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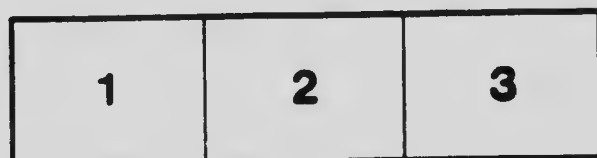
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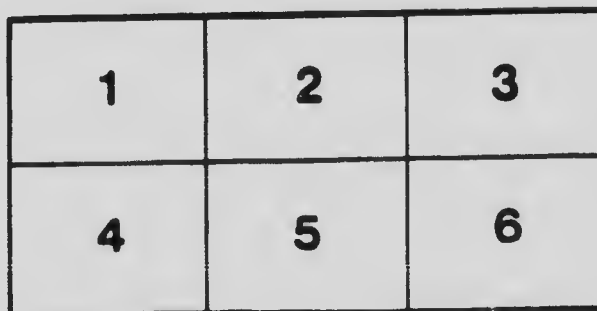
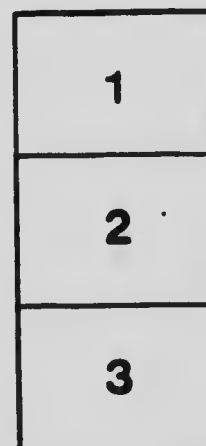
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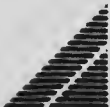
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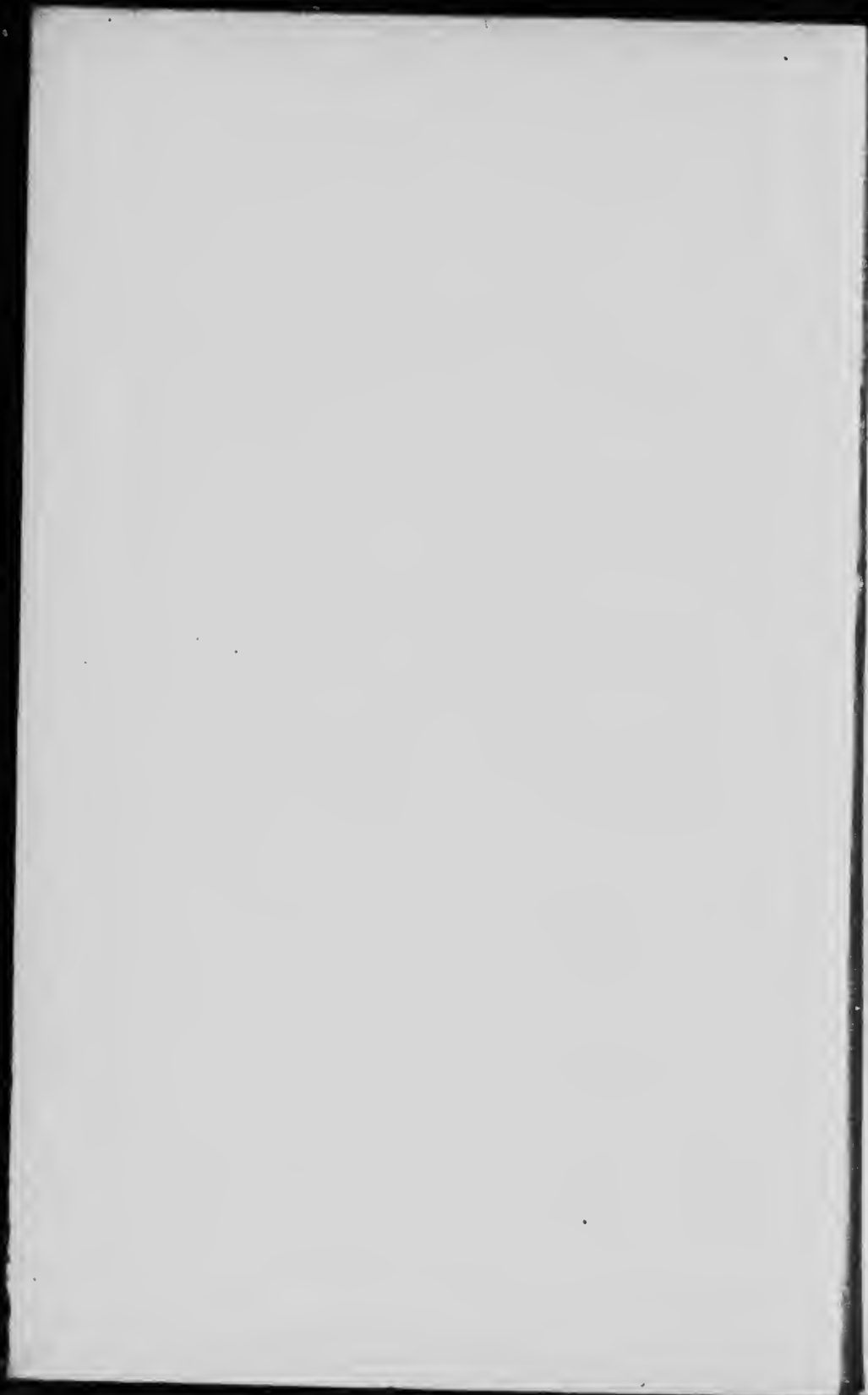


THE  
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WOMAN CAMPBELL, PRATED

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**THE MYSTERY WOMAN**

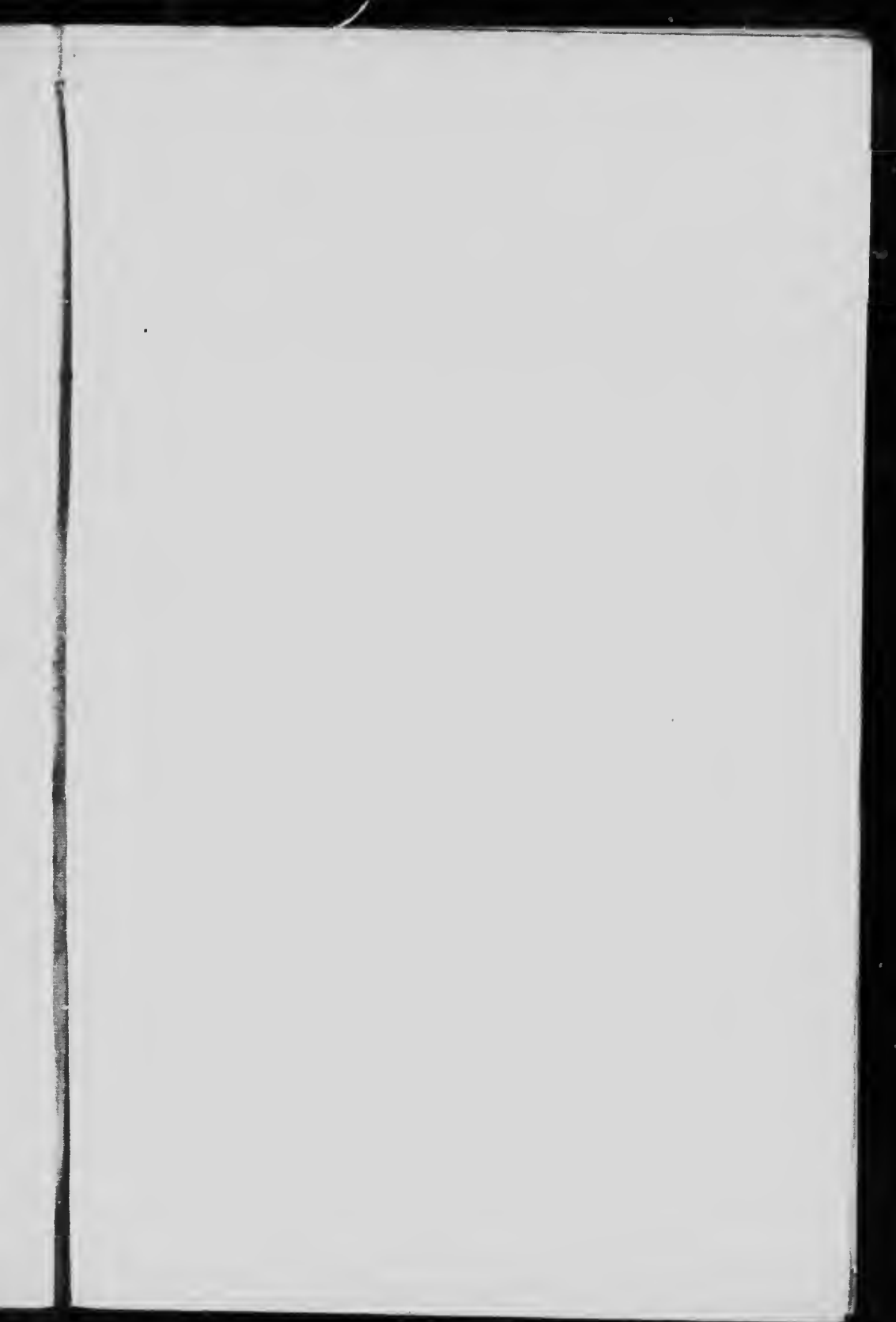
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THE WOMAN WHO WAS BURNED AT THE STAKE







# THE MYSTERY WOMAN

BY  
MRS. CAMPBELL PRAED

WITH A FRONTISPIECE IN COLOUR BY  
DUDLEY TENNANT

CASSELL AND COMPANY, LTD  
London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne  
1913

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# THE MYSTERY WOMAN

## CHAPTER I

It was the first day of January in the year 1901. The Honourable Mrs. James Lascene was at home, a fact more important to the lady herself than to that section of society in which, by right of marriage, Everil Lascene was entitled to hold an insignificant place. On toleration indeed, for the old Chaunterells were by no means pleased at their son's choice. With twelve hundred a year and an ancient name, they thought that he might have done better than to unite himself with the penniless daughter of a retired colonel. They only consoled themselves in reflecting that after all he might have married an actress or a barmaid. Therefore Lord and Lady Chaunterell extended a formal civility to their daughter-in-law, and Mrs. James managed to make considerable capital out of the fortnight in early September when she and her husband were bidden to shoot partridges before the annual migration of the elders to the Riviera.

James Lascene, a stupid, little, narrow-shouldered ex-lancer, was the youngest son of the Earl of Chaunterell. He had two elder brothers. Lord Palache, the heir, was unmarried and a doomed consumptive, existing with only three-quarters of a lung, for the best part of the year in the Chaunterell villa at Mentone. Horace, the second son, had from youth shown a dare-devil disposition, and

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as he was addicted to hunting big game in the unhealthiest parts of the world, James Lascene had been considered to stand a good chance of inheriting the family honours. But some eighteen months back, Horace had met in Java, and had subsequently married—much to Mrs. James's dismay—Lady Ethel Bargrave.

That her husband, and, after him, her son, should inherit the title was the height of Mrs. James Lascene's ambition. Horace's marriage interfered considerably with her hope of one day becoming Countess of Chaunterell. However, Everil Lascene was a wise young woman in her generation. She promptly made friends with her sister-in-law, and Lady Ethel, who was a kind-hearted creature, sometimes graced with her presence the James Lascenes' entertainments. This particular one celebrated the seventh anniversary of their wedding, which had taken place on New Year's Day, and its double significance was made the occasion for a rain of small gifts—odd bits of silver, Battersea boxes, markers for bridge and such like, which were exhibited on a table at the end of the back drawing-room.

The James Lascenes lived in South Kensington, in one of that collection of fairly modern and commodious houses known as Chaunterell Gardens, the ground rents of which swelled the Chaunterell revenues. It was on account of the name that Mrs. James had chosen to live here. There was a certain fitness in it, she remarked, and besides, though Chaunterell Gardens lay rather far from the centre of things, it really suited them, Mrs. James explained, much better than a poky house in Mayfair, for with so large a circle of acquaintance, and an income which did not admit of dinner parties, it

was necessary to have space sufficient for a periodical crush.

Mrs. James Lascene was a clever woman and an admirable manager. She made the most of her advantages, though in the process she rendered herself a terror to her connections by marriage through her pertinacious pestering for introductions and invitations.

On this occasion the house was crowded. An imposing row of carriages lined the street, and within, a throng of well-dressed people surged in the tea-room, up and down the stairs, and in the long double drawing-room. Every moment new arrivals were being announced by the butler, assisted by a man-servant engaged for the afternoon. The hostess, backed by her little husband, whom she almost eclipsed as he hung sheepishly in the rear, stood on the wide landing receiving her guests. Her manner was elaborately gracious, and she greeted each comer with a nice appreciation of social distinctions. An elegant-looking woman—tall and slight, with rather a large nose—she was beautifully dressed in deep crimson bordered with silver fox, and wore some fine diamonds and a spray of costly carnations.

Mrs. James Lascene knew the value of natural decorations, and did not mind paying for them when she could not obtain them by other means. To-day there were flowers everywhere, and the first exclamation of visitors coming from the wintry outside air into the soft scented atmosphere was "Oh, what lovely flowers!" Whereat Mrs. Lascene would expatiate in the prettiest manner possible upon the kindness of "dear Lady Chaunterell," who had not only given orders for special hampers from the "Towers," but had sent "big branches of

mimosa and *armfuls* of carnations and anemones from Mentone."

Lady Ethel Lascene, scaling the stairs and overhearing the accentuated formula, smiled humorously to herself. She was a great, stately creature who looked like the Venus of Milo brought up in a hunting county, and condemned by the exigencies of modern civilisation and the rigour of the English climate to wear velvet and sables. As the butler announced her, there was a movement of heads in her direction. After greetings and congratulations, she took from her muff a bejewelled chatelaine in enamel work, and presented it to her sister-in-law.

"I'd have sent it, but the wretched people only brought it as I was leaving. I hope you'll like it. Horace got the turquoises in India, and the enamel is mine. If it's to be on view, tell me where I'm to put it. I've got a card, if you like to say who it's from."

Lady Ethel laughed with mischievous intent, while Mrs. James went into modulated ecstasies over the turquoises and enamel, and bade her husband take his sister-in-law to the back drawing-room, where the presents were laid.

"And then," she added, "you must go and see the palmist. She is in my *bovdoir*. Mrs. Raine tells me she's really good."

Lady Ethel smiled and nodded, and passed on, looking statelier than ever beside her shrimp of a brother-in-law. All the Lascenes were short men, and they mostly fancied tall women.

"I couldn't get Horace to come," she said—"not even on Cabby's invitation." Her eyes went peeringly round the room. "By the way, where's Cabby?"

"He's shut up somewhere, I expect," said the Honourable James, who stuttered slightly. "Everil doesn't approve of having children about; and I agree with her."

"Of course," said Lady Ethel, whose glance at her brother-in-law was quizzical. "Well, I left Horace glooming over the war, and cursing me because I couldn't see the necessity for his volunteering. I told him that he only wanted another excuse to get out of England, but that as in this case the chances of his coming back were smaller than usual, I'm not inclined to let him go. I suppose you and Everil have had the same sort of discussion?"

James Lascene smiled feebly.

"Everil thinks that with so many men out of the country, some ought to stay to take care of the women at home."

"I hadn't looked at it in that light," observed Lady Ethel. "At all events you and Horace are not as bad as Isleworth. Even I should have been ashamed to funk it as he did. I suppose he's coming along. I saw him in a hansom just now, close by here. What a lot of people you've got, and I don't believe that I know one of them."

Lady Ethel had stopped, her eyes were roving. Suddenly they were arrested.

"Who is that girl in grey—over by the door? I've an idea that I've seen her somewhere."

"May have," replied James Lascene laconically. "She's Everil's sister—Althea Stanmount."

"Oh!"

Lady Ethel's enthusiasm seemed to have received a



check. Her eyes wandered again, but came back to the girl in grey.

"But she looks nice—though she's odd, don't you think?—and a bit gone off. Excuse me, I forgot that she belonged to you. She would be quite good-looking, Jim, if she were properly dressed. Like a cameo-head, isn't she?"

"I don't know. Everil has just got a set of cameos that Aunt Georgina sent her, but she says c-cameos are out of fa-fashion."

"Poor old Aunt Georgina!" murmured Lady Ethel. She had just caught sight of an acquaintance. "There's Mrs. Raine. I must go and speak to her. Horace tells me there's some talk of Leonard Dracott marrying Sylvia Raine." Lady Ethel turned, dangling the chatelaine. "You go and put this where it should be, Jim. I'll come and look at the things presently."

James Lascene, who was accustomed to obey orders, twirled his big moustache and skulked off with the chatelaine, while Lady Ethel accosted a benign-looking elderly lady, who was wandering absent-mindedly about. They chatted familiarly for a few minutes, then Lady Ethel said:

"I want to go and see your Witch of Endor."

"My Witch of Endor?" repeated Mrs. Raine, blankly.

"The palmist you recommended to Everil. I suppose she's a sixth sense woman! You're a member, I know, of the Sixth Sense Society. Do you think they would admit me? I once had a dream which came true. What is the qualification for membership?"

Mrs. Raine shook her head, smiling indulgently.

"You must be seriously interested in the development of man's higher faculties, Lady Ethel, and be prepared to investigate occult phenomena, as they are called—though everyday, occult occurrences are becoming less and less phenomenal."

"That's true," replied Lady Ethel, "especially at this time of year, when it's too dark for anything else. I hardly ever go to a tea-party where there isn't some weird person wanting to take an impression of your hand or to read your future in the grounds of your cup, or some unearthly crystal. It's quite a means of livelihood, I understand; but it won't pay as well as the stage, and it has more risks—the chance of being run in by some too assiduous police-detective, for instance."

"Oh! that is easily avoided by a little tact and judgment," replied Mrs. Raine smoothly.

Lady Ethel's sweet, deep laugh made a melodious organ note in the shrill buzz of voices.

"First, exercise a small amount of intelligence in creating an Act of Parliament; then a little more in evading it. How truly British!"

Mrs. Raine affected not to hear. She was a little in advance of Lady Ethel, making for two or three raised steps that led by a narrow platform just beyond the two drawing-rooms to the curtained doorway of Mrs. Lascene's boudoir.

As they passed through the crowd, Lady Ethel was again attracted by the girl in grey, sitting solitary in the same place upon the landing, and watching the scene about her with an abstracted air and curiously dreamy eyes.

"What an uncanny looking creature!" exclaimed Lady Ethel. "*She* looks like a sixth sense woman."

This time Mrs. Raine turned interestedly.

"Althea Stanmount? Yes—she *has* gifts, I'm told. But I fear she lacks the true spirit." Then Mrs. Raine dropped her portentous tone and added in most feminine fashion: "I do think her married sisters might help her to dress better."

"Perhaps she doesn't want to wear Everil's old gowns—I shouldn't," flashed Lady Ethel humorously.

"Possibly not," assented Mrs. Raine. "But it might be politic to make use of them. Althea Stanmount has got a certain style of her own. If she chose to make the most of it, she might take the lead in psychic fashions. And that is an art in which our dear Berenice—our Sixth Sense sibyl—does not exactly shine."

"Are we to have sixth sense fashions next?" laughed Lady Ethel. "But 'Sixth Sense sibyl' sounds really attractive. Why not persuade Miss Stanmount to offer her services to your society?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mrs. Raine vaguely. "One can never be sure of an untrained psychic. But I must go and talk to Althea presently. She doesn't seem to know anybody here."

"Nor do I," replied Lady Ethel, "except you. I never do, at my sister-in-law's parties. How about the witch now? Dare one intrude unannounced? Ah! there's Jim. He'll tell me."

Lady Ethel turned to her brother-in-law, who was passing, to take his place again behind his wife.

"Look here, Jim," she began, but paused, her ear caught by the butler's stentorian announcement:

"Mr. and Mrs. Johnson Moggs."

"Good gracious!" murmured Lady Ethel. "Who

are Mr. and Mrs. Johnson Moggs. Jim? She's excessively pretty."

"She is another sister of Everil's," drawled James Lascene. "Johnson Moggs is a rattling good sort, but he's a grocer—in a big way, of course—something like B-Braunbred or G-Garrood. Only he doesn't go in for supplying you from the c-cradle to the g-grave. He's first-rate, though, for Russian caviare. It's his sp-speciality. Got an agent on the Volga. Moggs is making a fortune out of caviare and Russian p-products. Everil won't have his things because she says it's advertising the family de-degradation, and I agree with her, but you'd find 'em excellent, Ethel."

"I'll order some," said Lady Ethel. "I don't always agree with Jim. And of course I've heard of Moggs's Caviare. So she's Everil's sister! Why on earth didn't Everil tell me about her? I'll be delighted to call. She looks a perfectly charming little person."

And she did. The small, piquante face with its peach-like bloom and large eyes—blue as nemophila flowers—was quite charming, framed in a huge picture-hat with many plumes. The little lady was overshadowed by her big beaming husband, whose shoulder she hardly reached.

Lady Ethel, keenly observant, noticed a repressed shiver contract the form of Mrs. James Lascene, whose thin-lipped mouth set itself in an acidulated smile as she held out her hand to the pretty little woman and her big husband.

"How do you do, Molly? So kind of you and Johnson to remember our wedding-day. The little silver barrel is *most* appropriate."

"How do, Ev'ril. Hope you'll relish my special brand. 'Royalty Brand,' I call it, you know—supplied to Windsor and Marlborough House."

Mr. Moggs rolled out this interesting information in a rich bass voice.

"You're looking deuced smart and well, Ev'ril. Same here!" and he nudged his pretty wife. "No one would think we'd all been married seven years. Doesn't seem like seven years, does it, since Jim and I met you and Molly at that subscription hop, a fair knockout for both of us chaps—ha! ha! And now there's Cabby come to town and our little Nan—God bless her! Where's Cabby?"

Mrs. James's voice was rasping as she answered:

"Almeric has been forbidden to appear. This sort of thing is most undesirable for children."

"Tut! tut!" said Mr. Moggs disappointedly. "Well, you *have* got a squeeze, I must say, Ev'ril—case of storming a kopje—eh?"

"You will find it less crowded in the drawing-room," said Mrs. Lascene icily.

"Come along, Johnny. Everil wants to get rid of us," said little Mrs. Moggs, slipping her arm into her husband's. "You take up such a lot of space, you know. Is Anthony here, Everil?"

Mrs. Lascene gave a satirical laugh.

"Oh, dear no! Anthony would not leave his Greek gods, but you'll find Althea in some corner."

A stream of fresh arrivals drove the Moggs pair beyond the point where they might have found Althea. She saw them, but made no attempt to attract their attention. Althea was not in the mood that day for social banalities.

She noted a puzzled expression on Mr. Johnson Moggs's broad, kindly countenance which conveyed that he, too, felt bored and out of his bearings.

"It's a pity," thought Althea, "that Everil can't stand Johnson. After all, he's much more of a man than James."

Then she was roused to sudden interest in a pretty young girl who went by on the arm of a good-looking man of about thirty—the brown and muscular, well-groomed, open-air type of Englishman. The girl, who was Mrs. Raine's daughter, returned Althea's nod with a blushing smile.

A moment later, there appeared in the arched doorway a dandified-looking man, his dark, slightly supercilious, but extremely handsome middle-aged face, suggestive both of drawing-room adventures and a shrewd regard to the main chance.

"Lord Isleworth," announced the servant.

Mrs. Lascene's movement forward was so markedly cordial that Althea was stirred anew to a faintly satiric interest.

"Everil must think that highly ornamental personage worth cultivating," she thought. "I suppose he's a guinea-pigging lord who may get James on to a directorate."

Mrs. Lascene, however, had no time to dally with even a viscount. Somebody else claimed her attention, and Lord Isleworth strayed onward, staring at the crowd. A couple of minutes later he was again at Mrs. Lascene's elbow, evidently asking for an introduction, and with the nearest approach to enthusiasm that his tired eyes could express.

Mrs. Lascene met his request with the radiant smile reserved for her favoured guests. But a faint look of disapproval clouded it as she became aware of the object of his sudden admiration. It was somewhat reluctantly that she went with him into the drawing-room.

Just then Mrs. Raine's soft voice sounded in Althea's ear: "Miss Stanmount! Can you make room for me? I'm quite tired of standing about?"

Althea's settee, wedged between a palm and a Florentine cabinet, was capable of accommodating two, and in a minute or so she and Mrs. Raine had fallen into friendly talk.

"I saw Sylvia just now," said Althea, "she was looking charming."

"Dear child," replied the mother with a tender smile. "The Witch of Endor, as Lady Ethel calls her, has been prophesying to my Sylvia the fulfilment of her heart's desire."

"Ah!" said Althea, and added abstractedly, "but she will have to go through some bad times first."

"The palmist said nothing about that," exclaimed Mrs. Raine.

"It is true. And Sylvia will prove it before very long."

"How do you know?" persisted Mrs. Raine.

"I can't tell you how I know. But I *do* know," replied Althea. "Sylvia will gain her heart's desire, but—it will certainly be at some cost to another woman."

"Oh, of course that would be sad," Mrs. Raine's tone suggested that suffering to others must be a natural consequence of Sylvia's triumphal march along the road of Fate. She paused for Althea to enlighten her further,

but at that moment Althea's eyes were fixed upon two other figures moving slowly through the throng—Lord Isleworth and her sister, Mrs. Moggs, whom he was taking down to the tea-room.

As they passed, Althea paled and gave a convulsive shudder. She had a vague presentiment of ill. Directly Mrs. Moggs's nodding plumes and the dark sleek head bent to hers had vanished from the landing, Althea turned impulsively to Mrs. Raine.

"Do you know that man with my sister?"

"Lord Isleworth? Yes, he's in our Fordshire Militia; Leonard Dracott was saying that he is in rather bad odour, because he backed out when the regiment was ordered to South Africa."

"Mr. Dracott is the man who was with Sylvia just now?" asked Althea.

"I dare say. He's a great friend of Sylvia's," said Mrs. Raine complacently. "You may have heard of him. He came into Dracott Keep quite recently—that beautiful old place not far from the Chaunterells'. Such a nice fellow!"

"And Sylvia's heart's desire? I understand. I suppose he was taking her to have her fortune told?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't go in himself, I feel sure. He scoffs at occultism, I believe to say. He can't distinguish between spiritual development and mere charlatanry; but he's a charming young man and devoted to Sylvia. This is quite between ourselves, you know, Miss Stanmount, nothing actually settled—but almost so—I am sure I can rely upon your discretion. Do tell me, have *you* been in to see the palmist?"

"Only for a moment, while Everil spoke to her—



not to have my fortune told. I could have told hers, poor thing, more correctly, I'm sure, than she could have told mine."

"Really! How interesting! Have you the gift of second sight? Yes! I was certain of it," cried Mrs. Raine, clasping her hands ecstatically. "I always said you had the clairvoyant eyes. Oh! my dear Miss Stanmount, if you are indeed one of the few favoured ones of the earth, you are endowed with a precious power which should be carefully cherished and employed judiciously for the progress of the race."

"I'm afraid I haven't thought of my small gift from that exalted point of view," said Althea with a whimsical smile. "Occasionally, I have wondered whether I could not make a little money out of it."

Mrs. Raine looked rather shocked.

"The labourer is worthy of his hire, isn't he?" said Althea cynically. "However, I am not contemplating the profession seriously, Mrs. Raine. And there may be nothing in it, but of course I know that I have made some tremendously good shots sometimes."

Mrs. Raine became keenly interested.

"Tell me about the palmist," she said. "What did you feel about her?"

"She won't be a palmist long. She has heart disease; and the life she leads is killing her. I should say that she will not earn her fee this afternoon. If she hasn't collapsed already she is bound to do so soon."

Althea had changed her tone. She spoke in odd, monotonous accents. Her grey eyes were fixed upon the curtain dividing the palmist's sanctum from the drawing-room with a gaze so intent that it seemed to pierce its

heavy folds. Her eyes, narrowed under their hanging lids of creamy whiteness, looked like a gleaming line of white between heavy fringes of unusually thick pale lashes. The eyebrows, too, were pale, matching a quantity of almost ashen coloured hair. It was certainly a striking face—colourless and classic in outline.

Mrs. Raine stared at the girl, pondering her words.

A strange creature, this Althea Stanmount—a curious mixture of upper heaven and lower earth. All her life, she had longed for mundane advantages which had been denied her—wealth, influence, high position. Beneath her cold calm there lay a passionate yearning for power—the power to sway men's hearts, to govern men's intellects. Yet no one could have guessed at the wild waves of desire that surged in the breast of this insignificant shabbily clad woman.

There had been times, however, when Althea Stanmount knew herself to be potentially great, when, as at this moment, there shone in her strange pale eyes a light which might have illuminated the face of some seeress of ancient days.

It was a dim suggestion of that latent power which had first drawn the attention of Lady Ethel Lascene. Althea's eyes attracted her again now as she was crossing the room. She turned, on an impulse, and came towards the place where Althea and Mrs. Raine were sitting. Both looked up as she came. Mrs. Raine laid her hand on Althea's arm, intending an introduction, but Lady Ethel, though looking at Althea, bent over the elder woman and spoke in a low voice.

"Have you heard? Your Witch of Endor has been suddenly taken ill."

Mrs. Raine's ejaculation had a ring of elated surprise, quite out of keeping with the doleful nature of the intelligence. She clutched Althea's arm.

"Do you hear, Miss Stanmount? What do you say to *that*? Do tell me, Lady Ethel—what has happened, and when?"

"Why, the palmist went off into a dead faint not ten minutes ago," said Lady Ethel. "I'd just gone in, expecting thrilling revelations, when it happened. Luckily, I got hold of Dr. Philbrook—he and Mr. Moggs carried her by the back stairs into James's study. Everil doesn't want a fuss, so we are not to talk about it. But I'm afraid the poor creature is in a bad way. I suppose you did not know, but Dr. Philbrook says it's a case of heart disease."

## CHAPTER II

"I HAVE never known such a wonderful instance of a prediction verified," said Mrs. Raine solemnly. "Lady Ethel! I *must* tell you; Miss Stanmount, as you know, has been sitting here for some time past. She could have had no possible knowledge of what was going on behind that curtained door, and yet I can assure you that a few minutes ago she prophesied this—exactly."

Lady Ethel's kind eyes rested inquiringly on Miss Stanmount. "You are my sister-in-law's sister, I know," she said. "We ought to have made acquaintance before now. I am very glad to meet you."

Althea acknowledged the greeting somewhat stiffly.

Mrs. Raine broke in, impatient of formalities.

"I've been telling Miss Stanmount, Lady Ethel, that she has a power which should be devoted to the cause of spiritual evolution."

"I'm afraid I haven't anything so fine at heart," smiled Lady Ethel. "But I am very interested about your prophecy. I suppose one mustn't say that it might be a fluke! I am rather a sceptical person, but if you could tell me of something that's likely to happen to myself or to my husband, which came true—that would go far to convince me." She pulled a stool from under the palm and sat facing the other two.

Althea looked penetratingly at Lady Ethel.

"I might warn you," she said slowly, "of a disaster which I see hanging over you."

"What kind of disaster?" cried Lady Ethel. "Do tell me. No, Mrs. Raine, you needn't go away. I'm not afraid of compromising disclosures. When will this disaster come off, Miss Stanmour?"

"This afternoon, I think," said Althea quietly. "It is an accident. You will injure some part of your body. Oh! don't smile," as Lady Ethel's facial muscles twitched involuntarily. "You had better be careful going home to-day. Are your horses to be trusted?"

"I've been taken about by them nearly every day for weeks," said Lady Ethel, raising her eyebrows whimsically. "My husband is supposed to be one of the best judges of horse-flesh in England. But there's no accounting for the effect of motors on spirited beasts, and I'll tell my coachman to keep a sharp look out. Thank you for your warning. I can't say, can I—that I shall be glad to have it verified?"

Just then Mrs. James Lascene threaded her way towards them. She looked worried; her eyes were fixed dubiously on Althea.

Lady Ethel asked impulsively:

"I do hope that poor palmist is better, Everil."

The irritated tone in which Mrs. Lascene replied did not convey sympathy with the sufferer.

"Really, I hardly know. James and Doctor Philbrook are seeing about getting her home. I think it most unfair to me that in her condition of health she should have accepted my engagement."

"Poor thing!" said Lady Ethel. "I suppose she has to make her living."

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

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Mrs. Raine bent forward. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Lascene."

"So am I," said Mrs. Lascene almost discourteously. "Look at all those people waiting to have their fortunes told," and she glanced towards a large group gathered outside the curtained door. "I wanted the woman to make my party a success, and this is how she has done it!"

Mrs. Raine's soft face expressed distant disapprobation.

"Why don't you get your sister to take the palmist's place?" exclaimed Lady Ethel. "She would make your party a success, I am sure."

"Oh, yes, I know," said Mrs. Lascene doubtfully. "Althea's clever at that sort of thing, but of course she has never done it in a general way, and I don't know whether she is to be depended on."

Althea's lip stiffened.

"I shouldn't mind guaranteeing that she is to be depended upon this afternoon," said Mrs. Raine pointedly.

"I think so, too," said Lady Ethel.

"Will you do it, Althea?" said her sister sharply. "There isn't any time to waste over discussion. But it isn't a bad notion. I was coming to ask you if you could suggest anything."

Something within Althea told her that here was the opportunity she had longed for.

"I will do my best, Everil, if you wish it," she said simply, and rose to follow her sister. Mrs. Raine and Lady Ethel Lascene made way for her to pass between them, giving her as she went little nods and smiles intended to be reassuring. But Althea scarcely needed

their well-meant encouragement. She had an air of quiet self-assurance.

Once through the people and past the curtained doorway, Mrs. Lascene gave a sigh of relief.

"You'll be my salvation this afternoon, Althea, if you make a good thing out of it. Unluckily, most of my friends are strangers to you. But you're clever at mystifying people. I'm sure you can wrap up your nonsense in oracular language so that some of it shall hit the mark."

Again Althea stiffened.

"Tell me what you want me to do, Everil."

"Do! It doesn't matter what you do, so long as you make the hanky-panky impressive, and you're sharp enough for that. I wish Anthony had been here to help you. I do think he might have come for once."

"Anthony is deep in his 'Homeric Sociology.' You couldn't expect him to put your afternoon party before his 'Helen in the Palace of Menelaus.'"

Mrs. James made a dramatic gesture.

"Oh! If Anthony, with all his talent, would only write something that would sell, instead of hanging on to those stupid gods and goddesses. Nobody cares for them nowadays."

"Except for Plutus—the God of Riches!" returned Althea with her enigmatic smile. "Things haven't altered much since Lucian's time. 'Way for the Gold Gods—the Gold Gods to the reserved benches.' It seems to be the same cry in London to-day."

"Oh, drop that," said Mrs. Lascene, "you're as bad as Anthony."

"Hopeless as a social quantity," replied Althea.

"You stick to your gold gods, Everil, and leave Anthony and me to our dear dead Greek divinities. We may make something out of them, after all."

"Not in Urania Mansions, West Kensington, nor in that gown," said Mrs. Lascene acidly. "You really might have got yourself up better, Althea."

"Perhaps you would have liked me to come in the robes of Helen of Sparta," laughed Althea. "I've been doing lay figure to Anthony this morning for the illustrations of his new book. But as I'm not to be on view, my clothes can't matter. There—leave me to my own devices, Everil, and go and shepherd your lost sheep."

"I'd better show you some of that woman's dodges first. Look here."

Mrs. Lascene had had the furniture of the little boudoir readjusted for the afternoon. A large screen was placed across the end of the room, but it did not quite meet the wall. Beyond it was another door leading to the back stairs by which the unfortunate palmist had been removed.

"You sit in that chair behind the screen," said Everil, "and people put their hands round. Of course you are not supposed to see their faces, and, unfortunately, you probably won't know who any of them are. But I can give you a hint. I noticed the careful way in which the palmist woman fixed up that screen. Well, I guessed why. Do you see the glass on the wall just at the gap? As you sit there, if you look towards the glass, when the door opens, you'll catch a glimpse of whoever is coming into the room, but you've got to be careful that your chair is at the right angle."



Althea shook her head haughtily. Her soul revolted from such chicanery, yet she had a sudden inward prompting to make use of the suggestion.

"After all," she thought. "I'm not a practised soothsayer. Why shouldn't I make use of any extraneous help?"

Everil was watching her anxiously. "For goodness' sake don't cry off, Althea. I don't know what to do with the people until O'Neill comes."

"O'Neill?"

"The new man whose voice everyone is raving about—I got him to promise to sing for me. He has just telegraphed that he can't be here till six. So tiresome and inconsiderate! You can slip off as soon as he comes. Now, how soon shall you be ready?"

"In five minutes."

"Oh, all right. There's a man here who is mad about occultism; he's keen to have his fortune told, so I'll send him in first, if I can. I want to get hold of him, you understand, for James's sake. He belongs to the *haute finance*. Prophecy big things to him. He's a sort of Baron Hirsch—shall I tell you his name?"

"No—no," cried Althea. "I'll do what I can without trickery."

Mrs. Lascene laughed. "As you please!" Then she departed, leaving behind her a trail of the jessamine scent which she always used.

Althea, left to herself, took off her hat and gloves and sat down in the chair as directed, awaiting developments. The mention of her brother Anthony made her wonder what he would think of the enterprise on which she had rashly embarked—Anthony, the only member of her

family who had ever shown the least understanding of the mystic side of her nature.

She was not frightened. A queer other-world confidence possessed her. All day she had been living more or less under the influence of that other world. She had had a curious dream the night before. Althea had dreamed the same dream many times, but only brought back the remembrance of it in broken fashion. Always, the dream in its entirety escaped her. But there stood out from it with extraordinary vividness a dream-presence, a dream-voice of peculiar power and quality. Many times had she heard that voice, many times had she been conscious of the presence, compelling, bewildering; and now all day she had been under the spell of that familiar dream-presence, haunted by the sound of that dream-voice. But, this time, remembrance had brought back the outline of a face—an eager, bronzed face with dark eyes, luminous, passionate, masterful yet pleading, beseeching yet commanding, which had flashed upon her out of the shadowy background of her dream. As she now sat waiting in the palmist's chair, she had a strange thrilling sense of having been borne backward centuries of time, to meet the hero of that dream.

The sound of Everil's artificial laugh on the other side of the door recalled her to the present. Then the door clicked and closed behind a heavily breathing and, conjecturally, stout man. Althea sensed the stoutness with what she called her inner mind—sensed also certain other qualities of her first client. Elated at this, she abstained from consulting the mirror. A round, full voice, with an indefinably un-English intonation said:

“I am instructed to keep myself invisible, and to

give you my hand round the screen. That is right, isn't it?"

A large, long-fingered, capable hand presented itself to Althea's gaze.

"You are a very talented palmist, I understand," the voice went on. "I shall be greatly interested in your reading of my palm."

"I am not a palmist in the ordinary way," returned Althea. "Perhaps you're not aware that intuition has more to do with the occult study of character and conditions than the mere reading by rote of lines in a palm, which is an easily acquired art?"

"I quite believe that that is so," said the stranger. "Pray let me assure you that I have no disposition to scoff at occult learning."

Althea took his hand in her own, studied its peculiarities and gave a short character sketch which was pronounced correct.

"Now," she said, circling the firm wrist with her fingers. "I have so far read you, as you appear, without touching on the conditions of life which have made you what you are, or probing the springs of your ambition. Do you wish me to tell you everything that comes to me?"

"By all means," he answered. "Speak as freely as you please, but forgive me for saying that I do not think you are likely to hit the mark."

Althea ignored the comment, and went on in a low-pitched voice which had hardly any inflexions.

"You are a self-made man," she said. "You were born in a foreign country, not the land of your people. You were brought over to London as a little boy, and,

in childhood, led a life of restriction and hardship. The surroundings of your youth and the bent of your own character determined you early to make your way in the world and to acquire riches. In the beginning, this was for the sake of riches alone. As you grew older, however, and understood more of the race from which you sprang, you were fired with an intense desire to restore it to its ancient privileges. Money is required for this—much money, combined with divine favour, without which you feel that your purpose cannot be accomplished."

The hand Althea held, shook. The tremor spread to the tips of the long, firm fingers. Evidently, the man was stirred. But Althea forgot to speculate on the personality of the individual to whom she spoke. She was conscious only of the quick pulsation in the wrist her own fingers circled. Her words flowed on in the same monotonous way.

"There are few to whom you have divulged that cherished purpose. One is a woman who stands close to you—your wife, I should say. She is with you heart and soul. Tell her what I am saying. Let her judge of its truth. Work on, hope on. Force directed upon a particular object must ultimately bring about its accomplishment, though perhaps not in the manner and the time dreamed of."

"But shall I succeed?" the man asked.

Althea was silent; then she said slowly: "Moses led his people out of Egypt, and though it was not for him to guide them to the end of their pilgrimage, he was permitted to stand on Pisgah, and to view the Promised Land."

The man was exceedingly startled. His hand suddenly

gripped Althea's. "How do you know all this?" he asked.

"I speak only the words that come to me," answered Althea.

"At least you must be aware of who I am," he urged.

"You are a man of business, and yet an idealist. You have a healthy mind, a powerful frame, and a vivid imagination. You are married to a woman who, like yourself, belongs to an expatriated people. She, too, dreams of an immense restoration."

The man's hand was twitched out of Althea's, and she heard him throw himself back in his chair, which creaked beneath his weight.

"I am a Jew," he exclaimed. "A Jew of Hungary, but, nevertheless, one of the Chosen Race. And now it is only fair to tell you that you have spoken of the secret purpose of my life—a purpose of which it is not possible that you can have any knowledge."

"I know nothing," replied Althea, "beyond what is given to me to know. There is no more that I can say to you to-day."

The man rose.

"My name is Heinrichfels," he said. "May I know yours?"

"I am called Althea," she answered simply.

"We must meet again. Mrs. Lascene will, perhaps, give me your address?"

Althea murmured: "Thank you," and then he went away.

She leaned back, waiting for the next comer. She was vaguely conscious of the stir and hum of voices behind the dividing curtain, but though no longer under

the dream spell, she felt herself divided by far more than the material barrier from that wave of frivolous life surging beyond the door. It was as though a keener and wider consciousness were bubbling up within her.

Her clients passed in and out in turn. Baron Heinrichfels had so praised her powers that people pressed along to have their fortunes told. Those issuing from their interviews were heard ejaculating: "Wonderful!" "Absolutely correct!" "Quite uncanny!" and their faces were more eloquent than their words. Everil, triumphant, though slightly embarrassed, parried questions. Mrs. Raine was more emphatic and tantalisingly mysterious, while Lady Ethel talked openly of the prophecy made to herself. Altogether, the atmosphere vibrated with curiosity and expectation.

The crowd of applicants increased so inconveniently that it soon became necessary to post a guard by the curtained door. Everil commanded her husband to stand sentry, but Captain Lascene was too small to hold his own against the throng, and Lady Ethel brought up big Mr. Johnson Moggs, whom she had accosted without an introduction, to her brother-in-law's support.

Pretty little Mrs. Moggs, coming up from the tea-room with Lord Isleworth, inquired what was going on. Her husband caught the question and nodded over the shoulders of the crowd.

"Althea's telling fortunes, Molly. She's fairly on the job. But *you* are not to have a look-in. You can get an unprofessional opinion from her whenever you want it."

"What does that mean? Who is Althea?" asked Lord Isleworth.

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

"Althea's my sister," said Mrs. Moss. "I didn't know she was going to tell fortunes, but she's awfully good at it."

Molly looked up at him with her child's eyes of limpid blue. Molly was really distractingly pretty, and Lord Isleworth believed himself capable of appreciating a woman's charms from the purely artistic standpoint. Now he mentally compared her red lips to the cleft halves of a rose-bud with a string of pearls between. Being a writer of society love-lyrics, he thought the dimpled face framed in golden hair was the most inspiring he had seen for some time.

Molly blushed at his look and laughed uncomfortably.

"How does your sister tell fortunes? By cards or crystal-gazing?" he asked.

"Oh dear no, none of the ordinary ways. Sometimes by palmistry, but I don't think that means much to her. She seems to get hold of ideas in an inside sense and brings all sorts of rigmarole out of her 'inner consciousness.' Sometimes Anthony, my brother, helps her. They call it 'divination.' But I don't know much about these things."

"Nor do I. However, I quite believe that 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,' don't you know?"

Molly confessed that she didn't know anything about Horatio, but declared that Althea had often foretold things that had come true.

"Do you think she would prophesy for me—something that I want very much to come true?" he said softly.

"What is that?" asked Molly.

"That you and I are going to be great friends."

Molly made an arch little grimace. "I don't see how Althea could tell that! But you can ask her. I'll tell Johnny."

Mrs. Moggs pushed through the crowd, her admirer close behind—not altogether pleased at being taken literally.

"Johnny! This gentleman wants to have his fortune told. My husband—Lord Isleworth."

Mr. Moggs grinned amiably and, flattening his bulk against the wall, held the curtain back for Isleworth to enter as the latest client passed out. Then seeing discontented faces in the rear, he put his head through the aperture and before closing the door cried out:

"Time, please. Only five minutes apiece. Plenty more waiting."

Althea had turned at the voice and, without intending it, saw momentarily reflected in the mirror Lord Isleworth's face. The new client spoke with an affectation of deference.

"I am told that you have a wonderful power of divination. I shall feel honoured and grateful if you will allow me to test it. Shall I show you my palm?"

He extended his well-manicured hand. From the angle of the screen she scrutinised it for a moment or two, but did not touch it with her own fingers.

"I am afraid I can say nothing which would be of interest to you," she remarked at last.

"How is that?" he asked, nettled. "Am I, like happy nations, without a history?"

"On the contrary," replied Althea, "your history seems an eventful one, but I am not able to unravel it."



"Cannot you predict anything in my future?"

"I regret—I cannot predict your future."

He was irritated by the slight emphasis which he fancied that she laid on the word "your."

"Why do I exercise such a stultifying effect upon your genius?" he inquired. "Won't you explain? Is it possible that you can't see into my future because it may affect your own or that of someone near to you? Isn't it said that seers are sometimes at fault where their own interests are concerned?"

Althea was conscious of vague meaning behind his words. She did not speak.

"Come, you are not playing fair," cried Lord Isleworth. "According to the rules of the game you owe me five minutes of professional enlightenment. If you cannot—or will not—foretell any event in my own life, at least you should be able to prophesy upon some question of public importance. The war, for instance. How soon will peace be proclaimed?"

Her silence exasperated him.

"Is the oracle dumb?" he cried mockingly. "Prophesy, O Prophetess!"

Now Althea's voice came from behind the screen, slow and fateful as though impelled by some inward force:

"Peace will not be proclaimed until the British Empire has been plunged into universal mourning."

Isleworth gave an uneasy ejaculation. "A bigger defeat! More lives to be sacrificed! Is that what you mean?"

The slow, monotonous tones answered:

"I mean that when the Mother-Queen is released

from her long service of love, the heart of the nation will be stirred to deeper and more widespread sorrow than even for the slaughter of its sons. The sceptre of wisdom which Queen Victoria has wielded for nearly sixty-five years has grown too heavy for her hands, and the hour is approaching when she must lay it down."

"That prophecy, at Her Majesty's advanced age, is a comparatively safe one. You must fix a more definite time-limit if you wish to be believed, O Prophetess! When will this much-to-be-regretted event take place?"

"Within twenty-one days," came the answer, sad but assured.

Lord Isleworth remained perfectly motionless for a moment, then he rose and buttoned his frock-coat round him.

"Well, I am much obliged to you for the opportunity you have given me of testing your powers. I confess that the boldness of your prophecy amazes me. I can only say that I hope you may in three weeks' time be proved a false prophetess."

Althea heard the door click and knew that he had gone. She sat up in her chair staring into vacancy. How had she dared to speak as she had done? The Queen! So far as she was aware, the Queen was in her ordinary health. What force—Althea wondered—outside her own consciousness could have made her predict that the Queen would die in twenty-one days? She herself had always had a deep sentiment about Queen Victoria. Tears welled in her eyes. Sincerely she echoed Lord Isleworth's taunting hope that, in that respect, the twenty-first day might prove her an impostor. But Althea knew instinctively that Lord Isleworth would

tell the story everywhere, and, if she were proved wrong, good-bye to all chance of success as a psychist. Madness must have possessed her to prophesy ill to the Queen round whom the patriotic feeling of the nation centred. And yet with the cold spasm of fear, shame, regret, something assured Althea that the madness would make for triumph. Two distinct beings fought within her—the lower self, poverty-bound, unendurably galled by the fetters of circumstance; and that other self, lofty, calm, baptised with the fire of the gods.

Althea had not long to collect herself, for her clients kept pouring in. Lord Isleworth lost no time in spreading his tale. It occasioned considerable talk outside, but Althea was careful to say no more on such matters. The minutes passed swiftly as she spoke to one after another who came in to consult her. In the tense and delicately balanced mental state to which she was strung, Althea was scarcely conscious of the passage of time. Then came a long wait during which no fresh visitant appeared. A confused buzz of voices and evidences of some increased stir in the rooms beyond reached Althea's sanctum. Released from the effort of concentration, she smiled bitterly to herself. No doubt the fashionable singer had arrived, and the audacious fortune-teller was no longer the sensation of the afternoon.

This was true. Popular interest had shifted. Lord Isleworth, the centre of a crowd round the curtained doorway, saw necks craning and eyes turning towards a striking looking man whom Captain Lascene was piloting towards the grand piano. The name of O'Neill went from lip to lip.

The throng round the boudoir door rapidly melted.

Baron Heinrichfels, one of the few who lingered, was struck by the peculiar expression on Lord Isleworth's face.

"You look as though the prophetess had treated you to some astounding revelation," he remarked.

Lord Isleworth made an ironic gesture.

"She did. Nothing less than a change in the monarchy. And within twenty-one days."

Baron Heinrichfels stared in astonishment. His heavy, semitic face became alert. A startled light showed in his keen dark eyes, deep-set between their bulging brows.

"Twenty-one days," he repeated.

"Rash, wasn't it? You don't happen to have heard any disquieting rumours about the Queen's health, eh, Heinrichfels?"

"None whatever. Reassuring reports rather than otherwise, I am glad to say. I understand that Her Majesty's message to the new Australian Commonwealth to-day is in her very best form, and that she is keen on seeing Lord Roberts as soon as possible on his arrival from South Africa to-morrow, and getting from him the fullest details about the war."

"Ah! Well, I don't know whether this seeress means to take up prophesying as a lucrative means of a livelihood, but it looks as if she had cooked her own goose."

"It is certainly to be hoped that in this instance her prediction may miss its mark," said Heinrichfels, and added thoughtfully: "but there is an Oriental saying that the spoken word writes itself on the future."

At that moment a blue-eyed, golden-haired, highly neurotic type of young woman with an extraordinarily

strained expression upon her otherwise innocent looking face, appeared, gazing eagerly about her.

"The 'Brinvilliers'!" murmured Lord Isleworth.

Baron Heinrichfels checked him with low-voiced sharpness.

"Too bad! Give her the benefit of the verdict!"

"Not proven! Better almost to be found guilty in the case of a crime of the passions. I only quote what I hear whispered everywhere."

"Baron! Please tell me where I can find the fortune-teller," exclaimed the lady, hurrying forward.

Mrs. Lascene, passing at the moment, paused—her manner perceptibly cold.

"I'm afraid it's too late, Mrs. Grainger. Mr. O'Neill is going to sing, and the palmist is off."

"But I'm told she's so wonderful. Can't I see her?"

"I'm afraid not," Mrs. Lascene reiterated. "She has probably gone already." And with her artificial smile Everil made her escape by the curtained door.

"Mrs. Grainger!" said Isleworth. "Have you heard that this remarkable soothsayer has predicted the Queen's death in twenty-one days?"

"Good heavens! Why, that's treason."

"So I consider. Well, in three weeks' time her reputation will be made or irretrievably marred."

"But how dreadful—if it comes true. I hear she told Lady Ethel Lascene to beware of an accident to-day."

"To-day? Then that prediction will be more quickly verified."

"And they're saying she has made such wonderful shots about a lot of people. There's a girl—Jean Grant, who is engaged to a militiaman at the front. I passed

her on the stairs, crying—she was going home. The palmist had told her to be prepared for bad news of her lover. He's in *your* regiment, I believe, Lord Isleworth."

The subject of the South African War was a sore subject with Lord Isleworth. It was one on which he felt considerable personal anxiety, for he had no desire to go out to be slaughtered by the Boers. Whenever that subject was mentioned in public, therefore, he preferred to remove himself to some more congenial object of interest. Now he made an excuse to stroll away after pretty Mrs. Moggs, leaving Mrs. Grainger talking excitedly to the baron.

Meanwhile Mrs. Lascene had entered the boudoir and pushed back a fold of the sheltering screen. Althea tottered to her feet, her ravaged face telling its own tale.

"Why, you are as pale as a ghost," cried Everil.

"I feel that virtue has gone out of me."

"Never mind. James shall take you to get some champagne-cup. No one else will come in now. People don't want their fortunes told when a man like Mr. O'Neill is going to sing. I kept Mrs. Grainger out. I was afraid you might make some horrible revelations about the death of her first husband—all that mystery which was never cleared up, you know. You're not very tactful, Althea. After that outrageous statement you made about the Queen, there was no knowing what error of judgment you might commit. How could you give yourself away like that? It was execrable taste. Lots of people are talking of it."

Althea's face worked. Every word went home.

"I ought not to have said it, I know, but it came, and I believe it. I have been right before about those

in high places, you know, Everil. Don't you remember how I felt about the Duke of Gloucester and about Prince Harry?"

"Yes, I remember your telling us about the duke's death at the time it took place, and you always said poor Prince Harry would never come back. You are an extraordinary girl, Althea, but you should not prophesy evil concerning people; only good. However, I can't stop to scold you now. At all events, you have made my party 'go.' Your predictions will be the talk of London. But of course you won't disclose your identity. Slip in when you feel inclined, and hear O'Neill."

Mrs. Lascene took the back way into the corridor in order to reach the drawing-room by a side door.

Althea picked up her hat. Her hands trembled as she pinned it, before the mirror, over the soft rolls of her ashen-yellow hair. Her pale face was curiously aglow. In spite of the false step she had made, her success had elated her. She felt thrilled and excited by the whiff of notoriety. It was intolerable to pass unnoticed into the herd. All sorts of schemes raced through her mind. Althea knew herself to be acute and resourceful, and she determined that whatever happened she would not again go under.

As she stood drawing on her gloves, the rapt look on her face was not so much that of the inspired psychic as of the resolute woman of the world, visioning attractive possibilities.

Then suddenly she gave a start, a faint cry; her whole expression changed, she made an eager step forward, her arms half extended. Then they dropped to her sides, she paused, listened, leaning forward, her head a little

sideways. She was like one bewitched. Through the curtained doorway came the full, rich tones of a man's baritone voice. Althea had never heard that voice from human lips, but she knew with a stab of exquisite certainty that it was the voice which she had heard in dreams.

It seemed a call of destiny. At last Althea moved forward. She opened the door, drew aside the portière and looked along the drawing-rooms, which were packed with people, their backs towards her, none stirring. O'Neill was singing a song about love and death. Althea was not wont to think of death, nor had she ever been given to sentimental rhapsodising; yet, while the singer sang, love seemed a great and wondrous thing, and death but the bridge to a fuller life beyond, in which souls, separated here, would certainly be reunited.

When the voice ceased, there was for several seconds a complete hush in the audience; then came a great burst of applause. A dense, human wave surged towards the farther end of the drawing-room. To Althea, all seemed a confused blur of forms and faces. She stood on the top of the steps leading to the boudoir and just within the doorway, her fair head and cameo-like face clear cut against the velvet curtain. She could not have told how long she stood there clutching the folds of the curtain and waiting—she did not know for what. She awoke to the world, when, through a break in the human wave, she suddenly saw the singer. He stood talking to Mrs. Lascene.

A man of medium height, his limbs spare but strong, the shoulders broad, the whole physique expressing exuberance of vitality: the fine, rather large head, over



which brown hair curled crisply, thrown back; the face un-English, irregular-featured; the dark eyes, magnetic, directed towards Althea.

She met his look and saw a sudden flame as of recognition leap into his gaze. To her, cognition had instantly come. This was the face; these, the dark, compelling eyes which had drawn her in last night's dream.

O'Neill made a hurried bow and apology to his hostess. Before he could be stayed he was forcing his way strategically down the room. Now he had passed the archway, sprung up the two steps and stood breathless before Althea.

"I have been waiting for this day," he said in deep, rich tones. 'Cleino! My lady of many dreams! I knew that we should meet—in the flesh—at last!"

### CHAPTER III

"CLEINO!"

Althea repeated the name in bewilderment, yet with a vague sense that she had heard it somewhere before.

A good many heads from the crowded landing beneath were turned up to her inquiringly.

O'Neill held her two hands in a tender, forceful grasp. With a firm movement, he pushed her gently back within the doorway, where she could not be seen. The curtain fell behind them. They stood together in Everil's little boudoir, Althea's hands still in his; the magnetic eyes shining into hers.

Then she made an agitated gesture of withdrawal. Instantly he released her. The quick movement of his arm struck the light Japanese screen that cumbered the space about them. The folds fell back, making a slight clatter which recalled Althea to her ordinary senses.

She clutched the high back of the chair where she had been sitting and spoke jerkily, nervously, but with a good deal of dignity.

"You are Mr. O'Neill, I believe, the famous singer, but I do not remember ever having seen you before. I think you must be mistaking me for somebody else. My name is not—*Cleino*."

He threw out his hands protestingly.

"Ah! Why speak so? Such a mistake is not possible. The real self of you knows that it is not possible."

"I do not understand," she said slowly.

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

"Your soul understood when it looked at me across the room. Your eyes spoke to me as they have often spoken in dreams—as you spoke last night when I called you and you came to me."

"You call me in dreams!" she repeated, amazed, yet with an inward conviction that he spoke truth.

"You know it!" he cried. "You recognised me just now, as I recognised you. Yes, in dreams I have often called you and you have answered me; you are always there—waiting for me. Even last night we met, as certainly as we meet to-day—face to face. Only that in dreamland there are no clouds between! The long quest is ended; the veils rent; the prison walls broken."

"The prison walls!" breathed Althea.

"We live in prison, you and I—do we not? I mean the prison of our earth-lives. We are cramped, fettered—we have strained urgently at our bars. But though our bodies have been bound, our souls have escaped in our dreams to search for and find each other through the mists of time and space."

His tone intoxicated Althea, but she struggled against its domination. She murmured something about dreams being unreal; adding, that to think otherwise was all foolish fancy!

"This is no foolish fancy," he said almost sternly. "You know it is true. You have been in prison—is not that true?"

"Yes, it is true." She spoke as though the words were wrung from her.

"But you knew that some day the prison door would be unlocked and that the things you desired would be yours."

"The things I desired! How do you know that I have desired things? What things?"

"Liberty! Power! Love! A voice that should speak with knowledge and authority: not one uncertain of itself. You have been awaiting your hour of release—as I, too, have waited."

Althea brushed her brows with both hands. She felt dazed, confounded, at hearing this stranger speak with such exactitude of her ambitions.

"You, at least," she said suddenly, "need no key to unlock your prison doors. *Your* voice commands a hearing."

He smiled in serene contempt.

"For songs of a day that please the passing multitude! Do you think that it is merely for the conquest of London drawing-rooms that I have been working and waiting?"

"I do not know. Am I to understand that you have undertaken some nobler mission?"

"That is so. But—first always—I have been working and waiting for *you*."

His words vibrated with an emotion so evidently genuine that it must have been incomprehensible to her, had not the ring of his voice possessed that familiar other-world charm. She fought against it, but his gaze, shining with its mysterious inward fire, drew her own as by enchantment, and Althea felt herself being swept into the vortex of an amazing individuality. She made a frantic effort to shake off the influence.

She laughed satirically, but her laugh jarred even upon herself. The superficial, worldly side of her rebelled against this man's extraordinary defiance of conventions; yet all that was most real and earnest in her, moreover

all that leant towards the occult, was thrilled by his fervid utterance.

"In this prison of flesh," he was saying, "the knowledge of life beyond physical existence comes to most people only in flashes which seem as unreal as you say you imagine dreams to be. But in dreams we find our best realities. Do you not realise that? You seem to have forgotten so much—so much! But now that we have opened for each other our prison doors, the flashes of recollection will lengthen, and, gradually, you will remember all and understand all. Then you will keep your word and will help me, as you promised long, long ago, in the great Cause for which I live and work."

"What is the Cause, and how do you work?" asked Althea.

"This is not the time nor place to speak of it," said O'Neill hurriedly, for at that moment the portière rattled on its rings, and voices that Althea knew well sounded close outside. "No matter, we shall meet again soon," he whispered, bringing a soft glow to her face as he drew back.

The portière swung open, and little Mrs. Moggs burst in, her big husband looming behind her.

"Mr. O'Neill!" she cried with her pretty imperious air. "I'm sorry to disturb your fortune-telling, but my husband and I are just going, and I want to introduce myself. I'm Mrs. Johnson Moggs, and I should like you to sing at my house one night next week. Why! Have you met my sister before? I should have thought you'd scarcely had time to make friends." She turned a puzzled stare from one flushed face to the other:

O'Neill bowed low.

"Friendship, madam, is a question not of time, but of affinity."

Molly looked mystified.

"Well, anyway, tell me, please, what night you're free. I'm arranging a dinner, Althea. You and Anthony must come," she added in an afterthought intended to be good-natured. "I don't suppose the date will make any difference to *you*."

O'Neill consulted his engagement book.

"I shall be charmed, madam." He named a near date, to which, after much pursing of her pretty brows and counting events on her finger-tips, Molly agreed.

"It will give me very great pleasure," said O'Neill, putting up his pocket-book. "And now I must make my adieux to Mrs. Lascene." He bowed once more, then took Althea's hand. "Did I not say," he murmured, "that we should meet again soon?" In a moment the curtain had swung to behind him.

"The fellow didn't really mean that he was going to pipe at our place for the pleasure of it, I suppose," said Mr. Moggs, rubbing his chin doubtfully.

"You ought to have asked his fee, Johnny, but you always leave everything to me," said little Mrs. Moggs with a portentous sigh. "I tried to find out from Everil, but I believe *she* got him to sing for nothing."

"Well, none of Everil's shabby dodges for me—mind that, Moil. *We* can afford to pay the chap handsomely, and we will. Cheque in an envelope handed him with his hat and pretend you know nothing about it. That's the way it's done in the best houses, according to Googe—and one's butler ought to know, as it's *his* job."

"Oh! *Googe!* I wonder you submit to *Googe's* leading-strings," pouted Mrs. Moggs.

"I defer—not submit, my dear!—to any man who can give me points, whatever his trade may be. Come down to the dining-room, Althea, and wet your whistle. I am sure you must want a reviver after all your talkie-talkie. You've had a dry old time of it. Molly's made a conquest—have ye heard—eh?—that sleek-haired little lord!"

Althea winced, and Molly's eyes darkened for an instant. But Johnson Moggs, blind to subtle indications, guffawed genially.

"The dinner-party's for *him*—just to show him how we stand in the world. No, I shan't shut up, Moll"—with a tender chuck to Molly's chin. "I'm devilish proud of my pretty wife. She can mash the lordling as much as she pleases, so long as her heart's in the right place. Come along, girls. We'll give you a lift home, if you like, Althea."

Lady Ethel had gone away from the party rather early. She left unobtrusively, and, as O'Neill was singing at the time, she came down the stairs alone and passed along the hall, trying to spy her own livery among the footmen waiting at the open door. But she was not successful. There seemed to be no one to call her servant, and she went out wonderingly between the lines of men, whose attention appeared completely engrossed by something that was going on outside.

The street lamps illuminated the row of carriages drawn up beside the garden railings opposite. The coachmen's heads were all craned in one direction, and

excitement was animating the assemblage. Lady Ethel had to step out into the street before she could attract anyone's eye, and in doing so she caught some of the comments that were being interchanged.

"A reg'lar chip o' the old block!"

"See 'ow 'e 'andles 'em! A pity 'e ain't Mr. 'Orace's son."

In the last speaker Lady Ethel indignantly recognised her own footman with a broad grin on his mouth. At sight of his mistress he shamefacedly touched his hat.

"The carriage, m' lady? Yes, m'lady," and he darted with frantic signs towards a victoria and pair, the subject of all the flutter, which was careering round the square.

Lady Ethel knew her own carriage and her own roans, but she had not been prepared for the new driver. The little son of James Lascene was perched on the box, his short legs ineffectually gripping its edge and the reins in his sturdy fists, while Dawson, the big and eminently respectable coachman, seated in the footman's place, was gazing down with pride upon the small Jehu. Cabby—nicknamed Cabby because of his passion for horses—was flushed and exultant, his ruffled head hatless, his eyes fixed on the roans' ears and his arms stretched to their fullest extent. Lady Ethel stood on the kerb watching him, and wistfully wishing that he were his uncle Horace's son.

Dawson became suddenly aware of his mistress's observation, and made an ineffectual grab at the reins. Cabby, snatching them to his breast in an unprofessional way, shouted at the same moment:

"Hullo, Aunt Ethel! I'm just coming up. You see me turn."



## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

Lady Ethel gasped apprehensively. Dawson, with a sheepish glance at his mistress, made another effort to take command. But Cabby was not to be ousted from his proud position.

"Hold hard, Dawson, hold hard!" he cried. "I can manage it without you."

"Steady, Master Cabby! Steady!" exclaimed the man, whose brawny hands were now firmly locked over the small, eager pair. The horses, fresh with long waiting, objected to the sudden check. They plunged. Dawson, from his attitude, had no great purchase, and there was plenty of power in Cabby's little fists. The result was a very unsafe approach. The child swayed on the box, and Lady Ethel, full of alarm, darted into the road with some notion of catching him, should he fall. As she did so, the prancing fore-foot of the near roan struck her instep, and she sank back on the pavement with a cry.

Cabby swung himself to the ground with the agility of a monkey. He was a splendidly made little fellow, big for his six years.

"Oh, Aunt Ethel, I'm so aw'fly sorry! What made you get in the way? If I'd had a sec, I'd have brought 'em round all right. But that juggins Dawson *would* interfere."

Lady Ethel smiled through her pain.

"Never mind, old boy. Only—Nimrod kicked me."

' Did he—the brute! I'm *aw'fly* sorry."

Tears rushed to the boy's brown eyes, for he adored his Aunt Ethel. She leaned heavily on his shoulder—the most acceptable sign of forgiveness that she could give him. The footman meanwhile had readjusted the

carriage cushions and the bear-skin rug, and Lady Ethel dragged herself into the low victoria.

"I shall be better when I get my shoe off. Thanks, Cabby. Now you run in. Home, William"—to the footman—"and tell Dawson to drive carefully."

The footman mounted and the roans started at a well restrained pace. Lady Ethel leaned forward and cast another reassuring smile at the disconsolate Cabby; whose small shoulders were disappearing among the men. Then she leaned back, white with pain.

"Well, this proves Miss Stanmount to be a true prophethess!" she thought.

Cabby met the Johnson Moggses, with Althea, coming down the steps.

"Hullo, young man," exclaimed Uncle Johnson cheerfully. "What have you been doing? And where's Mossoo?"

"Mossoo's got a holiday; it's *jour de l'an*," said Cabby, and added ruefully, "I've been driving Aunt Ethel's horses, and she got in the way, so Nimrod kicked her, and I'm afraid she's badly hurt."

It was not difficult to get the whole story from the boy. Mr. and Mrs. Moggs, who had both heard of the prediction but had not thought much about it, regarded Althea with amused scrutiny and astonishment as she sat with them in the double brougham. Althea said little, but her eyes were sybilline. She was thinking deeply.

## CHAPTER IV

THE brougham pulled up by Kensington Church, and here Althea got out, picked up her skirts from the mud, and stepped into a waiting 'bus. She was dropped at Eric Road, West Kensington, in which was situated the great red brick pile of buildings known as Urania Mansions.

The lift was out of order—a frequent occurrence, Urania Mansions being worked on a cheap system, and Althea had to toil up to the sixth story, where she and Anthony had their little flat under the sky. Althea let herself in with a latchkey, and at once ran along the passage to her bedroom.

She unfastened her things feverishly, and threw them down with such reckless disregard that one might have supposed her a lady who indulged freely in new hats and gowns. Her action symbolised the attitude of mind which had made her silent all the way home, and which included a determination to expel from her mind all romantic dreams. Perhaps it was the unconscious influence of Johnson Moggs that made her look at the events of the afternoon from a business point of view.

She decided not to tell Anthony about her meeting with O'Neill. Her own vague sense of recognition—the compelling effect the singer had upon her—all this must be forgotten before they met again. She could not submit to that sort of compulsion. She had to lead a common-sense existence, and could not let herself be troubled

about such super-mundane experiences. She had known many from childhood. The thing was to make good money out of some of them. Now, she saw her way dimly to this desired consummation.

She slipped on a plain grey tea-gown. Althea loved grey, and she knew that it suited her. As soon as she was dressed she went back along the passage, and opened the door of her brother's studio.

It faced north, and had a large abutting window of which the lower lights were darkened. A worn Turkey carpet was on the floor. At an angle with the window was a model's stand covered with a prayer-cloth, and on it a lay figure with a petulantly twisted arm, and some sprawling drapery. The fireplace had shelves over it, on which were arranged bits of old pottery of classic shape, some copies of Greek vases and Tanagra statuettes, and a variety of pipes and tobacco jars, oddly incongruous. A work-table and a chintz covered arm-chair at one side of the fireplace imparted a feminine element, but Anthony's own arm-chair and table opposite were distinctly masculine. There was a queer jumble of furniture—a Queen Anne oak writing-bureau, a dilapidated Italian cabinet, a few Empire and Chippendale chairs, and a quaint tripod in bronze. Round the walls were homely bookcases of stained deal containing a student's library, and upon the top of them stood large-sized statuettes in plaster—the "Agrippina" of the Lateran, the "Diana Lucifera," and the "Ariadne" of the Vatican, studies in drapery; the "Artemis" of the Louvre and the "Demeter" of the British Museum, as well as other classic copies. One part of the wall was covered with a faded piece of tapestry representing the meeting of Ulysses and Nausicaa ;

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and, stuck up here and there with drawing-pins, were rough black-and-white sketches and photographs, also of classical subjects—many of them begrimed with smoke and having torn edges, yet adding to the air of dignity and remoteness from sordid interests that characterised the room.

A window, looking east, had a tilted screen of tissue paper to soften the light, which seemed an unnecessary precaution in the sunless London winter. Beneath it, was a deal table bearing an electric lamp, carefully shaded. There were different implements of the etcher and illustrator ; and an easel, with an unfinished canvas pushed behind the model's stand, showed that Anthony Stanmount worked occasionally in oils. The place, although an untidy and tobacco-reeking den, was obviously the abode of a cultured gentleman.

Anthony Stanmount was seated at the writing-bureau, pipe in mouth and pen in hand, a little low table at his side strewn with books. He looked up as Althea entered, and, throwing down his pen, turned to her. He was a man of about thirty-five, spare and sallow, with the student's stoop and perpendicular furrow of the brow, and the artist's sensitive physiognomy and long, nervous hands. His hair, growing back from his temples, had threads of premature grey ; his dark eyes were sunken and limpidly bright, his features thinly drawn, his mouth and chin hidden by a dark silky moustache, and his beard cut in a point.

As Althea came forward her tremulous eagerness communicated itself to him.

"Well," he questioned, "what has happened? Something, I feel sure."

Althea laughed, standing with one hand on the mantelpiece, between him and the fire.

"Something? Yes, Anthony—something quite odd. How quick you are to understand! You are the only one who ever understood me."

"I have tried to understand you," he answered gravely.

"And you believe in me? I mean, in my psychic gifts?"

"Certainly I believe in you—and in them," he rejoined.

"I am sure you do. You always took them more seriously than I did, even. Do you remember how we used to practise in the garden-room at our old home? I can see myself now, with my eyes shut, striving to put my mind back—back, as you taught me. And you, rolling out the grand Greek lines—Cassandra's lines! We used to say that I was like Cassandra, because the others scoffed at my prophecies until— Oh! do you remember how I foretold dear dad's death in the hunting field, and his devoted Grayson's of the kennels just after? That was a strange thing! How could I possibly have known that they would go together?"

"The spirit was upon you."

Althea grew thoughtful.

"I must have changed a good deal of late years, Anthony."

"Undoubtedly you have. I have sometimes wondered what material-minded *kobold* had got hold of you."

"Is it surprising? We've been so poor since dad died. I've *had* to be so practical that I think I drove my 'spirit' away. But to-day——" Althea came closer;

her face was illumined. She stood with her hands clasped on her breast. "To-day, Anthony, the spirit came to me, and—I *saw*!"

"You saw!"

He pulled himself round upon his chair, his fine face alert. She dropped on to the fender stool close to him.

"I *saw*," she went on more soberly, "several happenings to persons there. One was a girl who has a lover—as yet not publicly acknowledged. I saw that he will not be true to her. Another was Everil's sister-in-law. I told her she would have an accident—and she has had it already. But the most remarkable was about the palmist Everil had engaged. I prophesied that she would have a heart collapse before she had half earned her fee."

"Poor soul! And that——"

"Happened very soon after I had foretold it. And through *that* came my great opportunity."

Althea went on to relate how Everil had been glad to make use of her. She spoke of Baron Heinrichfels and of others with whom she had been successful. Anthony listened intently, stroking his short beard. When she paused, he knew that she had left out the most important part of her tale.

"Go on," he said impatiently. "That is not all?"

"No. One of my clients was a man I took a great dislike to—a certain Lord Something, who seemed tremendously attracted by Molly. I didn't like it. And I could 'see' nothing for him—perhaps because I was prejudiced against him. He jeered at me for being a dumb oracle, and finally challenged me to prophesy some national event."

" Well ? "

" Well, you know, Anthony, I have been right once or twice before about some of the Royalties. The farther off one is, the more clearly one seems to see."

" Of course. Well, who and what was it this time ? "

Althea leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone.

" The Queen—our dear old Queen—her death ! "

" Good heavens ! You did not speak about such a thing, Althea ? "

" It was very ill-judged of me, but I *did*."

" It was exceedingly bad taste, and might get you into trouble."

Althea shrugged, looking anxious.

" I can't help it. Taste has nothing to do with this faculty of mine. I'm not accountable for what I 'see.' The man made me speak, and I just uttered the words that came to me."

" It was certainly indiscreet. However, Her Majesty is very old. The world will probably say that you purposely pitched upon an event that in all human probability must take place before long."

" But, Anthony, the extraordinary part is that I got the date. I had the impression of three sevens, which I translated as three weeks from now—the twenty-first day of this new year ! And I foolishly said so."

Anthony looked very grave.

" This is the first of January," he remarked thoughtfully. " We can but wait and see."

The brother and sister remained silent for several minutes, Althea screening her face from the glow of the



embers with her pale, transparent hands, long-fingered and sensitive like those of her brother. Suddenly she burst out:

"Anthony, there's something else I want to say. Can't we turn this gift of mine to account? Why shouldn't we practise it again, and perhaps give public demonstrations? They would pay, I feel sure. And who knows?—we might convince the world that there is something beyond matter."

Anthony gave a deep, incoherent ejaculation. Althea had touched him upon a tender point. She went on hastily:

"A great deal will, of course, depend upon whether I am proved true in this important national calamity. But, Anthony, I *know* inside myself that I shall be proved true. And, apart from that, I was right to-day in so many things which I could not possibly have known by my human intelligence. Why shouldn't we use my gift to benefit others?"

Anthony's eyes were brooding in space. He turned them upon his sister and said, resolutely:

"You are right. It would not be a question of benefit merely to ourselves. It is—to *me* at least—far more a question of proving to the ignorant masses what I believe to be the case—what science is beginning to suspect—that there exist realms of research beyond that of dense matter. But consider, Althea; the prophet is more often stoned than crowned!"

"I'm not afraid of being stoned. If this power is genuine, I shall be protected. Whence it comes I cannot tell, but I sometimes feel that it has a source far, far beyond my present self."

"Your present self? You mean that we must have lived before?"

"I suppose so. One can't go anywhere in these days without being forced to think about the theory of re-incarnation. It is so much talked of. And it explains a good deal in life, you know."

"Strange that our minds should have been running in the same direction." Anthony laid his hand upon a pile of books on his writing-table. "Althea! I have a theory about *you*. I shall not tell you what it is until I have tested it. Will you submit to an occult experiment?"

"Of course—from you. It wouldn't be the first time. Do you remember our trying Eliphaz Levi's magical evocation, and how I got uncomfortable in the middle and made you rub out the figures and destroy the circle? I had an idea that you were conjuring up the devil."

"I may have been. We won't try that sort of thing again. It doesn't do to dabble in magic. One may get out of one's depth. What I now propose would be different—perfectly harmless and legitimate, I think. Trust me, Althea."

"Oh, I trust you all right, Anthony. Besides, I'm not really afraid of occult experiments. I feel in my element with them, somehow. Let's begin at once. It's Jane's evening out, and no one will interrupt us." As she spoke, Althea burrowed for a log of ship wood in a basket beside the fireplace and threw it on the red coals. There was no other light in the room except from the shaded lamp on Anthony's writing-table, and from the moon shining through the uncurtained panes of the studio window.

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

Anthony got up and opened a door in the Italian cabinet in which he kept special treasures collected during his travels, and from which he now took out a small, antique brazier, some bottles of pale green liquid, and a lump of resinous substance. Bringing the brazier to the fire, he selected a few bits of charcoal from the burnt wood, and some glowing embers. These he put into the brazier, adding a mass of dried leaves of verbena and laurel and a bundle of herbs, which he took from a drawer, quelling the flame of them with a piece of the resin. A thick, aromatic smoke arose from the burning mass. Althea watched her brother curiously, as he carried the brazier to the bronze tripod, and placed it in front of the model's stand. On the stand he set a low, straight-backed chair; then he turned to his sister.

"Come," he said.

Althea obeyed, but as she got up at his call her limbs felt heavy. She seated herself slowly and deliberately in the chair he had placed, but she felt as if she were under the influence of haschish, or some such drug, and the ascending fumes at her feet still further confused her brain.

"What are you going to do, Anthony?" she said; but he made no answer, merely throwing on fresh handfuls of sweet-scented, dried leaves, and damping the flame on the brazier with liquid poured from the bottles. Althea swayed in her chair, and her head fell against the back.

"What—are you—going—to do?" she repeated, and her voice sounded to herself far away and indistinct. "Anthony, you won't hurt me—will you? Oh, how strange it is! . . . I don't know where I am.

. . . I'm slipping. . . . Hold me! . . . Where am I?  
. . . Isn't that thing there—*Althea!* . . . Can—there  
be—two—Al—the—as? ”

Anthony, who had paused in his act of filling the brazier as her voice became more feeble, was kneeling on one knee, eagerly watching her. Gradually her eyes had glazed; then the lids dropped over them. There came one or two deep, long-drawn breaths, and then Althea's respiration grew barely perceptible. Anthony knelt on, motionless, scarcely drawing his own breath as he watched her.

Suddenly a slow shiver shook the girl's frame. She sighed, and her lips parted. Making a motion with her hands to her head, she bent and addressed him.

“Speak, O Agathos! priest and prophet, fourth among the Sacred Five—speak, for Cleino awaits thy words, and will transmit to thee the answer of the gods.”

## CHAPTER V

WHEN Althea came back to consciousness she saw her brother's eyes fixed upon her. He was standing at the edge of the platform in an attitude almost of adoration.

The moon had shifted, and was no longer framed by the south-east window. The log of wood which she had put on the fire was burned to white ashes, and the brazier sent forth only a thin curl of smoke through the air, which was still impregnated by the subtly acrid perfume. The expression in Anthony's face surprised and touched Althea.

"What has happened?" she asked. "I feel so queer."

He came nearer to her and resumed his ordinary manner.

"Can you remember anything?" he asked.

The clock of a neighbouring church struck the hour as he spoke—eight strokes. A small chiming clock in the room followed suit. Althea glanced at it. She knew that three-quarters of an hour must have elapsed since she had taken her seat on the platform. She put her hand to her forehead in a puzzled way.

"I feel as if I remembered something. Yet I don't know what. Have I been asleep? If so, I must have been dreaming."

"What are dreams? May they not be our truest realities?"

Althea was startled at Anthony's words. They seemed the echo of those which O'Neill had spoken.

"What are dreams?" Anthony continued. "It is the question I have been asking myself for years past. To-day you have given me in part the solution."

"Is that so, Anthony?" she exclaimed. "Really?"

"Dreams," he went on, "may be divided into two classes. One is the kind which belongs to the lower soul, called by the Kabalists *nephes*, which clings to the fleshly body and, collecting the events and impressions of the day, fashions them into an unreal jumble. These are the ordinary dreams of most people. The other class is inspired by the divine soul, which is the immortal *ego*, garnering in itself memories of many lives, and unfolding them to the inquirer under given conditions. That has long been my theory, but hitherto there has been no possibility of proving it. When you were a young girl, Althea, I hoped and believed that in you I might some day find the proof. My faith was justified, for in the last hour I have discovered in you that which may revolutionise life for both of us."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

He stopped in his agitated pacing, and, leaning against the mantelpiece, looked at her earnestly.

"Tell me," he said, "have you no dim remembrance of a life far back, in which you were very different from what you are now?"

"Yes, yes; I have occasionally had fancies about a far-back life—flashing pictures and sensations—so clear they were almost like remembrance. It has seemed to me that once I must have had great power in some way. Don't ridicule the idea, Anthony. I have never con-

fessed this before, even to you, for I feel deeply the absurdity, and yet it has been borne in on me that once, long ago, I was almost worshipped—that priests and kings bowed to me—that my word settled the fate of nations. Oh! I have thought it folly, but often it has seemed to me as though *that* were reality, and *this*—the monotonous existence of insignificant Althea Stanmount—were just the dream-state from which I must awaken.”

Anthony nodded comprehendingly.

“Put your memory back half an hour,” he said, “and tell me how much you remember in this consciousness of what happened in your other consciousness just now.”

Althea’s forehead puckered. Her eyes became fixed.

“Everything is shadowy. My impressions shift and change. I remember a place dimly—I have seen it often in dreams.”

“Describe it,” said Anthony.

Althea’s eyes took on the glazed look, the pupils turning slightly upwards.

“It is in another country. There are mountains and blue sea in the distance, and a long, green valley with a river running through it between the mountains and the sea. There is a small town, all white and gold, that juts out from the side of a mountain with two peaks above it and precipices below. I see a great temple with many white pillars and statues—its golden roof shines in the sun. . . . I have seen something like that temple before—here, in London. Ah! I know. It was the model of the Parthenon.”

“And the mountains—the two peaks?” said Anthony eagerly.

" Now I know—the names come to me. They are the peaks of Parnassus. The temple is the Temple of Apollo, at Delphi."

Anthony drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

" Go on. You are seeing that temple from another point of view than that which you described a little while ago. Tell me what you now see."

" I am in gardens—beautiful gardens which surround the temple. . . . I see many statues—statues of men—and statues of animals. . . . There is one near the entrance—a great bull made of gold or shining brass."

" The brazen bull by Theopropus of Ægina," Anthony interjected. " What more ? "

Althea continued—to Anthony's delight and wonder, for he recognised the accuracy of her report. She described the colossal brazen horse, which he identified as the Argive gift; the statues of Latona, Diana, and Apollo shooting their arrows at Tityus; the equestrian statue of Achilles and other images and trophies, till she seemed to grow bewildered.

" There are so many figures of horses . . . and figures of men and of gods. Here is a marble portico in which are brass shields and the beaks of ships. . . . Oh! I am tired. Is not that enough ? "

" No. Go forward—through the temple—and describe again to me the place in which you were when you spoke to me just now."

There was a long pause. Althea murmured of altars, of the sacred fire, of a gate through which she passed, of a descent. . . . Her words faltered. She seemed to become uneasy. Her limbs stirred nervously. Now a thin film of smoke rose from the embers of the brazier.



## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

Althea muttered to herself. She made a gesture with her hands over the dying brazier. Her lips contorted.

"There is no need to repeat the scene," said Anthony. "I only want you to remember the place in which you spoke to me just now."

After a further pause Althea answered in a muffled voice.

"I am in the Sanctuary. The air is thick. Vapour rises. The rock walls are round me. Laurel wreaths cover the Tripod. The Sacred Five are here. . . . Agathos, I have answered you already—no more, no more: it is tampering with the gods."

She rose, stretching her arms.

"Let me be free. I desire to go now," she murmured.

"Ay! I am coming—coming—Ion!"

Anthony, bending towards her to catch her faint utterances, made a gentle pass upwards towards her head.

"Enough—enough!" he said. "Come back, Althea."

Althea sank again into the chair; the troubled look slowly left her face; her eyelids blinked; her expression became more natural.

Anthony watched her in mingled exultation and anxiety.

At length she opened her eyes and looked about her like a sleep-walker awakened.

"I am cold; I want to go to the fire," she said.

Anthony helped her down from the model's stand, and she made her way to the fireplace, walking uncertainly. There, she seated herself again on the fender-stool, hugging the warmth. He took his own chair at the writing-table and continued watching her silently as

a physician might watch a patient recovering from a swoon.

Presently she spoke, briefly.

"Well, was it satisfactory? Why did you send me off again?"

"I did not intend to. I only wanted to see how much you could remember of what you had been telling me with regard to a former life of yours with which we got in touch."

"A former life! So that was your theory! And have I proved it for you?"

"For *me*, entirely. You went back twice to a place you had evidently known well in ancient Greece. Each time you described it under a different aspect."

"You mean—Delphi?"

"I mean Delphi, and more especially the Temple of Apollo at Delphi."

"I thought so. But surely you don't mean that *I* described Delphi?"

"With perfect accuracy, according to my knowledge of the classical authorities. I was reading Pausanius this afternoon." And he again indicated the pile of old leather-bound books at his elbow. "You described the situation and appearance of the town at the foot of Mount Parnassus with its twin peaks. You described the temple enclosure—certain distinctive features, such as the bull of Theopropus, the portico hung with shields and beaks of ships."

"But I never learned anything about Delphi. I have only had vague recollections of some such place. I don't know now why I am so sure of the name."

"Exactly. I hoped to bridge the consciousness of

the past and present—of Althea Stanmount and the Greek woman. But I failed, for you slipped back immediately into the Greek personality, which was plainly a powerful one. The first time—after I had put you into a trance—you spoke at once as your former self in the sacred cave of the temple where the Pythia gave her oracles."

"Anthony! Was *I* the Pythia?"

"That is the question," replied Anthony gravely. "I can only tell you that you described yourself as seated on the Tripod, half concealed by laurel garlands, and surrounded by a troupe of priests and augurs. When you first went into trance you re-enacted the part of the Pythia and gave sufficiently definite answers to the questions I put to you."

"What questions?" she cried.

"They concerned yourself chiefly. You prophesied your own success as a seeress in London."

Althea clasped her hands excitedly.

"Well, I believe I could give out true oracles if I tried in the right way."

Anthony stooped forward and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"I, too, believe that you could give out true oracles—if you tried in the right way. But there was a warning engraven on the Sanctuary at Delphi, Althea. You would do well to remember that. It said: '*Let no one approach these places but with pure hands.*'"

Althea shivered involuntarily.

"Yes, I know. Behind this gift of mine there lies some wonderful mystery. This afternoon it seemed to me a sacrilege—the way many of those people came,

eager to interrogate Fate for their amusement, without any idea that it might be very real, very serious. I don't know how to explain my feeling. It was as though I recognised something sacred in myself—as if I were standing on the threshold of holy precincts, where I must put off my shoes from off my feet, and which I, only I, had the right to enter."

Anthony nodded, and again there was a little silence, full of thought. Althea broke it.

"I wonder—if I was really a Delphic Pythia Anthony, what were you?"

The solemnity on Anthony's face deepened.

"You addressed me just now as 'Agathos'—fourth among the Sacred Five."

"What does that mean?"

"The Sacred Five were always stationed near the Pythia to receive and interpret her answers. The priesthood was perpetual in their families. They, too, prophesied, and I imagine that they had a great deal to do with the selection and training of the girls chosen as Pythias. You implied this in what you said to me. At the same time, it appeared that this Agathos went to you for the ratification of his auguries."

"Because I had the true spirit," cried Althea enthusiastically. "And I have it still. Yes, yes, Anthony; you spoke truly when you said this would revolutionise life for us. I shall get back my old inspiration; I shall be a power again. And you know—the priests lived on the sacrifices."

Anthony made no answer.

"I don't want money for its own sake," Althea went on hurriedly; "but how is it possible to develop such a

faculty when one is hampered by material cares? My soul needs the sunshine of prosperity so that it may bloom and bear fruit."

Anthony's face softened.

"You have had a hard life, I know, Althea, and perhaps I have not helped you as I should."

Althea smiled, but her eyes were moist.

"Then make up for it, dear old boy, by stage-managing my *début* as a modern Pythia."

He frowned rebukingly.

"I could never regard this as a mere frivolous enterprise, Althea. Where is your intuition if you cannot understand me?" He faltered, for he was naturally a very reserved man. Then he spoke in a great rush of feeling. "My deep conviction of a past of great spiritual ideals has been my chief belief and comfort in a murk of modern pessimism. It is, in my opinion, the base of all hopes of a World Religion. I cannot undertake this mission, Althea, unless it be in a truly religious spirit."

"Forgive me," she answered meekly. "I understand."

"Then you must realise that the Pythias of Delphi were carefully trained for a long time before they could be permitted to mount the sacred Tripod. They were strictly guarded from contaminating influences; their discipline was even more severe than that of the Roman Vestals. Are you prepared to renounce the world in spirit if not in actual fact—to lead the pure and simple life without indulgence of the flesh?"

Althea laughed tremulously.

"Dear Anthony! Could any life be simpler than mine? Wherein do I indulge the flesh? Not in dressing up my body, nor yet in feeding it. I have worn this

woollen frock for three years, and we have pickled mackerel and cold apple tart for our supper. Judge, then—do I shrink from austere fare ? ”

A faint smile played round Anthony's thin lips.

“ Pickled mackerel and old gowns have nothing to do with the truly austere life. You might wear silks if you wore them with a consecrated heart. And, indeed, silk, being a non-conductor, is a preventive of impure magnetism. On the subject of diet, I will read up the Pythagorean dicta.”

Althea laughed again.

“ If Pythagoras had lived in these days he might have dictated differently. All I know about his teaching is that he forbade his pupils to eat beans. Luckily, I'm not devoted to beans ! But I am ready to do anything, Anthony, to follow any discipline you think fit. For just imagine what this would mean to me. Compare the dead level of my daily round with the exciting possibilities of a modern Pythia's career ! ”

She sprang to her feet and flung out her arms in a passionate gesture, her pale face aglow.

“ I will be such an oracle as shall make all the fortune-tellers of London hide their heads in envy and despair,” she cried. “ I will be the living representative of your dead gods, Anthony, and the exponent of your mystic philosophy. The world will read your books and buy your pictures when I have taught it to understand them.”

“ In short,” he said with gentle humour, “ it shall be the night of the gods no longer.”

“ Come, then,” she exclaimed. “ It is past eight o'clock. Let us begin our austere life on that pickled mackerel.”

## CHAPTER VI

NEXT morning a rosy glow of hope illuminated the little flat in West Kensington.

Althea made her morning toilet blithely, and at breakfast she and Anthony discussed anew the engrossing subject with which the minds of both were filled.

The post brought Althea a pencilled note from Lady Ethel Lascene :

"You are really wonderful," her ladyship wrote. "It was foolish of me not to pay more attention to your warning, but then I should not have had the satisfaction of knowing it to be verified. And it *is* a satisfaction, though a painful one. I didn't see you again yesterday, and I expect you were still shut up, prophesying, when that delightful 'limb of mischief,' yours and my nephew, Cabby, contrived to bring about my disaster. Our coachman had been letting him drive the roans round the square, when I came out. Of course he had no business to let the boy show off, and I got alarmed and went too near, so that one of the horses kicked me! I really couldn't let Cabby know how much hurt I was; he seemed so cut up, poor little chap. But the doctor tells me that the tendons of the instep are badly injured, and that I shall not be able to put my foot to the ground for some time. Do come and see me the first afternoon you can. I'm so tremendously interested in your witchcraft, in spite of what it has cost me."

Here was confirmation of Cabby's own story! Althea read the note aloud to her brother. The news had a solemnising effect upon them both. Althea's exultation was mingled with awe. But during the morning, her practical duties in supplementing the inefficient services of their one maid gave Althea no time to think about her prospects as a seeress. She hated domestic work, but she did it because she equally hated dirt and disorder.

Luncheon, for the Stanmounts, was a light business. After it, Althea usually lounged by the fire, and amused herself with a novel or the newspaper till it was time to go out. To-day, however, she burrowed in the book-cases to find translations of ancient Greek writers, while Anthony, as he worked away at the drapery of his lay figure, cast an occasional glance at the blonde head bent over some musty tome.

By and by, the door bell tinkled, and there was a rustle of silken skirts across the hall. Then Jane, the general servant, appeared, to say Mrs. Raine had called.

"Mrs. Raine? Oh, yes." Althea rose to her feet, tumbling "Æschylus" back into his proper place. "You know Mrs. Raine, Anthony? The mother of Sylvia Raine—that pretty girl."

"Sylvia Raine!" repeated Anthony thoughtfully. "Yes, I remember. A sweet-faced girl—a perfect model for Persephone."

"They were at Everil's party yesterday," went on Althea; "and Mrs. Raine talked to me about that Sixth Sense Society she thinks such a lot of. Do you think I ought to belong to it?"

"As far as I have been able to glean," returned



Anthony, "the aim of the Sixth Sense Society is to obtain the sixth sense. Since you are already in possession of that, my dear, I do not see what good the society could be to you."

"Perhaps not, but Mrs. Raine is kind and amusing. Will you see her?"

"Not unless you particularly wish it. I am extremely busy."

Anthony was doing illustrations for a new translation of "The Odyssey." It was chiefly in this way that he made a livelihood, and he was known among scholars and publishers as an authority on classical costumes and archæology. Althea left him now to his work and went off, smiling complacently. She was flattered by Mrs. Raine's prompt call.

Mrs. Raine had been shown into a small room, looking east, which was daintily if inexpensively furnished. The chintz had a running pattern of honeysuckle and roses; it toned with the deep crimson carpet—a small square. Althea had stained the boards round the edge herself, and arranged the knick-knacks which had been given her from time to time. There was a fair show of miscellaneous literature, and some of Anthony's sketches adorned the pink walls. As Althea entered, Mrs. Raine rose from an arm-chair by the fireless grate. Jane had forgotten to light it. Althea exclaimed at this, and having greeted her visitor, she wasted scant time in apologies, but kneeling down upon the rug, lit the fire.

"I often have to do things like that," she explained, "but I am so sorry you should have been shown into a cold room."

Mrs. Raine did not look cold. She was handsome

and sumptuous in her brocade gown and sable-trimmed cloak. Althea regarded her wistfully.

"My dear Miss Stanmount," began Mrs. Raine, "I couldn't help coming to see you after the extraordinary fulfilment of your prophecy yesterday to Lady Ethel Lascene. You've heard?"

"From Lady Ethel herself. I'm so sorry."

"Yes. Yes, of course one is sorry. But you must see how important this is—what a confirmation of psychic truths!"

"At any rate, Lady Ethel will certainly believe in my prophecies," smiled Althea.

"My dear, we are bound to believe in them; if you could have heard Baron Heinrichfels talking about you! And we are so anxious," Mrs. Raine's voice dropped portentously. "Our very belief in the vindication of your marvellous power naturally awakens feelings of sorrow and anxiety for our beloved Sovereign. There! One cannot speak of that. But I may tell you that I have deferred ordering an eau-de-Nil evening dress which Sylvia had set her heart on."

"Poor Sylvia! And green is such a becoming colour to her."

Mrs. Raine looked at Althea searchingly.

"How calm you are! You seem to take these wonderful verifications as a matter of course. But those who know much more about these things than you or I will, I hope, explain to you what a far-reaching effect they may perhaps have."

Mrs. Raine laid her hand confidentially on Althea's sleeve.

"I deeply regret that none of the—Family—were at

your sister's yesterday. But I was so impressed by your powers that I wrote about you last night to the Father."

"The Father!" exclaimed Althea.

"My dear," said Mrs. Raine. "I am so confident of your becoming one of us that I may speak to you of the Family. The Family, as the Father often observes, will be a stupendous factor in twentieth century evolution.

"Do you mean the Sixth Sense Society?" inquired Althea.

"The S.S.S.? Not exactly, though all members of the Family belong also to the S.S.S. I might say that the S.S.S. teaches occult truth exoterically, while our mode is purely esoteric. In schools of occultism there has always been this distinction between the Initiated and the Unendowed."

"I have not been initiated. Do I then belong to the Unendowed?" asked Althea.

"You are wonderfully endowed," returned Mrs. Raine clasping Althea's hands. "It may be—oh! think and hope so—that you have a mission to fulfil. But the Father will decide."

"I don't see how," said Althea bluntly, "for I haven't the faintest idea who you mean."

"I speak of Father Frensham," replied Mrs. Raine, her tone conveying gentle rebuke. "The Founder and President Parent of the Family."

"President Parent!" repeated Althea, who found a difficulty in keeping her face solemn. "Does the possession of the sixth sense imply a committee of spiritual progenitors?"

"My dear!" said Mrs. Raine, still rebukingly, "surely you have heard of Father Frensham?"

"I'm very ignorant," returned Althea. "I'm afraid I can't place him at all."

Mrs. Raine made an impressive gesture.

"The Father occasionally honours my house by his presence at some special gathering of ripening souls."

"Indeed!" observed Althea blankly.

"Yes, I want you, dear Althea—you will let me call you Althea, won't you?—I want you to come with me now to the Home House in Gabriel Grove, Notting Hill. The Father is giving one of his delightful addresses there this afternoon."

"But I'm not a member of the Family, nor even of the Sixth Sense Society, and I thought you were most exclusive."

"This meeting is a general one," explained Mrs. Raine, "and I have already asked the Father's permission to bring you. I knew that as soon as he heard of your psychic gifts he would be willing you should come."

"But if it's a matter of favour," said Althea, "I don't think I care about going."

Mrs. Raine looked pained:

"My dear," she said, "you do not rightly appreciate the privilege, but you will do so—you will do so. The Unendowed are by nature unfitted to take part with us. But you are not of these."

"Who do you mean by the Unendowed?" asked Althea.

Mrs. Raine waved her hand vaguely.

"The world at large," she answered. "Comparatively few people, alas! have even the rudiments of the

sixth sense. You have already evolved it in so marked a degree that it would be wrong to neglect the means for its higher cultivation."

"Ah!" cried Althea with a quick indrawing of her breath. "You think, then, that I should be right to turn it to account?"

"You would be extremely culpable were you to ignore so sublime a path of progress," replied Mrs. Raine. "I propose to call a special gathering at my house to-morrow evening, in order that you may have the opportunity of giving us a further example of your remarkable power. It is a key with which to unlock worlds, Althea. The whole universe is yours to conquer."

Althea was torn between a desire to laugh and a sense of the underlying truth of these words.

"I know," she answered gravely. "But I've been thinking things over, Mrs. Raine, and it seems to me that this power of mine is an uncommon sort of thing and ought to be treated in a serious manner."

"That is exactly the spirit of which the Father would approve," cried Mrs. Raine. "I see that you realise the solemn responsibility of such a gift as yours. Everything you say encourages me in certain hopes; but we will talk of these later. I must really insist upon your coming with me to-day. You can have no idea of the invigoration and support that you will derive from the Father's discourse. And in such a spirit you will find nothing but benefit from giving a few simple manifestations among friends to-morrow night. Now do run and put on your hat, and come with me to the Home House. My brougham is waiting."

Althea disliked being taken so much for granted, but

she had a burning wish to go. She thought she might get some useful hints from the lecture, and the evening party at Mrs. Raine's would certainly be interesting. Nevertheless, she looked doubtful.

"I must ask Anthony," she said. "I suppose your invitation for to-morrow night includes my brother?"

"Of course. I shall be charmed to see your brother. I would have mentioned him, but I fancied that Mr. Stanmount was a recluse who never went anywhere."

"That is almost true," said Althea, "but I will do my best to persuade him."

She went back to the studio, her whole form quivering with suppressed excitement.

"Anthony! Do put that brush down for a moment and listen to me. I seem to have wakened up the world yesterday. Mrs. Raine has come on purpose to take me with her to a lecture of the Sixth Sense Society, where I'm to be introduced to the father of all the prophets. And that's not everything. She wants you and me to go to a party at her house to-morrow night—'a gathering of ripening souls,' she described it. And I am to play the oracle! Will you come with me? Say 'Yes.'" Althea had drawn close to her brother's side, and was tapping his shoulder.

Anthony put his arm round the girl.

"Tell me more about it, Althea."

Althea began quoting Mrs. Raine, finishing excitedly, "Couldn't you take some Greek properties along with us, Anthony, and arrange a classic effect? You know I should look the part. We'll burn some of that stuff again and wake the divine frenzy."

He was very grave.

"Do you really wish this, Althea?"

"*Do I wish it?* I believe it is my destined chance for making Althea Stanmount famous. Oh! help me, Anthony. Let me start at once on my career as an oracle."

Anthony was silent. She noted the hesitation in his face.

"I know what you are thinking," she said. "But my hands are pure." She held them out. "Help me to keep them so. I will practise any austerity you please, and in all things I will be your submissive pupil."

The scholar and the mystic in him rose at her appeal. She stooped and laid her pale yellow head against his dark beard. His arm tightened round her.

"My dear, if you want my help you shall have it. I will not fail you, Althea. Prove your inspirational power if you so desire, but pray heaven that it be from the high gods."

## CHAPTER VII

"Is Sylvia a member of 'the Family,'" inquired Althea, as Mrs. Raine's brougham drove up Gabriel Grove.

"Alas, no," said Mrs. Raine sadly. "Sylvia has small occult sympathies. Sylvia must as yet, I grieve to say, be classed with the Unendowed."

"Mr. Dracott is also, I presume, among the Unendowed," remarked Althea, with a laugh that was faintly cynical.

Mrs. Raine sighed.

"It is the one drawback in a delightful personality," she murmured. And then she leaned forward with an earnest expression. "Dear Althea, I cannot help feeling that it may be reserved for you to convince many people of the sublime truths towards which we sixth sense seekers are ever stretching out. Does that not embolden you?"

Fortunately Althea was not required to answer, for just then the carriage stopped, the door was swung open, and the footman touched his hat.

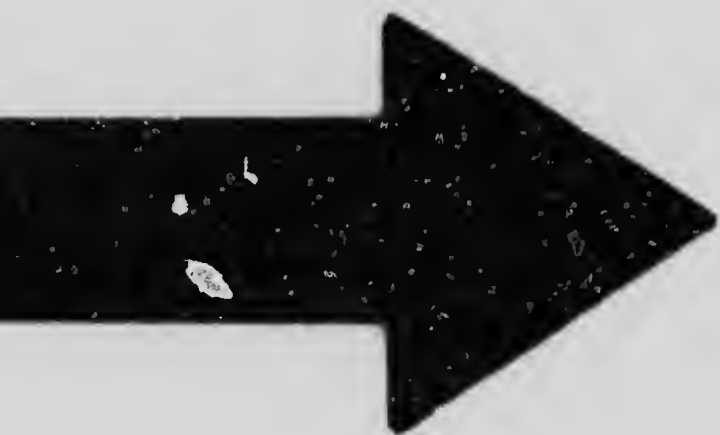
"There seems to be quite a crowd," said Althea nervously, as they got out.

"People come early for the chance of having a few words with the Father before he begins his lecture. He is kind enough to receive any particularly pressing case in his own study, and that is what I shall petition for you."

Althea's face was a mixture of amusement and con-

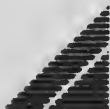
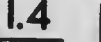
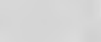
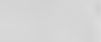
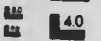
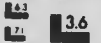
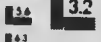
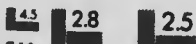
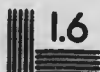






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sternation, but she had no time to reply. As they entered the hall they were met by a sallow man with sandy hair and ill-kempt moustache. He had large, prominent eyes, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles. To Althea's surprise he addressed Mrs. Raine by her christian name.

"Ah! Mirabel, I am rejoiced to see you. Berenice had a flash along the invisible wires which told her that there is something specially significant about your coming to-day."

"Really!" Mrs. Raine looked pleurably excited. "I am delighted to hear that dear Berenice still shows signs of psychic activity."

"Alas! It must not be encouraged," proceeded the sandy-haired man portentously. "Her precious health is our first consideration. Only one so gifted as Berenice, and I need not say," he added with a passing glance at Althea, "that such a person would be hard—could realise the exhaustion which follows upon the effort to concentrate her occult faculties."

"Indeed, yes. But let me present the friend I have brought. Althea Stanmount—Arcaster Ellis."

Althea bowed rather stiffly, but the man held out his hand.

"I am pleased to welcome you," he said. "Berenice is in the tea-room. Won't you go in?"

Mrs. Raine led the way, and Althea found herself in a long, sombre-looking room with a table across one end, where a couple of maids dispensed tea and coffee. There were a number of people present, and Althea thought she had never seen so diversified a gathering. A few very fashionable and well-dressed women were prominent

—the type of London lady who is always in search of a sensation. There were also some weirdly appalled and intense looking persons—survivals of the æsthetic movement, as well as various representatives of advanced womanhood. Epicene women in mannish garments abounded, also epicene men of feminine air and voice. Some breezy country dames were staring about them with a frank air of interest, and several Americans, who might be known by their spiritual eyes and strong individuality—not in the least resembling certain Paris-bred Americans whom Althea had met in Mrs. James Lascene's drawing-room. Besides all these, there was a rank and file of old and young middle-class women who obviously came from the suburbs. The men were in the minority, and did not present such varied types.

Mrs. Raine craned her neck in and out amongst the people.

"Ah! there is dear Berenice," she cried, and went towards a largely-built young woman wearing a purple tea-gown much trimmed with imitation lace, who was stationed in a recess beside the fireplace and surrounded by a group of people all trying to talk to her at once. Berenice had a large face, heavily featured, but redeemed by a pair of fine, greenish-coloured eyes, which roamed in a restless, observant manner from side to side.

Mrs. Raine took her hand, and there was a half-whispered colloquy between them. Berenice conversed with an assured air, displaying a set of large, white, even teeth and a broad red line of gum. Althea felt convinced that she should not like Berenice. She responded reluctantly when Mrs. Raine drew her forward. Berenice acknowledged the introduction in a patronising way.

"Mrs. Raine tells me that you have psychic faculties," she said, her large, greenish eyes wandering over Althea's unfashionable attire. "Probably you have more leisure than I, and are therefore able to give yourself up freely to their development. I have many claims, both social and domestic, to consider."

Althea smiled. Apparently Berenice was not an ardent sixth sense votary. "It naturally grieves me," continued Berenice, "that I can no longer be the mouth-piece for the Father, but my doctor disapproves of the trance condition, and I am bound to consider my health."

"True—most true," returned Mrs. Raine. "Well, perhaps the Father may be provided with another mouth-piece. And if the succession were secured, you would be willing to abdicate, would you not, Berenice?"

"Perfectly willing," replied Berenice with promptitude. "I should even be pleased to assist in training any approved psychic who might be able in *some* measure to take my place."

Althea stiffened, but the idea tickled her. She bent her head over a cup of tea—bitter and half cold—to hide her amusement.

The stream of people had been changing, and the room was a buzz of talk. Berenice was soon drawn into the vortex of new arrivals. A queer company they seemed to Althea, and their conversation an incomprehensible jargon of odd phrases, mystical catch-words, and unheard-of creeds.

Mrs. Raine sidled up to a lean young woman with a determined air, who wore a golf cape strapped across her hollow chest and hanging clumsily down her back. She had discarded her hat—a battered felt, with a dragged

bunch of cock's feathers—which reposed upon the coal-scuttle while she strode about amongst the people, apparently with the desire of dislodging anyone who had got into a comfortable corner.

Mrs. Raine tentatively accosted her, asking whether Father Frensham was disengaged and would receive a novice. The young woman replied in strident tones that the Father had already three claimants waiting to speak to him, and certainly could not see anybody else.

"Then we had better go upstairs," said Mrs. Raine meekly, "before all the good seats are taken."

"Who was that outrageous person?" asked Althea.

"S-sh! She is co-secretary with Ancaster Ellis," answered Mrs. Raine in a whisper. "She does an immense amount of work for the society, and is one of its firmest props."

"So I should imagine," laughed Althea. "Samson holding up the gates of Gaza."

Mrs. Raine shook her head with indulgent reproof.

They had paused upon the threshold of a large double drawing-room, in which the chairs were placed in rows, leaving an open space before the fireplace in the larger room and a diagonal passage across from the entrance door. By the fireplace Althea saw a tall, slender man of olive complexion with large, soft brown eyes, fixed upon her as she came up the room with Mrs. Raine. He bowed with what seemed exaggerated courtesy, his shapely olive-skinned hands folded upon his breast. Never had Althea seen eyes so gentle and yet so forceful in their gaze. They seemed to read her soul. But he did not speak, and she passed on in Mrs. Raine's wake, feeling that the dark eyes were following her.

Mrs. Raine stood irresolute, surveying the seats. Such of the audience as were assembled had placed themselves modestly on stiff chairs in the rear. The most comfortable chairs and couches were empty, and drawn up round a small table with a carafe of water and a glass upon it, which was set immediately in front of a carved oaken chair.

"That is the Father's place," said Mrs. Raine. "We will try to get near him."

"This will do nicely, won't it?" said Althea, pointing to a large old-fashioned arm-chair set well to the fore; as she spoke she drew a smaller one to its side. But Mrs. Raine shook her head again admonishingly.

"That seat is reserved for Berenice," she said. "The Father likes her to be near him so that she may indicate to him by a sign should the Inner Voice speak."

"The *Inner Voice*?" questioned Althea.

"The Inner Voice speaks in Berenice," explained Mrs. Raine, and placed herself upon a straight-backed settee.

"Do you mean the woman in the purple tea-gown, who, I suppose, is the wife of the sandy-haired young man that addressed you by your Christian name?"

"We do not recognise conventional distinctions in the Family," returned Mrs. Raine. "It is a beautiful idea."

"Oh, very. Only the practice comes unexpectedly to a stranger. But tell me, is Berenice, as you call her, mistress of this house?"

"Berenice has always looked after the Father's domestic comfort," said Mrs. Raine. "She has been truly a daughter to him, and much more. Her psychic faculties



were developed under his care, and she is used in trance as his mouthpiece for our general instruction—at least, she *was* until she married Ancaster Ellis.”

“That must have been a blow to the Family,” said Althea. “I wonder she did not manage to combine matrimony and inspiration.”

“I fear they are occasionally incompatible. Dear Berenice is not strong just now, and the doctor will not allow her to be placed in the trance condition.”

“So there can be no more oracles until you have found a new Pythoness,” said Althea. “I’m beginning to understand.”

“I knew you would!” exclaimed Mrs. Raine ecstatically. “When you see the Father, you will realise the greatness of the privilege that may be yours.”

Meanwhile, people were filing along, and the room was almost full. Althea observed that the foremost arm-chairs were kept specially for the more fashionable ladies, who were shown to these places by Ancaster Ellis. Among them was the blonde neurotic-looking woman whom Lord Isleworth had nicknamed “the Brinvilliers.” She was extremely rich, Althea knew, and now Mrs. Raine told her that Mrs. Grainger was an ardently generous and much appreciated devotee of the Sixth Sense Society.

“So it is ‘Way for the Gold Gods,’ even in the bosom of the Family, which says it doesn’t admit conventional distinctions,” thought Althea cynically. She could not help being sorry for the unfortunate dowdies of the gathering, who were being hustled about in the rear by the other secretary. From watching these manœuvres, Althea’s eyes were suddenly drawn to the soft yet piercing

gaze of the dark-skinned man who had greeted her entrance. In a remote corner he stood with folded hands and dignified mien, an image of lofty and benignant calm. Touching Mrs. Raine's arm, Althea asked:

"Who is that Eastern looking man with the beautiful face?"

Mrs. Raine followed her glance.

"Oh, that is one of our Indian members—Hanwhat Singh. He is here as a delegate from the Oriental branch. I'm told that he is a very advanced disciple. We have several classes or degrees, according to our grade of endowment, which may be moral, intellectual, or psychic."

It flashed humorously on Althea that Mrs. Raine's grade of endowment must certainly be moral. It could not be intellectual, and presumably was not psychic. But what, she wondered, was that of Hanwhat Singh? It was at least clear that he did not desire the chief seats in the synagogue.

Berenice entered just then, making a great stir as she came. Everybody looked at her as her husband adjusted the cushions of the big arm-chair, and she sank luxuriously into it. Then all heads turned again to the door, for the Father himself was entering—a picturesque figure in a monkish coat of rough grey serge, finished with cords; a grey beard sweeping his chest, and a small cap of grey velvet surmounting a venerable head. He bowed to right and left as he walked up the room, and the company rose in respectful salute. The Father had prominent eyes of pale blue, very clear and set widely apart, which gave him a look of simplicity.

Taking his stand at the side of the table, he raised his arms, uttering a short formula in some tongue unknown

to Althea, at the same time performing certain significant signs with the first and last fingers of his right hand. He then stood silent, his clear, light blue eyes ranging the room. They rested at last upon Mrs. Raine and Althea. Mrs. Raine leaned excitedly towards Althea and whispered :

" You will remember, my dear, that we do not turn our backs upon the Father."

" Our *what?*" exclaimed Althea, startled.

" Our *backs*," repeated Mrs. Raine modestly. " If the Father summons us you will retreat facing him."

Althea's sense of humour rose.

" Must I also curtsy and kiss his hand?" she asked.

But there was no time for any answer. The sandy-haired secretary summoned Mrs. Raine to the table where, balancing herself spasmodically with the tips of her fingers upon its edge, she bent, almost on one knee. The Father beamed upon her in paternal fashion. Althea could not hear what passed between them, but a moment later the secretary signed to her to approach. Althea had a wild wish that the floor would open and swallow her, but she went forward with apparent unconcern.

Father Frensham's large, light blue eyes turned upon her. The solemn ingenuousness of his expression nearly made Althea laugh outright. She contrived, however, to maintain a becoming demeanour, and bowed when she was addressed.

" I am pleased, daughter, to welcome a new aspirant towards mystic development—one who, our valued Mirabel informs me, already possesses some of the preliminary endowments necessary to advancement." Father Frensham spoke in a measured oratorical manner.

"You will soon learn," he went on suavely, "the privileges we offer and the rules which bind our members together."

"Oh! but—" stammered Althea, "I fear I am not prepared to join a confraternity."

"Your timidity does you credit, daughter," smiled the Father with bland approval. "I shall take the opportunity of watching you to-morrow at Sister Mirabel's, when I shall judge of your endowments. The possession of the sixth sense is comparatively rare at the present stage of evolution, and should be regarded as a precious talent to be cultivated for the benefit of select souls such as we number in our ranks."

Then with a wave of his long-fingered, yellowish hand, the Father signified that Althea's audience was concluded.

Forgetting Mrs. Raine's injunction, she turned and walked hastily to her seat. As she sat down, she saw that lady duly backing as though from the presence of royalty, and was excessively amused at the horrified glances directed towards herself. Mrs. Raine, however, when she realised what her *protégée* had done, looked so hurt that Althea was remorseful.

"I'm awfully sorry," she whispered apologetically, "but I'm not accustomed to go to Court, and I didn't remember." She could say no more at the moment, for the Father had begun his address, which he gravely entitled, "The Evolution of our Younger Brethren."

It took Althea some time to discover that the younger brethren referred to were four-footed. It had never occurred to her that she had any responsibilities towards animals, as neither she nor Anthony cared to keep pets,

considering that the limitations of a flat were ill-suited to them. But now her thoughts drifted to a disreputable-looking Irish terrier much beloved by her nephew Cabby, and familiarly known as "the Hooligan." According to Father Frensham it was the duty of everyone concerned to inspire "the Hooligan" with a sense of his true position in the universe. Then there was her niece Nan's cat, Felida, otherwise "the Fair Persian"—a lady of sumptuous ease, who had acquired a habit of choosing the softest corners and the tittiest bits, and who would be called upon to suffer in consequence through countless incarnations in other forms. Althea wondered whether she herself had ever been a dog or a cat. A good many women might have developed from cats, she fancied, and she mentally traced the possible ancestry of several of her acquaintances.

Thence, it was natural to drift into conjecture about the people present. Mrs. Ancaster Ellis looked extremely comfortable among the cushions of her big arm-chair. Once she stirred at a movement of the wealthy Mrs. Grainger who sat next her and, with an intimate gesture, handed her scent-bottle to that important person. There was nothing remarkable about Mrs. Ancaster Ellis, but as a medium between gods and men she provided food for speculation. So certainly mundane were her interests, that it was difficult to picture her in the capacity of priestess. Althea was touched by the unsatisfied, eager look in some of the faces round her.

The words came into her mind: "Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?" One middle-aged woman was nodding in apparent confirmation of the lecturer's theories. Althea perceived that she was suffer-

ing from a kind of palsy. She averted her eyes, wondering if the poor creature found consolation in the hope that she might some day be incarnated in a wholesome, unafflicted body.

Several elderly ladies were dozing surreptitiously, for the room was ill-ventilated. None of the windows was open, and fumes of gas from half-lowered jets, combined with the heat of a large fire, made the atmosphere oppressive and stupefying. The energetic co-secretary, stationed near the door, kept a stern eye upon the back rows and frowned at any unfortunate culprit who coughed or fidgeted. Althea wished that she would enforce as rigorously the attention of those in front; but the front rows were apparently privileged. The aristocratic dames seated there whispered together, played with their jewellery and yawned. A few seemed interested in the lecture, but it soon became too technical for any but the Initiated to follow. Althea wondered why Father Frensham did not employ English synonyms instead of unintelligible Sanscrit words and phrases. His diction was laboured, its periods balanced to a nicety, but expressed in a stilted and complicated fashion, which seemed a pity, for he was a very earnest old gentleman. The back rows were, on the whole, far the most attentive. But many of the people in them had an unbrushed, unwashed look, and Althea could not help thinking that the Sixth Sense Society might have been pushed to better advantage had its members paid more attention to the care of the bodies they were inhabiting, than to problematical discourses concerning former garments of flesh which they might or might not have worn and cast aside.

When the lecture was over, the company began to discuss the evolutionary status of animals in the moon when that orb had been a living planet. But what did it matter, thought Althea, whether you had been an animal in the moon or not—whether you had lived a thousand lives or one? The practical point was to get the most out of the life you were living. It was surely wiser to improve the present than to worry over a problematical past. She was relieved when she discovered that the meeting was breaking up.

Mrs. Raine took her place in the string of people passing before the chair of Father Frensham, beside whom stood Berenice. Every person bent low in a deep farewell obeisance. This sort of ceremonial jarred upon Althea. She revolted against what she considered a ludicrous form of servility, and was for a moment determined to take no part in it. But she did not wish to be discourteous, and shrank from drawing attention upon herself, so she bowed hurriedly, and slipped past to the door as quickly as she could.

"It's worse than making gods of the Roman emperors," she thought to herself. "I call it just degrading."

A low, deep voice behind her answered her unspoken thought.

"Those who see deepest into the human heart are filled with loving pity for the poor striving ones who, in their blind worship of form, adore in reality the spirit for which all are seeking."

At the first words Althea looked round to see the beautiful face of Hanwhat Singh at her shoulder, his soft, penetrating eyes fixed upon her. She met his gaze frankly.

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

It seemed quite natural that he should know what she was thinking.

"That may be so," she said. "But what good is there in—all *this*? Serious-minded people in search of truth want something more elevating to lay hold of."

Hanwhat Singh smiled a benignant smile.

"Good is in all things," he replied. "He who so desires may gain good when and where he will. But truth is not easily apprehended."

The departing crowd pressed round the pair as they paused near the doorway. Mrs. Raine was beckoning to Althea. Hanwhat Singh lowered his head and spoke yet more softly.

"You also, madam, if I mistake not, are in search of truth. While there is time, tread with reverence and caution the path you would enter. It will lead you to an altar, but remember that upon every altar a sacrifice is required."



## CHAPTER VIII

"THERE'S one thing I don't want, Anthony," said Althea, as they journeyed jerkily in a four-wheeler from Urania Mansions to Mrs. Raine's house near the top of Cromwell Road. "Please arrange that I am not poked away in a room by myself as I was at Everil's. I want to see and be seen. I should like to stand on a pedestal and show off my Greek draperies! You ought to have been a man-milliner, Anthony. The poor ghost of Helen of Sparta must have inspired you when you laid in a stock of white Chinese crêpe at Shanghai."

The brother and sister and a sewing-woman had spent a busy day in the fashioning of Althea's costume. Anthony Stanmount had devoted a legacy of £2,000 to the satisfaction of his longing for travel, an improvidence which he never regretted. During his voyage round the world, and a year divided between Italy and Greece, he had collected a store of miscellaneous properties. Amongst other treasures he was the possessor of an antique gold fillet and of a necklace and armlets copied from ancient designs. These he had taken out to-day for the decking of Althea.

"I will do my best," he said, in answer to her appeal, but he was rather disappointed that she was not more impressed by the solemnity of her vocation. He could not quite comprehend Althea's point of view.

Mrs. Raine had begged them to come early in order

to arrange plans for the evening, but almost immediately after they arrived at her house, Mr. Dracott, who had evidently been dining there *en famille*, sauntered into the drawing-room. He stood apart, ostensibly studying a collection of miniatures while the other four chatted together.

"Your dress is perfect," said Sylvia to Althea with girlish frankness. "I never saw you look so well. It suits you exactly. And what exquisite gold things!"

She touched Althea's armlets, and stared at her with astonishment.

Althea's Chinese crêpe robe was lustrous and costly. It fell round her form in severe but graceful folds. The upper garment, hanging loosely from the bust, was bordered with gold embroidery and fastened on the shoulders with antique clasps. The ancient necklace clasped her throat; the fillet bound her head and confined the classic bands of her pale hair. Though slender, Althea was correctly proportioned as a statue, and her cameo-like features showed to the best advantage above her Greek dress. She knew she looked well, and did not need Sylvia to tell her so. In fact, she paid small attention to what Sylvia was saying, for her grey eyes, bright with unusual excitement, were wandering towards Mrs. Raine and Anthony. The two stood conversing animatedly at the end of the drawing-room, where three or four steps led up to the conservatory, the entrance draped with curtains and prettily framed by tall, spreading palms. Anthony was testing the curtains of gaily-coloured Syrian stuff to see whether they would draw closely over the opening.

Seeing Althea's pre-absorption, Sylvia turned with a charming air of intimacy towards Mr. Dracott.

"You weren't long over your cigar. And you are just in time—I hear wheels below. The freaks are arriving."

"The freaks!" exclaimed the young man.

"People with six fingers and six toes are freaks," laughed Sylvia. "What is the difference between six toes and six senses?"

"A sixth toe would be apparent, but the sixth sense is not," returned Dracott absently. He was gazing admiringly at Althea in her graceful Greek draperies. Sylvia flushed a soft pink—the colour of her own filmy apple-blossom frock.

"Let me introduce you to Miss Stanmount," she said.

Althea returned Dracott's admiring gaze with considerable interest.

"Miss Stanmount told fortunes at Mrs. Lascene's the other day when the palmist was taken ill," explained Sylvia. "I can't think how you did it," she added to Althea. "It *was* clever of you."

Just then Mrs. Raine approached them and spoke hurriedly, one eye on the door.

"Sylvia, dear, I think I hear Hawkhurst bringing someone up. Take my place for a moment. Althea, your brother and I have settled everything. We have decided that the conservatory is *the* place. You can easily amuse yourself by watching people through the curtains before you begin, for if you don't mind, Mr. Stanmount and I both feel that it will be best for you to remain behind till the moment comes for you to reveal yourself—on account of the mixed magnetism, you know."

Althea nodded.

"Mr. Stanmount tells me you will give us some experiments in psychometry. Have you ever seen anything of the sort, Mr. Dracott?"

"Never," replied the young man quietly.

Mrs. Raine shook her finger at him.

"Ah, sceptic! You will be convinced to-night. I told people to be here punctually at ten, Althea. Now you shall explain to Mr. Dracott what psychometry means, if he will take you into the conservatory. Your brother will join you presently—I see he is talking to Sylvia. And oh! Althea, *remember!* The Father's eye will be upon you." With this last mysterious injunction, Mrs. Raine hurried to take up her position as hostess.

Althea laughed. Then she encountered Mr. Dracott's candid eyes returning from a long look at Sylvia. Their expression was observant, even affectionate, but showed no embarrassment.

"Does he care for her?" Althea asked herself, and was unable to decide.

Dracott and Althea strolled away and settled themselves behind the curtains in the conservatory, whence through the gauzy mesh which divided close-woven stripes of blue and violet they could watch the rapid filling of the room below. The conservatory was dim, having only two or three yellow Japanese lanterns suspended among the foliage of palms and ferns. There was a large shrub of scented verbena, and Althea crushed a leaf or two in her fingers and inhaled the delicate odour, which always gave her a sense of vague remembrance. In the centre was placed a carved oak chair, something the shape of a Roman curule seat, and before it was the

brazier filled with dried herbs and incense. Althea looked with passionate interest at these preparations. She was not nervous; on the contrary, she felt an odd consciousness of power.

Meanwhile, a crowd was collecting in the drawing-room. Father Frensham had already arrived, and with him came Mr. and Mrs. Ancaster Ellis. Althea was glad to see that the other co-secretary of the "S.S.S." did not put in an appearance. Perhaps she had not been invited. The party seemed to be a mixture of what Mrs. Raine had called "the Initiated" and "the Unendowed," and it amused Althea to trace out the classification. Among the latter she might certainly count her sisters. There was Mrs. James Lascene, who struck just the right note of elegance, and little Mrs. Moggs, captivatingly pretty with forget-me-nots in her hair, flirting audaciously with Lord Isleworth. Baron Heinrichfels, with his wife—a stout, fair woman of the type of a Dutch madonna—sat near Mrs. James Lascene, while big Johnson Moggs stood chatting genially with insignificant James Lascene, the pair looking not unlike a sturdy mastiff and a Yorkshire terrier. The room soon became thronged with people, all talking energetically to each other. Most of those in front were already seated, while the larger number craned their heads eagerly behind. Father Frensham, in his monkish grey robe, was smiling blandly at his devoted spiritual daughter Berenice—rather over-dressed—who sat by his side, her greenish eyes roving round the scene. Althea saw that nothing escaped her, and that from time to time she whispered confidential comments into the Father's ear. They had been placed among the foremost, and Althea wondered what they would think of

the psychic experiments she was about to essay. Keenly as she desired to succeed, Althea rather hoped the Family would disapprove of her.

"You have not told me what sort of conjuring trick it is with which you are going to amuse this wonder-seeking company," remarked Dracott. "Psychometry, don't you call it?"

"Mrs. Raine called it so—I did not. And I do not perform conjuring tricks, Mr. Dracott."

"I beg your pardon," he said hastily. "But you tell people's fortunes by palmistry, don't you? I know something about that."

"Really?" smiled Althea.

"Well, I ought to. I once travelled through New Zealand with a conjuror as his assistant. Perhaps you wouldn't believe, Miss Stanmount, that I've had a lot of ups and downs in my life. That was before I came into Dracott—by a fluke, you know—the foundering of a yacht with two generations in the direct succession on board. I was a distant cousin, without twopence to my name."

"What a change!" murmured Althea.

"Aye, from a conjuror's show to my dear old Keep! It was a shooting lodge of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, rebuilt in Elizabeth's reign, battered to pieces by Cromwell, and restored in the times of Charles and James. Excuse my prosing about it, but I'm awfully fond of my home, though it has only been mine for so short a time. I should like you to see it, Miss Stanmount."

"And I'm sure I should enjoy seeing it; but I'm afraid there's not much chance of that," replied Althea.

"Why not? The Chaunterells' place isn't far off,

and your sister is married to one of the Lascenes. And then Mrs. Raine has a house in the next village to mine. I should say it's extremely likely that you'll be down in those parts."

"Perhaps. But tell me about your conjuror."

"Oh, he wasn't much to speak of. But his wife was a mystery-lady who told fortunes. That's how I got to know some of the secrets of the trade."

"Please let me share your knowledge," said Althea in her most provocative manner.

Dracott's eyes, which were honest as those of a dog, gave her a perplexed look.

"Perhaps all mystery-ladies haven't the same methods," he replied. "Cuteness and observation carried her through. Is that how you manage?"

Althea laughed cynically.

"It's not much use my explaining my methods to you, for it would take a great deal of convincing to make you believe in me."

"I'm not so sure. But do tell me—what is psychometry?"

Althea paused a moment. Then she said, speaking slowly, word by word:

"I believe that the whole universe is one great soul, which has, of course, its own gigantic memory. All that happens is stored for ever within that wonderful memory. Any bit of matter, even inanimate, must be a part of the Universal Whole. Therefore, every morsel has its own fragment of memory."

"I know what you mean," said Dracott. "I've had a kind of idea of that myself. Places, things—old furniture, for instance, and bits of bric-à-brac—stones

even—they do give out sorts of distinctive feelings of their own. Is that psychometry?"

"It's the beginning of it, at all events. If you were to give a genuine psychometrist any particular object she would be able, in most cases, to tell you its history, and that of at least some people connected with it."

"Can you do that?" he asked, looking at her very keenly.

"I believe so, but I can't remember afterwards what I have said. I go into a kind of trance, in which my 'demon' becomes active."

"Your *demon*?"

"Or what the ancient Greeks called their 'demon'—Socrates, for example."

"Socrates? Oh, that old chap," said Dracott vaguely. "His demon was rather an inquisitive bore, wasn't it? The truth is, Miss Stanmount, I'm not great on ancient Greeks. They don't knock about the Colonies, as I've had to do. Isn't there a poet who said Nature was his book and Life his schoolmaster? That has been my experience."

"Nature is a fascinating book," agreed Althea thoughtfully. "But Life, alas! is often a most cruel schoolmaster. That does not seem to have been your case, however, for you've won a big prize."

"Yet there's one better worth having," he answered. "At least, I've always thought so."

"What is that?" she asked.

He smiled rather sheepishly. "I should say—love."

At that moment Anthony Stanmount appeared between the curtains. And there was Sylvia, standing at the foot of the steps. She seemed perturbed. A shadow darkened her pretty eyes.



"Please tell Mr. Dracott," she said, "that he mustn't stay in the tabernacle."

Dracott had sprung up and faced Anthony.

"My brother," said Althea. "Mr. Dracott."

"I am sorry to turn you out," said Anthony courteously, "but my sister ought to have a few minutes to herself before we begin."

"Of course," replied Dracott. "Don't get stage-fright, Miss Stanmount. You look the part splendidly."

"Thank you," smiled Althea. "All the same, you don't believe in me," she added coquettishly.

"I am going to give you a test," said Dracott in a grave tone. "It's a pretty severe one, for you will have to tell me something that only I and a dead man know."

Then the curtains closed behind him, and the brother and sister were alone. They glanced at each other meaningly. Both were tense with excitement. It was possible that young Dracott's test might defeat their hopes. At the least, it promised difficulty. But Althea's confidence in herself was not easily shaken, and her brother's belief in her gave her moral support. However, there was no time to talk the matter over. Already the buzz of voices in the room beyond was growing loud and impatient. Anthony signed to Althea to take the oak chair while he lighted the brazier at her feet. Soon the aromatic perfume stole to her nostrils, intoxicating her. As in a dream, she could hear the rise and fall of the voices, which now seemed very far off. Then all sounds died away, and Althea had the sense of floating into distant space.

## CHAPTER IX

THE drawing apart of the curtains disclosed Althea sitting upright in the oak chair, her hands resting upon its arms. Her eyes were closed, and the burning brazier at her feet sent up thin curls of smoke, diffusing a faint incense-like odour. The white-draped form, illuminated by two electric lamps, showed clearly against the background of palms and flowering plants.

Anthony stood by his sister, his gaze upon her, his arms extended. He made one or two slow passes, and the girl's bosom fluttered beneath her robe. She heaved a long sigh, audible to those in front. Every eye was strained upon her. Baron Heinrichfels, who had helped to open the curtains, gazed eagerly at the charming picture she presented. Dracott, on the other side, watched her intently. Both would have remained standing near the stage had not Mrs. Raine, leaning forward, begged them to go back to their seats. As they did so, Anthony lowered his arms and moved near to the edge of the utmost step.

He had intended to speak the merest introductory formula, but as he described the gift of divination which ruled over ancient peoples, so that the Delphic oracle became a power deciding the destiny of nations, the man's voice deepened, and he seemed to be possessed by the spirit of Hellas. There rose before his hearers, as his vivid words portrayed it, a vision of the Eternal

South, of sun-kissed, sapphire sea ; of pallid marbles set amid starry myrtle rods on shores where Aphrodite reigned ; of green-wreathed youths running with naked breasts, of tall, straight maidens, fresh and fair in the bloom of their beauty. Carried away by his passion for the old warm land of ideal loveliness, his dark, distinguished features transfigured by his transcendental beliefs, Anthony Stanmount stood self-revealed, a totally different creature from the taciturn man of letters he was supposed to be. People began asking each other in whispers whether this was really the Anthony Stanmount who had the reputation of being a rather disagreeable recluse, clever but eccentric, and chiefly known for having designed some Greek scenes and dresses in a recent spectacular production to which he had certainly imparted remarkable artistic merit. General interest, however, soon veered from Anthony to Althea, who remained now quite motionless, save for her soft, regular breathing.

Mr. Johnson Moggs, deputed to the task in an unguarded moment by Mrs. Raine, had been boisterously carrying round a Chinese bowl in which were placed folded bits of paper. This he handed to anyone desirous of drawing by lot for the chance of submitting to Althea an object to be psychometrised. Some of the folded slips were marked inside with a cross, and there was great delight, alternating with disappointment, as one or another who drew these slips found themselves favoured, or otherwise.

Mr. Moggs had been stalking about with a genial air, causing much amusement as he fulfilled his office. He had put on his best business manner, offering the con-

tents of the bowl as samples of a new, trade speciality, pretending to perceive with a practised eye the most likely customers, and generally comporting himself in a way that set Mrs. James Lascene's teeth on edge.

Mrs. James Lascene did not care for most of the company with whom she found herself. At heart she was too conventional not to dislike cranks of every class, but she could condone their existence when they were born in the purple. Mrs. Raine, however, though belonging to this category, was noted for occasionally getting together "hordes of impossibles," and the present was, Everil Lascene considered, one of these occasions.

Althea's attitude had reduced Mrs. James to a state of puzzled indignation. In Mrs. James's eyes her sister stood between two equally objectionable courses—that of making what Mrs. James called a "public exhibition" of herself, or of joining the Sixth Sense confraternity. This last, Mrs. James could scarcely credit, even of Althea, but half-whispered confidences which she had overheard between the Ancaster Ellises and Father Frensham had roused her fear and indignation. They all—with lofty calm, she noticed—refrained from drawing out of the bowl.

"Come—play up, Everil," grinned Mr. Moggs when it came to her turn, and he thrust the bowl under his sister-in-law's dignified nose. "You started this boom, so you're bound to support it for the benefit of your family. Come—come now; try Althea's new patent. I can thoroughly recommend the brand."

"No, I thank you," said Mrs. Lascene severely, straightening herself against the back of her chair. Her unquenchable brother-in-law guffawed and passed the

bowl to Leonard Dracott, who had been watching its progress impatiently. He promptly picked out a slip of paper and opened it.

"I've got my chance!" he cried.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sylvia at his shoulder. "Well, I think it all extremely silly. And I was quite under the impression that you didn't believe in this Sixth Sense nonsense."

Dracott did not answer. He was detaching from his watch-chain an oval gold locket, about the size of a large hazel-nut. It was dented in places, and did not look valuable, yet he seemed to prize it. He placed it carefully in the Chinese bowl.

"There!" he cried. "There's my test. Let the lady psychometrise *that* correctly, and I'll believe in her."

It happened to be the last article required, for the number was strictly limited. Mr. Moggs bore off the trophies triumphantly. And now Leonard turned to Sylvia.

"What was in your locket?" she asked shyly.

"Wait and see what Miss Stanmount has to say about it," he replied. "The locket contains something that was given to me by a friend who is dead, and which I hope to give to my wife some day, if I am ever fortunate enough to have one."

Sylvia's heart leaped. She blushed to her forehead. Leonard Dracott had always thought her the sweetest and most charming girl he knew, and latterly his thoughts about her had been very tender. Yet now he found himself comparing Sylvia's wild-rose bloom with the loveliness of creamy pallor, Sylvia's brown curls with classic bands of light yellow hair, and Sylvia's sparkling

brown eyes with dreaming eyes of grey fringed by thick pale lashes.

It was then that someone called on Dracott to help draw back the curtains, and he sprang forward, while Sylvia, a little sore at heart, glided noiselessly to a low settee. She kept her gauzy skirts over a spare corner of it in the hope that he would rejoin her. He soon did so, and together they listened to Anthony's peroration.

Althea, meanwhile, sat motionless in the carved curule chair.

"Miss Stanmount looks beautiful," murmured Dracott. "I think she's a most awfully interesting woman. Don't you?"

Sylvia smiled wistfully.

"You wouldn't find her so interesting if she were not so becomingly dressed. Those Greek things just happen to suit her. But no one ever thought anything of Althea Stanmount till she began prophesying the other day."

The note of bitterness in the tone was not like Sylvia, but Dracott made no answer, for at that moment Althea moved. Her hands were raised—the slender, rounded arms extended—to take something from Anthony's hand—something that he had selected from the Chinese bowl, and was now holding out to her.

"Look—look!" whispered Dracott. "I believe that's my locket—it's just about the size."

Althea passed the little article several times from one hand to the other, stroking it delicately with the tips of her sensitive fingers. Then she raised it to her forehead and held it there while the audience waited in breathless interest. Presently Althea lowered her hands, clasping them upon her breast, just below her milk-white throat.

A rapt look came on her face. Her eyes behind their fringe of heavy lashes were partially unclosed, but seemed to be gazing at some far-off point in space. She appeared to see nothing of the brilliantly lighted London drawing-room, with its eager crowd. And in this rapt manner she began to speak.

"This locket contains a pearl—a large, long drop. There is a little knob at one end that has been pierced. Once a thread was run through it. It hung upon the neck of a brown-skinned girl—a girl of savage folk, not savage herself."

Leonard jerked Sylvia's elbow and uttered an irrepressible ejaculation of astonishment.

"Is that true—what she says?" whispered Sylvia.

"Quite true. My word, how amazing!"

"I see an island set in blue seas," continued Althea slowly; "an island with surf breaking on its shore. I see coral reefs and groves of palm trees. Now I see the man who gave her the pearl. He is a white man, and they love each other dearly, though she is only a brown-skinned girl of the island. She wears a white garment, and round her waist a belt of scarlet flowers. On her neck shines this big pearl."

"There! Do you hear?" exclaimed Dracott.

Someone in the audience cried "Hush!" and Anthony turned his head, obviously vexed at the disturbance. Leonard subsided in dismay, while Althea went on very slowly but distinctly, each sentence following the other in a delicately precise and unemotional fashion.

"I see a cliff . . . the yellow sands beneath it gleam through the shallow blue water. Farther out, the ground shelves—the water is deeper and darker. The

white man is building a hut on the cliff. The girl is going to bathe. She is fearless and strong—the rippling blue waves roll over her—she plays among them like a child. Now she strikes out into the deeper water, but there, danger lurks, and she does not know it. . . . A great shark seizes her foot! She shrieks and struggles, but the water has turned red with blood. . . . The man is running down the rocks. He gives a terrible cry and plunges into the sea . . . but he is too late . . . too late!”

A long-drawn, painful pause ensued. The audience waited, breathless. Sylvia, watching Leonard, saw the deepening wonder on his face.

“Is *that* true?” she whispered again.

“Yes, yes; absolutely true. How on earth did Miss Stanmount get to know it? Not another white man in the world ever heard the story besides me.”

Sylvia shrugged slightly. She was scornful of the whole affair, but against her will she felt surprised and puzzled. She could not help listening eagerly as Althea resumed.

“. . . I see a boat with brown men in it. They have spears and knives. The shark is there, in the water. . . . The men are flinging their spears at it. . . . Now they have got the shark on shore. . . . They have split the jaws, and found something strangely embedded between the teeth. . . . It is the pearl! The brown girl's pearl!”

“Good Lord! How uncanny it sounds as she tells it!” muttered Dracott.

“Up the cliff they go,” continued Althea in her slow, precise tones. “They are carrying the pearl. The hut on the cliff is finished, and the white man sits



outside, looking desolate. They give him the pearl. He is overwhelmed. He takes it into the hut and hides himself alone. . . ."

There was another long pause. No one spoke. Althea pressed the locket to her forehead. After a few minutes she went on dreamily.

" . . . I see a different country . . . and a tent on the borders of a forest. The trees are tall and grey, with thin, greyish leaves, and the grass is very coarse. There are horses hobbled not far off. . . . The white man is there, but he seems very ill. His hair has gone grey. He is wrapped in blankets, and is lying on the ground, outside the tent. . . . There is a fire near, and a young man is pouring something out of a pot into a pannikin. . . . The sick man calls him feebly, and seems to want to show him something—I think it is this pearl, which he has had hidden in his breast. He is talking feebly; he seems to be telling the young man about it. The young man listens: he has a nice, strong face—very gentle. . . . He seems to understand. . . . Now the sick man puts the pearl into his hand, saying something earnestly, and the other stoops low to hear, for the sick man's voice is very weak. . . . Everything is growing dark around him. . . . I can see no more . . . no more, except . . . except the young man's face."

There was another pregnant pause. Then Althea raised her voice in ringing tones.

"I see him clearly now!" she cried, and pointed at Leonard Dracott. "There he stands!"

## CHAPTER X

ONE of Althea's hands, holding the locket, had dropped on her lap. The other was pointing straight at Leonard Dracott. He had risen and faced her. A low, questioning murmur ran round the room, which resolved into a wave of delighted applause as it became apparent that Dracott was the owner of the locket. Anthony signed to him to come and claim his trinket.

"Are you satisfied with what you have heard?" he was asked.

"Perfectly. Moreover, I can swear that before to-night no one in England was aware of what this locket contains." He pressed the spring, showing the pearl set inside, like an acorn in its cup. Heads immediately began bobbing up, eager to peep. At Mr. Raine's request, Dracott passed the locket round among the audience. All saw plainly that the pearl was exactly as Althea had described it, with a small excrescence at the upper end, pierced so that a thread could be run through it.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Baron Heinrichfels.

"Wonderful indeed!" echoed Father Frensham in blank astonishment.

Berenice was clearly dumbfounded. She bent forward to examine the pearl, and then sank back silent in her chair. Her husband whispered something in her ear. They both looked at Althea critically.

Sylvia, after one glance at the pearl, sat down again

and stared straight before her, frowning sharply, her curved rose-leaf lips pulled into a pucker like those of a puzzled child. No one noticed her. Presently, Leonard's voice, urged by that of Mrs. Raine, silenced the buzz of talk.

"I think I ought to say," he began awkwardly, "that I proposed this particular test, believing it would floor—I mean, that it would be pretty stiff for even a gifted person. And now," he raised his voice, "I feel it my duty to state that every word Miss Stanmount has said is true in the smallest particular. The pearl was lost and recovered just in the horrible way described. It was given to me later on by the chap it belonged to—my chum, who had been in love with the poor little brown-skinned girl. We were working a claim together in Australia when he fell ill with fever and died, just as you have heard, at our camp in the bush. So I think you'll agree with me, ladies and gentlemen, that my test has shown us splendid proof of—of—the ability of the lady who has favoured us with this remarkable exhibition."

Leonard's little speech was received with vociferous applause. A volley of questions followed upon it. He would probably have found them difficult to answer had not Anthony put in that he thought they had better defer questions and proceed with the entertainment.

Renewed excitement now arose as Anthony again gave Althea an article from the bowl. This time it was a ring, which she pronounced to be the property of an aspiring young poet, hitherto unsuccessful. The work upon which he was now engaged, however, would, she said, win him fame, and his name would soon be known as one of the finest poet-dramatists of his day. The

young poet, blushing pink with pleasure, reclaimed his ring amid congratulations.

Interest became even keener with the next item. A bangle, clasped by a diamond heart, had been taken from the arm of a girl whose engagement to a well-known soldier at the front was suspected, though not given out. The secret was a secret no longer, as Althea described a camp on the veld, and the interrogation of a Boer spy by an English officer who was recognised by many people with whispered comments and ripples of laughter as the girl's lover. The girl herself, abashed and uncomfortable, did not venture to reclaim her bangle, which was surreptitiously conveyed to her by Mr. Moggs, wearing an understanding grin.

Anthony quieted the amusement by displaying an orchid which had decorated Lord Isleworth's coat. A shiver shook Althea as her brother tried to place the blossom in her hand. She refused to touch it and covered her eyes. Lord Isleworth himself begged that she would speak.

"Tell us what you see," commanded Anthony.

Althea obeyed, with evident distaste.

"I see a child's bedroom, brightly furnished. The child is there . . . a little, yellow-haired girl. She is asleep. Her face is flushed and tear-stained. . . ."

Althea became agitated and swayed in her chair.

"You shall see nothing that need distress you," said Anthony soothingly. "Go on."

" . . . There is a kind-looking woman beside the bed. She wears a white cap and a frilled apron over her black gown. She is praying ; there are tears running down her cheeks. . . . Now a big man enters, as though

he can scarcely drag himself along. . . . His limbs seem to have lost power. . . . His eyes are blood-shot. . . . His face all drawn. . . . He sees no one but the child. . . . The woman steals away. . . . I see the man kneeling beside the sleeping child. . . . Great sobs shake him. . . ."

"What has all this to do with the flower?" asked Anthony quietly.

Clearly, unhesitatingly, came the answer from Althea's lips: "The man who wears the flower will cause the sorrow of that other man and his little child."

A series of long drawn "Oh's!" half suppressed, followed this statement. People looked curiously at Lord Isleworth as he stood by the steps leading to the conservatory, an image of unobtrusive distinction. He seemed only a little amused and surprised. With one hand he stroked his carefully trimmed moustache, while with the other he held the orchid which Anthony had given to him and examined it minutely as though it were responsible for the whole business. Then his gaze went calmly round the room and stopped at his hostess.

"Dear Mrs. Raine," he said, in faintly humorous appeal, "do let me assure you that in the course of a perhaps faulty, but I hope not wholly inartistic career, I've not yet descended to the part of Adelphi villain—I can't imagine myself in it—upon my honour I can't."

There was a rippling titter.

Somebody in the audience gave a choked gasp. It was big Mr. Moggs.

"Bally ass!" he muttered. "Can't stick that sort of chap myself," he chuckled confidentially to Dracott, with whom he had made friends, "but my little missus seems to get on with him," and honest Johnson beamed

upon his pretty wife. Her blue eyes, coquettishly lifted, were drawing Isleworth back to her side. He paused a moment to readjust the orchid in his button-hole, and then with a shrug and a smile dropped nonchalantly into the seat she had kept for him.

Mrs. Raine, though proud of Althea's performance, had become nervously doubtful as to what embarrassing turn it might take. She murmured a sympathetic protest to Lord Isleworth, and threw an anxious glance at the statuesque figure in the carved chair. But, except when Anthony spoke to her, Althea seemed unconscious of everything that went on below the platform.

"Now," said Anthony, lifting a letter from the bowl, "tell us something about the owner of this."

"Ah!" Althea sighed as she touched it. She drew the letter from its envelope and pressed it to her lips.

"The owner?" she repeated questioningly.

"No," said Baron Heinrichfels rising. "It was I who put that letter into the bowl. The writer is a friend of mine who is interested in mystic things. I should like to be told something about him."

Althea placed the letter on her breast with palms folded across it. She began to speak in a rapt monotone.

" . . . I hear the beating of a wild bird's wings against the bars that prison him. The wild bird sings—his voice is strong and sweet. He sings to a world that listens and acclaims—songs of joy and love! But he dreams of other things. His is the soul of an enthusiast pent in a body that was born of the oppressed and dispossessed. He dreams of a great Restoration. . . . Of the enfranchisement of his people. . . . Of—alas!—

vengeance on the system that upholds what he considers wrong . . . .

" . . . Tell him that not in dreams but by martyrdoms may freedom be won. Freedom sits among the stars, washing her garments in blood. He who would be free should be ready to pour out his own blood for her sake. Hopes and ambitions must all be cast aside—desires foregone. Not till the soul loses all sense of separateness can it attain freedom."

"That is as it should be, of course," said Baron Heinrichfels, "but if I may be permitted to interrupt for a moment—I want to tell you that the writer of this letter is deeply enamoured of some mysterious unknown lady. He is an enthusiast, a dreamer—just as you described—buoyed up by hopes, in which I may say that I share. He says he will succeed in whatever he undertakes when he has the support of this woman-friend. Now what I want to know is whether that will be so, and how soon they may be united."

"Her mind is set on base ideals," a calm, grave voice answered through Althea's lips. "Because of these, she shrinks from fulfilling her pledge to him. Yet her very being is the sign and seal of that pledge. Neither time nor space can keep asunder two that are from the beginning one. When the destined moment comes they shall stand face to face and each fulfil the other's need—for suns will pale and worlds no longer spring to birth before the dual soul shall fail to find its own."

The baron nodded as though he perfectly understood, but the baroness urged him to another question.

"May I venture to suppose, then," he asked, "that assuming they are—er—one in fundamentals, this lady

may in a short time be induced to afford my friend her support ? ”

“ Time exists not, save in the measurement of man,” replied the calm, grave voice. “ Man will always reap what he has sown, but he may not say of any hour ‘ That shall be mine.’ This man’s due will become his under the Eternal Law, yet none may set a period to the fulfilling of that law, lest he endanger his own destiny.”

Anthony now interposed.

“ With your permission,” he said, “ we will proceed with the next subject. I have here one more article, and my sister has already been speaking for a long while.”

The baron at once acquiesced. He received back his letter and pocketed it. Then Anthony gave to Althea the last object in the bowl. This was a beautiful pendant in the shape of an Egyptian scarab, carved in black steatite with gleams of gold here and there; it was heavily embossed with turquoises and had a small ring at one end. Althea took it with evident distaste. She held it cautiously between her finger and thumb.

“ Speak ! ” commanded Anthony. “ Tell us what you see.”

Althea at once began to describe a scene in ancient Egypt. She spoke of music—the clash of cymbals, the blare of brazen instruments, the fluty note of reed pipes. She saw a procession, she said : a number of priests in many coloured robes, of white-clad, dark-skinned maidens, followed by a great concourse of people all on their way to some temple. Foremost among them she saw the Pharaoh of that day.

“ . . . The people are trooping into the temple,” said Althea. “ Its great walls are graven in many



figures on a background of gold. There are high pillars crowned with massive faces half hidden in the shadows of the roof—strange, calmly smiling faces looking down upon the people—stone faces that will outlive those human faces and smile the same smile upon generations yet to come. . . . The music grows louder . . . now softer. The maidens are singing in sweet voices. . . . Smoke rises before the images of two Great Ones whom the people have come to worship. . . . There are other images of animals borne high by the priests. . . . One of the priests is young . . . he is restless. . . . He seems anxious not to be observed. . . . The ceremonial is very elaborate. While the people are kneeling he draws back out of sight. . . . The shadows are deep. . . . He is not noticed. . . . He slips through an open door. . . . He is a swift runner. . . .

“Alone in her empty palace—for she has sent all her servants to take part in the sacred ceremony at the temple—the Queen Nesheptu awaits the priest. She is very beautiful—dark-skinned, majestic in her gauzy wrappings of green and blue with golden snakes twining her arms and two thick snakes of gold with emerald eyes curling round her head. She stands upon the marble threshold of her own private rooms, looking out over the sunlit courtyard. Her eyes are full of a dreadful purpose. . . .

“Swiftly, swiftly comes the priest. . . . She holds out her hand as he approaches.

“‘Where is the passport?’ she cries. ‘What hast thou brought me?’

“‘It is here,’ he answers. ‘I bring thee that which shall prove the passport of thy husband Horea to the land of eternal silence.’

"Unfolding its silken wrappings he shows her—this carved scarab! . . ."

Delighted exclamations rose from the audience. "How interesting! This very scarab! How wonderful."

Althea took no notice, but went on in her slow, monotonous tones:

"The Queen is speaking: 'Verily, the Beetle! So thou hast fulfilled my commands, O Ahn! Has this beetle then power to dispatch my laggard spouse into the Underworld?'

"'Power in plenty,' answers the priest, 'poison enough to dispatch six men. 'Twill issue through the beetle's feet, if they but tread his flesh.'"

"Poisoned!" A whisper ran through the audience. Women shivered as though at a distasteful idea. Althea turned her closed eyes mutely to Anthony.

"Continue," he said.

Althea set the scarab down upon a small table beside her and with her hand a few inches above it she went on with her story.

"The Queen is speaking: they are subtly evil words: 'When the beetle has done its work, thou shalt assuredly receive thy reward, my Ahn. Even now, I would have thee take thy joy of me, but time is short, for Horea will be here soon to accept this charmed gift of his spouse.'

"She raises her eyes, in which dark secrets dwell, to those of the priest, which are bent on her. He forgets all but that Nesheptu is near, her proud lips readily yielding to his ardent desire. He clasps her closely to his breast. Her mocking laughter fills the air. While he kisses her, she, delicately fingering the blue back of

the scarab, presses it into the hollow at the base of his throat.

"Behold how brilliantly our beetle shines upon thy neck, my priestly Ahn!" she exclaims.

". . . But Ahn has grown rigid. He is filled with a sudden fear. . . . His eyes are starting from his head. . . .

"Oh, Nesheptu! What hast thou done?" he cries. 'I felt the death-touch of the feet!'. . . .

". . . Tush! It is nothing,' laughs the Queen, softly removing the creature. 'We do not waste our precious poison upon *thee*, O Ahn.'

". . . But he cannot laugh with her. He is stricken into silence. There are four reddish marks upon his skin. . . . The deathly stream has entered his veins. . . . He staggers and falls upon the marble floor. . . . Nesheptu kneels beside him . . . watching his last breath flutter forth. 'That was well done,' she murmurs. 'Go first into the Underworld, my devoted Ahn. Prepare the road for Norea. Here, I have no further need of thee.'"

An ominous quietude hung in Mrs. Raine's drawing-room. There was a sense of strain in the air. The attention of the audience was stretched to the point of nervousness. The strain could be distinctly felt. The audience began to stir fitfully, but Anthony held up his hand to maintain silence.

Althea continued:

". . . The Queen pushes the body of the priest beneath her couch, whereon she then seats herself to receive the King . . . she has not long to wait. He comes. He is old and ugly, small of stature, puny, and over-weighted with the magnificence of his robes. Nesheptu loosens

them, talking solicitously the while. She shows him the blue and golden beetle, telling him it is a gift from her. He regards it admiringly. . . . He is seated upon the couch beside her, his arms around her. Softly, opening his vesture, she runs the tiny golden feet of the beetle up and down over his bare breast, caressing him. . . ."

Suddenly, as the sibyl spoke, a shrill shriek sounded from the far end of the long drawing-room. There was some confusion in the back rows. Anthony looked round.

"Oh! please, *please*, Mr. Stanmount," cried a chorus of eager voices: "Ask your sister to go on. Do let us hear if the King died."

"Did the King die?" inquired Anthony of Althea.

"The King died," replied Althea in a grave voice. "He died in Nesheptu's arms, though none guessed how, for the poison was unknown, save to the priest, who had distilled it from rare herbs. Its secret departed with him as Nesheptu had desired, leaving her free to accomplish her ambition."

"But the beetle—the beetle?" cried the chorus of voices.

"Aye, what of the beetle," repeated Anthony to Althea.

"Nesheptu buried the beetle in the desert with her own hands," was the answer.

"Then what chance has brought it here?"

"No chance; but Destiny," said the grave, inexorable voice. "As the cycle of time rolled round, the beetle was discovered, and came back to the hands of Nesheptu, who dwelt on this earth again beside Horea, wearing other garments of flesh. Once more, at its touch, has Horea been driven hence into the Underworld, and his

spirit, forced to wander in that land of silence, cries aloud against Nesheptu."

Now there was a surging movement among the people in the rear—a rustle of silken skirts, and a slender, golden-haired woman with pale lips and wild eyes walked swiftly up the long room.

"Please give me back my scarab," she said, holding out her hand.

Anthony picked up the beetle gingerly between his finger and thumb, and was about to give it to the owner when a tall, dark man who pressed behind her thrust himself forward.

"In heaven's name—*don't*. Destroy the thing—throw it into the fire—anywhere, so that it can do no more harm. Come away, Alisande. You are overwrought." He dropped his voice as he spoke the last words, but the lady ignored his appeal.

"I claim my property," she said.

Anthony wrapped the scarab in a piece of paper and placed it carefully in her outstretched palm. Mrs. Raine hurried up at the moment.

"Dear Mrs. Grainger, pray be careful. Do you think it wise to wear such a—such a very ill-omened ornament?"

"I don't know, I shall see," replied Mrs. Grainger vaguely.

"Give the thing to me, Alisande," said her husband persuasively.

She looked up at him, and with white lips, regardless of spectators, she exclaimed: "To you? *Never!*"

"Well, anyway—come home," he urged.

She glanced round the room. Her underlip was quivering; her breast was heaving. Mrs. Raine feared an

hysterical outburst, when, to complicate matters, Althea's voice rang out clearly, from the raised seat where she was placed.

"Nesheptu! hearken, lest a worse thing happen unto thee. In long-ago Egypt the beetle brought death at thy bidding for the sake of power. Yesterday, it dealt death once more for love's sake. Do thou beware of the beetle, lest thou, too, die to this world and thy spirit be driven into the land of silence, where Horea waits for thee."

Mrs. Grainger dropped the arm of her husband, which she had taken, and turned to the platform. She looked as though she meant to exculpate herself before this unknown judge who spoke with the voice of the pale girl in the carved chair. But something arrested her speech. She seemed suddenly to realise her surroundings, struggled for self-control, and became once more an ordinary woman of the world, bidding farewell to her hostess.

"It was a really remarkable performance—most interesting; I must congratulate you, Mrs. Raine. Good night—good-bye." She spoke the last word emphatically, moistening her lips with her tongue. A red spot burned in each cheek, and her eyes shone. Her husband put his arm round her shoulders and drew her towards the door. It was significant that not a woman came forward to shake hands with her as she went. Berenice, even, shrank back as Mrs. Grainger passed. But Mrs. Grainger did not observe this. She appeared to see no one.

After she had left, Berenice and Ancaster Ellis put their heads together, and held a hurried conversation in a whisper. Then they turned to Father Frensham, and, one on each side, induced the old gentleman to rise from his seat.

Father Frensham particularly wished to stay and partake of supper, for Mrs. Raine's cook and her wines were renowned. But the prospect to which he had pledged himself of pronouncing upon Althea's endowments apparently proved—after what he had heard and seen—too much for the poor old gentleman's nerves, and he shuffled away, shaking his grey-capped head dubiously, in the wake of Berenice.

Mrs. Raine, much perturbed, met them making their way through the throng.

A rapid colloquy ensued—nervous attempts at persuasion on the part of Mrs. Raine, and a great deal of head-shaking, with grim yet alarmed determination from the Ancaster Ellises. It was all very puzzling to Mrs. James Lascene, who, sitting near, caught snatches of the talk.

"I don't approve—no, I *don't* approve," Berenice was saying in her sternest tones. "Psychic gifts should be used judiciously. A psychic does more harm than good by such indiscreet revelations. Miss Stanmount ought to distinguish between those who are fitting objects for exposure and those who should be immune."

"But how?" murmured Mrs. Raine feebly. She glanced in a deprecatory fashion towards the tiny stage, but Anthony had closed the curtains over the opening, and Althea was hidden from view.

"How?" repeated Berenice loftily. "That is part of a psychic's training."

"We must not be hard on Althea," murmured Mrs. Raine. "She has had no training as yet, and I fear she lacks natural discrimination. But this—strange story need make no difference in our own attitude towards Alisande."

"No difference!" echoed Berenice. "How can you say so, Mirabel? After to-night's disclosure, Alisande must, of course, be requested to resign. It is *my* duty to see there is no canker at the heart of our holy rose."

Everil could not catch Mrs. Raine's reply, but saw that she was startled and distressed. The Ellises seemed bent upon departure, and though their hostess did her utmost to dissuade them, she was unsuccessful. With an air of outraged integrity Berenice swept her husband and her adopted father from the room.

Hardly had they gone, when Mrs. Raine found herself surrounded by her numerous other sixth sense friends, who were all anxious to depart likewise. The members of the Sixth Sense Society were like sheep; they followed where their leaders led, and for long they had been accustomed to consider Berenice's word as law, and to hang upon her eyelashes, as it were, for the smallest indication of her will.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Raine, my sister was too realistic. She seems to have quite unnerved some of your guests," smiled Everil when the troubled hostess at length found herself beside Mrs. James Lascene.

"Well, you see," said Mrs. Raine, whose usual gracious calm was ruffled, "the suggestion of poison was *most* unfortunate. But I do not feel it fair to put blame upon your sister. She is wonderful—quite wonderful."

"Why should the suggestion of poison have been so unfortunate," inquired another lady, who wanted to understand more of the scene she had just witnessed.

"Don't you remember that Scotch murder trial—the Ringrose case?" an officious woman put in eagerly. "You would remember, Mrs. Lascene?"



Everil bridled with severe dignity.

"Certainly. We were at Chaunterell at the time; and I agreed with Lady Chaunterell—my mother-in-law who always holds such sensible and charitable views, that after the verdict of 'Not Proven,' it was only right to give M.s. Ringrose the full benefit of the doubt."

"Exactly!" said Mrs. Raine. "We all felt that. But you can't think how the poor thing suffered. Doubt is almost as bad as condemnation."

"Well, any way, she got the old gentleman's money, and has since married the man of her choice," sharply returned the officious lady.

"Mr. Grainger behaved splendidly, of course. And then Alisande has had comfort from the dear Father's and Benenice's teaching. But if she is to lose it all now!" and Mrs. Raine heaved a perplexed sigh.

"Lose what! her second husband or her money?" asked the first lady.

"Neither. I was referring to the sympathy of the S.S.S. We are all *one* in our Society. If one member suffers, all the other members suffer with her."

"They don't seem to desire to do so in this case," said Everil with her artificial laugh.

"That is exactly what I was saying," replied Mrs. Raine illogically. "And it will be such a *mutual* loss. Dear Alisande is building the Father a lecture room. And did you notice Berenice's diamond stars? I happen to know that they were a present from Alisande."

"Mrs. Ancaster Ellis may perhaps reconsider her decision in view of those diamond stars," said Everil satirically. "But I am inclined to agree with her that my sister ought to know how far to go in this sort of

thing. I must speak to Althea about it. She gets quite uncomfortably near the truth sometimes."

"Oh! I pray you will do nothing of the kind," implored Mrs. Raine, almost wringing her hands. "Dear Mrs. Lascene! I beg—I beseech you!—the world will suffer if Althea's light be darkened. It is a divine gift, I assure you—a divine gift! And who are *we*, poor blind mortals! to judge how far she should employ it."

Everil looked amused. Mrs. Raine was so evidently sincere. They both glanced across the room at Althea. The curtains had been opened, and she stood at the top of the three little steps leading into the conservatory, Anthony behind her. At the foot of the steps stood Baron and Baroness Heinrichfels, with a group of people all eager to claim her attention. Dracott was holding out his pearl in its cup, boyishly wild to retail to Althea all she had said about it. There was a delicate flush in her cheeks; her eyes were wide open now, and they scanned the various countenances beneath her with a faintly apprehensive look. Anthony had had no time to tell her more than that she had done well, and she obviously wanted to be sure how he stood with them all. Would they praise or criticise her?

Suddenly she saw Mrs. Raine, and her thoughts flew to Father Frensham and the proposed scheme for attaching her to the Sixth Sense Society. From her hostess's wistfully troubled look Althea felt sure that she had not given universal satisfaction. She glanced eagerly round the room. Her heart leaped with relief, but she experienced a sense of comical dismay, for, with the exception of Mrs. Raine, it seemed that there was no longer a single member of the Sixth Sense Society present!

## CHAPTER XI

THE Johnson Moggs's dinner-party was an event of considerable importance in their big house in De Vaux Square. On the night in question every person, except the youngest member of the household, was making preparations for dinner.

Mr. Moggs himself, with the invaluable Googe in attendance, was drawing sparks from his thick mop of reddish hair, so vigorously was he brushing it.

"I say, Googe, I don't think much of these rubbishy little links you've made me wear," he said discontentedly as his shirt-cuffs caught his eye in the glass. "Where are my blue enamel ones?"

Googe paused in the act of smoothing out an imaginary crease in Mr. Moggs's ample dress coat.

"Beg pardon, sir; they're not quite the thing."

"Oh, come, now, Googe!" exclaimed Mr. Moggs indignantly. "They're extremely tasty."

"To be sure, sir, and valuable, I'm aware. But gentlemen mostly prefer a smaller and quieter style in the evening. A matter of taste, of course, but there it is. *Experientia docet.*"

"Which means that you know better than I do," growled Johnson Moggs, who, on such matters, invariably deferred to his man's opinion.

To say merely that Googe was an excellent servant would not be describing him adequately. Next to being

the pink of his profession, his ambition was to be considered a man of culture. In any servants' hall he was respectfully regarded as possessing profound erudition, but it had taken Mr. Moggs some time to get used to Googe's habit of pointing morals and adorning tales with more or less appropriate Latin quotations. However, Googe had hitherto lived in what he would have described as the "best families," and knew the ways of a world to which the rising grocer was not yet accustomed. Thus it happened that Googe became, as he phrased it, the *custos morem* of Mr. Johnson Moggs.

His toilet complete, Mr. Moggs went down to the dining-room in charge of Googe, who poured him out a glass of sherry and bitters while rapidly explaining the arrangements for dinner. When he gave his master a neatly written list of the pairs who were to go down together, Googe was blandly encouraging.

"You'll find Baroness Heinrichfels a most agreeable lady, sir. It's not the first time I've waited behind her. You bring her in on your right arm, you'll remember, sir, and place her on your right. Sir Sidney Jones will lead Mrs. Raine to the seat on your left, and the rest will follow *seriatim*."

"Good old Sid!" said Mr. Moggs, with his glass raised. "Wish he wasn't so deaf. I say, Googe, where have you put Mr. Parfit? He won't be happy in this crowd, but he's a first-rate chap, Parfit—one of my smartest managers—and I want him to have a good time."

"Exactly so, sir. I've Mr. Parfit here, sir; between Miss Raine and Miss Porson."

"Jam for Parfit! Shouldn't mind being Parfit

to-night. Here's luck to him." And Mr. Moggs gulped down his sherry and bitters.

"One moment, if you please, sir. Perreps I'd better remind you that it's not hetiquette nowadays to drink anybody's 'ealth. The wine goes round *sub silentio*, as you may say."

Mr. Moggs nodded gloomily.

"Well, *I* like to see some goodfellowship over a feed, Googe. However, you evidently know your nobbs."

He went slowly up the softly carpeted stairs and entered the gaudy drawing-room. It was furnished according to the most modern Empire style, in pink and blue brocade; but its flowery Axminster was far too bright to be even a passable imitation of old Aubusson. The gilding and blaze of electric light was fairly dazzling, but Johnson Moggs had eyes only for his daintily lovely wife. She stood upon the hearthrug, a small, brilliant figure in turquoise satin and diamonds. He went to her and laid his great red hands on her snowy shoulders.

"Give us a kiss, old girl."

"Oh, don't, Johnny!" she exclaimed pettishly. "You smell of sherry. And what a time you've been! People will be here directly. Good gracious, Selina! Where did you get that gown?"

Her sharp glance had fallen upon a slender form in a diaphanous frock of pearly sheen, shrinking behind Mr. Moggs. This was pretty Selina Porson, a penniless young cousin of his who acted as governess to their little daughter. Selina had been commanded by Mrs. Moggs to dine down to-night in order to fill a suddenly vacant place at table and prevent the party from numbering thirteen. It was not an unmixed joy to Selina. Her

cheeks were flushed and her hazel eyes had a pathetic sweetness as she looked deprecatingly at Mrs. Moggs.

"Cousin Johnson did it," she faltered.

"I only obeyed orders," laughed Mr. Moggs. "Nan said you'd want a new gown. Glad it came in time, Selina. Enjoy yourself—that's the way to pay for it." Mr. Moggs put his open hand to his mouth, and spreading out the fingers, whispered, in an audible aside, "Parfit's coming!"

Selina flushed deeper, and Mrs. Moggs exclaimed "Hush!" for there was a rustle at the door, and Googe announced impressively, "Sir Sidney and Lady Jones."

The City knight and his wife came in arm-in-arm. They were the kind of people who are always punctual, and yet always fear they may be late. Lady Jones began apologising before she noticed that no one else had arrived. She was spare and angular, with the remains of good looks, but a hard girlhood and early married life had left their mark. Her manner was ornate, and her speech voluble. Her carefully dressed head swayed from side to side as she talked. Molly found herself moving her feather fan in unison with that long thin neck.

Mr. Moggs gave Sir Sidney a genial greeting, and the two retired to the opposite corner of the fireplace, discussing City topics. Sir Sidney was stout and bald, with a ring of limp black hair round his crown. He seldom heard what anybody said, and invariably concluded his own rare remarks with a rapid "What—what—what?" his hand up to his ear, ready for the reply.

The next arrivals were Mrs. Raine and Sylvia. Mrs. Raine looked dignified in black velvet with some fine

lace. Sylvia wore a becoming shade of daffodil colour, with a bunch of daffodils in her breast. But there was an indefinable change in her face, lines round the rose-leaf mouth, and her soft eyes darkened as they fell on Leonard Dracott, who entered immediately after the Raines. Sylvia fancied that Leonard avoided her. Certainly he seemed very much taken up talking to other people. And yet she had not seen him since the night of her mother's party—an unusual lapse of time.

Mr. Parfit, a gentlemanly young man with a camellia in his coat, grateful for the recognition which enabled him to be here to-night, but too doubtful of himself to be assertive, made a bee-line for Selina, to whom he had already lost his heart. Then Gooze's voice, rolling magnificently, announced :

"The Baron and Baroness Heinrichfels."

Molly, talking fast to the Heinrichfels, and envying the baroness her madonna-like calm, was feeling uncomfortable, for her principal guest had not arrived, and if he did not appear they would be thirteen, after all. She was nervously asking the baron whether he belonged to the Thirteen Club when Gooze's unctuous announcement, "Lord Isleworth," sent a small flutter through the room.

Molly's sudden flush and the gleam in her wide-open blue eyes made her look positively bewitching. She took an impulsive step forward and exclaimed in childish relief, "Oh, I'm so glad you're come—at last."

Lord Isleworth languished over her hand.

"Am I so late? Forgive me; I've brought my apology, if you will do me the honour of accepting it."

Molly looked mystified. He laid a small vellum-covered volume on a table beside her.

"My little book, just fresh from the publisher. I waited to write an inscription. No, no; not now," as she stretched her hand to the book, and he added, in a lowered voice: "Read it when you are alone."

Molly blushed more deeply and uttered shy thanks. Googe appeared again at the doorway.

"Oh! you're not the last," said Molly nervously. "I'd forgotten Althea." And Googe announced: "Mr. and Miss Stanmount."

Althea had chosen well the moment of her entrance. Every eye turned towards the brother and sister—to Anthony's pale, distinguished face, and to Althea, who was the sensation of the hour. Their joint resources had been heavily drawn upon for the gown Althea wore. It was a striking arrangement of dead white silk, falling in long straight folds, without any sort of ornamentation. A single string of pearls that had belonged to her mother clasped Althea's throat, and her pale hair was bound by a chaplet of dark leaves that might have been the Delphic laurel.

"I'm sorry to be so late, Molly. I've been with Lady Ethel Lascene this afternoon, and she detained me."

The baroness bent forward, and inquired after Lady Ethel.

"She has had a great deal of pain, but it is easier the last day or two," said Althea. "Her doctor has ordered her out of town as soon as she can travel, so she is going down to Chaunterell Towers, and wants to make up a party of interesting people."

"So *you* are wanted," put in the baron.

"I scarcely think that I shall be able to go," smiled Althea. "My engagements are thickening."



Mr. Moggs, red and perplexed, was hurrying round the room with his list in his hand, when Googe announced dinner.

"Althea, Mr. Dracott takes you down. Anthony, take Miss Raine. Bless me, I'd forgotten Parfit." And he scurried across to the corner where Selina and her swain sat. Mr. Moggs rallied them unblushingly upon their absorption in each other. Then he hastened back, with extended arm, to Baroness Heinrichfels.

"Come along, ma'am, we've to lead the way, if you please."

Once at table, Mr. Moggs tucked his napkin comfortably across his ample waistcoat and felt more at ease. He meant to enjoy his dinner, and he wanted everyone else to do the same. His large smile contrived to include all his guests. Molly had, fortunately, an excellent cook. The *hors d'œuvres* inspired confidence, and the soups fulfilled expectations. When the fish course had passed everyone was talking cheerfully, and whatever concern host and hostess may have felt about the success of their party had been dispersed.

Sir Sidney Jones's conversational powers were very limited, but Mrs. Raine's placid sweetness was unruffled, for the unbroken progress of a well-cooked dinner conveyed to her a sense of contentment that was peculiarly sustaining.

Meanwhile, Mr. Moggs had discovered that Baroness Heinrichfels was a lady of sound views, able to throw light on various commercial tangles. and, as he found that he had not a dull moment, his spirits rose proportionately.

Lord Isleworth frankly monopolised the hostess. H

talked to her in soft tones, and his eyes expressed lyrical admiration. So did his lips. Baron Heinrichfels, turning tentatively to Mrs. Moggs, and catching without the preceding context Lord Isleworth's significant statement, "A beautiful woman is the one perfect thing in the universe," smiled to himself, and became at once absorbed in the doings and opinions of his lawful partner, Lady Jones.

When interest in her flagged and he again glanced sideways, Molly was protesting.

"But *I'm* not the Greek style like Althea. Now, everybody is raving about *her*."

Lord Isleworth's gaze, first directed down the table upon Althea, and then, returning with frank satisfaction to his hostess, expressed subtleties which were rather lost on simple Molly Moggs.

"Your sister is an extremely clever young lady," he said. "I admire the way in which she is playing Dracott."

Molly detected the acrimony of Isleworth's manner.

"I don't think you like Althea."

"Or, rather, she doesn't like me. I only hope she won't persuade you to share her dislike."

"Oh! how could she? . . . But you're really not offended with Althea for what she said about you at Mrs. Raine's? Of course, it was all nonsense. You—you don't go about making people unhappy like that—do you?"

Lord Isleworth bent closer to her.

"Need I assure *you* that, as I told Mrs. Raine, I don't play the part of Surrey-side villain—of course, that was nonsense."

Molly's eyes, lifted from the flowers tucked into her

bodice which she had been fingering, fell again before his steady look.

"But I don't want you to suppose," he went on, "that I haven't lived—suffered. When you have time to read my versicles, you'll taste in them the flavour of Dead Sea fruit."

"Dead Sea fruit?" Molly spoke in a tone of awed fascination. Lord Isleworth talked like the people in plays and novels, whom she had always wished to meet, but had never met in Johnson Moggs's circle of acquaintance.

"Do you not know," continued Isleworth, "that disappointment must be the lot of any man cursed—or blessed—with the poetic temperament, until, indeed, he finds love, the one true reality, which has so many counterfeits? But he *must* find it—soon or late."

"Too late, perhaps!" said Molly, with her girlish laugh, which was slightly forced. "He might have got married, you see, to one of the counterfeits."

"Happily," answered Isleworth, "I have been spared that supreme disillusionment. For marriage, unless it be the rare and perfect union, must inevitably prove the bitterest of disillusionments."

"But I— Oh! I shouldn't like to think that!" Molly's glance went involuntarily towards the end of the table, where, his red, good-humoured face visible to the right of the *épergne*, as he laid down the law on caviare to Baroness Heinrichfels—Johnson Moggs presided over the feast. Lord Isleworth smiled cynically. Molly said, in a doubtful voice:

"You think ordinary affection doesn't last?"

"Experience teaches that nothing lasts—except the

one reality, and, as you say, that is usually discovered too late."

Molly sipped her champagne agitatedly. Lord Isleworth allowed Gooze to refill his glass. He was drinking claret—Mr. Moggs's cellar was perhaps his chief social asset—and Lord Isleworth savoured the aroma of the wine with something of poetic rapture. He resumed:

"That's where the misery comes in of our present social arrangements. Experience is needed for the right understanding of love and marriage. Where there is not the absolute interblending, the instantaneous recognition of souls, no marriage, however promising it may seem at the onset, can stand the test of monotony. Once emotion has become, as it were, mechanical, the glamour is lost. Yet were it otherwise, if society were but differently constituted, life might be lived as a series of waves of bliss."

"But all that sounds dreadfully immoral!" Molly said, puzzled, a little bit shocked, and greatly attracted.

"Have you ever known that sweetest, intensest joy of life, I wonder?" he went on. "You, who are yourself so exquisite, have you ever experienced the exquisite joy of emotion as a fine art? All emotions are crude in their original states. Therefore every emotion should be transmuted into fine art. The joys of nature intoxicate, but the joys of art inspire. And to arrive at perfection, one must experiment. Experimenting in love is no mere pastime when it shows us how to find the real passion at last. I wish it were my lot to teach you—*that*. Tell me, when may I see you again?"

He took a tiny engagement book from his pocket and glanced through it. Some light banter followed.

The banter was too personal for good taste, and more than a little crude. Isleworth decided that if Mrs. Moggs had not been so fascinatingly pretty there would have been a flavour of vulgarity about the whole affair. He had never made love in so elementary a fashion before, but this captivatingly unconventional little person seemed incapable of appreciating complex methods. Perhaps that was not surprising. One could scarcely imagine Johnson Moggs conducting his courtship of her in any but the most elementary manner.

No; Molly was not subtle, but through her simplicity there ran—as was the case in different degrees with her sisters—a very definite streak of worldliness. Marriage had not been for her the social lever that her sister Everil had found it. She, too, hankered after novelty and all the imponderable advantages which rank expresses to the middle-class woman. She was shrewd enough, apart from the glamour he had already begun to throw over her, to know that intimacy with Lord Isleworth might lift her in the social scale and give her what she vaguely summed up as a good time generally, while so far she did not pause to calculate the price she might be called upon to pay.

Baron Heinrichfels had been watching his opportunity during a temporary release from Lady Jones's attention. He had caught snatches of Isleworth's talk with Molly, and thought it time to break in here with an appreciative question about the noble lord's latest poetical production. Isleworth possessed the proverbial poet's vanity, and fell agreeably into the snare. So the conversational ball was picked up on either side, and the minds of Molly and Isleworth were for a little while

diverted from each other. By and by, however, Isleworth addressed himself anew to his hostess, and Baron Heinrichfels found himself unable to withstand Lady Jones's persistent assaults, though the topics she introduced were not of a kind to interest the Jewish financier. She gave up the siege at last, and Heinrichfels occupied his silent moments in observing the Stanmount brother and sister.

Baron Heinrichfels was very much in earnest about the people and things that interested him, and the Stanmounts interested him more than anyone else at the present time. The exterior of the baron—that outward mask of the successful financier—could not always conceal the keen spirit of the Hungarian Jew bred on Hebrew mysticism. Every occasion on which he saw Althea whetted his enthusiasm concerning her. He had got his wife to call on the girl, and had himself made overtures to her brother. Anthony's habits of seclusion rendered him difficult from the point of view of ordinary social intercourse, but the baron's genial ways and genuine interest in subjects which Anthony held dear had partially thawed his reserve.

To-night, Sylvia Raine realised that Anthony Stanmount could make himself extremely agreeable. Dining out bored Anthony, but he was pleased to find himself between the baroness and sweet Sylvia Raine. Anthony Stanmount was so different from other men that the few women with whom he conversed felt complimented, and Baroness Heinrichfels was far too much a woman of the world not to accommodate herself to the capabilities of anyone near her. As to Sylvia, Anthony admired her and her daffodils. The picture of her brought

again before his Greek-bound imagination a further back vision of Persephone playing on the Flat of Nysa. Just so, he thought might Demeter's daughter have looked, with all the fragrance of early spring about her and the wind-blown blossoms at her feet.

But it was well for Sylvia's peace of mind that one of the huge silver *épergnes* hid Leonard Dracott and his companion from her view, for Leonard had no attention to spare from Althea. Ever since she arrived he had been hovering awkwardly round her and beamed when he found that he was to take her down to dinner. Her smiles bewitched him, and no words were needed to tell Althea how completely she had subjugated Dracott. She was flattered by his obvious devotion, though to her he was but representative of the multitude whom she hoped to win. She felt like one who, having starved on husks, suddenly enters upon a rich inheritance, and is promised the most satisfying things she could desire. She seemed to be a new Althea—quickenened by an uplifting of spirit that made her feel as though she were treading on air. This evening she was distinctly aware of two strong and separate forces striving within her—the aspiration of the seeress, pure and spiritual: the passionate desires of womanhood, athirst for supremacy. Which should triumph, she did not care to question. She looked beautiful. Though slender, she was extremely well-made, her throat and delicately moulded arms were of the mellow tint of ivory. There was a flush upon her face—a faint flush like the inner, rose hue of a pale seashell, for Althea never flushed deeply. Out of her shining eyes gazed the confident spirit that dominated her.

Gener. conversation was running largely upon Mrs.

Ringrose, the subject of the Scottish murder trial, who had married Mr. Onslow Grainger. Althea listened intently. She had already heard from Anthony the story of the scarab as she had herself told it, and many of the people whom she had met at Mrs. Raine's had dropped hints that night which had heightened her interest in the heroine of the case. Now she put a question to Dracott, but he had been abroad at the time the trial came on, and his knowledge of the whole affair was confined to Althea's own recent share in it.

"It is a tragic drama," said Baron Heinrichfels sadly. "I feel deeply sorry for Onslow Grainger, who is a charming fellow—and for that unhappy woman. Public opinion has been against the poor lady. If I were Grainger, I'd take her to another country to live it down."

"Public opinion cannot affect her in the world to which she is bound," said Althea, surprised at her own voice, for the words came forth involuntarily.

"And what may you mean by that enigmatic utterance, Miss Stanmount?" exclaimed Lord Isleworth. "Really, you deal in astounding prophecies!"

Althea was saved the necessity of answering, for just then Mr. Moggs, who had been growing more and more cheerful, rapped loudly with his fruit-knife on the table, and broke into a noisy little speech in which he said, that as a young lady connected with his family was now starting on what he hoped would prove a good paying business in the prophesying line, he considered that it would be only friendly of them all to drink to her prosperity.

"Googe, fill fresh glasses," he ordered with a defiant glance at his man. "No heel-taps, mind."

Googe, controlling the perturbation he felt, duly went



round the table. There was a lull in the conversation, making clear the sound of several newsboys' shrill voices far down the street. They seemed to be shrieking some sensational intelligence.

"Wonder what's up!" muttered Mr. Moggs.

"Let us hope it is not another South African disaster," remarked Baroness Heinrichfels.

Lord Isleworth invariably turned conversation from the subject of the South African war. Now his quietly cynical tones came from the other end of the table.

"Miss Stanmount, here's a splendid chance for you to prove your uncanny powers. What's the West End scandal? That's what they must be shouting."

"How do you know that there's a scandal?" asked Molly.

"Because, dear lady, as I was coming along I saw a lot of people crowding round some headline boards, and I read on the top of one of them, 'Terrible West End—*something*.' My Jehu was driving too fast for me to see the word, but 'scandal' is a safe hit."

In the street the newsboys' raucous shouts drew nearer.

"Googe, cut out and get a paper," said Mr. Moggs, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

With an air of dignified disapproval the sorely tried Googe stalked from the room.

"I was under the impression," observed Sir Sidney Jones nervously, "that a young lady's health was about to be proposed." His hand hurried to his ear. "Excellent old port of yours, Moggs; couldn't have a better bin to toast from—what-what-what?"

Mr. Moggs rapped again on the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sure you'll all join with

me in drinking success to my little sister-in-law, Althea Stanmount, in her new job as—as——” He paused for a word.

“As a prophetess,” suggested Baroness Heinrichfels.

“Oh! if it might be as priestess of our movement,” murmured Mrs. Raine.

“As a most stunning fortune-teller!” cried Dracott.

“As the modern Oracle!” said Baron Heinrichfels, bowing low to Althea. The others laughingly followed his example. Only Selina and Mr. Parfit looked as though they did not understand what was being talked about.

Althea bowed and smiled. She herself had scarcely tasted her brother-in-law’s excellent champagne. A richer wine was flowing through her. Baron Heinrichfels’ eager glances plainly showed his deep interest in her. But her wits were keenly on the alert, and she detected the irony in Lord Isleworth’s manner as he remarked:

“My faith in the Oracle would be absolute had she condescended to foretell the event now being cried in the streets.”

Just then the raucous shout became distinguished in words:

“Awful West End tragedy! Suicide of a lady!”

The guests exchanged startled glances, when Googe, gliding in with the paper for his master, paused beside his mistress’s chair to say, in a low tone:

“Mr. O’Neill is in the drawing-room, madam.”

Mrs. Moggs nodded.

“I’ve engaged O’Neill to sing to-night,” she said to the baron. “Please make Johnny hurry upstairs. These singers are so easily offended, which is ridiculous, considering what high fees one has to pay them.”

"O'Neill!" repeated the baron. "My dear friend Ladislav O'Neill! We've met before to-day at a luncheon at Atherley House, where the Princess Ermytrude specially asked to have O'Neill put next her."

"Oh!" Molly was disconcerted. She made a hasty attempt to give the signal for rising, but Baroness Heinrichfels at the other end of the table seemed engrossed in something Mr. Moggs was quoting in a horrified voice from the paper Googe had brought him. Everybody leaned forward to listen. Suddenly Mrs. Raine uttered a sound of distress, her hands dramatically clasped upon her breast.

"Johnny, what is it?" cried Molly sharply. "Has anything dreadful happened? Thank goodness, whatever it is it cannot affect us."

"I'm not so sure of that, my dear," Mr. Moggs's cheerful red face had grown portentously solemn. He forgot his grammar. "This here's a bad business," he said. "Mrs. Grainger has killed herself, and Althea's name is given as having foretold her death."

"Mrs. Grainger dead!" Molly paled to her lips. Everybody had risen and every face was turned towards Mr. Moggs, who remained seated with the newspaper spread before him.

"The very woman that Althea frightened away from Mrs. Raine's," exclaimed Molly excitedly. "Good gracious, Johnny! Do read out what it says."

Mr. Moggs held the paper closer and began afresh in a halting manner:—

"Mrs. Grainger, wife of the popular Q.C., perhaps better known as the heroine of the famous Ringrose trial,

which resulted in a Scotch verdict of 'Not proven,' committed suicide this afternoon at her residence in Charles Street, Mayfair. The deceased lady was found sitting before a writing-table in her boudoir, death having overcome her to all appearance instantaneously, for the pen was in her hand with which she had been writing a confession that she intended to kill herself by means of an Egyptian scarab which contained a secret and virulent poison.' "

"They'll bring it in temporary insanity at the inquest, of course," observed Lady Jones in her high, metallic voice. "Don't you think so, Baron?"

"Poor Grainger!" exclaimed the baron. "He went out of town yesterday. If he had been at home, this would not have happened."

"Oh! Do go on, Johnny," cried Mrs. Moggs impatiently. "What do they say about Althea?"

Mr. Moggs continued:

"One curious element in this tragedy takes us back to the days of Cagliostro and Nostradamus, and should arouse keen interest among investigators of occult mysteries. It appears, as we understand from the confession alluded to, that Mrs. Grainger was impelled to her act of self-destruction by certain revelations made by Miss Althea Stanmount, a lady who has recently become celebrated in West End drawing-rooms as a psychometrist and clairvoyante. These revelations referred to the Egyptian scarab, which in a series of thrilling scenes describing its ancient uses, Miss Stanmount declared to have been constructed as an instrument of poison, and

by which she warned Mrs. Grainger that death would come to her. The clairvoyante's prophecy has thus caused its own fulfilment.' "

Althea drew a long, shuddering breath. Mrs. Raine gave another hysterical cry :

" Oh ! Althea ! Althea ! "

Anthony's voice, clear and determined, came across the table.

" My sister must not be held accountable for this. She spoke under the magic power of divination as any psychic of ancient Greece or Egypt might have done, unknowingly. And the words she uttered, it will surely be remembered, were to warn Mrs. Grainger against the possibility of death by means of the scarab—*not* to urge her to take her own life. I repeat—Althea is in no way responsible for this."

Mr. Moggs shook his head.

" That's all my eye, Anthony. *I* don't know how Althea does these tricks, and I'm blooming well not going to ask. But you can't tell me this poor woman wasn't affected by what she heard. Some silly women only want to be told *not* to do a thing in order to drive 'em to it. And I take it that's been the way with Mrs. Grainger. But this business will queer Althea's pitch. A nice job it'll be, if the police get hold of it." Johnson Moggs rubbed his chin perplexedly.

" What are we to do, ma'am, if she's run in ? " He turned to Baroness Heinrichfels.

The baroness smiled with gently cynical humour.

" A clairvoyante courageous enough to advertise herself sufficiently is not likely to be ' run in, ' " she said.

"That danger is for the class of fortune-tellers who visit back-doors. Miss Stanmount is safe, I fancy, for the Princess Ermyntrude has asked me to arrange an interview for her with our 'Oracle.' Your sister has earned her laurels, Mr. Stanmount, but I agree that she should not be help responsible for all the thrusts of Fate that follow. At all events, Franz and I will do our best to protect her interests—will we not, Franz?"

"Will we not!" repeated the baron with fervour.

All eyes turned to Althea. She had become the chief object of thought in the room, and the nature of that thought was representatively expressed by the baron's attitude and his wife's words.

A feeling of immense and growing power filled Althea.

At mention of the Princess Ermyntrude, a proud smile had parted her lips. The Princess Ermyntrude's interest in occult matters was well known, and her favour would mean much.

Certainly the Althea Stanmount of to-day was a very different person from the shabby, neglected woman of last Tuesday, who had been a mere cipher in the crowd. She saw at once that the story of Mrs. Grainger's suicide would increase her reputation as a clairvoyante. The possibilities bluntly put forward by her brother-in-law were disagreeable to contemplate, but a moment's reflection told her that nothing serious could come upon her for her share in the tragedy. The prospect of publicity did not alarm her. She was startled at the rapidity with which she had set in motion the machinery of the gods, but she felt the threads of destiny in her fingers. She wanted the greatest in the land to come and consult

her and help to spread her fame as kings and priests of old had come for counsel to the Delphic Oracle.

Nevertheless the news of the disaster gave Althea a staggering sense of the nearness of powers transcending those which she had dared to assume. There was once a thief, she remembered, who had stolen fire from heaven and whom divine vengeance had overtaken. What if it should overtake her also?

Looking up, Althea's eyes met the eyes of Leonard Dracott, who was watching her with the dumb faith of a dog.

She laid her hand for an instant on his arm.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I know *you* understand and feel for me."

The young man was thrilled. He wanted to throw himself at her feet, to kiss the hem of her gown, or to do any other mad thing that might assure her of his devotion, but being a modern Englishman, he merely stiffened and flushed.

"Come along," cried Molly, with her pretty imperiousness. "We can't bring poor Mrs. Grainger back to life by standing here talking about her and Althea. Let's go upstairs. Mr. O'Neill is in the drawing-room, waiting to sing."

There was a picking up of fans and gloves as Mrs. Moggs gathered her fluttering covey together; then with a rustle of silks the ladies swept on their way.

## CHAPTER XII

MEANWHILE the youngest member of the household had been feeling sadly out of things. Having assisted—or otherwise—at the toilet of Selina, little Nan, with Fanshawe, her mother's maid, and the upper-housemaid had peered through the stair-rails on a higher landing to watch the party descend to dinner. This was interesting, but all too brief. Then the upper-housemaid, who waited on Nan, helped her to undress, but it was a very disconsolate little damsel left tucked up under the rose satin coverlet.

Nan was not alone, for Felida, the pink-nosed, silver-grey Persian, lay curled round at the foot of the bed, but Felida was poor company, as she much preferred to go to sleep, and Nan had to bring all her fortitude to bear upon the next hour. It gave out at last. Nan was much too excited to sleep, and was bubbling over with the desire to chatter to somebody. She had been consoling herself by looking forward to her nightly visit from her great friend, Mrs. McCulla, the cock, who was in the habit of coming up to see her in bed. But now she reflected that perhaps to-night Mrs. McCulla would not have time to come upstairs. This was a serious matter, and it effectually drove every sign of sleep from Nan's eyes. She sat up in bed and began to reason. When Nan reasoned, she usually went astray. It did not take long for her to convince herself that a trip of



inquiry was quite within the bounds of propriety. She accordingly hopped out of bed, turned on the electric light and put on her blue dressing-gown and slippers. Then she scuttled surreptitiously down to the hall, passing a pair of astonished waiters. There was a swinging partition which shut off the kitchen stairs, and this had been set open for convenience' sake during the serving of dinner. Nan crept to the top of the flight.

"Mrs. McCulla!" she called insinuatingly. A giggle rose above the splashing of water below.

"There's that limb again," said a girl's voice. "She's calling you, Mrs. McCulla."

"And what did I hear ye call *her*?" cried Mrs. McCulla's softly indignant tones. "I'll tache ye to speak of yer superiors, Serann Figgis. Git on wid thim dishes now."

Mrs. McCulla went to the foot of the stairs.

"Alannah! Is it yerself that I see there? Back to bed this very minnit, or the good little people will be catchin' ye."

"There *ain't* no good little people," retorted Nan scornfully. "Do come up, Mrs. McCulla. I want to know how the dinner went and whether you've anything nice for me."

"As tasty a mennoo as iver I see," said Mrs. McCulla proudly, "from thim vulgar anchovies to th' pineapple ice. Av annywan wants to cook a betther dinner, let 'em *thry*! I got a saucer o' velvet crame for ye, darlin'; an' a bit o' pastry what wouldn't hurrt a babby."

"And a teeny taste of pineapple ice, Mrs. McCulla," wheedled Nan.

"Ne'er a squaze!" said the Irishwoman sternly.

"Ye'd not shlake a wink wid pineapple ice inside ye. T'would give ye the teeth-ache furrst an' the stummyache atherwards. Be off wid ye now till I bring ye the crame."

Nan withdrew and waited until her ally appeared.

Mrs. McCulla came slowly up the kitchen stairs. She was stout, but comely, and in her pink cotton gown she made an attractive picture—her dress unhooked at the collar, showing her softly palpitating throat, a few rings of brown hair clinging to her damp forehead. Others hung about her ears, curling coquettishly. Her cap was awry and her apron none of the cleanest, but Nan cuddled her and the saucer of velvet cream with joy. Reposing upon the edge of the saucer was the most delicious looking little man made in short crust with currant eyes, a cherry for a mouth, and garments outlined in citron peel.

"I thought ye'd like a 'little husband,' darlin'," whispered Mrs. McCulla, whose voice was as soft as her heart, and whose hand was unparalleled in pastry. "He's as light as a wafer, and won't sit heavy on yer chest."

Nan seized upon the "little husband," and bubbled forth her thanks. "I s'pose *you* have a husband, Mrs. McCulla," she said. "Where is Mr. McCulla?"

Mrs. McCulla, who had merely adopted brevet rank, was staggered.

"Arrah, darlin'," she drawled. "An' is it Mистер McCulla ye're mintionin'? Shure he's—he's dead in-toirely."

"And buried?" inquired Nan. "Well, you be glad you're not dead, too."

Just then Googe, tall, calm, and consequential, came by, carrying a tray.

"*Appetitus rationi pareat*, Miss Nan," he remarked affably.

Nan nodded, though she did not understand a word. Like the rest of the household, she was rather in awe of Googe. His fine manners had infected her. She always put on a queenly little air in addressing him, and Googe, for his part, treated her like a grown up young lady, which was delightful.

"Mrs. McCulla makes beautiful apple tarts," she said politely, "but I like veivet cream best."

Googe's pale, smooth-skinned face broke into an indulgent smile. He looked tenderly at Mrs. McCulla and, carried away by secret emotion, burst into an original rendering:

"*Amor vincit appetitus!*" he exclaimed as he went on his way. The fact was that Googe himself was enslaved by Mrs. McCulla's skill in cookery. Moreover, Mrs. McCulla had "eyes of most unholy blue."

The blue eyes softened now suspiciously—a point not lost on Nan—as they followed the slight figure of the butler.

"Mrs. McCulla, why do you look like that?" she asked with embarrassing directness. "Are you thinking of Mr. McCulla?"

The Irishwoman winced.

"Shure I'll tell ye the truth, darlin', if I never did it before. Ye see, Miss Nan, a lone female is made to feel her position if she don't get married, so I call myself 'Mrs.,' not wid anny notion of decaving the quality, but for the purpose of providing meself wid proper rispact."

"And shall I be made to feel my position if I don't get married?" inquired Nan with prompt anxiety.

"The fairies were kind at yer christenin'," said Mrs. McCulla evasively. "Shure they put a bit of gold in yer daddy's pocket to buy ye the bhoy that ye fancy—not to mention the swate face on ye. Will ye go up now, accushla?" as Nan's cream had disappeared. "There's a fairy-woman waiting to stroke yer eyes to sleep."

"Oh, people only make up those stories to tell children," said Nan shrewdly. "But I'll go."

She had got half-way up the first flight of stairs when she was attracted by a hurried step in the hall. Googe went quickly by. Then there seemed to be some stir at the door. Naughty Nan did not want to be caught in her dressing-gown and slippers, but curiosity got the better of discretion and she sat down on the stairs to wait and see what happened. Googe was admitting a late visitor. "Yes, sir, the ladies and gentlemen are still at table," she heard him say as he helped the stranger off with his overcoat. "Will you walk upstairs, sir? This way."

Nan suddenly realised that she had not time to escape. She sprang to her feet, turned, and began to run upstairs as fast as what Googe would have called the "impedimenta" of her trailing garments permitted. Unluckily she trod on the edge of her dressing-gown and promptly measured her length.

Googe, with a quick "Excuse me, sir," rushed up, forgetting for the moment his scholarly pretensions.

"You ain't hurt, Miss Nan, are you?"

Nan was on her feet again in a moment.

"Not at all, Googe, thank you," she replied with an exact imitation of her mother's manner. "I needn't keep you. Is this gentleman going to the drawing-room?"

"Mr. Ladislav O'Neill," explained Googe as he turned to the amused visitor, "this young lady is——" But Nan cut him short.

"I am Miss Moggs," she said with dignity, holding out her hand. "I will take you upstairs if you will come with me."

O'Neill followed her, while Googe looked after the little blue figure and permitted himself to shrug.

"She's a *lusus naturæ*, that's what she is," he said, as he went for the paper Mr. Moggs had desired him to fetch.

Nan led the way to the drawing-room. There she placed herself upon one of the daintily upholstered chairs opposite to O'Neill, swinging her slippered feet, her yellow head nodding after a way her father had to give point to her talk. Prepared to entertain the tardy visitor, she first interrogated him as to why he had come so late—why had he not dined downstairs? O'Neill replied that, candidly speaking, he had not been invited to dine downstairs, whereupon Nan freely commiserated him and explained that she had not been asked to do so, either. After they had fraternised as companions in misfortune, Nan inquired what he had come for?

"To sing," he replied with a cynical smile.

Nan looked puzzled.

"I wonder how Mummy'll like that," she remarked dubiously. "Mummy says that when Johnny sings it's dreadful. And poor Johnny's very fond of singing. He likes a nice loud song. Is that your kind?"

"Sometimes," said O'Neill. "Who is Johnny—your brother?"

Nan lifted her small nose contemptuously.

"I haven't got no brother. Johnny's my daddy. But *I* can sing and dance, too. I dance with Serann."

"Do you? Won't you show me how you dance?"

Nan looked uncertain.

"Serann couldn't come just now—she's washing up. And she'd be shy in the drawing-room. Serann and I dance in the scullery."

O'Neill began to comprehend. "Then Serann is not your governess?" he hazarded.

"Sneeler's my governess. I call her Sneeler because I can't say Selina," explained Nan, whose logic was exclusively her own. "Sneeler's not half such fun as Serann. But I'm very sorry for poor Serann—she has to be a kitchenmaid, though it's her ambition to go on the stage. Mrs. Figgis—that's her mother—says girls are safer in the kitchen, and Serann is but young."

O'Neill was duly sympathetic.

"Johnny gives her a ticket for the theatre when I ask him," continued Nan, leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, her rounded chin resting upon her upturned palms. "Serann wanted to play *Boy Blue* in the pantomime this year. The dancing was lovely."

"I should very much like to see *you* dance," said O'Neill.

Nan got up with a pleased wriggle. She gathered her blue dressing-gown in both hands, and kicked off her slippers. Flinging up her head till it gleamed and fluttered like a golden butterfly, she began pirouetting, her whole body alive with movement, and singing in a sweet treble voice:—

*" Oh! I'd like to be a fair-ee,  
An' wear short clothes,  
I'd like to be a fair-ee,  
An' dance upon me toes.  
I'd throw me arms an' legs about,  
An' all the boys and girls 'ud shout,  
Bra-vo! Bra-vo!! Bravo, Mary Ann!!!"*

" Who taught you to dance like that, changeling? " inquired O'Neill of the blue bundle, squatting, breathless, on the floor, and smiling at him seraphically.

" My dancing mistress, where Sneeler takes me, but I've taught Serann. I teach her every new dance I learn, and she taught me that song. We change the name to Sairey Ann when we're singing it in the scullery. It kind of comforts poor Serann."

" I see," said O'Neill. " But would you really like to be a fairy? I don't feel sure that you are not one already."

Nan made a grimace of derision.

" There *are* no fairies—'cept in pantomimes."

" Indeed there are. Perhaps you won't believe that I had a fairy for my great-great-ever-so-great-grand-mother."

" What! " Nan crept closer. " Tell me about her," she commanded, " but speak the truth. It's no use making up stories for me."

" I'm sure it isn't, and I won't try it on, I promise you. Truly, then, my great-great-ever-so-great-grand-mother was a real live fairy. There are lots of greats about her, you see, because she lived many hundreds of years ago.

" Oh! " said Nan, permitting herself to be taken up in O'Neill's arms. " What sort of fairy was she? "

" Haven't you heard of the good, kind, ugly, little people who live down inside the earth and only come up sometimes to see what the world is like outside ? "

" You mean gnomes and goblins," said Nan. " I've read about them in *Grimm*, but *they* are not real."

" Yes, they are—quite real. There are a lot of them in my mother-country ; dear beautiful Hungary, where I was born. We call them ' pchuvushi.' "

And O'Neill plunged into the legendary lore of his motherland, and told Nan the pathetic story of the little plain *pchuvush* woman who wandered up to the surface of the world one day, and saw a handsome gipsy man asleep under a tree in the Hungarian forest, and lost her little fairy heart to him. And how the gipsy man awoke and liked the ugly little creature whom he saw beside him, and offered to marry her if she would make him rich and successful. And how the *pchuvush* people made their tiny countrywoman promise when she went to take farewell of them, that if they let her go and marry the big gipsy man she would send all her children down to live in the *pchuvush* world beneath. And how she broke her word ; for she bore ten fine sons, but could not bear to part with them.

" And so," finished O'Neill, " the poor little *pchuvush* people had the worst of the bargain, for no fine white men went down, as they had hoped, to marry their little brown maidens, and thus to make their race bigger and stronger, as they had wished to be. But the sons of the *pchuvush* woman and the gipsy man had many gipsy children, strong and handsome and healthy, and wise in wonderful lore—able to make all sorts of magic charms, and to see into the future, and to know what goes on



behind the stars. And their tribe is called Kukuya—that is a *pchuvush* word—and from that tribe my mother came.”

Nan had listened, enraptured.

“Then you are really Mr. Kukuya,” she said.

“No, my name is O’Neill,” he answered. “My father was an Irishman, but he met my mother in Hungary, and married her in a gipsy tent beside the forest, and I was born there. I didn’t cross the sea till I was bigger than you are.”

Nan reflected.

“I shall call you Kukuya,” she said. “It’s a much prettier name than O’Neill. I’m glad you’re Irish. I think all the Irish are very nice because Mrs. McCulla is Irish, and she says they are. You’d love Mrs. McCulla. She’s our cook.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, and she’s such a *very* nice person.”

“I’m sure she must be. Now suppose you sing me something else?”

“Not just now,” said Nan, lifting her finger. Her quick ear had caught the sound of voices in the hall. “P’rhaps I’d better go. Good-night, Kukuya.”

She bounded off his knee, and was gone like a flash. O’Neill wondered at the suddenness of her departure, but he did not wonder long, for the door re-opened in a minute or two to admit the ladies.

O’Neill rose hurriedly. There was before him a blend of delicate colours, a confusion of figures and faces, but among them all he saw only Althea.

## CHAPTER XIII

ALTHEA was almost the last of the line of daintily dressed women who ascended the stairs, and so absorbed was she in thinking about the probable effect of the tragedy on her own aims, that it was not till she reached the drawing-room door that she reflected she was about to encounter O'Neill.

The prospect did not please her. She had no desire to come again under the influence of this extraordinary stranger. Althea had a healthy contempt for what she considered romantic nonsense. There had been no room for it in her life ; but at the back of her mind lay a conviction that this was not romantic nonsense. She was afraid of the influence of the singer. Yet several times since Everil's party Althea had told herself that all he had said to her was absurd, the hallucination of a partially unbalanced brain. When they met again, she must ignore everything that had passed between them. Any other course would have been foolish, even in the days of her obscurity. Now that she was on the brink of fame and fortune, to pay serious attention to such silly talk would be doubly absurd. She wished that Molly had not engaged the man for to-night, but since they must meet, Althea could only hope that he would not make himself obtrusive.

Holding these ideas, Althea passed O'Neill without a sign of recognition. This was easy, as Molly was talking

to him at the moment. Molly had infused some surprising warmth into her manner, for the baron's avowed friendship for the singer had placed O'Neill on a different level in Mrs. Moggs's estimation.

O'Neill did not, however, appear to notice Althea, and this chagrined her. She crossed the room and took a solitary seat on a wide pink and blue settee. The rest of the party fell into groups. Selina Porson was shyly trying to entertain Lady Jones with a volume of amateur photographs. Mrs. Raine, who seemed to have been much shaken by the news of Mrs. Grainger's death, had retired to a distant corner and was fanning herself feebly. Sylvia was bending over her, gently expostulating. It was an opportunity for Baroness Heinrichfels, who had to arrange with Althea the private interview for Princess Ermytrude. The baroness came over and sat down by Althea's side.

Baroness Heinrichfels was essentially the womanly type. Her heart had gone out to this girl. She wanted to help her in practical ways. The baroness had the *entrée* to some of the first houses in England, and was shrewd enough to know that such introductions might be made immensely profitable.

But to-night Althea found great difficulty in keeping her attention fixed on what her friend was saying. All the time, she was keenly sensitive to O'Neill's presence. She kept her own eyes carefully averted from his vivid face, but was perfectly aware when his look was upon her. All that was sentient in Althea grew restive under this influence. Whole battalions of forces and emotions of which she had hitherto been only dimly conscious seemed to rise and range themselves on behalf of O'Neill.

This inward responsiveness of hers angered Althea. At any other time, the plans the baroness was proposing would have filled her with pride. Now, even royal favours dwindled beside the desire she fought against that O'Neill should again envelop her in the magic of her personality. Was the figure of this man, she bitterly asked herself, to blot out all her ambitions?

The baroness misconstrued the cause of Althea's pre-absorption. She put it down to the natural effect of the shock the girl had just received. The kind woman was doing her best to make the neophyte in Althea accustomed to the possibilities of her position, when Molly turned her back on the singer and departed to speak to Lady Jones. O'Neill at once crossed to where Althea and the baroness sat. At sight of him Baroness Heinrichfels smiled and nodded, motioning him to a seat. They immediately began to talk about the recent tragedy. O'Neill had heard of it on his way to De Vaux Square.

Althea followed his tones with a growing sense of familiarity. His nearness gave her a sense of pleasure. Still, she was not quite at ease. The baroness observed this, and laid her hand sympathetically upon Althea's arm.

"Miss Stanmount has been sadly upset by this terrible story, Ladislav. She blames herself for her unconscious share in it, and I feel she is alarmed at the power within her. You must talk to her, my friend. You, who know so much of the mysteries of the unseen, can tell her that there is nothing to fear in a gift like hers."

Althea flashed a glance at O'Neill. As her creamy eyelids were lifted, he saw, deep in her grey eyes, the struggling soul of the woman.

"What can I say?" he asked.

"A great deal," answered the baroness. "Tell her that she is one of the many Voices proclaiming in all lands that the time is drawing nigh when captivity will be lifted and the spirit shall be poured upon all flesh. Is it not so? Already our sons and our daughters prophesy; our old men dream dreams and our young men—like you, Ladislav, see visions. Tell her that the visions that she sees and the prophecies that she utters do but show forth the gracious power working within her. Therefore she has no cause to be afraid."

"I do not think I am afraid," said Althea slowly. She was surprised at the baroness's speech. The elder woman's face was lighted by an exalted look. Both Baron and Baroness Heinrichfels were a rare combination of the worldly and the idealistic.

"It is difficult to describe how I feel," said Althea. "I hardly know. Such conditions are complex and puzzling."

"I will leave Ladislav to try and make you more at home in them," said the baroness. "I see poor Mrs. Raine is greatly troubled about Mrs. Grainger's death—I must go and say a word to her."

O'Neill sprang up. When the baroness had passed he drew his chair nearer to Althea's settee and leaned forward, his chin upon his hand. She waited breathlessly for the words he should utter. It did not occur to her to speak first. At length he said, abruptly:

"You remember me?"

By a sudden impulse Althea, too, leaned forward, her usually calm face quivering. The questioning look in her eyes kindled all the fire of his.

" You remember me ? " he repeated, below his breath.  
" You *do* remember me ? "

Althea's eyes grew large and bright. She strove to answer collectedly.

" But of course I remember you, Mr. O'Neill. We met at my sister's—my other sister's—Mrs. James Lascene. You were singing—and you—you——" The effort failed.

He bent lower, smiling tenderly.

" I said things to you that would have made any other woman suppose me mad. But *you* understood. *You* knew me beneath the mummer's garb. To you I can never be merely Ladislav O'Neill, the Hungarian-Irish gipsy who pipes for a living. To you I am, as of old, your faithful Ion—not Ion the insurgent, but Ion the server in our dear white temple—Ion, who tended the Pythia's laurel, and who never worshipped the gods as he worshipped the Pythia Cleino."

Althea was exceedingly startled. Here, if she had needed it, was confirmation of her own temple story. Had she and this man actually lived and served in that far back temple together? She held her breath in awe; yet she did not feel so afraid of his power over her now that he was explaining things. She laughed lightly.

" Really, Mr. O'Neill, it would not be surprising if I did suppose you mad. Who *was* Cleino ? "

" It was your own name," he cried. " Don't you remember your own name ? "

Althea shook her head.

" Please enlighten me. This is interesting."

" Don't you remember the temple at Delphi ? " he

asked. "Baron Heinrichfels tells me that you have given accurate descriptions of it."

"He has heard that from my brother. But it was only in trance. You must recollect that 'the Oracle,' as they call me, and Althea Stanmount are two entirely different individualities caged in one person."

"So I begin to realise," he said sadly, "even as Cleino, the Delphic Pythia, whose mystic utterances men came from all parts of the world to hear, was a different woman from Cleino, the celebrated courtesan whom Ion had helped to escape from the temple."

"And what happened to Ion?" asked Althea eagerly.

O'Neill's smile was bitter.

"Ion would in these days have been called a social democrat. He had defied the political authorities, and had only evaded banishment by taking service in the temple. There he defied Apollo by daring to love his priestess. What could follow when Ion was captured? It is an ugly story. Do you want to hear more of it?"

"Yes," said Althea quickly.

"Ion planned the details of their escape. But they were overtaken in Eubœa, and there Ion was captured and put to torture to induce him to betray the whereabouts of Cleino. Had she surrendered herself they might have met death together. However, she contrived to reach Asia Minor, where she ruled the populace by her beauty and gifts of divination, forgetting the man who had perished to serve her."

"How do you know all this?" inquired Althea.

"Cannot you guess?"

Althea shook her head again.

"Then listen." His melodious voice shook. He laid

his hand upon the back of the settee and leaned nearer to her.

" You have come to me night after night in my dreams—you, the Althea Stanmount of to-day—and told me this story of bygone time—told it me with remorse for the past and as a pledge of what our future shall be. For you and I, who gave to each other all that we had to give, gave it for all eternity. Not lightly may lovers redeem their vows by deeds of disloyalty. Love lives for ever, beloved. That was one of the earliest lessons that Cleino, by her mystic learning, taught to Ion. Love is eternal, and though, like Apollo, Love dons various disguises, yet he stands unveiled at last. You may journey north, south, east, or west, but some day Love will be waiting for you on the confines of the world."

Althea sat motionless, her eyelids drooped now, showing only a thin line of light between the thick lashes.

" Some day the balance between us will be made even," continued O'Neill, " for justice demands the payment of every debt, and destiny extorts it. Therefore, I wait till Althea redeems the promise of Cleino. That she will, I have the assurance of your own dream-self, beloved."

Althea made no reply. Backwards the thread of her mind was reaching, striving to touch some clear point in those strange dreams which had so constantly haunted and yet eluded her. Visions of the past he spoke of, rose and melted before she could fix them. Long sleeping echoes were awaking in her heart and brain. And to the man who had aroused them, there is no knowing what she might have said had not her brother-in-law's strident tones broken in upon the pair. The gentlemen had just



come up from the dining-room, and Johnson Moggs bore a message from his wife.

"Sorry to disturb you, Althea, but Molly wants Mr. O'Neill to sing. How de do, sir? I heard you the other day at my other sister-in-law's, and a ripping good thing you gave us. I'm one of those who are really fond of music. I can do a bit of shout myself, but my wife says I get out of tune. Shall I fetch your music?"

O'Neill sprang up and made an elaborate bow, which embarrassed Mr. Moggs.

"My music is here," he said, lightly touching his forehead. "Pray tell Mrs. Moggs that I shall be delighted to obey her."

Then, as Johnson went off, the singer paused beside Althea. "But it is to you that I will sing," he said softly. "Listen to me, beloved. The song is my own."

He went to the grand piano and seated himself. It was a Bechstein of magnificent tone; for though Molly was no judge of an instrument, she had wisely permitted a connoisseur in the trade to select one for her. Perceiving its quality, O'Neill's long-fingered, bronzed hands floated affectionately over the keyboard. He played a delicate rippling passage, full of feeling; then a few hushed chords, and then the glorious baritone voice rang out:—

*"Belov'd! I wait within a shrine  
That once was thine:  
Outside, the stream of life flows on,  
But thou art gone.  
Above the passing of the years  
Thy wayward feet  
Ring lightly up the steps that Time  
Has graven o'er thy fame.*

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

*I hear each beat  
 Re-echo through the empty shrine  
 Where thou should'st be—  
 My lonely heart that longs for thee.  
 Priestess Divine! Saint of my Shrine!  
 Come back to me.*

*"Thou dost not come! Alone I wait  
 In faith, till thou dost pause and heed.  
 Till the strong hand of Fate  
 Shall wing thy feet, and thou shalt speed  
 Straight to my arms,  
 And satisfy my need.*

*"What though abysmal darkness rolls?  
 What though years come and go? Our souls  
 Shall answer each to each at last  
 The master call,  
 For when life's lesser things have passed  
 Love shall be all.  
 Then turn, belov'd, nor tarry late.  
 Though still will I serenely wait;  
 Eternity is ours to share,  
 No matter when we meet—nor where."*

Under cover of the burst of applause that followed the song, Mrs. Raine turned to Leonard Dracott, who stood sheepishly near her, his eyes fixed on Althea. In her white dress, Althea looked like some virginal goddess as she lay back against the brilliant pink and blue cushions of the settee, talking in an undertone to Baron Heinrichfels. The baron's admiration had reached a profound pitch. He did not know that it was of set purpose the psychiatrist was leading him on to tell her personal anecdotes of fashionable individuals who had leaning towards

spiritualism, fortune-telling, and the like. He did not know that she had begun garnering up such scraps of information in case she had future need of them.

"Well, Mr. Dracott, what do you think of the possibilities of the sixth sense now?" asked Mrs. Raine, her mind full of the recent tragedy. "Does your scepticism hold out against such terrible proof as we have had to-night? Or has Miss Stanmount convinced you?"

Leonard laughed awkwardly, and pulled his moustache in a deprecating manner.

"No one could doubt Miss Stanmount, I'm sure. She's marvellous. Yes, I suppose I must confess, Mrs. Raine, that as far as Miss Stanmount goes I *am* convinced."

"Ah! there are stranger things than you dreamed of in your philosophy of life," said Mrs. Raine drily. "Althea possesses a mystic key—though, I fancy she scarcely knows how she ought to use it as yet."

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## CHAPTER XIV

DURING the next few days Althea's correspondence increased by leaps and bounds. It included assaults of press agencies, interviewers, managers of entertainment bureaux and lecture syndicates, and of all varieties of cranks and enthusiasts—to say nothing of fashionable ladies desiring information, each as to her particular destiny. Many applicants called in person, which led to Althea engaging the daily services of a page-boy. She had no desire to secure herself from bombardment, for she found it extremely profitable.

As to the Ringrose-Grainger affair, the papers were full of details, more or less accurate, of this. But nowhere did Nemesis in the shape of legal complications hurry upon the heels of the mystery-monger, though large-headed headings, with references to Miss Stanmount's share in the tragedy, decorated the foremost sheets of the principal dailies. At the inquest the jury brought in the usual verdict of temporary insanity, about which there seemed to be no doubt in the opinion of the public. But though interest in the Grainger case died down in due course, people continued to make much of Althea. There was, nevertheless, a good deal of controversy concerning her.

To begin with, someone in the country wrote a letter to the editor of the *Daily Post* inquiring whether any Biblical saying authorised what he called the "Doctrine

of Metempsychosis." The vicar of a northern parish indignantly replied in the negative, whereupon another parson tentatively quoted some obscure texts, and asked for an opinion from the bishops. The bishops modestly refrained from expressing any, but two converts of the Sixth Sense Society took up the cudgels in defence of what they called the Religion of the Future—in which was apparently incorporated a belief in reincarnation and the Law of Readjustment—quoting promiscuously Hermes Trismegistus, Origen and Madame Blavatsky. At the mention of their leader, the Theosophists entered the fray, supported by battalions of eastern authorities and all the mysterious lore of Central Asia, which in its turn provoked the ire of an agnostic scientist, and incited the scoffing editor of a certain sixpenny weekly to increase the circulation of his paper by challenging Miss Stanmount to prove her psychic powers in a test of his own imposing, at the forfeit to himself if she succeeded of a thousand guineas.

To this Anthony, on behalf of the noted clairvoyante, returned a dignified refusal. He hated publicity, but having pledged himself to support his sister, he was prepared to do so at any personal sacrifice. Therefore he called upon the sceptical to come and judge for themselves of the new oracle's inspirational power.

Althea hired a studio large enough for a lecture hall, with a vestibule, and another room which served for the Oracle's sanctum. With the aid of a scene-painter and some classic looking properties, Anthony transformed the place, and here Althea gave public performances. She had also plenty of private engagements, and money began to pour in, for fees were purposely put high.

Thus Althea's world widened with extraordinary rapidity. She soon had to engage the daily services of a typist and shorthand writer for the conducting of her vast correspondence; to start an agent for the booking of her professional engagements, and to secure a smart little coupé. Last, but not least, she engaged a maid for herself. Out of a crowd of applicants, instinct directed her choice of a Frenchwoman, called Julie Lamotte. This girl had formerly been a lady's maid, but later on the confederate of a professional mesmerist. Misfortune, however, overtook the mesmerist, and Julie was forced to turn her attention to the comparatively dull rôle of dressmaker's assistant. She, however, ardently desired to enter again the service of a professional psychic, to whom, she modestly hinted, her experience might be of value. Althea thought so too. She went to the dressmaker for the girl's character, which appeared to be in every way satisfactory. A few days later, Julie Lamotte entered Althea's service and contrived to adapt herself admirably to the requirements of the Oracle.

Althea seldom now had an hour unoccupied. Her mornings were given up to letters, callers, photographers, and dressmakers, her afternoons to public or private séances, while in the evening she had many social engagements.

The princess's séance was supposed to be private, but a report of it got into the papers, and also a statement that one of the Cabinet Ministers had sought the Oracle's pronouncement on an important diplomatic question. It was true that the Minister had consulted Althea, and that she came through the consultation with triumph. That was at Atherly House, where the Oracle, as she was

now generally called, performed before a select circle of royal and illustrious persons, all of whom appeared duly impressed. And after this, applications poured in anew. Among them came a magnificent offer from the proprietor of a music hall. Altogether the boom was immense.

Yet through all her successes, Althea was possessed by a dread lest her gift should fail her. This idea was intolerable. After all the glorification she had received, she could not bear the thought of failure. She said nothing to Anthony about it, but she was determined not to leave herself entirely at the mercy of her divining faculty. Thus she made a practice of storing up stray bits of information concerning the private lives of possible clients. Julie Lamotte helped her considerably in this. Julie generally contrived to know something of a personal and private nature about the ladies who made appointments with her mistress. Althea herself scarcely knew where her ordinary faculties ended and her mystic powers began. When she entered into a trance she seemed to pass through a borderland wherein her lower mind rapidly sorted the clues that she had gathered in her daily life, ready for the super-normal intelligence to utilise as occasion might require.

One morning Althea awoke troubled and restless. She had had a wonderful dream, and the remembrance of it brought a burning blush to her face. She had dreamed again of O'Neill. The skies had been dark above them—mysteriously cold and gloomy, yet showing a pale, faint glimmer like that of early dawn. And Althea had heard him speak again in the old sweet way which made her tremble with joy and pain.

"Love is always ours, for love is eternal," he had said. "You will learn this some day, beloved, and cease to fight against your fate; for by love we came into being, by love all nature lives, and by love all reach the ultimate goal." He drew her close to him, and kissed her lips. Then he said "Farewell."

"Oh, not farewell!" she cried. "Not now—when I am beginning to understand."

"We have eternity before us," he had answered, "but the road is rough, and you have shrunk from it. I go, for I have other work to do."

Then Ruth's cry had risen in her soul: "Where thou goest I will go. . . ."

"Come, then," he had answered, "for the gods of all time have demanded a baptism of blood, and from the beginning life has been merged in life. Come!"

And together—twain that seemed to be one—they rose, and soared far into those strange cold skies of morning.

Julie brought her mistress's early cup of tea while Althea was still puzzling over her dream. She sat up in bed in one of her new nightdresses. It was made of finest batiste, trimmed with valenciennes and palest lavender ribbons, and was a perfect joy to wear. She tried to forget her dream, turning over the pile of letters which Julie had brought. It was Althea's custom to read out the names of people who wrote to her in order that Julie might tell her what she happened to know about them. Althea then made notes in a private writing-book. This enabled her to consider the applications while dressing, and saved time in dictating replies. But to-day she was too restless to attend to her correspond-



ence, and decided to betake herself to the British Museum, where the great marbles always calmed her spirit, if she came in an unquiet mood.

The solemn shadow and silence of the museum itself was soothing. Here past, present, and future seemed unfolded before her in one long vista. What were the homes of to-day but the tombs of to-morrow? At best only a single name here and there could be written in letters that would outlast time. Yet, above all, sat the gods—elemental, inscrutable, immutable—but divine!

Althea went through the gallery of Roman busts, past the Towneley Venus, and so by the statue of Demeter. Here the tender, penetrating gaze of the goddess arrested her steps. There were few people going by that way, and no one noticed the slight, pale woman leaning upon the railing before the statue of Demeter. There was such exquisite sympathy and understanding. Althea felt, in Demeter's face.

She remained for several minutes before the statue, the grand loveliness of which not even its cruel defacements can hide, drinking in thoughts that drew her nearer to the heights where the spirit of Demeter dwells. Then she remembered that Anthony had asked her to take note of an effect of drapery on one of the marbles in the Elgin room. She stayed some time making a rough sketch of part of that splendid if somewhat blurred relief of three dancing girls, in which robes and limbs seem to be literally moving upon the stone.

Althea was still standing before it when she heard the tinkle of a laugh she knew intimately, carried towards her through the opening by which access may be gained to the Carian and Assyrian monuments. Following it,



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came the sound of another voice whose thin, well-bred drawl was unmistakable. Althea was startled. It was no misdemeanour to pay a morning visit with a male friend to the British Museum, but she wished that the friend had not happened to be Lord Isleworth. On no conceivable theory could it be assumed that he and Molly had felt a simultaneous desire to improve their acquaintance with the monuments of antiquity!

With a vague idea of tracking the pair, Althea slipped her pencil and pad into a small bag she carried, and passed down the steps. She strolled through the lower precincts without seeing them, and had just decided that they must have gone to the mummy-room upstairs, when she stopped short at the end of the Egyptian gallery.

Rounding one of the great pedestals from which the cat-goddess Pasht looks down in black majesty upon a race that only derides her divinity, Althea came face to face with Hanwhat Singh. His grave salutation showed Althea that he had not forgotten her. She went forward shyly to speak to him.

"You have been often in my thoughts," he said. "I have followed your career with interest, and have listened attentively to some of your addresses, which are said to be inspirational."

"Have you indeed?" exclaimed Althea. "How odd that no one should have told me of your being present."

Hanwhat Singh smiled.

"Madam, you have become the accepted oracle of a large circle of people in this great London," he said gently. "You have proved your power to draw aside the shroud that covers the past and to pierce the clouds

that veil the future; you have proclaimed yourself the exponent of spiritual truth, and yet you have not mastered the simple scientific fact that it is not always necessary to transport the flesh," and he lightly touched his own thin breast, "to any place in order to see and hear what is done and spoken there."

"But," Althea answered, "I really don't know much about occult methods—at least in this self. It is the other part of me that knows."

"The other part," he repeated, "the part that acquired spiritual learning in that long ago novitiate which you half remember, and that is therefore well qualified to teach; as I, who have heard her, can testify."

"It is most kind of you to interest yourself in my work," said Althea. She hesitated a moment. "I wonder if you can tell me why it is that I am not always sure of myself? Sometimes it seems as if that other part of me might fail. Things don't always come to me as they should, and I cannot be perfectly sure of getting answers to questions when I wish."

Hanwhat Singh looked at her fixedly. There was large compassion in his eyes.

"I believe," he said, "that this is not one of the afternoons on which your psychic powers are at the service of the public. Have you any private engagement?"

"None," she answered, "until this evening."

"Then will you come and listen to me? I am speaking at Gabriel Grove between five and half-past six. I might be of help to you."

"Oh, may I? I fear there is not much friendly

feeling towards me among the members of the Sixth Sense Society."

"I know that," he answered, with a sort of sad humour. "But, if you will come, I will guarantee that you shall not be observed. I must, however, ask you to promise not to speak to anybody."

"Certainly," said Althea. "Do you propose to make me invisible?"

"I only ask you to come straight upstairs, and to take your seat in the lecture-room without addressing anyone. Leave immediately after the address, if you please, in the same way."

"But I shall feel like an eavesdropper," laughed Althea. "Of course, I know such things are possible. It is mesmerism of the optic nerves, is it not? My brother has told me that Eastern occultists are clever at it, and I suppose you are one of them."

Hanwhat Singh waived that point.

"Come, and I will make you feel welcome," he said.

"I will come gratefully," answered Althea.

## CHAPTER XV

ALTHEA timed her arrival at the Head House that afternoon so that the leading dignitaries of the Sixth Sense Society were already enthroned. Hanwhat Singh, standing up at the farther side of the room, a slight, dark figure in his close-fitting coat, sent her, by a glance, the sense of welcome he had promised. She stood hesitating in the open doorway. Following his look, she saw a vacant chair placed conveniently near, and seated herself, relieved that no one took any notice of her presence.

Hanwhat Singh prefaced his address by the remark that he had been asked to speak on any subject that he thought likely to appeal to the London members of the Sixth Sense Society. They had, he knew, already heard from Western occultists much that was interesting and profitable upon the complex organism of man in its various conditions, physical and ethereal; also upon the action and control of invisible forces of which the very existence was unsuspected by the majority of men and women. They had also received considerable instruction concerning the plan and government of the universe, and the evolutionary progress of the soul through many forms and kingdoms up to the point at which humanity now stood, and where its degree of advancement permitted, in a few individual cases, occasional dazzling glimpses of the race's ultimate destiny. But it was not upon possibilities so transcendent that he

desired to touch to-day; nor did he propose that they should just now concern themselves with scientific details as to the many grades of evolution and sub-divisions of matter, or any of those vast cosmic problems before which indeed it were better to bow the head. He had chosen, he said, a subject more simple and more easy of demonstration; one which since long before the accepted beginnings of history had been of practical interest to mankind, and by which the lives of many must be affected. This subject was the development and use of the psychic faculty.

Althea leaned forward, confident that she would get some hints to help her. Hanwhat Singh proceeded to point out that psychic powers lie latent in everyone, their conscious activity being a question of time and condition. But he went on to explain that in the case of a person desiring to develop them, a special course of training should be gone through.

"It is presumptuous to suppose," he said, "that proficiency in occult powers can be arrived at without preparation. What man or woman would be permitted in these days to practise an important profession without recognised qualifications? Thus in former times, when mystic knowledge was more accurate and wider spread, no psychic was considered competent as an oracle or diviner unless he or she had been trained during a term of cloistral seclusion—this seclusion being an essential condition which now, in the rush and turmoil of Western life, is difficult to attain. A modern psychic has many difficulties to face in the way of development—chief of these, the incredulity which scoffs at everything it does not understand. Luckily, whatever the tendency of the



age, the universe knows but one law. The watchword of the world is Progress. And psychical science, like physical science, makes for progress. What matters it," he went on, "that the ignorant scoff? The ridicule of to-day may become the applause of to-morrow. Scientific men are frequently looked on as cranks; the spiritually-minded, almost invariably, as mad. Yet neither applause nor ridicule avails anything. Sympathy, however, is needed by all who have work to do. We who desire to open a wider area than can be traversed by ordinary faculties want the world's sympathy. We cannot do without it, because the world is made up of human beings, and it is with human beings and their fate that we have to deal. The sympathy of the world is a propelling force; so far be it from me to condemn anyone who relies for support upon public favour. Faith in a public favourite is a very real thing, and sustains in exact proportion to its strength. But it is not everything that is needed."

Here the dark eyes resting upon Althea seemed to read the strivings of her soul, as the lecturer continued :

"To most people, psychism seems more impossible to understand than the dual properties of electrons. Scientific men have traced existence down to the atom, and from atoms to electrons, but they cannot tell what is the power that works the electrons, nor whence the electricity comes. The cleverest have not quite settled to their own satisfaction what the last thing in matter really is; much less have they arrived at the first in the spiritual kingdom. But they have acknowledged that the invisible world—or rather the world that is invisible to ordinary vision—is the one in which they must conduct

their explorations if they would arrive at the causes that create manifested Nature. Now in this so-called invisible world the spectroscope, the microscope, the telescope, all aid the man of science, but the psychist could help him more. When he has found out all about spectra and electrons, he will be pushed upon a plane where only spiritual science can be of any service to him. The day will certainly come—if it has not come already—when physical science will fail to advance further unless psychical science holds out a hand. Both have long been stumbling in the dark. Both have had much to contend with; both have overcome much. In earlier days the accepted bodies of religion scorned science. Then, spiritual power of a different sort was in the ascendant, and looked upon all science as evil. Now, it is the turn of science to refuse spiritual light. But why should not spiritual and material science merge forces, since each can greatly help the other? Each *needs* the other. Each is a perfectly legitimate inquiry into the elementary rules of being. Physical science has tried to find out many things for some time past, and though it has gained in certain directions, it has failed in essentials. Psychical science can at all events prove a great deal that the other sticks at. But at present it must be acknowledged that both are very limited."

The Father signified approval by a slow movement of his grey-capped head as Hanwhat Singh went on:

"It was for the perfection of these spiritual powers that in former years young, aspiring psychics joyfully consented to a long and arduous training, such as would strike consternation into the heart of any fashionable clairvoyant of to-day. It meant the relinquishment

of all worldly pleasures, isolation from companionship—save that of other novices and of priestly persons in charge—and was practically a lifelong process. Yet it was regarded as the most sacred privilege, and there are few examples of any who, having essayed this training, chose to forfeit it. For the most part, these psychics of former civilisations gave themselves gladly to the pontifical jurisdiction of their times, submitting without a murmur to the restrictions imposed upon them. They were fed upon special diet, subjected to special exercises, and clothed in special garments made from particular textures understood to be favourable to psychic conditions. I do not need to explain to you, my friends, who are students of these matters, that certain vegetable and animal products are helpful in the development of the psychic faculty, while others are highly inimical to it. It was thus that psychic youths and maidens were kept apart even from the ordinary life of the temple. They were utterly absorbed by the earnest purpose of fitting themselves for their high vocation. And why? Was it not that they realised the holy trust vested in them, and knew that only thus might they become in very truth utterers of that Divine Voice which from the beginning of the world has spoken to those whose ears were opened."

With a slow glance along the rows of chairs where his own sex was certainly in the minority, Hanwhat Singh admitted that psychic gifts are most frequently found among women.

"This is only to be expected," he said simply. "The nature of woman fits her to be the medium or link between embryonic and perfected man. The female is the receptive element. Woman, who gives birth to man, can best

receive into her soul the divine spirit, which is the spirit of man made perfect. And hence, throughout all ages, the messages of heaven have been most freely transmitted through the lips of women. It is true that there have been prophets and seers in all times who were listened to when popular opinion bade women be silent; but it is a noteworthy fact that there are many instances in history of women who have been appealed to for advice when the foreseeing faculties of the chosen prophets of the people had failed."

Then in graphic language Hanwhat Singh sketched the customs of various religions that from time immemorial employed women for purposes of divination; beginning with the Devadassi, the holy virgins who in ancient Hindu temples devoted themselves to the worship of the Supreme, he went on to speak of the temples of long dead Egypt with her priestesses of Pasht, of Iris and Osiris, and then of Greece and her Delphic Pythias, of Rome and her honoured Vestals. He told of the Virgins of the Flame in drowned Atlantis, who live still in occult tradition, and passing on to later days he spoke of the well-known seeresses of Judæa, from whom counsel was taken—of the famous Deborah; of Huldah the wife of Shallum who dwelt in the college at Jerusalem; of Noadiah; of Miriam the prophetess; of the four daughters of St. Philip of Hierapolis; and of many others.

"These women were all, we may be sure, specifically prepared for their great office. Yet to-day we hear," proceeded the lecturer with a touch of irony in his voice, "that all such 'phases' as their complex natures exhibited are now scientifically understood, both in their psychological and their pathological aspects! Presump-

tuous indeed, I may say, the mind that ventures to grapple with these profound problems on the plane of matter. In the times of which we have been talking, occult phenomena were justly discerned to be the fruit of divine inspiration, or, in certain dark cases, of demoniac possession. That they should sometimes be misunderstood and misrepresented is not surprising. From the time of Montanus it has been the attitude of the western world to regard the trance medium with horror. Maximilla, the chief prophetess of the early Montanists, was tortured and abused for her revelations. Yet she lived a pure, unselfish life, and many of the views of the sect to which she belonged were in strict accord with the ruling clerical powers of the age she lived in. The Montanists thought a great deal of psychic gifts, as have all peoples who have ever seen anything of their efficacy. Even those who in ignorance scorn psychical phenomena, confess that such examples as the temporary suspension of natural functions, instances of thought-reading, faith-healing, and the like, are more common during times of religious fervour, thus proving, while they would fain disprove, the connection between supernatural power and its physical expression. It is after periods of spiritual drought that the wave of life-giving force comes, as it is coming at this commencement of the twentieth century. From the far west and from the east alike it is coming, and many look for it who have faith. They return as eyes weary with night watching look for the dawn. Then the sect shall cease to cry against sect, for a new voice shall be heard, heralding peace."

Hanwhat Singh paused. There was silence in the room except for the sound of a piece of coal falling

from the grate on to the tiles, where it broke into ashes. Then he continued :

“ The trance condition, which appears so incomprehensible to modern intelligence, and against the possibility of which so much has been averred, is perfectly natural ; for, in one full of supersensual fire all ordinary sense powers must necessarily be in abeyance. Montanus understood this ; so have others in all ages. It is a belief said to be borrowed from Pagan myths. That may be so, for in Pagan times the human races were but children borne upon the breast of Nature, their nurse, listening to the stories she told them, the beautiful stories—just as you who are mothers to-day tell your little ones stories because they cannot accept what you call ‘ religious truths ’ in any other form. Later on, Pagans were blamed for these beliefs, just as you, when you go out into the world, would be laughed at if you said you believed nursery tales.

“ My friends, men have two parents. The father, whom they scarcely know, whose name is Love, and the mother, whose face is veiled before them lest she dazzle them with her brightness. Her name is Truth. But Nature, whom they know best, is the nurse of all men, and in their childhood instructs them in her own wonderful way till they enter the school of Material Law with its class-teachers, Science and Form. When arrived at full manhood they pass into the bridal chamber of Spirit, where they espouse their true mate. Then Love, the father that gave them being, sanctifies the bond that binds spirit to matter. But until that union has taken place, Love is too often a stranger within the gates. For, my friends, how seldom we know Love as he is—Love,

the mystical and mighty, Love the conqueror of fear, whose joy is in giving, who makes no bargains, who is eternal—one for ever with his own. Only to Love dare Truth unveil her face, for only the eyes of Love have ever been able to look upon it. When Love has made us mighty, then will our darkness be turned into day, for the face of Truth shall be revealed to us also. Love only can fit us for learning the things that Truth knows. It is for us in turn to tell them out abroad. Taught by Love, the words of Truth in our mouths shall make all men listen. False utterances shall die away, and their echoes perish, but the voice that is the voice of Love, proclaiming Truth, shall ring down all the ages, no matter by whose lips it is spoken."

A prolonged pause followed. The eyes of the speaker went earnestly from face to face; then the clear soft voice continued;

"There are unfortunately no temples on the ancient system suited to the novitiate of a modern psychic, and such establishments as there are for the acquirement of higher wisdom are sedulously guarded from intrusion. A few of these are known to exist, even in the western world—in Hungary, in Austria, in Spain, and Italy, in some parts of America, and on the northern shores of Africa—where seclusion and the necessary training may be secured. Amongst us of the East, they are, I may tell you, more numerous than could be imagined."

At this point the thread of the lecture escaped Althea. She was mentally straying on aerial heights crowned by some imposing centre of occult learning, where she might herself become the tutelary oracle of a select circle of

religious aspirants. It was several minutes before certain words struck on her ears :—

“ . . . But though of the ancient temples but a few broken marbles remain, the purpose for which they were built is urgent as ever. Seclusion may be found, even in modern London. Some of us have reached that degree of spiritual advancement when the doors of the senses can be closed at will. It is possible to realise solitude even in the thronged market-place, for the soul possesses a cloister which no earthly tumult can disturb, a sanctuary in the depths of its being where it may await with befitting humility the coming of the sacred messenger. For the divine gift of prescience is as the pure wind of Paradise that passed over Eden when God walked in that Garden, and not yet had His children stretched forth rebellious hands and snatched the forbidden fruit. It was thus, an old story tells us, that the curse of sin and death fell upon mankind. However that may have been, be sure that the fruit of knowledge—the food of gods and angels—if presumptuously obtained, must needs bring sin and death. Yet, man having once plucked and eaten, neither gods nor angels can take from him his heritage. So it was ordained that in fullness of time, men, having learnt by suffering and having grown to the height of angels, should become as gods, discerning good and evil.

“ My friends, the tree of knowledge grows still in the garden of the world, and psychics, before all others, are eager to pluck and eat. But let those who would gather remember that for the theft of the forbidden fruit, or the celestial fire—it has been symbolised in various faiths under varying forms—a bitter price was required. [Wisdom



itself is unavailing without the power of distinguishing between truth and falsity. It was for the purpose of cultivating this quality of true discernment that the old temple training was instituted. None entered the temple but they who had pure hands. To those with pure hands and a pure heart the truth became known. Lies might be whispering round the Tripod; greed and self-interest might tempt to fair promises and pleasant divination, but the well-trained psychic had learnt to discern the false oracle from the true.

“So the soul of a true psychic should become even as a clear vessel through which divine wisdom may shine.

“What then shall I say to those who stand upon the threshold of Truth's temple, hesitating between the spiritual joys for which they vaguely yearn and the attractions of a world that they are unwilling to renounce? Better far that they should wait until the world's many voices shall have ceased sounding in their ears. Then, in the silence, Love shall touch their lips with a live coal from Truth's altar and lead them in to learn of her.

“But let us not dwell upon the painful thought—the terrible responsibility—of those who, spurred by pride and ambition, spend their spiritual gifts unworthily. We do not dare to think of what their portion may be. A prophet of Israel long ago solemnly admonished such as these, and I need but repeat the words of his warning: *‘Therefore night shall be unto you that ye shall not have a vision, and it shall be dark unto you that ye shall not divine.’*”

## CHAPTER XVI

ALTHEA felt extraordinarily uplifted after the lecture. She was full of emotional fervour as she went down the stairs and out into the street. Hanwhat Singh's words had stimulated her, and she longed intensely for clearer vision and nobler aims.

She was engaged to perform that night at Hamerton House, where an illustrious guest was staying with the Duke and Duchess of Hamerton. The party was a small and select one, but likely to be influential in the social career of the Oracle, and it was undoubtedly of great importance to Althea that she should acquit herself brilliantly, and not fail in the least particular. Nevertheless, she silenced her maid when that obliging young person began as usual to furnish details regarding the evening's clients. Julie pursed up her lips in astonishment, but dutifully refrained from comment.

Julie took a keen pride in her mistress's appearance, and Althea had never looked better fitted to the part she had to play than she did to-night. There was a wistful solemnity in her large pale eyes, and a dignity in her movements, that was half girlish, half sublime. She was supremely anxious to comport herself as one permitted to tread the borderland of higher things. Perhaps for that very reason her inspiration had never been more true—her "demon" more fully in possession. As the fumes of Anthony's herbs and resins floated up from

the burning brazier, she cast her soul in faith upon the force that she relied on to inspire and sustain her, and sank trustfully into a deep sleep. When she awoke, the smile on Anthony's face, and the plaudits of the audience assured her that she had done well.

Triumph fuller than she had ever known waited on Althea. In every word addressed to her lay recognition of her extraordinary gifts; every look conveyed homage to the sibyl and to the woman. And the triumph was exceedingly sweet. The spiritual seclusion of which Hanwhat Singh had spoken was lost sight of in mists of flattery.

Just before leaving Hamerton House, Lord Isleworth, who was present, murmured cynically in her ear:

"Have you happened to notice, Miss Stanmount, that the Queen continues to drive out as usual every day?"

Althea remembered with a pang that her celebrity hung upon a slender thread.

But that night a rumour rang through London that Queen Victoria was ill.

At Althea's public reception on the following afternoon there was an increased attendance. Many were turned away from the doors, and in the lecture-room itself a large concourse of fashionable folk crowded, and besieged the Sibyl's platform.

Mademoiselle Lamotte, who was in waiting with an engagement tablet in the ante-room, profited considerably on her account, and was secretly engaged in making notes on her mistress's behalf.

The *Court Circular* was not definite enough to warrant a postponement of entertainments, so Baroness Heinrichfels gave an evening party which she had arranged for the

18th. The Oracle was the attraction of the occasion, and Althea's "demon" once more proved reliable.

The news from the Isle of Wight had affected her far more than she cared to show, for people gazed curiously at Althea, and her excited imagination gave point to their scrutiny. She was torn between loyal and affectionate hopes for the prolongation of the precious life dear to so many, and selfish fears lest the very continuance of that beloved life, so deeply desired by the nation, should affect disadvantageously her own advancement. This was not a moment, she felt, at which she could afford to chance adverse happenings. Therefore Julie was again permitted to chatter volubly to her mistress of all she had gleaned, and was well content.

Althea had seen Ladislav O'Neill several times since Molly's dinner-party, but he had not again spoken to her. He preferred to stand aside while she was being loaded with honours, as though with that part of her life he had nothing to do. And at this Althea felt injured. But she was conscious of something behind the mask of the man's manner which she dreaded arousing. And there was always Leonard Dracott in the background.

Marriage with Dracott at some distant date might be desirable, but marriage with O'Neill was an impossible idea, and Althea steeled herself against its delirious sweetness.

To-night, however, destiny, in the person of the baron, sent them in to supper together. Dracott was out of sight, so Althea permitted herself to be particularly gracious to the singer. They spoke little at first, for both shrank from commonplaces, but O'Neill's expressive eyes questioned Althea's gravely. During one of these looks she started and turned pale.

"What is it?" he inquired, bending forward.

"I saw a scene imaged in your eyes," she said slowly.

"How strange!"

"You are not the first person who has seen things in my eyes," he answered. "I am half gipsy bred, you know. My mother was a genuine gipsy woman, and when I was a very little boy my eyes were habitually used as magic mirrors by the tribe. What was the scene you saw?"

"I saw a broad river with banks lined by buildings. There was a tall narrow house with a trellis-covered pathway leading through a garden to a shed by the river. And I saw a sort of landing stage, and a barge with a little boat attached to it."

"My house is by the river. You probably saw a picture of it."

"Oh! Is that where you live? I did not know."

"You must come there some day, if you will. I have some gipsy charms and curios which I should like to show you. Baroness Heinrichfels knows the place. We'll get her to bring you."

"I should like to come, but—isn't there something queer about your house? Has any crime been committed there?"

O'Neill shook his head, smiling slightly.

"Not that I know of. Please disabuse yourself of such fancies."

"Oh! Nothing to do with *you*, of course—at least, I hope not! But I feel some desperate influence—something that strikes and destroys."

O'Neill's face darkened.

"Do you take any interest in Socialists?" asked Althea suddenly.

"Why?"

"I don't know. You're different from most people. I was so surprised the other day to hear that my nephew's tutor—apparently a guileless person—had socialistic tendencies."

"Your nephew's tutor! What is his name?"

"M. Adolphe Gaudelle—more generally known as 'Mossoo.' My brother-in-law, Johnson Moggs, nicknamed him, and the nickname has stuck. But he is really an excellent little fellow, who does his duty conscientiously in the state of life in which a somewhat unkindly Providence has placed him."

"And why not? Do you suppose that Socialists have no sense of duty and honour? If so, you are mistaken."

"I know nothing about them," said Althea. "I don't suppose I should have gleaned so much from Mossoo if the poor little man hadn't felt called upon to justify his opinions."

"It is a mistake to attempt to justify one's opinions," said O'Neill briefly.

"Even to one who wishes to understand?" returned Althea softly.

O'Neill flushed as he answered:

"Communism and Socialism are only stepping-stones to that at which every true reformer aims—the beatific vision of the future, when false governments shall have been swept away, and the world shall enter upon a new epoch of enduring peace—when the voice of the people shall echo everywhere the sublime cry that from time to time has floated from the lips of martyrs down the ages—Faith and Freedom. Do you not know your Mazzini?"

"A misguided enthusiast—almost an anarchist!"

cried Althea. "You surely don't want to follow in his footsteps? You will tell me next that you belong to some secret society."

"No, I shall not tell you that. Under existing conditions, I am not at liberty to do so."

"You speak as if you might be a Russian Nihilist, bound by the laws of some terrible confraternity, and awaiting orders to assassinate a crowned head," retorted Althea merrily.

"The faith that men are willing to die for is not, I feel, a matter to jest over," said O'Neill gently.

"Forgive me, I could not suppose you serious. I know that you sympathise with Baron Heinrichfel's scheme of buying up Palestine and starting a millennium there. But that's quite a peaceful project. The baron is not revolutionary."

"No; but he, too, is a dreamer. Revolutions are evolved from dreams."

They rose at the moment to give place to another couple. "In fact," said Althea as they left the supper-room, "dreams are responsible for a good deal. But there is a statute of limitations, Mr. O'Neill, even for the poor dreaming ghosts of old Greece."

He paled before the smiling glance of her clear grey eyes.

"Never mind," he said. "Some day you will know all there is to know about me."

He led her into a spacious conservatory built out at the back of the house beside the ball-room where the entertainment had been given. Here they sat down. Shaded lights and comfortable chairs beneath overhanging tree-ferns made the place inviting.

"What a quaint ring!" remarked Althea, her glance

falling on a broad band of gold upon O'Neill's little finger. She deciphered a word, in the Greek character.

"That means 'Necessity,' doesn't it?"

"It means 'Fate.'"

"Is it one of the insignia of your secret society?"

"Does the Oracle need to ask? They tell me that you can read whatever you put your mind on like a book. Can you not read my fate?"

"I don't know, unless you were to give me the ring to psychometrise."

O'Neill shook his head.

"This ring is the one thing that I cannot let you psychometrise. It was given to me under a pledge which does not allow me to remove it from my finger."

"As you please, of course," said Althea, surprised and offended. To mark the indifference she was far from feeling, she let her gaze wander round the conservatory and through the open doors of the adjoining room where a gay crowd passed and repassed. A sudden flush rose in her cheeks. She had caught sight of Leonard Dracott moving through the throng, and knew from the manner in which he reared his handsome young head and looked about him that he was searching for her.

"Do you ever come to my afternoons at the studio?" she asked O'Neill, more for something to say than because she thought he would do so.

"Yes," he replied, "but you would not notice me. I sit near the door and I leave before the rest. It is at such times that you look most like your real self—the self that I know best."

Althea smiled. "Do I please you?" she asked. "Am I sufficiently Greek?"



O'Neill hesitated.

"As for being sufficiently Greek in the sense you mean—you know that we have one modern painter who is truly inspired by the Greek spirit, Luigi d'Alenzo. He was near me one day, and I saw him watching you. As you stood in those white draperies, you might have been a statue out of the Hall of the Muses in the Vatican, just come forth alive. I saw his face—he was enraptured."

"Yes?" Althea's grey eyes glistened.

"D'Alenzo was silent for a long time; then he turned to me, and said, 'At last I have seen the marble live!'"

Althea gave a sigh of content.

"He wants to paint me as a Pythia," she said. "He tells me he could make it *the* picture of next year."

"And crowds will surround the canvas as they have surrounded the woman, but the one who should be nearest must worship from afar."

Althea laughed deliriously. Was there any one person in the world, she thought, for whom it would be worth while to barter this delicious sense of mastery over many?

Dracott's voice seemed to come in answer. He had seen her, and hurried to the conservatory.

"Miss Stanmount, it isn't fair to hide yourself like this. I've got a message for you from the baroness."

O'Neill rose abruptly, and, bowing low, vanished. Dracott dropped into the vacant chair.

"How jolly it is here! I've been longing to speak to you. The baroness? Oh, that was a tarradiddle. I despaired of getting you to myself without some excuse. But it's true that she asked me what had become of you. Such a shining light should not be hidden, you know. It is cruel to leave us in darkness."

Leonard was impulsive and boyish, but his devotion was so genuine that Althea needed all the tact at her command to keep him within limits. She began drawing on her gloves.

"Let me do that," he exclaimed, as she struggled with the wrinkled suède. "Buttoning ladies' gloves is one of my accomplishments. What a slender little wrist!—so different from any that I have ever seen before."

Althea gently withdrew her hand from his clasp.

"Miss Stanmount, are you coming down to Chaunterell with Lady Ethel?"

"She has been kind enough to ask me, but I don't see how I can manage it. I'm booked for dozens of evening parties—to say nothing of other engagements."

"Oh, do come. I've a plan that depends upon you. Chaunterell and Dracott are not far apart, and there are one or two other villages among which we're working up funds for a cottage hospital. It's badly needed, for we're all some distance from Fordingham, our town, you know. So we're getting up a show in the music-room at Dracott—a few glees—and I'm doing some innocent conjuring tricks that I learnt when I was in the trade. We thought that perhaps you'd help us."

"What part do you want me to take in your variety entertainment?"

"Why, your own special line, of course—prophesying and seeing visions. Everybody down there has read of you in the papers. Besides, I've mentioned about my pearl, and it's got round. They're all enormously interested. Couldn't we fix up dates? I do so want you to see my home."

Leonard leaned forward with a quiet purpose of which Althea was perfectly conscious.

"You will come?" he whispered, touching her arm.

She did not answer. She was gazing abstractedly through the interstices of the fern-fronds. She looked very pale.

"You need a rest," he exclaimed. "This sort of thing must take a lot out of you."

"It does—rather," she confessed.

"I was sure of it," he cried. "You must not knock yourself up. It's too bad of your brother to exploit you."

"Anthony! You don't know Anthony. He's a thorough mystic at heart—not at all given to exploitation. But all his life Anthony has been trying to find a link between the seen and the unseen. He thinks he got something of the kind in me; and he believes—as I do—that it may do some good to the world."

"Very noble, of course," agreed Leonard moodily, "and I don't say your shows are not perfect in their way, but I could kick some of the outsiders who come in and stare at you—I could, indeed, Miss Stanmore."

Althea laughed.

"I don't say anything about a private house like this," Leonard went on. "It's the public shows where any bouncer can pay his guinea and walk in—curse the whole boiling of 'em! I beg your pardon, but it's enough to make a fellow who—who cares about you, furious."

"Why shouldn't they stare at me?" said Althea cynically. "It's what I'm there for."

"But you don't know the kind of things they say. I heard two brutes of Americans, who prided themselves on their sharpness, saying what a lark it would be to

play a test trick on you. On *you*! Think of it! And some superstitious fool of a Scotchman took his wife and daughter away, saying the devil spoke through you."

Althea's eyes widened. This was a new side of the question.

"Thank you for telling me," she said. "Of course, it doesn't matter. One must expect something of the kind. But why, if you dislike my performing in public, do you wish me to do so at Dracott?"

"Because there you will be in *my* house, and I can protect you."

Althea's face softened.

"You are very sure that I am not an impostor?"

"An impostor? Good heavens! Most fortune-tellers are impostors—I allow that. They supplement themselves in every way that comes to hand. My particular palmist lady fertilised her imagination with bottled stout behind the scenes. And she was always on the look-out for private bits of information about things and people which she could work up effectively when she got the chance. But *you* wouldn't impose on anyone."

"Ah!" Althea suddenly shivered.

"Are you cold? Let me get you a wrap?"

"No, no; it's nothing."

"Of course *you* couldn't do such a thing," continued the young man.

"After all," said Althea, "it's natural—if one were in a difficulty."

"Lots of poor devils run off the rails, I believe. It's natural! But you are not likely to try and get out of any difficulty in such a fashion."

"Supposing—I *did*?"

"It would be a bad blow—but it's impossible. I don't mind telling you that there have been two or three instances which might have shaken my faith in you if I had not known you too well."

"Tell me one," said Althea with dry lips.

"Well, that Australian millionaire chap whom you bowled over by the account you gave him of the way he first struck gold. Of course, I'd told you all about the Mount Matthew streak, and how he sprung from a stool in an architect's office to being boss of the mine; but I'm ready to lay anything that what I said didn't weigh a jot with you. It just occurred to me that you might have been putting two and two together—if you were anyone else."

"Ah!" said Althea again. "But as it was——"

"I knew it could only be coincidence. You'd have told the truth just the same directly he gave you his nugget to hold, whether you'd heard the story before or not. Didn't you see true pictures of my pearl, which you certainly knew nothing about?"

"Yes," murmured Althea. "Well, I will come to Dracott if I can. And I hope that your faith in me will never be shaken."

"That is impossible," repeated Leonard.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then for three days the heart of the nation hung upon bulletins from Osborne. Life went on in a strained, anxious manner, till on that melancholy Monday it was known that the fiat had gone forth, and on Tuesday the great Queen-Er press passed peacefully to her rest, and her children all over the world mourned exceedingly for their loss.

## CHAPTER XVII

CABBY and his dapper little French tutor were walking slowly in the park, each wishing he could get rid of the other. Both were delighted when they espied Nan and Miss Porson by the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. Nan was feeding the ducks in a nonchalant sort of way when Cabby, catching sight of her, began running, his repressed exuberance breaking forth in a wild whoop. Nan looked up and dropped the paper bag she carried, which the terrier at Cabby's heels promptly took the opportunity of examining, successfully routing a party of ducks who had come ashore with the intention of making an onslaught upon it.

Mossoo meanwhile had advanced towards Selina and deferentially preferred a request. Might he leave Monsieur Almeric in her charge for an hour? He had an urgent private engagement, but had not liked to disappoint the boy of his walk. If Monsieur Almeric might accompany mademoiselle and his little cousin it would be so charming for him, and very, very amiable of mademoiselle. Mossoo's pleading tone suggested that his own engagement must be pressing.

Selina bowed kindly acquiescence.

The air of relief on Mossoo's meek, clean-shaven face was plain; his thanks, volubly expressed. Should he meet mademoiselle, and her charges near the Achilles statue, say in about—he took out his watch and studied

it attentively—perhaps an hour and a half? He would not fail.

Mossoo raised his hat and hurried away. Selina did not look after him, for she had seen someone else coming from the opposite direction whose swinging stride she knew well, and whose eager smile brought a becoming flush to her pale face.

Nan and Cabby meanwhile were in full cry after the fleet-footed Hooligan, who was bearing the paper bag in his mouth with a "don't you wish you may get it?" expression—his stump of a tail wagging violently. When his pursuers wearied of the chase, he lay down and began worrying the bag, but on discovering that it only contained dry bits of bread he got up in disgust and strolled with a bored air behind them.

Cabby and Nan were almost the same age, and excellent friends. Early in life, when asked by her right-minded Aunt Everil if she would not prefer a little girl to play with, Nan had responded stoutly:

"No. Girls like boys, and boys like girls."

To-day, having her own way royally, she remarked:

"If you're always such a nice boy, Cabby, I'll marry you when I'm grown up."

"Oh, I hope not, Nan!" remonstrated the nice boy, feebly.

"Pooh!" retorted Miss Moggs. "I don't know that I shall want to. You can amuse me, but someone like Johnny would be much better for marrying. Only there never could be anyone like Johnny. I think Johnny's the bestest man that ever was borned."

Nan's thoughts were apt to work like a whirlwind. Here a philosophic tangle faced her.

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

"I wonder *why* people are borned? I didn't ask to be borned. Did you?"

Cabby shook his head. Having no solution to offer, he changed the subject by wondering whether they were walking too fast for Miss Porson. He was far too well-drilled to have adopted Nan's curt cognomen of "Sneeler."

"Never mind," said Nan. "We'll look after her presently. How stupid to be a grown-up who can't run!"

"Who's that with her?" inquired Cabby, glancing over his shoulder. Nan turned swiftly.

"Why, it's Mr. Parfit. We meet him every Saturday and Sunday. He's one of Johnny's shopmen."

"Does Uncle Johnson *call* him a shopman?" asked Cabby in shocked tones.

"I don't know what he *calls* him, but he *is* a shopman. He 'tended to us the other day when we went to the big shop in Tottenham Court Road."

"I don't think gentlemen ought to keep shops," announced Cabby, giving bold utterance to an idea that had been exercising his small mind. "It's not a gentlemanly thing to do."

"If *some* gentlemen didn't keep shops, who'd keep the other gentlemen?" inquired Nan tartly. "Besides, Johnny says almost everybody's in business nowaday."

"Uncle Horace isn't, nor yet Uncle Palache, and I shouldn't like 'em to be," said Cabby firmly. It was characteristic of him that he made no comment concerning his father.

"I don't care. Uncle Anthony sells his pictures and his books and I don't see no difference in keeping a shop—'cept that Johnny has lots of customers and Uncle Anthony hasn't."



Cabby changed the subject again.

"Tell some more about *him*," Cabby jerked his head back towards the couple, slowly following.

"He's a stupid sort," said Nan loftily. "He declared he didn't know what mistletoe's used for—fancy!" with fine scorn. "I told him to ask Sneeler. I wasn't going to show him."

"And did she?" inquired Cabby, his curiosity stimulated.

"Oh! she just got pink. Once he came to call when mummy was out and asked for Sneeler. I heard Gooze telling Mrs. McCulla that I ought to go and play propriety, so I went, but they didn't seem to want me. I said, 'I've come,' and they said, 'What for?' so I said, 'To play propriety.' And Sneeler looked awful silly, and Mr. Parfit began to cough."

"P'rhaps it's only a game for two," said Cabby.

The children had by now crossed the bridge, and were among the trees in Hyde Park to the north of the Serpentine. There was a big crowd in the direction of the Achilles statue, and the Hooligan barked vigorously at various unkempt roughs who came slouching past.

When they got within sight of the drive, Cabby thought he would like to look at the carriages. There were not many of them to-day, but a few could be seen in the distance filing down from the Marble Arch, and up by way of Grosvenor Gate to the big entrance at Hyde Park Corner. The sun, a red ball, suddenly showing from out of the wintry sky, struck the buttons of the servants' liveries, and the metallated top-knots of the horses. It happened that Lady Ethel, with Althea Stanmount and Leonard Dracott—who had both lunched at

her house—having dropped some cards in Brook Street had entered the park through Grosvenor Gate, and was proceeding towards Kensington when the progress of her barouche was checked.

Nan had drawn near to the railings just above the mass of chairs at the bend overlooked by the Achilles statue. She planted her little feet on the seat of an empty chair and peered through a rift in the throng. A ripple was passing through it—a regular wave of excitement. People were getting up from their seats and poking forward as though for sight of some famous person. There were murmurs of curiosity and some that sounded distinctly angry murmurs. The driving road was getting blocked with people.

Cabby, meanwhile, ran along the railings and perched himself upon the top bar at a convenient angle, whence, over the heads of the crowd, he watched with keen interest the slow advance of a pair of restive roans who were snorting and prancing so that it was as much as the coachman could do to manage them.

"Why, it's Dawson!" cried Cabby jubilantly. "And there's Aunt Ethel. I say, Nan! Where are you, Nan? Here's my Aunt Ethel, and Aunt Althea."

Someone in the crowd caught up the last name.

"Althea! That's what she calls herself—looking as innercent as if she 'adn't prophesied about our dear Queen—Gawd bless 'er beloved mem'ry."

"Yes, Althea's the Oracle's real name, I believe," said a paired woman in a picture hat to a shabby genteel friend at her elbow. "I've heard her speak. She's wonderful, but you may well ask whether her power's from heaven or hell."

"Why don't this Althea or Oracle—whatever her name is—say when the war's to end?" said a red-eyed woman in deep black, bitterly. "There's many wanting to 'ear that."

A rough humorist joined in. Making a trumpet with his hands, he shouted towards the carriage:

"I say, missus! Next time ye're on the job, find De Wet for us, will 'ee?"

Cabby listened bewilderedly. The constant repetition of his Aunt Althea's name, coupled with such comments, at first amused, then made him wrathful. Nan, standing on her chair, grew nervous at sight of the stream of roughs pouring down towards the Serpentine. She sprang off and ran to the bend by the statue, but she could not see any sign of Cabby, for he was effectually screened from her view by the throng. Then there came a great movement among the foot-people which swept her along with them. On all sides Nan heard her Aunt Althea's name in terms of disapprobation.

"That's her," said an angular woman to the crowd—"the little pale 'un in the big kerridge."

"She's a witch, that's what the wumman is," said a strong Scotch voice.

"I thought witches 'ad been put down by Act o' Parlyment," exclaimed somebody else.

"Parliament's incapable of putting down witches of that sort," cried a cynic. "Even the daily papers can't do it."

Someone else sent forth a derisive howl.

"Yah—witch! Mother Shipton!"

Meanwhile the carriage became fairly surrounded by the pressing mob. It had reached that point where a

side road branches off towards the Serpentine below the great bronze monument presented by the ladies of England.

"Yon wumman's got the evil eye. We ken the kind she is north o' Tweed," cried the harsh Scotch voice.

"She should be whipped and doused," echoed another.

"There's water handy," and a coarse guffaw broke the torrent of invective.

The carriage was now literally unable to move for the throng that pressed it. Cabby, clinging to his perch, grew scarlet with indignation. He did not comprehend what the tumult was about, but that everyone was abusing his Aunt Althea seemed plain. Nevertheless, he thought more of his adored Aunt Ethel. She looked extremely nervous, but Aunt Althea sat up straight, and kept very quiet.

Lady Ethel was leaning forward, with one hand restraining Mr. Dracott, who appeared anxious to leap out, while with the other she pointed down the side drive. The footman turned from the box to take an order from his mistress, while Dawson, his square face grimly set, was struggling with the roans.

"Poor Aunt Ethel!" thought Cabby remorsefully. "She'd never have been in such a funk if Nimrod hadn't kicked her the other day. And now, if there's a smash, she may get hurt again."

All Cabby's inborn chivalry was stirred. He contrived to stand upright on the railing, supporting himself by his boot-heels and holding on with one hand to an overhanging bough.

"Aunt Ethel!" he shouted. "Don't you be frightened. I'm here, Aunt Ethel. Dawson! You should give the cads what-for with the whip. Cut down by your

side—that's the ticket. Now get 'em round—easy does it. You'll be out of the lot in a jiffy. Don't you be frightened, Aunt Ethel."

Cabby waved his cap encouragingly.

The word "cads," in his frankly contemptuous tone, might have brought retribution upon the small boy's head, but his fearless attitude, or the sharp white teeth of the Hooligan, yelping madly, kept the crowd in check. Dawson was not slow to avail himself of the momentary diversion and was luckily enabled to turn the roans and get the carriage round into the clearer road.

"Never mind their mouths, Dawson," sang out Cabby. "You've got to keep 'em in."

Then, suddenly dropping from his point of vantage, he darted, with the Hooligan at his heels, in and out through the crowd, wriggling like a fish or using clenched fists as occasion required, till he gained the edge of the grass. There Nemesis, in the shape of Selina backed by Mr. Parfit, opportunely descended upon the truant, who felt his shoulders severely shaken.

"Cabby—oh, Cabby! What a wicked little boy you are! What have you done with Nan?"

The boy had forgotten all about his cousin, and turned blankly to look for her.

Nan was at the moment struggling in the arms of a north-country matron, who, thinking she was lost in the crowd, had endeavoured to restrain her headlong career.

"I want my Aunt Althea," sobbed Nan wildly. "Lemme go to her. I don't want you."

"Haud the bairnie—sh's bewitched!" cried the same Scotch voice that had credited Althea with the evil eye.

"She says 'tis her auntie, puir wean! Maybe 'tis the treuth."

"Hoots, Elspeth! Do ye no ken the de'il blinds them he bewitches? The lassie's no seein' her auntie in yon cross-eyed quean. Dinna greet, ma lambie. A'll find yer mawther fur ye, and we winna leave ye till ye're in safe keepin'."

Being wise in her generation, Nan ceased to struggle with strength that was greater than hers. She waited an opportunity.

"That's ma wee bit bairnie," said the woman Elspeth. "Och! the bonny e'en of her!" as Nan's turquoise eyes determinedly winked away the tears.

In other circumstances, Nan might have liked this kind, brawny woman; but at present she was feeling the insult to her family keenly.

A fresh surge of the crowd swept her and her protector nearer the grass edge. People parted before them, and Nan saw the carriage a yard or two away, with Auntie Althea looking as if her face were cut out of stone, and a flurried, handsome lady beside her. Quick as thought, Nan ducked her head, crammed into her mouth the hand that held hers, and employed all her available teeth upon it, causing the Scotswoman to give a scream of pain and loose her clasp. Instantly Nan dashed into the roadway. But at that very moment Nimrod, curvetting beneath Dawson's salutary lash, plunged forward with forefeet poised in mid-air.

It was over in the space of a minute, but the incident did something to sober the throng. There was a gleam of golden hair beneath the shining hoofs, a purple velvet tam-o'-shanter was kicked across the road, a pair of slender

black legs amid short white petticoats gyrated madly, and then—Nan sat up on the other side of the grass, and glared at Mr. Parfit, who had rolled over beside her.

"What did you do that for? I wanted to get into the carriage."

Poor Mr. Parfit struggled to his feet and explained matters apologetically.

"Oh, Nan, Nan!" cried Selina, throwing her arms round the child, while she regarded her hero with wet, worshipping eyes. "Be thankful you're saved."

A call from the carriage attracted them. Lady Ethel had stifled a shriek.

"It is my niece—Molly's daughter," said Althea faintly.

"That adroit young man pulled her away just in time."

"Your niece! Oh, hadn't we better take her in? And Cabby too? Not that they are likely to be any safer here."

"It isn't necessary. They can get out of the crowd quicker on foot. Mr. Parfit will take care of them—won't you, Mr. Parfit?"

Mr. Parfit beamed.

Selina, tremulous and tearful, held Nan tightly by one hand while she hung on to Cabby with the other.

"You have more than you can manage with both children," said Lady Ethel. "Cabby, come in with us—quick! Now drive on, Dawson, as fast as you can."

"Can't be done, m'lady," replied the coachman. "They've got 'old of the 'orses."

"Oh, dear! Isn't there a policeman anywhere?"

Dracott stood up on the back seat and looked over the box, but the arm of the law seemed conspicuous by its absence.

A fresh mob surged in front. It appeared to have sprung up by magic, but it was in reality largely composed of the dispersed audience of a popular park-orator who had been speaking. Curious and insulting faces poked themselves into the carriage. Lady Ethel was almost as white as Althea, but her native courage had begun to re-assert itself, and she managed partly to pull up the hood of the barouche, bidding Althea do the same on her side, so that a shield was drawn between them and their persecutors. The footman on the box was cowering in abject fright, but was compelled to rally at his mistress's orders sufficiently to draw the hood closer forward.

Cabby, in answer to Lady Ethel's questions, had explained the absence of his tutor, and now he and the Hooligan sat as still as two mice, the boy doing his best to sustain poor, anxious Lady Ethel by the pressure of his small, hot hand. Dawson longed to lay about him freely with the whip, but refrained, fearing to excite the crowd further.

Dracott tried remonstrances, but in vain; his voice, as he appealed to the people to let the ladies go by, was completely drowned in the general noise. Now a band of men—apparently of the Socialist type—had joined in. These were shouting to the tune of "*À bas les aristocrats,*" when suddenly the stern face of the old Scotsman who had started the cry of witchcraft was thrust over the carriage door.

"Whaur's the wee lassie wi' the bonnie blue e'en and the toosie yellow heid—eh, Witch?" he cried.

Althea shrank back beneath the shelter of the hood, but the indignant northerner shook a brawny fist in her face.



"What hae ye doun wi' the wean? Ha'e ye sperited her awa' to serve yer master, the de'il?"

"You're horribly mistaken," began Lady Ethel nervously. "You mustn't——"

"Please let me settle this myself," interrupted Althea, sitting forward. "I'm exceedingly sorry you should be concerned in such an affair." Then she turned to the man, deliberately fixing him with her gaze in a most uncomfortable fashion.

"Leave the carriage instantly," she said. "If you do not, you will fall and be trampled on."

The long, lean fingers clinging to the side of the barouche relaxed their hold. The old man's features twitched, his figure seemed to crumple up. He collapsed into nothing and slunk away among the crowd.

"What on earth did you do to him?" asked Lady Ethel, in astonishment.

Althea shrugged her shoulders.

"He insisted that I am a witch, so I gave him a taste of my craft. It disposed of him, at all events."

But the incident had showed Althea the dark side of her position as an oracle. Hitherto she had only been applauded in drawing-rooms; now she knew what it was to be the butt of an angry populace. These people hooting her in Hyde Park were no better, she thought, than any set of medieval fanatics escorting a sorceress to the stake.

"I don't half like this, Althea," groaned Lady Ethel.

"Let me get out and face them. They will let you go on, then."

"Good heavens! And leave you to be torn to

pieces!" Lady Ethel's firm fingers closed on Althea's wrist. "Sit still, please. That's right, Mr. Dracott."

Althea found her other hand taken prisoner by Leonard.

"If anyone gets out, *I* do," he said. "But I don't fancy a free fight would help us. I thought I saw reinforcement through the trees. Perhaps it's a squad of bobbies."

Lady Ethel peered from behind the hood. The carriage was swaying uncomfortably, for the roans were using their hind legs, though their heads were held fast. Althea's eyes met those of Dracott, and a faint flush overspread her pallor.

Fortunately, Cabby's attention was distracted at the sight of a little dark man who was running towards the carriage.

"I say, Aunt Ethel, there's Mossoo. I never saw him look so alive before."

The little Frenchman's clean-shaven and usually meek visage was aflame; his black eyes sparkled. It was evident that he had been drinking deep of some excitement. He began pouring forth a torrent of excuses, but Lady Ethel was indignant at the tutor's neglect of his duties. She determined to urge her sister-in-law to get rid of the man, as he seemed untrustworthy. Now she dismissed him from the carriage rather abruptly.

Just then the advancing battalion which had been making for the beleaguered barouche mingled with the crowd around it, and a deep musical voice rang out an order in some foreign tongue.

At the sound, Althea started so violently that Dracott released her hand in amazement. There was an in-

describable look on her face which roused in him a feeling of fierce jealousy.

"Why, it is Mr. O'Neill," exclaimed Lady Ethel. "And these people seem, actually, to obey him."

O'Neill had spoken hurriedly to the dour-looking men at the horses' heads. The hands on the roan's bridles immediately dropped and Nimrod and his mate made a bound forward. There were cries and scurrying among the crowd, and almost before Dawson had squared himself anew to his reins the block ahead had parted. A gesture from O'Neill appeared to be law. Out of the mass there sprang a bodyguard, striding, two abreast, on each side of the carriage, O'Neill beside Althea. In the confusion the hood had fallen back, and their hands met over the edge of the barouche, but neither of them spoke a word. Lady Ethel, however, was eloquent in her gratitude.

"On! Mr. O'Neill! We have had *such* a disagreeable adventure. Imagine any modern crowd mobbing one for a witch! Popular opinion is like a weather-cock, you see--apt to veer with every change of wind, and to-day it is not in Miss Stanmount's favour. I scarcely know how we should have faced the ordeal much longer if you had not come." She went on impulsively: "How *did* you manage to get rid of the creatures? We are so indebted to you. Now I think, if the coast is clear, we ought to drive on. Come and see me on Sunday, won't you? A little faster, Dawson. Good night, Mr. O'Neill, and a thousand thanks."

Lady Ethel sank back with a sigh of relief, drawing her furs around her.

"After *that* experience, Althea," she said, "it is fortunate that you are coming down to Chaunterell."

## CHAPTER XVIII

THE gloom which spread from end to end of the Empire when Victoria the Great and Good was taken to her last resting-place affected Chaunterell and its neighbourhood as well as the rest of the world. A decorous melancholy hung over Lady Ethel's house-party, and for several days all amusements were suspended. The general depression, combined with memorial services in the village church, imparted a sense of lengthened Sabbath-keeping which set Althea asking herself how she would like to be the lady-paramount of a country parish and compelled to active interest in choir practice and village morals. The death of the Queen had obliged her to cancel all her London engagements for a time, so that it was not difficult for her to get away from town; and now she was strolling alone through the park one afternoon shortly after her arrival, thinking these thoughts, when the sound of hoofs on the drive behind her disturbed her reflections. She immediately turned aside among the trees, but Dracott, who was driving his mail phaeton, recognised her and pulled up. The groom sprang down and went to the horses' heads, and Leonard himself dismounted and came straight to Althea.

"I must thank my lucky star," he exclaimed. "Of course I knew you directly." He looked down at her white serge dress with its broad bands of white fur and took her all in with a possessive air that amused while

yet it irked Althea. Gazing ardently at the cameo-cut face framed by the furry border of her hat, and the soft collar of Arctic fox, he said :

" I'm so glad you haven't put on the garb of affliction. Every woman one meets is as black as a crow. I wish there were some less gloomy way of showing one's sorrow. I hate conventional mourning."

" In the old days unmarried women were allowed to mourn in white," said Althea, " and I think that white expresses best what one feels about the white-souled Queen who has gone."

" I did not know you were so loyal," he returned. " People have been saying different things about you, since your unlucky prognostication came true."

" I dare say. Nevertheless I am loyal to the great and noble woman whom all England mourns."

" But it's wonderful—the worship of the woman, I mean." He plucked at a flake of bark on a beech tree near them, and crumbled it between his fingers. " I realise it better now than I did before—now that I know what it is to worship a woman." He glanced diffidently at Althea, but her face was averted. He hurried on, " I can understand that a thousand years hence—if England lasts as long—it will always be *the* Queen, just as for a man there can never be any but *the* woman. Don't you think it ought to mean something rather big to a woman—having power over men?"

" Rather big!" repeated Althea with faint derision. " It's the taste of wine—it's intoxicating—stupendous—to feel a crowd thrilling to you." She checked herself hastily. " How much longer are you going to keep your horses standing in the cold?" she asked.

"I'll send them along and walk with you—unless I may drive you to the house?"

"No, thank you—I am cold. I prefer to walk."

He spoke to the groom, who took the reins, and the phaeton rattled off over the frosty road.

"I thought you did not feel a crowd when you're in a trance," Dracott continued. "I've seen 'em hang on your words—but you always said that you knew nothing."

Althea did not answer for a moment. She rustled the dead leaves on the ground loudly with the toes of her boots as she walked. Then she answered evasively:

"Why, of course I don't feel the crowds when I'm in a trance. Are you going to throw doubts on the genuineness of my phenomena—as Father Frensham would put it?"

"I never dreamed of throwing doubts," he cried. "It's true that I only believe in what you call the psychic sense because I believe in *you*. If your phenomena were faked, there'd just be all the difference in the world to me. But that wouldn't be you—as I believe you to be. Don't, please, Miss Stanmount, doubt my faith in you. Only sometimes you seem to contradict yourself."

"I'm a living contradiction," she answered pettishly. "Don't you see that I'm two me's—the one who is good, and who *knows*—and the other me who doesn't know, and who is no better than anybody else—in fact a great deal worse."

Dracott looked puzzled.

"I wonder which 'me' it is that I'm walking beside now," he said.

"That shouldn't be hard to guess. But never mind.

Tell me if anyone is preparing a particularly severe test for me at your show."

Dracott hesitated. "Well, as you ask me, I'll give you a warning. They *are* getting up something that they think will floor you."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Isleworth, and his sister, Lady Carwardine. Do you know her?"

"No. Is Lady Carwardine very clever?"

"She's all there, I can tell you. She knows her world pretty well. I say, though—talk of the old gentleman—there are Isleworth and Lady Carwardine going up to the Towers."

Following Dracott's eyes, Althea saw a victoria coming along a road that joined the main avenue at a point they were approaching. As the carriage swept by, Lord Isleworth raised his hat with his usual cynical smile. Lady Carwardine, a pretty, sharp-featured woman with bright black eyes and dark hair, nodded to Dracott and scrutinised Althea with the interested stare she might have given to a creature in a menagerie. Althea was familiar with the look, and it always made her angry.

These new arrivals had been admitted to the house before Dracott and Althea reached it.

Chaunterell Towers was a big, red brick house having an imposing façade, and an immense galleried hall with an organ at one end, and various reception rooms opening off it. Several of these were shrouded now in brown holland, and one wing, containing the old people's private rooms, was shut up, but there was sufficient accommodation for many more guests than Lady Ethel had collected.

Her sister-in-law, Mrs. James Lascene, was wont to say of the Towers that it was "so typical," though she never explained what she meant by this. Chaunterell was certainly impressive, but was also homely. It had the same mingled simplicity and stateliness that characterised Lady Ethel, who, assisted by her husband, was now dispensing tea in the great hall to some of her guests. The guests were mostly what Lady Ethel called "colaterals." Besides Anthony and Althea and the James Lascenes, there was a sporting parson cousin, without a cure, but with two tall, handsome daughters, splendid specimens of the modern tailor-made girl, who had their foil in an exotic widow—a distant relative of the Lascenes. Then there was another cousin, a diplomatist named Lascene-Babington, and his wife, and a few hunting men, who had hitherto been rather bored at Chaunterell, for all meets of the fox-hounds had been cancelled till after the Queen's funeral. Now, however, the near prospect of hunting had cheered them, and the progress of caviare sandwiches and steaming muffins was having a generally inspiring effect.

Tea was in full swing when Althea entered, with Dracott following her.

Lady Ethel looked up from the silver tea-urn, and seeing the couple, smiled humorously. It was perfectly plain to her that Althea had infatuated the young man, and that he relied upon herself as Althea's friend and hostess to further his desires. Lady Ethel was touched by the big, purposeful look in his candid eyes as he greeted her. She did not quite approve the sudden transference of his allegiance from Sylvia Raine to Althea Stanmount. Lady Ethel pitied Sylvia, but was less



interested in Sylvia's immature sweetness than in Althea, whom she really liked and admired. Nevertheless, with the best wish in the world to forward Leonard Dracott's views, Lady Ethel had unwittingly prepared for him a serious opponent.

"Althea!" she cried cheerily. "Come and have some tea. How do you do, Mr. Dracott? I must tell you that I've got another draw for the show—Ladislav O'Neill."

"O'Neill!" repeated Dracott in surprise. "That's luck!"

Althea was silent for a moment. Then her voice softly echoed Dracott's.

"Mr. O'Neill! That is indeed a draw. You should insist on an extra row of chairs, Mr. Dracott, at—let me see, shall we say two guineas? Thanks so much, Ethel," and she took a cup of tea.

"Horace was in the plot," explained Lady Ethel, "but I didn't want to raise false hopes, so I said nothing at first. The fact is I got a half promise from Mr. O'Neill in town when he heard that the Oracle was coming. And, of course, I told him how dreadfully we wanted a hospital hereabouts. But he said 'hat his help must depend upon the possibilities of putting off his engagements. Apparently he has succeeded, for he has telegraphed that he will be free and can come down on Thursday."

Althea glided away, cup in hand, while Dracott discussed the question of rehearsals. There was another reason for his visit to-day. He wanted to arrange with Lady Ethel to bring a party from "The Towers" over to lunch at "The Keep." Althea was, of course, the chief

object of this invitation, and what he particularly desired was permission to fetch her himself in his phaeton. Lady Ethel, after a brief consultation with her husband as to the strength of the Chaunterell stables, declared it would be a matter of convenience if Mr. Dracott could do so. She herself was a good whip, and her lame foot was now well enough to permit of her mounting the box of a brake, so she expressed the intention of driving the rest of the party.

Meanwhile Althea had been addressed by Lord Isleworth, who brought up his sister to speak to her. Althea disliked Lord Isleworth more than ever. She hated the faintly sneering way in which he began to speak of Mr. Moggs. Lady Carwardine struck in.

"Mrs. Moggs was in the park last Sunday, and everyone said she was the prettiest woman at Church Parade. Black suits her."

Althea assented briefly. Lady Carwardine went on in a lowered tone, Lord Isleworth having turned away.

"I've been scolding my brother. You know Isleworth can't exist unless he has an adoration to play about with. Quite harmless, of course—but Mrs. Moggs really shouldn't let him *afficher* her so plainly. She must be inexperienced. At Prince's the other day when they were skating together she looked charming, but everyone was talking about her. I felt almost inclined to give her a word of advice."

Althea stiffened.

"My sister is less inexperienced than she chooses to appear. And her husband, to whom she is devoted, is very well able to take care of her."

Lady Carwardine laughed maliciously.

"How delightful! A mutually devoted couple! So uncommon nowadays. By the way, Miss Stanmount, I want to give *you* a little warning."

"Indeed," said Althea. "Warnings seem in the wind to-day. What is yours, may I ask?"

"Just this. Driving up here to-day from the West Lodge, we passed some of the men and maids going for a walk, and I recognised a woman called Julie Lamotte, who, Lady Ethel tells me, is your maid. Perhaps you don't know that she was dismissed from Ernestine's because she rifled pockets and read letters when people were being fitted?"

Althea looked calmly at Lady Carwardine.

"Indeed! I had a perfectly satisfactory reference with her."

"Oh! that was probably because Ernestine was afraid to tell the truth. But it's a fact, I assure you. I was the actual cause of the girl being sent away—though she doesn't know it. I spotted her tricks. But then I'm sharp—it takes a good deal to deceive *me*—and though she was extremely clever in covering and excusing herself, I happen to know that she'd extracted and read some letters of a friend of mine that, if misunderstood, might have been considered compromising."

"Ah, well, you see I don't receive compromising letters, Lady Carwardine. Julie's curiosity would not be rewarded if she rifled the whole of my correspondence," said Althea, adding blandly: "And I find her a very good maid."

"No doubt. She is a talented young person—just the type, I imagine, who would be useful to you."

Althea bit her lip. There was a faint emphasis which

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pointed the meaning of these words. Lady Carwardine's eyes were like lances flashing. Althea wondered vaguely why the woman was her enemy, but she saw that Lady Carwardine was a force to be reckoned with, and felt that at all costs she must be armed against her.

The next morning Leonard Dracott's phaeton with its pair of high-stepping bays and smart groom gave Althea a reassuring taste of the good things of life that he was ready to offer her. She had not yet made up her mind to marry the master of "The Keep," but she was strongly tempted to do so, for the post of psychic diviner presented difficulties, and her visit to the handsome old Norman house that day engendered a feeling of sumptuousness and solid comfort which was decidedly soothing.

She enjoyed immensely the quick drive through a white world in which the trees and hedges made a frosted network and stalactites dropped from cottage eaves, for there had been a light fall of snow the night before with a sharp frost following it. Leonard was clearly anxious to keep her to himself, so they spun along, well ahead of the brake. Althea thought it would be pleasant to drive often behind such splendid horses through villages where peasants curtsied and touched their hats as the carriage passed. The smoke of an iron foundry on the horizon—Dracott pointed it out to her as one of his sources of wealth—reminded her of that old manor house where part of her girlhood had been spent, and from which on winter evenings she had watched the smelting furnaces flaring. There she had first become conscious of her mystic powers, and she told Dracott anecdotes of her early instances of clairvoyance.

He listened, awed and interested, showing that he

regarded her as some wonderful, supernaturally gifted being. It was plain that he felt it was almost profanation to love her ; and this was a convenient sentiment, for it kept things from coming to a crisis. The thrill of power was far too dear for Althea to dream of relinquishment as yet. Visions of world-wide fame were flitting through her mind even while she talked to her charioteer, but she was considering carefully how soon it would be worth her while to marry Dracott.

"The Keep," as they approached it by a long avenue of naked elms in which rooks were nesting, was a splendid pile seen from different aspects as they drove along the winding avenue from beside which shy deer scampered away into leafless glades. On one side rose the remains of a medieval keep, and from it extended the Elizabethan building with its protruding mullioned windows and ancient doorway. The entrance front was more modern. It had been added to by the cousin from whom Leonard had inherited, and whose taste being towards the Palladian style, and his passion music, an anachronism had been perpetrated in the new great hall and the big music-room annexe where the entertainment was to be given. The pseudo-classical tendency of the late owner showed, too, in a broad terrace, stretching round two sides of the block and set about with groups of statuary of the Bernini style. The terrace was approached by marble steps, and there were urns and ornate balustrades hung over with frost-rimed creepers, but which Leonard said were a mass of roses, wistaria, and clematis, all through the spring and summer.

"A jolly old place, isn't it?" he remarked with candid pride as they paced the terrace while waiting

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for the other carriage to arrive. "Tell me what you think of my home, Miss Stanmount. I never wanted so much that anyone should admire it."

Althea's admiration was frank enough to delight him. His whole face lightened with pleasure.

"I wouldn't change Dracott for Chaunterell," he said, "though I envy them their bowling alley. I'm told this is all wrong," he added with an apologetic wave towards the nymphs who gave a suggestion in their flying draperies of being pursued by Apollo.

"Some old buffer of an architect was finding fault with it the other day, but I'm quite satisfied. I like the images and things. Do you know there's one at the end that reminds me of you."

They walked towards the statue he spoke of, a more reposeful figure than the rest—the copy of a Muse in the Uffizi. He looked from the marble to his companion with adoration in his eyes as she stood leaning against the balustrade.

"I always think of you as a sort of goddess," he said, in his tender, bashful way, "and as if there wasn't anything in the world quite good enough for you."

His eyes went from her to the broken battlements of the Keep, and along the lines of park and garden. It seemed so little for Althea to accept, although he had thought it a great deal to bestow on Sylvia.

"To-day you don't seem so like that sort of goddess," he said and he jerked his head towards the Muse. "I suppose its because they didn't wear hats with swallows perching on the brim and soft furry things." He awkwardly touched the white fox trimmings of Althea's long, cream-coloured coat. "I think that fancy of yours for

white is awfully fetching. It makes you seem as if you didn't belong down here, which is just what I feel about you." He hesitated a moment, stroking the white muff she rested upon the balustrade. "Do you know you put a queer kind of notion into my head as we were coming along over those white roads—one of your sort of notions?"

"Is Saul among the prophets?" she rejoined smiling. "Tell me."

"It was the snow, and you in your white furs, and the shining look in your eyes," he said softly. "My mind went back to a fairy story that my mother used to read me when I was a kid. It was about a boy who was desperately in love with the Snow Queen. They went driving along through the snow, and the boy could not resist her spell—he didn't want to. The one thing in the world he wanted was that the Snow Queen should keep him with her."

"And did she?" asked Althea, with the cold, sweet smile that was to Leonard so alluring.

"Well, she took him to her castle—which, by the way, wasn't so warm and comfortable as these old diggings of mine—and there she told him that if he wanted to please her he must put together a puzzle made of bits of ice. But he couldn't."

"I remember. The puzzle spelt *Eternity*."

"Yes, he found that out in the end."

"The only eternal thing in the universe is love," said Althea dreamily. "I know the end of that story, Mr. Dracott, but the Snow Queen wasn't in it at all. There was a girl he had loved long before her—a girl who had travelled ever so far to find the Snow Queen's palace,

and her boy sweetheart. It was *they* who spelled *Eternity* together."

Dracott shook his head and drew nearer to Althea, but she shrank from him.

"Snow Queens are not made to be loved," she said, "unless it be by some stormy giant of the Nature world. No ordinary mortal could melt her to love. The little human maid really suited that simple-minded boy much better." Althea was thinking of Sylvia Raine.

Dracott may have guessed her thoughts, for he made a passionately negative gesture. His enchantress stopped him.

"Look!" she said, pointing through the trees. "There's the Chaunterell brake and Lady Ethel on the box, with Cabby beside her. Now you've got to do your duty as host, Mr. Dracott, instead of telling fairy tales about eternity."

Dracott gnawed his moustache in grim vexation, but he had to go and help Lady Ethel down from the box seat of the brake, and be polite to his guests. The good moment with Althea was already gone, and with it her air of white mystery. His goddess had descended to the commonplace.

"Do let us have luncheon soon," she said. "I'm horribly hungry."

Dracott had provided an aldermanic repast which the party ate in a long oak dining-room, with dead Dracotts looking down from the panels. A variety of delicacies from Johnson Moggs and Company graced the table, and apropos of these, Mr. Moggs became the subject of conversation.

"Capital fellow, Moggs," observed Horace Lascene.



"The only chap in London who understands caviare. And he's so amusin'. What *I* want to see is Moggs in the huntin' field. D'ye think he'd trust me to mount him—eh, Ev'ril?"

Mrs. James Lascene looked aghast.

"Do you mean to say that you've asked *Johnson Moggs* to Chaunterell?" she exclaimed.

"I thought I'd told you so," put in Lady Ethel, secretly amused. "Mr. Moggs and I have grown to be great friends. He's bringing Mrs. Moggs to stay over the hospital show. Their little girl is coming, too. She's a pal of Cabby's, I understand."

Cabby, freed from "Mossoo's" rule, was enjoying himself immensely. Just now he was busily munching jam tarts piled with cream. He returned Lady Ethel's nod affably.

After luncheon most of the men went out of doors under the guidance of Horace Lascene, while Leonard led the rest of the party on a tour over the house. Mrs. Armston, the pretty widow, having discovered that Leonard Dracott was worth cultivating from a matrimonial point of view, displayed the deepest interest in architecture, and claimed so much attention that during the latter part of the day he had no more talk alone with Althea until the time came for him to drive her back to Chaunterell. Then she contrived to keep him off personal subjects, merely contenting herself with permitting the young man to glimpse possibilities which made his heart beat fast. Yet there was nothing by which he could feel sure of her. He had always felt sure of Sylvia Raine, but that had been her mother's mistake, not Sylvia's.

## CHAPTER XIX

TEA was being brought into the great hall at Chaunterell. A pair of yellow dachshunds in crimson-lined baskets on either side of the fireplace yapped lazily as the footmen adjusted two little brass stands, and set on each a dish of hot cakes. Tea was always a substantial meal at Chaunterell.

The Ladies Lascene were downstairs to-day. These two old maiden sisters of Lord Chaunterell were quaint, kindly oddities—types of an earlier Victorian period than any which the rest of the party remembered. They sat together on a wide settee conversing in gentle dignity with each other, an oak-stand between them on which were their old-fashioned, embroidered work-satchels, piled with wool which they were knitting into children's petticoats.

The Ladies Lascene seldom sat in the hall; they preferred the drawing-room, where they were in perfect keeping with the early century hangings and furniture, the big flowered chintz and the gilded consoles and *étagères*, displaying that collection of Old Chelsea, Leeds, and Worcester, for which Chaunterell was famous.

Horace and James Lascene irreverently styled their maiden aunts "the Twins," because they resembled each other so closely, and, but for some slight differences, always dressed alike in full, short-flounced black silks, long-waisted bodices, and wide open sleeves with muslin or

lace ones beneath. Both had round crumpled faces and the bunches of ringlets that one associates with the portraits of Mrs. Disraeli in her youth, and other ladies of the 'forties. The ringlets were scarcely grey, for few of the Lascenes went white. Lady Georgina, the elder, had curls that she liked still to consider flaxen. She was very deaf now, and had been extremely romantic. Partly from the deafness, and partly from an inherent love of romance, she was given to elaborating upon any information she gathered, which seldom reached her correctly to start with. The picturesque detail she was thus enabled to weave around a possibly commonplace setting afforded her much pleasure, but her little romances were liable to be pounced upon and disentangled by Lady Augusta. Nevertheless, they were devoted to each other. Each called the other "Dearie," and neither was happy apart from her sister. Lady Augusta's ringlets retained some of their nut-brown sheen; she was more alert than Lady Georgina, and far the more sensible of the two, but they were both gentle souls, and shared three deep interests in life—parish matters, the game of patience, and knitting. They played patience every evening after dinner, but would have considered it dissipation to do so at an earlier hour. During most of the day they sat side by side and knitted mysterious woollen garments to be bestowed in charity.

Mrs. James Lascene was knitting too; she always brought socks to knit for James at Chaunterell, and pretty Mrs. Armston near her played her exquisite hands about an embroidery frame. The Lascene-Babingtons, James Lascene and somebody else had made up a bridge set. Althea and Anthony at a table apart were deep in their

letters, while Lady Ethel in a low chair with her lame foot supported on a rest had the afternoon post spread before her. It was not raining, but the thaw made a drip outside, and the Polperrick girls, who had just come in, stopped on the parquet, pointing to their splashed habits.

"We aren't fit to enter civilisation, I ady Ethel, but we've had a splendid run. They'll all be here directly, and I think we'll cross over to the other fire and dry ourselves."

There was a widening of the circle, and a group of weather-stained pink coats soon joined the girls round what was called "the east fireplace," where they drank tea and something stronger, and discussed the day's run. The Moggs family was expected, and Horace Lascene had just remarked that the train must be late when there sounded a scuffle in the vestibule and a shrill little tinkling laugh echoed in response to a boisterous shout—unmistakably Cabby's. Then the wide doors were burst open without ceremony, and the heir presumptive of the Chaunterells appeared, with a very smart young lady.

"Aunt Ethel! This is my little cousin, Nan."

The pair were almost of a height, Cabby in his covert coat, cap in hand, ruffled hair, and honest manly little face. Nan wore a purple pelisse trimmed with grey fox, and her large velvet hat was turned up with a plume of grey feathers over her yellow curls.

Cabby was extremely anxious that Nan should make a good impression. Nan, on the contrary, was not at all concerned about the matter, but stared about her with frank curiosity.

Lady Ethel put out her hand for her stick, but Cabby rushed forward.

"Don't get up, Aunt Ethel. The carriage isn't here yet. We nipped out at the lodge and cut across the new plantations."

Nan favoured the lady in the low chair with a patronising nod, but Lady Ethel drew the child toward's her, and Nan, instantly sensing the innate motherliness of the big, childless woman, put up her face to be kissed.

Nan was soon installed with a cup of tea and a plate of muffins at a little table near the two old ladies. She observed them interestedly while she munched her muffins.

Then there came the sound of an arrival outside, and Mr. Moggs's rolling bass voice was heard.

Lady Ethel rose to receive her guests, Cabby solicitously offering his small shoulder for her support.

Johnson Moggs, in an extremely well made grey suit, loomed big and unaccustomed behind the dainty figure of his wife, who looked as if she had stepped out of a French fashion paper. A murmur of admiration went round the hall as she approached.

Very lovely indeed was Molly in her sheeny black dress and dark furs. Her nemophila eyes shone brilliantly and her bloom was exquisite, but there was a careworn look beneath Molly's cream and roses.

"By Jove! She's rippin'," muttered one of the men in pink. "Who is she?"

"Moggs! Moggs!" repeated another. "You don't mean——"

"*Caviare* Moggs—rattling good chap," whispered Horace Lascene, putting down the cups he was carrying.

Mr. Moggs, having discovered and waved a kiss to his daughter, was feeling happier.

"How are you, Moggs?" said Horace at his elbow. "Glad to see you. Coldish sort of day, isn't it? Have some sloe-gin before you tackle tea."

But Mr. Moggs had already taken a cup from Lady Ethel's hand and was drinking it in big gulps, staring as he did so, much as his own little daughter had done, round the big hall with its double flight of stairs, its pillars, and carved projecting fireplaces where the flames leaped from the blazing logs, illuminating the scene. Fire-glints fell on the effigies in armour, and lighted up the family portraits—statesmen in wigs and ruffles, frail Lely beauties, Godfrey Kneller dames, with high-tired heads, abnormally narrow shoulders, and swelling bosoms, while beneath them were grouped the men and women of the day in modern attire. The two quaint old ladies on the settle seemed to Mr. Moggs odder than all the rest, and his gaze lingered in that particular corner because of Nan, whose eyes were riveted on the Ladies Lascene.

Lady Georgina smiled benevolently upon the small guest, who having finished her tea, rose and stood absorbed before the old ladies, wondering why they wore their hair in such odd-looking puffed-out loops and curls over their ears. Lady Georgina invited her to take a stool at their feet, but Nan politely declined.

"I've been sitting such a long time in the train," she said. "You *have* to sit in the train; the other people don't like you to run up and down, so I'll stand now, if you don't mind. My legs are growing, that's why they want to stretch."

"Yes, this is a beautiful old house to sketch," replied Lady Georgina complacently. "But you shouldn't sit

in the rain, little girl, and"—looking doubtfully from Nan's short, black-stockinged legs to the grinning, toothless gaps in her mouth—"you are young to be able to sketch."

"Stretch—not sketch!" screamed Nan. "And I don't want to sit in the rain. I had *to-sit-in-the-train*."

"If you come round by her left ear she will hear you better," said Lady Augusta quietly. "You need not raise your voice—only try to speak distinctly."

Nan crimsoned and nodded.

"It's losing my front teeth," she explained.

Lady Augusta was duly sympathetic and asked kindly questions.

"And how are all your little brothers and sisters?" inquired Lady Georgina.

"Haven't got any," returned Nan promptly.

Lady Georgina was at a loss.

"I thought, Dearie, that Horace said this little girl was one of a large family?" she said to her sister.

"No, Dearie. That was the new curate's family. This is little Miss Moggs from London—Miss Moggs—from—London."

"Moggs! Moggs!" repeated Lady Georgina. "We never knew a Moggs, did we, Dearie? There was Captain Miggs, you remember—such a charming fellow—"

"Yes, I know, Dearie," broke in Lady Augusta, cutting short her sister's most romantic memory. "He was killed in the Crimea. But this is Moggs—not Miggs. No relation."

"People always think I ought to have brothers and sisters," ventured Nan politely. "But I really haven't."

Fascinated by the rapid play of the two pairs of

skinny hands adorned with valuable, old-fashioned rings. that plied their knitting so busily, Nan presently burst forth.

"What pretty work you are doing!"

Lady Augusta kindly opened hers out, for the child to see.

"I think it's lovely. I should like a petticoat like that," remarked Nan. "Mine is only white flannel, but it's got little silk shells round it. You look," and she picked up her skirts and displayed the edge of her inner petticoat.

Lady Augusta bent indulgently and admired Nan's scalloped border

"Why don't you make your petticoat pink, too?" asked Nan of Lady Georgina.

"When I was a little girl," observed Lady Georgina reprovingly, "I should have been severely chidden for lifting my skirts in company."

"Oh," said Nan, "perhaps you hadn't got such pretty petticoats to show."

Then her sharp eyes, travelling from one ringleted head to the other, noticed that Lady Georgina's velvet bandeau was plaited in a way that used to be called "the Greek band," whereas Lady Augusta had a flat velvet bow on hers.

"I want to know," exclaimed Nan, whose curiosity suddenly got the better of her good manners, "why you don't match *exactly*?"

Lady Augusta's thin, veined hand went up to her carefully dressed head, which she thoughtfully patted.

"We think a little variety is pleasant and wholesome," she said diffidently.



"Pleasant and wholesome," echoed her sister. "That is why we make a difference in our work. Augusta prefers pink—don't you, Dearie? Blue was always *my* colour." And Lady Georgina gave a reminiscent sigh.

Meanwhile Althea had observed the eyes of Johnson Moggs fixed upon his wife with a look in which pride and tenderness were mingled with a profound and wistful puzzlement. Some cloud seemed to have come between them. Molly did not seem happy. Her manner was hard and flippant. She snubbed the poor man in a quite unusual way that jarred on Althea, striking her as painfully significant in connection with Lady Carwardine's recent insinuations.

Althea was deeply troubled by the change in Molly, but she was naturally a reserved woman, and shrank from interference in other people's affairs. The position was a difficult one, and she would have preferred to ignore Lady Carwardine's hints as well as the evidence of her own eyes. But Althea's intuitive faculty told her that this was not a time to keep silence. She must make some effort to win Molly's confidence.

Accordingly, after Julie had left her that night, Althea went along the corridor in her wrapper, fervently hoping that she might not meet Johnson. She was relieved to see his dressing-room door half open and his dress-coat lying across a chair. He had been up to change it for a gorgeous smoking jacket, and was now downstairs with the other men. Althea knocked softly at her sister's door. There was no answer, so she turned the handle and entered.

Molly had dismissed her maid and was sitting in a big chintz-covered chair before the fire, apparently sorting

a bundle of letters. With her hair loose about her shoulders, she looked very sweet and childlike. But at the sight of Althea, she started and sprang up, tumbling the letters to her feet. Her face went white.

"Good gracious, Al! What do you creep in like that for?"

"You didn't hear me knock, Molly, and I want to talk to you."

"Talk—at this hour! Can't you keep your talking till to-morrow?"

"No, Moll. There is something that I particularly want to say to you."

"Well, fire away," said Molly pettishly. She stooped to pick up the letters and hastily gathered them together. Then she walked across the room, and bundling them into a drawer in the dressing-table, turned the key upon them.

Althea watched her sister in silence. Her eyes fell upon the silver-gilt toilet set on the dressing-table. It had Molly's monogram in turquoises, and had been one of Johnson Moggs's wedding presents to his bride.

The remembrance of her blundering, faithful brother-in-law spurred Althea.

"When you've done fidgeting over there," she said quietly, "perhaps you'll come and listen to me."

Molly glanced round with a suspicious air. She came slowly across the room, her pretty chin uplifted, her hands clasped before her like a naughty child. Althea could not forbear a smile.

"You deserve shaking, Moll, you really do! How am I going to lecture you?"

Molly thrust out her clasped hands sharply.

"Don't lecture me, Al. I can't stand it."

Althea softened and grew serious at once.

"My dear, I have no desire to lecture you, but I'm afraid you need it."

Molly turned her head away so that Althea could only see the curve of a pale cheek, and one small ear protruding from the mass of golden hair that hung over her shoulder.

"What about?" she half whispered.

"Lord Isleworth."

There was silence. The soft pink knuckles of Molly's hands were so tightly locked that they stiffened and grew white.

Althea steadied herself by the mantelpiece.

"You know"—she began, but a harsh, mocking voice, unlike Molly's, broke in upon her carefully-prepared speech.

"You hate Lord Isleworth. You've never done him justice. Hadn't you better refrain from discussing him?"

"I don't want to discuss him, except in relation to you," returned Althea quickly. "I dislike the man—yes—and when I see my sister being taken advantage of——"

"Stop!" cried Molly. "You have no right to speak to me like that."

"Dear Molly! You are *such* a child, and everyone knows Lord Isleworth's character."

"He is a friend of Lady Ethel's," said Molly between her set teeth.

"A near neighbour—that is a different thing. It's partly why I wished to speak to you. Pray see as little of him as possible while you are here. I believe Lady Ethel thinks of taking you over to luncheon at Isleworth tomorrow. But people in town have been talking about you and him, Molly, and you know it isn't fair to Johnson."

"Oh, rubbish about Johnson!" exclaimed Molly vulgarly. "You've always wanted to have your knife into Isleworth because he didn't believe in your occult tommy-rot."

Althea bit her lip.

"That doesn't matter. It's beside the question. But *don't* give occasion for any more gossip."

"Didn't know there was any, and I can't see that it matters much if there is. I have my reasons for being friendly with Lord Isleworth."

"What are they?" said Althea gently.

Molly laughed disagreeably. She flung herself into the chintz-covered chair.

"Well, if you want candour, you shall have it. Lord Isleworth is extremely useful to me. Through him, I've been invited to a lot of houses where even Everil would give her eyes to go. Of course, I've let him think that Johnny's going to turn the business into a company and put him on as Chairman of the Board at a big salary, and perhaps Johnny may, some day. Anyhow, I'm only taking a leaf out of Everil's book of rules for social advancement—and yours too, Althea. Your dodge is to come the oracle over any addle-pated idiots who'll listen to you. Mine's different, but our aim is much the same, I fancy."

Althea was stung by the grain of truth in Molly's words, even more than by her vulgar flippancy.

"My dear, how can I argue with you, when you talk like that?" she said. "Please put me aside for the moment. Can you honestly assure yourself that your intimacy with Lord Isleworth is likely to advance your social interests—and Johnson's?"

"Haven't I said so?" muttered Molly.

Althea sighed.

"You must be mad. At all events, I do wish you wouldn't go to Isleworth. Gossip in town is bad enough, but gossip in the country is much worse."

"Lady Ethel is the proper person to settle that question," said Molly loftily.

"Lady Ethel has been so out of things lately that she probably knows nothing about—all this. Can't you make an excuse?"

Molly shrugged.

"Why should I? Why need I be rude to Lord Isleworth because you can't throw dust in his eyes over your miracle-mongering? He happens to see through that sort of thing and to be rather down on it. Are you afraid that he'll make your precious career too hot for you some day? It's a free country, Althea, and you'll have to put up with his opinion of your little dodges. He'll never believe you're an inspired archangel on an excursion trip from Mars."

Althea could not help laughing.

"You must do as you like, you foolish child, since I evidently cannot convince you that you are making a mistake. But I can't think what you see in the man. Your own husband is worth a dozen of him."

Molly's blue eyes darkened.

"Oh, Johnny?" she said pettishly. "What ideas has Johnny above his counting-house and his stock-in-trade?"

"You knew what Johnson was when you married him. You can't alter him, but you won't meet many men as good and kind. As for Lord Isleworth, it's enough to see how other men treat him."

"I know! It's most unfair," cried Molly hotly, showing that the shaft pricked her. "It's all because he wasn't keen on going out to be killed by the Boers. Why didn't Jim Lascene volunteer—or his brother—or that young Dracott, who is always dangling after you? Why not say the same of them? But no, you can't forgive Lord Isleworth for not knuckling under to your soothsaying."

Althea thought she had better return to her own room.

"Well, good-night, Moll," she said. "Think it over, and don't do anything rash."

Molly made no answer, and Althea went to the door. But as she was closing it after her, an odd sound caught her ear, and she opened it again, and looked in. Molly had curled herself round in the big chair, and with her face buried in the cushions, was sobbing as if her heart would break. Althea was back at her side in an instant.

"Molly! dear little Moll, I didn't mean to hurt you. I only wanted to put you on your guard with that man. Tell me what's troubling you." Then, as Molly only sobbed louder, Althea exclaimed: "For heaven's sake, tell me, Moll—Lord Isleworth hasn't made you unhappy?"

But Molly pushed away Althea's hand.

"Go, go," she cried stormily. "I don't want to be worried. I'm tired—sleepy—I've got a headache. Be off, Althea. I've never interfered with *your* little game. Do let me alone."

So Althea went sorrowfully away.

## CHAPTER XX

THURSDAY was a typical February morning. There was in the air that smell of moist earth, and of starting sap which speaks of growing things. The aconites had their heads well above ground, and clumps of snowdrops pushed forth delicate blossoms through the yielding soil.

Mr. Moggs, his first unaccustomedness over, found plenty to amuse him at Chaunterell. He was a poor sportsman and had small knowledge of horses beyond those which drew his delivery vans, but he took a keen interest in anything which could be called a "going concern," and the Chaunterell stables and Mr. Lascene's hunting stud seemed to him to answer that description. He had his own opinions as to the practical working of the matter, and was delighted to be taken round by his host and allowed to tot up a few figures in regard to expenses of fodder, wages, livery, taxes, repairs, vets' fees, and so forth, all of which was highly entertaining to Horace Lascene, who liked Johnson Moggs, and showed it in the face of the more critical demeanour of his other guests.

Horace Lascene kept no motors. He detested machinery as a substitute for horseflesh, but was very regular in his visits to the stables. This morning he and Mr. Moggs had just been looking over the stalls, Johnson smoking a big cheroot and sending forth volumes of smoke while he absorbed information against the time

when he and Molly should have a country place of their own. As a rule Cabby did the honours of the stables in a manner that pleased his Uncle Horace vastly, but this morning Cabby was nowhere to be seen, and Mr. Lascene, having given his orders for the day, was sauntering round, with a word here and there to the grooms, when sounds floating out through the door of a harness-room attracted his attention.

Johnson Moggs smiled broadly as he recognised his daughter's shrill tinkle. Horace Lascene beckoned, and they stepped softly to the door and peered within.

Nan was perched upon a trestle for saddles, her black-stockinged legs dangling, while Cabby and a stable-help were instructing her in the mysteries of rising in her seat.

Cabby turned to his uncles with joyous assurance.

"I've just been 'splainin' things to Nan. Biddle's been showing her what a lady's saddle's like. We were looking at my pony, and Nan wanted to ride him, but I told her she couldn't, 'cos he's never carried a girl."

"Johnny dear, buy me a pony," pleaded Nan, slipping from the trestle and seeking the shelter of her beloved's big hand.

"I dare say! I dare say!" puffed Mr. Moggs with a large pressure of the little fingers. "Anything else you'd like, madam?"

Horace looked sympathetically at the little, eager, freckled face with the short lip curving over the gaps where Nan's front teeth ought to have been. A happy idea occurred to him.

"P'rhaps next time your cousin comes to stay, young 'un," he said to Cabby, "we shall have another pony



that can carry a girl, and then you'll be able to go out together."

"Now I call that very jolly of you, Uncle Horace," said Cabby, and trotted out of the harness-room, treading the soil as sturdily as if he were already lord of Chaunterell.

Nan gave a long drawn "O—h!" of delight.

"We *are* enjoying ourselves, aren't we, Johnny?" she remarked, in an audible aside to her father. "What a pity we never came here before."

Horace Lascene in front caught the naive comment and chuckled. His hand was on his nephew's shoulder. But at that moment Cabby saw a friend in a butcher's cart, and with a shout to Nan to "Come on," twitched himself away and sped out of the stable-yard and along the back drive.

Cabby's friend was Tom Cheek, a youth employed by the principal butcher of Fordingham, who purveyed for all the big country houses round. Just now Tom Cheek was driving a grey cob with a doubtful reputation about which he and Cabby coincided in views not likely to commend themselves to more experienced heads. Cheek and Cabby were both convinced that what the grey needed to "get the vice out of him" was a slack rein, an open road, and free use of the whip. In this method Cabby had more than once secretly assisted, all of which he had already confided to Nan, who was deeply interested in the process of getting the vice out of the grey cob.

About noon, Althea was sitting near the fire in the hall, skimming the morning papers, when the two old ladies came in, prepared for walking on muddy roads. Their full skirts were reefed after the manner Mr. Leech

has portrayed, they had on goloshes, and they wore black mushroom hats, each with a fall to protect their eyes. Their maid followed them with two old-fashioned reticules, out of which peeped sundry oblong packages.

Both the old ladies looked mildly astonished and rather put out.

"We are going into the village to inspect the schools," said Lady Augusta. "We had asked your sisters whether they would permit the dear children to accompany us."

"Yes, to accompany us," echoed Lady Georgina.

"We thought that it might please them to present the infant school with some small gifts that we have put up for the most deserving infants," explained Lady Augusta, "but it seems that neither Nan nor Almeric is to be found."

"No—not to be found," echoed Lady Georgina.

"They were to have taken luncheon with us afterwards at the Rectory," said Lady Augusta, and both the old ladies cried in chorus:

"What *can* have become of the dear children?"

Althea thought it highly probable that Nan and Cabby might have absconded purposely in order to avoid the visit to the school-children and the Rectory, but she did not say so.

Some time after the old ladies' departure, Lady Ethel limped down, looking discomposed.

"Cabby always brings me a flower to wear when I am going out," she said, "but to-day he has not done so, and my maid tells me that Mr. Moggs is hunting for the children and cannot find them."

Althea propounded her theory, but Lady Ethel shook her head.

"No. Cabby may have forgotten all about the old aunts' plan, but he wouldn't play a mean trick like that. I know the boy too well."

Mrs. James Lascene was descending the stairs with her head erect—a stiff figure in sables, silk, and jet.

"Are you talking about Almeric?" she said. "It's a mistake to spoil the boy as you do, Ethel."

"Well, I wish he'd come back before we start," said Lady Ethel.

Mr. Moggs appeared at the moment. His legs were muddy, and there was anxiety on his large red face.

"Anyone got an idea where that youngster has taken my Nan?" he cried. "The Lord knows what they're up to!"

"Oh! Cabby is quite capable of taking care of himself and of Nan, too," smiled Althea.

"I'd give a fiver to be sure of that," said Mr. Moggs, and he eagerly questioned the servants who were carrying rugs and foot-muffs to the carriage. But no one had seen the children.

Lady Ethel tried to reassure Mr. Moggs. Cabby's appetite, she said, would bring the children back for luncheon. Meantime they were most likely at one of the keepers' lodges, whither she would send to inquire.

Mrs. James pointedly consulted the little jewelled watch she wore pinned among her furs.

"Excuse me, Ethel—but are we waiting for Molly? James, do send someone to hasten Molly."

Her husband was immersed in *The Field*, but he got up obediently.

"Here comes Molly," exclaimed Althea.

Molly had put on her newest and prettiest French

frock. It was of glittering black with cunning touches of white that threw up her peach-like bloom and golden hair. Mrs. James glanced at her critically, and then turned to her brother-in-law.

"Really, Johnson, hadn't you better get brushed up if you intend to lunch at Isleworth to-day?"

"I don't intend to lunch at Isleworth," replied Mr. Moggs hastily, "and Molly won't either."

"What's that you say, Johnny?" Molly advanced, her eyes scintillating, her fair brows drawn in a pucker.

"I say you and I are not going to lunch at Isleworth, Moll. Nan's out somewhere—haven't you heard? She can't be found."

"What does that matter? She'll turn up presently."

Johnson gazed at his wife in blank astonishment.

"It's only one of her naughty pranks," said Mrs. Moggs.

"One of her pranks!" repeated Johnson Moggs in a low, pained voice. "But, Molly, what if it is something more serious?"

"Rubbish! I object to having fusses made and engagements broken in a quite unnecessary fashion. Stop behind, if you like. I shall not upset arrangements."

Molly's blue eyes flashed defiantly. Her husband's grew large with pain and repressed anger. She turned, gathering her long seal-skin coat about her. He followed her in bewildered silence to the entrance hall.

Thither Lady Ethel had already gone in search of her own husband, whose word and presence were law and solace to her at all times. She found he had just come up the drive and was examining the roans as they pawed the gravel.

Horace Lascene would have been a dandyish little man, but for the bronze that tropical suns had given him and the stamp of sport and travel. Lady Ethel limped to his side and explained the situation. Horace's clever, clean-shaven face settled in its firm lines. He made a sharp, clicking sound with his tongue as he listened.

"All right," he said. "Moggs and I will scoot round for the youngsters. They're safe enough, you may depend, old girl, but Cabby deserves what-for, I own. Now, you must cut along to Isleworth. Her ladyship over there doesn't like being kept waiting for her vittles. She'll give you a taste of cayenne, if you do it. Look here, Jim," and Horace called to his brother: "You and Bill Babington are both rigged out sufficiently—which of you will take the spare seat and escort the ladies?"

"You had better stop at home, James, and lock Almeric up in his room till I return," said Mrs. James. "He must be punished for running off in this wild way."

"J-j-just as you like, Everil," stammered the docile husband.

"But you agree with me, don't you, James?" said his wife, making an unexpected demand for moral support.

"Oh! Of-of c-course the b-boy must be p-punished. I quite ag-g-gree with you, Everil."

Horace Lascene, carefully tucking the rug over the knees of his own wife, whom he adored, but whose behests he was apt to treat differently, bent to hide a smile. Their hands met for a moment beneath the fur. Then the barouche rolled away.

The diminished house-party partook of luncheon in rather ominous silence. The host was absent, and with him Mr. Moggs. They came in about half-past two, and

while they were hurrying through their meal a message was brought that the children had been seen half-way to Fordingham in one of Bloxam the butcher's carts, drawn by a grey horse. The yokel who told this story held to it when questioned by the gentlemen, and furthermore declared that "the li'l' lady wor a-drivin', and the li'l' gennelman 'ad the whip, and was a-walloppin' the grey like to make the blood spurt. An' the chap with 'em, he wor laughin' fit to split his sides."

Horace hastily remunerated and dismissed this informant, and then he and Johnson Moggs looked at each other blankly.

"We may as well go over to Fordingham—eh, Moggs? Come, buck up, man," and Lascene pushed the brandy towards his guest, for Mr. Moggs showed signs of collapse. He shook his head feebly, and sank into a chair.

"Nan driving! Good God! what were they about to let her do it?"

"I'll skin Cabby for this. But we must bestir ourselves." Horace pressed an electric bell sharply. For the first time in his life he was wishing that he had a motor. "The dog-cart at once," he said to the footman who promptly appeared. "No—stop, William!—the stanhope; we may need it. And Bridges had better come—he's the lightest weight, ain't he? Tell 'em to put Polly and the Raven to—they're quickest. Now Moggs, cheer up—we'll bring those young reprobates back in a couple of hours."

Meantime the rest of the party sat dismally over their coffee and cigarettes. Then came the portentous face of the butler.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, sir?" he said to Anthony, who went out with him, wondering what ill news had come round.

It appeared that somebody else had met the local carrier, who told a tale of a runaway grey horse and an empty cart rattling at his heels. Following on its tracks, the carrier had come across a gruesome heap—the shattered cart and the grey with his neck broken. There was no sign of any occupant, but the cart was Bloxam's, for it had his name painted on the back panel, and the servants all had decided that it must be the same cart in which Tom Cheek had called for orders that morning.

Anthony listened in silence. Then he remembered the boy's father and went into the conservatory, where James was enjoying a mild flirtation with Mrs. Armston.

James paled a little as Anthony drew him aside.

"Don't see what I can do," he muttered.

"Why! ride to the spot, man! And find out whether they've discovered anything further."

But the redoubtable James shook his head.

"Must stop at home. Boy stood on the b-burning deck kind of business, you see."

Anthony shrugged disgustedly and went back to the group in the hall. The old ladies had just come in.

They were considerably shaken at hearing that the children had not returned. Lady Georgina inquired tragically whether the ponds had been dragged, and wandered off into a childish reminiscence of her brother—the Almeric of two generations ago—who had been lost for half a day in one of the coppices.

"Come and lie down, Dearie, you're tired," interrupted Lady Augusta. Anthony waited until they had gone;

then he told what he had heard. The grave faces around grew graver.

"Oh! I *wish* Bill was here. He'd ride over at once," exclaimed Mrs. Lascene-Babington warmly.

"I'd go myself," added Anthony, "but I think that my sister and I can be better employed."

"You will consult the Oracle? That's right," murmured a few eager voices.

"Rot!" muttered one of the men under his breath. *He* had been consulting the sporting parson. "I'll go, Mr. Stanmount," he said aloud, "and here's Mr. Polperrick, who'll come with me."

"I'm extremely obliged to you," said Anthony gratefully. "Now Althea, we must do our share."

Althea rose silently from the corner where she had been sitting.

She did not speak until she and her brother had reached a little tower-room allotted them by Lady Ethel for private experimentation. Then she turned to him and threw out her hands despairingly.

"It's no use, Anthony—I can't do it."

"*Can't do it?* Why not?"

"I *can't*—I mean I shan't succeed. I feel that I haven't it in me."

He stared at her in amazement, but he spoke very gently.

"What makes you think that you would be likely to fail?"

"Oh! don't use that word," she cried. "The very sound is ill-omened."

"My dear, it is not like you to be nervous."

She laughed raspily.



"Even you don't know me. I am often tortured with nervousness."

There was a moment's pause in which they looked apprehensively at each other.

"No good was ever gained by fear," said Anthony at length. "If you have done nothing to forfeit your birthright, my dear, it should still be yours. Let us, at all events, try."

Althea submitted. But it was as she had feared. Anthony burned the sacred herbs and used his utmost efforts to induce the prophetic ecstasy. In vain! The "demon" was obdurate, and brother and sister faced each other again, Anthony keenly disappointed, Althea wild-eyed and despondent.

"What does it mean?" she cried.

"I'm afraid it means that the power has deserted you—at least temporarily. It may come back. I hope and pray it will, for I have considered you the living proof of vital truths, Althea—the living vindication of true mysticism."

"A poor proof!" she exclaimed bitterly.

Like a grey ghost she stood before him. The pale rays of the wintry sun lowering westward shone through the panes of a mullioned window, lighting up her white, drawn face.

"I am thinking of to-morrow," she said, in a low voice. "The hospital entertainment."

"So am I," answered Anthony. "I was going over to 'The Keep' this afternoon about some of the arrangements. I think I had better prepare Dracott."

Althea shrank back as though she had been struck.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried. "Don't tell him, Anthony! Don't betray me."

"Betray you, Althea!" he replied in astonishment.

"There may be no need," she explained hurriedly. "The power may come back, as you said, and—if so—why need he know about—this?"

"It is scarcely a question of betraying you, Althea," said Anthony dryly. "We have the children to think of. If they have come to harm there can be no entertainment at 'The Keep' to-morrow. Dracott ought to be prepared for that contingency."

"I suppose so," said Althea wearily.

"I will find out if there is any news of them, and then I shall start at once. Naturally I should say nothing to Dracott to which you could object. Meanwhile you had better go and rest. You are worrying yourself—I hope unduly—but you will look worn out if you don't take care."

Althea put her hand to her head in a confused way.

"I know. But I can't help fearing defeat."

"Don't think about it. There may be a perfectly simple reason why we could not get any answer through just now. It was always rare for a psychic to be able to read any aspect affecting herself. Personal investigations were usually forbidden. And this affair concerns our own flesh and blood."

"Yes," said Althea wistfully. "Of course we are both too anxious about the children to have clear minds."

"That may be it," returned Anthony. "Emotional vibrations certainly hinder the current of divine inspiration. In this case it seems that we can do nothing."

"Nothing!" Althea echoed sadly as he left her.

Solitary in the little chamber, the sense of separation from her higher faculties made Althea realise how im-

potent were the strivings of her unaided lower self. Alone with her recent defeat, the thought of all it might mean fairly overwhelmed her. She could hear already the cries that would ring at her name: "Charlatan! Trickster! Another of those fortune-tellers who has been found out." She felt already the scorn that would be heaped upon her. It was intolerable!

She went to the window, wringing her hands. Dusk was creeping on. A wind had sprung up which had loosened some of the trails of ivy round the house and set them flapping and rocking dismally. Some of them dashed sharply on the pane, against which Althea, grateful for its coolness, piteously leaned her hot, throbbing head. She felt dizzy. All her own future seemed rocking in the general balance of things.

Presently she went down into the firelit hall, which was untenanted. She sank into a big grandfather's chair by the hearth, in which her slight form was almost hidden. There she remained shut in with her own thoughts. An hour passed. She took no heed of the sounds of an arrival. A lumbering fly had crunched the gravel with its wheels, and deposited a fresh visitor at Chaunterell. Doors opened and shut, feet passed to and fro, then the new-comer was ushered in.

The butler sent a sudden illumination through the hall by turning on the electric light. Althea started forward in her chair. The stranger advanced impetuously. It was O'Neill.

In a moment the grasp of his hand soothed and comforted her. She clung to it, scarcely knowing that she did so. He seemed a bulwark of defence against the world whose contemptuous verdict she dreaded.

"You are looking tired," he said gently. "I trust all is well with you."

The words recalled her.

"Thank you, all is *not* well, I am sorry to say. Our little people—my sisters' two children—have been playing truant all day, and their disappearance has given us a great deal of anxiety."

"But surely you have been able to throw some light on it," he said. "My gipsy mother would have looked in a pool of water or a sheet of glass—anything that could be utilised as a mirror of destiny."

"I don't see things in that way," faltered Althea.

"No, you are more truly clairvoyant. You have the sight that sees through space."

"Not always," she answered with a sudden impulse to frankness. "This time I have not been able."

"Are you losing your gift?" he cried. "Well, I suppose I must not say that I should be glad if that were so. But remember—whatever else fails you, I am at your service as long as I am free to serve you."

"What does that mean, my friend—that you are a martyr to some blighted Cause and may be required to sacrifice your freedom?"

"I am a pioneer," he answered gravely. "And to me the sacrifice of personal freedom seems a small thing if it be repaid with the priceless boon of universal freedom."

Althea smiled.

"You are pleased to be heroic. And I cannot say that I quite understand you. But then I am only a commonplace person with commonplace aims—except for my gift, and that I hope will not fail me."

"Do not let it stand between us too long, I pray you," said O'Neill gravely. "Lest a Power that we cannot control should separate us."

Althea shrugged.

"I am altogether in the dark. You must forgive my stupidity, but I cannot see that any power need spoil our friendship if we do not permit it."

She spoke quietly, almost indifferently, but her eyes were luminous, and the man gazed at her with the light of an immense passion in his own. He looked very forceful and out of the common. Even his brown, waving hair was virile; the full throat beneath his strong, uplifted chin, his burning eyes—all gave him an air of distinction. He wore a dark suit of tweeds. The butler had relieved him of the oddly shaped cloak he had worn hanging back from his shoulders, and the crushed Austrian hat he carried. He and Althea were alone. Althea apologised for Lady Ethel's absence, and explained that she would be back soon.

A pair of footmen carrying silver trays broke in upon them. They watched without speaking the men arrange the tea-things—the hissing kettle, and the plates of hot cake upon their tripods by the fire. Then there came a yapping from somewhere in the background, and the pampered dachshunds waddled in, followed by the two Polperrick girls and Mrs. Lascene-Babington, who had come from a fruitless quest, splashed and tired. Althea introduced O'Neill, and conversation became general.

Soon afterwards, wheels and hoofs sounded on the gravel outside, and as the hall door opened Lady Ethel's deep musical voice and Everil's and Molly's high-pitched tones were heard.

A servant's voice replied in a subdued manner. It was broken by a distressed exclamation from Lady Ethel. The three came in together—Lady Ethel sadly perturbed, Everil decidedly cross, Molly apparently unruffled, but looking extraordinarily lovely and sparkling.

Lady Ethel was vexed at their own lateness of return.

"One of the horses cast a shoe," she explained, "and we were late in starting from Isleworth. Oh! Mr. O'Neill, I quite forgot you were coming by this train, or I should have sent a trap to meet you. But we have been so troubled."

Just then the wide doors swung open again and Mr. Moggs came up the hall with Mr. Lascene. Johnson's gait was shambling. Even Horace had lost his spruce look. He sat down by his wife and told her what they had been doing.

"But we've heard nothing of the brats," he finished. "Old Bloxam, the butcher, hadn't seen 'em. Said his boy who'd called here came in about noon and went off on a fresh round, but didn't mention the kids. Good old chap, Bloxam! Talked like a father himself—eh, Moggs?"

But Mr. Moggs was past comment. Lady Ethel gave him a cup of hot tea, and as he drank, his bloodshot gaze went aimlessly round the hall until it met his wife's. She winced before his look.

The strain became acute. Other searchers who had been out, dropped in, grim with disappointment. Dracott came over, flushed and eager to help, from 'The Keep,' bringing Anthony back with him. Everybody discussed plans of action, more or less apprehensively. Horace Lascene was telling Lady Ethel that he had already

lodged information at the County Police station, and telegraphed for detectives, when suddenly there came an unusual amount of noise from the outer hall—much scuffling and banging mingled with the unwonted sound of servants in excited talk and pierced by shrill voices.

Small men have a certain pull over big ones on some occasions. Horace was flinging wide the doors before Mr. Moggs got half-way across the hall.

"You reprobates! Look here, Moggs."

"I want my tea," said Nan, boldly advancing.

Cabby was politely pushing forward a modest but very stout, rubicund gentleman with a stubbly beard, whose attention was divided between mopping the back of his neck and pulling off his leather driving gloves.

"Aunt Ethel, I thought you'd like to see Mr. Tester. He gave us a lift from Holly Tree Farm. We had dinner there to-day."

"An' we had tripe—and duffy pudden' wi' a sup o' treacle to 't," echoed Nan, obviously mimicking someone. "I liked Mrs. Tester, she was very kind—but I'd like my tea now, please."

Mr. Tester twirled his hat and sought inspiration from the inside of the crown.

"M' lady, Mr. 'Orace, ladies and gennelmen—what 'appened was this way: I seed that harum-scarum boy o' Bloxam's, driving th' lady and gennelman straight to kingdom come, as you might say. And thinking o' my own little uns, and what I'd ha' wished a neighbour to do in like case, I stopped 'em, and gave Tom Cheek a bit of a rating—though I'm sorry I spoke 'ard, for I hear he's been picked up since wi' a smashed collar-bone. But I'd have brought li'l' master and miss back sooner

if t' missus hadn't thought best to keep 'em for a bite of dinner 'long of we. An' then—blow my boots! if Snowdrop—that's our best Alderney—didn't give us a rare turn-up wi' calvin' afore her toime and terr'ble bad she do be."

Mr. Tester was quite unprepared for the volume of appreciation which greeted him. Lady Ethel was graciousness incarnate; Mr. Moggs nearly shook his hand off, and inquired pressingly for the fullest details of Snowdrop. Horace produced a bumper of port, which Mr. Tester swallowed at a gulp.

"Thanky, sir, your good 'ealth, m' lady, and yours, Mr. 'Orace. 'Ere's likewise to th' li'l' gennelman who's a chip o' th' old block, of which there ain't a sounder in Great Britain."

Everil Lascene contrived to make her voice heard.

"Almeric! To your room, sir, this instant."

The boy grew scarlet, and stiffened till there seemed to be a ramrod down his small back. He turned slowly and rigidly, casting an imploring glance at his Aunt Ethel, but she chose to take no notice of his humiliation. This cut him to the heart, and he was going sorrowfully away when Horace Lascene, catching the drift of affairs, called out: "Oh! Come now, Ev'ril—not this time, please. It won't happen again, I'll wager."

Everil was adamant. But Nan, who had been making a triumphal progress on her own account, sprang from the arms of her friend Kukuya and flung herself before her cousin.

"Cabby's no worser boy than me," she announced. "If he's going to be punished, so'm I. But I think Mr. Tester ought to be too, 'cos he said he'd see us through."



Mr. Tester, whose burly form was balanced to a nicety on the extreme edge of a chair, and who was awkwardly accepting cake which he did not want, welcomed the diversion. He chuckled sheepishly, and got upon his feet.

"I reckon, ladies and gennelmen, if I may make so bold as to speak, that this 'ere's a case for clemency. An' bein' a good Conservative meself, and a Primrose Leaguer, which I'm proud to state, I'm one that votes for the 'olding together of the Empire, and the advocatin' of a sound policy——" Mr. Tester's tones waxed louder. "An Imperialist policy, ladies and gennelmen! in every grade and every part of the country, extendin' of the olive branch to our rebellious sons—'specially when we've got 'em under our thumb, so to speak. Which being so, all I can say is I don't like to see things made too 'ard for anyone. The li'l lady's quite right—I did promise to see 'em through, and I should wish to cast my vote on the side of clemency. M' lady, Mr. 'Orace, ladies and gennelmen, we all see the advantage of clemency at times, whatever our personal feelings with regard to the upholding of law and order may 'appen to be. Not meaning any offence, m' lady, but if I might suggest, the question could be settled by the usual show of hands; if those in favour of a policy of prudent and not too 'arsh legislation, would kindly put up for Master Cabby."

So saying he stoutly set the example.

"Bravo, Tester!" cried Horace Lascene. "Up we go!"

And the show of hands carried the vote.

But Althea could not forget that, for the first time, her psychic power had that day failed her utterly.

## CHAPTER XXI

It was a fine night, unusually mild for February ; Dracott Keep stood outlined in coloured lights. The avenue was hung with Chinese lanterns ; the terrace, the windows looking upon it and the entrance to the music-room were a blaze of lamps. In the large music-room itself every available foot of space had been utilised. Crowds had assembled. The names of the Oracle and Ladislav O'Neill were an immense draw. Expectation was keen.

Althea, waiting at the back of the stage, watched the scene from a loop-hole in the curtains. The assemblage looked sombre because of the black dresses of the women, but there were diamonds in plenty, and lights shone through masses of hot-house blooms and greenery. Most of the country houses round had brought parties. That from Chaunterell Towers took up a big block. Molly, the most noticeable feature of it, was looking delightfully attractive with white flowers on her breast, and a big white posy from the greenhouse at Isleworth in her hand. Lord Isleworth was just behind her, leaning over her shoulder and murmuring words which deepened the flush in Molly's cheeks. Lady Carwardine was flashing smiles on simple Mr. Moggs, whom she evidently bewildered by her talk. A few rows lower, were Mrs. Raine and Sylvia, with Mr. and Mrs. Ancaster Ellis, who were staying with them at "The Cot," their little country house.

When the turn for the Oracle came, Althea, at a sign from her brother, took her seat in the centre of the stage. He lighted the brazier full of herbs at her feet. The fumes dizzied her, but that was all. They did not open the door of her supernormal consciousness. She remained painfully sensible of everything that was going on around her, the continuous stir on the other side of the curtain and Anthony's almost noiseless movements close at hand. She heard O'Neill cross the stage from the wings to take his place at the organ, on which he was to play a voluntary prelude to the performance.

Now the organ pealed out in a kind of Gregorian chant. The curtain rose. Never had Althea's appearance evoked greater enthusiasm. She sat almost as motionless as though she had been carved in stone; and the classic figure showing the curve of her bosom beneath the Greek robes, the statuesque head, the loosely knotted fair hair, pale in comparison with the fillet of gold that confined it—all combined to impress the spectators. Their admiration found vent in applause, which was only drowned by O'Neill's swelling chords.

Presently the organ notes died down to a low, pathetic strain; the stop was the *vox humana*, and it sounded very like a human voice. To Althea, the singer's own voice spoke through it, calling upon her to be worthy of her noblest self. But it called in vain.

Then Anthony spoke to her—addressing her as “Maiden Priestess of a long past age.”

Althea thrilled at the reverence in his tone. Natural gifts of speech and imagery came to her assistance; she gave an harangue strikingly similar to her noted trance orations. O'Neill's musical accompaniment was so low

that every word she uttered rose distinctly above it. Blending intimately with each variation of her voice and method, it supplied in a measure the spiritual inspiration that was lacking. This was only emotional force, she knew, but it added impetus to her triumph.

Her address was received with rounds of applause.

Following on that, the first two or three objects handed her gave Althea opportunity for further eloquence and dramatic characterisation. In the next she scored by means of knowledge obtained through Julie Lamotte.

Now she began to take a perilous pleasure in the game, snatching at indications thrown out by people in the audience who believed her to be unconscious. Through her half-shut eyelids, veiled by their thick, pale lashes, she became by degrees fully aware of her surroundings. It was easy after all, she thought, for one who had readiness of perception to dispense with occult machinery, and to make normal faculties serve the double purpose. Despite her fears, it seemed as though this performance of the Oracle were to be as successful as any she had ever held.

Lady Carwardine had persisted in keeping her test to the last, and when the allotted time had nearly expired, she commissioned Mr. Moggs to take the object, wrapped in tissue paper, up to the platform. Before presenting it, he stood upon the steps, and delivered a small speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the owner of this little article wishes me to make a statement which she considers fair to herself as well as to the Oracle. The lady asks me to mention that she is purposely providing a test for the *bona fides* of the Oracle."

"Hear! Hear!" murmured Lord Isleworth.

"Hear! Hear!" said Dracott emphatically. Mr.

Moggs nodded approval. He looked a pillar of British rectitude.

"For my own part," he added, "I know the Oracle, and I'd lay a tanner that she wouldn't tell a lie, if she could. Besides, we've seen her proved right pretty often already. That's all, I think, I've got to say, except that the other lady—the owner of this ring—pledges her word to state at once whether the Oracle is right or not, in what she says about it; which, I take it, will be satisfactory to everybody."

Mr. Moggs passed the packet to Anthony, and made his way back, amid clapping hands, to the benches.

The Oracle, with eyes apparently closed, unfolded the tissue paper and held the ring, running the tips of her fingers round it. It was a large green stone, quaintly set with diamonds. She put it to her forehead and to her breast, as was her custom; then began in rhythmic tones, very like those in which she usually spoke on such occasions.

The history of the ring, she said, was a tragic one, and she gave it without faltering, seeming to see the places and scenes she described: an old manor house, a tapestried parlour, a secret staircase, a woman in the dress of Charles the Second's reign, a man in the costume of a Court gallant, the meeting of a faithless wife and her lover, the ring placed upon a false finger in pledge of sinful troth. Then a flight planned, intercepted, the vengeance of a wronged husband—a sword-thrust in a white bosom, a life bleeding away. A bier with dead hands crossed—the ring still showing upon that false finger amid the chanting of nuns. Now silence—darkness—the tomb.

Mr.

The Oracle's voice dropped ; she sank back in her chair, the ring fell upon her lap, and Anthony picked it up to be restored to its owner. Lord Isleworth stepped forward this time. He received the ring with a bow, but there was a mocking expression on his face which made people wonder what was coming next. The applause was long and loud. So vivid had been the Oracle's pictures, so definite her utterance, that no shadow of doubt as to her revelation seemed to have dawned upon her listeners.

This performance was the last item of the programme, and people were beginning to fidget for their wraps when a sudden lowering of the lights and the first bars of the National Anthem reminded them that they had been requested not to leave the hall till the anthem was over.

O'Neill's glorious baritone rang out in the half darkness while the Oracle's white form, like that of some presiding goddess, remained visible in the centre of the stage. To everyone present, O'Neill's solo recalled poignantly the nation's bereavement, and the ghost of a sob ran through the full-throated chorus which took up the refrain, when for the old familiar word, so dear and gracious, there came the new, untried title " God Save the King." The last notes of the anthem had scarcely died down, and the wave of feeling was yet unspent, when a voice at the front—Lord Isleworth's, in its thin but commanding accents, said :

" May I request that the lights be turned on, and the fall of the curtain delayed for a few minutes ? I have to ask the attention of the audience while I say something on behalf of Lady Carwardine as to the result of her test

of the Oracle's—powers." He made a pause before the last word which was not complimentary. "It was a test in which I believe Mr. Johnson Moggs fully concurred," Lord Isleworth went on, looking towards Mr. Moggs, who rose at once. "I think Mr. Moggs will agree with me, that it's only fair for Lady Carwardine to fulfil her pledge, and tell us whether or not the Oracle's story of the ring was a correct one."

Mr. Moggs squared his shoulders defiantly.

"Certainly, certainly. I beg her ladyship's pardon. The Oracle seemed to have got her pictures so pat that I didn't suppose there was any question about 'em."

Lady Carwardine had by this time glided up the gangway and stood on the stair beside Lord Isleworth, a small but striking figure sheathed in glistening jet.

"Nor would there have been any question," she said, smiling brilliantly, "if the ring I originally intended for the test of the Oracle had been submitted, instead of the one I really gave her. The result has interested me enormously. I suppose we must conclude that the psychic currents got mixed. That would be the Sixth Sense explanation, I fancy," and she gave a contemptuous little nod at Mrs. Raine, who in her turn whispered eagerly to Mr. Ancaster Ellis.

During the pause that followed, a regular hubbub arose, in the midst of which Mr. Tester, located somewhere in the rear, and evidently considered to be the spokesman of the neighbourhood, mounted the bench where he had been sitting, and cleared his throat loudly.

"Mr. Dracott, ladies, and gennelmen, if I may speak for a good many here, we don't know nothing about sick senses. Ours is all fairly bright, praise goodness, but

we do like to see straight 'itting. If her ladyship's got anything to say, let her out wi' it, and give the other lady a chance. Us'll hear both wi' pleasure. We ain't no red Radicals 'ere. We're true blue, we be, and we don't want no palaver—we want justice—good old long-headed justice. Let 'em say their say, ladies and gennelmen. Give 'em a fair field and no favour."

Lady Carwardine joined as heartily as anyone else in the laugh that followed.

"This is not a political meeting, my good friend," said she. "But I'd like to explain why I didn't give the test I first thought of, and as the Oracle has awakened from her divine sleep, the matter may interest her."

Murmuring grew louder. Mr. Moggs clutched his smooth-shaven chin. Lord Isleworth surveyed the scene through his eye-glass. Anthony stood silent behind the Sibyl's chair. She was leaning forward, her hands pressed tightly on the arms of it, her eyes distended.

Leonard Dracott spoke to Lady Carwardine.

"May we have at once the statement you wish to make? Miss Stanmount, after her exhausting performance, is scarcely equal to prolonged strain."

"Certainly," replied Lady Carwardine. "My statement is very simple. I had intended to test the Oracle's well-known divining powers with an old ring taken under peculiar circumstances from the tomb of an ancestress of mine. You have heard the story. It would have been perfectly correct if I had happened to give up *that* ring. But I did not. The ring I gave had no particular story at all. It was made at Colombo two or three years ago from stones I bought at one of the native shops there. But their colour and the setting were copied from the



original old ring—which is why I substituted the one for the other.”

“Then,” said Dracott hotly, “the exchange of the ring was a planned trick?”

“Not at all,” said Lady Carwardine blandly. “It was arranged to make the test more interesting. I can tell you exactly why I did it. My maid was one of the few people who knew the story of the first ring. A day or two ago I heard that she had detailed it to a visitor whom she had been receiving—Miss Stanmount’s maid. I make no accusations against my maid nor Miss Stanmount’s maid, nor against Miss Stanmount herself. I merely decided to alter my plan, and I said that I would let you know the truth about the result, so there it is. You must draw your own conclusions.”

There was a disapproving silence. Then someone in the audience rose to speak. It was Mr. Ancaster Ellis, and his intervention was certainly magnanimous. He only wished to observe, he said, what everyone acquainted with psychic laws would readily understand, that the pictures connected with the ring originally intended for the test having been imprinted on invisible space, they might, by reason of the changing of the rings and the consequent confusion of magnetic currents, have been seen and given in perfect good faith by the psychic.

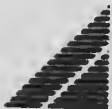
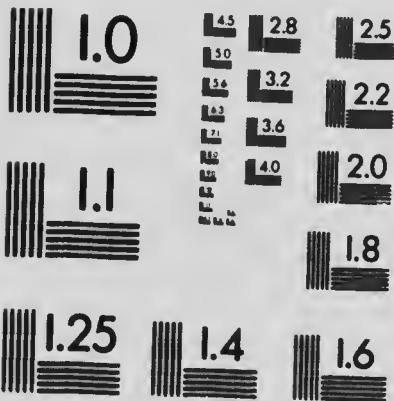
Lady Carwardine smiled sarcastically.

“Thank you very much. No doubt, Miss Stanmount’s unfortunate error can easily be explained. At all events it would be charitable to suppose that it must have been due to a confusion of magnetic currents. Personally, I don’t pretend to know anything about such highly mysterious agencies, but the result has justified my idea



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that it would be more interesting—as a test—if I changed the rings.”

She moved back to her seat, still smiling disagreeably. The curtain went down, and a general buzz of talk immediately began. The bulk of the audience began to take their departure, but they seemed only half-satisfied. Mr. Ancaster Ellis's well-meant effort had done very little to save the situation for the Oracle, for few of the people had any idea of what was implied by magnetic currents. They understood, however, that a severe reflection had been cast upon the celebrated psychic, and in consequence some of the shrewder farmers and rustics of Fordshire considered that they ought to get their money back. They would have asked for it if they had been anywhere but in one of the big houses. But this somewhat awed them, and they were content with grumbling huskily among themselves as they went down the room.

Leonard Dracott had arranged to entertain his friends and the county magnates at supper. A huge oaken door leading through the old keep to the great dining-room had been thrown open, and as soon as the place was clear of the general public, he was to escort his own party thither. First, however, he was bent on speaking to Althea, and for this purpose he elbowed his way uncompromisingly through his guests. They were all discussing the Oracle's failure; some dubiously confessing that their faith in her was shaken, while others pronounced her a fraud as boldly as they dared. Lady Ethel and most of her contingent from Chaunterell Towers looked frankly uncomfortable. But Lady Carwardine declared herself vastly amused at all the dis-

turbance. The non-critical attitude she assumed was galling to Leonard. He himself cast only a curt word here and there, for, as he caught the comments passing from side to side, he found it difficult to be courteous. In his haste and indignation he never even noticed Sylvia Raine, who stood silent in her filmy black dress, with a wreath of snowdrops in her hair. She looked like a wistful image of spring in mourning. The girl paled as he passed her, sprang up the steps to the stage, and disappeared behind the curtains.

The stage itself was vacant except for O'Neill, leaning against the organ, and Anthony, who, with sedulous care, was sifting the perfumed ashes from the brazier. The exact manner in which he lifted tiny lumps of aromatic gum that had not been burnt, from the refuse, was like that of an automaton performing a task.

Dracott went straight to the green-room behind the stage, where Althea was sitting huddled on a low chair. She looked dazed, and appeared to be listening blankly to Julie, who was pouring forth a torrent of indignant French.

"May your maid wait outside for a minute?" said Dracott. "I want to speak to you, if you will let me."

Althea bent her head mechanically, and Julie left the room. Dracott stooped and touched Althea's hand. She looked up at him.

"I have failed!" she said despondently.

"No, no," he exclaimed. "You read the true pictures that belonged to the old ring which Lady Carwardine at first had in mind to offer you. The modern ring, substituted to bewilder your faculties, has no history. Therefore no pictures of it appeared to you. It is all

perfectly simple. Everyone ought to understand what happened."

Althea smiled wanly. It seemed strange—that the scoffer of so short a time ago should dispose of the difficulty thus.

"But even if it were not so," proceeded Leonard. "If you had failed ignominiously, would it matter much that you had once been wrong, when so many times you have been proved right? It was a mere accident."

"A mere accident!" repeated Althea, with averted head.

"Lady Carwardine played a most unfair trick," he went on. "I can never forgive her for it, nor for her malicious insinuations."

Althea turned piteous eyes upon him.

"Do you believe them?" she asked.

"Believe them! Believe that you are a cheat—that you employ spies! If a man had said such things, I should know how to give him the lie. As it is, there is only one way in which I can show the world my absolute faith in you. Althea! I've come to ask you to give me the right to defend you."

She did not seem to understand him.

"Give me the right!" he cried. "Tell me that I may have the right."

"The right!" she repeated dully. "What right?"

"Don't you see? No one would dare in my house to speak evil of my promised wife."

Althea turned her face away again. He knelt beside her, lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"My adored one!" he said. "I won't worry you. Only let me have the joy and privilege of serving you."

Althea glanced at him wildly. Words trembled on her lips, but they died away. Dracott took the faint murmur for assent.

"I want to lead you out before them all," he whispered, "and put you in your rightful place. My face will show how proud and happy I am."

"Oh, no, no, you mustn't!" she cried. "Indeed—indeed—I cannot—*yet*."

"Very well," he replied, rising. "I will say nothing till you give me permission. But my face will tell its tale."

At that moment there was a sound at the door and Anthony entered.

"Dracott, Lady Ethel sends you a message that they are all waiting supper for you."

Dracott straightened himself.

"Oh! confound them. Yes, yes, of course I must go." He looked from Anthony to Althea, confusedly pulling his moustache. "Miss Stanmount, I wish I could take you along. What would you prefer to do? Shall I send Horace Lascene to bring you? I'll keep the seat on my left for you."

"No, no," pleaded Althea. "I couldn't eat anything. Let me stay here."

"Don't do that. I can't bear you to be alone." Dracott was visibly discomposed. "At least let me send you some champagne?"

"My sister is tired," put in Anthony. "I think she had better keep quiet for the present. Perhaps you can suggest a room where she might rest."

"There's the yellow drawing-room. I will join you there, Miss Stanmount, as soon as I can get away, and

then perhaps you will let me take you to have some supper. You must—you *must* take care of yourself."

Althea nodded silently, and Dracott left the brother and sister alone. There was painful constraint in Anthony's manner as he asked Althea if he could do anything for her. She shivered and twisted her fingers tightly together.

"No. Please don't trouble about me. This affair is all terribly unfortunate, of course, but there's no use in talking about it, Anthony—at any rate, now. Hadn't you better go and take somebody in to supper? I dare say no one will hold you responsible for my failure. You might send Julie to me, if you see her."

And without a word, Anthony left the room.

But before Julie could reappear, the door opened to admit O'Neill.

Althea noticed that he was crumpling a pink telegraph paper in his hand.

"I want to speak to you alone for a few minutes," he said abruptly. "There is a conservatory where we are less likely to be interrupted than we are here. Will you come with me?" He seemed full of some strong half-suppressed excitement. Taking her consent for granted, he hurried her along the corridor and through the yellow drawing-room into a conservatory, in which were only two or three lights. This part of the house was quite deserted, but an echo of voices came from the room beyond.

The conservatory was furnished with rugs and basket chairs, and had a great central bed of palms and creepers with a few odorous eucalyptus plants. Behind this O'Neill stopped and stood facing Althea, his brown face



keenly alert, the eyes very bright, the mouth firm but intensely tender. Suddenly, he threw out his arms and crushed her against his breast.

"I am not going to condole with you, my heart's treasure, nor even tell you that I am sorry you failed—because I know the reason of your failure and I know it is best for us both that you should fail."

Althea gave a gasping cry. He held her closer—closer; she felt his passionate breath upon her face.

"I knew that at last the hour would come when Fate herself would give you to me. Beloved! I claim my own."

To Althea it seemed as though the dream-world that she knew in sleep had opened to her and was full of peace. She leaned her head against his heart, her face uplifted for his kiss. Time became non-existent. Their two souls were as one.

Ladislav released her with yearning reluctance.

Althea's face had the light of Paradise, but it faded as he spoke.

"Beloved! We have been in heaven. But duty calls. I came to tell you news that is momentous. Circumstances in my life have arisen which compel us both to an immediate decision. It is a crisis in my life, Althea."

"A crisis in your life!" she repeated. "What is it? I know nothing of your life."

"You know that I am not merely a singer. There is more in my life—a power to which I must yield implicit obedience. That power has just now called upon me to place myself at its disposal."

"But how—*what* calls you?"

He displayed the crushed pink telegram, which was in cipher.

"This was brought to me here. I have no choice but to leave for London to-night."

"No choice!" she repeated vexedly. "But why?"

"That I can't explain yet. There is only one condition under which I could evade the orders I have received."

"And what is that?"

"It depends upon you. Upon whether you decide to cast in your lot with mine; to come with me and proclaim yourself my promised wife; to give me your whole self—in mind as well as heart—to swear that my people shall be your people, my faith your faith, my masters your masters."

"But this is monstrous!" exclaimed Althea. "How can I submit myself to any masters?"

"Beloved! Have we not both acknowledged one master—Love?"

Her face softened. "But that is not what you mean. I love you, Ladislav, but you ask too great a sacrifice of me."

"Dearest! Is it indeed a sacrifice that I ask? A sacrifice for you to be mine as I am yours—in all entirety? For you—the goddess of my dreams—to become as you were of old, my priestess of all that is noble, my glory my inspiration? If so, sweetheart, may it not be well that you should regain through sacrificial love the diviner self who is forsaking you because you put her to ignoble purposes?"

Althea winced.

"But what is it that you want of me? Tell me in plain words the mystery at the back of your life."

"I am not at liberty to do so yet. When you are my wife you will understand, and you will be my daily counsellor. Your highest powers will be devoted to the cause that I serve—the enfranchisement of the oppressed."

"Then, it is as I supposed. You belong to some secret society for giving independence to Hungary, or Home Rule to Ireland or Palestine back to the Jews. I have heard all about such things from Baron Heinrichfels. Perhaps he is one of your Society also?"

O'Neill did not answer.

"Is he?" Althea asked.

"Heinrichfels is one of us—to a certain extent," said O'Neill slowly.

"Does that mean that he is not compelled to obey such orders as these?"

"He is not. But that is beside the point. I am one of those members bound to obedience—to death, if need be."

Althea laughed hysterically.

"Ladislav, are you mad? One is not a slave in these days. Do explain yourself."

O'Neill's face whitened. His features grew tense.

"I have told you all I can," he answered. "I am summoned for a duty which may be near or far—safe or dangerous. I know no more than you what the duty is, except that it is of a nature on which only unmarried men of the first section of my society are employed; and that it will in all probability involve our separation. I have liberty to evade it on one condition only."

"Well?"

"A member on the eve of marriage may, if he chooses, renounce the severer duties and retire into the secondary section. This is one of the rules of the organisation.

But for this, the woman who is prepared to join her lot to his must appear with him before our committee and there make a profession of allegiance and co-operation in the aims of the Society. In this she incurs no further liability than that run by such outside members as the Heinrichfels, for instance."

Althea drew a long breath, but she made no answer.

O'Neill continued: "It is necessary for the couple to go through a binding form of betrothal, which must be followed, as soon as legal formalities allow, by the civil marriage." Here his voice broke. He took her in his arms again. "Oh! beloved, if you love me, trust yourself to me. Come with me to-night. We shall be in London at dawn. Your brother shall go with us, if he will. You and he can go straight to your flat. Then at noon, I'll take you before the committee. It will be no ordeal, I assure you, dearest. And after that there is only the question of a licence and our immediate marriage. To-morrow night we may be on our way to my own land. Then, for a week at least, we shall be free to think only of each other. We will live the life of Nature near the forest that I know of on the great plain of the Poustas and all earth shall breathe for us of love. Come, Althea, come."

His arms tightened round her. She swayed under the spell of his influence. Then, in a flash, she saw the world beckoning—the world, whose favour she had so nearly forfeited, but which she might yet regain. Popularity, power, riches, on the one hand! On the other, mysterious destiny luridly illumined by the wild passion of this seemingly half-mad enthusiast. It was the world!

Althea who replied.

"Ladislav! You are talking sheer folly. How can I rush into marriage like that? What would my people think? Anthony would never countenance such a plan. It would be perfectly absurd."

O'Neill grew ashen grey.

"I implore you not to consider conventional scruples," he cried. "This is the supreme moment in our lives."

"It may be, I don't know. If so, surely you can extricate yourself from your own dilemma. When you have done that, we will reconsider our position."

"Althea!"

"I mean it, Ladislav. I really cannot take all this seriously. Come and see me when Anthony and I are back in London. We can talk of marriage when you are free to do so."

Her tone maddened the man. It gave him a sense of impotency. She slipped from his arms and stood a little apart—a mere mask of a woman, and he could not pierce the mask. He sprang towards her with an instinctive desire to clasp her again in his arms—to force her to capitulation. But she drew back in a way that would brook no such venture. He poured forth incoherent pleadings, telling her they had no time to dally—that death itself might seal their separation.

Althea listened silently. She gave no sign of the conflict within her. Yet she was torn by the two selves of which she was so often conscious—the dream-woman whom this man loved, and the woman who loved this man with a passion as intense, as incomprehensible, and the modern-day worldling.

Suddenly, she felt very weak, remembering all she had gone through. She dared listen no longer, lest her

strength should fail. She put her hands before her face, moaning.

"Don't, don't, Ladislav. You have spoken so strangely to-night that I can't understand you. Do let things be as they were between us. You must see that what you have proposed is impossible, and at all events I am not fit to discuss the matter now. I have had an exhausting evening. Please allow me to pass."

But O'Neill barred her passage between the big bed of palms and an abutting stand of flowers. His arms were outstretched; his face afire.

"Althea, be brave! You will not refuse me? It may be for all time! And you only need a little strength of purpose. Be true to yourself and to me. Althea! Say you will come with me. Let me take you away."

Suddenly both became conscious that another man stood in the curtained archway leading to the drawing-room. O'Neill moved sullenly aside. Althea made a tottering step forward. She had the white, strained look of a woman who has been insulted. It was easy to misinterpret her manner.

Dracott, coming in search of her, had always disliked O'Neill, and now all his young British blood boiled. He was furiously angry. He strode forward and drew Althea's hand within his arm.

"Mr. O'Neill! this is my house, and Miss Stanmount my most honoured guest—more, I hope that before long she will be its mistress. I must ask you to remove your presence, and to trouble this lady no further. My servants shall have orders to find you a conveyance."

O'Neill bowed.

"I thank you. My arrangements are made, and my

departure has only been delayed in order that Miss Stanmount might have opportunity to make an important—an irrevocable—decision.”

“Miss Stanmount’s decision can have needed no consideration,” put in Dracott cuttingly.

“That was for Miss Stanmount to inform me. I have now the honour to wish her good-bye.”

O’Neill bowed again, and turning, went swiftly out of the conservatory and through the long yellow drawing-room. As its distant doors opened and closed upon him there sounded the laughter of gay voices; further yet, the muffled roll of carriages.

But a deep sob struggled to Althea’s lips. She realised that her decision was indeed irrevocable.

## CHAPTER XXII

THE Moggs family went off by a ten o' 'ock train the next day, and their departure partially relieved the strain of the Chaunterell house-party; a strain vaguely felt, yet evident, though everyone tried to ignore it.

Althea was a prey to torturing emotions. Her grief at having severed herself from the man she loved was embittered by anger against him for having so melodramatically brought matters to a crisis. She was angry with Fate for placing her in such a position, and angry with Leonard Dracott for having pressed his own advantage.

"When can I see you?" Leonard had whispered the previous night when they parted. "You belong to me now, Althea. You won't grudge me my right?"

"I will see you soon," she had answered. "But you must give me time to think."

As yet no one suspected that Dracott had made her an offer of marriage, but Althea felt disagreeably certain that he would appear at the Towers that afternoon. In any ordinary emergency she would have applied for advice to Anthony, but just now she and Anthony were disposed to avoid each other. Althea knew that her brother's faith in her had received a severe shock, but she was too busily occupied in trying to find a way out of the immediate tangle which faced her to think very much of how the matter concerned Anthony.



Thus it happened that about three o'clock that afternoon Althea left the house, unobserved, for a solitary stroll in the park.

The soft greyness of the mild February day appealed to her, and her own mood softened beneath its balmy influence. There was a dreamy stillness in the air—a kind of mystic quietude. In the midst of Althea's pain and self-absorption she could yet feel the kindly coming of the spring, of rising sap and budding branch. The many glades and paths in the park stretched before her, broad and tempting. Tinted mosses were springing up round the roots of the trees and ambitious trails of ivy tipped with bright shoots of green were busily climbing the boles of beech and elm and gnarled oak. Their dead leaves had all been carried away for garden mould and the bare earth beneath was a rich brown and smelt pungently ripe and sweet.

There had been rain before the dawn, and in places the grass was still wet. Rainbow ribbons of moisture sparkled on the bigger blades, Althea had to pick her way among them, for now and then there came a soft, squashy sound from underneath. Here and there, were patches of radiant young green where wood sorrel lifted its snowy, rose-veined cups, fit for fairies to drink from; and dainty celandine pushed golden crowns through the rich, loamy soil. There, too, were thick clumps and spreading patches of violet leaves scattered with faint purple flecks for those who cared to search among them.

The sky was heavy with smoke-coloured clouds, but they showed light at the edges, and one big bank in the south-west was glowing with a dull gold radiance, for somewhere behind it the sun was shining. Althea paused

to gather a cluster of delicate drooping sprays of catkin that had brushed against her hat. All about her, pencilled twigs hung against the soft grey of the sky and slim, sharply outlined buds spoke the promise of spring. The birds were all silent, however, and to Althea it seemed that the whole air was full of an expectant hush.

By and by she noticed that she had struck the east avenue—the one by which Leonard Dracott would probably come. She did not want to meet him a moment sooner than was necessary, so she turned away from the carriage road into one of the numerous grassy alleys with which the park was intersected. Walking quickly, wrapped in her confused thoughts, she was soon out of sight of the drive, and presently found herself in an unfrequented part of the park. Here the timber was plentiful, and on every side of her stretched vistas of dusky, roughened tree boles converging to a small open space where several grass rides met.

Althea was proceeding down one of the broad alleys to this point when a feeling suddenly came over her that she was not alone.

She hesitated and gazed around her. A purplish mist seemed rising everywhere, making the innumerable black and grey trunks of the leafless trees look like gaunt, grim ghosts of themselves, marching solemnly through the strange purple twilight. Althea felt a curious sense of giddiness. She leaned forward and stared intently before her. So confident did she feel that she was not alone, that she was scarcely surprised when in the little clear space ahead she beheld a figure which she knew at once. Those close-fitting garments, that dark, turbaned head, and the peculiarly sinuous

outlines could only belong to Hanwhat Singh. But that it should be Hanwhat Singh, puzzled Althea. For a moment she was considerably taken aback. What purpose brought him, she wondered. Was he staying at Mrs. Raine's? And if so, why should he come here alone?—for none of the Lascenes, Althea thought, could possibly know him. But Hanwhat Singh was so unlike other people that anything might be expected of him, even that he should present himself, an unbidden guest, at Chaunterell. However, he should be made welcome. Althea hurried forward, holding out both hands.

"How charming of you to come! But how did you find your way here? You really are a most wonderful person——" She stopped short, overwhelmed by a striking majesty in the man of which she had never before been conscious.

Hanwhat Singh's large, soft eyes shone upon her in profound pity. He raised one hand.

"My child! Come no nearer." His voice was low and gentle as ever, but to the listener it had a new quality—a music not of this sphere.

Althea obeyed. She could not have stepped nearer had she wished, for her feet were rooted to the ground as though an invisible wall held her back. Her gaze fixed itself glassily upon him, nevertheless her intelligence remained keenly alert.

"Come no nearer," he repeated, "for that which has been given me to say to you is not from the man you know, but from a Source of which I am the channel, and the magnetism now radiating through me might be more than you could bear."

Althea mutely bowed her head. There had come

upon her something of the other-world consciousness which she dimly remembered.

"At this crisis of your destiny—more momentous in its eternal issues than you by any means understand," continued Hanwhat Singh, "I am permitted to give you a few words of warning and counsel. For it is not the Divine Will that any soul should perish, much less one who has made more than ordinary progress upon the spiritual path. By that progress in past lives you have earned the right to special guidance, though, alas! in the present your feet have wandered far from the Temple of Truth."

These words struck home. Althea lifted her eyes faintly protesting.

"Do not judge me too hardly," she murmured.

"My child, I am not here to judge you," said the clear, compassionate voice. "I am here to point out the danger in which you stand. A high gift was yours but you have debased it to unworthy uses. I mean the almost conscious touch you have experienced with that divine part of you whence all your true inspirations come—the immortal you, figured by the priestess Cleino."

"Cleino!" exclaimed Althea. "Then I was—I am Cleino?"

"You once were Cleino in the flesh, as you are, and ever will be, that which was Cleino in the spirit—the immortal self, ever living, which has neither personality nor name. Cleino represents the highest point of advancement to which your immortal individuality has ever attained. Cleino is therefore one with your mortal personality of to-day. But she is superior to it, for in each of us are two beings—the sinless, ever-existent ego, and the lower, fleshly presentment, made up of tendencies

pertaining to humanity. As we live—for good or evil—so we nourish or dwarf the spirit, and so we fashion the earthly garments we doom ourselves to wear. This is the mystery of the Eternal Self."

Althea listened in awed silence.

"You have made communion with your spiritual self increasingly difficult," Hanwhat Singh went on. "Were you to continue in your present course, the day would come when the power of enjoying that communion would be lost to you."

Althea lifted her arms with an exceeding bitter cry.

"It has come already, and through my own fault. I have been false to my ideals and false to my higher self. What is to be done?"

"Be true at any cost," he answered simply. "There are two broad rules for the discernment of truth, the same that were taught long ago by the Master in Galilee. Love is the first and greatest commandment; and the second is like unto it, for by Him Whose love upholds the universe, heartlessness is counted the unpardonable sin. And yet you would have injured another—a fellow-woman whose understanding of love is perhaps nobler than your own. In the fore-ordained union of man and woman lies the secret of the soul's evolution. Dare you, then, deprive any soul of its legitimate means of growth? As you deal with others, so shall justice require the same of you."

Althea looked up questioningly.

"I do not want to cause pain, yet how can I help it?" she said. "I have thought of telling Leonard Dracott the truth, but he will suffer."

"Love and pain are the soul's educators; suffering,

the ladder by which it climbs. The pinpricks of suffering involved in a break with you, however, cannot be compared with the pain which separation from his soul's mate would ultimately bring to Leonard Dracott. In the severance of twin souls and in their struggles to regain their fore-ordained unity lies the deepest, most destructive suffering. This pair has not deserved that pain, and were it unjustly inflicted upon them, the great Law of Readjustment must necessarily exact full reparation of the injustice. My child! do you place yourself in opposition to that law?"

Althea shrank, abashed.

"Help me," she said humbly, "for I, too, suffer. I have lost Ladislav. And he is *my* fore-ordained mate. I know it by my love for him. Oh! if love be the greatest commandment, I desire to follow it."

"To death?" said Hanwhat Singh solemnly. His words seemed an echo of those O'Neill had spoken.

"I hope I'm not a coward, but surely the time has gone by for the block or the martyr's stake?" she said wonderingly.

Hanwhat Singh shook his head gravely.

"Tragedy walks, masked, through all ages, redressing the balance where God's scales have dipped. As Cleo you allowed your lover's life to be sacrificed to your ambition. The payment for that debt must be exacted."

"I don't mind anything that gives me back Ladislav," cried Althea. "Tell me how to win him again. It is not too late—is it?"

"These are questions which I cannot answer. I may not advise you in those details of your life in which you are capable of judging for yourself. That would be

waste of the power at command, and waste is not permitted to servants of the Great Law. But remember that the power of the spoken word is incalculable. If you have deliberately sent from you the man you love, you have in so doing created a force strong in proportion with the purpose that launched it. You may be compelled to abide by its results until the effect has been duly worked out."

"Oh! why does destiny seem so inexorable?" cried Althea.

"Because man is in the infant stage. He has not yet learned to discern truth. But you, whose inward sight was keen, have wilfully allowed yourself to be blind. It was thus your gift of inspiration failed, for it pertains to the purer part of you, and can only be employed upon those higher levels which are the spirit's natural home."

Althea, overwhelmed, was silent.

"Now, before I go, I must show you that there is other work for you to do."

As Hanwhat Singh spoke curious gauzy curtains of a pale greenish-grey seemed to rise before Althea. They resembled the folds of gauze that creep down and rise up in a transformation scene. Gradually they became denser, obscuring the tree boles and everything within sight, till they hung like filmy drapery between her and her surroundings. Presently a breath like a summer wind passed over them. They fluttered rhythmically for a moment or two, then softly parted, and one by one, pictures appeared slowly between them—living pictures that stamped themselves upon Althea's brain, placing beyond all doubt that which she had vaguely suspected.

"Oh! I understand—I understand!" she cried,

when at length the gauze had finally cleared and she stood once more, face to face, with Hanwhat Singh. "But my sister shall be saved. I'll take the first train to town."

He checked her.

"You have another claim to consider: your first duty is towards the man now waiting your decision."

"But if I delay," Althea urged, "I may be too late."

"I do not think so. Even those who control the higher levels of life are compelled to await the due ripening of human conditions. It may be necessary that your sister should taste the fruit of her folly."

"But I must not let her rush on to destruction! You do not advise that?"

"I advise you to make plain your own path. Then to seize the moment for action, when it comes—as it will. Now I must leave you."

"Oh! don't desert me," exclaimed Althea.

But Hanwhat Singh's hands were already lifted as though in benediction. The purple mists rose round his feet till Althea saw no more of him, but the calm, benignant face and the shining eyes. They, too, vanished, and she was alone.

Slowly she drew herself together and a shiver went through her frame, like that which ushers back life to one whose consciousness has been for a time suspended. Her limbs tingled. Her head felt light and giddy. She gazed bewilderedly around. She saw the quiet grassy spaces, the glades of the park, the brown boles of the trees. She peered this way and that, but the spaces were void.

Then she knew that something wonderful had happened to her—whether in the body, or out of the body, she could not tell.



## CHAPTER XXIII

IN Mr. Moggs's big house in De Vaux Square, the early dinner below stairs had just been finished. Serann was clearing the table in the servants' hall with a dragging step. Serann had a shrewd suspicion that there were incomprehensible "goings-on" in the household. The upper maids were obviously excited, and though the cook and the butler maintained a decorous silence, they were certainly not satisfied about something. Conversation had been constrained all dinner-time, and so absorbed were the seniors in the subject which evidently occupied their minds that the observant eyes of Mrs. McCulla forgot to keep watch over Serann's movements.

Googe and Mrs. McCulla were now seated in two large leather-covered armchairs on each side of the fireplace. Googe was affecting to read the newspaper, making critical comments upon the latest news from South Africa, at which Mrs. McCulla briefly nodded from time to time, but which Serann was perfectly aware had nothing to do with their thoughts. Googe laid down the paper at last, and stretching himself with assumed ease, remarked that the South African war was a terrible thing for England.

At that moment the upper housemaid came in to collect some dinner napkins which required darning.

"'Oo cares wot England's been a-doin' of," she remarked bitterly, "when they see their missus making a

fool of 'erself, and her with as kind a 'usband as ever stepped."

Serann gaped, unnoticed.

"Your feelings do you credit, Bella," said Googe severely formal, "but we are not called upon to judge in this matter. It may be but an *ignis fatuus* after all."

"The fat'll be in the fire soon, *I* know—if that's what you mean," retorted Bella vulgarly, as she counted over the napkins.

Mrs. McCulla gave her head an admonishing shake.

"Shure ye forget yerself, Bella. But how's things gettin' on upstairs?"

"Gettin' off as fast as they can," said Bella. "Only Miss Fanshawe's not goin'. Rare upset about it she is, too."

Mrs. McCulla exchanged a meaning glance with Googe, and then she caught sight of the kitchenmaid's open mouth and round, astonished eyes.

"Serann Figgis! Why don't ye set about washin' thim dishes? Be off wid ye now, and the sooner ye do it the sooner ye're done."

Serann's jaw drew up with a click. She nearly dropped the pile of plates she carried, but recovering herself, scurried round the table, and bore off her tray in awestruck silence.

Mrs. McCulla put her finger to her lip.

"We quite feel with you, Bella, but it don't do to speak so plain. What's that bell?"

They glanced at the indicator as a sharp electric peal reverberated.

"Dressing-room, to be sure," exclaimed Bella. "It's Miss Fanshawe. I told her to touch the bell if she wanted 'elp."

"Has she not yet arranged her *postulata*?" inquired Googe.

"Meaning—as she done the packing? No, she 'as not," retorted Bella. "No more wouldn't you, if you d 'ad the set-out she's 'ad."

Mrs. McCulla tiptoed creakily across the room and closed the door behind Bella. Then she returned to the hearthrug and whispered dramatically:

"May the saints preserve the pore foot!"

"It'll take 'em all their time to do," returned Googe irreverently, as he rose from his armchair.

"Thin do it shtrike ye, Hinry——?"

"*Inter nos*," said Googe solemnly, "it do. Did I not find 'em myself, *in flagrante delicto*—that is to say, he was a-kissing of her hand."

"Was he now?" said Mrs. McCulla interestedly. "Shtill, kissin' of the hand is not *iverything*."

"It is not," answered Googe. "Society ladies take it customary, I believe. But there are various kinds of kissing, my *desideratum*." He stole an arm round Mrs. McCulla's ample waist. "There is the kiss *pari passu*—what you may call a passing salute. And the kiss *in puris naturalibus*. There's never any knowing what man means of that."

Mrs. McCulla coolingly submitted to Googe's demonstration. Then the painful subject under discussion came up again.

"Seposin', Hinry, he hasn't anny intintion of marryin' her?"

Googe's brow darkened.

"A lord's a lord and called upon to act as such. We've no ground to think different of him, though he

has played the *anguis in herba*—disturbing of our matrimonial Eden."

"Mr. Moggs 'll feel it turr'ble," quavered Mrs. McCulla.

"He will so," acknowledged Googe, "though what he see in Mrs. M. beyond looks, passes me. I never did think much of the Stanmount connection. A gentleman of Mr. Moggs's prospecks could do a deal better."

Mrs. McCulla sighed and leaned heavily on Googe's shoulder. At the sound of a light step on the stair they moved hastily apart. Bella reappeared.

"I've come for some string," she said, adding saucily: "My! 'Ow 'ot the fire's made you two."

Googe turned in a dignified way to a drawer.

"Is she reely goin', Bella?" inquired Mrs. McCulla breathlessly.

"Reely goin'? I should think so! Though Miss Fanshawe knows no more where to, than Miss Nan does—pore little soul!"

"Hinry! Can't ye say a word to the missus," exclaimed the soft-hearted Mrs. McCulla, stirred to the depths of her being at thought of the child that was to be left.

Googe stroked his nose reflectively.

"In my position as *amicus curiæ*,"—he began, but Bella, who was evidently overwrought, laughed impudently.

"You won't get the chance. She don't want you rung for—not even to 'elp with the luggage. It's my belief she's ashamed to face you, Mr. Googe. But you'd better up and take a look at her, for you won't see her after this unless it's in the divorce court." And Bella flounced off.

Mrs. McCulla made a grab at Googe's sleeve.

"Hinry! Can't ye save her? Think of the harm she's bringing on that innocent angel upstairs."

Googe frowned thoughtfully.

"Etiquette, my *desideratum*, forbids me to present myself unless I'm rung for. But I shall make a point of being in the hall at the moment of departure, and you may be sure I shall say all that my *locus standi* permits."

Googe mounted the stairs just as Edward, the youthful footman, was struggling with a large dress-basket, which he deposited beside a smaller one in the hall.

"Then there's the hat-box, Edward," called out Fanshawe, who came down behind him with a dressing-bag. "Oh, Mr. Googe, please call a cab—a four-wheeler."

Googe slowly extricated his whistle from his waistcoat pocket.

"So you ain't on in this act?" he inquired tentatively.

"There isn't a part for me," replied Fanshawe with an hysterical laugh. "It won't be long, Mr. Googe, before I'm looking out for another place."

"*Festina lente*, Miss Fanshawe, *festina lente*," responded Googe. "Do you mean to tell me she ain't leaving no address?"

"None that I know of. But there's a letter for Mr. Moggs on the smoking-room table."

Googe went into the smoking-room, and picking up the letter which, directed in Molly's childish scrawl, lay furtively beside the blotting-pad, he placed it against the engagement tablet, so that it could not fail to catch anybody's eye. Then he returned to the hall as Edward staggered down under Mrs. Moggs's huge hat-box.

There was a rustle of silk and Molly appeared. At sight of Googe, she shrank.

"Fanshawe! Isn't that cab here yet?" she called querulously.

Googe stepped forward, an image of imperturbable destiny.

"Do I understand, madam, that you wish for a cab? Shall I not telephone to the stable for the brougham?"

"No, no, get me a four-wheeler, and make haste!"

"Excuse me, madam," said Googe pointedly. "May I inquire if there is any change in the arrangements—any message for Mr. Moggs, when he returns this evening?"

Molly bit her lip angrily.

"I have written to Mr. Moggs. He will tell you about the change in our arrangements. Oh, Fanshawe, what a time you are fastening that bag! Is everything down? Edward! A cab at once, please."

Edward, with his hand placed officiously on the knob of the hall door, threw the portals wide open. It happened that a four-wheeler was at that moment crawling past, and stopped, in obedience to the footman's signal. A street loiterer rushed to Edward's help, and in a very short time all the luggage had been carried to the cab without any assistance from Googe.

Molly drew a breath of relief. She was stepping out, taking no notice of the butler, who waited in an attitude of expectancy.

"Are there any orders for this evening, madam?"

"No," said Molly shortly.

"My master said, madam," persisted Googe, "that he would make a point of being at home for luncheon to-morrow, because Lady Ethel Lascene is lunching here with you."

Molly cut the man short.

"I shall not be at home. Mr. Moggs will do as he pleases."

Googe was silenced, but Fanshawe came to the rescue.

"If you please, madam, I forgot to ask you if I should prepare the blue brocade to wear with the turquoise and diamonds to-morrow night—the party at Baroness Heinrichfels, madam."

Molly completely forgot her manners.

"Oh, don't bother me, Fanshawe. I'm not going to Baroness Heinrichfels' party. Tell the cabman to drive on sharply, Edward."

"Yes, m'm, where to?"

Suddenly an ear-piercing shriek sounded from the staircase:

"Mummy! Mummy! I want you."

The gods, occasionally too lavish of information in the case of children and fools, must have made Nan aware that something momentous was taking place. Tired of solitude—her white slave, Selina Porson, being away on a visit to Selina's fiancé's relations—Nan had left the schoolroom and run down to the next floor in search of "Mummy" and amusement. There she had found traces of packing and general disorder, but no "Mummy." Molly had avoided seeing her daughter lest the small freckled face should defeat the reckless purpose in her mind.

Hence the sudden shriek and patter of little feet.

For a second Molly craned forward, fumbling irresolutely at the cab door-handle. Then she bade the driver:

"Get on quickly—Hyde Park Corner—I'll direct you presently."

The hall-door clanged grimly as Googe shut it.

"*Jacta est alea!*" he exclaimed, facing the eager throng of servants, who seemed to have swarmed into the hall in a moment. They gathered his meaning from the indignant solemnity of his manner.

It melted as he saw little Nan, refusing to be comforted by Fanshawe. Mrs. McCulla, hearing the storm of voices, came along from the baize door that led to her own regions. Her Irish eyes were exquisitely blue and misty. Two large tears like shining pearls were rolling down her warm, pink cheeks. She held out two firm, feather-light sister arms.

"Come, come, me jewel!" she cried, catching the child to her billowy bosom. "Come down to the kitchen, Alannah, and we'll make ye a foine little gingerbread shwateheart for yer tea—wan with a tailcoat to him and a fancy weskit all powdered with hunderds and aousins and a chocolate shillaylee and a'—will we, now darlin'?"

"I don't want a sweetheart," sobbed Nan, "I want my Mummy."

By and by there sounded a loud and agitated ringing at the hall-door bell. Althea, scarcely able to conceal her anxiety, was fidgeting impatiently on the top step. She had driven straight from St. Pancras.

"Is Mrs. Moggs at home?" she inquired, striving to regulate her voice.

"Mrs. Moggs has gone out of town, I regret to say, madam," replied Googe gravely.

"Out of town!" Althea trembled. She put her hand against the side of the door to support herself. "When did Mrs. Moggs leave?"

"About a hower ago, madam. Mrs. Moggs was—er—"



unaccompanied." The last word summed up Googe's view of the situation.

Althea tried to think collectedly.

"Won't you step in, madam?"

"Yes. I should like to speak to you, Googe."

Althea went through the hall into the smoking-room. There she seated herself. The butler had followed her deferentially.

"Mr. Moggs is not at home, I suppose?" was her next question

"Mr. Moggs has been at Hull on business, madam. He returns this evening."

Althea paused a moment. "Did Mrs. Moggs leave unexpectedly?"

"It may have been in consequence of a telegram Mrs. Moggs received this morning. There were no orders given," proceeded Googe, eyeing his interlocutor tentatively. "Mrs. Moggs's maid was very much hurried in the packing."

"Oh, did Fanshawe go, too?"

"Miss Fanshawe did not, madam. Mrs. Moggs left this house unaccompanied," repeated Googe icily.

Althea put her hand to her forehead.

"I'm extremely anxious to see Mrs. Moggs. What address has she left?"

"No address, madam—unless it is in this," and Googe indicated the letter on the writing-table. Obviously he regarded that letter with stern distrust.

Althea pressed her hand over her eyes. She was trying to think out Molly's possible plans.

The mail trains for abroad had either started, or were not starting till evening. It was conceivable

that Molly had meanwhile driven to Lord Isleworth's rooms. Althea gave a sigh of perplexity. Googe, anxiously awaiting developments, saw that she was baffled.

"May I get you a cup of tea, ma'am?" he said sympathetically.

Althea nodded, and Googe left the room. She was glad to be alone. With a wordless cry she threw her soul out upon the Infinite, stretching forth in spirit for some clue by which she might act.

The effort brought almost immediate result. Gradually she felt herself rise to that peculiar condition of mental poise wherein she had been wont to await oracular answers.

And the answer came! It came in one word that rang clearly, resonantly, through her brain. *Dover!*

When Googe entered with tea Althea hurriedly poured out a cup.

"You have a Bradshaw, or an A.B.C., that I can look at?"

"Certainly, madam. Here's an A.B.C.," and Googe produced the volume.

"Please find the next train to Dover."

Googe promptly turned the pages.

"The next train to Dover, ma'am, is 4.20 from Charing Cross, arriving at Dover 6.45."

"And the next train after that from Dover to London?" asked Althea quickly, as she gulped her tea and swallowed a cress sandwich.

Googe's finger travelled along the page.

"The next train from Dover to London, after 6.45, ma'am, is 7.35. It arrives at Victoria, 9.51. There's

another train to Charing Cross, but it doesn't get in till much later."

"That's all right. You don't shut up the house, I suppose, before eleven?"

"No, madam, not before eleven."

"Well, I'm not quite sure of Mrs. Moggs's arrangements, but I think she may return here to-night. Let me see the time-table."

Googe handed the book to Althea, who carefully perused the page on which his finger rested.

"H'm! Yes, I see." Then she looked up at him. She felt obliged to trust the man to a certain extent, but she wanted to be sure what mettle he was made of. She had not much time for consideration, but she liked the look in his keen dark eyes. His expression gave her confidence.

"If Mrs. Moggs doesn't arrive by half-past eleven, Googe, you'll understand that there's no need to wait up. Perhaps you'd better not say anything to Mr. Moggs, as it's uncertain. No doubt"—Althea floundered a little, "No doubt Mrs. Moggs has explained."

"Certainly, madam," replied Googe. "I understand fully. Nothing is to be said to Mr. Moggs." Googe gave a discreet cough. "But I shall be prepared for Mrs. Moggs's return between ten o'clock and half-past eleven."

"That's right," said Althea, rapidly consulting her bracelet watch. "Now call me a hansom at once, please."

This time, Googe proved himself amazingly prompt. His respect for Miss Stenmount had increased with a bound. He attended her obsequiously to the hansom

and then went down to deliver himself on the subject Mrs. McCulla.

"I don't 'old with 'anky-panky—never did," he declared. "Them little fortune-telling tricks are all m'hey. But it's only fair to say that Miss Stanmount the *genius loci* of the family. If anyone can settle h'lordship's 'ash, it's the Horacle."

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## CHAPTER XXIV

ALTHEA caught the train without difficulty, and secured a first-class carriage to herself. She was glad of time for thought, for she had not had much since her interview with Hanwhat Singh—an ineffaceable memory. Now the quiet journey did her good.

At Dover she went at once to the Lord Warden Hotel, feeling braced to battle point. Fortunately, in the vestibule she caught sight of Molly's trunks.

A few adroit questions elicited the information that "Mr. and Mrs. Isleworth" had arrived that afternoon by the three o'clock train from London, had engaged a private suite, and ordered dinner with the intention of taking the night boat across the Channel.

Althea declared herself to be the lady's sister and requested to be shown upstairs forthwith. The clerk at the bureau hesitated, but Althea's manner was authoritative, and she was accordingly taken up in the lift, and conducted down a long corridor to a door at which the lift-boy knocked. There was no reply.

"I think the gentleman has gone out," said the youth. "Perhaps the lady is in her bedroom."

"I will see," said Althea, and unceremoniously entered.

The room was empty, but it had the look of recent occupation. There was a tray with tea and empty cups, and a liqueur decanter of brandy. A half-smoked cigar-

ette lay on an ash-tray, and on another table were Molly's silver-handled umbrella, and her long sealskin coat.

The man withdrew, closing the door behind him. Another door leading into an inner room stood ajar, and from behind it came sounds of stifled sobbing. Althea went in.

Molly was there and alone, crouching on a sofa racked with weeping. Her pretty hair was dishevelled, her dress awry, her plumed hat had fallen upon the carpet. The poor little sinner was far too full of woe to notice anyone, till Althea touched her shoulder. Then she gave a faint scream, and started up.

"Oh, Althea!" She opened her arms, but dropped them hastily.

"I've come to take you back," cried Althea, drawing the tumbled figure into her tender embrace. "Molly! It's not too late?"

"Much too late," sobbed Molly, her wet face pressed against Althea's cheek. "You don't understand, Althea. I've left Johnny and my little Nan. . . . I've left my home—with Lord Isleworth . . ."

There was a pause. Molly shook all over.

"And I've got to hate him!" she burst out. "I thought I cared for him, but now I know that I never did. . . . You see Althea—I—I—" Molly stammered helplessly. Althea held her closer,

"Go on, Molly——"

"I'm a worldly beast," Molly said—"It's true—I'm like Everil, only not so clever. And he—he talked to me as if he was a hero in a book, and as if I was everything to him. . . . And I thought that if he loved me like that I should live in a different sort of world. . . . I

thought of Johnny being just a shopkeeper . . . and . . . oh! I suppose I was getting a little tired of Johnny. . . . Tired of Johnny! Oh! my God! Oh! oh! Johnny—" and Molly broke into yet more passionate sobbing.

"Molly, listen!" said Althea firmly. "You need not say a word more to me. I shall not ask you a question, but you must come straight home, and tell Johnny everything. He will forgive you, even if it is worse than I suppose—even if it is what the world would call 'too late.' He loves you, and his love is a very different thing from Lord Isleworth's."

"Of course it is," moaned poor Molly, "but he won't love me any longer. I can't go back and face him."

"Yes, you can," said Althea encouragingly. "It's no use stopping to think about it, Moll. You must come at once. Where's Lord Isleworth?"

"Out somewhere," shivered Molly. "We quarrelled because—because—oh! he's a horribly wicked man, Althea. He never meant to marry me."

"You might have known that," said Althea dryly.

"How should I know it?" Molly's blue eyes flashed fire. "I never questioned such a thing till now."

"No, dear, because you were not accustomed to dealing with men like Lord Isleworth. Johnny may be a shopkeeper, but he's more of a gentleman."

"Johnny is—himself," sobbed Molly. "And now I've—I've lost him."

"Hush, hush, you must not give way like that—you haven't lost him—you can't lose anyone that loves you. Love is the strongest thing in the world, Moll. If you loved Lord Isleworth you'd far better go with him, because you'd belong to each other. But it would be

desperately wrong and silly when you don't. You only want your husband. Come and tell him so."

Molly drew a long, shuddering sigh.

"I daren't," she said.

"Well, then, *I'd* dare, if it were me. I know Johnny well enough to be sure he'd do the kindest, rightest thing and *I* haven't lived with him for seven years, as you have."

Althea put her lips to Molly's hot forehead, and then softly smoothed away the damp rings of golden hair, leading her to the dressing-table, where the application of a comb and a powder puff made some change in her appearance.

"There isn't time to sponge your eyes, but if you keep your veil down they won't show much."

"Do you think we can escape without seeing—*him*?" whispered Molly, feverishly anxious all at once to be off.

"I hope so. But remember—you are still Johnny's wife, and Lord Isleworth cannot keep you from your husband unless you choose."

Molly nodded violently, much as Nan might have done. She was putting fierce restraint upon herself.

"Have you any presents Lord Isleworth has given you?" said Althea, rapidly replacing the toilet articles she had taken out of Molly's dressing-bag. "If so, you must leave them behind."

Molly shook her head dumbly. Then, with an effort, she said:

"There was a diamond bracelet—it's over there—on the floor. I—I threw it at him just now when—when—I found out what—he meant."

"I'm glad," said Althea between her set teeth.

"Oh, I've been a fool—a fool!" Molly went on



brokenly. "But he seemed to care for me so much. Yet he only meant to—to buy me."

"Brute!" said Althea sharply. "Come—we can't stop to talk here." She closed the mouth of the dressing-bag with a snap. "There's a train at half-past seven to Victoria. You'll be at De Vaux Square before they're shut up for the night. But we've no time to lose."

Althea picked up her sister's hat, and straightened the plumes. Molly put it on and glanced at herself in the glass. She gave a cry of dismay.

"What a fright I am, to be sure! Who'd ever look at me now?"

Althea interrupted her impatiently.

"Do come, Molly, I want to get out of the hotel."

She half led, half pushed her sister through the doorway.

The sitting-room was still untenanted. Althea rang the bell and ordered Molly's belongings to be taken downstairs and carried with her heavy luggage to the station. Then she hurried her sister to the lift; in a few moments they were in the vestibule, where Molly's trunks were already placed on a truck.

There was a slight delay at the desk, where Althea laid a couple of sovereigns.

"We haven't time to wait for the bill. My sister is obliged to go back to London. Anything else, the gentleman will settle. Now, Molly, we have just time to catch our train."

The shrinking little woman stood in the shadow of an archway, looking across the crowded vestibule with a frightened stare. Althea, following her eyes, saw that Lord Isleworth had just entered the hall. She caught Molly's trembling hand and drew it within her arm.

They might have avoided him, for he did not see them, but Althea thought it best to face him frankly.

Lord Isleworth looked exceedingly disconcerted at the sight of her, but in a moment recovered his ordinary calm demeanour.

"Miss Stanmount! Pardon me, but I cannot call your presence here to-day an agreeable surprise."

"I imagine not, Lord Isleworth. I am here to save my sister from the consequences of the mistake she made in coming—a mistake which she has had time to regret. I am going to take her home—by her own wish. Between you and me, there is, I think, no need for any further words."

The man's thin, aristocratic face whitened. His lips curled. He smiled satirically.

"I suppose I must accept the situation. But I have a right to hear from your sister's own lips her wishes in this extraordinary proceeding."

Althea drew Molly to one side, out of the stream of passing people, where they were less likely to be overheard.

"Now answer him, Molly. Speak for yourself. Tell him the truth—just what you feel."

Molly, who had been cowering against Althea's side, began to speak jerkily, vivid red mounting in her cheeks, her miserable eyes on the ground.

"It's quite true what Althea says—I don't want to have anything more to do with you. I am going back to my husband, if—if—if—he will have me. He was always good to me, but you—you—you——"

Then her eyes brimmed over. She lost control and sobbed bitterly, covering her face with her hands.

Lord Isleworth frowned. He drew the corners of his

moustache down between his teeth and gnawed it. He was obviously discomposed.

"I will not make the ordinary excuses," he said stiffly. "There still holds good, I perceive, the tyranny of the wedding-ring. Yet, Molly, you might have had more faith in me. I would have dealt fairly by you."

"Nothing you could say or do would make any difference now that you've shown me what you are," sobbed Molly with unexpected energy, as she mopped her eyes.

"Then there's nothing for me but to wish you a felicitous return to your domestic hearth. I see I am destined to go on to Paris alone, after all, to-night. Think of me leniently if you can, and—— Good-bye," he faltered. "I'm afraid my feelings will not change so easily as yours."

He bowed abruptly and turned on his heel.

Molly looked after him in a dazed, uncertain way. Her blue eyes swam, her underlip dropped helplessly. Althea gripped her arm.

"Come, come! we have only just time to catch our train. Oh, Molly, be thankful that he took it as he did. Be thankful that you have nothing more to regret."

In the train, they had a compartment to themselves, but they did not speak much. The fount of Molly's tears seemed to have run dry, and she sat, miserable and self-absorbed, her face turned to the window, gazing blankly into the darkness. Althea, in her corner, allowed her thoughts to wander to her own affairs, which were harassing her. Suddenly Molly leant across and touched her knee.

"If you only came up from Chaunterell this morning, Althea, how did you find out where I had gone?"

Althea described her interview with Googe.

"Oh, Googe!" cried Molly. "That horrible, good-hearted, lynx-eyed Googe. He did his best to stop me. So did Fanshawe. They're all devoted to Johnny. How on earth shall I face them?"

"So far as the servants are concerned," said Althea firmly, "you will certainly not betray yourself to them."

"But if Googe told you where to find me, they must all know," whimpered Molly.

"Googe did not tell me where to find you, and nobody knows the truth, or will know it, except myself, and Johnny—when you have told him."

"Then how did you know?"

Althea had been expecting this question.

"I can't explain, dear. You wouldn't understand—you've always made fun of that sort of thing. But truly there's a great psychic power behind the world—only men call it by different names—which won't always let one destroy one's life, even when one is bent on doing so—as you were. And that warned me."

Althea smiled unsteadily.

Molly tucked her hand humbly into her sister's.

"It's true I can't understand your queer old occult ways, Al—they're beyond me. But at all events you turned up just in time."

"Just in time!" repeated Althea reassuringly. But was it in time?

When Googe opened the door, he received his mistress imperturbably, rising to the occasion with all due decorum. The drawing-room fire had not been lighted, he explained, but there was a good fire in the smoking-room. Yes.

Mr. Moggs had returned, Mr. Moggs was upstairs. Should Gooze inform his master that Mrs. Moggs had arrived?

Molly shivered. She looked in the glare of the electric light such a woebegone object that Althea interposed hurriedly.

"Not just yet, thank you, Gooze. Mrs. Moggs would like to get warm first. We've had a bitterly cold journey. We'll go into the smoking-room. I mustn't stay long, so you might keep the cab."

She got rid of Gooze as quickly as she could, and she and Molly went along the hall to the smoking-room at the end of it, where a bright fire burned. A spirit stand and siphon stood on a side table.

Molly rushed to the writing-table, to find that her letter had disappeared. With a cry of horror she pounced upon the envelope lying on the carpet, where it had fallen short of the waste-paper basket. She rose, looking ashen grey, and shaking all over.

"I must go. I've got no right to stay after what I've done. I left a letter here for Johnny, and he's read it."

"Well, what of that?" said Althea, purposely speaking in a dry, practical fashion. "You meant to tell him."

"Yes, I know. But I didn't think he'd be home first. I meant to break it to him—in my own way. It wouldn't have seemed so bad now that I'm back. But if he has read that horrible, bald statement, he will never forgive me. Let me go, Althea, let me go, I tell you. The cab hasn't gone yet. I'll take it—you can come with me, if you like. I'll go to the flat or anywhere you please. But let me go!"

She would have fled precipitately had not Althea forced her into a chair and stood over her. There was no time to spare, however. Seeing that Molly was on the

verge of hysterics, Althea mixed from the spirit-stand half a tumblerful of brandy and soda.

It was evident to her that Molly's nerves must have undergone a terrible strain in the scene which she had had with Lord Isleworth. Only her husband could soothe her conscience-stricken misery. But she drank the contents of the tumbler, and that stopped her teeth chattering and pulled her nerves together somewhat. She promised not to go away while Althea went in search of Johnson. Both guessed where he was most likely to be found, and without hesitation Althea hurried through the silent house, and straight up the three flights of stairs. Everywhere seemed to hang the peculiar hush that means disaster.

She soon reached the little rose-lined nest that was Nan's. Here, the desolated child had, under Mrs. McCulla's kindly ministrations, fallen into a deep sleep. Her father was now kneeling at the foot of the bed, his arms stretched across it, his head bowed upon them.

A dim other-world recollection dawned on Althea. The thought flashed upon her that she had beheld something like this scene before.

She came up softly and touched her brother-in-law. He turned, and the rose-shaded glow of the electric burner showed her his haggard face and blood-shot eyes.

"Johnson," she said simply, "I've come to fetch you downstairs. Molly wants you."

The big man swayed heavily. Althea put her hand under his arm to steady him.

"Molly!" he exclaimed. "Did you say—Molly?"

"Yes. She's in the smoking-room. She wants you badly, Johnson. She's been making a horrible mistake, and she's so unhappy about it—and so tired."

"Tired—eh?" he repeated dully. "I dare say she is tired."

"You'll come to her, won't you, Johnson?" persisted Althea. "She wants to explain something to you."

Johnson struggled clumsily to his feet.

"To explain something to me!" he muttered. "Yes, yes, of course she does. But she needn't talk about it to-night, if she's tired."

"But she wants to—she must. You'll be kind to her, won't you, Johnson?" said Althea anxiously.

"Kind to her? Kind to Molly?—my Molly! What the devil do you mean, Althea?"

Then Althea realised that the blessed truth had somehow sunk into Johnson's dulled brain and quickened it. She drew back with a sigh of relief.

For a moment the big man stood poised at the top of the stairs, blinking oddly; then he clattered down with large, loose movements; and Althea remained, waiting—listening.

The silence in the shrouded house was broken only by the soft breathing of the child in the bedroom. The suspense grew unbearable at last. Step by step, Althea crept down the stairs, her heart in her mouth.

As she drew near the hall a peculiar gruff crooning fell on her ear. It came from within the smoking-room. Althea recognised the voice of her brother-in-law and the indescribably tender way in which he had often, in earlier years, soothed his restless baby daughter.

Then Althea knew that all was well, and, contented, she stole out into the night.

## CHAPTER XXV

AFTER the blow that Althea's occult reputation had received at the hands of Lady Carwardine, it was plain that the next occasion upon which the Oracle would be required to appear in public must be a very momentous one. It was fortunate for Althea that this should chance to take place at the house of her devoted adherents, Baron and Baroness Heinrichfels. They had not been present at Dracott Keep, but gossip was already rife concerning what Lady Carwardine frankly styled the "exposure," and Althea thought it possible that malicious whispers had reached the Heinrichfels. She had heard nothing from them, however, and was therefore bound to fulfil her engagement, which was a professional one.

On the evening in question, Julie Lamotte began, as usual, to pour various items of information into Althea's ear, while dressing her hair. Stimulated rather than daunted by her mistress's late reverse at Dracott Keep, Julie had been busily collecting data with reference to the personages likely to be present at this party. It never occurred to her that such assistance would not be acceptable. Twice Althea checked her flow of chatter, but Julie was far too full of her own importance as private inquiry agent to pay attention to checks. They were more or less mechanical, moreover, for Althea was thinking so deeply that half the time she did not hear when her maid was speaking.



Julie was puzzled by her manner. The Oracle was often silent, but to-night she was plainly preoccupied, and seemed scarcely conscious of her surroundings. When she found that Julie had finished her hair, and was waiting to slip the snowy, silken crêpe sheath of her gown over her head, she rose and dumbly submitted, standing before her full-length, threefold mirror. Julie exclaimed delightedly at her appearance.

There was a new charm about the slender, majestic figure and pale, wistful face. The grey eyes had lost their dreamy look and were wide with a new purpose. But Althea scarcely glanced at herself, and her maid's admiration fell on deaf ears. While Julie was adjusting the quaint golden armlets and necklace she re-started her stream of adaptable details. This time Althea silenced her with a peremptory gesture.

"I do not wish to hear anything more," she said. Then, seeing the Frenchwoman's dismayed face, she added: "You want to help me, I know, Julie, but I would rather not be helped in that way." Julie shrugged in pantomimic horror.

"*Ciel! Mais c'est une affaire très, très importante.*" And then followed a volume of excited broken French and English.

"Suppose mademoiselle should again find herself not able to satisfy her patrons? *Enfin*——!" Julie's whole body indicated the deluge.

"We will not think about that, Julie. We will listen for the Divine Voice—the voice of the spirit of truth."

"Pardon! Ze spirit zat speak through mademoiselle is *magnifique*. But he is not always zere. Suppose he

not come—suppose he have a leetle fatigue like ze oder night? Then it shall be for mademoiselle to make her histories alone. And if all were silence to-night!”

“Better silence than lies,” said Althea.

Julie bridled indignantly.

“Mademoiselle! I speak ze troof always. Me—I give myself much pain for to speak ze troof. Ce petit accident at ze château of ze Monsieur Dracott—it was not my fault. Si! Si! Mademoiselle—I tell mademoiselle ze troof. And if mademoiselle refuse ze aid that le bon Dieu provides through la pauvre Julie—*ce n'est pas sage!*”

Althea smiled painfully. How could she instil into this bit of flotsam on life's sea the code in which she had herself failed?

“*Pauvre Julie!*” she said kindly. “Never mind, le bon Dieu will make things right in the end. Now take my cloak. I shall not need you any more to-night.”

“Mademoiselle needs me no more?” exclaimed Julie tragically.

“Not to-night.”

“Do I not then attend mademoiselle as usual? Mademoiselle may require to have engagements arranged.”

“There will be no engagements to arrange this evening, Julie. That is all. You may go.”

The maid departed, perplexed and angry.

Althea sighed. Though outwardly calm, her mind was torn by troublous thoughts.

As she sat beside Anthony whilst they drove along towards Piccadilly, neither of them uttered more than a few commonplace sentences. Each was afraid to break the restraint that had fallen upon them, lest words might

be spoken which should render the old intimate relation impossible. Anthony was very anxious about the performance of this evening, but he was careful to say nothing on the subject which might unnerve Althea. His own faith in her was partially reassured by her demeanour.

Arrived at Baron Heinrichfels' house, Anthony stepped out, first helping his sister to alight, and then turned back for the bag containing the aromatic gums and herbs which they brought with them on such occasions. There was some delay, for the linkmen had ordered the Stan-mounts' brougham to make way for others following, and Anthony had to wait till it settled into the line. Meanwhile, Althea passed on under the awning and through an outer vestibule into the large square hall, which had various doors opening into it on each side, and a great staircase and gallery supported by pillars, while at the end was a wide, draped archway, and beyond this the ball-room in which the entertainment was to take place. Here Baroness Heinrichfels, a stately figure in black, was standing to receive her guests.

Althea never joined the general throng till after her performance had been given. She knew now that she was expected to pass by a side corridor to the platform arranged for her. Missing Anthony, she waited to be conducted thither, standing uncertainly in the shadow of a large palm that was placed near the staircase leading to the gallery and upper reception rooms.

A servant approached, and would have handed her along the line of his liveried followers to the presence of the hostess, had Althea not intimated that she was expecting to be joined by a companion. It seemed strange to her that the baron himself was not to be seen,

for he was usually officious in doing honour to the Oracle on the first word of her appearance. Nervous and puzzled, Althea stood screening herself by the drooping fronds of the palm. Now a man, who had driven up in a hansom just behind the Stanmounts, advanced slowly up the hall.

Althea made an impetuous movement forward. Her cloak fell open, revealing her form in its vestal white, and the light of the central chandelier fell on her fair head in its filmy white scarf, and showed her face—eager, anxious, tender. There was no mistaking her look. The man was Ladislav O'Neill.

Directly he saw her, O'Neill's face glowed. He quickened his step, holding out both hands. But the gesture was intercepted by the grip of another hand upon his shoulder.

A door had suddenly opened near him—the door of the baron's private room, and the baron himself had come out.

Baron Heinrichfels seemed strangely perturbed. The few low words he spoke to the singer were electrical. O'Neill's face changed completely. His form appeared to collapse. Then he drew himself up and bent his head.

Althea made a quick step nearer, but neither of them heeded her. They had half turned their backs and were speaking earnestly. Althea slipped behind a pillar.

"Who is it that has come?" she heard O'Neill say.

"The Three—Gottlieb, Gaudelle, and Hiram Blake. You know them better than I, but it seems to me these men are stormy petrels. Their tendencies are revolutionary, Ladislav. Don't let them lead you to extremes. They say they must see you at once on important business

of the First Section. We of the Second Section are kept in the dark and I'm glad of it. But you know my views. Temporise, my boy, temporise."

O'Neill shrugged, a trifle contemptuously. A sound broke from his lips, half a curse, half a groan. He looked towards the spot where Althea stood, and then dropped his gaze, believing, no doubt, that she had gone.

There had been a lull in the arrivals, and for the moment the hall had been almost empty. Now a fresh stream of guests entered. The baron glanced at them uneasily.

"I cannot stay. My wife requires me. I suppose you'll see these men, Ladislav?" He pointed to the door of his room, which was a few inches open.

"Of course," said O'Neill.

"But for God's sake—be careful!"

Then the baron went away. O'Neill oraced himself and walked across to the room. He threw the door wide, pausing on the threshold as he did so. Althea saw three men within, standing in an attitude of expectancy. They were in evening dress, but wore heavy cloaks, which fell back from their shoulders.

One had thick yellow hair and a huge fair beard; he might be of Teutonic origin. The next was dark and dapper, and except that he wore a heavy black moustache, seemed to Althea to be amazingly like Cabby's late tutor, M. Adolphe Gaudelle. This man was evidently a Frenchman or a Pole. The foremost was lean and florid, with piercing eyes, big hooked nose, and straggling grey-black whiskers.

O'Neill surveyed all three with folded arms and a smile of tragic understanding.

"My friends! could you not trust me for a few hours?"

The lean man laughed harshly. He answered in a metallic voice with a decided North American accent:

"I guess not, Brother. We've had our orders to see you through this business. So that with your permission we'll shut that door, and then you can cast us as you please for our parts."

The door closed, and Althea heard no more. Pale and trembling, she emerged from her shelter. Just then, a number of electric lamps depending from the floor of the gallery above were switched on, and the inner colonnade was brilliantly illuminated. Baron Heinrichfels, repassing at the moment, perceived Althea.

His manner was somewhat constrained and lacked its usual genial air, but she did not know whether to attribute this to anything he might have heard about herself, or to the disturbing presence of the three strangers.

"Miss Stanmount!" he exclaimed hurriedly. "I was looking for you. I did not know that you had come till a minute ago when your brother told me he had missed you. I sent him along to your quarters behind the scenes. Allow me to escort you there."

The baron offered his arm and led Althea at once through the hall and by way of a long passage to the stage. There he left her in Anthony's care.

Anthony had already prepared everything, and almost immediately a symphony by stringed instruments announced that the Oracle would shortly be visible.

Anthony knelt to set the brazier alight, but Althea stopped him. She had grown calm again.

"Don't do that. I want to speak to the people first. I mean in full consciousness."

"Surely that is a mistake! You have never spoken on the stage except in trance—at least——" Anthony paused confusedly. Althea smiled.

"So there is doubt in your mind, Anthony, as well as in other people's. All the more reason why I should explain myself."

Anthony looked uneasy.

"Whatever you wish to say, Althea, I am convinced that it is I, and not you, who should say it."

She shook her head.

"No, in this matter I must have my way. Forgive me, but I know that I am right."

Anthony drew back, hurt, but no longer insistent. The music had ceased, and he signalled for the curtains to be drawn apart.

Althea saw before her a mist of inquisitive faces. All were on the alert, for feeling ran high this evening, and it was very mixed. Many anticipated the downfall of the Oracle; many others were eager to see their idol reinstated in public opinion. Amongst these, though Althea did not know it, were the Baron and Baroness Heinrichfels, who had been deeply troubled by reports of the affair at Dracott. To-night, Lady Carwardine was talking of it openly in a way that roused their indignation, but which was difficult to combat without discourtesy.

Among the kindlier faces, Althea saw Lady Ethel Lascene whispering anxiously to her husband. There, too, was amiable Mrs. Raine, who, notwithstanding the shaky condition of occultism, was looking surprisingly

content. Althea wished that the Ancaster Ellises and Father Frensham could have been present, for it would have seemed only fitting that they should hear what she had to say. She saw her sisters gazing at her curiously, and wondered what they would think of it all. Then she caught sight of Lady Carwardine and grew apprehensive—but only for a second. With a brief call upon her inward self for courage, Althea looked determinedly over the heads of the audience and fixed her eyes upon an invisible point in space. She had risen from her chair and stepped to the edge of the platform. Now she began to speak. Her voice was naturally low, and she did not attempt to raise it; but it was clear, and so well pitched that every syllable fell distinctly upon the ears of her listeners. She spoke simply:

“I am asked here to-night for the purpose of giving you some demonstration of what has been called—and what I still believe to be—my wonderful occult gift. But before attempting to show you any example of that power—if, indeed, it has not deserted me—I should like to say some words concerning the nature of my gift, so far as I am able to judge of it, and also to explain to you the true facts of its workings through me, about which I am aware there has been much discussion—how far those workings have been due to genuine inspiration, and how far supplemented by information gained through exterior channels.”

A sound like a rushing wave, made up of many murmurs—dismay, reprobation, incredulity—broke over the audience. An East End assemblage would have hooted and roared. These people recognised conventions, and remembered that they had to behave accordingly.



So the murmur was repressed, and they settled themselves to listen with a pleased feeling that they were about to be offered a new sensation. The slight white form upon the platform was so calm that many thought they could not have heard her aright, and that this confession was a mere oratorical ruse to secure a more dramatic effect. Althea Stanmount, whether trickster or sibyl, was evidently a woman out of the common. This impression deepened as she resumed :

“ There is no doubt in my mind, nor, I think, can there be in the minds of those who understand anything of psychic laws, that the power of prevision transcends human faculties. It is veritably a divine emanation. Nevertheless, unworthy mediums are sometimes chosen for the transmission of superior forces. In such matters questioning is vain, for behind all spiritual manifestations there lies a mystery far beyond human understanding. Why so great a gift should have been bestowed upon one so utterly unworthy as myself I cannot tell ! It would be presumptuous to judge. But I owe to those who have loyally trusted and upheld me the assurance that I have not always practised as an impostor among you ; and though I stand here self-convicted, ready to take my full measure of blame and shame for resorting to methods that a true psychic would have eschewed, I still lay claim to reverence for those utterances of mine that were, in very truth, empowered by the wisdom of the Highest. For it must be clear to those of you who will dispassionately consider the manner and substance of revelations I have made, and advice I have given you, that the answers to many questions you have put to me could only have come from supernatural sources.

" Now the confession I desire to make is, that, fearing I might not always be able to reach this highest mental plane, I have sometimes made use of unlawful and surreptitious means to provide myself against the possibility of failure. I make this statement, trusting that our host and hostess will appreciate my motives and forgive me for doing so here, because I am aware that there has been much conjecture concerning a recent occasion in the country, where I was shown to be in the wrong, and at which were present many of those I see to-night.

" If you will permit me, I shall enumerate as shortly as possible various other instances in which I know that what you relied on as my inspirational gift was not altogether genuine."

Then, without implicating anyone by name, Althea told on what occasions her psychic power had been supplemented. She explained that she had gradually discovered that there were degrees of the trance condition, and that the capacity of the inspirational self appeared at times to become enhanced when the lower mind was stored with information.

" I don't pretend to be able to explain," she said, " how knowledge gained through ordinary means can affect the spiritual self, but that it does so I have reason to be assured. We are apt to look upon the spiritual consciousness—the subliminal self, as I believe it is called in some schools of psychology—as something god-like, and totally different from that part of us which manifests in physical life. God-like it is; but not, I believe, fundamentally different in nature from the selves we know. Those of us in this twentieth century who

accept the doctrine of reincarnation which the old Greeks held, will admit that the immortal ego is made up of various qualities acquired in the many lives it has passed through. Now, I take it that this process of acquirement would be impossible, were it not to a great extent brought about by the action of the lower mind—the mind with which people ordinarily function.

“I myself, and I dare say many of you, have often been conscious of the action of two minds—the one in commonplace daily use—the other a storehouse of supermundane knowledge, available only on specific occasions.

“It follows that this subliminal mind must be illuminated from its own sphere—the sphere of pure spirit—that thus sheds light, however faintly, into the denser faculties of the flesh, which, up to the present stage of our evolution, are what we are principally required to work with.

“On the other hand, it would appear that the coarser thoughts and qualities actuating our daily life operate in their turn through the higher vehicle. Thus it is probable that my own intense desire to stand well with my clients affected my trance utterances and enabled me to stamp them with that accuracy of detail and correctness of application which I have been told has given them their chief value.

“But, unfortunately, my fears and desires led me farther. They induced me to sow a harvest of ill-gotten seed, from which my higher self was compelled to reap or remain silent when called upon to speak. Her utterances therefore became sullied with the deceit I practised by drawing on ordinary earth-plane sources of knowledge. These I thrust upon her—fearing her incapacity to prove her all-seeing heaven-birth. I, who speak to you now,

feel my deepest shame in this—that having so lofty a communion at my service, I should ever have thought it needful to distrust—to arm, as it were—that spiritual agent whose happy portion it should have been to soar superior to all such assistance, whose power to attain lay in her purity of purpose, whose strength was in her singleness of intent. The more I mingled the pure flow of inspiration with the tricky currents of lower things, and that higher self still responded to my demands, the more sure I felt of the practical need of that ignoble mingling. No psychic could be inspired always, I told myself. Every psychic should have her mental crutch! Thus I was self-deceived, subconsciously. It was but a step from deceit in the subconscious condition to deceit in full consciousness; thence to the bitter price I was called upon to pay.

"None of us can escape from fetters that we have forged, for we cannot escape from ourselves. Equally impossible is it for the lower self to be entirely separated from that higher part which is indivisible from it, because the supreme Self is one and eternal, differing in manifestation under different conditions. But the lower self may become, through unlawful practices, partially alienated from its purer elements.

"In my case, the result was inevitable. The subliminal mind remained my slave until too extortionate demands were made upon it. Then the silver cord that binds spirit to matter slackened, so that I lost touch with that higher and nobler part of me.

"At Dracott Keep, upon the recent occasion to which I have referred, my intuitive self, shrinking from its share in the unworthy method I had adopted, withdrew

its forces—thus bringing about the condition I had been dreading. No longer was self-deception possible. The trance in which I was supposed to be, was, I knew only too plainly, no trance at all! I was left to deal unaided with the problem of my position. Then, alas! instead of frankly confessing myself at a loss, I attempted to continue my usual demonstration of psychic power, pretending that I had the support of that vital spiritual element of which, in reality, I had been bereft.

“What happened then, most of you are already aware, but I have wished to explain this matter in order to let those who accused me hear exactly how far they were justified in their conclusions. Very likely you all believe me to have been false from the beginning, and imagine that I am only making this explanation in a forlorn endeavour to reinstate myself. It is natural you should think so. That is part of the condemnation I have so justly merited. But I have not shrunk from telling you how much has been true and how much false in the ways that I have worked among you, for I know that, however unworthy are the exponents of occult truth, it shall surely shine revealed at last.

“For myself I say no word of extenuation. My motives must have been obvious. That I should lose your confidence is well, perhaps, for me, but if any of you care to come to me again for such help as I can give—I must say, like the prophet of old upon Mount Pisgah, that ‘only such words as are spoken unto me, shall I speak.’”

When Anthony appeared from between the closed curtains and asked whether it was the wish of the com-

pany that the Oracle should attempt any further demonstrations of her clairvoyant power, the question was answered by a tumultuous affirmative.

Baron Heinrichfels came forward and with genuine emotion in his voice said that his own confidence in the Oracle and that also of his wife was unshaken. They both felt, he said, that Miss Stanmount had considerably strengthened her position by her honourable and interesting statement. He himself had had too much experience of psychic conditions and their attendant risks—chief among which might be reckoned a liability on the part of even the purest psychic to self-deception—not to appreciate the noble spirit that had induced Miss Stanmount to offer the explanation she had so generously given. At such a moment, he continued, questions on personal matters might be inappropriate. As the Oracle had once prophesied a heartfelt national calamity—which prophecy, sad to say, had been fulfilled—he would now suggest that she should use her power of prognostication to predict any event of national importance in the new reign which was to be inaugurated by the public opening of Parliament by the King on the morrow.

Anthony bowed gravely and withdrew.

Presently the curtains parted wide to disclose Althea seated with the lighted brazier at her feet, clouds of fragrant incense ascending before her. Her eyes were closed, but she was not yet entranced. As the fumes mounted slowly, she was filled with a vague wonder whether the divine energy would return to her. She was inwardly determined that, should it fail, she would acknowledge herself spiritually disowned and deserted. Then before heaviness fell upon her she made a supreme

effort to send forth her soul towards the Infinite. In answer, it seemed, to her desire, she felt as though she were no more flesh, but all spirit—spirit which mounted on through pulsing space until there came a deep, sweet emptying of self, and yet a wondrous sense of fulfilment beyond all dreams—the realisation of measureless greatness, of ineffable power. For a moment—or for an age, it might have been—Althea knew her soul to hang expectant in that illimitable region between earth and heaven, and then the fumes of the incense finally overflowed her physical senses and she lost touch with the lower world.

Those watching the Oracle closely saw how the rhythmic heavings of her bosom grew more and more irregular, now quickening for a few sharp beats, now slackening to long enfeebled breaths, till at last they seemed to cease altogether, and her form became as that of a marble statue instead of a living woman, but with a beauty so unusual and sublime that those who watched, gazed at her in wonder. After a minute or two, without the twitch of a muscle or the flicker of an eyelash, the statue spoke—in a voice that was like Althea's, but transcending the voice of Althea—a voice strangely calm and sweet that seemed to come from far away.

“ You ask of the King. Shall I speak of the man so dearly beloved of many, or of the monarch round whom dark clouds are gathering? The prince whom the prayers of his mother's devoted people once won from an untimely grave, or the King for whom the angels of life and death again wait to do battle? ”

“ Not yet may the crown of his country encircle his brow—I see it hovering over his head, but not yet



may it descend—I know not if this be the veritable insignia of earthly empire, or the unsubstantial eidolon of what might have been. Into the Veiled Region whence supreme fiats issue, one such as I may not penetrate.

“But this I see—a black cloud hangs over England. It darkens London. It blots out Westminster. . . . From beneath it shoot lurid fires. And I see a great procession—the people’s tears mingled with welcoming smiles, for the hope of the nation advances. But close upon the King the dark shadow comes—upon the fair and gracious lady at his side, and upon all those in high places with whom the people’s destinies are bound. . . . Darkness obscures the procession. . . . There is treachery in the air . . . I hear the roar of an on-coming calamity that may well make Europe tremble. . . .”

The Oracle paused. An excited voice from below called out :

“A bomb! Good God! Can nothing be done to avert such a disaster?”

The Oracle replied slowly :

“It could be averted. But such catastrophes are seldom contemplated seriously until it is too late to provide against them.”

“The King should certainly be warned,” exclaimed the other speaker.

“Wal! I reckon the King of England would feel he was playing it pretty low down on the nation if he refused to open Parliament because a gifted lady had taken upon herself to prophesy that something onpleasant might interfere with his plans.”

This remark came from a tall gentleman standing at the back of the room. His grimly humorous intonation



made people turn and stare at him. He bore the scrutiny imperturbably. His appearance was peculiar; he wore ordinary evening dress, but he had a rugged cast of countenance, straggling grey-black whiskers, and a queer intent gleam in his eyes.

The Oracle sat motionless, her eyelashes sweeping her pale cheek.

The baron rose.

"May I beg you to stretch your power to its limits, and to give us, if you can, some indication as to this disaster which will set our fears at rest or enable us to counteract it?"

There was silence for a minute, during which the whole room hung upon Althea's utterance. Even those who disbelieved in her power were impressed by her bearing.

"Can you not say whether this disaster is irrevocably decreed?" urged the baron.

The answer came in those clear tones which gave a curious sense of distance, as though the seeress spoke from some lofty invisible height:

"Few decrees are irrevocable. But, alas! I cannot pierce the clouds which roll before me. Only this I know—a human instrument has been chosen for the execution of this act of destruction—this mad deed, mistakenly intended, not to dissever, but to unite high ideals with reality. To this man will be offered opportunity for an alternative sacrifice—the sacrifice of all which he holds most dear. Should he release himself from the other terrible and ill-judged obligation, he will be freed from all fetters of the flesh, and taste of true union such as he desires, at the fount of eternal bliss, where the real and the ideal are one."

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

The voice of the Oracle had died into silence. All eyes in the hall watched her as though the people were spellbound. They saw a slow shiver pass over the still form from head to foot, and the marble appeared once more to regain life. The transition from sleep to waking was unmistakable. Althea's limbs stirred faintly. And now her eyes opened and she gazed with the blank, bewildered look of a sleepwalker upon the upturned faces below. Her gaze was long after referred to as proof that she had spoken, that night at least, under some supermundane influence.

Suddenly she caught sight of a little group in the audience at the back of the room—three dark figures, and before them one over whom they seemed to be keeping guard. The fourth was Ladislav O'Neill. His eyes made dumb supplication to the woman he adored.

Althea stretched out her arms and moaned. Anthony signalled instantly for the curtain to be drawn. The string band began to play a soft melody. It was Schumann's "Traumerei." Althea stirred in her chair. The brazier at her feet was smouldering now, and the clouds of incense had scattered, but their heavy perfume weighted the air. She still looked and spoke like one not wholly conscious of her surroundings.

"The laurels tasted very bitter," she muttered. "They made me feel sick."

Anthony wondered at first what she meant. Then he remembered that it had been a custom with Delphic priestesses of old to chew the leaves of Apollo's laurel in order that the sacred frenzy might be more easily induced.

"Althea!" he said, bending over her. She looked at him vaguely.

Anthony's face was full of feeling.

"My dear, you've done splendidly," he said. She smiled at him. But a faint perplexity showed in her eyes. She stretched herself again and sighed.

"I am very tired, Anthony. I think I had better go home."

"I will take you at once," he answered.

Just then the baron and his wife hurried round to speak to them. The baroness clasped Althea in her arms, kissing her earnestly.

"Dear girl! You have indeed proved your powers to-night. I can't stay more than a moment, our friends are waiting for supper, but several have begged me to convey to you their sincere appreciation of all you have said. For myself and Franz—you have our entire confidence, Althea—now more than ever."

Althea bent her head. She could not speak, and after embracing her again the baroness went away.

The baron said some kindly words, but it was plain that Althea was exhausted, so he did not attempt to combat Anthony's intention of taking his sister away at once.

Althea silently accepted the baron's arm, and he conducted her with marked deference down the steps leading from the platform and through the crowded rooms. Curious eyes followed the fair head bound with laurel leaves. The bystanders remarked that Miss Stanmount walked like a woman in a dream. Only twice did she appear to notice any of the people present. Once, when she passed Molly and big, beaming Johnson. And once, when Leonard Dracott and Sylvia Raine crossed her path. The young man drew the girl sharply aside.

But Althea saw that Sylvia wore a large, pear-shaped pearl hanging on a slender chain round her neck, the pearl destined for Leonard Dracott's wife.

The baron took leave of Althea near the door of the outer vestibule. Anthony, having cloaked her, went forward to instruct a footman how to find their carriage. Meanwhile Althea, left alone, moved back behind the pillars which supported the gallery. Suddenly the door of the baron's room was flung open and O'Neill came towards her. Close behind him, ranging themselves round the open doorway, were the strange Three. None of them intervened, but a grim smile crossed the lips of Hiram Blake.

O'Neill took Althea's hand in both of his and held it. The eyes of each were drowned in the other's gaze.

"I did not think we should meet so soon," murmured Althea. "But I'm glad, Ladislav. It nearly broke my heart to think that I had sent you away."

"My God!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Would you call me back?—too late!"

"It can never be too late for you and me," she said in low, caressing tones.

"Oh! if I could tell you! If I could see you alone! If I could have but one hour!"

The despair in his voice frightened Althea.

"But, of course, you shall see me alone," she said aloud, instantly. "Why not come to me to-morrow, Ladislav? Come early—before the streets are blocked. I shall expect you—at our flat. Yes—come to-morrow."

"Naow, naow, my friend! I reckon to-morrow's a date you can't calc'late upon," put in Hiram Blake

harshly. His heavy hand fell on O'Neill's shoulder.  
"I guess this lady must excuse you."

Althea glanced at the intruder haughtily. Then her gaze went back to O'Neill.

"I accept no excuse. You will come—won't you, Ladislav?"

"Dearest! If I could only tell you—but I dare not," he whispered brokenly.

"Althea!" called Anthony, "come along, quick, or we shall get out of line again."

She threw a yearning glance at O'Neill.

"Good-night, Ladislav, but not good-bye," she said.

As she moved away, a bunch of violets, brushed from her breast, fell to the ground. O'Neill sprang forward, picked them up, and thrust them within his coat.

"Violets!" said the yellow-bearded man significantly.  
"Violets mean fidelity. But they are flowers of death."

## CHAPTER: XXVI

THE brother and sister said little during the homeward drive. When they entered the studio, where a light supper had as usual been laid for them, Anthony forced Althea to swallow a few mouthfuls of food and wine, which refreshed her. She was dumbly grateful for his affectionate care, but she could not bear to stay and talk to him, so she soon went to her room. There she sat awhile in an arm-chair, thinking.

She was in one of those moods when bodily sensations are in abeyance, and the mind touches, as it were, the confines of two worlds, so that it is difficult to distinguish between the phantasmal and the real. She found herself wondering whether anything was real. Was not all life a dream within a dream? Nothing seemed to endure save the immortal self.

As Althea meditated on this her brain grew dizzy; she lost the sense of proportion. But through all, alive among the shadows, appeared O'Neill, with despair in his eyes.

Would he come to-morrow? Ah! to-morrow was already here. Midnight had struck long ago, and now the clock in a church tower close by boomed forth the stroke of one. It sounded like a knell. Goaded into sudden terror, Althea realised that O'Neill was in some immediate danger. She felt that there was only one thing for her to do. She must try, somehow, to save him.

She gave herself no time for consideration. She made her preparations at once, deliberately and noiselessly. Divesting herself of her evening gown, the classic chaplet and her ornaments, she put on a simple grey dress and a long dark cloak with a hood over her head, hoping thus to evade observation. Taking her latchkey, she turned off the lights in her room, and stepped into the corridor. The flat was in darkness except for a pale glimmer that crept through the stained glass partition in the hall from an electric lamp outside on the landing. Althea crept along quietly, and let herself out of the hall door, which she softly closed behind her. The lift shaft was black and silent, and she walked down the stairs to the vestibule below. She had intended to tell the night porter that she was going to see a sick friend, but there was no need to make excuses. The man was snoring in his chair, and the heavy outer doors were still unlocked. Passing through them, Althea found herself alone in the night.

The pavements were deserted, and the roadway also. In the Hammersmith Road she spied an empty hansom which its sleepy driver was taking home. She hailed it. At first the man refused to turn, but when she offered him double fare he consented to drive her to the address she gave him by the Thames, just across Putney Bridge. She had never been inside O'Neill's house, but she knew where it was.

By a devious route that skirted St. Paul's School and Hammersmith Cemetery, finally entering the Fulham Road, and thence proceeding across the bridge, Althea at last found herself in a side street parallel with the river.

The cab pulled up before a dingy door set in a stucco wall that seemed to be shedding its plaster in leprous scales. The door was illuminated by a street lamp on the opposite side of the road, where there was a hoarding that curved round and closed-in the tiny cul-de-sac. No other dwelling-house was visible, and from the dark, little street it was not possible to see the lights of the bridges, or those of craft on the river. A more desolate spot could hardly be found in the suburbs of a great city. With some difficulty, for there was no lamp above the door, Althea found a hanging bell-handle. When she pulled it the bell gave forth a muffled clang.

The cabman promptly demanded his double fare.

Althea paid him, suggesting that he might wait to drive her back again.

But the man grunted sulkily that it was time for decent folks to be abed, and whipping up his horse, had disappeared before any answer came to Althea's ring.

She stood shivering, and, for the first time, frightened; then rang again. Presently she thought she heard heavy footsteps on a flagged passage inside. There was another wait, however, of a minute or more, before bolts were withdrawn, and the door flung open. A man stood framed in the doorway; behind him a dimly lighted entry.

The man was tall; a cloak, the pattern of which Althea recognised, hung squarely from his lean shoulders. His features were indistinguishable, but the raucous voice which accosted her was that of Hiram Blake.

"I guess, ma'am, that your business must be considerable to bring you here at this time of night."



"I have come to see Mr. O'Neill," Althea answered boldly. "My business is important. I must speak to him at once. You have seen me before," she added, pushing back her hood. "My name is Althea Stanmount." As she spoke, Althea stepped over the door-sill and slipped passed the American.

He made no attempt to stop her. Peering forward into the night, he satisfied himself that she was alone. Then he shut the door, rebolted and locked it, putting the key into his pocket.

Althea saw that she was at the mercy of possibly desperate men. But the purpose within her allowed no room for trivial fears. She detected a gleam of cynical approbation in the deep-set eyes which watched her.

"I am not afraid of you," she said simply. "Only let me see Mr. O'Neill."

The American gave a dry laugh.

"I reckon, ma'am, that when an adventuresome fly walks into a spider's web, that fly's got to take the consequences. Come this way, if you please." He opened another door at the end of the passage, and led her into a small square hall warmed and lighted by an oil stove with a large, red, pyramid-shaped chimney-glass. This cast a lurid glow over the place. It showed, fronting Althea, a narrow staircase and two doors with an oak dresser set between. Hiram Blake seemed considering whether he should take her into the room to right or left. She heard a murmur of voices in the room to the left, but he opened the right-hand door, and she stood in the middle of the floor while he fumbled for matches.

"Oh, please be quick," exclaimed Althea. "I want

you to tell Mr. O'Neill that I have come to see him on urgent private business."

"Mr. O'Neill has got some urgent private business of his own on just now," retorted the other imperturbably, as he turned up the gas; "but I'll see what can be done."

Althea waited, still standing. She gazed about her with feminine interest, taking in the outline of a piano, a writing-table, and sundry things that gave the general impression of a bachelor's sitting-room, an impression confirmed by the faint odour of stale tobacco. There were some queer-looking weapons and curios; music in sheaves; a portrait of herself in the Oracle's dress. She felt all a woman's curiosity in regard to the surroundings of the man she loved, and her eyes roved over everything that spoke of him. Through the uncurtained French window she could see the river, gloomy and turgid, with red lights here and there brokenly reflected, and she now discerned beyond the dim space of garden and of flagged walk, partially trellised, the square shape of what seemed a boat-shed on the river's marge. Then her attention was abruptly distracted. She became aware of voices in the next room, and she saw that there was a curtained space in the wall, denoting folding doors. It was through these that the voices came. She could not distinguish the words, but there was no mistaking Hiram Blake's hoarse, metallic accents above the guttural murmur of dissentient tones. Then O'Neill's rich voice broke in, and a moment later the door through which she had herself entered, reopened, and O'Neill stood before her. He shut the door carefully and came towards her, his arms extended. She flew to his breast. Again she was held close to him.

Again her heart was beating against his. Nothing else in the world mattered.

"Oh, Ladislav!" She spoke betwixt his passionate, agonised kisses. "I have come to tell you that I will be yours—I *am* yours—utterly, absolutely! I will agree to anything you wish. But I could not wait till to-morrow. I felt that I must come to you. I could not wait for you to come to me, dearest! because—because I was frightened. Your eyes frightened me. You looked so desperately sad this evening. What was the matter, Ladislav?"

The words poured forth in a broken torrent, her arms about his neck.

"You made me feel quite afraid," she went on, as he did not answer. "I kept thinking of all the strange things you said to me that night when I sent you away and you spoke of my decision being irrevocable. It was not irrevocable, Ladislav. How could it be irrevocable when you know I love you? You understand that, don't you, dear? I love you as I have never loved—never could love—anyone else. And a little while ago when I was alone in my room it came over me that you were in danger—that something might really happen to separate us if I did not come to you at once. So I came! You wanted me, didn't you, Ladislav? Why do you look so strange?"

"I have only just been wakened from sleep, Althea," he said gently. "I was dreaming of you—dreaming that you would come to me."

"That was not strange. But why were you asleep, Ladislav? Oh! I know it is past midnight, but you are fully dressed," and she stroked the rough sleeve of the dark tweed suit he wore.

## THE MYSTERY WOMAN

"Sleep was necessary for me, so they gave me something to make me sleep," he said evasively. "I have to be out—and away by dawn. Meanwhile—thank God! I slept soundly. It is said that condemned men must sleep soundly the night before their execution, or they would go mad."

"Their execution! Then it is true—you *are* in danger?"

"Yes, it is true—I am in danger."

"I thought so. Mercy on us! What is the danger? Tell me quickly, Ladislav. What insane deed have you done?"

He smiled sadly.

"Nothing, yet. The insane deed is not yet accomplished."

"Then I am in time," she exclaimed joyfully. "It is not too late!"

"Alas, yes!—it is too late. There was but one way in which you might have claimed my exemption."

"From what? From whom? From those men I saw you with this evening? Does that horrible American hold your fate in his hands?"

"Do not abuse him, darling. It is to him that I owe this last, sweet meeting with you. The others would have refused it."

"But this is too monstrous! Are those men almighty that they should dare to divide you and me?"

"No power can do that, beloved. We are one for all eternity."

"Oh! Eternity is far off! I want you now. Who are these men that they should presume to keep you from me?"

"They are, like myself, servants sworn to obey orders."

"Whose orders? I have the right to know."

"Your right was admitted, Althea, when I asked you to go with me and claim my release—as my promised wife."

"Oh! Do not torture me. Tell me what orders they are that you must obey?"

"They are those of a Council which rules a great secret organisation. An organisation for the advance of freedom and the suppression of wrong."

"Oh, I know. Some absurd society with ridiculous rules and regulations which you could not explain."

"I have explained to you all that I dared to explain," O'Neill answered patiently. "I told you that certain members without tie of wife or young children—of whom I am one—have bound themselves by solemn oath to strike at tyranny when the word is given. The word has been given, and last evening the lot fell upon me."

Althea shuddered. His earnestness was deadly. She could scarcely believe him serious, even now, but his face wore the look of one whose whole existence is merged in a single immense ideal; Althea felt painfully that for the purposes of that ideal even she was to be pushed aside.

"Last evening," he went on, "your own inner senses were opened to the vision and the cry which a few hours hence shall pass through England—a cry like that which rang of old in Egypt when Jehovah destroyed Pharaoh's hosts, so that the oppression of the taskmasters might be lifted, and the people that were afflicted go forth free."

Althea stared in amazement. She knew Ladislav O'Neill to be an enthusiast, and felt it possible that he might be misguided by his artistic temperament and

his gipsy blood. It was evident that he had socialistic tendencies, but he could not be a foul plotter, an assassin ! She attempted to argue with him indulgently.

" Dearest, love of liberty and hatred of wrong must be in your blood. But we are in England, Ladislav, where political plots are unknown. We are not in Russia or Poland or Hungary—where people are constantly striving for freedom, I'm told. And who can blame them ? But Nihilism is abhorrent to sane minds. Don't ask me to believe that you could be persuaded to take any part in Nihilist iniquities."

" You call Nihilism an iniquity ? " he said. " Is it not conceivable to you that there are Nihilists, as you term them, who are reformers and voluntary martyrs for their cause ? Men such as Socrates and Bruno and Savonarola, and scores besides who were reformers and martyrs. There are leaders of the human race even to-day who have outgrown its swaddling clothes—surgeons of humanity who do not shrink from using the knife, because they know that only thus can cancerous growths be removed. Men of action, Althea, who realise that under the existing order of things there is no course but to strike boldly at the root of systems which tend to tyranny."

" But there is no tyranny in England," she exclaimed. " England is a free country. England has always championed freedom."

O'Neill laughed bitterly.

" England ! Has England not murdered her heroes ? Does she not punish the innocent, and lay burdens on the shoulders of the weak ? England crushes her workers with ill-paid labour and lets her little children cry for bread. Are not her police-courts and her public offices

filled with the fruit of injustice and wrong? Is not England to-day shedding the blood of her sons in an unholy assault on freedom? The sole hope of the country, Althea, lies in revolution. Such a revolution as knelled the hour of France's empire a hundred years ago! But it is her inept government which has doomed her monarchy. I am only the instrument chosen to carry out its doom."

Althea caught her lover's hand and pressed it frantically to her cheek.

"Good heavens, Ladislav! What are you talking about?" she exclaimed. "How *can* you speak so? Everyone loves our monarch. Besides—his reign has only just begun. He has always been the prince of English gentlemen. He may prove the finest of English kings."

"I am not speaking against the King," replied O'Neill stubbornly. "I have nothing whatever to say against anyone—man or prince. But we, who think most of the future of the people, consider that England has been a monarchy too long. The day of the anointed ruler is over. The voice of the people must be heard. See—I, too, can prophesy, my Cleino!" He caught Althea by the shoulders and gazed deep into her horrified eyes. "I, the insurgent Ion, who strove even in Delphic days for his country's freedom! Who failed for love's dear sake and died—to live again and strive again. To fail once more, perhaps—the gods alone can tell! At all events, in failure or in conquering, to die! And I prophesy that before the sun has set this day the fate of Ion, if not of England, will have been decided."

Faint with fear, Althea leaned against him.

"You mean that if you do not do this deed——?"

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"The men you saw—my associates—are sworn to cut me down without quarter. But I shall fulfil my pledge."

She trembled violently.

"Is it to be when the King opens Parliament to-day—at Westminster?"

O'Neill nodded.

"But how?" whispered Althea.

"A bomb will be laid under the House of Lords. We have a confederate whose place I take. The plans are well arranged."

He laughed harshly, and she uttered a laugh which was the hideous echo of his. How could he imagine that this crude Guy Fawkes scheme could succeed? she wondered. But with a sharp pang she reflected that the absurd and impossible sometimes come to pass.

"It is to be while the King reads his speech," went on O'Neill. "When all Parliament is listening. There is but a narrow boundary, beloved, between the visible and the unseen. We are alive one minute, but who can ever say that we shall be alive the next? This means a change, not necessarily an end, though the entire Constitution of England will probably be blown away in a breath—only the wreck of a dynasty left."

"My God!" Althea shuddered from head to foot. Swift revulsion seized her. She snatched herself away from the madman's clasp, and stood, swaying giddily—the whole black horror of the affair gradually revealing itself. She was the Oracle once more, and the vision and the warning of which in her normal state she had no recollection came back upon her in all its dreadful meaning.



Tottering a few paces, she clutched at the nearest thing for support. It happened to be the curtain which veiled the inner doorway, and as she hung upon it, she could hear again the murmur of voices into which broke Hiram Blake's strident tones. Very soon the jailers' patience would become exhausted, and her interview with O'Neill be cut short.

She saw that he had been struck by the same fear, for his face had changed. He was gazing at her with the anguished gaze of one who looks his last upon that which he loves best on earth.

"Althea!" he said, "our time is growing short. Do not shrink from me, beloved."

She mastered herself with difficulty and put her hand in his, but her eyes went round the room with the piteous stare of a trapped creature. There was no available egress except through the French windows to the garden. Beyond that lay the river. A desperate purpose began struggling in Althea's brain. She crept quickly to the French window, pulling O'Neill with her, and turned the handle. It yielded to her touch. A gust of cold air stirred the fur on her cloak. He drew close to her.

"What are you doing, Althea? You cannot go that way."

"I am not going—yet. I shall stay—to the end—unless they drive me from you. But I cannot breathe here. For Heaven's sake come into the garden, Ladislav. I hate to think that they are waiting behind those doors." She signified the curtained doors behind her with a rapid gesture. "At least, let us have our farewells in peace."

He followed her unsuspectingly. They stepped softly out upon the flagged path.

' I want you to tell me how you will carry this—message of death," she whispered.

" By water," he answered briefly. " You have named it well—the message of death."

" Show it me, Ladislav," she pleaded. " I want to see the—the dreadful thing. I've a foolish fancy to see it. Indulge me to-night, dear. It is our last, remember. There is no to-morrow for us. Come !"

She lured him along, holding his hand. In the dim patch of garden the surrounding trees seemed like grim monsters guarding the place. The house was evidently old, with few windows. The lower ones were partly shadowed by the broken trellis covered with dank ivy which enclosed the flagged walk leading to the river. Althea noticed that the casement of the room next the one in which she had been, was curtained closely. She drew a deep breath of relief. Her mind was working with extraordinary rapidity. She went noiselessly toward the river bank. At the water's edge she could see the low, heavy outline of a barge moored endways, and beyond that again a small boat rocking on the advancing tide. She turned to O'Neill, pointing :

" Is it there ? "

He nodded silently. He seemed half dazed. They were at the door of the boat-shed, and she pushed it, but it did not yield. He fumbled in his pocket, drew forth a key and turned the lock.

" This is our workshop," he said simply.

Althea looked eagerly around. The building was filled with the implements of a laboratory, carpenter's shop and forge. Clearly, a good deal of mechanical business was accomplished therein. A second door, which

was ajar, opened on to a tiny landing-stage, and steps descending to the river.

They stood upon the landing-stage. Althea had been caressing O'Neill's disengaged hand. Now she let it go and sprang unexpectedly upon the barge. He followed, remonstrating.

"Be careful, Althea! There is risk, my dear. You must not forget what is at stake."

"I am not likely to forget what is at stake," she answered between a laugh and a sob. "The fate of an empire—many innocent lives—and more. Oh! much more to me!"

As she spoke, she stooped down near the middle of the deck. She had discovered a trap-door with a heavy iron ring. She tried to pull this up.

"No, no," he cried. "It is not there."

"Where, then?" She peered to right and left over the dark spaces of the barge. Then she darted to its broad stern, near which the little boat rocked, tethered by a rope.

"It is here!" she exclaimed, and bent over a small square object which lay covered by a piece of tarpaulin. Althea picked it up—a wooden box with stout metal clamps. She raised it in her arms triumphantly.

"This is it, is it not, Ladislav? I am sure it is. This is the message of death."

"Put it down!" he cried hoarsely. "You don't know what you are doing. You might damage the thing—you might set the machine in motion any moment. Put it down, Althea—put it down!"

"I shall not put it down," she said desperately. "I came to save you to-night, Ladislav, and though I

don't know how. I can at least prevent your doing this dreadful deed."

He dared not seize her, lest some untoward movement should jar the machine and precipitate a catastrophe. Althea read the thought in his mind, and holding the box close to her breast, she eluded him and stepped carefully back to the other end of the barge. She balanced herself upon its flat ledge and looked anxiously from side to side. Her cloak fell from her shoulders, showing her slender grey figure outlined against the dark stream. Her gaze went wildly round the scene in a vain search for help.

During the next moment or two, time seemed still for Althea. The dull, red lights on the shore receded. The dull, dark roof of heaven, sprinkled with pale stars, blotted out past and future. Life, she knew, with deep inward conviction, was one eternal Now, its deep abysses as well as its fairest dream-fields lit by love—that fire divine, that is as the breath of the soul. And the soul itself passing through phase to phase, from sphere to sphere, reproducing experiences in order to acquire perfection, is sublimely eternal—a flame of that greater Fire that never can be quenched.

She turned to O'Neill, full of spiritual exaltation. The vivid glimpse of wider issues had given her a sense of courage and enlightenment. Then she perceived the three dark figures hurriedly approaching the little landing-stage. Against it, the barge swaying with the tide tipped unsteadily and Althea had some difficulty in keeping her balance. She saw the gleam of three daggers bare in the starlight, and knew that the moment had come when there would be that change of which Ladislav had spoken, a change, but not the end—and it would not be for

England, but for her and him. Yet just an instant, as Hiram Blake's strident tones rang out, Althea thought she must be dreaming. It could not be that this meant death.

But the commonplace words were significant.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am, only we don't like darned interference of this sort. May I trouble you to put down that plaything, and step across here."

Althea looked at the infuriated man quickly and looked away again. Her nostrils were dilating, her breath came in broken gasps.

"Ladislav!" There was womanish terror in her voice. "You won't let them touch me?"

He was already at her side.

"Give me the box, Althea. It's all they want. Then they won't harm you, dear."

For answer Althea turned to the water. She stooped over it. There was a swift, sidling movement, and the case, released from her hands, fell clear of the barge, straight down into the river.

As it disappeared O'Neill uttered a fierce imprecation, answered by curses from the landing-stage. Led by Hiram Blake, the three jumped upon the barge. It rocked beneath their weight.

Quick as thought, Althea darted back—on to the little boat. "There is still a chance if you can cut this rope," she cried. "Save yourself and me, Ladislav."

He sprang after her, but the tiny craft, built for speed, could ill sustain such movements. Its rowlocks dipped to the water's rim. Close behind came the avenging Three, their gleaming daggers raised. Deep below the sluggish river rolled.

"There is only one way, beloved," exclaimed O'Neill.  
"Will you come?"

Althea lifted her face and kissed him in full sight of those following.

"To the end of all things," she answered, and he wrapped his arms around her as though they would never loose their hold.

Then he leaped.

"Holy Moses!" exclaimed Hiram Blake.

The little Frenchman screamed voluble oaths.

The yellow-haired man pulled his beard and said nothing, for he was inclined to be sentimental, and the incident came as a shock to him.

All three stood staring blankly at the disturbed surface of the water where the ripples were widening. And this was what they might have seen:

Two misty Shapes that rose from the river and floated up into the early morning sky. Against its purplish, star-sown canopy they rose, clinging together, and soared towards the east, where a sheet of pale pearly light was spreading softly, illuminating the far distant reaches of space.

And the happy Shapes soared on, never dreaming they were dead.

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