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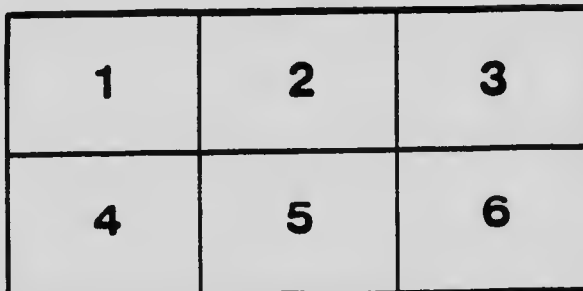
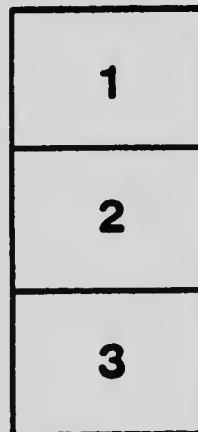
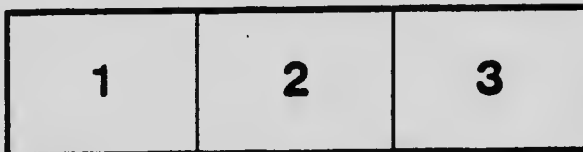
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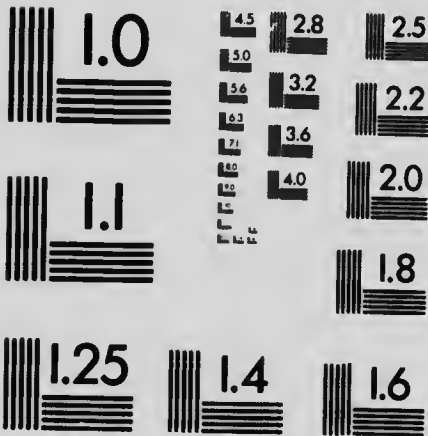
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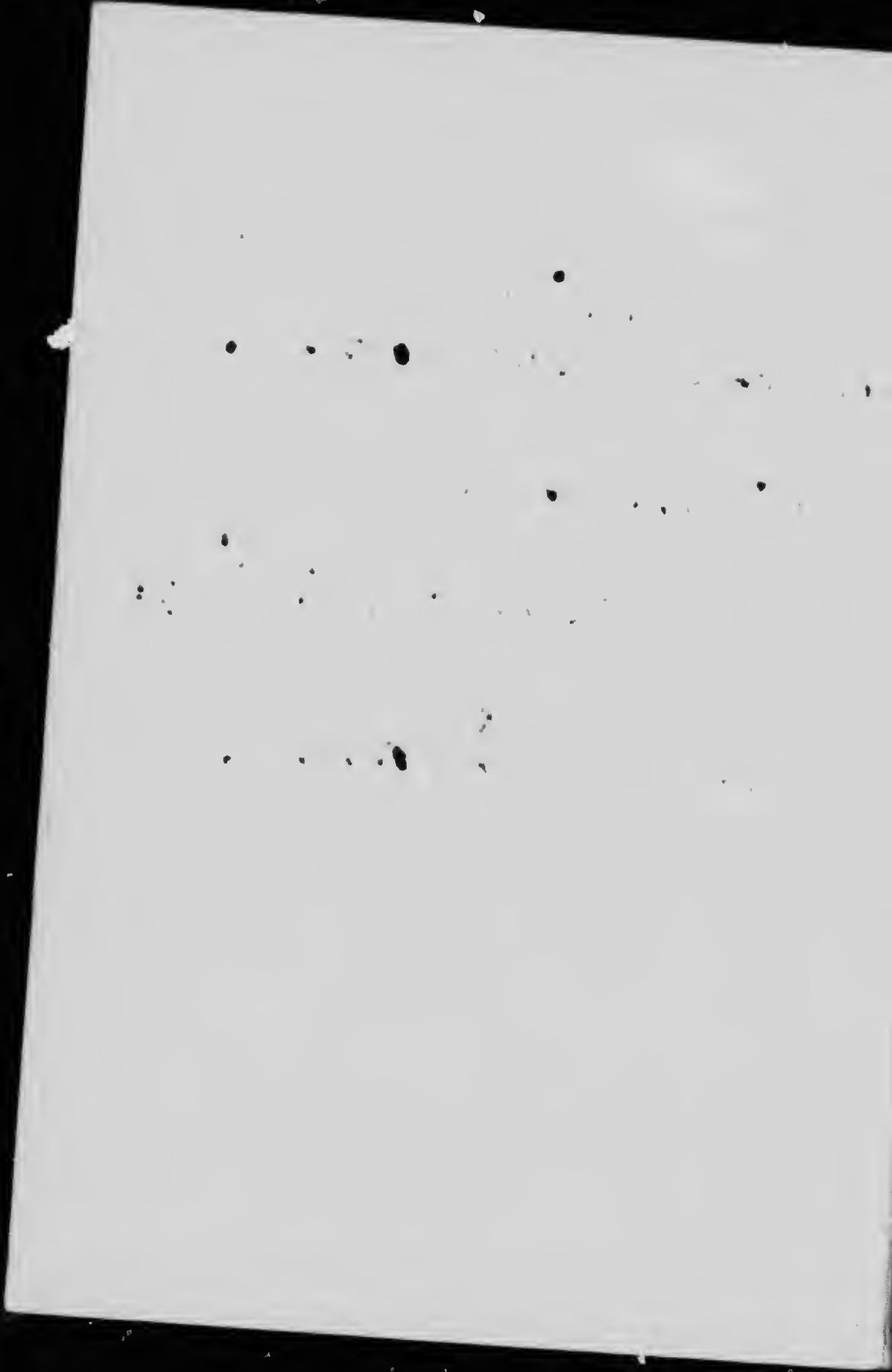
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Mrs. Richardson.

Woodlands -

September 26th 1919

From L. M. Marshall



The Honourable Mrs. Garry



The Honourable Mrs. Garry

By

Mrs. Henry de la Pasture
(Lady Clifford)

Author of "Peter's Mother," "The Lonely Lady of Grosvenor
"The Tyrant," "Catherine of Calais,"
"Master Christopher," etc., etc.

"How the world is made for each of us!
How all we perceive and know in it
Tends to some moment's product thus,
When a soul declares itself—to wit,
By its fruit, the thing it does."

Browning



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title *Erica*.

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To

MY HUSBAND

HUGH CLIFFORD

WHO SUGGESTED THE WRITING OF THIS STORY

I DEDICATE IT

But if he finds you and you find him,
The rest of the world don't matter:

Rudyard Kipling

The earlier history of Erica is related in
Master Christopher by the same author.

The Honourable Mrs. Garry



The Honourable Mrs. Garry

CHAPTER I

"Journeys end in lovers' meetings."—*Shakespeare.*

ERICA, sitting opposite her mother, glanced at the jewelled watch on her wrist, and observed that their journey was drawing to a close. The train was due at Paddington in half an hour. This, she judged, would give her time to make her explanation, and to receive her mother's ejaculations thereon, without leaving a margin for too much repetition on either side. She had to allow, also, for the cajolery or persuasion that might be necessary to ensure Lady Clow's perfect docility in following out the course of action upon which her daughter had decided; but experience had taught Erica that it was easier to surprise than to argue her parent into acquiescence with her schemes; Lady Clow was, like most persons of weak character, much given to after-thoughts, remorse, and the impulse to go back upon any given decision.

Erica looked at the face opposite—large, flabby, yet cherubic; with light blue round eyes,

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innocent as a baby's; and a tremulous curved mouth which had once been lovely, but was now rendered ridiculously small by the enlarged pendulous cheeks and manifold chin. Lady Clow met her daughter's direct look with an eager smile, pathetic from the very readiness of its response.

"You have not spoken for a long time, darling. I hoped you might be asleep."

"I don't generally sleep with my eyes open."

"I have had a little nap myself," said Lady Clow, apologetically.

"You have had a couple of hours' sound sleep," said Erica, with sardonic truth, "so I hope you've forgiven me for rousing you so early this morning to catch the train."

"Oh, my dear! Forgiven you!" Anything in the nature of an appeal moved Lady Clow's too soft heart to melting. "I hope you've not been worrying yourself—straining your dear eyes looking out of the window for hours—over that. It is true I was a little cross," she said, remorsefully. "From a child I have always felt inclined to cry when roused from sleep. And to end a visit so suddenly—a visit to the man you are engaged to, and when he was ill—but the moment you said you were in trouble I gave way—even though I am still all bewildered with the shock——"

"Do you want me to explain?" said Erica.

"I have been thinking of nothing else, even in my sleep. I do not deny I have slept a little. The motion of the train is apt to make me drop off," said poor Lady Clow. "But I would not let myself ask a single question. I thought it best to wait until you poured it all out to me of your own accord. Oh, Erica, I hope—I hope—there is nothing wrong between you and Christopher?"

Erica made an infinitesimal pause before muttering, half under her breath, "I feel inclined to make a clean breast of it all, and start fresh—" and was startled by the passionate fervour of her mother's response.

"Oh, Erica, if you would. If you would! I sometimes feel I could forgive you anything in the world if you would but be open with me. But to grope about in the dark—never even knowing what the person nearest and dearest to you is thinking about."

"Who in this world ever knows that?" said Erica, rather bitterly. "Nine times out of ten if I told you what I was thinking about, I should never hear the end of it."

"No word of reproach should ever pass my lips."

"You take it for granted there would be matter for reproach."

"I can't help knowing what you are, Erica. My own child!" said her mother simply.

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Erica laughed shortly.

"I will make my revelation in the fewest possible words," she said, "and I will ask you to refrain from useless lamentations over what can't be helped."

Lady Clow fumbled nervously in her shabby black handbag, and producing a handkerchief, whisked away the tears already gathering under her large white eyelids.

"Yes, Erica," she said, faintly; and indeed the thick fluttering of her heart caused her actual breathlessness; but her daughter did not realise this physical distress, caused by suspense and apprehension.

"In plainest English then, Mamma—Christopher broke off his engagement to me yesterday afternoon—" Lady Clow sank back in speechless dismay—"because he overheard something he was not intended to hear."

She considered within herself how much she had better tell her mother, and decided with her usual quickness that it must be as little as possible, and that little as near the truth as possible. But even as she decided, a variation of the facts, at once simpler and more expedient than the truth, presented itself to her mind; and the habit of a lifetime prevailed.

"Christopher had been told that there was something in the nature of a flirtation between myself and—Mr. Garry," said Erica, "and

though I might have explained that away, I could not explain away my own words; for he heard me confess that I loved young Garry; and that he, Christopher, bored me to death."

The round, light blue eyes were fixed on her in anguish.

"What is to be done?" gasped Lady Clow.

"I am glad you take a practical view," said Erica. "There is, of course, only one thing to be done. I am going to marry the man I love. He always wanted me to throw over Christopher, and I would n't. But since Christopher has thrown *me* over——"

"Which Mr. Garry?" asked Lady Clow, helplessly.

"Am I the kind of person to fall in love with a younger son? Tom Garry of course. You may remember that you reproved me once, at the beginning of my acquaintance with him, for being so vulgar as to call him the Honourable Thomas. Well, I am going to marry the Honourable Thomas."

"You told me—you told me yourself that he was a pauper."

"That was a figure of speech. He is a pauper compared with Christopher Thorverton, but not a pauper compared with you and me. His father makes him an allowance, and he means to chuck soldiering and to find a job

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that pays. His brother Robin is making money on the Stock Exchange."

"I don't understand--my head is going round," said Lady Clow. "You say it was yesterday afternoon that poor Christopher broke off your engagement. How can you be already engaged to marry somebody else?"

"I wrote to Tom last night," said Erica, calmly, "and he telegraphed to me this morning." She glanced again at the watch on her wrist; the little jewelled watch that was one of Christopher's many presents.

"Engaged by telegram!"

"He had talked it over with me a thousand times," said Erica, impatiently, "and only two days ago he urged me to face Christopher and tell him I did n't love him and could n't marry him. He implored me to ask Christopher to set me free, and then--" the slight laugh that escaped her held more of tenderness than of mockery--"to give him my hand and--face the music. Well, I did nothing of the sort. Christopher very kindly solved the problem for me by setting me free of his own accord. So I'm going to give Tom my hand and--face the music."

"I don't believe his parents will consent," said Lady Clow, who could only grasp at each aspect of the situation in turn as it revolved about her bewildered brain.

"He won't ask them," said Erica, calmly.

"It could only lead to unnecessary delay. We do not intend to be delayed."

"Do you mean—you will be married—actually married, very soon?" said Lady Clow, trembling.

"Immediately."

"When?"

"To-day."

Lady Clow screamed.

Erica looked at her watch again.

"It's past one now. If Tom has been able to make the arrangements, he will meet us at the station, and we *must* be married before three o'clock."

"Erica!"

"You have often told me you objected to long engagements."

"I don't believe it will be legal."

"Oh, yes. It's in *Whitaker's Almanack*. You get a special license. It costs thirty shillings, and it is available directly you have it. The only condition is that one of the parties must have resided in the district for fifteen days. He's had his rooms in Lower Belgrave Street for fifteen months. So we must be married in his parish."

Lady Clow cried silently. Erica judged that the moment for cajolery had arrived.

"Look here, Mal, I did my best—my very best—to endure Christopher. I honestly in-

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tended to marry him. But if you could know the relief of its being over, you'd be glad I was marrying—" she hesitated—"the man I love, instead of a boy who bored me to death. And I can tell you this. I don't respect many people, but I respect Tom Garry. He is good through and through."

"How can he be good through and through when he's been so dishonourable as to make love to another man's *fiancée*?"

"Don't you know me well enough to feel sure that was my fault?" asked Erica, sardonically.

"I daresay it was. But I can't help feeling sorry for Christopher," wailed her mother, too distracted to speak connectedly. "So that is the reason he was too ill to come home last night from the Manor House."

"He had a cold in his head; and he probably took too much whisky," said Erica, contemptuously, "and on the top of that found out I was bored to death with him. So he very sensibly told me he did n't care to marry me. It was *his* doing after all. I can't see he's so much to be pitied. Console yourself by reflecting how wretched I should have made him. I could n't have kept it up. As it was, he exasperated me half a dozen times a day."

"I don't see how I can—how I *can* let him go on giving us an allowance, after this," said

Lady Clow, looking at her daughter with wide, frightened eyes.

"I don't see why not," said Eric crossly. "You are the only relation he has in the world, and he is only continuing what his father felt to be a duty, and so it was. I shan't have anything more to do with it."

"I don't feel I *can*," repeated Lady Clow, obstinately, "and then—then I shall have nothing in the world to depend on, Erica. I had better go to the workhouse."

"Don't be absurd, Mamma." Erica considered for a moment. "Have you anything to go on with?"

"Of course I have. I have not touched my last quarter's allowance. We have had no expenses all the summer and autumn that we have been staying at Moreleigh. And Chris gave me that £500—that time you went up to London; I paid the rent of our rooms up to Christmas, and settled up everything we owed, and paid for all the clothes you bought. I have two hundred pounds altogether at the bank, and that is literally all I have in the world."

Erica thought of a great many bills of which her mother knew nothing, and which Christopher had joyfully paid during that week she had spent in London with him and his sister. She thought also of the magnificent string of pearls which he had given her and of two big

white velvet cases at the bottom of her trunk, which contained an emerald and diamond necklace and tiara, which she had chosen rather for the value of the stones than for the beauty of the setting. She wondered uneasily whether he would presently write and demand their return. She was conscious that she had never rightly understood Christopher.

"If he *does* stop your allowance," she said, decidedly, "*I* shall take care you're all right. And the two hundred pounds will last a long while. By the time it is gone I shall know exactly where I am."

"My darling! as though I would sponge on you. I could do with a bed-sitting-room, and my meals on a tray," sobbed Lady Clow. "Perhaps it won't be for long."

"Don't be silly, Mamma," said Erica in bracing tones. "You're comparatively young and perfectly healthy. There's no reason on earth why you shouldn't live for years; and I mean to get on in the world, and to make Tom get on. After all, he's got to come into Kellacombe one day, even if he doesn't make his fortune now as I have every intention he shall."

"Oh, Erica. I can't grasp it all."

"Cheer up. You'll have time enough to think it over presently. Meantime I wish you'd fix your mind on the main fact that it's my wedding-day."

“No wedding—no breakfast,—no bridesmaids—no trousseau!”

“I should say I had a pretty handsome trousseau,” said Erica, drily.

“You *can't*—you can't wear the things poor Christopher paid for,” shrieked Lady Clow.

“What do you expect me to do with them? Throw them away?” demanded Erica. “What good would it do Chris if I returned them? They would scarcely fit his sister. Poor little May! I think I see her dressed up in my wonderful bizarre creations.”

“I shall never be able to go through with it,” said Lady Clow. “I shall faint dead away, or do something foolish. It's too much. Too sudden.”

Her large face was really so white that Erica hastily unlocked the tiny crocodile-skin dressing-bag with its gold fittings, that had been another of Christopher's presents, and took out a miniature crystal flask.

“Look here, Mamma, you must n't give way and spoil everything. We are almost there now,” she said authoritatively, and forced her sinking parent to inhale some powerful salts. “And you have n't got to go through with anything. You simply collect the luggage and drive straight home and wait for us, while Tom and I go off together in a hansom to his parish church and get married. Then we'll

lunch together somewhere and come and call for my luggage, and incidentally get your blessing."

"Erica! Is your mother not to be present at your marriage? Is she not to give away her child—her only child?" cried Lady Clow.

"No, she is not. Even if you were fit for it, which you're not, we shall be in a hurry and there won't be time. And besides, I don't wish it." Her tone was final, but at her mother's woeful expression she relented, and became reproachful, even caressing. "I should have thought you'd be too happy and thankful to know I was going to marry a man like Tom, to care whether you were present at the ceremony or not, so long as it came off; instead of making delays and difficulties when your child's happiness is at stake and every moment of value. Think that all the anxiety about her future, which has tormented you by day and kept you awake by night, will be ended for ever and ever, when once I am safely married to Tom. It is he who will have to take care of me then."

"Oh, my baby! My darling!" sobbed Lady Clow.

She could not help responding gratefully to Erica's caress, and clung to her daughter, murmuring fond words of endearment. Erica, on her side, and in the intervals of being kissed

and wept over, found a clean handkerchief for her mother, straightened her bonnet, which was apt to fall awry in moments of emotion, and generally put her to rights in preparation for her arrival at Paddington.

“Life is the strangest thing in the world,” sighed Lady Clow. “It seems to me only yesterday you were a little girl, the prettiest that ever was born as every one owned, though from the time you were three years old I could do nothing with you; looking like a cherub, when all the while you had thrown my knitting, needles and all, into the fire, because I refused you a lump of sugar. And I dressed you like a little princess, even after your poor father failed in the City, and we hardly knew where to turn for a meal, until old Mr. Thorverton came to the rescue, and even then it was a struggle. Two hundred a year is n’t much, Erica, for a woman brought up like I was, though I’ve learnt to be careful, God knows. And you never wanted for anything I could get you, though I’m bound to say you were always discontented from the first, and no wonder, cooped up for ever in cheap lodgings,—a girl that had only to be seen—! But there were only the wrong people to see you. And many and many a time you’ve been angry with me for guarding you like a dragon, though I dare say you’ll thank me for it now.”

“Did you guard me like a dragon?” said Erica, with a queer smile.

“You know I did. I don’t mean I could stop your flirting—no one could have done that,” said Lady Clow, sincerely, “and I never said a word about either of the curates, or that poor young Dr. Morris, whom you treated so badly. But at young Hickie and old Mr. Burchardt I did draw the line. I should have been thankful enough to see you settle down with a good, respectable man, however poor, and I could not know then that you would have a chance to do so much better for yourself. I am sure when your cousin May’s invitation to stay with her and her brother came last summer, it seemed like an answer to prayer; for a long visit in a great country house like Moreleigh Abbey, where you were bound to meet all sorts of nice, respectable, well-behaved people, was just what was wanted to make you look on life from a different point of view. And you had them all at your feet, at least all the men, just as I knew you would,” said Lady Clow, exultantly, yet mournfully, “poor Christopher, and Tom Garry and his brother Robin, and all. And it did seem like Providence when poor Chris and you were engaged, for he was a very distant cousin after all, and it was somehow different from his father, and taking his money had always weighed on me. But your marriage with him would have

put it all right and made it natural enough. Well—it was not to be; and now here you are engaged to somebody else——”

“Here I am, engaged to the eldest son of Lord Erriff of Kellacombe,” said Erica, impatiently, “and if you must indulge yourself in a short sketch of my biography, Mamma, you may surely be thankful that you have that item to end up with. And I desire that you will never again refer to any of the persons whose names you have mentioned. I am beginning a new life, and one in which they will certainly find no place. Now, pull yourself together, and for heaven’s sake, don’t fail me.” Her tones grew hurried and almost beseeching. “Don’t disgrace us both by making some foolish scene on the platform. Here we are.”

Though Erica replaced the flask, and fastened her little bag with a steady hand, her heart beat perceptibly faster, and her beautiful face was paler than usual, when the train drew up beside the platform, and her eyes searched the waiting groups thereon rather anxiously.

But Tom had not failed her. With a leap of the heart, and a sensation more akin to pure gratitude than any she had ever known, Erica recognised the fact that she might always depend upon Tom.

She scanned him rather breathlessly as he emerged from the crowd; she had seen him al-

ways in the country, and generally in cricketing flannels, or in shooting or hunting kit,—a lusty and gallant young squire enough; it struck her now that he looked much more serious, and much more distinguished in his London clothes; with his tall, slight figure, straight, delicate features, and handsome, brown eyes lighting up with relief and eagerness as he caught sight of her.

“Thank God, you’ve come,” he said, as the carriage door was opened, and he gave her his hand to help her descend. “My man is here to see after your luggage.” He turned and signed to a solemn, black-whiskered servant. “You and I must drive straight to the church. Two o’clock was the hour fixed.”

“There’s Mamma,” said Erica.

“Of course!” Tom, recalled to earth by the substantial vision of Lady Clow, was full of apology. He gave her his arm, and she tottered across to a four-wheeler, whilst the porter, under Erica’s capable direction, emptied the railway carriage of her belongings, and Tom’s man collected the luggage.

There was the usual yellowish mist of a London November day, but no actual fog. The noise, the crowd, the raw atmosphere, all brought a sense of home-coming to Erica, after her long sojourn in the country.

“The fog was thick this morning, but it lifted at twelve o’clock,” said Tom. Lady Clow was

far too much agitated for speech. She could neither collect her thoughts, nor trust herself to utter a word.

Her four-wheeler drove off, and Erica felt a curious sudden pang of compassion at the last sight of the handkerchief held up to the large, sobbing face.

The old toppling black trunk and shabby hold-all of faded green, rocked together on the roof of the cab, so that she could distinguish the vehicle among a crowd of others for quite a long time, as she stood on the platform beside her future husband.

It was as though her mother, and, with her mother, all the shabbiness and sordidness and uncertainties of her past, were being suddenly driven out of her life.

CHAPTER II

SYMBOLIC of the present was her new luggage: three large trunks, a monster hat-box, and a handsome dressing-case in a leather cover; the miniature dressing-bag she chose to retain in her hand. But Tom did not question whence came these signs of prosperity. That Erica should be beautifully dressed, and have beautiful possessions, seemed to him part of the natural order of things. Also, he was in a hurry.

He ordered his servant to drive to Lower Belgrave Street with the luggage, and to see that luncheon was ready for their arrival a little later. Then he turned with relief to Erica and helped her into the waiting hansom.

They drove away, and neither spoke until the hansom was speeding past the Marble Arch into Park Lane, then she murmured:

"Are you sure you're glad?"

"I've thanked God every moment since I got your letter." He took it out of his breast pocket and showed it to her. "I feel as though I can hardly speak till—till 's done,—till we're safely married," he said.

“Let me read the letter. I forget what I said; I wrote so hurriedly.”

He let her take it; and she read the words she could scarcely believe had been written less than twenty-four hours earlier; so strange they looked in her own writing.

“I am no longer engaged to Christopher. He found out by chance that I was marrying him for Mamma’s sake, and not because I loved him, and he has set me free. If you do not believe this, I refer you to Mamma. She will tell you what I only learned the day I became engaged to Christopher, that we have lived for years on the allowance his father made us, and which he has continued. I do not know whether he will go on with it now or not. I only know I am very unhappy. If you really love me—if you wish to save me from myself, as you said—let it be all as you planned. It will only be a day later. I will marry you to-morrow if you wish, in the same way, and under the same conditions. Mamma and I will come to Loudon by the nine o’clock express, and you can meet us and let her go home, and take me with you. Telegraph only one word to me here the instant you get this. One word: YES, or NO. ERICA.”

She refolded it mechanically, and returned it to him, and he put it carefully away in his pocket-book.

"You are marrying me with your eyes open," she said, looking straight before her, and speaking in rather hard tones, because her cold nature was stirred to unaccustomed depths, and she feared to betray the novel emotion which possessed her. "You know that while I was engaged to Christopher I—I flirted with Robin as well as with you—" He winced and uttered a sound as of entreaty. "Let me speak. Confession is not much in my line. I might not feel inclined another time, and I'm trying to be honest—as you begged me to be, when you told me the other day that I was never meant to plot and scheme and do ugly things." Her mouth quivered.

"Don't—don't remind me. I was a fool and a prig," he said passionately. "And you—you never had a chance. Brought up to think it your duty to marry a rich man. And now—after all—you are marrying a poor one, God bless you," he said, and, heedless of passers-by, lifted her hand to his lips.

"You make it difficult," sighed Erica, and yet smiled. Her drooping self-respect raised itself a little from the dust into which Christopher's contempt and repudiation had cast it. She thought that after all, she need not speak to him of his brother Robin's careless offer to make amends for Christopher's cavalier treatment.

She would be amply avenged on Robin—for

his merry self-confidence, his easy assuredness of conquest, the light and mocking method of his wooing—when he learned of her marriage to his elder brother. He would have to realise then that she must have been ridiculing him in her heart throughout all his assumption of superiority, of knowledge of the world, and of human nature, and assurance of his power over her. The laugh would be on her side.

And she knew Robin well enough to be sure that he would never give her away to his brother; not only for the sake of his own vanity, but because he would scorn thus to revenge himself upon a woman.

Tom would know nothing of that episode unless she told him, nor need any one know. Why should she tell him? Yet she wavered.

“Suppose I wanted to make a clean breast of—of everything,” she said, as she had said to her mother, “show you all the ugly thoughts and sordid schemings that I’ve hated even while I’ve gloated over them——”

“It’s enough that you’ve hated them,” said Tom. “I won’t have you humble yourself to me, my Queen. I don’t believe in introspection. Put all ugly thoughts behind you, and start fresh from to-day—with our new life together——”

“He wants to put me on a pedestal and worship me. Men are all alike,” thought Erica. “Why should I disappoint him? And after all,

I'm not on my death-bed. I'm only beginning a new life, as he says. It will make it a very difficult life if I let him into the secret of every method by which I shall probably have to manage *him* presently. And I am absolutely dependent on him. It is only people who are absolutely independent who can afford to be absolutely true." Aloud she said:

"Perhaps you're right, Tom. It's morbid to dwell on one's own shortcomings. And after all, there's nothing—nothing serious that you don't know already."

It was rather by instinct than from conscious intent that she turned her limpid blue eyes upon him with an innocent, pleading expression that contradicted her admission of guile. Those candid eyes conveyed the expected impression to Tom's honest mind, inflamed with ardent love.

"My darling," he said, "you don't suppose I'm not sure of that? If you forgot sometimes that what was play to you might be death to—a poor fellow who loved you, it was only because you didn't understand. And after all, it's not a crime that you should have tried to sacrifice yourself to a boor you couldn't love, for your mother's sake, because he was rich."

Before Erica's mental eyes rose suddenly the vision of Lady Clow driving away, alone and weeping, in the rickety four-wheeler. An unwonted sensation of remorse made itself felt.

“There it is,” she said, with a lovely tremulous smile, “I put it all on Mamma. But I—I am not sure it was n’t just as much for my own sake that I wanted to be rich.”

As she made the admission, her starved conscience, unaccustomed to even so small a sop, glowed with gratification; it was too small and weak from long neglect, even to perceive how scant a proportion of justice had been rendered to that stout and guileless mother, who was innocent of any smallest desire to sacrifice her daughter, and who would on the contrary have died willingly, and even eagerly, to ensure her child’s happiness.

Nor did Tom pause to examine or regret the wrong done to poor Lady Clow. Actual tears of admiration and worship shone in his brown eyes as he looked at his betrothed’s downcast eyelashes.

“Oh, Erica—it needed only that,” he cried unsteadily. “I love you for owning it. I honour you. It proves to me that I was right—I knew all the while that your soul was as beautiful as your face. And now—you’ve got it all off your chest, and we can forget everything in the world except ourselves and our happiness—and the new life together that we are to begin to-day.”

Erica, letting her suède-covered hand rest in his firm clasp, felt for the moment as though

she had really made a full confession of all those ways—which her mother had once sorrowfully called crooked ways,—to Tom, and been forgiven; and under the influence of this delusion actually experienced something of the strange peace which confession is apt to bring to the laden soul. Vividly present in her mind was the memory of the night of suspense and mortification through which she had just lived; and her heart still throbbed to recall the passionate intensity of the relief which Tom's telegram had brought in the early morning.

Yet she had supposed, judging him by her own low standards, that her value would be diminished in his eyes since Christopher had thrown her over. She realised now, with something akin to real humility—with a wondering novel sensation of gratitude—the measure of Tom's generosity and of its unconsciousness.

He was not after all, the stern young judge, who, whilst magnanimously accepting her changed attitude towards himself, yet saw in her a goddess humbled to earth, abashed, forsaken, and proved of commonest clay—but the lover and champion who believed in her still, and was prepared to defend the illusion of her perfection in the face of her own admissions and of his better judgment. For the first time she understood how much deeper was his feel-

ing for her than Christopher's calf-love or Robin's careless admiration had ever been, and with a certain cold yet fierce resolution peculiar to her nature, she determined that his marriage should neither disappoint nor disillusion him.

Vaguely, as one groping in darkness, she sought to form high resolves for the future; but her imagination was so unused to exercise in such directions that it produced only the slang formula, *I will play the game*; before flying back like a bent twig, to the engrossing subject of herself, her prospects, and the question which had been at the back of her mind ever since she received Tom's telegram, as to which of her trunks ought to go with her on her wedding journey. She supposed there would be a wedding journey. . . .

"Here we are, my darling," said Tom.

No human being known to either of them was present at the short ceremony which made Tom Garry and Erica Clow man and wife. The witnesses received gratuities, and Erica received the certificate of her marriage which she folded absently and put into her little bag, and the officiating clergyman shook hands with the bride and bridegroom and offered polite congratulations.

Erica, tired physically and mentally, felt the whole proceeding to be somewhat dreamlike, but

Tom exulted openly and boyishly, as they walked out of the church together, and said:

“It’s all right at last, and you’re Mrs. Garry. Now we’ll go and have some luncheon, for you must be starving. I know I am.”

They drove straight to his rooms, and he opened the front door with his latch-key.

Erica never forgot the look of that door; a blue enamelled one with polished brass fittings, wedged between two shop fronts. She felt, during the short delay while Tom paid the cab, as though she were waiting for admission into a new world; and that in crossing that threshold she left the Erica Clow that had been, outside for ever.

The rooms consisted of three upper floors and a basement; completely shut off from the shops, which so encroached upon the ground floor on either side, that nothing was left save a narrow passage leading to the steep staircase.

Erica’s trunks, piled one on the top of the other, made the gangway yet narrower.

“I’ll lead the way,” said Tom, and he sprang upstairs, two steps at a time.

Erica half expected, from the dinginess of the position and the exterior walls, to find rooms resembling her mother’s lodgings; but this was, as she again realised, a different world.

The front room was furnished as a sitting-

room, and the back, divided by a curtained arch, as a dining-room.

“Why, you must have wonderful taste, Tom,” she cried, with delight.

“Not I—these rooms are miles too fine for me. I took them over to oblige a pal, and I’m glad I did, for they are n’t too fine for you. They were furnished and done up by Finguar—he’s a bit of a sybarite and rolling in money, and he let them to me cheap because he knew I’d take care of them. All that china’s worth a lot of money. His housekeeper dusts it and cooks my breakfast. Luckily she and Gudwall get on well. Both rather Psalm-singing sort of people. I think she means to marry poor Gudwall. Oh, here he is. Luncheon ready?”

The black-whiskered, serious servant brought in a tray noiselessly.

“Mrs. Jarmin is in the bedroom, sir. She thought perhaps——”

“Mrs. Garry would like to see her room—of course,” said Tom, gaily. “It’s the room over this—Finguar’s own room, and as pretty as this.”

Erica glanced round the sitting-room, with its delicately tinted grey walls, throwing into high relief a few brilliant modern water-colours, and the gay red and blue and gold and green of the Dresden china figures in severely plain cabinets. The brocade curtains were of the same mouse-

grey shade, which was repeated in the velvet hangings of the archway.

There were two or three luxurious arm-chairs and a wide divan piled with cushions, and a low, solid elbow-table where Tom's pipes and a few books found a resting-place.

Through the arch she perceived that the same scheme of decoration was repeated in the little dining-room, a perfect background for the pictures, and for the silver and crystal which glittered under the rose-shaded lamp suspended from the ceiling.

The luxury appealed to Erica, and she nodded approvingly before she vanished up the narrow staircase.

The next floor contained also two rooms, and she smiled at the contrast between the one into which Mrs. Jarmin ushered her, and that next it which Tom had made his own.

The front room which was to be hers, was very modern and comfortable; with a carved wood French bedstead, painted white, and with furniture and pictures of the same period.

She judged Lord Finguar to be somewhat effeminate in his tastes, and with a glance at the wreathed oval mirror, congratulated herself on the fact.

"It is quite perfect," she said, "but what can he have wanted with so many hanging wardrobes?"

“Well, Ba ’m, I believe they was furdished for a lady,” said Mrs. Jarmin, who had a chronic cold. “But I dever seed dothing of her. So it *bay* be ody talk. But you should see the bath-room, all rose-colour tiles and silver fiddings.”

“Are you Lord Finguar’s housekeeper?” asked Erica, abruptly.

“Id a madder I ab,” said Mrs. Jarmin with conscientious elaboration of detail. “I was reely caretaker to the Dowager, as was, before she was took to Kensal Green. I lived in London all my life, and I wooden live away or I could have gone to the fambly long ago. But I ’ates the country. So when the yug gentleman cub into his own, I was sent here; bud he went away dreckly and Mr. Garry toog his place.”

“You keep everything very nice,” said Erica, graciously.

“I do keeb things as dice as I can, but the furditure people ’as orders to come reg’lar too. And Mr. Garry is a quiet yug gentleman, and Gudwall gives no trouble.”

“Where is Lord Finguar now?”

“I heard tell he was somewheres in Africa, shooting-like,” said Mrs. Jarmin. “Cad I do anything else ’m? There ’s a dice hot luncheon ready for you.”

Erica took the hint, and hastened her preparations. She looked at herself in the glass, re-

moved the brown velvet toque with its aigrette, and jewelled buckle, and regretfully doffed the wonderful sables which Christopher had given her; thinking as she did so, how well they set off the purity of her complexion and the red-gold tints of her hair. She had worn a gown of white cloth, bordered at wrist and hem with sable, for her journey, which as she knew, was to end, if all went well, in a wedding. She had nothing more bridal that was suitable for travelling in winter.

As she removed from her face and hands all traces of railway dust, and re-arranged the waves of hair upon her brow, she appreciated shrewdly the value of youth, that could present so fresh and charming an appearance, after a sleepless night and a four-hour journey by rail.

When she descended, she found that Tom had dismissed Gudwall and was prepared to wait upon her himself.

He carved chicken and poured out wine, and hovered about her, serving her deferentially,—and she liked to be served deferentially. Her appeal to him, her dependence on him—had awakened all the chivalry of his nature; and he was the more reverent because of the circumstances which had brought them together that day.

“Oh, Erica,” he said. “If I’d only known all this time that I’ve been so down on my

luck, that the hour was close at hand, when you would be sitting opposite me here, at the very table where I've propped up the newspaper or a book against the tea-pot, and read through my breakfast, morning after morning; after thinking of you and dreaming of you all night! I'm glad you've taken your hat off. Oh, darling --say you feel at home."

"I feel very much at home, and the rooms are charming," said Erica. Her red lips parted—the slight smile that was her loveliest expression showed the perfect teeth, slanting inwards, and the dimples set at the corners of the beautiful mouth, and in the centre of the soft white chin; narrowing the cold blue eyes until only a glint of colour was visible between thick golden fringes. If the oval face were too large, and the stately throat a trifle overfull—who could quarrel with the pure, faint rose-colour that flushed their almost infantile softness and whiteness under his gaze.

"Darling!" he said. "I can hardly believe it all, even yet. It seems too good to be true that we're actually married."

"Wasn't it very difficult to arrange it all—in such a short time?"

"It seemed impossible," said Tom, "but as it happened, things fell out rather luckily for me. To begin with—as soon as I'd settled the license question—which was naturally the first thing I

thought of—I made up my mind to have a shot at getting leave from my Commanding Officer—and by a miracle put the thing through.”

“Do you mean you can’t get married without leave?”

“You *can*,” said Tom, drily. “But in that case you can also make pretty sure you won’t have much further use for a uniform.”

“Why—what would happen?”

“Nothing. You just don’t go back, that’s all. You don’t belong.”

“But surely——”

“Of course there are exceptions—and if you choose to keep your marriage dark—but with us—there’s no question of anything of that kind,” he interpolated hastily. “Everybody’s got to know, and the sooner the better.”

“But suppose your Commanding Officer had refused?”

He smiled.

“We should have got married just the same, sweetheart! And I should have sent in my papers at once. But as it chances, my Colonel is a brick, besides being always a very good friend to me.”

“Tell me all about it,” said Erica—interested. “Where did you see him?”

“Barracks—inspection—” said Tom, laconically. “Told the Adjutant I wanted leave, and explained matters more or less to him as he’s

a great pal of mine, and asked for a moment alone with the Commanding Officer. He arranged it all right."

"But I want to know exactly what happened," said Erica, impatiently. "What he said, and what you said, and what the Adjutant said."

Tom laughed.

"I went into the orderly-room where the two were sitting side by side at the table and saluted and said, 'Could I speak to the Commanding Officer, sir,' and the Adjutant said, 'Lieutenant Garry to speak to you, sir, will you see him?' and the Colonel said, 'Yes, certainly,' and asked me what he could do for me, and the Adjutant got up and went out. So I began at once by pulling out the license and showing it to the Colonel. It seemed the easiest way; and he said, 'What on earth's this, Garry?' and I explained the circumstances."

"How did you put it?" asked Erica, curiously.

"I told him the truth," said Tom, simply, "exactly as though I'd been talking to my old Dad. He's a splendid old boy, full of understanding. I told him how much I cared for you, and that I'd had reason to believe for some time past that—that you—cared for me, but that you were engaged to another man whom I did not think worthy of you in any way—and that rightly or wrongly, I'd urged you to break

it off, and you would n't, and that now I'd suddenly got this letter from you—saying——”

“That he'd thrown me over, and that I was at a loose end,” said Erica, in a hard voice.

“I didn't put it so crudely as that,” said Tom, flushing, “but he had to know that you'd honoured me by appealing to me in a way that not only justified me in the course I proposed to take, but made it imperative for the sake of my own honour and happiness that I should respond instantly. Oh, he saw that all right,—but what he jibbed at was my father's not knowing. Of course he had to talk about eldest sons, and duties to one's family, and so on.”

“Didn't he want to know who *I* was?”

“Oh, well, of course,” said Tom, hastily, “I'd told him my mother and sisters knew you, and all that, and that my father not only knew you but liked you excessively——”

“You were certainly justified in saying that,” said Erica, with grim humour; and she laughed, recalling Lord Erriff's little gallantries, and unconcealed admiration for her, on his introduction to Christopher Thorverton's betrothed.

“But then of course he said why not tell him? and I could only argue that it must inevitably cause delay, and consequently place you in a painful position, and that even if my father sympathised with me, as I felt sure he would, my mother was bound to make difficulties, and

want a conventional wedding, and everything that in the circumstances we should most dislike——”

“So he gave way——?”

“Well—I expect he saw I meant to do it, all right,” said Tom, “and after all, as he said, he could n’t treat the thing as though I were a youngster. I’m nearly seven-and-twenty, and—and—well—he does n’t pay compliments as a rule,” said Tom, rather shamefacedly and with an effort to laugh—“but the things he said about looking on me as one of the steadiest fellows going, and things like that, made me feel that it was all very well to talk lightly of chucking soldiering, and all that—but that I will be something of a wrench when the time comes to—to unbuckle one’s sword for the last time. Well—he ended by saying he trusted me too much to stand in my way, and just told me to put down the leave I wanted, and called in the Adjutant and asked if it would be all right; and of course the Adjutant said it was, and the dear old boy initialled it and asked me if that was all, and I said ‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,’ and saluted and went out, wondering how I’d done it.”

“And did you tell any of the others?”

“Not I. I just saw young Woosnam in the officer’s ante-room, and told him I’d got leave, and put him down for my duty.”

"Was he pleased?"

"He's got to be pleased," explained Tom, surprised. "He's a junior subaltern. Besides, I don't suppose there'll be anything for him to do. There are four or five on the roster before me, and I shall pay him back. Talking of marrying, *he's* married, which at his age he'd certainly no business to be. But he's an only son and his father's rolling in money so I suppose he had to— Well—by that time it was pretty late, and I only just had time to change into mufti, and go back and see the parson again—I'd seen him on the way—and make sure it was all right—even to flowers and music. I thought you'd want some music——"

Erica cared nothing for music, but she liked the attention, and told Tom so very prettily.

"The only thing I *didn't* do--was to take our tickets to Paris," he said, "but we might go down to Folkestone this afternoon, and cross to-morrow or next day as you prefer—only I was n't sure what you'd wish, or if you'd prefer any other place, or if you'd think, as I do, that Paris would be the jolliest place we could choose for our first trip together. I know Paris fairly well, but I thought you said you'd never been——"

Erica reflected.

When an idea was presented to her it interested her, if at all, solely as it affected herself,

and the disadvantages of Tom's proposal became apparent to her when thus regarded.

She was shrewdly aware of the value and unforgettability of first impressions. She knew that surroundings count for much, and that in unfamiliar surroundings she would be at a disadvantage. Tom knew Paris fairly well, but she did not know it at all. She remembered that Lady Erriff had boasted in her presence once that her sons spoke French and German with equal fluency; Erica's French was a negligible quantity. Tom was a good sailor and she was a bad one. Travelling was a test of temper, and Erica's temper was far from perfect. She was sufficiently shaken by her recent experiences to realise that she had hitherto overrated the power of her charms to conceal these deficiencies of character, of which she had become dimly and uneasily aware; and for which Christopher in one way and Robin in another had manifested contempt; she was the more determined that Tom should regain every lost illusion of her perfection during his honeymoon.

In short, she wanted to go to Paris, but not now; not until she had made her position in Tom's heart doubly secure, and established the ascendancy she craved over his mind and judgment.

"Tom, dear," she said, with a new and enchanting meekness which made his heart throb,

“when you—when you told me to go to Christopher honestly and tell him the truth,—that I did not love him,—and ask him to set me free—you said that when I’d done so, I was to give you my hand, and we’d face the music together. Well—Chris set me free, of his own accord; but I’m afraid—it will look to the world very much as though I’d jilted him, to run away to you——”

“Let it,” said Tom, gaily. And he quoted: “*They say. What do they say? Let them say!*” I shall tell my father the facts. He’ll understand. I don’t care a button for any one else.”

“But if we went to Paris, it would look more like running away than facing the music,” she persisted. “Why should n’t we stay where we are?”

The moment she had uttered the suggestion she felt it to be an admirable one.

In London she was at home; and where, in strange hotels, were they likely to find such luxurious, such warm and comfortable and softly-lighted rooms?

Erica, like a cat, loved warmth and softness and luxury; and indoors appealed to her far more than the outer air.

There was no lack of amusement in London, and she would have the advantage of understanding what was going on when they went to

the theatre together. She would know what to wear, and when to wear it, and be at her very best.

Her dressing-table upstairs was perfect; there was sufficient wardrobe space to accommodate her new dresses; and she would be saved the trouble of packing and re-packing. When she thought of doing this for herself—of brushing her own hair, and fastening her own dresses, and mending her own clothes, Erica was dismayed; for hitherto her mother had done all these things for her. She began to realise the possibility of missing that willing service of all her life. Well—while she remained where she was there was old Mrs. Jarmin—anxious to do what she could. She supposed in time she would get used to waiting on herself—but this was not the moment to begin——

She did not realise that the reason she had given Tom for her dissent from his scheme was an unreal one; and if any one had pointed this out to her she would have said, in all sincerity, that no woman could make a man of Tom's calibre understand the importance of such details, and that the woman who tried to do so would be a fool. She clinched the matter by saying, with that thrill in her low voice which was not the least of her charms:

“You know, it's bad enough for me—knowing you're going to hurt your people by this

—and that it's you who will probably be blamed for Christopher's unhappiness——”

“Well,” said Tom, slowly, “if it comes to that, I would have made you throw him over and come to me, if I could, at any moment; because I knew you did n't love him and that you *did* love me,” he said, with a happy look of pride and fondness; and she thought to herself, He is very simple, after all.

“But I'm glad it *did n't* have to come that way,” he said, “though anything would have been better than your being sacrificed to a lout of a boy like—there—I ought to be the last man in the world to call him names, poor fellow, since his loss is my gain.”

“Who could call him anything but a lout?” Erica said, with a hint of vindictiveness in her voice. Then she recollected herself, and changed her manner. “I could have found it in my heart to pity him—if he had n't been so brutally, hideously, frank—in—in—the way he did it.”

The colour flooded her fair face again, and she put up two white hands to hide it; and Tom knelt beside her, and laid his arms about her, and his face against hers.

“Sweetheart! Don't think of it again. Don't speak of it again,” he said passionately. “I forbid you. You're my wife now. I'm here to take care that no one in the world ever shows you one word or look of disrespect. And as for

Paris—you're not to consider anyone's wishes or feelings except your own. What do I care where I am so long as I'm with you. Oh, Erica. . . ."

Erica leaned against him, vaguely glad of the support of his strong young clasp, for she was tired, mentally and physically; at once amused and attracted by his authoritative assumption of the rôle of her protector and champion.

He was a year her senior but she felt infinitely older and wiser than he, and had hitherto regarded him as a boy; a gallant, well-mannered, handsome boy, less charming because more serious than his brother Robin; but on the other hand, infinitely more to be trusted. She found herself thinking stupidly—"I am really married, and this is my husband," with a new sensation of shyness and fondness for Tom, who had not failed her; who, she believed in her heart, would never fail her.

"Let us stay here," she said. "Tom, let us stay here. I'm tired, and shaken, and not a bit inclined to go to Paris. And wouldn't it take a long time for letters? If you are going to write and ask your father's forgiveness, as you said? Besides—I don't want to go. You brought me home, here, from our funny little wedding—and oh, Tom—poor Mamma!" Erica found herself, to her surprise and disgust, battling with an inclination to cry. "She will

think we are lost! I promised to go straight back to her and get her blessing! It's a great bore—" she said, between tears and laughter. "I'll go alone if you like."

"My darling; am I likely to let you go anywhere alone, to-day?" said Tom, tenderly.

CHAPTER III

LADY CLOW sobbed uncontrollably for some moments after finding herself alone in the cab, giving way completely to the emotion that possessed her, now that there was no fear of incurring the sarcastic reproof of her daughter.

The outburst sensibly relieved her, and by the time she had lifted her face from her handkerchief, and looked out upon the familiar scenes—half shrouded in the raw London mist, through which she was passing—she felt, it is not to be denied, a sudden lifting of the spirit, in the realisation of all that Erica's marriage might mean.

Somehow, the appearance of Tom Garry at Paddington, with the respectable, black-whiskered Gudwall in close attendance, had brought a measure of consolation to her troubled mind. Erica she did not trust, but there was that in Tom's clear eye, alert yet steady bearing, and low distinct voice, that inspired confidence.

Poor Lady Clow was on Christopher's side; certain that he had been badly treated; filled

with indignant sympathy for the boy who had showered kindnesses upon her and her child; and ready to be angry with Tom, though in her heart she doubted not that he, too, was but a puppet answering to wires pulled by Erica's cool and skilful hands. Yet, when Tom Garry offered her his arm, with that gentle deference of manner which became him so well, she could not, for the life of her, help clinging to it with a gratitude almost affectionate. Nor could she help contrasting his chivalrous politeness with the uncouth and unmannerly ways which distinguished Christopher; who, in like circumstances would probably have stood by, whistling, with his hands in his pockets, allowing her to scramble out of the train and into her cab, as best she could, unaided.

"Of course there's no comparison," she said to herself, tearfully. "There's that excuse for Erica. Poor Chris is plain as well as bad-mannered, and Tom and Robin both so good-looking that I never could see a pin to choose between them, except perhaps that Tom has a bit of a moustache and cuts his hair as close as he can, while Robin has the sense to let people see his handsome mouth and his curly hair, which must be a satisfaction to his poor mother. Still, every one says it's Tom that is to be trusted, so I can only thank God Erica's got Tom, quite apart from his being the eldest son.

But I feel like a traitor to everybody all the same, and I shall write to poor Christopher and beg him not to fret, the minute I get home. Poor boy; I only hope the shock won't kill him. But Erica must manage her own affairs, and at least there will be a gentleman now to have the responsibility instead of me. I was never fit for it even if she had n't been so wicked to me—oh, what am I saying! Wicked! My little Erica! My baby—and it is her wedding-day!”

The tears gushed forth again, but with less violence; and a fresh idea suddenly occurring to Lady Clow, she thrust her large face—crowned with a flowered bonnet, and mottled with weeping—through the open window of the cab, and cried to the cabman to stop at a certain confectioner's shop in the High Street, Kensington.

Tom persuaded Erica that to walk part of the way, at least, to her mother's lodgings, would be an exceedingly pleasant and wholesome proceeding, and she consented not unwillingly. Erica liked new sensations, and it was a new sensation to walk in London beside this immaculately dressed young Guardsman who was her lawful husband.

The young couple entered the Park at Hyde Park Corner, and walked briskly past Knightsbridge Barracks towards the Albert Memorial; and Tom received several greetings, and Erica

the attention from passers-by which her beauty always excited, and which was considerably increased now by the magnificence of her sables, and the generally expensive and striking nature of her attire.

“But you used to say you didn’t like walking,” said Tom.

“I don’t like walking in the country—I hate hills—and muddy boots, and seeing no one—” said Erica, so gaily that Tom did not know she was in earnest.

The unwonted exercise had brought a brilliant colour to her face when at length she declared herself fatigued; and they left the gardens and hailed a hansom.

“You won’t want to stay very long with your mother?” said Tom, jealously.

She vouchsafed again that slight, lovely smile, but behind it lurked the recollection that she had to live up to an ideal, and that Tom had once reproved her for her studied indifference to the feelings of her fond parent.

“Poor Mamma!” she said, in the low, mocking tone that was so much more natural to her than that new-born meekness. “Do you grudge my devoting half an hour to being kissed and cried over, on my wedding-day, when you have taken me away from her for ever and ever?”

“I grudge your giving any one in the world except me, a word, or a thought, or a look, on

our wedding-day," he said, with the fervour that became his youth and good looks so well; and they drove the rest of the way in silence, with hands clasped under the sheltering sables.

The afternoon light was failing as they reached Lady Clow's lodgings, and the gas was lighted in the dingy hall and on the narrow staircase, and flaring in the chandelier which hung over the centre-table of her dismal sitting-room.

Erica had forgotten how dismal it was, and in size it seemed to have dwindled. The months spent at Moreleigh Abbey made even Tom's rooms in Lower Belgrave Street seem absurdly small, but they were palatial in comparison with these lodgings.

There was the dreadful *chambre*, with its cheap vases on mats, and the biscuit box, and solitary dim decanter; the old-gold plush suite, that was the landlady's pride, and which Erica had not known to be so hideous until she looked at it in the light of her recently enlarged experience; the chimney-piece with dyed grasses in tall china vases, with bulging bodies, whereon were depicted unspeakable landscapes; the fly-blown mirror, partially obscured by the bunch of poppies painted across its spotted surface, by the landlady's accomplished daughter, who was also responsible for enamelling the wicker arm-chairs in sealing-wax red.

Lady Clow had been seated in her favourite corner, with her back to the light, and her knitting on her lap; but the arrival brought her to her feet, and she was hovering over the centre-table—whereon the tea-things were grouped about a large iced-cake—by the time steps were heard ascending the staircase.

The opening of the door seemed to let a great deal of fresh air into the close atmosphere of the little room tainted with gas, and the smoke of a fire which though made up to an unusual size, did not draw perfectly; and there entered Erica's tall and comely figure clad in white cloth and sables, and cap of velvet, with the brilliant colouring of her lovely face shining through a gossamer veil; and Tom, slight, tall, upright, with clothes so perfectly cut as to be unnoticeable, and the light of a happier almost unrealisable in his bright, young eyes.

"Let me introduce Mrs. Tom Garry, Mamma," said Erica, gaily, "with her distinguished husband. I'm sorry we're late. Good gracious—how on earth did you raise a wedding-cake?"

She broke off into a short, vexed laugh.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I hope you don't mind! It seemed so dreadful, no breakfast, no bridesmaids, nothing—of all the things I ever dreamed of; and me providing nothing at all, not even a trousseau,—and I knew I could get *this* ready-made," said poor Lady Clow, distractedly.

“Isn't it my business to cut it?” said Tom, and he came forward, and smiled so reassuringly at his mother-in-law that she gave way to her inclination to fall on his neck and embrace him. He endured it manfully, though he could have held his own with any man in England where feeling for his collar was concerned; and he put her very gently and respectfully into the chair before the tea-tray.

“There, you've congratulated me and forgiven me for springing it so suddenly upon you, all in one breath,” he said, “and now I hope you'll give us some tea.”

Erica could not help regarding him with more respect as she perceived his perfect ability to cope with the embarrassment of the situation.

And as usual, poor Lady Clow began to repent her impulsive action.

“How can I forgive you when I'm still all in a muddle?” she said tearfully. “My head is in a whirl—and when I think of poor Christopher——”

Erica's fair brow darkened, and once more it was Tom who intervened.

“Dear Lady Clow,” he said, very decidedly and seriously. “We're not going to talk any more about that. If there's anything to be said on that subject it will be said between Thorverton and me. But I think you'll find there is nothing more to be said. Your daughter's my

wife now—and I'm going to try and make her happier—” his voice trembled with sudden earnestness, “than she's ever been in her life before. I hope some day you'll even come to be glad that she married the man she loved, even though he's a poor man, instead of a rich man she could n't and did n't love.” A certain severity which he could not help, made his young face stern as he remembered that Erica's mother had brought up her daughter to believe it a duty to marry for wealth rather than love; but he relented before the piteousness of those round, tearful eyes, and added kindly, “Come, you must n't spoil her wedding-day with reproaches and lamentations, or I shall be sorry I let her come. But she wanted to tell you herself, that she's married, and that she does n't repent it—” he smiled tenderly at Erica—“and that I'm going to try and be a good son to you, and make up as much as I can to you for taking Erica away.”

“Oh, Mr. Garry!” sobbed Lady Clow. She looked at him with woeful blue eyes, brimming over with self-reproach for she knew not what; but dimly she realised that Tom thought she was somehow to blame for Erica's engagement to Christopher; and in her humility and nervousness she was only too ready to agree with him; too grateful for his consideration and too eager to respond to his appeal, to stop and consider facts.

“Oh, Mr. Garry, what can I say? I am such a poor creature. I can only cry when I feel deeply—but a mother knows—a mother thinks—of other days. And if only you had seen her when she was little,” sobbed Lady Clow, “you would have thought she was a cherub dropped from heaven. I have her photographs—” trembling with agitation she unlocked a cupboard in the *chiffonier*, and with shaking hands, pulled out a folding case of photographs, and thrust it upon her son-in-law.

“Take them,” she gasped, “it is you who have the best right to them now. I have other copies. But these were the ones she used to fetch out of the cupboard when she thought I was down-hearted, or wanted to get round me. She had such pretty ways, Mr. Garry.”

“Don’t you think it might be ‘Tom’?” said her son-in-law, smiling. He was touched, in spite of the absurdity, and he received the little case reverently, as he would have received any relic of Erica. But his bride’s calm, incisive tones cut into the confidences which Lady Clow now began to pour forth volubly for his benefit.

“Now, Mamma,” she said, “you’ve forgotten all about tea, and while they bring it, you and I will leave Tom to look at the photographs alone, and come and have a look round upstairs. There are one or two things I want you to send me——”

The heavy creaking of the staircase enabled Tom to follow every step of his mother-in-law's ascent to the upper floor, and the trembling of the chandelier betrayed each movement she made in the room above his head.

"She must weigh twenty stone," he reflected, but there was a shade of dismay in his amusement. "Erica *must* take exercise. It's all very well for her to say she hates walking——"

Upstairs, Lady Clow, as was natural, embraced her daughter fondly, and cried over her afresh. Erica suffered the infliction with more patience than usual, for a few moments, and then withdrew herself kindly, but decisively, from her mother's encircling clasp.

"That will do, Mamma," she said, in her lowest tone, yet speaking as she always did, with the deliberation and distinctness that gave an authoritative flavour to her utterance. "There's reason in everything—you've indulged your emotions sufficiently for one day, and if you go on like this, you'll have a splitting headache tomorrow. Let us settle one or two things. First, you must promise me, once for all, never again to mention Christopher's name to Tom."

"It was tactless of me, darling, I'll try not to do it again; but I don't like to promise. My feelings are so apt to carry me away."

"Your feelings will carry *me* away from you altogether, I promise you, if you don't control

them," said Erica, with cold displeasure. "Do you think it is all going to be so easy for me, a pauper and a nobody, marrying Tom without his people's consent, and with the task of pacifying everybody before me—that you must needs try and complicate matters? Do you think it will be very pleasant for Tom to hear you praise Christopher's generosity, and lament his disappointment, and all the thousand and one references you will be betrayed into, if I don't forbid the subject once for all?"

"Forbid is not a word for a daughter to use to her mother, Erica."

"I have n't time to choose my words, we're going in a minute. It will be a long time before I come here again."

"Oh, Erica! I wish you would n't talk so cruelly—on your wedding-day. Dear Tom spoke very differently," sobbed Lady Clow. She had already admitted her son-in-law into her expansive heart.

"If I'm being cruel it's in order to be kind," said Erica, impatiently, "and as for Tom; you know very well that however nice he may intend to be to you—and he does intend to be nice—it all depends on me really whether he ever sees you again."

"Erica!"

"Well, you *do* know it. Besides, I could carry him off to the other end of the world.

He's got to earn a fortune somehow. And it's in your own hands. If you choose to make me one or two promises——"

"I must know what they are. I won't promise in the dark. I can't help seeing through you, Erica."

"I'm going to tell you what they are." Erica's impatience took the form of greater slowness and distinctness of speech; and every word cut her mother, figuratively speaking, as sharply as the lash of a whip. "You must promise me on your word of honour never to mention Christopher at all to Tom—nor anything to do with our private business."

"May n't I tell him about the allowance Christopher has made us all these years?"

"He knows it; and does n't want to hear any more about it."

"But I want to know whether he thinks I ought to let poor Christopher go on with it now. I have a strong feeling that I can't accept it, under the circumstances."

"If there is one thing I despise more than another," said Erica, coldly, "it's the extraordinary delusion entertained by a certain type of woman that she is bound to divulge all her private business to one or another of her male relatives. You did n't even know Tom yesterday. To-day you want to run and confide our most intimate affairs to him."

"He's my son to-day," said Lady Clow, piteously.

"I'm much more your daughter than he's your son. Very well, then; you can choose between us."

"Oh, Erica, my darling! How can you?"

"I'm going down," said Erica. "It's no use talking to you. You go round in a circle."

"Erica! Don't go. I give in. I daresay I'm foolish. Don't go." Her mother clung to her. "After all, what does anything matter to me? It's only you I've lived for all these years. I've nothing else in the world to care for. I'll never mention Chris again to Tom. I won't do anything you don't wish. Do you think I would be the one to come between you and your husband?"

She did not see her daughter's smile.

"Oh, my darling. I've been praying on my knees for your happiness almost ever since I came in. My baby's wedding, and me not there! I could n't unpack. I could n't touch my luncheon. I could only think of you going off all alone with Tom Garry, and ask God to bless your married life, and let it all be for the best."

"Of course it's all for the best," said Erica, more kindly, "if you'll only cheer up and look on the bright side for once, Old Thing."

It was only in moments of expansiveness that

she indulged in this affectionate expression, and Lady Clow brightened instantly, kissing fondly the smooth white hand she held in her own. "Now, listen, Mamma. I've married the Honourable Tom, and I'm going to take care of you, but it must be in my own way. You can see for yourself he's as straight as a die and as good as gold——"

"I can—I can—I'm sure now that he had nothing to do with it," said Lady Clow, earnestly, and Erica burst into a laugh which bewildered her parent.

"Let us admit my sole responsibility," she said. "We have only to concern ourselves with the future. I mean to live in London if I possibly can."

"Oh, Erica, then I can come and see you often."

"I can come and see *you* often," said Erica; and met her mother's innocent, round eyes firmly. "You're always here; so I shall know where to find you at any hour of the day or night."

"And I shall always be longing for you, my darling. Counting the hours between your visits."

"But that does n't apply to *me*," said Erica. "I don't want you to come toiling half-way across London only to find that I'm busy with visitors, or not at home, or that it's just the

most inconvenient moment for you to turn up. It avoids all heart-burnings and all bothers to make plans beforehand and stick to them. I'm to come and see you here whenever I can—and I promise I'll come often——”

“God bless you, my darling. I know you will; but what I shall do without you I don't know.”

“— and you must promise,” said the cool, unrelenting voice, “never to come and see me at all unless I send for you.”

Lady Clow looked helplessly at her beautiful daughter, and the fond, foolish smile died from her large face; the surprised amiability of the round eyes gave way to the piteous, bewildered look of a hurt baby.

“If you'll promise me this—I'll promise in my turn to be—nicer to you than I've ever been yet. I know I've often been rather a beast,” said Erica. “But it's made me savage to be poor and of no account. And—and it may seem odd to you, but I'm happier to-day than I've ever been since I was a kid. Tom may not be rich, but he's a gentleman, and a good fellow, and I like him, which is much more important than loving him—and I like to think that I'm the Honourable Mrs. Garry now, and that I shall be Lady Erriff one day. I don't pretend not to be a snob. I'd far rather be somebody than nobody. As much perhaps for your sake as my

own. Perhaps I'm fonder of you than you think, Old Thing." Something in the expression of her mother's face brought that note of coaxing into Erica's low voice; but Lady Clow did not, as usual, melt into any grateful response. She looked instead, in a strange, wistful silence that held nothing of reproach, into her daughter's face.

"Promise," said the imperious tones.

"I promise, Erica," said Lady Clow, and her voice trembled. "I will never come and see you unless you send for me, and I shall always be waiting for you here."

"I knew I could depend on my own Mammy," said Erica, and the relief of her expression was unmistakable. "I knew she was the one person who could never fail me."

"How could a mother fail her only child?"

"I won't quarrel with you even for dropping into the third person to-day," said Erica, good-humouredly. "Oh, and there's one other thing. I shall bring you round one of my big trunks to take care of. There's so little space in Tom's rooms, and I shall know it's safe with you to look after it."

"It shall stand here, in my own room, under my own eye."

Erica, looking round, could not help wondering where.

"By moving the dressing-table a little," said

Lady Clow, "and squeezing the wash-stand into the corner——"

"That 's all right," interrupted Erica, "and now we really must go down. It 's rather hard on Tom, you know. After all, it 's *his* wedding-day as well as mine. What are you looking for?"

"This," said Lady Clow.

Lightly as she moved, the rickety floor shook, and the crockery on the wash-stand rattled, as she crossed in haste to the corner of the room where stood a small, solid, chest with brass-bound corners. Letting herself down on to her knees with difficulty, she unlocked and lifted the heavy lid.

"Of all the things I used to have," she said, breathlessly, "when your dear father was rich and respected," the unconsciousness of the admission was pathetic, "there 's nothing of any value left but this. This and the forks and spoons at the bank. I shall write and tell them that those must be sent to you at once. But this I 've always kept myself, to give you on your wedding-day. Your dear father gave it to me on the morning he was knighted."

She dived among the miscellaneous articles with which the chest was filled; old baby linen, packets of letters, bundles of receipts, old bank-books, and queer, worthless mementoes of the past which were valuable in her eyes—and produced a card-board box.

Hoisting herself up from her knees again, she brought it to the light of the gas-jet over the dressing-table, and took from the box a parcel rolled in innumerable wrappers, from which there finally emerged a leather case containing a bracelet of solid gold set with five large brilliants: the kind of expensive ornament which would in the present day be condemned as vulgar and ugly, but which at the time it was bought would have been regarded as handsome and desirable. She removed a slip of paper with a faded writing and replaced it alone in the case, and put the bracelet into Erica's hand.

"Your father would have liked you to have it, and there's nothing wrong. He gave up all he had in the world to his creditors, and when I brought that, he burst out crying; but he said it was n't honest to keep it. And they sent it back to me; I suppose they must have read the inscription inside—about the occasion on which I got it; and guessed how I must value it; they sent it back with some of the forks and spoons that were old, and had belonged to the Clerks for a long time; and a few other things that we had to sell in the end. But it showed what they thought of him, that they should have sent anything back," she said, with pride.

"Keep it, Mamma," said Erica, in a low voice.

"I can't. I only kept it for this. I've been tempted to sell it lots of times, but I knew I

could n't ever hope to be able to buy you such a handsome wedding present. If it's old-fashioned—" she said hurriedly and wistfully, "you need n't wear it regularly, you know. I dare say the taste for that sort of thing will come round again, though. But I should like you to put it on now. Your father would have liked you to wear it on your wedding-day." She clasped the bracelet on her daughter's arm, and relocked the chest, and they went downstairs together.

CHAPTER IV

ERICA and Tom, leaning back in the big luxurious motor—which a word on the telephone to a friend of Tom's had placed at their disposal—glided down the Fulham Road, through the motley crowd in its Sunday garb, over Putney Bridge; through Kingston, by the riverside, and across the downs past Leatherhead, and along the Dorking Road, pausing at an historic wayside inn for luncheon.

Now Tom was an outdoor young man, who could not imagine that any one would spend a Sunday in London which might by any possibility be spent in the country, and though he had the motor closed in deference to his bride's wish, he would greatly have preferred to enjoy the fresh air, and supposed that she would be as glad as he was to emerge from the car, and walk into the old-fashioned garden of the inn, while the waiters bustled about to get luncheon.

"I'll take you up to the top of Box Hill after lunch," he told Erica, "and show you the view. Fancy your having lived for twenty-five years in London, and never having seen it."

Erica would willingly have lived another twenty-five years without seeing the view in question; but her smile concealed her thought, as she followed Tom across a damp lawn into a leafless and deserted arbour.

The faint, red, November sunshine had here conquered the mist of late autumn, and showed the still branches of the trees against the blue.

The faint, clean, aromatic smell of wet earth and crushed leaves replaced the raw breath of the London fog.

"Nice hunting day," said Tom, inhaling it with unaffected enjoyment. "So mild we might really lunch out here. What do you think?"

Erica shook her lovely head.

"Everything would get cold, and the dining-room looked so snug," she pleaded. In her heart she wondered how Tom could imagine it would amuse her to come to this primitive hostelry, when they might have been lunching together luxuriously, either in their own dining-room, or, better still, at the Ritz or the Savoy, where as she reflected, she could both have seen, and been seen by, a gay crowd. Also her palate, naturally fastidious and now educated by the *cuisine* at Moreleigh, revolted from fare which recalled the cheap and careless cookery of her mother's lodgings; whereas Tom ate contentedly the underdone beef with its usual accompaniment of watery potatoes and cabbage now set before

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them, and enjoyed a pint or so of draught, bitter ale; nor did it occur to him how sad it is, that the country which produces the best vegetables in the world, should have evolved so little ability to prepare the same wholesomely and palatably for the table.

Erica wore on this occasion a big, black picture-hat, and a neat suit of dark red cloth, and had discarded her sables for a set of white fox furs. She looked very lovely and very happy. Her distaste for the plainness of the meal, the shabbiness of the waiters, the darns on the tablecloth, and the draught from the ill-fitting window on one side, and scorching of the fire on the other, could not shake her relief in her growing conviction, that in becoming the wife of Tom Garry, she had done the best possible thing for herself.

They had plenty to talk about, for though they had fewer tastes in common than either at present realised, they had all their interests in common, and that is a great bond.

Tom had written to his father and calculated that he would get a telegram about noon on the morrow, allowing for the time it might take Lord Erriff to persuade his wife to forgive her son's act, and estimating this time at a couple of hours or so.

"Of course my mother is sure to be annoyed since the match is not of her own making; but

when once she knows you, she is bound to get fond of you, even if she wasn't the kindest-hearted woman in the world," Tom had reiterated with a frequency that made it clear to Erica that Lady Erriff disliked her, and had openly expressed that dislike to her son. "And my poor old Dad is cracked after you already."

"Do you think they'll ask us down?"

"Of course. That will be the very first thing they will do. Only, in the circumstances, I expect they would think it better taste not to have much of a reception for us, as they would in the ordinary course," he said, apologetically. "But I'm only too glad to be spared anything of that kind, and I'm sure you would n't have cared for it."

Erica would have cared very much. She would have liked triumphal arches, and speeches, and to be the centre of observation and admiration in a crowd. But she had the good sense to realise that, in the circumstances, as Tom said, their arrival at Kellacombe must be shorn of these glories.

"I must have a talk with my father, and decide what to do. I'm afraid he won't like my going on to the Stock Exchange as well as Robin, and I expect he'll want me to stay on in the Brigade; but if I do, I'm afraid it will be a tight squeeze."

"What do you call a tight squeeze?" Erica

asked the question rather anxiously. Hitherto Tom had vaguely apologised for his poverty, and entered into no details.

“My father makes my income up, including my pay, to between six and seven hundred pounds a year,” he said. “I doubt if he’ll be able to give me more than another two or three hundred at the outside.”

Erica was silent. Her ideas had naturally become very much larger since her engagement to the rich young man, Christopher Thorverton; and above all since her visit with him and his sister to the Ritz Hotel, when he had bidden her order anything she liked, above and beyond the sum she had brought up to London to expend upon her trousseau, and to send the additional bills in to him.

Even Christopher had been startled at the sum total. Erica loved beautiful clothes and jewellery, and was intoxicated by the novelty of finding herself able to acquire so much that she coveted.

She argued with herself that Christopher was too much in love to quarrel with her for extravagance, and that this happy condition of things might not last. Wherefore she determined to profit by the opportunity offered, and to indulge her passion for self-ornamentation to the uttermost.

She limited the quantity of her gowns, be-

cause she possessed a business instinct, and knew that the changing fashions would render them quickly valueless; but the quality she did not limit. Lace, she said to herself, was immensely becoming to her, and would last indefinitely; and the same remark applied, in a lesser degree, to the stock of furs which she prudently laid in.

Her collection of fans would not have disgraced a Duchess, and even an Italian lady of the last century would have been satisfied with the *lingerie* with which she provided herself.

Every possible article was embroidered with the name *Erica*, in a *replica* of her own large flowing handwriting; and the gold fittings of her dressing-case bore the like stamp. In this detail her innate caution displayed itself—her cold and wary forethought.

“Why don’t you have *E. J. T.* put on your dressing bag and everything else?” Christopher had said, fondly. “That will be your name, you know, *Erica Jennifer Thorverton.*”

“It’s not lucky to put it on beforehand,” Erica had said, and he had argued no more. The mere thought that anything might happen to prevent his marriage had sent a cold chill of apprehension through the young man at that time.

“I spent more than eight hundred pounds on

my clothes during that week at the Ritz," she now thought to herself, as Tom looked across at her, waiting for her answer, "and I wonder how much more Christopher spent over all the other things he gave me—yet what riches eight hundred a year would have seemed to me a few months ago. I wonder if I ought to make Tom leave the Guards? As long as he is in them I shall live in London—and I am stocked with everything I can possibly want in the world just now——"

"It's not much, I'm afraid," Tom said anxiously. "I don't know if we could manage. I shall give up polo, of course, entirely."

She did not realise the greatness of this sacrifice to Tom.

"It's so difficult for me to judge," she said, cutting the cheese on her plate into little squares, without attempting to eat it. Erica felt that she had had enough of bread and cheese. "I don't know what our expenses will be."

"I expect your dress costs a good deal," he said, as though he had just awakened to the fact; and Erica could hardly help laughing aloud at his simplicity. His brother Robin would have perceived quickly enough the extravagance that must have gone to the dressing of Erica.

"And then," he said, in a low tone, "there was something else in your letter, which we

must discuss, you and I—about the allowance Thorverton has been making your mother.”

Erica now wished very heartily that she had made no such allusion in her letter; but at the time she had thought only of that justification of her original acceptance of Christopher, which the dexterous misapplication of the fact of her mother's dependence upon him would afford.

“Of course I understand she is one of the only relations he has on his father's side, and that it is therefore, in a sense, his duty to provide for her as his father did before him; but as it is our action which will now probably make it very painful for her to go on accepting it, it looks to me as if it has become rather my duty than his to take care of her—as if she'd naturally look to us——”

The perception of his recklessness, rather than of his chivalry, leapt to Erica's brain.

Here was Tom, who but a moment ago was showing her the distressing poorness of his own immediate prospects, now proposing to shoulder an immense additional burden. She felt that she must defend herself and him from any such quixotic generosity of intention, and almost involuntarily she snatched at her accustomed weapon.

“I don't think it would ever enter Mamma's head to refuse Christopher's allowance. I am sure she looks upon it as a right, and would

be both distressed and annoyed if you mentioned the subject to her at all."

The moment she had uttered the words, her conscience, inspired by the unaccustomed response to its feeble call on the previous day, cried to her once more.

She looked into Tom's unsuspecting eyes,—those soft, brown, long-lashed eyes of the Garrys that held as much of kindness as of beauty,—and saw that they were unsuspecting, and despised herself for having lied to him; though she tried to stifle her self-reproach by reasoning that she had lied for his own good.

"I won't get into the habit of it," she assured herself. "I hate it. I've made up my mind to start fresh. It's only for this once."

"You know best," said Tom. "Of course I can't interfere with your mother's affairs. Only suppose *he* won't go on with it, as you suggested, then we *must* look after her——"

"It's time enough to discuss that when it happens," Erica said. "Mamma evidently does not think it likely to happen. I wrote in great haste and confusion——"

"Well," said Tom slowly—"it's not as though *you* personally would benefit, I suppose. Of course I could n't allow that."

His honest eyes, full of love and admiration and pride, met hers, across the table, and she tried to smile; but a vague sense of apprehension

made her smile a difficult one; and it died away altogether as his glance, wandering over the outline of her beautiful throat and shoulders, was suddenly arrested by the long string of pearls she always wore.

The room was warm, and she had thrown aside her furs; her open jacket disclosed a blouse of exquisitely embroidered muslin and fine lace, through which the blue ribbons of her under-bodice showed faintly; the necklace, twisted twice lightly about her throat, rose and fell upon her bosom.

"I love those pearls," he said quickly, "I love your always wearing them. They have somehow become for me almost a part of your personality. When did you first begin to wear them?"

She was furious with herself because she could not control the warm colour which suddenly flooded the face and neck, which were not less pure in colouring than those pearls she loved.

"Erica," said Tom, in a low voice, expressive of distress and mortification. "Was it—Thorverton who gave them to you?"

It took all her self-control to hide the exasperation which possessed her.

She had felt so happy, so secure, so free from care, ever since they had walked out of the church together as man and wife; ever since

Tom had said to her in triumph: "You're Mrs. Garry now,"—and already, her peace was threatened.

Tom—in the very first hours of their married life, worshipping her as passionately and sincerely as any wife could desire that her husband should worship her,—was yet going to be, what Erica, for want of a more comprehensive word, called *tiresome*.

And there was no time to weigh her answer. His brown eyes held hers, full of love and trust indeed, but full also of authoritative questioning.

During that momentary hesitation she had to decide whether she would lie to Tom again or not; and with the full certainty that if she did not she would lose the possession she valued most on earth.

The worried look of a hunted animal came into her great, blue eyes, as though her spirit knew not which way to turn. For that brief space of a few seconds her presence of mind failed her; not because she lacked power or ingenuity to invent a history for the pearls, but because the memory of the suspense and misery which had preceded her wedding with Tom rushed upon her and unnerved her. Her suffering was too recent to be forgotten, and all her present happiness could not efface the memory of that, her dark hour, when the folly of her cunning had been made manifest to her, and

when she had vowed, in her agony of mortification and wounded pride, that if another chance were accorded to her, she would prove herself worthy. . . .

“Your silence has answered me,” said Tom, rather pale, “forgive me for asking, my darling.”

He dropped the subject, but with it his blitheness of manner; asked her if she had finished her luncheon, paid the reckoning, and proposed that they should return to the car, and go to the top of Box Hill, where they might get out and look at the view over the vales of Surrey and Kent.

Erica assented, and followed him, wondering whether he meant to say any more about the pearls. She was not altogether certain in what direction the nicety of Tom's sense of honour might lead him. Faintly and doubtfully she hoped that it might forbid his ever mentioning the subject again; in which case she would take care to put the pearls out of sight altogether for the present.

Her hopes were dashed to the earth; for almost as soon as the motor had started, and as she nestled down in her dark corner among her furs, Tom slipped a possessive arm round her, and said, gently but authoritatively,

“You'll send back the pearls to-morrow, my sweet.”

"Very well, Tom."

Her submission enchanted him, and he told her she was an angel.

Erica's mind busied itself with possibilities as she yielded to the caressing arm, but Tom followed up his victory with unexpected promptness, and asked her to take the pearls off her neck and give them into his keeping then and there.

"Now that I know where they came from, my darling, I can't bear you to wear them a moment longer."

"Where can you put them?" she said; annoyed, but not visibly so.

"In my pocket."

"Suppose you get your pocket picked? Or the string may get broken."

"I'll see to that," he said, briefly.

She was obliged to take off the necklace and hand it to him; looking very meek and lovely as she did so, with lashes downcast to veil the vexation in her eyes.

"Darling," he said, stuffing them into the pocket of his light overcoat with a carelessness that exasperated her. "I'll get you some like them as soon as I can afford it."

Erica had some ado to preserve herself from laughing derisively. She felt her chance of ever owning such another rope of moonlit, perfectly matched globes, was remote indeed.

"I wonder if you have any notion of their value?" she said, ruefully.

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"I believe they cost over two thousand pounds. Perhaps more."

Tom looked so crestfallen that she relented.

"I would give up more than that to please you," she murmured, and showed him a glint of blue eyes beneath thick golden fringes, before turning her face to stare at the landscape past which the motor was speeding.

"There's no good in doing things by halves," she thought, drearily; "yet how absurd it all is, and what possible good will the pearls do Christopher? It's not as if he could n't afford to buy any amount more."

Tom, meantime, was silently realising that a certain instinct, which he tried not to define too clearly to himself, was missing in Erica. Yet his thoughts of her were very gentle. Though he could not doubt, that, left to herself, she would have worn the pearls happily enough, untroubled by any sort of scruple, and with an unconsciousness that surely proved her innocent of guile, he said to himself that a woman's standard of honour differed from a man's, that her desire for jewels is as natural and instinctive as that of a child's for a toy, or a butterfly's for a flower, and that she had been brought up by a poor, fond, foolish mother, incapable of incul-

cating high principles which she did not herself possess.

"Sweetheart," he said, lifting her ungloved hand to his lips. "If I can't get you all you want now, at least you'll have all the Garry things one day. My grandfather, you know, collected jewellery, as well as furniture and pictures. There's the diamond pendant that belonged to the Empress Josephine; and my mother has some beautiful things. I suppose in the course of nature they'll all come to you."

"I don't want them," said Erica. She answered mechanically as she thought he wished her to answer, but she was thinking of the jewel-cases that lay at the bottom of her trunk. When the pearls were sent back to Christopher, would he ask also for the return of the tiara and necklace he had given her? And if he did not, what was the use of jewellery she dared not wear? But it was worth a great deal of money; and presently, would she not be in need of money?

The afternoon was so mild that they put a rug on the grass and sat there for nearly an hour, gazing from Box Hill upon the beautiful, misty landscape spread before them, illumined by the faint, low sunshine of the November afternoon. But the glory of the day was dimmed for Erica. The glow of her own self-

approval had faded into the regret of realised loss. She hankered after the pearls, and though she did not wish that she had lied about them to Tom, she wished that she had not betrayed the truth by that untimely blush; and that he had been content to take the pearls for granted.

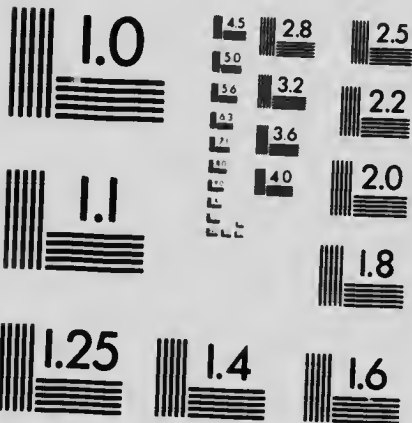
Was he going to begin to ask tiresome questions concerning the rest of her possessions? She must draw the line somewhere. She would warn her mother. With relief she remembered the promise she had extracted from Lady Clow, who was scrupulous on the subject of keeping promises. She was thankful that Tom would not be likely to see Lady Clow often; and determined that, at any rate, a long time should elapse before he saw her again.

Erica was not sure whether Tom's manful assumption of authority bored or attracted her. Perhaps—taken in conjunction with his good looks, and gentle manners, his impassioned love-making, and the admiration for her beauty with which his brown eyes were overflowing—it gave an additional thrill to her feeling for him, which if not actually love, was something near akin to love. As she had told her mother, she *liked* Tom, and her liking was another term for respect. But how far she would be able to tolerate interference with her own plans and wishes and possessions, was another matter.



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She shook herself free from annoyance with a certain philosophy which belonged to her.

"I wonder what they will say when they get your letter?"

"Just what I was thinking."

"Do you care very much?"

He considered.

"I care most, I suppose, because the view they take will make all the difference to your material comfort," he said frankly, "but I should hate to vex them, too. However, I can trust my old Dad. He'd have done the same in my place. And he's generosity itself. He'll do what he can, and my mother will come round."

"I always felt she disliked me."

Tom wished, almost unconsciously that Erica had not put this feeling into words. But he only said, apologetically:

"I suppose mothers are always a little jealous where their sons are concerned. But she's the soul of good nature, and you can make her adore you if you like."

Erica was well aware that Lady Erriff would never adore her, but as she did not care in the least whether her mother-in-law adored her or not, she said no more.

"Nothing matters so long as we are together," Tom said, unconscious that he was but singing the refrain of the old song that every lover utters in turn.

Erica looked at him with a curious thoughtfulness in her china-blue eyes; the black picture-hat made a wonderful background for her glorious hair and the pure colouring of her fair face, and Tom thought that he had never seen her look so beautiful.

“Nothing matters so long as we are together,” she echoed mechanically, and to herself she said:

“I wonder if I shall ever feel like that about anybody?”

CHAPTER V

MORNING brought the restlessness of expectation; but no telegram by noon, as Tom had confidently hoped.

He wished secretly that Erica had consented to go to Paris, where they could have filled up their time with sight-seeing. As it was he had to content himself with booking stalls for the Gaiety that evening, while he found time hanging rather heavily on his hands during the afternoon; for though Erica was willing enough to dawdle down Bond Street and look into the shop-windows, she did not care for the brisk walk in the Park which Tom craved; and decidedly negatived any proposal for a second motor expedition.

He went off for a solitary constitutional, and was rewarded on his return at five o'clock, by finding her, a vision of loveliness in a tea-gown of mauve and purple chiffon, seated behind the bubbling urn, whilst on a silver salver beside her lay conspicuously an unopened telegram.

To herself she had already commented derisively on the proof of the influence Tom had

established over her, that the non-opening of the telegram afforded.

Had Christopher Thorverton been in Tom's place, she knew that she would have coolly torn it open, and read it, to satisfy her curiosity the moment it came. Had it been her mother's property, no sense of propriety would have restrained her from the same course. But she was not only a little afraid of Tom, but determined that he should believe in her and look up to her as his ideal of perfection in womanhood; even that she would, so far as circumstances would permit—this reservation was almost unconscious—be worthy of the belief she intended to inspire. So she had left the telegram lying there unopened.

And behold! Tom took this noble behaviour as a matter of course; tore open the yellow envelope without comment, and read the contents twice over before he turned to her and said:

“It's from Robin.”

She could not help starting a little, but she recovered herself instantly, and Tom was too intent upon the telegram to notice her increase of colour as she said imperiously:

“Let me see.”

Instead of handing the telegram to her obediently, as Christopher would have done, he retained it; and read it aloud.

"Summoned home on account of your news. Pater is writing to you. Think all right now. Both as well as can be expected. Personally hearty congratulations to you both.

Robin."

"It was just like him to wire, and awfully considerate. Good old Bob," said Tom, in a tone of some relief. "Of course he's done all he could to put it right. Well, after all, I'd rather hear my father's views at length. I suppose it was too much to expect him to wire. We shall have to possess our souls in patience until to-morrow."

Erica, too, was relieved by this telegram.

"So that is the line Robin is going to take. He is going to ignore everything—pretend he does n't care," she thought to herself, and smiled sardonically, yet approvingly.

They dined together at the Ritz, and went to the Gaiety in the best of good spirits, only dashed for a brief moment by Tom's venturing upon a criticism of his wife's dress.

"You thought it pretty enough at Kellacombe," she pouted.

"Yes, I know. But London is a different thing. We're dining at a public restaurant," said Tom, and again that note of authority sounded in his low voice.

He was unconscious that his point of view

had changed entirely, and that much that had delighted him in Christopher Thorverton's *fiancée* was displeasing to him in his wife. Vaguely he remembered that he had burned with indignation during a careless conversation at Kellacombe, when the excessive *décolletage* of Miss Clow's surprising but exquisite toilettes had been discussed and condemned in his presence. Then he had brooded in bitter scorn over the contemptible feminine jealousy displayed by the plain, the flat-chested, and the middle-aged, of the noble perfection of that statuesque young figure—the white dimpled shoulders, the fair round arms. Now he simply, and *sans phrase*, bade Erica fetch a scarf, and veil these charms from the curious and vulgar gaze of the multitude. And again, her meekness enchanted him, and turned what might have been an unpleasing incident into a very pretty love-scene; when she came downstairs,—shrouded in chiffon of a delicate pale sea-green, that would have been fatal to colouring less exquisitely fair, but from which her beauty emerged triumphantly, if modestly, and the more triumphant for the subdued expression of the lovely curved mouth, the droop of the golden lashes—Tom almost threw himself at her feet; he did kneel to kiss her hand, thus paying homage to his queen for her submission.

“ Oh, Erica, it needed only that touch of meek-

ness to make you adorable," he said. "You're perfect."

He did not know why Erica sighed, as he took her into his arms and kissed her.

It might have been the sigh of love content; of a woman's soft yielding to the masterfulness of her chosen mate; of a soul faintly protesting its unworthiness of worship. But it was for none of these reasons that she sighed.

Erica missed her pearls. They had been the key-note of that gown which had for its scheme the suggestion of a sea-nymph's draperies. The pale green scarf was in harmony; it floated about her like a sea mist, from which emerged the beauty of her face and head, crowned with its rippling glory of red-gold hair; but the rope of pearls that should have been her solitary adornment was missing.

In her delicate ears alone, shone two perfect, pear-shaped specimens. Hourly she trembled lest Tom should ask some question concerning these; but he possessed none of the feminine acuteness of perception in such matters that distinguished his brother Robin. Had not her blush roused his suspicions, he would probably never have dreamed of enquiring into the origin of the pearl necklace. Nor, having once explained his feelings and wishes in this matter, did he dream that Erica would ever again wear jewellery given to her by Christopher Thorver-

ton. She had removed from her finger the half hoop of diamonds which had been her engagement ring, and locked it away; and her shapely, rather large, white hands were innocent of any ornament save her wedding-ring. She missed the diamonds sorely; for she loved material beauty in every shape and form, and especially she loved the light and sparkle and colour of gems; there was also, that touch of avarice in her nature which not infrequently accompanies any excess of vanity.

As Tom kissed her, murmuring words of tenderness, he thought with a new thrill of triumph, underlying the triumph of possession that was already his, that the very force of his love had conquered the wilfulness of this beautiful woman who was his wife; he could now think even of those faults in her which had stung him into sharpest pain and disapproval, with indulgent tenderness, so ready she seemed to throw them off and to emerge perfect. How jealously would he guard that perfection.

"If I can help it, she shall never know an unhappy moment," he said, vehemently to himself; as though such a fate were possible, or even desirable, for any mortal. His reverence for her obsessed him not less strongly than his passion, even in this first ardour of union; and Erica's alternating moods of chill indifference and soft response only increased that ardour.

On the breakfast table next morning lay Lord Erriff's letter.

"My dear Boy:

"You will understand that the news contained in your letter of Saturday's date must have been something of a shock to your mother and myself. She is, as I think, very naturally displeased and hurt; but of her ultimate forgiveness, you know her love for you, and kindness of heart, too well to entertain any doubt.

"As regards myself, to be frank, your letter made me fear that you had committed a dishonourable action by running away with another man's promised wife; but your brother Robin, on his return home, relieved my mind on that point, as he was able to explain that the young lady had confided to him on Friday afternoon the fact that Mr. Thorverton had himself broken off his engagement with her.

"I have therefore to apologise for doing you an injustice in my thoughts, but your letter was not very explicit. I understand, however, that having the young lady's feelings in the matter to consider as well as your own, you found it difficult to explain to me so clearly in writing, as you will, perhaps, when we meet, the reason for such unseemly haste.

"It is unfortunate that you could not see your way to allow a proper interval to elapse between

the breaking of the lady's engagement with another man, and her marriage with you. I could wish, in short, that if it had to be done, it had been done differently; but this, in the circumstance of your marriage being already an accomplished fact, is the strongest expression of opinion which my respect for my son's wife permits me to indulge. There remains for me only to add, my dear Tom, that you have been the best and dearest of sons to me, and that to say I wish you happiness is a very mild way of expressing my earnest desire that every blessing may attend you in your marriage as in all else. I am glad you contrived to make it all right with your Colonel; my only comment is, that the C. O. of your day must be considerably more amenable than the C. O. of mine. However, no doubt he took your age and excellent record into consideration, and his attitude is, at least, a complimentary one, affording proof of his opinion of your judgment.

"As regards ways and means, I can understand your anxiety; and I only wish, my dear boy, that it was in my power to relieve it by an immediate offer of such an increased allowance as would make everything easy and comfortable. That I can do what I now propose to do is rather owing to your brother Robin's generosity than mine. He is as anxious as I am that you should remain in the Brigade, at

all events for the present; and to make this possible desires to give up the allowance I have hitherto made him. He has proved to me that it is no longer a necessity to him, and it is, of course, a great relief and pleasure to know that he is doing so well on the Stock Exchange; justifying his choice of a profession so that I am forced to cease my lamentations at his refusal to carry on the family tradition. If he is not to be a great lawyer like his grandfather, he may as well become a great financier.

“Now if I add this sum of three hundred yearly to what I allow you already, and increase that by another hundred on my own account, your income will be brought up, as I calculate, to a little over a thousand a year. Do you think you will find it possible to manage on this? I fear it is the utmost I can do at present; but as you know I am crippled by my efforts to pay off that mortgage, which will be to your advantage in the end; also you must remember that your sisters are growing up and must have justice done them. If, therefore, you feel it wiser to give up soldiering while you are still young enough to seek a more lucrative profession, I have clearly no right to dissuade you. Of course you could come to Kellacombe, settle down in the agent’s house, and manage the estate and the home farm in his stead; but I am never very sure whether that kind of arrangement is a wise

one, and old Amery would be very unhappy if we superannuated him. He and I jog along merrily enough, and certainly to the contentment of my tenants, in the old ways. Still, no doubt these could be improved upon, and the land be made to pay better than it does now, and I would deduct a portion of the salary you would, so to speak, inherit from old Amery, for his pension; and make you the allowance I have already proposed. You would have the advantage of a very pretty little home amid the surroundings you know and love best, and be able to lead the country life you prefer into the bargain.

"You will of course, desire to talk all this over with your Wife, and if you prefer we can also discuss it together before you make your final decision

"My feelings would incline me to persuade your mother to agree in the suggestion that you should both come here as soon as your honeymoon is over, but I think, for your Wife's sake, it would be wiser to defer any return for the present, in the circumstance of poor young Thorverton's critical condition.

"I quite understand that, as Robin says, you could neither of you have been aware of the serious nature of his illness, which only manifested itself as pneumonia on Saturday—the very morning of your wedding. . . ."

Tom raised his eyes and looked at Erica across the breakfast-table.

She was radiant in a pale blue wrapper, being given to breakfasting *en déshabillé*, when she descended at all for that meal; a habit disapproved in secret by Tom, though it was hard to disapprove of so fair a vision.

She met his troubled gaze serenely.

“Are you thinking of telling me what your father says?”

“He says everything that is kind—a little stiff—but that is natural enough, poor old boy; and he will do everything in his power,” said Tom, hurriedly. “Erica, I am afraid it will shock you to hear that poor Thorverton is ill—pneumonia.”

She raised her eyebrows with a faintly incredulous air.

“May I see your father’s letter?”

Tom coloured slightly, and handed it to her across the table.

As she read it, he tore open a letter from his brother. Robin wrote in his characteristic telegraphic style of cheerful flippancy.

“*Dear old Man:*

“*All more or less blown over, but advise you to keep clear of this during nine days’ wonder, etc., and especially until young Thorverton is out of the wood.*

“*I got hold of old Dobree and the other doctor*

yesterday. Pneumonia and chill on liver from getting wet through on top of bad cold. Says ordinary healthy youth would have thrown it off, but poor Thorverton's love of good cheer seems somewhat against him. However, no doubt he'll pull through—though of course our Mamma, who as you know never hesitates to diagnose any case without seeing the patient or knowing the symptoms, says broken heart. Tell Erica with my love, that this is all rubbish, and that no sane man ever yet died of that complaint. Meanwhile let me explain to you that having left home on Sunday night, I got to my office on Monday morning just in time to get the wire summoning me back to Kellacombe instantly. Heaven bless you! But the journey seemed short as my mind was full of an offer to go off to the Straits at once and inspect certain propositions there. I've decided to accept. Expect there's money in it, and anyway I shall be well paid, so don't be agitated about the allowance suggestion. It's been on my conscience for some months that I was too well off to let the dear old man go on anxiously screwing out pence for me. And don't chuck. I should be awfully sick if you did, and so would he. Stick to it like a good fellow and here's to you! After all, you were jolly lucky to avoid the intolerable fuss and boredom of a conventional society wedding.

"Your aff. brother, R. G."

P. S.—I consider the 'traditional good looks of the Garrys' now secured for at least a couple of generations, and shall devote myself entirely to the search for the plain millionairess, so invaluable a stay in the background for all families of position."

Erica returned his father's letter to Tom, and devoted herself in silence to her coffee and omelette.

Tom, seeing her fair brows knitted in thought, came round the table, and kissed her, and, all unwitting of the trend of her thoughts, said tenderly:

"You're not to worry yourself about poor Thorverton, my darling. Robin says he's certain to pull through all right."

"I'm not worrying," said Erica with truth. "If it were the gardener's boy, every one would be laughing at all this to-do over a common cold. But as it's the rich Mr. Thorverton all the doctors in the county are making a fuss, and calling it pneumonia. I don't blame them. It's their business."

"I don't agree with you," said Tom, straightforwardly. "Old Dobree is the most scrupulously honest old fellow in Christendom. I've known him all my life."

"You always think that the people you've known all your life can't do wrong," said Erica,

with a shade of impatience. "I've seen him fussing about over Christopher. He was always getting liver attacks or unpleasant things of that kind. Everybody knew that he'd have been perfectly all right if he'd left off that horrid habit of drinking whisky and soda at every spare moment of the day and night. Of course he's bound to be more feverish if he gets a chill than other people, who have n't soaked themselves in alcohol. Often and often when I've said good-night to him I've known he could only just pull himself together to shake hands. As to opening the door for one—such small attentions never entered his head. Those were left to his thieving agent, Captain Sandry, who hated me because I found him out; or to his tipsy sycophant, Joe Murch, who encouraged him in all his bad habits. You need n't look so serious. I did what I could. Took him out for walks in the evening, and ruined my shoes and the hems of my gowns, to keep him out of temptation. But lately, he got worse in spite of all I could do. I knew what it meant when he stared at me with his eyes all glassy, and talked thickly—men dazed with drink are like ostriches, they think that so long as they can walk about and talk no one notices any difference. Sometimes I've had hard work to hide my disgust—" her shudder was partly theatrical and partly real.

"Hush, my darling. The poor chap's ill, and

paying dearly for it all now," said Tom, and he read his brother's letter to his wife.

"Good old Robin has played up splendidly, hasn't he? You know he is one of the most generous-hearted fellows in the world, in spite of his head for business."

Erica nodded approvingly.

"What are we to decide?" Tom asked. "Will you try and get on, as my father suggests, on what we shall have; about eleven hundred pounds a year, I suppose; and stay where we are? I don't pretend it will be very easy—but it's more than I dared to hope for, thanks to Robin. Or shall I give up the attempt to stop in the Brigade and retire to the country, where we should be comparatively rich?"

"I think we ought to try this first," said Erica decidedly. "I like you to be a Guardsman, and I'd rather be poor in London than rich in the country. Of course I must make a few alterations here if it's to be our permanent home—but I don't think we could ever find anything nicer—my bedroom is perfect; and if you'll hand over all the managing to me—I'll do my best."

Tom jumped up with an expression of relief and pleasure.

"You shall do anything you like," he said. "I can't tell you how I hated the thought of sending in my papers. It was—worrying me

like anything—" he spoke hurriedly, shy of betraying the emotion which possessed him. "I'm most awfully grateful to my old Dad, and to Robin—and to you, my darling," he came to her side, and bent his knee and kissed her hand.

Erica just touched his closely cropped dark head with that white hand; a touch almost too light to be felt, and yet a caress.

She liked to be made love to, and if the reverence in which her young husband so obviously held her sometimes provoked her secret mockery, it nevertheless flattered her vanity and touched her heart; while it added piquancy to the occasional masterfulness which she found attractive from its very novelty.

Bethinking herself, she uttered slowly the conclusion to which she had come during her momentary reflection.

"And now, if you like, and as we can't go to Kellacombe, I'll come with you to Paris for the rest of our honeymoon, Tom."

CHAPTER VI

CHRISTOPHER THORVERTON died on the following Saturday, and the news of his death reached Tom in Paris on Tuesday morning.

Tom, looking rather white and troubled, sought Erica in her room, and told her, and was half-relieved, and half-angered by the calm with which she received the news.

"What did you expect me to do? Make a scene?" she asked, with a touch of the derisive insolence which she usually permitted herself to employ only in converse with her mother.

"I certainly did not expect you to make a scene," he retorted. Tom was more easily provoked than Lad. Clow, and if he had Irish eyes, had also something of Irish quickness of temper. "But I thought you might have shown some feeling for the poor fellow who, after all, must have loved you in his own way, boor as he was."

"You'll be joining in with the rest of the neighbourhood soon, and saying I killed him," she said, disdainfully.

"How do you know what the neighbourhood is saying?"

“My knowledge of their charitable ways—and a distracted letter from my parent,” she showed a crumpled sheet. “Apparently she cannot get it out of her head that it must have been *I* who jilted *him*, in spite of all my protestations to the contrary. I own, on the face of it,” she uttered a slight laugh, “it seemed more likely.”

“You can laugh—and he lies dead!”

“I suppose you would be better pleased if I sentimentalised over him,” said Erica, sardonically. “It does n’t happen to be my way. When I have reason to dislike people, I dislike them, whether they live or whether they die.”

She was combing her long, red hair, and her face was half hidden by the thick waves hanging on either side of the white shoulders—lightly draped by a muslin wrapper—and past her waist.

Tom felt suddenly a strange ache of doubt and misery. Was she then really callous, heartless, impudent? He resented intensely the tone she chose to adopt towards him. His taste was outraged and his love wounded. But as he stood thus, looking down with the light and fire of anger in his brown eyes upon the beauty of the woman he loved, the careless lifting of a heavy tress from Erica’s brow showed him that the face beneath had lost its lovely colour—that the sweet, curved lips were pale.

His brief indignation melted into a rush of pity and remorse.

"Erica!" he cried, "my darling! you are suffering all the time and won't show it. What a brute I am! What a fool, to misunderstand you because you don't wear your heart on your sleeve as I do."

"Let me alone," she said, struggling out of his embrace, and speaking in a tone that Lady Clow had heard more than once, but Tom never. "Is this marriage?" she panted, with rage and tears in her voice, "that one is never to have a moment to oneself—that one's very thoughts are to be pried into and commented upon—and one's privacy invaded whether one likes it or not? For if it is, I wish to God I'd never married."

Tom released her instantly, and stood still for a moment looking at her very gravely and tenderly. Then he said, "I beg your pardon, Erica," and turned and left the room.

"I'm glad I hurt him," said Erica.

She caught sight of herself in the glass, and her anger vanished as suddenly as it had arisen.

With those copper-coloured tresses hanging about her face and neck, that were now scarlet, and her light blue eyes blazing, she was quite extraordinarily handsome, but looked also like a fury incarnate.

The vision inspired her with mingled shame and triumph, but it startled and sobered her.

"I believe I have mistaken my vocation—I ought to have been an actress," she thought, and tried, with great interest, to recall the expression; but the light and colour of anger were gone from her face, and she abandoned the attempt, and sank down in her chair again, leaning her elbows on the dressing-table, and resting her chin in her hands. Her anger against Tom was already dead, and she was coldly displeased with her own lack of self-control.

"It is Mamma's fault. She has let me bully her all my life; instead of punishing me for flying into rages when I was little, she was frightened and gave in. I've got into the habit of venting my temper on her—and even on—on Christopher. But he irritated me to madness, and I could always bring him to heel at a word until—until—he found me out," her face burned suddenly and an odd choking feeling oppressed her throat—"and now he 's dead."

Listlessly, and to escape from an intolerable thought, rather than because she was interested in it, she reread her mother's letter, which had evidently been dashed off in much hurry and agitation of mind, being scrawled and blotted.

"Oh, my darling, darling Erica! I am so shocked and upset. The terrible news has come, and poor, poor Christopher passed away on

100 The Honourable Mrs. Garry

Saturday about midnight. Dear May, like the kind little cousin she has always been, wrote to me at once. 'Tell poor Erica,' she says, 'I do not know where she is, or I would write, I know she will be very sorry and very unhappy. Please tell her I know this, Cousin Jennifer,' you see how generous and forgiving; and she goes on to tell me he died of pleurisy and pneumonia, and that the doctor from London said he had no constitution, and had not taken care of his health. I am sure she writes all this, in the midst of her sorrow, out of tenderness for you. But oh, how my heart aches over it all. I had a line also from Mrs. Foss, the housekeeper, who was always a friend to me and attentive to my wants, and from Dr. Dobree, who attended me for my rheumatism, as you remember; he wrote very kindly, saying he feared it would be a great shock to me. Oh, what must not they all be thinking of you. I am so miserable, my darling, about it all, and to think how your honeymoon which should have been the happiest time of your life will be spoiled by this sad happening. May God in His mercy forgive us for the share we had in bringing it about, for I would rather stand by your side in this. God forgive me, it was I who first put the idea into your head, I daresay, by being so anxious to accept his invitation to Moreleigh; or if it was not, you knew how much I wished such a marriage for you. Perhaps it

was partly to please me that you tried to be nice to him and could n't, and now he has died of a broken heart, for no doctor will persuade me a common chill would have carried off a fine, young man like that if he had wished to live. But he had lost you, and what was there for him to live for? It was just the same with your poor father—he was ruined—and he had n't the heart to live, and just dwindled into his grave. But it's over now, and the poor boy is at rest from his suffering.

“I daresay I'm writing foolishly and incoherently, but there's not much time, and I'm crying so when I think of his poor little sister, and I dare n't offer myself to go to her for I should be ashamed to show my face after all poor Christopher's kindness.

“Do for pity's sake write a word of comfort to me, Erica. It is lonely work sitting alone all day, and the evenings are so long. If all was as it should be I should n't care so much. It's the natural end for a mother to be left alone. But as it is I get thinking—and remembering some of the things you've said to me—but don't fret over them now or ever, my little one—I know you did n't really mean them. And I've often wondered if it was your fault. I don't mean only because of the mistakes I may have made bringing you up, but whether bringing up makes so much difference after all. It's odd,

but I catch myself thinking of you much more often as you were when you were a little thing. You had a character of your own even then, and way- you couldn't have learned from any one round you. It's all so strange when one sits thinking, and thinking, all alone, over the days that seemed as if they were going to last for ever and yet are all gone so quickly, and it seems natural to you, I daresay, that I should be growing into an old woman, but I can't get over the surprise of it myself, and it wouldn't seem strange to me to find myself a little girl again in the next world. Those photos of you that Tom would n't take, I've put on my little table next me now, where I can see them all day, and fancy you running to get them for me as you used.

"You'll do what you decide about writing to May, but in your place, my darling, if I were you, I'm not sure I would write at all. Oh, Erica, it's all like a bad dream. But I try to take comfort in the thought that you're married to a good man now, and can begin fresh, and perhaps be a better and a happier woman in the end than you could ever have been if you'd married that poor boy. . . ."

Erica laid down the letter suddenly, because the sudden realisation of what her position would have been to-day had she married Chris-

topher, instead of Tom, flashed across her mind.

She moved uneasily, as though trying to shake off thoughts of which her better self—that self in which Tom believed so fervently—was ashamed. But her imagination had long been her master, and trained steadily for years to revolve about the image of her own glorified personality.

Therefore she thought,—not of Christopher Thorverton, the boy who lay dead at two-and-twenty—nor of his little sister's grief—nor of the suffering through which he had passed to his rest—but of a beautiful young *châtelaine* robed in deep mourning, with a floating veil of *crêpe*, brilliant hair, and a rope of pearls about her neck—moving through the dim halls of Moreleigh Abbey—her own mistress, rich, and free. Free to wed whom she liked, do what she liked, go where she liked, and wear what she chose, unhampered and unquestioned. Free also from this absurd and intolerable burden of blame which fate seemed ready to assign her.

All these advantages she had thrown away deliberately, through her own vacillation and the weakness of her vanity; she, who had admired herself for her cold spurning of her mother's advice and Christopher's entreaties, and dawdled through the long summer months, indefinitely postponing the marriage that would have given her so much; she, who had thought

herself so infinitely wiser than that poor, weak mother; so astute, so calmly able to play with her destiny; and the hearts of men.

The faint chiming of a little silver travelling clock roused her with a start from these unprofitable dreamings, to the vivid realisation of their unprofitableness. The clock belonged to the fine dressing-case which Christopher had given her. He was dead, and for him Time was over; but to her was Time yet given.

She had recognised the measure of her folly clearly enough during the night of misery and suspense which had preceded her marriage; but Christopher's death brought home to her even more clearly the material cost of that folly, and she suffered in proportion to the strength of her inherent craving for riches and luxury and beautiful possessions.

But the suffering of baffled ambition did not altogether blind the dim eyes of her soul to the fact that all was not lost with that fortune of Christopher. That Tom's loyalty had given her the chance which she had dumbly craved; the chance not only of a measure of prosperity, but of regaining her own self-respect and peace of mind.

With a mental effort she put from her the futile vision offered by the slave who had become the master of her brain, and having indulged her imagination for a full half-hour, called her common-sense to her aid.

With something like terror she remembered that she had revealed to Tom an Erica he had never known, in spite of her resolution that as his wife, she would restore to him every lost illusion of her perfection.

Her mind, cleared of vain regrets and dreamings, worked rapidly; her knitted flaxen brows relaxed their frowning, and with her sudden change of mood, the expression of her face became composed and purposeful.

She brushed her long hair with energy, and twisted the thick coils deftly about her head; slipped off the muslin wrapper, and rang for the chambermaid to fasten her dress. Awaiting her advent, she stood for some moments looking through the net-shrouded windows of her luxurious room, over the white walls and grey roofs of Paris, stretching far away through the clear and smokeless atmosphere.

The pretty chambermaid brought hot water, and exclaiming with a shiver that Madame must find the room cold, turned on the hot air, and commented admiringly upon Erica's open-work, purple silk stockings and suède walking shoes to match, before advancing to fasten the smart, short gown of violet velvet. When she had finished, she took up the little tray of coffee and rolls that the *sommelier* had brought to the bedside an hour or two earlier, and looking round with a deprecating smile, as though to apologise

for finding nothing further to do, finally departed. The hands of the electric clock on the wall now pointed to half-past ten.

Erica opened the door of the sitting-room.

Tom was sitting miserably by the window, looking out upon the Champs Elysées, and making pretence to read a newspaper. He lifted his eyes when his wife entered, but he did not move, though with every sense he realised the beauty of this vision in violet; the glory of hair and freshness of colouring, and alluring curves of the tall and shapely form.

Erica came straight to his chair and knelt beside him, and hid her face against his arm.

She was acting, and yet she was in earnest; and she neither knew herself, nor could it be possibly judged by Tom, where sincerity ended and acting began. It was true that she desired his forgiveness sincerely, and that if she could have passed the sponge of oblivion over the slate of his mind, she would gladly have wiped out the ugly scrawls she had made upon it during the last hour.

It was also true that she despised herself heartily and was ashamed of her own display of anger and rudeness; but the very truth of these emotions made her pose the easier, and gave reality to the thrill in the low voice, which she nevertheless used with full consciousness of its effect when she said, very simply:

"I'm sorry, oh, I'm sorry."

The mute appeal of her attitude had already gone to his heart; and he lifted her and caressed her in silence.

"It was my fault. I made no allowance for the shock. It affects people so differently."

She caught at the suggestion, blending excuse with truth.

"Ever since I was a little girl," she said in a low, tremulous voice, "I've always been angry if anything hurt me. I was angry when my father died, though I was hardly more than a baby; and it's always been my instinct—my devilish instinct—to revenge myself on somebody. If I fell down and hurt myself, and Mamma flew to help me, I used to bite and scratch her *because* I'd hurt myself. It—it hurt me to think that Christopher was dead—and I struck out blindly at you——"

She rested against his shoulder, and again the relief of confession stole into her soul, and again she was at this moment only half aware that she had in reality confessed nothing of her real feelings in the matter of Christopher's death.

"It is I who should be asking forgiveness," said Tom, caressing her. "I, who suspected you of being heartless, because you do not show your feelings easily, though you were suffering so that you did not know what to do. Another time I shall know better. And if it eases your pain to

be angry with me—" Tom broke into an unsteady, tender laugh—"why, you may be as angry with me as you will. But don't let your natural grief for poor Christopher make you morbid, my sweetheart. It's true what Robin says. Men don't die of love. Did *I* die when I thought you were going to marry Thorverton? Yet God knows whether I loved you! And if he had n't caught a chill that particular day, it would n't have entered any one's head that his broken engagement had anything to do with his dying. That was just bad luck. Though if there is a shadow of possibility that the unhappiness of losing you hastened his death, you know *I* share the responsibility with you, my darling. I wish I could take it all. I can't bear you to be unhappy. Only let it comfort you a little, my sweet, to know that I do understand, and am only grateful to you for coming to tell me your thoughts and feelings."

Then Erica realised that Tom understood nothing, and that she had no more revealed her thoughts and feelings to him, than he was capable, without such revelation, of divining them.

He trembled with sympathy for the remorse that he believed was gnawing at her soul; but it never even crossed his mind that it was Christopher's great possessions that she was regretting, rather than his untimely end.

Her self-contempt struggled with contempt for Tom's simplicity. Yet she perceived dimly the depths of the difference which divided their minds; and the generosity of his, which was unable to suspect the meanness of her outlook.

Tom kissed her tenderly.

"Let's come out, my darling, into the fresh air. It will be the best thing for you after this awful shock and horror. Come out into the sunshine and away from the hotel. We will lunch at Paillard's, or anywhere you like, and talk over what you'd prefer to do. I'm ready to go home this moment if you like."

On this November morning Paris was bright and white and sunny, as London had been dull and yellow and dark.

They walked briskly together down the Champs Elysées; past slouching soldiers, muffled, white-hatted cabmen, fat drivers of elongated three-horse omnibuses, and smart French babies with bored, solemn English nurses.

Erica, threading the bewildering rush of motors, trams, electric cars, and bicycles, which complicate the dangers of Paris horse-traffic, under Tom's steady guidance, was more acutely conscious of his personality than ever before.

Unmistakably British; unnoticeably well-dressed in his dark tweed suit and Homburg hat; serious and quiet, with grave, brown eyes, and slight moustache half concealing the firm

lines of a well-shaped mouth and decided chin; a spare, boyish figure, with muscles developed by training and hard bodily exercise, upright and alert in carriage and bearing; a voice rather low and pleasantly modulated in conversation, though it could ring out clearly enough when occasion demanded.

Altogether an intelligent and honourable specimen of young manhood, frank, open-handed, modest, and well-behaved; taught by the rough and wholesome discipline, to which youths of his class are fortunately still subjected, to abide strictly by the code of honour in force among his fellows; to show respect to his elders, deference to women, and courtesy to all men; and by the same system to hold his own with his equals, and hold his tongue concerning himself and his opinions, and more especially concerning any of his attributes or achievements whereon he might have reason to pride himself in secret.

Thus shorn of all possible eccentricities, he conformed in every respect to the required standard, and consequently exhibited little outward sign of either the strength or the weakness of his individual character.

Erica had been married a little over a week, and at the end of a week she had intended to reduce him to complete submission. Given the opportunities of an unlimited *tête-à-tête*, in the

intimacy of a honeymoon, she had imagined her task would be a light one, for that he was madly in love with her she could not doubt; and of her own cleverness she held perhaps, an almost exaggerated opinion. She had supposed that Tom, with his gentle deferential manner, and anxiety to render her every possible homage and service, would be an easier subject than Christopher—an ill-mannered youth, spoiled by fortune and the flattery of parasites, and of a disposition something sulky and obstinate. Yet in his roughest moods, and after her most capricious treatment, she had always been able to subdue the surly Christopher with a look or a word. She had begun to be aware that she had no such power over Tom.

Erica was half angry, half amused. Her vanity was piqued, but her fancy was attracted by this personality which had proved so much stronger than she had anticipated.

And yet—"It will be very tiresome," she thought, with a kind of humorous despair, "I *want* to start fresh—I *want* to play the game—but if that means I am to be guided in all I do by Tom's sense of honour—I'm not sure whether life will be worth living——"

They reached the friendly colonnade of the Rue de Rivoli, and her attention was caught by the endless display of *bijouterie* in the shop windows.

"Is there anything you want?" Tom said,

slipping a fond hand under the violet velvet sleeve, in the shelter of Erica's sables.

She could have laughed aloud.

Anything she wanted! She wanted everything. She wanted to go into those shops and turn over those glittering heaps, and pick out and carry away every trifle that took her fancy.

The mania for shopping is not less strong and uncontrollable in some women than the mania for gambling in others; and yet the former manifestation of the greed of desire is not recognised as a vice. She thought of Tom's pocket-book, and the few notes she had seen him unfold and count carefully before they came out, and that on the morning after their arrival in Paris he had chosen for her at *Cartier's*, under her own guidance, the ring that was to be his wedding-present to her—a large, deep-coloured sapphire, set very finely in platinum and diamond dust. That he could not well afford it, both knew, but he had not the heart to deny her or himself this one indulgence, and excused the extravagance with the reflection that the sale of his polo ponies, hitherto his dearest possessions, would bring in a sum of ready money.

The dark blue of the single sapphire was so beautiful that Erica almost ceased to regret the half-hoop of brilliants shut away in her big dressing-case.

“I like looking. The designs of the in 'tation

jewellery are always prettier than the real," she said, with the ghost of a sigh. "But you must n't buy me any more things till your ship comes in, Tom. How I wish some one would leave us a fortune——"

She broke off rather suddenly startled by a recollection which had hitherto, curiously enough, escaped her.

"Paris is certainly no place for paupers," Tom agreed cheerfully. "Don't you think you ought to come and have some breakfast, darling?"

Erica mechanically allowed herself to be led away, and Tom talked on, but the sense of his words did not penetrate her brain, which was busy with speculation.

Her own careless suggestion echoing in her ears had reminded her suddenly of the paragraph in the will which Christopher had shown her, and in which the testator gave the sum of *twenty thousand pounds free of legacy duty to his betrothed wife, Erica Jennifer Clow.*

She was ignorant of business, and did not know whether her marriage to Tom would render this bequest null and void. If not, she thought with a beating heart, surely, in so sudden an illness and unexpected a death, he would not have had time to destroy that will and make another? He had never even returned to the Abbey, where she had seen the document locked away in the drawer of his writing table; but had

spent the week of his illness at the Manor House, in the care of his cousin, Anthony Denys,—and there died.

She found herself seated opposite Tom in a restaurant, before a *sole au gratin*, and some rather sweet *Sauterne*. He watched her a little anxiously, thinking that she still looked pale, and that her manner was abstracted and dreamy. But she relieved his mind by doing full justice to the meal set forth; even if she showed herself disinclined to talk until the Turkish coffee and cigarettes were brought.

In the of a dozen different mirrors innumerable replicas of Erica—Erica in perspective, Erica lost in distance, full face, side face, and back view—could be seen by Tom. He brought his eyes back to the original, and studied thoughtfully the fair face beneath the violet velvet *toque*.

Erica, conscious of the perfect cut of her gown, sat very upright; her eyes were down-cast; her bosom rose and fell beneath a semi-transparent vest of exquisitely embroidered manve chiffon; she was tranquil, thoughtful.

The dark blue sapphire became very well the plump, white hand which was from time to time lifted to remove the cigarette from the pretty lips.

She raised her eyes.

“Tom. I have been thinking.”

Tom had been thinking also, but he decided that it was not the moment to acquaint Erica with the subject of his thoughts. He did not like his wife to smoke in a public restaurant, and it seemed to him that she ought to have known by instinct that he would not like it; but he had already expressed surprise or disapproval in the matter of several small lapses from convention, which he might have rather admired in Miss Erica Clow, but which he detested in Mrs. Tom Garry, and he felt that she was more inclined to suspect him of priggishness than herself of ignorance, so that on this occasion he refrained. Also, he had begun to realise, during the last ten days, how very limited was Erica's experience of the world in which he had lived all his life. "After all," he thought, "these are not the things that matter. The unconventionality of one year is the fashion of the next; and she is so quick, she will see the *nuances* for herself in a very short time, and learn all the unwritten laws."

Aloud he asked, "Of what have you been thinking?"

"That I see no particular need for us to hurry home if you can make it all right about leave. While we are known to be abroad the Moreleigh and Kellacombe people cannot be discussing our possible or impossible return to that neighbourhood. We get our letters for-

warded—so that if there were anything more to hear—any more details—the delay would be trifling. And we could n't go to theatres or about much in London—whereas here——”

“You would n't care to go to theatres just now?” he said.

Erica's blue eyes looked straight into his with a candid expression.

“I'm not going to pretend, Tom. You know my way. I say what I think in season and out of season. What good could it do any one for us to sit and yawn over illustrated papers in our little *salon* all the evening? In London, I grant you, we could n't go to the theatre—yet. We might be seen. But here no one is likely to see us, I suppose, if we go to some out of the way place. And if my French is not good enough for me to follow the dialogue, I like it all well enough—it's amusing to look at——”

Tom informed her bluntly that nothing would induce him to take her to a theatre while Christopher Thorverton lay yet unburied.

“Whether one was seen or not—and one is always liable to run up against people in Paris,” he said, “I should feel it most infernally bad taste, as well as heartless, to show the poor fellow's memory so little respect under the circumstances. Sometimes I can't understand you, Erica.”

“I think you never understand me,” she said

rather bitterly. "You tell me you hate me to suffer, but when I suggest something that would distract my thoughts——"

"I won't let you do what might cause you to be misjudged, apart from everything else——" he said, warmly. "Darling, let's go and buy some books, and have a quiet evening or two together. I'd read aloud to you if you'd let me——"

Erica did not care for books, and hated to be read to, and she had already discovered with wonder the intensity of Tom's affection for literature which she thought extraordinarily dull.

But she assented listlessly to his proposition, dropped the end of her cigarette into her coffee-cup, and slowly drew on and buttoned her grey suède gloves.

"Sweetheart," he said, contemplating that not altogether assumed pose of dejection with deep distress, "I seem to be always forced into this hateful position of denying you something, or finding fault. It goes frightfully against the grain. But what on earth can I do? It's my business to take care of you."

Erica liked the sound of remorse, and the suppressed tenderness of his voice. "I know," she said, submissively.

"You think I'm a brute to you?"

"No—only you never think of my point of view," she murmured. "I daresay you're right on this particular point," she added, hastily,

"I'm not conventional, and you know how I was dragged up—not even sent to school. Poor Mamma content to teach me what little she knew, so long as she could only keep me with her. I'm not even educated," she spoke with real bitterness.

"It was abominably selfish of her." Tom spoke with extra warmth because he was so glad to be able to sympathise with Erica. "She never seems to have thought of *you*."

Again her atrophied conscience lifted its puny head and reminded Erica of a fastidious little girl who had eaten three pennyworth of cream with her porridge every day, and lived on chicken and mutton-chops, while a stont, flabby, feeble, anxious woman sat over a tray of weak tea and lodging-house bread and butter, and declared she was not hungry.

The problem that had troubled poor Lady Clow in Erica's childhood had been the problem of how to feed and clothe her child, and keep a roof over her head.

"I daresay she could n't afford to send me to a good school, and she'd have worried herself to death over my health if she'd sent me to a cheap one," she said, hastily. "The poor old thing did the best she could for me, according to her lights. She had a pretty hard struggle to keep going at all—and she has a great horror of over-educated women."

"I like you to stand up for her," said Tom, "and I hate to think of any woman having to struggle with poverty."

Erica's heart throbbed suddenly. She seized her opportunity as her custom was.

"Perhaps poor Christopher has left her some money," she said, boldly. "He ought to—she 's about the only relative his father had, I believe. Of course I'm not counting his sister, and I know the Denys family are more nearly related—but that is through his mother. After all, the money came from his father."

Tom was silent.

She waited a moment and thought to herself. "Anyway, I've put the idea into his head." Then yet another idea occurred to her.

"Tom," she said in a low voice, "what did you do with my pearls?"

"I packed them in a cigar box and sent them back by registered post," he said grimly.

"For *him* to get when he was so ill?" Erica's voice betrayed anger, though the cause of her anger was not that which her words implied.

"I did not know he was ill on the Monday morning, when I sent the pearls."

"Did you write a letter?"

"I put a note inside the box," he said, shortly, "saying '*You will understand I should not like Erica to keep these now.*' and signed my name."

"Who do you suppose would open the parcel?"

“The poor fellow’s executors, I suppose.”

“Who will they be?”

“I can’t tell you. His sister, probably—or Anthony Denys—how should I know? Must we talk about it?” said Tom impatiently.

Erica said no more, but as they walked to Galignani’s library she thought of nothing else.

CHAPTER VII

LADY CLOW welcomed her daughter with tearful delight.

“Oh, Erica—the time has seemed so long—and so much has happened. My darling, how pretty you look! I am glad you are wearing violet,—it is half mourning. Poor Christopher! And your furs suit you so well. To think you’ve been married over a fortnight! I need n’t ask if you’re happy? At least as happy as you can be, after such a sad blow.”

She poured out her ejaculations, lamentations, congratulations, in a breath; and Erica, in accordance with her invariable custom, waited to let her mother’s first outburst of emotion exhaust itself. Then she spoke clearly and decidedly.

“First of all, Mamma, let us talk business. You wrote to me that you’d heard from Mr. Gethell?”

“Such a very kind letter. He said that May wished him to write to me at once, and tell me that my allowance is to be continued. There is to be a charge on the estate for it, and May says if

there were not she should look upon it as a sacred duty left to her by her father and brother. This is, I am sure, to soothe any scruples I might have. It is Providence, Erica, for I was at my wit's end what to do when my balance was finished. I could n't consent to live on you and Tom; and I could n't have felt comfortable taking money from poor Christopher while he was alive. But a legal bequest is a very different thing; his father wished it, and Mr. Gethell says it has nothing whatever to do with the twenty thousand pounds which poor Christopher has left to you."

"And which Tom refuses to allow me to take," said Erica, bitterly.

Lady Clow exclaimed in dismay.

"Look here, Mamma, for once I've come to you for help. If you fail me——"

"Erica! How could I fail you? But you won't ask me to go against Tom? He must know best," faltered Lady Clow.

"How do you mean, he must know best? A quixotic prig of a boy," said Erica, fiercely, but perceiving her mother's terror, she softened her voice. "I'm thinking of his interest quite as much as of my own. Don't you realise we're poor? We've got to live an expensive life whether we like it or not while Tom remains in the Brigade. Do you think I want to have his career cut short because he's married me?"

—and do you think it's very pleasant for me to be living expensively while my mother is in wretched lodgings vegetating on two hundred a year, and trying to save something out of that for my future?" Lady Clow hung her head guiltily. "No, Mamma, all I can tell you is that I'm not going to be robbed of that money that Christopher meant me to have, and which is legally my own. If you won't help me, I'll help myself. I'll quarrel with Tom,"—Lady Clow screamed—"and stand on my rights. No one can refuse to pay it to me. He can't prevent my taking it. Only if you knew how pig-headed and tiresome he was, you'd realise that defying him simply means an open breach—he would n't stand it—there'd be a separation."

"Erica—for pity's sake. At the end of a fortnight! I'll do anything in the world to prevent that. Oh, and I hoped so much that you were settled,—respectably, happily settled," sobbed her mother. "Only don't—don't ask me to walk in crooked ways. I never have. I never could."

"I'm not asking you to walk anywhere," Erica uttered a short laugh in spite of herself. "I'm asking you to protect my interests. Suppose I have children——"

Lady Clow uttered a low moan in which sympathy, reproof, and hope were oddly mingled.

"Are they to be left totally unprovided for

because their father has ridiculous scruples? You see I'm reduced to talking in the third person myself in my extremity," said Erica, derisively. "Are they to starve because their grandmother was afraid to stand up for them——?"

"Oh, Erica! God forgive you. Me—that would shed my heart's blood for them—or for you. Everything I have in the world——" she sobbed incoherently.

"I'm not asking you to shed anybody's blood. I am simply asking you to be firm—though I know I might as well ask a jelly-fish to be firm—and to avoid a row with Tom."

"I'm sure I should be only too thankful to avoid a row with Tom," said Lady Clow, in great alarm and distress. "I hope it would never come to that, and I cannot think he would ever have a row with a lady. He is much too gentle."

"Let me tell you he can make himself very unpleasant when he likes," said Erica, crossly. "And when his absurd high-flown principles are at stake, he cares not a jot for his interests."

"Your dear father was just the same," put in Lady Clow.

Erica paused; surprised at the force with which she resented this comparison.

She remembered all that she had ever heard of the old bankrupt father, who having reached

the brink of ruin,—without, so far as she could gather, making a single effort to save himself,—had surrendered his all meekly, and thenceforward resigned himself to live on charity, which hurt his feelings, but not sufficiently to goad him into making any fresh exertion to earn his own living.

Her mother had cried out to Erica, when in the hardness of her youth she had criticised this inaction, that it was not for her to blame the father who had loved her; that he was old and weak and broken in health before the disaster occurred, and that he had his pride, since, although he was obliged to accept the Thorverton money he could never endure to think, far less to speak, of the obligation.

Erica had curled her lip, and in pity, been silent.

Nevertheless the impression created in her mind was one not complimentary to her dead progenitor, and she did not like to hear any comparison made between him and her husband; though she was ready enough to declare that Tom was pig-headed and tiresome.

“But if it’s against his principles to take this money,” said Lady Clow, “I don’t see how you can stand out against him—far less how I can help you?”

“I’m going to tell you how, if you’ll listen for a moment. I shall tell Tom I will refuse

this legacy since he insists, and I'm going at the same time to write myself to Mr. Gethell, and accept it for *you*—that is, have it paid into your bank in your name,—whenever they're ready to hand it over, which of course won't be for months."

"Erica! my darling. It's very generous of you," protested her mother, and her round innocent eyes were flooded with tears of gratitude and admiration. "But I don't want it, I don't indeed."

"But I do," said Erica, in that cold and cutting tone born of exasperation at her mother's invariable readiness to attribute to her high and unlikely motives. "Only I mean you to take care of it for me. I can come and ask you for money then whenever I want it, and it will be a provision for the future besides."

"Will Tom know?" said Lady Clow, trembling.

Erica deliberated, and said, "I don't know why he should. But I can't be sure. He certainly won't know if I can help it. But if he *does* know he can't ask *you* to give it up."

"Will he be very angry with me, my darling?" said the poor woman. "If he came and argued with me, I don't think I could stand out against him. I don't indeed, Erica. Gentlemen have so much more knowledge of business. I know I should be convinced in a moment, and every-

thing I said would sound all wrong," she ended in a lamentable voice.

"He shan't come and argue with you," said Erica, setting her small white teeth almost grimly. "I tell you what, Mamma, you must have a telephone put in."

"A telephone!"

"Here, on your writing-table. If I want to tell you anything in a hurry it might be useful. I can't rush down here every time I want to speak to you. And think how convenient if you wanted to get something from a shop on a wet day."

"But I am never in a hurry. And it would be a dreadful expense. Besides, I should never dare to use it. It would flurry me dreadfully."

"Nonsense," said Erica. "I have one by my bedside, and I would call you up and say good morning regularly while I was having my breakfast. You would be at your accounts by that time."

"So I should," said Lady Clow, much struck and delighted. "It would be much less lonely. It is very kind of you to think of it, Erica."

"Only you must n't be for ever ringing me up," said Erica, warningly.

"I should n't think of ringing any one up," said Lady Clow, "unless the house was on fire or anything like that," she added cautiously.

"I am not very likely to have any news that

is urgent," she sighed. "My letter from Mr. Gethell was an event, however; and I have thought of nothing else ever since.

"I suppose he told you Christopher has left the Abbey to Anthony Denys instead of to May?" said Erica.

"Left the Abbey away from his only sister!" gasped her mother.

"Well—Anthony is his nearest male relative, and if his father bought the Abbey, it had belonged to his mother's people for generations; and it does n't signify much, since May and Anthony are going to marry each other."

Lady Clow uttered an exclamation of joy.

"He is a sensible man after all. I was afraid he would think she was too young."

"Considering he is twenty years older than she is—" said Erica, sarcastically.

"What does that matter when people love each other?" cried Lady Clow, warmly. "Your dear father was nearly thirty years older than I. It is better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave."

"I'm not sure I don't agree with you," said Erica.

"Though it would be absurd to call Anthony Denys old. He is not yet forty, and she is a very old-fashioned, steady, little thing for her age. She will make him very happy. She was kind and considerate even to me. And now she

will live in her own beautiful home, and I hope live to see her children's children. After all, Erica, perhaps it has all turned out for the best?" She scanned her daughter's face anxiously. "Though I am surprised at their engagement being announced so soon after her poor brother's death."

"It was settled before he died; and it is n't announced. Tom had a letter from his mother, and you know how she collects gossip. She had heard of my legacy, and wrote in a great state to Tom because Lord Erriff had declared that Tom would certainly refuse to allow me to accept it."

"I am glad Lady Erriff is on your side."

Erica laughed.

"It was the twenty thousand pounds which brought her over to my side so suddenly, unless am mistaken. She actually writes to Tom that she is sure I am too sensible to allow him to indulge in quixotic notions."

"He should listen to his mother," said Lady Clow, shaking her head wisely.

"He prefers to listen to his father,—one of the most high-flown, unpractical, light-hearted Irishmen in the world, always ready to give away what he has n't got."

"Gentlemen have very odd notions of honour, my dear. One often has to humour them without knowing why. Even your poor father——"

"One comfort is, Old Thing, that I can always depend on you," said Erica, interrupting without ceremony. "I'd rather trust you than Lady Erriff, however willing she may be to help me."

"I should think so," said Lady Clow, jealously. "I never liked Lady Erriff."

Erica rose and slowly fastened on her white furs before the dim looking-glass.

"After Christmas, I shall find you some nicer rooms."

"I would rather stay here, my dear. I am used to the landlady. Strangers make me nervous. And the place is full of memories."

"Very horrid memories."

"Oh, my darling, how can you say so! I sit here and fancy I can see you in that chair opposite, in your old, blue wrapper, holding up a newspaper to keep the fire from scorching your pretty face, and talking to me while I sat over my mending. Often and often you have made me laugh, Erica."

Some faint perception of the amplitude of her mother's capacity for forgiveness touched Erica. She had surely given her oftener cause for tears than laughter.

The nostalgia of childhood, which is generally strongest in later life, or in solitude, thrilled her curiously for a moment.

"Well, Old Thing, those were n't bad times, though I'm thankful they're over. It used to

be pleasant enough—sitting over the fire, all shabby and scorched, roasting chestnuts or toasting muffins on winter evenings; and retrimming my old hats in summer to go out and sit in the Park under the trees with you, and come back on the top of an omnibus. It sounds too awful now—but still—now and then I miss you——”

“Oh, Erica—and you not married three weeks!” Lady Clow could have wept for joy and surprise in the admission. “I often worry myself over your things, my darling—you’ve not been used to mending and packing for yourself.”

“I shall be able to have a maid soon—thanks to poor Christopher’s legacy,” said Erica, as she kissed her mother and bade her farewell.

As she climbed into the waiting hansom and drove back to Lower Belgrave Street, she thought:

“It’s all very well to talk of starting fresh, and being absolutely straight and true and all that, but Tom makes it impossible. There is such a thing as deceiving people for their own good.”

Tom had gone off to parade before Erica was awake, and she had hoped to find him awaiting her on her return, but she was half-way through her solitary luncheon before he came back from a court martial, and she had the pleasure of seeing him for the first time in uniform, with sword and sash.

The sordid plotting and scheming, that had filled her busy brain, fled before the natural healthy pride of ownership, with which she could not help secretly regarding her husband, be she calm and collected as she would.

Tom's handsome brown face was so beaming and honest in his joy at greeting her; his entrance seemed to bring such a cheerful whiff of the outer world of men and action into the severely artistic rooms.

"It's rather jolly to be back in London," he said. "I say, the Colonel's going to bring his missus to call on you this afternoon."

"I suppose they'll all come," said Erica, composedly.

"It does n't follow. Anyway, Lady Wilhelmina is a most charming woman. Everybody likes her. And he's pretty well the best friend I've got in the world, I believe—apart from pals of one's own age, of course. Oh, and I met old Billy Tudor to-day."

"Who is old Billy Tudor—?" Erica was annoyed by her husband's habit of taking for granted that the names, at least, of well-known people, with whom he had been acquainted from childhood, must be familiar to her.

"Oh—rather a club bore—but he knows every one," said Tom, vaguely. "He told me my old Dad was up here last week, boasting to every one he met that I'd married one of the most

beautiful women he'd ever seen in his life. What do you think of that?"

Erica smiled demurely, but she was pleased with Lord Erriff.

Gudwall brought Tom's luncheon and waited upon him deferentially, while she sat by, making a ripe pear last as long as possible, in order to keep him company as she listened to his cheerful talk.

She contrasted her present with her former lot, and while she experienced a faint thrill of triumph, was also conscious of an under-current of discontent. Could it be, she wondered vaguely, that she was, in some measure, already bored with her new life?

She thought of her mother, lonely and shabby, seated in a p'ush armchair with broken springs, in a corner of a room whereof the glaring ugliness was infinitely more apparent to them both since their long sojourn at Moreleigh; and of the hashed mutton and milk pudding, dingily served, which had probably formed her luncheon; and then saw herself as in a picture, beautifully dressed amid beautiful surroundings, before an exquisitely appointed table, with its central silver basket of hot house fruit, and opposite the handsome young officer, who was her devoted husband; and said derisively to herself that it was obviously impossible that she could be bored or disappointed.

But the fact remained that for some months past she had lived in an atmosphere of intrigue which had excited her vanity and amused a totally uncultivated mind. Now that she had sailed into this haven of safety, there was no denying that the calm had also an element of flatness.

Also, beyond this question of Christopher's legacy—upon which she did not greatly care to dwell in Tom's presence and with his trustful eyes looking into hers,—there was nothing in particular to occupy that narrow, active brain.

The wheels of her small household ran smoothly without help of hers, since her dwelling had been swept and garnished long before her entry; her wardrobe needed no replenishing, and she had no money at present to spend.

The honeymoon allows of many silences, and of intervals which may be filled with rational converse if two minds are in tune. Tom and Erica knew little of each other's minds, and each, perhaps instinctively, feared to know more.

She was interested neither in sport nor in politics, nor in abstract subjects, and their only mutual acquaintances were members of his own family, whom he did not care overmuch to discuss with her, since her comments were rather candid than complimentary; and the Thorverton's, whom for obvious reasons they did not discuss at all. Tom endeavoured to fill the

blank which he was vaguely beginning to realise, by reading aloud to her, an accomplishment in which he delighted and excelled, but Erica's efforts to be interested were not very successful; for whether he chose prose or poetry she had always some ado not to fall asleep.

But they were young, and loved each other in proportion to the capacity for love at present allotted to each: so that when he asked her to come and talk to him while he changed into mufti, she assented affectionately, and they went upstairs together, the narrowness of the ascent almost necessitating his arm about her waist.

"Tom, are you ever bored?"

"Often. I'm bored at dear old Bubble and Squeak coming this afternoon," he said, frankly, "though I want them to come all the same. But it will keep us in till they do come."

"I should get on far better with them if you were n't there," remarked Erica.

"I'm afraid I ought to be there, as the dear, old boy warned me they were coming," he said doubtfully.

"It will make it so much stiffer," she said slowly. "I think you make me nervous, Tom. I always feel as though you're criticising me."

"I'm awfully sorry." His cheerful face clouded over. "I suppose it's because I love you so that I want every one to think you perfect," he said rather lamely.

“If you were a little more in love with me you would n’t criticise me at all,” she said gently.

“I don’t think I’m like that—” he said in rather troubled tones—“I’ve never quite believed in love being blind—but be content, sweetheart, to know I *do* love you.” He took her in his arms and kissed her. “Every time I come back to you—even if I’ve only been away an hour or two—your beauty seems to come upon me as a fresh surprise, and I think what a lucky, lucky devil I am—and how—” his voice grew husky—“I’d lay down my life for you a thousand times over, Erica, if need were——”

“That’s what Mamma is always saying,” said Erica. She stretched her shapely arms above her head, and yawned slightly—perhaps aware that the action displayed the curves of her statuesque form, and the fine lines of her throat and upturned chin.

“Have you been to see her?”

“Yes—I went this morning.”

“Ought n’t I to go?”

“I’ll take you again one day,” said Erica, slowly, “there’s no hurry. The old thing would be flurried to death if you went alone. And she likes plenty of notice.”

“Right,” said Tom.

Lady Wilhelmina was a charming woman,

according to English ideas; that is to say, she was good-looking, well-bred, kind-hearted, and as incapable of talking scandal as of offering an original remark on any given subject. A native of any country but her own would have pronounced her incurably dull. Her husband, however, did not find her so. She busied herself with many harmless hobbies, cared for her poorer neighbours, and in social matters guided him gently in the way he should go, without unduly monopolising his time.

Between the ages of thirty and fifty she had not changed perceptibly, though her figure had become perhaps, a little fuller; she was fair and colourless still, with good teeth and a charming smile. She was dressed expensively, but not artistically, always in a modified, and never in an extreme form of the prevailing fashion, and her voice was peculiarly low and soft.

She sat on a high chair, which suited her figure better than the waist-breaking lowness of the divan which accommodated her husband; and praised the colouring of the rooms.

“We are not responsible for the decorations. They are Lord Finguar’s. He only let his rooms to Tom,—while he went off to shoot big game,—for a nominal rent,” said Erica, with the frankness she affected. “I should never have thought of anything so delicate as this dust-colour, or mouse-colour, or——”

"Pearl-grey—?" suggested Lady Wilhelmina. "It is such an effective background—" She looked at the water colours on the wall.

"Most effective," echoed Tom's Colonel, and looked at the peach-blossom colouring of his hostess, blooming against the grey velvet curtains.

He was very susceptible, and a slight and lovely smile, and a glance from the china-blue eyes, completed Erica's subjugation of all that was left of his heart.

"Then I suppose you will be house-hunting?" said the gracious voice.

"Oh, yes," said Erica, to Tom's surprise, "but we are not in any hurry. Our plans are still rather unsettled. Of course this is inconveniently small."

"*But* so charming," said Lady Wilhelmina, and again her husband echoed the words, looking at Erica as he repeated absently:

"Charming, absolutely charming."

It was entirely a visit of ceremony and lasted only ten minutes, and during that time, Erica talked a good deal, and with exaggerated *non-chalance* and authoritativeness, of Paris; and the facilities afforded by the French capital for the purchase of clothes, comparing the establishments there unfavourably with those of her native city; whilst Lady Wilhelmina,—who had visited Paris annually for the past five-

and-twenty years,—listened, with that air of attentive interest which made her so popular.

As Tom escorted the visitors downstairs, Erica heard the Colonel's kind, bluff, hearty tones saying warmly, "Well, my boy, you must let me congratulate you again now I've had the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Garry," and Tom's soft-voiced answer, "Thank you very much, sir."

She listened with that slight, amused smile lingering on her face, and then walked to the oval Dresden mirror, that was so unlike the fly-blown, poppy-decked looking-glass over her mother's mantel, and lifted her arms, and yawned.

"Thank heaven, that's over."

Tom came upstairs two steps at a time, and as he entered said with an air of relief:

"Well—now we can go out. What did you think of them?"

"He's an old dear, and she's deadly."

"I thought you got on so well with her." Tom's voice was disappointed. "She's an awfully popular woman. Never says a word against any one."

"Yet I will bet you anything you like that at this moment she is abusing me to her husband," said Erica, looking at him calmly.

Lady Wilhelmina never abused any one, but as she drove away from that blue enamelled door, so modestly hidden between a fish and a

bonnet shop, she said, in reply to the Colonel's outburst of admiration:

"Yes, dear, she is *wonderfully* good-looking. That marvellous Venetian hair and exquisite colouring. No wonder poor, young Garry lost his head. *What* a pity she is n't quite—quite—quite——"

That was all. Erica returned the call, and Lady Wilhelmina was not at home.

A few days later, the wife of a young ensign called, and finding Erica alone, was very communicative, and willing to answer every question put to her by her hostess.

"I thought I'd come and see you because I was so disappointed when none of them came to call on me when Charlie and I married, over a year ago now," she said. "Of course they were all very cross with him for marrying at all when he was only an ensign, and paid him out by shooting him, as they call it, for all sorts of extra duty, so that really I hardly ever saw him at first. But Mr. Garry is senior subaltern, so of course it will be very different for you."

She was a pretty, little person, dressed in the most *outré* mode of the moment, with sables as magnificent as Erica's own cast about her black velvet shoulders, and large turquoises in her little, curled ears, and yellow hair fluffed beneath a black velvet hat.

Erica felt, and looked, very stately and dignified beside this small and babyish matron; she glanced down upon her, metaphorically, from a great height, as she said, in chill and level tones: "You are not the first,—Lady Wilhelmina has called already."

But the little visitor was not abashed.

"Oh, yes, *she* is bound to come. And I thought all the others would follow suit. My sister married into a Line regiment, and all the officers' wives called upon her at once—that was at Dover. So I naturally supposed it would be the same with *us*. But the Brigade is different." She tossed her pretty head, but the childish eyes were pathetic.

"Of course I don't really care a bit. Charlie and I are everything to each other—and there's Baby. But as a matter of fact, only one of them has called on me, and she's never been near me since. I believe it was only to see what I was like. No," said the little person with unexpected loyalty, "I won't tell you which. It would put you against her, and she and all that set are sure to be quite different to you. I don't blame them. Charlie says they're glad of any excuse not to come if one doesn't happen to belong to their set. I don't pretend to belong. But I'm quite happy without. We've got a lovely house in Wilton Crescent. I wish you'd come and see it. Charlie's people are awfully

rich—cotton-spinners—” she said frankly—
“and they wanted him to marry; and are as
pleased as Punch about Baby’s being a boy.”

“Of course I’ll come,” said Erica, more
graciously. She reflected that she knew nobody
and could not afford to be too particular; also,
Mrs. Woosnam’s open admiration pleased her.

“Will you—really—that’s nice. Perhaps—
would you lunch with me to-morrow? One-
thirty?” asked her would-be hostess, beaming,
and as Erica assented, she said, naïvely, “I do
hope we shall make friends. Charlie would be
awfully pleased. He thinks no end of Mr.
Garry.”

Tom’s only comment, however, on this visit,
was: “Mrs. Charles Woosnam! What cheek!”

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. CHARLES WOOSNAM received the beautiful Mrs. Garry with flattering deference, and the young husband proved to be so good-natured and good-looking a flaxen-headed giant, that Erica understood his Daisy's adoration of him, far better than his adoration of his Daisy, who betrayed continually a commonness of speech and mind that only her absolute, frank simplicity made endurable.

He was very shy, but Erica's calm directness set him at ease. She took the lead in the conversation at luncheon, and felt more in her element than she had felt for some time, giving a mocking imitation of Lady Wilhelmina's manner, which made Mrs. Charlie scream with delight, and caused even the stolid young Guardsman,—who had a great respect and distant admiration for the wife of his commanding officer,—to burst into a sudden guffaw of laughter.

Erica liked young Woosnam, though she was bored by his fatuous worship of the baby, which was presently brought down for her inspection;

she knew at the first glance that this young man would be a slave, if ever she chanced to need one, and noted the fact subconsciously, for future reference.

Little Mrs. Woosnam was also at her feet, becoming more and more confidential when Charlie went off to play golf and left the ladies alone together. She was young, lonely, and in want of a female friend. It half annoyed Erica to perceive a certain similarity in their positions, when Daisy, with the honest outspokenness that characterised her and was one of many redeeming qualities, lamented the fact that "the gurls she used to know had all dropped out of her life. They've married men quite different from Charlie. Luckily none of them's in England. I can't help being glad because I'm afraid Charlie would n't have cared much for their style. But I never forget their birthdays. It's nice to be able to afford to send presents worth getting. I never had the chance till I married. And of course I do write—though I hate writing letters—but I could n't bear any one to think me grown snobbish, just because I happened to marry well—could *you?*"

Erica did not care in the least whether her former friends thought her snobbish or not, and said so with perfect calm.

"Ah—but your friends were different," said Mrs. Woosnam, in good faith. She rested her

little chin thoughtfully on her infant's bald head. "I'm free to own one or two of mine were rather *com.*" She sighed regretfully.

"But then Charlie's people are nothing much—very different from *him*, if you come to that. He was brought up quite unlike them. I think it was a relief to them all that he did n't marry some stuck-up person who'd have looked down on them; and yet his old mother gives me a dig sometimes because I'm not the sort of grand lady his money gave him a right to look for if he liked. Human nature, I suppose. Oh, Baby, *don't* wake up—you've been so good. Well, I'm free to confess I was a very lucky gurl. Sh—sh—sh—I'm afraid he's going to cry—will he bother you?"

"I don't care for babies," said Erica.

"You don't—" The young mother's jaw dropped. She looked from the whimpering morsel of humanity in its spotless robe of real valenciennes, to the serene face of the senior subaltern's wife, and perceiving in amaze, that Mrs. Garry was in earnest, rose in a crestfallen manner, and rang for the removal of Master Woosnam.

"How much trouble is saved by a little frankness at the start," Erica reflected, while this removal was in process—"if I had pretended to like the creature, it would have made a perpetual third on all my visits here, and conversa-

tion would have become impossible. As it is, she will be quite useful, driving me about, or better still, lending me her car. And they certainly have a first-class cook."

Mrs. Woosnam did not bear malice, and was thankful for the company of her beautiful visitor ever at the cost of the baby's banishment.

She took Erica up to see her bedroom, an abode of great luxury, consisting of the whole upper floor divided by arches; with painted ceilings, and much carved and gilded furniture.

"It's all Italian. My father-in-law got a man-decorator who does nothing else to do up the house for us. It cost a fortune, but it is pretty. You should see Baby's nursery—" she checked herself. "This is the safe where I keep everything that is n't at the bank."

The unsophisticated creature was delighted to call her maid to unlock it and display the contents, which consisted mainly in a quantity of uninteresting diamond stars, and a tiara of hideous design.

"It's a funny thing, but I like my pearls better than any of these fine things," she said. "My real name's Marguerite. That means pearl, does n't it? Only since baby came I've had to give up wearing them in the daytime. He clutches the string so he's broken it twice. He's so strong—" again she checked herself—lifted out a string of pearls and handed it to Erica,

and Erica saw at a glance that the pearls did not compare with her own, and remembered almost simultaneously that her own were hers no longer.

When she returned to Lower Belgrave Street, after driving about London for some time in Mrs. Woosnam's luxurious motor, Erica sat down at the writing-table in the bedroom which she had thought so charming,—but which appeared singularly small and ordinary in comparison with the one she had just seen—and wrote a letter to May Thorverton.

“I did not write to you before, because your letter to Mamma showed me that there was no need, that you understood all I must be feeling. But now that I hear you are going to marry your cousin Authouy Denys, I want to tell you that I am glad, I who know that there is no one like him in all the world.”

Even in her letter-writing Erica betrayed her dramatic instinct.

“If, now that you are to be his wife, you could persuade him to think more kindly of me, I should be grateful, but I dare not ask it. You, and perhaps you alone, know that I did not leave Moreleigh of my own accord, that I was forced

to go—and to you alone I owned that my own fault and folly had given your brother a right to think that I did not love him, and justified him in throwing me over. But the fact that he was justified did not make me less wretched. You tried to persuade me that he might forgive me, but I knew better. Still I can never forget your kindness to me on that unhappy evening before I left Moreleigh. . . . I dared not tell poor Mamma what had happened until we arrived in London, and then she was in despair. Naturally she blamed me, no doubt I deserved it. It may seem a little thing to you, but it made it worse for me that unwittingly I had ruined poor Mamma, for she said it had become impossible for her to accept any longer the allowance your brother was making her. I did not know what to do nor where to turn—but Tom met us, and everything was changed—and I am far, far happier than I deserve to be, and a thousand times happier than I ever dreamed I could be again. Only I am thankful to have this opportunity of writing to you; for once you told me that you did not believe I was as heartless as I made myself out, and I do not want you to think me heartless now——”

Erica paused and read the letter over. “Shall I send it or not? Why do I feel uncomfortable when I read it? Every word’s true—and I

want to be friends with May and Anthony Denys. When I live at Kellacombe they will be our neighbours, and it would be tiresome to have any embarrassments, and I can't put things more plainly—under the circumstances." She fenced skilfully with her conscience, knowing well that it was no match for her mind, which was accustomed to dictate her plans and carry them out without heeding its disapproval, though perfectly conscious of that disapproval.

She knew that the letter, as it stood, was incomplete; yet she tried to persuade herself, that it was not written as a mere weight-carrier for the little message that would presently be laid lightly upon the top of its burden of half-truths.

"I do not want you to think me heartless now——"

After a long, long pause her faint resolves to the contrary yielded to the overwhelming strength of habit and opportunity combined, and she wrote boldly:

"—— and yet I must have seemed so to you when I allowed Tom to send back the pearls which Christopher gave me. If I had known what was going to happen I would never, never have let him do it. I think of them day and

night. I don't want the money he has left me, though I am so grateful to him for remembering poor Mamma, and for being so generous beyond belief to us both. I would rather she had it all, since Tom and I are too poor to help her as we would wish. But the pearls I promised Christopher I would always wear, and I am miserable at having let them go."

She hesitated, and then signed *Erica*, and enclosed the letter and sent it to the post at once, lest she should change her mind.

A certain novel sensation of remorse made her excessively uncomfortable for a time, and especially in Tom's presence, so that she wished the letter unwritten over and over again, at ever-increasing intervals, until this wish was lost in suspense and annoyance as the days passed by, bringing no reply.

She had almost ceased to expect one when she found a black-edged letter upon her breakfast tray, and recognised May's pretty, careful, round handwriting. Erica was breakfasting in bed, as usual, with a pale blue wrapper about her shoulders, and her long hair hanging in two mighty plaits on either side of her face. The days of her slovenliness were past; her observation at Moreleigh of May Thorverton's dainty toilet appointments had inspired her with the spirit of emulation. Also she had by this time

forced the unhappy Gudwall to seek outside accommodation, and installed a maid of her own in his vacated room; so that she was now as *bien soignée* as could be desired.

Tom had returned from an early parade, and was changing into mufti in the next room; she could hear him moving about. Presently he would open the communicating door.

She tore open the letter with trembling fingers.

“My dear Erica:

“Thank you for your kind letter about my engagement. I am sure my dear, dear brother would have wished you to keep the pearls he gave you, but there seems to be some legal difficulty about their valuation. As soon as this has been arranged I will send them to you, so that you can keep them always in memory of Christopher, because whatever happened afterwards, he loved you once very dearly. indeed I am very sorry for all you have suffered, and only thankful it is not all unhappiness for you, or for me. He would have been glad to know this, and he told Anthony on the first day of his illness that he would rather I married him than any one in the world. It is not to be until the New Year and then we shall be married very quietly here and go away to Switzerland for our honeymoon. I am very glad Chris did what was right

about Cousin Jennifer and I understand your wishing everything should go to her. Of course Mr. Gethell will arrange this if you write to him.

"Your affectionate Cousin,

"May."

"May I come in?" said Tom.

Erica had time to conceal the letter before she received his morning kiss; and again that uncomfortable feeling of remorse assailed her, and banished the triumph with which the letter had filled her.

"Look here," said Tom. "I've heard from my old Dad, and he wants us to go and stay at Kellacombe early in February."

Erica reflected that by that time Anthony and May would be in Switzerland, and expressed her pleasure.

Tom paused a moment and then said gently. "I'm afraid you won't like it, darling, but he says also that he agrees absolutely with me that in the circumstances I can't allow you to accept poor Thorverton's bequest, which is to *his betrothed wife*. There's no doubt whatever he'd have destroyed that will. It was only a temporary one."

"Christopher told me," Erica said obstinately, "that he had had it drawn up in case anything unexpected should happen to him, so that I should n't be left unprovided for."

"Yes. As his future wife," said Tom. He slipped his arm round her, and drew her towards him as he sat on the bed.

"Erica—darling. Say you would n't take that money," he said, imperiously, with his fresh, young wholesome face pressed against her soft cheek. "Say you won't touch it. If you want money, I'll send in my papers and go to work. I'm ready and willing."

"I can't feel about it as you do," she said. "It was Christopher's duty to provide for Mamma and me. We're his father's cousins, however distant, the only relatives old Thorverton had that I know of. And it would put Anthony Denys into a very painful position if I refused it."

"Rubbish," said Tom. "I'm not going to argue about it." He turned white, as he was apt to do when he was angry; and withdrew his arm, and stood up, looking down upon Erica with his black brows drawn together above the soft, brown eyes that had been so kind and merry. "It's settled we're going to refuse it all right, and I've given you my reasons. But I wanted you to *feel* as I do about it, that's all. If you can't, you can't. I'm sorry."

He turned about and marched out of the room.

Erica shrugged her shoulders. She found it easier to deceive Tom when he was angry; and as soon as she was dressed she wrote to May,

and thanked her for her letter, and for her promise to return the pearls. She added that as her movements and Tom's were rather uncertain, she would be much obliged if the pearls, or any communication from May or Mr. Gethell, could be addressed to her mother's lodging. For safety's sake she also sent a note to this effect to Mr. Gethell himself.

Then she went downstairs. Upon this occasion she did not kneel down beside Tom and say that she was sorry. On the contrary she hummed an air, a little out of tune—which exasperated him, since he had the ear for music which she lacked; and when he suggested that they should go and look at some pictures together, she declined, on the plea that Mrs. Woosnam was coming to take her out shopping, and that she intended to lunch in Wilton Crescent afterwards.

“Just as you like,” said Tom. “Only I shall be rather at a loose end.”

He was beginning to feel himself often at a loose end nowadays; an experience not uncommon to a young man newly married to a girl not exactly of his own class or set. The week-end, and shooting, and other invitations which had been showered upon Lord Erriff's eldest son, had practically ceased altogether since his marriage: not merely because the senders of such invitations were unacquainted with Erica, but

because there were vague reports of an elopement with another man's *fiancée*, and the tragic death of that other man; and though few people knew any particulars, the general opinion was that Tom, hitherto of blameless reputation, had proved himself to be a regular Garry after all; reckless and foolish where a pretty woman was concerned.

Here and there arose better-informed persons,—*raconteurs* with good memories, of an older generation,—spreading more detailed information.

Thorverton was the dead man's name, and he was the son of the pretty Mrs. Thorverton who was once so well known in London. Had n't there been some story about her, and the late Lord Erriff, Tom's uncle, better know as Jack Garry? Oh, yes, they had been devoted for years, and when he was killed suddenly in the hunting-field she confessed everything to her husband and left him for ever, leaving him the boy who had a right to his name, and taking her baby with her.

And now Jack's nephew had run away with young Thorverton's bride, a week before his wedding-day; and young Thorverton had died of a broken heart.

Tom was but vaguely aware, through the hints of one or two friends, of what people were saying; but he was savage with his acquaint-

ance, who showed so little desire to be acquainted also with his wife.

He said to himself that it was a nine-days' wonder, and that they would live it down.

But he was sensitive, and he suffered none the less because he breathed no word of his suffering to Erica.

In the spring his mother should come to London, and present his wife; and he would consult his father, who was a man of the world, and who would be as anxious as Tom could desire to lend Erica his countenance and protection in every possible way.

The mere thought of talking matters over with his father soothed his troubled spirit; but Erica's lack of sympathy and understanding disappointed him bitterly, and he had never loved her less than when he went off alone towards the Guards' Club; taking off his hat sulkily as Mrs. Woosnam's white and silver motor flashed past him, and little Mrs. Woosnam herself smiled at him, all over her small, pert, radiant face, framed in a ridiculously large motor bonnet; with eyes as blue as the turquoises in her ears, and her small person wrapped in ermine.

Erica liked driving about London in so magnificent an equipage as Mrs. Woosnam's motor, and was alive to the attention she excited, as

she leaned back in the right-hand corner of the car, from which she had complacently ousted the owner; whose prettiness was also completely eclipsed by Mrs. Garry's more conspicuous and striking beauty.

On the other hand, Mrs. Woosnam's chatter, which could hardly be called conversation, fatigued Erica's mind, already preoccupied; so that she reflected, with some ingratitude, that the drive round the wintry park would have been infinitely more soothing and restful had she been alone.

Since even Erica, however, could hardly request the mistress of the car to leave it, she was obliged to put up with her company, but Mrs. Woosnam became alive to the fact that her friend was not in good spirits, and ventured to say so.

"I am a creature of moods," said Erica, frowning and looking straight before her. Her profile was perfect, Mrs. Woosnam decided, even though the corners of the beautiful mouth were drooping, and the white brow puckered with discontent; the little worshipper thought of her own delicate snub nose with passionate disapproval. There was much humility mingled with her adoration. Erica had dominated, easily enough, the shallow, affectionate mind; as she had been accustomed to dominate her mother and the little circle about her. It was as though her

natural imperiousness had acted as a spell upon her surroundings from her earliest babyhood. Since her marriage to Tom, however, she had sometimes felt as though the spell were broken; and a certain restlessness in his presence was the result. Erica's self-confidence was restored in Mrs. Woosnam's company even though she was bored.

"You must take me as you find me, Daisy," she said, turning those strange, light, thickly-fringed eyes on to the anxious, childish face upturned to her. "I am older than you are, and have known a good deal of trouble and disappointment. Even now, perhaps, I am not altogether so happy as the world in general supposes; which must make me, at times, rather depressing company. If you find it so, you have only to say a word, and I shall understand."

The thrill in her low voice went to her listener's heart.

"Oh, Erica, *darling!* as if I would n't rather be with you than with any one in the world. I only wish I could help you. I know there must be ever so many things in your life that have nothing to do with me. I was saying to Charlie only this morning how very, very lucky I was for *you* to have picked me out as a friend, who could be friends with anybody you liked."

"What makes you think I could be friends with anybody I like?"

"Why," said Mrs. Woosnam, colouring, "it 's the kind of thing Charlie says I must n't say—but I don't know how else to put it. Quite apart from being the most beautiful person I ever saw—yes—and Charlie says the same—well—Mr. Garry is the eldest son of a lord, there 's no getting over that." Erica shuddered slightly as the little underbred voice shrilled forth the explanation for which she had asked. "*You know.* People may say what they like, but it *does* make a difference."

"I suppose it does," Erica said, with a disdain that awed Mrs. Woosnam; but to herself Tom Garry's wife owned that she had been unable, so far, to perceive that it made any difference at all.

They drove to Wilton Crescent, and did full justice to an excellent luncheon, for Mrs. Woosnam, discovering, as she put it, that Erica was fond of good living, had ordered her *chef* to do his best. Afterwards they visited the very picture gallery which Tom had suggested.

The brilliant garden-studies, with which the rooms were hung, attracted Erica; and she lingered so long before the picture of a peacock sunning itself on a grass walk between two gay herbaceous borders, that Mrs. Woosnam said regretfully:

"I see *you* understand art. *I* don't."

Erica smiled, but she uttered no disclaimer.

"I wonder what this water-colour would cost to buy," she said pensively.

She had a curious feeling of fellowship with the peacock; sunning its beauty with vanity so unashamed and enjoyment so obvious; its crested head shone like a jewel among the soft, many-tinted velvet petals heaped on either side.

"My!" said Mrs. Charlie. "Can you buy these exhibition things? I had n't an idea!"

She dashed to the desk, and conversed breathlessly with the dignified individual presiding over it.

"Yes, madam, we have had many enquiries; but for some reason the artist fancies that particular picture himself, and has put almost a fancy price upon it."

Presently a little label was affixed to the glass of the picture with the word *Sold* printed on it. Erica had moved on.

"You won't get it till the end of the show," said Mrs. Woosnam, on the way to Lower Belgrave Street. "Oh, Erica, I have been so longing to give you something—what's money to me? Charlie's father gives me more than I can do with, and I've never been used to it, as you know. You won't hurt me by refusing it?"

"Why should I?" asked Erica.

"She accepted the gift so simply and beautifully," Mrs. Woosnam said afterwards to her

husband. "I felt it was n't *me* doing a favour but *her*. I'm afraid they're very hard up, Charlie. I wish we could do something for them."

"You must take care what you're about," advised her husband. "I know you mean well, Daisy, but you'll be offending them."

"Oh, Charlie, you don't understand. She's my friend. And I'm sure she'll be a good one. She has such a noble face. One can't fancy *her* doing a low-down thing, or being mean or false, or anything of that kind."

"Why should she?" asked the simple Charles.

CHAPTER IX

ON her return to Lower Belgrave Street Erica looked round at Lord Finguar's collection of water-colours, in the shaded light of the electric lamps, as she entered her own drawing-room, and observed with satisfaction that there was not one which gave her so much pleasure as the picture she had chosen that afternoon. Insensibly her eye had been educated by these works of an artist celebrated in Spain, though scarcely known in England. She began to find some of the pleasure in looking at them, that she found in looking at the brilliancy of jewels, or colour of draperies.

She rang for her maid—a small ill-shaped woman, with a cockney accent, and a mass of coarse hair frizzed out to produce the effect of a head too big for the round and narrow shoulders that bore it; her character bore testimony to the effect that she was unusually quick in her work and service, and as Erica could not endure slowness, and as the maid happened to be out of a place and was thus able to begin her duties at once, she had engaged her without

hesitation. Certainly the young woman was not as thorough as she was quick in her work, and Lady Clow would have wept over the hasty mending, crooked seams, and uneven darning that had replaced her exquisite and careful handicraft; but Erica had a large supply of new things, and was careless of detail, and only concerned that she should not be kept waiting a moment when she rang for her attendant.

She changed her walking dress for her favourite tea-gown of brown chiffon, with belt and collar of mock gold and gems. She returned to the drawing-room, ordered tea, and flung herself down on the divan beside the fire, among the cushions.

She cared nothing for reading, and being out of humour with herself, fastened her thoughts on the cause, instead of diverting them with a book; and came to the deliberate conclusion that she was behaving foolishly; alienating Tom by an irritability which she had hitherto been able to keep in check whenever it suited her purpose to do so.

She recalled the skill with which she had played on his feelings and on Robin's, and on Christopher's, in the past; and marvelled to realise that since she now had only Tom to consider, she should find it so difficult to keep him happy and contented, or to be so herself.

"It is because I am trying to do the impos-

sible," she told herself. "I am trying to be somebody else—the Erica Tom wants me to be—and at the same time I can't help falling back at times into being the Erica I really am. I love Tom—yes, I *do*"; she thought of his good looks, his gentle manner, the fire and fervour of his Irish blood that gave the necessary touch of romance to his worship of her, and again of the sturdy straightforwardness and honesty of his character—with a shrewd appreciation of these qualities that was not in the least like love.

"I even like him to be masterful—to follow his own principles and make me do the same whether I like it or not. It interests me and I respect him for having the courage of his opinions. In some moods I *like* to submit to him. It gives me a kind of subtle pleasure, not unlike the subtle pleasure I have had in secretly outwitting other people. And the annoying thing is that I find none in outwitting Tom. I want him not only to believe in me, but to have reason to believe in me. I should *like* to be able to look him in the face and not have a single secret from him—and I *can't*—I *can't*."

She flung a cushion out of her way and changed her attitude with unnecessary force.

"I thought that when once I was safely married—it would be so easy. Yet I'm somehow no less bored and dissatisfied than I was in our wretched lodgings, wearing frocks that cost

thirty shillings instead of thirty guineas. Then I longed for clothes and jewels, and now I've got some, I long for others, and for a thousand things besides. I want a house and servants, and money to spend, and a motor of my own—and to know the right people—something is always dangling out of my reach. I wonder if I should n't be wiser to give up the attempt to *be* what Tom wants, and devote all my wits to *seeming* to be that. Then I should n't be irritated or irritating as I am now, through this constant struggle with myself, and Tom would be perfectly happy. Also I should get all I wanted—in time. And my life would be interesting instead of dull and empty as it is now. I can't think what prevents me—except this sick feeling of hating myself—for not being simple and natural and true as he is—but how can I help it? I was n't born like that," she thought drearily.

When Gudwall brought in the urn she gave the order that she was at home to callers; angry with herself for suspecting him of amusement since callers were so rare; and not knowing that Gudwall's mind, like her own, was much pre-occupied with his personal affairs.

She felt as though her backward glances into the past had evoked therefrom a phantom, and a most unwelcome one, when the door presently opened and Mr. Hickie was announced.

"Hallo, Eric!"

Mr. Hickie advanced with an air of confident and familiar friendliness which gradually faded away as he perceived the stately figure of his young hostess drawn up as though she were standing at bay—and a dangerous light of battle in her eyes.

Erica did not utter a word until Gudwall had closed the door, and then she spoke with an icy and cutting intonation which astonished her visitor. "I am Mrs. Garry."

"You don't suppose I don't know that. Why, I saw the announcement of your marriage in the paper. That's what brought me here. *Erica, only daughter of the late Sir Joseph Clow, to the Honourable Thomas Garry, eldest son of Lord Erriff of Kellacombe.* But I see what you're hinting at——"

"I never hint," said Erica.

"You mean that now you're married, I mustn't call you by your Christian name."

"I certainly mean that," said Erica, composedly, "and I also mean that I have no intention of continuing my acquaintance with you at all."

He was so genuinely amazed that she felt an inclination to laugh in the midst of the annoyance that beset her, and her anxiety lest Tom should come in before she could send Mr. Hickie away.

And it appeared that it would not be so easy as she supposed to send Mr. Hickie away.

"Look here," he said, and actually sat down on the nearest chair, caring nothing that his hostess was still standing. "We'll have this out. I don't understand you. Have I offended you in any way?"

Erica was seldom troubled by over-much regard for other people's feelings; and on this occasion was not likely to subdue her habitual and cynical frankness of utterance.

"The fact of your existence offends me, now that it is recalled to my recollection," she said, calmly regarding him.

Mr. Hickie stared at her unbelievably and then burst out laughing.

"I say—you're a cool hand. Not a bit changed! That's how you used to talk to your mother. That's what used to fetch me even more than your good looks. The daring of you—and the way you'd slip out to matinées with me when she thought you were at afternoon class."

"I was very young, and very badly brought up," said Erica, reddening with anger. "I know now that my mother was quite right in objecting to the acquaintance I used to scrape up with our fellow lodgers."

"That's your gratitude for the way I used to treat you—gloves, and chocolates, and ribbons

—anything you fancied!" he cried, indignantly, "and I was hard-up, too, in those days. Why, I've still got the pretty notes you used to write thanking me, and the letter you wrote to say good-bye when I went off to the Argentine eight years ago, when I was silly enough to believe you were really fond of me." His voice softened.

"I cannot help your being silly," replied Erica. "Most people, no doubt, are silly when they are very young; and I was evidently no exception to the rule."

"Look here," said Mr. Hickie,—the colour faded a little from his face. "Look here, *Mrs. Garry*," with elaborate satire, "you're making a great mistake, and presently you'll have to own it." There was an odd note of mingled triumph and mortification in his voice, and he looked at her as though inclined to pity her coming confusion. "I'm not the man to be played fast and loose with now, whatever I may have been eight years ago. If you've got on in life since those days, so have I. You wait till you hear what I've got to tell you."

"I'm sorry I have n't time to listen," said Erica, with her hand on the bell.

"But you *shall* listen," he cried, crestfallen. "I've come here on purpose, and as sure as my name's Albert Hickie I'll say what I came to say. You promised to write to me when I went away, and you wrote once or twice, and

then your letters stopped, and I made sure your mother who never did like me, had stopped them; so I wrote to the landlady, and she answered you 'd left her place, and she did n't know where you were."

Erica had by this time decided that the quickest way to get rid of her persistent visitor was to hear him out.

She seated herself on the divan, and as he leaned forward with earnest face and wagging finger, summed up his appearance disdainfully,—his ill-cut clothes and impossible tie; his muddy boots which left marks upon the immaculate grey velvet carpet every time he moved,—and his movements were many, for Mr. Hickie lacked entirely the habits of repose peculiar to the well-bred of all races, and fidgetted without ceasing—his short, square figure, and the thick features of his round, clean-shaven face, which was nevertheless not destitute of manliness, nor of purposeful energy.

"Well—I was down on my luck just then, and left it alone—but I was always a persevering chap, with plenty of push, and I made up my mind I'd find you again one day. Still, I had more important things to think of then. Earning my bread for one. And presently, after a hard fight, things began to look up a bit. What do you think I'm worth, as I sit here?"

As she was about to reply contemptuously that

she was not interested in the question raised, —the door once more opened, and Gudwall announced:

“Lady Oakridge.”

A well-dressed, middle-aged woman came forward with outstretched hand and smiling face.

“I must introduce myself to you, Mrs. Garry. Lord Erriff wrote and asked me to come and see you, and said he would write and explain that I was one of his oldest friends, and Tom’s godmother; but of course he has n’t?” She laughed good-humouredly. “I daresay you’ve heard Tom speak of me, however?”

“You sent him this silver cigarette box,” said Erica, with great readiness, and a charming smile. “He will be so glad to see you. I am expecting him every moment.” She glanced meaningly at Mr. Hickie, who had cleared his throat; but he showed no signs of leaving.

“You might introduce me to your friend, Erica,” he said reproachfully.

Lady Oakridge was far too polite to evince the faintest surprise at the unconventional appearance of Erica’s caller, and Erica’s coolness stood her in good stead.

“This is a Mr. Hickie whom my mother and I met when we were in some lodgings in Bayswater a great many years ago, while I was a little girl at school—” she said, with great distinctness, and a note of amusement in her voice

that rendered Mr. Hickie vaguely uncomfortable, though his understanding was not quick enough to perceive that it immediately placed the two ladies *en rapport*, and enabled them to exchange a glance of understanding and sympathy. "Mr. Hickie saw the announcement of my marriage in the newspapers, and very kindly came to see me," said Erica, with the same friendly graciousness, which was so unlike her earlier manner, and which yet seemed to place Mr. Hickie at an even greater distance than before.

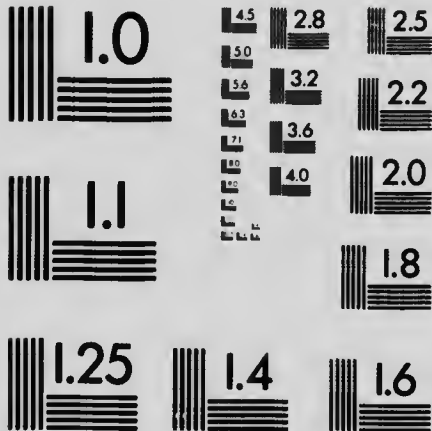
"Oh, indeed," said Lady Oakridge, and she inclined her head smilingly and immediately resumed her flow of conversation, giving Mr. Hickie no opening for the explanation he had intended to utter.

"I've been quite longing to see you and make your acquaintance, and your father-in-law wrote me such a charming letter. So delighted about it all, and so glad dear Tom is not giving up his profession. Such a mistake for a young man, and so very popular as he is. These charming rooms. You don't know when Lord Finguar comes back? But when you *do* begin house-hunting, I hope you'll come over to our side of the Park. So much healthier and higher up. Oh, I forgot. I suppose it would be inconvenient for Tom's barracks. How tiresome. But of course there are always such nice houses to be had on the Cadogan estate. And



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I daresay Lord Finguar won't return for ages. Such a charming man. You know him?"

She rattled happily on, and Erica's spirits rose, partly because her vanity was soothed by the note of flattery which ran quite undesignedly through the medley of the lady's speech, and partly because she divined that here was no spirit of criticism.

Lady Oakridge possessed the rare faculty of sensitiveness to her neighbours' good points, whilst to their faults and weaknesses she was, in general, happily blind. Lord Erriff had shown his usual astuteness in sending her to call upon his daughter-in-law.

"Alethea Oakridge will run about all over London praising Tom's wife, and declaring she is the most charming creature in the world, and that is just what is wanted," he had reflected.

Being quite as tactful as she was amiable, Lady Oakridge divined that Erica was, as she put it to herself, naturally anxious to get rid of that dreadful looking man; who was now,—having disposed of some tea, and a morsel of hot tea-cake,—first blowing on his fingers to get rid of the crumbs, and then furtively wiping them on a corner of the table-cloth, apparently with the object of saving his pocket-handkerchief. She therefore decided to cut her own visit short, since it was evident that Mr. Hickie had every intention of sitting her out.

“Well—I am so delighted to have seen you, and made your acquaintance, and it will be too nice if you are able to come and dine with us. I know you must have so many engagements; I’ll write directly I get home, and suggest a date—and you’ll give my love to dear Tom?”

The entrance of Tom himself caused a diversion, but after a fresh outburst of congratulation, Lady Oakridge persisted in taking leave, and he escorted her downstairs, receiving on the way her voluble assurances of pleasure in making his wife’s acquaintance, and admiration of her beauty.

Erica had risen to make her farewells, and did not reseat herself. She stood in her brown draperies, on the hearth-rug, a model of calm indifference, with every sense on the alert; and Mr. Hickie stood watching her, with a sentimental air that enraged her, but not speaking, until Tom had returned, and shut the door.

Then he said, with a trembling voice, “I’m afraid I’m not such a welcome visitor in your house as I’d looked to be, considering my claims on your wife’s friendship, Mr. Garry.”

Tom smiled at him with pleasant courtesy.

“Well, you see,” he said, in tones that sounded especially soft and deep in comparison with the high-pitched and querulous notes of Mr. Hickie, “I don’t know what your claims on my wife’s

friendship are. Whatever they may be, I am sure she would n't wish to ignore them."

"I wish I was sure. It's like this. We were, as I may say, boy and gurl together," said Mr. Hickie, beginning to be affected by the recollection, and as suddenly cooled by a short derisive laugh from Erica.

"Well—" he said defiantly, "if I *was* a few years older than you, what is a fellow of two- or three-and-twenty but a boy? And I'm sure there's nothing to be ashamed of in the recollection, unless it was that we went to the theatre together half a dozen times, without your mother's knowing. And I was as willing as could be that she should have come too, only to tell you the truth the old lady neither cottoned to me nor me to her. I'd have paid for her seat and welcome, though in those days, as I said just now, I was hard up——"

"To cut a long story short, Tom," interrupted Erica, in her most incisive tones, "when I was a silly schoolgirl I played at having a very mild and harmless flirtation with this Mr.—Mr. Hickie,"—her slight, contemptuous pause before his name, spoke volumes to Tom. "Mamma, very properly, did not approve of my acquaintance with him, which arose solely from our having lodgings in the same house; and he was always giving me chocolates and offering to take me to see pantomimes or something of the kind;

and like a naughty child, I took the chocolates and went with him to matinées on three or four occasions when I ought to have been at a day-school which I attended for a short time. I am very much ashamed of it all now, of course," she said, and looked straight into Mr. Hickie's crestfallen face with unwavering eyes that seemed to scorch him with a kind of cold lightning of contempt, as much as to say: "Did you imagine you were going to get the better of *me* by appealing to my husband?"

He tried to answer her, but words literally failed him—in a kind of desperation he turned to Tom.

"I need n't tell you," he said faltering, "that, for all she's pleased to say she's ashamed of it now—my—my friendship with your wife was a perfectly harmless one."

"You certainly need n't tell me that," said Tom, in a clear and decided voice.

"Still—I've gone short of a meal more than once to pay for her chocolate and things—" said Mr. Hickie, his voice was still trembling with disappointment and anger combined, "though I'd scorn to cast that up at her; and she knew I was fond of her, and I thought she was fond of me. I don't mean to say I ever made her a regular downright offer. I could n't afford to for one thing. But directly I got back from the Argentine my first thought was to find her

out again after all these years I'd lost sight of her. Of course I knew there was more than a chance she'd got married, but you could have knocked me down with a feather when in the very first paper I took up in my hotel I saw that announcement of yours. There's a coincidence for you! But I noted the address, and I came here, if you'll believe me, without a thought in my mind but to be the best of friends to her; and to you, too, if you'd let me."

"I quite believe you," said Tom. His gentleness encouraged Mr. Hickie.

"Mr. Garry, I was just about to tell your wife something that would have surprised her, when that stylish, old party in black came and interrupted me. I was going to tell her something that would have made her wish she'd been more civil to me. I'm not the pore young clurk I was when I left home. I've worked, and pushed, and saved, and one way and another had a good bit of luck. And now I'm worth, as I sit here—" he knocked the gilt rung of his chair impressively with his boot, and another flake of black London mud fell on to the carpet. "As I sit here I'm worth—if I was sold up this minute—something like forty thousand pound,—and p'raps more."

He looked from one to the other.

Erica laughed outright.

"I am very glad to hear it, Mr. Hickie," said

Tom, kindly, "but I don't quite see what that has to do with your friendship for my wife."

Mr. Hickie appeared hardly able to credit his host's stupidity.

"I'm a rich man," he gasped, "few people care to sneeze at a man who can lay his hand on a sum of money like that at a moment's notice—and to begin with—there's nothing—nothing, I'd have grudged her in the way of a wedding-present—I said so to myself as I saw her going into raptures over a silver cigarette-box that could n't be worth, at the most—more than four or five pound. Forty or fifty would have been nothing to me. For an old friend. But she does n't want my friendship, it seems—" He could not help looking imploringly across the room at Mrs. Garry, and the disdain of her expression made him feel inclined to weep.

"Erica," said Tom, gently, "we are dining out this evening—ought n't you to go and dress? It's getting rather late."

She went away without a word, and without another look at the friend of her girlhood.

Mr. Hickie never quite knew how it was that he found himself walking down the narrow staircase in Tom's company, while Tom was saying quite pleasantly and naturally:

"I think, if you won't mind my saying so, Mr. Hickie, that you made a mistake from the very first, in your friendship with my wife,

though I've no doubt at all that you meant very kindly by her indeed. But you see, the fact remains that you persuaded her to accept presents and treats from you without her mother's knowledge, when she was a little girl; and naturally she's ashamed of the recollection; so that I fear the sight of you can never be anything but rather painful to her. I'm afraid it would be better for you not to come here any more."

"I quite see that—" said poor Mr. Hickie, "though as for being a little gurl, she was eighteen if she was a day."

"Of course that makes 't worse," said Tom, with a shade more distance in his manner. "You must see that."

Mr. Hickie was bewildered, but he said, "Of course, of course,"—hurriedly, as he shook hands with this serious, good-looking, ultra-polite young gentleman, who was Erica's husband, in the dim light of the lantern hanging over their heads in the narrow passage where they stood.

"Allow me," said Tom; opening the front door as Mr. Hickie fumbled with the brass handle.

"Thank you—" Mr. Hickie almost said *air*, but, remembering that he was a capitalist, checked himself just in time. "One moment—" he stepped back, hesitated, and said in a pleading voice, "I suppose—after this—I'd better not send her a wedding-present?"

“Much better not,” said Tom, gently, but decidedly. “Though it is very kind of you to think of it.”

“I should n’t grudge it at all. I’ve plenty of money—but I won’t if you think it would be better not.” He was out in the street now, and his plain, earnest face was illumined by the electric lamp outside.

“I’m quite certain it would be better not. Good-night.”

The door was shut with a final click, and Mr. Hickie, with a last look over his shoulder, walked slowly away towards Victoria Station.

Tom went up the narrow staircase, two steps at a time, as his custom was, and opened the door of Erica’s room.

The dressing-table was softly illumined, but she was standing by the chimney-piece, in a rather dejected attitude, looking down into the fire, which glowed upon her russet robes, and cast little lights and shadows upon her pensive face.

“May I come in?” he said, and closed the door behind him, and came to her side, and took her in his arms.

“The poor fellow’s gone away, my darling, and I don’t think you’ll ever be troubled with him again.”

Erica leaned her head against his shoulder, and to her own surprise, and without knowing exactly why,—she began to cry.

CHAPTER X

ERICA was at a theatre with Tom, in the front row of stalls, when between the first and second acts, a small, dark gentleman of Jewish and foreign appearance passing them on his way out, stopped and spoke to Tom.

“Let me introduce Mr. Hehnuth Reinhardt to you, Erica—a great friend of Robin’s.”

Erica remembered vaguely having heard of Mr. Reinhardt as a partner in the firm of stock-brokers to which Robin belonged. She thought he looked uninteresting and her manner was indifferent, as he asked permission to take the vacant stall beside her, and began to talk to her. Then she modified her opinion and observed that his large, dark blue eyes—heavily shadowed beneath straight, black brows,—were extraordinarily full of fire and expression; having observed them, she forgot the insignificance of his person, the plainness of his small face, and the wave of black hair, which fell over a disproportionately broad forehead, and produced an effect of unkemptness which she deplored.

He spoke in a thick, soft, guttural voice, with a German accent.

"You do not care for the play"; he stated a fact rather than asked a question.

"How do you know that?"

"I had watched you, if you will forgive me for saying so," he said simply. "I had the excuse of being an artist."

She regarded him curiously.

"I thought you were on the Stock Exchange, —with my brother-in-law."

"I am certainly a stock broker, but not less an artist. There are many artists on the Stock Exchange."

"I thought the artistic sense was supposed to clash with the business instinct?"

"That is great nonsense," he said calmly. "On the Stock Exchange are a great many Jews. All Jews have business instincts; but where will you find a race with a finer artistic sense?"

"I do not know any Jews," said Erica, musingly.

"You see before you an undistinguished specimen," said Mr. Reinhardt, "and as for your knowing none—I do not credit it. You probably did not know them to be Jews."

Erica was amused by his perfect sincerity of utterance, and by the warm and vivid light of admiration—almost worship—of her beauty, which could easily be read by so experienced an observer in his expressive eyes.

"You are a great friend of Robin Garry's, are you not?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not know if I am a great friend. I know Garry."

"Don't you like him?" said Erica, surprised. "Everybody likes him."

"Why not? He is full of good spirits, and as pleasant to look at as I am the reverse. I do not dislike him, and that is a great deal. One does not like many people."

"I like a great many people," said Erica, smiling at him.

He noted the loveliness of her curved lips, almost perfect in shape, and the evenness of the small, white teeth, as he replied seriously:

"I should not have thought that. I have the misfortune, myself, to dislike most people. I find in them so little to like."

She laughed outright.

"It amuses you that I speak the truth?"

"I pride myself on doing the same, in season and out of season."

"There is no sense in speaking truth out of season," observed Mr. Reinhardt, "and I think you do yourself injustice."

She was a little astonished.

"You give more the impression of being a *diplomate* than one who is to be read in a moment."

"In what way?"

He glanced at her comprehensively, and then turned away his eyes.

"Why don't you answer?"

"If I answer at all I become personal, and that might properly offend you on so short an acquaintance. I do not wish to offend you."

"But if I give you leave to speak frankly?"

"Then I obey," he said readily, and looked at her again, with those soft, melancholy eyes which held only respect, and a certain dog-like pathos, as who should say: *I admire at a distance. My soul, calmly conscious of greatness, looks sadly out of the window of its prison-house. Do not measure the importance of the captive by the meanness of the dungeon.*

"In the first place," said Mr. Reinhardt, "your dress betrays you. It has been thought out. Its style, which is *outré*, would extinguish a less beautiful woman, and a simpleton would not have dared the experiment. But to call attention to your beauty could only increase its reputation. One thing surprises me—you do not deck yourself with jewels."

"I would if I had them," said Erica, for the sake of maintaining her claim to frankness.

There came an answering flash of approval into his eyes, and he nodded with quick satisfaction.

"There you entirely convince me. That explains why you omit the accessories needed by

such a *toilette*. However, you will have as many as you choose."

"What makes you say that?" she asked, frowning a little.

"You are of those to whom all things come," he answered, so obviously unconscious of offence that criticism was disarmed.

"I am glad you think my dress artistic," she said, graciously, "since you are an artist."

"I did not say I thought it artistic," explained the exact gentleman. "I called it on the contrary *outré*—the bright colours—the cut—are pardonable only because they fulfil their object."

"Indeed—" said Erica, nettled. "But I happen to prefer the *bizarre* to the conventional, and I happen to love bright colours as I love the glitter of gems." Then she added, to render herself more interesting in his eyes. "I have often thought my passion for both, proves me to possess a certain artistic feeling."

"It is the most elementary form of artistic feeling then which you possess," said Mr. Reinhardt, bluntly, "since you share it with children and savages. A baby in arms snatches at anything that glitters."

"You are not very complimentary."

"I was not attempting to compliment you," he said, with surprise. "If I had wished to do that, I should have spoken of your beauty, then my compliments would have been sincere. I am

not of those who, from diplomacy, compliment people on what they obviously do not possess—tell a silly woman that she is clever, a clever woman that she is pretty and so on. Above all—if you ask me to say what I do not think on the subject of art, or artistic feeling—” he shrugged his shoulders, “it is one of the subjects on which I cannot lie.”

“You admit you can lie on some subjects?” she asked triumphantly.

“Of course.” Again his surprise was manifest. “There are subjects on which a man lies. But to the art he loves,—if he be an artist—he cannot be untrue, not in his words, not even in his thoughts. The feeling for one’s art is therefore a stronger passion than that of love, because it lasts as long as life and reason last.”

“Some men’s love for a woman might last as long.”

“It is possible,” assented Reinhardt, calmly. “I have myself never come across an instance, however. I said, *even in thought*.”

“That no one can tell.”

“‘Wouldst thou know thyself? Observe thy fellow-men. Wouldst thou know thy fellow-men? Observe thyself,’” he quoted.

“In that case, you can read me easily, in spite of my diplomacy.”

“To a certain extent. Not easily. You are a woman.”

“And since you can compliment me sincerely on nothing but my looks, also a simpleton?”

“No. I have already said I should judge you to be a clever woman.”

“On what do you base your assumption of my possessing an intellect?” she asked, rather scornfully.

“I did not suggest that you were intellectual,” he explained, conscientiously. “An intellectual woman could scarcely have failed in attention to this play.”

“Why? It is long and prosy and boring.”

“Because it illustrates that problem of Labour which most nearly concerns your country and the time in which you live.”

“I do not pretend to understand the Labour question, since I have not studied it.”

“No,” he said, tranquilly, “but a woman of intellect would have been the more deeply interested to learn. However, there are many clever woman who are not in the least intellectual; and to whom art and music also mean nothing.”

“Does music mean nothing to me?”

He smiled.

“We are sitting in the front row of stalls—and we have talked throughout a performance which, although not perfect, was not bad—of—what was the orchestra playing?”

“I have n’t the faintest idea,” she said, a little crossly, yet laughing.

“ Since you pride yourself on frankness——?”

“ I have no ear for music,” said Erica. “ Have you?”

He smiled again, and did not answer.

“ You talked as much as I did.”

“ I shall hear that music many times again. But one does not lose an opportunity of talking to one of the most beautiful women one has ever seen; for that, without her goodwill, which is uncertain, may never recur.” He gave no intonation of vulgar compliment to the words, but spoke with the air of one stating seriously an incontestable fact.

“ If you know Robin,” she said, “ I should think it more than likely we should meet again.”

“ It does not follow. I do not go into society. If you ask me to come and see you, I will come.”

She gave the invitation the more promptly because she perceived Tom, who had left his place, returning, as the signal for the raising of the curtain on the second act was given.

Mr. Reinhardt bowed and departed, with that involuntarily wistful expression, which the mere size and deeply-shadowed setting of the almond shaped, dark blue, long lashed eyes gave to his small, sallow face.

Tom was evidently deeply interested in the able, interminable dialogue of the second act; and this time Erica gave no curious observer the opportunity of gauging her intellect by her ob-

vious inattention and boredom, but sat upright and motionless, with her eyes fixed on the stage, not speaking until the curtain was lowered again.

"How did you get on with Reinhardt? I saw him talking away. I hope you were n't very bored? I met a man I had n't seen for years, and he buttonholed me, so I could n't come to the rescue," said Tom, apologetically.

"He did not bore me," said Erica, playing with her fan. "He poses as a kind of misanthrope and Sherlock Holmes rolled into one."

"I should n't have thought he posed at all," Tom said. "I should have said he was a straightforward little beggar. Robin says he's one of the cleverest fellows going—a financial genius."

"Does that mean he's rich?"

"Colossally rich, I believe. A wonderful musician—speaks every language under the sun—and exhibits in the Salon."

"What a little prodigy!" said Erica, satirically. "Is there anything he can't do?"

"I should think quite a number of things," said Tom, laughing. "I know he can't shoot, because I once saw him try; and I should n't think he could ride, or play golf, or any outdoor game under the sun. Though after all there's no reason on earth why he should," he said hastily. "A fellow has n't time for everything, and I expect he's the sort of chap who

could learn anything he made up his mind to learn."

"I've asked him to come and see me," said Erica.

They spent Christmas quietly in London, lacking as they did invitations to spend the season elsewhere; and though Lady Clow would have been only too glad—had she dared—to invite her son-in-law and her daughter to share the turkey and plum-pudding to which she sat down, resolutely, herself—she did not dare. She was partially consoled by the explanation that Tom was on guard, and by an early visit from Erica, who appeared laden with gifts for her mother, having discovered that in this manner she could salve her conscience without excess of trouble or exertion.

Early in February Lord Erriff made the receipt of a cable from Robin an excuse to come to London and visit his eldest son. Hampers of game, fruit, and flowers, heralded his arrival, with a note in which he invited himself to lunch with his son and daughter-in-law on the following morning if it were convenient to them.

He was far too punctilious to appear either a minute before or a minute after the appointed hour; but Erica designedly allowed Tom to receive him alone, before her deliberate and studied entry.

She found them eagerly discussing Robin's message, but both sprang up as she entered, and Lord Erriff immediately came forward and saluted her with equal warmth and gallantry, though he had almost to stand on tiptoe to accomplish this feat.

Erica, flushed and smiling, looked her best, and Tom glowed with pride and amusement as he saw that in his delighted contemplation of her beauty, his father's attention was completely distracted from the business in hand.

"To return to Robin's cable, sir," he said, smiling, as they sat down, in high good humour, to the excellent luncheon which the joint efforts of Godwall and Mrs. Jarmin had provided. "I suppose we may continue our discussion before Erica——?"

"I have no secrets from any of my children—who are arrived at years of discretion," said Lord Erriff. "Erica will not mention the subject outside this room. Robin, though not usually economical, my dear, has sent me a cable of commendable brevity—and unsigned, from Singapore—consisting of merely two words—*Sell pictures.*"

Erica opened surprised, light blue eyes.

"I thought——" she began, looking at Tom, and hesitated—with a diffidence not usual, which was her tribute to Lord Erriff's presence.

"You thought the pictures had all been sold

long ago," he interrupted. "Quite right, my dear. My brother Jack, who had expensive tastes, sold a portion of my father's collection, and I sold the remainder when I inherited, with one or two exceptions."

"Then they were not entailed?" she asked.

"Nothing was entailed, for the simple reason that my father, the Judge, was the first Garry that ever I heard of who had anything to entail; and though there can never have lived a Garry without the gift of the gab, none of them ever coined the gift into cash until he made a name for himself at the Bar. When he was made a peer, he bought Kellacombe, and filled it with pictures and furniture and china, all chosen by himself; and left everything unconditionally to my eldest brother Jack, who broke his neck in the hunting-field, as a Garry should, poor fellow. So I came in for it all. I've a fair lot of family portraits, but none worth money, except two which I've never been able to make up my mind to part with. Of course those are the two Robin has in his mind."

Erica looked a question.

"An Opie and a Romney, my dear," said Lord Erriff, "both portraits of my grandmother, the famous beauty—another Mrs. Tom Garry. Romney painted her as a little girl of twelve, and Opie when she was seventeen. My grandfather had to fly the country for killing one of her

suitors in a duel when she was sixteen, but he came back and married her a year later. Tom, we must certainly have a portrait of *this* Mrs. Tom Garry."

"Too expensive," said Erica, gaily.

"The artist does n't live who would n't do it for love," cried the gallant gentleman.

Tom laughed, but he said: "Now, Dad, about the telegram. Why is n't Robin more explicit?"

"Well—I did tell him," said Lord Erriff, reluctantly, "that I regretted having no capital for him to invest, with the opportunities that he thought he would have, and he said he should n't make any suggestions unless in exceptional circumstances. His exact words were: 'If I cabled you to raise capital at *any* cost you'd know I meant the chance of a lifetime had come and you would n't fail me.' Now Robin is well aware what store I set by those two pictures of his great-grandmother."

"He is as fond of them as you are, sir," said Tom.

"Well—it is you who are more concerned than Robin is," said Lord Erriff.

"I should trust Robin," said Tom, decidedly. "If he thinks the opportunity of such magnitude that it's out of all proportion to the pleasure of owning those two pictures, depend upon it we should think the same in his place. We shall

know when we get his letter, but the matter is evidently urgent."

Lord Erriff nodded and sighed.

"You think they'd best go up to Christie's at once?"

"I'm afraid I do, and it might be well to cable Robin to that effect."

"I should like to have had them copied."

"That could be arranged afterwards."

"I think I'll go round and see what Duveen would be inclined to offer me. They wanted the pictures when they came down and valued those Sheraton cabinets. You'd best come with me, Tom, I'm not a good hand at bargaining."

"Somebody told me the other day that the beauty of the subject counted enormously, and that Romney ladies were worth more than Romney men," Tom remarked. "I'll come with you, Dad, and see you don't give them away, or do anything in a hurry."

"Well—" said Lord Erriff, "at least we have a real, live Mrs. Tom Garry, and one not a whit behind the first in looks, eh, Tom? Let us pray that *her* grandson may not be sacrilegious enough to sell her portrait a hundred years hence."

"What will it matter to *me* by that time?" said Erica, laughing and blushing. She was flattered and set at ease by her father-in-law's affectionate gallantry; and indeed Lord Erriff

was light-hearted and exceedingly easy-going by nature, and had already almost forgotten that there was anything reprehensible in the manner of Tom's marriage. Also he was in high spirits; partly because a holiday was a rare pleasure, partly because he was very glad to see Tom, and partly because he was excited at the prospect of making a small fortune.

His forgetfulness of past events was shown by his easy reference to the marriage of Anthony Denys and May Thorverton, which had taken place very quietly at Moreleigh on the previous day.

"Best thing that could have happened," was his comment. "Now we shall have a Denys back at the Abbey, which is as it should be; and that poor little girl happily established. Old Lady Denys has her heart's desire, and may die in peace, though she looks much more like living on at the little manor-house for another twenty years. The bride and bridegroom have toddled off to the Italian Lakes, and are to be away three months at least. By the by, when are you coming down?"

"We could get away almost any time now," said Tom.

It was settled that they should come as soon as he could arrange for leave, and Erica was glad. She desired to see Kellacombe again very much, now that she was the prospective mistress

thereof; and found herself trying to recall the number of the rooms and the size of the park.

Tom and his father were full of apologies in leaving her alone; but she was sincere in her expressed wish that they should go off together, saying that she desired to go and see her mother, and that she had not seen her for some time, which was true; and not saying that she had invited Mr. Helmuth Reinhardt to tea, which was also true. Tom remarked that if she were going to see her mother he would not hurry back, and she was very glad to hear him say so. Lord Erriff's pleasure in the prospect of an afternoon's *tête-à-tête* with Tom was almost pathetically obvious; his kind, merry, little, brown face was wrinkled with smiles, his soft, brown eyes were brilliant with pride; and he walked down Lower Belgrave Street with his hand resting on his son's arm.

CHAPTER XI

LADY CLOW had been early warned by the lately installed telephone—whereof the bell never failed to make her start and scream—of her daughter's probable visit; and in consequence she was looking eagerly out of the dingy window of her lodging when Erica arrived. The room had undergone several changes.

The protesting landlady, overawed by the Honourable Mrs. Garry's new magnificence, had been forced to remove some of the more glaring ornaments, and to submit to the installation of a comfortable stuffed arm-chair in Lady Clow's favourite corner.

She was mollified by the presentation of the shabby black silk dresses which Erica had persuaded her mother to discard, in favour of new ones of a more modern make which she insisted upon paying for herself.

"I feel as if I were robbing you, my darling," said Lady Clow, anxiously. "Can Tom afford to give you so much money?"

"His father has increased his allowance," said Erica. She did not mention that the half hoop

of diamonds was no longer in her dressing-case, and that various unconsidered trifles of a like nature had also taken a trip with their owner to a celebrated shop in the City; and there been exchanged for a moderate sum of useful cash.

Lady Clow wept tears of joy and gratitude over every fresh manifestation of her daughter's consideration.

She showed her clergyman and her doctor—almost her only visitors—the new appointments on her writing-table, the stock of expensive paper with her address stamped neatly in one corner, and the late Sir Joseph's crest in the other; and exhibited a wonderful water-colour sketch of a peacock sunning itself in a summer garden, which hung on the wall above.

"She showers gifts upon me," she declared, and both doctor and clergyman nodded approval, and said that a devoted daughter was perhaps the greatest blessing life could afford.

Erica entered her mother's sitting-room, exquisitely dressed in the perfectly cut, black braided blue serge suit which she had chosen as appropriate for the occasion of her father-in-law's first visit to a young couple apologetic.

The simplicity and severity suited her, as she very well knew; but she scarcely realised how much better than the startling combinations of colour which she sometimes affected.

"There are two letters waiting for you, my

darling, and a registered parcel, as I told you this morning on the telephone," said Lady Clow. "One letter is addressed by little May, and has the Moreleigh post-mark. Fancy her writing on her wedding-day—or perhaps the day before, and addressing it *here*."

"I asked her to address all letters here. I have asked several people," said Erica, composedly, "since I was not sure whether Tom and I were going out of London, and Gudwall is excessively careless about forwarding things. Where is the parcel?"

She took it into her hand, and the colour rushed to her face, for she was almost sure that it contained the pearls. May's letter confirmed the assumption. It was written on the eve of her wedding day, and told Erica that she was anxious the necklace should be handed over before her own and Anthony's departure from England.

The other letter was from Mr. Gethell.

Erica skimmed it rapidly; taking in a general sense of the explanation that since Mr. Anthony Denys was not only sole executor, but also sole inheritor of the late Mr. Christopher Thorverton's estate, which was charged with the payment of only two legacies,—one being to his own wife and the other to Erica—and since it was understood that the immediate payment of the legacy to herself would be a convenience;—the fact that Mr. Anthony Denys desired that there

should be no delay in this payment, coupled with the fact that there were unusually large sums of money lying uninvested at the late Mr. Thorverton's bank at the time of his decease—had enabled Mr. Gethell to anticipate the usual slow course of events. Erica was only concerned with the fact that Mr. Gethell was prepared to hand over her twenty thousand pounds at once, or to pay it into her mother's banking account if she still desired this to be done. . . .

She sat down immediately to answer the letter, and as she did so, her impatience with Tom's scruples increased. How simple it would all have been; and how annoying to be actually forced by his tiresome and exaggerated sense of honour into those very crooked ways which she had intended so firmly to abjure.

There were tears of vexation in her eyes, as she wrote to Mr. Gethell, asking that the money might be paid into her mother's account, but she had decided this to be the more prudent course; and since she despaired of shaking Tom's convictions by open argument, resolved, with a regret that was sincere, that there was nothing for it but to outwit him.

She rose from the writing-table with a stamped and addressed letter in her hand.

"Anthony Denys has ordered Mr. Gethell to pay my legacy into your account, Mamma, as I wished," she announced.

"Anthony Denys! Then it must be all right. He would n't do anything he thought wrong," cried Lady Clow, joyfully. "My darling! I am very glad. And I shall not touch it, nor spend a farthing. I will keep it all faithfully, for your—for some day—oh, Erica!"

Her large face grew pink, and her round eyes filled with tears of happy anticipation. She beheld herself endowing a little row of expectant grandchildren.

"Of course you won't spend it," said Erica, with that forceful distinctness that denoted extreme impatience. "On the contrary, it will all be invested for you by a friend of Tom's; a gentleman on the Stock Exchange whom he introduced to me the other day, and who is supposed to be a genius in such matters."

"I am glad he is a friend of Tom's," said Lady Clow, doubtfully. Her eyes sought wistfully to read her daughter's severe and lovely face. "Will he come and see me about it, darling?"

"Of course not," said Erica. "It will all be arranged by correspondence; or I shall see him myself. Nothing will be required of you except perhaps your signature. And anything you have to sign I will bring you."

"I am very nervous about investments," said Lady Clow, anxiously, "and there is one thing I must put my foot down about, Erica. It must

all be put into Limited Companies. I had a friend once—a poor governess—who had all her money in something unlimited; a bank, I believe. She was ruined.” Her voice sank in dismay to a horrified whisper. “She lost all her savings and on the top of that she had to keep on paying calls. I don’t mean visits, but money. They came when she least expected them, asking for all she had, and she died not knowing when they would leave off coming. Poor thing. When she was dying she said to me, ‘They may call as loud as they like now. I shan’t hear them.’ The thought seemed to comfort her. But it was a lesson to me, and I should like to see the list of investments first, and perhaps ask our new vicar to go through them; he is a thorough man of the world, not like the one *you* knew, and he was talking to me only yesterday about the solemn responsibility of trustees—he is a trustee himself—and how they should always invest money in gilt-edged securities with low interest. He said he had made it a rule through life to distrust anything that paid over three per cent.”

It enraged Erica that her mother should thus suddenly develop an inclination to interfere in her affairs.

“If you are going to talk such nonsense, Mamma, I tell you at once that I shall not have the money paid into your name at all,” she said,

in a cold fury of displeasure. "I come here to inform you that Tom has introduced to me one of the best known financiers in London,—one of the heads, actually, of his brother's firm—and you talk of asking a clergyman's advice! The consequences be on your own head. Have you forgotten all I said about what would happen in the event of your refusing to help me to keep my own money?"

Lady Clow had not forgotten. Visions of estrangement—separation between husband and wife—starving grandchildren—crowded upon her distraught brain, and as Erica made as though she would tear up her letter to Mr. Gethell, she melted into tears and entreated her to desist.

"After all, the money *is* legally yours," she sobbed. "And if Anthony Denys thinks it's all right—and it is better it should be in my name even if it is invested in shaky speculations such as people on the Stock Exchange delight in; what would calls matter to me? I have but £200 a year. You can't squeeze blood out of a stone."

The reiteration of this undoubted fact appeared to afford her a measure of consolation, for she wiped her eyes resolutely; and Erica relented, and painted a picture in glowing colours of safe investments, paying a reasonable interest, which must be allowed to roll up quietly through the years into a mighty pro-

vision for the future. To complete her victory she made announcement of a hitherto secret hope, which caused her mother to burst into an incoherent torrent of joy and terror and affection and congratulation, so overwhelming that the subjects of legacies and investments were immediately drowned therein.

“Oh, my darling, my darling! Take care of yourself. Oh, if I could but be with you to watch over you every hour of the day. Yes, yes. I will agree to whatever you like about the money. What does money matter—what does anything matter—in comparison with this? Only promise me not to fret or worry about anything—anything. As if your mother would cross a single fancy of yours at such a time,” she cried weeping.

When Erica had gone away, and the tired maid of all work opened the door noisily to enquire if she should light the gas, Lady Clow started out of a dream and begged her not to do so until she should ring.

For though Erica's radiant presence had vanished, the little dark room was bright with visions; it was in fact—in Lady Clow's dreams—no longer a small room at all. It had expanded into a large square early Victorian drawing-room, solidly and expensively furnished with a magenta-coloured satin and rosewood suite, and two handsome crystal chandeliers each

filled with fifty wax candles; there were also a quantity of bronze and china ornaments on marble-topped and gilt-legged tables, and a few finely bound books on rosewood tables, every one of which treasures Lady Clow could have found blindfold in its accustomed place; a drawing-room which had in fact ceased to exist except in the memory of the woman to whom it had been the heart of a happy home, where a pretty young wife sat in state and pride among her new possessions.

Lady Clow sat motionless in her chair by the fireside, with fat hands folded over the knitting which had dropped into her lap, and vacant eyes staring before her into that past which showed no elderly woman of exceptional stoutness, but a young mother whose slender arms were clasped about a little live warm creature, while a sleepy head rested against a heart beating so wildly that its owner was not sure whether it were hope or memory which thrilled it, or whether that sleeping baby of her yearning dreams were in truth Erica, or Erica's child.

The sound of music greeted Mrs. Garry's return to the house in Lower Belgrave Street—a haunting hackneyed melody reached her ears, but she knew not that it was hackneyed. It was followed by a few chords, and Reinhardt began to sing.

Erica was not musical, but apparently Gudwall was. His grim, set face was pale, and his large, black eyes were filled with tears. He appeared to forget for once, his dignified and total lack of interest in his surroundings.

"He's been going on like that, singing and playing, for the best part of half an hour," he said to Erica, with an emotion which even his respect for his mistress could not wholly subdue. "I've heard nothing like it out of the opera, ma'am."

"Do you go to the opera?" said Erica, astonished. "I suppose you are very fond of music."

"I am a Welshman, ma'am," said Gudwall. The explanation appeared to him sufficient, but Erica shrugged her shoulders as she entered the drawing-room; the betrayal of a human element in Gudwall appeared to her almost uncanny. She was even vaguely offended.

"I'm glad you came in," she greeted Mr. Reinhardt, calmly.

"You told me four. I therefore arrived at four, and waited," he said. "I had been making a great noise, but there was no book in the room that I cared to read. Or I was not in the mood for reading. What has happened? You look excited—pleased?"

"I want to ask your advice," said Erica. This was the fourth occasion of her meeting with Mr.

Reinhardt, and their acquaintance had made rapid progress. She was shrewd enough to perceive him to be trustworthy, though conscious that she failed in reading his character.

Tom, and Robin,—poor Christopher,—most of the men of her acquaintance she had read easily enough, but this old-young man was still somewhat of an enigma.

His utter simplicity of manner, his calm cynicism, his artistic enthusiasm, his astuteness in business, his scrupulous exactness in conversation, his reserves and his frankness—appeared to her mind contradictory attributes. She found his talk interesting, and surprised herself and Tom, after they had dined with him, by saying suddenly that his eyes had a thousand meanings.

She now decided to tell him the circumstances of her legacy and of Tom's refusal thereof.

"Don't you think it very far-fetched scrupulousness?" she asked, at the end of a story shortened by her hearer's quickness of comprehension.

"It is not business, to refuse money that is lawfully your own. You should never part with money if you can help it," said Reinhardt. "But it is very fine, all the same," he spoke with admiration. "There is something to like in a man who can refuse a large sum of money from an honourable sense of delicacy."

"It is my money," said Erica, sardonically.

"It is yours undoubted," agreed Mr. Rein-

hardt. "You do not share his fine feeling, but that does not make it less a fine feeling."

"I do not see why he should indulge his fine feelings at my expense," she said, rather tartly.

"Nor I. It is for you to judge whether you will take the money, not for him," he said gravely. "He is trying to be not only your husband, but also your conscience. That is ridiculous. But why do you not tell him this, and say—I insist on taking my own. That would be so much simpler."

"I can't now," said Erica.

He accepted the statement without comment.

"Suppose your mother were to marry again?" he suggested, after a pause, "it might be very inconvenient that the money should be legally hers."

"You have n't seen her," said Erica, and she smiled.

It was settled that he should invest the money in Lady Clow's name, and settled also that the subject of the investment was not to be discussed in Tom's presence.

"I am doing this for you, not for him. It is a matter of business. I shall charge the usual commission," he said, calmly, and to her secret astonishment. "If I were doing it for Garry I should not mention it to you. Also, I quite understand that if it is in your own name your husband may insist on your restoring it; and

that if it is your mother's property it becomes much more difficult."

"It becomes impossible," said Erica, triumphantly, and added curiously, "Surely you would n't give it up, in my place?"

"I give away money often—I give it up—never," he said, oracularly. "But I am not judging for your husband. In his case I cannot tell. There may be *nuances* that you do not convey. A man loses you. He dies. He leaves you money. Because he loved you your husband wishes you not to take his bequest."

"I was engaged to him—for a time," she owned.

"It all means nothing, put like that. A case can be put in many different lights," he said. "All that matters is that since the money is legally your own you mean to benefit by it, if not in one way—then in another."

"Exactly," Erica said with relief. "Now when you write to me of this, please write to my mother's address."

He noted it carefully in his pocket-book.

"Now about choice of investments——"

"I want it put into the things Robin Garry reports most favourably of——" she said, boldly.

"So! you have heard from him?"

"No—has n't he cabled to you?"

Reinhardt smiled.

"I will get some shares allotted to you—if I

can, to-morrow—in a thing of which he has reported favourably,” he said thoughtfully. “But do you understand that you would get no interest for perhaps two or three years? Would not that inconvenience you?”

“Would it pay more than other things—afterwards?”

“We hope a very great deal more.”

“Is it certain?”

“Nothing is certain, in business. I believe this is as certain as anything can be.”

“I’ll put ten thousand pounds into that, and ten thousand into things that pay interest now.”

He laughed.

“I cannot promise to get you ten thousand pounds’ worth of shares in Kuala Keliling—if I get you five you will be lucky. I said I would *try* to get you some.”

“I thought you were practically the head of the firm,” said Erica innocently.

“I will do what I can,” said Reinhardt. His eyes turned longingly towards the piano.

“You are in a mood for music,” she said, with that little thrill of sympathy in her deep voice.

“Then play to me.”

“It is a fine piano, but it wants playing,” he said, with alacrity.

Tom found his wife sunk in a reverie over her little ornamental writing-table. She started

at his entry, and put an open parcel into the drawer, locked it, and came to greet him.

He drew her on to the divan beside him, and they sat together looking into the fire. Reinhardt, who had not moved from the piano, continued to play; and though Tom's hand clasped her own fondly, Erica perceived that her husband was thinking not of her, but of the music. He listened entranced, spell-bound; when a pause came he said, entreatingly:

"Sing something before you go, Reinhardt."

The low voice filled the room with a music of which even Erica could not withstand altogether the power, and the wonder, and the sweetness.

Reinhardt had spoken truly when he declared himself an artist.

Vaguely there stirred within her a desire to be at peace with herself and all the world; it was as though the harmony which moved her senses also revealed to her the jarring discords of her own soul; so that she shuddered slightly; mindful of treason and kisses mingled.

Tom was recalled from dreaming to earth by the shudder, which preceded the closing chords of Reinhardt's song. He murmured tenderly, "You're cold, my darling?" and folded about her the furs which had fallen from her shoulders.

"Don't. I'm stifling," Erica said, rather sharply, and drew herself away.

Reinhardt rose abruptly, and said he must go. He was so small and slight in form that it seemed as incredible that a rich and powerful baritone voice should emanate from him, as that the flood of music which fills a moonlit valley in May should pour from the throat of a little brown bird, or the deafening chirp of the *grillon* hidden under the narcissus of a Swiss mountain, be uttered by an insect.

He went away quickly, because the emotion of his song possessed him still, and he did not care to talk.

The firelit room seemed yet filled with the echoes of his music as Erica whispered hurriedly:

"Tom! I have a letter from May, written just before her marriage."

"Yes, darling," he clasped closer the hand he held, feeling with surprise that it was cold and trembling, as though Erica—the scornful and self-possessed—were nervous.

"She has sent me back the pearls," said Erica, her lips and throat were oddly dry. "She—asks me—to keep them always—in memory of Christopher, because, she says, that—whatever happened afterwards—he once loved me very dearly."

Tom did not speak, and she hurried on, impelled by a sudden impulse.

"There is something more. I am afraid you will not like it, but it cannot be altered now. I

had written to tell May—of your wish—that I should not accept poor Christopher's legacy to me——”

“I did not know you had written that,” he clasped her hand more closely—warmly. Again she shivered a little.

“It was against my will, of course,” she said, half angrily, and fighting against a rising sob in her throat. “But I did it, and so—so—the twenty thousand pounds has been sent to my mother instead.”

“But that's the same thing,” said Tom, quickly and sternly. “Your mother must——”

“Hush.” She was half crying. “You can't interfere. It's too late.”

“Nothing can have been paid yet—in this short time—less than two months.”

“It can. It has. He says——”

“Who says?”

“Mr. Gethell says it is an exceptional case,” she explained rapidly, almost incoherently, trying to still the trembling of her own voice. “There were no legacies to be paid but mine and May's. All went to Anthony Denys, and he was the sole executor, and he knew my mother was badly off, and there were large sums of money lying uninvested—Mr. Gethell never could get poor Chris to attend to business—so Anthony and May decided they would get it off their minds before they started on their

honeymoon. They told Mr. Gethell to pay it into Mamma's account, as—as I would n't take it. You can't take it away from her." The voice gathered courage and defiance. "You *can't*, she's—she's definitely accepted it, and it's made her so happy. She had nothing in the world of her own. Besides—" she clutched wildly at every straw of argument that presented itself to a mind half-drowned in apprehension—"besides, if you could—it's too late—she's—she's put it in the hands of trustees—she asked her vicar's advice—it's—it's all been invested for her in gilt-edged securities at three per cent., and tied up on—on our children," she murmured.

"Mr. Gethell wrote to her?"

"Yes—some time ago. You know I have n't seen her for days. She can't talk sense on the telephone. She waited for me to come."

"And May wrote to you?"

"Yes."

"Will you show me her letter?"

"I burnt it. It was marked private, and enclosed with the pearls."

"When did they come?"

"I found them at Mamma's lodgings. May was not sure where we were. She said they had to be valued for probate or something of that kind, or she would have sent them sooner. She wrote on the very eve of her wedding-day.

Oh, Tom, you must let me keep them. You must, you must."

Tom suddenly put away the hand he held, and got up, and moved restlessly about the room, fingering this or that object upon the little tables, mechanically.

He knew not what cold touch of doubt had been laid upon his heart, but it grew suddenly heavy within his breast. A vague uneasy sense that Erica had outwitted him seemed, like a pale scarcely defined spectre, stealthily advancing to fight against his sturdy determined faith in his wife. He laid it low, and came and stood before her, looking down in compassionate wonder as he perceived, even in the fire-light, how colourless she was, and how anxiously strained was her expression.

He knelt down and brought his face on a level with hers.

"Did you care so much, my Erica?" he asked. His tone was very gentle.

In a sudden passion of relief she spoke the truth.

"I did not care for Christopher. I care for the pearls. I want them more than anything else in the world. And I ought—to have what I want—now." She held out uncertain groping hands towards him as though appealing for his support and assent, and Tom caught her just in time to save her from falling.

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As he realised that Erica had fainted—some of the wonder and awe, and tenderness and anxiety that had moved Lady Clow to tremble and weep over her daughter—stole also about the heart of Tom.

CHAPTER XII

A WEEK later, Erica, in the doorway of the great house at Kellacombe, shaded her eyes from the bright morning sunshine, as she watched Lord Erriff, horn in hand, and Tom, as whipper-in, standing on the red gravel drive; while the beagles alternately jumped and fawned upon their gaitered legs, and sniffed the wet grass strewn with dead leaves.

After a few parting words of caution and warning from Lady Erriff, to which nobody listened, the party set off briskly across the park, and the mistress of the house went about her daily business of ordering dinner and inspecting the kitchen premises, but Erica lingered still.

Presently the pack started a hare, which fled like the wind—the pack after her, the men running behind—from the plantation whence she had emerged, towards the great avenue of forest trees, into which the last stragglers disappeared.

Erica went slowly across the large light hall, pausing to glance up at the wig-framed face of the great lawyer, Tom Garry, first Lord Erriff,

whose shrewd eyes twinkled at her from the huge canvas above the mantelpiece. In the panel on his right hung the picture of his wife—an early Victorian portrait of a pretty woman in a crinoline, with a wreath on her smooth parted hair. On his left was a portrait of their son, the second Lord Erriff, nicknamed in his own neighbourhood Handsome Jack, and popular for his very failings. He was represented as wearing his peer's robes, and holding a large coronet very carefully before him in both hands. Erica looked at the face and thought that it might have been Robin—so exactly were reproduced the delicate features, and the soft merry handsome brown eyes that he had inherited from the beautiful grandmother, who had been a favourite sitter with so many famous artists in her early youth.

The Opie and the Romney had already vanished from their places in the drawing-room, and the gaps upon the walls covered with hunting pictures brought from dark corners of unused rooms.

Erica had been only two days at Kellacombe, and to say that she was already greatly bored by her stay would be to express her feelings very inadequately.

Tom and his father were inseparable, and out of doors from morning until night. Kathleen, her pretty little brunette sister-in-law, who was

but just grown up, seemed to Erica almost a child, and a child moreover with whom she had nothing in common, for Kathleen was also very decidedly an out-door girl. Nora, the second girl, who was the black sheep of the family, had been despatched by her mother to school as unmanageable; and Brigit, the youngest, was not only excessively shy, but a little dreamer, living in a world of her own, peopled by characters out of books, and figments of her imagination. Brigit secretly admired her beautiful sister-in-law, but was seldom in her company, being held in bondage by the humble governess, who bicycled daily over to Kellacombe from Bursdon, to give her lessons and take her for walks.

Thus there remained only Lady Erriff, and Erica was bored by her mother-in-law—finding her conversation fatiguing to endure, despising her want of intellect and lack of consistency; and not always troubling to conceal the contempt of which Lady Erriff was becoming faintly aware, though she could not be described as a sensitive person.

She was in fact one of those well-meaning women, whose good and evil qualities are so nicely balanced that the gratitude aroused by their virtues cannot outweigh the irritation produced by their short-comings.

Hypocrisy was far from her thoughts, and she

was perennially astounded, grieved, and injured, when she found herself accused of defaming her neighbours of malicious intent; yet whilst dealing forth kindness with one hand, she would be busily writing libellous comments on the recipient of her bounty with the other.

After the first outburst of indignation and disappointment, she had promised her husband to make the best of her son's marriage, and with the sincere intention of fulfilling her promise wrote an affectionate letter of welcome to Erica, while at the same time she filled her letters to the various members of her own and her husband's family with lamentations, giving details which could but produce a singularly unfavourable impression of Tom's wife upon them all.

Lord Erriff was furious when his eldest sister, Lady Riverton, wrote to condole with him on poor Tom's unhappy fate; and replied in such angry terms that the old lady, who was also quick-tempered, forwarded his wife's letter in self-defence.

The result was that he stormed at his Julia, letter in hand, and to no purpose at all, since she could perceive in it only a proof of her sister-in-law's perfidy.

"Don't you see that you are practically accusing this poor girl, who is our son's wife," he cried, "of evil antecedents; and without any shadow of foundation for such insinuations."

"I look upon Katie's returning you my letter as a breach of confidence," said Lady Erriff, indignantly.

"In it you say—'of course we must make the best of it, for poor Tom's sake, but what she is, and *what she has been*, I shudder to think of. She does n't even *look* really respectable. Masses of red hair in unnatural quantities, and her dresses too dreadfully *décolletées* for words. Barely decent'—How could you write such words of the poor child—?"

"The letter was marked private, Tom," cried his wife. "It was most dishonourable of Katie to send it to you."

"Why should you expect Katie to connive at your treachery to Tom, and your slandering of his wife? You force your confidences upon her and she naturally declines to keep them from me, her own brother. Why should she keep your letters secret at my expense? She is a great deal too honest to fall into any such trap. She did right to send me your letter," he said fuming.

"Treachery is a dreadful word, and it is dreadful to think that Tom's marriage should cause dissension between you and me, darling," said Lady Erriff, weeping. "I shall never trust Katie again as long as I live."

Lord Erriff's indignation burnt itself out, and he despaired as he had despaired a hundred times before, of convincing his wife that she

had acted wrongly. She remained entirely satisfied with her own behaviour and assured of his unreasonableness.

"I suppose women have no sense of honour," he said to himself, falling back upon the dismal aphorism with which men who have chosen wives destitute of this quality are apt to console themselves.

He was too easy-going to bear malice, and forgave his Julia when he had written to explain away, as loyally as he could, her letter to Lady Riverton; but the recollection of the injustice done to Erica caused him to treat his daughter-in-law with peculiar kindness, and Erica, in consequence preferred him to any other member of Tom's family.

Her dawdling progress through the hall brought her face to face with Lady Erriff, who was bustling back from the servant's quarters, and she anticipated the enquiry which was immediately made.

"What would you like to do this morning, dear?"

Lady Erriff was a tall thin stooping lady nearing her fiftieth birthday. Had she been upright her watery and rather pink-rimmed grey eyes would have been on a level with those cool, light blue eyes of Erica which met them so imperturbably.

"I thought of taking a stroll, it is so fine,"

said Erica hastily, and knowing that Lady Erriff made it a rule, as she said, never to go for a walk in the morning. "It fritters away the day, dear."

She was never at a loss to find occupation for any one.

"Then I wonder if you would mind taking a pudding to a poor woman, Mrs. Bence, who lives just on the boundary of the Moreleigh estate where it touches our land? It would be a very easy walk, not half a mile. You remember we passed it yesterday, and you said what an ugly cottage it was."

"The one with the slated roof. I will go if you like," said Erica, reluctantly. "As a matter of fact I have visited that cottage once, with May Thorverton—Mrs. Denys—" she corrected herself—"the old man was alive then——"

"I don't know why she should visit there—they are *our* tenants," said Lady Erriff. "The old man is dead, and the old woman lives there with her granddaughter. She seemed to crumple up into an invalid in a very odd way the moment he died. I am sorry to say she is not really a nice old woman. She reads books quite beyond her station, has a mischievous tongue and unsettles her neighbours. Still, though she is a socialist and won't go to church, I send her puddings. I have always been broad-minded, and she is old and ill. I hope you won't en-

courage her to air her views however; I always make a point of repressing her when she begins to hold forth."

Erica resolved at once to hear what the old woman had to say.

She set out at her usual leisurely pace; carrying a little basket, and half annoyed with herself for undertaking so uncongenial a mission. Yet she was not destitute of a sentimental curiosity in revisiting the cottage, nor of a desire to contrast her present feelings as the prospective owner of Kellacombe, with her sensations of three months earlier, when she had surveyed both estates from the elevated ground where the boundaries met, as the prospective owner of Moreleigh. She realised with a kind of grim amusement that she would now regard the surrounding landscape from a contrary point of view.

Then it had been autumn—she remembered the still sunshine that had lain upon the brown and red foliage, and the fading yellow of falling leaves, and the mists that clung to the valleys.

Here also was a still morning glorious with sunshine, but now there was no sadness of autumn, no chill of decay; instead, a faint thickening of the points of bare branches, the promising of buds to come; the glad call of birds; the hopeful bleat of new-born lambs gambolling clumsily on trembling disproportionate gawky

legs; great drifts of belated snowdrops lingering under the park trees, and clumps of daffodils thrusting green spears and golden heads through last year's tangle of dead grass and leaf.

On her way she met a village child playing truant, who looked at her fearfully. The red chilblained fingers twisted a tiny bunch of white violets, and as Erica stopped and looked at her, the little maid, imagining herself detected, held out the flowers in an almost unconscious, yet desperate bribe.

"Thank you very much," said Mrs. Garry, graciously. She was too much a cockney ever to leave home without a purse, and it seemed a good opportunity to get rid of a threepenny bit which she was always mistaking for sixpence.

The truant, dumbfounded at this reward for misdoing, stood looking after her, and Erica went on her way, with the glow of one who has performed a good action.

The white violets, tied up with ivy leaves, were sweet-scented, and Erica fastened them in her bosom, and felt so unusually light-hearted in the freshness of the morning and the gladness of the spring sunshine, that she lifted up her tuneless voice and sang, as she walked slowly up the incline leading to the ugly cottage which was her destination.

When she arrived, and paused at the wooden gate, it did not, after all, look so very ugly.

There was a waxen *pyrus japonica* covered with blossom nailed upon the red brick wall, and above the low slated roof, the pointed flowering rods of a tall almond tree were lifted against the cloudless blue of the sky, while upon the doorstep a giant bush of wild currant had dropped a rose coloured carpet.

She knocked at the unlatched door, and hearing a faint response, pushed it further open, and went into the cottage.

This was the kitchen where she had seen the old wife stretching white stockings for her husband's corpse, while he lay waiting for death, in the inner room, whereof the open doorway now showed the empty bed.

The widow sat in a patchwork-covered arm-chair beside the fireplace, and it appeared to Erica that she had aged unduly in the past three months. Her leg was supported on a wooden stool; a pair of shrewd, dark eyes glittered from a withered yet wholesome face, red brown and wrinkled as a well-stored russet pippin. An open book lay on her lap, and she removed her spectacles as Erica entered, and apologised politely for her inability to rise.

"I hope you don't mind my coming," said Erica, and she put the basket on the table. "Lady Erriff has sent you a custard pudding."

"'T was turble kind on her," said Mrs. Bence, courteously. "Willee be so gude as to putten

on the dresser, miss. Her'll be wanting the basket back."

Erica obeyed resignedly. It seemed to her that she was somehow acting out of her character, waiting on old women, and putting pudding basins on dressers.

"A beautiful spring morning," she said, feeling she must open the conversation. "I left winter in London."

"'T is onseasonable," said Mrs. Bence, shaking her head. "And you may depend on 't winter he'll come back middle o' March or so, and kill the lambs, and nip the buds crool and wither up the flowers as has been deceived like by this here wa'amth. Thank you, miss, I'll send my grand-darter back wi' the dish."

"You need n't trouble. I'll explain," said Erica, graciously.

Mrs. Bence smiled genially and said, "You bain't well acquent with her ladyship."

"I'm her daughter-in-law."

"Ah." Mrs. Bence smiled again as who would say, "I may live a trifle out of the world, but do you think I'm ignorant of it's happenings?" Aloud she remarked civilly, "I've not forgot the day you came up along with Miss May as is now wed to Squire Denys, and see'd my old man. Willee sit down, my lady?"

Erica sat down on the wooden chair.

"I remember that day too. I'm afraid you must be lonely now?"

"I'm lucky to have my grand-darter to bide wi' me," said the old woman.

There was a pause, and Erica, as usual when she was at a loss, took refuge in an outburst of frankness.

"Tell me honestly, does n't it bore you horribly for strangers to come and call on you like this without being invited? I should loathe it myself."

A sly gleam of humour stole about the old woman's shrunken mouth.

"Well, my lady, you knocked at the door, which is more than some do. But 't is kindly mint; us must take the rough with the smooth."

"I'll go this minute if you like," said Erica.

Her smile had its effect.

"Nay, 't is arlways a pleasure, if you'm please to excuse me for being so bold, to see a face like yourn. You'd have been surprised to hear how my old man went on about 'ee on his death bed. 'T was more like an angel come to visit un than a martal maid, he said. But us did n't know then—" her twinkle convinced Erica that her story was known to Mrs. Bence—"as you was going to take and marry our master Tom, as brought me the first rabbit he ever shot, and a proper skinny one 't was."

She laughed with an acute note of enjoyment.

“Eh, you ’m surprised I can laugh so hearty yet,” she said quickly, “my husband dead and ahl. But the day wude be long if I sat mumping all the whiles. ’T is long enough, tied to a chair wi’ my bad leg as I be.”

She betrayed a desire to unswathe and exhibit the swollen limb that rested on the wooden stool; but Erica dissuaded her so earnestly that she desisted.

“Was it an accident?”

“Lord no, Miss. ’T was the hard life as done it. Too many children and too much standing about before and after each. I bain’t never had time to sit down comfortable wi’ a buke in all my days till now. And I be making up for lost time and no mistake, and wi’out no qualms of conscience neither; for taking counsel with the Lord, I’ve decided as He ’d be the first to own as ’t is now my lawful holidays, and fair earned.”

“Then you can’t get about at all?”

“I won’t say that; tu church I can’t travel, but to tellee the truth I manages to crarl round and do a bit of cleaning now and again. ’T is sertain sure if us wants to think a thing well done, us must do it ourselves; for one expects mar from other people than they’ve any mind for to du.”

“Can’t your granddaughter——?”

“Em’ly does what her can, but I makes no account of her cleaning. ’T is well known they

Bard Skules ruin our maidens for housework as well as for manners and obejence. 'Tis along of these 'ere young youths and fly-by-night moppets as is set over the children nowadays; being themselves onripe in wisdom though forward in the getting of scholarships.

"In course the children sarces them, as they wudent durst sarce old witty ancient teachers, who'd make them mind their betters and their beyaviour. My Em'ly be vast enough to tell I that my speech be turble ignorant, and so I'll allow it may be; but can her bake or mend or cuke as I can? Why, she can't so much as scardl the milk wi'out searching the pan. A fine wife her'll make the girt vule who weds her if such a one she ever finds."

"Do you know," said Erica nodding, "my mother used to say much the same sort of thing about me."

Mrs. Bence glanced sharply at her.

"'Tis very like the change from the old times be felt by high and low," she said indulgently. "Sitting here alone I ponders something wonderful."

Again Erica nodded. She remembered poor Lady Clow's complaint that she had too much time to think.

"My old man used to say as the railways, having turned everything topsy turvy since his grandfather's days, he thart as how the folk was

still mazed with the suddenness of it arl. But this be sartain, that good 's come out of the changes for us, and the poor be better off than they was. Luke at us. Brart up 'leven children on eight shillings a week. My old man boasted on 't, but I got a long memory so well as a long tongue, and I bain't forgot the cold, nor the hard work, nor the taste of turmot mash, as we've sat down tu for a meal many's the time.

"My sons and darters has n't never had to set that befar their little ones, and thank God for it. Why, my youngest grandson, as can't mow in a week what my old man cude mow in tu days at his age, gets eighteen shillin' a week."

"The prices of everything have gone up, I suppose?" suggested Erica.

"Some has gone up and some has gone down, miss," retorted the old woman. "'T is the wants as has gone up, and pondering, I've come to see as us that be old must be patient wi' the mistakes of them as be young and struggling to get a foothold above the place where us was forced to bide. In every scrimmage there's bound to be damage done, and if they've throwed down a lot of things as experience has tart us to prize, along wi' the burdens as was bound on our backs, why, you may depend on 't they'll pick those up later when their place is

firm. They've gained more than they've lost, 'carding to my notions."

"Lady Erriff says you're a socialist," said Erica, smiling, and Mrs. Bence was quick to see the quality of her smile.

"I don't hold with no labelling of my opinions. They come and go to suit my tharts and my conscience," she said, stoutly. "And whatever I be, miss, you might be the same in my place."

"I know nothing of politics," said Erica, gaily. "Life seems to me a scramble, and every one free to snatch what they can out of it."

Mrs. Bence peered out of her sharp eyes and shook her head. "You 'm please tu excuse, but there's a deal mar tu it than that, and you 'd know it if you 'd lived nigh seventy year as I've done, and watched a man live and work and die, as done his duty arl the days of his life, and got little by it, and yet went out to meet his Maker wi' a smile on his face, and his mind so full of peace as ever it cude hold. There bain't no scramble about that; 't is a steady fight, under arders. Us as is old, knows as the need of discipline be the first crying need. Tu o' my sons be soldiers, miss, as has telled me what discipline can do for the worstest of the worst, and says I, 't is n't only in the rigements they find out that. Us has arl got tu 'bey arders and reg'late our time from the King on 's throne as must be here and there 'carding

to the clock, tu the labourer as can't keep the cows waiting past milking-time. And each of us has got tu know his place in the world and keep it stiddy, and du the best he can tu better it 'earding tu 's powers. 'T is the young and the idle as listens to vule's tark about arl men being equal."

"And you disagree?"

"Be *I* a vule?" asked Mrs. Bence, heatedly. "Arl men equal! Be there one of my grandsous as cude ha' held up his head alongside my old man at their age? Why, 'a cude have lifted any one of them up in 's tu hands, and dashed un's brains out against the flure. Be one of them so witty and cunning as he were tu know the ways of the birdses and the beastses, nar tu du the thatching in 's spare time? Be Em'ly *my* equal as buys ready-made blouses and wears holes tu ready-made stockings? And lays abed in the marning and sits up nights wasting candlelight over they novelettes till her silly eyes be only able to blink at 'ee through goggles, same as my grandmother at eighty-vour? And her twenty year old, by which time I'd borne and nursed dree byes, and gotten the stiddest man, and happiest home in arl Westacombe for my own. Equal! Why, my dear soul, there bain't tu men even in thickey village as you could even with each other. God Almighty made men as different as He made trees and cattle, in strength

and vally and looks. They knows better than tu tark such nonsense tu I, but when they cries about the labourer being worthy of his hire, then I listens and says, 'Now you 'm tarking clean sense.' Us has lived tu hard and worked tu hard, back along, and 't is time things were arltered; and they be arltering, day by day."

"I hear nothing of any alteration except for the worse," said Erica, lightly. "Of farms that used to pay double, and land that is only worth half what it used to be."

"Yes, her ladyship bain't never tired of singing that song, and telling how a hundred years back the landowners was so much better off," said Mrs. Bence, with a curious light in her dark eyes. "But there—I can't tark straight tark tu her ladyship, for she 'd take it disrespectful and I was brart up tu respect my betters."

"Talk straight talk to me. I like it, and I won't tell," said Erica, smiling again.

"'Tis sartain sure as you be the rising sun us be advised to worship," said Mrs. Bence, "and for that matter, Ibain't afraid o' nobody since I got few wants now, and shall have none in a short time, being bound for the grave, and tu sons ready tu take me in if I was turned out of this yere cottage, which 'taint likely, for her ladyship have a kind heart and us arl knows it. But this I was minded to say to her. If in them olden days the squires was so much better

arf, how comes it that us, as was tilling the land for un, was feeding our little ones on turmots and living in pigstyes on wages so low as six and seven shilling a week like my father got? There be summat wrong about that, my lady."

Erica nodded sympathetically.

"But the day be coming, if it bain't come," said Mrs. Bence, with glittering eyes, "when the workers will be paid to the uttermost farthing, gude measure and running over—and that's where I'm hoping that they Bard Skules be going tu help them as will come after us, when they got past their ignorant mistakes at starting. Us as is far-seeing must be patient till their common-sense begins to work and makes clear to them as 't is no use setting the blind to lead the blind. They'll find out yet as 't is witty well-mannered experienced folk, commanding fear and reverence, as must be axed to teach children, and not vulgar flighty young things as knows no better than tu mock at the mother as bore them in pain and reared 'em in patience,—or their father as sweated in summer and froze in winter to get their bread. Miss, as I sits here my blood boils to remember as my Em'ly when her got her scholarship over tu Bursdon, crossed the road because her saw her own father, as had been after a whitewashing job, coming along, and thart as he'd shame her befar her school-mates. Her made believe not tu see un. When

I heard on 't I told her father tu take a stick tu her, but he says 'Mother, 't is ignorance. Life will teach her better. Doantee be hard. The maid be tu full of buke larning to mind manners.' 'Manners,' I says, ' 't is heart her 's lacking.' 'Nay,' says Joe, as was always the best of sons tu me. 'They be much the same thing—for what be manners but taking thart for others?' But I wude n't be daunted telling the maid that her might speak so fine and learn so much and dress so gay as her wude, but 't was a low mind and a common as lurked beneath such outward seeming, if her cude think shame of greeting her own father."

Erica moved uneasily, and again Mrs. Bence's sharp eyes scanned her face, but this time apologetically.

"Tu one brart up like you, miss, 't is difficult to onderstand as a chud cude behave so ignorant," she said, "but that 's what I say—if the world is tu improve, the poor must be taught good manners so well as the rich; and tu be gentle like to each other and those below 'em as well as tu those above, same as the real gentry be. For manners maketh man as our old parson used to preach, and many a tell he 's had wi' me about the respect us should have one tu another. But them as has n't got can't give, and think of my Em'ly set up to teach a parcel of little innocents—"

She lifted a thin hand worn with toil and age, and shook a finger at Erica.

“Will *her* teach them what manners means, or gratitude, or learn them not to be ashamed of honest work?” she asked, passionately. “But I bides my time in patience, for I says, gude will come out of arl, and the change be but beginning. Presently them as works for us will see so clear as I do sitting pondering over it arl, after seventy year toiling in the thick on’t. And I see as presently the children will be tart as character stands even above buke-learning, and that ’t is only vules as be ashamed of work; for lookee here, miss, honest work makes honest men, and there’s none so quick as workers tu find out as there’s no equality under the sun; and tu show who can teach the rest, and who’s a bungler, and band together against the shirkers and the drinkers, and make laws against them and learn them to obey, and choose the best man for their leader and stand by him and one another true and loyal. Loyal!” she cried, “they been saying as there bain’t no more loyalty among us. ’T is n’t true! There’ll be no tark of want of loyalty when a man have summat tu lose. Give un a home as is worth fighting for and see if un won’t fight vor’t. Give un time to know what th’ inside of his own home be like, and let the lowly have a bit of leisure for the joy o’ living so well as the

great—" she stopped suddenly—" You 'm please to excuse. But I gets carried away. Having a long tongue and being a witty woman, I pours forth my tharts——"

" I like your talk, and I 'll come again," said Erica, rising with that air of amused graciousness which she had worn throughout the interview.

" Seeing as how I shall soon be forced to hold my peace for ever," said Mrs. Bence, grimly, "'t ain't surprising I should like to tark while I can, and wi' some one tu listen better 'n Em'ly, as understands nart."

" I think I 'm sorry for Em'ly," observed Erica. " I expect you 're rather hard on her."

With a sudden impulse she unpinned a gold safety pin set with a turquoise horse-shoe, which she wore at her throat. It was a brooch she did not care for, and a relic of days she wished to forget.

" Give that to Em'ly," she said, with a little laugh.

" Her 'll be clean rampin' mazed with joy," said Mrs. Bence, and reddened with pleasure. " Doantee think I 'm hard on her," she urged. " Her be a gude maid in her way. You 'm forgetting that basket."

As Erica went away the old woman looked wistfully after her.

" They 'm all alike. Youth be for youth, taking

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arl our wise wisdom and solemn tharts zo light
as thistledown. But there 't is. They got their
time before un, and us knows we got tu go sune,
and thereby what 's play to them be death tu us."

CHAPTER XIII

THE afternoon post brought a letter from Robin which Lord Erriff read aloud to Tom and Erica, summoning them mysteriously to his study for that purpose.

It was dated from Singapore, and written some days before the despatch of the cable suggesting the sale of the pictures.

"I have been carefully examining a number of rubber estates out here, and am quite convinced that there is a great deal of money in the business. We are hard at work acquiring large interests in several of the biggest and best properties, and we shall be floating four really good propositions on my return to London. You'll see in the papers that Kuala Keliling, the shares in which were only allotted the day after I cabled you, are already above par, and I am convinced that that is only the beginning, and that the four I am speaking of have just as good prospects. A boom is, in my opinion, certain in a year or two—say in 1905 or 1906—and I am personally convinced that with the

enormous impetus to the consumption of rubber which must follow the development of motors all over the world, a thousand pounds invested now, might bring in forty or fifty per cent. in a few years' time; perhaps with luck even more. Never since the beginning of things has there been such a chance! Don't think I'm romancing, my dear old Dad, I'm basing my arguments on the demand that's bound to come, and the known limits of the supply; and older and wiser heads than mine are pretty well turned out here at the almost certain prospect of eventual magnificent profits. Their weak point is that they have n't the money to carry on through the lean years that lie immediately ahead, and that's where we come in. I am so afraid you will be put off by the fact that if you invest as I advise and urge, there would be no possibility of interest for the present, or for some time to come; and I fear you may be too much pressed for actual income to meet your yearly expenditure, to be able or willing to follow my suggestions, since you told me before I started that, short of selling Kellacombe itself, you saw no possibility of raising money for investment. But it would be worth while to borrow a little ready money, even if you have to pay five per cent. for it, and let me put you into some of these things on the ground floor. Do take counsel with Tom, and try and hit upon something."

“Well—the pictures ought to run to eight or ten thousand—from what Duveen says,” said Lord Erriff, looking up at his son. “According to Robin, I might get three or four thousand a year out of that one of these days, eh? Sounds like a fairy-tale,” said Lord Erriff, shaking his head delightedly. “My poor grandmother who never brought a halfpenny into the family during her lifetime—to bring us that after being dead for years! But I regret those two pictures all the same.”

“Still, it’s a good deal of money to sacrifice for the privilege of looking at her portraits,” said Tom, smiling.

“Aye. Well! They’re out of our hands now, and we’ll see what Christie’s will do for them.”

“You’ll cable to Robin directly the sale’s over?”

“To be sure; don’t I believe in his business instincts just as much as you do yourself?” said Lord Erriff, enthusiastically.

The prospect began to excite him, and he built castles in the air; quadrupled his capital, sold out half, paid off mortgages, doubled Tom’s allowance, and provided for his younger children, in the course of two or three turns about the library.

Erica listened eagerly. She was glad she had paid no attention to Lady Erriff’s suggestion

that the gentlemen had better be left to themselves, to discuss Robin's letter, which had to do with investments and such like dull matters. When her father-in-law presently turned to her and apologised for his discursiveness, she laughed and said, "But I like business, and it interests me very much."

She declined to go out again, pleading that her morning's walk had tired her, and when Tom offered to stay at home with her, she besought him very prettily to go out with his sister Kathleen.

He departed reluctantly, but once out of doors, was tempted to remain there, assisting his father to superintend the planting of a quantity of spruce firs, and Erica had plenty of time to execute the plans she had in her mind.

Writing to her mother, she enclosed a sealed letter which she desired Lady Clow to post immediately and with her own hands.

It was addressed to Mr. Helmuth Reinhardt, and contained an almost telegraphic intimation that the £20,000 had been paid into her mother's account, and that Erica now desired the whole instead of the half, to be invested in rubber, and would be quite content to wait for her profits.

Then she went and sat by the window of the great state apartment which was her bedroom at Kellacombe, looking out upon the park, down

at the deer moving slowly across the turf, and the gusty ripples on the dark brown surface of the lake, reflecting the bare trees, and cloudy grey sky; and up at the black steers grouped upon the crown of the bracken clothed slopes, and outlined sharply against the watery, low brightness of a colourless sunset.

As the light waned, she grew depressed; and her thoughts recurred to her call upon Mrs. Bence. She wondered idly what Em'ly was like—the sharp little modern maiden who won scholarships and crossed the road to avoid meeting the honest workman who was her father. Were her sympathies with Em'ly? Uncomfortable comparisons presented themselves. She saw her mother's large, piteous face, fading from rapture, at the suggestion that she should not visit the house in Lower Belgrave Street uninvited. Fragments of the old cottager's conversation haunted her mind:

“I told her—her might speak so fine and dress so gay as her would, but 't was a low mind and a common as lurked beneath such outward seeming. . . . ‘Mother, 't is ignorance. Doantee be hard. Life will teach her better. . . .’”

Erica shook off these thoughts impatiently but they recurred; and she wished for Tom's return.

When he came in, it was as though a rush of wet, cold air entered the room with him; and the face he pressed against hers was fresh and cold.

“I’m late, darling, but my father and Kathleen were so excited over the arrival of the young specimen firs, and so anxious to get them in at once, that we all turned to and worked over the planting. There are a couple of blue stone pines—little beauties. My old Dad and Kathleen had settled where everything was to go, and we got in the last before the light failed. You’ll see them all to-morrow. I wished you’d been there, it was so jolly; but it would have tired you, standing about, and you’d have been cold—” his voice was tender. “Have you been very dull, Sweetheart?”

“I’ve been resting—and writing to my mother—and then looking out of the window and thinking.”

She wore a warm, quilted wrapper of white silk, and the white hand he held was soft and warm; he knelt beside her, and looked out across the tossing branches of the forest trees, now silhouetted blackly against the stormy sky.

“Oh, Erica—I love this place so—you don’t know what it is to me to be here. I wish it did n’t bore you——”

“I never pretended to like the country,” said Erica.

"I know. And yet—I can't help wondering what you'll do when the time comes for us to live here," he said, rather wistfully.

"That may not be for ages."

"God forbid that it should be soon," he said, "but in the ordinary course of nature it's bound to come."

"We need n't live here all the year round even then, I suppose," she said.

He rose, and moved across to the fireplace, and built up the logs carefully to make a larger fire; and she left the window, and curled herself comfortably into the deep old-fashioned sofa in the chimney-corner. Tom blew up the red ashes into a white blaze, and as soon as the flames were roaring up the wide chimney, he came and sat beside his wife, and drew her closely to him.

"Sweetheart—I wish it was n't so dull for you. If we were better off, we could fill the house with people, and you'd see then how jolly the place can be. Of course now, with my mother just pottering round alone, and no one to be entertained or entertaining, and my father out all day, and Kathleen and Brigit no companions for you—it is dull. But if Robin's prophecy comes true, you wait and see how different Kellacombe would be. It's awfully difficult to do any place justice when every halfpenny has to be counted, thanks to my spendthrift uncle. Nobody knows how good my old Dad is, and

my mother too for that matter. They go shabby and deny themselves every luxury except hunting, but no one can say their cottages are n't as good as any in the country, nor their tenants as well cared for; and they both do an awful lot of good in their way."

"Do you think it does any good to carry custard puddings to old women?" asked Erica.

"Not in itself"—he coloured, because he was sensitive, and did not like the faint inflection of satire in Erica's voice. "The day is long past when a little attention of that sort from the squire was supposed to console a labouring man's wife for a leaking roof or a scanty wage."

"If I had been a labourer's wife in those days," said Erica, contemptuously, "I should have thrown the pudding out of the window."

"No, you would n't," he said, quickly. "You forget that the opinions of the labourer's wife have changed quite as much as the opinions of the squire's wife. The gentry in those days were just as hard on themselves as on their tenants. They supposed it to be the will of God that humanity, and especially the weak and poor and the young, should suffer and be glad. Look at the way they treated their own children. My grandfather was flogged at four years old with a horsewhip, for stupidity over the Latin grammar; we have the fact conscientiously recorded in my great-grandfather's diary. He was

brought up so severely that he used to cry with cold and hunger as a little child, and was thrashed unmercifully at all ages, in deference to Solomon's recommendation, by pious parents who believed they were doing their duty. Yet he grew up to be the kindest, wittiest, and merriest of men as well as a great lawyer, and *his* wife was shocked because my mother was given chloroform when I was born. She thought that it was flying in the face of the Scriptures, and that women ought to suffer the pangs of childbirth because it was God's will; and for the same reason she and her forebears were honestly persuaded that the poor should be content with hardship and glad to run at the chariot wheels of the great; and the poor thought so too. It is absurd to blame people who were all acting honestly according to their lights, because they did not act according to our modern notions."

"You always want to make out that everybody means well," said Erica, impatiently.

"I think—most people—do," said Tom, slowly. "In the cases I'm quoting I'm sure they did. And in any case I'm quite sure that it's not fair to talk as if the cruelties or injustices of the past, were committed by the same people as we are to-day, or suffered by the same people. Our very natures have changed to a certain extent under the influence of civilisation. Imagine

a crowd of to-day watching the burning of a young girl at the stake. Many would be physically unable to look on, and the rest beside themselves with indignation and pity."

"I suppose people got used to it."

"Exactly, and I suppose some people would say that it proves our national decadence; and others that it shows how our best susceptibilities have developed."

"And of course you'd say the latter."

"I should. But I think they've developed very slowly. In fact I think they almost stood still for a number of years; and that lately they've grown with a great rush, just as our facilities for moving from one place to another have grown with a great rush. Remember it's a comparatively short time ago that a famous judge gravely laid down the axiom that a man could beat his wife with a stick no thicker than his little finger. Imagine a judge who would dare now recommend a man to strike a woman. Also think how happily husbands of that date got drunk every night, and how little disgusted were their wives, who called a sober man a milksop. After all, squeamishness is a modern product, and if you go back far enough, nobles were scarcely better off than peasants, so far as actual comfort, cleanliness, and sanitary conditions were concerned; and to none of them was slavery an outrage, but part of the natural order

of things. It's a far cry from the Saxon thrall with his brass ring round his neck, to the English labourer of a hundred years ago even in the meanest cottage, and with the lowest wages."

"You seem to have thought a great deal about it. I suppose your conscience pricked you," said Erica, with her favourite shrug, and the ghost of a yawn.

"Of course I've thought about it," he said bluntly; "everybody concerned with landownership thinks about it now. A hundred years ago I probably should n't have troubled my head over the subject."

"I don't see what all that jumble has to do with the custard pudding your mother made me carry to old Mrs. Bence, in spite of her being a socialist—or perhaps in order to convert her."

"You don't understand the relationship which still survives between the great house of the village and the cottage, simply because you're a cockney; and though you may have visited both, you haven't *lived* in either," he said quickly. "The carrying of the pudding is only the symbol of a kindly intercourse of life between neighbours, and has nothing to do with the condescending charity of strangers. It would be very much resented if it could be said, 'So and so was ill, and not so much as a jug of soup sent from the hall.' After all, it is only a more sensible and practical form of visiting card."

With a quick change of voice and look he said pleadingly, "don't sneer at my mother, Erica. She has many faults—but nobody's perfect; and if any one's ill or in trouble she flies to help. Indeed—in her way—she has a heart of gold, and is the soul of generosity." He paused and said in a low voice, "She did n't like our marriage, it's true; but it was she who proposed at once to add to our allowance. My father had nothing to spare. Kellacombe of course does n't pay for its upkeep—what little money there is, is hers. I don't like to think what she must have cut off of her own wants to supply ours. And she would n't dream of mentioning it, and would be hurt if we did. It's so much a matter of course to her. Be a little indulgent. After all—she is my mother."

"That's the sort of argument which annoys me, Tom," said Erica, dispassionately. "I can't like people because they happen to be mothers or fathers or brothers or sisters. I should have liked your father if he'd been no relation to you whatever, and the reverse argument must hold good of your mother. What is the use of pretending? To be perfectly frank, I think the less she and I see of each other the more friendly we are likely to be."

Tom said nothing. He stared into the flames which his touch had evoked from the wood ashes. His spirits were dashed and chilled.

"You mean we'd better go away as soon as possible?" he said in a dull voice, from which all the warmth of feeling which had prompted his appeal for sympathy had died away.

"I don't want to be a brute," said Erica, half angrily, half relentingly. "But you must see for yourself that I'm a fish out of water here, and that your mother and sisters and I haven't a thing in common. It's not my fault that I was n't brought up in the country. I've plenty to do in London."

If Tom wondered what Erica had to do in London, he did not say so; and a silence fell between them, which remained unbroken until the sound of the dressing-gong startled them both.

CHAPTER XIV

ERICA and Tom returned to London in March, and Erica was very glad to be at home.

As she entered the little drawing-room in Lower Belgrave Street, she thought it looked smaller, snugger, and prettier than ever in comparison with the great bare white hall, filled with a litter of maps, and riding whips, and newspapers, and shabby arm-chairs, and dilapidated tiger-skins, which was the family living-room at Kellacombe. Also, she decided, in defiance of the poets, that she liked daffodils in silver vases better than daffodils dancing in the east wind, and that violets in crystal bowls were as sweet as any to be found under the hedges.

Concealing these views more or less successfully from Tom, she expressed them with all her natural intolerance and emphasis to Mr. Reinhardt, who came to tea with her on the afternoon following their return.

"I am supposed to be looking so much better for my change of air," she said, "that Mr. Mungo is to be asked to paint my portrait."

"You are looking beautiful," he said, in his

most impersonal manner. "I haf never heard of Mr. Mungo. There is only one person who should paint your portrait."

"I daresay!" said Erica satirically, when he had named the artist in tones reverential. "Do you know what he charges?"

"I neither know, nor care. The portrait of a beautiful woman by a great artist is for all time. It is worth therefore a great deal of money."

"But Tom, unhappily, is not worth a great deal of money," said Erica, lightly, "therefore, it can't be done."

Mr. Reinhardt considered.

"It can be done," he said, seriously. "You will come to tea at my rooms, and meet Tom. I haf the honour to be his friend. He will see you, and he will then ask you to grant him the privilege to paint your portrait as a favour."

"I wonder what Tom would say," she said, uncertainly.

"You do not usually consult any one's wishes but your own," he said simply.

"I'll come to-morrow," said Erica, decidedly.

"No—I'm driving with Daisy to-morrow, I'll come Wednesday."

He looked at her with a withering expression.

"A great artist does not pay visits to order. I will ask him to come and see me, and when he finds himself in the mood he will arrive. I

shall telephone to you and send my car, and you will throw over Daisy, or whoever it is, and come without delay; or lose your chance to show Mrs. Tom Garry to posterity as she would wish to be shown."

"There is another Mrs. Tom Garry who has been shown to posterity," said Erica, lightly. "Romney painted her. She *was* a beauty."

"If Romney painted her, she is a beauty still."

Erica acknowledged the truth of his remark, and gave him the date of the coming sale, and a description of the pictures of Tom's ancestress; all of which he noted gravely in his pocket-book, —but without comment.

She hardly knew whether she gave him the information from any subtle ulterior motive or not; and she returned to the subject of her visit to Kellacombe.

"I loathe the country. I loathe country-house life. I am overjoyed to be back in London," she said.

"I know little of the life in English country houses," he said. "As I told you, I do not go into any society, except, of course, that society of Bohemia which amuses me and to which I belong."

"I should call it going out of society," she said, impatiently. "Of course I know they are badly off, and can't entertain much. They live

what my mother-in-law calls a nice, simple, family life, and I believe she is considered a wonderful housekeeper and is quite popular in her own neighbourhood."

"If she is a good housekeeper she would also be popular in my country," he remarked. "No doubt she greatly enjoys her own existence."

"She does nothing of the sort. She can't enjoy her meals because the cook may be selling the dripping; nor her wine because the decanter is emptier than she thought it was; nor her fire because the coals were short in weight and the price gone up; nor her drive because the coachman is stealing the horses' corn instead of feeding them on it; nor her prayers because some old woman who ought to be in church isn't there."

"For heaven's sake, it is enough. Why is she not shut up in a lunatic asylum?"

"I suppose her family have got used to her."

"No doubt they are also sorry for her troubles," he suggested.

"I suppose they think it's the right thing. She imagines she is living entirely for her husband and children, and certainly her life must be a very dull one. Up at an unearthly hour to read a chapter with her youngest born, and nagging at her all the time because her hair or her pinafore or her shoes are untied or untidy, till the child's sprits are dashed for the day.

Then a fight with the cook and a wrestle with household accounts and a wrangle with the gardener and a tussle with the keeper's wife at the lodge; and a boresome drive to call on boresome neighbours, and knitting babies' socks all the evening to a running commentary of gossip. Before my visit," said Erica, with a little dry laugh, "I actually rather looked forward to being mistress of Kellacombe; but now she may put off turning out as long as she likes if that is the kind of existence awaiting me—though Tom says hundreds of English women lead it contentedly enough."

"But it is not the kind of existence awaiting you," said Reinhardt, composedly. "One's life is what one chooses to make it."

"What sort of life do you suppose mine will be?" she asked, looking at him curiously.

"I am not a prophet. But you will not sacrifice yourself for others, nor live obscurely and unknown. It is in the life of the cities—the artificial life, that you will shine; not in the natural and homely life of the country."

"I see no chance of shining anywhere," Erica remarked, rather fretfully.

"It will come," he said.

The next chance of shining that was given her, was when she met the great artist in Mr. Reinhardt's rooms in Mount Street.

She received the telephone summons as she

was setting forth to attend a matinée with Mrs. Woosnam, and she obeyed it instantly.

"But the two stalls will be wasted," cried the purchaser thereof, in dismay.

"Have you ever met him?" asked Erica, disdaining argument on this point.

"No, of course I know he's one of the greatest artists living. But I've often heard he hates painting pretty people. I suppose you and I are both pretty people," she giggled. "Of course it will be something to be able to say one has met him."

"I was n't given leave to bring you," said Erica, thoughtfully.

"Oh! I hope they won't mind. I shall feel wretched. Let me wait outside."

She followed Erica nervously into the lift, which was to take them to the top floor where Mr. Reinhardt dwelt.

Certain structural alterations had converted two flats into one, and the half of one into a great studio. At one end, a recess, lighted by a north window, was partially screened off; the rest of the apartment was decorated with a simplicity almost Japanese.

Some easy chairs and two tables to hold tumblers and cigarettes stood round the fireplace. In a low window looking over roofs and chimney-pots to the grey London sky, a wide seat was heavily cushioned, and a wheeled book-

trough stood beside it. There was a full-sized grand piano on an open space of parquet flooring. A Chinese cabinet and a writing-table were the other articles of furniture. In a corner a cherry tree in a giant pot was covered with blossom, and this gave a spring-like air to the spacious room.

The great artist lay back in one of the easy-chairs, smoking, and the little artist balanced himself upon the fender seat.

"Here she is," said Reinhardt.

The great artist jumped up, and his keen, bright eyes shot the quick, narrowed cursory glance of one who has been too often disappointed, and immediately widened with the joy of one who has found that which he has long sought in vain.

The glance inspected and dismissed little Mrs. Woosnam in what was literally no more than the twinkling of an eye.

The uninvited guest sidled timidly in the wake of the beautiful Mrs. Garry.

With that air of deliberate disdain, which was the disguise of an overwhelming self-consciousness, Erica came across the polished floor, and after touching Reinhardt's hand, and bowing slightly in acknowledgment of his introduction of his friend, she seated herself with her back to the cherry tree, and faced the window.

The faint March sunshine filtering through

the London atmosphere of smoke and haze, sought her unveiled face, and the soft rings of bright hair beneath her black hat, and illumined the pure complexion with its transparent flush, and the clear and lovely blue of the cold, watchful eyes.

The beauty of that colouring, and the full curve of the red lips, softened the natural severity which the straight profile, and the coldness of those light eyes, lent to Erica's expression.

There was also the redeeming quality of a pretty smile, the more valuable for its rarity.

She smiled now as she described with unfeeling candour the terror of Mrs. Woosnam in approaching Mr. Reinhardt's studio, without an invitation, regardless of the frank protestation of her friend.

"I am glad to see you, and I know your husband," said Reinhardt abruptly to his apologetic guest. "He is very good-looking—a giant—he would stand well for the statue of a Norseman of old, with his yellow hair and blue eyes and those big shoulders."

"Oh—if you know Charlie!" cried Mrs. Woosnam, and was immediately at ease and happy; satisfied to shelter herself even under the shadow of his name.

She talked artlessly and ignorantly as her fashion was, and exhibited much anxiety to see

all Mr. Reinhardt's possessions, wandering round the studio with him, and examining his sketches and caricatures with her pretty, pert, little face alight with pleased curiosity. To entertain her further, he unlocked the Chinese cabinet, and showed her the collection it contained.

Erica remarked that the room was hot, and threw back her sables and her heavy velvet coat; she wore a lace blouse, and her full white throat, with two delicious creases, was bare; the close-fitting bodice revealed the beautiful lines and curves of arms and shoulders and bust; about her neck hung the string of pearls which was her only ornament, save the two pear-shaped globes in her delicate ears.

She was acutely aware of the piercing eyes which devoured her beauty eagerly and critically, as she sat, twirling the hand-screen that Reinhardt had handed to her, to preserve her from the scorching of the fire. Conscious that there was no fault to be found with her attire, and almost unconsciously confident of her looks, she was calmly willing that he should gaze his fill, while they exchanged a few commonplaces regarding the cold, and the regrettable return of wintry weather after the premature outburst of spring.

The personality of the great man did not attract Erica; his hair and pointed beard and moustache were grey, and she associated grey

hair with old age; though there were no signs of old age in the brilliant deep-set eyes, the clean unlined skin, the mobile mouth, and nervous virile hands of the artist.

"I suppose Mr. Reinhardt has been playing to you," she said, with a glance at the open piano. "He does everything. Have you seen his drawings? He did a caricature of me the other day."

"I should like to see it. His caricatures are excellent."

"He has never asked me to sit to him for a serious sketch, which I think is unkind," said Erica.

A faint gleam of mockery seemed to flash from the brilliant deep-set eyes, but she smiled at him so frankly that it vanished, and he sat up with alacrity, and said, "Allow me to repair that omission. Will you sit to *me*?"

"It was rather obvious of me," she said, "but of course I know who you are, and every artist I have ever met has asked me for a sitting, so I thought I'd get it over."

The crudeness of her candour jarred on him, but he cared so much more for the outline of her face and throat, which, as Erica turned slightly in answer to an exclamation from Mrs. Woosnam, presented to him yet another aspect of her beauty, that he dismissed the impression with a shrug.

"That would be different. I have only sat to fifth-rate artists—or amateurs. Sometimes I come out a fright, and sometimes like the lid of a chocolate box."

He laughed.

"I will neither make you a fright, nor the lid of a chocolate box."

"No, but I have often heard you bring out people's bad qualities in a startling manner."

"It is my endeavour to reproduce the personality," he said, with a queer smile.

"Oh, Erica!" called Mrs. Woosnam in ecstasy. "Here is something you would like."

Erica rose very slowly, and dropped the magnificent velvet coat altogether; she permitted herself a little stretch and yawn of relief as she did so.

"It's so frightfully heavy," she said, apologetically.

He bowed very slightly, and followed with his eyes contentedly the slow movements of the statuesque and shapely figure.

"No—" said the guttural voice of Reinhardt, authoritatively, "you cannot see them properly from here. Go and sit in the window-seat, and I will bring them to the light one by one."

He lifted out a little tray, and brought a small table to Erica's side.

"Unset gems. My!" said Mrs. Woosnam. "Are n't they lovely?"

Erica picked out a large, round stone of dull red from its bed of cotton wool.

"Is it a ruby? I like them better cut," she said.

Mr. Reinhardt very gently directed her open hand, in which the stone lay, towards the sunlight; the imprisoned rays leapt to life, and transfigured the gem.

"It is a star ruby," said Reinhardt, "the finest I haf seen. It is for you, if you will haf it."

The delight on Erica's face transfigured it almost as completely as the sunlight had transfigured the precious stone.

"He 's given me a star sapphire—look," said Mrs. Woosnam. "Only I *reely* don't think I ought to take it. Whatever will Charlie say?"—in her excitement the natural vulgarity of her speech became almost rampant. "You 'll have to come to dinner with us and let him thank you himself, Mr. Reinhardt."

Erica looked at the sapphire, which was of a grey blue, with an even more perfect star.

"I haf a great many star sapphires, more or less blue; but I haf only one star ruby," said Reinhardt, quietly, and he held out a little dish of mother o' pearl, in which lay twenty or thirty of the dull round grey-blue stones, which flashed into a constellation as a direct ray from the sun fell upon them.

"The ruby is worth more than all those

sapphires put together, I suppose?" said the artist.

Reinhardt looked up, and they exchanged a smile so brief that it was hardly more than a flash of understanding.

"He's much too generous, but just look what heaps of things he has," cried Mrs. Woosnam, and brought forward another little tray full of rounded compartments, containing each a cut sapphire—light blue, yellow, white, and purple; sparkling and flashing.

"I haf collected gems for many years," said Mr. Reinhardt. "Here are different coloured pearls, golden, grey, black, and pink. The pink are from the Bahamas, the golden from Ceylon, where I got the star ruby and all the sapphires and these."

He held out a much larger tray, and immense aquamarines, cut like diamonds, lay like miniature lakes, of every shade of sea-green and faint blue and cerulean waters.

Erica had forgotten the artist, and the thought of her portrait. She hung breathlessly over the little trays which he held out to her one after the other, perhaps more really interested than she had ever been before in her life.

He shook out a bag of opal-tinted milk-clouded moonstones onto her lap, and she plunged her hands into them, with a delight almost childish, letting them slip through her white fingers.

"They are of no value," he said, "these, too, came from Ceylon. I believe it is only there that they are found. I bought most of my gems in the countries where they were found."

"It is a pity they should ever be set," Erica said, regretfully. "Are you not afraid to keep so many here? Surely they might be stolen?"

He showed her that the cabinet concealed a safe, and remarked that he doubted whether even his servant knew what it contained.

"There are only two stones of real value," he said, "and those I do not keep here," and he brought from the drawer of his writing-table a wash-leather bag, from which he produced a cat's-eye of enormous size, and a sapphire so large and lustrous and of such a deep blue, that Erica glanced discontentedly at her ring.

"They are both worth a grrreat deal more money now than they were when I bought them," he remarked, contentedly. "For the sapphire I paid only nine hundred pounds, it is worth now fifteen hundred at least. And the cat's-eye——"

"I don't like the cat's-eye," said Erica, but she looked longingly at the sapphire.

"I will paint you as Marguerite, in the jewel scene," said the artist, with a touch of malice in his pleasantry. "It would be a new reading of the part——"

Reinhardt demurred so violently that Erica interposed.



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"I have n't yet said I would sit at all, and if I do, I shall wear my green chiffon tea-gown," she observed. "It is more becoming than anything else I have, and it won't date. Some day I shall be painted in a magnificent Court dress with quantities of jewels," she explained; "but it does not need a great artist for that sort of thing. The Romney portrait of the beautiful Mrs. Garry is just a girl in a white frock—and the Opie, which I do not like nearly so much, is the same. But I must be painted in green."

She disregarded the sounds made by the great artist and the small one, and did not trouble to enquire whether these were intended to convey approval or protest. With a calm that petrified Mrs. Woosnam, she explained that the picture must be finished in time for Tom's birthday, which was the 1st of May, and that the sittings must be without his knowledge, that the gift should come as a surprise.

"But are you sure he meant to *give* it to you, at all?" asked Mrs. Woosnam as Erica's majestic figure presently preceded her into the motor.

Erica drew the black fox rug about her knees, and shivered in the March wind.

"I am not at all sure," she said, serenely, "but I am quite sure I don't mean to sit to him for nothing. Why should I? Of course he can make a copy if he chooses."

Mrs. Woosnam did not answer; she was a little uneasy. Erica's cool acceptance of favours frightened her, and left her doubting whether her own heart-felt thanks for the star sapphire which now rested in her purse, had not been too profuse.

"Where shall you have it set?" asked Erica.

"I thought I'd wait and show it to Charlie," Mrs. Woosnam suggested, rather faintly.

A moment later she gave the order for the motor to stop at a shop in Bond Street.

The jeweller with whom she was accustomed to deal rather pooh-poohed the sapphire, striking half a dozen matches in the effort to light up the star; but he showed a good deal more interest in Erica's ruby, and demurring to the suggestion of a plain setting, recommended a diamond mount of precisely similar design for each, to be worn as a pendant.

"That would be very nice," cried Mrs. Charlie, "exactly alike! It would be a souvenir of this afternoon, and of our friendship," she whispered aside to Erica, adding: "You'll let me pay for both, darling, *please?*"

"If you like the ruby better than the sapphire, I'm quite willing to change," Erica remarked, dispassionately, as they re-entered the motor.

"I would n't think of it. Why, they said it was worth ever so much more. But it's

just like you to offer," said Mrs. Woosnam, enthusiastically.

Reinhardt,—who had escorted his visitors only into the lift, with an apology for feeling obliged to return to his distinguished guest—shut the door of the studio on re-entering, and uttered the monosyllable, "Well?"

The artist was stroking his short-pointed beard thoughtfully, and looking into the fire. He raised his head and smiled. "Well?" he echoed.

"Is she not wonderful?" asked Reinhardt; his guttural voice deepened and became musical with emotion. "Ripe perfection,—in form—in colour—what is there left to desire? She is large, yet each pose into which she falls reveals a fresh beauty. Even when she poses consciously, she is not ungraceful. Could more be said?"

"She is posing all the time," said the artist thoughtfully.

"That is so," agreed Reinhardt. "It is the blemish that banishes the divine elusiveness of charm from her, that she can hardly for a moment be natural. Yet—whether she casts down those heavy eyelids so that the thick golden fringes lie on her cheek that has the bloom of the peach; or whether she looks—with that assumed frankness which veils a purpose almost brutal in the directness of its egotism—into your

eyes; or whether she parts her lips, and smiles slowly, displacing the dimples of a child—can you take your eyes from a face that is like a statue's come to life; that has stolen the freshness and colour of the rose and retained the coldness and severity of the marble?"

"She came to life, and forgot herself, and was natural for one moment when you showed her the gems," said the artist, "but the only revelation I could perceive was the unconscious greed that showed in her eyes when you dropped the shower of moonstones into her lap; though her face fell when you mentioned that they were of no value," he laughed whole-heartedly.

Reinhardt shrugged his shoulders.

"A woman holds out her hands for jewels, as a child does for a plaything," he said. "The question is—will you paint her for me?"

"For her husband?" said the artist, with a flash of his bright eyes. "You forget his birthday is on the 1st of May."

Reinhardt smiled.

"I want her to be immortalised as she is now, and only you can do it as I want it done," he said. "The question of the ownership of the picture does not disturb me."

"I would do more than that to please you," said his friend, with the light grace and graciousness that characterised him. "Also she is an interesting subject—up to a certain point."

“What do you mean—up to a certain point?” asked the exact Reinhardt.

“I am to be frank?”

“I am under no illusions concerning her; you may be as merciless as you will,” said Reinhardt, calmly.

The artist smiled in his beard and nodded kindly.

“I mean that, granting her quite remarkable beauty—the chief characteristics she revealed this afternoon, were, briefly—greed, vanity, a complete disregard of other people’s feelings, a certain tenacity of purpose, and a somewhat unusual lack of delicacy in pursuing that purpose—all interesting qualities for a picture to suggest—but requiring a certain subtlety of treatment if they are to be less glaring in the reproduction than they are in the original. And when it comes to evoking from such qualities as these, any hint of the actual soul of the woman——”

The dark eyes, with the involuntarily melancholy expression, met his own.

“Why must we assume that she has a soul?” said Reinhardt.

CHAPTER XV

ERICA gave less than a dozen sittings to the brilliant and erratic artist who was Reinhardt's friend, and he produced a portrait which was declared to be the masterpiece of the moment; and which was not only conspicuously displayed in the yearly exhibition at Burlington House, but was also undoubtedly the most widely discussed picture of the year.

Tom denounced it, and went again and again to look at it, fascinated by the cold, wary, blue eyes of the portrait, which followed him from one side to the other, and, wherever he stood, appeared to be lightly mocking him. It was difficult to criticise a free gift, and Erica had had a very pretty little scene with him on his birthday morning, describing her chance meeting with the artist, his entreaty that she would sit to him, and his offer of the portrait; and her final decision to accept for the sake of his father, who so urgently desired a portrait of her, and could so ill afford to pay for one. Incidentally this explanation revealed to Tom the cause of many prolonged absences concerning which he

had been too proud to enquire, though he had resented not a little the frequency with which his wife had deserted him for the society of Mrs. Woosnam.

He wished she had chosen a less remarkable garment to wear for her portrait than that formless, clinging, scanty drapery of chiffon; but it was hard to quarrel with the presentment of bare arms so exquisitely moulded, of a neck and bosom so white and rounded and of such statuesque proportions; and though he did not think the pictured face nearly so beautiful as Erica's own, he was fascinated, too, by the way in which that exquisite figure, leaning against a black oak pillar, in its green dress, appeared to dominate the crowd with its disdainful gaze.

Lord Erriff, for his part, declared that the picture did his daughter-in-law no sort of justice, but he was flattered by the sensation it created, and read the notices in the papers aloud to his wife, with excited comments of his own.

Lady Clow drove to the Academy in a four-wheeler, and with the utmost difficulty mounted the staircase, and after a despairing glance at the turnstile, was compassionately admitted by a side entrance to the exhibition, where she walked about with her catalogue opening of itself at the page where the name of the Hon.

Mrs. Garry, shared a line with the name of her distinguished delineator. She was so agitated that it was not for some time after she went away that she realised that she had forgotten to look at any of the other pictures. She waited, panting, in the crowd, opposite her daughter's portrait, until a vacant place, or rather two vacant places, offered her a seat; and then she sat there for upwards of two hours, gazing;—with her spectacles on and her spectacles off, alternately, and her soul in her dimmed eyes, listening to the remarks made by the onlookers.

“It is Erica to the life. Not only her but her very spirit. But oh! if it had not been just at that moment that he caught the likeness!” she ejaculated to herself, and wrung her hands together in her lap. “I’ve seen her look like that over and over again, when we’ve been having one of our talks that’s kept me awake all night. I had half forgotten—but that look brings it all back,” thought the poor woman. “I could sit for ever and look at her. Yet it’s as though she’d just mocked me to my face, as she used to, in that way of hers that often made me wonder—God forgive me—why I ever brought her into the world at all.”

She returned to Burlington House a second time, bearing the fatigue and unpleasantness to one so timid, of finding herself in a crowd; and again she experienced the shock of acute recog-

dition, in meeting Erica's very eyes on the painted canvas.

And standing before the picture caught a whispered name, and had her attention directed to a good-looking man with a pointed, grey beard and brilliant eyes, who was pausing also before the portrait—glancing up at it with a half-satirical, half-amused smile on his parted lips.

The strangers who had whispered his name to each other, turned politely away, but Lady Clow uttered a stifled exclamation, and became so pale with emotion that the artist, supposing her to be fainting, authoritatively cleared a space for her and placed her on a seat.

‘Oh, no, no—it’s nothing,” she faltered, “it’s only—I heard your name, and I—I’m her mother.”

He took the seat beside her, and the crowd being very great, the slight commotion and stir of the episode was almost immediately lost in it, so that they could speak unobserved, and it seemed to Lady Clow as though a laugh were hidden in the curly, grey beard, as the kind, bright, amused eyes met her own.

“Her mother—I see now,” he said. “And what is your verdict, I wonder?”

She told Erica afterwards, in piteous tones, that she had not meant to say a word when she began; but there it was—he was so gentle and encouraging that he seemed to draw her on. She

explained that she could not deny the likeness. It was so startling that it made her heart jump into her mouth. But if only—if only——

“Tell me,” he said, bending sympathetically towards her. “I would rather have *your* criticism than any one’s—for who can know her as you must know her?”

“And who indeed?” said Lady Clow, when she reported this conversation faithfully to Erica. “‘But oh’—I said, ‘if only you’d happened to catch her in one of her rare moments—when she lets fall a word that shows she’s fond of me in her own way after all; and brings back the recollection of the coaxing ways she’s grown out of—that would have made my child as she used to be, live once more for her mother. For after all,’ I said, ‘the dead themselves are not more lost to us than the children who turn into grown-up people. In fact, you know, we may hope to see our dead again, but nowhere is it promised to a poor mother that she may hold again in her arms the little soft innocent thing that used to cling to her, let her yearn as she may. That is over for ever. They grow up and look at you with hard eyes like those in the picture—and only now and then perhaps a glance or a word—to remind you.’ And he said, thoughtfully—‘I ought to have discerned the possibility, but you see, when your daughter sat for me, there was nothing to evoke that glance

or word. Now if I had but seen *you*, before I painted her'——"

Lady Clow assured him earnestly that she had never in her life been as pretty as Erica.

"I don't say she didn't get her complexion from me; to be sure I was pink and white as a young girl could well be, in my day; but her beautiful features I never had, nor yet her figure; and I do hope she'll never get mine; unless things go by contraries she shouldn't; for when I was her age, I was as thin as a thread-paper, and she has always been what you see her now, a little inclined to fulness. It's a great misfortune to be so stout as I am, and the worst of it is you know all the time it's a misfortune people only laugh at. Not to be able to go through a turnstile, and to stick in the doorway of a cab as I do——"

There were tears in her round guileless eye as usual, when the artist, with mingled coartesy and gallantry,—yet keenly observant of the smiles and glances her mountainous form produced—gave her his arm on the stairs, and found a cab for her.

"Curious. It never occurred to me—the tragedy of a fat woman," he said to himself, as he returned to the gallery.

From Lady Oakridge Erica heard that her portrait was discussed at every dinner-table in

London, and that everybody was dying to make her acquaintance, and that it was a thousand pities she could not go out much just now, but that next year she would certainly have a delightful time, since everybody was raving about her.

The torrent of compliments from Tom's god-mother was not displeasing to her, and it was a fact that invitations began at length to pour in upon the young couple, with the opening of the London season.

Lord Erriff's sister, Lady Riverton, who was a very great lady indeed, came to see Erica, partly from curiosity, and partly because her brother had begged her to do so.

She evinced an unexpected interest in her new niece, finding her a little languid and subdued, as was natural in the circumstances; and this stood Erica in good stead, for it confirmed Lady Riverton's suspicions that her sister-in-law's accounts of the young woman's want of manner and insufferable self-confidence were largely apocryphal.

"And she is certainly the most beautiful creature that ever was seen," she told her friends. "Poor, dear Julia has done the family reputation for good looks nothing but harm; her children have had to try and be handsome in spite of her; but young Tom's wife will put all that to rights in the next generation, it is to be hoped."

Lady Riverton was many years the senior of Lady Erriff, but she was one of those women who never seem to grow old. As she had been a small, sparkling, lively brunette with beautiful dark eyes and black hair at seventeen, so she was now a small, sparkling, lively brunette with beautiful dark eyes and white hair at seventy; still active, still interested in every one and everything.

“Time has stolen nothing but my hair,” she boasted cheerfully. “What of it? One can always buy hair. Sight and hearing and wits one can’t buy, and those have been mercifully preserved to me.”

She asked Tom and Erica to one or two very small dinner-parties to meet her especial intimates; and grey-haired generals, diplomats, and statesmen talked in lowered tones to young Mrs. Garry, and admired her so excessively that their old wives might have looked askance at her had she not instinctively retained the subdued and gentle air that had so favourably impressed Lady Riverton.

Tom found his Aunt Katie’s collection of old fogeys very tiresome, for they naturally paid him less attention than they paid his wife; but he willingly endured the penalty of an occasional dull evening in return for his aunt’s kindness to Erica, which touched and pleased him.

"Aunt Katie will present you next year, as my mother never comes up. Every one loves her, and she loves everybody," he told Erica. "She is like my father, however, very susceptible to beauty."

At the last of these little dinner-parties appeared Lady Wilhelmina and her husband; and this meeting resulted in an invitation to luncheon which Erica informed Tom she did not feel well enough to accept.

She had a shrewd instinct that under the shelter of Lady Riverton's wing she would be able to do without the belated patronage of his Colonel's wife, and the writing of the refusal filled her with secret satisfaction.

Looking back afterwards on those bright days of the early season, they seemed to Erica strangely dreamlike and unreal. For though she had crossed the threshold of the great world which she had hitherto only beheld as an outsider, she was still little more than an onlooker.

In the early morning she drove to the Park with Tom, and sat under the trees, with the evidences of spring all about her; carefully cultivated flowering bulbs dotting the turf. She watched with unending interest the procession of riders and walkers, pleased if now and then one man or another detached himself from the passers-by, and came and talked to her and Tom. Her young husband was very tender of

her, very attentive to her; terrified lest she should over-fatigue herself; and regardful of her lightest whim. When he was absent on duty, Mrs. Woosnam was only too glad to take his place; her motor was at Erica's service, and they would fly to Bond Street, or stroll quietly down Sloane Street, doing that unnecessary shopping that becomes a habit with the idle woman in London.

In the afternoon Mrs. Garry drove sometimes with Lady Riverton in her magnificent old-fashioned baronche, or sometimes with Lady Oakridge in her smart victoria; insensibly acquiring a certain amount of knowledge of the shibboleth of the circle to which both ladies belonged, as to a generation whose manners and customs were fast becoming antiquated.

At tea-time she no longer feared Gudwall's amusement when she told him she would be at home to visitors; for visitors not infrequently came, and the wives of one or two of Tom's brother officers appeared, making lame excuses or none at all for their delay in calling. Erica took her time over the return of these visits.

She did not feel equal to entertaining people at dinner in her own house, mistrusting her want of experience, and resolving, with the wariness characteristic of her, to be at her best when she showed herself first to Tom in the light of a hostess; but whenever old Lady Riverton lent

her opera-box she always made an effort to go; though she cared nothing for music, and though the bad air of the opera-house invariably gave her a headache. She could not resist the pleasure of seeing and being seen by the fashionable folk who as yet only knew her by sight as the subject of the picture of the year.

Mrs. Woosnam, with a top-heavy tiara balanced on her little, round forehead, was on two occasions her devoted companion; while Tom hovered in the background with Charlie Woosnam. Erica watched enviously the little stream of visitors who invaded the boxes opposite her own, as she envied also the jewels worn by women whose opera-glasses were not infrequently directed towards her box.

On the third occasion, Tom happened to be on guard, so Erica invited Lady Oakridge to accompany her. A sudden temptation assailed her, and she unearthed the emerald and diamond necklace and tiara which had lain concealed, since her marriage, at the bottom of a trunk, and with some trepidation, decided to put them on.

A certain uneasiness of conscience marred her enjoyment in wearing them, and it angered her that this should be so. "They are my own," she thought, "and it is absurd that Tom's fancifulness should prevent me from displaying them openly."

But she could not shake off the uncomfortable feeling; and even found herself wishing that the ornaments were less conspicuous.

“What magnificent emeralds, my dear,” said the loquacious Lady Oakridge, and dashed off into long stories of historic gems which she averred were not much more remarkable in size and lustre than those worn by Mrs. Garry.

Erica saw Mr. Reinhardt’s small, sleek, black head in the stalls, and was glad that when he came up to pay his respects to her between the acts, he, at least, made no comments on her new display of splendour.

He was full of passionate invective against one of the singers, and equally fervent commendation of another; and as Lady Oakridge was an adept at talking shop on every conceivable subject, they were presently plunged into a discussion. Erica’s eyes wandered about the house, noting keenly the occupants of the boxes, and now and then interrupting Lady Oakridge to ask for a name or a history, aware that the lady was perfectly well able to carry on two conversations at once without losing the thread of either; while she spoke so fast that she could pack into ten minutes, information that an average talker could not impart under an hour.

The last interval was nearly over when a voice made both Erica and Reinhardt start violently; Reinhardt because he was nervous, excited by the

music, and highly strung; and Erica because she thought for a moment that Tom had somehow returned unexpectedly from St. James's Palace, where she had supposed him to be safe on guard until the following morning.

"How do you do," said Robin. "Sorry I startled you. I'm only just back."

"My dear Robin!" cried Lady Oakridge. "I thought you were in the Malay Peninsula, or somewhere of that kind."

He smiled at her affectionately as at an old friend.

"I was," he said, and then turning to Reinhardt remarked, "I meant to turn up and surprise you at the office to-morrow, but I could n't resist the opportunity of coming to pay my respects to my sister-in-law."

He turned his handsome eyes on to Erica; so like Tom in feature, and so unlike, in his light and airy nonchalance, his easy palpable vanity, and the half-mocking flattery of his smile.

"How 's everybody? I need n't ask how you are."

His eyes dwelt almost caressingly on her flushed face, and his tone was one of frank brotherliness.

"Was my father very much cut up over selling the pictures?" he asked confidentially, as though to show Erica how complete was his acceptance of her as one of the family.

"I think he has got over it," she said, smiling. "He will be anxious to hear——"

"Don't talk business to-night," pleaded Robin. "Firstly, I've got a toothache, and secondly I'm too intoxicated with joy at finding myself at home again to talk sense." His eyes roved about the great opera-house; bold, merry, full of lively interest. "I say, there's old Corella, staring straight up at you like a proper, rude, old toad, as they say down to Kellacombe."

"He can't help staring; his eyes bulge naturally," said Reinhardt. "He knows more about music than any one I haf met here. I shall return to my seat next him."

The lights were lowered.

"I put off coming up too long," said Robin, regretfully.

"Won't you stay?"

"Thanks, I can't. I'm with some people who came over from Paris with me. Where's old Tom?"

"On guard."

"I'll look him up; or I'll come and see you both to-morrow if I may."

He disappeared and Reinhardt went with him.

"Helmuth," said Robin, taking his arm affectionately, as they walked along the corridor. "Do you remember I confided to you once that I was madly in love with that goddess of beauty who has now become my sister-in-law?"

"I never remember such confidences," said Reinhardt, stolidly. "There has been too many."

"I have come to the end of mine at last," said Robin fervently. "On my way back from the Straits—I met——"

"A woman."

"An adorable grass-widow, whose husband misunderstood her——"

"Is it possible?"

"—— and whom she had consequently, and very properly, left behind her, in a climate—well as hot a climate as his worst enemy could wish any poor devil to frizzle in," said Robin, with a twinkle in his eye. "Still, her image is now fixed unalterably in my heart. Before I went away red hair appeared to me an admirable thing in woman——"

"So it is."

"It should be black as the raven's wing," said Robin, "with hazel eyes, and curling eyelashes, and a *mat* white complexion—to tell you the truth the East washes out any other sort of complexion pretty effectually—I mentioned she was French?"

"No, you did not."

"French, amiable, witty; a witch who can make every other woman one meets appear plain and stupid."

"She must be a witch if she can make your sister-in-law appear plain or stupid."

"Literal as ever," said Robin with a laugh.

"Let me get back to my seat in time, and I will grant the lady every virtue under the sun."

"Providence has been beforehand with you, oh, omnipotent one, in granting my charmer every virtue," said Robin, with a shrug. "It is her only defect that she is, alas, middle-class to the backbone."

Reinhardt lifted his melancholy eyes to Robin's laughing face, with an enigmatical look.

"When I marry," he said, slowly, "I hope that my wife also, may be middle-class to the backbone."

Lady Oakridge drove Erica home, and the footman opened the door which lurked in the shadowed embrasure between the jutting shop-fronts, and returned Erica's latch-key to her as she descended from the brougham, in her white brocade cloak and dainty green satin shoes.

She uttered her thanks and good-night gaily as she ran across the pavement and into the narrow hall-passage.

But as she shut the door, and put up the chain and went up to her bedroom, passing the empty, silent drawing-room—Erica felt an unwonted sadness and depression of spirits. Robin's return had brought back to her suddenly the last occasion of their meeting—on the evening of the day when Christopher had thrown

her over, and when, stung to the quick by the light, contemptuous confidence of Robin's offer to replace him, she had written her tremulous, almost despairing appeal to Tom. . . . As she removed the emerald and diamond ornaments, and put them in their cases and locked them away, she wished she had not worn them, or that she had shown them openly to Tom. From sheer force of habit, her imagination busied itself inventing and perfecting a better story to account for her possession of them than the stale and trite repetition of the fact that she owed these, as she owed all her possessions of value, to Christopher's generosity during their engagement.

By the time she had turned out the electric light by her bedside, and laid her head upon the pillow, she had mentally explained in detail that the emeralds were her father's last gift to her mother, returned by his creditors in consideration of the rectitude he had shown in voluntarily resigning his all without a murmur, to satisfy their claims. An ampler and more romantic history than that of the bracelet, yet founded on that story, outlined itself in the darkness. . . . She stopped short, and said aloud to herself, almost in terror, "I am weaving a tissue of falsehood. I will tell him the truth."

She wished Tom had been at home, that she might make one of those semi-confessions which

always eased her conscience so greatly when she was in her present mood; and which would be so much easier to make in the darkness, and with his arms about her. But he would not be back until the following morning.

Contrasting him with Robin, she thought of him more tenderly, perhaps, than ever before, and with a more thankful realisation of the security which her possession of his name and his love afforded her.

She was soothed by these thoughts; her depression gave way to a gentle melancholy, and so she fell presently into a sound sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

TOM came upstairs just before noon; quietly, because Erica sometimes slept late, and he feared to disturb her; but she heard him presently moving about his room and called to him, dismissing her maid.

He opened the door between the rooms, and came in; omitting, to her surprise, his usual morning greeting. He had unbuckled and laid aside his sword, but he was still in uniform; and she noticed that his usually bright alert expression was somewhat clouded over.

"What is it, Tom?"

"Oh. Nothing——"

"Nonsense. Something's put you out."

"I've seen Robin," he said, with apparent irrelevance. "Only for a moment. He'd been to his office for an hour, and had to rush away to his dentist to have his tooth out. He said he was going back to the City directly after."

"Is there anything wrong with his investments?" she asked with sudden alarm.

"No," Tom said gloomily. "On the contrary, he's full of buck. Thinking he's going to make

a colossal fortune. He's very angry with my father for refusing to borrow money at any interest."

"Well then—" Erica completed deftly the coiling of her long hair which she never allowed her maid to hand'e. She leaned back in her blue wrapper, looking up at him. "He told you we'd met at the Opera?"

"Yes. He said you were looking more beautiful than he'd ever seen you, and that every one in the house was talking about you—and admiring your wonderful emeralds," said Tom, looking straight at her.

Erica had absolutely forgotten her self-reproach and misgivings of the previous night; they rushed upon her memory now, together with a great anger; but the anger was directed against Robin and not against herself.

"It is odd," she said, flushing with vexation, but speaking scornfully, "that I always had a presentiment that Robin would try to make mischief between you and me when he came back. He hasn't lost much time."

"That's rubbish," said Tom, sternly. "Men don't do those things. Robin wished to give me pleasure, and he knew there could be no surer way than by praising you."

Erica changed her tone.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said softly. "It was horrid of me to say that. But to tell you the

truth—" Erica was conscious of a glow of self-approval because she decided even as she spoke to abandon the story of Sir Joseph's creditors and the return of the jewels—" to tell you the truth, I was cross because I'm really not to blame. I suddenly came across my emeralds when I was rummaging in one of my trunks, and thought how exactly they'd match my frock—and it seemed a thousand pities not to wear them. The last chance I may have this season. If you'd been at home I'd have asked you frankly if you minded,—because, of course, poor Chris *did* give them to me—but you were away; and I tried them on and they looked so well and—and I really didn't think there *could* be any harm."

"I see," said Tom.

He did not offer to caress her, nor fling himself down in his impetuous way beside her, thanking and praising her for the effort of this confession and appeal, as she expected. Erica did not like the change in his manner. Her anger against Robin grew and strengthened, but she did not feel angry with her husband.

"I think it's horrid of you to take it like this," she said, assuming petulance. "If you only knew—I lay awake in bed last night for ages worrying over it; and I'd made up my mind to tell you about it this morning. That

was why I called you in here, and sent Clarge away." If her conscience protested, she was far too anxious to pay any attention to it.

"Tom, don't be horrid to me." She went to him, and put her arms about his tall, uniformed figure, and laid her head against his shoulder. Erica rarely offered a caress. "Darling, don't you believe me?" There was the little thrill in her voice that could bring tears at will to her mother's eyes, and now actually brought them to her own.

She saw herself reflected in the long glass of the wardrobe, as she clung to Tom; and in the midst of her anxiety to prevail, felt a throb of satisfaction in the picture thus presented; of the handsome soldier, with his upright supple figure of youth and strength combined, and dark head bent above the lovely face and crown of bright hair that lay on his breast.

She raised blue eyes swimming with tears, and noted with something like alarm the grave, almost pitying expression of his face.

"Are you so angry with me for not telling you about the emeralds?" she said, clinging more closely. "But I had forgotten all about them. They were in two big cases at the bottom of my biggest trunk. I had never worn them. It was the pearls I cared for. Tom! Don't you believe me?"

"I suppose so," he said, in a dull flat voice.

“It—it was n’t so much—about that; though that was part of it—but——”

“Then what?” she said, genuinely bewildered. A dozen conjectures flashed into her mind. Had Robin spoken indiscreetly of his original flirtation with her, and subsequent proposal? Impossible; he was a gentleman and could never have spoken of either. It must have been some inadvertency, some discrepancy, of her own. She tried to remember what she had told Tom, and could not.

With an odd, sickening sensation of having passed once before through some scene of this kind, in which her memory had played her false,—she put her hand to her forehead; recollecting, and not for the first time, the proverb anent the necessity of a good memory, in relation to uttered words having no foundation in fact.

“Tom! Do tell me what you mean,” she said faintly. “Don’t be like this. You might remember—you might be more considerate.”

He put her gently into the arm-chair and gave her the bottle of salts towards which she signed; and without waiting to be asked, threw open the window, and let the fresh spring air and the cheerful noises of the street enter the overheated room freely. But he rendered these services not with his usual tenderness and eagerness, but mechanically, almost abstractedly; and her mood changed.

"I wish you would n't be so priggish and solemn, making mysteries of your grievances like this," she said angrily, "when I'm not fit for tiresome scenes."

"I beg your pardon," said Tom. "I did n't wish to make mysteries." His brown eyes that had lost their pleasant frank expression, regarded her sombrely. "In talking of business to Robin, he—again without the faintest thought of making mischief—congratulated me warmly upon the fact that your mother had managed to get five thousand shares in Kuala Keliling allotted to her. He said he supposed it was Reinhardt's doing, and I answered that of course that was so."

Erica's lips and throat were dry. She felt neither mentally nor physically able to cope with the situation.

"You will remember," said Tom, very slowly and distinctly, "Robin's letter to my father from Singapore, mentioned that the Kuala Keliling shares were to be allotted the morning after he sent his cable about the pictures—the morning after you told me your mother had placed the legacy in the hands of trustees and that it had all been invested in gilt-edged securities at three and one half per cent."

Her lips quivered.

She abandoned all effort to defend herself, and lay huddled together in the chair, a lonely and

pathetic figure, holding her blue wrapper about her with one hand, and stretching out the other piteously to her husband.

"It was because—because I was afraid," she said, and began to sob in a childish despairing way that made his heart ache.

"Afraid! Of me!" he said in wonder and pity.

"Afraid—you would take away the money," said Erica.

He stood looking at her.

"I see," he repeated dully.

"You've never realised how much things of that kind mean to me—who've had to do without them all my life," she sobbed.

The tears rolled down her face—large, heavy tears; he could not bear to see them and presently said gently, "Don't cry any more, Erica. It's not good for you."

"How can I help it, when you are angry with me?"

"I don't know that I'm angry. It would n't be any use if I were," he said; and the hopelessness of his young voice was so unlike Tom's blithe tones that for a moment a pang of real sorrow touched her.

He returned to his dressing-room, and she rose unsteadily, and bathed her eyes. Tears were very disfiguring to Erica's fairness, and she leant out of the open window for a few minutes, and let the air play upon her flushed face.

Opposite were the frowning buildings of a big national school, and in the high-walled playground she could see the children playing and running, and hear their shouts.

The warmth and gaiety of early summer had penetrated even these dull streets, and a flower-seller passed on the opposite pavement with a basket of red roses.

A distant barrel-organ played popular songs, and a butcher-boy whistled in unison. Erica turned away, and with flagging footsteps sought Tom in his dressing-room.

He was at once too generous and too tender-hearted to withstand the silent appeal of that drooping attitude and shamed face downcast. He crossed the room quickly and took her into his arms. But the embrace between husband and wife was a silent one. Neither knew what to say.

Robin's appearance at luncheon was a relief. He was far too tactful to appear to notice the red eyes of Erica, or the pallor and depression of Tom, merely devoting himself without ostentation to cheering and amusing them both.

To himself he said: "They've had a row, and he's got the best of it. Good old Tom."

He related the history of his visit to the dentist; mourned the excellence of the luncheon which he might not share, and complained that he was up to his eyes in work, but appeared

to have some time on his hands; for when Tom mentioned that he was playing polo at Hurlingham that afternoon, in place of a brother-officer who was down with influenza—he explained that he was escorting his pretty French grass-widow and her sister to Hurlingham to witness that very match, and offered to motor Erica down with his party.

But Erica refused. She was feeling languid and unwell, and though Robin's gay chatter had changed the trend of her thoughts, and obliged her to laugh with Tom, at his adventures, she had nevertheless not forgiven her brother-in-law for his unconscious betrayal.

She said she was not sure if she would be able to go out at all, and that if she did she was pledged to her mother; and Robin did not press his invitation.

The brothers arranged to start together, and Tom lingered behind Robin, and whispered to Erica to take care of herself and kissed her tenderly, turning again to smile at her as he left the room.

She heard the front door close, and it was as though all the brightness of the summer day faded with their departure.

Erica bade Gudwell say "Not at home," to visitors, and lay on the sofa, really feeling unfit for the exertion of getting up and going out.

The noises of the street made the room seem

the more silent, and the loud ticking of the clock irritated her. She lay among the cushions on the low divan; and the contrast which the bowls of red roses and vases of carnations afforded, with the soft, grey tone of the walls and curtains no longer gave her pleasure. A great weariness and disgust possessed her. Life had held to her lips the magic cup overflowing with happiness, and it was as though she had chosen of her own free will to drop in the poison that must cloud that clear and sparkling draught. Yet she knew very well that the free will was only apparent, and that two powerful enemies, habit and opportunity, had compelled.

She thought of all her good resolutions, and sickened over the recollection. She, who had prided herself upon a clear brain, and a strong will, realised how feebly she had succumbed to one petty temptation after another. She thought of her resolve upon her wedding-day, that their marriage should restore to Tom every lost illusion of her perfection. And lo, she perceived that from mere vanity and greed of gain, she had shattered the idol he was so pathetically ready to worship.

After resting and vexing herself with thought for an hour, she dozed for a few moments, and waking with a start, went up to her room to telephone to her mother, deciding that she felt too ill and too miserable to go out.

The disappointed exclamation emitted by poor Lady Clow,—who had already been stationed for half an hour by the window, watching for her daughter's arrival—caused Erica a passing compunction. For a moment she thought of turning her mother's disappointment to joy, by graciously summoning her to Lower Belgrave Street; but she decided this would be a dangerous precedent, and promised to go on the morrow to Kensington instead.

Habit induced a look at herself in the glass before descending; and she added, almost unconsciously, a few effective touches to her hair and dress, which dispelled the heavy dishevelled look resulting from her brief slumber, and long tossing among the cushions of the divan.

The faint air of sadness gave meekness to her face; and the dull powder-blue tint of her gown was exceedingly becoming to her fairness.

It is not to be denied that that interval before her mirror sent Erica downstairs in better spirits with herself and the world.

Her mind was busy again, actively working. She did not lack courage, and the brave are not able to sit down and bemoan the ruins of any hope for a prolonged space of time, without bestirring themselves to sweep away the débris and build afresh. Erica told herself that at least now, and for the first time, she had no secrets from Tom; that it was almost a relief

that he knew what he knew; that to-night she would tell him that she had been a thousand times on the verge of pouring out all her heart to him, and that only the fear of losing his good opinion had prevented her. Now he knew her weakness: her love of wealth and luxury, her hatred of yielding concrete possessions for the sake of abstract principles which she scarcely understood. He knew now that she had lied and plotted and schemed to retain her own, but that he loved her in spite of this knowledge she did not doubt, and a vague sense of rest in that assurance grew upon her.

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CHAPTER XVII

ERICA found tea waiting for her in the drawing-room, and realised that her mood of depression was over. The sounds of London entering through the open windows no longer saddened her, and her eyes dwelt with pleasure upon a mighty jar of arum lilies which stood in the corner behind her favourite chair, before which the tea-table had been placed.

Gudwall, who was famous for studying quietly the individual tastes of his employers, had set a smaller table ready to her hand with a pyramid of fresh strawberries on a painted dish, and a frosted silver jug of cream beside one of the plain ginger cakes that Erica especially liked.

She had practically no occupations; but, to please Tom, was endeavouring to interest herself in a book he had given her,—a collection of modern poetry, exquisitely bound.

This, too, lay ready to her hand, with a silver paper-cutter inserted to keep the place.

She lifted it idly and read beneath her own name on the fly-leaf, written in Tom's clear

minute hand, a verse of Yeats, which through all the trials of over-quotation, retains its power to charm.

*“ When you are old and grey and full of sleep
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once—and of their shadows deep.
How many loved your moments of glad grace
And loved your beauty with love false or true—
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you.”*

For the moment, as she stood, with the open book in her hand, and her blue eyes bent upon the page whereon Tom's hand had set down these words—and when she raised them at the sudden opening of the door—they did not lack that “soft look” which was, with her, so rare an expression.

Her pensiveness turned to amaze at the confident entry of a young gentleman quite unknown to her; and he, in his turn, stopped short, confounded and covered with painful confusion.

He was very tall—and by no means broad in proportion, being on the contrary of a narrow build, with shoulders inclined to slope. His face was almost handsome, so far as the shape of his aquiline features, and his large, dark blue, short-sighted eyes were concerned—but his chin receded, and the expression of his face was not only gentle, but rather foolish.

"I say, by Jove," he said, "I—I'm most awfully sorry. I beg your pardon a thousand times. I—I'd no idea. I've only just come home. Perhaps you'll allow me to introduce myself and explain—" he stammered—"I'm Lord Finguar."

"Our landlord!" said Erica, with a lovely smile. "Will you have some tea? Tom's playing polo."

Her *sang-froid* enchanted him; dumbfounded as he was already by the radiant beauty of the vision which had met his eyes when he burst into the room in such unmannerly wise.

It was true that Erica might, at the moment of his entry, have been posing for the picture of a saint, with the low afternoon sun burnishing the halo of her hair, and the classic folds of her dim blue gown falling about her, as she stood, with one white finger pointing to the page of an open book, and meek white eyelids golden-fringed, and down cast.

Though these thoughts passed vaguely through his brain, the young man, who possessed but a limited vocabulary, summed them up briefly in three words; murmuring to himself as he dropped an apologetic eyeglass:

"She's a peach!"

Aloud, he continued to stammer forth excuses.

"I must have seemed quite inexcusable; but to tell you the truth, I meant to spring a sur-

prise on Garry. Daresay he's told you we're pals; at school together and all that, you know."

"Are you in the Brigade?" interposed Erica; knowing that he was not, she yet asked the question from desire to show interest.

"No, by Jove. I wish I were. I never could pass an exam. Failed every time," he said, simply. "No, I'm a useless log, but not my fault. Willing enough to serve my country, but my country would n't have me." His fatuous laugh betrayed nervousness. "Seems to me there ought to be some use for fellows like me, who can shoot and ride and could be trusted to obey orders, don't you know, even if they can't pass exams; but the army don't think so, or somebody does n't think so, and there it ends. I don't know how to apologise for bursting in upon you like this, but you see, I—I've got a latch-key on my watch-chain, so I let myself in, and meant to scribble a note to Tom if he was out,—but, of course, if I'd dreamt you were here——"

"I suppose he'd have put you up if I had n't been here," she said, smiling.

Finguar was struck by her astuteness, since he had come to suggest himself as a visitor to his own rooms, in accordance with arrangements previously made between himself and Tom.

"Of course that's impossible—under the circumstances," he said, and hurriedly changing the

conversation—"How's old Gudwall—I left him in charge—and my old aunt's housekeeper? I suppose they're here still?"

"Yes, they are here. Do you mean you had n't heard of Tom's marriage?"

"I can't say I had," said Finguar, turning red. "Jolly stupid of me. Haven't seen any one since I landed, practically."

"I wonder he did n't write——"

"Oh! Why should he?" said Finguar, vaguely. "He never writes letters, and no more do I. And besides, he would n't have known where to write. I've been wandering about—no address."

"The papers? It was announced last November."

"Last November I was 'way off in the Rocky Mountains. Funny, is n't it, one can do without newspapers for months and never miss them, when one's away—and yet one must be reading them every other minute when one's at home."

He suddenly remembered that he was a self-invited guest, and sprang to his feet.

"You've been most awfully kind to forgive me like this, Mrs.—er—Garry," he said. "I hope you'll explain how it was, and get old Tom to forgive me too."

"Oh—must you go?" said Erica. Her disappointment was so obvious that he wavered.

"I'm all alone," she said, and through his

mind passed an indignant wonder as to whether Garry could be already neglecting this beautiful woman. Much he wondered also, who this beautiful woman was whom old Tom had married. That she had not belonged before her marriage to his own world an unerring instinct told him; but an equally unerring instinct assured him that she had not belonged, either, to that half-world which he thought he knew almost as well as his own.

“I want to tell you,” she said, “how absolutely perfect your rooms are. You must have the most wonderful taste.”

“I know nothing about it,” said Finguar, and he sat down again. “I employed one of those decorator Johnnies—you know the kind of thing—longish hair, and gave ladylike squeaks when he found the right sort of cabinet to hold my grandmother’s old cups and saucers. But I must say I thought he did it all jolly well.”

“My room is a dream,” said Erica. “I simply love it.”

A sudden wave of colour rushed over Lord Finguar’s refined foolish face.

“I’m sure you didn’t have it done like that for *you*,” she said, softly. Her eyes invited confidence.

He hesitated. He knew now more certainly than ever that she did not belong to his own world, or that such a leading question to a

stranger would have been impossible to her. But he thought none the worse of her for that.

He was a very simple young man; with that streak of quite unconscious, but utter cynicism which a certain hard knowledge of the world and its ways generally forces upon simple young men of his class.

She was very pretty, and all alone; and she had practically appealed to him to confide in her; and if she wanted him to confide in her, why the devil should n't he confide in her? A man must confide in some woman, and he had n't seen any one he was in the least inclined to confide in for months.

In short, he had revealed the tragedy of his life-history already to one pair of sympathetic shell-like ears on his voyage out—and to another in a far-off American city.

The sad story had become easier in the telling; the need for human sympathy more acute; and if his fair hearers had smiled as well as sympathised, the simple young man had not divined their amusement.

She had been a little girl in the chorus of a musical comedy; not even a principal—nothing extraordinary in the way of looks—just one of those little girls, with grey eyes and brown hair and a resolute will, who have the pluck to fight, as well as the sweetness to charm, a world in which they have to earn a living.

Lord Finguar loved her, and she would n't look at him. He wanted to marry her, and "take her out of it all"; and if he could not help being struck by his own magnanimity in so wishing, the wish had nevertheless sprung from a heart filled with a warm and generous desire for her happiness as well as for his own.

"You see, Mrs. Garry," he explained, simply, "there really was n't any one to mind. My mother was dead, and I'd no sisters to worry about my marrying one of their own sort. I mean—" he grew suddenly red again—"somebody they *knew*, don't you know. There was n't any one to make things unpleasant, in short; and I'd promised to provide for her people. They were awful—an old granny who drank, and a half-witted brother—and at last, one day, quite suddenly, she said she'd marry me. I got the rooms ready—and—and——"

And at the last moment, the little girl with grey eyes and brown hair found she could n't marry a man she did n't love, and wrote Lord Finguar a letter blotted with tears, to say so.

"You know, Fin, I've never pretended to love you, and I only came round because I thought Charlie was off it. I've treated you bad, but that was the whole reason, and now I find he was true all the while. . . . He's got a good place, so it will go hard if we can't help Gran

and little Billy along between us. He's got a mother to keep too, so we're got nothing to reproach each other with, and I'm going on with my work. I'd have hated to leave it worse than anything, and whatever I should have done with myself, without it I don't know. And I know I can't live without my Charlie, anyway. . . . And I don't care a bit who says I'm a fool. I know myself."

So she gave her noble suitor the go-by, and married a young man in her own class, and went unconcerned upon her honest way.

Lord Finguar had been very magnanimous indeed. He sent a magnificent present, which was accepted with cheerful gratitude; and tore up the letter of reproach which he sat up all night to write, instead of sending it. Why should he cloud her happiness? He handed over the rooms to his friend Garry, and rushed abroad to get over his disappointment as best he could.

The story took time in the telling, and the afternoon sunshine faded, though the light of the summer evening precluded all necessity for lamps.

Fascinated, Lord Finguar lingered, and skilfully Erica prolonged sympathy and interest. His suffering was now almost imaginary, but the wound to his vanity was not altogether healed, and the balm of her outspoken surprise at the unaccountableness of the chorus girl's behaviour was soothing.

She heard, though he did not, the stopping of a motor at the door, and flying footsteps taking the stairs, two steps at a time, and said with a smile.

“Here 's Tom. I always know his step.”

Robin entered alone.

He was rather pale, but perfectly self-possessed, though his whole demeanour conveyed the impression that he was the bearer of bad news. He nodded to Finguar, evincing no surprise at beholding him, since he had forgotten, after the manner of his kind, that Tom's pal had been away at all; he came straight to Erica's side and spoke rapidly.

“Look here. Tom made me come on ahead, because he was so awfully afraid of startling you. He 's quite all right, so there 's nothing for you to be anxious about, but he took a toss, and his beast of a pony managed to kick him in the chest. So he 's coming home with his ribs all bound up. He says they don't hurt a bit. But he was frightfully anxious about you, though I told him I knew you were far too much of a Spartan to think the world had come to an end, because he arrived looking a bit white about the gills.”

His brown eyes were anxious, though he spoke so lightly.

“You 're not trying to make it out less than it is?”

"Upon my honour I'm not," said Robin, earnestly. "One rib's broken, that's all. So they bound him up."

"Is n't that serious?"

"I had two ribs broken once and walked about for two days without knowing it," said Finguar, simply.

"Every fellow gets his ribs broken sooner or later," said Robin, promptly. "My old Dad's had his smashed in twice. The surgeon on the ground said Tom was perfectly all right. Of course he may have to keep quiet in bed, for a day or two. But you'll look after him."

"Poor old Tom," said Finguar. "I'd best clear out. If there's anything I can do—I'm at the Ritz, Garry—" he spoke to Robin, "you know I'd be only too glad. I'll come round in the morning if I may, and see how he is."

Erica smiled at him mechanically as she shook hands. A presentiment of evil had laid its chill grip about her heart. She had suddenly lost interest in Lord Finguar, and did not trouble to conceal the fact.

Anxiety for another was so wholly novel an emotion to Erica, that she hardly recognised the cause of the restlessness which possessed her through the interminable hour of her waiting for Tom's arrival.

He was taken upstairs, and laid on the iron

bedstead in the plainly furnished dressing-room that presented so great a contrast to the luxurious bedroom which was her own; and not until he was safely established there did Robin permit Erica to see him.

"It will only upset you," he said, in his most coaxing manner. "What's the good of crowding? It will only make him anxious about you."

Erica acquiesced with calm common sense.

She was surprised that her heart should beat so fast when at length she went upstairs and saw his pallid face smiling on the pillow.

"I want him kept absolutely quiet," said the doctor in attendance, "because he's suffering a bit from shock." He glanced at Erica, and said, cheerfully, "I'll send round a nurse, Mrs. Garry."

"I'm all bound up, and you're not fit to wait on me, darling," said Tom, rather faintly. "I'm most awfully sorry. It's rotten bad luck. No, I'm not in pain. I'm perfectly all right."

"Don't you talk. We'll explain to Mrs. Garry how it all was," said the doctor. "With any luck you'll be all right in a day or two."

Later, Tom said to the nurse: "I want to say one word to my wife before I go to sleep. Will you leave us alone a moment?"

She nodded and went out.

The Honourable Mrs. Garry 313

Erica knelt beside him, and he looked at the dear, familiar, beautiful face with more than usual tenderness.

"Sweetheart, I only want to tell you—you're not to worry any more about anything. I've made up my mind what to do."

"Don't think of anything unpleasant while you're ill," Erica murmured. "It would be all right if you'd make up your mind I can't help what Mamma calls my crooked ways. I meant to give them up when I married you, but it's too difficult."

"Don't you see it's my business to make it easier?" he said. "I've been to blame. I ought not to have clung to my easy pleasant job of soldiering, and dependence on my poor old Dad; and I've decided to do now what I ought to have done at first. Chuck the Brigade, and go to work, and get my wife all she wants. I'm no stupider than Robin, and he's made money. That's settled."

He shut his eyes as though to indicate that the subject was closed, but she lingered, saying nervously:

"Will you forgive me, Tom?"

"Of course," he said, with a look of surprise; and almost immediately dropped off to sleep.

All was silent in the sick-room, and the noiseless watcher, in blue linen gown and white cap

and apron, sat in her armchair by the window, her tired eyes gazing out over the roofs and chimneys of sleeping London.

There was a tall factory chimney—the nurse knew not of what kind—which was lifted against the dark purple of the summer sky, and sent out pale wreaths of white transparent smoke.

She moved like a phantom in the light of a night-lamp, stealing from time to time to the bedside, to look at the patient, who was restless, though he seemed to sleep. She made not a sound when she admitted Gudwall, who brought her a cup of tea as the dawn broke behind the tall chimney.

The sky reddened, even through the London smoke, for the sunrise; Tom Garry's face on the pillow was yet more pallid in the early light of morning than it had been on the previous evening. A whisper summoned the nurse to his side.

“Is my wife sleeping? Could you see without disturbing her?”

She smiled and nodded, and looked into the next room.

“Fast asleep. Would you like me to wake her?”

“Not on any account,” he said, with an expression of relief.

“Are you still quite easy?”

He hesitated.

"Not so comfortable as I was. I can't breathe quite comfortably. It's nothing to signify."

"I'll take your temperature again now," said the soothing even tones.

"Please—let me cough first," said Tom in a voice of suffocation.

A few moments later the nurse knocked softly at the door of the drawing-room where, unknown to Erica, Robin had spent the night on the divan. He started up as she entered.

"Anything wrong?"

"*Very* slight hemorrhage," she said, hurriedly. "I'm afraid the broken rib has injured the lung after all, though this is the first sign we've had of it. I think we'll get the doctor at once, please. Don't frighten his poor wife—he's so anxious about her." She stole swiftly upstairs again.

His poor wife. The phrase rang ominously in Robin's ears as he hastened through the silent empty streets.

CHAPTER XVIII

ERICA sat beside Tom's bed in her loose blue robe, with her bright hair wound plainly about her head, and his young, hard, healthy, brown hand held between those soft, white, useless fingers of hers.

She had been warned that Tom's one chance lay in his being absolutely quiet, and he realised this also. Any attempt to speak brought a cough and resulting hemorrhage.

He lay motionless; conquering the restlessness that beset him by sheer force of will; his face was pallid and anxious, his breathing obviously difficult.

Earlier in the day, a great authority had been called in to consult with the surgeon who had treated Tom at the time of the accident, and brought him home; and another doctor who was by this time also in attendance. The great man pronounced against any possibility of an operation, intimated plainly that he had been sent for too late, and in the drawing-room downstairs told Robin that the case was hopeless; after his departure the young surgeon spoke

earnestly of the recuperative powers of youth and health, but acquiesced in Robin's decision that Lord Erriff should be summoned immediately.

The nurse was unremitting in her care, and Erica, sitting on the opposite side of the bed, watched her deft and tender service with a dull sense of her own helplessness and uselessness in a sick-room. Her understanding was sufficiently strong to make it impossible that vanity should mislead her on this point, though vanity as overwhelming as her own might have misled a weaker nature. Vaguely she thought of her mother; and of the skill and tact and presence of mind with which that stout inconsequent woman appeared always to become suddenly endowed in the presence of illness.

Erica had telephoned to Kensington on the previous evening that her visit must be postponed, but had given no clue to the cause lest her mother should rush round and make enquiries. She looked forward with sufficient annoyance and distaste to the probable invasion of her home by Lady Erriff.

But Lady Erriff did not come; she was confined to her bed with a bad cold, and Robin's summons, cautiously worded, had not been sufficiently alarming to make her throw prudence to the winds, and rush to her son's side.

Perhaps Robin knew very well that Tom would rather have his father alone, as he knew that

that last faint hope of which the younger surgeon had spoken, depended on the absence of all emotion, and the maintenance of absolute quiet in the sick-room.

Lord Erriff arrived at about six o'clock, and had time for only a few hurried words with Robin on the staircase; and those words sounded angry from the very excess of his painful anxiety.

“Why was n't I sent for yesterday?”

“They could n't tell, Father. There was n't any sign of internal injury at first—we did n't dream it was serious until—four o'clock this morning. It's come like a shock——”

“D'ye mean he's in actual danger?—and you did n't say so plainly——” stormed Lord Erriff, still in a whisper; and even as Robin whispered his sorrowful answer, the nurse came out on to the landing above, and down to the first turn of the stairs in a kind of soft rush.

“Come,” she said, breathlessly, and beckoned, and was gone instantly.

When they entered, Tom's dark head was already supported by her kind, strong arm; and Erica, white and motionless, stood, holding fast the brown hand which had scarcely left her own all day. It needed no words to tell them that it was his life blood that was ebbing away.

They could not tell if he recognised them; Lord Erriff thought so, but Robin had no such hope or illusion.

His brown eyes were fixed, intent and grave, almost enquiring in expression, as though he saw Death coming in gentle guise, and was saying to himself, with something of surprise and relief, Is that all?

As the nurse laid him back among the pillows, and closed those dark eyes, the expression of grave relief grew and settled upon his face, and the anxiety faded for ever.

It was all so swift, so silent, so apparently painless, that Erica did not recognise it for what it was; nor realise that Tom had left her, and without a parting word, until she was brought back to the chamber of death many hours later.

The nurse, alarmed by her calm, which was almost stupor, thought the return might bring those tears which are supposed to render grief innocuous; but the only momentary agitation that visited Erica was when something was whispered of sending for Lady Clow—of bringing her mother to her.

“Do you want me to go mad?” she asked Robin fiercely; and it was his intervention that prevailed with Lord Erriff.

The nurse transferred her attentions from the patient who needed them no more, to the wife for whom all his care had been; and succeeded in coaxing Erica to sleep much as though she were a baby.

Worn out, but ready to start into wakefulness at the slightest sound, the little angel of healing took her place on a low couch beside the great luxurious bed, and found without seeking the sleep she needed so sorely and had earned so well.

The days that followed were to Erica dream-like in the sense of horror, and blank loss, and unreality that pervaded them.

All business, and the formalities arising from the suddenness of the death, with the answering of notes, and payment of bills, and interviewing of relations and of lawyers, were taken off her hands by Robin; who, as though regarding her as a trust bequeathed him by his brother, guarded her with a tenderness and zeal which vaguely comforted her.

She exerted herself only to write and break the news to her mother, ordering her in so many words to remain where she was, and promising to come and see her as soon as she was able; but Lady Clow disregarded the order and came, trembling at her own temerity, to the door of the house in Lower Belgrave Street, demanding news of her child.

It was Robin who saw her, and soothed and calmed her and brought her port wine, as she sat on the edge of the divan in the grey drawing-room, possessed even in her grief by a

wonder as to how she would ever be able to rise from that low seat without assistance.

His unvarying presence of mind was not due to indifference, for Robin mourned his brother sincerely; but it was in his nature to shrink from any betrayal of feeling.

And the refrain of Lady Clow's wailing speech was:

"You're so like him. If it was n't for your curly hair I could think it was him speaking to me. And how could it hurt her to see me for a minute? One single moment is all I ask."

"When people are—out of their minds with grief, they turn away from those they love best—you must know that," said the ready-witted one.

"But it is so selfish of her. Could it hurt her to see me? I would not speak. I would kiss my child and go away. But she takes a pleasure in hurting me, God forgive me for saying so."

Robin thought it not unlikely. He had his own opinion of Erica, but he would rather have died than betray it to her mother, or any one else now. That peculiar, almost feminine gift of perception which he possessed, and which his brother had lacked, led him to say reproachfully:

"Come, I think it is you who are selfish. Very likely she dare not trust herself to keep calm in the presence of your sympathy. And you know

we must think of her just now the more—" Robin's brown face showed emotion, "because he is not here to take care of her."

"God bless you, you are a true brother—she does n't deserve it—" sobbed Lady Clow, indistinctly. "I'm glad she has the nurse here to see she does n't overdo herself."

Robin felt too dreary to smile, even at the idea of Erica—who passed her time between bed and sofa, miserably tossing among cushions, or sleeping heavily—overdoing herself.

He told Lady Clow, in that low musical voice, hardly raised above a whisper, of the arrangements that had been made; of the military funeral—Tom was to be laid to rest at Kellacombe—of the service in the Guards' Chapel. But of Erica's plans he could tell her nothing. Only that she wanted to be left alone; and that she would not talk; that she was probably asleep and that she had given orders that no one was to come and see her, and that she would not be disturbed; and with these reiterated explanations Lady Clow was obliged to be content, and so took her reluctant departure, blessing him as she went.

Erica refused to go to Kellacombe, but an interview with her father-in-law she could not escape, when he came up to London for the memorial service held some days later.

He had no blame for her; and permitted not even his wife to express disapproval of her now. Her state of health, the suddenness of her bereavement, aroused all the tenderness of a singularly warm and tender-hearted nature; but he was struck by the new sullenness of the fair, lovely face, as Erica rose to greet him in her black draperies. Her exceeding loneliness filled him with an acute anguish of pity; and that she need not have been alone did not occur to him.

"My dear, my dear," he cried, you ought to come away. Let me take you home with me. You must not sit brooding here alone over your sorrow. Indeed it is not right."

He sat beside her, looking even more like a kind withered little jockey than ever, holding her hands between his tanned knobby fingers, and gazing at her anxiously out of the soft, long-lashed, brown eyes which shone oddly from a face disproportionately small, and wrinkled as a monkey's. With broken voice, in delicately chosen words, and with all the eloquence at his command,—and being half an Irishman he lacked neither charm nor power of expression—he pleaded with her to come to Kellacombe that Tom's son, if the child proved to be a son, might be born in the house that was his lawful inheritance. And incidentally he let fall, as a matter of little account, that he and his wife, consulting over the absence of marriage settle-

ments, had decided to allow her a thousand pounds a year for the maintenance of herself and her child.

Erica expressed her listless thanks, and consented at last to come to Kellacombe; partly from weariness, and partly because she thought that anything would be better, as she said to herself, than "having Mamma fussing about me—at such a time."

But she said she would stay where she was for the present, and declined utterly to be persuaded of the necessity for a change of scene.

"Has—has anything been settled about keeping on these rooms?" asked Lord Erriff, hesitating.

"I know Lord Finguar. He won't turn me out," she said, calmly.

Lord Finguar, whom Robin had already approached on this subject, became almost hysterical in his protestations.

Mrs. Garry must stay in the rooms as long as she chose. He didn't care if he never saw them again. Everything he had in the world was at her service. Tom was the best friend he ever had in the world; and why a fellow like that should be taken, and a loafer like himself who had nothing to live for, be left behind, was more than he could pretend to know. No, he didn't remember what rent poor Tom paid. More than the rooms were worth, he was quite

sure. He did n't remember what he paid himself. He thought he had the rooms on a long lease. Yes, his lawyer would know. Tom only took them as a favour, because he, Finguar, was going abroad and wanted some one to take care of them. He would probably go abroad again now.

Robin reported to his father that for the present, at all events, Erica need not be disturbed.

She took all that was done for her as a matter of course, and the uppermost sensation in her mind, when Lord Erriff left London, secure in her promise to go to Kellacombe in July--was one rather of relief than of gratitude.

The solicitude of which she was the object made her impatient; she was glad to say good-bye to the nurse who had tended her so devotedly, and glad when Robin told her he was going down to Kellacombe with his father for a time.

She wanted, in short, to be left alone; to gather together her shattered powers of thought, and to realise what had happened.

The appalling suddenness of the blow that had fallen, had, in a measure, stunned her. Her mind took in only the most material and prosaic facts.

She would never be Lady Erriff, though she might be the mother of the heir. She remem-

bered with a dull surprise that held something of cynicism, that Robin's fate depended on the sex of the coming baby. If it were a girl she supposed the Garrys would cease to take much interest in her. If it were a boy—for the first time a kind of cold comfort crept about her heart—an odd yearning, which surprised herself, to hold Tom's son in her arms, and see a pair of brown, honest eyes looking into hers—given back to her as it were, from beyond the grave, as though in token that Tom had not vanished utterly and for ever.

"It's all sentiment," she said to herself. "I never cared for children. Why should I like a baby simply because it happens to be my own?" Yet her thoughts turned again and again to—Is this little phantom brown-eyed Tom, and she found herself saying:

"He shall go into the Guards."

Again, she wondered dully why Tom had died when his life must have been so incomplete; even why he should be so sincerely, almost passionately, it seemed, mourned by so many people. Apparently his brother-officers and his men had regarded him, not only with affection, but with something like reverence. Why? He had done nothing particular. He had been nothing particular. Yet letters and tokens of grief for his sudden end poured in, received generally by his parents, for the time of his mar-

riage had been short, and Erica had known few of his friends or associates. She read in wonder of memorials, of votes of condolence, of records less formal, testifying to the love and respect Tom had gained during his comparatively few years on earth.

What was Tom's history?

A short childhood in the country; a clean record at school; a little learning and many games. A clean record at Sandhurst; a little more learning and more games. A great deal of sport, a little active soldiering in South Africa, and a little passive soldiering in London; more sport, more games. That was all.

Life itself had been little more than a game to him, perhaps, so far; but he had played it straightforwardly, and with all his might, and honourably according to the rules; this was admitted in the few words of colloquial commonplace, which was all the epitaph that the limited vocabulary of his most intimate friends could provide, and which would in his own simple opinion have been all the epitaph that the heart of man could wish. *He was one of the best.*

Then it was character that counted, after all; more even than life itself, since life without it was meaningless, and since it outlasted life. It could only be for this that Tom's memory was held dear. There was nothing else that Erica could see. Tom had not been remarkable in

any way. He had led the ordinary life of a healthy, undistinguished, young Englishman of his class and of his times.

But he had played the game.

The long bright summer days were empty and silent and dreary, and she missed his companionship, missed increasingly the devotion which had surrounded and defended her. She spent long hours in bed, and on her couch, mistaking the numbness of mind which was due to the shock she had sustained, for philosophy. Her health suffered, as was natural.

A minor vexation was the fact that Gudwall had given notice. He wished to return to Lord Finguar's service; or if not, to find another master. A house without a gentleman was not to his taste.

Erica had always vaguely known that Gudwall silently resented her intrusion, but she had not realised how much more he had mutely resented his own banishment to lodgings when she desired to make room for her maid.

"And such a maid," he remarked to Mrs. Jarmin, who sympathised with him passionately. "She'll be found out one of these days."

Erica was already beginning to find out Clarge.

The perfection and thoroughness of the service rendered her by the trained nurse; the neatness, cleanliness, and order of all her ways,

had perhaps opened her eyes more fully to the shortcomings of the little cockney whom she had engaged in such haste, and with such scant care of enquiry.

She required a good deal of waiting upon just now, and the slovenliness of Clarge presently moved her disgust and resentment with a force that surprised that furtive-eyed attendant greatly.

"I hate to watch you dusting the room," she said, wrathfully. "First you rub my shoes, and whisk smuts off the chimney-piece not caring where they fly; and then you wipe my brushes and combs with the same cloth, and without first shaking the lace-mats, or dusting the table on which they stand. All you do is slovenly and lazy and superficial. A wipe here and a flick there. If I leave you to smooth my bed you throw my pillows on to the floor. Anything to save yourself trouble. You never look to see what I want, or straighten a crooked blind, or pick up a scrap of paper, or carry away an empty cup, unless you're told to do it. If that's how you work when I'm watching you, I wonder what you do with my things when I'm not there?"

Clarge sulked, though she mended her ways because she feared her mistress; but she was not a pleasant attendant in a sick-room. Her inefficiency, and the annoyance of having to search

for a trustworthy butler, to replace the excellent Gudwall, weighed heavily upon Erica, who hated household management.

And as a whim had caused her to refuse her mother's company, so another whim caused a revulsion of feeling.

She had asked Clarge for a lace handkerchief, one of a kind she particularly fancied, and of which she knew she had ordered a dozen; and the handkerchief was not forthcoming. Something was stammered about absence at the wash, and Erica retorted that she had not used any of this kind for weeks. One was at last produced triumphantly, but her enquiries after the rest of the dozen could produce no more; and the promise of immediate enquiry of the laundress could not still her suspicions.

She lay tossing among her pillows, and thought of the piles of beautifully embroidered linen, and extravagant silk stockings, of gloves and lace and costly odds and ends innumerable, which she had handed over to the charge of this vulgar little stranger; and growing feverish at last from vexation and worry—she suddenly stretched out her hand and telephoned to Lady Clow.

She bade her mother pack a trunk with necessaries, and come to her for a few days. When she had finished speaking, and listened—not unmoved—to the broken words of delight and willingness which Lady Clow panted down the

telephone, in the muffled tone which proved her inability to refrain from pressing her lips to the mouthpiece—Erica rose, and put on her white wrapper, and for the first time since he had been carried out of it, entered Tom's room.

Robin, the considerate, had asked her leave, after the funeral, to have all his brother's personal belongings, clothes, uniforms and the like, packed and despatched to Kellacombe,—there to be stored in the attic which had been his own as a boy, until she should decide what she wished done with them. He wanted to spare her the pang of seeing them; but for a moment, Erica, glancing fearfully about the blank, strange, empty room, resented the absence of the well-known dressing things,—the piles of clothes—the rows of boots. Then she was thankful they were gone, and that the pain of removal had been spared her. Yet a pang of memory stabbed her heart; for even the uncurtained window—before which she had so often watched him shave—with its view of the tall chimney against the summer sky, brought him back in the bright familiar aspect of every day; and relegated to the background the vision which haunted her of nights—of a pale face laid back upon the pillows, and grave intent brown eyes. . . .

She wondered miserably if she could bear to see her mother coming in and out of this room; there was, however, no other; and at home—the

lodging in Kensington must perforce always be home to Erica—the mother and daughter had always slept in adjoining rooms.

And with the coming of Lady Clow there was no doubt that much of the pain and dreariness of her solitude was altogether banished.

She had often remembered her mother's foolishness, seldom or never her tenderness and care.

She could now close her eyes, and leave the dusting of the room, the management of Clarge, the looking for a new butler—in her mother's hands; and Lady Clow proved herself equal to the occasion.

Seeing at a glance that Erica was really far from well, and that her spirits and nerves had suffered and were still suffering, with an intensity that surprised her—from shock—she hid from her all vexatious details.

Moving with the lightness, and somewhat of the appearance of a balloon, she brought the service of love to bear upon the tending of her child; and wept only as she unpacked her shabby trunk alone, in that room which she knew must have been Tom's. The tenderness of her heart added quickness to her perception, and she closed and locked the communicating door.

"She would give a start every time she saw me come in instead of *him*," she thought, sorrowfully.

The dishonesty of Clarge was detected in the

twinkling of an eye by the experienced lady; who stood by while the unhappy maid unpacked and unfolded and counted the remainder of Erica's rifled stores.

"Where are those fine cambric handkerchiefs that I embroidered myself? Where are the beautiful nainsook nightgowns trimmed with real lace? Nine of them? You don't tell me any one ever bought nine of anything. You've taken three. And seven pair of these black silk stockings? What do you mean by seven pair?"

Gudwall was on the watch too; hand in glove with the old lady, and determined that his enemy should not escape; and Clarge had presently to choose between the sending for a policeman, and the searching of her boxes by Mrs. Jarmin in Lady Clow's presence.

The housekeeper was nothing loath; as relentless in the pursuit of dishonesty as an old servant of life-long integrity usually is; and Clarge's trunks gave up a variety of pilferings; but much of Erica's store of fine linen had disappeared.

"She was always carrying parcels out of the house—to the cleaners indeed!" said Mrs. Jarmin. "I don't know why I did n't suspect her before."

Clarge broke down, confessed, and implored mercy; and Mrs. Jarmin mounted guard over her, while Lady Clow departed to inform Erica

what she had retrieved, and enquire what should be done.

“We have got back some of your best handkerchiefs. She had actually sewn her own initials—one of those cheap, ready-made monograms, over the tiny little ‘E’ I embroidered,” said Lady Clow. “She has been wearing your linen and stockings. You say you have your diamonds safe?”

“I wear the key of my big trunk on my bracelet,” said Erica, “and looked through my things yesterday. Luckily I have all my valuables and a lot of lace locked up there. I have given her heaps of things. She deserves to go to prison.”

“She knows it. I heard her say to Jarmin, ‘What will they do? Do you think they’ll send me to prison?’ And Jarmin answered sternly, ‘It’s where thieves usually go. . . .’ It may be the saving of her, poor thing, being found out like this. But it’s given her a dreadful shock.”

“I daresay. Most annoying,” said Erica, satirically. She saw that her mother’s soft heart was beginning to melt as usual, and felt impatient.

“She’s crying bitterly,” said Lady Clow. “She is n’t trying to brazen it out. She begs your forgiveness.”

Erica was about to retort forcibly, when a vague memory stirred her curiously.

“She’s had a terrible lesson, and of course

she can't expect a character," said Lady Clow. "I mean not as a maid, or any place of trust. But she might find work of some other kind." She hesitated. "Prison is an awful thing for a young woman like that. Could n't you—give her a chance, Erica?"

Erica was silent.

"We're none of us perfect," urged the soft voice.

"What do you want me to do?"

"If you would—could n't you—will you forgive her?" said Lady Clow.

The vague memory became clear in Erica's mind as Lady Clow said, "Will you forgive her?" and she recollected asking forgiveness, and the gentle look—the look of surprise—with which Tom had answered, "Of course!"

She turned her face away from her mother.

"Of course I'll forgive her," she said, dully. "Settle it all as you think best; but don't let me see her any more. Don't let her come near me."

"She shall leave the house at once," said Lady Clow, in relieved tones. "I'm very glad. Thank you, my darling. It is very good of you not to be more angry."

"What's the good of being angry?" said Erica, and again the words were like an echo from the past.

"No good. That's what I always think.

She's a very ignorant girl; you can tell that from her speech and ways. And she says she did it to help her mother. It's not as bad as though she were robbing you and deceiving you *only* from mere vanity, and greed of finery, or money for herself—" said Lady Clow.

She was gone; and Erica, hiding her face in the pillow, suddenly burst into the pitiful, smothered sobbing of a hurt child.

CHAPTER XIX

ERICA'S son opened his eyes to the world on a breathless summer morning, early in September, at Kellacombe.

He was a large tranquil baby, bald as an egg, with a bright scarlet face; and by no effort of the imagination could it be supposed that he would grow up to resemble the Garrys; nor that the lashless slits of blue light, which gleamed beneath red and hairless brows, could ever develop into brown eyes with dark and heavily-marked surroundings.

Lord Erriff exhibited an almost reverential tenderness and anxiety for the young mother, who lay listlessly among the lace-edged pillows in the great state room; gazing through the open mullioned windows upon the rippling brown surface of the lake, and the bracken with the sunshine on it, stretching upwards to the golden green of forest trees against the dim, blue hills of Devon.

"Erica is doing perfectly well. You will only turn her head, darling, if you make such a fuss about her. And after all, I can't help wishing it had been a girl," said Lady Erriff, reproachfully. "It would have been better by far for

our own Robin to have succeeded us than for Erica's son."

"Tom's son," said Lord Erriff.

"But not like Tom. He is her living image."

"All new-born babies are alike," said Lord Erriff, meaning to show his plain common-sense by this original remark, and indifferent to the look of patient forbearance which his wife cast upon him. "What better could be wished for the child than that he should resemble his mother? She is a beautiful, healthy, well-grown young woman. Her son should be a fine strapping fellow one day. No doubt he will develop some sort of resemblance to his father later on. And if not—he is all that is left to us of our son."

"I don't think she cares for her baby," complained Lady Erriff. "She is as cynical as she can be. She said yesterday that she had always understood that the mother of a new-born son experienced a wonderful thrill when she heard his first cry; and that on the contrary, when she recovered from the chloroform and heard her baby screaming in the next room, she felt nothing but annoyance. I daresay she meant to be clever," said Lady Erriff, resentfully, "but it sounded to me most unnatural. She is always posing."

"You do her no kind of justice, my dear, simply because she flirted a little with other people before she married Tom."

"A little!"

"Julia," said Lord Erriff, gently, "your heart is kinder than your tongue. If I did not know that, I should find it difficult to forgive your criticism of one who is sharing our terrible sorrow. If she does not show the usual joy and pride of a young mother, you might in pity remember that she has had to go through her trial alone—to bring a fatherless child into the world. A baby is all very well, but she must feel it to be a poor exchange for the husband she loved."

"If I thought that—" said Lady Erriff, weeping—but in her heart she did not believe that Erica had loved Tom. "She is so cold and sarcastic. When I told her I knew exactly what she was feeling by what I was feeling myself, she replied quite flippantly that she was feeling nothing at all, except thankfulness that it was all over. And I cannot think it right that she did not even wish her mother to be with her at such a time."

"She may have her reasons. Remember she only came herself at my urgent request," said Lord Erriff, patiently.

Though Erica professed to have experienced no thrill of maternal joy at her first babe's first cry—she was not destitute of a very lively and healthy thrill of jealousy whenever Lady Erriff ventured to approach him; and privately ordered

the nurse to make excuses whenever his grand mother proposed to carry him downstairs.

She had no objection, on the other hand, to watching the delight and excitement with which Tom's sisters regarded their nephew. One or the other of them was for ever seated by the rose-coloured cot; but in particular the little black sheep, Nora, who had returned from school, very round-shouldered, and inclined to be anæmic; with a habit of furtive correspondence, and an endless hoard of mysterious secrets to be imparted to her little astonished sister.

Nora chose to attach herself to Erica with a devotion rendered almost frantic by her mother's opposition. Her admiration for her beautiful sister-in-law was sincere, but the display was largely self-conscious. Erica was at once bored and amused; bored because Nora haunted her room for hours, sitting with great brown eyes fixed in adoration upon her face; and amused because Lady Erriff's resentment at this devotion was so very obvious.

Meanwhile, Robin, the disinnered, accepted his fate lightly as he accepted most happenings. He tolerated his father's and mother's display of emotion over the birth of Tom's son, with the half kindly, half contemptuous indulgence of youth for the weaknesses of age; and though privately that the odds were against Erica's bringing up her son to be a particularly creditable

able head of the family, and agreed with his mother that it was a pity the baby was not a girl; though loyalty to his dead brother prevented his admission of any such reflections.

"I'll do the best I can for the poor little beggar," he thought, and shrugged his shoulders. "I'll see he goes to school in decent time, too; but the only sons of widows don't generally get much of a chance to my way of thinking."

Lady Clow wrote joyful, incoherent letters to her child.

It was not in human nature that the poor lady should be altogether unresentful of her exclusion from Erica's society at a moment which would have been to her of such engrossing interest; but she feared to vex her daughter, and kept her mortification as far as possible to herself.

"I understand, my darling, that you don't want a homely, fat old thing like me fussing about you, at Kellacombe," she wrote, "and interfering with all the modern ways of a trained nurse. And since the baby is a boy and the heir, of course the Garrys will consider they have first claim. It is all very natural. I could wish the darling had been a girl, to belong only to you and me. I have been dreaming of seeing another little Erica run about once more, and sitting on her little stool, pulling my knitting-

needles out of the wool, and looking like a cherub dropped from heaven, with your blue eyes and pretty smile. But of course it is natural, very natural, you should want a son to remind you of dear, dear Tom."

But the little phantom Tom had already vanished from Erica's dreams. Its place was filled by the substantial reality of this fat prosperous-looking baby, which grew daily fairer, more placid, and larger; thriving in the fresh air of the West Country.

When Erica was carried downstairs for the first time, on a glorious September morning, and wheeled in an invalid chair to the shelter of the spreading cedar upon the lawn, she looked round her with a certain feeling of proprietorship which she had not, curiously enough, experienced during Tom's lifetime.

Around her was spread a fair domain, which was *her* son's lawful inheritance, and which she might one day be called upon to rule and guard for him.

The realisation gave her a momentary languid pleasure, and though she told herself that she hated country life, and found it intolerably dull, yet she could not but own that whatever Kellacombe might be in winter, it was pleasant enough in summer.

The great white house, with its green creepers

and open windows, lay in the blazing sunshine of noon; and from the various doors and French casements, opening on to the wide lawns, the younger inmates sped in and out in their black frocks, enjoying the holiday season even though the memory of their brother's death had shadowed it, calling to each other across the old-fashioned ribbon-borders, bright with geraniums and cherry-pie, and basket-beds sweet with roses. The air was scented deliciously by a giant magnolia, which spread its mighty arms about the south front, and offered open creamy cups of fragrance to the warmth of the sun.

An archway, cut in a tall box hedge on her right, framed a vista of kitchen garden, where the nurse paced along a narrow path in the shadow of a red wall covered with ripening pears. She carried the white bundle which held Erica's hopes. The sunflowers glowed in this bright picture, and Japanese anemones flaunted pink and white flowers in profusion above the humbler crowd of Michaelmas daisies.

The gardeners were busy mowing the distant tennis lawn; the faint whirr of the machine, making only a restful sound as they led the booted Shetland pony cautiously to and fro.

Lord Erriff, dressed like an unprosperous farmer, trotted down the garden path, carrying a bunch of grapes which he had cut in defiance of his own head-gardener.

Robin was away, shooting partridges, and Lady Erriff had gone up to town for a few days shopping; partly because she wanted to attend a sale at a particular shop where she could make sure of buying things she did n't want more cheaply than at any other time of the year; and partly because her daughter-in-law had, she told her husband, got on her nerves.

Her absence produced a notable sense of relief and freedom. Every one did what he liked without any guilty underlying consciousness that the mistress of the house was expecting something else to be done.

A servant advanced across the lawn and approached the convalescent with cautious respect.

"A person wishes to see you, ma'am, if you feel able. He says he would n't take but a few moments of your time."

"What person?" said Erica, nervously.

"Well 'm," said the young West-country footman, bluntly. "He was butler over to Moreleigh in the late Mr. Thorverton's time."

"Oh! Is it Cloberry?" said Erica, with great relief. "Tell him to come at once."

A moment later, and the awkward footman's place was taken by the ubiquitous Cloberry. Calm, dignified, and reposeful, he stood before young Mrs. Garry; who might have been a queen as he said to himself, so stately and upright in

spite of her weakness, with the beautiful transparent colour coming and going in her fair face.

Erica's fear of stoutness was vanishing fast; she looked almost fragile—as far as one of such statuesque build could look fragile—in her filmy black draperies.

The old subdued enthusiasm and desire to serve her, returned upon Cloberry with renewed force, as he explained in a few respectful and well-chosen words the reason for his application.

“Mrs. Foss, the housekeeper at Moreleigh—the only one of the old servants as has been kept on by Mr. Denys,—heard from Lady Clow that you was in want of a butler, ma'am. I should be very glad to enter your service, ma'am, if you think me suitable.”

So Erica perceived that it was to her mother that she owed this timely application.

“That's just it, Cloberry. I'm not sure if you are suitable.” She raised candid blue eyes to his large impassive face. “Of course I should like nothing better than to engage you. I am quite aware of the entire confidence poor Mr. Thorverton placed in you.”

Cloberry bowed very slightly. To himself he said admiringly, “*Poor* Mr. Thorverton! She oughter'a been a empress.”

“And it would be an especial comfort to me now to have some one about me whom I could trust absolutely, as I do my present butler. I

don't want to be bothered with details about housekeeping and wine and accounts——”

“Beneath her, and she knows it. Always was my ideal of a *real* lady,” thought Cloberry, triumphantly.

“And I like things done well, as I know you would do them, and I want everything comfortable about me.”

“And oughter have it,” he commented mentally.

“*But*, you see—Mr. Thorverton was very rich and I'm not rich.”

Cloberry looked grave. Well he knew that nothing could be done without money; and at that change in his expression Erica became suddenly determined to engage him.

“I will be quite frank with you; knowing as I do that you are worthy of trust,” she said with royal graciousness, “and it would be useless to expect you to manage if you did n't know what there was to manage on. I intend to stay in my rooms in Lower Belgrave Street. I have a cook-housekeeper, and I believe some one comes in to help her; my own maid, and Gudwall saw to everything, catering and all that. I don't know how he managed.” She spoke a little wearily. “Of course we did n't entertain. There's only room for four at the table, but if anybody *did* come in to dinner or luncheon, it was always perfectly done. I could n't bear

different class of servant; and yet I have, for the present, only my jointure of about a thousand a year to live on. I expect," she added, calmly, "to have a great deal more later on."

"What she expects, she'll get. See if she don't," thought Cloberry. But his expression changed not by so much as the twinkle of an eyelash. He waited; gravely attentive and deferential; a first-class specimen, as he knew, of a perfectly trained British butler.

"It is possible my mother will be with me a good deal. But if so—she will add to my income. We should live very quietly, of course. And in any case—a woman, living alone, should not have many expenses." Her smile was pathetic yet dignified. "Personally, I require very little."

At this a faint ripple, as it were, passed over the calm expanse of Cloberry's face.

"Perhaps I ought to do without a butler altogether."

"It would not be suitable, ma'am, if you will pardon me; with the young gentleman growing up to take his proper place in the world," suggested Cloberry, glancing towards the bundle in white; and even the glance was respectful. "If you will excuse me, ma'am," he lowered his voice, and there was a ring of sincerity, even emotion in its tones, "the late Mr. Garry was always a very good friend to me. I would do my best to serve his son, and you, ma'am."

"Then that is settled, and I am very pleased to engage you," with the unmoved calm that always impressed Cloberry in spite of himself.

"No thanks. Nothing. Takes it all as a matter of course. Never so much as asking my wages. She's born to get on," he thought, approvingly, as he went on his stately and portly way. "Me to go and live in rooms on a thousand a year! But I can afford my fancies, thank God. A quiet little place in London will suit me well enough for a time. It won't last little nor yet quiet. Not if I know anything of human nature," thought the experienced Cloberry. "She'll fall on her feet. That sort always does."

Erica scrawled a pencil line to tell Lady Cloberry that Gudwall might now leave as soon as he chose, since Cloberry was ready to take his place, and she then dismissed all further domestic anxieties from her mind with great content.

Within a month of her child's birth she had regained her health. Her beauty and courage glowed afresh, and she was quite ready for the small encounters with her mother-in-law which presently arose.

Lady Erriff returned from London laden with gifts for her family; her heart was kinder than her tongue, and her intentions were always excellent, though she lacked perception to a quite remarkable degree.

None of her children resembled her, and she

was often at a loss to account for the unanimity of their disapproval of her actions; that disapproval which had to be made almost brutally clear before it penetrated the armour of her simple self-content.

She thought Erica received the embroidered pelisse for her babe with scant graciousness; not realising that it was Erica's experience of poverty which made her instantly recognise that the garment in question was, as she said to herself, "shop soiled"; but realising vividly, as perhaps was natural, that this haughty young woman was actually at this moment living upon a liberal allowance which came mainly from her mother-in-law's pocket. Lady Erriff did not grudge that allowance to her son's widow; she was, like many women, generous in large ways and incredibly mean in small ones.

Thus she had bought the baby's pelisse because it was cheap, shutting her eyes to the fact that it was grubby.

"This delicate embroidery suffers in London fogs, but of course it will clean," she said, trying not to see how much grubbier the cloak looked, as Erica spread it forth, rather maliciously, in the full glare of the sunlight.

"Oh, Mamma, if you *would n't* buy things at sales," said Kathleen, impatiently. She was sensitive, and often suffered vicariously for her mother. "I think it's quite horrid. And I

don't believe it's big enough. He's such a splendid big baby."

Robin, lounging in the hammock with his cigarette, was also annoyed, exchanging a quick glance with his sister.

"The lace is very handsome; of course it will clean; and it can easily be altered," said Erica, politely. "It was very kind of you to think of it."

"Your mother thought it very pretty," said Lady Erriff; and as Erica looked surprised, "Oh, by-the-bye, I forgot to tell you," she spoke guiltily from nervousness, "I popped in to see her. I knew she would like news of you."

Erica could not hide her flush of annoyance, and again Kathleen's face burnt in sympathy; but before she could take up the cudgels for her sister-in-law, Erica spoke for herself, letting the clear-cut syllables fall with great distinctness.

"I am sorry you did not tell me you thought of going. Anything unexpected startles my mother so much. She has a weak heart, as might be guessed from her appearance. What made you think of it?"

Lady Erriff's extreme curiosity to see Lady Clow's abode had made her think of it; as Erica knew, and as Kathleen and Robin, and even little Nora and Brigit also knew; but she took refuge in dignity, pursing up the lips of a singularly weak and obstinate mouth.

"My dear! It is very natural I should think of it. I have children of my own. I know what I should feel like if one of them were ill. We had a very pleasant talk together."

"That means that you cross-questioned Mamma, and that she babbled to her heart's content, holding forth about my father's bankruptcy, and the kindness of old Mr. Thorverton and Christopher," thought Erica; and Robin knew her well enough to divine the anger which she betrayed only by that beautiful colour.

"I'm rather tired," she said, addressing Kathleen, whose sympathy she felt; "I think I'll go in and rest a bit."

"There's an autumn feel in the air," said Kathleen, jumping up, and loading herself with Erica's cushions and rug. Robin without a word gave his sister-in-law his arm, and Nora and Brigit followed in the procession as a matter of course.

Lady Erriff, left alone under the cedar tree, with her despised gift spread upon a wicker-table, almost shed tears. As it was not in her nature to suffer in silence, she presently sought her husband in his study.

"What is the matter, my dear?" said Lord Erriff, recognising a well-known droop of the under-lip.

"It is very odd, Tom, the way Erica seems to have got round you all, in my absence," Lady

Erriff began in her most inconsequent manner. "The children all rush about after her. I am nobody in my own home. They leave me alone without apology. And Dr. Dobree is just the same. He never even asked if my long journey had tired me, but went on raving about her splendid constitution, and the way she had recovered her strength after her confinement. Why should n't she? A great healthy dairy-maid of a girl. Her mother told me she had never had a day's real illness in her life. I thought she would be pleased to hear I had been to see her mother, and if you will believe me, she was quite put out. You know that horrid cold manner she puts on. I shall be very glad when she is gone. I wish she would leave the dear baby with us and take herself off."

"You said nothing about going to see her mother."

"Am I obliged to ask Erica's leave before I call on poor Lady Clow?" cried Lady Erriff, but she coloured.

"It would have been franker, perhaps, to mention it, my dear," Lord Erriff said, though he knew such comments were useless.

"If I had mentioned it, she would have prevented it somehow, and told her mother to say Not at home," said Lady Erriff, warmly, and with quite unconscious self-betrayal. "I see through Erica, Tom, which you do not. And

besides, I only thought of it at the last moment. Of course as soon as I got there I knew well enough why Erica would not have liked me to go. A dreadful poky lodging, and such an uncomfortable room. I can't think how she can let her mother stay in such a place. I should be ashamed if I were her."

"My dear, according to your own showing she is ashamed."

"I wish you would not argue round in a circle like that. It makes my head swim, darling," said Lady Erriff. "I went to see her with the best intentions, though it's the other end of nowhere, and the smell of boiling cabbage on the staircase almost knocked me down. But I was determined to let poor Lady Clow know that it was not I who prevented her from coming to Kellacombe for the birth of her grandchild."

Lord Erriff sighed, and made no further attempt to argue with his wife, who presently talked out her grievance, and thanked him for his sympathy with tears in her weak eyes.

"I always feel better when we have talked things over, darling," she said. "It makes me feel no one can come between us; and you remember what I said long ago when we first met Erica, and how I warned you she was the kind of girl who would easily get her head turned with a little attention. You see how true it was."

She stooped to kiss his forehead before leaving

him, with quite real emotion. Then she went away, a tall, dignified figure in her black crêpe gown; with elaborate golden plaits of unnatural length and quantity dressed high upon her narrow head, and a kindness in her pale, blue-grey eyes, that was not less apparent than was the obstinacy of her pursed-up mouth, or the weakness of her receding chin.

Her husband looked after her with an expression of mingled humour and melancholy.

Kathleen said dejectedly to Robin, as they returned to the garden together, her hand slipped under his arm, "Mamma is impossible. What do you think she did besides going off to see Erica's mother without telling her?"

"How should I know?" growled Robin.

"She made Packer look privately at the name of the maker of that lovely black gown Erica wears at night, and then went there and ordered a dress for herself."

"Why should n't she?"

"I suppose a man does n't understand. But it is a—well, it's an *impossible* thing to do. Of course Erica would have told her if she had asked, and equally of course she will find out and be disgusted. Any woman would be. I hate it so—and I hate above all that she should give Erica an excuse to despise her—because in my heart of hearts I don't care much more for Erica than poor mamma does herself."

"Don't put things into words—Mistake,"—advised Robin.

She squeezed his arm affectionately.

"But I'm very, very sorry for her," she whispered. "The—missing of *him* must be worse, in a way, for her than for any of us, though she's very brave about it. And the baby is a darling, even if he's not like the Garrys."

The next encounter between Erica and her mother-in-law, was on the subject of the child's christening. Lady Erriff named the sponsors, who ought, in her opinion, to be chosen; and Erica replied immediately that she had already settled the question by inviting friends of her own to officiate.

"May I ask who they are?"

"His godmother will be Mrs. Woosnam, the wife of one of Tom's brother officers," said Erica, calmly deciding then and there, to write and intimate to her friend Daisy the honour she proposed to confer upon her. "And the godfathers will be Mr. Reinhardt, a friend of Robin's as well as of Tom's; and Lord Finguar."

Lady Erriff was unable to find fault with the first and last selections, but after a disconcerted pause she pounced upon Mr. Reinhardt.

"It sounds like a German name."

"It is a German name."

"I do not see why you should give the poor

child a German godfather. Does he belong to the Church of England?"

Robin laughed aloud.

"I never asked him what church he belonged to," said Erica, missing the point of the laughter. "He has been a very good friend to Tom and me, and I mean him to be one of my boy's godfathers."

She looked at Lady Erriff with calm *nonchalance*, and Lady Erriff, sure of receiving no support from her son and daughter, abandoned the point.

"There is nothing left to settle, then," she added with an annoyed laugh.

"His name!" said little Brigit, who was a peacemaker. She slid her hand into her mother's, but looked adoringly at the sleeping tranquil face on Erica's lap.

"That is settled already, dear," said Lady Erriff, tossing her head until the black *crêpe* bows upon her garden hat trembled. "No one has ever even raised the question. He will have his dear father's name."

"No," said Erica. Her large, blue, clear eyes met those pale blinking ones fully; and the younger woman reflected vengefully upon her elder's stealthy descent upon the lodgings of poor Lady Clow. Erica was fully conscious of her advantage; and she had never looked lovelier than as she sat among the flowers of the lawn.

with her child on her knee; and the brightness of her uncovered hair, and the freshness of her exquisite colouring, daring the morning sunshine triumphantly. A slight malicious smile played about the corners of her lovely mouth, as she said slowly:

“His name is Joseph.”

CHAPTER XX

HAVING said it, she was obliged to stick to it; though the satisfaction of vexing her mother-in-law was almost slight compared with the annoyance of having to withstand the entreaties of Tom's sisters; her own secret dislike of her father's name, which she had no real desire to perpetuate; and the torrents of tears, and floods of amiable recollections, which the choice of it evoked from Lady Clow.

Lord Erriff, faithful to his task of championing his dead son's wife, alone defended her.

"It is most natural she should wish to give the boy her father's name. It does not signify what he is christened. I can't live for ever, and when I go, he will be Erriff."

To Robin he said privately: "But surely, my dear boy, Reinhardt is a Jew?"

"I suppose so, sir; but he won't come to the christening," said Robin, with a twinkle in his eye. "He'll send a magnificent present instead."

"Could n't you suggest to Erica——"

"Leave it alone, Dad," advised Robin. "My mother's badgered her till her back's up, and

she's capable of saying she won't have the kid christened at all. She's got good reasons for asking Reinhardt. He's managed her mother's investments pretty cleverly."

"But if he's a Jew, my dear boy——"

"He may be a Christian for aught I know. Do leave her to settle her own affairs."

"I have certainly no right to interfere," said Lord Erriff.

He suggested to Erica that the christening ought to take place at the parish church, and that the sponsors should be invited to Kellacombe; but Erica did not propose to subject her friend Mrs. Woosnam to Lady Erriff's criticisms, nor to introduce Lord Finguar thus to her mother-in-law's notice. She said that she must return to her mother, who had been far from well ever since Lady Erriff's unexpected visit.

By this time October had dawned, but summer was lingering late; the days were still warm and sunny, and the flowers untouched by chill breath of wind or frost.

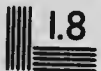
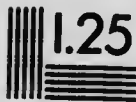
Erica had made her slow progress round the kitchen garden on her father-in-law's arm, before seating herself under the cedar on the lawn; while Lord Erriff, who could never, as it seemed to her, bear to be still for a moment, busily attacked obnoxious growths in the grass with a spud.

From the open casement of the drawing-room



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there issued suddenly a strangely familiar figure, making his way across the garden towards them.

"Who is that?" she asked quickly, and Lord Erriff answered with the dismay of an Englishman in his home surprised by a visitor:

"I am very much afraid it must be some one calling, my dear."

But before he answered, she had recognised Christopher Thorverton's boon companion and associate, Joe Murch.

Erica was annoyed, but an inclination to laugh overpowered her annoyance, for the alarm clearly painted upon his red face, made it abundantly clear that he doubted his welcome.

He carried his hat in his hand from an excess of respect, and a subtle change had come over his appearance. His attire, though still of a sporting order, was less groomlike; his carrotty thin hair was shorter and carefully oiled; his eyes were less bloodshot and watery. In a word he looked at once more healthy, sober, and respectable than Erica had ever known him look before. In his anxiety to greet her, he barely observed his host, and shook hands with Lord Erriff,—whose greeting was a perceptibly chilly one—quite mechanically.

"How d'ye do," Mrs. Clow—I mean Miss Garry," he said, in anxious confusion. "I hope I don't intrude. The fact is, my wife is calling

on Lady Erriff and she happened to mention you were out here, so my wife suggested I'd best come out and pay my respects; though I told her I could n't be sure you'd be glad to see me," he added, simply.

"Why should n't I be glad to see you?" said Erica, with distant graciousness. "I did n't know you were married, Mr. Murch."

"If you'd told me this time last year what was going to happen to me, I'd have bet any money against it," said Mr. Murch, accepting the invitation to sit, implied by her gesture. "I'll tell you all about it if you like."

He was so relieved by her friendly reception that his good spirits were restored, and his voice became so confidential that Lord Erriff returned without apology to his occupation of improving the lawn.

"It was this way, Miss—I mean Mrs. Garry. If it had n't been for poor old Christopher falling ill as he did—I might never have got married—" her slight frown did not escape him. "I dare say I ought n't to mention him to you—but I'm a rough sort of chap; honest—speaking first and thinking afterwards. My wife has shown me my faults, Mrs. Clow. A woman in a thousand to put her finger on the weak spot. Well—as I was saying—when I went back to my mother so unexpectedly—Bingo and me together—turned out, as one might say, on account

of poor Christopher's illness, from a place I'd come to look on as home—she said there was only one thing for me to do, and that was, to get married."

"I suppose she found you a wife?" said Erica, sardonically.

"She did," said Mr. Murch, simply as usual, "a friend of her own; ten years older than me, between ourselves—but with a nice bit of money. That was just like my mother. Always thinking of my interests. I was married before I knew where I was, and it's been my salvation. I know it. Know it well. There's nothing I would n't do for that woman, Mrs. Garry. I've given up whisky—between you and me, poor old Chris and I used to do a bit too much that way—I've given up Bingo—he used to snap at her ankles, and I could n't have that—I've given up smoking—and all my ole pals have given me up. Let 'em go," he snapped his fingers. "I've no use for pals of that sort. Here to-day and gone to-morrow."

He seemed about to weep, from sheer force of habit, but restrained himself, with an alarmed glance towards the drawing-room window; and Erica reflected that she had never before seen him so completely sober.

"Poor old Chris was never one of that sort," said Mr. Murch. "Many's the scrape he pulled me through when we were up at t

'Varsity. It made it all the greater blow when he failed me at the last, so to speak."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't have forgotten that night I witnessed his will?" said Mr. Murch, earnestly. "I warned him then, in your presence, that if he'd put me down for anything it would be null and void. You remember what he said? 'This is a temporary job, ole pal,' he said, 'and I'll put you down in the next.' If I've told his lawyer that once, I've told him a dozen times. But nothing came of it; though they must have known, Mrs. Garry, what his wishes would have been; and as I said, 'It's not for myself. What do I care?' But when a man's married a woman with a good bit of money, and can't even afford to pay for his own washing—it's a bit thick, is n't it, Mrs. Garry? When he had every right to expect a legacy. I'm told you were n't forgotten, Mrs. Garry, in spite of—but that's none of my business. I'm sure I don't grudge it."

"You're very kind," said Erica, composedly.

"I'm not the sort to bear malice," he responded, fervently. "But I do feel it hard I've not had a penny to call my own since poor Chris died. My wife orders my clothes at the Stores, and made me give up the two pounds a week I got from my mother from the day she married me. I wrote my mother a beautiful

letter about it. And she came to see my wife, and cried on her shoulder for half an hour. Pity they 're not on speaking terms now."

"How's that?"

"They've got nothing in common but their love of me; except that they're both the kind of women who don't think men ought to be trusted with money," he said, dejectedly. "I daresay they're right. But my mother's all for slaving in the house, and my wife all for sport and outdoor life. What that woman does n't know about a horse isn't worth knowing. That's why we're here. Taken a place from a tenant of Lord Erriff's for the winter, and let her own little hunting-box up in Leicestershire for double what she's paying for this."

"I should like to see your wife," said Erica, and he jumped up with alacrity.

Mrs. Murch was quite as tired of making conversation with Lady Erriff in the drawing-room, as Erica of listening to Mr. Murch on the lawn; and the return of her husband made an opportunity for rising to take leave after the exchange of a few civil remarks with her host.

Erica had expected to see a commanding-looking woman with a certain modicum of good looks and a fine figure; whereas she beheld a diminutive person, dressed in a suit as nearly resembling a riding habit as possible, with a hard felt hat, which appeared to be kept on,

together with a very palpable yellow wig, by a black net veil drawn tightly across a small plain face with suspiciously red cheeks and lips.

Mrs. Murch might have been any age between thirty and fifty, and was light and active as a school-girl, with bird-like glittering eyes which seemed to hypnotise her mate.

When she made her farewells and tripped out of the room, he followed submissively, and almost on tip-toe. His subjugation was a very complete thing.

"A reformed character," said Lord Erriff, looking after him with a twinkle. "Poor woman!"

"I think they are both quite dreadful, darling," said Lady Erriff, "but I called on them because they are renting our tenant's house, and because I understood he was an old friend of Erica's."

Far from disclaiming the friendship Erica said at once; "I was delighted to see him again. Poor Christopher Thorverton always said he was a good sort at heart, in spite of his little weakness. And now he seems to have turned over a new leaf .ltogether."

"How she had the face to mention young Thorverton's name to me—!" said Lady Erriff, in relating this occurrence to Robin.

There was a certain amount of relief at Kellacombe, when the beautiful young widow,

and her baby, and the nurse, departed; but it was as nothing to the relief experienced by Erica when she entered again the little, grey drawing-room, gay with rose-coloured and golden globes of giant chrysanthemums, and sad with memories of the all too recent past; yet robbed of the sting of utter loneliness by her mother's tearful welcome, and her almost frantic joy in the baby, who was now to be handed over by the trained nurse to his regular attendant.

“The most beautiful child I ever saw! Oh, Erica, Erica! I never dared hope he would be like this. He is you over again. Your very self! I could think I was holding you in my arms. And I have found a good, honest, old-fashioned nurse for you. She will take all responsibility off your dear hands, and look after your mending as well. I could come and give her a hand in any emergency.” Lady Clow looked anxiously into her daughter's face, and reading thereon no expression of dissent, waxed yet more joyful. “Mrs. Jarmin is almost as excited as I am, and the nursery looks so pretty all blue and white. Lord Finguar gave orders himself about its being done-up, and redecorated, she says, and came here to see it. He sent in a rocking-horse, but he told Mrs. Jarmin that was n't his christening present, poor man. And he wants to know if you'd like a couple of rooms built out over the leads on the stable, because

if so, it's arranged for in his lease, he says. He would willingly have it done, if you could manage to go away for a few weeks at any time. He seems to be a most thoughtful young man."

"It's not a bad idea," said Erica. "I want a change after that relaxing West-country. We could go to Brighton and escape the fogs. After all, we're fearfully cramped here. I'll write and tell him to see about it. If we had two extra rooms, Maamma," she said, slowly, and Lady Clow trembled, as one on the verge of a joy almost too great for contemplation,— "there's no reason why you should n't come and settle down with me here—while the baby's so young. Of course you'd keep to your own sitting-room, and be quite independent of me."

Lady Clow fell, almost literally, upon her daughter's neck.

"Oh, my darling! I did n't dare to suggest it; but if it *could* be! I would never come near you," she cried, with an earnestness almost ludicrous. "It is natural you should want to live your own life, unhampered by me—very natural indeed. But to be under the same roof with you again—and with that little darling who is your living image——"

Lord Finguar was obliged, after an interchange of notes, to come and see Erica about the building of the two additional rooms.

The impression made upon him at their first meeting was violently renewed when he thus saw her again, less than five months after his friend Garry's death, in her deep mourning.

He had been in Scotland at the time of his godson's christening, and Mr. Reinhardt had also not returned to London, so that both the godfathers had been represented by proxy. Both likewise had sent massive goblets in honour of the occasion.

Mrs. Woosnam too was out of town, but she had travelled from Yorkshire to be present at the ceremony, and her gift was a lace christening robe and pelisse, that put poor Lady Erriff's bargain to shame.

When the warm-hearted little godmother brought back the newly-made Christian to Lower Belgrave Street, and laid him in his mother's arms, she could hardly refrain from tears at this first meeting with Erica since her bereavement.

"Oh, Erica darling—darling! But he will make up to you for everything. You 'il see what a comfort a baby can be! He's twice as big as my boy was at his age," she cried, with overflowing generosity. "Oh, if you could see how lovely you look—standing there with him in your arms—like those old Italian pictures—" she sobbed.

Her loyal admiration was pleasant to Erica and delightful to Lady Clow; but sincere as it

was, it fell short of the wonder and worship which almost transfigured Lord Finguar's refined, gentle, foolish face—when he, too, saw his godson for the first time, in the arms of Erica.

She was too experienced not to recognise in that expression something of the blind humility of first love; and in spite of the tragedy which he had related to her, guessed that his feeling for the little chorus girl had been a lighter and more transient thing, than this passion, which she perceived herself to have aroused, might presently prove.

At their previous meeting, she had looked tired, and unwell, as was natural in the circumstances; but now her beauty was fully restored, and with an added softness and delicacy which lent it additional charm. The light blue eyes had lost their coldness, and even held something of appeal, as though a hint of self-distrust had, for the first time, touched Erica.

"Here is your godson," she said, smiling.

"You're not going to ask me to hold him?" He drew back in alarm.

"No, no. Only to look at him before I send him upstairs. His name is Joseph." And in answer to an unspoken question, "I could n't bear to hear him called Tom," she said softly.

"Of course not, by Jove!" he said hurriedly.

"So I named him after my father, Sir Joseph Clow. I don't suppose you ever heard of him.

The bankruptcy of his firm, poor darling, was before your time."

She did not know why young Fingnar's face cleared, nor divine that he said to himself, with enigmatic brevity:

"City, by Jove! That accounts for it. That's all right."

"I had an uncle who went bankrupt once," he said, sympathetically. "Bore it must be." He gazed upon the sleeping face of Tom's son, and searched vainly for an appropriate remark, bursting forth at length:

"Seems a nice quiet sort of a baby."

Erica ordered him to ring the bell, which he did with great relief.

In the brief interview which followed, the subdued and guarded reverence of his manner touched her.

The interview was brief, because he decided he ought to make it so, and on this occasion she made no effort to detain him. Perhaps she knew that he was already caught more securely than he himself dreamed, in the web of her fascinations; the extent of her indifference to this knowledge stirred her to a dull surprise.

It was settled that she was to remove herself and her child to Brighton, while the actual building of the rooms was in progress; and he assured her that they would be finished with lightning rapidity, and that the workmen would carry on

their operations from the stable yard, scarcely needing to enter the house at all. Also, that the contractor promised to have them ready for occupation in the early spring. Erica insisted that the rent must be raised and with great delicacy he forbore to oppose the suggestion.

Then he took his leave, mentioning casually, that later in the winter, he might be in Brighton, and asking if he might come and see her; but he was unable, in spite of the casualness of his words, to refrain from blushing and stammering as he spoke. She gave the required permission with distant kindness, and he went away.

Erica went to Brighton with her mother, the nurse, and the baby, and took up her abode in the excellent lodgings which the experienced Lady Clow had selected.

At first she enjoyed the change of scene, the bracing air, and the brilliant sunshine.

Every morning and every afternoon her bath-chair was drawn up and down the esplanade, while the nurse walked beside her, carrying Master Garry in his long robes.

Her widow's bonnet framed a face, too lovely in its purity of outline and colouring not to be remarkable, even among a crowd of holiday-makers and convalescents. There was nothing to prevent her from walking except indolence, and a certain listlessness which had grown upon

her daily since Tom's death. Her spirits were low enough to alarm her mother, although her health was now perfectly restored.

Presently bad weather set in, and after ten consecutive days of imprisonment in the lodging-house drawing-room,—with little to do beyond gazing through the window at a straight line of grey sky, and a straight line of white-flecked sea, and a straight line of rain-washed pavement—Erica's restlessness overpowered her, and she declared to herself that existence in such circumstances was intolerable.

The baby made no demands upon her attention.

He throve on a patent food, slept, woke, stared into space with large light blue eyes, fed, and slept again. His weight increased, his white cheeks took a flush of rose, and a faint indication of golden down appeared on his bald head.

Lady Clow hung over him for hours enraptured; a single gurgle from the infant appeared to repay her for unlimited snubbing from her daughter.

She had to talk to somebody, so she talked to the nurse; and the nurse, who was old-fashioned and discreet, received her confidences with no further betrayal of her own opinion than an occasional "Well, I never, my lady!" and "Ah, dear, dear!"

They were thus excellent companions; the nurse sewed for her mistress while Lady Clow

sewed for the baby; the nurse washed and dressed the baby while Lady Clow looked on and commented ecstatically upon his bodily perfections; and Lady Clow minded the baby while the nurse had her meals.

Reminiscences of Erica's childhood poured forth, and her mother reproached her pitifully for indifference towards her offspring.

"I never pretended not to be indifferent to babies that I know of," said Erica, assuming at once the cynical pose with which she was wont to meet any appeal from her parent.

"Erica! Your own son. Dear Tom's boy!"

"If he had been like Tom," retorted Erica, "I might have thought more of him. Am I such a perfect being that I should wish to see myself reproduced? I should have imagined that you,—who have so often denounced what you are pleased to call my heartlessness, and my crooked ways—would see that though they are bad enough in a woman, they would be a thousand times worse in a man."

"Why should he not inherit his father's disposition? Dear Tom was kind, and gentle, and true," said Lady Clow, weeping. "Why should not the dear baby take after him?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you," said Erica, coldly. "Why did I not take after my father?"

"I made mistakes in bringing you up. Often and often I have lain awake at night and thought

over the mistakes I made. I spoilt you. I let you take it as a matter of course that everything must be done for you, until you came to think yourself a superior being and took it all as a right. It never entered your head to be grateful for anything I did, and because I did n't want gratitude I did n't see how bad it was for *you*, poor little thing. I blame myself. It was almost as though I created your faults," said Lady Clow, sadly, "and that is why I cannot think this little angel will inherit them. I feel as if God had given me another chance, when I look into his dear little face that is so like yours."

"You argue in a circle as usual," said Erica, crossly.

"We will bring him up so carefully. To be a good man——"

"We are born what we are. Bringing up makes precious little difference, to my mind," said Erica.

"If it comes to that—he is like me too," said her mother.

"I am quite aware of that," said Erica, with a short laugh.

An invitation from Mrs. Woosnam, who suggested that Erica should accompany her on a shopping expedition to Paris, arrived at the moment when Mrs. Garry's nerves were fretted

almost to breaking point; and she accepted the invitation with a faint revival of interest in the prospect of buying clothes. The interest was stimulated by the disapproval expressed by Lady Erriff, who wrote that she thought Erica should not leave her child, and reported Lord Erriff's remark that he could not understand modern mothers.

"As if I were not here—devoting myself day and night—" cried Lady Clow, resentfully. "But it is true that I could not have left you, Erica, even for a few days. And babies' illnesses are very sudden—though if it is to do you good, my darling——"

Mrs. Woosnam received Erica's acceptance with a delight, which was doubled by an intimation from Lieutenant Woosnam that he proposed, after all, to accompany his wife to Paris.

"Between us we will pet her and look after her till she gets back her spirits," she cried. "From hints she lets drop—though she never actually complains, poor darling—I gather that dreadful old mother of hers must be rather a trial. And the poor dear reely does love shopping. I hope she'll let me give her a few things."

"You are always wanting to give people things, and they don't like it," young Woosnam warned her.

"I know, I know. But I reely do think I'm

getting more tactful," she answered with apologetic meekness. "It's such a temptation you see, being *able* to get what one knows they want. And Erica's different—she's such a *great* friend——"

Mrs. Woosnam was unwilling to confess, even to herself, how much surprised she was at the new reluctance to profit by her generosity which was evinced by her great friend. On the other hand, Erica displayed a shrewdness in her own buying that astonished Mrs. Woosnam; and her affectionate admiration for Mrs. Garry would have increased tenfold had it not been for an unforeseen element that threatened to quench it altogether.

Mr. Charles Woosnam's attentions to the beautiful widow, became so marked that the young wife's jealousy was aroused, in spite of her conviction of Erica's disdainful indifference. She fought against it loyally, with the usual result; and began to wish heartily that she had never been inspired to invite Erica to accompany her to Paris.

"Yet it's a shame to be angry with *her*," she thought, with the unusual honesty and charity which characterised her. "It's not her fault she's so beautiful that she would turn any man's head; and I know well enough she does n't care for Charlie,—though he's twice the man to look at that poor Tom Garry was—I know it was

him she loved. But—but he's dead, poor fellow, and though I know it's only a passing fancy of Charlie's, and that he loves me and baby a thousand times more in his heart—still—" she shed a few scalding tears of mortification—the bitterest perhaps of all tears—"I can't help wishing he would n't show his passing feelings as he does before people. No one could help noticing the way his eyes follow her about. And it's mortifying that he never speaks to me—nor even hears what I say—when she's in the room—just like he used to be about me once, and not so long ago either," she thought, with a scorn that was foreign to her simple nature. "But now he's for ever putting her cloak on, and leaving me to look after myself. It's—it's hard—after all he's said. But I won't be a fool and lose him through this—I'll win him back when she's gone. He'll come back to me all right."

The way she took to bring about this desirable result was also the usual one; of snapping at her husband in private, and bursting into tears and a storm of reproaches when he shamelessly questioned her as to the wherefore of such unusual behaviour.

"Don't you think *I* care," she sobbed. "Only I—I can't bear to see you make such a fool of yourself, that's all."

"Was it I who invited her to come?" asked

the young giant sulkily; and then, growing angry in proportion to his consciousness that his wife's unhappiness was to some extent justified, he thundered: "'Pon my soul, I shall be afraid to speak to a woman if it's going to lead to this sort of thing, and everlasting scenes."

"It's not fair. I never made a scene in my life," she gasped. "And even now I'm not making a scene. I—I'm only telling you——"

He was fond of his wife, and of course the quarrel ended in a reconciliation; but the glory of her innocent faith in him had paled, and he was to her no longer a god, but a mortal man; and the perfect happiness for which she had uttered a daily thanksgiving, upon her knees, ever since her wedding morning, was no longer a thing of heaven but of earth.

The great Lady Riverton appeared in Paris at this critical juncture, and Erica transferred herself, how, no one quite knew, to the protection of her aunt-in-law; while Mrs. Woosnam fled home with her husband safely in tow.

Mrs. Garry's daughterly devotion to Tom's aunt had increased with her perception of the annoyance it caused her mother-in-law; but also, the old lady's shrewdness and outspokenness were exceedingly congenial to her; whilst her own subdued and gentle air, assumed almost unconsciously in Lady Riverton's presence, suited the deep mourning she wore, and com-

mended her highly to Lady Riverton's sense of the fitness of things.

"Poor thing! She is more beautiful than ever," said the little old lady to her friends, with tears in her bright dark eyes. "I am broken-hearted when I think of Tom. No, she won't see any one. Quite right. I hate these modern habits of setting mourning at naught. But if you like to come in at tea-time. . . . She looks the picture of health, but her nerves are shattered by the blow, and my sister-in-law's well-meant attentions when her baby was born nearly drove her mad. You know what poor Julia Erriff *can* be. So she left the child with her mother for a few days, and toddled quietly over here, with poor Tom's favourite brother-officer and his wife; and I persuaded her to stay on with me when they left," Lady Riverton was honestly convinced that she had thus persuaded Erica, "till I go to the Riviera. It rests me to look at anything so beautiful, and I am very far from well since my bronchial attack. Of course she'll marry again, though it's too early to talk of such things as Julia most indecently does, and imagines that in that case the baby would be handed over to her, if you will believe me. Meantime we are as snug and peaceful as possible together in this quiet little hotel."

An agitated telegram from Lady Clow invaded this peace.

The baby was ill, and perhaps Erica had better return immediately.

The poor lady betrayed, in the confused wording of the telegram, at once her own indecision of mind, her anxiety, and her fear of disturbing her daughter by an unnecessary summons.

Erica, during her preparations for the journey, alternated between a suspense which astonished herself, and an impatient certainty that her mother was making a mountain out of a molehill.

Lady Riverton offered to accompany her, but Erica pointed out that she was running an unnecessary risk by so doing, and Lady Riverton remembered her bronchitis, and agreed with a grateful sigh that she had better not. It was with some relief that Erica found herself traveling alone, and as fast as as she could, to London.

Here another incoherent telegram told her that the baby had been violently ill, with an internal inflammation attributed to a chill; that it was hoped all danger was over, and that Lady Clow, not liking the sole responsibility, had summoned his paternal grandparents.

Jealousy rather than anxiety made the hour's run from London to Brighton seem a long one to Erica.

Lord and Lady Erriff had taken rooms at an adjacent hotel, and Lady Clow, receiving Erica alone, in the lodging-house drawing-room, and

gasping forth gratitude for the kindness shown by both, had to bear the brunt of her daughter's displeased reproaches.

But upstairs—where the nurse awaited her, tearful and terrified—a sudden shocked silence fell upon Erica, when large violet eyes, deeply ringed in a baby's pale wasted face, met her own, as she bent over the cot.

She hardly recognised the plump, rosy cherub she had left, in this pathetic changeling. She realised that Tom's son had been indeed very near to death in her absence.

She signed imperiously to the nurse to leave the room, and stood beside the cot for some moments, watching the child; terror, self-reproach, a thousand mingled feelings clutching at her heart.

Then she lifted him in her arms and against her breast; and the fierce protective instinct and passion of motherhood awoke in her for the first time.

CHAPTER XXI

ON an afternoon in February, Reinhardt, having obeyed a summons to Lower Belgrave Street, stood in the archway of the little drawing-room, looking at the portrait of Erica, for which space had been found on the farther wall of the inner apartment.

He shook hands absently with his hostess as she entered.

"It is not in a good light, and it wants a great deal more space. It is a thousand pities your rooms are so small. Also he says he would give anything to paint you again. He told me he had a talk at the Academy with your mother, which threw a new light on your character."

"I know. She told me. I wish to heaven she would refrain from holding forth about me in public places," said Erica, with the frankness which she indulged without fear of shocking or alienating Mr. Reinhardt, whose calm was not easily perturbed. "As for sitting to him again, it would only be because I know his paintings are valuable if I did; for I hate the picture, and to tell you the truth I don't think it does me any sort of justice."

He looked directly at her.

"If it did once, it certainly does not now. You are more wonderful than ever," he stated the fact dispassionately. "It would take an Italian artist to convey your expression to the canvas," he said, with a sudden but subdued enthusiasm, "for no other could give so well the look of—the Madonna. It is that which has given a new meaning to your beauty."

"It appears that misery is becoming to me," said Erica, flippantly.

"I am sorry you are miserable," he said, gently. His beautiful melancholy eyes shed a sympathy that transformed the plainness of the small sallow face. "Yet, believe me—it will pass."

"What do you know about it?" she said scornfully.

He was silent.

"Well?"

"If I say what I know—I intrrrude on your feelings—" he pointed out. "You would have the right to detest me. I do not want to give you that right. Let me play to you——"

He rose and went to the piano.

She did not care for music, yet his playing soothed her.

When he closed the piano and returned to her, she was sitting in a low chair looking into the fire, with traces of tears upon her cheeks;

and he noted, with the eye of an artist, how infinitely that touch of sorrow and softness added to the loveliness of the face she turned to him.

"Have you ever failed, utterly and hopelessly failed, in anything you meant to do?" she asked him.

He considered, with his usual care for exactness.

"I cannot remember failing utterly in anything I have deliberately undertaken to do. But I have often attained only a small proportion of the success for which I hoped."

"When I married Tom—I meant to make him believe in me," she said listlessly. "I meant also to justify his belief in me; to play the game absolutely."

Reinhardt nodded in silence.

"Before we married I'd—I'd lied and schemed and plotted often enough, in small petty despicable ways, to get things if I wanted them. I wanted so many things. But I meant to change all that, and make a fresh start. And I could n't change. You know what Tom was. You aggravated me once by talking about his fine feelings."

"There was more to like in him than in most people," said Reinhardt, in his usual dispassionate manner. "He had principle; not only in theory, but in practice."

"I thought it would be easy to live up to his

principles. And I only succeeded in even seeming to live up to them, more or less, for a little while," said Erica, bitterly. "On the day of his accident, he found me out, by chance. I suppose my powers of invention and cunning failed me for once.

"I was tired and my nerves were unstrung. I was almost glad to be found out. Life was becoming impossible. I was sick of acting—to *him*—and yet, in a way, I suppose I enjoyed playing on his feelings, and outwitting him." She uttered a little laugh, so full of bitter pain that he scarcely recognised the Erica he thought he knew. "The reason I have often seemed callous about his death is that—thinking it over—I am glad he died," she said, with a frown of deliberate recklessness. "It is better to die than to live disillusioned and unhappy. I should have made Tom unhappy. Already he was losing his light-heartedness; he was puzzled and disappointed. I jarred on him. He was loyal and tried to hide it; but those things—don't get better. And yet I was trying. I suppose I tried to combine being different—with—getting what I wanted—it was n't thorough. Still I *was* trying, for the first time in my life—that is what makes it so humiliating to have failed—utterly——"

She was so obviously fighting the emotions which threatened to overcome her, that Rein-

hardt could not look at her. He was sitting opposite her, on a low chair, with his elbows on his knees, and his little black head in his hands.

"I took out my pearls yesterday," she said, dejectedly, "and put them round my neck, and knew suddenly that I should n't care if I never saw them again. I never realised that these things I have always cared for so much, could be quite—quite worthless after all; until Tom slipped away so suddenly and quietly, and left them all behind for me to do what I like with. Then for a moment, I saw vividly that the things I thought real are the transitory vanishing ones—and that nothing lasts except memories for a little while,"—she spoke bitterly,—“memories of truth—and kindness, and—and just words—words—spoken or written.”

"It is only the abstract which counts," he said, nodding. "That is, the soul. Dreams—thoughts—words—these are real—the material things are but the toys of life——"

"The toys made me happy," she said, almost angrily.

"You haf outgrown them."

"Tom's death has spoilt my life."

He waited a moment and then said gently:

"You haf now—to mark time."

"It is nearly nine months since he died," she said, "and I think it gets worse, this rest-

lessness, of—of—you may call it remorse, if you like.”

“That is a poisoned sorrow, and hardest of all to bear,” he agreed.

“What experience have you had?” she asked, quickly. “When have you ever felt it?”

“Because I am an artist,” said Reinhardt, calmly, “I can feel—what I have never experienced. But no one can escape a shadow of that sensation, who looks back upon a youth hard and thoughtless. Yet, if you will occupy your mind—and not permit yourself to dwell upon these thoughts,—the sharp edge of them will be dulled—the pain will pass—” He paused and said deliberately, “If you had loved him it would be different.”

“How dare you say I did not love him?” she said, and her face flushed. “I cared for him more than I ever cared for anybody except—ah—except myself—that is what you are thinking. But you are wrong,” she said, defiantly.

Reinhardt said nothing. His expressive dark eyes met her angry light ones steadily.

“Don’t you believe me? I tell you I am sick with grief whenever I think of him,” she said, vehemently. “I hate Robin’s footstep because it is so like his that will never come up the stair again. I rage when I think of the ugly, stupid, cross, useless people left on earth, while he who was so kind and young and active, and

pleasant to look at, lies cold in his grave. They wanted me to go and see it, but I would n't. I never will. I realise what's happened to him well enough without that. I hate even that photograph of him in uniform," she said, pointing to one on the table. "It is cold and stiff and dead—to me. I miss his living presence. I am missing him all the time."

"That I believe," said Reinhardt, wearily.

"If my sorrow is not a real thing," she said, almost pleadingly; "there is nothing real about me." Two spots of colour burned in her face. She leaned back, exhausted by the rare intensity of emotion which had possessed her. "I used to think sometimes that there *was* nothing real about me."

"I also," said Reinhardt.

"Tom never thought so," she said.

"It is true. He perceived in you the soul which I missed," said Reinhardt, thoughtfully. "Perhaps it was sleeping—perhaps insignificant—obscured by the splendour and perfection of your body; it is certain that souls must differ in value and significance and beauty as greatly as the flesh which conceals them. Yet it has now become conscious of its own existence; and made me also conscious of it for the first time; though it was not I who called it to life."

"It was certainly not you."

Her scornful tone and laugh angered him.

“How could I tell you had a soul?” he said, indignantly. “What sign did you give me? Music did not touch you, nor art; poetry—the grrreat thoughts of grrreat men, clothed in the perfection of words—meant nothing to you; never haf I seen you moved by anxiety or pity or emotion for another; to the suffering of the world you were blind, and deaf, and careless. Only of your own desires you thought,—that your body might be adorned and cared for as its beauty deserved. And I who worship beauty—worshipped beauty in you. I haf not seen anything else to worship.”

“I dare say it was only Tom’s fancy that there was anything else,” she said, bitterly. “It was my misfortune that I should have married the kind of man who would trouble himself about a woman’s soul one way or the other. There are men who might have been happy enough with me. I ought to have married either a fool who would love me blindly, and think me perfect whatever I did—or a man so wise that he would have no illusions about me, and love me only for my looks—like you.”

She turned blue, scornful eyes upon him; and though her lack of reserve vexed him as it had often vexed him before, his every sense was thrilled by the loveliness of the fair face that confronted his own. Also he stood convicted in his own mind by her shrewdness.

"It is true that I lof you," he said, in a low voice, "though this is not the time to tell you so. Perhaps I should never have told you so—to make myself a laughing-stock. I—who am almost a dwarf beside you—ugly—insignificant—a nobody—and yet—a slave to your beauty. Content with that—to worship that—alone."

"Oh, I know that *you* would have expected no fine feelings from me," she said, mocking him. "And I should not have needed to plot or lie or scheme if I had married you—simply because you are so rich that you would have been able to give me all I wanted."

"Everything in the world—I would lay at your feet," he said, with a passion for which he despised himself, and which he could not help. "Haf I not said I lof you?"

Her emotion had exhausted itself. She leaned back and looked at him with an utter and impersonal indifference to his admission which galled his sensitive spirit almost beyond endurance.

"Of course, I shall have to marry somebody sooner or later. I can't go on like this," she said, coldly and wearily. "Everybody expects me to marry again, and equally, of course, everybody expects that I shall marry Lord Finguar, who has made *his* intentions pretty obvious. He is," she said sardonically, "the fool of whom I was thinking just now."

Reinhardt sprang from his chair angrily.

"Why do you tell *me* this?"

"I tell you everything. It has become a kind of necessity with me. You are the only adviser I have whom I trust, and who understands me. You may be an artist—but you take a perfectly practical view of life. You have no illusions. And I believe you would advise me quite impartially."

Reinhardt moved restlessly away from her, as though undecided what to say next. His obvious pain and embarrassment gave her a certain satisfaction. Since she must suffer so much, she was glad that he, also, should suffer a little. He came back to the hearthrug, and stood looking down upon her; his long-lashed melancholy dark blue eyes burning with suppressed feeling.

"I believe I am advising you impartially, though in the circumstances it is not possible to be sure. I advise you to marry me rather than Lord Finguar."

"Because you are a richer man than he?" she asked calmly. "But he is quite decently well-off. They say he has seven or eight thousand a year, and a finer house than Kellacombe, an old castle. He is good-looking and amiable, even if he is a fool. It is an ancient earldom. I should enjoy the felicity of walking out of the room before my mother-in-law. And the Garry family would prefer him a thousand times to

you—as a stepfather to my son. Can't you see how much more suitable it would be?" she asked, always with that slight derisive smile.

But he knew that beneath the smile, she was in earnest.

"He would be much more suitable to the Garry family," he answered, steadily, "but not to you."

"Why?"

"If I tell you why, you will be angry."

"What does that matter? We often make each other angry," she said. "Why would he not suit me?"

"Because you are—thank God—middle-class to the backbone, as I am myself," he said, and she darted a furious look at him; and then laughed, but her laugh did not deceive him as to her anger. "You have at heart nothing in common with the people to whom your marriage has united you. You may be with them, but of them you will never be. And you are far too clever not to know this. I have not seen Kellacombe, but I have seen Finguar's ruined castle. What would you do there? In the long summer days? In the long winter evenings? You think he could live in London? I tell you he could not. His heart is in the sporting life, the life of outdoor that for generations his people have loved, and which to you means nothing—as to me. His wander-years are over, and he dreams

of a home, with you as the mother of his children; but the home of which he dreams would be to you a prison. Remember the life of Kellacombe that you haf described to me with scorn. The life of the housewife; the teaching of the children; the visiting the poor; the working in the garden; that would be your life. He has less than ten thousand pounds a year, but he has more than ten thousand claims on it; which he will no more ignore for the sake of your dresses and jewels—when that craving shall return upon you, as it surely will—than he will ignore the rest of the calls that are in his blood, that he has inherited with his father's house, and woods, and fields. You think that you will be stronger than he, and force him to live here—but so surely as you do, the amiability of which you speak will vanish, and you will make another man unhappy.”

Erica was silent. She thought of Tom's love for Kellacombe.

“You haf with Lord Finguar nothing in common,” said Reinhardt.

“And what with you?” she demanded.

“With me—a grrreat deal,” he said slowly, “though I find my pleasure in art, and you find yours in dress, and jewels, and luxury.” He returned to the chair opposite hers, and faced her. “With me you would regain that interest in life which you believe yourself to have lost

for ever; and that, without quenching the light of your soul which has to-day dawned, however dimly, on my blindness. I swear to you that it would become to me also dear, as your beauty is dear. But you are of the city, as I am. The breath of life is for us in the streets, the theatres, the parks, the world of men and women; among those who plot and scheme and work with their brains to wrest their share of the gifts of the earth, and make use of them. I can gif you all you wish. Also, above all the rest, to me you can talk without reserve, as you haf said. It is the essence of companionship. As for your son, you know very well that I can be trusted to take care of his interests," he said.

"I can take care of my son," Erica said, fiercely. "I want nobody to help me."

He raised his expressive eyes.

"I did not know that you cared for the child," he said, with perfect simplicity. "If that is so, you haf already one interest in life."

"I did n't care, at first," she said. "I might if he'd been like Tom, as I hoped. But he was n't. Yet when I came near losing him, something gripped my heart, and I suffered, God knows why, as I never suffered when Tom died. And now, it's—it's a kind of love so intense as to be more like pain. Something I never felt for anything or anybody in all my life. I suppose," her laugh was tremulous, "it's—mother-

hood—the kind of wild unreasoning instinct that's made my poor old mother cling to me through thick and thin. I dare say he'll live to pay me out for it,—as I've paid her out,—to be cruel to me because he's bored to death with it. For he's like me, you know. When I look in his little face I can't help seeing with a kind of terror how like me my boy is. So my mother is delighted, and the Garrys are vexed; especially my mother-in-law, who hates the thought of my son being the next Lord Erriff instead of Robin. But I'm going to guard his rights like a tigress. And if you want to know it's—it's only for his sake I should marry again at all. It's because I care for him like this that one man is as good as another so far as I am concerned, provided he can give my boy all he wants, and all I'm having to do without now, let my mother and Cloberry manage as they will."

Reinhardt was very white.

"Who can understand women? The pith of their conversation like the pith of their letters—lies in a postscript," he said, bitterly. "Just now you said you'd lost interest in everything——"

"In everything to do with *me*. I did n't mean to tell you a word about *him*," she said coldly. "I don't know why I did."

"I can give you much more than Finguar——"

he said, in a low voice, "so far as mere money is concerned."

"You can't bring him up to be a sportsman, as Finguar can," she retorted. "You can't give him the training or companionship, or tastes which belong to his class,—the class to which you so politely intimated just now that I do not belong, any more than you do,—as Finguar can."

"I cannot," he said. "But I can give *you* the life that would suit you best."

"That does not matter. I've told you I don't care any more for myself."

"But you will. You are still only at the beginning of your life. A baby is not everything," the words were on his lips, but he did not utter them. He said to himself despairingly; "When it is a question of motherhood, who can tell?"

"Of course there's a great deal to be said for mere money—" said Erica, perhaps moved by his pallor and silence. "There's his education to think of, and putting him into the Guards—and after all, visits to his own people and his own place at Kellacombe, would perhaps be happier for him than any amount of sport, and training of that kind, in another man's house.

"If you took my advice and married me, rather than Finguar, it would be then only—for the money?" he said, with dry lips.

"Yes," she said, in a hard voice. "If I were

a rich woman—I mean really rich—I would n't marry at all. Why should I?"

He looked at her strangely, and looked away.

"Haf you forgotten the money I invested for you?" he asked.

"Of course not."

"Half of it is in Kuala Keliling," said Reinhardt. "It will probably declare ten per cent. dividend next year, and the value of your capital has more than doubled already."

"Ought n't I to sell out?"

"As you choose."

"What do you advise?"

"I am holding on to everything I have in rubber, and buying more," he said. "The rest of your investments are as promising, or more so. We have got hold of some good things, thanks largely to young Robin's quickness and business instincts. If you hold on, there is little doubt that before long, you will be a rich woman."

"What do you mean by rich?"

"I mean richer than Lord Finguar; and with no claims on you."

"Are you certain?"

"Nothing is certain in business. I myself have no doubt," he said, quietly.

"When shall I know?"

"In a year or two, at the outside."

Vaguely it crossed her mind that it was

strange she should owe to him the circumstance that obviated the necessity, after all, of her marrying him for his money.

A slight smile half dawned on her lips. Her active mind busied itself anew; a fresh interest was certainly springing to life.

"By-the-bye," she said, suddenly, "I have been wanting to tell you that it was time there was an end to this farce of keeping my money in my mother's name. Please make arrangements now for transferring it to mine."

"Her consent will be necessary," said Reinhardt.

"I will tell her I wish it," said Erica, imperiously.

She rose, and he rose also, taking her move as a sign of dismissal. He was half a head shorter than she was, and more conscious of the difference than she was herself; painfully and unnecessarily conscious.

His eyes travelled slowly over the statuesque lines of her long, black gown, and rested on her fair and noble face, and the glory of her hair.

"I wonder why you sent for me this afternoon?" he asked, and his tones were deeper and more guttural than ever. "Was it to ask me that?"

"What?"

"About the transfer of the money?"

"Dear me, no," said Erica, instantly. "That

was an after thought." She stopped short, coloured painfully, and said hurriedly. "I may have had it at the back of my mind. I sent for you because I was lonely, and worried about expenses, and I had to talk to somebody. And as I said just now, it has become a kind of necessity with me to tell you things, because you are the only person who understands—and with whom I can be—myself."

"I see," said Reinhardt.

He looked at her so steadfastly that she was confused. His eyes said much that his lips did not utter.

"You've been—very good to me," Erica murmured, hurriedly. "You'll—come and see me again, soon?"

"I will come and see you again—some day," said Reinhardt.

Then he took his leave gravely, and went away.

THE END

NOTE.—The author hopes in a later volume to give the further history of Erica and her son.



