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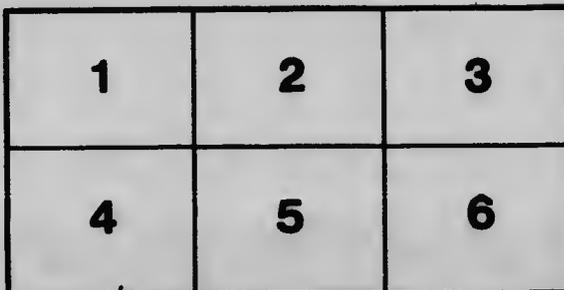
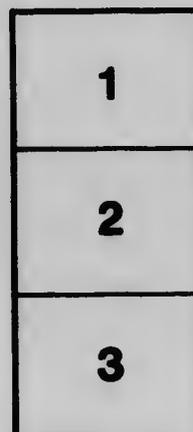
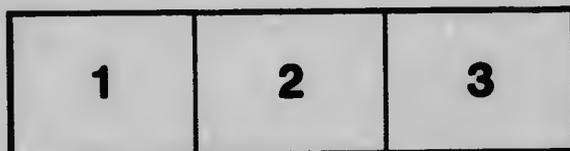
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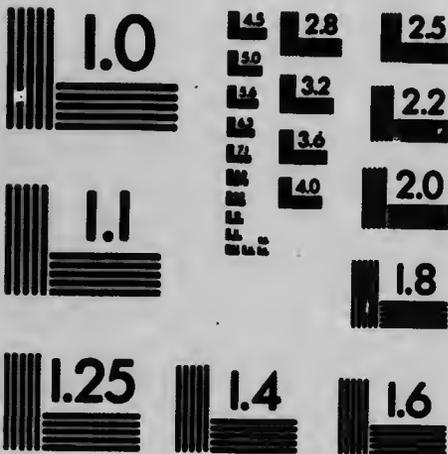
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A
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SARA DEAN

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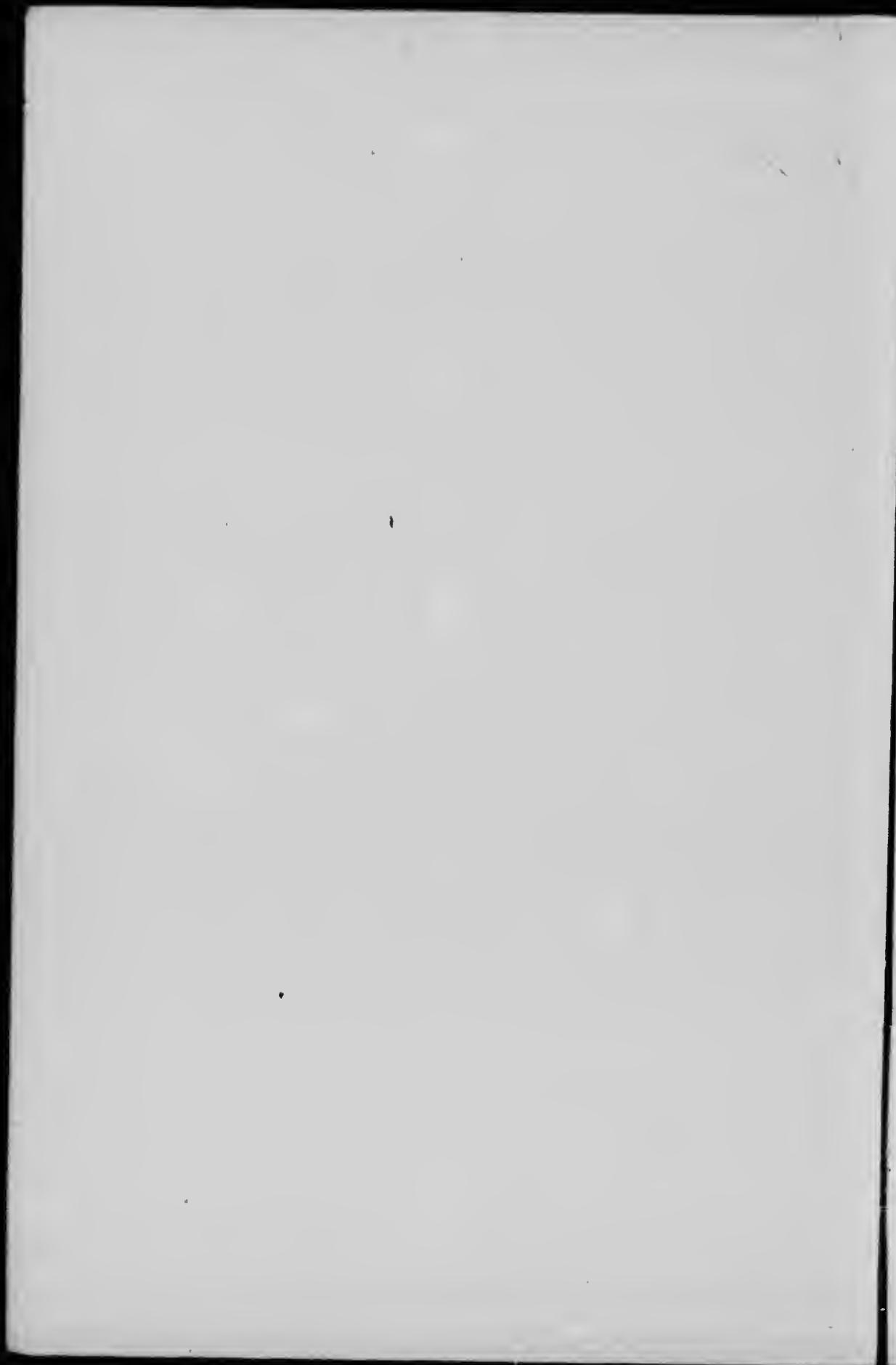
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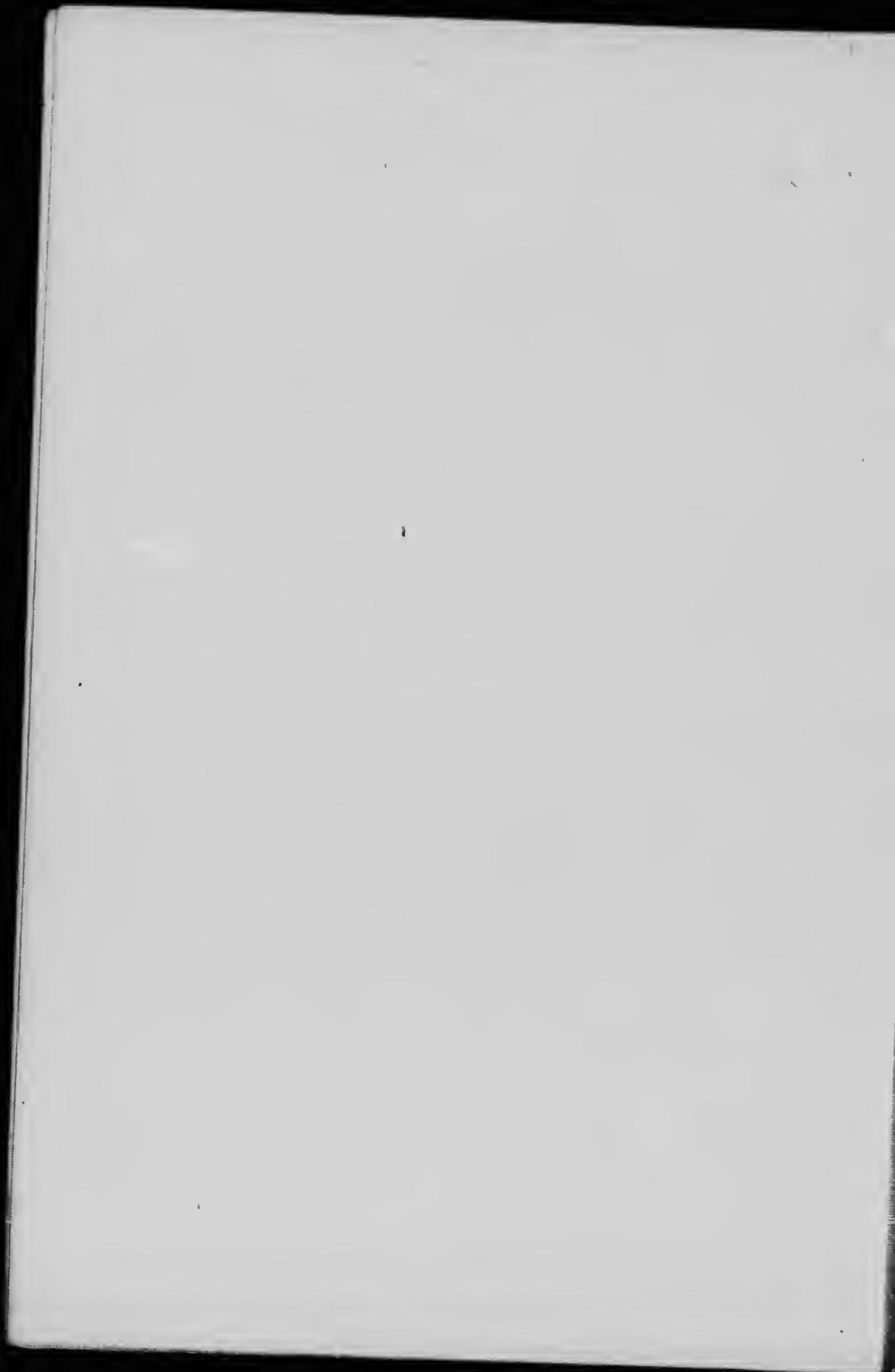
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A DISCIPLE OF CHANCE



A DISCIPLE *of* CHANCE

AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
LOVE STORY

By SARA DEAN
AUTHOR OF "TRAVERS"

*O, sir, so wilful men,
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters*

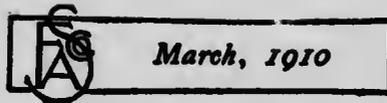
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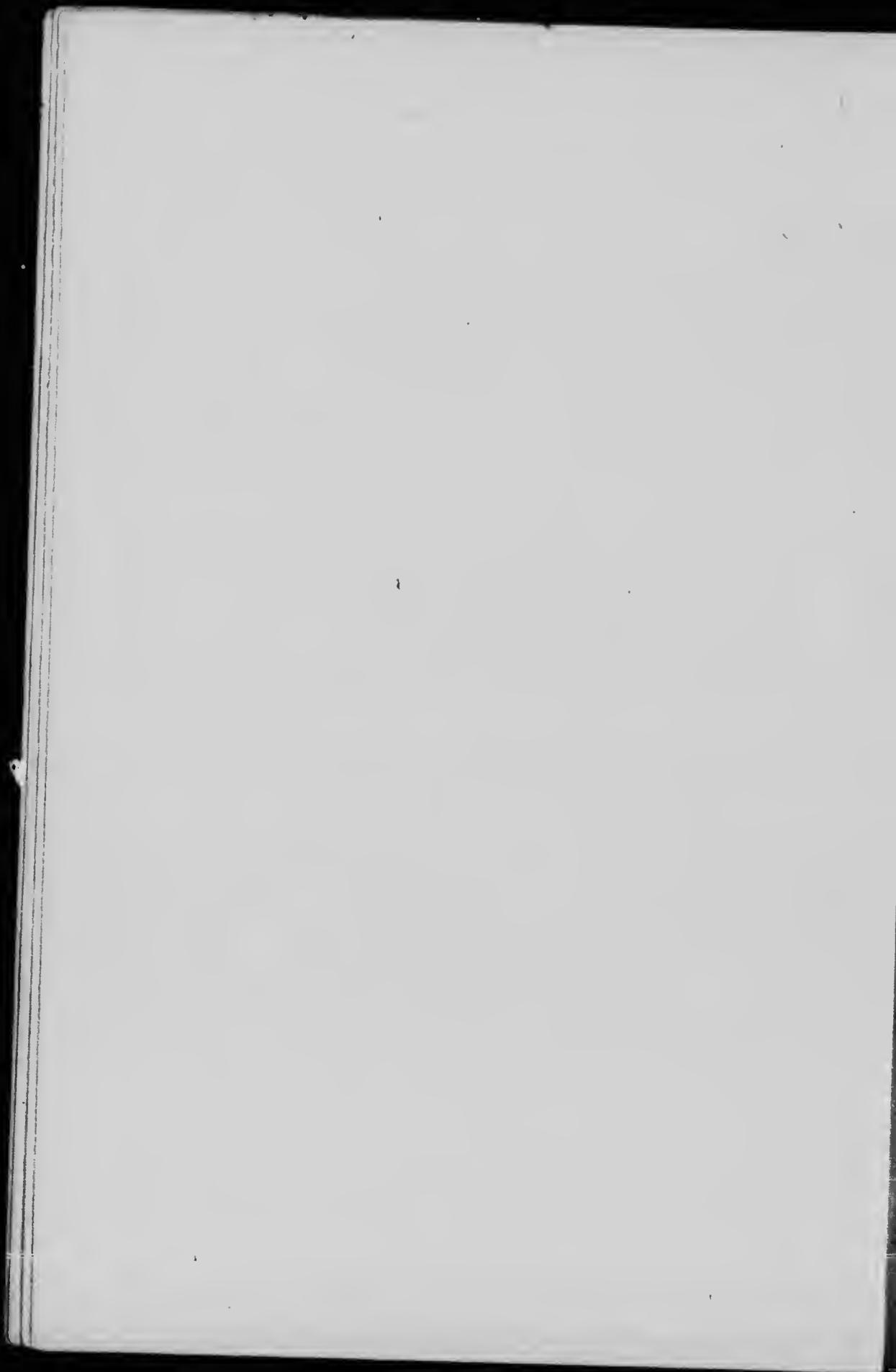
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**DEDICATED IN HUMILITY
TO MY FATHER**



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A PROLOGUE

What is it then,—some Reader asks,—
What is it that attaches
Your fancy so to fans and masks,—
To periwigs and patches?

Is Human Life to-day so poor,—
So bloodless,—you disdain it,
To “galvanise” the past once more?
Permit me. I'll explain it.

This Age I grant (and grant with pride),
Is varied, rich, eventful;
But, if you touch its weaker side,
Deplorably resentful:

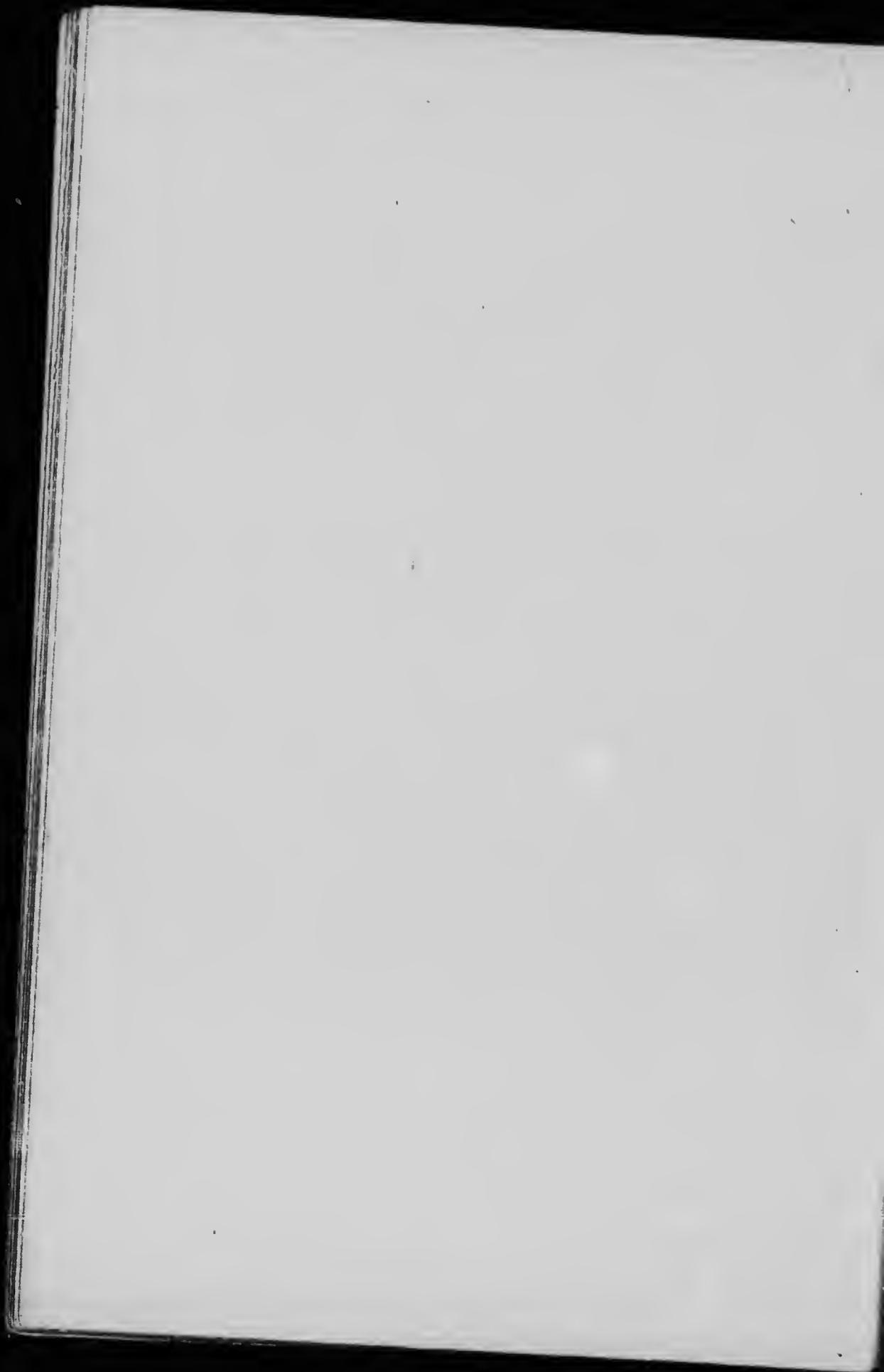
Belaud it, and it takes your praise
With air of calm conviction;
Condemn it, and at once you raise
A storm of contradiction.

Whereas with these old Shades of mine,
Their ways and dress delight me;
And should I trip by word or line,
They cannot well indict me.

Not that I think to err. I seek
To steer 'twixt blame and blindness;
I strive (as some one said in Greek)
To speak the truth with kindness:

But—should I fail to render clear
Their title, rank, or station—
I still may sleep secure, nor fear
A suit for defamation.

—AUSTIN DOBSON.



A Disciple of Chance

CHAPTER I

OUTSIDE WHITE'S CHOCOLATE-HOUSE

But here among us the chief trade is
To rail against our lords and ladies;
To aggravate their smallest failings,
To expose their faults with saucy railings.

—*A Muse in Livery.*—DODSLEY.

“Two o'clock and a fine morning,” called the watchman.

For hours London had lain in almost unbroken obscurity. The lanterns, which the grudging citizens had suspended before their houses, had long since guttered out. Here and there amidst this gloom was etched the orange-coloured oblong of a lighted window; but for the most part the tortuous streets, dusky even in daylight, were steeped in pitchy darkness.

To this darkness the scene before White's chocolate-house struck a note of sharp contrast.

There the torches of the waiting linkboys cast a glare of shifting light, and the brilliance, flooding through the chocolate-house windows, struck long slants of yellow upon the thatch of straw spread over the way. The footmen had extinguished their flambeaux and withdrawn to a neighbouring taphouse. The less fortunate coachmen, who dared not leave their boxes, nodded, and the drooping horses slept upon their feet.

Before the chocolate-house, and for a hundred feet to right and left of it, straw was spread, to deaden the sound of passing vehicles.

A DISCIPLE OF CHANCE

A slim man, in a livery of apricot and gold, left the house whence issued the babble of his fellow-lackeys' voices, and advanced with mincing steps to the side of a great gilt coach.

"Wake up, Hawkins," he cried, "your snores fair split my ears. Faith, I wonder, if you must sleep, that you cannot manage it more genteelly."

Hawkins started into life all on the defensive, and it was only by an agile leap, which put all his affectations to flight, that the footman avoided a blow from his whipstock.

"Gad's life!" he exclaimed. "This is the most scurvy ingratitude, when I have brought you a tankard of hot perry."

"Humph!" said Hawkins, with a long-drawn breath, "I dreamt I made a pass at a highwayman on Hounslow Heath. Hadst thee been but three inches wider in the chest, thee'd have had a smart one. Hand it up, mon."

Hawkins took the battered tankard and drank off its contents without pausing.

"Langley," he said, as he drew the back of his hand across his lips, "there are times when I see the making of a man in thee."

Langley dangled the returned tankard lightly from a finger-tip.

"La," he answered, "I would I could say I saw the making of a pretty fellow in you, but you smack over-much of the stables."

"The stables, quotha," cried Hawkins scornfully. "Give me a horse any day to those in there." He jerked an indignant thumb in the direction of the lighted chocolate-house windows. "If it's beasts you want, give me horses, not monkeys."

Langley lifted up his hands.

"I protest I am shocked to death, Hawkins. You're

OUTSIDE WHITE'S CHOCOLATE-HOUSE 3

fresh from Worcestershire. It's like his lordship might forget your family's long service if he heard that."

"Marry," came huskily from the box, "I've seen his lordship riding to hounds like the best gentleman of them all. No one could take his six-barred gate better than he. Now see for yourself, man. Will you look there! Straw strewn in the street as if for a lady for her lying-in. No one respects a gentleman as can carry his six bottles more than I; but all these frills and frother—this keeping an honest man out of his bed until 'tis clear morning, and four-footed creatures standing for twelve hours on end! It ain't human! it ain't like the Gowers, that it ain't!"

The sky was brightening perceptibly, revealing the vast army of chimneys against the grey, and bringing out a ghostly gleam of apricot in Langley's livery, as he stood behind the posts that guarded the footway from the muddy road without. He tossed back the fancied ruffles at his wrists with a gesture he had often studied in the fragment of mirror that served him in his dark quarters.

"Fore Gad, Hawkins," he protested, "you had best unsay that. A gallant, merry-hearted gentleman is his lordship, despite his quips and his whimsies. I'm glad to serve him and I don't blush to confess I've learned much from the set of his waistcoats. I'd back him at sword-play against any blood in the realm. And, la, it would break the heart of you to see him in the park of a morning. His manage of his cane is an inspiration, and his conduct of his snuff-box puts the ladies in a flutter."

Hawkins growled scornfully in his throat.

"I've a black bitch at home as can walk on her hind legs and curtsey like a lady, but I fancy her best as a ratter. Let me see his lordship at it 'cross country with the hounds in full cry, and that be worthy of his blood, say I."

A DISCIPLE OF CHANCE

At this instant a louder shout of laughter than usual floated out from the chocolate-house. The outburst was followed by an exclamation, a cross-fire of voices and a renewed clatter of dice.

The watchman, sauntering past with his rattle, stopped to question.

"What madness is within?" he asked, his voice wheezing through his upturned collar, and his breath showing mistily.

Hawkins, from his perch above the hammercloth, rolled a savage eye at him.

"No madness, mon," he answered. "'Tis his lordship's pleasure to be merry, and a good way 'tis, and we'll hear no guttural question it."

None but he might depreciate a Gower.

CHAPTER II

HAZARD

Come, come, leave business to idlers and wisdom to fools:
wit be my faculty and pleasure my occupation; and let
Father Time shake his glass!

—CONGREVE.

A SOUND of many voices arose within the chocolate-house. It was the hour of the morning when even the polished beaux of the eighteenth century became careless of the come and go of conversation; when latent egotism revealed itself, and human nature grew indifferent to its smiling mask.

The wax candles had burned low, been snuffed, replaced and burned low again. The air was stifling, heavy with the reek of steaming punch, and crossed by varying odours wafted far, amid the float of powder from scented wigs—amber, patchouli, bergamot and the insistent perfume of musk.

Much of the light was absorbed by the dark, unreflecting panelling of the room, but still the scene was bright with a motley of colour from tamboured and tinselled waistcoats, brocade and velvet gold-laced coats, falling full from two buttons at the back, wide spreading and buckramed, their set the test of sartorial art.

These gentlemen had not removed their coats for the greater freedom of their gaming-jackets, which they always kept at the club for their convenience. They were guests of the Earl of Yerington, whose whim it was to receive them there, though his own home stood but a long stone's throw away. Yet perhaps they all played with greater relish untrammelled by any sense of more intimate

hospitality. Even hardened gamblers may feel a faint pang at taking over large sums of their host's gold, and Lord Yerington's ill-luck at hazard was proverbial.

The waiters, as they moved about, were not in their usual plain brown, but were liveried bravely in apricot and gold, the colours of the host of the evening, who declared the dull brown gave him the doldrums; and he was not the man to count the cost of such a caprice. He always protested that he had long since forgotten his birthday and trusted to the peerage for assurance that his epitaph should read aright.

Yet, though this whimsical gentleman permitted his steward to discharge all his debts, save those of honour, he, too, kept his accounts with scrupulous exactitude.

As the air within the room grew hotter, the reckless laughed louder; the cautious played with close-set lips and narrowed eyes; the plethoric spoke indistinctly of their gains and losses; the choleric became fractious and suspicious—while others carried their liquor jauntily, as did Lord Yerington, who bore his continued losses throughout the evening with careless bonhomie.

Once again he rattled his dice-box and threw.

"A pox on it!" he exclaimed; "the devil sits on my shoulder. The lowest cast, mark you, two aces and a deuce."

The man sitting on his right, whose flushed face was shadowed by a vast periwig, took up his host's remaining notes without a change of expression.

"'Pon my honour," said Horace Walpole, from where he sat half-way down the table, "ever fortissimo, Yerington. 'Tis monstrous bad art."

The table was burdened with gold and notes, culminating in a glittering heap in front of the individual wearing the old-fashioned wig to whom Lord Yerington's last losses had gone. The latter leaned his arms on

the empty space upon the table before him, smilingly studying his neighbour's face.

"'Slife! Burroughs," he cried, "at what figure do we buy your smiles? There lies the major part of my twelve thousand pounds, and there sit you as glum as a Chinese idol at an auction. Rouse yourself, man, in the name of mirth."

George Selwyn, who had been nodding with a large sum staked before him, awakened in time to hear this last observation.

"Mark Burroughs," he said in a low voice to Horace Walpole, "Midas to the life, asses' ears and all."

Horace Walpole took an appreciative pinch of snuff.

"Faith, this Midas simile is apt," he said, "for I am told this gold-gorged monster starves for Lady Caroline's smiles which Yerington has for scarce the asking."

Selwyn lifted his eyebrows.

"Hath this bull of Basham a heart? Nature, capricious wench, what tricks you play!" he sighed.

"Titania loved Bottom," said Walpole.

"In magic midsummer," answered Selwyn. "Yet, after all, there's magic in the air. List, my son, while I chant thee the latest canticle. I'm told the lady's virtuous, pure as a mountain stream, as coldly chaste and unattainable as a glacier-guarded Alp. Amen!"

He ended with his eyes rolled ceiling-ward.

Walpole suppressed a shout of laughter.

"Whose tale is this?" he queried.

"Faith, man, 'tis his own," and George Selwyn nodded toward his host with a comical grimace. "He, too, a man not new broke to the town, and who sets the tongue of scandal wagging weekly with some madness. She's hoodwinked him completely, or I'll tuck no more Burgundy beneath my waistcoat. The ways of women are riddles."

"Don't try to guess them, or the cumulous cloud you ponder on, tinged with the rose of heaven or of hell, will turn to veriest vapouring," said Walpole with a cynical shrug.

Lord Burroughs made no reply to Yerington's good-natured challenge. Mechanically he set his hand upon the high-piled gold before him, but it did not betray the claw-like involuntary clutch of the miser. It lay there, the fingers showing heavy and primitive, unredeemed by the care expended upon them. His mien was absent and absorbed. An acute observer might have detected a trace of uneasiness beneath it. His face, heavy of outline and swarthy, was deeply flushed. His lips showed sensuality; his chin, obstinacy; and his eyes, of a peculiar opaque grey, the whites now faintly streaked with red, possessed not a redeeming ray of animation. He had been drinking heavily, and he was to drink still deeper before he roused within himself the courage to make the move which was to create a tempest in the room. He was a man of sluggish imagination, and so each step of the way he planned for himself, possessed a disconcerting element of surprise. He went, as it were, over an uncharted course, impelled from deep to deep by his resolve, yet uninspired by the animating sparkle of adventure.

"Egad, Yerington," drawled a vapid youth, with pinched features and colourless face, who nursed one hand in a muff, while the other, much bejewelled, played over the table, "I'll throw a main with you for a hundred pounds."

"Sorry I can't take you, Baxter," answered Lord Yerington, "but I resolved to-night, if luck went against me, I'd lose my twelve thousand pounds; but not a penny more."

"We'll take chequers," cried Sir Geoffrey Baxter. "He's good for chequers, isn't he, gentlemen?"

And he laughed a thin, high laugh, as if he had uttered a witticism.

"Don't think me scurvy of my hospitality," answered Yerington. "I'll wish you luck to a man, but would you have me forswear myself?"

"To yourself? Of course," said Walpole. "Would you be gaoler to your own vows? Life would scarce be worth the living if one were. Vows to yourself in sand, to women—in water."

This was followed by a burst of laughter.

"Egad," interpolated Gilly Williams, "that's true to you, Walpole. I'll warrant you never drank heart-deep to the most maddening toast that ever moved a minuet or turned men's blood to flame."

Lord Yerington had risen to his feet.

"Nay! nay!" he cried. "Let us drink to the women in wine,—not in anchoritish water."

A murmur of approbation went about the room and, with varying degrees of difficulty, his guests rose to their feet.

Their host raised his glass high, challenging their eyes as he called the toast.

"Here's to the dear sex of our torment, God bless them!" he cried, his white teeth flashing, the light striking sparks from the jewels on his ringed fingers, "half angels, half sisters of Satan; our joy and our undoing. Let us drink to them in wine as sparkling as their eyes, as intoxicating as their charms, which dethrone calm reason, making revered philosophers the gibe of fools, and fools themselves more antic in their follies!"

Sir Geoffrey, who was leaning tipsily forward, supporting himself in this position by a clutch upon the table, now spoke, his high voice sounding shrilly across the room.

"Now, Yerington, let us pledge the fairest toast in London."

"As to that," replied Yerington with a laugh, "there are like to be as many toasts as there are gentlemen."

Sir Geoffrey sniggered, with a leer towards Lord Burroughs.

"Not quite so many, methinks, Yerington. You've one now, I dare swear, on the top of your mind. Out with it! Give us the beautiful Lady Caroline Dashwood."

The room, hushed a moment before, now took on a more meaning silence. Even the waiters, ill at ease in their unaccustomed liveries, felt instinctively there was something in the wind, and paused to look with curiosity upon the group around the table. The guests looked at one another furtively, with glances which, slight as they were, were clearly perceptible from where Yerington stood.

Lord Burroughs made an involuntary movement, and for a moment lowered his mask. Lord Yerington looked down into his face and surprised there a slow, smouldering gleam of something that had in it a hint of unspeakable malice. From him he looked at the faces of his friends, who had risen to the former toast and who stood about the room in varying degrees of the perpendicular. Some had neckcloths loosed, the wigs of many were awry, or pushed back for greater coolness in the hot air, while here and there one had altogether discarded his, and presented a shaven poll to the host's searching gaze, in which a spark of anger was beginning to appear.

The silence was too expressive to be mistakable.

Lord Yerington leaned a little further forward over the table, speaking to Sir Geoffrey in a tone that filled that feeble-hearted gentleman with a panic-stricken impulse of apology. Lord Yerington, though his lips smiled, was not a pleasant man to cross with that look in his eyes.

"Sir Geoffrey," he said, in a voice of exquisite politeness, "you were pleased to mention a lady's name a mo-

ment since, and to link it with mine in a phrase that appeared to place her somewhat intimately within my thoughts."

"An accident, damme," cried Sir Geoffrey, his tongue stammering over the words, "the plaguest devil of an accident."

Lord Yerington, his demeanour unruffled, as courteous as before, looked from countenance to countenance of those who lined the table. He saw here an expression of discomfort, there traces of a sneer, and George Selwyn, whose prudence was always overridden by a sense of the absurd, pinched Gilly Williams visibly as that gentleman sought to wipe away a smile in the depths of his linen handkerchief.

"There prevails in town," went on Yerington, "an ugly habit of throwing upon women the mud of evil comment. A cowardly trick, more cowardly in that it lies within the law and is difficult of punishment. Were a woman an angel, some of this filth must cling to her. I trust this habit is not epidemic at White's."

A few of the men who listened to him and met his eyes were conscious of a vague creep of shame.

Captain Hugh Elliot, his close friend, bronzed and newly returned from his campaigns, looked up at him with a glance of pride. His Scotch prudence often moved him to protest against his intimate's mad extravagances, but he had never yet lost faith in him. It relieved him, now, to realise that Yerington had not been a traitor to his friendship for Lady Caroline's husband.

Gilly Williams spoke with the impulse to relieve the atmosphere which had become surcharged with personality.

"I protest, Yerington, you are seeing double and 'tis but the third hour of the day. I thought you had a more seasoned head."

There was a murmur and a movement of relief. All

welcomed this relaxation from the strain of the last few moments, and the eager gamblers longed to get back to their dice.

Still Yerington watched them. It was only when he turned and searched Captain Elliot's face, whose eyes met his in a flash of disarming comprehension, that his suspicions took flight. His was not a nature that formed a ready soil for them.

"Slife!" he cried, "if I have been seeing double, I'm glad enough to have my vision cleared. I've no taste for phantoms. And now, if you please, I'll call the toast."

He raised his glass.

"I give you the Lady Caroline Dashwood. A lady as good as she is beautiful—and if any are in mind to dispute this point, my sword has a more biting and convincing trick of argument than has my tongue."

"My dear Yerington," drawled George Selwyn, after he had tossed off the toast, "we are none of us thirsting for a taste of your blade, we know its metal too well, much less in such an argument as the unstained virtue of the Lady Caroline."

His face was guileless as a child's.

"Nay, what we want is to have you back in the game again," said Gilly Williams. "'Tis balm to see another lose more than oneself. This evening's work will keep my French tailor whistling for his bill for another twelvemonth."

"Come in! Come in!" was echoed round the table, and roused by the idea they beat upon it until the golden guineas danced.

Lord Yerington was hesitating, for it went against his nature to say no to friendly pressure; but he caught Hugh Elliot's shrewd eyes fixed upon him with question of his strength of purpose, and it moved him to a compromise.

"I swear," persisted George Selwyn, "without you, Yerington, it is like a wake without a corpse."

"Well, then I'll make you a bargain," said Yerington lightly. "Here's my snuff-box." He held it up and turned it about that all might view it. "'Tis a pretty trifle of Italian workmanship. How many will give me a hundred pounds on it? You may cast for it amongst yourselves, afterwards. Going, going, a golden snuff-box for a hundred pounds. Who'll take me? I'll stake it against my heels, I'm so unlucky with my hands."

It was passed from guest to guest amidst a fire of comments.

"I'll take you! I'll take you!" was called as it went until it reached Walpole. Once in his hands it came to a pause. He examined it closely with the absorbed air of a connoisseur. His eyes were eager as he raised them to look at Lord Yerington, who noticed his excitement with a mischievous twinkle of his own.

"Only a hundred pounds to take your chance with the others," said Yerington. "And permit me still to indulge in one of those rare luxuries, a resolve. Vice loves company and those *devotées* of hazard yearn for my companionship."

"What's it against?" asked Walpole, steadying his voice with difficulty.

"Against my chance of dancing down the table and touching no coin or note with toe or heel," answered Yerington.

Captain Elliot turned away from him with an impatient gesture.

"A mountebank trick," he cried, "I wonder at you."

"Egad, I wonder at myself," answered Yerington, airily. "Come, Walpole, a hundred pounds upon it?"

Horace Walpole put the snuff-box from him, as if to place an interval betwixt himself and a temptation.

"Upon my soul, Yerington," he said, his slight frame inflating with indignation, "do you know the value of this trifle, as you call it?"

He asked the question, aware that Yerington stood scarcely second to himself in the lore of collecting and was versed in all that pertained to art.

"My grandfather brought it with him from Italy," Yerington answered, with a nonchalant shrug.

"'Tis invaluable," cried Walpole. "The jewel in itself, set in its midst, is worth ten times a hundred pounds. The workmanship is Cellini's own. 'Tis historic—you must know it. This lid, so exquisitely wrought, was once Pope Clement's button before it was made up in this form. All the world has thought for centuries that it was eclipsed amongst the treasures of the Vatican."

"There!" said Yerington, with an air of innocent triumph, "there you are. A treasure of the Vatican, obtained, the devil knows how, by my revered grandsire! A bargain, a most preposterous bargain! You all bid me, I see, save Burroughs—Burroughs the victor, who persists in glooming like a vulture on a blighted palm-tree—Elliot, who is tramping on my toes with what I take to be a hint, and Walpole, who seeks to evade responsibility for the ill-got gains of my forebear. For who would swear that my revered grandsire did not carry it from the papal dinner in his boot? Walpole, I catch your eye. I see you, also, would be counted in. Am I bid, gentlemen? It is done. Down with the money and you may cast for it afterwards."

Eagerly they paid over their gold, and the vexed and impatient Captain Elliot was made stake-keeper.

"Is it ready?" called Yerington. "Do but serve me well, good heels, and oh, Master Punch, betray me not."

"If I win, then Burroughs or I shall end the evening richer by this stake."

He sprang upon the table, his guests steadying it with their hands. He paused there an instant, a brilliant figure in his yellow brocade coat, white satin breeches and silk stockings. He wore his own hair powdered and curled, tied at the back by a black riband, the ends of which were brought forward and fastened under his chin by a diamond of rare beauty. His waistcoat, of gold tissue, was confined only at the waist by two buttons of brilliants, and then fell open to display his Mechlin ruffles.

He began his dance. The feet within his buckled red-heeled shoes were trained to fine balance in fencing and in the minuet. The punch did not play him false. Steadily he danced down the table, circling the piles of gold, avoiding, here, a guinea by a hair's breadth, there, a note which his movements set floating. All eyes were fixed on him eagerly, especially Walpole's, to whom even his one chance in fifteen was precious, and whose heart was fixed in the hope of possessing the snuff-box lying carelessly beside Captain Elliot.

Lord Yerington reached the top of the table and jumped lightly to the floor. He had gained his wager.

The applause that followed had little heart in it. Each man valued the bauble beyond the money he had staked upon it. Lord Yerington seated himself, shook back his ruffles from his wrists, slipped the coveted snuff-box into his pocket, and turned to Lord Burroughs.

"I'll throw a main for a hundred pounds," he said.

The dice had scarcely rattled ten minutes when Lord Burroughs counted the gain of Yerington's recent stake amongst his winnings.

CHAPTER III

THE WAGER

How merry my ghost will be, and shake its ears to hear itself quoted as a person of consummate prudence.

—HORACE WALPOLE.

CAPTAIN ELLIOT looked at Lord Burroughs keenly, as he absently rattled his dice-box.

"It is a pity that you did not play with *your* dice, Yerington. If you had, 'tis possible that your luck might have taken another turn."

Lord Burroughs sprang to his feet with an exclamation of anger. His movement sent a handful of gold spinning over the floor.

"Zounds! man," he cried, "do you insinuate?"

The company turned, all attention upon the instant. They were more moved by the piquant prospect of a quarrel than they had been by Yerington's ill-fortune.

Captain Elliot looked coolly back into Lord Burroughs' empurpled face.

"'Tis well known," he said, "that a less thing changes luck at times."

A quiet smile passed from lip to lip. The man whom he addressed had a record for a short memory for debts, and Mrs. Chevenix, it was well known, passed many sets of loaded dice over the counter of her toyshop.

"Luck, luck," muttered Lord Burroughs, "'Tis of luck you prate, and still of luck."

"And of what else would you have us?" answered Hugh Elliot, a volume of insinuation written upon his face. "Perhaps you have yourself a phrase at hand which would better suit the occasion."

Baffled, Lord Burroughs resumed his seat, and as usual Gilly Williams played pacificator.

"Yerington may solace himself," he said, "for he's a gallant loser, and there's many a hero of a battle-field who cannot boast as much. Your good fortune lies elsewhere, Yerington, and rumour hath it you cause more wives to be imprisoned in the country and more virtuous maidens to accept in desperation the first toothless wooer who offers, than any man in London."

"'Tis a pity," answered Yerington indifferently, who, indeed, had little liking for the reputation it pleased his friends to saddle upon him, "that hag Rumour hath not a prettier invention that we might be served up some new plums in this pudding of her making."

"She would if she could, I'll go bail," said Gilly Williams. "And after all there is but the man and the maid, and three generations exhausts every turn in the drama."

The moment had arrived for Lord Burroughs' meditated *coup*. He rose slowly to his feet and the suppressed excitement within him caused something like animation to appear in his heavy face.

"But there is another side to the drama," he drawled. "'Tis not only the man and the maid,—there may be the man pitted against his fellow. Let us weave a tale of our own."

He was half reeling upon his feet, swinging from side to side, while his ruffles were here and there stained with the wine which also disfigured the plum-coloured velvet of his coat. He leaned forward, gathering, as it were, the gaze of all those present to himself.

"You call Lord Yerington a pretty and a gallant loser. He's a man of his word." He sneered, brooding still on Elliot's observation. "He loses fairly, and he plays fairly."

"Yes, yes," came in hearty tones from the company, moved to even louder acclamation by their dislike for the man who was speaking.

"Here's his health, then," cried Lord Burroughs, lifting his glass. "I give you my Lord Yerington."

The toast was drunk, and drunk deep, with enthusiasm. The drowsing gentleman awakened to ask if it was a fire, and promptly had a bottle of port poured over his shaven head, from which he had long since shed the wig.

"Well, gentlemen," continued Lord Burroughs,—there was a hint of a subdued threat in his manner, "I love a gallant loser, on my life I do—a man who loses, and pays, and is not afraid to risk."

His covert sneer pricked Yerington.

"'Fore Gad," he said with something like annoyance, "is all this for me? I lose, but as a gentleman must lose, who gambles and fails. Come, another subject, I prithee, Burroughs."

There was mischief in the air. The company were conscious of it and they waited the next move of the game with curiosity.

"Faith, Yerington," said Burroughs slowly, "let me prove your mettle. I'll lay a wager with you that will give scope to your spirit. You lose so fairly and consistently, so gallantly," he bowed. "You will have no appetite for a wager that I'll suggest, which will make trial of your courage, indeed. What is money? A mere appendage, an accessory. Convenient, I'll admit, but not essential. I'll lay a wager, if you will, that may prove your gift of light-hearted losing. Methinks this may be a trial beyond your spirit."

He had mistaken Yerington, who did not rise promptly to his bait, not from lack of spirit for ventures in the dark, but because he disliked all that appeared to savour of the braggart. He, therefore, answered indifferently.

He did not refuse to consider Lord Burroughs' offer, for in that day it was a point of honour amongst gentlemen to accept all challenges that did not infringe upon their code.

"What is this mysterious wager to which you refer? I can scarce entertain it, even if I am in mind, until I have knowledge of it."

It was an age of frequent and bizarre wagers. The room waited upon Lord Burroughs' reply with curiosity. When it came, however, it was of so unusual a character that it was followed by an outcry. He began it deliberately:

"I'll lay a wager that within a year you'll have forfeited your fortune, and your acres, to boot. If at the end of that year you are still possessed of your fortune, I'll pay to you fifty thousand pounds."

A murmur ran round the room.

"Your loss, Burroughs," said George Selwyn, "for Yerington is a Croesus, if he is a gambler. Even Yerington and his spendthrift father made no impression on that fortune."

Yerington stood narrowly observing the man who had proposed the wager. There was such evident venom underlying his manner that he was curious. Lord Burroughs had counted upon his dashing into the wager with his usual thoughtlessness. It was not caution that gave him pause now, but a sort of wonder at the mood that was animating the man who challenged him.

"What's at the other end of this?" he asked. "If I am penniless and stripped of my estates I'd scarce be in case to make the wager with you upon equal terms."

Lord Burroughs fumbled in his waistcoat for his snuff-box. He took a pinch. He knew his next words would bring a storm of protest about his ears like a swarm of angry bees, and he was bracing himself to meet it. He

was far gone in his cups and had screwed himself up to a sort of Dutch courage. He inhaled the snuff and dusted his ruffles.

"The stakes are these: if you win,—my fifty thousand pounds. If you lose——" he paused.

"And if I lose?" echoed Yerington, who was beginning to enjoy himself.

"And if you lose within the year, your life is forfeit."

The glasses were placed upon the table with a clatter and the men started to their feet.

"Abominable! villainous!" came from every hand.

Captain Elliot's eyes were steely.

"I believe," he said, leaning forward past Yerington, until his face was within a yard of Burroughs', "that you are a damned coward."

In those days men fought on far slighter provocation, and yet Lord Burroughs chose to ignore him.

"Be quiet," said Yerington, laying an arm about his friend's shoulder. "He's not worth a moment of anger."

He had no foreboding and his spirit was quieted for the moment by Lord Burroughs' stupendous effrontery.

"'Od's life! you'll not consider this!" cried George Selwyn.

It was the wager of a man twice drunk,—drunk with wine and the deadlier fumes of jealousy. All present knew that what Lord Burroughs risked was a good half of his fortune, and that he might have picked a quarrel with Yerington and had it out at the point of the sword. He was a skilful duellist, but his was a nature which always chose the devious, rather than the downright course.

Yerington rose quietly to his feet. His very contempt for the man contributed to his resolve.

"The betting-book," he called to one of the waiters. He raised his hand to quiet the ringing protests. "'Tis fair enough, gentlemen. I am in no mind to be beggared,

and my friend here," he bowed, "has staked deeply. Faith, it may be that he has done me but a favour. For who of you will swear that if he found himself upon a morning penniless, but he'd be glad for so pretty an excuse for taking out his passport to the other side?"

The book was laid upon the table.

Lord Burroughs' face was livid. On a sudden a sickly fear for his fortune came over him.

Before Yerington could write, Elliot interfered.

"A man's a coward," he cried, turning to him, "to lend himself to such an act as this for fear of ridicule. Give this drunken bully the laugh, as he deserves."

Yerington's gaiety had returned.

"I hold him in the hollow of my hand," he said, "and after all, life is all a chance."

And he signed with a steady hand.

Then came Lord Burroughs' signature, harsh, square-lettered, with a deep-drawn, cruel-looking line underneath it.

"My dear Burroughs, I'll pension you," said Lord Yerington as he closed the book.

CHAPTER IV

A PLEASANT HOUR-SLAYER

Be wise to-day; 'tis madness to defer:
Next day the fatal precedent will plead;
Thus on, till wisdom is pushed out of life.

—EDWARD YOUNG.

WHEN the madness of play is in the air, memories are brief, and five minutes after the strange wager had been registered, the gaming was as 'deep as ever.

Yerington bet no more. His high spirits were unabated. Hugh Elliot still played, venturing small sums only, withdrawing from the game at intervals, and keeping his gainings cautiously aside. The moment his gold showed a deficit, that moment the sport was over for him. He had done his share of drinking, though his head bore it steadily. It may be that beneath his unmoved exterior the dour Scot grew a bit 'dourer.

The tall old clock against the wall pointed to the hour of four. At that moment the door of the room opened quietly and a man appeared standing in the shadowy passage, the light of the room but half revealing him. He was of slight figure and the pallor of his face was death-like. As the scene within the room was revealed to him, though the sounds which had greeted him should have prepared him for it, he paused as if gathering heart to advance.

Yerington first recognised him.

"Burn me, if it isn't Hervey! Come in, you vagabond. What hours, my son, what hours! Give an account of yourself, sirrah!"

This remark was followed by the waving of dice-boxes and a dozen laughing challenges.

Lord Hervey entered and closed the door behind him. There was a curious hush in his manner. The light of the room now revealed him clearly—his sunken features, large eyes and close-set mouth. A strange figure he appeared, elaborately dressed; and his pinched face, now that the candlelight shone full upon it, showed a touch of womanish rouge upon the cheeks. Several exuberant gentlemen sprang to meet him and bundled him unceremoniously into the middle of the room. At that moment they felt no respect for his sharp tongue, nor for the dignity which, as if in defiance of his slight physique, he usually supported with special emphasis.

"Faith," he said at length, drawing his handkerchief across his lips as if he spoke with difficulty, but his crisp utterance proved that wine was not the explanation. "What a picture for Hogarth! 'Tis a pity he isn't here. Yerington, you do well, on my faith, you study the mode. Gad's life, what would you more? The mode!"

"He is in form to-night," whispered George Selwyn. "Pray heaven, he may continue."

"We treat the hours, Hervey, as you do yourself," said Yerington, "as if they were our enemies, and we slay them as merrily as may be. Would you have us mumble them as a friar does his beads, with prayers? That's to be old at twenty."

Hervey bowed with a flourish.

"Gentlemen, I commend you, I commend you all. Condole with me that I have missed this pleasant hour-slaying, but for the moment another matter held me. A mere trifle, but it kept me by the heel. Egad, such accidents occur at times. Had I the making of the world, such affairs would not be so damned intrusive. They spoil a man's stomach."

He took a pinch of snuff, tapped the box lightly and returned it to his waistcoat pocket.

"Has she been unkind?" hiccoughed Sir Geoffrey, who had long since bidden discretion good-bye.

It was well known that Lord Hervey's wife, the beautiful Mary Lapel, was a lady of uncertain temper.

"Now I ask," went on Lord Hervey, in his cold, thin voice, unheeding Sir Geoffrey, "what two events only,—I propound it to you as philosophers,—can one be certain of in this life?"

"La, 'tis a conundrum," cried Sir Geoffrey.

Lord Hervey turned with a contemptuous smile to the intoxicated dandy and watched him for an instant before he answered.

"'Fore heaven, it is a conundrum."

"Oh, mighty wizard!" cried Gilly Williams. "Point out your cave and we'll attend you there. But, 'fore George, my pocket aches like a beggar's stomach. My neighbour here hath my birthday clothes, my coach and six, and Lord knows what else. Let us to play again, I beg."

"What is the answer?" asked Lord Yerington of Hervey, for he read something seriously amiss in his seeming irrelevance.

Lord Hervey turned to him and lifted up two fingers, smiling as he did so.

"We are sure of but two things," he said, "of birth and death."

"He croaks, the raven croaks," someone cried.

"And the joke," went on Lord Hervey, seating himself casually upon a corner of the long table, "the pith and kernel of the whole matter is, that unconscious we enter the world and dead we leave it. There's humour there, methinks," and leaning forward he poured himself a glass of punch, and tossed it off at a draught. "That life's only realities we should pass unknowing through!"

Lord Yerington was serious as his eyes searched Her-

vey's face. Beneath this man's hardness and habitual cynicism he often fancied that he caught the note of real feeling. Occasionally the conviction seized him that under his dandyisms and his rouge there dwelt a sensitive and not ungenerous heart, which chose to cloak itself in gibes; a very real contempt of forms, which concealed itself behind an over-elaborated parade of them. Lord Yerington laid his hand upon his shoulder. His handsome face was grave.

"There's something behind this," he said in a low voice; "what news have you?"

Lord Hervey moistened his lips, for they were dry, and shrugged his shoulders.

"A mere nothing," he said slowly, "a bagatelle. 'Tis but that Mountford——"

At the sound of this name the men ceased their play to listen, all save the slumbering gentleman, whose snore crossed the waiting silence.

"You know, gentlemen," he said, interrupting himself, as he turned his head over his shoulder to smile down the table, "his gift for hour-slaying. Well, wise man or prodigal, call him what you will, he, too, has been playing, but doubtless he was a blunderer. All who fail *are* blunderers. He's lost everything he possessed and something more, I dare venture. And so"—he snapped his fingers—"he ended it!"

He sat upon the table motionless. For an instant his habitual mask of indifference dropped and his face, the rouge mocking him, was bathed in tragic sorrow, for Mountford had been dear to him.

"Not dead!" cried Yerington.

Hervey roused himself with an effort and reassumed his usual appearance of insouciant indifference.

"He has faced," he answered, "the second of life's realities."

Again a silence fell upon the room.

A young spark, unchecked by the pervading feeling which he did not share, for he had not known Mountford, absently rattled his dice-box, then stopped, embarrassed by his blunder.

Lord Hervey, amid the hush that had not yet grown to question, rose abruptly to his feet.

"Your pardon, gentlemen, I must be off. I have"—his voice forsook him for an instant—"I have other business toward."

As suddenly as he had appeared he departed. The purport of his news hung heavy on the air.

Colonel Gifford, a handsome man, with the scar of an old sabre-cut across his forehead, spoke: "'S blood, how did Mountford do it, think you? Hervey need not have acted so like a speaking doll at a fair, trained to a few phrases. Was it steel or powder, at his head or heart, or did he bungle it? I'm pricking with curiosity."

"Two to one it was a pistol," cried Gilly Williams.

"I take you," answered George Selwyn. "Make it ponies."

Sir Geoffrey shivered.

"Ugh, it would be such a nasty mess. Brains everywhere. I swear a man should be more tidy."

Lord Burroughs spoke for the first time since his wager with Yerington. He had heard Lord Hervey's news, unmoved.

"Egad," he said, as if the thought had newly struck him, "Mountford! Now I can have the finest cook in England."

A few wore shocked faces, but they did not abandon their play. The steady cast of dice and the chink of changing gold soon filled the room. In the cool of the morning, in the depression of the next day's headache, many would recall Lord Mountford, possibly to

link his name in an anecdote of dubious sobriety; for a few days some might even abandon the play.

Gilly Williams was the first to note the heavy roll of distant coaches.

"The house has risen," he said, "an all-night sitting. Yet here you are, you lazy dog," he turned to George Selwyn, "and your constituents may kick their heels for all of you."

Selwyn lifted his heavy eyes. "Faith, I do it for the benefit of my soul, for absent men can tell no lies."

"I have you there!" exclaimed Walpole. "'Tis diverting to even hear of honesty from a politician."

"Do you know the creature when she crosses your path, Horry? I'll propound her to you. Truth is a dame who speaks ill of our neighbours to us. A liar is that jade who speaks ill of us to our neighbours."

Time was beginning to hang somewhat heavily on Yerington's hands. His friends, for the most part, were absorbed by play. Therefore, when the door was opened to admit a newcomer, he rose to meet him with even more than his usual impulsive hospitality.

A tall, dark man entered. He carried himself with all the exaggerated mannerisms of the period, and his bow and flourish, as he greeted the crowded room, were triumphs. He was one to arrest attention wherever he went. He possessed a curiously accentuated individuality. His hair, which he chose to wear curled and carefully arranged, but unpowdered, was a rayless black; his eyes brilliant and steady in their regard, as if he consciously ruled their gaze. His eyebrows, heavy and irregular, were also black. His skin was a thick white, against which his lips shone surprisingly red. The outlines of his bold and aquiline face appeared abrupt. It was as if he were a masterly sketch, which as yet wanted the modifying touch of finish. He gave the impression that

his lips were too red, his hair was too black, his skin too white and his eyes too steady. The muscles about his mouth were peculiarly facile. His smile came with disconcerting suddenness. He seemed to anticipate a witticism, so instant was his appreciation, and it left the other members in a game of persiflage with the annoying sense that he had penetrated to the quick of their wit, and foreseen their darts before they sent them. The mobile muscles about his mouth reflected each fleeting emotion, like well-trained soldiers under the command of an exacting officer. As he stood by the door now, in a suit of black velvet, laced with silver, and a tamboured waistcoat, over which flowed a cascade of Valenciennes ruffles, all eyes were directed towards him.

"I vow and protest, Yerington," he began, "I've been in a twitter to be here for the last five hours. How much of good life is wasted in words! They swam so thick about Westminster that I could see scarce a gleam of poor torn reason in them all; and then the House divided, and, 'pon honour, it was scarce a wonder."

"La, Mansur," said Yerington, "when was serene reason throned at Westminster? There sits policy, self-interest, ambition or jealousy. Faith, here you'll find reason where there's frankly none, and none to prate of it. Here, friends, is Mansur, fair gorged with eloquence of the old ladies who line the benches of the House of Commons."

"Your most obedient," said Mansur, with his hat over his heart. "I dare swear I've missed fair sport."

George Selwyn looked up at him gravely.

"'Fore Gawd," he said, in tones of admiration, "what a chief mourner you'd make in your silver and black! I'll go bail they've murdered your bill and you're tricked out for it. Requiescat!"

Mansur's face betrayed no annoyance. He did not appear to note the grudging greetings extended to him.

To Yerington's surprise, Captain Elliot had risen abruptly from his chair and now stood with his hand upon its back, his tall figure inclined slightly forward, as if he were striving to peer upward into the newcomer's countenance. A flush had appeared on the face of this man who usually drank himself white. When he spoke, his Scotch accent was pronounced, as it was only when some strong emotion or excitement possessed him.

"Yerington," he said slowly, "who is this Mr. Mansur? If my memory serves me, I've heard his name before."

"Faith and you have, Hugh," answered Yerington heartily.

Mr. Mansur's manner was unembarrassed.

"Ah, Captain Elliot," he cried gaily, "dost forget Eton so early as this?"

The Captain's lips curled contemptuously.

"No, I do not forget Eton," he answered slowly, "but I thought I had not heard aright."

"But you do, Hugh!" exclaimed Yerington, slapping him on the shoulder. "And this is Mansur, 'little Mansur of the raisin eyes,' as you used to call him, you irreverent dog."

"Yes," said Captain Elliot, his manner unchanged, "but prithee how comes Mr. Mansur here?"

There was a perceptible movement about the room. Mr. Mansur had been admitted to White's club reluctantly, for it was its boast that its members were men of both family and fortune, but Lord Yerington had chosen to make his election a personal matter and had, so to speak, borne him in upon his shoulders. Therefore, to see this unpopular intruder publicly baited, was causing secret elation.

Mansur neither flushed nor changed his expression. He knew a battle was before him. He read a challenge in Captain Elliot's eyes, and that what caution he might have brought to the encounter earlier in the evening, had long since been drowned in punch.

Yerington sought to forestall any unpleasantness. Elliot's manner was an enigma to him. His own nature soon shed the memory of past clouds.

"Come, Hugh!" he exclaimed, "do you think yourself Mr. Garrick with your tragic mask? Drink a bumper to old school days and put yourself in spirits. I'll propose a toast. Mr. Mansur, M. P.!"

"Ah," said the Captain tauntingly, "a Member of Parliament!"

"And I'm told a most moving speaker," said Yerington, "which may mean that you empty the House, Mansur."

"Yes," continued Captain Elliot, "and from one of your boroughs, Harry, I'll be bound."

Mr. Mansur took out his snuff-box.

"Faith, I feel as if I were before a magistrate, charged with the Lord knows what," he drawled. "Did you learn your manners on the continent, Mr.—ah!—Captain Elliot?"

Captain Elliot's cold anger increased.

"Neither my manners nor my morals there, Mr. Mansur, for I've neither prowled nor stolen. Yerington, you featherbrain," he cried, turning to his friend with sudden vehemence, "have you forgotten that boyish love affair of yours? Who was it stole the girl's letters from your room and took them to her father?"

An instant of silence followed this question.

Then Yerington said, scarcely conscious that he spoke:

"Mansur! I had forgot!"

"Yes," cried Captain Elliot, "you have a talent for

forgetting. But you may remember that you whipped this scoundre' before half the school and ducked him in the horse-pond. Is he the one to forget, think you?"

"'Twas but a boy's trick," said Yerington, in real distress. "I wonder, Hugh, that you recall it now."

"Recall it now," retorted Captain Elliott; "you and I are not cut off the same piece. My memory is of a different quality. Once a hound, always a hound, I say. And you've brought this sneaking fellow here!"

Mr. Mansur's eyes flickered. He was no coward, and Captain Elliot's words were threatening to destroy the carefully reared fabric of years. He felt no caution, nor did what judgment his passion had left him suggest any. Such a scene as this could only be wiped from men's memories by a later and more vivid one in which he must not come out second best.

"Hugh," protested Yerington, "in the name of common sense forego your anger. You've studied your tactics and the Court Calendar until you are clean out of tune with life."

But Elliot's antagonism was not to be laid. These last words had sent him harping along a new line of thought.

"The Court Calendar, forsooth," he echo'd, taking a long aggravating stride towards the man whom he addressed. "What says my butcher's son to this?" He bowed, his hand upon his hilt, thus tilting his sword-tip in the air. "Does my memory fail me, or was your father,—good, prosperous, worthy man, who made his fortune honestly, I have no doubt,—was your good father a carver of beef and a dresser of mutton? Did he serve boars' heads all ready for roasting with a pippin in the mouth, and hang lines of skewered entrails before his stall for those who chose economy?"

It was a long speech for the usually silent Captain Elliot, and it brought a smothered laugh.

"What an opportunity for a coat of arms!" whispered Horace Walpole. "A butcher's cleaver rampant and a calf couchant!"

Mansur's face was livid, but he had himself in perfect control. He was being deliberately goaded and he could have parried as deliberately. He chose, however, to attack and he drew his sword.

"On guard, sir!" he cried.

In a trice Captain Elliot's weapon was in the air, and their blades crossed with an angry flash of fire.

There was an exclamation and a rush on the part of the spectators. Half the candles were extinguished, and they fought in semi-darkness, partially offset by the cold morning light stealing in at the windows. The space was contracted and the duellists were hampered on every side.

"Elliot! Mansur!" exclaimed Yerington, in anger, "'Tis scurvy of you, upon my life it is. Put up your swords. Damme, I demand it."

The only answer was a slip of Elliot's feet in a pool of overturned punch and an onward rush of Mansur, whose attack the Captain skilfully parried.

Yerington was not to be gainsaid.

"I'm master here to-night," he cried. "Let your blood cool and have it out to-morrow, if you will."

Careless of consequences, he beat down their swords and put himself between them.

Captain Elliot had no time to check his thrust as he perceived his friend's intention. His eyes had been fixed upon his antagonist, and it was with a sensation of actual physical sickness that he felt his weapon encounter resistance, and slide onward. He paused, too dazed for connected thought.

"Harry," he gasped, his eyes staring.

Taking the Captain's bare blade in his hands, Yerington withdrew it, afterwards clasping them across his breast.

Mansur stood, his sword point lowered, breathing heavily, beads of perspiration upon his forehead.

Captain Elliot was distraught. He took Yerington in his arms. The others crowded round. Face appeared behind face, shutting out the air.

"A surgeon," cried one.

"Make way!" exclaimed another, "you smother him."

"Harry," gasped Elliot, "have I wounded thee, lad? God forgive me, have I hurt thee? Hasten, someone, for a surgeon."

"No, no," said Yerington faintly, "don't move, not one of you. A moment, Hugh?"

"Ay, lad," answered Elliot tenderly.

"You'll not cross swords upon this again, promise me," continued Yerington scarcely above a whisper.

Even in the midst of his grief Captain Elliot cast one enveloping look of hatred at Mansur's expressionless waiting face. He swallowed hard before he answered.

"If it is your will, I promise," he said. "Yet, but for him I'd not have hurt thee."

"You hear, friends, he promises," breathed Yerington, raising a feeble hand.

There was a murmur of assent.

Hearing it, Yerington's head lay back against his friend's shoulder. He took his deeply bordered lace handkerchief and spread it upon his chest. There it lay sheer, but unstained by blood.

"Faith, Elliot," he said, his eyes closed, "you have a most comforting shoulder. The only wound I've minded you've healed with your promise. My tailor will see to the other." And flicking off the handkerchief he showed

a deep cut in his coat, where the blade had slipped harmlessly past under his arm.

As the trick dawned on the spectators there was a round of laughter and applause.

Mansur slipped his sword into his scabbard with a smile.

With an oath Captain Elliot jerked himself away from his friend. Yerington was prepared for this and recovered himself with a lithe movement, the handkerchief still held in his finger-tips.

"Come, Hugh," he said. "The hoax was to save two friends."

Captain Elliot's face was black with wrath.

"God forgive you this," he cried, "for I will not." And he flung himself angrily from the room.

CHAPTER V

THE SCARECROW OF TEMPLE BAR

Where Sickness pines, where Thirst and Hunger burn,
And poor Misfortune feels the lash of vice.

—JAMES THOMPSON.

ALL the guests had departed save Mansur. The room looked black and gloomy; the table disarranged; here and there a chair upon its back; the candles standing in drooping shrouds of wax; and all swimming in the cold, disillusioning light of early morning.

Yerington, standing in the midst of the disorderly room from which even the waiters had withdrawn, threw wide his arms with a prodigious yawn.

"'Ods life," he cried, "I'm weary to death of White's. This little world of St. James's begins to cramp me. I feel an itch for an adventure."

Mansur smiled.

"Adventure ever sits at your right hand, methinks, and if I do not mistake, it would be safe to construe it as feminine."

Yerington was too intent to heed the sneer.

"And now as to this St. James's," he continued, pursuing his thought, "do you know, Mansur, I've never in my life strayed so far toward the City as Fleet Street?"

"Not even to cheapen a jewel at the 'Change?" asked Mansur.

"No, not even to eat a Guildhall dinner and throw my bones beneath the table like an alderman," responded Yerington. "And to-day, so weary am I of the tedium of this little world I'm in mind to seek a new sensation at the other side of Temple Bar."

Mansur shrugged his shoulders.

"It would be like seeking to spice good meat with wormwood. Be content with your plethora of pleasure."

"Nay, I need bleeding," returned his companion.

"May I suggest that the yellow brocade——" Mansur lifted his eyebrows.

"Why not, prithee?" laughed Yerington. "Give the poor devils a little harmless pleasure." He threw a careless arm about his friend's shoulders. "Don't protest, for I've made a vow to the god of all vanities that to Fleet Street I shall go this morning."

"A madman must have his way," answered Mansur resignedly.

He recalled the ruddy roads, the running kennels, and the mud far-scattered by passing vehicles with an inward sigh for his own black velvet and silver.

Yerington dismissed his waiting coach, and started for his morning stroll, as fresh apparently as if the night had been passed in virtuous slumbers.

Mansur tucked his *chapeau bras* beneath his arm, and accompanied him with what philosophy he could summon.

"If one must play the fool," he told himself, "'tis well to play it in the right company; then if the coffee-house wits make free with you, your name is advantageously coupled and reaps a sort of glory in the telling."

From the chocolate-house they walked towards Whitehall. The air was heavy with stenches, the ground under-foot boggy, and there were many pools upon which the light of the morning shimmered.

From Whitehall they turned in the direction of Charing Cross. Although the day was still so young, restless London, which awakens by strata, was already astir. Vice and misery that had not slept, or early rising indus-

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try now held possession. Occasionally a drunkard reeled by, or the voice of an itinerant vendor calling his wares echoed through the King's Mews, which they were now approaching.

Lord Yerington sauntered on, observing all with a humorous eye and occasional comment, to which at times, despite his efforts, Mr. Mansur returned but an absent reply. Where the tide of early traffic flowed into the Strand, just opposite the grey stone front of Northumberland House, a gutter above him sputtered and discharged its contents. Some of the far-flying drops lodged upon his black velvet and his faultless white silk stockings.

"Dammel!" he exclaimed. "This is a filthy adventure."

Yerington turned in time to see him endeavouring to right his toilet with a scented handkerchief.

"Ah, Mansur," he drawled, "thank fortune for your black velvet. I've a sample of every sweep we've passed upon my elbow."

Mr. Mansur's facile muscles relaxed into a smile.

"Methinks," he said, "there would be adventures more worth your seeking were our bows not pointed towards Old Bailey."

"No," insisted Yerington, "a hooded wench in patens suits better with my mood to-day."

"And are you maid-seeking?" said Mansur.

Something in his tone sent Yerington's quick eyes towards him. A flavour of last night's badinage still lingered in his mind and he was unusually ready of suspicion. Mr. Mansur noted his expression, and it but served to increase his own ill-humour. The thought his words had suggested to his companion was obvious to him, and he watched its flitting across Lord Yerington's consciousness, its shadows as it hovered for the moment, and then passed, with a sense of irritable disdain.

By this time they had reached St. Clement Danes, threading their way through the throng of moving foot-passengers. Now Temple Bar stood across their way. It bore its grim burden of heads from which, in some instances, the hair still fluttered, while beneath it the hurrying crowd passed without so much as an upward glance.

Not so Lord Yerington.

"Would it please the greatest dandy of them all," he said, "to know his teeth shone the brightest up there?"

Mansur's glance followed his. He knew Yerington had an inclination towards the Stuarts and he cherished some such feeling himself. He loved a long line—loved it with a sort of envious intensity.

"Mansur," said the earl, placing the handle of his cane solemnly against his companion's waistcoat, "above you, you behold a hideous example. Those poor 'devils, for varying reasons—ambition, some of them; for loyalty—as others conceived of it; a few just to draw a restless sword, I'll go bail, refused to let well enough alone. Perhaps a quarter of them had convictions—damned, disagreeable hurdles to keep your conscience ever on the jump."

At this instant he felt a light and insistent touch upon his arm. He turned in time to see the top of a much-worn wig that had probably seen Monmouth Street many times, and a hat held in a hand spread wide in a great flourish. When the fellow straightened himself, he revealed a pallid face, on which starvation was writ large, dark eyes and a mouth twisted into a humorous smile that had somehow contrived to live past the hunger. His tattered coat, possessing a hanging shred of tinsel here and there, had a jaunty set that defied its rags.

"A thousand pardons to your lordship," he began,

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"and to you, sir," he turned to Mr. Mansur, with a second bow; "but I mark your lordships deign some slight interest in," he cast his hand upward with a supple wrist-movement—"this fruit of Temple Bar!"

Mr. Mansur withdrew himself, but Lord Yerington lingered, arrested by something in the fellow's manner and words, and his quest of that morning included a test of each vagrant chance that might cross his way.

"We've a goodly harvest just now."

The man gave Lord Yerington a rapid, shifty glance. If his face betrayed the Jacobite, he meant to form his phrases to that tune. As it revealed nothing but amusement that might change rapidly to a less approachable mood, he ended with a shrug.

"The reaper," he went on, "is the great justice of the noble Kingdom of England." He took off his hat with a wide sweep. For an instant a faint glow showed in his pale face and his lips twisted against his will. Yerington watched him, vaguely amused, and awaiting his next move. From the depth of his ragged waistcoat he produced a glass.

"Will your lordship be pleased to have a look?" he said ingratiatingly. "A penny a head is my charge, with twopence for Lord Balmorino. You'll confess he's worth it. 'Tis a mere bagatelle to pay for seeing a man who died so bravely,—and I'll give their histories with them for an extra twopence, though it may be that your lordships' memories will not need the tedious process."

A smouldering sort of anger was beginning to grow within Lord Yerington at the flippancy of this travesty of humanity.

"Bah!" he cried, "I mislike this. You are little better than they yourself with your death's-mask."

The fellow bowed again, and when he straightened himself there was a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"I'm worse, my lord," he said, "for I've a stomach."

This reply turned the edge of Yerington's displeasure. His hand stole to his pocket, and then he withdrew it with a laugh. The man had followed his gesture with eyes as keen and eager as a weasel's.

"Here, Mansur," he called, "give me a guinea. I'm as penniless this morning as this beggar himself."

Mansur approached and handed him the money, distaste in every movement.

"Is this the colour of your adventure, Yerington?" he said contemptuously, indicating the tattered figure with a lift of his eyebrow.

The man put out an eager hand for the gold, and then with a sort of pride forced himself to hold it for a moment in indifferent fingers before he slipped it into his pocket.

"I'm overpaid, my lord," he said with his former affectation, "and you've not used my glass."

"It was for your *bon mot*, my man," laughed Yerington, "and none too much." Then he added aside to Mansur, "I must tell this to Selwyn. It will divert him vastly."

"Ah," said the man airily, "Mr. Selwyn, then, has the pleasure of your acquaintance, my lord. I have met him often beneath the scaffold. We have a great community of tastes."

A gleam of keen enjoyment danced in Yerington's eyes.

"Mansur," he said, "did you mark that? Selwyn shall never hear the last of this!"

George Selwyn's *penchant* for executions and death in all its most harrowing forms was one of the jokes of the town.

The genial laugh that rang from the depths of Lord Yerington's chest revealed his nature more truly than the

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lightly given guinea, and the man was not slow to note and take advantage of it. The humorous angles about his mouth echoed Lord Yerington's merriment. He took his snuff-box from his pocket and held it nonchalantly in his grimy fingers.

"Would your lordship spare me a few pinches of your mixture?" he asked impudently. "'Tis a sad thing to have the weaknesses of a gentleman annexed to the fortunes of——"

He did not complete his sentence, but preferred that Yerington should read what he chose into the gesture with which he ended.

That nobleman's white teeth answered him.

"Pray have a pinch of mine," he said, offering the snuff-box of last night's wager with an ironically elaborate bow.

Unabashed, the rascal brought his heels together and took a liberal pinch.

"Gad!" he ejaculated in an ecstasy, with his eyes closed. "'Tis heaven."

He still held his snuff-box wide. Lord Yerington tilted the contents of his own into it and the fellow closed its lid and returned it to his pocket without a comment.

"And so," said Lord Yerington, "you know Mr. Selwyn?"

Again an uncontrollable twist of the man's lip. In an instant, however, he was smiling.

"My history furnishes meat for Mr. Selwyn's fancy," he answered. "We are a family of gallows-birds. One day I, too, shall hang."

He said it lightly, his eyes upon Lord Yerington, who felt an involuntary creep of revulsion that revealed itself in his face. The man noted it.

"My words revolt you, my lord," he said suavely.

"Layhap. Yesterday there were four of us,—my mother, my sister, my brother and——" he bowed, "myself. To-day, there are three of us. Yesterday my brother was hanged."

Lord Yerington remained looking down into the pinched face beside him.

The man continued.

"We are not all evil, my lord, though we are to be reckoned amongst the vermin that swarm the dark alleys of this town. My mother and sister, God knows, they ill deserve me, and yet to-day I'm all they have."

Again there was the strange twist of his mouth, but his tone was unmoved.

"Doubtless, as your lordship passed these streets to-day, you turned your head from them. We, the vermin, are bred in darkness and early acquainted with violence and with vice. And of such does England, in her justice, form that dangling fringe in chains, upon the gibbets, through which doubtless your lordship's horses were urged on your approach to town. They cannot starve us fast enough, and so they hang us," continued the man, his voice sinking to a lower note, but his manner as flippant as before, "I am the worst of us, and yet I've fared the best. My brother was of a different metal. He lingered by the mother and the sister. One day, when they all hungered, he forgot, and so, in the name of noble justice, he was hanged. Faith, it is amusing when you consider it, my lord! When I think of all that I and my fellow-soldiers have borne off in pillage—but that was fair and just, for it was war."

The man suddenly forgot his auditor. "God!" he cried, "and I came home to that!"

Yerington's hand closed upon his shoulder.

"I'll give you service," he said. "Call to-day upon my steward. I'll leave orders with him."

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The fellow shrank together, as if the hand upon his shoulder had been laid there in violence. His habitual instinct of distrust of the classes above him revealed itself in the keen gaze he turned upon Lord Yerington's face. For a second doubt hovered, followed by a sly glance of something not pleasant to see. An instant later he shrank within himself with a shudder.

"No," he said below his breath, "I will not—not with the memory of Jack's face before my eyes. One day I should be tempted."

Lord Yerington still watched, more amused than deeply touched. To him—so strong in class distinction—this man, made up of a strange motley of impulses, was but a curiosity which it pleased him for the moment to wonder over. His impulse of charity died without a pang.

The fellow whom he regarded, half shame-faced at his outburst, threw up a defiant head and looked boldly back. The questioning surface-gaze that met his, killed the momentary gleam of good in him and sent the pendulum of evil-thinking swinging the further in rebound. A suspicion dawned in his mind. Here might be game beyond the guinea. He settled the ragged ruffles on his breast with an air of swaggering bravado and grinned with a lift of the eyebrows full of ugly questioning.

"You walk early, my lords," he said slyly. "Such gentlemen as yourselves would scarce haunt Fleet Street without reason."

"Devil take the fellow!" ejaculated Lord Yerington. "Damme, but I'll swear he thinks we seek an easy Fleet Street bride."

The rascal's face fell.

"Mayhap your lordship has already chosen one," he suggested.

"'S blood! not I!" answered Lord Yerington.

The man's manner grew eager.

"I know such gentry as yourselves are sometimes hard pressed." The memory of the carelessly bestowed guinea danced in his thought. A gentleman of empty pockets and obvious prodigality. The case told itself! "I could find you a widow with a fat jointure and not uncomely. A widow married by a Fleet parson might not come so ill as the Fleet Prison."

He cast a furtive, searching glance at them.

Mr. Mansur swung round, and sauntered away. In Lord Yerington's face the fellow read a solemnity so profound that to his quick wits it hinted raillery. Acting upon this lead, he assumed a jaunty air.

"Ah, pardon my obtuseness, my lord," he cried, with a rakish smirk. "I see, 'tis a matter of pure gallantry. Youth! Youth!" he threw up his eyes. "Youth! Youth!" he cast them down again with an air of ribald insinuation. "Then, mayhap, 'tis a maid you'd seek,— a pretty, round-checked maid. For such as these the fee is a guinea in the Fleet Prison. I," his manner grew eager and confiding, "I could find you a parson outside the Fleet by the Ditch would 'do it for the half, and half to a poor starved vagrant like myself."

Yerington watched him, smiling.

"Maids so cheaply bought are scarce worth seeking," he said.

"Not so, my lord," the man said, sinking his voice to a whisper; "London is vast and maids are many. Such knots are oftentimes tied in the Fleet at the gentlemen's pleasure. Who can swear that the maid protested when there were none to hear?"

Lord Yerington's expression, which he did not understand, urged him to further inducement.

"Remember," his eyes narrowed, "if she does not please, the parson has but to tear the entry from the

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register, and there you are, a bachelor—a gay bachelor, and none the wiser.”

Yerington took one stride and grasped the man by the scruff of his neck.

“You vile, crawling, filthy vermin!” he said, scarcely above his breath. From side to side he shook him with deliberate violence. “Go to join that gallows-bird, your brother. The air is foul with you.”

With amazing agility the man squirmed from his grasp—then stood carelessly at ease a few paces away, unmoved by the wrath that still blazed in Lord Yerington’s face, or by the comments of the crowd which had begun to gather. He shrugged his shoulders and slipped his hand into his ragged pocket in a furtive search for the guinea and treasured snuff-box. Assured of their safety, he turned; a slow, livid passion transforming his face.

“Blame your laws,” he cried, his tone concentrated, “don’t blame me. Blame your laws which hang honest men while such men as you prosper and fatten—vampire that you are. A poor creature I may be; but you! What are you? A pretty gentleman, forsooth! Say rather a prowling beast of prey; a blood-sucker. By what right do you live, and oppress—and then but die and rot like the rest of us!”

He spat toward the figure in the yellow brocade; then abruptly the rage died from his face.

“Gad!” he exclaimed, affectedly, “I’ll spoil my dinner. Anger is a luxury.”

And, gathering himself together with a foppish air, he mingled with the crowd, and disappeared.

CHAPTER VI

A RESCUE

O villain, villain, smiling, damnèd villain.

—SHAKESPEARE.

MANSUR'S mood was rapidly approaching exasperation. He was amazed that Yerington persisted in his whim now that the sun was higher in the heavens, and that the West End was beginning to manifest itself occasionally in a sedan-chair on its way to the Exchange. A peer of the realm might disport himself after so whimsical a fashion if he chose, but he, Mansur, could not afford it. The plainly dressed city crowd, in its brown and snuff-colour, intent upon its day's occupation, filled him with irritation second only to his annoyance with Yerington, who was acting like a boy or a drunkard, he told himself. He had already learnt that that nobleman, once launched upon an idea, however trivial, persisted in it with the determination worthy of a conviction. He drifted down each branch road of life, and treated it with a seriousness becoming a highway. Mansur, who set himself to grim goals, toward which he laboured over years, found this quality in Lord Yerington a heavy tax upon his patience, even when it furthered his own ends. He was contemptuous of it, failing to perceive in it the shadow-side of a virtue,—a capacity for concentration which properly directed might make for devotion to a cause, a comrade or a love. Lord Yerington had hitherto felt no impulse at the helm of his life, save that of his own unconsidered fancies.

“And what now?” asked Mansur, as they were once more upon their rambles.

Yerington had paused now, and was gazing meditatively up a dark alley almost deserted, above which but a narrow irregular line of sky was visible. A dirty kennel guttered down its middle and a gaunt, uncarved pump stood in its midst.

"I'm in mind to try this," he said.

"You're in mind to have a knife in your ribs," retorted Mansur. "I've no appetite for such neighbourhoods."

"I confess it outsmells my bergamot," said Yerington, taking a few steps up the narrow way.

Mansur followed him, after conquering an obstinacy so strong that it warned him against himself.

Yerington sauntered up the alley, glancing from side to side as he went. The street seemed uninhabited. Most of the windows of the houses were broken and the panes stuffed with rags. Only once, through a half-open door, the dance of a flame upon a hearth was visible.

"If 'twere plague time," he mused, "I'd swear we'd find death rotting behind these casements."

He stopped before one house, about which there still lingered indications of former wealth. The balconies were richly carved, and although the knocker of the heavy door, which was ajar, had been wrenched away, one flambeau extinguisher, dark with smoke, stood out from the wall beside it.

Yerington studied the stone escutcheon graven above the portal with interest.

"'Tis that of the Ponsonbys," he said. "How the fortunes of a neighbourhood may change!"

As he stood idly regarding the house, a sudden crash of glass sounded above him, and splintered crystal fragments tinkled at his feet. He glanced up in time to see a hand, white and small, which had been thrust through the panes, withdrawn. There was a suddenness in the

movement that suggested violence. A scream came to him, anguished, smothered, but distinguishable.

"Help, for God's sake, help!"

Yerington's apathy vanished, his eyes were alert.

Mansur stood unmoved.

"There's mischief afoot," said Yerington eagerly.

"Let us within."

"Madness!" ejaculated Mansur. "Would you risk your life or perish in some brawl for a 'Have-at-all'?"

Yerington wheeled round toward him.

"There was real anguish in that cry. When a woman is in danger, I do not stop to question of her character before I offer help. Will you in with me or no?"

He was half across the road as he spoke, his sword in his hand.

"Not I," said Mansur coolly. "I'm no Bedlamite."

Yerington was now a cautious foot within the house, and he turned upon Mansur, over his shoulder, a look so fixed in contempt and repudiation that that gentleman changed his purpose and entered the house behind him.

"That's better," said Yerington, a hint of relief in his whisper. "I could not have believed it of thee, Phil."

In the street without, nobody had stirred. It may be that a cry such as that which had just rung through its brooding shadows held no unfamiliar note.

Within the house Lord Yerington and Mansur found themselves in a hall lighted faintly from above and pervaded by that curious melancholy odour which hangs in the air of rarely inhabited houses. A sink-staircase wound up to the next floor. An uglier position from which to resist a possible rush from above could scarcely have been devised. This fact Lord Yerington recognised in a flash as he set his foot on the first step.

The zest of adventure was beginning to mingle with

his impulse of protection, and he smothered a laugh in his throat, as he turned to Mansur below him.

"Don't press too close behir i me," he whispered, "there is scarce room for sword-play in this cage, and I'll get in a swinging blow, if I can."

Mansur came on a few cautious paces to the rear. As they neared the top of the staircase, Lord Yerington paused and listened.

"I hear their voices," he said. "The devil's in this, I'll lay."

The light flooded down from above and another gleam came to them from the end of the hall to which they were ascending, and upon which several doors opened. Lord Yerington stole cautiously to the front of the house, and turned the handle of the door which, according to his calculations, led into the room from which the scream had come. Mansur's head and shoulders only were visible above the stairway where he stood and watched.

With a quick, stealthy movement Yerington pushed back the door.

The room was empty.

A few bottles stood upon the mantelpiece. A chair, upholstered in leather, one leg missing, was tipped crazily against the wall. The shattered pane at the window told him that he was in the room he sought, and below it, upon the floor, he saw a few drops of blood. He stole to the door connecting this apartment with the one behind it. It was of strong oak, unpanelled, with hinges of wrought iron extending half across it. No entrance was to be obtained there.

He returned to the hall, feeling peculiarly helpless, and the sound of a girl's voice raised in violent, sobbing protest reached his ears.

"Zounds!" he exclaimed, "Phil, are we to be baffled?"

He strained at the strong door behind which he heard

the voices. It scarcely quivered, even when he threw his whole weight and added force against it. But at the sound of his impact there came an exclamation in a woman's voice, followed by a waiting silence.

"Open!" cried Yerington, knocking sharply with the hilt of his sword.

A feminine voice cried out suddenly, then ceased with a smothered quaver, that clearly told the story of a hand pressed upon her lips.

That quaver moved Yerington.

"Mansur," he said, "a shoulder here!"

"Let me warn you——" began Mansur.

"A shoulder," interrupted Yerington impatiently, "or no shoulder—which is it?"

"You'll repent this," said Mansur, but he approached and heaved with a will, confident of the unyielding oak and the probably doubly-shot iron lock.

Yerington, unaccustomed to situations that did not yield readily to his desires, for an instant stood lost in thought. The sound of that girl's smothered cry was echoing and re-echoing within him. Then his eyes wandered to a window at the end of the hall opening upon roofs. It suggested to him a possible solution of the difficulty. He went down and unhasped it.

A moment later he was out upon the slates, calling to Mansur to follow him. That Mansur did not, he scarcely heeded, so intent was he upon his purpose. He saw, with something like dismay, that the sharp peak of the roof was intercepted at the corner by a stack of high chimneys, round which he would be obliged to climb before he could ascertain whether, after all, this way held the key to the difficulty. He clung to their smoky, grimy sides, ascending partly by their help and partly upon his knees to the peak of the sharply inclined roof. This point of vantage gained, he rounded the obstruction and

saw, to his relief, that the slates descended abruptly to the verge of the window into which he was seeking access. He crawled along the comb of the roof until opposite it, intending to profit by his unexpected flank movement.

The vision of himself in this position, upon hands and knees, like a cat, his silk stockings torn, his ruffles soiled by the closeness of his embrace of the interfering chimneys, took full hold upon his imagination. Helpless, he hung upon his perch, in the throes of sudden, uncontrollable laughter. Neither his keen consciousness of the need of prompt action, nor the probable danger that awaited him, could check this burst of inconvenient merriment.

He swung himself into the position from which he intended to make his way downwards. Probably his movements were less secure because of the mirth that convulsed him. One red heel slipped, and in an instant he was sliding over the tiles in a sitting position, his scabbard dragging behind him. He vainly attempted to check himself. Before he had time to reason out a course of conduct, or to concentrate his mind upon any move, save the impulse to grasp with hands and heels at the slates, he had reached the window. Both his heels rapped sharply against it. It flew inward, and the Earl of Yerington made abrupt entrance, feet first, into the room.

In a flash he had regained the perpendicular, his sword in hand. Not an instant too soon, for some one within hurled himself forward, almost impaling himself upon the point of it. A turn of Yerington's wrist snicked off a waistcoat button before the fellow withdrew beyond its range and bared his own weapon.

The room was dusky, lighted only by the window through which Lord Yerington had entered. He had scarcely time to observe anything before his adversary engaged him. He bethought himself of Mansur upon the landing without; but the locks, as he knew, were shot,

and he was helpless to summon him. Furthermore, he was young and at that moment his blood was singing with the lust of battle. He had not made a dozen passes before he realised that he had met a swordsman worthy of his steel. He was hampered where he stood in a corner of the apartment. For the moment he chose the offensive, seeking to attain a position where there would be room for his weapon. The man opposed to him yielded with reluctance, inch by inch, determined he should not gain the advantage which he sought.

He was a stalwart rascal of middle height, clad in a brown frock-coat, with high riding-boots and a bobwig. He did not possess Lord Yerington's agility, nor had he his length of reach, but these advantages were offset on his side by the elasticity of the constantly trained muscles that told in every thrust of the sword; and he possessed a depth of chest and breathed with an ease that revealed great heart-power and probable endurance.

His strong, yellow teeth showed as he fought, one eyelid lowered almost to closing. Yerington's appreciation went out to this adversary with whom he was fighting, possibly to the death, in pure admiration of his swordsmanship, underlaid, however, by an unreasoning sense of invincible antagonism, independent of the cause and concentrated on the man. It was a vigorous, skilled encounter where weapons met and flashed, writhed, thrust and parried in the grim silence of deadly earnest. Lord Yerington's play betrayed his temperament as clearly as his opponent's did his. He feinted, played for an opening, fighting often with his sword point near the floor, only to flash it upward in an instant, in a defence or attack, so sudden and unexpected that it would have bewildered a man less skilful and bold than the one who, with the half-closed eyes, held his ground opposite him. They were so nearly matched that a doubt began to rise in Yerington's mind as to the probable issue of the fight. For an in-

stant he gained an advantage. He followed this up with a trick he had learned in Italy, and for a moment his opponent was bewildered and gave a yard of ground before he recovered. Lord Yerington's blade wounded him slightly in the forearm. Hastening to follow up this advantage with a degree less caution than he had hitherto employed, he became conscious that a new element had entered the field. He felt the impact of a soft body against him, and he realized that his legs were pinned.

The man with the drooping eyelid opened both his organs of vision wide, and laughed triumphantly. He, too, grew over-confident.

Hampered as he was, Lord Yerington leaned forward and caught his antagonist's sword and with a supple movement of his wrist, sent the weapon flying over his head. Ripping out an oath, the man turned to regain it. As he did so, Lord Yerington, with the flat of his blade, and without waiting to see who the clinging creature about his legs might be, delivered a long swinging blow behind him. This action was followed by a howl, and what appeared to be a bundle of flowered, wadded calico scrambled in a huddle into the hearth and cowered there, whining in fear or pain. For the moment Lord Yerington was free.

"Mansur!" he called, taking a rapid step toward the door.

He was in no mind to push this brawl, in which he found himself, to extremes. He did not know how many enemies might be about, nor had he been able fully to reconnoitre the room itself.

Before he could reach the door, however, the man in the brown frock was on his feet again, and at him with a rush. Yerington avoided his oncoming by a dexterous movement which he had learned of Mr. Broughton, the then fashionable exponent of the art of boxing, an art

popular among the dandies. Swinging suddenly back, he took his opponent in a close embrace, dropping his sword as he did so, and the latter's swung harmlessly past him. He held the man, helpless as an infant, in his skilled grip. He grinned down into his face, for he had contrived to tip his adversary's head back at an angle that threatened to snap his neck.

"Are you satisfied, my pretty fellow?" he demanded. "Trust not thy life to swords only when next you go a-squiring."

He tightened his grip until the breath went out of the man in his arms with a grunt. For a few seconds longer Lord Yerington held him, seeking to wind him further before he flung him from him.

He heard a sound and turned sharply. He feared that the huddled mass in the chimney was again seeking to trick him, or that an enemy, hitherto unseen, was about to cross his designs.

What he saw was a young girl.

Her face was still blanched by recent terrors, and from beneath her tumble of brown curls her dilated eyes questioned him.

"You called—a friend, I think, sir," she said in a voice clear if tremulous.

The charm of the girl's personality, the surprise he felt at her appearance—for in the excitement of the conflict the cause of his coming had escaped him—and the calm courage and self-poise of this inquiry amazed Yerington into a whistle. This he checked with his involuntary courtesy.

"Your most obedient," he said gallantly. "A thousand pardons if my present occupation prevents my extending to you a proper greeting. I could, I doubt not, truss this fellow more securely if my friend were here."

The man looked up impudently.

"You win this cast," he said.

"Methinks 'tis well I do," answered Yerington, throwing him to the floor. "Lie there, sirrah!"

The fellow propped his shoulder against the wainscot.

"'S blood," he said, "I must learn your trick. 'Twas a good one."

"It will scarce serve you in Newgate," answered Yerington, contemptuously. The cause of his coming was recurring to his mind as the heat of the fight began to abate. "Where is the woman whose voice I heard, you gallows' food?"

He was about to turn, when the man made a quick gesture that warned him against unwary haste. The fellow caught his threatening glance and settled back once more against the panelling with a laugh, his left eyelid lowered until there was but a crafty gleam between the lashes.

"Faith," he said, ignoring the question, "I'll lay a wager I was not born to swing."

A stealthy movement by the fireplace directed Yerington's gaze that way.

The object in the flowered calico morning-gown had crept out into the grey light of the room, and was stealing towards Yerington, stark fear in its fat repulsive visage. It was a strange figure of a man, in a worn scratch-wig, with fluffs of cotton appearing here and there through rents in his wadded garment—a cowardly, crawling creature, whose puffed face told the tale of dissipation, and whose watery eyes faltered as Yerington turned to him.

"By the Lord Harry," said Yerington, "a Fleet Street parson, I'll be bound. A perjuring filth-monger in bands, a clerical magpie in black and white. What devil's game have you been playing, you maggot?"

The cringing rascal spread wide his dirty hands.

Yerington's reply was a kick that doubled him up with gurgling protest.

"Come," he demanded, impatiently, "the woman."

"Here she is," replied a quiet voice at his back.

He wheeled about with a start to face Mr. Mansur.

He had never looked handsomer than he did at that moment. Perfectly groomed, his hair unruffled, he formed a striking contrast to the dishevelled peer.

"I remained in the hall awaiting a possible sortie from that direction," he said smoothly.

"You did," cried Yerington, with a laugh, "a damned good move to be on the nether side of such sound oak. Mansur, you should have been a lawyer,—an ink-slinging, phrase-mongering lawyer, with a pen and no sword, damme——"

Mansur, facing him, lifted an eyebrow that abjured silence and checked Yerington in surprise. The girl had appeared but a moment in a scene of much excitement and he had failed to associate her, with her look of calm courage, with the screams which had brought him to the rescue of an unknown woman, and for the moment she had slipped his mind. Mansur stepped to one side with an introductory wave of his hand and Yerington beheld the motive cause of his whole adventure. The girl stood before him and in a flash he realised that it was she who had shot back the bolts and admitted Mansur.

This coolness and resource filled him with amazement. He bowed.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said gallantly.

The girl's eyes were still dark from recent fears. She was throbbing with a gratitude so deep that it defeated her efforts to express it. The breath caught in her throat and choked her.

Yerington had risked his life in defence of her, when

her need was great. Now that he saw her, his town-bred cynicism returned to him. Rake he might be, but hypocrite he was not. Even as he rose from his obeisance, and brought his hand across his heart with an air of profound respect, his practised eye noted her simple attire, her plain grey gown, her white kerchief laced across her bosom with black velvet riband, her simple pinner, her Nithsdale thrown across a chair near by; her white stockings and her black unbuckled shoes. He realised she was not of his world, even while the strange quality of her beauty amazed him and brought a light into his face as he looked at her.

Mansur's acquaintance with her antedated his own by a few seconds only, yet so strong is sex that, as he noticed the play of admiration in Yerington's eyes, his grew dark.

"Oh, sir," she cried, clasping her hands, "how can I ever, ever sufficiently thank you?"

As she spoke, another of her charms was revealed. She had a strange quality of voice, which, once heard, lingered in the memory. It was reduced at certain inflections to a rich huskiness, but it rose and fell now on one note and now on another like a chime, revealing a gamut of emotions.

Yerington listened, noting its haunting inflections rather than its words, at the same moment throwing a glance at Mansur that inferred clearly: "A rare morning's work. What say you now to my adventure?"

It might be that this girl had escaped one danger but to fall into another in the rescue of these two young bloods. Perhaps the man at the wainscot thought so, for he laughed again, and at the sound the girl shuddered and fled towards Yerington, trembling and grasping his arm, in the extremity of her terror.

"Oh, sir," she cried, "I can no more."

This appeal brushed aside all Yerington's frivolities.

He helped her chivalrously to a chair, into which she sank exhausted.

"I would we had wine," he said in a tone of vexation, turning to Mansur. "The maid is in need of it. Go you, and fetch it."

Mansur's eyes travelled slowly from him to the frightened girl, and from the girl to him. Odd, unexpected dimples trembled about his mouth, coming and going, as if they played a game of hide and seek.

"We have still two rascals to keep an eye upon," he said; "I'd best wait a while longer."

She made a movement of panic.

"I pray you, gentlemen," she entreated, "don't leave me. I shall soon have quite recovered."

The men stood watching her. They were both under the spell of her beauty. Her face was so young, so gentle, and yet so strong. It was a type new to Yerington. He noted it, lost in the speculations it aroused.

A sound in the room caught his ear.

The parson had been creeping towards the door. Mansur had not moved to prevent him, nor had the rascal at the wainscot spoken. He knew, circumstanced as he was, that no such opportunity for exit was open to him. He lay back filled with silent laughter at the undignified appearance of his recent ally, who had half crept and half rolled over the floor, seeking to avoid observation.

"'Ods bodikins, parson," he said impudently, as Yerington sprang towards the man and brought him whining to his feet; "they've scented you!"

And he gave the view halloo.

Yerington turned round to him, amazed at his sheer effrontery.

"We've had enough of you, sirrah," he said. "We'll have this lady's tale, and that, mayhap, may put you out of humour with mirth, for a time."

The girl had risen and was standing, her gaze roving from the scoundrel on the floor to the shrinking parson, as if their presence and the memory of her recent experiences worked a spell upon her.

Mansur took upon himself the rôle of interlocutor. His manner was full of insinuating deference.

"May we crave," he said, "that you will tell us, in part at least, how this came about?"

The girl looked peculiarly alone and pitiful, her breath coming in gasps, and yet striving to force her trembling lips into submission to her will.

"I beseech you, but a moment, gentlemen," she urged. Suddenly she broke down, hiding her face in her hands. "It has been all my fault. I have been wilful and wrong."

Yerington affected to study a picture pinned crazily to the wall. Mansur examined his nails.

A moment later the girl continued:

"I left my home early."

"Alone?" asked Mansur.

There was suspicion in his tone. She noted it, and after that her words came more steadily.

"Not alone," she answered; "but in such a cause it might be that I would leave my home alone, even in the face of good counsel."

Yerington's life had been saturated in Court and town intrigue. He watched the girl narrowly as she spoke.

"I was upon an errand of mercy," she went on, "and it was only on my return that this mischance befell me."

She cast a glance, as if fascinated, at the man near the wainscot, who had settled himself down in a comfortable attitude, prepared to enjoy her narrative. The parson was bowed forward, his hands before his face. The Fleet Street prison, which he had recently left, seemed a veri-

table Paradise compared to the prospect of Newgate, which now loomed large before his horrified vision.

The girl continued:

"I am a stranger to London. It was in a crowded portion of the Strand I became, I know not how, separated from my companion."

"I saw to that," laughed the man at the wainscot. "They should have led thee in a crook, my lambkin."

At the sound of his voice she shuddered.

"Hold your tongue!" cried Lord Yerington.

The rogue fixed his eyes upon the smoke-darkened ceiling, as if in derision, and the girl continued.

"I was 'distraught with fear when I found myself alone in a crowded thoroughfare. I knew not where to turn. I spoke to one woman. She had a market-basket on her arm, and looked a simple, kindly creature; but when I inquired my way of her, she scowled and called me such names that I fled away. How afraid I was! I saw several men, old men, who I thought would be kind to a girl in trouble, but they leered at me so that I dared not question them."

Yerington, despite his interest in her tale, at these words could not resist a glance at Mansur, but that gentleman, his head bent forward, listened to her as if he were conscious of no other presence in the room.

"At length, when I was near despair," she went on, "I saw this man. He was dressed as you see him, but his face was not the same. It seemed kind. He told me that he had seen my need, and he begged I would accept his service. He appeared a friend in all that sea of unfriendly faces. His coach was near, he said, and he would straightway take me to my aunt. At first I was afraid, for it seemed to me scarce a gentleman's equipage."

"My manners were better than my coach, you see," said the man from the floor.

The girl continued:

"He told me gently, with one hand upon the door of the coach, that he had a sister just of my years in a convent in France, and that he would be grateful if a stranger did her such a service, if she was in my trouble. After that I could not doubt him. It seemed a curious way that we went, and when we turned up this narrow street, I became fearful and would have sprung from the carriage, but it was too late then. He himself carried me here. Then I knew it had all been planned. Even the wicked parson was waiting for us. I was told I was to be married and that it was useless to struggle, for they would sign the marriage register whether I would or no. That would tell a tale, they said, it would be vain for me to contradict, and against which no denials of mine would avail."

Her voice failed her.

Both of the listening gentlemen read the man's villainy to its centre. Such a trick was all too prevalent in Fleet Street, where women were wiled to have such marriages forced upon them, and afterwards held over their heads as a threat, that the villains who perpetrated them might use their knowledge as a source of income. It was strange, however, that they should have chosen so simple a girl for such a purpose.

Yerington's face was set with anger.

"Up, upon your feet!" he exclaimed, turning to the rogue. "I'm weary of you, and I marvel at my patience."

The man rose, settling his disarranged garments as he did so.

"At your lordship's service," he said coolly.

"What Satan's impulse," demanded Yerington, "prompted you to attempt this monstrous wrong upon this child?"

The rascal regarded him keenly, with an expression half whimsical, half penetrating.

"Such marriages stand in England," he said at length. "Blame your laws and not me. As for the girl, what need had I of her? She would but have hampered me. I had no thought of her, save as a means to an end. It might be that her parents," he winked towards her as if to share a hint with her, which he denied Lord Yerington, "would pay high for that entry in the register."

"Zounds!" exclaimed Yerington, thoroughly aroused. "Hanging's too good for this fellow. I would I had the quartering of him."

Mansur had been sunk in reverie.

"England has laws," he said at length, "best leave him to them."

This speech suggested a new thought to the girl, and a new horror. Her colour, which had been slowly returning, faded. "Is this," she asked, scarcely above a whisper, "a hanging crime?"

"Happily it is," answered Yerington vindictively.

"Oh, it is too horrible," she exclaimed in an outburst of emotion she had hitherto controlled. "I have seen them, hundreds of them in chains on gibbets, with the crows circling about them, haunting, horrible things, as we came to London. The air was foul with them."

She hid her face in her hands.

"Prithee," said Yerington, with ready kindness, "do not think of them."

"I dream of them," she persisted, shuddering.

The rascal saw his opportunity in this girl's horror. He stretched his neck and felt it with speculative fingers.

"Fore George," he said, "'tis a pity that so fair a lady

as yourself should send such a pretty neck to be wryed upon the gallows."

"I send you," she echoed in dismay.

"Ay," he answered, "for I'll be sworn if you spare me, that these gentlemen for your sake would not force the issue."

Yerington burst into a laugh at the audacity of the proposal.

"I——" she looked about her, the dark shading of her blue eyes, heavily lashed, showing in the half light and adding power to her appeal; "have I your leave, gentlemen, to spare this fellow if I would?"

They bowed a courteous consent, watching her with curiosity.

She drew slowly nearer to the man upon whom she was to pass judgment, and whose life hung upon her next words. She formed a sharp contrast to the other members of the waiting group—Yerington, the gay, careless gamester; Mansur, the man of relentless ambitions; the ruffling rogue who waited upon her decision with a forced indifference; the cringing parson, rank with broken faiths.

Yerington stood with his hat in his hand, his body slightly inclined forward, inferring all the deference he so often affected and so seldom felt. There was a lurking spark of amusement in his eyes. He considered himself a mere spectator in the scene. Yet something was settling upon his consciousness, infusing into it an unfamiliar element that subdued that amused twinkle almost to eclipse. The accustomed lilt of the tune to which he had set his dancing feet through life, returned to him as soon as the need of action was past, and the girl's extremity had been relieved. Life and death themselves were jests, he had always asserted, yet, strangely, this girl's face forbade the thought its full fling.

As she approached her former captor, the man's air of

impudent confidence was dashed. He was taking a gambler's chance, playing his last cards with habitual recklessness, and he was prepared to pay the forfeit if he lost. All his years he had faced death, contemptuously, at close quarters. When, however, his look crossed her clear gaze, for an instant his faltered.

The words with which the girl broke the silence were so strangely childish that Mr. Mansur gasped, and the man recovered his former assurance.

"Oh, I fear me," she exclaimed, "that you are a very wicked man!"

The fellow whom she addressed made a deep obeisance.

"Nobody has ever paid me the compliment of doubting it," he said.

"Oh, if I could but be sure," she went on, as if thinking aloud, "that, if I gave you your freedom, you'd attempt no wrong to another woman."

"I'd make fifty such promises in as many minutes," he returned glibly.

Beneath her childishness was a woman's spirit, which appeared in her next words.

"I'll have no promises," she said coldly; "I know how much they are worth with such men as you." She paused for a moment. Then she exclaimed in distress, "No, I cannot play the judge, I cannot." And she turned away.

Yerington addressed the fellow in a leap of sudden, unfamiliar anger. The girl's words had moved him.

"You have the lady's pardon, and I dare swear a pretty use you'll make of it. Had I only been left to deal with you, the day would have ended after a different fashion. Thank her and go."

The man bowed towards the girl, whose back was turned upon him.

"The world would be gorged with rascals, if all

judges were like your ladyship," he said with a broad smile. "I pray you, gentlemen, mark me down a villain, a good honest villain."

He put on his hat, settling it into place with a sharp tap upon the crown and took two swaggering steps towards the door.

"My humble thanks to your ladyship," he continued. "And I pray you mark: I too can keep faith after my fashion." This he said with a leer so full of insinuation that she turned towards him with a start. "As for you," addressing Lord Yerington, "my compliments upon your swordsmanship, though you won by a trick with which, I confess, I am not familiar. The other man who could have unarmed me does not live. Now, gentlemen, if you please, a trifle—my sword."

Yerington uttered a low exclamation at the proposal.

Stooping, he picked up the man's weapon and taking it across his knee, broke it sharply twice and handed him the shattered fragments.

The rogue's face went black with anger, his recent danger entirely forgotten.

"'S blood," he cried, sputtering over the words, "my good Flanders blade! It has carved my way so long, curse you!"

"Put your next to better use," said Lord Yerington. "We are letting a sad rascal out upon the world."

The man fought back his wrath and encompassed them all in a swift glance that appeared to note every detail, as if he entered them in a mental note-book.

He swaggered to the door, opened it, and disappeared.

The girl watched him with dilated eyes, and her hand fluttered to her heart.

"Something tells me," she gasped, "that my path will cross that man's again."

CHAPTER VII

MR. MANSUR INDULGES IN AN IMPULSE

Musidorus, slain by an arrow that flew out of a dimple in Belinda's left cheek.

—THE SPECTATOR.

THEY had forgotten the parson till they saw him creeping towards the door, his figure bent double, a very ball of deprecation. In another moment he would have gained it, but Yerington intercepted him.

"Aha, the maggot!" he announced.

The parson stood rubbing his hands and shuffling upon his feet. Then he rolled his head towards the others and laughed unctuously, amidst his cowardice, with a coward's instinct to fawn where he could not bully.

"He! he!" he tittered, "your lordship's merry."

"Ha! ha!" echoed Yerington, with an affectation of laughter.

"He! he!" fawned the parson; and for a few seconds this farce of mirth was continued.

Then Yerington broke off with an abruptness that left the parson undecided as to his course, and his face convulsed by such conflicting expressions that Yerington almost burst into genuine merriment; but his gorge rose at the sight of the man.

"You're the most arrant knave that I've met this morning, and you are not the first by many. Be off with you after that other rogue, your better, for he affects no virtue, nor robes his villainies in black and a band."

He drew his sword and beat the parson lightly with

the flat of it. The cringing creature gave a cry of fear that he checked next moment in a gurgle of mock laughter.

"Your lordship's merry," he stammered.

"Merry," echoed Yerington, "I never was less merry in my life. Back to the ditch, you reptile! I'll spare you for the lady's sake. Let word of another trick like this come to my ears and you'll pay dearly for it."

He opened the door, and the man rushed past him, wincing as he did so in fear of a blow.

Yerington, Mansur and the girl whom they had just rescued left the house and passed down the still silent alley towards Fleet Street. The sounds of its teeming life floated up the narrow way as they walked beneath the over-hanging houses.

Lord Yerington was a conspicuous figure at any time. Mr. Mansur's black and silver, though elegant, was less noticeable than was Yerington's yellow brocade. The girl, wrapped in her Nithesdale, her face partially concealed by the hood, was still a striking figure. Her walk had a freedom that arrested the eye. Such a carriage gives distinction, even to the shrouded forms of the purdahed women of the Orient. She bore herself lightly, though her heart was sick within her.

Once within Fleet Street they paused, and she spoke to Yerington with a pretty gesture of entreaty.

"Prithee, sir," she said, earnestly, "call me a chair and let me go hence. Thank you, I never can, though all my life I'll remember you with gratitude and in my prayers."

Yerington gazed down into the upturned eyes and found them singularly good to look upon. His relish for the end of the affair of the morning lessened.

"Nay, my little maid," he answered gently, "we must see you safe to your home. It would be ill courtesy to

trust you now alone in such a neighbourhood, which has but lately attempted such a wrong against you."

She clasped and unclasped her hands as if she found herself trapped in a situation from which, for the moment, she saw no exit. A line of doubt and perplexity appeared in her brow.

Mansur peered past the shadow of her hood.

"Those guardians who have so little treasured so fair a maid as to let her come to such a pass, had best let those who saw her danger, acquaint them with it."

His tone was low and suave, but at his words there came a touch of resentment into her face.

"None are guilty but myself," she answered with spirit, "and I guilty but in too little knowledge of this wicked city. I trust, gentlemen, you will not take advantage of my gratitude to force your services upon me."

Mansur regarded her with a trace of suspicion, but on the instant Lord Yerington bowed.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said, his hat in his hand. "I await but your orders if they do not include the command that I must leave you, before I have seen you where you have, at least, a reasonable hope of safety."

Her face broke up in gratitude and self-accusation.

"Forgive me," she entreated, "what I have said in return for your goodness; but indeed I am so sore beset I scarce know what I uttered."

Yerington's reply was a grave smile that became him well. For the time he had taken this unprotected girl into his charge, and though every winsome charm of hers, which each passing moment revealed more clearly, tempted to gallantry, he forbore to abate a jot of his brotherly attitude.

"Whither is it your pleasure we shall take you?" he asked.

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She reflected for an instant before she replied with evident reluctance.

"I fear it is so distant, methinks if I found Soho from there the way would not be difficult."

"Soho!" echoed Mansur.

This fashionable quarter was not such a one as he had expected her to name.

"Your will is our pleasure," replied Lord Yerington; and they turned their steps in that direction.

She was not long to remain in his charge. He was conscious, as he walked on beside her, of increasing curiosity.

Mansur, taking his cue from him, did not speak, though his active mind was busy. A fact that had escaped Yerington was momentarily impressing him more. This girl had neither the manners nor the accent of one born to the condition which her simple attire appeared to indicate. To this fact and the situation he was mentally fitting theory after theory with small satisfaction to himself. His reflections were interrupted when their progress was stayed by a crowd which had gathered across the way.

It was withal a good-natured knot of people that seemed divided between a desire to console and help some one at its core, and to indulge in a running fire of cheap and coarse wit, that blight of most hastily gathered crowds of promiscuous humanity.

Yerington halted, peering ahead of him with a willingness to be amused, characteristically inclined to get a fling of fun from every chance situation.

The girl, as she stood between them, gave a little exclamation. For an instant she listened, then she spoke aloud, forgetful of herself, throwing her voice ahead of her, in an impulse of reassurance to some one she could

not see, who was hidden behind the rampart of backs and unsavoury wigs.

"I'm here, dear," she called, "I'm quite safe. I pray you, gentlemen, let me pass."

She sought to press her way between the people.

In sheer surprise they gave way. This girl's appearance in the companionship of two young beaux caused a pleasant diversion and inferred a possible interpretation of the affair that gave it a turn to their taste. For a moment they stared with stupid curiosity, then came one or two rude comments followed by a laugh.

She soon reached a woman, who turned to her with a glad cry. The woman had been weeping, and her pale blue eyes were pitifully swollen. It was evident that the motley assembly about her had been gathered by her panic-stricken inquiries which at length had ended in helpless distress and collapse. The resourcelessness with which she had faced the situation was accounted for by one glance at her kindly, gentle face. It revealed her to be a woman of amiable nature, of a strong sense of established habit, little imagination and no initiative.

It was only when these two women met that the young bloods understood the great control that the girl, scarcely more than a child, had been exercising over herself. Once she felt the motherly protecting arms about her, the emotion she had been so bravely holding in check overwhelmed her. With clutching fingers she clung to the other, and pressed her head down upon her shoulder, as if she could not gain sufficient comfort from the reassuring contact.

"Hold me tight, hold me tight," she gasped. "Don't let me go."

"Oh, my baby, my baby," cried the elder woman. "Has no harm come to thee?"

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Her face now was strong, quiet and motherly. She was oblivious of her recent panic.

"Yes, yes," sobbed the girl, patting and clinging to her, "these gentlemen——" She did not finish.

The woman turned toward Yerington and Mr. Mansur.

Then her jaw dropped, her eyes flew open, and she stood frozen, the image of dismay.

Seeing her embarrassment, Lord Yerington stepped forward.

"My good Mistress Culpepper," he said kindly, "it has been our good fortune to rescue your——"

The girl raised her head and looked into the elder woman's face.

"Niece," she prompted breathlessly.

"Your niece," continued Lord Yerington, "from an awkward and most unfortunate position. She hath come forth from it with nothing worse than an unpleasant memory and hath borne herself bravely."

Mrs. Culpepper continued to gaze at him, her face growing whiter.

"My lord! my lord!" was all that she could gasp.

Lord Yerington interfered, with his instinctive tact.

"We'd best escape this crowd," he said. "I see, hardby, the door of a most respectable appearing tavern. Let us within."

The woman placed her arm about the girl and obeyed. She was still in a state of perturbation at the turn affairs had taken and yielded an unquestioning obedience.

Within the inn they were greeted by a little man in a violent state of irritability, wearing a ginger-coloured scratch-wig.

"Out of here," he commanded, "this is a reputable house and I'll have no young bloods and their drabs here."

Yerington was powerless to silence him.

"No, you can't use your grand manners with me," he went on. "I don't want such, nor any patched-up Fleet marriage parties neither. I know the tribe well and I'll have none of them."

His eloquence was gradually subdued by a series of guineas produced at judicious intervals by Mr. Mansur, and a sitting-room was procured; upon which the landlord closed the door with much muttering and many a shake of his scratch-wig.

Once within it, Mrs. Culpepper turned to Lord Yerington with a curtsy. She again looked wide-eyed and helpless, caught in the clutch of a situation to which she was inadequate.

The girl pushed back her hood for a clearer view of Lord Yerington's face. Mansur was still intent upon the clue which now seemed near the grasping.

"'Ods life, Mistress Culpepper," said Yerington, "it was good fortune which made me play young Lochinvar to this niece of yours, for of a truth she was nigh to wedding."

"What does he mean, my darling?" queried Mrs. Culpepper, turning in distress to the girl.

Her respect for his lordship's presence forbade her seating herself, but her niece pushed her into a chair with a tender lack of ceremony. Kneeling before her, she explained the situation in a few words. The narrative was pain to her, told as it was so soon after the experience. But she persisted in it, in that calm ignoring of personal stress that was so much a part of her. The gentlemen watched and listened, wondering at her self-control. But Mrs. Culpepper was not to be calmed.

"Alack, alack," she wept, "that you should have been in such straits. I can never forgive myself. The villain, the wretch. And he laid hands on thee!"

MANSUR INDULGES IN AN IMPULSE 78

The girl's face crimsoned.

"None can harm us, save ourselves," she said proudly.

"And of my own free will I forgave him."

"You forgave," said Mrs. Culpepper, "but what will——"

Her niece laid a firm retaining hand upon her wrist and interrupted her.

"No need to ask what *she* will say. None must know of this, save ourselves."

She rose and addressed her rescuers.

"Gentlemen," she began, "I am much beholden to you. A greater debt can no woman owe any man." The colour deepened in her cheeks and she hesitated for an instant. "Will you add to my gratitude its last mead? I prithee, say nought of this, now nor never."

Mansur's promise came glibly off his tongue.

Yerington's only reply was a bow.

Soon afterwards they placed Mrs. Culpepper and her niece in a hackney-coach, and stood, side by side, behind the posts bowing to them with their best flourishes. Mrs. Culpepper shrank back, embarrassed to pain by the novelty of her position. To be handed, even into the humble vehicle with its carpet of dirty straw, by the Earl of Yerington, overcame her.

Her niece took her place beside her. Before the hackney-coach moved off, she leaned forward, her sweet face framed by the crimson hood.

"Believe me, gentlemen," she said earnestly, "though I have enjoined you to silence, my heart will not be silent. It will thank you always."

She extended her hand with a gracious little gesture, and first Lord Yerington and then Mr. Mansur pressed their lips upon it.

She had coupled them in her thanks, but as she drew up the tin shutter, pierced with holes, that served as a

window in the hackney-coach, she looked last at Yerington.

As the vehicle went lurching off over the rutty street, the two gentlemen stood watching it. They were ignorant of its destination, and had given a pledge not to query further about it.

Yerington was absently smiling to himself, and at the moment was conscious only that his blood flowed a little faster at the memory of the girl's face on which his thoughts dwelt pleasantly, and that it was a whimsical turn of fate that made him the rescuer of the niece of Mrs. Culpepper, innkeeper of the Royal Arms at his own village of Oxholme. Possibly that consideration conduced to his seeing the ugly black hulk of the hackney-coach lose itself in the crowding vehicles in the Strand with less sense of finality and regret. He stood watching it idly, until his attention was arrested by an oddly familiar form in black velvet laced with silver, which he suddenly saw dodging recklessly amid the traffic of the thoroughfare.

"Mansur," he called, in amazement.

But for once in his life Mr. Mansur was indulging in the luxury of an impulse.

As he disappeared, Lord Yerington laughed and then he frowned. "Love hath clapped him on the shoulder," he thought to himself. "Niece of Mistress Culpepper! You'd best have an eye out, Mistress Culpepper."

More than once, as Lord Yerington continued his walk, he shook his head. He remembered Mr. Mansur's pledge to the girl, and he was not satisfied.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PATCHES

Bring, O bring my essence-pot
Amber, musk and bergamot.

—BATH GUIDE.

LORD YERINGTON stood in the great hall of Grangely House. Neither to his damaged dress, nor to the hour of his return, did he give a second thought, and his lackeys bore themselves with admirable gravity. They felt a certain reflected distinction in the finished oblivion of their master's manner and, below stairs, they swore among themselves that no other young blood in the realm could have compassed it.

His majordomo stood before him, with his wand of office, where Yerington lingered for an instant.

Mr. Walpole had called, and they had sent over his letters from White's. The anteroom was full; two jewellers, a draper, a man from France with the velvets, a bootmaker, and once more the foreign gentleman about the Pieter de Hoogh, which he declared was rare and genuine, and would his lordship deign to look it over?

Lord Yerington yawned.

"Faith, and if they were creditors they could not wait more patiently. Pray send them away. The Pieter de Hoogh man may call to-morrow, and if I have risen I will speak with him."

Mr. Jenkins, his valet, greeted his appearance with an obsequious bow.

He was a small man, wearing a formal bag-wig neatly tied, speckless brown frock and square-toed, silver-buckled shoes. His expressive hands were seldom motionless.



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They were uplifted, helping, deprecating, running through an endless variety of gestures, possessed of an eloquence all their own. His eyebrows were black, pointed, half-way up his forehead, and they delicately echoed every emotion that so well-trained a servant would permit himself.

Half asleep, Yerington suffered Jenkins to disrobe him.

"Your lordship will rest?" suggested his gentleman.

"Faith, not I," answered Yerington, "leave that to the grave, Jenkins. My bath, and my silver grey frock, and the devil take me if I don't make two days out of one, and the almanac, lying old woman, be damned!"

An hour later, his face white with soap-suds, he sat patiently while, stroke by stroke, Mr. Jenkins removed the lather with his discriminating razor.

"Egad," said Yerington, from one side of his mouth, "if ever I repent my sins I'll first dismiss you. Exit Jenkins, and enter ashes and a hair shirt. To be shaved by you is a luxury."

Jenkins' hands hinted deprecation.

"Your lordship is pleased to flatter," he said.

"Flatter! Not I," answered Yerington.

Mr. Jenkins delicately powdered his master's face and considered.

"And now," he said, contemplating him with an air of pride, as if he were a creature of his creating, "what patches?"

"Burn me, if I know," yawned Yerington. "Jenkins, my man, you're going off. Would you have me lend my mind to patches?"

"No, your lordship," answered Jenkins soothingly. "That is my affair; and yet there's a world of eloquence in patches."

He opened a gold patch-box.

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"Here, for example, is one for a Parliamentarian." Accustomed to the little man's vagaries and enjoying them, Yerington rolled a speculative eye at it.

"Too fine for me, Jenkins," he said. "You overshoot me."

"A round one, your lordship," exclaimed the valet triumphantly. "A solid, serious round one, to be placed near the eye, to give it force and eloquence."

"Gad, or by the mouth to hint a full stop," added Yerington. "And now for a soldier?"

"There's little *finesse* in that," mused Jenkins. "A grenade or a cannon placed squarely on the jaw. And now, my lord, pardon a liberty, but what would you suggest for a lover?"

The mirror was facing Yerington. In it he cast a shrewd look at the little man, but he perceived that his face was as innocent as an untroubled pool. His words, however, had drawn the fingers of memory sharply across the strings which had been struck so discordantly and often at White's the night before. He frowned as he thought of the Lady Caroline Dashwood.

Jenkins continued meditating, with his head on one side.

"As to the lover, instruct me," answered his lordship, after he had reflected a moment.

"'Tis a matter of much delicacy," answered Jenkins, and as he continued to speak he tallied on his fingers. "First, there is the ardent lover; then there is the languid lover; and then there is just the little affair of gallantry, which leaves the coming on and the going off in the hands of circumstance. For the ardent lover,—hearts, Cupid's bows and love-knots; for the languid lover,—a torch reversed, would not be out of place." There was an eloquent pause. Jenkins was enjoying his own conceits.

"And now for the little affair of gallantry?" queried his master, with some curiosity.

"That requires nice management, my lord. What say you to a chaise and pair? It might mean a retreat, an advance, or an elopement. There's safety in a chaise."

"No chaises," said Yerington. "A parliamentary full stop, I prithee."

CHAPTER IX

LADY CAROLINE UNMASKS

As in friendship, so in love, we are often happier from ignorance than knowledge.

—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

LADY CAROLINE sat in her dressing-room under the hands of her tire-woman, Dorcas. The latter's skilled fingers were arranging puffs and curls with fine effect above her white forehead and arched eyebrows, but Lady Caroline's tawny eyes smiled no approval. She stared at herself in the mirror and no flaw escaped her, though her thoughts were busily employed. A letter from her lord and master lay carelessly upon the dressing-table amid a collection of pomade and salve boxes, white lead, carnation and a litter of curl-papers.

This letter was in reality an inexorable guide-post that told Lady Caroline she had come to a parting of the ways—in short, that she must now play with her cards upon the table.

She had refused herself that morning to all the gentlemen who often drank their chocolate with her during her toilet. She was persuaded that Lord Yerington would call and she intended to see him alone. When, however, her black boy announced him to her, she did not change countenance, though some instinct warned her that this interview would be prolific of results. With her nerves upon the rack she had begun to long for some change, even a disastrous one, anything but this unwavering demeanour that maddened her.

As Lord Yerington entered the room she did not turn

round, but looked at him in the mirror. She extended him her hand, over which he bent his head.

"Your ladyship's most humble and obedient servant," he murmured. "I'll swear this morning Venus herself would cry you mercy."

Her reply was a nod to Dorcas, who vanished.

Alone at the dressing-table she tended an already perfected eyebrow with an ivory comb.

"I protest, Yerington," she drawled, languidly, "I'm shocked to death. What is this I hear of your losing twelve thousand pounds at White's last night?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I beg your ladyship's approval of my moderation. Think how easily it might have been twenty thousand."

She was contemplating her profile in the glass, by the assistance of her hand-mirror, hoping at the same time that he might note its proportion. She shook her head at him reproachfully.

"I fear you're a sad rake," she said with a sigh.

"I have no taste for solitude," he answered.

"You see my room is empty," she went on. "I denied myself even to that fascinating young spark, Captain Darlington, and to all the others, that I might have a quiet half-hour to tell you how horror-struck I was. Dorcas brought me the news with my chocolate."

Yerington glanced about the room at the empty chairs.

"Your ladyship is too kind," he said, bowing with his hat crushed between his hands. "Faith, I believe from your lips I could take reproof before half of White's, for they carry their own healing."

"La," she answered, a sharp note running through her voice, "why these fair words to your old friend's wife? They'd serve you better—elsewhere."

"Not so," he replied, "elsewhere fair words are seldom rooted."

"And here?" she queried, a lift of hopefulness arching her lip.

"Here," he answered, with unwonted seriousness, "they bloom in the richest soil—that of friendship,—where we may not look for hastily seeded passion flowers nor rank weeds of self-seeking, but for fairer blossoms."

She let her mirror fall upon her dressing-table with an angry rattle, and rose, her flowered tabby gown sweeping wide about her. Her cheeks were flushed beneath her rouge.

"Dashwood returns shortly," she said, interrupting him as he would have continued.

"I know," he answered.

She hated herself for the hope that would gleam out through the first chance rift that seemed to offer.

Going over to him she laid a jewelled hand upon his shoulder.

"Are you glad?" she asked, longing ardently for a negation.

His brown eyes looked down into her tawny ones and she thought she read in them a touch of sadness.

"Lady Caroline," he began—the formality of this title portended seriousness—"I've been a graceless rake all my nine-and-twenty years, and yet in that harvest of ill-spent days no consequence has wounded me as has the knowledge that I possess to-day that I've killed the power to shield you."

She moved back from him, wondering.

He took a few troubled steps to and fro, and when he spoke, the emotion in his voice filled her with jealous pain. Much as she loved him she had not rightly judged his capacity for genuine feeling.

"Twice in my life I have met men whom I have trusted with all my soul," went on Yerington, speaking

with an effort, for the real heart of him he kept hidden. "One is my friend Hugh Elliot; but he's just another self, and I fear his cautions often irk me to my maddest extravagances. The other one is your husband."

He paused, Lady Caroline watching him narrowly. As she listened, dreading his next words, she began to fear for her self-control. All the false, simulated years were having their revenge upon her. The long strain had been too great. She dreaded lest a glance or a word at this crisis might lose him to her. The hysteria she so often affected was hovering near, threatening to overwhelm her. He expected her to speak, and when she did not he found it difficult to break the silence.

At this instant the little monkey, which was Lady Caroline's pet, began to mow and gibber from its perch above the curtains. Yerington turned towards it with his invariable instinct of loathing.

"Silence, my love," admonished Lady Caroline, but at intervals as Yerington spoke it continued to chatter distractingly.

"Your ladyship," he went on, a trace of almost boyish embarrassment in his manner, "during the last twenty-four hours I have learned much that I marvel did not come to me sooner. I realise now that, with the best intentions, a man of my reputation cannot play friend to a woman fair as yourself. The world distorts such relationships."

Lady Caroline turned sharply away and, misinterpreting, he took a troubled step towards her.

"Prithee, dear lady," he besought, "pardon me if I must bring to you the world's base lies and insinuations. You have lived above them and so have no record by which to judge them. Believe me, I tell you true, it were better for you that this society of mine should be taken elsewhere."

Lady Caroline opened and closed her fan impatiently.

"I don't understand you, my lord," she said.

"Do not make me speak more plainly. Enough, dear Lady Caroline, that for your sake, and for your husband's sake, whose friend I am, I must henceforward affect your society less. Prithee, support me in my virtuous intentions, for I assure you my present position sits somewhat oddly upon me. This slander will soon die away for want of fanning."

She caught her breath with a sharp sigh in her throat and the tortoise-shell snapped in her fingers. His words filled her with mingled despair and contempt. She flung the broken pieces to the floor.

Seeing them, the monkey descended and bore the pretty trifle in triumph to his perch, where he broke it to bits with teeth and fingers.

"For want of fanning," she quoted, her eyes flashing. "Prithee tell me, my lord, is it then your sovereign will that I shall no longer look to you for escort to assemblies and routs and drums?"

For an instant he was puzzled. The next moment he attributed her annoyance to a heart too pure to grasp his meaning. He, therefore, answered patiently:

"Even so, for your sake."

She threw her head back and laughed, but the mirth did not reach her eyes.

"For my sake," she echoed. "Do you dare, sir, to tell me, by inference, that I, Lady Caroline Dashwood, know not what becomes me, that I am not fit to protect my own fair name? Forsooth, it must be you who come here prating of 'For your sake'—'For your husband's sake.'" She swept a low curtsy after each quotation, her ringlets nodding. "As if I was a green country girl, just from the tambour-frame, and conserve-

making. Lud, I am put to it indeed when I must turn to you for counsel of my manners and my morals."

The moment she had dreaded had come. She was in a sweep of passionate anger, which waxed with every turn she took over the polished floor, her dress whispering in silken rustles as she moved.

Into her words Yerington still read the injured dignity of a pure-hearted woman.

"On my life, your ladyship," he answered, "I'd rather bear your wrath than, now my eyes are opened, give the tongue of scandal further argument."

"Scandal!" she exclaimed, all her vanity aflame, "'twill be scandal indeed when they nudge each other, those cats I hate, Lady Caroline Petersham, Mistress Chudleigh and the others, and laugh and say I've lost you."

She hit him on the raw. Those were the last names he would have chosen to link with hers. Though she had moved in their world, he had never accounted her of it. In her wrath she had betrayed an intimacy she had long manoeuvred to conceal from him.

His face became stern, and his eyes darkened.

"The laughter of such as they is better for a good woman than their disdain. I trust they have no place within your intimate consideration."

She felt a momentary embarrassment which turned off into accusation.

"La, Lord Yerington as preacher! On my faith, it sets ill upon you. You'll be joining Lady Huntingdon's parties, and sitting under Mr. Wesley, I'll go bail."

So much of the best of him lay wrapped up in his faith in this woman, that Lord Yerington felt as if the world were rocking beneath his feet. Suddenly the waters of evil—of carelessly spent days, of heedlessness of consequences, of repudiation of responsibilities—that

tide in which he had drifted, threatened to overwhelm the better impulses that still clung to the brink.

The look with which he regarded her, grave and penetrating, spurred her on. The weakness of the habitually dissimulating was added to the emotion that possessed her, and she doubted him, doubted his sincerity. The suspicion seized her that his self-restraint was but indifference. This thrust aside such prudence as her anger had left her.

"I know," she cried wildly, "'tis another woman. Some hussy has come between us. 'Tis not of me you are thinking, but of her. She's jealous and you'd spare her."

She came nearer, seeking to read his face. Her own was distorted. He looked past her eyes, seeing for the first time what lay beyond.

"My God!" he groaned, and turned away from her.

Then she realised all she had lost. She was filled by a delirium of despair.

"Yerington," she besought, clutching him, endeavouring to lay her perfumed head upon his shoulder; "forgive me! Indeed, I was distraught."

He stood like a man of iron. He could not endure to look at her.

Her voice was now all softness. She took his hand coaxingly between hers, leaning against him as she did so.

"Beloved, beloved," she entreated, "don't turn from me. For years there's been no me—only thee. Could I bear to let thee pass out my life without a word, and leave me desolate—a ghost, a shadow?"

From this moment of his life he was to turn, bereaved of much that gave it dignity. In this room, with its scents and trifles, its rouge-pots, pomades and patch-

boxes, its scattered curl-papers and huddle of unoccupied chairs he was to leave behind him a dead belief. As he rounded this new corner of his life with finality his manner changed.

He drew back from her, placed his heels together and made a low bow. His eyes were mocking.

"My compliments upon your miming!" he exclaimed. "'Pon honour, you do it well. I must commend you to Mr. Garrick. Play out your rôles, dear Lady Caroline. I kiss your hand. Faith, it diverts me to think how I must have irked you with what you call my Methodistical airs!"

"Yerington," she entreated, desperation in her voice, for he was bowing himself nearer to the door, his face white and hard. Darting past him, she stood barring his passage, one hand stretched to ward him back. "Don't leave me like this. I'll be what you will,—discreet, kind to Dashwood. Don't leave me."

His manner was courteous and suave.

"I cannot bring myself to lay a hand upon you," he said. "But, methinks, your tire-woman might wonder if I sought the other passage."

She fell forward upon her knees, sobbing and clinging to him.

"Another pose?" he queried. "I commend you. 'Tis infinitely becoming. Had Niobe so superb a neck I'll swear the gods would have spared her."

He slipped past her and opened the door.

Seeing him upon the eve of departure broke down the last clinging shreds of her pride. If he left her with that expression on his face she knew her last hold upon him was gone, that he went forever. The future loomed before her terrifying, unfaceable.

"Yerington, Yerington!" she pleaded, all tactful facility of phrase deserting her in her panic of the empty

future, "don't go! On my knees I beseech you, don't go!"

His eyes grew cruel. For the first time in his life he read her more unworthy than she was.

She was a beautiful picture. Her curls drooped about her face; her eyes were eloquent with despair; her soft, round arms were stretched out to him in an agony of entreaty. The sight of her loveliness but deepened the sting of his disillusion. How above all women in his world had she stood but an hour before! He turned sick at soul as he looked at her. His faith in her had been so rare a thing, helping like the roots of a sturdy tree to keep the earth within his soul in poise. His belief in good dwindled to a pin-point.

As her groping fingers touched him, he laughed out a harsh, abrupt peal that struck her like a blow. She shrank together, shuddering, her eyes fixed and staring upon his.

"Acting again, my lady," he mocked.

"Stay, stay," she murmured with stiff lips, putting a further stamp upon his misreading.

A flame of wrath shot through him.

"You bid me stay," he said, his voice like steel, "you would have me lend myself to the base rôle you've planned for me. Prithee, upon what terms would you have me? As your paramour? How may I judge where I stand in your regard? God! God!" he cried in a sudden access of feeling; "I'd loathe thee less had I not trusted thee so utterly. How many men, bethink you, have you besought to stay?"

With a moan she covered her face.

"No, no! not that," she cried inarticulately. "Believe me, not that."

"You've taught me to believe," he exclaimed bitterly. "Would you have me again believe you and be twice

befooled?" He threw back his head with a gesture of his hand across his forehead. "Gad! but that diverts me. The Lady Caroline protests."

He opened the door and closed it upon his laugh. Every note of it rang an insult. When an instant later he reopened it he discovered the woman he had just flouted crouched where he had left her, her eyes wild.

"If you betray Dashwood I'll not spare you," he said.

She listened dumbly until the ring of his heel upon the parquet floor was no longer audible. As the last echo of it died to silence she threw herself prostrate, clutching at the polished boards in a paroxysm of futile passion.

"I'll make him suffer," she gasped, "I'll make him suffer, suffer, suffer!"

Her voice ceased. Lady Caroline had fainted honestly, simply, directly,—not from wounded love, but from rage and flagellated vanity.

CHAPTER X

A HEDGEROW BURLESQUE

FAG.—You'll be secret, Thomas?

COACHMAN.—As a coach-horse.

FAG.—Why then the cause of all this is—Love—who has been a masquerader ever since the days of Jupiter.

—RICHARD BRINSLEY SHERIDAN.

A TRAVELLING coach, drawn by four white horses, was bowling over the highroads of Warwickshire. The postilions, rising and falling in their saddles, were urging the animals forward at a smart pace. They knew well that one of the gentlemen in the coach behind them was no lover of slow travelling.

The coach was followed by a chaise, piled high within and without with luggage, and containing two gentlemen's gentlemen. One was a dapper little man, with his eyebrows half way up his forehead, and who at every changing of the horses carefully counted and re-counted the luggage.

The dusky coach had two occupants. Lord Yerington was lounging in a corner making an ineffective attempt at slumber. Captain Elliot leaned forward, intent upon the scenes through which they raced.

"Wake up, you lazy dog," said the Captain, prodding his companion, "and see the real world. This is better than the Mall."

Yerington peered out sleepily.

"The real world," he quoted. "Item, a village with one street; item, a slinking dog; item, a horse trough; item, an inebriated yokel. Spud me, I'd rather buy a toy one at Mistress Chevenixes'."

Ellict laughed in high spirits, for he thought he was having his own way in this journey.

"Pay up like a gentleman, and no grumbling," he said, "for you know it was this flitting against that trick you played with Mansur; and now you slumber through it."

"Not I. The devil take this deep-sea-roller of a coach. And when I bargained with thee I had no thought of the inns—of the chickens whose dying squeak mingled with the spatter of their fat upon the grill. 'Fore Gad, it's too damned natural."

"What you need is a bit of camp life," said Elliot disapprovingly.

"What I need is a rattle of the bones at hazard and a bowl of steaming punch.

"I was happy when I met thee,—
Fragile me and wanton you,"

he hummed in the words of a ditty of that day, balanced his hat upon his knees and regarded the Captain from a corner of his eye.

"Now we are fair launched into the God-forsaken country, can you find it in your heart to tell me why you made all that tara-diddle with Mansur a few nights since?"

Captain Elliot did not reply immediately, for he was annoyed. Then he said slowly, as he had that night at White's:

"Once a hound, always a hound."

"And you'd have fought him for a boyish caper," asked Yerington wonderingly, "which I'd clean forgot you dour, unforgiving Scot?"

Elliot turned wrathfully to him.

"But has he forgot? God, man, there are times when I almost lose faith in thee. I'll warrant I would have

skewered him with a good appetite, and I would to-day, but for the oath you stole from me."

"Phew," whistled Yerington, and he avoided the exigence of argument by affected slumber.

But for some moments Captain Elliot's angry fingers drummed upon the casing of the open coach window.

At the next inn their repast was presided over by a comely dame in a lavender print gown. She had known Yerington from his boyhood, and beamed upon him, while he ate and drank, complimented and toasted.

"Oh, lud, what high spiri's your lordship do have," she said, bridling. "How like you be to your father, the late earl! I never see a gentleman could bear himself that noble. It was a pleasure to serve his lordship."

"I'll warrant you did not enjoy your service more than he enjoyed the serving, my good Mistress Adams."

"How like the dear late earl!" said the radiant Mrs. Adams, unperceiving the ambiguous twist of this last remark. "He did have such a way of putting things. That's what it is to be quality, as I tell my husband."

"You flatter us," responded the earl, "upon my soul, you do."

"La, how you do rattle," said Mrs. Adams, straightening an imaginary fold in the tablecloth, "though we do know the quality when we see them. There was one gentleman as went out just as your lordship entered the inn. 'Susan,' says I to my daughter—she with the black eyes and the pink gown—'he's not the quality,' says I, 'for all his coach and his horses and his fine clothes. I can tell one,' says I to my daughter, 'and I'll warrant the mother as had the bearing of him was no lady.' Hoping," with a curtsey, "that your lordship will pardon the liberty. But I was that put to it."

Yerington sipped his negus, leaning back in his oaken chair with his legs crossed.

"Blame yourself, Mistress Adams," he said, "for we poor men are weak creatures, and beauty tempts."

"Oh, lud, your lordship, it was not that. It's a pleasure to serve the quality of the four counties with my own hand."

"I'm grateful for the privilege, Mistress Adams."

"But, your lordship, this man was all for hastening on, and in such a way. Ordering this way and that way, and yet never satisfied."

"And you think this stamps a man as without the gentry?" queried Elliot.

"Lud, sir, that was not it. After keeping the inn in a roar with his orders, you'll scarce believe me, sir, but he found fault with the account. He haggled over every penny, and if the stable-boys jeered when he drove off you can't be wondering. I control them as best I can, but——"

"Stable-boys will be stable-boys," drawled Elliot.

"That's what I say," she answered complacently.

"And Mr. Mansur cannot blame them if they are only human stable-boys. Nothing will persuade me, your lordship," the woman ended firmly, "that that dark gentleman, for all the airs he gave himself, was not a highwayman. Nothing!"

Captain Elliot shook with a silent laughter that brought tears to his eyes.

"There's one for you, Harry," he gasped. "Mistress Adams, you've done me a good turn this day."

Mrs. Adams' mob cap border trembled with dismay.

"A friend of your lordship's!" she exclaimed. "Oh, your lordship, I scarce caught sight of him, and the stable-boys are villainous liars."

Soon afterwards they resumed their journey.

Half an hour later they were proceeding at a spanking gait through a wood where the trees met overhead

and the sun picked out golden patches on the road here and there. It was a lonely spot, one that would bring the thought of highwaymen into the minds of even hardy travellers. Captain Elliot turned to examine the priming of the pistols fitted into the holsters in the coach beside him.

Yerington leaned forward, scanning the underbrush with interest. A sound had caught his ears unlike the steady rumble of the coach. No one was visible, and yet he had distinctly heard a suppressed cough.

"Draw up," he called out sharply to the men.

They did so with evident reluctance. They, too, had heard the sound, and in this solitary spot it had sent their hearts clip-clapping.

"Had we not best dash for it, your lordship?" asked one, approaching and touching his hat with fingers that were not steady.

"Not we," responded Yerington, putting out one booted foot, "I saw the bracken move. We'll have a rabbit hunt."

"I'll warrant 'tis but a lost sheep or a wandering one," said Elliot jestingly. He followed, however. His pistol was in his pocket, but his fingers were on the lock.

"With a damned human cough," returned Yerington. "There, the rascals are running."

The bracken stirred, indicating an evident retreat.

"My friends," he drawled languidly, "why not be philosophers? We have you covered."

A low laugh answered him, and the rustling ceased.

"Ecod, my lord, and what proof have you that we may not wing you?" said a voice as languid as his own. "I admire your courage, but your prudence would scarce save your skin."

The voice fell upon Yerington's ears with a vague

sense of familiarity and brought him to a full halt. He stood, a long, green-clad target for unseen foes. Behind him came Elliot.

"The fellow's right," he said. "But you, Hugh, the hero of Indian fights, what say you to this?"

Elliot looked comically taken.

"I'll confess I thought 'twas but a beastie," he admitted.

At this moment a man's figure rose above the underbrush. He presented a thin, pinched face, eyes full of crafty intelligence, a frayed hat set at a rakish angle, and the mockery of a coat which was fastened at the waist, and over which flowed the tattered ruffles of a filthy shirt.

Yerington gave a low whistle and turned to Elliot.

"Gad's life!" he cried, "'tis the scarecrow of Temple Bar. The Flying Mail to Matrimony."

The fellow responded by swinging off his hat.

"Your lordship's memory flatters me," he said.

"You travel well in the grass, sir snake," said Yerington, eyeing him suspiciously.

"My belly," answered the man, "is a meddling brute of a member, and unless I humour it now and again it will have the best of me. For the nonce, you see, I chose to travel on it."

"No words!" exclaimed Elliot impatiently. "Let your companions show themselves."

He made a start in the man's direction, intent on bringing hostilities to a focus.

"If you would call the roll," said the rogue, "there are two of us." And he gave a kick in the grass. "Come up, my darling. The gentlemen would see your pretty face."

Slowly a shambling giant of a man arose, his wide, vacant eyes staring, and speechless with fear,

"Your honours," he burst out at length, with a calf-like bleat, "'tis my first such prank. And you know it well, Tom," turning in appeal to his companion.

"A mighty man over the bottle," said Tom, "but daylight and sobriety shake the marrow of him."

"He's harmless," said Elliot.

Lord Yerington and Captain Elliot broke their way through the bracken to where the men stood. With a magisterial air the former seated himself upon a lichened stone.

"Prisoner," he demanded, "advance and give your evidence."

The man called Tom grinned responsively.

"I'm tempted to tell your lordship the truth," he said.

"Don't ee, Tom, don't ee," cried his companion.

"He'll no be believing thee, and we may hang for it."

"Pah," cried Tom, "think you I'd serve up truth, unless 'twere a commodity best suited for the occasion? A well-spiced tale is ever more to my fancy. First, my lord," he continued, "I must plead in defence of my employer the vagaries of that impetuous passion,—love. Youth, youth, youth!" he cried and cast up his eyes.

Lord Yerington's own flickered.

"That's the second time within the week you've spoke that word to me. 'Pon honour, it will go ill with you, if your eloquence again be squandered in so poor a cause."

Tom's face grew serious.

"I'll serve you the facts, my lord, with as little dressing as possible."

His companion groaned.

"You may talk us into Newgate," he protested.

"We were fair put to it," Tom began, "and a lover came across our path. What he asked meant at worst

but a swoon or two, and a dose of sal volatile for the ladies."

"Ladies," echoed Yerington, with a frown.

"A mere nothing, my lord. Only a flutter that a man's shoulder could cure. I' faith he was in desperate need."

Yerington gave an exclamation of impatience. The introduction had not pleased him. The man hastened on.

"'Twas a question in which we risked our skins. Our pistols were not loaded. The gentleman so stipulated, and let them bear witness."

Captain Elliot examined the weapons.

"No charge nor recent powder marks," he said briefly.

Lord Yerington's eyes were beginning to dance.

"I scent a pretty story here, Hugh," he said. "And what more?"

"But the veriest bit of gallantry," answered Tom. "At best—a lady's heart; at worst—its palpitation."

"Phrases," sneered Captain Elliot impatiently.

"The lady, it would seem, had not yet reached the yielding point," the fellow continued. "The impatient gentleman would hasten matters. In brief, for the nonce, we were highwaymen; this stretch of woods our lurking place,—you'll admit it was admirably adapted for the purpose—our pistols were two great boasts to which we could not live up, as your lordship knows. The coachman and postilions already had known the colour of the gentleman's gold; and the ladies! One had a tongue to make you quail! Faith, we had a lashing. As for the younger one I scarce caught sight of her. We rushed forth flourishing our weapons. The postilions affected panic. Up dashed the young gallant to the rescue. Our part then was over. He had routed us fairly, at so much a head. So there you have it—a play;

a romance; a farce. Who knows? Think you, my lord, this merits jail?"

"Gad," gasped Yerington, over his knees which he had taken into his embrace; "heard you ever a better jest, Hugh? A farce, a roaring farce."

"Damned poor sport," commented Captain Elliot drily.

"Prithee, did she faint?" queried Yerington with sudden interest.

"Not she, my lord. She was a plucky one."

"No shoulder then," said Yerington. "He lost on that throw." A sudden light danced across his face. "I'll swear 'twas Mansur," he said.

He looked at the fellow sharply, whose face betrayed nothing. He was true to his pay. In the background the great booby hastened to perjure himself.

"It was Mr. Mansur," he whimpered, "and do you but let us off, we'll have no dealings with him again."

Bethinking himself of his rôle of magistrate, Lord Yerington ordered them away with an air of some dignity and a wink to Captain Elliot.

"But mind, no more such tricks," he ended, "or it will go ill with you."

The great shambling giant, a comical enough bogie to throw at a frightened woman, slid off among the trees and was lost to view.

Tom, however, could not forbear a sweeping bow and Lord Yerington caught his shoulder in his strong fingers.

"How goes it with the mother and the sister?" he said.

A fleeting expression of better feeling appeared in the man's face.

"Very ill, I fear, my lord," he answered with something like shame.

"Are they honest?" asked Yerington, watching him. Tom's eyes met his fairly.

"A fit question of such a son," he answered. "They are honest as the day,—God pity them both."

"And the name?"

"Lascelles," said the fellow with a faint trace of pride.

"A good name," said Yerington.

"It takes but a few generations of such men as I to bring good names to the dust. The best man of our family, as I've told you, my lord, was hanged."

His manner was bitter with regret and a seeming helplessness to right the wrong.

"How may I find your mother?" asked Yerington.

A few words informed him and he entered the address in his note-book.

"My steward will find work for them," he said.

The man straightened himself, a strange light in his eyes. He seemed unable to grasp the purport of Yerington's words. As conviction seized him he was overcome by sudden, weak laughter.

"Pardon, my lord," he gasped, "I have not broke fast. From my heart I thank you."

He left them abruptly. At intervals as they stood listening, the laughter that was near to tears came to them; and it sat upon their spirits with a sense of tragedy.

CHAPTER XI

CAPTAIN ELLIOT REQUIRES REINFORCEMENTS

When an engineer finds his guns have not the desired effect, he changes his batteries.

—THE TATLER.

THE chimneys of Oxholme Castle were smoking for the first time in many months.

Within its great hall, Lord Yerington and Captain Elliot, still in their travelling dress, were regaling themselves over a bowl of steaming punch.

"A penny for your thoughts," said Captain Elliot.

"I'd be overpaid," drawled Yerington. "'Tis of the way back to London. I see a procession of damp beds, of half-cooked fowls, of bridling landladies and damned insistent guide-posts telling me how far I am from town. And, what of your thoughts?"

The Captain was frowning at him, through the blue smoke arising from his churchwarden.

"I'm thinking of the ride I intend to take to-morrow," he said. "And here are you yawning out your life in the finest country God ever made, because you can't be in a dirty coffee-house, with a score of bloods as empty-headed as yourself, or dangling about the ladies' boudoirs while they put on their red, and pick the lock of a reputation. There are times, Harry, when I weary of thee."

Yerington covered a yawn with his hand.

"I've been counting," he said; "you spoke a hundred words!"

Despite himself, Elliot laughed.

"Are you never serious?" he asked.

"Never at Oxholme," answered Yerington; "or

what chance would I have against this awful array of my ancestors?"

He waved his arm to indicate the portrait-panelled walls of the hall.

"A race to be proud of!" exclaimed Elliot.

"Gad, that's what's the matter. I've heard that since I was in my cradle. I hadn't the choosing of fate that made me the last of my line."

He rose up and wandered about the room.

"This is Sir Reginald Gower," he said, pausing before the portrait of an eagle-faced man in armour. "He fought under William the Norman and laid the first stone of Oxholme. Is that a face, I ask you, to add savour to existence? See that beak."

"The nose of a warrior," said Elliot.

"That square chin."

"The corner-stone of character."

"Character!" exclaimed Yerington. "Do you suppose he ever thought save in Roman capitals? Or swore an oath of less than twenty letters?"

He turned toward the table with a shrug.

"It gives a man the vapours to think how many of them went into the mixing of him. Oxholme plus portraits, plus their eyes. Dammel! I don't like it."

As he resumed his place opposite the Captain, that young soldier leaned forward and placed a hand for an instant upon his arm before he withdrew it with some embarrassment.

"There's a sparkle in that reckless soul of yours that's like a tonic to my sobered blood, Harry," he said. "But I'm concerned about you."

"One thing I promise you," laughed Yerington, "if 'twill give you comfort, Hugh, and that is that I shall not be sepulchred with my feet upon a dice-box and a folly in my hand."

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Captain Elliot shook his head gravely.

"I prithee, good grandam, don't," protested Yerington. "Turn to this philosopher, Sir Punch, and be merry. There's no such shield and buckler 'gainst the onslaughts of a damned meddling conscience as a laugh."

For some moments Elliot regarded him with his shrewd Scotch eyes. Then he lifted up his glass of the commended punch and drained it.

"He is going straight to the devil," he was thinking, "and the right woman, mayhap, might save him. I cannot."

The punch, as he drank it, was flavourless.

CHAPTER XII

THE LORD OF THE MANOR

Five geese,—a landscape damp and wild

Such things, to say the least, require
A Muse of more than average fire.

—AUSTIN DOBSON.

THE next morning Lord Yerington arose with a sense of pleasurable anticipation.

Captain Elliot departed early on an extended ride, and this left his host to his own devices. At ten in the morning he swung off across the meadows towards Oxholme village at a brisk pace.

As he came in sight of it his face brightened. It was the field of many a boyish exploit, and it had been years since he had caught more than a casual glimpse of it. At one end of it arose the market-cross and facing it was the well-remembered gable front of the Royal Arms, his secret goal ever since he had left London.

One of the first objects that arrested his attention was a man seated before an easel, painting. It was an unusual sight and Lord Yerington drew near and glanced over his shoulder.

The artist turned and looked at him. He revealed, as he did so, a pale face with delicate features, luminous brown eyes and a sensitive, beautiful mouth.

"Ah!" exclaimed Yerington, "I'll be bound 'tis Michael Culpepper."

The young man did not rise with ready village deference. Instead he returned to his canvas, giving it an indifferent stroke here and there.

"Your lordship's memory flatters me," he answered.

"Michael Culpepper, indeed, born to the Royal Arms, but not to the purple. 'Tis long since Oxholme village has had the pleasure of welcoming you. Doubtless, your lordship has passed the time pleasantly. The steward has well represented you here."

"Put that as you will," responded Lord Yerington lightly, though he caught the grate of irony in the tone. "Prithee, how is your good mother?"

"Well, your lordship," answered Michael without turning his head.

"And your pretty cousin? I trust that she suffered no ill results from her adventure?"

The brush twisted nervously in Michael's grasp and fell to the ground. He stooped to pick it up, and when he raised his face again it was slightly flushed. He began gathering his apparatus hastily together.

"No, I thank your lordship," he said. "Is your lordship bent upon visiting the inn?"

"I just thought I'd drop in and make my compliments and inquiries," said Yerington.

It was with something nearer astonishment than surprise that he perceived that Michael had taken easel, paint-box and canvas under his arm and was hurrying off towards the inn without further ceremony.

He opened his lips to call after him, closed them again, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Burn me," he muttered to himself, "we must not judge these poor devils, for there's a fine distinction betwixt genius and madness, and from what I saw upon his canvas, methinks this man is cursed with somewhat of the former."

He soon reached the inn, a dignified stone structure with many gabled and mullioned windows, and across the front of which ran a shallow garden, guarded by a stone wall.

Lord Yerington passed under the lintel and into the hall. The rooms to right and left were empty.

He heard the sound of men's voices. He passed to the foot of the stairs and, glancing down the narrow passage, he caught a glimpse of the tap-room. It swam in a haze of smoke and he heard an interrupted come and go of the broad Worcestershire drawl. A horse-fair in the village had gathered the tenants from the neighbouring farms and the room was full.

Lord Yerington felt an inclination to pass a few words with these seldom-visited people of his—a kindly impulse rooted in an old affection. He went down the hall, past the kitchen and stood in the doorway. The men appeared dimly through the clouds of tobacco smoke rising from their pipes. They were all smoking, save the poorer ones, to whom tobacco was an unpurchasable luxury, and exchanging their short country confidences. The principal topic of interest that day was the return of the lord of the manor.

"They do say," said one man as he kicked a log into place with his heavy boot, "as he takes milk baths to keep his skin so white and fine."

The village cobbler, a small man with bowed shoulders, laughed, revealing his toothless gums.

"My daughter is housemaid at the castle. She saw his dressing-room, and she says it was that full of pastes, and patches, and smelling-bottles;—'Ods bodikins! a Court lady could scarce have used half."

A contemptuous chorus arose.

A hulking youth, with gorilla-like length of arm, and knees set far back, double-jointed and swinging forward toward the feet, which always tell of strength, if ugliness, leaned back and gave vent to a great laugh.

"Ecod!" he said. "I'd like to have it out with him,

bare fists on the village green. He'd see how much he'd squeeze out of us bad harvest years after that."

A smooth voice interrupted him. They turned to see Lord Yerington standing in their midst, smiling, scented, immaculate.

"My good fellow," he said, addressing the man who had last spoken, "I've a damned bad memory for faces, for which I beg your pardon. May I so far impose upon your good-nature as to inquire your name?"

Every man had risen and was shuffling upon his feet, dabbing at his forelock shamefacedly, exchanging between while dismayed glances with his neighbour. The young man whom Lord Yerington addressed began to sweat with terror.

"My name, your lordship," stammered the young bully as if it were his life which had been demanded so carelessly, "my name, please your lordship, is Jonah—Jonah Easton."

"Ah!" returned Yerington, "I recall you now, Jonah. From the Hill Farm, I think."

"The same, your lordship," replied Jonah, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "We've been tenants of your lordship's family for nigh three hundred years."

The lord of the manor approached and felt his biceps with experienced fingers.

"And judging from your muscles," he said, "the Hill Farm has nourished you well, Jonah."

A slow grin was beginning to steal from lip to lip of the ruddy-faced farmers in the tap-room. Lord Yerington embraced them all in a genial smile.

"It would seem from what I heard upon my entrance," he said, "that my good Jonah here would like to try a turn with me upon the green. I am altogether at his service. Whatever hour falls most conveniently with

Jonah's occupations will be agreeable to me. My present engagements are not pressing."

"Oh, please, your lordship," burst out Jonah, "I'd never make so bold. 'Ods bodikins, but your lordship would make hay of me."

Yerington surveyed him a moment with a humorous glint in his eyes.

"I'm not sure of that, Jonah," he said. "You are very well muscled. If at any time you feel yourself going off let me recommend milk baths. They are damned refreshing, I assure you."

A stir of consternation went about the room, and in the midst of it Lord Yerington turned and made a nonchalant exit.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEQUEL

My mind is troubled like a fountain stirred,
And I myself see not the bottom of it.

—SHAKESPEARE.

LORD YERINGTON mounted to a well-remembered panelled room on the second floor. Every detail of it was familiar to him. The bright flowers by the window and the fair white curtains were precisely as he remembered them as a boy. He went to a mirror and contemplated himself. He was not a conceited man, but he was well aware that his disarranged hair, his soot-blackened face and his torn stockings, had scarcely conduced to render him a romantic figure that morning in Fleet Street.

He was telling himself that the Fates were fighting for him. He had no reason for positive assurance as he came down to Oxholme that he should meet Mrs. Culpepper's niece—she might have been at the other end of the kingdom—yet, as he passed beneath the portico of the inn, he had caught a glimpse of a face gazing down at him from a window, the sight of which filled him with smiling complacency.

He had not hastened upward for reasons of his own. The women of his world had been won with an ease that had taken much of the pleasure from the quest. He stood now upon the brink of thirty years, with heart chipped here and there in some passing affair, but which had come from the contacts slightly damaged it may be, but seeming to have gained in power of resistance in the repeated firings, like a piece of much-baked china. Love-making was a fine art, and Lord Yerington had lent him-

self to it as he had lent himself to fencing, boxing, cock-fighting and dicing, because it amused him, and he always played the game like a gentleman. Where women were concerned he was frankly cynical, but no coxcomb. He had been too much occupied with being amused to give overmuch thought to himself. Therefore, when he left the blue eyes to await his coming, he was but acting his rôle in life as his observations had taught him to. He thought a little waiting would be a marvellous *sauce piquante* even to an interview with an innkeeper's niece.

The room he had now reached was the one in which he had observed her. Though it was empty, a faint perfume of roses still lingered about it. He smiled to himself as he noticed it.

He pulled the bell-rope dangling beside the chimney, and when the waiter appeared, he demanded Mrs. Culpepper.

"Oh, your lordship," that worthy woman began almost before she was well within the room, "'tis a sight for sore eyes to see you back again. Indeed it is, my lord."

"Egad, my good Mistress Culpepper," he returned, "I'm glad to be back. Faith, it seemed to me I counted four more geese upon the village green, and two more asses loose upon the common. The land fatteneth."

Mrs. Culpepper was in an agony of nervousness. There were two spots of heightened colour upon her fair, round face.

"You are pleased to laugh at us here in the country, my lord," she said. "Well, we are rustic, yet your mother loved it."

At the mention of his unknown mother Yerington's face softened for an instant; but the mood soon passed.

"Upon my honour, Mistress Culpepper, you would be formidable did you but lend yourself to argument."

"La, my lord, I doubt your roasting me," said Mrs. Culpepper, and then she changed to another subject with uneasy abruptness. "Now can't I make your lordship a loving-cup to welcome you back? What shall it be? Your favourite port?"

He looked down at her over the bridge of his handsome nose. He saw that she was hedging against his next question, and he felt a faint impulse of pity for her weak expedients.

"Later, later, Mistress Culpepper, and I'll drink my welcome home with a good heart," he answered. "But now for that pretty niece of yours. It would give me much pleasure to make her my respects, and to congratulate her upon her recovery."

Mrs. Culpepper knew that the dreaded moment had arrived and that evasion was useless. She read it in the face of the tall young man whose outward appearance was so careless; but she knew the Gowers, and she knew all the determination that might lurk behind just such a smile as Lord Yerington now turned upon her. With sudden resolution she drew herself erect, her hands clasping one another over her speckless pinner.

"My lord," she began, "my husband and my husband's father and his great grandsire have lived beneath this roof. I well know what I may forfeit if I cross you. I entreat your lordship, I beseech you, do not persist. I cannot, I cannot send my niece to you."

Her opposition was hardening the spoiled beau, and the memory of a pair of blue eyes was dancing more alluringly than ever within his mind.

"I'll not devour your niece," he answered lightly. "I fear Dame Rumour hath been dealing hardly with me that so casual a request should put you in such a tremor."

"You may ruin us, if you will, my lord," Mrs. Culpepper ejaculated.

"But, my dear, good, kind, worthy Mistress Culpepper," he interrupted, "do be a sensible woman and send your niece to me."

"She's not here," cried Mrs. Culpepper, her gentle face taking on a look of resolve.

"Aha," cried Lord Yerington laughingly, "if I didn't see your niece in that window when I came in, then I'll eat my sword and scabbard."

With gentle force somebody took the hostess of the Royal Arms by her shoulders, and a face surrounded by a lace frill above which set a hat of Tuscan straw, appeared behind hers.

"You see, dear, that his lordship hath seen me. Prithee permit me to enter, therefore, and inquire his lordship's pleasure."

Mrs. Culpepper made a motion of dissent and dismay, but the girl went laughingly past her and swept Lord Yerington a deep curtsy, in which there was more of town than country. He would have been a coxcomb indeed had he read much in her manner that induced to his vanity. Her eyes were bright, her air was gay, but there was a vague something underlying it he could not understand. Something in her appearance which escaped his masculine power of analysis, was changed. As she poised before him upon her red-heeled shoes she did so with an ease as different as was that pervading hint of something in her dress, from what he had known of her before, and that placed her aloof from that frightened girl of Fleet Street.

He but marked this change to revel in it. He enjoyed her appearance as much as he did Mrs. Culpepper's dismay, who was pushed from the room, protesting still, amid coaxing little whispers.

"And now, my lord," said the girl as she returned and

stood before him, "what may be your gracious lordship's pleasure?"

Yerington leaned back at his ease in the ingle-nook, smiling in mischievous enjoyment of her evident high spirits. Now that he again saw her in her heightened beauty he was congratulating himself that he had come. He watched her as she stood, her graceful head upon one side, in an attitude of questioning. He did not immediately reply. With genuine relish and practised observation he was noting each freshened charm. He had risen when she came in, but had reseated himself. It was not necessary to stand in making his compliments to this innkeeper's niece. He accepted her appearance as his prerogative which an hysterical woman's flimsy prejudices had too long delayed.

"I understood," said the girl at length, "that your lordship had condescended to inquire about my health."

She interrupted the silence because the calm, quizzical stare of the gentleman upon the settle was trying her beyond endurance. She was no finished woman of the world who could brazenly ogle in return, or ignore him, as she chose. When she spoke, he was once more struck by her curiously magnetic voice and its intonations that lingered in the memory.

"Egad," he was saying to himself, "it was well worth this journey from town to follow up that little episode, and to put Hugh into a good humour into the bargain."

He was still too absorbed in studying her to reply, and so she herself answered her own query with a spirited sparkle in her eyes.

"I humbly thank your lordship for your kindly interest. Indeed, but for much discomposure of mind, I've suffered nothing. Again, I thank your lordship, and I shall never

cease to be grateful to you. And now, have you no commands? If not, I humbly ask leave to withdraw."

"No, child," he answered, rousing himself. "Prithee, don't withdraw."

"But if, as it seems, I cannot serve you, my lord?" she paused interrogatively.

"But you can serve me," he answered with a trace of haste, dropping his quizzing-glass. "If my memory does not deceive me, the Royal Arms offers good cheer."

She made a meek, little curtsy.

"Your lordship is kind. We have been assured by the gentry that neither our kitchen nor our cellar is altogether amiss," she answered with a trace of pride. "If your lordship will but honour me with orders, I'll see that they are executed straight."

"Oh, Lord," groaned Yerington, rising tardily to his feet, "if I must, I must. But I prithee, pretty wench, serve me thyself."

A laugh danced in her eyes.

"La!" she protested, "I am but awkward in such matters. Had you not best let me send James to you?"

"James me no James," he ejaculated, "and attend me after your own fashion, for I'm not particular. Now, what about a boiled fowl? No, egad, not that. I had over many fowls during my journey here. Let us say rather a cutlet grilled, a mutton pie, a cold duck and a jelly. Best do well by the house." He took her into his confidence with a smile. "Mayhap you yourself might help to put upon it a respectable, mangled appearance of appetite. Truth to tell, my pretty child, I have breakfasted."

"Lud, sir," she answered, with another curtsy, "and I could never find courage to join your lordship at table. La, what a twitter it would put me in."

"'Tis nothing, 'tis nothing," he answered. "Your rosy fingers, I'll be bound, could handle a fork to admiration, and give distinction to a feast for kings."

She held out the extolled fingers and regarded them with an appearance of pretty fright.

"Nay, your lordship. Sure, they would be all thumbs. I prithee, spare me. We are not particular, do you but order with a free heart, whether the viands come forth unmangled or no."

"Now for the cellar," he continued. "I recall that your Burgundy is to be depended on."

"La, your lordship," she answered; "I'd scarce dare praise it overmuch, being of the house myself as it were, but it doth seem as if the county squires hereabout got fair advantage from it—after a time."

He laughed heartily, and going up to where she stood, chucked her under the chin with his cane. She made an involuntary movement, as if to put him off, then checked herself and looked back at him, though with more aloofness in her gaze. He now could see, to his satisfaction, the rare dark pencilling in her eyes beneath their shadowing lashes. The sight gave him pleasure, and moved him to a touch of fatherly advice.

"Child, I prithee, serve me thyself. But methinks you'd best leave others to tend these Burgundy-inflated squires. You are over fair to play Hebe to such as they, methinks."

"Your lordship flatters me," she said with one of her too frequent curtsseys. "La," and her fingers began plaiting a design in her pinner. "I've never attended them in all my life. But for your lordship's kindness I'd not be here this morning."

Yerington was moved to disproportionate elation at the thought.

"That was wiser, little maid," he said.

"I'm but a visitor here," she continued, with a quaint touch of pride. "In my own home I do not serve."

He looked down at her, idly swinging his cane, and enjoying her feminine irrelevancies.

"And what do you do in your own home?" he queried.

"I—I—brew, and I work cross-stitch, and I'm a very good hand at simples."

"I can quite believe that," bending nearer with a touch of insinuating tenderness, "and I prithee brew no charms in them to make men madder than thy beauty warrants. And now, bring all I order, and forget not the Burgundy—and, mind, nobody shall attend me, save thyself, at the cost of my displeasure—on all the house of Culpepper."

"I heed you, I heed you, my lord," she answered in a flutter. "No one else shall come, I promise you."

During her brief absence he stood looking out over the red geraniums and between the thin white curtains upon the green below. He was in very high spirits. The affair was opening in a most promising fashion. He was not sketching out any plan of action. Why should he? She was the innkeeper's niece and he was the Earl of Yerington. It was a pleasing sequel to a well-remembered morning. How beautiful she was! Such a figure, such a pretty, shy grace. Egad, he was glad he had come. The episode bade fair to divert these enforced idle weeks in the country most agreeably. He foresaw that Hugh Elliot would have many a ride alone. He had no design against the Culpeppers, nor any of their kind. He was just idly floating along, enjoying the moments as they came to him. But he could not foresee the unprecedented force this girl's personality was to exercise over him. When a man keeps a loose hand at the helm he cannot calculate how far a sudden, chance cross-current may carry him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PENALTY OF TRUTHFULNESS

No age, no profession, no station is free;
To sov'reign beauty mankind bends the knee!
That power resistless! no strength can oppose—
We all love a pretty girl under the rose.

—OLD BALLAD.

THE girl returned with the tray, breathing somewhat heavily from her burden, with her cheeks flushed.

Lord Yerington sprang at once to assist her.

"No, no," she besought, "go away. It is not fitting, my lord." And an instant later she was setting the table.

"There is the tablecloth bleached on Oxholme turf. Have you anything to equal that in London?"

"Nothing, I protest," he answered, but his eyes were upon her.

She saw the innuendo, but pretended not to heed it.

"There's your mutton pie," she went on. "We are famous for our mutton pies. There's your cutlet, fresh from the grill. I vow, I forgot your duck."

"Spare us!" exclaimed Yerington, "I'll sleep the better without it."

"There is your jelly, and there your Burgundy."

She stood off with her head on one side, her arms akimbo, contemplating her accomplishment with pride.

"But you've brought but one knife and fork," protested Yerington.

"Oh, lud, your lordship, I prithee spare me. I should be in such a state, and I could attend better to your wants upon my feet."

"If you will," he answered, assenting because he really

liked to see her moving about, and he began a repast which consisted almost wholly of the much-patronised Burgundy.

She stood watching him.

"It was a strange chance, my lord," she said at last, "that made you my rescuer."

"Most chances are strange," he answered. "I'm thinking it was a strange chance that made you the niece of Mistress Culpepper."

She darted a quick little glance.

"She's not really my aunt, you know. She's my foster-mother."

"Really," he replied with interest, "and where do you live?"

She gave her arm a vague, encompassing wave.

"Over there, my lord."

"In a neighbouring village?"

"Yes—near a neighbouring village."

"And your father,—what is his occupation?" asked Yerington, after he had drunk off a deep draught of the Burgundy.

"He was a soldier, my lord."

"And died in his country's service, I dare venture?"

"How did you know he was dead?" she asked, startled.

"I but inferred it," he answered. He leaned luxuriously forward over the table and studied her. She was maddeningly pretty.

"Prithee," he said condescendingly, "sit here beside me."

She hesitated so obviously that he was moved to protest.

"You are as bad as Mistress Culpepper," he said.

"This chair is at your service, and I command you."

She came and seated herself near him, crossing her feet

and hands primly, and glancing at him occasionally out of the tail of her eye. Something in her attitude diverted him greatly.

"Come," he said with an air of amused speculation, "what did you think when you discovered who I was?"

The prim severity of her attitude relaxed to greater unconsciousness at this question, and a new expression stole into her face that mystified him. There was in it a mingling of greater seriousness, and a deeper intelligence. When she replied, however, her words were non-committal, though suggestive.

"I but thought," she answered slowly, "is that the Earl of Yerington? I never dreamed he looked so."

Lord Yerington leaned a little nearer to her, his curiosity piqued. She was drawing him on by an indefinable claim her loveliness made upon him. He had known many women, beautiful and witty, and yet this girl possessed a peculiar charm for him.

She felt his increased nearness with a certain sense of discomfort, but she determined upon a bold course, and she persisted in it. Had she been more worldly-wise, it is probable she would have been more prudent.

"How thought you I looked?" he questioned.

Her provoking profile was alluring him dangerously, and he had drunk deeply of the Burgundy. What is more, he had a loose hand upon the helm of his intentions and the cross-current of a sudden impulse was awaiting him. She leaned slightly forward, speaking seriously as she answered:

"I thought," she said, gravely, "that you would look like Squire Charteris."

Yerington yielded himself to unexpected mirth. The vision of his hunting neighbour came to him,—of his befuddled gaze and empurpled visage.

"Like Squire Charteris," he echoed, "with his face like roast beef and his rattling armament of oaths? Hast ever seen him, child, the morning after a hunt?"

She nodded her head.

"But why like Squire Charteris?" he persisted.

For an instant she hesitated. The piquante charm of her manner was merged beneath a serious intention, but the hold she exercised over Yerington was none the less potent because of that.

"I thought you would be like Squire Charteris," she said, picking her words carefully, and he could not guess that her heart was beating madly at her own boldness, "because Squire Charteris drinks, and Squire Charteris gambles, and throws away the money his honest tenants pay him, in wanton living."

She had struck clear and gone deep, but the consequences she had not reckoned on. Lord Yerington had been resisting her fascination with rare self-control. Her words brushed this aside. The flame of his anger sprang up and with it his ruthlessness. He was a man of his own age and she but of humble birth after all. Her words sent the slight restraints he had established against his own inclinations hurling down-stream. In an instant he had sprung to his feet, his eyes dancing dangerously. He placed a hand on each of her shoulders and looked down into her frightened, upturned face.

"Be careful, my girl," he warned, "be careful. You deal somewhat over generously with that commodity of frankness. Keep the truth for your enemies."

As he looked at her shrinking from him her attraction took a more irresistible hold on him.

"A gambler, am I, and drunkard and a rake? Well, they'll go all three of them into the kiss I'm going to give you."

He took her in his arms, in which she struggled madly,

and then lay so inert in the apathy of sheer terror that it might have moved him to mercy; but it did not, for now his arm was tingling with the soft pressure of her waist. She contrived to twist her lips away from him, but he pressed an ardent kiss upon her cheek. She broke from him and stood panting. He looked at her, the devil dancing in his eyes. He was prepared for an outburst of anger, for tears, but not for the paroxysm of aversion he read in her face as she tore out her handkerchief and rubbed the spot where he had kissed her, almost until it bled. She seemed lifted up by her indignation and, despite her recent experience, utterly unafraid.

"Oh, that you could be such a coward, a coward! A brave man with men, but with a woman—a coward!"

His breath was slightly quickened as he watched her and he was still laughing, but with something akin to bravado now.

"Still somewhat over free with the truth," he said lightly. "Such luxuries carry their punishments."

She turned her back upon him with an exclamation, still rubbing her cheeks. He watched her, utterly impenitent.

Suddenly she began to sob softly to herself.

"Oh, oh," she cried, "you've made this debt which I still bear to you a burden. How can I endure it?"

"My dear child, forget it," he answered. "That kiss paid for it all."

She faced him now, her eyes flashing, but her mien grown quiet.

"My lord," she said, "had I been your equal you would not have treated me after this fashion."

"Ods life," he answered, "but I would, though I might have gone about it in a rather different way."

"I did not cry out," she said, "because it would bring Michael, and he was set against my coming here."

"And so they warned you against me?" said Yerington, seating himself nonchalantly on the side of the table, his eyes still sparkling as he looked at her.

Her sincere dignity was appealing to the best of him, and he was fighting it back with the worst of him. As she watched him her courage failed her. She made a sudden dart towards the door. Yerington reached it before her, and stood barring her passage. She looked up and she could not but recognise how handsome he was. She sank her spirit to appeal.

"I entreat you, my lord, let me pass."

"Egad, not I," he answered.

She wrung her hands.

"But how have I injured you that you should treat me in this fashion?"

"Injured me?" he repeated, leaning forward. "Who is to reckon the injury that two such eyes as those may do? Who is to calculate the harm that two such red lips as those may work? Faith, I am in sad case, and methinks you owe me something for the damage you have wrought."

"I could not have dreamed of such cowardice—and then to mock me. Will you let me pass?"

"Not unless you promise to see me again," said he promptly.

"See you again? Never!" she ejaculated.

"Then," returned Lord Yerington coolly, placing his back against the door, "it is my glad yet painful duty to continue for a while longer, your gaoler."

"Why do you use me so?" she demanded.

"Because, damme," he returned, "you attract me most unaccountably, and I am in no mind to lose sight of you. Your rustic beauty hath a charm that the city belles have lost. Stab me, but I'd quite forgot that such fresh beauties were still abloom, and methinks any-

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where they are rare. I'd almost come to believe there were no flowers save those, bound by ribands, upon a lady's staff. The country begins to lure me vastly."

"Ah!" she exclaimed distressfully, "and I dare not call because of Michael."

"Michael as a defender of assailed innocence! Egad, 'tis a pretty rôle. I envy Michael."

He was beginning to feel a hovering sense of jealousy of Michael.

"But, my lord, let me pass," she said again.

He looked down at her and his face was growing serious as he studied hers. His absence of design was embarrassing him. One thing only he knew definitely—he did not intend this glimpse to be his last of her. At length he answered deliberately:

"I will let you go upon one condition. That still is that you promise that I shall see you again."

She studied him in her turn. Evidently with her, pledges were not lightly given. Her pure eyes were untroubled and she was deep in thought.

"Yes," she answered at length, "I will see you again, and possibly again. I'll remember you as you were that day. Surely once more I may look at you with confidence and pride."

For a moment longer he hesitated, for he was loath to end the interview. Then he opened the door with a low bow.

"You have your freedom, madam."

She gave a little relieved cry and went past him, half shrinking as she did so, into the hall without. Her eyes were still fixed on his as she passed down it and vanished.

He shut the door and leaned back against it.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. And then he shrugged his shoulders recklessly. "There are some disadvantages

in just waiting for life's chances. One would like sometimes to have a guess at the road."

A moment longer he stood in reflection.

"Damme," he said aloud, "I thought such eyes were out of date."

CHAPTER XV

MISTRESS MARJORIE

The tidal wave of deeper souls
Unto our inmost being rolls
And lifts us unaware.

—LONGFELLOW.

THE game laws were not so stringent at that time as they are at present. Every morning Captain Elliot took his fowling-piece under his arm and started off for a day's shoot with a gamekeeper, old Galbraith, a countryman of his own. He enjoyed the sport heartily and came back in the evening in high spirits, to smoke many pipes over the punch before he retired to bed. Yerington seldom accompanied him, but he made no complaint. The latter gentleman was much occupied at the time in garnering a harvest of disappointments. Self-analysis was a habit in which he did not indulge. Therefore, he deliberately refused to name to himself the reason of his persistent haunting of the Royal Arms at Oxholme, nor the secret of his varying moods, which alternated between a sort of bravoish hilarity and something akin to glumness. He was not accustomed to glumness, nor to disappointment, and his own sensations were a puzzle to him. It was obviously absurd to trace any pursuing consciousness of discontent in himself, the spoiled dandy of the London boudoirs, to his failure to catch another glimpse of the heroine of Fleet Street.

It may be that this consideration exaggerated the airy indifference of his manner when he came across her unexpectedly one morning, turning a sharp corner by a sweetbriar hedge. The dew was still upon the grass,

and it was not Lord Yerington's habit to go forth when the dew was on the grass. But within the last few days he had somehow acquired it.

The girl was carrying a basket upon her arm, and when she saw him she made an involuntary movement of timidity. The next instant she conquered this impulse, and looked at him with a calm little greeting smile.

"Good morrow, Aurora!" said Lord Yerington, sweeping off his hat. "You look purely this morning."

"If you please, my lord," she answered, "my name is Mistress Marjorie."

He kept his hat beneath his arm as he sauntered along beside her. If he felt any discomfort at the recollection of their last meeting, it only served to put into his manner an added shade of frivolous jauntiness. He could perceive that she shrank as she walked close against the hedge, in an instinctive desire to avoid him, that she was too proud to betray openly, and occasionally a straying branch of the wild briar, moist with dew, struck across her cheek, or tangled in her curls. There was lurking mischief in his eye as he observed this.

"Mistress Marjorie," he repeated; "I protest 'tis a pretty name. It likes me well. But still are you Aurora, for where you are is it not always morning?"

There was a little twitch in her mouth. For an instant it crossed his mind that his elaborate manner, and his fine compliment were amusing her. He took refuge from that thought in the practical.

"Prithee, pretty Mistress Marjorie, what do you carry in your basket?"

She regarded him with sudden gravity.

"Nothing that would in the least interest you, Lord Yerington."

This reply annoyed him. She was beginning to have the power to annoy him, and he was not easily ruffled.

"How do you know whether it would interest me?" he queried.

"Because," she answered, with a little spirited cock of her chin, "your lordship has nothing in common with the shadow-side of life nor with its commonplaces. And, forsooth, my basket is filled with commonplaces and altogether unworthy of your lordship's notice."

Her persistence urged him further.

"Do you refuse to name its contents to me, then?" he asked.

"Not at all," she replied, with an exaggerated air of indifference, that set him and his curiosity upon one side. "I have in it a glass of calves-foot jelly for John Simmons' wife. John Simmons is a commonplace tenant of your own, and his wife a thin, yellow-faced, red-haired woman, who could possess no slightest interest to you, my lord."

Her insistence vaguely irritated him, but he did not contradict her.

"And what else do you carry besides the jelly for the red-headed woman?"

"Flannel and liniment for Hester Newton's rheumatism. You may recall Hester Newton, my lord." She gave him a look that forbade him to dissemble. He felt no inclination to do so.

"Hester Newton?" he answered heartily. "Of course I do. A comely creature, I remember, who was long housemaid at the Castle."

"Until rheumatism crippled her," she said, "and now she's no longer comely. No, she could have no slightest interest for your lordship."

"I am sorry to hear of her misfortune," said Yerington, his ready sympathy aroused.

"The next," she went on, as if he had not spoken, "is food,—food for John Wilson's family."

"For John Wilson!" he exclaimed, honestly shocked. "Would you tell me that John Wilson and his family are actually in need of food?"

She walked along serenely. Her profile was as clear cut as a cameo against the dark of the hedge.

"He's not old enough for the almshouse," she answered; "and the children are to be considered. What would they do?"

"But I can't understand," he exclaimed. "For years John Wilson has had Meadow Farm. 'Tis a very fair piece of land, the cottage is good. Now, why this talk of food?"

"I suppose it is natural, your lordship," she answered, "that it would never occur to you that in any corner of the world there might be a lack of it."

"I prithee, credit me with some imagination," he retorted, a furrow appearing in his brow, as with his riding-whip he viciously snicked off the head of a daisy.

"Ah, then," she answered, "your lordship's imagination, like a well-trained steed, chooses but to amble in agreeable pastures. It may not have occurred to your lordship, that three bad harvest years in succession, and the high rent he must pay for his farm, if he would not lose it altogether, and so leave his children without a roof to shelter them, and himself a means of livelihood if affairs turned better, might reduce John Wilson to something near starvation. One thing he knows, and that is that he can expect no reduction on his rent."

"By heavens!" exclaimed Yerington, in an outburst of feeling. "Why have I not been told of this? I am not a Shylock!"

He was so disturbed that he quickened his pace, and strode on for some yards without heeding her.

"Why, it is abominable!" he cried. "Shameful! I

had not heard of this. My tenants oppressed, and starving, while I——" He broke off abruptly.

As she listened her face changed. A glad smile trembled about her lips and in her eyes, which grew wonderfully soft; but nothing of this appeared in her manner to her companion when she spoke again.

"Yet these things," she went on, "underlie your people's hatred of you."

The thrust went too deep. He turned round towards her, aglow with anger.

"I protest you employ great freedom of tongue," he said. "My people hate me? How know you that they hate me?"

She was a little frightened at his manner, but she held her ground bravely.

"Sure, 'tis scarce my affair, my lord, for they are not of my parish, but in matters of charity methinks 'twas as poor a thing to narrow one's ministrations by geography as one's sympathies by a creed. These people of yours are suffering. I am much among them. I help them as best I can, but I scarce can offset an absent and indifferent lord of the manor."

The words were a challenge, though her air was sweet and unaggressive. They displayed an insight beyond her years, and were a contradiction, in their earnestness, to her youthful face.

"But how comes this about?" protested Yerington. "I have never wished my people to be pressed. There was no need."

"You can scarce persuade them of that," she added with a touch of wistfulness, "for rumours of your lordship's deep play and—and——" she hesitated, "your extravagances often reach Oxholme Village. Perchance your lordship may recall your steward, Mr. Walter's face."

A flash of illumination came to him.

"Fore George!" he exclaimed, "I do. A brute, if there ever was one. How could I have so forgot!"

He was genuinely distressed. The man had been recommended to him by Mansur, and he had thoughtlessly accepted him, without further consideration.

"You can scarce expect such an one," the girl said softly, "to make the lives of your people easier."

She soon after terminated the interview, with a resolution that piqued Lord Yerington into an affectedly indifferent farewell.

His walk back to the Castle was troubled and full of reflection. He was wounded in his heart, in his pride, in his sense of loyalty to those dependent upon his consideration.

The next morning he had a stormy interview with Mr. Walters, at the end of which the stewardship of the Oxholme estate was vacant.

That evening he consulted Elliot, with a seriousness that delighted that gentleman, and took his advice as to a successor, with results that soon established a new condition of affairs among his tenants.

Captain Elliot, poor blind man, who had been devoutly praying for a good woman's influence in Lord Yerington's life, took the change to himself, and went about for days, puffed up by an entirely groundless self-complacency.

CHAPTER XVI

MASTER CUPID

Only love makes live.
Oh, why was women made so fair?
—P. J. BAILEY.

LORD YERINGTON's sensations during the next few days can be best described by successive stages.

After he had established his new steward, stage one: This was represented by a period during which he went much among his tenants and learned many disagreeable truths. He resolutely occupied himself about the estate to the no slight satisfaction of Captain Elliot, who thought he saw in his friend decided indications of reclamation. Three days passed without his having seen Marjorie. Then he became restless. Next, he met her for a few moments near the old Saxon mill upon the Severn. Their interview was brief, but long enough to reveal to him new phases of her character—a puzzling gaiety, a charming gift of mimicry, which had in it a child's bubbling light-heartedness, but no trace of mockery, and a capacity for a kaleidoscopic change of moods that left him unsatisfied with her, with himself and with existence generally.

Stage two: He ceased to go about the estate, again left Captain Elliot to his own devices, and devoted himself to a former enthusiasm. There had come a spell of showery weather, and he shut himself up in the library and turned out pages of very creditable Latin verse. Patriotism, friendship, the *Via Sacra* during a triumphal procession of Julius Cæsar, a dawn upon the Alps, all these aspiring themes held his mind for several successive, industrious days. At the end of this scholarly seclusion, he

discovered, to his profound surprise, that his Latin verses had been pushed carelessly aside—friendship, Cæsar, and the Alps being alike forgotten, and that an eager pen was rhyming with enthusiasm 'down pages in which the name of Marjorie appeared and reappeared.

"The devil take me!" he exclaimed aloud in chagrin. "Here I am, like a fool, stringing rapturous adjectives in praise of a saucy little baggage who laughed at me distinctly last time I met her, 'with a fling of soft laughter to tangle my heart,' 'A mesh of gold sun-flecks in her dancing curls.' Dancing curls! What an expression! It sounds like a wire-haired doll at a fair. Harry, you need exercise."

He took this exercise, riding far and hard, and returning much sunburnt, with a sharpened appetite for his dinner.

Stage three: He divided his time between the Royal Arms and the Saxon mill upon the Severn. Marjorie kept out of sight until an incident forced her hand. Lord Yerington was lounging along the shining stretches of the river upon his left, with his favourite boar hound, Thor, at his heels. Thor was a large-natured dog generally, but if provoked too far he was liable to violent, if rapidly passing, outbursts of temper. A self-confident spaniel had been biting at his heels for some moments and had been ignored in kingly fashion. He imposed too far upon Thor's patience, who turned suddenly and snapped at the pertinacious animal. The little creature gave a howl of pain, and one of its legs hung broken and useless. The next moment it had fallen from the bank, and was whirling, rendered helpless by its maimed leg, toward the weir.

Without hesitation, Lord Yerington plunged in after it. He was soon breast-high in the glassy tide and keeping his feet with difficulty. He grasped the yelping little

animal as it eddied round on the lip of the foaming spill. His rescue had been spontaneous, and he had had no thought beyond the impulse to succour the dog. But, when he reached the bank and discovered Marjorie there, wringing her hands at the plight of her pet, his eyes lighted up. He felt a certain elation that it was in her cause that he had played good Samaritan.

Together they took it to the mill and laid it tenderly upon a pile of sacks. They put splints upon the injured leg, utilising their combined knowledge in such matters.

When Marjorie had entered, she had said a few words to the miller aside, who in turn whispered them to his apprentices, and Lord Yerington and she were left to themselves. In their ministrations, their hands touched more than once. Of this Marjorie was unconscious, as, with her face tenderly absorbed, she bent over her pet. Not so, Lord Yerington.

We may call the next few days, stage four. Marjorie and Lord Yerington met often at the mill. There, where the wheel roared, the waters rushed and the powdery motes dusked the air, their acquaintance progressed rapidly. The dog required much nursing. Over its curly head, Lord Yerington's education continued. He saw Marjorie in many phases. He caught glimpses of rare intelligence and insight, linked to childish irrelevancies that filled him with delight. He saw her refreshing enthusiasms, her ardent belief in good, her pensive flights of poetic feeling; and her dancing, impish perversity and unexpectednesses kept him continually amused and pleasantly apprehensive of where he should stand within her graces in the following moment. In short, this spoiled beau of White's was being put severely through his paces by a girl whose only knowledge of the tactics for his training came to her direct from mother Eve.

All was going admirably, when Lord Yerington one morning stubbed his toes unexpectedly on stage five.

He called at the mill and Coco, the dog, had vanished. As he stood gazing at the deserted pile of sacks, upon which he had grown accustomed to see Coco, he felt something akin to consternation.

The miller appeared and touched his forelock.

"Her—leastwhiles Mistress Marjorie, has took the little creature home. She said he was doing monstrous fine, my lord, and that now she could tend him herself."

The cold ungraciousness of this dismissal, unbroken by any, save the most terse and perfunctory message to him, stung Yerington. As he stood nonplussed, he thought he saw the miller grin. This recalled him.

"Of course, of course," he answered, with a touch of deliberate condescension, to put the fellow in his place; "he hath mended most marvellously. Methinks for surgery, I outrival the village barber."

He turned and sauntered from the mill into the sunshine. He passed over the bridge spanning the weir, and at length paused beneath the willows on the other bank. More than once, as he went, he said absently aloud:

"Yes, 'twas natural, sure 'twas natural."

Then he stopped with a smothered oath. Here he was like a gaby, still posing for the miller he had left upon the other side. He had grown acutely conscious of a suppressed amusement amongst the men at the mill, which had been respectfully hushed at his approach. It had annoyed him. He had tried unsuccessfully to eliminate them and their obvious interest in his affairs from his consciousness. Things had come to a pretty pass, when he found himself posing and still muttering like, what Hugh would term, an "innocent," for a set of floury millers.

"I protest," he thought, "what a figure I go."

He seated himself upon a log and began to throw chips into the water, watching them float away and dance down the stream.

"My man," he said severely to himself, "methinks 'tis time you went back to town. Faith, what equals the park of a morning and hazard of an evening. 'Tis worth all the silly country maunderings a simpleton ever dallied over. Egad, shake yourself together. To-morrow, you go back to town."

A spot of bright colour across the river attracted his attention, and a light strain of song reached his ears. It was a girl in a pink gown, loitering along in an airy, aimless way. Her every motion suddenly became of transcendent importance to him. She paused, picking a flower here and there. She reached the bridge, and hesitated a moment before she made up her mind to cross it. Midway she stopped and, leaning over, gazed with transfixed interest at the waters boiling past below.

Lord Yerington began to grow irritable as he watched her. She was so light-hearted, so perversely unconscious of the slight she had put upon him that morning, in withdrawing her dog from his protection, without the courtesy of an explanation. One thing at least he owed himself, and that was that he should entirely ignore the circumstance.

She continued her walk and started, as she saw him glowering at her from the log.

"La, my lord, is that you? I protest, what a fright you gave me!"

He knew that he was absurdly glad to see her, so glad that his heart gave a bound, and that certain discords he had been conscious of within him relaxed and began to swing in rhythm with her presence. He regarded her with dissatisfaction, and did not begin the conversation with his usual courtly bow and compliment.

"Why did you take Coco home?" he asked.

"My lord," she answered, "he was doing well, and I nethought that there I could attend him better."

"Mayhap," he retorted, "but 'twas scarce courtesy to remove him without a syllable to your fellow-surgeon."

He read hypocrisy in every line of her penitent face.

"I did not know your lordship would deign to be troubled about him," she replied meekly.

"Troubled about him," he echoed, "what have I been doing if I've not been troubling about him for this week past?"

She looked up at him beseechingly.

"True, my lord, you have been most kind. I humbly beg your lordship's pardon, but I did not presume to think——"

He was standing, and he now bent forward and looked into her face.

"You little witch," he said, a light in his eyes that frightened her, for she had not seen it there since the morning she had met him in the panelled room at the Royal Arms; "you are roasting me, and I know it well."

She edged a little further away from him.

"Nay, my lord, it is not so. For who knows better than I that 'twas your kindness to Coco brought you often to the mill."

He was angry with himself, straining at the bonds he was beginning to recognise and would not name, conscious of the untenable position into which he had stumbled. This girl was pure, was unassailable. He had begun to treasure the thought of that purity, and to exalt it. Here he was with this daughter of Eve, as enticing as the most accomplished town coquette, winning him by a thousand charms and holding him by her unapproachability. The position could not last. He would

end it. He would be glad to end it. He had distinctly seen the millers grinning, the yokels! Well they might grin. Here was a little wench, whose name he did not know in full, the daughter of a common soldier, or at best of a sergeant. If she had been, well, what she was not, his position would have been explainable. As it was, he looked an egregious ass. He would end it. He was off to town. What an absurdity it was that he, the Earl of Yerington, should be making concessions to this blue-eyed minx, glad at her smiles and dashed at her displeasure. Yet even in the rush of his vexation, he knew that he valued her simplicity, her truthfulness, her aloofness from his world as he valued nothing else in life. He looked at her again, and as her beauty and something in her personality took hold upon him, he said to himself in defiance:

"Egad, for a night at White's! To-morrow I leave for town."

Marjorie began to speak.

"I'm sorry I vexed you, my lord," she said tremulously, "for I have come to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?" he echoed.

"Yes, my lord," she answered, plaiting and unplaiting a fold in her white pinner, with nervous fingers.

"'Tis ridiculous," he ejaculated. "I can't hear of it for a moment."

She shook her head sadly.

"But alas, my lord, 'tis so. After to-day you will see Mistress Marjorie no more."

"My dear little maid," he answered firmly, "I dislike to appear discourteous, but your words sound like a death-bed speech. Am I wrong in inferring that you are meditating finalities?"

She gave a little choke of laughter, which especially annoyed him after her recent words.

"What are finalities?" she asked, lifting her eyes with a great appearance of innocence.

"Finalities," he answered, watching her narrowly, "are death and matrimony."

"La, my lord, I hope I shall not die yet, and as for matrimony, nobody would want me."

"Mistress Marjorie," he responded sternly, "above all other qualities in you I have ever admired your simple, direct honesty. At this moment you are acting, pardon my frankness, like a deceitful little kitten. You know well, worse luck, that many men will want you."

"Oh, my lord," she murmured.

He was in a towering ill-humour.

"Do you think that I, a man like me, would go about wasting his time, nursing the dog of a woman that no man would want?"

"You've been very kind to Coco," she said softly, still plaiting her apron.

She was digging a hole in the loose, brown earth with the toe of her little shoe.

A mood of bitter frankness was upon him.

"Mistress Marjorie, I've not been kind to Coco. I've been kind to myself, and you know it." He drew a step nearer to her. "And I ask you, after what happened at the inn, are you not afraid to be here alone with a rake like me?"

Her manner changed. Her little hypocrisies vanished. She turned and looked at him, with the sweet direct dignity he had grown to respect.

"No, my lord," she answered. "I know you better than you know yourself. I knew you'd only have to understand to have reawakened in you some of the faith that the town had smothered, and neither I nor any girl need fear you."

His face grew grave and soft.

"But you are a brave little woman," he said.

"No," she answered, her eyes alight, "only a believing one."

For a few moments they were both silent, watching the waters whirling toward the weir. Then again he turned to her.

"And what of those foolish words you dropped about good-bye?"

"It is good-bye, my lord," she answered gravely.

"But we have become very good friends, you and I, Mistress Marjorie."

"Your lordship is pleased to be most kind," she answered almost inaudibly.

"But don't you think this talk of good-bye is a little needless?" he persisted.

He had said to Lady Caroline, "A man of my reputation cannot be a friend to a lady so fair as yourself." But how grotesquely different was that situation from this one! Mistress Marjorie was but a little country wench, and, indeed, she seemed curiously unprotected even for a girl in her humble position. This case was not the same.

"I suppose to you," he went on indulgently, "a journey to London is a most momentous thing."

"It can be, my lord," she answered, a shadow falling across her face that arrested him.

"Yes, yes, I know," he said hastily. "That was a vastly uncomfortable circumstance. But I am speaking of the journey only. Now, I wonder what you would think of the grand tour."

"The grand tour?" she echoed uncomprehendingly.

"Yes," he answered, with an airy gesture of indifference. "Paris, Turin, Florence, Rome, Venice. Mayhap a stay at the Golden Horn."

"Oh, I couldn't dream of such a journey."

"Nay, I venture that you cannot. So you tell me good-bye in such solemn fashion, when I'll be sworn you are going but a short posting journey hence."

"You'll never see Mistress Marjorie again," she said with a growing touch of obstinacy.

He became more persistent, more bent upon his point as she evaded him.

"My dear little maid," he said, "do you tell yourself that you can vanish like the Princess in the fairy tale? Now try and think. We live in a vast world, which the map lays down to us in little lines and spots of colour. These, please you, consider to be empires, kingdoms, and principalities. This England of ours, great though it be in history, and growing in influence, these fusty old geographies still with brutal frankness would reveal as a little spot upon the coast of Europe. Do you think, you solemn-eyed demoiselle, that I could not find you on this little island?"

She faced him, and her eyes were sparkling.

"Do you infer, my lord, that it is your pleasure to persist in this acquaintance whether I would or no?"

"Very neatly spoke, dear child. That is the case to a syllable."

"And what if it be not my will?" she queried with spirit.

"Your will," he answered, looking fairly back at her, his face determined; "are you going to tell me that you'll avoid me?"

"I will avoid you," she said, tossing up her head.

"Then, let me tell you," he answered, "my very beautiful, very wilful and wholly bewitching young woman, that I am a man of my word, and I am in the habit of having my own way. And if you try to hide from me, I shall search England for you with a drag-net."

"Used to having your own way," she flashed at him.

"You've had far too much of your own way, and that's half that is the matter with you."

"The matter with me?" he echoed with something like consternation.

"Yes, it is. If you had had employment for your brain and had not frittered away the best of your life over dice, and shut in your heart under such fashionable waistcoats, you might be somebody now, and not just the spendthrift Earl of Yerington."

"Take care," he said, drawing a step nearer to her; "you know the penalty for overmuch truthfulness."

"That, for your threats!" she exclaimed.

She darted about like quicksilver, and was half across the bridge spanning the weir before he could recover from his surprise. He took a few rapid steps after her, then checked himself as the miller sauntered out into the sunshine. He stood watching her pink dress until it vanished about a turn of the road that wound up the hill.

The incongruity of a man of his position being baited by a chit like this came vividly to his mind, and he laughed. Then he paused and frowned.

"Damme," he thought, "here is a pretty state of things. But what eyes!"

Something within him whispered: "And what a pure, honest little heart."

"But devil take me, if I'll be beaten like this——" he ejaculated, as if arguing with that inward voice.

Then came stage six. It was a battle royal between love and family pride.

For several days he could not persuade himself that Marjorie indeed had vanished. At the end of that time he requested an interview with Mrs. Culpepper. He had never thought that shrinking woman capable of such

determination. But then he had never been obliged to reckon before with the implacable obstinacy latent in many gentle characters. At the end of the interview he had a disturbing consciousness that he had appeared ruffled; that his polished manners had been open to criticism. That thought in itself had power to irritate him, and he had gained nothing. He knew when he turned his back upon Mrs. Culpepper and the Royal Arms, that from that source at least he would gain no knowledge of Marjorie. He caught a glimpse of Michael as he went down the stairs, and it seemed to him that that young man's face wore an expression of triumph. But then, he told himself, he was becoming suspicious. He was continually seeing this expression or that expression in the countenances of people whose very existence he had hitherto only acknowledged because his code included courtesy to his social inferiors, and to have violated that, was as opposed to his ideals as to have ignored a debt of honour. Of course, all this added susceptibility to other personalities came about when he admitted an affinity outside his own social environment. This reflection sent him up the road to Oxholme Castle in a state of superb philosophy, heartily glad he had left the whole affair behind him, including the calf-eyed Mrs. Culpepper and the Royal Arms.

That night was sleepless and disturbed. The next day was restless. He found, to his surprise, that he had given the faithful Thor a brutal kick in return for a thoroughly warrantable demonstration of affection. The night following he again scarcely closed his eyes. He spent most of it pacing his room and calling himself a fool. Up to a certain point a man obtains infinite comfort from calling himself a fool, but after an interval, it ceases to solace, especially if the conditions which led to that observation are not alleviated.

He even lent himself to the lowness of catechising the millers. He could gain no information. He was unable to put down the quality of some of their replies definitely to crass stupidity, and was inclined to suspect them at times, of cunning. But then he had grown absurdly suspicious.

He returned and threw himself heavily into a chair in the great hall of Oxholme Castle. His boots were muddy, his costume less carefully arranged than usual, and his whole attitude filled with a profound despondency.

Hugh Elliot was already there enjoying his churchwarden and a volume of Virgil. That poet added flavour to his country surroundings, and he had often indulged in the perusal of this book during his stay. He looked up from his reading to see Yerington, his head bent forward on his chest, plunged in gloomy introspection.

"What ails thee, lad?" he asked.

"I've just recalled," said Yerington, speaking from the midst of a reverie, "that one of my ancestresses was the daughter of a bowman during the time of Henry the Second."

"Egad, man," laughed Elliot, "why go about with a face like that over it at this age? The blot has been washed away by generations of the bluest blood in England."

"Blot?" echoed Yerington, with a touch of choler. "What is blue blood? Half the time 'tis blue putridity."

"Whew!" whistled Captain Elliot, "this from you, Harry? I've ever maintained that ancestry puts spirit in a man, and so have you."

"Not I," expostulated Yerington. "As for you, you raw-boned, hide-bound Scot, with your granite-sown acres, and your crumbling little towered castle, and your

twopenny lairdship, what can you boast of, save of sheep-stealing?"

"True," answered Elliot with complacency. "I flatter myself nobody had more ancestors hanged than I. Ours was a spirited clan and we were canny on the lifting."

Yerington leaned forward, and there was in his eyes a sort of hopefulness, a touch almost of enthusiasm.

"There was a picture of this ancestress of mine," he said, "painted by a Dutchman. You know their glassy sort of work, and their sincere attention to each feature. Well, I've been studying her face and comparing it with her descendants, whose portraits are scattered about the Castle, and I'll be bound, Hugh, 'tis the noblest of the race who favour her."

Captain Elliot did not reply. He smoked with such energy that his harsh-featured face was soon almost obscured in a blue haze.

"Have you nothing to say?" asked Yerington, after a pause.

"Nothing," answered Elliot.

After a silence of some moments, Yerington rose abruptly to his feet.

"I'll be sworn, Hugh, 'twas scurvy of you to bring me to this God-forsaken corner of the world, and then sit there as dour and speechless as one of your own ghillies."

He swung himself from the room in a temper so rare for him, that Captain Elliot looked after him with affectionate speculation.

"Either the lad hath a touch of the spleen," he thought to himself, "or—— He hath been much by himself and curiously content with his own society. I don't like the tenor of his words. Hath he got mixed up with some village wench who is leading him on by a pose of virtue?"

No, surely, he is too town-broke for that. But I shall insist that he accept the Duchess of Croome's invitation."

When Captain Elliot made the suggestion to Lord Yerington at dinner, he acceded to it with a promptness that astonished his friend, and promised to go with him the next day to Marsden House.

Captain Elliot could not guess that he was seeking to throw out another bulwark of defence against his own heart; that he was telling himself that if he got back again to the world to which he belonged, some of this girl's strange, baffling hold over him might be weakened.

Lord Yerington passed another sleepless night. He swore at his pillows and punched them viciously, and actually lighted a candle to assure himself that the sheets were indeed linen and not some woolly, irritating compound that would account for his wakefulness. Then he gave up the struggle, donned slippers and a warm morning-gown and began a restless walk about his room. Suddenly in the midst of his perambulating, a resolve formed in his mind, at least he told himself that it was sudden, as we are all inclined to consider climaxes sudden to which we have been laboriously climbing over accumulating circumstances. The resolve once formed, it stood out in the darkness vividly. His former hesitations were as completely annihilated as if they had had no existence. He belonged to a race, which, once it pledged itself to a cause or to a love, gave itself with a whole-hearted, unquestioning prodigality. It was this same quality which had made him so reckless and light-hearted a gambler. He staked so freely and so finally.

As this resolve formed in his mind, he stood motionless for a few moments, permitting the flood of happiness that came with it, to envelop him. He was astounded that he for an instant could have considered the bepowdered, bejewelled, brocaded, senseless frivolities of Vanity Fair

against this girl. He recalled her qualities and gloried in them. She stood out like a beam of white light against the background of his own life. Hesitate? Not he! He should wear her proudly, where all the world might see. After that, for the rest of the night he slept quietly.

CHAPTER XVII

THE COUP

Zeal, then, not charity became the guide;
And Hell was built on spite, and Heaven on pride.

—ALEXANDER POPE.

A CHAISE was being driven toward Oxholme Castle; it was a claret-coloured, prosperous-looking vehicle. At intervals Mr. Mansur's face appeared at one of its windows scanning the park through which it was passing, surveying the gnarled centuried oaks, the lime-trees, beeches and spreading chestnuts. It was a superb park, carefully preserved, and its mellowed air and its expression of long-rooted possession lost no tithe of its significance in Mr. Mansur's mind, which calculated the cost of its upkeep to a penny. His eyes sought out the castle itself. It stood crowning a height, its machicolated towers pleasantly time-weathered and vine-draped. Though the postilions were urging the horses forward with sharp cracking of the whips and spurs mercilessly applied, Mr. Mansur still leaned slightly forward in his seat, as if his mind were eagerly upon the stretch and impatient for its destination. Under the three-storied gatehouse the chaise whirled and drew up before the door of the castle.

Mr. Mansur's polished boot was scarcely upon the step when Foulkes, the old butler, came out to greet him with due decorum. He ushered his master's friend into the hall with a respectful bow, and would have departed in search of Lord Yerington, when Mr. Mansur wheeled sharply round upon his heel and addressed him.

"Not above a pint of small beer to my men," he said

curtly. "I have scant patience with the country hospitality that sends a gentleman's postilions away reeling in their saddles."

The dignified old servitor permitted himself no glance of resentment, but as he turned away he thought:

"If they can tell a turnpike from a turnip patch when I'm done with them, 'twill be no fault of John Foulkes's."

Left alone, Mr. Mansur looked about the hall. The scene was no unfamiliar one to him, but he saw to-day with new eyes, for he was regarding it from a novel mental standpoint. He observed the great window, climbing almost to the groined and carven roof, a casual deprecation in his lifted eyebrows. Then he whistled a tuneless snatch, swinging to and fro upon his travelling boots as he did so. He was still so engaged when Foulkes again entered, with a bowl of punch.

"His lordship will be here within the moment," he said, "and he begs that you will refresh yourself."

He withdrew noiselessly. Still Mr. Mansur stood where he had left him. There was none of the relaxed ease in his attitude of one who found himself amidst familiar surroundings, and in the home of an intimate friend. His eyes became busy with the portraits upon the walls; the fair ladies and brave-appearing men, succeeding generations of the race of Gower, on the whole a comely one and of frank and open mien. A smile crossed his lips as he regarded them. A wonder arose in his mind that a race upon whom candour and hospitality was writ so large had still contrived to come down the centuries with their fortune undiminished.

He turned again to the great window, where the light filtered through the family quarterings, splashing it with vivid colour. He was wise in heraldry. There he read where the line of the Gowers had crossed with distinction in arms, in learning and honourably, back in the centuries,

with royalty itself. He looked upwards to the tattered pennons, dim and faded, which had been captured upon the battle-field; as he gazed his eyes narrowed. He was parched with a thirst for that centuried security, which Lord Yerington bore so lightly. He, Mr. Mansur, with his boundless ambition, and a consciousness of mental power, must stand there amid these storied surroundings and confess himself impotent to achieve that for which he hungered. Humbler men, with worthier ambitions, would have been unconscious of such a sting, but for him it was a parthian shot. He was hit fairly in his Achilles' heel, in the rift in his defence; all his ruthless calculations, his determined plottings, his practised mien of acquiescence, his tactful, patient waiting upon great men's pleasures, could not avail him here. Within Mr. Mansur there existed a weakness; once the strain became too great it cracked wide and through it poured a flood of torrential anger, honest in its fierce unchecked hate, as nothing else in the man was honest—save one thing.

This feeling was so fierce that he became conscious that his lips were dry and moved with difficulty. He approached the table where the punch-bowl stood, its spiced fumes rising temptingly. He paused with the ladle in his hand and looked into its crimson contents. He saw reflected in it the parti-coloured heraldic emblems inlaid in the great window. With a muttered imprecation, he plunged in the ladle, breaking and scattering the reflection into dancing lights.

An arm was thrown about his shoulders. With an uncontrollable start, he turned to see Lord Yerington laughing down at him.

"Aha," cried that gentleman, "so bad as that? I'll swear you thought that punch an enemy. Was it the memory of the evils it had wrought upon you that induced that savage thrust, or your own face within it?"

Mr. Mansur's well-trained muscles responded with a smile. He was startled, and his mind jarred into an accustomed pose. This prevailed but a moment, then a sidelong glance revealed to him something in Lord Yerington's countenance that caused him to lock warily away all open expression from his own face, while he sought to read the riddle of that look.

The conversation began after an abrupt fashion. This morning he had no need of further disguises.

"What has happened to you?" he asked.

Yerington had turned aside to pour himself a glass of punch. At this instant he was holding it to the light with a quiet look in his eyes. He was reading the vision of a girl's face into its gleam. A tone in Mansur's voice rudely dissipated this picture, and with it the expression which Mansur had detected. Instinctively he hid his treasured secret with a jest.

"Happened to me, egad," he answered; "what can happen in the country? Not so much as a flirtation with a parson's wife, who has a figure like a boiled pudding and eyes like its plums. I protest I'm vastly bored with my virtuous self. Come, save me with a pinch of the town. Have you news of a fresh scandal? What is the name of the King's last mistress?"

Mansur lowered his black eyebrows.

"I'll be sworn something has happened to you," he insisted.

"A tit for your tat," answered Yerington, as he daintily sifted the nutmeg into his punch. "How came you to Worcestershire? I heard no hint of such a journey when I saw you last."

"I'm on my way to her grace, the Duchess of Croome."

Yerington glanced at him over the punch.

"'Pon honour, I was not aware that you knew her

grace. Faith, you might do worse. I'm told her niece Lady Philida is fair. I've not seen her since she was a shy child and disappeared in the shrubberies at my approach."

None of Mansur's relief at these words appeared in his face. A fear had been cleared from his mind, the fear that had urged his horses up the two-mile hill to Oxholme Castle, and which had jumped to ready suspicion at the indefinable change in Yerington's face.

But this relief did not induce him to delay the purpose of his coming.

Lord Yerington's whole demeanour filled him with even more than his usual sense of antagonism. He saw him against a background peculiarly his own, unblurred by other personalities. This seemed to bring into clearer relief his handsome face and figure, the indefinable charm of his manner.

"And what, my lord, has brought you to Worcestershire?" he queried. "Methinks nothing was further from your mind when last we met."

Yerington's face shadowed.

Mansur's words had a power to pain him they would not have possessed a fortnight since. To-day this implied neglect of his estates carried straight to his newly-aroused sense of responsibility. But an unfamiliar impulse of reticence toward this man, in whom he had habitually placed a careless confidence, prompted him again to jest the truth aside.

"What better than a yearning for classic simplicity need inspire me, a longing for tootling shepherds' pipes, browsing barley-sugar sheep, on greeny, greeny meadows? Hang me, Mansur, but Bow china lies most abominably."

Mansur smiled.

"You've said nothing of shepherdesses," he said.

Then he bit his lip and turned abruptly toward the great carved fireplace. He had not intended that the conversation should take this turn, and he regretted it.

"No," slowly answered Yerington, "I haven't."

His eyes were fixed on the man who stood with his back toward him, one foot on the stone guard about the hearth. He was a distinguished figure and bore himself with an air for which long mingling with men of fashion alone could not account. Without it it is possible that even Yerington's championship might not have carried him into the exclusive circles into which he had now won an admission, if a grudging one.

At this moment Yerington had suddenly recalled the memory of those same shapely shoulders dodging into the congested traffic of the Strand in pursuit of a vanishing hackney-coach. The earl was slow to suspicion, but Mansur's appearance in Worcestershire began to hover in the outskirts of his mind with a sense of curious coincidence. As he watched him, suddenly Mansur burst into a fit of abrupt, harsh laughter. For some moments he stood lost in his strange mirth.

Lord Yerington sipped his punch, unruffled.

"Do you mind my saying, Mansur," he drawled at length, "that I find your manner scarce soothing? If I were not in the best humour in the world, I might add that it was irritating. I'm glad you are diverted, but devil take me if I see any wit in the present occasion."

Mansur wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

"A jest is not always in chorus," he said.

"So I infer," assented his host indifferently.

Mansur stood on the edge of his great *coup*.

Beyond that burst of unexpected laughter, which had in it a ring that suggested that control had for an instant slipped the leash, he was unmoved. This crisis toward

which he had built for years, upon which he staked so much, found him cold. It was as if his emotion hung in the wind, unable to answer to the helm. This eagerly awaited culmination came with a sense of atrophy.

"There are two occasions," said Mansur, shaking out his handkerchief, "when a man laughs with reason."

"And when may those be, pray?" queried Yerington, more from politeness than from interest, for he was conscious of a growing sense of annoyance. He felt out of tune with his old familiar.

"When Fate, the jade," answered Mr. Mansur jauntily, "has the whip-hand of him—or he of Fate. Has any news reached this Arcadia of yours of the proceedings in the House?"

"A breath or two. Walpole tells me that from the House to the 'Change Alley is like a chain of ants, and that the man who in the House cries up the stocks one day, the next cries them down," answered Yerington with a frown.

From the depth of him he disapproved of those political manipulators who traded in the country's credit and abused the confidence of their constituents for personal gain.

Mr. Mansur perceived the frown, but he felt an elated sense of indifference to it.

"The millionaires of yesterday are the paupers of today," he said with emphasis.

Yerington placed his glass upon the table. His cold disapproval grew, as he looked at the man before the carved fireplace, who still stood with his foot upon the guard.

"I fear," he said, "it is a veritable South Sea year. I hope from my heart you've had no hand in this abominable business."

Mansur shrugged his shoulders.

"And what if I have, Harry?" he said. "What has a parvenu to do with conscience? Surely that too is an aristocratic luxury."

"When have you heard me use the word parvenu?" asked Yerington.

He perceived the fling in Mr. Mansur's words and resented it.

As if this question had touched the fuse of his long-concealed animosity, the man whom he addressed swung round toward him. His face was transformed; all the practised smiles had vanished, it no longer showed the unblended sharpness of outline and colour and feature. It was as if the fire of hatred that consumed him united it into a unified whole at last. Compared to this flaming emotion, the nobleman seated beside the table seemed cold and white.

"Never called me a parvenu," he burst out, "you have a thousand times. Your very friendship was an insult, your manners, polished even in your cups, your infernal pride of family. There was condescension in the very way you never hinted at a difference."

"This is madness," said Lord Yerington, softly. "My poor Mansur!"

"Poor Mansur," echoed the other; "no! rich Mansur, if you will. I'm rich, do you hear me? 'Tis you who are poor, for I have ruined you."

Yerington regarded him without comprehension. This change in the friend he had trusted carried no conviction. Mad, he could believe him, but that he was false his mind refused for the moment to grasp.

"Ruined me," he repeated incredulously. "Why in the name of folly should you seek to ruin me?"

This faith so strong that at a blow he could not shatter it, lashed Mansur into greater intemperance of expression. He came nearer, his words chasing one another.

"Because I hated you. God, how I hated you! So you thought that we butchers' sons could be insulted and forget? You thought me such poor stuff that I might be beaten like a dog and forget?"

"Ah," said Lord Yerington, with slow-drawn breath. Captain Elliot's face that night at White's rose to his mind, sharp and sudden like a picture.

"Prithee, say on," he continued, changing his attitude for one of polite attention. "This waxes interesting."

Mansur scarcely heeded him.

"You were made for my plans," he went on; "a trusting fool, doomed to be the tool of the first man who would trouble to deceive you. I wanted position; I used you, climbed by you, hating you."

He smiled his quick smile, a flash of red lips and white teeth.

"I hope the situation diverts your lordship, for there's humour in it. Money you despise, save as an adjunct. I knew that in your little world of St. James's, butchers' sons without it did not exist. Money was the magic word with which to conjure me, with some nice managing of puppets, such as peers, a palpable body, which the *beau monde* might discern with quizzing-glasses. A parvenu *with* money, my lord, is, however, in somewhat better case than a peer *without* it. The parvenu exists on suffrance. The peer," he raised his eyebrows, "devil take me, if I can see that the impecunious peer exists at all. An escutcheon is a damned troublesome thing if a man hath not wherewith to house it."

Lord Yerington looked back at him as he spoke without a change of expression, though his words had been taking hold upon him with a sickening sense of conviction. It was characteristic of the man that for the moment the annihilation of his faith in his friend took posses-

sion of his mind, almost to the exclusion of the realisation of his shattered fortunes. That thought, however, was beginning to shape itself.

"You confided your affairs to my management," went on Mr. Mansur. "That was step number one. This agitation in the Indian stock provided me my opportunity. I did not use your money myself. That dual consciousness some men are pleased to call their conscience, is a strange and perverse thing. I detested each penny of your fortune, but I put every shilling of it into those stocks before they fell, and from my seat in the House I took care that they should fall."

"And how," asked Yerington calmly, "am I to know that you are not lying?"

Mr. Mansur handed him a paper with a bow.

"There is your assurance, my lord."

Yerington took the manuscript, turned it over, and examined the signature with care. It was from his own and Mr. Mansur's solicitor. He ran his eyes over it. It was addressed to him. The old family lawyer expressed in it vehement regret at Lord Yerington's strange obsession of judgment, and his refusal to see him and be reasoned with. Then it proceeded at great length, with a legal elaboration of detail, to lay down the exact extent and finality of his lordship's losses, and begged to subscribe himself, "his obliged and obedient servant, Josiah Crookshanks."

Silently Yerington returned the paper.

"My compliments," he said. "You possess forgery among your accomplishments. I've neither read nor answered Mr. Crookshanks' letters on this subject, as you know. You are a most damnable rogue."

Mr. Mansur, in the face of this perfect control, almost lost his own self-possession. Yerington's immobility was robbing his revenge of half its savour.

"I'd fain not be lonely in a naughty world," he responded with an attempt at bravado.

"And," said Lord Yerington, "if I were to tell this world of St. James's that you love so dearly, that my one stipulation about this fortune I entrusted to your management was that it should not be placed in stocks, what then? And my refusal to meet Mr. Crookshanks reads somewhat oddly too, does it not?"

"You were pleased to call me a rogue a moment since," responded Mr. Mansur smoothly. "Be that as it may be, I flatter myself my worst enemy would scarce call me a fool."

And he laid a second letter before him.

Yerington perceived that the writing was amazingly like his own, and it purported to commend Mansur, with here and there even a trace of his airy manner, to invest his money in the Indian stock. It had, indeed, been signed by him, with his characteristic flourish. Mr. Mansur had brought him the paper one day and, without troubling to read it, he had affixed his signature.

Mr. Mansur waved it above his head in an outburst of rare exuberance.

"Now, where is your pride of birth, my lord pauper?" he exclaimed exultingly.

At these words a sudden leap of fury sprang up within Lord Yerington. With a bound he was upon the man who taunted him. He locked his hands about his throat, blind with rage. In vain Mr. Mansur struggled to unloose them. The room swam red. It was a man in the prime of life and in the full flood of suddenly unleashed wrath whose fingers throttled him—no young dandy of the coffee-houses now. The rage of his primeval ancestors looked out from his eyes. Together they struggled and slipped over the polished floor.

Lord Yerington's abhorrence seethed above his wrath.

His teeth ground audibly, as he flung his antagonist from him.

Mr. Mansur lay upon the floor, tearing at his cravat.

"This is murder," he gasped, struggling to his feet, and though but half conscious what he said, spitting venom. "You choose to be a murderer, a cowardly murderer. Now, where is your pride of birth?"

Yerington had completely recovered himself. Every trace of the recent storm had vanished. His snuff-box was airily poised in his hand.

"Never more vigorous, good butcher," he answered, as he took a pinch of its contents.

Mr. Mansur choked over his words.

"Unsheath your blade, sir," he stammered; "no man lays hands on me but he must cross swords for it."

Yerington cast a look of amusement at his crimson visage.

"Faith, my blade hath a daintier appetite," he said, tapping his snuff-box before he returned it to his waist-coat pocket.

"Damn you!" shrieked Mr. Mansur.

He was mad with rage. His neck still ached, and his vision was obscured by the congested blood in his eyes.

"I prithee, not so loud," exclaimed Lord Yerington, with an affected shudder.

"Coward!" shouted Mr. Mansur, "you are afraid to fight me."

Lord Yerington's hand went involuntarily toward his sword-hilt. It but hovered in its neighbourhood and then withdrew a scented handkerchief from his pocket. He turned lightly toward Mansur. That worthy was no coward, and his weapon was already bared. When Yerington spoke, it was with an easy lack of exigence, that put aside all possibility of dispute.

"No gentleman impugns my courage but he must

cross swords for it, but, 'pon honour, one must draw the line somewhere, or one might find himself involved with his butler over a lost cask of Burgundy."

With deliberate and finished insolence he launched his darts at the weak points in the defence of his quondam friend.

Mr. Mansur would have spoken, but no words came.

"I marvel that you still linger," continued Yerington. "The bell-rope is here and the horse-pond is without. Shall I summon my men to give you a taste of it? 'Tis a flavour you'll recall."

Mr. Mansur's unsheathed weapon but emphasised his impotence. His face was distorted as he slipped his sword into its scabbard.

He spoke hoarsely.

"A title is a pretty refuge for a coward. It would not serve such as I. Let us see if when Lord Burroughs challenges you, you'll answer *him* to the point."

Lord Yerington stood motionless. He did not move until the grinding of the gravel told him that his enemy had departed. Then he raised his hand and brushed beads of perspiration from his forehead. He had just recalled the terms of his wager with Lord Burroughs, entered in the betting-book at White's, where all the world might read. He had made the wager so lightly he had scarcely remembered it since, save once or twice in jest.

Our deeds we may forget, but their consequences possess a haunting and relentless vitality.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE LADY PHILIDA

I've been roaming, I've been roaming,
Where the meadow dew is sweet,
And I'm coming, and I'm coming,
With its pearls upon my feet.

—OLD ENGLISH SONG.

MARSDEN HALL had been for generations the dower house of the Marsdens. It was a many-gabled mansion, set in a hollow between two hills. The one definite indication of the present Duchess of Croome's occupation was what she termed her Italian garden. This garden was in fact a formal, flower-bedded plot of ground near the fore-court, abloom with many English blossoms, the only foreign flavour about it being its pergola.

For some years the duchess had occupied Marsden Hall with little satisfaction to herself, for the duke had not made her generous settlements, and had, in fact, not cut up so rich as she had hoped. She sustained herself with what philosophy she might, by means of a voluminous correspondence with her town cronies, and kept her fashions up to date by the assistance of the *Ladies' Magazine*.

For years she had been putting aside every penny she could spare against the time that the niece whom she adopted should be taken up to London. At moments she was tempted to think, or at least to say, that Lady Philida's complete contentment with her country surroundings was somewhat *bourgeois*. She occasionally complained of this to Horace Walpole, who rather affected her society.

She had a liberal supply of anecdotes of the First George, not always of the most delicate character, and so pithy a manner of delivering them that he found her a diverting companion.

"Lud, Horry," she once said to him, "if we don't succeed between us in getting some ideas into the child's head beyond rheumatic old women and dirty babies and the pity of poor harvests, I protest I can do nothing with her. And yet she is bewitching chit, and would make the town wild, could we put but a little more languish into her glance and frivolity into her heart. We both know that too much virtue of a homely quality goes more against a girl in town than a squint."

The dew was still on the grass, when Lady Philida came running through the apple orchard, swinging her hat by the ribands, and singing the ditty popular in that day, but out of tune with her aunt's precepts:

"Art thou poor, yet hast thou golden slumbers?
O sweet content!
Art thou rich, yet is thy mind perplex?
O punishment!
Dost thou laugh to see how fools are vex
To add to golden numbers, golden numbers?
O sweet content! O sweet, O sweet content!
Work apace, apace, apace, apace;
Honest labour bears a lovely face;
Then hey nonny nonny, hey nonny nonny!"

Mr. Walpole, who had been treating himself to a rare morning ramble, stepped from behind a hedge and swept off his hat to her.

She paused, laughing, her cheeks as pink as her gown, her eyes shining, and a tiny drop of dew lurking here and there upon her curls. She was the very incarnation of youth and a young world.

"Ah, Lady Philida," said Mr. Walpole, shaking his

finger archly at her. "Still harping on the old note, and London but a few months away? 'Pon honour, your aunt has told me in all seriousness that if between us we don't convert you to a consideration of patches and brocades, you'll scarce be ready for the world of St. James's and the manage of your hoop at a levée."

"Lud, Mr. Walpole," she answered, "now you are going to tell me more of your horrid world, and its tortured pinned-up smiles. What in smoky London could you give me to equal this beautiful morning?"

"Nothing like it, I'll admit," answered Mr. Walpole, stepping along beside her, "but to equal it—this is a matter of opinion."

"But I love the country," she responded ardently, for the topic was not a new one to her, and she recognised in her companion one of the duchess' outposts.

"So do I love the country," responded Mr. Walpole.

"But, believe me, its bucolic charms may wane. Then 'tis the town we want, the friction of the wits, the *mode*. Believe me, Lady Philida, to eat a syllabub in your sweet country in a tamboured waistcoat of last year's pattern would have a serious effect upon my digestion."

The girl's frank laugh rang out.

"'Tis no laughing matter," he said, "for you must learn to bear yourself as becomes your station. That pink frock of yours, beautiful as an apple-blossom here in the orchard, would be out of place at St. James's."

"But I don't like St. James's," she responded, "and the ugly little round king, and the great flaunting ladies to make one shiver with their stare, and the silly beaux with their flourishes."

She swept a deep one in imitation.

He looked at her with more seriousness.

"I like not the rôle of grandsire, Lady Philida," he

said, "and, faith, I'm but a shallow creature, but may I venture upon a few suggestions?"

Perceiving the kindness of his purpose, she answered with a meekness that was only half feigned.

"I'm ready, Mr. Walpole, but indeed, forgive me, if I do not promise conversion."

"There is nothing of which the world is so impatient, as of excellence," began Mr. Walpole, "not the excellence of a nondescript order, but the excellence that builds altars to itself and carves inscriptions round the base."

"I don't like those square-built people myself," responded the girl.

Encouraged, Mr. Walpole continued, with an airy gesture of his hands.

"There are some virtues so ungentle, certain strange properties known as good qualities, which mark one as belonging to that nether region where there is no *ton*, —a dark borderland, where people say what they think without the polite circumlocution of society; where they wear their emotions wrong side out; where they do nothing that they like and everything that they don't like, and call it being virtuous."

"Methinks, Mr. Walpole," answered Lady Philida, "that real virtue is ever an unspeaking quality."

Mr. Walpole smiled at her benignantly, shaking his ruffles back from his wrist as he took out his snuff-box.

"Right, my dear child," he answered; "but believe me, too much *naïveté* in the town is as disconcerting as an ever newly-painted bench. People would avoid you, for the fear of carrying off somewhat of the commodity. You must put powder and patches upon your very opinions. There is nothing so indelicate as the naked truth."

"Think you they'd know the truth if they saw it?"

Methinks if it goes to town it goes in mask and domino and comes not over often in the light."

Mr. Walpole shook his head at her.

"Ah, now you're jesting, Lady Philida," he said. "But I vow, if you would be popular, you must be charmingly insincere and discreetly artificial. Put *Louis Quatorze* heels upon your heart, and learn to dance to the world's piping."

The girl peered round at him archly from under her curls.

"Oh, lud, Mr. Walpole, and what am I to believe of you? As I came through the orchard this morning I happened on a paper of scribbled verses. I read them, not knowing to whom to attribute them, and it was only later that methought I detected your hand."

"My dear lady," protested Mr. Walpole in some embarrassment; "me as a poet, I vow the thought is absurd. Prithee, give them to me."

"Nay, nay," laughed Lady Philida, dancing ahead of him out of his reach, "methinks if you do not know them, then you will hear them with a better appetite, for poets are ever modest."

And to the little gentleman's dismay she read them, giving an exaggerated lilt to the lines.

"Of sylvan charm and rustic grace
My Chloe!
Ne'er was fashioned fairer face,
My Chloe!
Phœbus amorous glance he threw
O'er meadows dreaming still in dew,
And stole whole moments from the night
To earlier set thy beauty light,
My Chloe!

"The lowing kine well love thy call,
My Chloe!
'Twould woo an anchorite to his fall,
My Chloe!

Let wine-breathed vows that false lips utter
Toast powder and patches, fans aflutter!
A syllabub I'll quaff to thee,
Goddess of chaste simplicity,
My Chloe!"

"Now," ended Lady Philida, looking up at him archly, "if you really had written those lines, Mr. Walpole, think how inconsistent you would be appearing at this moment."

Mr. Walpole helped himself to a pinch of snuff with an air of discomposure.

"Faith, what poet is ever governed by his muse? The most rapturous praises of dew-bejewelled pastures have been writ from a filthy attic in Grub Street. As for this Chloe," he ended with a shudder, "I'm sure her hands were red."

These were not the last words of counsel upon this topic which Lady Philida was to receive that day.

An hour later she was seated in the morning-room. This white panelled apartment was a cosy place, filled with blue and white china, from which breathed an odour of spiced rose-leaves. The chairs were comfortable; there were several embroidered screens to shut off possible draughts. The sun, when it shone, cast full-hearted beams through the broad many-paned windows, which were only sheltered by thin white curtains drawn wide, and without the window nodded crimson, heavy-headed roses.

Two King Charles spaniels nozzled saucy noses down upon black tan-flecked paws and cast loving glances upon their mistress, who was seated before the window. Sometimes she spoke to them, but oftener she gazed out wistfully across the tessellated terrace with its bordering stone balustrade, to the blue sky beyond. It was a perfect day, and the green world was calling to her, and here she was

tied to her tiresome embroidery frame, doing a simpering shepherdess in cross-stitch. Truth to tell, the shepherdess endured many trials, and there was much counting and recounting of stitches and unpicking of her rosy face as it progressed.

Lady Philida's black shoes, laced about her ankles with black ribands, were set primly upon a tabouret, and traces of mud upon them betrayed her early walk. Of this she was unconscious as she stitched away at the long-suffering shepherdess.

The duchess sat in a large chair before the hearth, sipping her morning chocolate, her tortoise-shell handled staff close beside her. Her active, if somewhat corpulent figure had no need of this assistance. To the duchess it was more a moral support to her dignity, an adjunct to her authority, than a supplement to qualities less abstract.

"'Tis now a full hour, aunt, since you said you had something to tell me," said Lady Philida coaxingly.

"What's this, what's this?" cried the duchess. "In my day young misses waited as they should until 'twas the pleasure of their elders to speak. Pretty manners these!"

A dimple danced in Lady Philida's cheek.

"Nay, madam, I thought it was your pleasure to know I waited upon you."

"The impudent baggage," responded the duchess, sipping her chocolate with an air of mystery. "I would seal up, if but to punish thee."

"Imp," said Lady Philida, addressing one of the King Charles spaniels, "don't be impatient, my dear, or I'll box your naughty ears. 'Tis monstrous bad manners."

The duchess laughed, for she knew it was her own spoiling that spoke in the wilful shake of the girl's head, as she addressed the dog.

"La, child," she said, indulgently; "I've as pretty a tale for you directly Dorkins has removed these cups, as any you have listened to," and she gave the bell-rope a pull.

"And now," she said, after the man had disappeared with the tray, speaking with her hands upon the arms of her chair, "I'll be sworn you can never guess my news."

"I confess I haven't an idea, and I've been cudgelling my brains for an hour," said Lady Philida.

"What say you to a visit from our graceless neighbour, Lord Yerington, deserter that he is? He has actually accepted the invitation of which I told you, though he could scarce forbear, considering the intimacy of the families. Is not that good news in a neighbourhood like this, where there are not a dozen families within driving distance, save hunting squires, with the manners of hostlers?"

Lady Philida bent her head low over her embroidery. When she looked up, her needle poised over her work, her head on one side, apparently absorbed in her handicraft, her cheeks were a few shades deeper in their tinge.

"La," she said indifferently, "a conceited town beau, I'll go bail, a brainless fop, who minces in his walk like a lady, and shudders, I'll venture, at the sight of a two-barred gate on a frosty November morning. I wonder, ma'am, if his manners are so bad that he comes to pay his respects at all."

"Hoity-toity," exclaimed the duchess, "Yerington shudder at two bars? What a jest! There is no more dare-devil rider in the county."

"Then a roystering bully, I suppose, whose French tailor cannot turn a bear into a man. It takes more than a fortune and a title to make such an one a gentleman."

The duchess' staff tapped the floor smartly.

"You pert little minx," she ejaculated, "so to miscry

my old friend's son. A handsomer, braver gentleman does not exist. They are a courtly and a dashing race. If they are overfond at times of their glass and their cards, would you be such a prig as to hold that up against a gentleman? And 'tis well known that a woman hath ever had power to cure them of that."

Lady Philida's falling curls obscured her profile.

"A woman?" she repeated. "What woman, then, could so control Lord Yerington?"

The duchess looked long and lovingly at the slight girl's figure outlined against the window.

"I'll be bound a wife could do it. It has always been so with the Gowers. Wilful and headstrong, throwing themselves, soul as well as body into each venture, but loyal husbands, even if a little wild at times. If I did not know this, I'd see thee hanged first."

Lady Philida's needle dropped from her fingers.

"What do you mean, ma'am?" she queried, her face crimson.

"Lud!" said the duchess, a little taken aback by her own indiscretion. "That madcap tongue has run away with me, and 'tis the cart before the horse again, for that comes second in my news. Such romantic, silly schoolgirls as yourself fancy that all of life lies in a pretty face and a roguish eye. A day at Court would teach thee better. This hard old world is all exchange, not give. That sentimental rubbish comes but in silly love tales. Be a girl ever so fair, would she gain a rich and noble husband, she must be dowered with something more substantial than her beauty."

Lady Philida had regained her needle, and her fingers felt more than one sharp prick as with eyes that did not see, she absently continued her cross-stitch.

"Then am I doomed to spinsterhood," she said, "or at best to wed a country booby squire and to ride pillion

to church of a Sunday in my best tabby, with a head two years behind the mode?"

This picture so amused the duchess that she laughed until the tears came, while her niece continued her embroidery with an air of mock despair.

"Oh, lud, lud, I've not been so diverted this twelve month," the duchess gasped. "And is this your future, my pet?"

Lady Philida set her lips, and her face grew serious.

"I would rather die a spinster and be epitaphed with full eighty years to my account, than to know that I must bring my husband an ample fortune before he would consider of me. If such a one came a-courting, and I was not the penniless maid I am, I would curtsy low and say, 'Prithee, your lordship, go make your compliments to my bank account. It may not blush for you and smile for you, but no more will I, sir; for 'tis it you love, and not my poor self, which am poor—poorer that this same bank account hath stole the possibility of honest love from me.'"

The duchess shook her *fontange* reproachfully.

"The same tune, child, ever the same tune. If I had not this precious news up my sleeve, I vow I'd box your ears for you. Thank the Lord, I had a longer head, and when the dotting old duke asked my hand, I threw over a dozen of less rank and fortune for him."

"And were you happy?" queried the girl, in a low voice, wondering at her own boldness.

"Happy," echoed the duchess triumphantly; "happy I was, putting older women who had lifted eyebrows at my birthday gowns where I had always longed to put them. 'Twas power I wanted, and I had it. I tell you, child, wounded vanity has ever a keener smart and lingers longer in the memory than this pretty cant of love. A shrug or a sneer had ever more power to

wound me than a reproach that you would say I deserved, you little prig. Happy! La, I was happy, and I mourned Croome as if he had been a gallant of thirty, though truth to tell," she added thoughtfully, "I'll confess he had a length of life in him I'd scarce have guessed at when I married him."

Lady Philida leaned further over her frame. Her aunt's casual references to the late duke always moved her to laughter, that kept her on the rack when he was mentioned. The duchess' unromantic philosophy lost somewhat of its acrid tone in her prevailing kindness.

"Now, I conjure thee, girl," she went on, leaning earnestly forward, "I can give thee the rules of St. James's in a twinkling, and do you but heed them, you'll never give the nasty hussies of the Court an opening."

She emphasised each rule as she spoke it by an impressive tap of her stick.

"Take care of your manners and you'll give your morals steady legs to travel on. If you have a pretty wit, hide it as if it were a sin, save to revenge thyself on women, or to appreciate the men. Suffer the agonies of the damned with a smiling face, but let no scandal touch thee; rather than that forego, lie, live like a nun—ever remember that a woman spotted is a woman spoiled. Her worst enemy could not point a spicy anecdote with Mary, Duchess of Croome, and if she had her black days, she had them alone."

A look of iron resolution settled upon the duchess' face.

Lady Philida read a new phase in her, one with which she was not familiar. She saw for the first time her almost morbid dread of a breath of scandal, a quality which was to have an indelible influence upon her own life.

The duchess went on:

"'Tis not so much to be fair favoured, as to bear

yourself to command homage, to claim it by your sweep. Never snub a young girl, because you never know whom she may marry. Beware of mawkish sentiment, for life is not all barley-sugar and compliments. Love in the country on a thousand a year means early grey hairs and ten children. Love may die at best, then see to it that you have a palace to coffer it in, for there at least you need not sit over often with the corpse. Penniless beauty and worth will languish in a corner while plainness and a dowry lead in the dance. Take care, then, if you have both, that you reign with a will, for life is a niggard, and pays only what we ourselves exact of it. Have you taken all that to heart, child?"

Philida crossed her arms upon the embroidery-frame, and smiled over it at the duchess, whose impressive hands were still upon the staff.

"Ah, aunt," she exclaimed, tenderly, "why does the kindest heart in the world choose to disguise itself thus? What would this niece of yours have done, if you, in your charity, had not taken her in, portionless and orphaned?"

The duchess took a pinch of snuff.

"Tut, I could have done no less for the credit of the family. And, faith, your baby fingers had a cling to them that went to a heart hungry for little ones that never came. Yet I have nought to give you, save love, for Croome tied up his money after a scurvy fashion."

Lady Philida coloured.

"'Twas his, dear aunt, to deal with as he chose," she pleaded.

This subject was painful to her.

"La, you little fool, 'twas abominable of Croome, and none but such a baby as yourself would deny it."

The duchess took another pinch out of her gold-chased snuff-box, smiling to herself as she did so.



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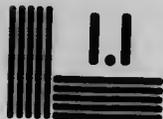
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"Fate, the jade," she said in a ruminating tone, "hath a pretty humour of her own. She has crossed you twice. First there was your father. Charlie Wentworth had his ways and he followed them, despite any advice of mine. Show him some foolish, babbling fellow, with some story of a wrong, and down went his hand into his pocket. Show him a penniless widow with babes and he robbed his own to succour them. He had much to answer for. He brought about himself a colony of people who traded on his credulity, and he has left you, as you know, with nothing more than an annuity that would scarce serve a parson's daughter."

Lady Philida was struggling with her tears. This story never failed to wound her.

"And I love him for his kind heart," she said with spirit.

"Hoity-toity, had your aunt not had a longer head, where would you be now, pray? The second time Fate crossed your fortune was when the duke died with his money tied round with hard knots to keep it from my family. 'A wastrel lot,' he called them."

She had come to the pith of her news, and she leaned back now, thoroughly enjoying herself.

"After all, Charles Wentworth, fifth Earl of Chedley, had builded better than he knew and some of the bread he had cast upon the waters was to return after many days. Come, child, sit here beside me and I'll give you my news."

Her mood was softer now and, as the girl seated herself on a low stool beside her, she stroked her hair with tender fingers.

"Had he seen you, I'd scarce have wondered, but it was for Charlie that he did it. That was well and surprising, too. All my days I've seen rank weeds of ingratitude spring where generosity has sown."

"Ah," answered her niece, her face brightening, "see how much warmer is the heart of the world than you believe!"

The duchess proceeded thoughtfully.

"One day a hungry boy came beneath your father's notice. He was ever a haunter of book-stalls. He was enjoying himself in one, nosing into volume after volume, as was his fashion, when his attention was attracted by the high voice of the bookseller, who was about to eject a lad who had crept in to steal a glance at some old classics. Your father marked the boy, pale and thin, as he shrank away, and questioned him. He learned that he was the son of a schoolmaster and that this youth, Obediah Hayworth, was orphaned and had been apprenticed to a shoemaker, but what touched your father most was that he was starving, not so much for food as learning. 'Twas ever thus with Charles. His heart and his pocket worked by a common spring. Touch the one and you opened the other. So he set to work to buy him off from the shoemaker, sent him to school, afterward to college and then, with a small sum in his pocket, shipped him to the Indies."

"Yes, yes," urged the girl, all eyes and ears, for all tales of her father and of his kindnesses were honey to her.

"Nothing more was heard of him, and all this went, we thought, but to swell the lists of benefits forgot. Your father always bore these patiently and said that good intentions blossomed somewhere, even if we never saw the harvest. I confess I've often mocked at this, but this Obediah Hayworth seems to prove that he was not always altogether wrong. Only this morning, and this is my rare titbit, I received a letter from a solicitor in London, a Mr. Crookshanks, and one I know well by reputation. This Obediah Hayworth, he told me, was

dead. He had had a strange career—been taken by pirates, enslaved, and I know not what besides; enough, at all events to account for his silence; but when he died, as the result of his dealing with the Indians, what with his mines and his ships, his fortune was one to dazzle even me, and I can take a vast one without a wink.”

“But prithee, where do I come in?” asked the girl.

“That, my dear, is the point of the whole matter. He has made you his heiress. Every guinea goes to you, the daughter of his benefactor.”

The duchess’ face was crimson with excitement. She leaned forward and lightly struck her niece on the shoulder with her staff.

“Rise, Lady Philida Wentworth, one of the richest heiresses in England!”

But Lady Philida did not rise. She sat looking at her aunt as if she could not credit her ears. Then, as the truth took possession of her, a shadow fell across her face, darkening into protest.

“I won’t have it,” she exclaimed vehemently, with a movement as if she pushed something from her. “You must not make me take it. Let us do something, give it to the poor, anything. I won’t, won’t have it.”

Her aunt’s hand was laid heavily on her shoulder.

“Horn mad,” she exclaimed, “as mad as your father! Ever this cry of the poor. What does it mean?”

The girl was now upon her feet wringing her hands passionately.

“It means my whole happiness,” she cried, a sob in her voice. “I haven’t meant to deceive you, because I thought that you’d be happy and proud too if you knew. I wanted him to love me, if love me he would, without title, without money, just as a simple country girl. At first I persisted because it was pride, and I was determined he should treat me as he should, because I was I

—a woman. And afterward the game grew dear to me." She was catching her breath over the words in her excitement, in her regret at the tender secret which was her own no longer.

The duchess had risen, forgetful of her staff, in anger, rooted in fear.

"Good God!" she ejaculated, "this comes of your romantic notions and your racing over the countryside like a peasant. I knew that no good would come of it. What have you been doing? Who is the villain?"

She took her niece by the shoulders and shook her violently.

Though Lady Philida could not at once check her sobs, she still had the spirit to struggle for control.

"He is no villain, ma'am," she said, the words coming muffled through her handkerchief. "You yourself have cried him up to me."

"I?" protested the duchess, "never! A low, skulking villain. Name him, miss. I swear I'll shut you up on bread and water until I starve this nonsense from your silly head."

"I cannot see," came breathlessly from behind the handkerchief, "why he was so brave a man, so pretty a gentleman, so bold a rider but a few moments since, and now because I tell you—I tell you—because——"

The words would not come.

"Heaven grant me patience," said the duchess between her teeth. "*Who is he?*"

"Lord Yerington," gasped the girl in an agony of shyness.

This was followed by so complete a silence that Lady Philida grew frightened and looked up. The duchess, who for a few seconds had stood frozen with amazement, now collapsed into a chair and gazed at her niece with a sort of helpless indignation.

"Oh, you booby, you country simpleton," she said. "Have you been going about by stealth with this Lord Yerington? And I thought I guarded thee. Is there then no special providence for fools? Come here. This is too serious for hide-and-seek. Tell me how it came about. How did you meet him?"

Bewildered and frightened by the seriousness of the duchess' face, for the first time, too, realising that her conduct, which appeared so natural to her, so inevitable and right, might perchance be open to another interpretation, Lady Philida willingly complied.

"'Twas first in London," she began.

"In London," echoed the duchess, "so far back as London, heaven 'fend us. And——"

"Michael Culpepper was 'l."

"Ah," said the duchess, with a long-drawn breath and a grim smile. "That mad foster-mother of yours and her madder son. I could have sworn she was at the bottom of this."

"If you are angry with her, ma'am," cried Philida, "'twill break my heart. Promise me you will not be angry with her."

"I'll promise nothing until I know the truth," said the duchess; "but oh, the round-faced, meek-eyed, gentle, timid women!" Her hand tightened vengefully upon her staff. "As sly as the devil, and as obstinate as a Scot. I know the tribe. Go on, girl!"

"Michael would neither eat nor sleep. Believe me, he was dying, ma'am. Mistress Culpepper was distraught with grief and entreated me to go to him. I seemed to have more control over him than any other."

The duchess shut her eyes and swayed gently as she spoke.

"A presumptuous madman who dares to lift his eyes. Life has been cruel to him, for it has given him genius

and a heart. I am grateful at this point for your simplicity. Say on."

"She thought—we both thought—that you would forbid it."

"Which I certainly should have," interrupted the duchess.

"And so I borrowed my waiting-woman's clothes! Remember, it was life or death."

"And he did not die," said the duchess with a falling inflection of finality.

"No," assented Philida.

Bit by bit the whole tale was told with pauses and intervals of incoherence, when the words were mingled with sobs. Through the entire recital it was pardon for Mrs. Culpepper that the girl besought.

When she had finished, she buried her face in the duchess' lap. After an interval, with a feeling of inexpressible relief, she was conscious of the stroke of her aunt's hand upon her head. More than once, as her niece had spoken, and when her eyes were not upon her face, the duchess had smiled.

"Well," she said at length, "his lordship comes to-day. If in the past you have forgot yourself, see to it that you are not too lightly won. Henceforth I'll have my eyes upon you."

Lady Philida looked up, not over well pleased with the last hint, but she thought now was her time to make terms if ever.

"I'll warrant you I led him a dance," she said, tossing her head. "But promise me, aunt, promise me now, that you'll say nought of this fortune until—well, for the present."

The duchess regarded her judicially, then suddenly she burst into low gurgles of laughter.

"Well, girl, I'll promise thee as long as things go

well and I see no need to urge affairs. I'll suppress the news. It will come with such *éclat* afterward to think you won him without a penny. It would set the town in a roar."

She smiled, looking before her thoughtfully. Across her mental vision passed a procession of her old cronies. She saw the Duchess of Marlborough, her Grace of Queensberry. What a *cachet* it would give her niece if she first captured this young peer about whom half the women of London were mad, before knowledge of her fortune came to the public ears! She grew more and more enamoured of the idea.

"A mourning ring will suffice for Obediah," she said thoughtfully, compromising with her conscience, as to any respect due to the deceased Mr. Hayworth.

Then she remembered Fleet Street, and shuddered for the girl within her arms. She recalled her stolen interviews with Lord Yerington.

"Oh, the baby," she crooned, with a tremor in her voice, "the little innocent baby. God bless and keep thee, my darling."

CHAPTER XIX

LORD YERINGTON REVIEWS HIS OBLIGATIONS

Came Melancholy to my side one day,
And said, "I must a little bide with thee;"
And brought along with her in company
Sorrow and Wrath.

—DANTE.

LORD YERINGTON sought the library. It was a shadowy apartment, pervaded by the odours of parchment and leather. He knew that in the carved Elizabethan escritoire he kept three things of which at that moment he was in need: his brace of pistols and his morocco-covered account-book.

He seated himself where the light fell across his shoulder, striking upon his hair and causing the red of his riding-coat to show a spot of vivid colour in the sombre room. He was soon lost in calculations to which he bent his mind with determination. He was going over his accounts. First, there came a list of pictures he had recently purchased and for which he had not yet settled. The mockery of paying before his death for a rare and costly collection that must be scattered after it, was whimsical. The list went on; a tapestry of Flemish weave, wrought from cartoons of Raphael's own, and intended for the dining-room at Grangely House. He ran his finger down various items—bits of precious china, porcelains of Japan, a new gilt coach, eight hunters he had bought upon recommendation and had not yet ridden; a long list of jewelled trifles, rings, brooches, buckles, miniature-frames and snuff-boxes. There were cameos and intaglios which he intended to add to his already famous collection, ancient coins, for he had a

nice appreciation of numismatics, and kept an agent always in Italy commissioned to obtain him rare ones as they came to light in the desultory excavations. There were bills for lace ruffles from Paris or Brussels, and silk stockings from Lyons. There was endless mention of brocade, velvet or satin suits, embroidered, laced or plain. He summed up the amounts, and they represented a large figure, but trifling compared to the ones that were to follow them, for he now came to his gambling debts. They ran down the length of page after page of his book with the dainty gold crest on the back, and amid them most of the members of White's appeared again and again. It was a veritable roll-call of the wildest sparks in the town. Those debts, too, he counted and placed the total at the foot of each column. His wealth had been so invested as to make him independent of the income of his estates. He felt no surprise when at the end of his reckoning he realised that they were completely cancelled by his debts. Rather it gave him satisfaction that he would be able to make his exit even with the world. His sense of honour was rigid in such matters. He could pay all—even Burroughs.

He took a pistol from the case where it had lain in its bed of purple velvet, and examined it. It was primed and loaded. Only the morning before he and Captain Elliot had had an hour of pistol practice. All this he did without hurry, concentrating his mind upon each detail. He was holding his thoughts resolutely in check. Once he gave them play, he dared not think how far they might carry him. It was too late to regret. He could not retrieve.

By his code, no course but suicide was open to him. Lord Mountford's way was the usual one chosen by noblemen of that period. Mr. Mansur had well said "An escutcheon is an awkward thing if you have not

wherein to house it." His wager alone, however, was sufficient to make him turn over the pistol and examine it. Had Lord Yerington won, Lord Burroughs' choice would have been between handing over to him half of his fortune or, failing to do so, to have foregone all contact with his equals. In short, to have become a social pariah. A false code it was, but none the less binding because of that.

Now came the inevitable pause which he had dreaded.

For the first time that morning an expression of uncontrollable pain convulsed his face. Upon the *escritoire* lay a letter he had begun to Marjorie. The sight of it, for a moment, wrung the power of action from him. With an effort, he drew the paper toward him. In this position he hesitated with it in his fingers fighting for strength to destroy it. He knew, if he read it, that the wall of misery that he was holding back from himself would rush in and overwhelm him. He rose and paced the floor in an agony of increasing agitation. Marjorie's face danced before his vision. Look where he might, he saw her and, if he closed his eyes, she still was there. He beheld her as he had first seen her, and then running on through her varying moods, laughing, reproachful, arch, or with her bewitching touch of *hauteur*, that so quickly vanished. An inexpressible longing seized him, just to see her, to touch her before he went out into the dark. This became so frantic, that he threw wide his arms and shut his lips upon a cry. He mastered himself and returned to the *escritoire*. He tore his letter to Marjorie into shreds. The temptation to write her a good-bye was strong upon him, but he resisted it. He told himself that if some girlish love for him had found a place in her heart, it would heal the quicker if he went in silence. The sooner she forgot the ruined profligate and suicide, the better.

He began an epistle to Captain Elliot. It ran:

"DEAR ELLIOT:

"Burroughs has won and I am ruined. Mansur has just brought me the glad tidings."

Here his pen wavered uncertainly over the paper. If he informed Elliot of Mansur's share in the affair, it would mean, despite the flimsy promise given him, a duel. He knew Mansur's skill with the small sword and he believed that Hugh would have little chance against him. He wrote on:

"You know the terms of my wager, and the forfeit. I've been a fool and I must pay with what is left of me. You would do the same, were you in my place.

"See that my debts are settled. You'll find a list of them in the brown morocco book. You and Crookshanks must manage this between you. The estates will cover them, I think.

"Good-bye, dear Hugh. Had I followed your advice, my end might have come after another fashion.

"Give my miniature framed in brilliants to Mistress Marjorie, niece to Mrs. Culpepper, of the Royal Arms. Tell her—No! tell her nothing, save that it is the gift of one who honoured and renounced her.

"YERINGTON."

The words came bravely off his pen, but once they were set down, he could write no more. He bowed his head upon his arms, folded upon the *escritoire*, and dry, tearless sobs choked him. Had Mansur known it, he had chosen for his *coup* the moment in all Lord Yerington's days which wrung into it the last drop of bitterness. Death he had faced more than once with a laugh, and to-day he would have met it with reasonable courage, but it now came to him just as life was promising a beginning. In his anguish he clung to the carved wood about the *escritoire*. He was wrung to his depths by the vain longing that possessed him.

The emotion that he had been holding in check with

grim resolution, once admitted, surged on. Close upon the heels of his love and his despair, came another sensation. A raucous hatred arose within him against the man who had brought this upon him. It raged through him, vexing him to madness. He strode up and down the room, gnawing his nails. The refuse of his nature, which had not hitherto been consciously a part of him, floated to the surface. The longing for revenge drummed in his ears. He called himself a coward, a miserable, puling coward, not for the meditated suicide, but that he should have considered it and bent his mind to it, to leave his enemy in the triumphant possession of the very spoils for which he had plotted. His heart leapt as he remembered that his wager with Lord Burroughs had not included a period within which he was to destroy himself. So insidious and rapid is the spread of evil that in his hatred of Mansur, he was beginning to incorporate a quality independent of it, almost opposed to it—a detestation of his own world. No man is so suspicious as a trusting man who has been deceived. His faiths fell about him. What were they all, Selwyn, Williams and Walpole—he recalled a dozen of his boon companions—but sycophants, men who supported his society for what it meant to them: his prodigal hospitality, the nonchalance with which he lost to them, the prestige of his name, and fortune? All his life he had scarcely given these considerations a thought; now he realised the significance they might possess for others, only to despise those who valued them.

He continued his disordered walk to and fro, flinging the furniture carelessly to right and left as he did so.

“Die,” he thought, “not yet.” And Mansur! How was he to be revenged on Mansur? Expose him he could not, while he possessed those letters to contradict what he, Yerington, might say. Injure him, he might, but

in a poor, weak, insufficient way. He would but find himself involved in womanish exchange of accusations and take his leave of life, when he did so, with a tarnished dignity.

His head was bent as he walked, his face concentrated. He was searching for a revenge that would wring Mansur's withers. Every suggestion that presented itself to him he dismissed as trifling and inadequate. In his excitement, it seemed to him that he was seeing situations with peculiar clearness; viewing things with a special accuracy, and fine sense of relevancy. Only when he should look back on those moments would he read them aright.

Suddenly his thoughts were arrested, and his walk halted by Captain Elliot's voice. He, who so seldom laughed, was laughing heartily. The grotesque incongruity of his merriment was not lost upon Yerington. As the Captain burst unceremoniously into the library, he held up an involuntary hand to restrain him. The young soldier, however, was too absorbed to notice the gesture, and threw himself into a chair, where he continued to laugh with many slappings of his thigh.

Backing up against a tall chair, Lord Yerington stood watching his friend's transports. The tragic situation in which he stood so isolated him that Elliot seemed almost a stranger.

"Oh, 'tis the very prince of jokes," gasped the Captain at length, "can you believe it? A miracle has happened, Harry, a miracle! Mansur is—in love."

"In love," echoed Yerington meaninglessly.

"Yes, damme," cried Elliot. "Your sawdust man, your red-lipped, black-haired, wooden man. Burn me, he hath a heart! I'll be bound, I gave him credit for possessing only a stomach, and a dirty, scheming brain."

"A heart," repeated Yerington.

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"Yes, and they tell me it hath passed into the possession of the pretty Lady Philida, the Duchess of Croome's niece."

"Another damned piece of acting," said Yerington, scarce above a whisper.

"What?" exclaimed the Captain. "This from you, Hal! Sits the wind now in that corner? Yesterday I would have said 'ay' to that, but, indeed, this tale runs like the truth."

"How came you by the news?" asked Yerington, without changing his position.

"In the stables. I was examining Pharaoh's sprain. They did not suspect that I was near, or it may be that their tongues would have clacked less glibly. Though, faith, Foulkes had given his postilions enough strong beer to float a two-deck man-o'-war, and their discretion was far below water-line. 'Twould have diverted you to hear how pat they had his qualities and how much they knew—when the distemper had seized him, how he had planned a farce rescue from highwaymen to force his acquaintance upon her. Do you recall those rascals we met in Warwickshire? Egad, that was after his method, sure."

"All this means nothing," objected his friend.

A hope was dawning within Yerington. Here might lie his revenge. But the very desire he felt to believe Captain Elliot's words made him fear to accept them.

"'Tis easy to love a fair lady near the great—and well-dowered."

"Lady Philida is portionless, as all the world knows," returned Elliot; "and he's clean daft about her. He scarce eats, and has lost a stone in weight. At night he steals out to pace about like a haunted man. Methinks he does not sit overmuch within the lady's liking and that his suit progresses but at a snail's pace."

Lord Yerington went abruptly to the mullioned window and looked down the wooded slopes of Oxholme to where the village lay in the valley. As he saw its thatched or slated roofs amidst their clustering green, his eyes were heavy with pain. His life, even were it granted to him now, would be a profitless thing, which he would not value at a farthing, if this love of his for Marjorie were to go uncrowned. It was by his own sense of loss and bitterness that he read Mansur's. If he loved this Lady Philida, here indeed was his vulnerable point.

To Lady Philida herself, he gave no second thought. She was of his world, and so condemned with it. Fair ladies' hearts were, he thought, but trifles, easily broken and as easily healed. When they were not treacherous and bad like Lady Caroline's, they were frivolous and light, like a dozen others he could name. He thrust all considerations of Lady Philida aside. In the perversion of insight that his passionate craving for revenge had induced in him, he did not for the time perceive that in so doing he had also brushed aside his own honour. But, nevertheless, he did not look toward the village with which the thought of Marjorie was associated, when he asked his next question.

"Can we trust this stable talk?"

Captain Elliot's laughter had ceased and something in his friend's persistence began to arrest his attention.

"Faith," he answered, "I can't furnish thee with a diagram of what degree of heart or head enters into this. But I do believe, did we but know, the portraits our servants sketch of us are more faithful than those painted in the withdrawing-room. We sit to them unconsciously, and have not studied our expressions in the hand-glass. As for this Mansur, I'll go bail Lady Philida can use his heart-strings as a lute and play on them

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what tune she fancies. 'Tis the fate one time or another of the worst brute of us all."

Taking up his whip, he sauntered, whistling, from the room.

Lord Yerington was left a prey to his thoughts.

CHAPTER XX

VANITY FAIR

Mit Woelfe ich bin gluecklich, heut
In euer Mitte zu weilen,
Wo so viel' edle Gemuether mir
Mit Liebe entgegen heulen.

—HEINE.

YERINGTON insisted upon walking the three miles to Marsden House. His mood of intense, if suppressed feeling, made the confinement of a chaise intolerable to him. More than once as Elliot swung along shoulder to shoulder with his friend, in a walk intemperate in its pace, he stole a surprised glance at him. Lord Yerington's mouth and chin were set in an expression of unfamiliar hardness.

"Egad," the Captain observed at length, "methinks the love-sick Mansur brought you news that has unleashed some devil in you. I vow I'd like not to meet empty pockets, a pistol and such an expression as you are wearing, on Bagshot Heath."

"Perhaps 'twere better that you did not, had I just staked my last guinea and lost," answered Lord Yerington. "A ruined gentleman hath the choice of a black mask and pistols on the Heaths, like Dick Harvey and Sir Giles, poor devils, or the shorter course which Mountford and Pland chose. Our blue-blooded fingers are too good for honest labour, and so we decide between villainy and death."

Elliot whistled to himself and turned the thought over in his practical head.

"Gad," he said, "you are right. Unless, perhaps, there might be offices within the King's preferment. Look at Walpole and Selwyn."

"Selwyn is popular, of family, and this came about by ways he wots of. As for Walpole,"—he snapped his fingers and laughed, "a Prime Minister's son need neither beg nor steal. For the others, we know who hold the King's preferments in their gaping, ugly Dutch pockets. Were I in bad case, I vow I'd rather starve than accept favours from such sources, even though I still had sufficient money to lose to them over cards, to coax forth a living. Gad's life, my stomach rises at the thought." He laughed abruptly.

"Methinks," he said, "honour hath as many faces as a Hindoo god. 'Tis a piebald, harlequin thing, into which we weave the colours of our own convenience. Yet at some grotesque, irrelevant consideration, it will stay our hand capriciously at this or that."

He stole a sidelong look at Captain Elliot.

"What say you to your friend as philosopher?" he asked.

"I like him vilely," answered Elliot, with a touch of grimness.

They continued their rapid walk in silence.

They did not enter by the great gate, but by a small door in a wall and thence across a sweep of lawns, to where the sharp Tudor gables of the house showed between the trees. They passed through a garden, lined by prim box-hedges, cut here and there into quaint shapes,—birds, or animals. Midway in their course stood a fountain; tiny streams played from the beaks of stone swans and within it goldfish glittered. Marsden House faced this garden.

Before it upon the terrace, a group of ladies and gentlemen was gathered. As Yerington perceived them, his

expression changed. For three weeks he had been a happy exile from Vanity Fair which he was about to re-enter. Behind him lay all that he valued—Majorie, and her courage, truthfulness and simplicity—before him his own world—glitter, polish, compliment, insincerity, vice that scarcely deigned to clothe itself in decent seeming. There they stood, he told himself savagely,—Walpole, fop, poseur, as empty as his polished phrases; Sir Geoffrey Baxter, a drunken fool; the duchess, hard and worldly, who had routed Sarah of Marlborough in more than one skirmish,—quick of wit, coarse of tongue, and who had sold her young life to a gouty, decrepit old peer and gloried in her bargain. He covered them all with the mantle of his condemnation. It stirred his acrid humour to consider how they would bow to him and court him, and to fancy how their smiles would fade and their looks grow absent at his approach, did they but know the case in which he stood. He would give these smiling hypocrites a run. He had the day before him, in which he meant to make these grinning puppets dance as he piped.

He exulted as he thought of Mansur.

As for this Lady Philida, whom he was to employ in his revenge, doubtless she was as the others, trained to deception from her cradle, an apt pupil of the worldly duchess.

Their hostess perceived their approach, and advanced to the top of the steps to receive them. She was an impressive figure in her towering head-dress, with her staff in her hand.

“Lud, Harry,” she called out to him, “I wonder you could find the way. I protest that a more graceless neighbour, a greater niggard of his precious time, I have never met.”

The two gentlemen were sweeping profound bows,

but she interrupted Yerington's gallant speeches and attempts at defence.

"No, no," she exclaimed, "no compliments. Perjure yourself, for perjure themselves men will, but don't waste your soul's welfare upon me, for I shall not believe a syllable."

"Have I your forgiveness, your grace, if I mend my ways?" asked Yerington.

"La, you hypocrite," cried the duchess, stabbing at him with her staff, "I'll believe in your mending as you prove it. And there is your friend, Captain Elliot."

She turned a keen scrutiny upon that soldier.

"I hope, sir," she said, "that your coat is the colour of your courage when you face the enemy and not the colour of your narratives when you tell of your engagements."

"Faith, your grace," answered Captain Elliott, "'tis more the colour of my cheeks when I greet a lady."

"You'll do," said the duchess approvingly. "I love a soldier when he is brave of heart and of modest mien. 'Tis a pity that the Scot speaks over plainly in your face."

"'Tis a matter in which I had not the choosing," answered the Captain, with exemplary meekness, for he had a fierce love of his braes and mountains.

"I'll not gainsay you," she said. "I'll go bail, had we all the choosing we'd be born of English fathers and fair mothers."

Walpole approached, waving them an airy greeting.

"Renegades from the court of beauty and wit," he cried; "Calibans who'd lurk in cavern darkness when paradise was breathing-space away! 'Pon honour, your crime carries its own punishment."

"How goes it with you, Walpole?" asked Lord Yerington.

"Of the best," answered that little gentleman, "I

set my watch by my gout. A twinge once a quarter of an hour, and a wind up in every joint on the hour. But 'tis but a *valse caprice*, and not the dead march that kept me chained at Strawberry Hill."

"He deserves it," said the duchess severely. "A man who denies himself honest English beef and port of '29!"

She noted Yerington's wandering eyes. They were observing a young girl clad in a white, lute-string gown, a broad Tuscan hat set upon her blond hair. She was engaged in an animated conversation with Sir Geoffrey Baxter. That young dandy was obviously well pleased with himself and his compliments. Their quality was well within Lord Yerington's knowledge, and he smiled cynically as he heard the damsel's bursts of appreciative laughter. If the dancing eyes beneath the Tuscan hat had noted his approach, they did not betray it by a glance. He dubbed her coquette before he had bowed his acknowledgment of the duchess' introduction. The laughing beauty's qualities he saw in outline, and these outlines of character he himself filled in with colours ground on the palette of his own experience.

"La, you saucy baggage!" the duchess exclaimed, "you'll spoil Sir Geoffrey. Let me present my neighbour, Lord Yerington. This, Harry, is Mistress Sybil Armytage, the saddest flirt in Christendom."

Mistress Sybil Armytage swept a low curtsy with a ravishing flash of her eyes at the tall man, who stood a little pale and plainly taken aback, after he had made her his flourish.

"But harmless, since I'm labelled," she said saucily with a little *roué*.

"But I understood your niece——" half stammered Yerington, turning to the duchess.

He had been pursuing his own thoughts, had been so

intent upon his purpose, that he was thrown off his guard and confused.

The duchess was mischievously amused when he came to a pause at a loss for a word.

Mistress Sybil's laugh was full of real enjoyment.

"La, my lord," she said, "you thought you'd see the sun, I'm only the poor, sickly moon, for which I humbly beg your pardon. The matter is quickly mended. Hither comes the central luminary."

She pointed a slender finger over his shoulder.

A conviction took possession of Lord Yerington that he was about to encounter Mansur, to meet together the pair associated in his scheme of retaliation. Hard and bitter he had been ever since he entered upon his resolve, but at this moment there arose within him a sense of fiercer antagonism. He turned, the foremost thought in his mind, not to face the lady, so laughingly pointed out to him, but his erstwhile friend.

Mr. Mansur could scarcely conceal his surprise at his presence. The calm, polished gentleman who had insulted him at Oxholme with so finished a grace, now revealed to him a face icily perfect in its control. He was conscious of a sudden tremor of something like fear. He had not expected this. He knew that peer's code and had counted upon it without question. He possessed the crowning requisite of a successful scoundrel, an apprehension of qualities in the men with whom he dealt, of which he himself did not possess the rudiments.

For an instant Lord Yerington held his gaze before he turned to the girl standing beside him.

The duchess was speaking, but he heard no syllable. He took an uncertain step forward. All the height and breadth and depth of his world had concentrated into the compass of one girl's face. She was looking at him with eyes half appealing, half expectant. He feared he

was losing hold upon himself. The thought flashed through his mind that he did not see aright and that he was reading one face into every woman's upon whom he gazed.

He turned towards the duchess.

"A thousand pardons, your grace, but I thought your niece——"

Again he was unable to continue. He was resolved not to look toward the spot where he thought his fancy had deceived him.

The duchess was persuaded that she read his evident chagrin aright and endeavoured to pass off the situation.

"Yes, 'tis Philida," she said. "When last you saw her she was but a child. But these children will grow to womanhood, much as we may wish to keep them babies. Come hither, you little minx, and make your bow to Lord Yerington."

Lady Philida approached and swept a low curtsy. She was filled with trepidation, her eyes mutely entreated him.

Lord Yerington looked, gave an apologetic laugh, and looked again. A conviction was growing upon him that was freezing the last remnants of his better nature.

Lady Philida and Majorie were one.

To assure himself he raised her hand to his lips. There was no mistaking its suppleness, nor its magnetic touch. As he straightened himself, he smiled at her from the surface of his eyes.

"Lady Philida, my compliments, indeed you've changed since last I saw you. Prithee, my dear duchess, accept my congratulations. Your niece will do honour to the Court. For the moment I thought I had seen her elsewhere. The Lady Philida, I hope, will pardon me," he turned to her with a courtly gesture, "when I explain that the maid for whom I mistook her is ex-

ceedingly fair. Though truth to tell, 'twas but a superficial resemblance." He raised his quizzing-glass, looked about him and took them all into his confidence, with an air of indolent candour. "For the maid I mention was but a simple country lass, as unlearned in the secret of many of Lady Philida's charms, I'll warrant, as the veriest booby."

The duchess flushed, and glanced an angry challenge at her niece, who stood the picture of dismay and bewilderment.

"A pretty mess you've made of it," her eyes telegraphed.

"My niece is a baby," she went on to Yerington, "a baby, if you will, but a baby for all that. A woman only, in that she is more given to controlling others than herself."

She turned aside, and began a conversation with the remaining guests. They had been on the tiptoe of curiosity, for the scene just enacted was mysterious, but they could not but fall into line when their tyrannical hostess cracked the conversational whip.

The duchess was not given to coercing her own moods. It was the last moment in which to leave the frightened and inexperienced girl unsupported. Discretion should have counselled her to assist Philida in her dilemma. But her temper was aroused and for the moment prudence was forgotten.

CHAPTER XXI

A GIRL'S HEART

Instead of oil and balm,
Thou lay'st in every gash that love hath given me
The knife that made it.

—SHAKESPEARE.

LORD YERINGTON stood looking down upon this girl, noting her conflicting emotions without an impulse of relenting. Her hands clasped and unclasped and the colour came and went in her cheeks. She could never have imagined Lord Yerington in the guise in which she now met him. She was untrained in all weapons with which to parry, save that of pride.

A few feet away, Mansur watched them furtively. He was seeking for a solution of the riddle. Until a glimmering knowledge came to him of the channel to which he had best confine himself, he chose silence. He was conscious that a power was dominating his life stronger than any which had hitherto entered it. This influence was struggling within him, threatening his self-control, and obscuring his nice judgment.

Yerington stood with his hat in his hand.

"Egad, your ladyship," he said, "but I owe you a thousand apologies. 'Pon my life I do. For whom, think you, I mistook you? Prithee, promise me in advance to forgive or I'd scarce have courage to tell you. 'Twas for simple Mistress Marjorie, the niece of Mistress Culpepper of the Royal Arms. 'Twas a scurvy blunder and one your ladyship would resent with reason."

Her spirit was overcoming her embarrassment.

"And why, my lord, should you apologise? Was not this maid, Mistress Marjorie, one who knew her own worth and dignity?" she asked.

Lord Yerington laughed, his eyes hard.

"Faith, she did," he answered lightly. "Like her sisters of another rank, she well knew how to draw a man on. Virtue and dignity in an innkeeper's niece! I cannot but laugh when I remember how well she played her cards. Truth to tell, your ladyship, I know such simplicity will divert you, but I was half distracted with such goodness in such a setting. Your ladyship will observe, that it was a very pastoral."

Lady Philida's fan snapped in her trembling fingers. The sound recalled vividly to Lord Yerington's mind a scene with another lady, a lady of virtuous poses, whom from his heart he had revered, until she threw away her disguise in a burst of passion. The action and the sound linked Philida more intimately with that moment of his disillusion. He had been befooled thrice where he most trusted, and he knew not how many times. It all read so clear in the exaggeration and shock, which had unseated his cooler judgment.

Philida looked back bravely into his cynical face.

"This Mistress Marjorie, I'm told," she said, "owes you a debt which no act of hers could wipe away, or balance. That consciousness she must carry to her grave. It would be sad, indeed, my lord, if you made that obligation, for which I doubt not she each day prays a blessing on your head, a burthen also."

Lord Yerington flippantly dangled his cane.

"Spud me, if I see the debt. That morning, if I mistake not the circumstance to which you refer, I went out in search of novelty. I had found the West End an awful bore. Faith, I was like to perish with sheer ennui."

He paused, tapping his shoe buckles with his cane, and did not see the growing sorrow and disillusion in Lady Philida's face as she listened.

"When in idleness I wandered up that narrow way and heard that cry for help, egad, I knew not what lay at the other end of the adventure, nor did I care. I was but seeking for something to stir my blood. I'd have fought the worst rogue unchanged, did it but give employment to my sword. Upon honour, I have to thank Mistress Marjorie for five minutes' *divertissement* with a swordsman I remember now with a leap of the heart. Would I could meet him again. That alone was worth two such mornings."

"And you had no thought of Mistress Marjorie?" she said, her voice thrilling with pain.

"Mistress Marjorie," he repeated, as if he recalled the memory with an effort; "I liked her well. She had a pretty spice of spirit. Egad, methinks we did not do badly in our meadow idyll."

"Oh," burst out the girl with flashing eyes. "You coxcomb! How dare you boast, sir, how dare you boast!"

She was twisting the broken sticks of her fan between her fingers, forgetting everything but her burning indignation.

Lord Yerington looked at her with a bold stare.

"Oh," he said slowly, "does the Lady Philida speak there, or is it Mistress Marjorie? I am but a poor male, who, though no saint himself, is still but a clumsy apprentice in these ladies' arts of impersonation."

"Your words are unworthy," cried Philida, her breast heaving. "I'm no such actress as you claim, and you know it well."

He spread his hands abroad affectedly.

"Prithee, fair lady, how am I to know, who am I to believe? *Par exemple*, who are you now? Marjorie"

—he bowed low—"or the Lady Philida?" He bowed lower.

All her pride was in arms. An increasing fear possessed her that she had already betrayed her heart to him. Her guiding impulse became a desire to blot out such an impression from his mind.

"The Lady Philida, an' please you, sir." She curtsied with a derisive flourish as deep as his own. "And she bids you 'commend her counterfeiting.'"

"Commend it I do," he answered gallantly, "I know but one fair dame who could have bettered it, and she counted more years to her credit than does your ladyship. Doubtless you will equal her in time."

"We are born to counterfeiting," said Lady Philida, with an air of gaiety, bent on her resolve of concealment.

"I protest I believe you," he answered, "and that but scarce twenty-four hours in town will instruct you in all the wiles, in which it may chance the country leaves you uninformed."

"La, sir," she said, with a toss of her curls to disguise her quivering lip, "we don't need the city for a schoolmaster. I can make my cheeses," and she swept him a deep one, "as well as if I had attended a dozen of the royal levées."

She was acting with a heart that pounded pitifully. Yerington swung his hat across his own, and they saluted one another, while Mansur stood puzzled.

Philida caught her breath sharply, for tears were threatening her. She feared each second they might fight above her pride. She had not the strength to parry with him longer. Involuntarily she turned to the group who conversed aside. The duchess looked up, reading danger in her niece's flushed face and eyes unnaturally bright.

"Sybil, my dear," exclaimed Philida lightly, "you're a baby for all your five seasons, and I'll prove it."

"Prove it," echoed the duchess in alarm; "you prove yourself a little ninny,—nothing more nor less. Hold your tongue!"

"Nay," cried Philida, "listen!"

To the duchess' speechless indignation, she captured her staff and assumed an air of authority, pursing up her lips, frowning, and flourishing the rod in so perfect an imitation of her aunt's manner that Mistress Sybil led the way in a burst of laughter. The others followed in spite of themselves and in wholesome fear of their hostess' displeasure.

"Now, I will give you the rules of St. James's in a twinkling," began Philida, tapping with the cane, and blowing out her cheeks. "Do you but follow them, and you'll never give those hussies at the Court an opening."

One by one they came glibly off her tongue, amid rounds of applause. She laid a special emphasis upon the words:

"My children, love will die at best, then see to it that you have a palace to coffer it in, and then you need not sit over often with the corpse."

"Her Grace of Queensberry to the life," gasped Walpole, tactfully seeking to trail a herring across the path that pointed towards the duchess.

That dame was divided between fury at her niece's audacity and a chuckle at her clever caricature, which she could not deny.

As Lady Philida stood before them a moment amid the clap of hands, but two observers read her aright. These were Captain Elliot and Mr. Mansur. To Sybil and Walpole she was a prankish girl bent upon a whim that diverted them. To the duchess she was a puzzle, and one she meant to catechise sharply later on. She knew she had spoiled the child, but she had never before indulged in so daring a flight as this. To Sir Geoffrey

she was a beautiful girl, whom it pleased him to watch without troubling his stupid head about attractions more potent.

To Lord Yerington's jaundiced view, rendered objective by his unsympathetic attitude, she was what she appeared to be, callous and shallow. But Captain Elliot noted her excitement, for which he saw no adequate cause, and he looked toward Yerington and frowned. Mansur had been puzzled by the conversation he had overheard, but having known Lady Philida in her disguise, he guessed at much and thought he saw an opportunity to widen the breach and revenge himself further upon Lord Yerington.

Philida did not possess the trained hardness with which to sustain the situation she had created. She felt her self-control beginning to go and resolved upon retreat, but contrived to make it an airy one. With a laugh, and a merry glance at her aunt, as if she knew how much she deserved punishment, and was in no mood to stay for it, she turned away with a toss of her head, played an imaginary tune upon the stone balustrade with her fingers, and walked off swinging her hat, the picture of wilful impenitence.

The irate duchess watched her go across the terrace, trip down the broad steps, and lose herself in the Italian garden, before she gained voice.

"Lud," she gasped, raising her hands, and not deigning to reach for the staff, which Philida had left out of easy grasping distance, "if she's like this here, the Lord knows what she'll be like in town."

She caught Sybil smothering a laugh, and turned to her wrathfully.

"This is your work, you impudent baggage, putting notions into the child's head."

Mr. Walpole poised upon his red-heeled shoes and

shook out a lace-bordered handkerchief that wafted far the scent of patchouli.

"Nay, duchess, I protest, these high spirits have a fascination that's all the Lady Philida's own, and all the young beaux of the town will be mad about her. What charm will those vapourish ladies have, patterned upon one another, against these pretty outbursts of Eve, as refreshing as the Garden of Eden itself!"

"La, go away, you rake," cried the duchess. "But methinks the child has some of my spirit."

CHAPTER XXII

THRUST AND PARRY

Plague on't that he should return to tease me just now.
—SHERIDAN.

LORD YERINGTON'S and Mr. Mansur's eyes had followed Philida as she vanished into the Italian garden. From there the refrain of a song floated back to them at intervals. Their gaze met, though neither moved, each awaiting the other's action. The situation, however, was interrupted. The duchess spoke to Yerington and, as he responded, Mansur wheeled about and sought the spot whence Philida's voice came to them in snatches.

Yerington watched Mr. Mansur, as he drew nearer to the figure flitting amongst the flowers. When his replies became absent and wide of the mark, the duchess dismissed him with a laugh.

"La," she said, "go to her, you oaf!"

With a hasty bow he obeyed her, not waiting to make a compliment or an excuse.

In the meantime Philida was standing beneath the Italian pergola in a frame of roses, the sun flecking her with light.

Mr. Mansur could not have chosen a worse moment for his approach, for a womanish impulse possessed her to vent on him a little of what Lord Yerington had made her suffer.

"I wonder you come, Mr. Mansur, when 'tis my humour to be alone," she said wilfully, half turning from him.

He stood before her, his hat in his hand, all his

ready phrases flown. His love for her was so honest that, despite himself, it made him honest. He was baffled by a sense of helpless adoration. This told in his eyes as he looked at her. His was a dark, strong face, and attractive to many women in its masterfulness, but at this moment it moved Philida to the point of exasperation. Most women are at bottom tyrants until love tames them and, sometimes, even then.

Lady Philida picked the rose she held in her fingers to pieces, petal by petal, while Mansur watched her.

"Prithee, have you no tongue, sir?" she asked at length, with a glance from her blue eyes with their dark pencillings.

He pointed to the rose.

"See," he said, "you've torn it bit by bit and yet, for all that, its heart was golden."

She twisted the stem about in her fingers, pretending not to understand.

"So it is," she said indifferently. "Yet how much more lovely was the rose when its heart was hidden! Now it has neither perfume nor beauty." She threw it carelessly aside. "Your phrases are so deep, Mr. Mansur, I protest I cannot follow you." She flung a sudden, startling contradictory smile at him.

Dazed by it, Mr. Mansur's head swam. The next instant he could have sworn aloud.

Lord Yerington had turned a corner by a stone urn and was approaching them with his confident indolence. Then Mansur knew that the smile directed toward him was but one of a woman's ready subterfuges to disguise her real thought. Instinctively he was aware that she had already seen Lord Yerington's approach when she had given that glance at him. But, perceiving this, he took instant advantage of the situation. He, too, played for Lord Yerington.

One arm upon the support of the pergola, he leaned nearer to her, his manner full of tender gallantry.

"But upon that theme I could speak for ever, my only excuse being my earnestness," he said, as if continuing a conversation.

Lord Yerington overheard.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he said, nevertheless advancing without a pause.

Yet, when he had gained Philida's side, he bowed and looked from Mansur's lowering face to hers, as if he questioned his right to linger.

Philida did not reply in words. She turned and walked slowly forward, the gentlemen sauntering beside her. The two men exchanged glances over her head. About Mr. Mansur's mouth the dangerous dimples came and went. Lord Yerington's face was debonair.

"I had understood," said Mr. Mansur, his voice studiously level and unemphatic, "that your lordship had an engagement with Lord Burroughs, which honour did not suffer you to break."

"Honour?" repeated Yerington, as if he had not heard aright. "Gad, Mr. Mansur is so nice in such matters himself that if he speaks of honour, he speaks with authority; but my engagement with Lord Burroughs is not pressing. It was not rounded by a date."

Mr. Mansur's eyes flickered, but his voice was even.

"There are some engagements to which circumstances set a date."

Yerington laughed.

"It was not so nominated in the bond, and delicate as is Mr. Mansur in these questions of honour, none of my house have needed tutoring on this point."

Something unusual in their tone impressed Philida. It had been taking all her self-control to maintain her at-

titude of indifference, but a note in Lord Yerington's voice roused a vague alarm in her.

"I thought, I——" she stammered. "Are not you gentlemen friends, schoolfellows, if I mistake not?"

Lord Yerington switched off the head of a blossom with his cane as he passed.

"True, true, Lady Philida," he answered. "Friendship is a rare and sacred thing, is it not? It binds men close in loyalty. Ask Mr. Mansur."

Silence followed. Mr. Mansur's face was black.

"Ours dates back a score of years to dear old school-days," continued Lord Yerington. "Rare days those, eh, Mansur? I must tell you, Lady Philida, that this modest friend of mine, though I'll be bound he's not over fond of talking of it, has a pretty taste in literature. 'Tis letters he prefers, if I remember."

"Madame de Sévigné's letters?" asked Philida, conscious there was an enigmatic intensity in the situation, and instinctively seeking to lighten it. Characteristically she was forgetting her own emotion in her desire to bring about a better understanding.

"What say you to that, Mansur?" giped Yerington over her head. "No, Mr. Mansur's not particular about style. 'Tis matter he prefers."

Mansur spoke:

"You may not have noted, Lady Philida, that Lord Yerington possesses a pretty wit in the art of juggling with phrases. Upon my life, let him but turn an agreement over upon his tongue a time or two, though it might read as straight as the plain entry in a betting-book, when he has done with it, it possesses a new complexion and its outlines and distances grow as deceptive as objects seen in a fog."

Mr. Mansur's thrust had gone home and Lord Yerington was impotent to parry it. Its burn lingered, stinging

in the open wound of his honour as he read it by his code. Was he, indeed, juggling with the terms of the wager? The doubt cut him to the quick. But it did more. It whipped into fury his wrath against the man who had trapped him. Having stooped to contemplate revenge, the desire for it grew more potent. He looked down at the girl beside him. He felt that he had been befooled, deceived by her poses, as he had been by Lady Caroline's. She danced in the torrent of his anger as a leaf eddies upon a current. Mansur was growing threateningly bold. He resolved to silence him, that he might be left a free hand to play out the game upon which he was bent. His heart at that moment was as ruthless and as worthless as the man with whom he parried. The whole, reckless gambler's heart of him he was staking in this venture, thrusting all consideration aside, except the one upon which he was concentrated. He was not reckoning upon any love Lady Philida might bear him. In the mood in which he then was, he would not have believed in such a love had she protested it. Had faith in such a love been possible to him at that moment his revenge would have been as impossible.

"A whimsical incident recurs to my mind at this moment," he began, so entirely without relevance that Mansur perceived in his remark a flank movement and listened all upon the defensive. "'Slife, it was a most droll circumstance that two such ragged knaves should have been the outposts of Master Cupid!" He wiped his lips daintily with his lace handkerchief.

Philida regarded him with troubled eyes.

"It happened on the road as we came here, and I protest, it was a vastly pleasant diversion from the cavernous old coach. I was half asleep when two shots sounded that put me on the sudden wide awake. My

men pulled up, and out of the coach Elliot and I tumbled. A highwayman was the smallest bird we thought to bag in that solitude. A highwayman! I can scarce speak for laughing! What think you we found?" He looked full at Mansur. "Two trembling, ragged rascals. I'll swear you'd not find their like out of St. Giles."

The game lay in Lord Yerington's hands.

Mr. Mansur was checkmated. If Yerington possessed this knowledge, he was powerless. The mere thought of the duchess' tongue made him quail. Here was the deadliest of weapons—the means to make him look ridiculous. In that scoffing world toward which he had laboured, a blighted reputation a man might retrieve, but let him become a jest and he was ruined.

Yerington's eyes sparkled with sardonic amusement as he noticed Mr. Mansur's discomfiture.

"I think I heard the duchess say she desired a word with you," he drawled.

"But, prithee, what's the end of the adventure?" questioned Philida.

"I crave your ladyship's indulgence," responded Yerington. "My runaway tongue hath betrayed me. A finish of the tale would involve one or two personages I'd spare, if you will give me leave. Upon my honour, Mansur, I wonder I had so long forgot the duchess' message."

Mr. Mansur glared back helplessly at him, but he added, in a low voice:

"You and I must meet in the *open* one day."

"What does he mean?" questioned Philida, as he turned and left them.

She felt all the threat and it filled her with alarm.

Lord Yerington did not reply. He was keeping an eye on Mr. Mansur, who walked under the pergola, past the sun-dial and vanished behind a hedge of box

trimmed in quaint fashion. A moment later he caught the glint of his red coat through the green, and knew that, true to his tribe, he was lingering within hearing. This fell in with his plans, for he wished him to witness the remainder of the play.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE ITALIAN GARDEN

Doch wenn du sprichst: ich liebe dich!
So muss ich weinen bitterlich.

—HEINE.

YERINGTON turned to his companion, to discover her regarding him with penetrating eyes.

"I thought you and Mr. Mansur were friends," she said.

"Are we not?" he answered flippantly.

She shook her head.

"Don't think I am so young that I cannot catch the note of thrust and parry. Methought to-day you and Mr. Mansur had little love for one another, and I am not sure that it was to my taste to have you send your shafts over my head."

She hit nearer than she knew, but that thought but pricked to keener relish Yerington's cynical humour. He perceived that her face was a little pale, and that the band of black velvet about her neck accentuated its fairness. She was a winsome picture and it may be that a stir in his blood, as he gazed at her, but added to his relentlessness. His eyes looked beyond her to the gleam of scarlet behind the box hedge.

"Young you are," he answered softly, "and your mirror has long since told you that you are beautiful. These two facts spell a charm to make men slaves to such as you and brutes to one another."

Something in his tone rang false in her ears and wounded her bruised girl's heart, the pain in which she was battling to conceal.

"I pray you," she said, taking a step away from him, to where a sheaf of glowing hollyhocks shot above her head, a rose-dappled background for her loveliness, "make me no town-turned compliments. I mislike them."

He bent towards her. Something in his expression moved her to instinctive distrust of him, but beneath this sensation lurked a consciousness of his fascination and his power over her.

"Alas," he cried, "that these poor, worn phrases still must serve me, though I could pray the gods for language new, and fresh and worthy of my theme. Yet, I've nothing but the usual vehicle, though it has long served also passion and the poets, to help me to convey to you what hammers at my heart."

"La, sir," she said, with a little lift of her shoulder, seeking to suppress the emotion his words, his manner and the insinuation of his lowered tone aroused in her, "spoke by the book, I protest. I have read it myself."

"Then am I undone," he exclaimed, "for it is writ large in a book called love. And if you have read it before my coming, what is left to me but despair?"

She was as helpless as a child to fence with this finished master of gallantry.

"'Twould be indiscreet, my lord, to wonder how many ladies had listened to your despair before. Believe me, I speak truth when I tell you I have no love for pretty compliments. It may be that in time I shall learn to think well of them, but now, in my country ignorance, they ring false and empty. Prithee, reserve your phrases for one more trained in the play of words than I."

The scarlet spot behind the hedge moved suddenly. In that movement Lord Yerington read relief, if not triumph. Lady Philida's attitude he interpreted but as a retreat that invited his advance. He resolved upon

methods that would give less room for even temporary triumph to the eavesdropper. He drew a step nearer to the girl. Involuntarily she shrank against the hollyhocks, with a movement of something like panic. This action would have touched him, had his eyes been less blinded.

"You say well, Lady Philida," he answered seriously. "Such phrases I have spoke before, and spoke them lightly. But one phrase has never hitherto passed my lips." He lifted his hat and bowed low. "Can you find it in your heart to become the Countess of Yerington? I offer you my hand, my name and my estates. Will you deign to accept them?"

Philida did not move, except that one hand mechanically groped behind her to the swaying stalks, as if she felt the need of support. The sun flooded her. Her eyes searched his face, as if she sought to read his heart; the rapid beats of her own revealed in a pulse in her bared neck.

Hat in hand, Lord Yerington stood before her, waiting. Strangely enough, now that he had sprung this mine which he designed for the man who played eavesdropper within hearing distance, the memory of him passed completely from his thought. He found himself hanging upon Lady Philida's answer, as if all the love her innocent deception had slain at a blow, stood waiting upon her reply. If, indeed, she were a scheming apostle of her aunt's training, she did not rise promptly to the fly of title and wealth which he danced before her. For a few seconds she stood in complete silence. When she spoke, her voice was full of an emotion he did not understand.

"My lord," she said, the words coming slowly and with intense earnestness; "do you ask this question of Mistress Marjorie or of Lady Philida Wentworth?"

He started. He had been intent upon his purpose, to the exclusion of all other ideas.

"Mistress Marjorie?" he echoed, feeling confusedly for her thought.

She clasped her hands and gave a little cry before she spoke, her eyes still fixed intently upon his face. When her words came, they were at times almost incoherent, but as he listened their significance grew clear to him, appallingly clear. He saw her meaning as by a flash of lightning.

"If 'tis the Lady Philida you ask to be your wife, then my answer is No! Never would I marry you. Think you I'd stoop to wed a man who, had my place in life been different, would have kissed me, and passed me by in wantonness, who would have made me a mere jest, a means to trifle a few hours away with, and then have left me without a second thought? Tell me, is it the Lady Philida you ask to marry you?"

Involuntarily, Lord Yerington's hand went to his throat. This revelation choked him. For an instant the scene about him swam.

"Ah!" she cried, "I see, I see. 'Twas only Philida. Then hear my answer, my lord. Again and again 'tis No! A poor creature would you make of me. A countess, forsooth! I'd rather be mere Marjorie, wedded to an honest, loving woodcutter."

She would have gone past him, but in an agony of self-abasement he fell upon his knees and buried his face in the skirt of her dress. This stayed her.

He could not speak. He could but let the tide of darkness and self-accusation engulf him.

At length he felt her hand upon his hair, and Philida's voice reached him, crossed by a peal of tenderness.

"Oh!" she said, with a check of laughter near to tears, "'twas Marjorie, 'twas Marjorie after all."

He found her hand and bowed his head upon it, mute, condemned of himself.

"I am so grateful," he heard her whisper, "and I doubted him."

The girl was lost in joy, and the man in a daze of misery.

A sharp, imperious voice struck across their abstraction.

"Hey, hey, my Lord Yerington, and is this your sense of honour! No London poses, if you please, for my country simpleton. I wonder at you, I do, upon my soul."

The duchess stood before him, her staff of authority in her hand.

Yerington rose to his feet. He opened his lips to speak, but for the moment no words came. The sharp, contradictory emotions of the last few hours had been too great and, finished man of the world as he was, he was not master of himself.

"Well, sir, well!" exclaimed the duchess impatiently. "Must you stand there gaping like a yokel? Explain this position in which I find you. And you, miss, what have you to say?"

Philida went to her, her face dancing over with smiles and blushes.

"La, ma'am," she said, "do you think so ill of your niece as to suppose that a gentleman may pose to her and flout her?"

Reassurance began to glimmer in the duchess' mind, but nothing but plain statements and facts would do for this practical dame.

"Come, Yerington," she said sternly, "have you been making love to my niece? Answer up."

No way of explanation lay open to Yerington. The duchess had discovered him in his attitude of adoration,

and to deny anything but left Philida to bear the brunt of the situation alone. He cast a glance to where she stood. She was looking at him with pride, love and trust, if, albeit, a certain pervading shyness.

"May I crave a few words with your grace in private?" he said at length.

"You may," answered the duchess, still choosing to appear unmollified. "As for you, miss, go to your room and stay there till I summon you."

Philida left her meekly, but in one of the alleys of the garden as she went she encountered Mistress Sybil, who had heard and seen all, and who was all curiosity. Philida's heart was running over with joy, and here was a girl like herself athrob with the romance of life, and her confidence went out to her, as wave dances to wave.

"Oh, Philida, Philida!" Sybil cried, winding her arms about her, "have you captured the Earl of Yerington, you little country mouse?"

"I've not said so," answered Philida, in confusion.

"I saw it all," whispered Sybil, "as I came in with the duchess, and if it does not mean a declaration then I protest you're a bold creature."

"You know better," expostulated Philida.

"How can I know better," said the sly Sybil, "when I saw it with my own eyes?"

Philida's inexperience walked into the trap.

"You know," she protested with crimson cheeks, "that his lordship would not presume to—to——"

"But he would, if you encouraged him," said Sybil, with a sage shake of her head. "La, all the world knows what a sad rake Yerington is. I warn you, child, you'll never get a declaration, if you hold yourself so lightly."

"But I will not have you think so ill of Lord Yerington!" exclaimed Philida. "And you should think too

well of me to suppose he would take an unwarranted liberty."

"Then you have had a declaration," exclaimed Sybil. "Deny it, if you can! Deny it, or confess yourself a bold, brazen hussy! Do you deny it?"

Completely at a disadvantage, Philida stood biting her lips.

Sybil burst into a shout of laughter.

"Oh, lud!" she cried, clapping her hands, "the baby has told me herself! If you don't deny it, then you confirm it."

She sped off intent on spreading her rare morsel of news, unheeding the agonised appeals Philida flung after her.

CHAPTER XXIV

MISTRESS SYBIL PLAYS FATE

My life its secrets and its mystery has—
A love eternal in a moment born;
There is no hope to help my evil case,
And she knows naught who makes me thus forlorn.
—FELIX ANVERS.

THE duchess led the way to the white-panelled morning-room. Once there, she faced Lord Yerington. He stood silent before her. His thoughts were still astray, his humiliation strong upon him. For a moment she watched him sharply.

His eyes were fixed before him, his apathetic attitude was ill-suited to the rôle of impetuous lover. He was steeped in a misery so profound that it blotted his power to hear, though not to feel. The duchess' next words came to him dimly, as from a distance.

"Now, sir," she said, "you have stolen a march upon me in a scurvy fashion. Prithee, explain yourself."

His mien raised a fear in her, and gave her voice a sharper edge.

He looked back at her, unheeding her manner. When he spoke, he put one hand upon the table before him to steady himself.

"Your grace," he said hoarsely, "I have much to accuse myself of." He hesitated, fought for a phrase. "Words!" he burst forth suddenly, flinging wide one hand in a gesture of profound contempt. "Again, words!"

The duchess' suspicions were further aroused. Her

shrewd, worldly eyes searched his face. She read in it a despair so deep, it startled her. Her own grew dark with apprehension.

"Yerington!" she exclaimed, "have you been acting in bad faith? Have you been trifling with this child?"

With a groan, he turned upon his heel and sought the window. There the duchess saw him outlined against the light without, his head bent upon his breast.

The flickering flame of her fear leapt high.

"My God!" she cried sharply, bringing down her staff with a blow that threatened the tortoise-shell, "is it so bad as that? Have you played with this child whilst you have been irrevocably pledged to another woman?"

He put aside this idea by a gesture so full of repudiation that her misgivings on that head took flight.

"Lud, man," she said, with a long-drawn breath, "what a start you gave me. Why all this shilly-shallying? If 'tis your conscience that is troubling you, don't be a fool. I know the world and your record. Between us, we must keep it from the child. Lud, I've ever loved a man of spirit, and, truth to tell, I trust you, because you've sown your wild oats in the sight of all men. No canting hypocrites for me; I detest the tribe. Now, what have you to say to me?"

Yerington fought for self-possession. He had no desire to shield himself. He was determined to tell the truth to this woman waiting upon his silence, but he knew his next words would cut him off from more than life. They would exile him from Philida. He could not summon the short, brutal phrases with which he intended to pronounce his own condemnation. In the struggle within him, drops of perspiration burst out upon his brow.

Mechanically, he brushed them away with his handkerchief, the light flashing upon his jewelled fingers as he did so. So strong a thing is long-established habit, that into

this gesture, wrung from him in honest anguish, there entered some suggestion of the dandy.

The duchess, noting him with renewed suspicion and growing anger at his strained silence, read into the action a foppish self-sufficiency.

"Sirrah!" she exclaimed, "have you flouted us? Have you played with her and flouted me? Has any one ever whispered you that you might flout Mary Croome and go scot free? Did you think it was but a pair of women with whom you had to deal? Oh, that the head of our house should be a youth with the heart of a chicken and a wrist of film! I'm not a man; but a woman, who has wit, is an ill one to cross, my Lord Yerington."

He turned his face toward her and she ceased the torrid tumble of her words with almost comical abruptness.

"I'll be sworn, Yerington, this is beyond my guessing," she said with a sort of puzzled meekness. "I give it up. What is it? But one word—you love her?"

At this question Yerington concealed his eyes for an instant with the jewelled hand that had offended.

"Love her!" he echoed. "'Tis one of life's vast ironies that I should love her so utterly."

As he stood motionless, he felt the duchess' practical hand upon his shoulder, set there with a touch of reassuring comradeship.

"You love her," she said, "and there's no other woman. That is enough for me. The rest, I'll venture, is but liver and remorse. I keep no man's conscience. I'm a worldly, hard, old woman, and you're a graceless rake, but between us, let us spare her. Keep your confessions for me, if confess you must, though 'tis a bad habit and I counsel you against it. Scratch your name from the buttery-book at White's and begin anew. Matrimony is a sort of rebirth, you know, and gives a man another lease on life."

Her touch upon his shoulder but redoubled in Yerington the sense of isolation which had persisted at intervals ever since Mansur's revelation of the morning. He put out his hand and took hers in a clasp of real feeling, without bending his head to the usual courtly salutation. As a comrade she had extended it to him, and as a comrade he accepted it.

At this instant there was an uncertain knock at the door, a mere rattling of the knuckles down the panels, ominously playful.

The duchess started and frowned. Without waiting for an invitation, the door was opened from without. A fair, curly head, dressed high and crowned by a lace frill, peered in.

"Did you invite us to enter?" Sybil asked, with affected submissiveness.

"No, I did not," snapped the duchess.

By this time the girl had danced into the room and thrown wide the door; behind it appeared a row of gentlemen, visibly discomposed and doubtful of their welcome. Male-fashion, they had been cajoled there by Sybil's wiles. She had led them, half commanding and half coaxing. Now that they faced the duchess, the impropriety of their position seized them sharply. No such sensation dismayed the mischievous damsel who had conducted them. She had commenced her expedition with a complete consciousness of her imprudence, and she delighted to be the conveyer of glad tidings and the defier of conventions.

"If you please, your grace," she said, "we have come to offer our congratulations," sweeping a deep curtsy.

"Upon what?" glared the duchess. "Not upon your own discretion, I'll go bail."

"La, you are not going to be angry," cried Sybil hypocritically, "or I protest, I'll die of chagrin. I con-

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fess I but coaxed the good news out of Philida, but methought 'twas for all the world to know."

The duchess' masterful staff rang sharply on the polished floor.

Yerington's face was colourless. It seemed as if fate had designed to trap him in the consequences of his temporary madness, and, what was worse, not him alone, but others, whom with all his heart he desired to spare. He awaited the duchess' next words with dread. If she acquiesced, he was committed to a position of acute embarrassment. He could not in honour deny what she might choose to acknowledge.

"What you know, is for all the world to know, you impudent baggage," cried the duchess angrily. "Horace Walpole," addressing that gentleman, who was palpably seeking to hide himself behind Sir Geoffrey, "you are old enough to know better."

With obvious reluctance, Mr. Walpole advanced to the foreground.

"I can but plead that Eve was wondrous beautiful, and that I am but a poor, weak man," he said.

"Lud!" exclaimed the duchess, "must Adam's excuse serve forever? You look, every one of you, like a set of simpletons, and let me tell you, if it did not jump with my inclination, I should lie this Eve, who so successfully has led you, out of countenance. It but happens she has forced my hand an hour or two, and so I do not choose to contradict her."

With an exclamation, Sybil rushed to take her in an impetuous embrace, but the duchess put her coldly away from her.

"If you do not learn discretion, the Lord knows what your end will be," she said with grave displeasure.

Yerington bit his lip. His gaze went past the gentlemen who were crowding into the room with bows and

congratulations and sought out Captain Elliot's face. The captain knew his friend's every mood.

As their eyes met, Yerington's fell.

The dinner that followed was of little comfort to any one who shared it. A desultory effort at light conversation continued throughout the meal.

Lord Yerington perceived that Mansur's face was dark with misery. Yerington made an effort to appear natural, but he could not bend himself to the treachery of an affectation of gaiety. Philida's countenance, every time he looked upon it, branded him with self-reproach. It was filled with a shy happiness, which added to its beauty.

The duchess felt she had been too little consulted in the entire conduct of the affair. For the time being she was conscious of more ill-humour at this thought, than triumph at the consummation of her cherished plan. She flung darts to right and left at squirming victims. Sybil alone was gay. She was rejoicing in the sensation she had caused, and deflected the duchess' thrusts with the ease of long practice.

Toward the end of the repast, a chance comment of Horace Walpole's caught his hostess' ear.

"Oh, those beaten paths," he was saying, "dusty with the feet of the conventional."

"And nobody haunts them with more persistence than you do, Horry," she retorted tartly. "Even your vices must pass muster as being *de rigueur*."

He shrugged his shoulders, a habit he had caught in France, and deserted his position without a blush.

"What would become of society if one was to be crucified upon one's epigrams? At least, duchess, you'll admit that the beaten paths are well supplied with mile-stones and guide-posts."

"So they are," said the duchess thoughtfully; "after

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all, convention, whether it be real or simulated, expresses one of society's efforts at self-protection."

She cast a thoughtful glance at Philida. No more stolen visits to her foster-mother, no more running about the countryside by herself, she thought.

But before she could institute this new régime, Philida had outwitted her with serious consequences.

CHAPTER XXV

UNAVOWED CONSPIRATORS

Jealousy lives upon doubt; and comes to an end, or becomes a fury as soon as it passes from doubt to jealousy.

—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

SHORTLY after dinner, Yerington withdrew with excuses. He told the duchess that the day's happenings gave him much to think over and arrange, and she dismissed him with an arch shake of the finger, and a warning to treat all bogies of the past as they deserved to be treated, as having no present existence. He was supremely thankful that Captain Elliot chose to linger with Mistress Sybil, enduring her daring sallies of wit with admirable philosophy. At that time he, of all things, desired solitude and an interval of reflection.

Mr. Mansur was restless under his humiliation and disappointment. He started upon a ramble, shortly after Lord Yerington had taken his leave. He turned his steps towards the village of Oxholme, and chose a short cut across the fields. He had not gone more than a quarter of a mile upon his way, when, to his infinite surprise, a figure in flowered muslin poised for an instant upon a stile before descent into the meadow beyond. That elfin form filled him with a tragedy of vain longing. As he looked at her the years stretched ahead of him, grey and desolate; his ambitions turned to dust and ashes; his goals withered.

An instant later he smiled bitterly.

He realised that Lady Philida, intoxicated with her joy, was flying to carry news of it to her beloved foster-

mother. Had she but known it, it had already travelled far and wide by the swift medium of the back-stairs and was even now no secret in Oxholme.

Mansur walked on, keeping the light-footed figure in sight, until it vanished within the door of the Royal Arms. He knew she would go at once to Mrs. Culpepper's private rooms, which faced away from the road, and so would have no knowledge of his presence in the inn, if he went there.

He had been torturing himself by the sight of her. He told himself that just so she had danced through his life, alluring him, yet ever beyond him. His hatred for Yerington was intensified, for the earl had triumphed over him on this the day he had planned for his humiliation. He felt as if he could have stretched out his hand and destroyed Lady Philida, as though she were indeed the fairy creature she looked, rather than have to endure again the sight of the love in her eyes he had read there that day, as she looked toward Yerington.

When he reached the inn, he stood before it, lost in thought. From the midst of his abstraction, he glanced up to observe two hostlers washing the yellow wheels of a chaise. His eyes, ever observant, caught sight of a coat of arms upon the panel. His expression changed. Almost instinctively he looked up to a casement of the window above his head. It was as if he already knew he would gaze into a pair of yellow-brown eyes.

A glove fluttered to his feet.

"My challenge, sir," called a laughing voice. "Return it if you dare."

A moment later, without awaiting the ceremony of announcement, found him knocking at the door of the room from which Lady Caroline had smiled at him.

"Come in," called her voice.

He entered, and faced her. She was clad in a dark

green travelling-dress, her hair clubbed, and her hat flung upon the oaken table.

"I accept your challenge, your ladyship," said Mr. Mansur, bending to salute the careless hand she extended to him. "In days of old 'twould have spurred knights to valorous deeds, I'll be bound."

She smiled, watching him speculatively.

"The knights of to-day put much upon the shoulders of the centuries," she said.

"Has your ladyship commands?" he asked. "Your most humble and obedient servant is at your service."

He watched her, as she turned away, and placed one small booted foot upon the rim of the empty hearth. He was assured she had just experienced a great shock. None of this appeared in her attitude.

"You are visiting in the neighbourhood, Mr. Mansur?" she said, delicately smothering a yawn. "My Lord Yerington has the pleasure?"

Mr. Mansur suppressed a smile.

"'Tis my privilege to be visiting her Grace of Croome," he answered.

At that moment the title had no power to lighten his mood.

She gave a quick glance, and disguised a start by a hand, raised to straighten a stray lock of hair.

"I did not know you knew her. Her grace has been little in town of late."

Mr. Mansur perceived that this was a sneer at his recent acceptance in her world, and registered it against her.

"And your ladyship is also visiting in the neighbourhood?"

"La, no," she answered. "I am on my way to Wardsleigh Abbey."

"I should have thought," said Mansur, studying the

clouded amber of his cane, "that the way to Wardsleigh Abbey scarce lay through Oxholme."

"The roads are better by this route, though the inns are not fit for Christians," she answered.

She stooped to pick up her handkerchief that had fallen. As she straightened herself, her eyes met his. There was a cool challenge in them, as if she defied him to suspect her of any deeper interest than she was openly displaying.

"Great news! great news!" she said, in imitation of the criers. "I've learned within the hour that Yerington is a captive at last."

He did not reply. The lash was quivering about his shoulders also. They were both practised dissemblers, but she was a woman, and for an instant she had him at a disadvantage. When he did not reply, she laughed to conceal a catch in her throat.

"I am told she's a mere child," she drawled; "a portionless baby, who has never seen the town, and who will wile away his moments with virtuous little mottoes learned at school. Lud, I can scarce contain myself for laughing."

She raised her hand to check her merriment, but Mansur's relentless eyes noticed that it trembled.

"Of her youth there is no question," he answered.

She flashed round at him, each of her thirty years stinging in her memory.

"Hath the baby bewitched'd you too?" she asked.

His eyes met hers unflinching. She was turning him into an implacable enemy, and slowly the determination to make a tool of her was crystallising in his mind. What better tool than a jealous, ruthless woman could a man wish? He began to speak, intending to sting her into a mood to suit his purpose. But he overestimated his strength. The picture he drew burned into his own

heart. His eyes grew dark, and when he ceased, his secret was as much hers as hers was his.

"The Lady Philida was born to win hearts. Methinks even in her cradle, her baby coos had magic in them. Her voice once heard is not one to be forgotten. Some, when they wound, leave the vanquished still the power to pull forth the darts. Not so with Lady Philida! Once her victim, ever her victim."

Lady Caroline tapped an impatient foot upon the floor.

"I protest, I never thought you a poet, Mr. Mansur. Pray continue."

"She is beautiful," went on Mr. Mansur, his eyes fixed before him as if he had not heard her, "but she carries her beauty simply as a thing apart. Her walk is light, as if it were her thoughts which bore her. Years cannot weaken her hold upon the heart, for 'tis some spirit within her which reaches out and takes men prisoners. Time cannot dull the radiance of her face; it will but brighten."

Despite himself, his head sank at his last words.

Stung beyond control, she flashed at him:

"'Tis false! We women all grow old; it is our curse."

Mr. Mansur bowed deeply, with a gleam of white teeth.

"Nay, the Lady Caroline's charms must be our despair forever."

She did not heed him; he had wounded her beyond disguising.

"A little country simpleton!" she exclaimed vehemently. "He will weary of her."

"Mayhap," he answered drily.

His tone penetrated. She checked herself sharply. Again she turned toward the hearth and stood there, twisting her rings absently about her fingers.

"I'm willing to lay a wager and give you odds, that

Yerington will weary of his Lady Philida," she said, as if in defiance of his derisive eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders, searching in his crafty mind for a plan in which he could utilise her and her jealousy. Desperate schemes they were, with desperate chances, but the memory of that look on Philida's face was biting in his consciousness like salt in an open wound. It was a stricken man who watched her, with the ready come and go of his brilliant smile.

"And she loves him?" she asked, absently polishing a brass candlestick with her fingers.

"Yerington was ever fortune's favourite," he answered lightly.

She stamped her foot in a burst of temper.

"I don't believe in fortune, nor in waiting for it. When I want things to happen, I make them happen."

She was getting to the point toward which Mr. Mansur had been urging her. He bowed, with inferred flattery in his manner.

"Ah, your ladyship may say so. You who possess the highest cards in life's pack—beauty, wit and—daring."

He hesitated before pronouncing the last word, to give it peculiar emphasis. She looked round over her shoulder and met his eyes. For an instant they read each other—then, each hastened to an elaborate concealment of their mutual knowledge.

"You trifle with words, Mr. Mansur. A long suit of hearts prevails against these cards you mention."

"If they be well played," he answered slowly, "but, if not——" He shrugged his shoulders.

She laughed.

"I suppose that little simpleton thinks that all the game of life goes down to hearts. A month in town will teach her better. But then," she added slowly, "there's the aunt."

"I think I smoke you," said Mansur, with an expression approaching real amusement. "The Lady Philida holds the cards, but methinks 'tis like that hereafter the duchess will play her hand."

"A dowdy!" she exclaimed, "who makes Jack Straws of other women's reputations, but guards her own like a Gorgon."

Suddenly she laughed low to herself.

"La, how quickly the spotless Yerington would desert his dove, if the world bespeckled her. Their wives must be flawless, these rakes. There's the humour of it."

For an instant Mansur's hatred for her showed in his eyes. He knew the world and her class, and he read her thought aright. Her instinct was to drag 'down this girl to her own level, yet this too helped the plan forming in his mind, and he smothered his wrath to lead her on.

Lady Caroline realised with something like chagrin that she must take this man in some degree within her confidence.

"If one were to interrupt this billing and cooing, how would one go about it?"

She took up her green muff, and began to pat it softly.

"'Pon honour, how should I know?" he asked, determined to lead her further into the open.

She considered him from under her lashes, her yellow-brown eyes contracted.

"You think piccadilloes will not prevail?" she asked, flicking a bit of dust from the velvet of her muff.

He took his cane into his confidence.

"Do you think there is a cast in dice of that colour that Lord Yerington has not seen thrown a thousand times?"

She laid her cheek softly upon the muff.

"What would you do, if you wished to—bring these fools to their senses?"

"Gad, your ladyship, I have no idea. The situation is undramatically perfect. A picture, I assure you."

He had counted upon her impetuosity. She checkmated him. She sank indolently into a great chair beside the hearth. She too possessed a valuable asset of villainy—patience.

"Methinks Master Cupid must long for a little spice in this barley-corn idyll. Lud, I should find it borish. Ycrington making sheep's eyes like a Philomel."

As she ended, she smothered a yawn and at studiously distant intervals remarked on the badness of the inns. Mansur perceived that she was resolved to show her hand no further, and that now he must make a move. He went about it obliquely.

"Speaking of adventures," he began, conscious of his abrupt method, but wishing to save the moments, "I heard of a rare one a fortnight since."

"Do relate it," she said idly, "to make me forget the inns."

"The scene was laid in France," he began.

"A country ripe for an *affaire de cœur*," she said, with a meaning glance.

"Especially those romances which do not always end with marriage," he said, contemplating his nails.

"Your information is varied, Mr. Mansur."

"It is sometimes of value to my friends."

She appeared to be half asleep and did not reply. He suppressed his impulse of impatience with a pinch of snuff.

"The general outlines of these romances are as old as Adam," he went on.

"Stop at Noah," she urged with her muff to her cheek. "There were so few characters in the Garden of Eden."

"There were Adam and Eve and Lilith," he said, "the

eternal triangle. My hero was a man of roving fancy, and his career was not without its interests. But at last he wanted a wife for his home and so a maid was chosen. As for Lilith——” He paused and tapped his snuff-box thoughtfully.

She was sitting upright now, her attitude tense. But she was superior to her torture and remained silent.

He continued, a slow admiration of her beginning to grow within him.

“Lilith would not be daunted. ‘For the moment,’ she said, ‘my beauty does not avail. The maid must disappear.’”

A puzzled frown appeared upon her forehead.

“This lady seems an idle-witted person, Mr. Mansur,” she said contemptuously.

“The case was otherwise, your ladyship. My hero had known the town. The ladies of the Court, dazzling with charms; but his love was now won by simple virtues. My sex loves change.”

Their glances crossed, and he continued:

“The little country maid was ignorant of the world, loved him for fancied qualities, which in truth had no existence.”

“Ah,” said Lady Caroline, “a little prig.”

“Destroy her ideal of him, or his of her; blur her whiteness with a scandal, or let the scales fall from her eyes, and my poor romance would go to pieces. This Lilith knew.”

Her hands gripped the arms of her chair. She seemed scarcely to breathe.

“One day in a lonely wood, she captured this maid. Her servants were trusty, and in her yellow-wheeled chaise she bore her off.”

Her eyes flashed.

“The case was curiously like this present romance,” he

continued. "The maid walked often abroad alone, like this Lady Philida, who at this moment is with her foster-mother under the same roof that covers us. She went home, as Lady Philida will return, by a road which half a mile from here, passes a lonely corner where the pines encroach upon the path." He held her gaze as he continued. "Lilith had her chaise windows darkened. The plan was safe, absurdly safe. A few words whispered to a girl by a lady, beautiful and injured. And if she kept this girl a few days from the world and there were insufficient explanations upon her reappearance, behold Mistress Grundy would prepare a blot to eclipse an escutcheon of Norman descent."

She made a movement of impatience.

"La, Mr. Mansur, your romance is a fiction and poor fiction, or the lady a fool. To steal a girl in broad daylight! A few questions, and the whole countryside would tell whither they went."

"The lady was no fool," said Mr. Mansur. "She knew there was a road, rutty and little frequented, that led past the spot where she captured the girl for miles by devious ways before it joined the turnpike."

"Whither did she take her?" she asked.

"To an estate of hers, remotely situated, and an old haunt of the Jacobites."

She recognised the description of a seat of her family, which had reverted to her from the distaff side. Even at the moment she wondered how he had knowledge of it. She laughed at his last phrase.

"La, Mr. Mansur, Jacobite? I thought the scene was laid in France!"

"So it was," he answered coolly, "but even there loyal Englishmen were put to it when kings, for policy, turned curious."

She arose with a gesture of weariness. For a full mo-

ment she stood, her finger-tips lightly touching the table, her eyes fixed ahead of her. Her mind was speeding off, arranging details, patching out weak places in the plot. Then she turned to him with a languid suggestion of dismissal in her manner.

"You are no gifted minstrel, Mr. Mansur. Your tale dragged woefully and seemed to have no issue."

"Of that another time, perhaps," he answered with a bow.

"Perchance before we meet again you'll have added a few details. And now, prithee, excuse me, sir. I have ridden far and am weary."

They parted with mutual smiles and compliments, seeking to deceive one another to the last; but just before Mr. Mansur closed the door upon himself, he spoke without turning to look at Lady Caroline.

"Can you trust your servants?" he asked.

"The fools adore me," she replied.

And upon this interval of candour, Mr. Mansur bowed himself out.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DUCHESS CREATES ENTANGLEMENTS

Yet doth an officious helper awkwardly prevent her victory.
—TUPPER.

THE sun was slanting towards the west, when the duchess looked up from her letter-writing to inquire about Lady Philida. She was told that she had been seen going down the road towards Oxholme village and had not returned.

The duchess made a movement of annoyance. She intended to suppress her niece's wanderings, and the frustration of her plans irritated her. But Philida had never hitherto delayed so late as this. She was conscious of a momentary feeling of alarm, as she saw the pale glow upon the limes without her window, and realised that the sun's weak rays told of its nearness to the western horizon. Within an hour it would be down behind the Malvern Hills.

Despite her occasional outbursts of almost brutal candour, the duchess was in many respects a secretive woman. Much truth, and often unpleasant truth, she told to others, but in unsuspected corners of her heart she jealously cherished certain reservations. Her reticence was capricious. She kept a guard over phases of her experience which many women, more discreet, would have confessed without a second thought.

This absence of Philida upon a day of such import, a day too that clothed the girl with an added dignity, gave her especial annoyance. She was anxious to get her safely back and intended to give her a sound rating and a warning. She resolved at the same time that this should be accomplished as quietly as possible. She had had enough

of Sybil's tongue for one day, and she disliked appearing as having indulged the girl to the point of indiscretion.

She threw down her pen and, with her prompt energy, sought her niece in her room and in her usual familiar haunts. She did not find her.

Sybil was upon the terrace, chatting with Sir Geoffrey and Mr. Walpole.

The duchess' alarm increased as the sun neared setting. She determined herself to seek Philida at the Royal Arms.

She donned her Capuchin, and set out upon her quest. The scent of the flowers in the rose garden, as she passed through it, was heavy with the touch of approaching evening. This impressed upon her the lateness of the hour and increased within her the irritation peculiar to quick-tempered people when they are alarmed. She passed along the road by the pine-shadowed corner, turned off across the fields, and entered Mrs. Culpepper's room. In her anxiety, she scarcely vouchsafed to knock.

The hostess of the Royal Arms, her face as placid as usual, in grey stuff dress and white cap and apron, was writing out labels for preserves, in a clear, upright hand. Her unruffled appearance acted like pepper upon the duchess' mood. Mrs. Culpepper looked up in surprise to see that peeress in her brown Capuchin, staff in hand, her face crimson from her rapid walk, glaring at her from the open doorway.

"Where is Lady Philida?" was her imperative demand.

Mrs. Culpepper's pen fell, leaving a trail of black ink upon the paper. Her face flushed pink.

"Lady Philida!" she gasped. "Is she not at home, your grace?"

"At home," echoed the duchess, lowering her voice involuntarily against possible prying ears, "no."

"But she left here two hours since," cried Mrs. Culpepper helplessly.

For the moment she had been too overcome to rise, but she now dropped the duchess a curtsy, and looked back at her pleadingly.

"She told me she was returning by the usual path," she went on.

"This comes of allowing her to tramp about the country," said the duchess. "I should have forbid her long ago. Now," she turned savagely upon the bewildered woman, "what am I to do?"

"There is Michael," whispered Mrs. Culpepper, fluttering towards the door.

The duchess had seated herself and was endeavouring to collect her thoughts.

"Michael?" she said. "Well, fetch him, but not a syllable to anyone beside."

A moment later Michael entered. His intellectual face was pale from the news he had just heard. His slight figure, with its somewhat stooping shoulders, was carried with a dignity free from self-consciousness. The haughty duchess was aware that his presence gave her a sense of support. This usually dominating woman turned towards him without a word. Her manner appealed and questioned.

"I'll search, your grace," he said, as if he made answer, "and make inquiries."

All her authority was in arms again at the last word.

"No," she exclaimed, rising; "mind you, no inquiries. I will not have the Lady Philida's name bandied from mouth to mouth about the countryside. Search," she said, "and go about it smartly, but no gossip. Return as soon as may be."

Michael departed, and the hour the duchess waited seemed an eternity. She walked the room; she berated

Mrs. Culpepper, whose meek bearing roused her to impatient fury. When at last Michael appeared, white and breathless, but with no single syllable of news about Philida other than they already possessed, the duchess was left wordless from the shock.

"Had we not best search the countryside, your grace?" ventured Michael, emboldened by his love.

Even in the midst of her sharp fear the duchess put the thought away.

"We must not have a scandal; we must not have a scandal," she repeated with white lips. "What visitors have you had at the inn to-day?" she asked, ignoring the weeping Mrs. Culpepper, as if she did not exist, and fixing an eye, despite the terrors to which she was a prey, upon Michael.

"The Flying Mail; a lady and a gentleman travelling past to Hereford; two gentlemen, fair-spoken men, though one had a squint; they did not name their destination."

It was Mrs. Culpepper who replied, for the absent-minded Michael gave little heed to the guests who came and went at the inn.

"And those were all?" asked the duchess sharply.

"And one lady in a chaise with three servants—Lady Caroline Dashwood," added Mrs. Culpepper, parenthetically, as if so grand a dame hardly suffered to be named in the inn's ordinary day-book.

"Ah!" exclaimed the duchess, holding up her cane for silence; and she knit her brows.

The name came to her with an impression of recent scandal. She did not reflect long. A few seconds later conviction seized her as strong as a revelation.

"The hussy!" she exclaimed, shaking her stick in the air. "The brazen hussy! This is her work; this is Yerington's work, the feather-brain; this is your work!"

turning fiercely upon Mrs. Culpepper. "You are all in it, and so am I for indulging her. Michael, you must be off with me to Lord Yerington's."

Still intent upon her determination to maintain secrecy, she sent off a short note to Mr. Walpole:

"DEAR HARRY:

"Lie for me, I intreat you. I'm too distraught for invention myself. Neither Philida nor I shall be back until to-morrow. Silence that giddy jade, Mistress Sybil, and that fool Baxter, and the servants.

"Yours,

"MARY CROOME.

"P. S.—Perhaps 'twould be well to tell them that Philida had an attack of the heart, and that I am detained here with her at Mrs. Culpepper's. We can see no one. Lie well, if you love me. Yes, this will do, with such additions as occur to you. I know you are safe as a sepulchre for secrets. I'll tell you all when I see you, and we'll compare notes before I tell my tale."

This she despatched by Mr. Culpepper himself, and then issued her orders to the hostess of the Royal Arms. One room she was to keep closed, and to circulate the report that Philida was confined therein by a sudden attack of the heart and that she, the duchess, was with her. There she was to convey food and, she added:

"See that it is eaten, for I relish my victuals. I must trust you and your invention, and I know you love the child; mayhap your affection will help your wits. God grant it!"

And having woven an elaborate web, and so paved the way to numberless possible blunders, she left the inn with Michael.

She was not intent upon her dignity at this moment, and, to avoid observation, left by way of the stable-yard. The village was built along one broad street, and they found themselves almost immediately in open fields. The

twilight had fallen and, even if they were perceived, they would not be easily recognised.

Michael was in a ferment of agitation and anxiety. Again and again he looked in amazement at this woman, as she took her difficult way over the fields and the ploughed ground, controlling her agitation in obedience to an exaggerated prudence which he regarded almost with contempt. Was Lady Philida's fate to be left hours longer in doubt because of the duchess' insane dread of a syllable of gossip? He could scarcely credit it, and yet the distress that urged the duchess forward became sharply accented almost as soon as they left the village a furlong behind them. She began to pant, but stay she would not, until a sharp stitch in her side brought her to a reluctant pause. Only for a moment she rested upon a stone showing faintly grey in the dimness, before she went off again.

They approached Oxholme Castle by the road, fearing that a short cut across the park would bring a challenge from a gamekeeper. Fortunately the gates were still open, and by a narrow chance they slipped past. The spreading lawns were interrupted only in places by flights of stone steps spanning the terraces. The great door of the castle, which opened upon the inner quadrangle, was closed; the mullioned windows to right and left of it unlighted.

The duchess passed round the tower and through the close box-hedges. A peacock, perched upon a stone balustrade, shrieked at their approach; the note sounded startlingly loud in the pervading silence. A group of windows, tucked into a corner where the tower joined the quadrangle, was illuminated. Some instinct told the duchess that there she should find Lord Yerington.

She approached and looked in.

Lord Yerington was seated at his escritoire, writing. Upon his left hand she could discern half a dozen letters,

sealed and ready for despatching. At this instant it was evident that inspiration had deserted him, for his pen hung uncertainly over the paper. He lifted his eyes and they met the duchess'. Her face was dangerously red; her hair was disarranged; her expression disordered.

He sprang towards her with a cry of alarm and question.

"My God! Philida!"

"Assist me," gasped the duchess.

He helped her up the two steps leading to the room, and she fell into a chair, struggling for breath. She was completely exhausted. He extended his hand towards the bell-rope, but she restrained him with a gesture.

"Give me an instant to recover myself," she said.

His face was filled with profound concern. He controlled himself and waited.

"What is wrong?" he asked at length.

"Everything is wrong."

He gave an exclamation, but she held him by a warning movement of her hand.

"I told you to-day," she said, "that your bogies of the past had no present existence. They have. This afternoon Lady Caroline Dashwood was at the Royal Arms. Philida also was there. She returned by the road past the pines. Lady Caroline's chaise disappeared in that direction and came back no more."

Her statement had been characteristically brief and pointed.

"But Philida?" he asked.

"Has disappeared." Her voice rang out sharply.

"Look at that darkness!" She pointed to the window.

"The child is out in that night, God knows where."

The shock staggered him. He began pacing the floor, his hands clasped behind him, the knuckles showing white in the strain. The duchess watched him, wondering at

his quiet, ready to resent it if it continued a few seconds longer. She did not understand him. He came to an abrupt pause before her, just as she was opening her lips to indignant speech.

"How long ago was this?" he asked.

"Three hours and more," she replied, "and here are you wasting the precious moments walking about like a beast in a cage."

His eyes were concentrated.

"We've no time for blunders, your grace," he said.

"Where is Mr. Mansur?"

"What difference does he make?" protested the duchess. "I thought I had found a man to help me. Here you are——"

"You left him at Marsden?"

"I suppose so," she answered impatiently.

Yerington raised his hand in imprecation, his face so transformed she scarcely knew him.

"Curse him!" he cried. "Curse him! We've him to thank for this."

"And what of your Lady Caroline?" she asked. "But what are we to do? I've brought Michael Culpepper with me."

Lord Yerington went to the window and bade Michael enter.

The duchess regarded Yerington with wonder. He was alert, cool and masterful. She felt herself suddenly powerless before him. A new man was revealed to her; a stronger man than she had supposed lay within his personality. The repression and resource of his manner took possession of her. She found herself following his directions almost with meekness. Upon one thing only did she insist with the pertinacity of a mad woman—upon secrecy.

A few minutes later Lord Yerington's chaise was on its

way to Wardsleigh Abbey. Michael and Foulkes, well armed, were upon the box.

Within the chaise sat the duchess, shaken for the moment by a severe nervous chill. Lord Yerington, with brooding eyes, watched the road as they sped along—the dark clumps of trees; the blur of lighted villages—ruling his vast impatience into immobility.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE YELLOW-WHEELED CHAISE

Men of no character, old women and young ones of questionable reputation, are great authors of lies.

—BEAU NASH.

As Philida began her journey back to Marsden House, she was bubbling with happiness. She felt in sympathy with the little creatures of the wood and air. She chattered to the squirrels and sent chirruping invitations to the birds, who inspected her half suspiciously, their heads cocked upon one side. The child heart in her was but freshened in the full tide of her love. She reverted to her infantile tricks and peered amongst the gnarled roots of the trees for entrance to gnome-land, and lifted the great lily-pads in the pool which shone midway in her journey, to seek for sleeping fairies beneath. She loved to befool herself with these beliefs, cherished from her babyhood, and something of their quaint mystery still lurked beneath her clear-eyed gaze.

She turned into the deep shadow of the pines, humming the refrain:

“Chantez, chantez, ma belle,
Chantez, chantez toujours.”

The road was seldom used, except by visitors to Marsden. It was, therefore, with something like surprise that she saw a chaise with bright yellow wheels and a pair of well-built horses that looked as if they possessed both speed and endurance, drawn up at the side of the road. These horses were strikingly unlike the white Flemish mares which usually served the local people of quality.

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The coachman was still upon the box, but the two footmen had descended and were standing at the horses' heads.

The road was shadowy and the situation lonely, and the silent chaise, with its closed and curtained windows, impressed her with a sense of something sinister. Her song died to silence, and she felt an involuntary impulse of retreat. This was so unlike her fearless self, that she conquered it and essayed to pass the waiting vehicle.

As she approached, one of the footmen left his station and advanced towards her, at the same time touching his hat with two respectful fingers. He had a shrewd face and, as she looked at him, his shifty eyes added to an already unpleasant impression.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon," he began, "but does it chance your ladyship can direct us? Are we on the way to Westen-sub-edge?"

Her surprise relieved her of her lurking sense of fear.

"You are altogether off the way," she replied. "You should have turned two roads back on the turnpike to Cheltenham."

"That's what I said," answered the man, scratching his head shamefacedly. "But his lordship would not have it. Pardon the liberty, your ladyship, but his lordship is that set with two bottles of port in his inside, in a manner of speaking."

Lady Philida took a step onward. She did not altogether like the man's manner, still less did she like the idea of his lordship and the two bottles of port.

"Pardon me, your ladyship," said the man humbly, "if you could but put it to his lordship that we are clean off the road; if he can't be brought to reason, we'll be in these woods till midnight. If you could but say it so that he could hear you through the door, in a manner of speaking."

She hesitated. The footman hastened forward and opened the chaise door a few inches, revealing the blackness within.

"Her ladyship says," addressing the unseen passenger within with an air of intense respect, "that it was the turnpike road we passed two miles back."

He jerked his thumb insinuatingly towards the carriage.

"Will you please to come a little nearer, your ladyship, so his lordship can hear, or it's clean starved we shall be?"

Still the situation did not invite her. Then her native kindness conquered her growing repugnance.

She approached within a few feet of the carriage and spoke with her back turned towards the footman.

"The road to Westen-sub-edge——" she began, but she got no further. Something muffling was thrown about her head and shoulders and the next instant she was lifted and half hurled into the interior of the chaise. Almost immediately it gave a lurch, and with a gasp of terror, she knew that it was moving.

The pace increased rapidly; the cracking of whips sounded, and the vehicle lunged from side to side.

Instinctively she fought with the smothering muffler about her head. She felt no surprise that it should be slightly fastened, and that its woolly roughness was soon removed. She was in the throes of a terror too great for wonder; she screamed shrilly and beat at the windows. They were muffled, and her frenzied fists sank in the soft wadding. She struggled to open them, and soon her knuckles were bleeding with her efforts. At length she fell back exhausted. Her haunting horror was of her unseen companion.

A moment later she felt a movement. To her amazement, it was accompanied by the unmistakable silken

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swish of a woman's skirt. Philida sat back, straining her eyes into the darkness. A hand stole out and caught hers.

"Do not distress yourself," said a woman's voice.

Intuitively Philida's heart contracted with antagonism toward the soft, grasping hand and the softer voice.

"I know not your purposes," she said, though the rapid beating of her terrified heart was cutting off her breath; "but I do know I'm being conveyed from my home, and against my will. I insist that this door be opened and that I may be allowed to depart."

The silence that followed redoubled Philida's fear. She battled to control herself. Had she but known it, the other silent occupant of the chaise was in turn endeavouring to keep herself in command. Her savage resentment against Lady Philida almost impelled her into open reviling.

"Child," Lady Caroline said at length, turning her voice to a cadence of patience, "believe me, I am acting for your good."

An angry sob answered her.

"Think, my dear," she continued, "what a bold move this is. Consider the risks I am running in the venture, and all for you."

Lady Philida did not reply. She even stilled her sobbing to a catch in the throat now and then.

Lady Caroline became a prey to curiosity. She had been prepared for hysteria or wild reproaches. This unlooked-for spirit aroused her to more acute jealousy. Perhaps Yerington had selected no mere pretty plaything after all. The wish to see her companion overpowered her. She was safe behind her mask. With cautious fingers she began to unfasten a corner of the padded window.

"I warn you," she said, as Philida made a move-

ment, "that we are choosing deserted roads and that my footmen ride upon the steps."

The light filtered into the dim carriage.

The two women studied one another.

Philida beheld a figure of unmistakable grace, but the black velvet mask betrayed nothing of her features. Lady Caroline saw a girl whose face was pale and tear-stained, but still lovely amid a tangle of disarranged hair. She was crushed into a corner of the chaise, her arms wrapped about her knees, her whole attitude betraying her supple youthfulness. Her eyes were fixed upon Lady Caroline in a stare of aversion greater than her fear.

Lady Caroline dropped the window covering, with an exclamation. She had seen the girl's beauty. She thought herself secure in her incognito; she resolved upon her rôle. She began her narration, speaking with a soft flood of eloquence. True to her nature, she became absorbed in the dramatic quality of the tale she wove. It was an ingenious one, to which she added an artistic touch here and there with a quaver of her voice that might have convinced older and wiser heads than Philida's, but Philida's head had nothing to do with it; it was her heart to which she was listening.

When the tale was finished, again Lady Caroline laid a hand on Philida's.

"I have confessed my shame to you," she said brokenly.

"I could die of the agony of it. I have unmasked my heart to a stranger. Dear child, I have chosen this desperate course that you too might not be sacrificed; that your life might not be committed to a man who knows not love nor truth nor constancy."

Philida shrank from her.

"Madam," she said, "if your purpose in the course you have taken has been but to decry Lord Yerington, then is your ruse wasted. I prithee, let me depart. I do

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not know you, and no one else shall have knowledge of this."

Lady Caroline could not believe her ears. She had never acted better, nor with less effect, and now for this child to hold out against her. A laugh reached Philida in the darkness.

"A bribe," called Lady Caroline, "as I live, a bribe! 'None shall hear of this,' " she mimicked. "I'll take good care many shall hear of it, my lady, before I'm done with you."

For mile after mile they lurched over the unequal road. Philida crouched in her corner; Lady Caroline resolved not to break the silence again.

As time sped on Philida, because she was young, because she was weary, because she knew not the end of the adventure, and above all, because the day had contained more happiness than all other days, at length, despite her pride, sobbed fitfully in childish, choking sobs, her cheek pressed against the cushion.

CHAPTER XXVIII

LADY CAROLINE CHECKMATES

A silver thread of goodness in
The black serge cloth of wrong.
—TUPPER.

THE chaise stopped amid a scattering of gravel. The footman opened the door. Lady Caroline sprang out with an ejaculation of relief, and it was closed behind her. Philida could hear an exchange of question and reply and an exclamation of suppressed surprise. She knew then their visit was unexpected. It seemed an eternity that she waited with her ears strained for every sound without. She distinguished the voices of the men, interrupted occasionally by a smothered laugh; the tramping of the wearied horses, or the chink of their harness as they tossed their heads.

At length the chaise door was thrown open, the yellow-red glow of a flambeau danced above her. It lighted up the front of an old manor-house. The grey tone of its stone proved how far she was from Worcester-shire. Two gargoyles above the doorway seemed to mow and grin in the dancing light. The flambeau was held by a woman, whose ruffled grey hair shone beneath it. Its gleam revealed her hard-featured, expressionless face. She spoke with a trace of surly respect.

"Will your ladyship descend?" she said.

Cramped from her long confinement, Philida did so. The house gloomed above her, dark and forbidding.

"Whither do you take me?" she asked with a thrill of fear.

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"Within," was the laconic reply.

Lady Caroline stood before the fire leaping up the old chimney which had so long been cold. She had little fancy for the shadowy old room, with its pervading odour of dampness, nor for the whispering wind, which had risen steadily. If waiting had not been a necessary part of her plan, she would have given herself over without further delay to an attack of the vapours.

The apartment was but dimly illuminated by a pair of candles in brass candlesticks, set upon the oaken table that ran down the middle of the long room.

Lady Caroline left her place by the hearth and, going to the window, opened the casement. The candles becked and flickered in the draught as she did so.

The moon was beginning to shine through the shredded clouds, which the wind was driving, and its light was turning the mist that lay along the ground into a sea of silver. From this the dark, stunted trees arose, ghost-like. As Lady Caroline leaned out, she listened intently. The creaking of a lightning-blasted elm before the door, to which the house owed its name, the sighing of the breeze, and the monotonous hollow complaint of the frogs, were the only interruptions to the prevailing silence.

Still she leaned forward; then she gave an exclamation as if an expected sound had reached her ears.

At first it was so faint as scarcely to be distinguishable; then it became louder and clearer. Over the brooding mist and past the stunted trees it came, trr-app, trr-app, trr-app, the sound of a horse's galloping hoofs upon the hard ground. With a quick, furtive movement she drew the window-casement shut and hasped it. Next she began to prepare her *mise en scène*.

By her order, a repast had already been spread at one

end of the oaken table. The steam curled up from the fragrant punch. The candles were set where they flanked the pewter plates, the best service the old house afforded. A moment she stood with her head upon one side, her finger across her lips, studying the effect. Apparently it contented her, for she laughed softly and gave a little satisfied touch to the fork and knife that lay beside the second plate, set for an expected guest.

All this was in obedience to her dramatic instinct, which demanded that the scene which she designed should have effective accompaniments. To stand about the gaunt old room, to have nothing to do with her hands; to provide herself with no means to accent an attitude of elaborate carelessness, would have lost her *coup* half its effectiveness.

A moment later the rapid hoof-beats passed the window of the room in which she sat, and ceased with a suddenness that told the tale of a hasty hand upon the bridle.

Lady Caroline flew to seat herself at the table. She was nipping fastidiously at the viands upon her plate when a spurred boot rang imperatively upon the stone flags. She continued to dissect a piece of boiled mutton, and did not look up.

"La, Mr. Mansur," she said sweetly, "you have ridden hastily."

The assured foot halted with a check of surprise.

She turned slowly round towards him. He was clad in a grey coat, and a black riding-wig; his boots were splashed with mud.

"It was sweet of you to hasten. See," she pointed to the chair opposite her and to the plate, "my hospitality has already foreshadowed you—Sir Rescuer."

Mr. Mansur flushed angrily.

"Madam," he said, "I do not understand."

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"Lud," she answered, "of course you don't. But that's because you are just a stupid, blundering man, who chose to pit his wits against a woman."

He took a wrathful stride forward, leaned one hand upon the table, and brought his menacing face within the candle glow.

"We waste words," he said, threateningly. "I came here for the Lady Philida and I mean to ride hence with her within the next five minutes. Take me to her."

"La! La!" she exclaimed with a pretty air of argument. "And now, monsieur, who wastes words? As if I did not know what you *meant* to do."

As he looked at her, a momentary doubt of the wisdom of his tactics crossed his mind; but the bullying instinct conquered.

"I'll search myself," he exclaimed, swinging around on his heel, and advancing towards the door.

"La! La!" said Lady Caroline gently, her eyes up-cast.

Puzzled into a pause, he looked back at her over his shoulder.

"Go on," she urged. "Prithee, hasten, Sir Rescuer. Find her if you can and carry her back to her doting lord. Do! 'Tis satisfaction to play Fate to two such pretty lovers. Can't you see them reunited in each other's arms? I vow and protest the vision moves me."

She raised her handkerchief and mopped her eyes delicately.

Wrung to an agony of jealousy by her words, he stood and lowered at her. Involuntarily his hand closed upon his sword-hilt, though he faced a woman.

She saw the movement and laughed, pointing a taunting finger.

"Poor little me!" she cried. "Poor little defenceless me! A sword and pistols, I'll go bail. Prithee, have you

a knife in your boot like the Spaniards; or a stiletto like the Neapolitans? Such an armoury against one woman!"

His face was distorted with anger, as he turned back to where she sat.

"Doubtless your ladyship's wit," he said sneeringly, "bespeaks some trap of which I have no knowledge. Your insolence suggests it."

She smiled at him with a shrug. It was a beautiful woman over whom the light of the candles floated, and as she leaned forward, her attitude was full of grace.

"You are a bold man, Mr. Mansur. But, remember the rules of the game. With a weak hand, *finesse*, and then, alack, consider what cards you carry. A long suit of—*hearts*——" she looked at him with insinuation, "is monstrous disconcerting."

He saw her thrust and guessed that she possessed his secret. The thought wrung a taunt from him.

"Your ladyship has knowledge of these long suits of hearts," he said. "You are so good at losing."

If this struck home, Lady Caroline did not betray it. She was mincing delicately at the cold mutton before her. It may be, however, that it added relish to her next words.

"Methinks, Mr. Mansur, you make but a poor rogue. A man who chooses to use life as a game of fence must see to it that his weapons are not flawed, or at crucial moments they may betray him. A good rogue requires a steady head and a heart well within his control. Also, he must be able justly to judge the metal with which he has to deal. You see, my dear Mr. Mansur, you made a mistake when you despised me." She dropped her affectation of eating and turned towards him. "Now, you are playing my hand for me."

Exasperated, he sputtered out an oath.

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"Playing your hand, madam? Damme, I'll expose it!" he cried, his spurred heel ringing on the flags.

"We waste time," said Lady Caroline.

"Then, let us be done with it," he answered.

She replied, by a gracious, inviting wave of her hand towards the plate opposite her own.

"Pray, then will you not be seated and let us talk it over like Christians? No good will come of fasting."

He made an angry motion with his arm; hesitated; read her face as he had never read it before. What he saw there counselled him to comply.

He seated himself upon the chair facing her own, but cavalierly, grudgingly, one arm thrown across its back. They were enemies now, he was seeking to read her purpose.

She filled his glass with the steaming punch.

He drank it off mechanically at a draught. It was an easy mask for a threatened betrayal of expression.

"To-day at the Royal Arms," began Lady Caroline without preamble, for there was no need now for a pose, "you thought you were using me. I was to bring the girl here. Then you were to come in your turn. You were to gain possession of her, and what your plan was then, the devil only knows. Gratitude from her, I doubt not, was to play a large share in it. I was to be left to bear the onus. A pretty trick, Mr. Mansur, to put upon a lady."

Mr. Mansur bowed over his punch.

"Roguary has no sex, your ladyship," he said coolly.

"Why, your interview with me at the inn implicated you irretrievably," she said, contemptuous of his last comment. "Could you push that aside with your flimsy devices?"

"Desperate ills need desperate remedies," he thought to himself, as he had a hundred times during his mad

ride. In all he had done, or had planned to do, he had counted upon three things. He knew Yerington was in desperate straits and the game must be soon played out. He relied somewhat upon the effect of Lady Caroline's tale on the girl, and upon her revulsion of feeling against Yerington when she knew of his lost fortune; but, above all, he counted upon stamping himself upon her memory in a rôle in which chivalry and tenderness would play so large a part. He would come to her when she was in her sorest straits, he would be to her all that a man could be,—he intended that their ride home should be somewhat prolonged; then he hoped for the rebound of her heart towards him when Yerington's position became known.

For a moment he sat lost in reflection, mentally reviewing his designs. This Lady Caroline perceived and chose this moment to refill his pewter tankard with the heady mixture.

"Drink it," she said, smiling. "Good fortune to our venture!"

She had gone one step too far, and defeated herself. She had counted upon the added recklessness which another long draught of the strong compound would put into him. He saw her move, and it warned him to caution and a guard over himself.

There was a sardonic glint in his eyes as he watched her over the brim of the tankard, affecting to comply with her design.

"And what is our venture?" he asked, warily leading her on.

She felt tempted to play with him, but a glance at her watch restrained her. She observed his face with relish. She was to enjoy to the full the expression her next words were to paint there.

She nodded towards a door dimly discernible at the

end of the long room. At this moment the sound of a dry cough reached them from behind its panels.

She leaned forward, her eyes pregnant with suggestion, and watched him narrowly to see the poison work upon him.

"There is a chaplain in there to whom my displeasure means starvation."

At first he did not understand. Then slowly her meaning penetrated. The current of his blood pounded in his ears. He kept all expression from his face, save a quiver at the corner of his mouth, which he could not control.

"Do you need a father confessor?" he asked, speaking low that his voice might not tremble. "I understand that to some fair ladies these pack-horses of the conscience do not come amiss."

But her quick eyes had noted the quiver. For the second time that night, she came direct to the gist of the matter, denying herself the luxury of preamble.

"You know the Duchess of Croome," she began. "She is a woman to be reckoned with, but do you but play this night's work properly and you will find her your best ally."

Mansur did not wait for her next words. He arose with calculated carelessness from his place by the table and within the radius of the candle-light. Going over, he stood before the fire. He knew that he showed in silhouette against it, as he faced the gloom of the room. He was determined that for the next few moments Lady Caroline should not read his face.

She understood him perfectly, and crossing her arms upon the table, grinned at him.

"Now I will give you the duchess' weak points," she went on. "They are two. First, her niece, Lady Philida; second, her dread of a single syllable from Mis-

tress Grundy. All the world knows this foible. She may be as bad as any of the rest," she ended with a wanton's careless disparagement, "but no one could ever lay a finger on her."

"I don't follow," said Mr. Mansur to gain time.

"You and the Lady Philida disappear within an hour of one another. It will have all the appearance of an elopement. The world will say that she fled to avoid her marriage with Lord Yerington, which her aunt was pushing on. You turn up the next day,"—she paused suggestively—"with Lady Philida and marriage lines duly witnessed, and though the girl might weep and protest, the duchess would back you, though she hated you, and had to starve her niece into submission by a year's imprisonment in the country."

The man, showing to Lady Caroline's eyes, black and inexpressive before the fire-glow, did not answer nor move. She watched him triumphantly. She was contemptuously sure of him. She returned to her parade of eating, picking at the viands with cattish delicacy.

Again the dry cough sounded.

Despite himself, Mr. Mansur's eyes stole towards the door from whence it came.

The wind had risen steadily; at moments its low soughing rose to a wail. Drops of rain fell down the gaping chimney and hissed in the fire behind him; a consuming sense of his position took hold upon his mind; the solitary house standing in the fleeting snatches of moonlight; the mists hovering over the surrounding meadows, obscuring the landscape; the gaunt stunted trees, bent by the prevailing gales; the stretch of dim, grey road leading off and lost in the darkness and the haze. Then his mind returned to the shadowed room in which he was standing. He became acutely conscious of the man behind the panels of that door, who was only waiting

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like Fate for him to lift his hand. He felt the presence of the trembling, affrighted girl confined in some distant chamber of this usually deserted house. Suddenly, the wind rose to a wild shriek and seemed to surround him, to leave him more definitely alone with his temptation. The sense of Philida's nearness, her accessibility, grew upon him. In his most conquering fancies, he had scarcely climbed to the definite hope of a real possession of her. Now, unexpectedly, she was within his grasping. The memory of her loveliness possessed him, left him weak and powerless for the moment. He felt his reason reel, and that desire was sweeping him off his feet. He had so far forgotten himself that he had moved further into the light.

Lady Caroline, seated where the candle-glow shone upon her, revealing her dark eyes, her rouged face, and the crimson stain of her lips, was the one bit of brilliant colour in the mirky room. Suddenly she became to him the incarnation of his temptation.

The dual nature of the man asserted itself. By a mighty effort of the will, he resolved to shut her out, to get back again to his customary attitude of calculation. He concentrated and withdrew his mind from his surroundings. The result was instantaneous. He became calm. He no longer heard the howling wind. He did not dally with the knowledge of their isolation.

The other side of him held sway. And in the light of its cold insight he shuddered back, like a traveller, whom the revealing dawn discovers on the verge of a precipice.

For the moment his passion abated. He saw not only the madness of his recent mood, but the futility of the plan of the afternoon which had led to Philida's kidnapping. The excuses and the explanations which during

his ride had seemed to him so satisfying and so impeccable, now appeared transparent, flimsy as gauze. In the revulsion of his feelings, an impulse to retreat seized him. So far he was committed to nothing.

Then his love arose. Could he leave Philida to the mercies of Lady Caroline? He now read her truly,—her resources and her ruthlessness,—and he did not know how far she might push her animosity. As his love for Philida gained the upper hand, and the clamouring temptation died away, his instinct of hypocrisy returned. He determined to conceal his real intentions.

When he spoke, Lady Caroline thought she had conquered, and she rose with a gay little clap of her hands. It might have been a girlish prank, and not a crime she contemplated as she ran towards the fireplace.

"Ah, Mr. Mansur!" she exclaimed, with a low bow. "What a pretty story we shall make of it! I'll go straight and fetch her, and mark you, sir, don't be fool enough to heed a few tears. At heart all women are Sabines."

She snatched the lantern from its hook in the hall, and he heard her footsteps upon the stone stairs.

As the sound ceased and he was left alone with the howling wind and the dry cough behind the panels, he almost repented his decision. There were two men within him; one was coldly calculating and patient; the other, headlong and passion-ridden. He had usually contrived to keep these contradictory personalities distinct, giving the rein to the one or to the other. Now they were at war within him and the kingdom of his heart and of his mind divided him.

To tranquillise himself, he began to walk up and down the room. A distant sound reached him. He paused, holding his breath to listen. Lady Caroline was returning, but he heard no second footfall.

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As she entered the room, he approached her and took her wrist in a cruel, unregardful grasp.

"Where is Lady Philida?" he questioned.

She struck his hand off sharply. Then she put the lantern upon the table and threw herself into a chair. Here she rocked from side to side, laughing and kicking her heels in an ecstasy. He thought her hysterical and reached for the jug of water. She waved him away.

"Lud, man, don't be a fool. My mirth is real, real. Fate, dear jade, I kiss your hand. My prettiest wit could not have contrived so neat a trap."

"Where is the Lady Philida?" he shouted.

He felt a brutal impulse to beat the truth out of her.

She sprang to her feet and dropped him a deep curtsey.

"An' please you, sir," she minced, "I must entreat a thousand pardons. Methinks for the present you must forego your embraces. The Lady Philida hath fled."

"Fled?" he echoed, uncomprehendingly, staring at her.

"La!" she said, "how you echo me! What you will, —vanished—gone, by a secret passage I'd clean forgot. If she's not frightened to death, or eaten by rats, she will by now have arrived at the prettiest den of iniquity I have knowledge of; an inn, fairly littered with tattered rascals. I'll warrant your Lady Philida will be weary of her escapade."

She threw herself back with renewed laughter.

During the instant that he watched her his eyes flamed. He sprang towards her, taking her soft shoulder in a grip that dug to the bone.

"Where is this room?" he asked hoarsely. "Take me to it."

She squirmed away from him. She felt no fear, though his face was convulsed.

"Not I, you brute, you hurt me."

For a moment he glared down at her, helpless. Her face was wicked in its mirth, as she looked back at him.

He took the lantern that she had set down on the table and hurried blindly from the room. He went up the stairs to face long, baffling passages. Down these he rushed, peering into empty rooms, pounding at closed doors, tearing up staircases that but ended in a *cul de sac*, maddened by an unselfish fear for the woman he loved.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE ROOM IN THE TOWER

Who could refrain
That had a heart to love?

—SHAKESPEARE.

THE hall which Lady Philida and the woman entered was narrow and stone-paved. Its darkness was relieved only by a lantern with pierced holes that spread radiating gleams against one wall, and the flambeau that her guide carried. At the back, the hall turned off at an angle and up this led a flight of stone stairs. Her silent companion, still carrying her flambeau which left behind it trails of black smoke and tarry odour, ushered her to the landing above. Here was revealed a second flight of stairs. Philida followed her guide without protest or question. The silent woman's society was a relief to her after her recent companionship. As she went, she calculated the height to which they were rising, subconsciously. There was fighting blood in her veins, and though for the time her head swam uselessly, the determination to escape if possible underlay her thoughts.

At length they reached the threshold of an open door before which her guide paused as a hint for her to enter. She did so and the woman followed, locking the door behind her.

The click of the lock as it turned revealing to Philida that she was a prisoner, let in upon her a tempest of panic and of protest.

"How dare you?" she cried. "Would you treat me as prisoner?"

"My orders, your ladyship," returned the other imperturbably.

Going over to the hearth, she proceeded to stir up the smouldering fire which was creeping and snapping uneasily among green boughs.

Philida battled back her sobs, and stood looking about her, seeking for an exit. She found herself in a large apartment hung with tapestries which were still beautiful, though frayed in places. They represented a hunting scene. A Flemish chest, rich in carving, but worm-eaten, stood against one wall. Beside the high stone fireplace were two great chairs, one upholstered in bronzed leather, but all its glory faded. Upon the hearth lay a fur rug worn bare in spots. There was an Elizabethan carved bedstead, piled with stuffy-looking bed-clothes almost to its heavy, wooden canopy. This completed the furnishing of the neglected room. The door by which they had entered was cut wantonly into the fine old tapestry. There was but one window set high in the wall.

To this Philida ran, and, standing upon tiptoe, contrived to open it. The damp blackness and a sense of the depth below sent her back from it with a little cry of disappointment and dismay. She turned, to discover her gaoler regarding her with an air of impersonal curiosity.

The woman had a mass of rebellious grey hair, a mouth curiously set, not hard, not firm, and hazel eyes beneath thick eyebrows. There was about her the appearance of one doing her duty, without enthusiasm, but with no hint of relenting.

"Oh," burst out Philida, "you are not going to help her to do this thing?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

"I must obey her ladyship," she answered immovably.

Philida was suffering from the shocks of the day and deadly weary. This reply crushed her. She flung herself face downwards upon the hearth-rug and sobbed. For many moments she lay there, a slender figure, her arms flung above her head in an attitude of abandon; her white-flowered dress crushed and disarranged as the firelight danced over her.

When again she looked up she found, to her surprise, that her companion had dragged the chest within the radius of the heat from the fire, and that her supper was spread upon it.

"Best eat, your ladyship," she remarked practically.

Lady Philida leaned against one of the chairs, and shook her head.

"It won't do you any good to lose your strength nor your beauty," suggested the other.

The girl regarded her with arrested attention. Her guide's matter-of-fact way of putting things calmed her. Yes, she would need strength. With an effort at self-command she approached the chest. The viands were of the plainest. A joint of cold meat, and a loaf of coarse bread flanked by a flagon of wine completed the repast. With a deliberate effort Philida began her supper. She had not broken her fast since the morning. She found, to her surprise, that she was eating with a fair degree of appetite. Helped by the meal, the sharp, heady wine, and the glow of the fire of which she was beginning to be gratefully sensible, her mind began to act.

So far at least she seemed safe. Her grim guardian had settled herself to turn the heel of a grey yarn stocking, as deliberately as if no tearful eyes watched her wistfully from the other side of the hearth.

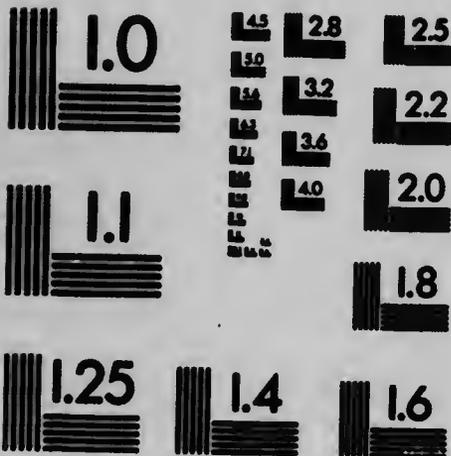
For some moments Philida regarded her, drooping where she sat.

The wind had risen. It whirled about the tower



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room, snatched at the casements and shook them violently. The candles were caught by the draughts which sent their flames veering; the shadows in the corners of the dark room moved uneasily; the great blot of the bed's canopy went quivering over the ceiling; there was a fluttering of swallows in the chimney. The little creatures were disturbed by the smoke, and their wings dislodged an occasional chip of mortar or wreath of soot. From the wainscot came the squeak and scuttle of mice. The whole room was pervaded by the spirit of loneliness and fear.

Philida was seized with a hunger for the touch of something warm and human. She crept over and crouched against her guardian's knees. The woman felt the soft huddle of her form. The action was full of appeal. She counted off her stitches carefully. There was an unfamiliar tug at her heart, as she felt the trustful pressure of her charge's shoulders.

As the wind rose to a louder shriek, Philida gasped, and threw her arms about her companion.

"Don't leave me?" she besought, her eyes strained over her shoulder at the moving shadows.

"Not unless my lady orders."

"Always my lady's orders!" cried Philida. "Have you then no heart? Do you lend yourself to this wickedness?"

The woman moved in her seat and set her lips obstinately.

"I know nought of that," she said. "That's my lady's affair."

"A pretty affair!" exclaimed Philida, in a burst of indignation. "And I'll see to it she suffers for it."

The other continued the exasperating click of her needles, but there was the ghost of a grim smile now upon her face.

"I'm thinking she'll see to it that you suffer first, your ladyship. My mistress is not one to enter upon a road unless she herself knows the turnings better than another."

Upon this reply Philida lapsed into discouraged silence. Her fears grew upon her. To keep them in abeyance, she began to question her companion.

"If we are to be here all night, mayhap, it was best if I had a name for you."

"You may call me Martha," said the woman.

"Martha," said Philida, "I like it well. Prithee, Martha, shorten the hour with some story."

"I know no stories, your ladyship," the other returned gruffly.

"Or even a little gossip, Martha. Anything. This wind affrights me."

"I know no gossip."

"Prithee, then, Martha, tell me your own history."

"My history, your ladyship! what history have such as I save toil, toil, toil."

Philida placed a cheek against her companion's knee, her back turned to the terrifying shadows of the room.

"Everybody has some history, Martha. Are you married?"

An angry exclamation answered her.

"Not I, thank God!"

"Did he die?" asked Philida, softly.

This questioning threaded her thoughts away from the terrors that threatened to overwhelm her.

The knitting fell from Martha's lap. She answered brusquely:

"When a woman is not married at forty-five, all the world knows no man has come a-courting her."

"I know better, Martha," Philida answered. "You have but to smooth away that frown and you'd be

comely now. But it did not frighten me. I knew that it did not pass below into your mind."

"It has been there many years and 'tis like to stay there," replied Martha.

"Alas, alas!" cried the girl, "then somebody has spoiled your life as that wicked woman now seeks to spoil mine."

When she had spoken, despite her resolve, she sobbed brokenly.

"Why does she seek to cross my love?" she queried at length. "She has her husband."

Martha laughed gruffly.

"You baby!" she exclaimed. "She flouts him behind his back and cajoles him to his face. Her husband, marry!"

"And yet you would help her," cried Philida. "I wonder at you."

A transient expression of shame appeared in Martha's face.

"I must live," she said bitterly. "I've a bedridden father, and work as I may I can't pay the rent. My lady suffers us."

She lapsed into sulky silence and resumed her knitting.

A suggestion came into Philida's mind, and with it a gleam of wild hope. She turned towards her companion, her face alight.

"You need not stay here, Martha, to toil and sin for this woman. I am rich, rich! I never was glad of it before. I have a fortune. I would give you a farm rent-free for all your life, and your father need want for nothing, if you but set me free."

"These be but promises," said the woman sulkily.

"In your heart you know you trust me," answered the girl with disarming gentleness.

"Mayhap I do," answered Martha, avoiding her gaze; "but it would not be the old farm."

"My life and happiness against the old farm!" exclaimed the girl, clasping her hands despairingly.

"I'll stay," said Martha sullenly.

Philida sprang to her feet.

"Are you human," she exclaimed passionately, "or only a machine that moves at another's bidding? Would you see my life ruined and help yourself to wreck it? Yet you loved once and know somewhat of what you are doing."

Martha's high, harsh voice arrested her. She had risen to her feet, and her eyes were burning beneath her heavy eyebrows.

"Speak not of him," she cried, her hand beating the air, "a wastrel wanderer, a stone that gathered no moss; a good-for-nought."

Philida was frightened by her fury.

"Yet surely you saw good in him," she said, wonderingly.

"No! no!" cried Martha. "I saw no good in him; I knew that he would beat me; I knew that he lied to me then; I knew he would not be true to me. It was only that he was not to me as other men were. I was a woman and a fool."

She wrung her work-hardened hands, wrapped in the tragedy of her blighted youth. Suddenly she turned to Philida, her large eyes heavy with antagonism.

"Why did you make me speak?" she questioned. "You are a witch, and I am afraid of you."

But Philida threw her arms about her neck and buried her face in her shoulder.

"Oh, Martha, Martha," she cried. "We are just two poor women together, you and I."

CHAPTER XXX

AN UNDERGROUND FLIGHT

'Twas a rough night.
My young remembrance cannot parallel
A fellow to it.

—SHAKESPEARE.

PHILIDA raised her head and looked suddenly at her companion, her face wild in its appeal. From somewhere in the distance, the strokes of a town clock floated to them. Its brazen tongue tolled ten. Hitherto the girl had been sustained by a hope of rescue. Now the hours had sped and no help had come.

"What can she do to me?" she questioned, frantically.

Martha's face fell.

"God knows, my pretty," she reluctantly said.

Philida was frightened by something in her manner. She took her shoulders in a wild clasp.

"She can't keep me from him?"

Martha turned away her eyes.

"I know she has summoned her chaplain. She would not need him herself. Marry you, perhaps."

Philida did not move. Martha looked up in surprise. She found the girl standing, white as marble, frozen into an apathy of horror, her lips parted, her eyes staring. These words would have carried no conviction save for her experience in Fleet Street.

"Marry me, marry me!" Her lips formed the words, but no sound came. The next instant a wave of fierce pride broke over her.

"She dare not! I am the Earl of Chedley's daughter."

Martha looked at her with an almost whimsical smile. " 'Tis little that will serve you once you're married," she said shrewdly.

Philida's spirit broke.

She clung to Martha's knees, entreating her, palpitating with fear, sobbing out incoherent promises of what she would do if she would but give her her liberty.

" Let me think," said the woman abruptly.

The girl checked her weeping and even withdrew her clasping hands to watch her. Martha frowned as she reflected. Hers was a secretive nature. Philida had moved her, but she was weighing the chances before she acted.

At length she bent over her, half fearful of her own resolution.

" Your ladyship," she whispered, " perhaps there is a way. Don't be too certain, for it is full of dangers and you may lack the courage."

There was no lack of courage or resolution in Philida's face as she looked back at her.

Martha answered the look.

" Then, first, your promise," she went on. " The farm rent-free for all my life, and the means, as soon as you can get it to us, to haste away from here."

" I promise, I promise," cried Philida. " But the way? "

Martha's eyes were sparkling beneath her black brows. She was unchaining her long-suppressed personality; taking measures against the mistress, faithfully served, but secretly disliked. The whole woman was vibrant, as she continued, still whispering.

" There is a secret passage from this room, behind those nailed-down tapestries. It goes down between the walls. I've known it from a child, though my lady is

ignorant that I have knowledge of it. From there it passes three-quarters of a mile, as the crow flies, to an inn below."

She paused.

"I would I could go with you, my lady," she said with a touch of her old surliness, "but I must not leave my father to meet her ladyship's wrath alone."

Philida's heart failed her.

"Must I go by myself?" she gasped.

Martha, conscious of her selfishness, felt a stir of anger.

"You have the choice of staying," she answered.

"Nay," said Philida, her voice quivering, "I will go."

Her imagination had already foreseen the terrors of the journey, but they were as nothing to her present plight.

At the sight of her wide, affrighted eyes, Martha felt a prick of conscience.

"The inn has an ill name. Could you but linger in the passage till the morning, then I could go to you."

Involuntarily, Philida shuddered.

"I have no watch to tell the hours."

Some unexplained, distant sound within the house caught her ear.

"Let us wait no longer," she cried. "Show me the entrance."

Martha hastened to the corner of the room. She inserted her fingers beneath the edge of the tapestry. The rotting material gave way easily. Pushing it back, a panel behind it was revealed covered with cloth, dust and cobwebs. For a moment Martha's fingers felt about vainly for the spring. Again the sound in the house below! Philida almost screamed as she watched the fruitless groping. Another instant and the door swung back with a creak.

A breath of dampness floated out and the sound of the scurry of rats.

Philida ran to the opening. She felt all a woman's shrinking horror of the rats, all a child's of the darkness, but her eyes were sparkling with excitement. She was possessed by a frenzy of fear lest an instant's lingering might trap her. Yet on the threshold she stopped, gasping.

"I must gather courage," she whispered.

Martha's heart almost prompted her to follow her. Only for an instant. She was eager now to get away herself by means not open to Philida.

The girl paused, one foot upon the shadowy staircase within.

"Leave the panel open for a moment. I must get accustomed to the dark," she entreated.

"My pretty one," cried Martha. "'Tis not so bad as that."

She left the room and Philida heard her exchange a few words with the man who watched at the door.

When she returned she carried a lantern.

"Heaven guard your ladyship," she said huskily.

Philida took the lantern and vanished. Martha peered after her. She caught sight of a stone staircase that turned abruptly and was lost in darkness; and the air was dank.

Lantern in hand, Philida picked her way down the uneven steps. The space in which she was travelling was scarcely two feet wide; the way was irregular. When the passage gave a sharp turn, she discovered that her course lay between the outer stone wall of the house and what she took to be the panelling of a room. In the darkness which gloomed ahead of her and with no way of gauging the distance she travelled, it seemed to her that she had been going on for hours next to the

walls of the old house. As she crept along, the rats scuttling before her, she suddenly became conscious of the sound of voices. One she recognised with a creep of aversion. She had first become accustomed to its intonations in darkness, and it may be for that reason she recognised it more readily under the same circumstances. The other voice was a man's. As she heard it she gasped, pressed close against the wooden wall and listened. Its tone struck a note of memory. The suspicion seized her that it was Mr. Mansur's. Before she could confirm or dismiss the thought she heard the sound of a chair hastily pushed back over the flags in the room below, and the ring of a spurred heel. This added to her fear of pursuit and she went on with almost incautious haste. She descended a dozen more steps, when a gleam in the wood hinted to her that she had reached a lighted room. She paused here and leaned her head against the crack. The faint radiance gave her a momentary comfort in the darkness. A short, dry cough reached her ears, and she started, trembling. All too probably here too lurked an enemy. Better the rats and the darkness.

A few feet farther on the way twisted downward precipitously and she had to cling to the side as she went. She realised that she had now left the house, and was travelling along a rough passage underground. The air grew damper and closer, but, to her unspeakable relief, the rats with their gleaming, red eyes ceased to scamper past her. The walls of the passage were rocky and irregular, and blotched with great patches of mildew; sometimes fungus hung down almost forming a curtain across the way. The air became closer and still closer. Her breath began to labour and her head to swim. A fear arose in her mind. What if she should smother in this horrid place, lie there and rot, her presence unsus-

pected by those in the sunshine above? Upon the heels of this terror trod another. This passage in itself told the story of secrecy and conspiracy! Suppose she were to come upon the bones of some murdered man or woman picked clean by rats. She felt her hair lift upon her head. Then she thought of Lord Yerington, and it steadied her. She was determined not to let her imagination wander, but to keep it fixed as far as possible by hopeful reflections.

As she went, the gleam from her lantern shone upon the slime of the walls, or revealed where a sluggish trickle crept down them and turned along the passage, converting it to mud.

The flame of her lantern, which had begun to burn blue in the impure air, leapt up again and a sense of refreshment came to her labouring lungs. She discerned before her a glow of moonlight upon the wall of the passage. A moment later she pushed her face into a refreshing tangle of green leaves. Between them, with a sense of unutterable relief and delight, she caught a glimpse of the cloud-sown sky, and the silver shield of a full moon.

She dared not linger and was soon on her way again. Occasionally she came upon these openings which gave directly upon the night, but which were hidden by the undergrowth. They kept some slight circulation moving in the otherwise stagnant air.

With a gasp of dismay she perceived that the rats were again beginning to appear. She could see the twin, red gleam of their eyes; but this also told her she was nearing habitation, and a tortuous winding staircase soon confirmed this supposition.

As she approached it, pushing her way slowly and with difficulty between the narrow walls, Martha's words recurred to her with their full significance.

"The inn has an ill name."

She had reached the end of her journey.

A panel stopped her course. She leaned against it, panting. Beyond it she heard the babel of men's voices. At first the sense of human companionship comforted her. Then a new sharp fear arose that blanched her already white cheeks.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE WHITE LADY OF LONE ELM MANOR

Here in the tavern haunt I make my lair.

—OMAR KHAYYAM.

PHILIDA stood in the dark with her cheek pressed against the panel, distraught with terror. From the room within came snatches of drunken song, ribald laughter and the clatter of tankards pounded upon the table. The coarse comment and oaths told her all too clearly what lay before her, and behind her stretched darkness, terror-steeped and rat-haunted.

Amidst the din within one voice became distinct. It had a dominating quality, a confident roll and the resourcefulness of epithet that revealed the bravo and the bully. The man was finishing a story whose purport escaped Philida in her confusion of mind. But it met with an outburst of wild applause.

"Well done, Will," exclaimed a voice, "as good a turn as ever I heard on. But she escaped thee in the end?"

"Ay; but he was welcome to her, for he gave the best sport my sword hath tasted since I handed Ken Gordon his passports. A pox, I say, on all white-livered poltroons who would exchange a lass for a swinging fight! I was well paid, I tell thee!"

The voice struck across Philida's consciousness with a sense of familiarity, but save for the added fear it raised in her, it did not definitely place itself.

Another voice, high-pitched and mincing, answered Will, the self-confident and brawl-lover.

"Egad, Will," it said; "I thought you capable of a

more fertile invention. 'Od's life, I did. Now, if you had such a prank to tell of as I could boast! It happened but a month since."

Here followed a circumstantial account of Mr. Mansur's farce of a rescue, and he related his mock trial before Lord Yerington with a pith and wit that convulsed his audience. No names were given—Yerington appeared as "my lord," Elliot as a "put of a gawky Scot."

For the second time that night, Philida, during her flight between Lone Elm Manor and this inn, had come close to stumbling upon the truth about Mr. Mansur, and gaining the key to his plotting.

In the breathless passage she crouched and listened.

Will spoke.

"Fore George," he said, "never blame another man's invention until you can play your own hand. Thunders of Jove, man, had I not taken you into my favour, you'd still be a skulking skeleton only lacking a gibbet and a chain to make you crow's food."

This time Philida recognised the voice. It was that of the chief rogue in her Fleet Street experience. The shock was too much. She gave a smothered cry, reeled and stumbled against the panel.

The sound of her fall reached the ears of those within the room.

"What's that?" asked Will, his eyes narrowed to instant attention. His hand went to his sword; he was upon the defensive; his face eager and alert. His life was a long fence with chance. His instinct was to fight.

The man who sat opposite him, but recently promoted to the prosperity of bag-wig, a frogged riding-coat and jack-boots, exchanged a quick, sly look with him. The Scarecrow of Temple Bar had somewhat mended his fortunes since last we encountered him in the woods of Warwickshire. He had heard the sound, but he did not

move. His slim hand caressed his lips, his eyes were watchful and furtive.

Not so the rude fellows who sat with them, grown ruder over their cups. They turned livid beneath their wine-dyed skins.

"The devil!" shrieked one, rising to his feet, flinging his chair upon its back as he did so, and staring at the corner from whence the sound had come. Instinctively he crossed himself. "'Tis the ghost of the Lady of the Manor!"

The second man got to his feet, his knees trembling.

"Ay, ay," he responded in a hoarse whisper. "I'll swear 'tis she. 'Tis well known there is a passage thence to the Manor. 'Twas there that Lord Cecil murdered her as she would have escaped him. She haunts it,—all the countryside is aware of that."

Will and Tom exchanged glances. Their lives were not as open books, and they had no appetite for secret passages and hiding-places unless they themselves occupied them; but it was not ghosts which they feared. They sought to brush the matter aside.

"All this for a rat in the wainscot?" said Will lightly. "Prithee, monsieur le Rodent, accept my compliments." He bowed with his hand upon his heart. "You've given these chicken-hearted gentlemen a turn, I'll warrant you." He took a sliding step forward and made mysterious passes in the air. "Come, monsieur, I'll exorcise thee."

He continued his cautious advance towards the paneling, his hand now upon his lips, enjoining silence.

Tom saw his purpose. He took a bottle from the table and held it by the neck. If there were to be unexpected developments and he was to come to an encounter with unknown foes he preferred this weapon, or a pistol and ten paces, to his sword.

For a moment the two terror-stricken men were held by the fear of ridicule. Then the thought of the possible phantom overcame them. Each scrambled to hide behind his neighbour. They were the epitome of grotesque fright.

With cautious fingers Will felt over the panelling for a hidden spring. The teeth of one of the men within the room suddenly chattered audibly and struck a note of pure burlesque, though to all the actors in it the scene was serious enough.

Philida, trapped within, was shaken from head to foot by the sense of horror and threat which the sound of the man's voice had aroused in her. Limp and powerless she leaned against the rough wall of her prison. Her experiences had been coming so rapidly one upon the other, that for the moment she was unable to think or act. Then the strange silence within the room began to penetrate her consciousness and an enveloping flash of new and imminent danger stung her into life. In desperate haste she began feeling her way back down the narrow passage. She had not yet reached the corner where it turned at right angles and led down the rudely cut staircase, when a gleam of yellow light upon the wall before her told her that the panel had been slidden back. The shock sickened her. She felt an impulse to hasten on and throw herself madly down the precipitous steps. The dreaded course over which she had just come seemed peaceful as compared with her fear of what lay behind.

Suddenly an inspiration shot through her. The memory of the word "ghost" was echoing confusedly in her mind. Her native courage and resource crystallised into instant resolve. Her lantern she had dropped. Summoning all her determination, she faced about, standing erect and rigid, her hands at her sides. In her filmy,

white draperies she advanced slowly from the dark into the dimness, and within sight of the staring faces silhouetted in the oblong of the open panel. Her face was colourless; her eyes wide and fixed, as she glided slowly forward, her nerves strained almost to the snapping point. There was the rattle of a down-flung tankard; a howl of superstitious animal terror; then the shuffle of haunted footsteps as the four men fought their way madly from the room.

Within the passage Philida lay in a dead swoon.

The hastily-deserted room revealed panic and flight—a chair lay upon its back, a tankard spread its half-consumed contents over the floor.

The door, which had been so recently slammed in alarm, opened stealthily. At first there was but a crack. This was widened hastily as the door gave a disconcerting creak. Will crept into the room and paused, his left eye lowered almost to closing, his sunburnt face crafty. His eyes sought the open panel and he laughed softly to himself; then with cat-like rapidity and silence he stole towards it.

A faint sound arrested him. He jerked himself erect and wheeled about, to face Tom. As their eyes met his expression darkened, for he had intended to have this adventure to himself. The Scarecrow grinned at him impudently, with a sly intelligence that warned him to fair play. With his usual adaptability when conditions pressed him, he decided to accept his enforced partner with philosophy. They were accustomed to working in unison, and when engaged in their roguery their tactics demanded few words. Side by side, they went stealthily towards the yawning space in the wall. Will had a candlestick in his hand; and this he held above his head and peered into the dusky passage. Even his experience

was almost startled into an exclamation when he came unexpectedly upon the fainting girl.

He knelt to examine her face and when he turned back towards the room, his own was quivering with excitement.

"The devil is in it," he whispered. "As neat a little bit of good fortune as has come to me in many a day. The Lady Philida again! She is somewhat different habited than when I saw her last, but the same little lady, I'll go bail. I had to plot to capture the Duchess of Croome's niece last time. Now, gad, she's walked straight into my net."

He rubbed his hands with satisfaction.

"When did you encounter her last?" queried his companion, upon the *qui vive* of curiosity.

Will laughed in his throat.

"'Tis the little wench of Fleet Street. Zounds! Fate hath thrown doubles. You'll pay for that slipping, my pretty," and he grinned down at the unconscious girl.

Tom moved uneasily.

"I like not this business," he said. "There may be little profit in it and a hanging at the other end."

"Get you out of it, then," said Will brutally. "I can manage it alone, if you're so nice on the subject."

Tom rubbed his hand across his lips.

"Are you sure of the swag?" he asked.

"You reckon the odds like a parson," growled Will. "Half the spice of such chances lies in its uncertainty. It may mean much or little. Methinks it will mean much, and the devil take snivellers, say I."

Tom's watchful eyes noted him, as he again stooped over Philida.

Will did not regard her pathetic beauty—his professional eye was but intent upon the fineness of her

garments. The little jewelled brooch that fastened her velvet band about her neck he removed and thrust into his pocket. He would also have withdrawn a simple golden circlet from one of her fingers, but she moved slightly and this restrained him. He rose, went to the table and took a napkin which had been carelessly flung there. With skilful, unrelenting fingers he gagged her where she lay. The movement recalled her to cruelly clear consciousness. Her lids lifted, and she stared up at him with a nightmare of terror in her eyes. Then they closed in merciful oblivion.

Tom leaned against the table observing every movement of his unscrupulous pal. He had not been blind to the girl's beauty, but that alone would not have stirred in him the faint relentings that sent him on with the adventure with little appetite. It happened that his villainy was adulterated by a tincture of right feeling, which reduced the quality of the one without raising within him the saving grace of the other. To deal with the abstraction he had offered Yerington in Fleet Street was one thing—this was another. The girl's helplessness appealed to him. But the good in him was so weak and spiritless a thing that it did not develop into a definite resistance. Therefore, when Will, purposeful and ready, took Philida's inert form in his arms and turned to Tom with a question in his eyes, it was the latter's subtle mind that responded with a plan of action.

"I'll frighten all those below with a tale of a ghost," he said. "Get you out by the side door that opens upon the landing of the staircase and I'll join you later. Then go on to the tithe-barn that stands a hundred yards down the road. You know it well. It has been a friend to us on many a friendless night."

Will's lowered eyelid winked intelligence.

Tom, with a howl of terror that reverberated through

the house, and a mien of wild disorder, rushed from the room. He reeled as he went, his eyes staring.

In the hall below a crowd of people was gathered. They were listening open-mouthed to the tales of the two men who had been with Tom in the room above when Philida made her appearance. They were delivering their stories with many extemporised details, and the flesh of their auditors crept. The hostlers, unrebuked, had slipped in from the stables, and were shuffling from spot to spot, choosing that where the tale was most lurid. The hostess, a red-faced woman, her arms akimbo, hands on hips, huffed angrily, and swore she'd sleep in any room in the house without turning the colour of cheese-curds at the sight of a mouse in the wainscot. The landlord was poised between horrified attention and diplomatic scepticism. One man, of villainous appearance, with a patch across his eyes, scoffed openly; but, for the most part, the audience was credulous and duly moved.

When, therefore, a shriek broke upon their ears, they grasped each other staring with fright, not venturing to move until they knew whither to direct their retreat. The maids rushed into the hall from the odd corners of the old house to which the hostess' rating had driven them, trembling and screaming. The cook appeared, brandishing a long-handled saucepan as if she meant to lay the ghost with it as Martin Luther had exorcised the devil with the ink-pot.

Tom tumbled down the stairs and into the hall. Once there he ricocheted from group to group, hurling the people against one another, too frightened for protest or question.

"I've seen her!" he shrieked, "I've seen her! She is covered with blood; her throat is cut from ear to ear; she is carrying her head under her arm; she shook it at me."

A quaver of horror rose in crescendo as the details multiplied.

Tom ended by rushing around the room like a mad dog, howling as he went, and in the course of his flight taking possession of a pair of silver candle-snuffers, which his quick eye had noted lying upon a dresser.

Out of the front door he sped like a comet, followed by a tail of terrified people as if he were the Pied Piper and his shriek had magic in it. He decoyed them to the shadow of a great beech within the inn yard. There he paused, the centre of a crowd, all athrob with the horrors of superstitious fear. They formed like a halo about him, even the landlady's disbelief shaken, and the man with the patch sunk to mere irony.

Tom was enjoying himself; he was possessed by the exhilaration of invention; he held his auditors in the palm of his hand; they hung upon his every word, watched his every gesture, and the tale he wove passed into history and so became a part of the lore of the county.

As he stood there, himself moved by the picture which he drew with graphic detail and fine sense of dramatic effect, a coach drove up to the deserted inn.

Lord Yerington descended from it in haste.

Within the inn all was alight. The fire was dancing cheerily upon the hearth and gleaming on polished pewter and copper ranged about the dark walls. He paused in surprise at finding the place so tenantless. Going to where he saw the bell-rope dangling, he pulled it with a will. He heard a shrill distant tinkle, but there was no other reply. Puzzled and impatient, he left the house and went into the stable-yard. The duchess' anxious eyes followed him from the coach window. Michael had descended and was standing at the heads of the steaming, weary horses.

Lord Yerington found the stable-yard as deserted as the house. As he returned wondering, Michael spoke to him.

"There is a group of people yonder, your lordship, beneath that tree."

At this instant the clouds swept from the face of the moon. By its light, a dark blot within the yard revealed itself to be a gathering of men and women. Their action was so strange that, allied to the burden of Yerington's continued fears, it sent him towards the spot with a quickened step.

The group was too intent to heed him. They were still magnetised by Tom's story.

"Gad, my friends," he heard a voice say as he approached, whose cadence he knew, "I'm a sinful man, but, I ask you, must a sinner spoil all his to-days with his yesterdays? No, no, say I, conscience is a sad meddling wench and if you don't keep her in her place, a man will have no peace—though I'm no worse than another. But, hang me, when I saw that beautiful woman in such a case my teeth chattered like a Spanish dancer's castanets, my flesh crept and my hair stood on end. I could remember every deed I'd ever done upon which an angel could not have smiled."

He wiped his forehead dramatically, waiting, with an actor's instinct, for his words to take due effect.

He had been sufficiently moved by his eloquence to start violently when a firm hand was laid upon his arm. He turned to look into Lord Yerington's face, stern and white in the moonlight.

"Come," that gentleman demanded, "what is this to-do, my mar.?"

The spell was broken; for the first time the crowd moved. Tom looked at Lord Yerington sheepishly. Even in the uncertain light he recognised him.

"'Pon my life, my lord," he said with his usual jaunty air, "these yokels were clean spent for a little spice; dying for a want of stirring of their stagnant fancy. Egad, I pidgeoned them a little. We are men of the world and can be frank with one another."

Yerington did not heed the last piece of impudence. He still kept his hand on Tom's arm and walked him a few paces apart.

Something in his story, and its relation so near to the spot in which he was searching for Lady Philida, linked it indissolubly in his mind with the thought of her and her danger.

Yerington had already driven to Wardsleigh Abbey. The news he had learned there was both good and bad. The butler, an honest man, who, unlike most of the world, thought of him more as his master's than his mistress' friend, gave him information he could not distrust. —That was that Lady Caroline had been expected that day, but that she had not arrived and had sent on no explanation. On hearing this he felt assured that Philida had her to thank for her present plight. If, as appeared to be the fact, Lady Caroline herself had kidnapped her, he could not conceive of permanent harm coming to the girl.

He knew that Lady Caroline was a woman of violent passions and he believed she had acted upon an impulse of unreasonable jealousy. But, he told himself, with an effort at self-assurance, she would scarce commit Philida wholly to a position which, if it meant ruin for the girl, would mean ruin for herself also.

He did not realise that natures which have schooled themselves for years to a course of duplicity, run to maddest extremes in sheer reaction.

His mind had reverted to Lone Elm Manor. He recalled its isolated position and its deserted neighbourhood

and it seemed a favourable spot for Lady Caroline's purpose.

Hence his drive thither in haste.

As he had listened to Tom's words, fantastic and extreme as they were, they almost confirmed in him an apprehension.

The hostess of the inn turned and discovered the waiting coach. The thought of guests of quality standing unattended at her doors, acted like magic upon her nascent fears. She hastened back, sending the maids before her. The hostlers returned to the stable, and the other spectators either went to their homes or stood conversing in scattered groups.

The clouds were beginning to float higher and thinner, the wind had died down.

Lord Yerington looked searchingly into Tom's thin face, with the sharp drawn lines on each side of the wide mouth, and the loose lips of a man to whom a lie came easily.

"The last time I saw you, sirrah," he said, "you were engaged in an ugly farce to impose upon a lady. To-night I find you tuning your fancy to trick a group of simple folk. What lies behind it? Speak honestly, for I'll know the truth later, and then I shall not spare you."

Tom, his eyes keen by nature and from a life of constant shifts, looked at the earl speculatively.

"There's fact behind each fiction, my lord," he said.

"Don't quibble," commanded Lord Yerington. "Give me the facts about this *ghost* story."

A look of whimsical intelligence appeared in Tom's face.

"Perhaps my lord seeks a lady?" he said slyly.

The rascal and the nobleman exchanged glances. Each was wondering how far he could trust the other.

"Her appearance here was strange enough," Tom was

thinking. "Methinks I may coin this circumstance to my advantage."

It was Yerington's nature to take a downright course.

"A lady hath been kidnapped," he said, speaking slowly. "She was stole from her home. Yonder in the coach sits her aunt, the Duchess of Croome, in great distress of mind. If you have any knowledge that can help us, you'll be well paid for it."

Tom sucked his lips and considered. That this hit near Lord Yerington's own interest he read in his worn face, in the impatience which he only kept in check by a visible effort. Then he recalled his former kindness to him. He had helped him. It was through his patronage that his mother and sister were now earning honest livings. That plant, gratitude, sometimes roots itself in odd corners of gnarled, distorted hearts. Tom possessed an intimate and complex knowledge of evil, but had had little experience of kindness. His mother and his sister he loved in his own warped fashion.

"I would I could help you without reward, my lord," he said, shamefaced at the unfamiliar stirring in his heart.

Something in his tone made hope leap up within Yerington, and a deep breath escaped him.

"I felt," he said, "that you had some knowledge."

Tom calmly reviewed the chances.

"'Twill mean my living, my lord. I must cut a cul whose help has filled pockets that have long been empty. It——"

Lord Yerington interrupted him.

"Enough! I want no knowledge of your affairs. It will pay you well to speak, if you have any information that would help us. Do not keep us waiting," he ended in a sudden anguish of impatience.

A few words of hurried explanation sent Yerington

back to the coach-side. Tom lounged along, some distance back of him, making a great parade of indifference to cover a night-bird's instinctive avoidance of the light about the inn. He could see that the duchess was speaking eagerly. He heard her exclamation and saw her take a step as if to descend from the coach.

This caused him to hurry forward and stand bowing and scraping like a Frenchman.

"My compliments, your grace, my very best compliments. Your most humble and obedient servant."

The duchess glared at him.

"What's this jack-o'-lantern?" she asked in indignant surprise.

Yerington hastened to interfere.

"This, your grace, is the man of whom I spoke to you, who has kindly offered to help us."

The bag-wig bowed half to the earth and rose again.

"I protest, your grace," he said, with his hat over his heart, "I am in a twitter at my own presumption. But is it your grace's intention to accompany us?"

"It is," she said firmly, visibly fighting her distaste of him.

Again he bowed with fantastic exaggeration.

"This venture, your grace, methinks is for men and not for a lady."

"Drat the fellow!" exclaimed the duchess indignantly, and would have continued, had not Yerington checked her with gentle patience.

"Dear duchess," he said, "the man is right. We know not what may lie before us and every moment is precious. Permit Foulkes to bring you some refreshment from the inn and let us go on."

"I've ever hated my own sex," growled the duchess. "Well, in mercy, off with you then and fetch the child; for my heart is hungry for her and aching with dread."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE TITHE-BARN

Turned King's evidence, sad to state—
But John was never immaculate.

—AUSTIN DOBSON.

LORD YERINGTON followed Tom, and Michael came up in the rear with a lantern.

Seeing it, Tom returned and whispered:

"Cloke that! 'Tis for honest men, not thieves."

Yerington turned, with a suppressed exclamation at his own oversight, and Michael closed the tin lantern-lid.

Together they stole past the inn under the dark shadow of a beech-tree and beneath the stone arch of a gateway.

The wind had died down. The air was moist, warm and breathless. The moon shone occasionally through scattered clouds. Ahead of them ran the pallid grey of the untenanted road, winding off into obscurity.

The silence, the darkness, the mystery, the moments stretched to hours in the intensity of his anxiety—all spelt fear and mounting dread to Lord Yerington. His heart hung heavy in his bosom while his imagination painted a thousand terrors against the screen of the night. His ignorance of conditions and the enforced self-suppression entailed in this unexplained quest in which all issues hung upon the good faith of a man whom he had reason to distrust to the core, wrung his patience almost beyond control.

At this moment the moon burst through a rift in the clouds and the scene immediately about them sprang out in sudden sharp contrast of black and silver. Tom's peaked face was revealed, shrewd and concentrated.

Yerington drew near and took his arm in a vise-like grip.

"Whither do you lead us?" he whispered, the intensity of his apprehension wringing the question from him.

Tom crouched further into the inky shadow of the wall, dragging his questioner after him.

"Damn the moon!" he muttered. "I'll lead you all to hell if you don't follow me in silence."

His voice thrilled in unmistakable earnestness. Its tone awakened a faith in Lord Yerington that braced his nerves.

The wall ran parallel with the road. With bent backs they followed, pressed close against it—splashing through pools of water and unconscious of the sting of nettles through which they broke their way. With the acuteness of the senses that comes in moments of great mental tension, Yerington heard the creaking of his companion's boots and perceived the fetid odours of decayed scents that arose from Tom's wig and mingled with the dampness and the smell of crushed herbage.

He strained his eyes ahead, seeking for an indication of the focus of their expedition.

Gradually, amid the murkiness of the half-lighted night he discerned the black hulk of the barn. It loomed vast and exaggerated in the gloom, and it struck upon his mood, indescribably sinister and threatening. Was this cavernous place pregnant with horrid possibilities, their destination? His heart registered the suspicion with a sickening bound. Again he hastened forward and laid a restraining hand on Tom's shoulder.

"My God!" he ejaculated, "not in there."

Tom turned a beset face toward him.

"In there," he muttered, "and if you're wise you'll let me general you."

The seriousness of his tone bit in, but Lord Yerington's self-repression had broken bounds.

The wall terminated before it reached the barn. He dashed heedlessly across the patch of intervening moonlight and into the shadow of its side without a word, Michael following close at his heels. The latter had, despite his haste, sufficient caution to leave the lantern darkened. They felt along the wall of the building, stumbled over a plough that was leaning against it, rounded a water-trough, and brought down a bucket with a clatter. This sound was followed by an outburst of barking from the house-dog in the farm hard by, which could be heard straining at its chain.

Lord Yerington knew that sound had put everyone within hearing distance upon their guard, but he was weary of repressed measures and impatient for action. He advanced heedlessly to the great barn door, crazily agape upon its hinges, and followed by the soft patter of Tom's oaths.

When the latter came forward and arrested Lord Yerington by a word, that gentleman could not know how much self-renunciation entered into the act. He could not suspect that Tom possessed his own type of professional pride, and that he felt humbled at being committed, as an accessory, to methods so unbusinesslike. But he had set himself to help this blundering, sorely tried nobleman, and he felt the stirring of an odd impulse of kindness towards him.

"Let me go first, my lord," he whispered, "I'll draw him with a false signal."

Yerington turned, his breath coming short, and en-

deavoured to read his face. Without awaiting an answer, Tom had slipped past him and pushed back the door, revealing the rayless darkness of the barn's interior.

Those without listened, every muscle tense.

An owl hooted softly; there was the deep breathing, rustle and stamp of disturbed cattle;—then but the drone of the warm summer night.

Yerington's fear was roused to frenzy.

He made an onward movement, when again Tom's whistle sounded, clear and distinct, and he curbed himself to wait a possible response.

The signal was followed by the soinnolent tinkle of a distant sheep-bell—and again but the cricket-blurred silence.

"Let us within," cried Yerington, "and make an end of this."

He pushed back the door with no pretence of caution and entered. These pauses had maddened him.

His nostrils were assailed by the dry prickle of straw-dust as he stood staring into the darkness. After an interval he faintly discerned Tom, motionless as a statue, standing near by. His tall, lank figure was unmistakable, even appearing as a dim blur where the faint light entering at the door dulled the blackness, and his impassivity, to Lord Yerington's mind, increased the sense of menace within the peopled emptiness. A hovering suspicion of his guide's good faith suddenly focussed into conviction within his racked mind.

"Michael open the lantern," he demanded with harsh abruptness, as a flame of anger and doubt flashed through him.

Without a sound Tom threw himself prone and wriggled into hiding beneath the straw.

Against the darkness Lord Yerington's face suddenly shone out, the lips tense, the eyes alert above the white

splash of his ruffles, Michael's face appearing dimly behind it.

Tom, from beneath the interlacing straw, watched them sharply.

They moved forward in a floating circle of light, searching the barn step by step. They went cautiously about high-piled sacks of grain, sending the rats scuttling; they peered into the enclosures where the cattle winked at them with an appearance of gentle, unprotesting injury; and made their way in through the billows of hay that in places rose almost to the roof, their anxiety mounting with every step.

"If the rascal hath cozened us he'll pay dearly for it," muttered Yerington.

As he spoke his foot encountered a resistance, obstinate, yet yielding. He snatched the lantern and leaned forward, the light straying among the golden litter of the hay. Buried deep in it he perceived the figure of a man. He was lying in a real or pretended slumber. His head was resting upon his arm and was thrown far back, revealing his brown, muscular neck.

As Lord Yerington bent over him, Michael heard a fierce exclamation. He had recognised the ruffian of Fleet Street. He spoke, and his tone put an end to the simulated slumber.

"On your feet, dog," he said, with a savage kick, "and give an account of yourself."

For an instant a faint ironic smile appeared on Will's face. His eyelids twitched, but they did not lift.

Between these two men, beau and ruffling rogue, there existed down in the roots of their natures a something that made them instinctive enemies. It was a matter aside from code or circumstance and was rooted in a primitive instinct in each man which, when they met, brushed aside culture in one, and love of gain in the

other, and left them, when face to face, swayed by savage impulses.

Will crept with rage as he felt the boot-thrust in his seasoned ribs. At its impact he cared not a jot for caution or reward. His strong, yellow teeth ground upon one another, and he felt grim joy in his power to torture.

This obstinate silence worked upon Lord Yerington like a poison. His face was colourless, but his tone was ominously quiet.

"Answer me, you hound," he said, half breathless with his passion, "or I'll throttle you."

In defiance of this threat, the man stretched himself like a dog and yawned.

"Good farmer," he muttered, "I don't harm your hay. The devil take it for prickliness. A pox on your poor fields, say I."

Yerington turned round in exasperation.

"A barn means a rope somewhere. Fetch one."

Michael swung off on his mission and Yerington was left in the darkness with the fuming rascal. He stood, his sword in his hand, consumed with fears for Philida, impatient of the fleeing moments, and filled with black anger against the rogue who defied him. Tom he had forgotten; he was too contemptuous for caution.

Suddenly he felt a movement. Cursing his own thoughtlessness he went down like a log. He was in an embrace like a vise. Instinctively he flashed up his arms, seeking to keep them free even at the risk of exposing his body. His sword had escaped his grasp in the surprise of the attack.

He felt Will's iron fingers relentlessly searching for his neck. He could hear a click in his antagonist's throat, half of joy, half of blind fury. Together they writhed over the yielding hay, each mutely seeking for an ad-

vantage, interlocked, muscle braced to muscle, in a death-grip of hatred and elemental thirst to exterminate.

Tom watched breathlessly for the issue of the fight sufficiently forgetful of his caution to rise, as he strained his eyes in the darkness, determined on a retreat if things went against Lord Yerington, and inwardly fuming at the turn affairs had taken.

Even in the earnest of the fight Yerington felt a fastidious loathing for the malodorous contact with the man whom he held in an embrace to the death. Slowly, inch by inch, his superior skill was telling. He was not the stranger, but the more skilled man, and Mr. Broughton's lessons had been applied both to muscle and a mind of nimble quality. Gradually, he gained a grip upon his antagonist's throat.

As he heard him gasp and felt him beginning to weaken, his relentlessness increased. His teeth were clenched. Into his iron fingers he ground revenge for that attempt of Fleet Street; revenge for Philida's present plight; revenge for that torturing, scorching silence. The face above the pinioned throat grew crimson in the darkness, purple, blue,—yet Yerington's mad anger burned unslaked.

Suddenly a flood of light revealed to him his enemy's distorted face. Michael's hand was upon his arm, his agitated voice in his ears.

"My lord," he besought, "for God's sake, restrain yourself. No good will come of this."

Slowly the blood left Lord Yerington's eyes, and the fumes cleared from his brain. His fingers upon the brawny throat relaxed and Will fell half-unconscious into the straw.

Yerington rubbed a hand across his brow.

"Faith," he said, his voice low and hoarse, "I was nigh to madness."

He stood for an instant, his hand on Michael's shoulder, for a sudden shaking had come upon him. Then he turned again to Will with determined patience, conquering himself, though his gorge rose at the sight of the man.

"Sirrah, now will you speak?"

The smile was undiminished on Will's swollen face.

"Gad, sir farmer," he wheezed, through his bruised throat, "this is scurvy hospitality," and he sank into a silence that told of a will broken by neither fear nor death.

"The rope is best for such as he," came in Michael's voice, cold, with a contempt so profound that it helped to rationalise Lord Yerington.

Together they bound the man, bringing the knots into place with merciless severity, and securing him to one of the scantlings of the barn. Nothing could wipe the smile from his lips, until a straying glance discerned Tom's face in the background. As he recognised him his eyes narrowed to a slit, the left drooping to closing. For an instant, in his surprise, he was impassive. The next he strained at his bonds, his lips flecked with foam. Assured of his helplessness, he ceased and swore fluently with precise selection of words that left Tom drooping.

That worthy did not reply. He had not split upon a pal without a prick of conscience.

Once more Lord Yerington approached the prostrate rascal. His first words were unfortunate. All his natural facility in dealing with men forsook him in his intercourse with this one.

"Remember your hanging lies within my hands," he began, "and tell me where the lady is whom we seek. If you do so, Heaven forgive me for it, you shall have your pardon."

Will's only reply was to roll one savage eye at him.

The earl's ire threatened to overcome him.

"Come, sirrah," he said, "though it sickens me to compound with such villainy, you shall be rewarded—well rewarded."

Still the look alone answered him.

"I'll make it a thousand pounds," said Yerington, stooping to treat.

Silence.

"Two thousand."

"A pox on your burrs, sir farmer," said Will, with a yawn, and closed his eyes.

Again blind fury possessed Yerington. He took Will by the shoulders and shook him until his teeth chattered. It was murder, stark murder, that Michael read in his expression.

"Let us search again, my lord," he besought. "There's nought to gain from this villain, and my lady may be in need."

This reflection brought Yerington to his senses.

"You are right, Michael. Follow us," he ended, turning to Tom.

He would not trust him alone with his late partner.

Foot by foot they researched the barn. Not an inch of it escaped them. It was with an exclamation of something like despair that the earl came to halt near the door.

As he did so, he heard the man in the straw laughing to himself.

Later, Will was resolved to seek out Lord Yerington and obtain his blackmail. Now, something in his manner and personality roused within him that devil, his familiar, and he determined to wait, even if he did so at a risk.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A JACOBITE HIDING-PLACE

Du bist wie eine Blume
So hold und schoen und rein;
Ich schau dich an, und Wehmuth
Schleicht mir ins Herz hinein.

—HEINE.

THE barn-door closed behind Lord Yerington with a creak like a note of sinister triumph.

He stood a moment, his head tilted backward, gazing up at the great building. Tom, he was at last persuaded, was honestly seeking to help him. Where, then, lay the key to the enigma?

Fortune, who had so long cast down her plums to him with such enervating prodigality, now seemed determined to cross him at every turn.

Into his mind surged a thousand maddening suggestions as he searched for a logical explanation for Will's strange perverseness, for his preference for an assassination in the dark to reward.

For a moment Yerington stood like a broken man.

"Where is she," Michael heard him mutter, "my God, where is she?"

As Michael heard the note of unselfish fear and love in his voice, his hatred of him died forever.

Only for a moment did Yerington stand inert. The next he was roused to feverish movement. Act he must, though he knew not where to turn. He took a few disordered strides, to and fro, scarcely conscious of what he did.

He started, as he perceived that a woman was standing beside him. He gave a choked cry, his mind on

Philida; but the duchess' agitated voice dismissed the gleam of hope.

"Yerington," she questioned, "where is the child?"

"Madam," answered Yerington, with a break in his voice, "the villain who stole her we have captured in that barn, but her we cannot find."

"What," shrilled the duchess, "you have found the rogue and yet you retreat! Do you call yourself a man? It seems after all, this quest was for a woman."

She began to hasten toward the barn almost at a run. Moved by her courage and distress, Yerington went after her, his lips in the clip of his teeth.

"Let me search," she cried, as she hastened on. "I knew a man could find nought else, but I thought I could trust him to discover the woman he loved."

"Dear duchess," said Yerington, "I am persuaded we waste time. Let us rouse those at the farm, summon assistance wherever we may find it, and leave no inch of ground unturned. 'Tis all that is left to us now."

For a moment her long-sustained habit of secretiveness fought wordlessly, blindly back at him. Her eyes, heavy with weeping, flashed antagonism at the tall figure beside her before her will finally broke, and with it was swept away her unreasoning impulse of false prudence. Even then her assent was grudging.

"On your head be all responsibility, but for Heaven's sake hasten. As for that rogue within, I'd torture his eyes from him, but I'd have the truth."

By common impulse they now turned toward the farm where they saw the dancing of a moving lantern amid the trees.

Tom's quick instincts guided him to the facts.

"Gad," he said below his breath, with something like a laugh, "he would loose the dog on us, and 'tis little like the brute will know gentry from gaol-bird."

Yerington recognised the danger in a flash.

"My good man," he called out sharply, "do not loose your dog. We're harmless folk and wish you no ill. Rather, we seek your help."

There was a moment of amazed silence, then came an exclamation of cynical disbelief and the lantern moved again.

This time the duchess' voice rushed in before Yerington could speak.

"Drat the fellow! Would you be up for setting your animal upon the Duchess of Croome? Saucy actions, these! Come hither, for we've need of you."

The lantern wavered and halted. Yerington, determined to parley no further, started toward it, the duchess following. As they approached they could distinguish the farmer's dark frieze coat, evidently donned in haste, for the pink of bare shanks appeared beneath it, and above it was faintly revealed a head round and red as one of his own apples, for he had not paused to assume his wig. He was obviously still hesitating as to his course, though the duchess' voice had carried a tithe of conviction to his mind.

As they neared him, however, he raised an old-fashioned blunderbuss to his shoulder, and they halted, gazing down its black mouth. As they did so they could hear Tom snigger in the background.

"Another inch," said the farmer, "and you'll have the whole of it, if you was half the peerage."

"That's right, John, the hussy," cried a woman's voice, and a dim white semi-circle at one of the windows took on the semblance of a nightcap round a blur of face.

This interruption moved the duchess to ire and utterly killed her passing sense of fear. She ignored her dignity and approached the yawning blunderbuss' mouth.

"Enough of woman's talk," she demanded. "Let me have my say."

Yerington was before her.

"My good man," he said, striding over the damp grass, "a young lady hath been stolen from her home. Prithee, can you give us news of her?"

Assured at last of the quality of the gentleman who addressed him, the farmer lowered his weapon, while the dog in the background growled and strained at his chain, and the cap-border in the window trembled with suspicion and sent down muttered comments, listening keenly the while.

"A young lady," echoed the farmer dazedly.

"Yes," returned Yerington, burning with impatience.

"The rascal who stole her we have traced to your barn, but of the young lady we can find no sign."

"Humph! a sl baggage, I'll be bound," asserted the night-cap.

The farmer again had recourse to scratching his bare poll.

"Ecod," he mused, "I'm dumned. A lady in my barn. I'm 'dumned."

He flooded the light about in growing bewilderment and a final stare at the duchess.

"Good Lord, man!" cried Yerington, interrupting another outburst of her Grace of Croome, "the minutes are passing! Tell us, have you knowledge of any lurking-place within your barn where a woman might be hid?"

The farmer sought to thrash out an idea by renewed scratching of his puzzled head, but the nightcap at the window was of quicker wit.

"Lud, John," it said, vibrant with interest and a change of sympathy, "there is the great chimney. Dost recall the great chimney, slow brain? I've scarce patience with thee! It may be the lamb's there."

"I prithee, madam," said Yerington, advancing toward her, and sweeping off his hat with a gesture that henceforth made her his ardent champion, "will you in kindness explain further?"

"There's a space, within," she began, "beside the chimney. You approach it only from above. It would hold, mayhap, three men standing upright. It is said they put people there who wouldn't pay their tithes. But we have no knowledge of that, being honest folk ourselves, and coming of honest stock——"

She trailed on volubly, but Yerington was off, snatching the farmer's lantern as he went, with no thought of the duchess, who was obliged to make her way in darkness in their wake. As Yerington ran he could have cursed himself for his stupidity. Such hiding-places were by no means rare in this Jacobite county, and there that great chimney had stood and he had given no thought to it; for which nobody would have blamed him but himself.

Behind him came Tom, cursing softly, after his habit. No loyalty to Will now, he told himself, who all this while had possessed this secret of the barn and which, at a pinch, might have meant the difference between life and death to him; and Will had chosen not to share it. He lent himself now to Lord Yerington's cause with an undivided heart.

They entered the barn. The ladder lay as the farmer's wife had said. To raise it and place it against the rough stone of the chimney, was the work of an instant.

Yerington mounted, but as he neared the top he turned suddenly cold and sick. He paused with his head in the space just beneath the roof to gather himself together. The silence within was ominous. For the moment the dread of what he might have to meet made all the world swim black. Above him there was the whirl of disturbed swallows.

He took the lantern in his hand and swung himself to place on the top of the grey stones where they did not near the rafters.

"Philida," he called softly.

The silence chilled him, though he had not dared hope for a reply. He lowered the lantern into the space built beside the chimney. It filled it with a gentle light, but left the bottom in shadowed darkness. The cavity was rough, and smoked in places by the candles of the prisoners, who had spent anxious, haunted hours within. Yerington climbed over the wall and began to descend, clinging to the angles with knees, feet and hands.

At length the light shone upon a heap of inert, crumpled white beneath.

Suddenly the scene seemed hideously familiar. He felt as if all his life long he had lived to this moment, when he should see his love lying there, crushed and senseless, perhaps dying or dead.

He slipped down, placed the lantern aside, and lifted Philida. Her head hung back helplessly, the whites of her eyes showing beneath her half-opened lids. Her heavy, unbound curls fell over his arm, and their well-remembered perfume clutched at his heart. He gasped as he perceived the heavy bandage about her mouth. His hands did not tremble as he unbound it. He was flaming with white fury against the man who had brought her to this. He removed the gag and leaned near in breathless anxiety, his cheek close to her mouth, seeking for an indication of life, and his hand upon her pulse. After an interval he felt a light throb against his finger-tips and a faint sigh escaped her.

In the reaction of his relief the tension suddenly gave way. He leaned back, the soft, childish form in his arms. His love rushed out to her in a flood. He held her close, yearning over her, pitying her, suffering with

her; calling her names stamped with tenderness, coins fresh from love's mint,—all his pent-up adoration for the first time bursting its boundaries into open expression. To him at this moment she was a child, but with a woman's unconquerable claim upon his manhood. The full tide of love, long held in check, would not be denied. In the breathless space she was his—he claimed her. He forgot the world, he forgot the relentless next hour, waiting like a watchman to call the truth and his exile.

The eternal moment of this merging of all of existence into sympathy, and yearning, and love passed.

Michael's voice sounded above, strangely harsh and moved.

"How does she, my lord?"

Yerington was snatched back into the realities. He closed his eyes a moment before he could answer. He alone knew that it was his farewell to Philida.

"But indifferent well, Michael," he said, steadying his voice with an effort. "Prithee, fetch me brandy."

Michael's head disappeared.

Yerington still held Philida. His heart was beating maddeningly. All his nature was concentrating in a longing for a kiss. He had hitherto felt himself bound in honour to steal none of the privileges of a betrothed, to which he knew he had less than no right. But why not one kiss? Would she, in her gentleness, begrudge him that caress—could she read aright all the dark misery of his heart? Those sweet lips, through which the breath came faintly, were so near his own. Some other man must cull their sweetness when he had passed out of her life. At that thought a jealous anguish scorched through him. Why not then steal this brief joy, that would go with him to his grave? He leaned nearer and still nearer to the face drooping like a broken lily upon his arm.

His lips met hers, soft and dewy as a child's. Then he raised his head with something like a sob, pressing her face close against his shoulder as if to hide it from his gaze.

"My love, my innocent," he whispered.

Again Michael's voice sounded above him.

"Here's the brandy, my lord," he said.

Yerington heeded his tone with the ghost of a bitter smile.

His lover's ears detected the ring of jealousy in it.

When he spoke to Michael, the voice and phrase were gentle.

"Best fetch me a ladder, lad," he said.

A moment later he mounted, Philida in his arms.

When the duchess saw her she gave a frightened cry.

"'Tis but a swoon," said Yerington. "Let me carry her to the farmhouse."

He could not bear to relinquish his burden.

He entered the low-raftered hall and, guided by the farmer's wife, who was now all officious attention, bore his precious burden to an oak-panelled room and laid her down on a high-piled four-poster bedstead.

The duchess darted past him, getting to her niece at last. She unpinned her kerchief and despatched the farmer's wife for vinegar and feathers. Relieved of her most intense anxiety, she turned to Yerington.

"Well may you stand there, useless and gaping. Tomorrow I may be able to suffer you, but for to-night, upon my honour, you try me past enduring. Your Lady Caroline, forsooth! But for you the child would be in no such plight."

She had but voiced the thought that had been hammering dumbly at the background of his mind all night. He took one more look at Philida. He noted the soft, round chin with its half-dimple; the long sweep of the

lashes upon the cheek; the witching curves and turns of the beloved face. Summoning all his courage, he withdrew his eyes from it and stumbled blindly from the room.

Philida was young and vigorous. Beneath the crude but effective ministrations of the farmer's wife, she soon regained consciousness; and the sob of relief and joy with which she recognised the duchess reduced that dame to tears, of which she was almost as much ashamed as a boy, and managed with as ill a grace.

Philida looked about her, wondering, as if she would have asked concerning some expected presence, but she remained silent.

The news of her recovery was brought to Lord Yerington as he was pacing the garden. When he heard it, he raised his hat and stood for a moment in mute thankfulness.

The dawn was colouring the eastern horizon with a golden promise of a fair day, when they began their return journey. Yerington borrowed a horse from the farmer and rode beside the coach window. He had insisted upon this arrangement, that Philida should have more privacy and comfort within. But these reasons were not all the truth. The sight of her reproached him ceaselessly.

As the coach rolled on, and he rose and fell in the saddle, he gave no heed to the scene through which they were passing;—the fresh new world in the dawning light, the rim of the sun, a sickle of gold above the hills, and the mysterious purple of the ploughed fields. The lazy whistle of the ploughboy came across the emptiness with a plaintive cadence, full of suggested sadness.

His eyes strayed off to the dim interior of the coach. His ears were strained for the sound of Philida's voice, which reached him but seldom, for most of the time she

slept, her youth and health yielding to Nature's kind impulse of restoration.

As they approached near to the slight elevation that led to Marsden House, the duchess leaned out of the window, and called him softly. He drew near to catch her words.

"Come to me to-day at twelve, without fail," she whispered. "I've much I want to say to you."

He bowed an assent, his hand upon the coach window-casing.

"And she?" he questioned.

With a smile, she pointed to the interior of the equipage. The smile and the gesture were full of hovering motherhood. The duchess' heart, new furrowed by recent fears and griefs, was very tender at that moment.

Yerington looked in, holding his breath.

The duchess was satisfied with his expression. She interrupted him.

"At twelve?" she said.

He started, and gathered himself together with an effort.

"At twelve," he answered; and raising his hat, he wheeled his horse and cantered away.

"I never thought Yerington could be so hard hit," mused the duchess contentedly.

CHAPTER XXXIV

COMMITTED TO DECEPTION

Bad begins, and worse remains behind.

—SHAKESPEARE.

TRUE to his promise, at twelve o'clock Yerington stood bowing upon the threshold of the morning-room at Marsden House, whither he had been shown at the duchess' request.

During his ride over, he had been tortured by conflicting resolves. One moment, he had determined to tell the truth, simply and directly, and accept his dismissal—he knew the duchess too well to entertain any doubts upon that head—and then go home and balance his obligation to Lord Burroughs by ending the matter. This resolve registered, he rode on, the conflict stilled for the moment. Before he had ridden a hundred yards, to his own surprise he found that a new impulse was battling to the front. He was scarcely conscious of its voice within him, before it became irresistible. Why face this useless ordeal? Let him take leave of the duchess with what dignity he might. She would know when it was past. He did not name Philida. His thoughts veered away from her. At this moment he had not the strength to face that battle.

But as he rode up to Marsden House, the most honest and strongest of him was the master. He was resolved to tell the whole truth, cost him what it might.

As he entered, the duchess looked up from where she was seated at her escritoire.

"Come in, Knight-Errant," she said, extending a hand

for his salute; "and pray be seated until I've sanded this and sealed it. I've been swimming in ink for the last two hours."

Her manner was brisk. She had the air of a woman much occupied by an agreeable pressure of affairs.

He chose a chair by the hearth; his long legs extended, dwarfing the delicate, feminine little room; and swinging his whip-stock thoughtfully between his knees, he waited. His resolve was strong upon him, and he was conscious of a certain large, impersonal patience. Life, he felt, for him could possess no more surprises.

The duchess finished her letters and, going to the door, gave them to a lackey in the hall.

"There," she exclaimed, with a breath of triumph, "that is the second lot; the first I sent to catch the Flying Mail."

Lord Yerington had risen to his feet.

The duchess paused before him, smiling.

"Lud, sirrah," she said, "I vow Philida has come off better, poor child, she looks purely compared to thee. What a chalky visage for six feet one and thirteen stone! Better borrow a little of my crimson than present such a complexion to your lady-love's inspection. I'll be bound you look as if it were life and not love was in the question."

He gazed at her thoughtfully.

She herself looked ruddy and well, with her towering old-fashioned *fontange* in which she still persisted.

"Perhaps 'tis love and life," he said.

The duchess, secretly pleased, disparaged him.

"Tut, man, leave such words as these to maids. I'll be sworn you men are of a hardier constitution."

He took a few troubled steps across the room, and when he returned again and faced her, he wore an expression the duchess had never perceived in him before. His

face was stronger, more resolute, and sadder. He was determined to come directly to the point and tell her the truth he had concealed too long.

"Duchess," he began, "I've something of grave import I must say to you. Let me tell you in advance that no one can accuse me more bitterly than I accuse myself."

The duchess had turned away and was fumbling in a bag for her netting.

"Oh, lud, lud," she said over her shoulder, "the same old cry again. We've had all that out before, Yerington. You have told me that you loved Philida, and no woman stands between you. Nothing else is of the slightest importance."

She had taken out her cherry-coloured netting now, and seating herself, she began it in a leisurely, sociable fashion.

"I warn you, Yerington," the cherry-coloured silk spinning off rapidly beneath her skilful fingers, "that rapine, murder and sudden death would not affect my appetite for dinner. I'm a hard, worldly old woman, and my one virtue is the fact that I affect to be nothing better. As for Philida, she won't hear a word of your confession, so don't waste time."

His face was so serious that it should have warned her. But she was so occupied with her own ideas that she had no eyes or ears for him.

"Your grace——" he began.

"Yes, yes, I know all about it," she interrupted. "If you must tell me, of that anon, but now listen to me. If I've not presented you with a face of such hang-dog gloom as you've brought here, it is not because all has been well."

"It is not Philida?" he asked in instant alarm.

"Nay, not Philida," she mocked; "she's marvellous well, for one who has been so sorely tried."

He bit his lip and schooled himself to patience.

"Seat yourself, and let us talk it over," continued the duchess. "Take that chair by the hearth, and mind you don't disturb the dogs."

He obeyed her, putting down at the same time a hand to pat the King Charles spaniels, in response to a life-long, kindly habit. Every instant of this delay was torture to him. He was filled with a nervous dread of the recurrence of his irresolution, and he longed to be rid of his secret. But the duchess was not to be gainsaid.

She leaned towards him to give her manner emphasis, her *fontange* nodding to her words.

"Oh, such a to-do as there has been! And, sure, nobody could have planned better than I. I thought I had not left a loophole. Yet I had to trust that Mrs. Culpepper."

Her defence was so elaborate that amidst his abstraction Yerington suspected a weakness in it. He felt a premonition of something wrong.

"Trusted Mrs. Culpepper with what?" he queried. For an instant he felt it in his heart to wish that the duchess was less of a general.

"Lud," she continued, "I can scarce hold my patience to speak of her. She made a monstrous blunder. By now half the county knows of it, or if it does not, it has some mangled version containing that half-truth that puts poison in a lie. Do you follow me?"

Lord Yerington did follow her. It took all his patience and his chivalry to contain himself. He guessed at much. He knew the duchess' methods. He feared she had woven a web in her too great anxiety, which had but served to entangle Philida. He raised his eyes and as they met the duchess', they were heavy with world-knowledge, intelligence and chagrin.

"Yes, that's it," she said, replying to his look, and

she folded her hands upon her netting and waited for him to speak.

He began to pace the floor, moved to his depths. He realised, as the duchess did not, his helplessness to mend matters. Destiny had played cranks with him and in his tangled life Philida had become involved.

At last he spoke.

"But surely this story does not mingle her name with mine?"

"Oh, doesn't it?" said the duchess, and she took an emphasising pinch of snuff.

"My God, madam!" he exclaimed in agitation; "why need it? Do you think that I will spare Lady Caroline Dashwood? Such an escapade might happen to any girl where a jealous woman is concerned. Heaven knows, the world may have a hundred versions, and they will include Lady Caroline and me, but they need not touch Philida to her discredit."

The duchess took a second pinch of snuff, to hide a sudden sense of discomfiture. All the morning she had been consoling herself by blaming Mrs. Culpepper. At the sight of Yerington's face, her faith in her own infallibility wavered for an instant. But that was the last moment when she would confess it.

"Can't be done," she said. "I've denied Lady Caroline Dashwood foot and horse."

Yerington half reeled, grasping the back of a chair and staring at her. The duchess became irritated.

"Lud, man!" she exclaimed, "don't stand there gaping. But for you and your precious Lady Caroline, nothing would have happened. Now the world hath it pat. It was an elopement. Mr. Mansur disappeared at the same time. My story is that it was an elopement, and that I overtook the mad young people and brought them back.

Now, you have your choice. Shall she have eloped with you or with Mr. Mansur?"

He uttered an imprecation and turned away.

"It's no use losing your temper," she said. "Things have got into a tangle, and I have simply put my woman's wit to mending them."

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed beneath his breath, "and how have you mended them?"

The duchess felt a ray of returning good humour and a touch of pride.

"Sit down, and I'll explain to you."

To seat himself quietly at that moment of torture and uncertainty was an impossibility.

"I pray you, duchess," he said, "pardon me. Methinks I can listen best upon my feet."

As she spoke he wandered restlessly about the room.

The duchess again took up her netting, and always afterwards the acute misery of that moment was associated in Yerington's mind with her restless needle.

"First, let me say," she began, "if the hussies will talk, give them something to talk about. If they will bark up some tree, see to it that the tree is of your choosing and trimmed to your taste."

"Good God, what have you done?" cried Yerington; a presentiment seizing him that turned him cold.

"What have I done?" she returned tartly, disliking his tone. "I've sent off a sheaf of letters to the worst scandal-mongers in the town. Wouldn't the poorest general set himself to dismounting the biggest artillery? I've written and despatched by post this morning a letter to the Duchess of Queensberry; to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whom you knew in Italy, with such tatters of reputation as it has pleased the gods to spare her; to Mistress Chudleigh, who has lost hers so long since that its

very ghost is laid, and Lady Caroline Petersham, who, if she ever had one, has forgot it."

Yerington's consternation broke bounds.

"I entreat you, madam," he said in the suppressed voice of a man who fears to trust himself, "what have you told these ladies?"

"I've told them," she said, "that you would have eloped together, but that I overtook you. I've woven a pretty tale of your mutual infatuation. I've formally announced Philida's betrothal and I've set the marriage day within the month."

Yerington's consternation was too profound for the weak resource of words. He went to the window and looked out at the sunshiny world with eyes that did not see. The duchess' voice came to him as from a distance.

"You surely aren't displeased, Yerington?" she went on. "The jades would talk and I gave them something to talk about. I chose the worst scandal-mongers to stop their mouths with a tale that had a trace of spice in it."

As Yerington continued silent, she turned towards him indignantly.

"Lud!" she exclaimed, "I vow and protest I thought you had more of the blood of your father in you. A match with the Lady Philida Wentworth is not one to be ashamed of."

For a moment in her sense of injured pride, the secret of Philida's fortune hovered on the verge of her lips, but she put the thought aside and continued the subject upon another line.

"She'll scarce be in town a fortnight before she can have the choosing of half a dozen of the most likely young sparks there. All the world is not blind, if you have but a half-vision. Why, in the face of your manner I scarce have courage to tell you the rest of my plan. I had

to manage it grandly, to make it go with a swing, or it was to court failure."

"Madam," he said dully, from where he stood by the window; "I would not gainsay you in anything that made for the Lady Philida's good. God knows, I'd grant her all that lies within my giving and count it an unworthy gift."

He felt hopeless, enmeshed in nets of the duchess' weaving, committed to a position in which he saw his honour involved so deep that a solution of the difficulty and an escape from it did not rise to his mind. Still, as he listened to her, he was searching for such an escape subconsciously, and with a mind rendered less alert by the anguish through which it had been passing.

At his last words, the duchess sprang to her feet with an exclamation of triumph.

"Spoke like a Gower!" she cried. "La, we will give them something to talk about. Such a ball as was never seen before. I have told Philida of it."

This brought him round, face to face, with her. Beneath the cold hopelessness into which he had sunken, anger began to rise.

"Philida," he echoed, "you have told Philida?"

"Why not Philida?" she said, "when I've told half the town. I protest, Yerington, I thought you a man of spirit. You know the town, and yet the veriest country squire would not need to have it pressed upon him that this thing must go with a dash. I had to give them something and of a flavour suited to their palates; make them gossip after my taste. I've told them 'tis to be held in the ballroom of Grangely House. I've named the musicians, I've described the minuets, and who was to lead off in them. I've told of the lights upon the lawn, I've hinted at the refreshments, and drawn graphic pictures of the decorations. Lud, Yerington, you know I'm

not one to do things by halves. Philida, the dear child, is mad with joy about it. You know she's scarce seen the town."

At her last words Yerington suppressed an oath and began a troubled pacing of the room, while the duchess' eyes followed him, amazed at his manner. He ran his hand through his hair; he endeavoured to think out a clear course for himself in the face of this position to which the duchess had committed him. He felt he had been a mere puppet in the dance of circumstance. He did not seek to depreciate the extent to which he had himself been to blame. He had, in fact, created the situation upon which the duchess' overanxiety had turned the key. He was seeking an exit from it. His mind devised one plan after another, only to dismiss them with a groan. If, indeed, Philida's reputation were entangled in the affair, how was he to seek exit from it without committing her further to a compromising position? He could have groaned aloud as he reviewed the considerations.

The duchess perceived that something was seriously wrong, and for the second time that morning, a doubt of her own policy entered her mind. The cherry-coloured netting lay unheeded upon the floor; the spaniels in vain coaxed her for a caress; she watched Lord Yerington, divided between an inclination towards dismay and indignation.

Then a new factor entered the field which completely routed all the forces he had been desperately seeking to gather and array against the circumstances which faced him. His thoughts had been vague and disordered; logic had deserted him; but he had been battling past this point and seeking to bring something like reason from the chaos.

A movement at the door roused him from his abstrac-

tion. He turned and perceived that Philida had entered. How could he reason now, when love and longing took the field against his scattered forces? She paused, visibly trembling, unusually pale, wholly bewitching in the added appeal of her weakness. His eyes sprung out to hers hungrily, caught the trembling star within them, formed half of laughter and half of tears.

His battle was lost.

In an instant he was upon his knees before her, his lips upon her hand, all the issues blurred and forgotten in the leap and passion of his love.

CHAPTER XXXV

LONDON TOWN

"Well," says she, "and don't you like the World? I hear it was very clever last Thursday."

—HORACE WALPOLE.

THE weeks that followed were trying ones to Lord Yerington. The duchess had promptly transplanted Philida to London. An old friend had put a house there at her disposal. It was in Piccadilly, set amid large gardens.

The milliner came and went, and Philida suffered herself to be measured and fitted; at moments childishly happy in the prospect of new gorgeousness; at other moments absent and almost impatient of it.

As the days sped, the girl seemed to cling to Sybil with a growing persistence that gave the duchess, despite her many occupations, a jealous pang.

They supported numerous visits of ceremony, and often the carriages and chairs before their doors almost blocked the way.

The Duchess of Marlborough eyed Philida through her quizzing-glass, as the girl stood curtsying before her.

"La, Mary," she said, "you should have been a general. You manage your forces most effectively. 'Strike at once,' you say, 'take the enemy off guard, and don't waste strength on long marches.' You ended this campaign, I'll be bound, before Yerington could say it was begun."

The duchess prepared her most impeccable smile.

"Though the Churchills may be famous for long campaigns, Sarah," she replied, "I've yet to learn that short ones are an evidence of bad faith."

It was a shrewd lunge at the late duke's tactics, and Lady Hervey, who was calling at the time, took pains to spread it, together with a vivid picture of her Grace of Marlborough's blank stare, as she stood glaring, impotent to reply. These dames had crossed swords again, and, as usual, it was not the Duchess of Croome who came off second best.

Lord Yerington paid his respects at proper intervals, but the intercourse between Philida and himself increased in constraint. They were drifting further and further out of touch with one another. The formalities of that age, as extreme as its licence, prevented this being observable to outsiders, and the duchess was determined to hold Philida with a firm hand. She had had enough of that young lady's independence, and resolved not to relax her vigilance until Yerington himself became responsible for her. She still held back the news of the girl's inheritance in deference to her entreaties and to her own promise, but at moments it trembled upon the tip of her tongue.

When at last news of it did leak out, it came from an unexpected source.

As the days passed, Yerington grew more miserable. His views had always been clear cut, when he had troubled himself to formulate them definitely. Now he felt, as he looked back, that he should have explained his position to the duchess on the day of his return after Philida's unfortunate experience with Lady Caroline, and then have left the duchess to act as she thought wisest. Now, hour by hour, and day by day, he became more hopelessly committed to his dissimulating rôle, and his contempt for himself grew as his passion for Philida increased. He assented to the duchess' plans for the ball, even giving his assent to the list of guests, which she went through the mere form of handing to him for approval. At each

step of the way he told himself that he had gone so far, of what avail to stop here? Furthermore, the duchess had so entangled the situation that he could not clearly see what course would compromise Philida the least. Unconsciously, she tempted him on and confused the clearness of his reason.

He avoided his friends at the coffee-houses, and began systematically to arrange his affairs. His melancholy and abstraction made him the butt of the town. Captain Elliot was now so completely in the toils of Mistress Armytage, that he gave less heed than usual to his friend's moods, and lumped them all to the account of master Cupid.

Now, into this vortex of divided impulses and conflicting feelings, another element was introduced. A young soldier, a Captain Darlington, had recently returned from a sojourn in America. He was a son of an intimate friend of the duchess', who presented him to Philida, and encouraged him to frequent calls. He was a simple, true-hearted lad and his blue eyes looked out of his face with a winning directness. He was soon fetching and carrying for Philida, her slave and humble adorer.

Yerington watched this friendship with growing disquiet. He saw that when in Captain Darlington's society, her eyes danced, and that she was full of a thousand witcheries which he himself had known in Mistress Marjorie, but which she now reserved for this lad only. To him she was grave, even embarrassed, avoiding him when it could be accomplished without creating comment.

And so to Lord Yerington's perplexities was added the bite of a fierce jealousy.

Mansur's path and his own crossed more than once.

That worthy had changed. His brilliant smile still played mechanically upon his lips, but in his heart he carried a consuming anger that blanched his face, and he had

lost a stone's weight within the fortnight. Worst of all on every hand, he began to harbour a hatred of Yerington so furious that in intensity it matched his love for Philida. His life-long craving for recognition grew like an appetite,—became a consuming thirst. This was more pronounced because, without the stimulus of Yerington's support, the members of White's made less disguise of their contempt for him, and the invitations with which he had been favoured grew fewer.

The apex of his exasperation was reached one night at Ranelagh, when Lady Caroline Dashwood cut him with finish and *aplomb*. He was walking round the Rotunda, and she looked down from her box, where she was entertaining a party of friends. Her eye wandered to him and past him. Nobody but a woman of the world, and a hardened one, could have accomplished the deed with such varnished perfection. Her transcendent assurance maddened him, the more so as he knew he was helpless against it. They were both in the same boat, and so mutually innocuous to one another. He could hear her laugh as he passed, and his very neck grew crimson with fury. As these slights accumulated, the determination strengthened to revenge them one and all upon Yerington. This had long since been his design, it now became an obsession. He began spying about for means to entangle him and, bit by bit, the requisite knowledge came to him. Such information does seem to drift to eavesdroppers, leaving honest, unsuspecting minds to become their victims.

Mansur was calling one day upon his solicitor, who received him in his private room. From this the latter gentleman was hastily summoned during his visit. An open letter lay upon the table. His proclivities drew Mr. Mansur's eyes towards it. A moment later he had read it eagerly. When Mr. Crookshanks, the solicitor,

returned, Mr. Mansur was critically inspecting a print of Hogarth's "Enraged Musician," that hung upon the wall some distance from the desk. But as he stood there, the tiny dimples were coming and going about his mouth. He was excited almost beyond his power to conceal.

He now felt that he had Lord Yerington at his mercy, but amid the whirling plans that that thought brought to him, one revenge, poor and inadequate, took predominance. It was in response to his smarting vanity. Lord Yerington should cross swords with him as with an equal. Day after day he practised with his small sword, training eye and wrist.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A WOMAN'S HEART

Time and chance are but a tide—

Ha, ha! the wooing o't!

Slighted love is sair to bide—

Ha, ha! the wooing o't.

—ROBERT BURNS.

IT was the evening of the ball.

Sybil Armytage, dressed for conquest, stood humming to herself, one slender, white satin-clad foot extended towards the flames that leapt up on the hearth. She was not in the best of humours, and it may be that the gay little refrain that she was singing was intended to conceal this fact even from herself.

Captain Hugh Elliot had been commanded to attend the King, and, therefore, he was not to be one of Lord Yerington's guests. Yet, if Sybil's mirror could have comforted her, she should have been well satisfied, for she had never looked more beautiful. Her hair was puffed high about a gilded coach and four in effigy, which careered across her dainty head. Her patches were placed to admiration, and her hooped skirt, with its great ramping flowers, swept far about her. She was wondering at Philida's delay when she, with a gay little laugh, darted into the room. Mistress Armytage turned to her and uttered an exclamation; then raised her hands in an ecstasy as much real as affected.

Philida glanced up shyly at her from beneath her lashes, questioning, and yet, withal, not ill pleased with herself. She was dressed entirely in white, her neck bare and the bodice of her dress sewn with pearls. Her hair

was arranged much as usual in soft curls, meshed at the crown in a pearl net. She was an entrancing picture and, for that evening, at least, she was aware of it.

"Am I in face, to-night?" she questioned with girlish need of reassurance.

"Lud!" ejaculated her friend, "I protest I could not have done better myself."

The younger girl responded with a deep curtsey, and then began circling about.

"Like you my gown?" she questioned, looking anxiously down at it over one shoulder.

"Like it?" echoed Sybil, "I am ravished. Your dress falls off your hips like a frosted Christmas cake."

"And my patches? I've never worn them before, and they feel monstrous sticky. Do they brighten my eyes, think you?"

She was answered with a burst of laughter.

"La, hear her rattle! Oh, Cupid, you sad rogue, how you do rout this virtuous cult, simplicity. See what comes of your poses, and your flannels for old women, and your herbs for rheumatism. But Cupid, the rascal," she held up an arch, taunting finger, "knew the truth all the time. Bless the black heart of him!"

Philida began to step a minuet with an imaginary partner.

"Do I know my steps?" she besought as she continued circling and curtseying, coquetting with her fan and casting exaggerated, languishing glances, while Sybil applauded to the echo.

"I protest. The very pink of dancers!" she exclaimed. "But why are you so set upon perfecting these graces?"

"La!" returned Philida, half pouting, "how could I but care to-night with half of London to mark me? And the women to watch my steps and say 'Little country wench, I vow she is a fright! What can he see in

her?" And she raised her hand to suggest a quizzing-glass before her eye.

"Ay," responded Mistress Armytage complacently, "so they will say it; and the more they say it, take it to thyself the greater the compliment. Faith, your rustic breeding shows in that. Who heeds the women? For the truth about thyself go to the men, and then 'tis not their tongues but their eyes that tell it. And for to-night," she added solemnly, "mend your ways toward Yerington. Upon my life, I could box your ears when I see you sit beside him with your wide, shy eyes."

Something in this last observation cut Philida deeper than she suspected. Her cheeks reddened, and her pride moved her to spar in her turn.

"Lud, my eyes are made to match those of your Captain Elliot," she said, "with his solemn face. Nature was in no smiling mood when she fashioned him."

"The impudent little wench," cried Sybil, colouring high beneath her rouge. "Captain Hugh, indeed! A great, hulking Scotchman!"

Philida laughed mischievously and evaded a blow from Sybil's vengeful fan.

"Your anger will not serve you," she mocked, dancing about the room to avoid her pursuing friend. "His words come as slowly as honey in the winter. Oh, and oh, the ways and tricks of you! And directly you've wounded him into the sulks, then you go about all sighs and heavy looks until it suits his majesty to smile again, that you again may torture him."

"Oh, oh!" protested Sybil, stamping with passion, "I'll swear it is not true!"

"And," continued Philida, with an elaborate curtsy, "and he only a stupid dolt of a soldier, with not a single compliment in his equipment and scarce an anecdote in his armoury."

This stung Sybil too far. She turned about with flashing eyes.

"How dare you?" she asked. "He's no feather-brain, that I promise you, as is some one I could name, if I had not too much courtesy. But he's a man, a true, honourable, brave man. I'm surfeited with compliments and coffee-house wit that has been laboriously rehearsed before the mirror ere it is ventured on in public. As for words—the devil but invented them that we might better hide the truth from one another."

She stood biting her lips, the rare tears shining in her eyes. In an instant Philida was all penitence.

"Dear," she whispered, "do not seek to hide your heart from me. Believe me, I love you for this, and I love him, thy Captain, for another's sake. You know it well."

Sybil's secret had been surprised from her, and she did not soften immediately to the proffered caresses.

Philida took her hands in hers.

"Come," she coaxed, "I prithee, dear, put off thy frown. Let us sit here by the fire. Remember this is my first ball, and I have much need of thy counseling."

But her friend would not be mollified.

"Need, indeed," she echoed, "you have put me in mood to give you advice, methinks. You have spoiled my whole evening with 'your this' and 'your that,'" and she gave an imitation of Philida's teasing manner.

"Ah, no, dearest, don't tell me that," besought the younger girl. "I could not bear it. My own heart is heavy enough. I could not be happy with the knowledge that I had wounded thee."

"Not happy," exclaimed Sybil, opening her eyes in surprise, "after such mad capers, you tell me that!"

Philida nodded her curls with a wistful smile.

"Do not we women early learn to hide our hearts, even beneath such capers?" she asked, softly.

"But you," said Sybil, half resentfully, "to talk of heavy hearts now, with all the town envying you; with a ball given to-night in your honour; and one of the greatest catches in England dangling on your hook." Her lips began to quiver. "You are hard to please, forsooth."

This contrast with her own lot that evening, overwhelmed her with a brief but tempestuous grief. She had parted with Captain Elliot in anger. He would not be there to note her charms, and to be won again to her feet. She flung herself, suddenly, face downward on the settle, regardless of her rouge, or her carefully dressed hair.

"'Tis very well to make up to me, now that you've spoiled my evening," she cried, withdrawing herself, pettishly, from the caresses. "And here is my dress from Paris and my new shoe-buckles, all wasted; and now my hair and my complexion are ruined too. I hate thy ball, and thy Lord Yerington."

To her surprise Philida, the forgiving, made no reply to this outburst. For a few moments Sybil lay wondering at the silence. At length overcome by curiosity, she stole a look through her fingers. Then in her surprise, she forgot her own vexation, and sat up.

Her friend had evidently forgotten her.

Philida was seated on the hearth-rug, the firelight playing over her and shining on the satin of her gown. Sybil gazed, half-awed by what she saw. The mask of roguish gaiety was dropped and here, indeed, was sadness. It was revealed in the pathetic droop of the lips and in the dreaming depths of her eyes. The older girl felt suddenly ashamed of her own recent tempest. It seemed so slight and poor a thing in the face of this unspeaking sorrow.

As she watched, the fire sputtered and leapt up, and the little group before it was pictured and re-pictured in the shining oval mirrors decorating the ceiling, where they appeared but distorted, as we often do in the untempered observation of our friends.

At length Sybil put forth a timid hand and shyly touched the musing girl.

Philida was recalled from her dreamland with a startled sigh, and then smiled again her sweet transforming smile; but her friend now had seen beyond it.

"Dear heart," she questioned softly, "what are you seeing in those flames?"

The younger girl gave a little shiver and then turned a wistful, patient face in answer.

"I scarce know what I see," hardly above a whisper.

"At times, dear, my too few years prison me."

"Silly," answered Sybil, her mood all softness now, "'tis more like they'll prison thee as they multiply. They'll be just new bars to the cage. Don't sigh over that."

But Philida shook her head.

"I am so ignorant, so ignorant," she came in sudden self-confession to the thought nearest her heart. "How can I hope to hold him,—I who know not even so much as why he thought he fancied a little know-nothing like me."

"Lud!" exclaimed Mistress Armytage; "don't be humble in Heaven's name. These patient Griseldas were made to lose men, and they deserved it soundly."

The younger girl smiled up at her friend, a smile full of her own gentle wisdom.

"Methinks, Sybil," she said, shaking her head, with a touch of her former roguishness, "though thy Captain may sometimes be miserable, 'tis little like that he'll be dull."

"Your Yerington," flashed back Sybil, "will be far happier than he deserves, the graceless rake. He's behind this mood; I'll be bound."

Philida shrank from her, blushing.

"And what if he be? 'Twould be no fault of his."

"Of course not," responded the wily Sybil. "But what is the trouble, child?"

"Oh!" burst out Philida, the sorrow she had been smothering for weeks, overflowing into open expression at last. "Sometimes I fear he loves me not at all."

The other threw up amazed, cynical hands.

"Doesn't love thee!" she ejaculated.

For a moment she turned the thought over in her shrewd mind and ended the silence by the smart tap of her fan upon her companion's shoulder.

"Little fool, why then does he marry thee? Half of England has angled for him, and yet he chose you, you little pauper. What better proof do you want, that he loves you?"

This worldly verdict left Philida unmoved. She turned away her face, till Sybil could only see the round of her cheek.

"But he is so cold, so distant. I might be her Grace of Marlborough, such punctilious kisses does he press upon my finger-tips."

Sybil's brown eyes widened.

"Never your lips?" she gasped.

In an agony of embarrassment, Philida shook her head in the negative.

"Does he never make occasion," persisted her friend, "to squeeze thy waist when none are by?"

The younger girl's head drooped, until her curls fell about her face, and a soft little sob alone replied.

"The iceberg!" cried Sybil, springing indignantly to her feet, "the salamander! I'll not believe it."

"Oh, don't, you hurt me," besought Philida, her voice full of pain.

No thought of ball-dress or disarranged curls now. Mistress Armytage forgot herself as she flew across the room to take the supple figure by the hearth in an impetuous embrace.

"Oh, my pretty, pretty one, weeping, and on the night of your first ball. Yerington will answer for this to me. Surely there's more here than we know, or"—a sudden flash of inspiration. "I'll be bound you've been too kind to him. 'Tis ever so with men. Did I make Elliot a whit less miserable he'd straight find new diversion in his cards, or his wine, or the devil knows what."

"Nay," cried Philida, pushing her friend away from her, her eyes sparkling with her aroused pride. "I'll warrant I made no occasion for tête-à-tête, and though I am new to town, men's eyes have told me I'd not have to mourn long if——" she could not finish. Her arms were about Sybil's neck and her head upon her shoulder.

"Oh, what avail are words, what avail is pride? I love him; that is all I know. Can I reason about it? I can only feel and fear. I've stood aside and marked him. He sorrows, Sybil. I have seen shadows fall across his face and hollows grow beneath his eyes, and I've whispered to myself: 'My love suffers. He has troubles. You are young and not wise, but, bye and bye, if you are patient he will confide in you.' But, I cannot always be patient. I have waited, and my heart has grown heavier. I've laughed all day with people's eyes upon me, and cried all night at memory of his face."

She sobbed brokenly, clinging to her friend.

Sybil's usual ready counsel deserted her. She stroked

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the head upon her shoulder in silence. Here was trouble that she could not heal, and for which her experience furnished her no key.

So they sat clasped in one another's arms while the coaches began to rumble past to Grangely House.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A MENACE

For a little mind courteth notoriety to illustrate its puny self.

—TUPPER.

THE hour for the arrival of guests at Grangely House had almost come.

Every device that the duchess could conjure from the depth of her invention had been employed to give distinction to the entertainment. The garden facing upon the Mall was lined with myriads of lamps of every colour, set in designs. Grangely House was a bower of flowers. They lined the halls, the great staircase, the numerous reception-rooms, and the ballroom.

The preparations were now completed, except for the lighting. Footmen appeared carrying candelabra. These lackeys were under the command of a dignified majordomo, bearing his white wand of authority. By his orders, the footmen added these candelabra to the already sufficient light shed from the candle-trimmed cut-glass chandeliers. These extra candles were for the card-players, and were set carefully upon each table, where also lay several unopened packs of cards. It was not to be supposed that the courtly gentlemen and dames defaced the cards with any imprints that might influence their play, but deep play was universal at that day, and this custom of an occasional change of cards, prevailed.

Yerington had chosen a coat of pale blue velvet and a white waistcoat laced in silver. His hair was carefully

dressed and powdered, his face patched to Mr. Jenkins' complete satisfaction. His waistcoat was fastened only at the waist by two buttons of diamonds and over this flowed a cascade of priceless lace. He wore his riband and star. The black knot which tied his hair was the one note of sombre colour in his costume.

When Jenkins had finished him that evening, he had been moved to something like outspoken enthusiasm.

"Your lordship might be dressed for a wedding."

Yerington tapped the lid of his snuff-box, and stood looking before him. There arose in his mind the vision of Philida, as she would appear as a bride. He made no response to Mr. Jenkins' observation.

His toilet completed, he went slowly through the brilliantly lighted, empty rooms. The house was pervaded by that peculiar sense of expectancy which hangs in the air of apartments prepared for, but still awaiting guests. As Yerington went, he saw his figure reflected and rereflected back from numberless mirrors. In the mood which then possessed him, this multiplication of himself became an annoyance. He was peculiarly conscious to-night of his isolation and of the fact that he represented the last of a long line. Therefore, in his mind somehow these mirrored duplications seemed to him like silent, ghostly ancestors, who were accompanying him through the deserted rooms. He was little given to nursing superstitious fancies, and yet this idea persisted until he made a sudden turn to avoid these echoes of himself. This brought him abruptly face to face with a gentleman, whose eyes met his in the gleaming panel of a door. He felt worsted as he looked back at him.

"My Lord Yerington," he said aloud, "I know not in which rôle you shine the better, that of knave or fool, but one thing I do know," the eyes gazing into his be-

came more resolute; "after to-night, God help you, you drift no more."

There was a step upon the polished floor, and he turned with a start to face one of his lackeys. The man hastened to suppress a smile. He had come upon Lord Yerington unexpectedly, gazing with interest at his own reflection, and he had attributed it to a dandified vanity.

"Mr. Mansur is below and would see your lordship," he said.

Lord Yerington hesitated and frowned. Mr. Mansur had been included in his invitation for that evening in no spirit of retaliation, for he had grown above that attitude, and looked back upon it with humiliation. He had included him because not to have done so would have been to arouse comment which he sought to avoid. He felt instinctively that his early presence there boded no good.

"Show him up," he answered, and taking his stand behind a bühl table, he waited.

A moment later Mansur entered the room with a sort of abrupt caution.

Lord Yerington looked at him keenly, and was surprised at the change in him. His face was sallow, his eyes restless, and the ready smile upon his lips was now a sort of distortion that occasionally escaped his control. There was the same expression of sketchiness about his features, but it was now as if the sketch were blurred. He had dressed with exceeding care. He wore a costume of striped yellow and black silk, his black hair faultlessly arranged and powdered grey. He looked not unlike a wasp.

Yerington, ever keenly sensitive to any antic circumstance, noted this comparison.

Mr. Mansur's perception of the humorous rose only to a vigorous spur. It is a quality an adventurer can ill

afford to dispense with, for the mellowing note of laughter is the surest key to the human heart. If Knox and Luther had possessed it, how much more permeating would their sympathy have been? In the hand of a saint or a sinner, it is a lamp with which to study his fellowmen.

From his place behind the table, Lord Yerington bowed.

"My first guest, Mr. Mansur," he said, "you honour me."

Despite his resolve, a taunt crept into his tone at the sight of his visitor.

Mr. Mansur drew a step nearer.

"I have a few words I would say to you in private. Are we alone?" he asked.

"Except for our conscience," returned Lord Yerington.

Again the suggestion of a sneer appeared. It seemed as if the man facing him roused, despite himself, the worst in his nature. As he spoke, he rearranged a fold of lace with exactitude.

"You speak lightly of your conscience," jeered Mr. Mansur.

Lord Yerington took out his snuff-box.

"May I offer you a pinch?" he said, extending it.

"If my memory does not deceive me, 'tis your favourite mixture."

Mr. Mansur put aside the jewelled trifle with an exasperated gesture.

Yerington returned it to his pocket and spoke coldly.

"You said, a moment since, you had a word to say to me in private. I must remind you that my guests will soon be arriving."

A trace of brutal bluster had crept into Mr. Mansur's manner, and he advanced threateningly towards his host. When he spoke his voice was hoarse.

"You insulted me a fortnight since and refused to give me satisfaction," he said.

Yerington thought he now perceived his drift. Mansur was palpably shaken by his passion. As he looked up and caught Yerington's regard, coldly watchful and attentive, it threw him more completely from any intended reserve. To-night he was not master of himself. His expressions no longer came and went like soldiers at the order of an exacting officer. He blurted out his design, bluntly.

"I've come here to-night to fight you. I'm determined to fight you. Give me satisfaction at once and here."

Lord Yerington's manner became more reserved.

"Faith, a most untimely request," he answered, speaking softly. "Consider how it might inconvenience my guests."

"Your guests!" jeered Mansur. "'Tis not courtesy, but courage you are lacking in."

His words contained no sting for Yerington. The cold patience of his reply told Mr. Mansur this more plainly than a protest, and the sense of his impotence to wound swelled the tide of his vanity and his jealousy.

Lord Yerington spoke again.

"I am host to-night. You came here as my guest. Therefore, I can only say—It is a charming evening and will you have a look at the decorations of the ball-room."

The crimson flooded Mr. Mansur's face, and his words came chokingly.

"A subterfuge, a contemptible subterfuge."

He made a threatening, incautious movement, and his foot slipped over the polished floor.

Lord Yerington eyed him with concern.

"You had best step warily," he suggested. "The parquet is newly waxed."

Mr. Mansur put one hand upon the table and leaned forward.

"Will you," he asked, as one who makes an offer upon which much depends, and which he is determined not to repeat, "fight me to-night and now, as man to man?"

Lord Yerington looked down steadily into his working face. The despair which underlay it, he guessed; he felt he could not longer pass judgment upon its duplicity. The ruin of his life in which he had involved Philida, the waiting rooms in which they stood,—a theatre arranged for another scene in the drama of deceit,—forbade that. He felt that he had sinned beyond forgiving, though he had been pushed on by conditions and circumstances, not by intentions. He was not a weak man, and therefore he did not stoop to the meanness of self-excuses. A sort of pity arose within him as he looked at Mansur's inflamed face.

"Believe me, Mansur," he said, a tone in his voice in which there was an echo of the old friendliness, "it is a poor thing, this revenge that you are seeking."

Mansur drew himself back from him.

He misread Yerington, as it was inevitable he should misread him, and it increased his coarse self-confidence.

"Ah," he cried, "a new tune this. Fight me to-night, or you will learn to your cost that it is I who make the terms, my lord pauper."

He was replete with spite.

"Did you think you could bait me forever?" he went on. "Do you think I am one to have no shots in my arsenal? Why, now is my halcyon time. You've arranged my opportunity for me, and pray accept my

most profound gratitude. The terms are: Fight me now and let me prove the metal of my sword against the one it pleases your lordship to carry at your hip, or—I'll expose you before your guests."

No such contingency had occurred to Lord Yerington. The shock staggered him, but he answered Mansur's challenge without flinching. He chose the first weapon at hand, well knowing its weakness, as he did so.

"And incidentally reveal yourself a villain," he said.

Mr. Mansur uttered an exclamation of contempt.

"I have proof positive that the money was invested at your request, and such reckless gambling, whether on 'Change or with cards or dice, is after your lordship's own manner. The world will then think 'twill bear your signature upon the face of it. Your case will scarce be a good one." He looked up with a cunning smile. "You, a man whose estates are forfeit to his creditors, who, if the truth were known, would have the bailiffs clamouring at his doors."

Every shot he had sent, went home. Lord Yerington registered each one with an inward twinge of his spirit. But, as he continued to listen, his mood changed. Mr. Mansur had gone too far. His recapitulation of the circumstances in which Yerington was placed had re-awakened in him a quality which had been lulled to quiet of late. This was his habitual gamester's instinct of indifference and of trusting to chances. He smiled at Mansur with a touch of his old light-hearted *insouciance*, who noted it with something like dismay. Then he determined to wipe that smile away by throwing down his last card, the one he had been treasuring.

During the previous portion of the interview, his assumed air of gentility had shown itself to be woefully deficient. His emotions had run away with him and

he had been unable to maintain the air of polished assurance and trifling indifference, attributes of the dandy of that day, which he usually affected with considerable success. Now, however, he felt he was treading upon firm ground. His mien became more self-contained as he continued to speak.

"Would a pauper, think you, be easily forgiven, even within the charmed circle of your world of easy morals, who sought to retrieve his fallen fortunes, without first confessing them, by trapping with his lies one of the greatest heiresses in England? And the Lady Philida is rich."

The mere audacity of the statement arrested Lord Yerington's attention. He felt there must be a mead of truth in it, or Mansur would never have ventured it. This possibility overcame him so far that he responded with a contradiction.

"The Lady Philida an heiress?" he said incredulously. "Such a statement is veriest nonsense, unless a small annuity makes her one."

Mr. Mansur's eyes were sparkling triumphantly.

"You play your part well," he drawled insolently. "But do you think you can persuade me that you did not know what all the world will soon know, despite her caprice to conceal it? Need I trouble to reiterate the thought doubtless circulating this moment in your lordship's mind, that Lady Philida has inherited a great fortune?"

Lord Yerington turned cold. He was persuaded of the truth of this statement, contrary as it was to all facts as he knew them. But Mansur only bet on certainties and a full hand. It took but an instant to outline within his mind how vile a creature he must appear, should this be true. Notwithstanding, he persisted in putting it aside.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream," he said.

Mr. Mansur wheeled around on a contemptuous heel.

"Don't waste your play-acting on me. You know my terms," he remarked as he turned.

Yerington watched him. He was telling himself how lately he had said that life for him could possess no more surprises and, indeed, as Mansur said, his case was scarce a good one. A record of an unredeemed pledge, of double dealing with a woman whom he loved, and now Mansur was pressing him that he might be denied the dignity of an explanation. His next words were wrung from him.

"One promise I give you," he said, with stiff lips, "the Lady Philida Wentworth shall be told to-night all that there is to tell."

Mansur had conquered him, and the condescension of this confidence from Lord Yerington assured him of it. He turned to him, filled with triumphant malice.

"I protest, my lord," he said, "your kindness overwhelms me." His manner put Yerington's last hope to flight. "'Tis sweet of you, on my word it is, to confess to the Lady Philida. Forsooth, the matter goes purely." Suddenly his manner changed. "Of myself I've but a word or two to add. The time of your confession, Lord Yerington, shall be of my choosing."

He had now reached the door. He turned and made a slight obeisance, insulting in its cool nonchalance, and then he went out into the hall, walking with his body inclined slightly forward, flirting his handkerchief affectedly.

When he had disappeared, Lord Yerington reeled forward and caught the table for support. He was still in this position when his majordomo entered the room.

"My lord, the guests are beginning to arrive," he announced.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE BALL

Hi narrata ferunt alio: mensuraque fici
Crescit; et auditis aliquid novus adjicit auctor.

—OVID. *Met.* XII, 57.

LORD YERINGTON had no design in his mind that might serve to defeat Mr. Mansur's purposes, whatever they might be. He stood upon the broad staircase, a brilliant figure with his star and orders, smiling a courteous welcome to all who came. There was nothing in his appearance to suggest the shadow that was hovering over him.

Directly behind him hung a portrait of his great-grandfather, painted by Van Dyck. It represented a man with a handsome face, full of charm and a spirited challenge of life. Below this pictured ancestor his descendant stood, with a smile for one guest, a compliment for another, an epigram for a third. Though his words were ready, his thoughts were not. At that moment he was unprepared for the issues which might lie before him, and he knew it.

When Philida approached him up the stairs, with a pretty air of timidity, he was conscious of her coming to the centre of his being, though at that moment he was assuring the Duke of Newcastle that he had a table placed for him where the boldest breath of air dared not intrude.

The duchess spoke to him, but he failed to catch her meaning. Was she congratulating him, or was it a question she asked as he bent over her hand? He answered wildly and at random.

Philida was coming! Philida,—shyness dyeing her cheeks a deeper pink than usual. She became the focus of his world. All the scene about him seemed a mirage and she alone was real. He drew himself erect, looking down at her. She gazed up and understood. All the questions with which she had been torturing herself died into silence, and in their place dawned a happiness, that gave to her beauty its last perfecting touch.

The duchess had swept on. She did not realise that her niece was not following. When she glanced back, she saw Yerington and Philida still standing, high and conspicuous half-way up the broad staircase, for all the world to see.

And all the world did see, and smiled and nudged, and Mr. Mansur saw and bit his lip. But for one happy moment the couple upon the staircase were conscious only of one another.

The moment passed. Philida tripped on after her aunt, and the earl turned to his next guest.

Lord Yerington chose her, his betrothed, and the lady in whose honour the ball had been given, to move the first minuet.

The guests crowded into the ballroom and gathered about the doors to watch them. Many of them had never as yet seen this girl whom the madcap earl had chosen for his wife, and they were one and all upon the *qui vive* of curiosity.

The duchess concealed her pride with difficulty. She had not yet settled down to cards which always absorbed her to the exclusion of other interests, whether at assemblies, routs or drums.

This first minuet was a trying ordeal to Philida, and she went through it with shaking knees.

But grace is a mental quality and, as she picked her way through the stately dance, curtseying, smiling, going

through her steps with a pretty care that kept her lips parted and her eyes wide lest she should blunder, she was irresistible.

As he watched her, Lord March swore that she almost made him forget the Zamparini, and George Selwyn whispered into Gilly Williams' ear:

"A good man spoiled for White's, I'll be bound."

The inveterate card-players settled down to loo, fargo, piquet, quadrille or whist, according to their several fancies.

In a corner Yerington devoted himself to Philida, while the duchess kept the pretence of an eye on her, as she impartially dealt cards, scandal and anecdotes, which she would have given her ears rather than that same niece she was guarding should have heard.

Over a game of cards, where "Fish" Crawford's caution kept the stakes too low for the spice of real interest, sat George Selwyn, Gilly Williams, and Sir Geoffrey Baxter.

"Yerington hath stole a march on us," said Gilly Williams as he took a trick without enthusiasm. "I'm hit myself. 'Twas warily done to capture this beauty in the country before the Court had had a peep at her."

Sir Geoffrey sighed portentously.

"I was visiting at Marsden House, but she had no eyes for me."

Crawford raked in the stakes with long, bony fingers.

"And I refused an invitation from her grace and, instead, I went to drink the waters at Bath," he murmured with a sigh. "Deadly dull, too, and nobody walking on two legs. What's the news in town?"

"None, save Yerington's lamentable approaching back-sliding into the holy state of matrimony," answered George Selwyn. "The most valetudinarian reputations have taken on a mysterious new lease of life."

Gilly Williams laughed.

"Lady Caroline Dashwood is reported to be doting on her husband," he said. "Egad, Yerington has so much to his credit."

Crawford arranged his cards and tucked a covey of trumps under his thumb. His eyes took on that peculiar expression which, combined with his insatiable interest in his neighbour's affairs, gave him the soubriquet of "Fish."

"I did better than that in Bath and touching Yerington, too," he said. "I had it straight from the Widow Sylvester."

"The Widow Sylvester?" exclaimed George Selwyn, casting up his eyes. "Then, Heaven have mercy on his soul! The Widow Sylvester, manufacturer of scandal, unlimited."

"Not so fast," cried Mr. Crawford, with a touch of irritation. "I admit the tale would have little value had I not first troubled to inform myself. This I know; my Lord Yerington's estates are for sale."

"This is simply folly," exclaimed Gilly Williams, with a touch of asperity. "Yerington plays deep, but he is in no such plight as this. Take, for example, this ball to-night. It alone has cost a small fortune."

"Fish" Crawford smiled drily.

"Nero fiddled over burning Rome," he said.

George Selwyn was genuinely distressed.

"This is the basest scandal. Yerington's engagement proves that. Lady Philida, it is well known, has only her beauty for dowry."

Crawford shrugged his shoulders with an aggravating smile. George Selwyn turned and addressed Walpole, who was passing.

"Come, Horry," he said, "here is a new rôle for you. Slay hydra-headed slander with a single blow. Have you heard the news?"

"The news?" exclaimed Walpole plaintively. "I know what's trumps—that's all. My very thoughts are speckled with clubs and hearts, spades and diamonds. In the name of variety, what is the news?"

Crawford came directly to the point. He was annoyed that his treasured bit of gossip should meet with so dubious a reception.

"Rumour hath it that Yerington is ruined. I have had it from the Widow Sylvester."

Walpole looked at him thoughtfully.

"Have you not learned," he said, taking a meditative pinch of snuff, "that at threescore years a scandal-monger's tongue hath outgrown all control? Such a woman's imagination is like the sun,—the nearer it draws to the horizon, the longer shadow it casts."

Discredited, but unconvinced, Mr. Crawford returned to the game, which was soon dropped by mutual consent. Then his story began floating through the room. A hint dropped as hands touched and eyes met in the mazes of a minuet; a few words over the cards; a comment from an envious mother sitting Gorgon-like in a corner with her partnerless daughters. Soon the room was full of the tale, carried by many-tongued, indefinable rumour.

Philida was in high spirits. Her relief at the dissipation of her recent doubts had doubled her enjoyment. A girl's undimmed joy winged her heels and her heart.

Yerington wandered from room to room and guest to guest, but somewhere in the background of his mind, he was always conscious of her presence, whether she was within range of his actual vision or not. He kept a covert watch upon Mansur. Amidst the chaos of his thoughts he was determined upon one thing,—that gentleman should not have a tête-à-tête with Philida. The meaningless gaiety of the scene about him oppressed him. The women in their sweeping skirts and elaborate head-

dresses; the men in their much-dressed wigs and French modes; the empty smiles and over-elaborate bows; the music, thin and stringy; the stately minuet alternating with the country dance: an encompassing disgust of it all came over him. Here, as in a mirror, he saw the delirium of his life. This company of men and women, hollow and heartless, made up for the most part the sum total of his friendships. Such scenes as this represented the theatre of his history. This audience it was to which he had always played. Now there was left to him only Philida, and that knowledge had grown to be a torture.

As partner succeeded partner, and he saw her repeatedly led out to the dance, he could scarcely conceal his envious pain. And when she romped lightheartedly through a reel with Captain Darlington, he turned away to hide his chagrin from observant eyes. The place he chose for his retreat was the top of the long ballroom, just where wide open doors gave upon the reception-rooms. These were filled with groups of people and lined with tables.

His move in that direction had been involuntary. Instead of shielding, it made him especially conspicuous. He was too absorbed by his thoughts to notice this.

When the country dance was finished, Philida turned to him with a swift, trusting smile. She had smiled at him after this fashion so seldom of late and he was not conscious how much love was in his eyes, as he answered her.

The old sense of isolation which had pursued him at intervals ever since he had been face to face with death in the library at Oxholme, took hold upon him with peculiar force at this moment. He had no thought for the people who might be watching them. They were as nothing to him during this brief remnant of his life.

As Captain Darlington left them, Philida gave a deep

satisfied sigh. She plied her fan vigorously, at the same time smoothing the satin folds of her treasured new gown.

"Isn't it beautiful?" said she ecstatically.

"And so you are enjoying it?" he asked, bending over her.

"Lud," she answered, "'tis monstrous diverting now I'm getting a little over being frightened. Does not Captain Darlington dance divinely, my lord! I vow, 'twas like floating."

She waved her fan and nodded her head to the music.

He rested one arm upon the screen and gazed down at her.

"What a child you are," he said sadly.

Philida was just beginning to feel sufficiently a woman to resent this.

"Indeed, I am not, my lord," she answered wilfully. "It is the curls that deceive you. When I am married——"

She stopped, biting her lips and blushing furiously. In their constrained and formal courtship this phrase had not appeared before.

He did not change expression or attitude, except that the slender, jewelled hand resting upon the screen closed suddenly.

"And when you are married?" he echoed in question, his eyes upon her crimsoned face.

"I'll pin them up," she went on, recovering herself, "and put on such an air. I protest it will quite frighten you." She nodded her head and laughed. "And you've not said yet that you like my new gown."

"I did not note it," he answered in a low voice. "I saw but your face."

"La, but you must note it. If you could but know

all the cutting and the pinning and the standing for hours that went into the making of it. Sybil says I could not have done better in Paris." Then a new and more serious strain of thought struck her. She turned to him, with a changed expression in her eyes. "Do you remember that first day you saw me, when I wore my tire-woman's borrowed clothes? 'Twas different then from now. How brave you were!" Her gaze rested on him with admiration, and a touch of wonder.

She had not spoken of this since their betrothal. The joy and the excitement of the evening were opening her heart, and she was turning to him naturally with confidences and reminiscences. He caught a glimpse of what his life with this child-woman might be, this strange compound of girlishness, mingled with a sympathetic insight beyond her years.

"I love to remember you as you were that day," she went on, and then she shook her head with a sage little air of reproach. "But, methinks, perhaps, 'twas your habit then to spell danger with too small a D."

She was silent for some minutes, opening and closing her fan, turning over a thought that she was hesitating to voice. His next words were so close to the line of her reflections that she looked up at him, startled.

"Tell me," he said, "how do you oftenest think of me?"

The question came slowly and with diffidence, but he was mastered by a yearning to learn somewhat of her heart and of his place within it.

She answered simply.

"I always seem to see you most vividly as you appeared the night after my experience with—Lady Caroline. I had been so afraid and closed my eyes upon such terror. I opened them as you carried me to the farmhouse. It was dark and I was still fearful. Then I

looked up, and it was your face I saw in the lantern-light. Your chin with that trace of a dimple." She studied him, forgetting herself. "And your eyes were looking down at me." She gave a little sigh. "You did not know that I had seen you, for I think I fainted again; but I could not have been nearer Heaven than I was then—to realise after all the terror that it was you who held me."

"Ah!" the exclamation was wrung from him. For an instant he held his hand across his eyes.

"What is it, my lord?" she asked in alarm.

His only reply was to seat himself beside her. From this position she could only see his profile, but she perceived that he was pale, and his voice when he spoke was strange.

"I would," he said, "that in the future, when you think of me, that you'd think of me kindly; that, if you felt disposed towards bitterness, you'd recall me as you saw me then. Keep your hold upon your ideal of me in spite of scandalous tongues, and try to remember that in every man there are many men: that man was true, true to the depth of him."

All her gaiety had gone.

"I do not understand," she said in bewilderment.

"What do you mean, my lord? You speak as if——"

She could not finish. The enigma read so many ways. Her youth and her inexperience seemed on a sudden to surround her, and to make her feel so hopelessly at a disadvantage with this man of the world. She felt chilled and set aside.

Yerington did not speak. He met her questioning eyes, striving to keep the despair from his own.

A voice broke upon their silence, drawling, frivolous, striking a harsh note of discord that made them both start.

"Fore Gad, Lady Philida," said George Selwyn, "it is scurvy of Yerington to keep you all to himself in this fashion. We will not suffer it, will we, Gilly?"

"Not so long as the gout has not laid me by the heels, I've still the makings of a minuet in me, and Lady Philida in her kindness may be pleased to favour me," responded that gentleman.

Mr. Crawford elbowed his way in.

"Will you present me, Yerington?" he asked, with a low bow. "Fortune has served me ill and I am yet poor in the absence of the Lady Philida Wentworth's acquaintance."

Yerington rose with a forced smile. He was not to escape the mummery of life. A tinge of bitterness appeared in the terms of his introduction.

"I can scarce pretend to the omnipotence of Fortune," he said, "but, with the Lady Philida's permission, I may mend this matter. May I present to your ladyship a gentleman noted in two courts for his interest in humanity?"

Philida swept a deep curtsy.

George Selwyn smiled at Yerington, relishing his dig at the expense of the incorrigible gossip. "Fish" Crawford, however, mounted his favourite hobby without delay and gave to Philida some of his sweepings of the evening.

"Egad, your ladyship," he said, with affected animation, "I swear the beautiful Mistress Gunnings will be expiring of spleen. The town already is murmuring with your name. I prophesy you'll be the toast of the season."

Philida was unaccustomed to flattery. She looked up at the man before her, waving his snuff-box and throwing back the ruffles from his wrist, and she felt moved to girlish laughter. Her amusement held her shyness in check.

"Indeed, sir," she answered, "I know not what I've done to merit this renown."

"That was pretty spoke, your ladyship, and, 'fore Gad, 'twas Nature who did it and not you; but if you would know what I have heard, and what has set the toothless old beldames and the younger ladies half mad with spite, then 'twould be well for you to consult your mirror."

"The town is new to me," she said with a dignity that sat quaintly on her years, "and I have no key to its ways."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE DUEL

Fair peace and fell strife,
Sweet dreams and fierce play,
Enjoyment and woe,
Hell and Eden below.

—JAROSLOV VECHLICKY.

At this moment Lord Yerington's face darkened. The fiddles had begun tuning for another dance, and it was Mr. Mansur who stood before Philida.

The crisis was reached, and he knew it.

His manner grew quieter as his fighting blood began to rise. This was the situation for which he had been waiting. He had realised that it was inevitable, and he intended to circumvent Mr. Mansur by every device within his ingenuity.

The friends who stood about him were familiar only with his debonair spirit, and had long accepted with reluctance his pronounced preference for Mr. Mansur. They, therefore, noted with surprise, the lift of his nostrils as he looked at him. There was an indefinable stress in this moment which wore upon its surface an appearance so casual. Therefore, though the fiddles were tuning with aimless notes not yet formed to dance-rhythm, these beaux still lingered, held by the curiosity that prevailed among them and which was as strong as their affectation, or their aptitude for epigram.

"This is my dance, I think, your ladyship," said Mr. Mansur, bowing low.

Philida rose to her feet in a little flutter of embarrassment. She had forgotten him until he appeared, and en-

deavoured to conceal her entire preoccupation by a smile. She had placed her hand upon his arm, when Lord Yerington spoke. His voice was so unnatural that at the first word Philida started and looked at him. His friends, too, accustomed to his genial carelessness, regarded him with surprise. This, however, did not appear in their faces. Habitual gamesters, even when they do not possess the immobility of the upper classes, seldom indulge in the luxury of facial expressiveness. They looked towards Mr. Mansur with gentle inquiry, though they were inwardly alert. That gentleman was rapidly throwing over the last vestiges of his prudence. His eyes were sparkling and his breath coming short. Yerington addressed him.

"Lady Philida dances with none but me to-night," he said slowly.

Philida's hand fell to her side. She turned in surprise to him, but under her surprise lay an involuntary concession to his will. She saw he was labouring under intense excitement. She felt a longing to conceal this from observers, to pass over the awkward situation with the best possible grace.

Mr. Mansur's face was livid.

"This is a matter for the Lady Philida," he said, his lips twitching.

"I pray you, gentlemen," she answered, placing her hand that shook slightly upon the arm Lord Yerington extended her, "but Lord Yerington's will is mine to-night."

With a quick-drawn breath he bent his head. Her loyalty to him moved him profoundly.

Sir Geoffrey had just joined the group. With his perennial tactlessness, his high shrill voice rose in protest.

"Egad, you are going to deprive us of our little share? Have not the Fates been niggard enough? Hang me,

'tis scurvy of you. I call you all to witness, is it not scurvy of him?" he asked, turning towards the others in the little group.

"If you were not host to-night, this would be a fighting matter," muttered Mansur.

Yerington's manner changed. He looked about him with assumed lightness.

"Friends," he said, "you know my madcap reputation. This is but another whim, you'll think. Then have it so, in the name of cap and bells, in the name of folly, in the name of nonsense and laughter; in the name of anything that is not ill-feeling. Give me my way—to-night."

Sir Geoffrey Baxter fluttered off with his grievance to the duchess. Yerington continued:

"After to-night, I pray you, mark me well. Then all such favours as lie within her ladyship's bestowal and as are agreeable to her gentle heart, she may grant at her discretion. You behold my entrance, by her ladyship's kindness, as tyrant." He bowed toward her with a gesture full of reverence, then raised his head and smiled round at them softly. "Of my exit, gentlemen, you shall hear anon."

"As jealous as Othello," whispered Gilly Williams, as they withdrew. "The merry earl! And of Mansur! When will wonders cease?"

"Something rotten in the state of Denmark," said George Selwyn thoughtfully.

Mansur turned away. From that moment he was immovably bent upon a design from which no consideration could divert him. For years he had built toward a position. Now he stood affronted and an object of mere ridicule in the world to which he had aspired. For half his life he had patiently toiled to accomplish the ruin of Lord Yerington, who now seemed upon the verge of

escaping him, and who had won the woman he had loved. He had, also, insulted him in public, and he had refused to meet him as an equal in duel. In the full tide of his hatred, his love, his prudence, even his ambitions, were forgotten. No publicity seemed sufficient for his revenge, and upon revenge he was determined. To the world he had always played. He had passed through life conscious of every eye upon him, tuning his poses and his phrases to an audience. To such a man an audience was indispensable. To him life's silent moments, however steeped they might be in events and emotions, were things of comparatively small value.

As he turned his back upon Lord Yerington and Philida, he could see nothing distinctly. The figures moving in the dance were mere blurs of colour under the brilliant light.

When the dance had ended Mr. Crawford sought him out. That worthy scented trouble, and Mr. Mansur's face suggested him as a clue. He offered his snuff-box, which the latter curtly declined. They stood at the end of the ballroom, where Lord Yerington and Philida had been during the foregoing scene, and therefore were clearly visible its entire length and throughout the stretch of the reception-rooms.

Crawford spoke in a low voice.

"Is it true," he asked, bringing his face close to Mr. Mansur's, "that Oxholme is stripped and that Yerington's estates are purchasable?"

Mansur looked round at him sharply, and then his eyes strayed towards the Duchess of Croome, occupied with her game of cards.

"I make it diamonds, Horry," she was saying. "I have no luck with hearts, even when my hand appears to warrant it."

Lord Yerington and Philida were well within hearing

of Mr. Mansur's voice as he answered. His manner as he did so was calculated to increase Mr. Crawford's curiosity.

"It may be so," he drawled.

Crawford's eyes twinkled, and he drew nearer, his head on one side.

"No difficulties, I hope?" he whispered, with an unconscious movement of his forefinger upon his under lip; a gesture often observable in misers, and Mr. Crawford garnered his scandal as eagerly as ever a miser did his gold.

"A whim, perhaps," said Mr. Mansur. "His lordship's full of whims."

Crawford cast his eyes ceilingward.

"What is England coming to?" he sighed hypocritically. "Men part with roof-trees which have sheltered theirs for generations, as lightly as they would a foundered horse."

Glancing over his shoulder, Philida's face came within the range of Mr. Mansur's vision. All the love he had felt for her, that once would have counselled prudence or delay, now only went to swell the sum of his desire for vengeance. Love, in a jealous heart, is scarcely to be distinguished from hatred. He was aware that with his own hands he was tearing down the slow-built fabric of his fortunes, but a savage joy went into the doing, for he knew that Lord Yerington's perished with his.

"You speak truly, Mr. Crawford," he said, purposely raising his voice. He knew, as he spoke, that many scandal-loving ears were eagerly waiting for his words.

The duchess had risen from her cards, and was standing conversing with Philida and Lord Yerington.

Mansur continued, responding to Crawford's last comment:

"The evil grows madder day by day. Those, whose

worst crimes were mere follies, sometimes, in the vortex—for human nature's weak, Mr. Crawford,——" interrupting himself.

"Lamentably weak," sighed Mr. Crawford, with intent eyes, shrugging his shoulders expressively. It was a cautious compromise, awaiting new developments.

"But now a case comes to my mind," continued Mansur. "'Tis sad, monstrous sad. A man who piled madness upon madness. Indeed, he had a reputation for invention in his follies that gave them a *cachet*. But mayhap, I'd best suppress it."

The words came clearly to Lord Yerington. He realised that the culminating moment was reached. He continued to exchange commonplaces with the duchess, but his mind was active.

Mr. Crawford began dimly to perceive that he was being used as a medium for a purpose which, at the moment, he could not guess. He felt a discreet impulse to withdraw.

"Perhaps it would be wiser—for the time——" he answered nervously.

The duchess turned.

"What is this I hear?" she queried, nothing in her code counselling delicacy. "My ears are wagging. Mr. Mansur, your mind has a judicial quality. Methinks those words were spoke to the jury." She waved a fan about to include the guests within hearing. "Why all this shilly-shally? Come, follow up your hint."

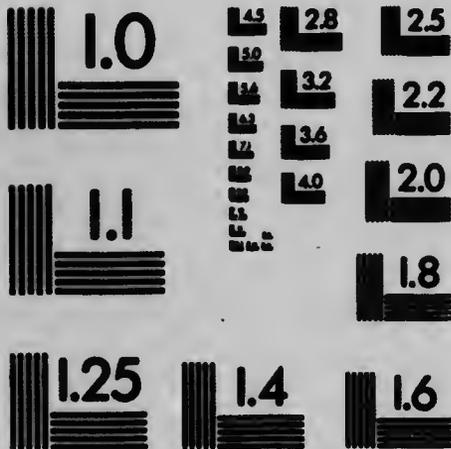
For an instant Mr. Mansur hesitated. It came fully to him that if he spoke it would then be too late to repent. He caught Yerington's eye, steady and penetrating. As he did so, he knew he would go on to the end.

"Your grace," he said, turning round to her, "I fear I've said too much. It may be that you know this man, and under such circumstances my information would



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scarce be welcome. Faith, 'twas a pretty farce he played, if farce you can call it. Mr. Walpole here has more intimate knowledge than I of dramatic terminology. Some, mayhap, might call it a tragedy."

"Fudge!" exclaimed the duchess impatiently. "Don't play us like this. I'll warrant this bit of scandal tickles your palate finely. Name, I prithee, both the scandal and the sinner."

"Lud, do we know him?" exclaimed Sybil Armytage.

"Egad, know him?" echoed Mr. Mansur. "You may know the set of his ruffles and the turn of his phrases."

"Heaven send that this is not all prologue!" said Miss Chudleigh to the Duke of Newcastle, "for, methinks, this man is like an Italian villa, façade and emptiness."

Mr. Mansur heard her comment and the emotional dimples began to play about his mouth, those danger-signals.

"My lord was a pretty fellow. He did credit to his tailor, and his *bon mots* became anecdotes. Could ambition ask more? His follies were imitated; and could folly ask more?"

"Curiosity can ask more," interrupted the duchess, "and that is brevity."

"I'll lay ten to one this is a fiasco," whispered Lord March to George Selwyn. "Old Shem grows prolix."

Mr. Mansur was called Shem by the men about town because the sharp red, white and black contrasts of his physiognomy were said to make him resemble the toy figures in the carved Noah's Arks.

"He was a pretty gentleman in the boudoirs," went on Mr. Mansur, with a supercilious lift of his eyebrows, "yet in his cups but like the rest, hiccoughing 'twixt glass and glass a dozen tipsy toasts."

"I mislike this story," whispered Philida to the duchess.
"I prithee, let us move on out of hearing."

A laugh had followed Mansur's last words. The ugly sneer with which he spoke them showed his personal venom, and brought him well within the range of the auditors' ridicule, while the sneer itself had little power to shock.

"There's no great matter here," said Walpole, who disliked him. "We've fifty such in our acquaintance and, if the toast be witty, where's the harm?"

Mr. Mansur turned his brilliant smile upon them.

"The point is yet to tell. His lordship played deeper and yet deeper; lost and lost again. Then he turned to other channels to retrieve. The hazard of the cards and dice alone did not suffice. He ventured all his fortune upon 'Change. Need we trouble to tell the end? He lost it,—every penny."

There was a perceptible rustle as the men and women of his audience turned and glanced at one another. The rumour of the early evening, which had been creeping about the corners, and circling like smoke wreaths, began to descend and take tangible form in their minds.

Mr. Mansur knew he had them. He ceased to speak, tapped his snuff-box, gave them time to digest the thought, and to focus their suspicions.

"One good quality our peer possessed," he continued after the pause, "that was the gift of silence. He held his peace. Not even his creditors learned of his changed fortunes. Before the bailiffs came to claim him he had a turn to make. As you'll perceive, he was a resourceful gentleman. He determined to wed an heiress."

This new phase in the narrative, while it added spice and dressed it to the taste of the jaded scandal-mongers, averted with a sharp twist, all their suspicions from Yer-

ington. For the last fortnight the town had been exhausting itself in comments upon Lady Philida's dowerlessness.

The tale made a peculiar appeal to the duchess' indignation.

"A monstrous trick," she said sharply.

Yerington gave a start that caused her to turn in surprise. His face was colourless. This ordeal wrung him beyond endurance. He was determined to stop Mansur's words at any cost, ready to go to any extreme, mad or fantastic. He did not know, as he stepped up to him, whether he should end the scene with his fingers on his throat; but when he reached him, his impulse took the form of words.

"This fellow needs a champion," he said, pausing before the man who had baited him almost beyond control. "There's more to tell, I'll warrant. I'll lay you a hundred to one that he is not so black as you have painted him. Oh, these trials by drawing-room! Your evidence may be perjured, Mr. Mansur."

There was an eager movement in the room.

"Will you take him, Mr. Mansur?" cried Lord March. "I'll back the unknown party of the first part. Shall we make it ponies?"

Mansur could scarcely conceal his exultation.

"No," he answered, slowly, "if it is to be a wager, let us decide it after the last French fashion. The dice there are no longer *à la mode*. It is swords now decide such matters."

A shrill feminine scream arose, followed by a masculine outburst of protest.

Lord Yerington awaited Mr. Mansur's next words. He perceived whither he was leading him.

"No," said the latter, suavely, "I pray you, ladies, do not mistake me. 'Tis the friendliest crossing of

swords. A mere bout of skill. Who first disarms his antagonist has won the wager."

It was an excess of sheer vanity, the tenderest of passions, that now was moving him. To cross weapons with Lord Yerington at last, to do so amid such a scene, and to prove himself the better swordsman, now possessed him to the exclusion of every other consideration. He knew that, if they but once engaged, it was a fight to the death. He had not read Yerington's expression for nothing. He knew the corner into which he had forced him, and that he faced a desperate man whose life he had ruined, and whom he now sought to disparage in the eyes of the girl he loved and of the world. He knew that he was tauntingly stealing from him the last stand he coveted—the privilege of himself explaining his position. This Mansur was as determined he should not do as Yerington was bent upon it. But he knew that he could twist this duel more to his advantage if he came well out of it, than he could challenge a plain statement of the circumstances from Yerington. They had both played high; they had both lost; they were both facing finalities.

To stop this man's tongue was Yerington's controlling impulse now. He turned to his guests with a smile of engaging lightness.

"The idea is novel and diverting," he said. "I yield to it with all my heart. Let us make this trial of our skill in the armoury. Or shall it be upon the lawn?"

"Why not here?" cried Mansur. "The light is better, and then indeed, he who comes off best will prove it was skill and not chance."

There was a murmur of excitement. The people there had not thought out the episode clearly to its ultimate conclusion. They had not realised that the duel was beside the point and decided nothing whatever of the unknown

person who had been attacked, and only the skill of two gentlemen. Mansur, with subtlety, had led them away from that point. What diplomat does not know the value of such a trick, and the need of concentrating the minds of his audience on the point that is not at issue in order that he may have his way upon the point that is? Later, these people would remember the irrelevance of this sham duel, and though some of them disliked the entire episode, they were still hypnotised into a compliance, if an unwilling one.

"I've just returned from Paris, and I've heard of no such wager," said Horace Walpole.

"'Tis done with buttons, I suppose," said Mr. Crawford, uneasily. He thought he saw further into the situation than the others did and he did not like the look of it.

Mansur's manner was full of suppressed excitement.

"We are no such bunglers, are we, Yerington?" he said. "With the points is the custom."

"But the swords may go wild and harm come to the ladies," objected Gilly Williams.

"We know our weapons from tip to hilt," said Mansur with a sort of wild gaiety in his voice.

The duchess precipitated the next move.

"Come," she cried, "I like this idea. There's life in it. We poor women!—our tame lives so seldom include duels, even sham ones. Prithce, on with it, gentlemen."

After these few scattered objections, an intense curiosity took possession of the onlookers. In corners the gentlemen were making hasty wagers, with heavy odds on Lord Yerington.

Philida was bewildered, silent and afraid.

The centre of the ballroom was hastily cleared. Its polished floor shone in the candle-light. The lackeys

solemnly snuffed all the candles into greater brilliancy, brought the gentlemen's dress swords, and withdrew.

The musicians stopped playing to stare at the strange spectacle of two gentlemen standing, their swords drawn and *en garde* in a ballroom, while the recent dancers crowded around the wall in silent assent to the spectacle. The musicians had been too far away to overhear the previous dialogue and they were almost persuaded that they were dreaming.

"On with it, Yerington, for the honour of your house," called the duchess.

Except that their faces were pale, nothing of the fatal nature of the encounter appeared in the manner of the combatants. Lord Yerington's blood always quickened when there was danger in the air, and the thirst that now possessed him to silence the man opposite to him, made his eyes steady and bright.

Mansur's manner, usually subdued to artificial quiet, was actually gay as he felt the slither of Lord Yerington's blade down the side of his. The sound of it was music to him, and the presence of the waiting guests, bepatched, brocaded, scented and beruffled, filled him with exultation. His most ardent fancy could not have painted such a triumph.

It was only when their blades engaged and disengaged, eye fixed on eye, each silently feeling for the other's strength or weakness, that the undertone of seriousness began to appear and that the white anger of their hearts was revealed.

Yerington's sword-play, brilliant, subtle, backed by a flexible and steely wrist, was resourceful and unexpected. Strangely enough, Mansur, whose shifty quality of mind would seem to promise a method of feints and expedients, fought with steady skill, stronger in defence than attack. It may be that he thought to weary his opponent, whose

nerves he knew had been for weeks on the rack. His defence was like a wall,—rapid, not brilliant, but inflexible. Yerington's attack, varied and full of imagination, in which he mingled the French and Italian schools, was strong and baffling. Yet against Mansur he seemed to gain no advantage. That gentleman's persistent attitude of defence only, surprised him. Then, with a flash, though with eye and mind so engaged it would seem that subjective impressions were for the nonce impossible, the truth came to him. He knew that his antagonist was not only seeking to wear him down, but was deliberately trying to irritate him. His whole attitude was calculated. In the encounter he would appear to those who watched, to be calm, skilful, unimpassioned. Then, if Yerington himself rushed in, he could plead that, in the face of a furious attack, he had struck wildly and in self-defence, and thus, in the very act of his villainy, clear himself. As this conviction came to Lord Yerington he realised why his usually baffling methods had hitherto availed him nothing. Mansur must have been deliberately practising with this fight in view. With this realisation, a fury took possession of him. He forgot Philida; he forgot the throng of his waiting guests. All his world was just the length of his sword, and all his determination, to blot the clear red and white of the countenance which faced him, to a sudden grey.

The swords flashed and twisted; the feet of the duellists shuffled over the floor with, now and then, a slip that brought a scream from the women. The combatants were beginning to breathe heavily. Occasionally the gentlemen who watched them made a comment.

"Well done, Yerington, that thrust is new!"

"Bravo, he has a wrist of steel."

Selwyn whispered to Walpole:

"But one generation from a cleaver, and yet he handles

his sword after this fashion. Talk not to me of ancestry."

Suddenly Yerington changed his tactics. He no longer attacked. He determined not to play Mansur's hand for him tamely. He stood back, his sword dangling, with a loose wrist, a provoking smile upon his face—and waited. This forced Mansur from his position. He advanced and feinted. Yerington parried and again put himself *en garde*. Again Mansur made the same pass. Again Yerington parried and again *en garde*. A livid anger began to appear in Mansur's face, and seeing it, Yerington grinned. They circled, watching one another, waiting; they both knew that the next attack would have all that hatred and skill could put into it.

Then a voice came across the silence:

"La, I protest, if they are so well matched, we shall wait here all the night and it will spoil the dancing."

A matronly "Hush!" admonished her.

Mansur knew that his design was understood. He saw too that Lord Yerington's temper was in command, while his own was getting beyond his control. He accepted the inevitable and forced the issue.

A moment later eye met eye, foot balanced to foot, and the swords played in deadly earnest. No more smiles now. Death and hatred were in the faces of these quondam friends. As they forgot, the watching crowd began to understand.

Philida, who from the first had feared and trembled, screamed out suddenly:

"This is no jest. Part them, I entreat you, gentlemen."

"It is most damnable earnest!" cried Walpole.

The exclamation that reached the combatants only served to make them fight with more grim determination.

They wished to gain their end before they were interrupted.

Colonel Gifford struck up their swords.

William Pitt, with his commanding presence and dominating flash of the eye, stepped forward.

"Shame!" he exclaimed, lifting his arm, his voice ringing. "I wonder at you."

George Selwyn struggled to control Yerington.

Captain Darlington endeavoured to bind Mansur's arms, but Mansur was the stronger of the two. He was near to frenzy, flecks of foam appeared upon his lips. Raging like a wild beast, he came within range of Yerington and thrust at him with a sword, of which they had not yet deprived him.

The women screamed shrilly. Some clung to one another; others swooned; others fled like partridges to cover.

The sword entered fairly near Lord Yerington's shoulder. When it was withdrawn, a bright crimson spot appeared upon his blue velvet and spread gradually.

Amid an expressive silence the men struggled to control Mansur, and Gilly Williams took possession of his sword.

"This is a most disgraceful scene," went on Mr. Pitt, with increasing indignation. "The time may come for explanations, but now, methinks, Yerington, 'tis best that you apologise to your lady guests. If this fellow has spitted you, 'tis little to be wondered at. He has been but true to his kind."

Mansur strained at the arms that bound him, his face crimson with passion. Instinctively he turned at this moment to spit forth his venom again.

"Ay, Mr. Pitt, we animals are fashioned after our kind; wallow after our kind; hunt after our kind; lie after our kind. But what of him, the peer, the aristocrat? Lies he after his kind?"

"Silence!" commanded Mr. Pitt, his face darkening. "We've heard too much of you to-night. Take him out, and let him breathe his poison in the dark."

"Would you know the name of the peer who has lied after his kind," shouted Mr. Mansur, struggling with his captors, "who lost his fortunes, and then sought to patch them up by trapping a girl with his falsehoods? There he stands—the Earl of Yerington!"

Nobody moved. The words petrified them into an amazed silence. A moment later Yerington's friends recovered sufficiently to attempt, in anger, to drag the raging traducer from the room. One arm he contrived to loosen, and with it he pointed over their heads to where Lord Yerington stood, one hand pressed to the spot whence the blood was spreading slowly.

"Look at him," he raged, "and say then that I lied."

Yerington raised his head and his eyes met Mansur's steadily.

But at this instant the duchess, to whom the scene, from her greater knowledge of the underlying conditions carried more conviction, swept forward and stood before him.

"Yerington," she exclaimed, her manner agitated, "is this true, then? Have you put this trick upon us?"

Her sudden attack overcame him, weakened as he was by misery and a sense of the impossibility of explanation. He realised that if he should tell the truth then, guilty in part as he was, that his words would carry no conviction. He bit his lip in silence, and still pressed his hand to the wound, to which, in the excitement, nobody had given a second thought—save Philida, who had been standing trembling in the background.

But when her aunt challenged him, she no longer trembled and hesitated. She came forward and stood before him, putting a hand upon his shoulder. The observing world, which criticised him, seemed to her a

slight thing compared to the insinuation of a blot upon his honour. She flashed round upon her aunt fearlessly, his only champion in that atmosphere upon which the virus of rumour had worked.

"Deny it," she pleaded, "deny it! They have doubted you."

Her splendid faith brought Lord Yerington a wave of joy. Then this died to shame, blacker by the contrast. She looked at him, her face glowing with perfect confidence, but a moment later, even her eyes could read the guilt and despair in his.

She stood regarding him in growing amazement, beneath the observant eyes of the watching guests.

"What?" she said at last, uncertainty appearing in her tone, though her hand still lingered on his shoulder, "you do not speak. Can these things be true, my lord?"

The agony of mind that possessed him caused the blood to flow with a gush and crimson his fingers. The scene grew dark and swam in his vision. He was upon the rack. Her next words came to him, said softly beneath her breath. His ears only caught them:

"He does not love me, then."

This thought alone had power to drive her from him.

She turned, wavered upon her feet, and then steadily, though her face was white and drawn, she passed down the brilliantly lighted ballroom, the one moving figure within it, and the focus of all eyes. Not even the duchess thought to speak to or arrest her. As she turned at the open doorway into the hall, Yerington's love and yearning went out to her in a gasping cry.

"Philida!"

He swayed and would have fallen, but George Selwyn caught him in his arms.

CHAPTER XL

PHILIDA'S COMING

I was beloved of gods and men,—
For Fortune smiled upon me then;
But Fortune left me in sad plight,
And not a friend remained in sight.

—GROTIUS.

IN the chestnut parlour Lord Yerington lay upon a couch, while the surgeon attended him. The latter was a slight man in a scratch-wig and snuff-coloured frock. He was bandaging Lord Yerington's shoulder with a sort of fussy orderliness. From time to time the sound of the roll of coach-wheels reached them, or the shuffle of chairmen's feet. His guests were still departing. They had been so numerous that the block of waiting vehicles before the house had caused some delay. No single one of his late guests had offered to linger with him. He was condemned at the bar of public opinion. This band of pleasant sinners had passed judgment upon him.

As he heard them depart, Lord Yerington was moved to irony.

"How they hasten," he said with a laugh. "Prithee, good Mr. Price, mark them."

"Yes, yes, yes," soothed Mr. Price, who was telling himself in his professional way that however odd circumstances might look, they were no business of his. "Remember, your lordship, quiet, perfect quiet."

"I'll rest quietly enough," answered Yerington grimly, as the surgeon pulled down his shirtsleeve.

"Yes, yes, yes," crooned Mr. Price. "Of course, of

course. But, remember, any excitement and the arm will be fevered directly. Pardon me, your lordship," and he proceeded to roll up his apparatus; "but you young bloods come next to sickly babies in furnishing business to men of my calling. Prithee, remember that I can do but half, and the rest must lie with you."

"Mr. Price," said Yerington with a smile, "I'll make you an oath that a quieter patient than I'll be this night does not exist outside a shroud."

"Perfectly right, perfectly right. I thank you, my lord," answered Mr. Price. "But I cannot leave you alone. I must give my orders."

"To be sure," replied Yerington, lying back and closing his eyes, for his head was light and he wished above all things to keep it steady for the next hour. "Just pull that bell-rope, will you, kindly?"

Mr. Price did so vigorously, but there was no response.

The household was already disorganised and gossip raging in the servants' quarters. More than once the majordomo had vainly demanded discipline in recognition of his dignity. Now, when he observed that amid the excitement below stairs, the bell-ringing had escaped notice, it occurred to him, for reasons of his own, to answer it personally. Therefore, it was he who appeared in his trim black, after a prolonged delay, in the chestnut parlour.

"Good Lord!" cried Yerington as he entered; "you, Walsh! You look like a mummer at a funeral. I protest you are a little ahead of time. Where is Jenkins?"

"Does your lordship not recall," answered Walsh, "that his mother was took ill most sudden, and that your lordship gave him leave this evening, after he had dressed you for the ball?"

"Egad, so I did," said Yerington indifferently. "Go

away, you won't do, Walsh. That crow's outfit of yours is little to my taste, though, spud me, there's humour in it, too."

Mr. Price thought that his patient wandered in his mind, and he exchanged looks with Mr. Walsh, who stood just within the door.

"Go, Walsh, and send me somebody. Damme, man, the turnspit dog would do, methinks. These dogs, Mr. Price, have an odd, ill-considered trick of constancy; but—I forget—I am not the cook. The cook is richer than I am by the turnspit dog."

He turned away from the two waiting men, with an indifferent gesture of finality and dismissal.

Mr. Walsh thought now his opportunity had come and he advanced an obsequious step or two.

"May I entreat your lordship to remember," he began with an unctuous air, "that a poor man's only fortune is his character, and I beg that your lordship will give me as good a one as lies within your lordship's conscience. I have been faithful—and long in your service——"

Yerington's inert figure was moved to sudden energy. He roused himself and looked at the man in black, who stood bowing and rubbing his hands, near the door. Then he reached out one long arm for a priceless trifle in gold and lapis lazuli, that stood upon a table near by. With unerring aim it flew straight at Mr. Walsh's head. That worthy dodged into the hall. Lord Yerington lay back, laughing softly.

"One must not heed the bite of every louse, Mr. Price," he said.

Mr. Price continued to roll up his bandages and to pack his little case.

A physician lives most of his existence, facing the odd cross-stitches and seams of life. He was puzzled, but he was still telling himself that it was no affair of his,

Beneath Yerington's manner his trained eye detected the *abandon* of a man on the verge of recklessness and despair. Just so had he seen a patient act, upon whom he himself had passed the death sentence. Though he washed his hands of any consequences, which lay within Lord Yerington's jurisdiction, his professional conscience demanded that he should do his best within his own.

"Here are the drops, my lord," he said, in his precise way, that sat oddly at variance with his untidy dress, and the traces of snuff upon his ruffles. "If there is no one here to take my orders then, prithee, read the directions upon the label. Well, well, well! To be sure! to be sure! And may I venture to add that it's scarce becoming for a gentleman of your position to be left alone without attendance?"

He helped himself to a pinch of snuff from a Japanned box, looking at his patient and gently smiling, as he did so, as if he were a child whose fretfulness he was seeking to appease.

"My very kind Mr. Price," returned Yerington, "this is a mere scratch. You'd have blooded me as much for a touch of the spleen."

Still dissatisfied, the surgeon watched him uncertainly. There came a slight knock at the door.

"Come in, burn you!" cried Yerington, impatiently.

It was opened to reveal two lackeys standing on the threshold. They appeared embarrassed by their own boldness, and it was with marked diffidence that they stepped within the room.

"If you please, your lordship, give us leave to serve you," said one.

Yerington regarded them with attention.

"Denby," he said, "and Sutter. I thank you, my good fellows. Here, Mr. Price, are two trusties. Prithee, give them your orders."

The surgeon complied and soon after departed.

Lord Yerington now turned to the two men, who stood near him with an air of uncertainty, embarrassed by their new duties which brought them into intimate contact with the master who, in his good fortune, had walked so far apart from them.

"How comes it, Denby," he asked, "that you are not below with the others guzzling my champagne?"

Denby made an eager movement and his eyes were shining.

"'Twas you, my lord, who gave me the money that saved my wife's life," he answered.

"Did I really?" said Yerington. "Faith, I'm glad of that. And she's quite recovered?"

"Quite, thanks to your lordship," answered the man.

Lord Yerington turned to the other.

"And now you, Sutter, what claim have I on you?"

Sutter had the eye of an enthusiast.

"Your lordship may recall Master Broughton and his booth in Tottenham Court Road. A brave man and a skilful with his fists is Master Broughton and the greatest boxers in England owe their fame to his teaching."

"Doubtless, doubtless, my good Sutter," answered Yerington. "I myself have some slight knowledge of his methods."

"Your lordship may recall," continued Sutter, his manner growing in enthusiasm, "that one day he challenged any man in England to stand up against him. I was there, my lord," he took a step nearer in his excitement, "and I saw you lay him out with claret running from his nose and ears. The other gentlemen of quality came masked, and they went down before him; but you, my lord, fought him with a bare face. You were not ashamed, and you won against all England's

champion. 'That's the master for me,' said I; and I never stopped a-trying till I got the place,—humbly begging your lordship's pardon for my freedom of speech."

Lord Yerington considered the two men thoughtfully. He owed their loyalty to him to a lightly bestowed and completely forgotten impulse of kindness and to a dare-devil escapade with which the town had rung. It would seem as if here then lay the harvest of his years.

"I thank you both," he said at length. "From my heart, I thank you. And now, I pray you, leave me to myself."

The men exchanged glances.

"But may we not make bold to serve you," said Denby, "as Mr. Jenkins is away?"

Yerington reflected before he answered.

"Yes, remain in the hall below. I may have need of you anon."

They departed, visibly uncertain of the wisdom of their course. The ruined noblemen of that day so frequently chose a brief and desperate exit from their difficulties that the fear of suicide was in the minds of both.

Left to himself, Yerington's first act was to rise and take his pistols from a closet in the panelling. He smiled as he recalled the fact that he was repeating here in Grangely House the scene he had formerly enacted at Oxholme. In all he did he was conscious of a dual sense, as if he stood aside and watched himself. This impression of unreality added the last touch to his mental suffering. Still with this haunting suggestion of keeping a watch upon himself, he went to a table and wrote a few lines to Philida. These lines were brief, and when he had written them he sat with his head upon his

hands. He was struggling with this same curious petrefaction of the spirit. Even Philida seemed far away; the step he meant to take dwarfed and unimportant.

"God," he cried aloud, "let me at least live until I die! What is this creeping death of sensibility?"

It was but the apathy following a blow that had cleaved his life to its core.

His next move was to carry his pistols, primed and cocked, to the chimney-piece and set them down below the mirror; then he continued his preparations. He moved the candlesticks to where the light would be best for his purpose. As he lifted his arm, he gave an annoyed exclamation. The bandages hampered his movements. He tore them aside unthinkingly, and did not wince at the pain in his wound, from which the blood flowed, the stain spreading over his white shirt. These bandages would be useless a moment later, and now they incommoded him. Again he raised his arm.

There came a hurried knocking at the door. He heard it, but it only made him resolve upon haste.

"Carefully," he thought to himself, "you must not bungle."

The gentleman who had walked with him that night through these waiting rooms now looked back at him, blood-stained, but resolute.

"Let me in!" cried a voice filled with entreaty.

Yerington doubted his ears.

The knocking had changed to the soft sound of palms beaten desperately against the door.

"Oh, I beseech you, let me enter," said the same voice.

Yerington went hastily to the escritoire and laid down the pistol in an inconspicuous position. He then donned a long, crimson brocade morning-gown, which had been brought to the chestnut parlour when he had been con-

vayed there, wounded. Then he went to the door and opened it.

Upon the threshold stood Philida.

She had covered her white dress with a long-hooded mantle. As she stepped into the room the hood fell back. Her first impulse was to look at him with a sort of horrified interrogation, and then to glance searchingly about the room.

"You are alone," she half whispered.

At the sight of her all the ice melted from about his heart. He became upon the instant alive in every pulse. A soft happiness rushed over him, a profound content. He watched her silently, every feature, every detail of her dress, each of her movements, growing upon him with a sense of encompassing importance. He had no wish to speak. He sought to breathe in the delight of her presence; to revel to the full in the brief ecstasy of this reprieve.

She had addressed him twice before he noticed it. Somewhat reassured by his appearance, a growing agitation took possession of her.

"My lord," she faltered, "my lord——"

"My dear lady," he answered, his voice all tender with his love.

At the words and the tone, into her face came a sudden aloofness.

"I understood, Lord Yerington, that you were wounded and alone. I feared——"

She bit her lip and fought her fear into silence.

He stood motionless, watching her, a half smile upon his face.

"And so, sweet Saint Elizabeth, ever present where there's need of help, you came."

"Pray, make no mistake, sir," she said, "I would do as much for my dog if he was wounded."

She had never looked more lovely than she did as she turned to him with a flash in her eyes.

"Believe me, I understand," he answered, thoughtfully.

"You must not mistake my pity for——" As she stumbled over the unsaid words a sweep of crimson dyed her face from chin to brow.

Again he answered softly: "I understand. Don't begrudge me this glimpse of you, or think I misinterpret your self-forgetting pity. From my heart I thank you."

He regarded her, a new expression upon his face, something rarer and higher than had before appeared there.

For an instant she paused, at a loss, wavered and half turned toward the door. But she could not leave him until she had been reassured.

"And your wound?" she asked, scarcely above her breath, her eyes searching his face.

"As men count wounds, 'tis the veriest scratch," he answered.

Again she turned away from him.

Suddenly, as he watched her, it was as if a cloud lifted. They no longer stood alone in the great world. His mind reached out to the crowded town and he seemed to hear the babble of many voices.

"Who saw you enter here?" he asked with a harshness in his tone that she misunderstood.

"Only the two lackeys in the hall," she answered, mentally searching for his thought.

The next instant he left the room.

Sutter and Denby answered his summons immediately. They had been standing whispering together.

"The Lady Philida Wentworth came here seeking her grace the Duchess of Croome. Her grace will

doubtless arrive within the moment. Relight the candles in the hall and in the white withdrawing-room, and wait below until I ring."

The men bowed respectfully and turned, intent upon his command. He checked them with a word.

"I can trust you?" he said.

There was something in his face that impelled their confidence.

"On our lives," answered Denby, earnestly.

Lord Yerington returned to the chestnut parlour to discover Philida standing in the middle of the room, her hands clasped before her face. Her cloak had slipped from her shoulders, revealing her white gown beneath, but she did not heed it.

The cloud had lifted from her world, also, and something of his thought she had perceived.

"Oh, what have I done, what have I done!" she half sobbed.

He drew a step nearer to her, his face soft.

"An act of purest mercy," he answered.

"It was unmaidenly," she cried.

"It was better still,—it was womanly."

She shrank from him, fumbling for her cloak.

"I must be off," she said, "I must be off. I must not linger here."

Her movements were confused, pitifully uncertain, as, torn by conflicting impulses, she went blindly towards the door.

When he saw her going, a sudden unreasoning rush of revolt came over him; a despair that thrust all considerations aside; a consuming longing for a few moments more of her society. His chivalry was forgotten in his selfish pain.

"Don't go," he besought; "I entreat you to stay a little longer, my dearest lady."

If she had still believed in his love for her, she would have had the key to his manner.

She stood shrinking, one hand pressed against the panelled wall.

"You forget, my lord! Your right is forfeit now to say such words to me."

"Yes, I forget," he answered passionately, "I forget everything save that you are there, and I am here. You, Philida, and I. They are all my life, these little, little moments. And yet you would go and leave me with my despair."

She could not read the riddle. The clue by which she should have been guided, had been broken that night in the ballroom; but, at his last words she started.

"Yes, I must leave you," she said, slowly; "but despair is for the weak."

He flung wide a reckless, beseeching arm.

"Weak," he echoed; "be that as it may, but stay."

There was a look in his face that she had never seen there before. As he stood barring her passage, he was mad with a longing for her presence, and he was struggling desperately against the moment that must take her from him. The shrinking expression of fear in her face did not move him. He was possessed by one dominating thought—that he could not let her go.

"I came here trusting you," she faltered.

"Then let me counsel you in the future," he replied, without changing his attitude, "trust not a desperate man."

"O dear, what shall I do?" she said, suddenly breaking down and wringing her hands, looking childishly inadequate and helpless standing before Lord Yerington, whose face grew more determined as it grew whiter.

"I will tell you what you are to do. You are to sit there in that chair by the hearth. See! The fire is bright and cheery. Does it not invite you?"

He moved towards it with a gracious, courtly gesture of invitation. Her dark eyes were fixed on him as if fascinated. He had never appeared so tall as he did in the crimson morning-gown, which accentuated the breadth of his shoulders. The white powder of last night's ball was still upon his hair. Something in his manner hinted to her submission. He handed her to the chair, which he pointed out. She sank into it, leaning slightly forward, every muscle tense.

"This is wrong," she insisted.

His reply was to put out a hand and with reverent, wondering fingers, stroke one of her shining curls.

"Oh, oh!" she cried distressfully.

He went on, as if she had not spoken.

"Just so it might have been," he said below his breath, as if he thought aloud, "if we were married, you and I together, the curtains drawn and the world shut out."

She was beginning to sob chokingly without tears.

"You used me very ill, Lord Yerington," she said. "I cannot think why—what I have done——?"

The words died into confused silence.

"Poor little heart," he said tenderly, "if I had my will, I'd spare you every pang. Believe me, even the memory of this night will pass. You will soon forget. Alas, the young so soon forget."

Misunderstanding him, wounded in her pride, these last words moved her.

"Forget!" she cried, drawing back from him, "I have no pang to forget. Think you I'll spend my youth, or one hour of it, in memory of a man who cruelly used me but as a pawn in a game? You mistook my coming

here to-night. I but feared for you. As for such pangs, believe me, my lord, they cure themselves."

The cruelty of this thrust in some degree recalled him from the mood that had been controlling him. For an instant he closed his eyes and gave a movement as of physical pain. He opened them to find her bending towards him, her expression transformed.

"You suffer, my lord!" she exclaimed.

He looked up at her and smiled slightly.

"Truth turned the thumbscrews, and I winced," he said. "You have brought me to myself. For that I thank you. I have kept you here and against your will. I entreat a thousand pardons, you- ladyship. You are free."

He bowed before her.

In bewilderment she groped for her cloak and stood drawing it about her.

"Go," he said hoarsely; "go, while I have strength to send you."

Mechanically he motioned her towards the door with a gesture which had all his former assured grace.

"Is your ladyship's chair below?" he asked. "I make apologies for my forgetfulness. I will do myself the honour of handing you into it."

He was wavering upon his feet now, and his vision was becoming obscured. Mechanically, he brushed a hand across his eyes, determined to keep a hold upon himself as long as he was still beneath her observation. He caught hold upon his consciousness with an effort. Then he realised he was not equal to the task he had set for himself.

"Will your ladyship pardon me if I delegate Sutter, or perhaps Denby? Methinks his name is Denby. The night is chill, and my wound is fresh. Your ladyship will remember," he laughed weakly, and again

brushed his hand across his eyes, "the years I have to my account and the life I have led. I am scarce an oak seasoned to the storm. Young Captain Darlington is more suited to your years. He would serve you gallantly. I am upon the shelf. Young Captain Darlington—yes, that would be meet."

The sound of a scream reached him faintly.

CHAPTER XLI

AN EXPOSÉ

As thou sowest, so shalt thou reap.
Smite and thou shalt smart.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

A SENSE of weakness, followed by question, the pang of awakening consciousness, then a vague hovering suggestion of soothing hands and voices.

Yerington's eyelids twitched and lifted.

Within the radius of his vision came Philida's face. It was intent, earnest and absorbed. Her ministrations had brought into it a touch of motherhood. His wound throbbed, but he was aware that about it there was a sensation of delicious coolness. He knew that his head was pillowed upon her knee. He closed his eyes and permitted himself to revel in a childlike sense of reality of the moment. Why turn to the realities with sharp birth-pangs of reawakening?

It was only when she bent over him until her curls swept his cheek, and he heard a distressed cry escape her, that the instinctive wish to dissipate her trouble roused him.

"Oh, why, why does he not recover?" he heard her murmur.

He did not move, but he looked up into her face.

"I am here," he said, scarcely above a whisper.

At this there was a movement in the room. Some one had been present who, at the sound of his voice, left with careful haste.

Philida raised her head. "You are better," she said

tremulously, "you were bleeding so dreadfully all that while."

He could feel her shudder.

He did not attempt to change his position, but lay back with his eyes still fixed dreamily on her face.

There was question in her eyes. He could see her lips quiver. Surely this was love she was telling herself, not daring to believe.

He was lying upon the hearthrug where he had fallen. The fire-glow danced over them, ruddying the round of her cheek. Near by was some blood-stained linen, a basin of cold water tinged with red, and a sponge. His shoulder had been skilfully bound. Such simple surgery was a part of a woman's education and, amongst the villagers, Philida had often played nurse to more serious troubles.

At this instant a clock chimed one. They did not heed it.

She put an enervating draught to his lips.

"Prithee, drink," she said, coaxingly.

He obeyed with reluctance. He had no will to get back to his problems with his returning strength.

"What happened?" he asked faintly, fighting for time.

"Alas," she cried, "your wound had been torn open; the bandages had slipped. You had lost much blood and fainted. I fear," she hesitated, "that I judged you a little. I realise you scarce were conscious of what you said after I came." She coloured delicately. Some doubt of him had entered her mind. She felt his hard determination to hold her there against her will, and she was grasping eagerly, with penitence, at this excuse for him.

He looked back at her without replying. He thought it possible that at last, before the insensibility overcame him, his mind might have wandered; but, for the rest,

mad he might have been, but conscious. It was hunger for her nearness that made him lie back, with affected helplessness, while into his vigorous frame the tingle of life was creeping with increased insistence.

He was soon to have need of this strength.

A hurried knock sounded, which was followed by Denby's entrance into the room with a startling lack of ceremony.

"My lord, my lord," he exclaimed excitedly, "her grace is below, and pardon me, your ladyship, but she is most awful put about. Sutter is taking her by the long hall, or her grace would have been here without warning."

With a curiously sudden increase of strength, Yerington was upon his feet, and had slipped on once more the crimson brocade morning-gown. He threw himself into a chair in instant assumption of the rôle of invalid, which rôle, his instinct told him, he had best play with finish.

When, in his worldly wisdom, he looked towards Philida to suggest a mode of action, or to provide her with a cue to follow, he was reproached by the pure, glad simplicity of her face. She was welcoming the duchess. The burden of her anxiety for him and her sole responsibility in his need had weighed upon her heavily.

At this instant her Grace of Croome struck the room like a whirlwind. With her great sweeping skirts and her high headdress she was a formidable figure under any circumstances, but now, magnified by her wrath, she was a power to reckon with.

Behind her came the slight, elegant form of Horace Walpole, his attitude breathing discretion; his eyes beseeching pardon; and his manner deprecating his participation in this scene upon which, nevertheless, he would soon be composing witty comments.

The sight of the duchess and her entirely justifiable

anger brought Yerington to his feet. The storm of her indignation blew out the flickering flame of his invalidism by its honest violence. He had been wrong in keeping Philida, and he rose now to acknowledge it like a man.

"Can I believe my eyes?" gasped the duchess. "Here she is, Horry. Here she is, in the very house which, if she had a grain of pride or spirit, to say nothing of prudence, she'd avoid as if it contained the pest. And you, sir, what have you to say?" turning sharply to Yerington.

Philida had stood dumfounded, hurt, and amazed at her aunt's words. The sense of her impudence in coming there, which for a moment had overwhelmed her, had been forgotten amid her anxiety for him. Now, as the duchess turned and challenged Yerington, she ran to her in an involuntary impulse of defence.

"Nay, madam," she entreated, "do not reproach him. I am all to blame."

"Indeed and indeed!" replied the duchess. "I'll have you know, you little minx, I'll reproach whom it pleases me. Where learned you your manners, my lady? Not in my house, I'll warrant you. To run away at dead of night to the man who'd cheated you, and flouted you, and made you the laughing-stock of London. Now, must you throw your good name after the rest? You—you—I've no words to tell you what I think. Horace Walpole, be a man for once in your life and tell her what she's doing."

Mr. Walpole shrugged conciliating, expressive shoulders. He knew he held only the position of talking-post to the aggravated duchess, and that words were the last assistance she desired.

"Oh!" she cried, wringing her hands in genuine distress, and unselfish concern for Philida, while she berated her, "you brainless doll, you simpleton, you dolt!

This comes of your having your own way. Think you that London is like a green field of daisies, this hour like midday, and such rakes as Yerington as harmless as sheep? Oh, Lord, Lord,—and 'tis partly my fault, too."

The cry with which she ended, with a break in her voice that was near to tears, touched Yerington.

Philida was standing in the middle of the room, a trace of pride appearing above her dismay. Wrong she had been and she was prepared for penitence, one kind word would have sent her sobbing to her aunt's shoulder, but this excess of reproach she could not understand.

"Believe me, your grace," said Yerington, "you may comfort yourself. My fortunes are at ebb, and my honour has a blot upon it too dark and recent to require the prick of mention to present it to your memory; but a trusting, noble innocence I still can recognise and reverence."

"This is all very well," answered the duchess, "but her coming here is known."

"Only to two servants I can trust," he answered gravely.

"But what of the chairmen?"

"They were my own men," said Philida, "Jones and Watson."

The duchess gave a relieved sigh at the names, for she knew they worshipped Philida and could be relied upon.

"Well, fortune favours fools," she said. "Be on with your cloak, Philida, and let us go. But how came it that she stayed so long?"

Her eyes challenged Yerington's with renewed suspicion.

For the third time since her coming, Philida resumed her cloak. As she did so her eyes were so filled with tears that the room shone mistily through them. She was striving to suppress her sobs, and was glad to turn her back

upon Lord Yerington, for she feared that he would perceive her distress. She was going away and there had been no explanation. A hope had dawned in her heart that if he would but speak, something he could say would give the present case a better complexion. Once she left she feared there would not again be an opportunity for explanation.

Lord Yerington did not immediately reply to the duchess' question. The thought of his approaching separation from Philida crowded every other consideration from his mind. A moment later, by an effort, he withdrew his eyes from her face and schooled himself to her defence.

"Your niece hath played good Samaritan," he said. "The bandages upon this trifling wound of mine had become disarranged. I scarce gave heed to them, but it seems I lost much blood and fainted. But for her, and her merciful assistance, I might have slipped easily out of an awkward position."

Traces of his mental suffering appeared upon his face. For an instant the duchess pitied him, but she forced this back from open expression. Her worldly-mindedness and, above all, her dread of ridicule outweighed her kindly impulse. Yerington's poverty she might have forgiven, but his trick, as she saw it, she would not.

"You've made a bad mess of your life, Harry," she said, studying him with a not unfriendly glance. "I'm not blaming you, but you've done it. Now, I put it to your honour to leave this child alone. She does not realise what all this means, but you do; I do. You will not interfere, you promise me?"

He drew himself up, careless of the bound shoulder. But before he could speak Philida had darted past him.

"Oh, aunt," she cried, "I beseech you to say nothing unkind."

One look at the girl's face hardened the duchess. The danger was obvious. She determined to rouse Yerington's pride and to obtain his promise.

"Silence, you baby," she said to Philida. "As for you, Yerington, there's no such useless lumber in the realm as a peer without estates. I'd spare you, if I could, but truth is truth."

Lord Yerington steadied himself with an effort. All his pride was in arms, but for the moment he could not give it voice.

"Upon my life," interposed Walpole at the sight of his friend's face, "why do we never prate of truth until we have something disagreeable to say? Yerington is ill; has been wounded."

The duchess was not to be gainsaid.

"I am thinking of Philida," she persisted. "If you married her, Yerington, you would be but a pensioner upon her bounty."

He smiled faintly.

"Madam," he said, articulating with difficulty, "Fate had trumped my last trick before I ever ventured upon this disastrous voyage. Your niece need fear no persecution from me."

A faint little cry followed this assertion, after which came the sound of suppressed weeping. Philida had been tried beyond her strength.

"Oh, aunt," she cried and, striving to hide her face in her shoulder, "take me away, take me away from here."

Yerington did not glance up. He hoped dully that, when he did so, the girl whom he loved would no longer be there. Each succeeding moment had increased his misery. But he roused himself to discover that Walpole had stolen to the door and that the duchess was watching him with an alert expression, over her niece's

head. One of his hands was uplifted in warning, his eyes were sparkling and there was a whimsical smile upon his lips.

"Friends," he whispered, "a strange commotion is without. It sounds a second Thermopylæ and that Sutter holds the staircase against a host."

His amused smile deepened within the limits of 'discretion' at the sight of the duchess' dismay. Involuntarily she swept Philida into her protecting embrace.

Yerington felt real alarm. He realised that the room had but one door and that Philida's presence there was compromising.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the duchess, "we must not be discovered here."

She cast a despairing glance around.

"I fear Sutter yields," whispered Walpole.

He was enjoying the situation and its possibilities. He had recognised a voice.

"Perhaps the screen will serve," suggested Yerington.

With amazing agility, the duchess disappeared behind it, pushing Philida before her.

"Shall I stay?" asked Walpole.

Yerington reflected a moment. Amid the raised tones of the altercation without, he, too, had heard a voice he knew.

"No, I thank you sincerely, Walpole," he answered, his brows knit. "I prithee, join the duchess."

"A whisper will summon me," answered Walpole, and he vanished with alacrity.

At this moment Sutter entered precipitately. It would appear that he had had an opportunity to display his favourite art of self-defence, for his livery was disarranged, and his wig awry above his excited face. He sought to hold the door against somebody who was trying to force his way in.

"I've done my best, your lordship," he gasped.

There was another violent effort from without. Sutter yielded to the impact.

Into the room tumbled a confused tangle of scarlet coat, white leggings and striped yellow and black. Gradually, amid the upheaval, Yerington distinguished the figure of his friend Captain Elliot, who, with vengeful face and set lips, was struggling with the waspishly clad Mr. Mansur. Slowly, with ruthless determination he overcame him and, bringing him to his feet, he pinned him to the panelling, a strong hand wound into the wine-stained ruffles of his neck-cloth.

He had a spare moment now to turn a quick, observant eye over his shoulder upon Yerington, who was standing an amazed spectator of the scene.

"Sound, Harry?" he asked.

"As a trivet," responded the earl, who, indeed, for the moment, had utterly forgotten his wounded shoulder.

"Good," returned Elliot. "Quiet, you dog," as Mansur made a renewed struggle; and the neck-cloth was twisted tighter.

Elliot had lost his wig, and his crisp, auburn curls stood erect upon his head like the hair along the spine of an angry dog. His strong teeth were revealed in a smile half savage, half triumphant. The military full-dress in which he had attended the King, was disarranged, and a jagged tear on the right shoulder revealed the shirt beneath.

Mr. Mansur leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. His hair, grey-powdered for last night's ball, was about his ears.

He had been as much overcome by his own ill-considered rage, and the wine to which he was not addicted, but to which he had turned in his hopelessness, as he had

been by any superior strength of the Captain's. He now appeared, blustering and brutal, the intellectual quality of his face for the moment in total eclipse.

"I've brought the fox to earth," said Elliot vindictively. "To heel, to heel," as Mansur struggled again. "No more tricks."

Yerington's thoughts flew to Philida, and he was inwardly fuming at this scene, which threatened disclosure. He felt a friend's privilege of annoyance.

"Take your fox hence," he said curtly. "I've no appetite for him or his kind, now."

Impelled by a double desire to conserve his strength, and keep the screen beyond the field of the encounter, he seated himself before it.

Captain Elliot's only response was a low laugh.

He was making an investigation of Mr. Mansur's clothing.

"Slowly, slowly," he warned, "let me draw your poison, my pretty fellow, *mon petit maître*. Gad, there you are, Yerington."

Something slid into the centre of the room, spinning over the polished boards, and then lay shining, the fire-light dyeing it to a false, bloody crimson.

A low cry, instantly smothered, came from behind the screen.

"A dagger and unsheathed, 'fore George," commented Captain Elliot, grimly. "Your body, Yerington, was to mend that lack."

Mansur's last pretence was gone. He lay back, glaring hungrily at the knife.

Yerington's lip curled contemptuously. He was unmoved by the incident, beyond a faint stirring of a satiric humour that Mansur had designed to wound him where alone he now was vulnerable, in striving to steal from him the only asset he possessed with which he could pay

his last debt of honour, and he disliked that the knowledge of the meditated crime should disturb Philida.

Thinking of the waiting women he spoke sharply:

"Why soil your hands with this fellow? Let the servants return him to the gutter whence he crawled."

A growl of fierce anger burst from Mansur.

"Coward!" he shouted, "coward!"

Yerington lightly wiped his lips to conceal an involuntary expression of dismay. Above all things he wished for the present to keep knowledge of that wager from those women in hiding.

"Gad's life, Hugh," he urged, "out with this fellow! Why parley?"

A look of concentrated attention had appeared in Captain Elliot's face. His ears were marvellously acute, trained in long, patient marches against lurking Indian foes. He had heard the faint cry and something more. He had detected the silken rustle of women's skirts. His keen eyes now perceived, in an angle of the panelled wall, a shining whiteness reflected, for which the furnishing of the room did not account, and a blot of glowing crimson. As he saw it, he recalled the swish of a gown of that tint, one fête evening as the duchess had swept down her withdrawing-room.

There was the gleam of a new resolve in his face as he turned again to Mansur. Once for all, he told himself, he must clear away the ground.

Not for an instant since the news of the strange duel had reached him in Buckingham Palace, had the thought of the wager been out of his mind. He had been cold with fear for Yerington as he had bounded up the steps of Grangely House. Coming on Mansur lurking there in the shadows had for the moment turned his thoughts into another channel.

With Yerington lying back in his chair, white, and

obviously much exhausted, and Mansur's wine-tainted breath upon his cheek, he reviewed his facts and his suspicions and resolved upon his course.

"So you add murder to your other gifts," he said tauntingly, to gain time.

"Put him out, man, put him out," urged Yerington, his thoughts full of Philida and fearing Mansur's next words.

With a quick movement, Elliot flung the man he had been holding, from him. Mansur fell into a chair which his impetus sent wheeling across the floor, to fetch up with a jerk against the wainscot.

He sputtered out an oath and half rose. Then a new thought caused him to change his purpose. He sank into the chair again, affecting an attitude of impudent ease. Lolling back in it, his legs crossed, the obvious moral *abandon* of the whole man was emphasised. He turned tauntingly to Yerington and looked him over deliberately with a sneer.

"What a ghost you would make," he said, the words coming thickly, "what a jolly old haunt! The colour of Stilton cheese, damme. Had that meddling Darlington not knocked up my arm, I'd have spitted you smartly."

Elliot listened, his face alert. At the last words he smiled slightly. Mansur had reached the point for which he had been wishing. When, therefore, Yerington sought to struggle wrathfully to his feet, he pushed him back into his chair—no difficult task, in his weakened condition.

"Old man," he said, below his breath, "in Heaven's name let me play your hand for you this once. Trust me, will you?"

"But you don't know," began Yerington, exasperated.

"I do know," said Elliot, with a glance full of meaning.

Yerington, but half convinced, shot a look toward the screen that gave Elliot the exact assurance he was needing.

"But——"

"Trust me."

There was no mistaking the shrewdness of his expression, nor its sincerity.

Perforce Yerington yielded. He realised that Hugh knew that others were present, though the devil only could tell how he had guessed. He must resign the helm to him. He had no hint of his intentions; but he knew that his loyalty, his native resource and his caution were beyond question. He sat motionless, with knit brows, girding inwardly at the physical weakness that held him at this disadvantage, while his honour and the good opinion of the woman of his heart hung in the balance.

Mansur was settling his neck-cloth and rearranging his hair, affecting a nonchalance contradicted by the furtive glances he cast about him. His mouth, an infallible index to the mind, hung loosely in his abandonment of long-sustained control.

Over him hovered the Captain like a scarlet-coated gadfly, his short cropped head intensifying his appearance of rooted aggressiveness, smilingly intent on baiting him.

"So we finished your game, good butcher," he said.

Mansur started as though a whip-lash had curled about his shoulders. The next instant he sought to conceal the movement by withdrawing his snuff-box and taking a pinch of the mixture. A trickle of the snuff escaped from his unsteady fingers and filtered down upon his ruffles.

"Mayhap," he drawled, though his voice was hoarse. "We're boon companions in misfortune, Yerington and I. My game is up on this side, but France awaits me, *la*

belle France! But," he leaned forward, his face transformed with spite, "I finished your game first, my pretty lordling."

Elliot warned Yerington's vehement anger to silence with a glance.

"How foolishly extravagant," he mocked from where he sat upon the table, one white-clad leg swinging, "to throw away your hard-won position in the world, your entrée at White's, your friendship for Lord Yerington——"

Mansur leaned forward, his hands upon the arms of his chair, his face expressing all the concentrated hatred of years.

"Extravagant," he said between his teeth, "to-night's work would be cheaply bought with a life. We are told that love is sweet." At this phrase, a new expression appeared for a moment on his face, as if, in his anger, he had stumbled inadvertently upon a forbidden thought; but next moment he continued, raising his tone, as if in contradiction to an inward voice. "No, hatred is sweet, but revenge sweetest of all."

"Yet in all of these, revenge and love, the patrician won," said Elliot, softly.

Mansur flung up his head.

"No," he flamed.

"I'll not have her dragged into this," exclaimed Yerington, anticipating what might follow, and livid with wrath.

Elliot was beside him in a trice.

"Harry," he said, "leave this to me—if, you love her."

But Mansur had heard Yerington's protest.

"So that hurts Lord Pauper," he jeered.

Elliot could hear his friend's heavy breathing as he struggled to restrain himself.

"'Tis of her I came to speak," continued Mansur hoarsely, "and her, and her, and her. I'll show you how clearly I read you from the first."

"Let him go on," whispered Elliot, urgently.

"I had lost you your fortune, ruined you, and then flung you away like a dried husk, confiding fool," the words tumbling over one another. "You determined on revenge. You knew or thought you knew that I loved the Lady Philida. You resolved to win her and wound me there. A pretty trick for a gentleman; but then you had not led the life that lent value in your eyes, to a trifle like a woman's heart."

"Silence!" shouted Yerington. "Curse you, Hugh, unloose me!"

"Prithee, patience, my lord," sneered Mansur. "There's humour in his next turn, for the Lady Philida, it seems, had won your rakish heart, while persisting in her disguise of Fleet Street. Lal you Gowers are monstrous romantic. It is a bad habit, and leads to much diluting of blue blood."

"Fool, he's trapping himself," whispered the Captain, restrainingly.

"The end, the end is coming," cried Mansur, exultingly, hastening his narrative. "You went to Marsden House, intent on Lady Philida, and revenge. La, la," casting up his eyes, "what a shattering of pretty pastorals! She had deceived you, and you were so immaculate yourself! You had been so passionately enamoured of this country girl and her simplicity, that you lost faith. You thought her no better than the rest, and it was so easy for you to condemn, having yourself no cause to ask forgiveness of your lady-love on one head or another. What a page for the Gower annals! What a record for the last of his line!"

He threw up his hands in affected dismay.

"But I forgot your wager-breaking. Perhaps, after all, not the last of his line."

Elliot's face had grown keener as Mansur had spoken; at whose last word Yerington had renewed his infuriated struggle to regain his feet. Elliot's controlling desire now was that at all odds Mansur should not be interrupted. He forgot Yerington's wounded shoulder in this thought, pressing a heavy hand upon it. It wrung a sharp twinge of agony from the wound and turned Yerington faint so that Mansur's next words reached him through a haze of pain.

"True, true," assented Captain Elliot, his concentrated eyes upon Mansur's face, "an odd wager that, and odder still the fact that your ruin of my Lord of Yerington followed so hard upon the night that he bet his life away if he lost his fortune."

Again the rustle behind the screen.

"And," went on Captain Elliot, "you knew of the bet, and you saw to it that the fortune was lost. It smacks to me of a conspiracy."

Mansur's response was a laugh.

"So he is seeking to saddle it all upon a conspiracy," he said, rubbing one hand upon the other, over his knee. "I in a conspiracy, with the slow-witted, addle-pated Burroughs!" He repeated this last phrase with relish, then turned to Yerington with an insulting expression of surprise. "But I was deceived! Well as I know this gentleman, I thought better of him than he deserved. I never doubted that he would pay the life he staked so lightly. But he had found a pretty crutch for his fallen fortunes."

The words carried intelligence tardily to Yerington's still pain-dazed mind, but Elliot saw his face begin to darken ominously and he spoke with haste.

"No conspiracy, then," he said; "a mere coincidence."

There was a bite in his tone that roused an uneasiness in Mansur, and so increased his bluster.

"Not all coincidence," he bullied; "I had planned to ruin him. After the wager it was more complete,—that's all. We've long memories, we butchers' sons. Strike us and we sting."

He was standing now, swaying slightly.

"My compliments, gentlemen," he bowed with an elaborate flourish. "Time presses and I have other business toward. I leave you, Captain Elliot, in possession of a dear and valued friend. I leave you, my Lord of Yerington, in possession of a dear and valued life."

Elliot barred his way with a bow as deep as his own.

"A moment, my good butcher," he said.

Mansur's face lowered.

"Give way," he demanded.

"With pleasure, after I've finished with you," returned Elliot, "and we'll see to it that the apartment is well aired, for I can smell a traitor as far as France. But now, for this despised Burroughs,—you did not choose that conspirator with your usual judgment. You deny conspirator. Well, partner,—what you will. A little thoughtless, was it not, to select a man who loved a woman, who in her turned loved Yerington?"

Mansur staggered back with an exclamation.

"Just so," returned Elliot smoothly. "It was written that Lord Burroughs would tell her all he knew; and next, trust a woman's hatred as little as her love. Each will weaken on a strain, and the situation was romantic. Was it like she would not speak when she knew what was at stake?"

The blood flooded to Mansur's face and, retreating, left him deathly pale. In an instant he recovered.

"Vapouring," he said, with a snap of his fingers.

Again Captain Elliot stepped before him.

"Did it happen, Mr. Mansur," he said, "as you lurked in the shadows with your dagger, that you chanced to glance toward my chariot,—you did not? Ah! then you failed to perceive a lady within it."

Mansur started, then controlled himself, and lifted an eyebrow of evil insinuation.

"A lady? I've no wish to pry into your secrets, Captain Elliot."

"A lady," repeated the Captain with increased meaning. "Lady Caroline Dashwood."

Mansur's eyelids flickered.

"And Lord Burroughs' confidante!"

A moment longer Mansur sustained his gaze before he burst out:

"The fool, the babbling fool!"

Captain Elliot stroked his shaven upper lip.

"Very thoughtless, Mr. Mansur. Addle-pated, slow-witted Burroughs!"

"Damn the man," sputtered Mansur.

"Best have her ladyship in," said Elliot, making a step toward the door, "to furnish us a few particulars."

"The hussy, not for me," ejaculated Mansur, "unless my Lord Yerington——"

Seeing the drift of his friend's intentions, Yerington met Mansur's insinuating glance with one of ignoring aloofness. Mansur felt the sting of it. He cast a dark look at him, and then his glance stole to where the dagger lay upon the hearth. There were white dents in his nostrils.

"The devil himself cries quits against a woman," he said hoarsely. "As for this Lady Caroline——"

Yerington would be constrained no longer.

"I'll not be cleared at that price," he declared, interrupting the threatened flood of abuse.

Mansur turned on him. "This pretty peer needs

friends and enemies, fair ladies and foul ones, to get him from the pits he digs for himself," he said.

Yerington averted his eyes from him, 'disgust in every line of his figure. His disdain pricked Mansur to a further expression.

"Yes, we pidgeoned you, Burroughs and I," he jeered triumphantly. "He, because he hated you for Lady Caroline's sake, and I—you know why. We planned this wager over our wine in a corner of The Thatched House tavern, and under the noses of a dozen of your cronies. But faith, we might have saved ourselves the trouble," he ended insolently, "for you hadn't the courage nor the honour to carry it out."

Captain Elliot stepped forward and lifted the pistol which he had long since despoiled, from where it lay behind a group of books upon the escritoire.

"Yerington," he spoke gravely, "he has said too much. Were you about to use this?"

Yerington looked levelly back at him.

"I'll not protest to him," he replied, contemptuously.

"Weren't we just in time?" persisted Elliot.

"No," said Yerington, gruffly.

"Was—some one else just in time?"

A stubborn contradiction was hovering on the tip of Yerington's tongue, when a faint sound from behind the screen arrested him. Hearing it, he could not lie.

"Yes," he answered, below his breath.

Elliot turned upon Mansur, and replaced the pistol upon the desk.

"You're answered," he said, "and we've no further need of you. You have confessed to the conspiracy, and the matter is ended. It is scarcely necessary to add that the wager has ceased to exist."

Mansur still had a sneer.

"Admirable, admirable!" he exclaimed, poising upon

his red-heeled shoes with a reassumption of his old rôle of dandy. "What a blessed thing it is to have friends! Let me tell you, Captain Elliot, that your word is as thistledown. A conspiracy, say you? Yes, a most palpable conspiracy, say I, 'twixt Lord Yerington and Captain Elliot to clear a coward. Who is to prove that I have confessed? Where are your witnesses?"

He jerked about at the sound of a step to face a dapper little gentleman in grey brocade, his *chapeau bras* beneath his arm, who came mincing toward him.

"Did you mention me, Elliot? I am quite at your service, my dear fellow. As for you, Yerington," he put out his hand, his face full of the emotion he so seldom betrayed, "I confess I misjudged you. Permit me to offer my apologies."

Yerington read Mr. Walpole's expression. He knew that this intellectual dilettante, this dandy whose code it was to trifle away his life and turn all serious things to epigrams, had been sitting in judgment upon him. He had doubted his courage and good faith.

The thought had power to bring the blood to Yerington's cheek, but he grasped the extended hand with his almost invariable impulse of toleration.

Mr. Mansur contrived to force a laugh.

"On my life you work your puppets well," he said, inspecting Mr. Walpole through his quizzing-glass. "Prithee, who will you produce next, my good Master Journeyman?"

This invitation was too much for the discretion of her Grace of Croome. She came sweeping into view, her face sparkling with championship of the man she had recently dismissed so summarily.

"Get this fellow out, Yerington," she demanded. "Lud, he hoodwinked me, me, Mary Wentworth," she cried, towering with indignation and lapsing uncon-

sciously into her maiden name. "There's the shame of it. He hoodwinked me!"

Mr. Mansur threw up his hands with an expression of admiration.

"Good Master Journeyman, what a collection!" he cried, affectedly. "Spud me! what a collection. Somewhat old, and a little frayed; but damned natural."

Before they could anticipate him, he darted forward, and taking a fold of the screen, threw it back against the wall.

There stood Philida.

She was irresistible in her white dress, with her hands clasped before her, blushing with confusion, and yet glowing with joy that the shadow that had lain between her and her love, had been dissipated. She was too moved for more than a moment of self-consciousness. Her glance flew to Yerington and rested upon him.

He watched her, all his heart in his eyes. How unutterably lovely she was! How wholly to be desired! A clutch came in his throat as he remembered the duchess' dividing words.

With a cry Mansur staggered back. He had torn wide the but half-seared wound in his own heart. Jealousy raged through him. He put up a hand and pulled at his neck-cloth. He looked round at them all, and last at Philida. His lips were dry.

"My congratulations, Master Journeyman," he said, struggling to speak lightly. "Your little play is complete. Wounded lover, anxious aunt, faithful friends—and now the heroine herself. What a *coup de theatre*! Vastly amusing, on my life! Methinks 'tis time the villain took himself off."

He drew himself up, but despite his control, his mouth twisted. He took a step toward the door, a second, then he wavered. The influence Philida exercised al-

most overcame his pride and his anger. He half turned toward her, as if a power outside himself drew him. Then with a low exclamation, he took a new hold on himself.

He walked stiffly to the door, opened it and disappeared.

turned
him.
old on
disap-

CHAPTER XLII

DISENTANGLED

I care not whose the beauties
Of all the world may be,
For Philida—for Philida
Is all the world to me!
—AUSTIN DOBSON.

THEY all stood listening mechanically, held as by an evil presence, until the heavy slamming of a distant door told them that Mr. Mansur had gone out of their lives.

At the sound Philida gave a little cry. Like a homing dove she flew to Yerington. Her happiness and relief had wiped the consciousness of witnesses completely from her mind. She was trembling with gladness and with the sting of the knowledge of what might have been.

Yerington felt all the eloquence of her clinging hands. For the first time she had turned to him in voluntary surrender and his love went out to her in a flood of tenderness, the deeper that it overlay a sadness so profound.

"Useless lumber," the duchess had called him, and useless lumber he felt himself to be.

He stood motionless, an arm about Philida, whose head was pillowed on his breast. His eyes met the duchess' and they were filled with humility and pride. He had not sought this. How was he to put it coldly from him?

But her Grace of Croome was alive again. She cast no reproaches at Philida nor the embracing arm. She had incorporated them into her scheme of things with

bewildering completeness. She was occupied with her own line of thought and she swept up and down the room crimson with indignation.

"Lud! lud! I can't get over it," she cried. "We've danced for that *canaille*. We were mere puppets, and he has pulled the string. We've danced for him; and you're the worst of all, Yerington," she turned with abrupt accusation to the earl, her *fontange* trembling in the tempest of her emotion.

The words reached Philida and she was moved to almost instinctive defence. On the instant she assumed the rôle she was to play through life.

"My lord," she said, "hath erred, mayhap, through too much faith in others. His own heart is not a trustful guide, being 'too little given to suspecting evil." Her fear for what was past, suddenly overflowed. "But, oh! my lord, henceforth guard thy dear life for my sake."

Her eyes were upon him, her head back-tilted in her earnest of reply and reassurance. Her re-established faith in him had blotted from her mind all that her aunt had spoken earlier in the interview.

Yerington looked down into her face, his own filled with a shadow of self-condemnation to which her faith in him had added the last touch.

The duchess noted his sadness and she felt a pang of conscience. She approached and laid a gentle hand upon his bandaged shoulder.

"Harry," she said, "unless you learn to value my words more justly, the future will scarce be without its jars. You have been abominably used. Not without fault, but more sinned against than sinning. I'll not gainsay you:—the little maid is yours."

His continued silence awakened a touch of surprised shyness in the girl he held in his arms. For the first

time the blush crept into her cheeks and she felt a pained consciousness of the group about her. Like a bird she fluttered back from him.

As he felt her shrinking, a spasm crossed his face. He did not yield to her movement, but held her close. Looking up, she grew conscious of his set lips and introspective eyes.

"Lud!" exclaimed the duchess, irritable because she felt an added twinge of self-reproach. "I spoke hastily, I admit, but why not let bygones be bygones? Philida's fortune is more than enough for you both. I know your race and your mending qualities or I never would have entrusted the child to you. Forswear gambling and take to politics. You have brains if you would but use them."

Yerington's feeling was too deep to be dissipated by a few phrases.

"La!" persisted the duchess sharply. "Every dun-derhead knows 'tis the duty of a man of long line to marry money. If I had a younger son, and he did not go heiress-hunting, I would disown him."

Over Philida's head Yerington's gaze sought out and met Elliot's. At that moment he wanted a man's deeper comprehension. Their glances crossed, and Elliot understood.

He knew that Yerington was drinking deep of the waters of humiliation, and that, though they were bitter, they were wholesome.

The knowledge he was facing seared deep into Yerington's soul. But that moment of profound discouragement held within it the germ of regeneration. It was the ebb-tide of self-complacency, when the waters of false ideals had receded and left the bare rocks of his history stark and ugly, for his disillusioned soul to read in all their nakedness.

He turned from Elliot to Philida, his eyes heavy with self-accusation, to find her face aquiver and aglow.

"I know, I know," she whispered eagerly, "we shall go on together, you and I. I'll share it all with you."

Her beautiful faith and love overcame him. He bowed his head over her.

"My love, my love," he whispered brokenly.

A thousand hopes and promises rushed to his lips; but he could not utter them.

He could only hold her close.

A jealous pang shot through the duchess. She turned and met Captain Elliot's kindly, penetrating gaze, and she responded to it with a brave smile, though her eyes were moist.

"They don't need us, Captain," she said. "We'd best find employment for ourselves. What of this Lady Caroline, cooling her heels in your chariot? I've little love for her, but she has done us a good turn at last, the minx; it's ill courtesy to leave her longer."

Captain Elliot became preternaturally grave.

"'Pon honour," he said, "this Lady Caroline has ways of her own, and 'tis like she is whisked away like the fairy godmother in the tale, now that she has waved her wand."

"Lud!" exclaimed the duchess, "not at this hour! She is too careful of her reputation."

She could not resist the thrust.

Captain Elliot permitted himself the luxury of a twinkle.

"But she had her robe of invisibility with her," he said.

Something in his tone roused his hearer's suspicions.

"You don't mean to say," she questioned sharply, "that she never had been there?"

"I do, precisely, ma'am," he responded, with a low bow.

It was a trick after the duchess' own heart. She threw herself in a chair with a choke of laughter, to wipe her eyes and laugh again.

Walpole's joy was as profound as her own.

"Gad's life," he exclaimed, with keen relish. "Lady Caroline to play down centre, and not be able to ogle her audience."

"Lud!" gasped the duchess, "my lacings will sure crack this time. Mark you, Horry, there was the canny Scot, if you will. He took Mansur's ace with a deuce, and the hussy never knew he had used her. What a rare tale! How can I pay you for it?"

The Captain spoke below his breath.

"Say a good word for me, to Mistress Armytage," he murmured.

THE END

