its gloomy depths, for the graves were giving up their dead under desecrating hands that had no pity for the cowed monks and cassocked priests who lay there waiting for the Trump of Judgment.

Curiosity had led Diana to the edge of a newly turned heap of bones that was to find fitting sepulture in the crypt, where they would no longer disturb the symmetry of the paved marble floor. And at that moment the body of a priest, whose burial had been of comparatively recent date, was thrown up at her very feet. Pallid, withered, parchment face, from which the cowl had fallen back, looked up at her with sightless eyes; once busy hands now in their eternal rest, crossed over the still heart, silent for ever, touched her soul with a sense of despair. It seemed to her that somewhere away in the recesses of her mind some one was repeating to her lines she had once read and long since forgotten :

“ Are these—are these indeed the end ?
This grinning skull, this heavy loam ?
Do all green ways by which we wend
Lead but to yon ignoble home ? ”

For an instant hope and courage wavered. Her father was like this—my God ! like this, with the kind face she had kissed so often, a cold thing of horror. His dear heart could no longer beat for her, since she could not even think of him without fear. Should she ever see him again ? Could it be true that he would rise again with his own body at the last day ? Oh no ! Nothing was true, since this was death ! And looking round for Burne to comfort her, to tell her that God was above all, her foot stumbled against a skull that the digger had thrown up almost upon her gown, and with a cry she fainted.

It seemed to Felix Cassell that all day long his sub-

conscious being had been waiting for that moment when he should hold her unconscious in his arms, pressed tight against his breast. He would carry her back thus to the hotel, and no one could rob him of his burden, for he had the strength of ten men within his veins to-night.

Jem Burne was upon him before he had made five steps. "Put her down," he said hoarsely over Cassell's shoulder into his ear. "Let me carry her."

"I will not!" said Cassell, with a laugh, and something in his insolently triumphant face made Burne shiver. "It is not the first time I have held her like this. Go you back and tell my cousin that Diana is unwell, and I am taking her to the hotel—and to the kind ministrations of Bertha Fox."

"I shall not leave you," said Burne hoarsely. "Miss Ponsonby is in my charge."

Later, it seemed to Burne an almost impossible thing that he could have acted as he did at the sight of Diana in Cassell's arms. The revolt of his body and soul was the revolt of the lover at the danger of the loved one. Something in Cassell had roused that fear, and he did not wait to see what became of the rest of the party, for fierce anger was drumming in his veins. Cassell ought not to touch her, and yet he could not take part in an unseemly brawl at the very church door, or over the unconscious girl.

He followed Cassell out into the night and up the steep street to the hotel. Wind-driven, a sea mist had veiled the stars, but the crescent moon, with a baby planet between her horns, rocked to her setting

in the sea. The hotel windows were points of fire as they came up to the door where Bertha Fox stood looking out, a dark thin figure with a restless air of expectancy about her. Under the street lamp Cassell stooped deliberately and set his lips to Diana's sweet mouth, and the girl stirred with a murmur of a name. It had been his own, though Burne did not guess it in his blind folly, but the next instant, Diana, revived by the rush through the night air, had slipped to her feet, assisted by Bertha's strong arm, and was being supported into her room, bewildered and helpless. Cassell proffered his help.

"Go you away!" said Bertha Fox, suddenly and strangely moved. "I will not have you touch her."

So she knew something of this strange atmosphere that surrounded Cassell? She was a party to this same revolt that shook Burne from his control? But what was it that Bertha Fox knew? What was this fear, in plain English?

Burne did not dare to permit himself to reason with his senses: they had warned him of evil, and that was enough.

In the long hotel passage the two men faced one another like two rival red deer when April is in their blood.

"What right had you to—to touch Miss Ponsonby, my promised wife?" said Burne, in a low voice, keeping his two strong hands clenched at his side. "You did not know perhaps—it was unwise of me to yield to her gentle, timid wish that our secret should not be known at present to the public—but I wish

you to know, after what I saw to-night, that your conduct was that of a coward and a blackguard—to kiss a girl who was defenceless and at your mercy ! ”

Cassell began to laugh, and in the sound of his mirth there was something so unseemly that Jem Burne lifted his strong right hand.

“ I have kissed her before. Oh, you fool—you blind fool—do you suppose that I spent money on the pretty Diana without being paid for it ? Why, she promised to be my wife long ago, with the same pretty timidity and entreaties for silence ; so I have the prior right to her.”

Burne’s strong right hand swung out and struck the words from Cassell’s lips. “ You liar ! You d——d liar ! Take back your words ! ”

Very slowly Cassell lifted his handkerchief to his bleeding lips where Burne’s knuckles had cut them. The little trickle of scarlet had dyed his white teeth and grizzled moustache, but had not put out the flame in his eyes. Henceforth between the two men there could be nothing but armed neutrality. Burne would have to leave the regiment that he loved—would have to set his feet on new paths, since never again would he willingly come in contact with Cassell in duty or pleasure. No faintest shadow of doubt crossed his mind that his senior officer was lying. He had as deep a faith in the honour and truth of Diana as he had in the justice of God, and therefore it was impossible for him to continue at the hotel as the guest of Cassell and his cousin ; and it was equally impossible that he should allow Diana to remain there

either. All these thoughts passed through the mind of Jem Burne even as he stood there, staring vaguely at the trickle of the thin scarlet line down Cassell's chin.

"You liar! I will *make* you take back your words!" he said again; but Cassell, staring at him, laughed and laughed and laughed, till, to escape that ghastly mirth, Burne turned on his heel and went up the passage to his own room.

"If I had stayed there an instant longer I should have killed him," he said to himself when the locked door was between the two men.

He sat down at the end of his bed and tried to regain his self-control. To have stood up in cold blood and struck his superior officer would have seemed the dreadful vision of a dream at any time, but to have struck him under such aggravated circumstances, made the dream almost grotesque, and at first he declined to believe it. A shock of unexpected catastrophe sets the whole world swinging out of gear sometimes, and it was so now with Jem Burne. He told himself that it would be impossible to meet Cassell at dinner with that mark upon his face, and yet, at the same time, he knew that even if the world fell about him in ruins, life must go on in its usual fashion where other men were concerned. If he wept, there were other people who would laugh; if he went hungry, other people must eat. His chief concern now must be to protect Diana's fair name, and therefore it seemed to him necessary that they should not both absent themselves from the dinner-table, lest

people might imagine that there was truth in Cassell's accusation.

He dressed mechanically, hearing the hurry of feet outside in the passages. His mind in its turmoil was hardly capable of consecutive thought: he seemed to have spent all his force in that quick blow.

When he left the haven of his own room he met Bertha Fox in the passage, hovering to and fro with the furtive air of anxiety that she wore sometimes.

"How is Miss Ponsonby?" he stopped to say briefly, for he had taken a baseless dislike to the woman, that had its origin in nothing save the reason of Dr. Fell's enemy.

"She is better, but does not intend to come downstairs again."

The eyes of Bertha Fox looked anywhere but at Burne's face. She had within her heart many things to say to him, but his glance did not encourage confidence. She had no reason to believe that he could trust her, just as she had no reason to be certain that he had quarrelled with Cassell over his behaviour to Diana. There was no doubt that the girl was very unhappy, and with the thought of her own Susie warm within her, Bertha Fox was ready to help the girl who was worse than friendless.

"Will you please tell Miss Ponsonby that I am—unexpectedly obliged to go away to-morrow morning early," he said gravely; "and I shall hope to be able to see her before I go."

Bertha Fox held her breath, for there was something cold, something lacking in his tone.

Many men are as nature made them, fiercely jealous of any defacing hand that should smirch even a speck of the bloom from the downy cheek of their particular peach, and Burne had the marks of the struggle in his voice.

"I will tell Miss Ponsonby," she murmured, and moved away, because she did not wish him to see that there were tears in her eyes. She knew that Diana had some great trouble in her life just now, although what it might be she did not press to know. It was love that had caught her in the net, though whether Cassell had an active hand in marring her happiness, Bertha could not tell, but she knew what she must do that night, since she had seen Cassell's face under the stars. Old thoughts, old memories throbbed in her brain, marching with heavy feet across the pages of her life. Love for all young girls had swept over her when her own child was born. Love for Diana had been the theme of these past few days. What was the meaning of these marching feet that never ceased from their steady tramp in her brain? Inexorable fate—inexorable fate—they beat out. Felix Cassell had determined to marry Diana, and she had never known him turn from his purpose yet. There must be some reason for his determination to which she was a stranger, but she would find out everything before she was much older, for to be the wife of Felix Cassell would be a fate that she could wish for no woman. And with this dreary thought to console her Bertha

went back to the room where Diana lay with her face hidden in her pillow, and all her hair spread about her like a veil.

Cassell did not appear at dinner that night, and his sister gave his excuses with the resolute air of a woman who is determined at all hazards to be gay. It was a great relief to at least one person at the table that Molly Anson's merry chatter never ceased from soup to prickly-pear dessert, and that she met the fatuous smile of a very young man in her place, who met each sally of hers with a laugh that compelled the others to join in the mirth, in spite of the varied anxieties that held them bound tightly in thrall.

Molly, in a white gown, with a tartan ribbon in her hair, saw nothing but the interest of the moment in having a pleasant young man with whom she could amuse herself, far removed from her mother's cold eye. She was sorry that Diana had been so much agitated in the Duomo, but she herself had only looked on the dry old bones as she would have done on the mummies in the British Museum. Poor Diana! it was a shame to miss this nice woodcock on toast, and these funny vegetables that looked like chocolate eggs! She was sorry for Major Cassell, too. Important letters to write were such a nuisance; and really—no one would stare at him, even if he had had a fall in the dark and bruised his face.

And so Molly chattered away an awkward hour; and Ethel, trifling with her dinner and able to eat nothing, heard and blessed her. To her had fallen the exquisite penalty of an interview with Felix Cassell after

his accident. The walls of the hotel at Rabato were very thickly built, since once they had been a palace for the Knights of Malta, and therefore no sound had penetrated through them to the ears of the other guests. But Ethel, stripped of her tinsel pretences by her brother's scorching words, had felt that every one knew she had been the wife of a man with the shadow and taint of prison upon him, and that she was merely a shopkeeper masquerading as a Baroness before the eyes of a silly world. She had been very foolish to manage his affairs so badly. He would take away everything from her, and send her back to London by the next steamer. So he had raved, but it was just at this point that she turned and flung her defiance back at him. She was not dependent on him, she would have him know. She had other friends in London. There was Sir Peregrine Ponsonby and Colonel Dare; yes, and a score of others who would back her up with substantial help if he failed her.

And in the midst of the clamour of her words he had suddenly burst into tears, clinging to her hand and saying that he was mad, and she must save him from himself. He had kissed her, and she had felt the stain of his blood wet on her own cheek; but she had loved him then, in his helpless distress, as she had never done since they were children in the nursery together, even while she doubted the sincerity of his grief where his offence against her own self was concerned.

A sister is so easy to deceive, Cassell had told himself.

A few tears, a few kisses, and everything is forgotten ; but he ignored the fact that a woman's jealousy is as boundless as the sky and deep as the sea, and that she is seldom deterred by man's simple notions of honour from injuring where she has been disappointed in her ambitions. A chance word that stings, a shrug, a smile—are all woman's weapons against her own sex, and until she has changed her nature and become a hybrid thing between male and female, she will never be different.

Jem Burne was a stupid, dense-headed man that night, and it never dawned across his mind that Ethel was ripe for confidence. If he had spoken to her, or given her any chance at all to confide in him, Diana would have been swept away from Rabato and shut in the safe circle of a wedding-ring before another sun had set.

But he did not approve of the Baroness or her maid, and therefore he bowed her a civil 'good-night' when dinner was over and went out into the veranda to smoke and to inquire the hour of a departing steamer next day that should give him time for a talk with Diana before he left the island. It never crossed his mind that he was leaving the girl in a den of lions who were hungry for their meal. His one thought was to find Mrs. Stafford and tell her so much of the story as he could confide to her, and then entreat her to offer the girl an asylum until he could arrange their marriage.

She should remain no longer in a household where she was constantly exposed to Cassell's attentions ; and with all an Englishman's hearty contempt for

foreigners he blamed the Baroness von Poppenheim as an easy-going, unconventional woman, who could not see wrong until it was under her very eyes, and to whom flirtation and intrigue came as naturally as breathing. He would eat her meat no more, and he was even careful enough to order his own breakfast in his room, and to pay for it beforehand. If Diana would come away with him next day, and break off from her new friends, he would entreat her to marry him immediately from Mrs. Stafford's house, and at the mere thought of such happiness he felt his heart beat faster.

Poor little Diana, with her history and her sorrow ! She had been like a rudderless ship in a stormy sea ; and with all a lover's self-sufficiency he told himself that from henceforth he would be her guide and companion, and that under his care she should be steered safe into harbour.

So he reflected, watching the smoke wreaths of his cigar complacently, unconscious of the passing hours, until a sleepy waiter brought him the key of the door, and, with hands wide spread, besought the Signor to 'forgive his sleep-bound slave.'

The night drew down, and every light in barrack and fort was extinguished ; and only here and there in the monastery on the hill a window glowed like a point of fire, showing where the white-cowled monks were keeping their hours with prayer for the sleeping world. Then he rose and went into the hotel.

Diana lay asleep in her room, tired of tears, weary of misunderstandings. There was a night-light burning

in a basin that shed a round circle of light on the ceiling and the wall, and crept up nearly to the great four-posted white bed where the girl slept so quietly. The window was open on to the veranda, and the curtains were shaking in the light wind. Outside the door, like an Indian servant, Bertha Fox lay stretched asleep on a rug. She had slipped out from her room after the hotel was asleep, with a sudden sense of fear that was inexplicable, and had thrown herself down to watch over the slumbering girl she loved. She had offered to spend the night in her room, but Diana had wished to be alone, and she had been unwilling to alarm her by suggestions of evil. But there was something in the air that kept Bertha awake that night—something electric—something that communicated evil to a heart that was passionately loving.

“If I could say a prayer,” said Bertha Fox, as she folded her rug into a mattress and lay down in her gown and shoes, “I should pray for Diana to-night; but I have prayed so seldom in life that it seems strange to me to fashion the words; but nevertheless, God be the guardian of this place to-night!”

The silence of the passages soothed her after a time, and against her will she fell asleep, with her hands outspread to guard the door. Her guardian angel, seeing her so engaged, uncovered his grave face that his wings had hidden so long, and basked in the smile of God, since once again had a heart returned to its allegiance.

Felix Cassell, shut up by himself in the solitude of his own room, passed an hour upon which he never

cared to look back. He had regained control of all his disturbed emotions, and a strange unnatural calm took possession of him. He was set on one thought, so that his mind seemed to work round the central idea as a wheel round a pivot. And that thought was Diana. When he opened his bedroom door and walked down the passage, it was with the deliberate step of a murderer going in search of his victim, for if he could not have Diana for his wife, he had no wish that she should live. He was uncertain as to which of the two feelings were stronger within him—love for Diana, or hatred of Jem Burne; but for the present, the hatred was the dominating force. That Burne should in some fashion be made aware of his intentions, was part of his programme, but that part would come afterwards.

How silent the hotel was, as he passed through it with something in his hand that glittered half in, half out of a leather sheath. Burne's door, open as he passed, showed no light, for Jem was still on the veranda at the other side of the building.

When Cassell saw Bertha Fox lying prone across the threshold of Diana's room, asleep, his face changed. He had not dreamed before that in her lay another accusing shadow to thwart his present scheme. The truth forced itself upon him as the Elizabethan dramatist of old saw it when he wrote :

“ Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.”

But she was safely sleeping, and he turned out

through the veranda to enter the room by the window that Bertha had forgotten to latch. If the window had been shut, Cassell was not quite sure what would have been his next step, for he knew within himself that there was murder in his heart for any one who stood in his way.

How quiet the room was, and the girl on the bed, whose soft breathing was the only sound to break the silence. The lamp gave just enough light to see her where she lay, with one arm above her head, the curve of her cheek indenting the pillow that she pressed so lightly.

It would be so easy to kill her; he thought that his hands were at her throat, choking the life out of her, so that no one might profit by the fortune to which she was heiress, and which it seemed to him was within her very grasp. When he had killed her he did not know what he should do with himself, but the sea was close at hand, and the sea gives up no secrets.

Diana woke suddenly, with all her senses alert. She sat up alive to the fact that there was some other presence in the room, and just for one instant her eyes held Cassell's through the parted curtains. Then she sprang up in the bed all her full white length, and cried out so that the room rang. She had been dreaming of her father, and her only thought was to rid the room of this evil presence that came between her and the blessed dead. She cried but once, for Bertha Fox, who was only a light sleeper, was in the room before Cassell could touch her.

“Oh—my God! Bertha, take him away—I am

afraid! He has got a knife in his hand!" she said, cowering away from Cassell, her arms outspread to keep him from her, her white face hidden in the copper masses of her hair.

If Cassell had been mad before, he was sane enough now, for the sight of Bertha Fox sobered him. She was like a threatening image of avenging power as she swept down upon him in her black gown.

"Come out of this room, Felix Cassell," she said. "Come away! How dare you—how dare you touch her! You are mad!" She caught him by the arm, she whirled him aside like a leaf in a December gale, and before he could speak she was standing with him in the little box-room that led out of Diana's bedroom into the passage.

"I shall not let you go until I have had my say to you," she said, "and it must not be said in the passage, for fear others should hear besides you and me. Oh yes, I have seen your ways with that girl from the beginning, and if it had not been for me to-night you would have made an end of her, I verily believe, so that no one else might marry her, in just the same way that you used to break Ethel's dolls when you were children in the nursery—just for thoughtless cruelty. I never spoke to you of Diana before, because I knew that it was no good, but you and Ethel are both the same—both pleasure-seeking and careless of any one but yourselves, just as I should be if it were not for my Susie. Oh, but I am glad you have nothing to do with Susie—you and Ethel—both going the same way, eager for money, eager for gain, and

never a thought for other people. Hush! I won't let you speak till I have done. Do you know what I shall do if you go near Diana again? I shall tell Captain Burne all about everything and help her to get away clear. Why, you daren't so much as let me tell Ethel where I found you to-night! She'd have you put straight into the asylum like your father before you, and I should see that you never came out again!"

Bertha's voice failed for want of breath, and Cassell pushed her aside. His was such an ignominious position that he was tingling with baffled rage from head to foot.

"Tell Ethel what you like," he said breathlessly; "but if you do breathe one word to my sister, I shall tell her to turn you away without a character, and you best know what would happen to you then! I may have been mad for the moment, I am sane enough now—quite sane enough to do you and Susie an injury if you let to-night's work cross your lips, my good Bertha!"

"Go back to your room now, or I shall rouse the house," said Bertha, panting with sobbing breath.

"Get out of my way," he said suddenly, and struck her with a cruel hand. Bertha Fox staggered against the table, faint and sick, and in that instant Cassell opened the door and went out.

He stood silhouetted against the light in the doorway for an instant, like a figure of the night; and, as he lingered there, Jem Burne came past on his way to bed. The eyes of the two men met with a challenge, and Jem Burne paused for an instant.

"I beg your pardon, Major Cassell," he said. "I was wrong and you were——" He choked on the word, for he was young and in love with an ideal; then went on to his own room, leaving Cassell wordless, still grinning, with lips tight drawn across his teeth.

Jem was ready to start in another hour, with bag packed, muffled in travelling coat and cap. He could not rest another moment under the same roof with the man who had betrayed him, and he let himself out into the darkness of the night with a fire in his veins that kept him at fever heat. He enclosed some money in an envelope addressed to the hotel-keeper, sufficient to defray his expenses, but to Diana he wrote never a word, for he would not willingly either see her or communicate with her again.

The clock struck three as he left the Square on his way to the harbour. Each stroke hung upon the still air with the resonance of unearthly music that had the tragedy of tears in every note. A fishing boat, with a lamp at the mast-head, was anchored at the quay, and after a little bargaining it was arranged that the *Maria Pia* should sail him back to Valetta before sunrise.

To the melody of flapping sails and the minor chant of the boatmen, singing as they strained at the cordage, Jem Burne saw the East quiver with a new day on the dirty deck of the fishing boat. Valetta was hardly awake when they ran into the Grand Harbour in the pulsating dawn light, but he let himself into his quarters with his latchkey, and picked up his letters with a shaking hand. He had not dared to think all

that long night, when he lay wrapped in his coat upon the slanting deck of the boat, his eyes aching to pierce the clouds that wrapped the sun. He could not stay in Malta now—of that he was convinced—but his future lay on the knees of the gods, for he could not see his path clearly marked before him. He had spoiled his career for a woman's sake, and, as it chanced, an adventuress, with the face of a Diana. He had yet to face his mother's reproaches and perhaps her tears.

There was a letter lying on his table with the War Office stamp upon it, and he opened it with a sudden catch of his breath. It was to inform him in formal terms that he had been selected for admission to the Staff College, and that he was to return to England immediately.

When things seem at their worst God sends a way out to turn darkness into light, and it was so now with Burne. There was no need for him to see any one in the place before he left except Mrs. Stafford, for the colonel would give him leave immediately. The next week would see him in England, and hard work would make him forget—Diana. Heart of his heart; soul of his soul she had been in their brief love story! She must be that no longer. Convicted on circumstantial evidence, Diana bore the whole weight of the blame, as so many a woman had done before her, since men are blind fools from everlasting, world without end.

Diana slept till long after daybreak, for Bertha Fox had given her a sleeping draught that held her mercifully enchained and stupefied. The woman had been terrified at the girl's passion of fear and self-loathing,

and had not known how to calm her till she went in hot haste to Ethel, and waking her, laid the facts of the case before her. Ethel was very angry, and, sitting up in bed, she gave vent to her feelings before she consented to see Diana at all. But the girl's condition alarmed her, and she was ready enough to leave her to Bertha's tender ministrations after the bromide was administered.

"Oh, do be quiet, Diana!" she said. "I tell you Felix was drunk, and you must have dreamed that he had a knife. He will not dare so much as look at you again, when I have done with him! Do you suppose I want a scandal in my household? I wish we had never come to Gozo; it is all too stupid!"

Harsh though they were, her words made the best restorative for Diana, and the trembling of her limbs ceasing, sleep came to her to save her reason.

Ethel sent for the girl early next morning, when she was still in the hands of her maid. It seemed to Bertha that she was intent on shocking Diana's finer sensibilities in every conceivable fashion, to prepare her perhaps for a life that should have nothing that was ideal in it. For Ethel sat there in her pink satin dressing-jacket, with the ravages that age and hard living had done for her looks plain for all the world to see. This mahogany-skinned, light-lashed woman, with the fallen cheeks and the thin hair, was no longer the pink and white beauty of everyday life, and Diana paused at the door, revolted.

"Come in," said the Baroness harshly; "I have something to say to you. I have seen Felix Cassell,

and he will trouble you no more ; and at the same time I may as well tell you that he is my brother, though I do not wish any one to know it but yourself for—for family reasons. He mistook your gay manner for levity, as I think I prophesied long ago. He has already left for Valetta, and we are to follow by the next boat. He left a message for you. He considered it necessary that he should inform Captain Burne of certain well-known facts in your father's history, since you had neglected to do so. Captain Burne was naturally much shocked and pained, and left Gozo immediately. He wished you to understand that everything must be over between you, as his mother would never consent to his marriage with a girl who owns such a family history. You will find in the future that truth is always the best, Diana."

Oh, Henry Ponsonby, in your dishonoured grave, if ever the dead can see back into the world they have left, you must have wept, too, at the sight of your daughter's tears !

CHAPTER XIII

“ THE VOICE OF THE GRINDING ”

“ There, little girl, don't cry :
They have broken your heart, I know :
And the rainbow gleams
Of your youthful dreams
Are things of the long ago.
But heaven holds all for which you sigh—
There, little girl, don't cry.”

J. W. Riley.

“ RATHER a mixed lot as to colour and looks, eh ? ” said Lord Arthur Verity, fresh out from England, as he surveyed the ranks of dancers in the Palace ball-room.

“ We are rather proud of our beauty and brilliance this winter, sir,” said the pert young A.D.C. with the eyeglass, who stood talking to him under the window.

“ It certainly has been a season quite exceptional in the matter of good looks and clothes.”

“ Confound it all, my dear chap ! Then, where are they ? ” said Lord Arthur, slowly eyeing the dancing couples who revolved about him. “ There's a stout native, with a complexion like fried toast, and an

officer's wife who has weathered so many hot weathers in India that the paint won't stick on her dried-up cheeks . . . Ah! there's a decent-looking woman in a green gown. Who is she?"

The A.D.C. who had been told off to look after the new arrival, who was the brother of the real occupier of the throne of Malta for whom Sir Abraham Lukin was holding the reins temporarily, glanced languidly round. He had wanted to dance with Diana, and not to dance attendance on a stout elderly diplomat with a thirst for information.

"The woman in the green dress—oh, Mrs. Stafford!" he said, in a politely bored voice. "Every one likes her; but I'll show you the beauty of the season in a moment, if you wait patiently, sir."

"You'll be glad to see the Duke back again, eh?" said Lord Arthur. "Old Lukin's not much of a figure-head—does better at his own job, eh?"

"Oh, Sir Abraham is a capital Deputy Governor," said the A.D.C. discreetly; "but of course the Duke is ideal, sir."

"H'm!" said Lord Arthur Verity. "Not so lukewarm to a pretty face perhaps, or more lenient to his aides, hey?"

The subaltern temporarily seconded from his regiment to fill a vacancy, as Sir Abraham had been on a higher sphere, smiled diplomatically and settled the blue lapel of his dress coat.

"Here is the girl I mean, Lord Arthur," he said suddenly, "and, by Jove! isn't she a pretty creature?"

Diana, dancing with an officer in naval uniform, came round the room as he spoke. It was the night after their return from Gozo, and there was something about her face that made young Watwin look closely at her, and then look away again with a sigh. Diana was dancing gracefully, as she always did. There was nothing of the yielding, swaying suggestion about her figure, as about that of so many women in the room. She seemed to be part of the poetry of motion, and the clean-limbed young officer dancing with her gave her just the support she needed and no more. Her grey mist-like draperies floated about her like a cloud, as her feet beat out the measure of 'The Blue Danube'—selected in deference to a German princelet who was gracing the evening by his presence.

Diana's eyes held within them the light of despair. She was going through the evening mechanically, as for the future she must go through everything. She must defy Fate, Bertha Fox had told her, striving to put some courage into her crushed heart. She did not want the whole world to know that she was suffering? She did not want to go back to Jane Harding and the 'Cosmopolitan' Hotel?

Bertha had been lacing her into her gown while she was speaking thus sharply to her. The girl must be roused from this extraordinary state of lassitude at any cost, or Bertha feared for her brain. She had done everything mechanically, with the air of a woman in a condition of coma, since the shock she had received in the hotel at Rabato. The Baroness said that she must be roused at any cost, for a fool with no wits

would be of no use to her in the future; and Bertha had done her best. But the eyes, full of slow consuming agony, had looked round the room in vain for Jem Burne. If she had at any time clung to the hope that he would appear at the Palace dance, ready and eager to give her the comfort of his forgiveness for owning such a family history, she knew now that she was mistaken. Jem Burne would never come to her again! How the violins made her heart ache with their throbbing note of pathos!

The Baroness had been very kind: she had helped her to write a little letter to Jem asking for an explanation, and had undertaken to deliver it herself; but there had arrived no answer to that little letter. The violins were calling and wailing to her that the note had been burned to ashes in the fireplace before the ink was dry, only Diana could not understand their burden.

Her eyes sought everywhere for Jem, since she had told him in her letter that if he could forget what had happened and her deceit in hiding the truth from him, he was to be at the Palace that night—and now, he was not here.

Her little grey feet danced past, and she was lost in the crowd.

"Yes, by Jove! that is a lovely girl," said Lord Arthur Verity. "You might introduce me later, Watwin?"

"I thought you'd confess we had our beauties this season," said the A.D.C., with a chuckle.

Cassell, watching Diana from the arch of the opposite

door, noted every movement of her supple figure. She had a touch of rouge on either cheek, and under the colour her face was very white. She had rings of black round her eyes, but they only set off the beauty of their deep violet blue. He would speak to her no more till he met her in London, and then she would be more gracious to him, since her position would have altered so entirely that she would realise how far his attentions would lift her from the dust in which her shining wings had been dragged. He could afford to wait his time, and, waiting, could plan new schemes for his own enjoyment that included Diana, and perhaps a house in a fashionable street in Mayfair, provided by her doting grandfather, where he could teach her his own personal idea of love.

"By Jove!" said Lord Arthur Verity, suddenly alert, "whom have you got here?"

Baroness Ethel was passing, gorgeous in peacock blue satin and silver, with the set smile on her face that she could command at will, covering to-night as it did a whole volume of difficult situations.

"That, sir, is the Baroness von Poppenheim," said the garrulous A.D.C.; "a jolly nice woman, too; the widow of an attaché to the court of Arcadia; plenty of money and knows how to spend it; the most popular woman on the island; a cousin of Major Cassell's, too."

"By Jove, sir, she's nothing of the sort!" Lord Arthur Verity's face grew more rubicund, and he

gobbled like a turkey. "Here, take me to that old fool Lukin, and I will explain one or two things to him to make him open his eyes. What business had he to accept a woman with no credentials from home? Why, I tell you, Watwin, that woman is no more a baroness than you are. She was the goddaughter of some sprig of Austrian nobility, so some people say; but that is all the right she has to the name. She keeps a massage establishment in London, and, by Jove, sir, she makes my—my corsets! And, what is worse, she keeps a gaming establishment connected with the shop, which isn't above reproach. She got hold of my silly young nephew, and I saved him just in time before she fleeced him of every penny he possessed, and his skin into the bargain! I turned her out of Maida Vale, and I'll turn her out of Malta! Such women are pestilential plague spots! And as for your Major Cassell, he is probably either a vietim or an accomplice, for he could not know Ethel Vavasour without being perfectly certain as to the position she occupies in the social seale."

"Good heavens!" said young Watwin, in such profound distress that his new acquaintance realised he was shaking the little kingdom of Malta to its very foundations. "You cannot mean what you say, sir? It would be too awful. Why, Major Cassell is her cousin."

"I can't help that fact, Watwin; I mean every word of what I say. And not only that, but the Duke will be most seriously annoyed when he returns, to

find that this adventuress has been received—so to speak—at Court!"

As Lord Arthur Verity spoke, the eyes of Ethel Vavasour met his own across the width of the ball-room, and in that shock of meeting the woman knew that her game was played out. It was incredible bad luck to realise that one of the men whom she had cause to fear should have arrived in Malta. Every detail of the sordid, horrible scene returned to her in full force. She remembered how Lord Arthur had burst in upon her snug little card party one night. She remembered his words once again, his threats of police interference and public exposure, the ignominious flight she had undertaken at a few hours' notice to another corner of London, the sullen despair of the ruined boy and the money she had been compelled to disgorge—for this had all made the darkest scene of a very sordid life.

She looked round for her brother; then realised that he had been in India at the time, and had known little of the disgraceful business. He could not help her now, although the greatest discomfort she could feel at the present was that he would be involved in her inevitable disgrace. There was always, however, the chance of Lord Arthur Verity's chivalry proving too much for his sense of justice, and she determined to speak to him if possible, and at any rate to entreat him to let her slip quietly away without a scandal. She knew that she was looking her best, and the recent shock to her nerves had strengthened her at every point,

so that his duller wits would be no match for her own.

She danced back again through the crowd to the point where he had been standing a few moments earlier. Her partner was a naval commander, who appreciated an amusing woman when he met one, and was particularly partial to Ethel's brand of cigars. He skilfully steered her glittering draperies clear of rout seats and clumsy midshipmen, but Lord Arthur was gone. She saw him next on the dais, where the Deputy Governor was seated with Lady Lukin and a few special friends; and when he drew Sir Abraham Lukin into a quiet corner, and assailed his sound ear with an air of importance, Ethel knew that she had lost the game and that her brief triumph was over.

Her face did not change in its expression, but the smile became fixed and she moved her fan quickly.

"I am perfectly exhausted," she said, with a little gasp for breath. "Do you think that at this teetotal entertainment a brandy and soda could be found?"

But even the stimulus of the strong spirit could not do more than deaden for the moment the thought of the valley of humiliation through which she would very surely have to pass.

The news of the absolute lack of social position on the part of the guest he had delighted to honour, drove Sir Abraham Lukin into a fit of rage, before which his A.D.C.'s fled in dismayed confusion. It

had been their fault entirely. Major Johnstone must remember that he had told him to be very careful as to who was received at the Palace during the Duke's absence; and if he did not remember, he must be a fool. They must turn the woman out at once, with her accomplice. A likely story Major Cassell had told him; and since the sham baroness was his cousin, he must have been privy to the whole affair. Therefore they must find Cassell at once, and charge him with the removal of this woman.

But though the distracted A.D.C.'s searched the Palace in every available corner, there was no sign of Felix Cassell, since a quick word from Ethel had warned him how matters stood, and he had left the Palace with the least delay possible.

And therefore it came to pass that to Major Johnstone, acting temporarily as head of affairs, fell the unpleasant task of showing Ethel Vavasour to the door. She was standing talking loudly to a little group of men, and he wondered when his eyes fell upon her that society could have endured so long her easy vulgarity. He himself was a man essentially retiring, who was out of place at such entertainments as the present one; and for the first time in his life he blessed his wife's ill-health and his own natural reserve when he realised that he at least had neither eaten nor drunk at Ethel's table.

"May I have a word with you, Baroness?" he said formally, and offered his arm to lead her to the deserted card-room. "Lord Arthur Verity is here," he said quietly, when they stood behind

the closed door. "I think you will understand why the Governor wishes you to leave the Palace?"

"I suppose he has been told things about me?" said Ethel, fighting for the last rag of her respectability with tooth and nail. "Let me see Sir Abraham Lukin myself; I can explain everything."

The Deputy Governor had said to his surrounding Court that "if the woman came within a foot of him he should know who to blame," and therefore Major Johnstone, in great alarm, hastened to convince her that the Deputy Governor absolutely refused to speak to her.

"I can assure you, madam, the least disagreeable thing that you can do for your own self is to leave Malta immediately," he said. "You may be sure that no one in the Palace will refer to your departure, and it will be easy enough to invent some excuse as to illness at home—or—or pressing business."

Ethel shrugged her shoulders. "So the game is up," she said; "and I suppose, as usual, the man—otherwise my brother, Felix Cassell—gets off scot free?"

"I do not think so," said Major Johnstone drily; and Ethel smiled.

When Diana stood face to face with her in the drawing-room of the little flat where Bertha Fox was already busily packing, Ethel Vavasour said briefly: "Something has happened at home to make it absolutely necessary that I should return to London to-morrow, and therefore we sail on the *Carola* at

eight o'clock and go back overland. You had better go and get some sleep, child. Bertha will pack for you."

"Oh, I am so glad we are going to-morrow!" said Diana, with a sudden sob. "There is nothing I want to stay here for now; I never want to see Malta again."

She would have been so glad at the moment for a little tender pity, but Ethel had none to give her—none to spare from her own disaster. And the girl, after lingering for an instant, went away to her own room to sleep the sleep of exhaustion.

She slept through Ethel's interview with her brother, that lasted far into the night. He should send in his papers, he said irritably, for, as usual, it needed a woman to wreck a man's career, and Ethel must have played the fool with Lord Arthur Verity's nephew. The whole disgraceful story would smirch him for ever in the island; and as the 'Westminsters' had another four years to put in there, it was obviously impossible that he could continue in the regiment.

He was not, on the whole, so angry as Ethel had expected him to be, for he had long meditated an easy retirement from the service. When a man has a good income and expensive tastes, he will find himself with a wider scope for enjoyment in civilian life, and the step that Major Cassell felt now to be inevitable, was only vexing in that he would far rather have taken it in his own good time.

"I suppose I shall be home soon after you," he said,

as they parted. "I shall make the excuse that Heron Vale requires its master, and Excelsior Mansions will see me before you have had time to unpack your fal-lals. It is a great nuisance, Ethel, but I shall have a better time out of the service, I'll be bound."

"You men are all alike," said Ethel contemptuously. "You think of your own good time and care nothing for what the woman nearest to you must suffer."

"You must look out for yourself now," he said, with a sneer, "unless Diana changes her mind."

"She will change it fast enough in London," returned Ethel. "She will have no amusements in Excelsior Mansions."

When Cassell had gone, and the flat was shut up for the night, Ethel went into the room where Bertha was packing steadily. The dismantled drawing-room, shorn of its prettinesses, the chairs heaped with dresses and coats, the half-packed boxes, all lent a dishevelled air to the place. Ethel sat down and wrote all necessary cheques and orders, then slipped out of her gown, still in silence, and left it lying in a shimmering opalescent heap on the carpet.

"So it has come to an end after all," she said at last, finding the silence insupportable. "Why don't you speak to me? Why don't you say anything to break this hateful silence, woman?"

"Because I have got nothing to say," returned the other deliberately. "Because I always knew that some one would give away the whole history. I told you so before we came if you remember."

" You are always so ready with your croakings, and when they come true you are indecently cheerful. I don't believe you care a rap what happens to me so long as you get your wages and plenty to eat."

" There are only two people I care for in the world now," said Bertha, picking up the discarded gown and laying it on the bed; " and one of them is Diana, and the other is Susie. They are one as innocent as the other; and if anything happens to either of them, I am sorry for the person that does the harm."

There was something that savoured of an indefinite threat in Bertha's voice, and Ethel made no answer, save to shrug her shoulders pettishly.

" You have grown a conscience, and it won't pay you, Bertha," she said, as she lay down at last for an hour's sleep. " In this world it never pays to be good—it is the green bay trees that get all the fun out of life."

" And they do all the paying afterwards," said Bertha suddenly. " The time for payment came to me long ago, Ethel Vavasour, and it has come to you now, only you don't see it. Why don't you change while there's time ? "

Ethel lifted herself up on one elbow. " Don't be a fool," she said, " and a silly one, too. There'll be time enough to think of change when I'm an old woman."

" You'll never change," said Bertha suddenly. " Sometimes I can see things, and I saw you last night

as plain as anything in my dream, and you were calling to me, and crying out in your pain that had got hold of you—and there was no one to help you.”

She spoke so earnestly that Ethel sat up and stared at her in amazement. “You make me shiver, with your great eyes and your nonsense,” she said at last, angrily. “You and I shall go to destruction together in the same boat.”

“Nay—I’ll not be of your company,” said Bertha gravely; “nor Diana neither.” And when a little later Ethel called for her to massage her into sleep, Bertha had left the room.

There was no rest for Bertha that night. Even had she possessed the time to lie down, sleep would have refused to visit her. Ethel’s fortunes had bound themselves up so inextricably with her own that they seemed now to be one, and it was natural that they should sink or fall together. She had the fatal lack of courage that belongs to such natures, and Ethel’s stronger character had dominated her so entirely, that it seemed she possessed no more any initiative of her own, so long as she could earn enough money to keep her child, so fast growing up to knowledge, in the quiet haven of Wendover Farm.

Girls had come and gone in her life before, and she had cared nothing for them, since they had walked open-eyed into difficulty. But Diana was different, and for the first time this woman felt every shrivelled sense of her being expand to the reality of love. She

was restored to self-reliance, because she had become absorbed by her desire to save the girl who trusted her from the fate that had overtaken herself, and at daybreak she went into Diana's room and drew up the blind with the stern air of a woman prepared to speak her mind upon a painful subject. Diana was not asleep, but turned and looked at her with heavy eyes as she came in.

"Is it time to get up?" she said. "Oh, I am glad we are to leave this place. I hate Malta!"

"I want to tell you, Diana, that you ought to stop behind. If you come with us, you will never see him you are so fond of, again, my dear; and you know best if that will hurt you."

She peered down in the struggling light at the girl in the bed. Bertha was so gaunt and white, and yet her harsh features were absolutely transfigured for the moment by a real passion of pity that was ready to spend itself on this young innocent suffering creature.

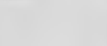
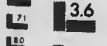
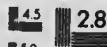
"Bertha, I know you mean kindly," said Diana suddenly, "and I want you to know why I must go away from here. Don't be afraid I shall cry, for I think I have no tears left. Captain Burne asked me to be his wife, and I said 'Yes'; but he did not know then something my father had done that was a disgrace; and when he found it out he could not marry me, because his mother and his relations would never have forgiven him for bringing disgrace into the family."

"Is this the truth, Diana?" said Bertha, very still



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



APPLIED IMAGE Inc

1653 East Main Street
Rochester, New York 14609 USA
(716) 482 - 0300 - Phone
(716) 288 - 5989 - Fax

and white, since the stars in their courses were fighting against the saving of this girl.

"Oh, it is true—it is true. I have no friends to go to; I have no one to look to now but you and Ethel," and Diana leaned her head against the thin shoulder and broke into tearless sobbing.

The dismay that Bertha Fox felt at this unexpected turn of affairs was only equalled by her anger against Burne. That any family history could have parted two lovers seemed to her incredible, since Diana herself was free from any taint.

"May God forgive him!" said Bertha, with lifted hand; "for I can't. Well, my poor lamb, if so be as you have got to come with us, Bertha will look after you. You may trust old ugly, sour-tempered Bertha, and when you want comforting, there'll be always her shoulder for you to lay your poor head on."

But the anger in her heart against Burne grew and increased till it swelled into a mighty tide that must have its outlet, and on their way to the quay that morning to go on board the *Carola*, a letter was slipped into the post-box by Bertha, addressed to the man who had been Diana's lover. She wrote no address that he could find them by, since this was against her strange code of honour and her conception of the straightforward playing of the game. But she told him in plain language whither his cowardice had driven the girl, and what her future would be as Cassell's wife; and having satisfied a nice sense of malice, Bertha Fox could contemplate the future with something like equanimity.

Diana watched the sun grow strong over the sea, remembering that she was going back to England and March winds and all the growing freshness of the spring. She felt now like a crocus bulb fast buried under the earth. The tendrils and exquisite living blossom were within her, but as yet she could not feel them stirring at her heart. She was dead till the sunshine should once again wake her to life; but even now the little tender germ of growth quivered in its prison when she saw Sicily grow out of the sea. There was life going on outside the life of love that she had missed, and the *Carola* was going straight into it, with her bows stained rosy with sunlight above the dancing blue of the waves.

But Ethel Vavasour, muffled in a fur cloak and huddled in a deck chair, had no eyes for the beauty of Sicily. To her it was not one of 'the green isles in the sea of misery,' but it was merely the first step towards the beginning once again of the treadmill of a life that had grown the more hateful in that she had looked into brilliant society for a moment and found it to her liking.

Major Cassell had gone on temporary sick leave, with a severe chill that was a most timely effort on the part of his misused constitution, and therefore it was that the few days that must necessarily elapse before Burne could leave Malta would be less difficult than might otherwise have been the case, for he had not met Felix Cassell since their parting in the hotel at Rabato. He hoped now that they would never meet again, since, if he eventually received some staff appointment,

he would be seconded from the regiment for some years.

His servant brought him his letters that morning and laid them down on the table before him. He was the most popular officer in the 'Westminsters,' and Shelley lingered now with an excuse of arranging papers, so that he might hear if his master had anything to say. Then, in view of his silence, tiptoed out on creaking boots, to put his head in a moment later.

"Please, sir, Martin asked if he was to exercise 'Greylegs' and 'Black Beauty' to-day, sir, for they're spoilin' for a gallop; or should you be ridin' down to the Marsa this afternoon, sir? There's a Company game on, sir, and we're hopeful that 'G' Company'll pull off the tie. There's a power o' money on it, sir."

"I shall not be riding to-day, Shelley, but the Company has my best wishes," said Burne curtly, and Shelley's head disappeared through the chink of the door.

"D——n women!" said Private Shelley to himself. "A nasty upsettin' lot is females, though I had thought as the young lady with the eyes and the smile was different to the common run; but they're all the same—'Tilda and all!" And since 'Tilda' was the prospective Mrs. Shelley, it may be imagined that the day was a dark one for the private.

Jem Burne took up his letters idly and opened one from his mother, out of which fell a cheque.

"DARLING JEM"—so ran Mrs. Burne's epistle, written

in her feeble, shaky writing—"I thought you might like a little ready money, as you are usually hard up through helping lame dogs over stiles. Dear, dear son! Was I sharp with you--was I unkind? Oh, my beloved, any woman whom you love I shall welcome as your wife, so long as she is a good girl and a true one. Never mind about her family; you can give her a long pedigree, as well as everything else to make a woman happy. I know you so well that I am convinced you would choose no one who was not in every sense of the word a helpmeet for you. Bring your Diana home to me, Jem, and I will give her a welcome, however deeply her ancestors may have transgressed the moral code.

"YOUR LOVING MOTHER."

So this was her tender, loving decision! God bless all mothers, and their hearts that are so true. A man may find his life rounded and perfected by marriage with the ideal woman, but in sickness or adversity he remembers the words "as one whom his mother comforteth."

There was a suspicious moisture in the eyes of Jem Burne as he folded up the cheque and put it into his pocket. "It isn't the money that I want," he said, "but it's the mother's kindness that makes me chokey."

There was a fistful of invitations from various hostesses, a bill or two, and a letter in a strange handwriting:

"DEAR SIR,--

"I don't ask you to excuse me the liberty of writing to you, because it is important. What does it matter about what Miss Ponsonby's father did? To think that you should have made her love you, and then just left her because you were ashamed of her father's taking that money, gets over me somehow. I don't know how you could look at her, and not be sure that she was as good as gold, and as true as steel. And now you have left her, I shall tell you what you have done in plain words. You have given her over to trouble, without a thought of what might become of her. Do you know what sort of person Mrs. Vavasour Bloggs is? Ask Lord Arthur Verity about the card-playing and dicing that goes on day in day out, and then think what you have done, and let it be a lesson to you. I have saved Diana once and Gozo from Major Cassell. How am I to know that I shall always be there to protect her? A lot of you care what comes to the most innocent child in creation; but the only thing that comforts me is that you were never good enough for her. So no more from

"Yours obediently,

"BERTHA FOX."

"Oh, my God!" The cry seemed to be wrung from Jem Burne against his will, as he started to his feet. He knew nothing of Lord Arthur Verity, save his name, but he was going to find him before he was half an hour older, if he had to knock at the doors of all the

hotels in Valetta. But at the first one he drew the prize.

Lord Arthur was sitting at his late breakfast when a young man in Rifle uniform was ushered in, and he looked up with a welcome.

"The kidneys are cold, my dear chap, I am afraid, but let me order you something hot. Always glad to see one of your regiment—capital fellows the 'Westminsters.' Sit down, and forgive an old man who can't sit up half the night and have agitating interviews into the bargain without being a sluggard in the morning."

"I must apologise, sir ; I hardly know how to begin ; but I was told that you could tell me something of the Baroness von Poppenheim's history. I—I have my reasons for asking."

His agitated manner, his anxious eyes, told their own story, and in another moment Lord Arthur was launched into the whole affair.

"My dear chap, I hope you are not seriously bitten by that old fraud Ethel Bloggs ? She is no more Baroness than I am, though I can't tell you the wrongs and rights of that part of her history. She keeps a massage shop, with a gambling club attached to it, in London somewhere, though I turned her out of one show when she broke up my nephew pretty near with unlimited braccarat—young fool that he was to go there. I declare, when I saw her dancing at the Palace last night, I could have tossed my bonnet over the windmill. But I told old Lukin—His Serene Highness the Deputy Governor, I mean—and, by Jove, I

made the old fossil skip! The Baroness got the order of the boot, and I expect she has cleared out of the island by this time. A pretty girl she had with her, too—a regular lamb in a lion's den from all I can hear. Hey, what? My dear chap, what have I said? Oh, by Jove! is it as bad as all that?"

"I—I am sure you mean to be kind, sir; but pray say no more," said Burne miserably. "And what am I to do if they have left no address?"

"I'll do my best to help you, if it is for the girl's sake," said Lord Arthur Verity. "But if I know anything of them, they have gone away—Mrs. Bloggs and her maid—and taken the girl with them."

"She has promised to be my wife, sir," said Jem Burne steadily. "A misunderstanding was engineered between us, as I now believe, and she has been taken from me by unfair means."

"Good heavens, my dear chap! what a series of catastrophes! But surely Cassell, who is in your regiment, and is, so I understand, Mrs. Bloggs's brother, could inform you of her address?"

"He would never tell me. He—he is in love with Miss Ponsonby also."

Lord Arthur Verity lit a cigarette and smoked for a moment in silence; then he said, "Leave me your address, and I will do my best for you. There's no use in telling you I am sorry for you, since you may guess it without the telling."

Burne rose wearily and moved to the door. "Thank you very much," he said. "My mother's address,

Grey Lady Court, Clifford Mallory, will always find me."

"What! You are the son of my old school friend Fitzroy Burne? Why, this is more than a coincidence."

He shook Jem's hand very warmly, and added a few words of kindness as to his dead father's memory, though the young man was in such haste to be gone that he had the tact not to detain him. But long after the door was shut upon Jem Burne, Lord Arthur Verity sat and shook his head solemnly at the vase of flowers in the middle of the table.

"Fitzroy Burne's son caught in such an affair," he said. "By Jove! and yet I'll swear the girl is good enough and sweet enough too—a regular English rose. Suppose she were old Peregrine Ponsonby's granddaughter into the bargain, and heiress to King's Haven? I have a good mind to wire to the family solicitor to find out, since they are advertising for her, and the name is the same. Well, well! The world is a small place, and the people in it know everything about every one else."

But Burne had gone straight in search of Mrs. Stafford, and in her company had visited the flat in Strada Mezzodi, only to find it being swept and garnished by an army of Maltese servants who were bewailing the departure of the English Signora, who was so liberal of hand and purse.

"Don't look like that, Jem," said Mrs. Stafford, in deep distress. "Oh, my poor boy, I am so sorry for you!" For Burne had found a ribbon that had belonged to Diana, and that she had discarded in her

packing. Delicately perfumed with violets, she had worn it in her hair one night at Gozo, and he had told her that it was his favourite colour. He forgot Mrs. Stafford—forgot even his own manhood, and—alas! alas! for Jem Burne—he wept the hard and bitter tears of a man who has woken from a dream to find that he has misjudged the woman he loved, and driven her from Paradise into exile.

he had
ad told
ot Mrs.
—alas!
bitter
nd that
ven her

CHAPTER XIV

THE VOYAGE

“Oh! that 'twere possible,
After long grief and pain,
To find the arms of my true love
Round me once again.”

THE five days' wonder of the disappearance of the Baroness von Poppenheim and of Diana Ponsonby died down in Malta, and, as was to be expected, many were the wild guesses as to the sincerity of the reason that had swept them away. Sir Abraham and Lady Lukin were naturally reticent as to the deception that had been practised upon them, but Lord Arthur Verity, who loved a good joke as he loved his life, cheered many a dinner-table with a slight sketch of the past of Ethel Vavasour Bloggs. He was very careful to lay stress upon the innocence and charm of Diana, and the history of her birth and parentage, when he realised them after close inquiry, was received with amazement by the society that had disowned her so long.

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Mrs. Anson, “that

the girl is heiress to ten thousand pounds a year and a place in Leicestershire? Why, Molly and I met old Sir Peregrine Ponsonby down at Melton—or rather we were staying with some people who knew him—and I declare he was considered quite a duke in the neighbourhood!”

Mrs. Anson had called on Mrs. Stafford in great haste when the faint trickle of scandal first made itself felt, and in her pretty drawing-room Mary Stafford did her best to soften the story that had been spread abroad about Ethel. She had been dismayed beyond description by the *dénouement* of the ‘Von Poppenheim affair,’ as it was already called in the island. Men laughed at the Club, with outspoken memories of ‘the fair Ethel’; and far more was made of simple flirtation than had ever been intended at the time.

“I say, do you remember the night Simpson dined there?” one man would say to his friend. “Do you know he said then that she was a queer sort, only Simpson is such an ass that we none of us believed him. But to think that she manufactures complexions beats cock-fighting!”

“We must not misjudge the ‘Baroness,’” Mrs. Stafford said now to her visitor. “You see, so many of us have eaten her bread and drunk her wine, that surely gratitude alone would compel us to hear her name mentioned in silence.”

“Oh! I don’t know about that. You are so quixotically generous,” said Mrs. Anson, with a toss of her head; “and I suppose you can afford to be so, because you never made friends with her. While we were all

being befooled right and left, you were having the laugh of us."

Mrs. Stafford moved uneasily. "I do not think that I make friends very quickly," she said; "but I cannot lay any flattering unction to my soul as regards that unfortunate woman. I did not care for her, it is true, but I was no prophet as to her character and social standing; and indeed I have always found it wiser to go about in life looking out for the best in every one."

Mrs. Anson sniffed. "We can't all be saints," she said; "and anyway, I don't think those sort of women ought to be tolerated for a moment. But do tell me some more about Diana Ponsonby. Molly is just miserable because she has gone; and I do think it a pity, under the circumstances, that we did not know more about her at the time, for then Molly would have made firm friends with her, and it would have been nice for her to go and stay at King's Haven."

"Very nice," said Mrs. Stafford drily; "only Diana has not arrived there yet."

"Well, I shall make a point of writing to her and keeping up the friendship very warmly as soon as we get back to England, or indeed from here," continued Mrs. Anson. "I have always found it advisable to keep up nice friends very carefully: you don't know when they may come in useful; and besides, think of the art treasures at King's Haven: they have a famous Van Steen there, and a lot of Turners, and some wonderful gold plate—and such family jewels, I am told."

"I have no doubt of it," returned Mrs. Stafford drily; "but if Diana's grandfather does not wish to endow her with them, I cannot see that they are of any use to her."

"Well, and what about Major Cassell? Is it true that Sir Abraham Lukin sent for him and rated him soundly, or do you think his sister deceived him as well about her gambling club?"

"I really cannot tell," said Mrs. Stafford stiffly. "I never knew Major Cassell well, and I am afraid I do not take much interest in him."

"Good gracious! Why, he is quite a rich man, with a fine place in the country! Heron Vale is really beautiful, I believe; and he must own two or three thousand a year."

"But I do not regulate my friends by the amount of their rent rolls." Mrs. Stafford moved forward to change the position of a vase on a table near at hand. She was not numbered among those who suffered Mrs. Anson gladly, and she wished to end the conversation.

"Oh! but I think rich people are so much more interesting than poor ones, or even than those of moderate incomes, don't you?"

Mrs. Anson—in her beaded hat, her black and green bodice, strained tightly over her figure—looked so indifferent a judge of the intelligence of her kind, that Mrs. Stafford repressed a smile with difficulty.

"I think that the most interesting person I ever met," she returned softly, "was a blind old man in an almshouse, who said he had God's sunshine in his soul,

so it did not matter that he had no eyes to see the light."

"What strange things you do say, Mrs. Stafford! Now, I never found any one intelligent unless he had had a Public School education."

"You are like the man who said he knew life inside out because he had rushed through the principal picture galleries of Europe, seen London from the top of the Monument, and kissed the Pope's toe," said Mrs. Stafford; "but we have wandered a long way from our original subject."

"I should never consider it a privilege," returned Mrs. Anson stiffly, "to kiss the Pope's toe; but I can tell you one thing that may perhaps interest you—Major Cassell is going home on leave in the *Annora*. He took his passage to-day while Beauchamp was at the office seeing if we could not get the term of our return tickets extended."

"The *Annora*! Why, that is the ship on which Jem Burne is returning," cried Mrs. Stafford; and then could have bitten out her tongue for her incautious speech.

"Ah! I thought as much. Both in pursuit of that Miss Ponsonby, for I am sure Molly's account of their goings on amazed me—when they were all at Gozo!"

"Do you know, Mrs. Anson," said her hostess, speaking very slowly, "that it would be much wiser if you repressed the fact of Molly's visit to Gozo, and of her acquaintance with the Baroness von Pöppenheim. I have a sort of idea that the less you talk

about your acquaintance with that woman the better it will be for Molly."

"Good gracious! I never thought about it in that light," cried Mrs. Anson; and for the moment was so repressed that she took her leave in silence.

Mrs. Stafford went straight upstairs to her nursery, and sat down by the side of Roland's invalid sofa. "It is just like a breath of fresh air to come back to you, darling," she said, stroking back the fair hair from the thin forehead very fondly. "I have been talking all uncharitableness with Mrs. Anson, and I don't like it."

"Mummy," said Roland, leaning his head against her arm; "do you know that since Diana went away her fairies come to visit me very often. They nod in at the nursery window, and come out of the dark corners in the night; and, do you know, I am not at all sure that they do not turn into angels sometimes."

"Diana helped you to see them, did she, darling?"

"I don't see them so well when she is not here. I think she brings them with her," said Roland restlessly. "Mummy, dear, shall I see her again soon—before I forget how to summon the fairies? She told me the secret, but I see them plainer when she is with me."

"Roland, darling," said his mother, with resolute cheerfulness, "the fairies will bring Diana back again, if you only wish it hard enough. They will bring her back with Jem Burne, and we shall all dance at their wedding like the great Pangandrum with the little round button on the top."

But when Mrs. Stafford went away to her own room she remembered the despairing eyes of Jem Burne, and her heart failed her.

In the early dancing sunlight of a March morning the *Annora* steamed into the Quarantine Harbour, and Jem Burne went on board. He had not spoken to Cassell save in the necessary course of his duty since they had parted at Rabato, and therefore, knowing nothing of his plans, he was astonished to see him come on board the ship with a pile of baggage, and attended only by his servant, who took an unemotional farewell of him as soon as he had established him in the next cabin to Burne himself. Cassell was muffled up in a big fur coat, and his face looked yellow and mottled. He walked with the air of a man who is not certain of his steps, and as he looked from side to side and his eyes caught those of Burne for the moment, he glanced away again immediately with a narrowing of the lids that gave him the appearance of an angry cornered wild beast. That he was ill there was no doubt, but Burne had no pity for him—only dislike, that grew with every passing hour. There was no time to make fresh cabin arrangements, for the *Annora* was crowded, and Cassell had only secured his berth at the last moment.

Of the causes that had driven him out of the island very little could be said, for they were known only to his inner self. He had been compelled to undergo an unpleasant interview with Sir Abraham Lukin, who, to gain moral support, had summoned Lord Arthur Verity to his assistance. Cassell felt afterwards that there would have been no difficulty at

all in bluffing Sir Abraham, but when it came to his companion, the saying was, that a Verity had never been deceived, and Cassell could quite believe it. All his paltry excuses tumbled to pieces in the face of Lord Arthur's dry common sense, and he stood exposed pitifully as the knave he had always been, hoist with his own petard. Lord Arthur Verity's cynical face, with the single eyeglass in his eye, would never leave his mind if he lived to be a hundred years old, he told himself. He had been so foolishly confused, had returned such stupid answers to the questions—indeed, had contradicted himself so freely, that the memory of that interview made him hot still. The result had been that if he remained in Malta, his name would be removed from the Palace visiting list. If he remained in the Army and exchanged into the other battalion, the story would follow him wherever he went, and probably militate against his promotion. He had never felt shame before, and indeed it was very improbable that he felt it now, but he was angry and disturbed, and the feeling corresponded in its effect to the saving grace of humiliation.

There were one or two people on board whom Burne knew, and the voyage would have been likely to prove agreeable had he not been pursued by anxiety as to Diana.

"Jem Burne used to be such a good fellow," said Colonel Jarvis to his wife when they were two days out from Malta. "Why, at Poona, no show was ever supposed to be first-chop unless he was one of

the party, and now Emmie tells me he's like a bear with a sore head if you rag him at all."

Mrs. Jarvis, a thin Anglo-Indian in a dhirzi-made blue serge gown, who had just replaced her sun helmet by a crochet cap in which she looked like an Indian idol, looked up from her deck-chair. "He's in love, my dear; there is every sign of it about him. But do look at Major Cassell—what is he doing? and he used to be such a nice-looking fellow, you know."

Felix Cassell was coming up the companion stairway like a man walking in the dark. It seemed to those who saw him that he was attempting to avoid treading on some repulsive object that constantly blocked his way, for he hesitated to advance, then set his foot down carefully, lifting it again to shake himself as if he was pursued by a loathsome presence that was threatening to fasten upon him.

Jcm Burne could see his face, and before Colonel Jarvis could make a move he had stepped forward and confronted him, hustling him intentionally aside from the music saloon where several ladies were sitting.

"Why, my dear," began Colonel Jarvis curiously, "it is really a remarkable thing—but—if I had to diagnose Major Cassell's present condition, I should say he had got delirium tremens."

"My dear Tom," returned his wife, settling her skirts like a ruffled hen, "what do you mean? Why, the poor fellow has not been to table at all since the voyage began, so I fail to see how he could have procured the means to get that complaint."

"There is such a thing, my good Amelia, as bringing brandy aboard with you in your trunks. I have seen that done before, only Cassell always seemed to me such a careful fellow."

"You are always ready to think evil," said Mrs. Jarvis indignantly, conscious of two daughters who had weathered five seasons ineffectually at Poona and Nasik, and had even passed unscathed through three expensive hot weathers at Simla. Cassell had once seemed to like Emmie, when she had come out fresh from England and was fat and pink. Now that she was lean and yellow he might perhaps care to talk to her for old acquaintance' sake, and Emmie was so clever that she could bring a man to the point in two moonlight strolls, and conjure a proposal out of an invitation to dance, only somehow she had never got hold of the right man yet—it had always been the impecunious subaltern or the Indian civilian fresh out from home. But here was Major Cassell a rich man, defenceless, at her mercy, and the opportunity should never be wasted.

Mrs. Jarvis rose to her feet with all the sympathetic civility of which she was capable. Major Cassell certainly did not look well; but then, no doubt he was coming home on sick leave. How tiresome and stupid Jem Burne was, trying to edge him away from the deck—she must put a stop to that at once. A little effective cossetting of the invalid would be just what Emmie would like, and a man is so susceptible when he is in weak health. She sailed across from her deck-chair with an outstretched hand. "Dea

me, Major Cassell, how delightful to see an old friend again! Why, I don't believe you remember who I am--now do you?"

Cassell was steadying himself by the brass rail at the head of the stairway, swinging feebly from foot to foot, while Burne held him by the arm. He was dressed very strangely, as Mrs. Jarvis observed with puzzled wonder that spread itself out into shocked amazement when she realised that he was clad in a pyjama suit and a light greatcoat.

Cassell looked at her vacantly. His eyes were wide open and very bloodshot, as if he had been staring sleeplessly at interminable space since the world began.

"Who are you?" he said, in an unnaturally high-pitched voice. "Why, you are the witch of Endor, curse you!" and catching himself free from Burne's hand he pitched backwards down the stairway.

The shock of his words deprived Mrs. Jarvis temporarily of speech, but her husband rushed forward and assisted Jem Burne and one of the stewards to carry Cassell to his cabin. The two men, upheld by a stern sense of the honour of the Service to which they belonged, laid Cassell in the lower berth and strapped his hands and feet together; then searching his cabin, discovered easily enough the source of his present condition. When the half-dozen bottles of brandy splashed through the porthole into the sea, Burne at least felt easier, since he could prevent any further attempt at procuring a fresh supply, and the man in the berth was half dazed by his fall,

and wholly unable to do more than mutter incoherent blasphemies as he strove vainly to turn from side to side of his narrow bed. A visit from the ship's doctor went far to assure Burne that he had undertaken a difficult task, but since he had set his hand to the plough, he had no intention of turning back.

Dr. Smedley examined the stupefied figure in the berth, pushed up his eyelids, gauged his temperature and condition, then finally turned to Jem. "At no time," he said meditatively, "is this man of specially well-balanced intellect. Just now he is under the influence of drink. He ought to be under constraint for the present. Are you any relation?"

Dr. Smedley talked in jerks, like notes of exclamation; but there was a solidity about his manner and a steadiness about his eye that Burne liked at once.

"We are in the same regiment," he said briefly. "If you will help me, I will undertake to look after him."

There was the remote chance that in his delirium Cassell might let fall some definite clue to the present arrangements of his sister. It was at least worth while attempting the task that had seemed so hopeless an hour before. It was no grim fight for life and death that Burne undertook, but a fight for this man's sanity with that special thought in view; for otherwise it would have been better for the world at large if Cassell were shut up in a lunatic asylum for ever.

Burne surveyed his muttering, mouthing patient with a stern eye when he was left alone with him save for the erratic presence of a timid steward who

had been told off to do his best for them, and was too much afraid to come closer than the extreme edge of the doorway.

Cassell lay still for a time, lulled by the strong drug the doctor had given him, but before long Burne became aware that he was watching him with eyes that were malicious in their cunning. He was so powerful as he lay there, with arms thrown out in front of him on the quilt, that Burne quailed for an instant at the thought of what might happen if they came to handgrips with one another. The innate luxury of the man was so evident from the elaborate silver appointments of his toilet apparatus, the perfumes and essences that surrounded the little cabin on every available shelf. There was no limit to the extravagant desires of Cassell. He would have harnessed the sun and moon to his chariot if by so doing he could have put off old age for a year or two; he would have drunk the sea dry in his inordinate desire for pleasure, if by so doing he could have set back the hands of the clock by ever so brief a space.

Burne looked at the man lying there before him, in a passion of disgust for a foppery that coloured its face, manicured its strong brown hands, and bound its figure with iron stays. Ulysses and his mighty men knew the worth of a giant old age: this man knew nothing beyond an artificial craving for youth. In repose, his livid face, the network of wrinkles about his eyes, his pendulous jaw and full lips, betrayed him for the brute that his own passions had made of

him. If nature had set Felix Cassell to dig his bread from the ground by the sweat of his brow, he might have saved his soul alive. But the fatal inheritance he had received from his ancestors, his power to indulge his evil passions by reason of the money he possessed, laid him open to every assault of the flesh, and his utter lack of religion or of moral sense, completed the disaster.

The fresh wind blew in through the open port, laden with balmy breezes from the North African coast. The Mediterranean was at its beautiful best, with a fringe of white to every shining wave. Steaming in that land-locked sea, with the ghosts of old Greek galleys haunting every mile of their way, Burne would have been content to enjoy the present, had he not been pursued by the haunting thought of his lost Diana.

Cassell stirred in his berth, and Burne rose from his seat under the port.

"I tell you I shall have Diana before the rats get her," said Cassell's level, horrible voice. "Look! there are rats running round and round Calypso's cave—up and down the walls—in and out of the crannies—and Diana's white dress is shining in front—there—just where I cannot reach her. I nearly had her at Rabato—there was only a woman between—curse her—curse Bertha Fox! Burne shall not have her—I had rather tread her face into the ground and stamp it out of its beauty than let him kiss her lips—curse him!"

The voice rolled on through a labyrinth of inco-

herent ravings through which Burne followed, bewildered and horrified. There was no depth into which Cassell failed to drag him. They explored miry morasses together, the very existence of which Burne had hitherto been ignorant. He learned of crimes and terrors that no decent mind could fathom, and when he came up on to the deck again, leaving the doctor temporarily in charge, he felt the nausea of a man who has walked all unwittingly into a muddy ditch. Under the clean stars he sat down to recover himself and to find once again his normal tone. He was not what the world would call a very religious man, but from the depths of his heart he turned to God now and sought after help that he knew would not be denied. He remembered suddenly a hot Sunday afternoon at Grey Lady Court, on the lawn by the fountain. He and his mother had been struggling with the Sunday text that he could not comprehend, though he had learned it word-perfectly.

"You will understand some day, little lad," his mother had told him, "only your heart has a long way to go yet."

And he had gone a long way, so that he now understood what the words meant, and they helped him to-night.

"When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him."

He had failed in his trust of the girl he loved, otherwise she would never have left him, and the failure was horrible to him, since he had been convinced of

her innocence from the lips of the man who was his rival.

There lay the sting—to be atoned for by a lifetime of love—never to be atoned for perhaps, but in the end to be condoned by a woman's heart that could never fail in tenderness.

Serenity and strength returned to Cassell before they steamed up the Thames. But with his return to normal conditions his hatred of Jem Burne reappeared also, disguised poorly enough under a mantle of attempted gratitude. He came on deck, wrapped in a greatcoat, the day they came up the Thames with the tide. No one spoke to him, and he addressed no one but watched with sombre eyes the brown-sailed mud barges warping their way up channel. England brown and cold and east of wind, was with them again but Burne for one was glad of the icy blast that blew from the stern English country.

“Good morning!” said Jem Burne, with an effort crossing the deck to Cassell's side. Cassell turned his chin to him, over the sable collar of his fur coat, and Burne looked straight into his sunken eyes. If ever a man had drowned his soul in evil thoughts, it was this unknown being who looked back at Jem through the eyes of Felix Cassell. If it be true—as it very surely is—that every good thought and action moves the world nearer to God, so is the opposite equally certain, and Cassell's world was being hastened downwards through the mere fact of his existence.

“Good morning,” he said; “typical English weather ain't it?”

This was hardly the greeting for a man who had practically saved his reason, and Burne resented it in silence.

"I believe I've been a bit seedy, eh—influenza, or some such infernal disease?"

"You have been—very ill," said Burne emphatically.

Cassell eyed him malevolently. "You have been sick-nursing me, I believe? I owe you thanks for bringing me round," he said grudgingly.

"You can repay me with interest," said Jem Burne, leaning forwards towards him, and speaking deliberately. "You can repay me by giving me the London address of the woman I know as the Baroness von Poppenheim, your sister."

Cassell raised his head sharply, with the gesture of a snake about to strike. "I tell you—no!" he said. "If I knew it myself I would not tell you!" And whether he spoke the truth or lied, Jem Burne had no means of knowing, since they parted at Tilbury Docks without another word.

CHAPTER XV

A SPIRIT IN PRISON

“ Au terme où je suis parvenu,
Quel est le moins à plaindre ?
C'est celui qui sait ne rien craindre,
Qui vit et qui meurt, inconnu.”

DIANA PONSONBY woke suddenly in the middle of the night. There were noises in the flats of Excelsior Mansions that she could not understand, though they terrified her. She had not lived in England for many years, but she had never imagined that people quarrelled and laughed and talked loudly from midnight to dawn in reputable households.

Her own little room was pretty enough, but there was a want of air and space about its four walls that gave her the sense of living in a prison. Her window looked out into the well of the courtyard, round which ran other flats, and the porter's rooms in the basement below seemed to be very far away.

It must have been quite early, for the March night was still black outside, and there was silence in the streets—the wonderful silence that holds London for just one hour after merrymakers have ceased to come home from theatre and restaurant, and before the early carts come in for the market.

She sat up in bed, for suddenly upon the dark wall before her there flashed a light, and in the light, as there had flashed to Belshazzar of old, the words—
“A spirit in prison.”

She knew it now—she was in prison! She, Diana Ponsonby. That was the meaning of the tawdry furniture and hangings; of the men who came and went and laughed at Ethel, and talked of their wrinkles and bald heads; of the women who ran in and out, in smart rustling clothes, smelling of scent and discussing false hair and rouge.

No one had in any way offended her by word or deed, but she had an intolerable sense of waiting for something that had not yet happened.

For the fortnight that had elapsed since their return the girl had hardly left the flat at all, but had sat working at hair frames and polishing manicure sets in the drawing-room, with its blue satin covered furniture, its array of card tables, its folding doors into the next room, where there were other card tables. Diana's health had begun to suffer from the confinement—perhaps indeed her mind was a little overstrained, for she fancied now that she heard Cassell's voice in the flat, and switched on the electric light with a beating heart. But even as she did so and lay back cowering among her pillows, the door slid open and Bertha Fox, clad in a grey dressing-gown and her hair in curling pins, slipped in, with her finger to her lips, and turned the key.

“It's only me, my blessed child. I—I couldn't

sleep—I got fidgety," said Bertha, in a strange hard voice. She came over to the bed and smoothed back the girl's hair with tender hands. "Lie down, my pretty heart—my little girl," she said; "and let me lie down beside you, for I want company to-night."

The letters of fire had gone from the wall now, and there was only the sound of the rain against the window, dripping monotonously into the gulleys with a dreary trickle of sound. Diana, heavy with sleep, turned to the woman at her side, well content.

"Dear Bertha, you are so kind to me—I shall sleep easily now. I thought I heard—a voice—I knew—in the flat."

Bertha Fox threw her arm across the girl's body with a protecting gesture. "Go to sleep, golden heart; there is no voice," she said; and while Diana slept, the woman watched, as she had watched many a tireless night and day since Diana came to the flat. Some day, perhaps, there would be time to go down to Wendover Farm and see Susie, and if she went, Diana should go with her, and it would be hard if she ever returned to Excelsior Mansions again. Innocent little Susie, among the buttercups and daisies of life, and innocent Diana, who dwelt like a thing of light in this house of cards, should be brought together and kept together in the haven of Wendover Farm, where trouble never came.

Bertha knew that to-day the select gaming club was to be reopened to its habitués, and that to-night men would drop in unobtrusively from every part of London till the rooms were full, and faro and baccarat

would be played till morning. Diana was to be decked out to help to amuse them, and Bertha would take care that she wore her grandmother's miniature and her pearls, for there might be among the guests some one who would recognise them, and who, for very shame, would rescue her from danger.

"Bertha!" Diana stirred in her sleep, and the woman's hand began once more the gentle patting, and her voice took up the wordless croon that comes naturally to every woman who has borne a child.

"Sleep my heart—sleep; there is nothing to trouble you."

There was something, however, to trouble the woman with the leaden complexion, the hopeless eyes. She had her own private distress, her own physical suffering to bear, besides the burden of anxiety for Diana. There was a growing agony within her that she guarded jealously from the knowledge even of herself. It was the seed of death, and she had not yet recovered from the shock of the discovery of her illness, that she had made recently. It was only in the quiet of the night that she could allow herself the luxury of tears, and the pain now was so bad that it forced them from her eyes.

'A green bay tree.' A green bay tree! Where had she heard those words? Years ago she had been an innocent ignorant country girl, and her mind sped back now to those far-off days. She remembered the country church, the squeaking harmonium, and the fervour of piety wherewith she had sung, 'Oh, Paradise! oh, Paradise! Who doth not crave for rest?'

None of the black-coated, red-cheeked Dorset labourers whose harsh untuneful voices had lifted to the roof of the little church on Millingham Island where her home had been, had wanted rest either. They had been thinking of the weather next day—of the harvest—the cattle—the pigs; but it had been temporarily soothing to sing of repose, and typically appropriate to Sunday, along with hot currant-buns and dripping-toast for tea.

But Bertha wanted rest now, as she had never desired anything before. There were carved angels round the little church—she saw them now in the shadow, with wings folded above their heads to support the books that the black-stoled clergyman bent over to read from. She had seen few angels since Millingham days, but the shadows of their adoring faces were with her still, and in her pain and anguish she fancied they stood over her bed now, with veiled faces, but with delicately waving feathered wings. She remembered how Felix Cassell had come to the Castle to stay with the Squire who was overlord of the isle. She remembered how the smart London party had been conducted up the nave to the Castle pew, that had been more like a drawing-room than a series of seats for miserable sinners.

Cassell had been good-looking in those days, and he had singled her out for attention. It had been so easy to meet him in the woods and lonely places of the island where no one came. And he had been infatuated by her, for she had been handsome enough then, even if her charm had been half due to the

exquisite setting of Millingham Island. There had been days, with the sunlight upon the sea, where the heather and gorse ran down to the water's edge—blue, purple, golden, and scarlet—with the green of the trees and the voice of many waters. There had been long silver evenings when the tide was out, and on the mud-flats the herons stood black against a sky of tender rose. But she had left all these and had joined Ethel in London to be near him, and had watched him tire of her. How long ago that had been! She was so tired and old now, and so desperately unhappy. She laid her hand on her breast once again, for the throbbing pain of it was intolerable.

'The soul that sinneth—it shall die.'

They had had a clergyman on the island, given to sermons of warning and thunderous denunciation of sinners. Bertha remembered that this had been the message of her last Sunday at Millingham. It had been October, and the day hung dim with presage of coming storm. Through the open church door the afternoon light filtered in across the marble floor, and an end of sunset cloud had wandered up to the pulpit and had powdered the dreary black stole with golden notes. A pheasant had chuckled in the wood outside, and all the discreetly sleeping farmers had opened their eyes at the sound, and become momentarily interested in the sermon thundering above their heads. But to Bertha the words set her apart as a marked creature, and the next day she had gone.

But Diana should never know what such trouble meant, for the plan to save her was crystallising in

Bertha's mind already, and when once they were clear of the flat it would be a strange thing if she could not find Jem Burne and bring him back to his allegiance.

When Diana woke at last she found that the morning was far advanced, and Bertha Fox, more silent and grey than usual, was laying out her clothes with the self-imposed elaboration of detail that was distinctive of her work for the girl.

"Mrs. Vavasour says you are not to hurry to get up, Diana," she said at last. "There's a big party to-night, and you will have to be up late, so better lie still a bit, my dearie."

"A big party! All those stupid people playing cards, do you mean?"

Diana lay back on her pillow, sipping her tea, and glancing about her with quick bright eyes of interest. Her indomitable youth was serving her well now, and she was no longer afraid of the future now that daylight was upon her. All her fears of the past dark hours of the night were rolling away like the clouds before the sunrise. Her room was pretty enough, in spite of its restricted outlook. There were gay blue curtains in the window, a rose-bowered carpet on the floor, and on her gilded bed a blue silk quilt embroidered with pink flowers.

"Only stupid people playing cards?" she said again, for Bertha was slow to answer.

"Mrs. Vavasour wants you to sing and dance, I believe," returned the other, examining a microscopic hole in one of Diana's silk stockings.

"Me—to sing and dance? Why, Bertha, how exciting! Only I can't do it."

"Ethel will teach you. I was to say that when you were dressed you were to come for your lesson," said Bertha, with strange reticence. "You are to put on a thin short gown, please—I should think your black *crêpe de Chine* tea-gown would do, my dearie, if you held the skirt up a little and put on a lace petticoat."

She looked back from the door at the bed, as she went out with her arms full of clothes to be brushed. Diana had gathered herself up in the middle of it, like a hunched white figure of some Indian god. All her copper-coloured hair lay about her shoulders, touched by the electric light above her into a glittering flame, and her eyes were like bright sapphire jewels. She was so lovely that the heart of Bertha Fox became as water within her, for she did not know what scene might not be enacted within the flat to-night.

"Do you like the country?" she said suddenly, in her abrupt, harsh voice. "I mean the real country—the quiet out-of-the-way place where you don't see anything but the cows and the sheep and the great wide Dorset fields that are like worlds in themselves of silence and green grass?"

"That is just the sort of country I do love," said Diana, clapping her hands gaily. "Because it is just there that the fairies live and dance in those fields every night. Is Mrs. Vavasour going to send me there?"

Bertha turned to the door so that her face was hidden. "No, my dearie, and you must not speak to her of the country—she doesn't like it, Diana—but

maybe to-morrow I shall try and get a day's holiday and take you down there to the farm. There's a little girl—well, she's a big girl now, except in my heart—and she lives there, and I am very fond of her. I want you to see her."

"What a nice plan!" cried Diana. "Oh, I'll say nothing about it till you allow me. I do not like the London life, Bertha: it frightens me somehow, and I cannot understand the way the men talk, and the women, too. Perhaps I should feel better if we were right away, dear Bertha, even for a whole day—somewhere where I could hear the fairies laughing."

Bertha nodded and went out, her face twitching strangely, for she had had an interview with Ethel that had convinced her of the folly of attempting to appeal to her generosity. Silence would be best, and afterwards action, for Ethel was in a strange mood that morning, determined to go her own way, and to school the tender innocent soul of Diana in obedience.

"I know as plain as I can speak that your brother has been with you, Ethel," said Bertha at last. "There's always a change in you after you have seen him; but I'll be no party to your plans for Diana."

"If you dare to interfere with us by so much as a lift of a finger," said Ethel angrily, "you shall be straight out without a penny or the clothes to your back; and what is more, I'll find means to let Susan know just what you are!"

Bertha shut her lips together in a hard line. She was growing so accustomed to Ethel's threats that the

sounded in her ears like vain repetitions. She intended to watch, and then to act, come what might, for if she could no longer protect Diana from Cassell in Excelsior Mansions, she would take her away before it was too late.

Diana dressed herself with a pleasant sense of excitement, for she liked the idea of dancing and singing before Ethel's guests, since she knew slightly some of them as good-looking, flattering men who seemed pleased with her lightest word. Ethel was always ready to send her off to her own room if any man looked more interested than usual in Excelsior Mansions, and she had once or twice wondered if Mrs. Vavasour was jealous, and had immediately dismissed the thought as an absurdity. But now it was to be different all in a minute, and she wondered to what train of circumstances she owed the idea that she should be the centre of attraction that night.

She looked at herself in the long mirror before she left the room. The black tea-gown was an inspiration, for it set off her colouring as nothing else could have done. She saw the vision of rose and white and blue and gold that looked back at her, and Bertha Fox glanced up disapproving.

"It seems to me as if you were vain, Diana," she said sourly. "I'd rather see you as you were last night, than like this. Vanity never helped any one yet."

"Why, you dear delightful cross old thing, I believe you grudge me the pleasure of dressing up and dancing," cried Diana, suddenly uplifted in spirits, as

women of keen emotional temperament so often are
"I am going to enjoy myself—to enjoy myself."

She danced round Bertha like a pantomime fairy flicking her with her light draperies, intoxicating her with the perfume of White Daphne that seemed to float from her skirts. Bertha stood still, grim and white and sourly silent. She had had a sleepless night, she was in pain, and she was very miserable. "Folks dance down the broad path to hell, Diana," she said. "I'd rather see you crawl up the chapeau floor on your knees like I saw a man do once for his sins."

"Oh, you grim, alarming woman!" said Diana with a little shiver. "Let me be happy; I can't think of any sin just yet."

"You were frightened enough last night," said Bertha.

"Everything is alarming in the darkness. Oh, don't let me remember my thoughts! If there is a moment to enjoy myself, I will seize it in the light. I think I might grow to be able to forget sorrows and to put them behind me resolutely and only think of the bright things of life if I tried very hard."

"You shan't ever forget while I am here to remind you," snapped Bertha Fox. "You have got to be afraid of feeling easy and gay—do you hear me, Diana?"

The electric bell from Ethel Vavasour's room rang sharply, and her voice called Diana's name with a new hard note in it that the girl had not heard before.

"Come here, Diana! I don't want Bertha—only you—come quickly."

And Bertha Fox caught the last glimpse of the light-hearted child Diana, as she turned to nod at her from the door of Ethel Vavasour's room; and as she folded the girl's clothes, she could hardly see them for the mist of tears in her eyes.

Ethel Vavasour, crouched among her pillows, looked tired and ill-tempered, and Diana, pausing on the threshold with fine nostrils offended by the heavy musk perfume, was almost moved to turn back; then stood with beating heart, rating herself for her cowardice.

"You wanted me," she said. "Here I am, Ethel."

The sombre eyes of Ethel Vavasour, wearied with the studying of many balance sheets that all came out on the debit side, glanced over the shrinking figure of Diana. The beauty of the girl, the delicate face and wild-rose colouring, the indefinable air of daintiness that seemed to emanate from Diana as it had done from her namesake the chaste huntress, were things that had a strange appeal for Ethel in the cold light of the March day.

"Come in and shut the door," she said wearily. "Can you dance, Diana—skirt dancing, I mean; not your waltzing and two-stepping, but graceful movements, you know?"

"I have never done any skirt dancing, as you call it," said Diana. "I don't think I should care to try it here for the first time."

"My good child, it does not matter what you

want or care for; you are my dependent, and have got to do what I tell you. Come here and let me look at the frock."

Diana came near, and Ethel reached out a hand and pulled her closer.

"I will try my best to please you—my very best, if you wish it, and I am fond of dancing," said the girl gently.

"Well, dance," said Ethel impatiently. "Don't stand there gaping like a fool, but show me what you can do."

Diana's bewildered eyes and trembling lips showed her absolute unreadiness for the task, but Ethel, turning, set in motion the springs of a powerful musical-box that stood by her bedside. It was Magyar music, wild and inspiring, that the box gave out, but it did not touch the girl at all, waiting with her skirts held in her puzzled hands. The same untutored desperate blood did not beat in her veins that had inspired that music; the clash of discords and of minor melodies bewildered her, and she stood turning her head from side to side like a helpless thing caught in a trap that sees no way out.

"Dance—dance!" said Ethel. "Show me what you can do. Spring high in the air; fling yourself about for every one to applaud you! Don't you see I want my card parties to have a charm about them never possessed before, and you must give that charm by the poetry of motion."

Diana lowered her skirts, a bright spot blazing in each cheek. "I can't do that," she said, in a troubled

tone. "Why should I dance like that? It would not be fitting."

"You are here to do what I tell you," cried Ethel triumphantly. "That is why I brought you to Excelsior Mansions—to attract my customers."

Diana put her hand to her head, bewildered. "I cannot understand," she said. "Let me go, Ethel—oh! if you mean what I think—let me go—anywhere, away from here! It cannot be right for me to tempt these young men to lose their money at your card tables!"

She looked round the gilded room, panting a little, her lips dry like a withering rose petal in her terror, her eyes full of fear, like the eyes of a frightened child.

Ethel suddenly saw that she had gone too far, and retraced her steps with an effort. "There you are, Diana—off at a tangent as usual. What I meant to say was that you are intended to amuse my guests who come here to play cards, while they are resting between the games. Why, men like a little variety, to inspire them to further efforts—oh! hang the thing!"

The Maygar music was wailing and shrieking its minor dissonances through every word of her speech, and she stopped the musical-box with a blow of her fist. She could guide this girl, but she could not drive her, and now she held out her hand with the old smile. "Oh, Diana, won't you help me to win their money?" she said. "You see, I keep up this house on what I make by playing faro and baccarat.

I am clever at games naturally, and the people who come here are stupid—*voilà tout!* Are you going to help me, Diana? The Beauty Shop pays so badly, and I owe such a lot of money; and if they did not play here they would be losing bigger sums at their clubs!”

“It does not seem right; it is such a strange way of living,” said the girl slowly.

“Don’t think about the way of living, think only of amusing my guests, darling Diana—good little girl. These men who are my guests don’t know that I am living on their money; they only come here to be amused; and how can they—be amused—if you are an absolute ice maiden, as I heard Charlie Fry call you the other day?”

“Ethel—I have not any one but you to look to—you would not—let me do anything wrong? You see I am quite alone—a girl can do so little to help herself.”

“If you choose to help me in my fashion, I will take—oh, such good care of you, Diana, and you shall lead a very happy life—oh, a very happy and comfortable life!”

The old kind-hearted Ethel of early Malta days had come back again, and Diana felt more at ease.

“I will dance for you, Ethel,” she said, “only they must be my own steps that I invent, and I must dance them my own way; and because I don’t like your music, I shall sing to my dancing.”

“Oh, if you are going in for the buttercups and daisies style, I can oblige you also!” The scornful

tone swept by Diana unheeded, but the box of tunes by the bedside, manipulated by Ethel's impatient hand, gave out a melody that was as simple as it was entrancing. Through its strain ran the echo of fairy feet, the delicate fall of wordless singing such as makes the woodlands ring in June. Many were the memories that stirred in Diana's heart as she listened, and the sombre eyes of the woman on the bed watched her thoughtfully.

Ethel must not fail in this last act of all: she must not allow her heart to be touched by the gentle kindness of this girl, and yet she was tempted for the instant to let her go—to send her away to Wendover Farm, and to risk her brother's anger—bankruptcy—everything, so that she might save Diana from being implicated in this transgression of the law of the land. But the impulse passed as quickly as it had been conceived, and Ethel sat up.

“You are quite right, Diana: you are an artist after all, and I am very silly. You shall have your dance—the folding-doors shall be thrown open, and you shall appear like the spirit of the woods in a white gown, please, Diana. I believe your dance will be the success of the evening”; and in the discussion that ensued as to the fitting moment for Diana's appearance, the gown, and the necessary atmosphere to be evolved, the fear that was in the girl's heart almost died away. She was to be seen only for a brief time. She was to be away from the crowd, and perhaps in London she could repeat the success she had made in Valetta. There would be people to

admire her, she would wear a charming gown, she would be the centre of attraction. Even her sore heart healed itself a little, because the dominant note of youth is optimism, and Diana could not realise that there was any reason why she should be afraid.

There are some women who look for sin in every corner, but Diana was as innocent as the wind that blows breezily across a heather-empurpled common. Her very thoughts were like the south wind that breathes from the footstool of God Himself, and she thought no more of the matter, save that there were foolish men in the world who preferred to spend their money in gambling quietly in forbidden fashion, and whom Ethel Vavasour Bloggs and her friends picked bare as trussed pigeons. She had been familiarised with the fact of gambling as a means of livelihood from earliest days, since her father would very often buy her a new frock, or take her out to lunch at a restaurant when his pockets had been replenished by bridge winnings; and perhaps she hardly realised the horror of the sin.

She turned, with the handle of the door between her fingers, and looked back at Ethel, pricked by an instant's hesitation. "Ethel—there is nothing wrong about this dancing—nothing wrong about your party this evening, is there? I don't know why I ask you, only somehow I want the assurance from your lips that there is no one who will be hurt by it?"

It was the instinct of the child within her, appealing against the unknown.

"Well, you *are* complimentary," said Mrs. Vavasour shrilly. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Diana. It isn't many women who would have picked up a girl practically out of the gutter where you were, and set her on her feet like I did—and this is all the thanks I get for it."

She put away the knowledge that they were law-breakers and might be in prison next morning, as she had so often in her life put away trouble from her before to-day.

Diana, still holding the door, knew that her eyes wandered to Cassell's photograph adorning the dressing-table, in its heavy filigree frame.

"I wish you could make your brother a better man," she said abruptly; "you are too good for him, Ethel—you are kind hearted—and he—he—has no heart at all—he is——"

"He is my brother" said Ethel, with a queer laugh. "Come here, Diana"

The girl came slowly, and Ethel took her wrist in a hot feverish grip.

"You have got to understand many things; you have got to do what I tell you. You have got to take my word as unquestioned law if you want bread and butter and clothes, instead of the cold streets. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," said Diana; and without another word she went out and shut the door behind her.

It was only when Bertha Fox realised that the front door of the flat was securely fastened that she sat

down to meditate upon the situation. That it alarmed her, was to put the case mildly. She had not definitely considered the advisability of escaping from Excelsior Mansions that very day, but now it was too late.

How many times in life had she not looked in the face the 'might-have-beens,' and 'too-lates' of existence! Just by the hair's breadth of a golden second she had escaped safety for Diana, and turned to realise that she had failed once again because she had yielded to the fatal dilatory habit that had spoiled her, girl and woman. She was of the Spanish nature that says 'to-morrow' to the world, and never 'to-day'; and after an interview with Ethel Vavasour she recognised that 'by the street of by and by, she had arrived at the house of never.'

"I ought to have decided before," she moaned to herself. "Knowing what I did of Ethel's affairs I ought to have gone away with the girl at once. Oh, woe is me!"

But she knew that there was more to realise than the mere fact of the moment, since it is only women whose wills are fatally weak who drift into the situation that had ruined her own life.

"No, you can't go out to-day, dearie," she said, when Diana came up to her with that request. "Ethel won't have you go, and the flowers will be sent in. There, go away now and leave me, for goodness' sake, dearie child; I'm so busy."

But in the little cupboard she called her bedroom Bertha Fox sat down to write a letter which she pushed under the front door, ready stamped for the

postman to take when she heard his step on the stairs, and it was addressed to Wendover Farm.

"MY LITTLE DARLING SUSIE," it ran, "Your mother is coming down to you any day now and bringing you a nice friend to play with, though she is a bit older than you are; still you can play at the butter-making together, and she will teach you lots of things you can't learn from books. Please tell Mrs. Grey we are coming, and, my dear heart, never forget your mother who loves you, though she can't be with you."

When the heavy foot of the postman had paused and gone on again, Bertha went back to her room and the work of stitching at Diana's dancing gown. But she had only set her needle in the stuff a few times before she slipped on her knees among the shining breadths of material.

"God—help Diana! Keep her safe—punish me if You want to—only save her—because I am used to suffering."

And the tears that fell on the spangled frills and marred their freshness were the tears of contrition, out of which spring the Jacob's ladders that lead to heaven.

CHAPTER XVI

EXPIATION

“I have heard the dropping of their tears
In heaven these nineteen hundred years.”

“ARE you ready, Diana ?”

The two sitting-rooms of the flat in Excelsior Mansions were blazing with light and ringing with noise though it was already past midnight. It seemed to Diana that there was only one corner where she could be alone and quiet, and even that was threatened with invasion, though Bertha Fox stood as a sentinel outside the door. She had never valued so much before the haven of her own room, as she did now that she was compelled to leave it and to come out into the unknown.

“Yes, Bertha ; I am ready.”

She was shivering in every limb with fear and excitement, and her varying colour was like the dawn light. She had obstinately refused to use any rouge or enamel, and Bertha, looking grudgingly at her, was sure that she was justified by the result.

There were half a dozen men in the dining-room and perhaps a dozen in the drawing-room behind folding doors ; and Diana, as she stepped along

passage to Ethel's room, could hear the rattle of the dice and the spinning of the little ivory balls in the roulette wheel. She could also hear now and again strange language, but since she did not understand the meaning of the words, they slipped from her harmlessly. The passages reeked with the fumes of strong cigars and the acrid odour of spirits and liqueurs. There was no means of ventilation in the narrow corridor, and the atmosphere had grown so thick that Diana hid her face in her shawl as she hurried on.

"There are a lot of people here to-night, Bertha," she said breathlessly, as she caught sight of a strange waiter hurrying along from the kitchen with a tray full of glasses.

"A regular crowd," said Bertha sourly; "but at any rate Ethel's room is empty."

They were playing baccarat for unlimited stakes in the drawing-room, out through the folding doors, and Diana wondered at the tense silence. That Cassell was playing there she was dimly aware, since she was always acutely conscious of his presence by some magnetic force that compelled her to acknowledge him.

Cassell was busily engaged in recouping himself for the expense of the Maltese trip, though she did not guess that such was the case, even as she did not guess that Ethel's flat had spelt ruin to half the young men who had been caught in her toils. Cassell had brought many of them there—Cassell, with his pretence at hearty friendliness, his sneering at all that was good and honourable in nature, his deadly selfishness.

There are some men in whom evil seems personified and it had taken definite shape in Felix Cassell, who cared nothing for the ruin of any man, so long as his own pockets were full of money.

Bertha, with nimble fingers, was arranging the *mise en scène* of Diana's dance—the green carpet on which her silver slippers were to be set, the curtain behind her of moon-and-star-powdered blue silk.

“Are you ready, Diana?”

Apparently Bertha Fox could say nothing but that to-day.

“Good gracious, yes! You might tell me if I look nice.”

Bertha surveyed her gravely. The petulant, charming figure in the sparkling draperies, the festoons of buttercups and daisies on the bodice, the outstretched wings of the filigree butterfly in the copper-coloured masses of her hair, made up a whole such as Excelsior Mansions had never realised before. Bertha put her trembling fingers to the match and lighted the pastille that she held, so that the whole room was filled with a haze of smoke, through which the ethereal figure of the girl moved like a spirit of the mist. The folding doors slid back, and Diana, with eyes dazed by the sudden blaze of light, began to dance. A room full of indistinct figures floated before her—men with strained, flushed faces, Ethel in a blue gown, Cassell leaning over the table, wrapped in cigarette smoke. Green baize card tables, little piles of gold, packs of gauze cards confronted her, but she did not see them at the first shocked instant. The elusive mist followed

her about so that she saw nothing but green gardens and heard in the sudden fall of silence only the voice of many waters. Her feet moved restlessly to the measure that was throbbing in her brain, beaten out from far away by the musical box that was winding out a quaint old-world dance by Corelli. The pearl necklace on her round young throat throbbed with her breathing, and the little diamonds set round the miniature flashed as they caught the light. Quite suddenly she began to sing in her sweet voice, untutored and fresh as a bird's song at dawn.

"This is wonderful, eh, Mrs. Vavasour? Who is she?"

"By Jove! what a rippin' dancer!"

These two remarks, and then silence in the room before her, and, from the corridor outside, figures that pushed their way in, until the room was full. Silence—the wonder of her personality impressed silence, so that every word of her song was clear and full:

"Up the airy mountains, down the rushing glen,
We daren't go a-hunting, for fear of little men:
Wee folk, good folk, trooping all together,
Green jacket, red cap, and white owl's feather."

Why, the fairies were in the room—they were in the very air, dancing like ambient moths in the gaslight. The vice and wickedness that haunted the rooms fled away before the tender message of that voice. It was as though Diana had called to them from the heights on which her own soul stood, and the stunted, wizened growths that those men called souls responded to the call from the morass in which they dwelt. There was

not a man there that night on whom the spirit of idyllic youth did not rest for an instant, and with youth, the memories of past days of innocence. And Cassell, looking round upon his visitors, gnawed his fingers in impotent fury as he realised that Diana had failed to create the atmosphere that he had intended. About the purity of youth there is something so sacred that in its presence sin has no place, and these men he had thought to entice were many of them ready to lay down their ears and go away ashamed.

“My God!”

Sharp as a sword-thrust the voice cut across Diana's song, as a tall old man, grey-headed and grey moustache, rose from his chair and came forward to the edge of the folding doors and the green dancing cloth. He was spare of figure and long of limb, and bore about him the impress indefinable but tangible of a gentleman. It seemed to Ethel, watching speechless and bound, that he was drawn to Diana almost against his will by chains of steel, and when he was levelled with her, the girl's song broke and ceased like the snapping of a cord. Eye to eye they stood for a moment in the tense silence—the girl and the man.

“Who are you?” said Diana, under her breath.

“Who are you—so like my dear father?”

“Oh!” said the old man, shivering suddenly, though an ague had struck him from head to heel. “This is Henry's child! She has got his mother's portrait on his mother's face—Althea's! Oh, my God!—the face of the fathers——”

He fell like the fall of a tree in the forest, one hand clenched on Diana's shimmering gown, so that the stuff rent from waist to hem, and the girl stood there, cowering away from him with frightened sobs.

It was Bertha Fox who finally shut to the dividing doors and dragged the fallen man into a more comfortable position, while the flat emptied itself of its visitors very hastily, and Cassell went out in search of a doctor, first pausing to confiscate all the money from the card-tables that lay there just as the players had thrown it down.

Ethel Vavasour fell back in her chair and went into hysterics, but when she found that there was no one to attend to her she dragged herself into her bedroom, where the old man lay with twisted face and jaw fallen. The eyes, half open, were turned up to the ceiling, and Ethel, looking down at him, shivered away.

"Goodness! is he dead?" she said to Bertha. "What an awful thing to happen! It will ruin the whole house—no one will come back again. Why did he fall in a faint when he saw Diana dancing?"

"Hush!" said Bertha Fox; "I believe he can hear you—I believe it is a stroke."

Ethel looked at him curiously, and then away at Diana. "You have brought me nothing but bad luck; I wish I had never set eyes on you," she said irritably. "You must sleep where you can to-night: I must have your room."

"Certainly," said Diana faintly. "I could not go to bed and leave him like this. By the address on the letters in his pocket it seems that he is Sir Peregrine

Ponsonby of King's Haven, and therefore he is my grandfather."

"Good gracious, what a nuisance!" said Ethel again. "I wish you would tell your relations not to come dying all over my place."

Diana opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again, and Ethel paused at the door for an instant.

"Why didn't you tell me you were Sir Peregrine's granddaughter? What a nuisance the whole thing is! Now there'll be a scandal, I suppose, unless Felix hushes it up."

"I can't help it," said Diana. "Please go away now, because we are not sure that he is not half-conscious."

"Oh, bother you and your grandfather!" said Ethel shrilly, as she left the room, banging the door behind her.

"Diana," said Bertha Fox, "when the doctor comes I am going to have Sir Peregrine moved to a nursing home, and you shall go with him if I can manage it. Look here, I fetched your black frock out of your room: put it on now, and you will be ready."

But when Dr. Bowlby arrived, fetched from some considerable distance away by Major Cassell, it was discovered that Sir Peregrine would never move again save on that long journey, where the carriage is straight and narrow one.

Cassell had produced his own doctor—a discreet and marvellous person who saw every reason to set smooth the rough places in life, and therefore made eve

arrangement for the comfort of the patient and those connected with him.

Sir Peregrine Ponsonby was a man of considerable importance in the world, but he was a childless widower and had recently quarrelled bitterly with his next male heir, who happened to be a cousin of Puritan habits and a nice taste in wool-work pictures. The family history of the Ponsonbys was public property, but the existence of the granddaughter was not, and with some alarm, Dr. Bowlby, having pronounced unfavourably upon the condition of his patient, withdrew for a conference with Bertha Fox.

The servants had removed every trace of the recent occupation of the flat as if by magic, and to all appearance Excelsior Mansions bore upon its surface a most respectable imprint. But Dr. Bowlby knew the truth, and his smooth voice took on a rougher accent when he was alone with Bertha.

"I don't suppose you want this business dragged about much in the light of day, eh?" he said. "To discover that Sir Peregrine Ponsonby came to his death in a gambling club would hardly please the family."

"How long is he going to live?" asked Bertha Fox.

"A few hours perhaps, but his heart is more than weak, and the shock is a bad one. I do not fancy he will rally. I suppose I had better remain?"

"Most certainly," said Bertha, with determination; "but I am very anxious to have a lawyer present."

"H'm," said Dr. Bowlby. "I know, oddly enough, the man who does the Ponsonby business, but it is

doubtful whether I can get through to him on the telephone to-night."

"Try," said Bertha tersely, and in another moment the clever little doctor, who saw an ample fee in his pocket and an interesting experience besides, was ringing up Mr. Varchester in his comfortable house in Kensington.

When Sir Peregrine Ponsonby came to himself dimly and vaguely, with a sense of weakness that was new to him, and in his ears the sound of many waters, he thought that he had already crossed the river of death. From the centre of many lights the face of his dead wife was looking down at him, with ineffable pity in her eyes, shining through tears. He tried to put out his hand to touch her, but he could not move his arm; and when he tried to speak, nothing but a jumble of meaningless sounds would come from his tongue. But it seemed to him that the girl with the face of his wife understood, because she loosened the necklace of pearls that was clasped about her throat, and, stooping, laid it in his nerveless hand. It was Althea Lavalette—the miniature of his wife, that he had given to his son Henry after his mother's death. This was Henry's child, for whom he had been searching, and he longed to speak to her, to welcome her, but he had no power to speak.

God! God! How hard life was! How cruel death was proving itself to be! She was there, and he could not speak to her—could not tell any one about him of the thoughts and longings that were surging at his very lips!

But the girl with the face of Althea guessed what was in his mind, and very simply she knelt down by the bed on which he lay and placed her lips against his cheek. She whispered the name he had never heard any one speak yet: "Grandfather, dear grandfather."

In the dim background was Mr. Varchester's face amongst others, and the agony of his eyes drew the lawyer to his side.

"Sir Peregrine, can you hear me? Yes—I see that you can; if possible, make some little sign with the head or the hand. Do you acknowledge this girl Diana Lavalette Ponsonby to be your granddaughter, the legitimate child of your son Henry Lavalette Ponsonby?"

Now, if there be an angel to guard each passing soul, let the angel of the darker deep give this man strength to speak and to do justice.

"Yes—I do," he said, and in the effort died, shriving his soul in its passing by the confession that gave Diana a name and a family, and perhaps a home.

'In the worst inn's worst room,' had died one sinner, but seldom had any man died as did Sir Peregrine Ponsonby, with his feet set on the very verge of destruction, his last thoughts filled with an agony of remorse for a life misspent. The taint in his blood he had passed on to his son, and made no allowance for the ruin of a weak nature. It seemed as if Henry had in his turn passed on the gambling mania to his child, or otherwise she would hardly have been there that day in one of the secret gaming clubs in London. But the

groping after consecutive thought failed with the failing brain, and straying among the green meadows of his early days the soul of Sir Peregrine passed to his Maker.

Diana rose to her feet at the touch of Dr. Bowlby's warning finger, and swept her hand across her eyes. Bertha Fox drew aside the curtains, and the London dawn struggled into the room. Far and faint and elusive in its shimmering beauty, it seemed to come from the eternal hills of heaven and to be a reflection of some flame that shone gloriously before the great White Throne. The light crept up to the bed and lay for one instant on the face of the dead man. In his dying, Sir Peregrine Ponsonby had gone back to his youth, and before Diana he lay with the face of her own dead father, so that she cried out his name through her tears.

She found herself a moment later, back in the dishevelled drawing-room, that still smelt of tobacco smoke, and Mr. Varchester was holding her by the hand and looking down very kindly at her out of old eyes that had seen much sorrow and many tears.

"How did you come here, Miss Ponsonby?" he said gravely.

"Oh! I have led a very unhappy life. Let me go away—with Bertha Fox somewhere, where I can feel safe," she said with a sob. "Night and day I am afraid."

"I will take you and your maid back with me to my house," he said; "you must not remain a moment longer under this roof."

"Don't even let me wait for my clothes," said the girl quickly. "They were given me by—by——"

"I understand," said the lawyer. "They were given to you under a total misapprehension."

Diana nodded, and quite suddenly she felt the tension of her nerves relax, and covering her face with her hands, she wept bitterly—hopelessly.

"Come, come, my dear Miss Ponsonby, you must not do that," cried Mr. Varchester, much distressed. "You must be brave and full of hope now that your troubles are over. Perhaps you ought to know that Sir Peregrine Ponsonby came up to London yesterday to make a will in your favour. I drew it out for him very briefly, and he must have signed it just before coming here last night. He bequeathed everything to the daughter of his son Henry Ponsonby, who is called Diana Lavalette, and you will be at once able to establish your claim to the estate and the name. King's Haven is a fine inheritance."

But Diana only wept. "It is too late—too late to bring me any happiness," she said, through her tears. "If my father had only possessed it, he would never have died, and I should have been spared so much sorrow—so much anguish."

"Who among us has a right to dare to criticise the ways of the Almighty?" said the old lawyer. "He leads us through devious ways and through thorny paths, but every one of the steps we take is necessary for the fashioning of our characters. Perhaps if you had been spared even one moment of your bitter ex-

periences you would have been less able to help and sympathise with others."

Diana looked at him, her eyes shining like drenched violets through her tears.

"And besides that," said Mr. Varchester, touching the miniature that she had clasped once again round her throat, "have you forgotten that you are the descendant of the woman '*qui avait toujours la joie de vivre dans son cœur*'?"

"I have not forgotten," said the last descendant of Althea Ponsonby. "All my life long I have been waiting for the joy to come."

"And it is here now, waiting at your very door, only you will not believe it," said the old lawyer triumphantly. "Open your arms wide and welcome it."

"Mother," said Jem Burne, as he bade his mother good-night in the quiet of her room, "I never thanked you for your letter as I ought to have done—I never told you what a dear mother you were, or how I loved you."

Mrs. Burne looked up into her son's face as he bent over her. Many mothers have to go through what she was enduring to-night—the placing of herself on a lower seat to the one she had always occupied in her son's heart. Few mothers felt it as keenly perhaps as Mrs. Burne, and few bore the supplanting as bravely as she was doing.

"I want you to know that your Diana will have a welcome, Jem. I want you to bring her to me," she said, holding him very closely to her. "Tell her from

me that she must forget all the past ; that I have forgotten it—long ago.”

“When I find her, mother—when I find her,” said Jem, with a break in his voice, “for to-night I had a note from old Lord Arthur Verity telling me to meet him at his club in London to-morrow afternoon, and he will tell me about Diana. It is all very mysterious, but I shall do what he asks me of course, though he might have told me at once without keeping me in suspense.”

“My dear son, follow the gleam always,” said Mrs. Burne. “I want you to be happy, my darling—I want you to be happy, and then I shall be also.”

And since this has been the cry of every true mother since the world began, it seemed strange that, left alone, Mrs. Burne should have wept herself to sleep, and woke to weep again.

CHAPTER XVII

IN EXTREMIS

"There comes a time
When the insatiate brute within the man,
Weary with wallowing in the mire, leaps forth
Devouring—and the soul sinks
And leaves the man—a devil."

THE flat in Excelsior Mansions was wrapped in silence and slumber after a stormy day. When Ethel had realised that Bertha Fox fully intended to leave her, she threw off the mask of veneer that she had worn so long, and Diana had shuddered away from the shrieking, raging woman, who had flung abuse after her, as having been the means of her misfortune.

"Till you came into my life, I was all right, Diana!" she had said, over and over again, till the waving hands, the mouthing, passion-torn face, seemed to be printed on Diana's mind in black horror for ever.

"What am I going to do without *you*, Bertha? Why, we've always been together for years, and if it's more money you want, wait a bit—just wait till my plans are successful, and I'll make you rich yet, and your girl too."

Here was another tone, but the pleading of it suc-

ceeded no better with Bertha, nor softened her inflexible attitude one whit.

"I've given you the best years of my life, Ethel," she said, in low, tense tones. "The years that the locusts have eaten, they are indeed. I don't know that I ever wanted to break away from it all till I knew Diana, but she is like a breath of fresh air in a prison, and I couldn't stop here now, whatever people say of me outside. I've got my living to earn as I always had, but I'll try and earn it honestly now, if it has to be by charring work."

"No one would have you now," said Mrs. Vavasour vehemently. "I told you when you came here that your bond with me was for life, and let alone the coming of death, you could never get free."

Bertha Fox stood looking down on the angry face for a moment in silence. Once she had thought Ethel the very epitome of all that was smart and successful in life. Now she wondered how she could ever have thought her anything beyond the cruel woman she so truly was.

"You may talk as you like," she said steadily; "I have the idea in me that God does forgive. You and such as you never remember His name, and many is the time that I have wondered if He was there up in heaven, or whether He was just the fetish you frighten children with. I think Diana has helped me—I know the helping her has made me see life different, and I want to be good."

Ethel sat up in bed, with the light upon her face. The garish sunshine found out the flaws in her

complexion and the smears of rouge on her sallow face. From her arms and hands, her loose sleeves slipped back, and her hair fell on her shoulders, faded and grey, since there was no reason for care in her appearance during the day that was to come.

"Why, you don't know what you are talking about. You—to talk to me of God and forgiveness! Why, woman, take life and enjoy it, for it is all you will get. Go back to your work, Bertha, and don't talk to me of folly any more."

"Good-bye, Ethel!" said Bertha again. She was strangely moved, for she had about her the feeling that she was essaying to climb out of the bottomless pit of despair. The mud clogged her steps, but she was shaking it from her as she steadily rose. Below in the pit Ethel lay still, unwilling to climb, willing only to wait and delay. She herself could see the stars above her at the mouth of the pit—they were growing in brilliance even as she climbed, but they would be clearer yet, the higher she set her foot upon the upward steps of the ladder.

Ethel, when she saw that she had finally lost the woman who for many years had been her slave and ally, sat forward in the bed, peering out into the room. "I hate you Bertha," she said. "I hope you and Susie will starve if you leave me!"

She raised her voice to a scream that rang through the little flat, as she fell back in a huddled heap of passion on her pillow. Very often had Bertha Fox seen her taskmistress in the same condition, and she knew only too well from whence her excitement arose.

There are few women who lead the life that Ethel had led, who are not addicted to stimulants of some description, and ruin comes in where the moral nature is concerned when that habit is adopted, since every sense of honour or impulse for higher things vanishes as the rose withers and fades when frost has touched it. The woman who drinks or takes drugs is not responsible for her actions. A lunatic asylum should receive her before she has wrought grievous harm upon the world and upon herself.

Bertha Fox set a carafe of water within reach of Ethel and closed the door upon her, then joined Diana in the passage outside, shaking like a woman in an ague.

"What has happened, Bertha?" said the girl timidly. "I am so frightened that I don't know what to do."

Bertha put out a trembling hand and took her by the wrist. "My dearie girl, don't pay any attention; only remember that you are going out of darkness into light—out of darkness into light."

She did not wish that any shadow from Excelesior Mansions should rest upon the memory of the innocent girl she loved.

"Forget it all; forget it all, Diana," she said. "You are going to a fresh life now, and there is no reason to remember anything out of the past—even the clothes you used to wear."

And with rough tenderness she pushed her out of the flat, and pulling the boxes out upon the passage, shut the door behind her and whistled up a cab.

It cost Ethel, when she was left alone, many doses of morphia before she was calm again, and her slumbers were heavily drugged through the first half of the night. She could seldom sleep without a lighted lamp, that hung suspended from a bracket of filigree work behind her curtains. Some minds dread the dark, and Ethel could not face the silent hours, save in drugged sleep, for then the ghosts of the past rise up and beckon the soul away from paths of pleasure, or paths of ease, to remember what has been. There was a past in the life of this woman, so dark that when she awoke in the early hours of the morning, to face reality, she knew what fear meant.

It was nearly three o'clock, and the French maid in her room in Excelsior Mansions was sleeping heavily after her evening glass of absinthe. Felix Cassell possessed a latch-key of his own that would admit him at all hours to his sister's flat, and for the first time for some days he had not availed himself of the privilege of occupying his room there that night, and she had not dreamed he would return.

But when Ethel sat up in bed, half asleep, and looked into the mad face that leaned over her through the curtains, she knew what fear meant, for she was alone in the flat, save for one woman. Felix Cassell ripped down the silken hangings with one powerful hand.

"I have found you out at last!" he said. "Where is Diana—for her room is empty?"

Ethel cowered away from him in terror. "What do you mean, Felix?" she said. "Don't talk to

me like that. Diana has gone, but there are plenty of other girls left in the world."

Then he struck at her, and the blow glanced from her forehead and caught her between the eyes.

"What have you done with Diana? You promised I should marry her," he shouted again.

"Felix—go away now: let me get up, and I will find her for you."

Ah! how frightened she was. Ethel knew now once again what fear meant, with the shiver of apprehension running through her body from head to heel as she remembered her father and the history of her family.

She was out of bed, with her feet on the carpet and half the room between them. Felix was mad—there was no doubt of it at all: he bore the imprint of lunacy in his face—in his eyes, his voice—and what could she do, alone, against him?

"I am going—to kill you!" he said, very slowly. "You cannot get out of this room: and even if you cry out, you will be dead long before help arrives."

Ethel screamed now. Ah! how she screamed. But he was upon her, before the first shriek died upon her lips, and had caught her by the throat with his strong hands.

"I am going to strangle you!" he said, "and there will be no proof as to your murderer, for no one will suspect your brother!"

"Christ! Christ!" Never one word came from the woman's lips, but from her heart went up the frenzied prayer.

The human being who denies the Redeemer of

mankind every day of his ill-spent life often returns to the faith of his father. In his death-bed, and Ethel Vavasour realised when it was too late that there is only one Name whereby we may be saved, and like the thief on the cross turned and cried out in anguish.

Under the pictures that surrounded the walls of her bedroom Felix Cassell thought to enter at last, and Cupid and Psyche and Venus Victoria smiled down at her in gay, flaunting mirth.

She lay with her arm across her face, mercifully hiding it from the growing daylight. The room was full of horror—full of fear; and in the chair by the window Felix Cassell sat and laughed, and laughed, pointing at the dead woman on the ground with one mad finger.

And so they found him; and so they found her—with God and the past between them.

Never any more did reason revisit the brain of Felix Cassell. He had lost control, as before him his father had done, and the doctor who received him knew from the first that his case was hopeless, and that he would never again be a free man, until the day he died.

Ethel Vavasour Bloggs lies in a London cemetery and her grave has no monument erected over it. Bertha Fox knows where it is, and sometimes comes to pray there. Her own life cannot be a long one but she contemplates with unwavering courage the fact that her death is not very far away. For Diana has shown her where real courage lies, and she

has lifted the cross of disease and pain upon her shoulders and bears it, because the Way of the Cross is the way of salvation, and sin is often purged by suffering, only the eyes of human beings are blinded, and we cannot understand.

urns
thel
here
and
t in

ls of
and
rn at

ifully
n was
y the
ghed.
with

her—

ain of
ce him
ceived
ppeless,
n, until

metry,
over it.
s comes
ng one,
age the
r Diana
and she

CHAPTER XVIII

THE END

“ Bid me to live : and I will live,
Thy protestant to be ;
Or bid me love, and I will give
A loving heart to thee.

Thou art my life, my love, my heart,
The very eyes of me.
And hast command of every part
To live or die for thee.”

“ My dear fellow, my gout has been something too appalling since I came back from Malta, or of course I should have done myself the pleasure of coming down to Grey Lady Court to renew my old acquaintance with your mother. But really, what with having had gastric influenza and the very devil to pay with my liver, I thought you would not object to coming up here, as there are things one cannot write, you know.”

“ Yes, yes,” said Jem Burne mechanically. He had never thought Lord Arthur Verity prosy before, or even an uninteresting old man, but he dubbed him both now.

Up in his comfortable chambers he sat, with legs swathed in flannel and an attendant valet seen

hovering through open doors, where medicine bottles and silver spoons stood in rows. Outside the window, far below in the street, the traffic of Piccadilly roared east and west, and Jem Burne drew an impatient breath. In all this cruel heart of London, there was only one thing he wished to learn, and that was withheld from him by the prosings of a sick old man.

“It was a strange thing, of course, that Mr. Varchester should be my man of business; and as you know his firm has conducted the Ponsonby business for generations, and he himself has every detail of the story at his finger tips; but sordid though it may be, kind friends made it worse than it was in reality.”

Ah! So here it was—the name for which he had been patiently waiting. Lord Arthur was going to tell him everything in his own way, and Jem set his teeth in a vain effort to be calm.

How many hours had he sat there, since the moment he had arrived from Grey Lady Court and his mother's resigned tenderness? Surely he had been listening to these platitudes for an age? What did he care about the Verity gout, or the condition of old Sir Abraham Lukin when the Duke of Bawne returned to his kingdom and took account of the stewardship that had existed during his absence?

Diana! Diana! His brain was throbbing out her name. How had she fared since the day they had parted—since the hour in which he had learned the truth? Many a time in the darkness of the night

he had woken and stretched arms of longing out to her memory. His lonely, aching heart had called her name, but as it is with the dead, there had been no answer—his hands had only beaten against a blank wall of hopelessness.

All these things flashed dully through the mind of Jem Burne as he sat with one hand locked in the other, studying patience by Lord Arthur Verity's chair.

"And so, when Varchester came to me with the whole story on his tongue, ready for confidence, appealing for help, I was anxious enough to tell him what I knew."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Jem, with dry lips; "only—get on, sir, if you please, with the story; it—it means so much to me."

"Bless my soul, my dear fellow, of course it does! I can understand it, and you may congratulate your mother from me on possessing, or being on the point of possessing, a most desirable daughter-in-law."

The blood drummed in Jem's ears. Had he missed any of Lord Arthur's conversation, or was he dreaming that the word "Diana" had been upon his lips?

"You were saying," he said patiently, "that you had found—Miss Ponsonby?"

Ah! How slow the old fool was! An intolerable desire came upon him to take Lord Arthur Verity by the shoulders, and to shake the truth out of him.

"Dear me, my good fellow, how fast you are going!

Now, I want to tell the story in my own fashion, for it will take a good deal of thought to fashion it in credible sequence, for really, Burne, the whole series of events makes me—well—makes one almost believe in the Guardian Angel theory of one's childhood."

The old eyes peered from under the bushy grey brows at the young man, as if demanding an answer to an unspoken question.

"I have never ceased to believe in the theory," said Burne, quite simply. "Why should I, when I see the signs of the presence of the angels through every stage in life?"

"Oh, well, you had a good mother," said Lord Arthur Verity. "I suppose—you never knew—that—that—the existence of your poor father prevented her from becoming Lady Arthur? Not that she would ever have married me perhaps, but I should like her to know that, after her, there never could be another woman in my life."

"She shall know it, sir," said Burne, steadying his voice with an effort.

Of course he was touched—interested; but what was the romance of a bygone generation, past and done with, to compare with the surging desire of his own heart, the living, breathing, palpitating present?

Lord Arthur read the truth in the young man's face and brushed his own hand across his eyes with a laugh.

"Quit the cackle and come to the hosses, eh, Burne? Well, well, I was young once, and I can remember what it was."

Somewhere away in the outer rooms a door shut sharply, and the expression on Lord Arthur's face changed to one of complete ease.

"What was I saying, my boy? Oh--ah--yes. Mr. Varchester, the Ponsonby lawyer, found Diana herself—none the worse for her adventures, mark you; none the worse for danger that need never be known beyond the walls of this narrow kingdom of mine—he found her kneeling at her dying grandfather's side; and old Peregrine Ponsonby lived long enough to be able to do her tardy justice, and she is now in legal possession of King's Haven and every brass farthing of which he died possessed."

"Good heavens!" said Jem Burne, feeling his way to knowledge like a blind man who gropes along a sunny road. "She is—one of the greatest heiresses in England—now?"

"Very true, my boy—very true; but in her veins runs the taint of the Lavalette-Ponsonbys' vice that brought her father and grandfather to ruin."

"There is no such thing as hereditary sin," said Burne angrily. "Your theories are ridiculous. Every man lives for himself alone—never mind what his ancestors have done."

Lord Arthur Verity shook his head, and a thin smile crossed his lips. "Opinions are divided on that point," he said quietly. "But have it as you will. Anyhow, Peregrine Ponsonby died in a gaming house, and his son got the order of the boot from Her Majesty's Army for the same propensity for gambling."

"Diana is like her mother and her grandmother : there was no taint in them."

"Very possibly—very possibly. Anyhow, that is not the argument. There was some fuss about poor Henry Ponsonby's disappearance from the active stage : you were treated, I believe, to an unexpurgated edition of it, or rather to a garbled version of his sins. The suspicion that he embezzled monies from the mess accounts of his own regiment was never proved to the hilt—it was, indeed, extremely uncertain ; and only last week the mess-sergeant of the Stewart Highlanders died, and, in dying, confessed that he had been responsible in the main for the whole sum that was missing. Henry Ponsonby, with criminal carelessness had left all responsibility to him, and was constantly in no condition to verify columns of figures. The mess-sergeant had been spared by poor Henry because of his eight children and sickly wife, and I suppose through a distorted sense of justice. And so Ponsonby went under, and Sergeant Macfie remained. If we grovel in the mud of the past, we may perhaps find various other extenuating circumstances, and white-wash poor Henry entirely, but I, at least, would advise you to leave the mud alone."

"Where shall I find Diana ?" said Jem Burne suddenly. "Give me her address ; I have her forgiveness to ask—I have——"

"Softly—softly ! Good Lord ! what an excitable thing young love is !"

Lord Arthur was laughing at him. He was intolerable. The room with its coloured prints of racing

scenes was an unworthy setting for Jem's love ; and yet, sheer gratitude dictated patience.

" I know I have every reason to be awfully grateful to you, sir ; I know few men would have behaved to me as you have done ; but you do not know what my anxiety is—you cannot imagine——"

" I suppose no one has ever been in love before, you son of a mother who had more lovers than there are fingers on this old gnarled hand I cannot move ! Why, boy, love nowadays is nothing to what it was when I went a-wooing ; you young bloods take all your emotions so lightly. I can remember—when I was young—riding thirty miles in Scotland across the moors to see your mother for five minutes."

" Riding ! That was nothing—forgive me, sir—I have sat and eaten out my heart in helpless fear for as many days. Action is enviable ; inaction is pain unending, that gnaws at your vitals like the Spartan fox."

Lord Arthur put out his hand. " You are right, and I am wrong. Diana is in the next room, and God help Henderson if he wants to come through it to give me a fresh fomentation."

But he spoke to empty air, for Jem had gone, and the door was shut.

April in England and the singing of innumerable birds in the gardens of Grey Lady Court, where the spring borders were at their brightest and best. On the terrace under the window of the music-room, Diana, in a white gown, was sitting in the sunlight

with Burne behind her silently reckoning the slow hours that must elapse before God yielded to the world the golden day that was to give Diana to him for ever and ever. Up in the music-room Molly Anson was playing an impertinent fantasia upon the old air, "Haste to the Wedding," for Mrs. Anson had gained the desire of her heart, and her daughter was to be the only bridesmaid who was to follow Diana to the altar; and the diamonds in the brooch that Jem had given her were no brighter than her expectant eyes. The Lukins had sent a wedding present when they discovered that the past of Diana Ponsonby was to be a sealed book and the future an extremely brilliant one, and their filigree silver Maltese gondola was adorning the little table in Diana's room, where her presents were displayed for kindly eyes to see.

She had refused to be married from King's Haven, for the house was too big and too full of bitter memories, so for the first time in the memory of man the place was shut up with its ghosts of dead loves and sorrows. Mrs. Burne had taken the girl to her heart with a passion of motherly love and tenderness that amazed even herself; so that the quiet little wedding was to take place, in spite of all precedent, from the bridegroom's home. Lord Arthur Verity had decided this when he offered to give the bride away, and to-day, once more restored to his pristine powers of absorbing food and drink, he was talking of old days to Mrs. Burne, and contemplating at that moment the chain of simple enamel daisies with diamond hearts that he

was going to put round the bride's neck on the morrow.

There were delicate tender thoughts and prayers abroad too on the ambient air, for Bertha Fox, in her quiet bed in the hospital ward, was remembering with thankfulness that whatever happened to herself in the future her child Susie was freed from the fear of want all the days of her life. She was too tired to care much that the doctors and nurses looked grave when they bent over her bed, for the Angel of Pain that is also the Angel of Pity had whispered in her ear during the long sleepless nights the thought of purification, and of peace. And Susie was safe; that was all that had ever mattered to her in the darkness and uncertainty of the future.

Mrs. Stafford was to arrive at Grey Lady Court that night—a new Mrs. Stafford whom Diana had never seen before, with hope in her heart, for Roland was in England in the care of the most famous surgeon in London, since to Roland's friend—Diana—nothing mattered that could be bought with money.

Love cannot be bought with money, but Dickie Lepel was dancing up and down the shaded garden paths, and there was talk of his making his home at Grey Lady Court till he was old enough to go to school.

Diana had a wondrous plan in her mind, that was unfolding itself daily more and more distinctly in the light of present happiness. King's Haven was to be made into a Home for Children such as she and Dickie Lepel had been. There was to be only one passport

to such a home, and that was loneliness and youth. If Diana could have her way, never any more should walk the earth children whose lives were full of 'the aching of hearts that are breaking: a past of delight and a future of tears,' and Jem approved of her plans—approved of this devotion of the Ponsonby fortune to the hallowing grace of charity. He had no desire to be a rich man, if he could have Diana to share his poverty, and the thought passed lightly enough over his head that through his wife he would become one of the richest men in England.

"Diana—oh, Diana," he whispered now in her ear, as she sat with one hand clasped in his, on the edge of the sunlight; "isn't it wonderful how Lord Arthur Verity and my mother can go prosing on for ever about the past, when you and I are heirs to every hour of the golden future? Aren't you sorry for people who are old and grey, who have set their 'crowded hour of glorious life' behind them?"

Diana turned misty eyes upon him. "There is no sorrow in my heart, Jem, to-day at all—there is nothing but happiness. When you and I sit together some day as your mother and Lord Arthur are doing now, do you think we shall regret any moment that has passed?"

"Ridiculous child! You and I are quite different people—we are the heirs of all the ages," scoffed Jem. And Molly Anson, sticking an impertinent head out of the window above them, drew back suddenly, for in one long golden kiss Jem and Diana had forgotten the whole world.

And so the fairies danced triumphantly back again into the life of Diana Ponsonby, and she never lost again the sound of the elfin horns of fairyland ringing down the peaceful avenues of her new life that love had sanctified and blessed.

THE END

gain
lose
ging
love

