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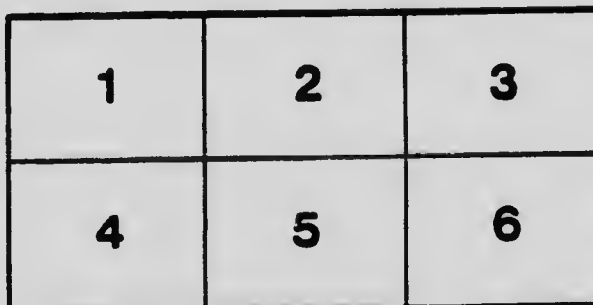
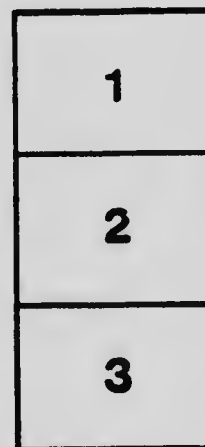
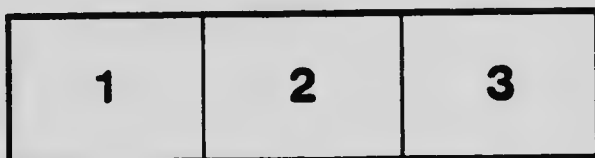
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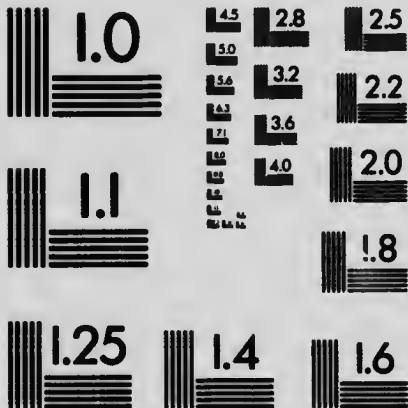
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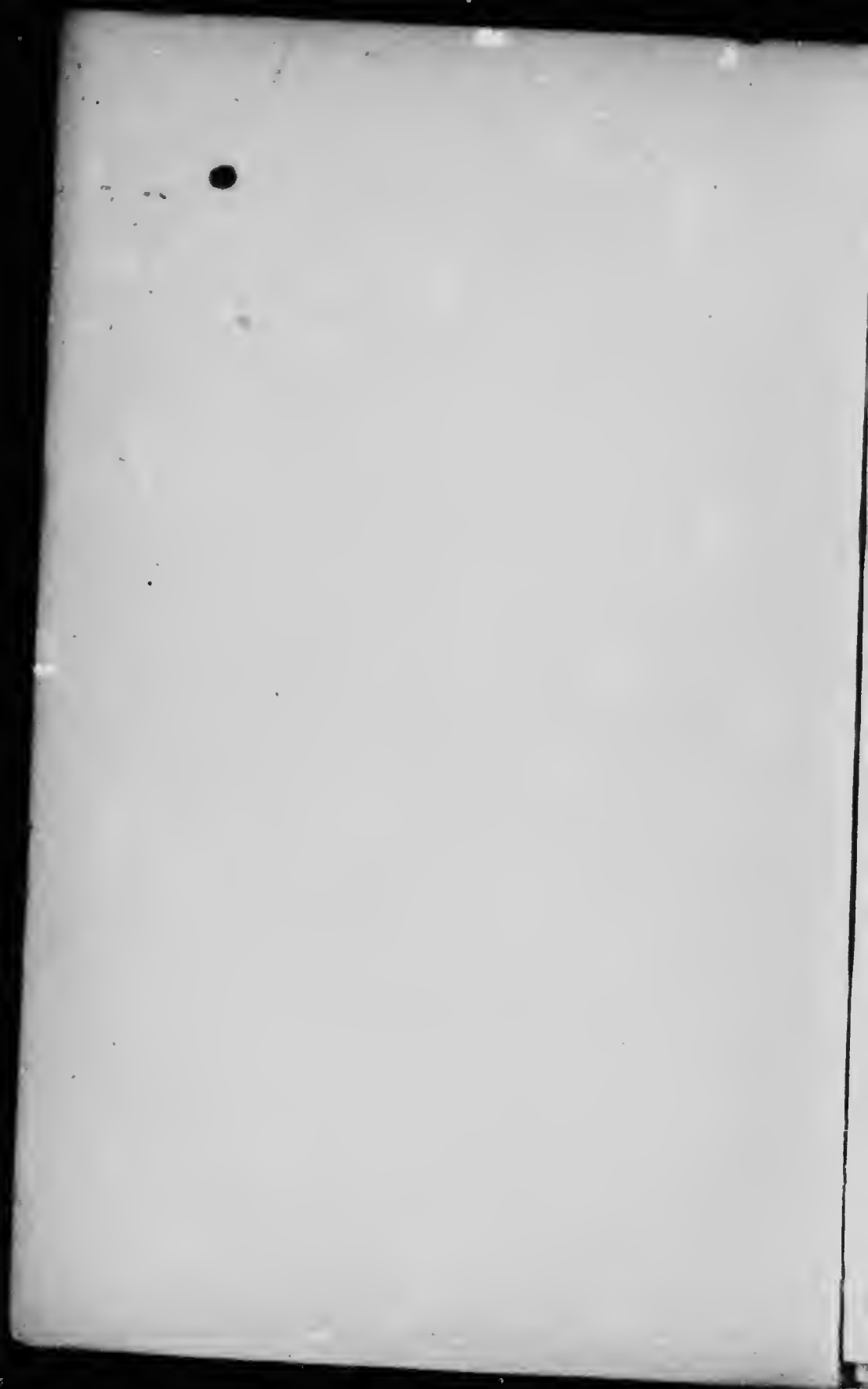
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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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THE RUGGED PATH
DIANA AND DESTINY
IN CUPID'S CHAIN
JUST A GIRL
NANCY
HER HEART'S DESIRE
A CORONET OF SHAME
THE OUTCAST OF THE FAMILY
ONCE IN A LIFE
LORLIE
STAUNCH AS A WOMAN
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THE SPRINGTIME OF LOVE
A PASSION FLOWER
THE BEAUTY OF THE SEASON
THE EARL'S DAUGHTER
THE SCRIBBLERS' CLUB

London : HODDER & STOUGHTON

THE HEART OF A MAID

BY

CHARLES GARVICE

AUTHOR OF "JUST A GIRL,"
ETC., ETC.

TORONTO

THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY LIMITED

LONDON: HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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CHAPTER I

THE BOY HERO

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that the village school of Summerleigh had recently been fitted with all the latest and most improved dodges for ventilation, the girls' class-room was, at half-past four on an afternoon of early June, decidedly stuffy and airless.

School had been dismissed, and Miss Angelica Todd, the mistress, gathered together the papers and books on her desk with a sigh which was expressive of relief alloyed by impatience and irritation; for though she longed to escape from the room from which a score of hungry young lungs had seemingly sucked all the air, she could not leave her post, because she had to keep watch and ward over one girl who had been kept in to do an imposition.

This girl was seated at her desk, busily engaged in her penal task. She was fifteen, a thin slip of a girl, all legs and wings, and she was the most troublesome of Miss Angelica's flock; though no one who regarded her at this moment would have suspected the fact, for when Cynthia Drayle's face was in repose it had something of the serenity of that of an angel, one of the dark-haired, grey-eyed angels of the early Italian masters. Her forehead, upon which the hair grew low, was smooth and unpuckered; there was no sign of fretfulness in the soft, girlish lips, her grey eyes were placid and unclouded; it was evident by her attitude and expression that she admitted the justice of her sentence, and was working it out steadily and methodically.

Every now and then her hair, having escaped the bondage of its ribbon, fell partly over her face, and she put up an ink-smearred hand to thrust it back. Only once did she glance up wistfully at the nearest window through which the sun was streaming; but her glance met that of Miss Todd's gloomily meditating one, and her eyes returned to the copy-book with grave serenity.

There was something in the girl's attitude and manner which began to get on Miss Todd's nerves; and presently she stepped down from her platform, marched with a schoolmistress's dignified gait to the girl, and looked over her shoulder. Cynthia continued writing, "It is rude and unladylike to thrust out one's tung."

"That is not the way to spell 'tongue,' Cynthia," said Miss Todd severely. "It should be t-o-n-g-u-e."

"Oh, should it?" said Cynthia, with surprise and a little *moue* of disgust. "It's ever so much longer a way, and it doesn't look any nicer."

"That is a matter of opinion," observed Miss Angelica stiffly. "You will be good enough to write the word in the proper manner," she added, as she left the girl's side and passed into an adjoining classroom, where the pupil-teacher was tidying up.

"Aren't you coming out, Miss Todd?" the latter asked deferentially. "It's beautiful out of doors, and I'm longing for a breath of fresh air."

"So am I," said Miss Todd with a sigh, "but I can't come yet; one of the girls has an imposition."

"It's Cynthia Drayle, I suppose?" said the pupil teacher. "She's always getting impositions. I'm glad I haven't much to do with her. I can't make her out; I mean," correcting herself primly, "I do not understand her."

"You share that misfortune with others; with me, at any rate," said Miss Angelica, with another sigh. "I, too, do not understand her. She is always doing

something for which one has to punish her ; and yet one can't help liking her."

"She's very pretty, certainly."

"Yes," assented the head-mistress. "I'm afraid she's going to be very beautiful. But I was not thinking of her looks, but of her disposition. With all her love of mischief, I am convinced that she is the best-natured girl in the school ; and she is certainly the most popular."

"Especially with the boys ; they are always ready to do anything for her ; she is quite the favourite. It's a pity she's so troublesome. Don't you think, Miss Angelica," the pupil teacher suggested somewhat timidly, "that it is owing to her bringing up ? She has not had the advantage of a mother, like most of us ; I mean a mother to care for her when she was growing up ; and she's lived alone with that queer man, her father, in that solitary, out-of-the-way place on the hills. Depend upon it, Miss Angelica, it's the strange way she's been brought up that makes Cynthia misbehave herself."

"Probably," responded Miss Angelica. "She is to be pitied, poor child." She looked wistfully at the opened door. "I think I will let her go now."

She returned to the other room and went up to the girl.

"Let me see how many lines you have done," she said gravely. Cynthia handed up the copy-book and stretched her angular self. "I trust you will remember the admonition you have been writing, Cynthia," said Miss Angelica severely. "Will you give me your promise never again to be guilty of such intolerable rudeness and vulgarity ?"

Cynthia pondered for a moment, with her head on one side ; then she raised the black-fringed eyes to the mistress's face and said demurely and gravely,

"I don't think I'd better promise, Miss Todd, because if Lucy Grimes were to make another ugly

face at me I'm almost sure I should forget the promise and put my tongue out at her. You see, it's so easy; it slips out before you know it. And I don't like giving a promise," she added slowly and thoughtfully, "unless I am quite sure that I can keep it. Father says that making promises is tempting Providence. I don't quite know what he means——"

"It is of no consequence," interrupted Miss Angelica quickly, but with dignity. "You may go now."

Cynthia sprang to her feet, stood on tip-toe, and stretched her arms out to their full length; then, as Miss Angelica's prim lips parted for a rebuke, Cynthia let her arms fall suddenly, and stood with her hands clasped before her in the attitude proper to a well-mannered school-girl; but suddenly her sharp eyes noted that the demure ribbon under Miss Angelica's spotless collar had become almost untied, and quickly and not ungracefully the long, thin hands went up to the ribbon and tied it in its formal little bow. There was something so fearless, so forgiving, in the little act that Miss Angelica's soft heart melted, and murmuring, "Thank you, my dear," she kissed the up-turned face.

In an instant Cynthia's arms went round her, gave her a hug, and, with a low, rippling laugh, the worst-behaved girl in the school almost ran into the lobby, snatched up her tam-o'-shanter and, leaping down the three outer steps, ran towards home.

"Home" meant to Cynthia an old and roomy cottage—it was not large enough to be called a house—on the side of a hill divided from the village by a valley or coombe of remarkable beauty; indeed, the whole place was beautiful, with a variety quite startling in its extent: wide, stretching moors, woods of rich and fragrant pines, emerald meadows, shady lanes. From the hill-tops one could catch glimpses of the sea.

As a rule, scenery does not appeal to the very young; but Cynthia was rather a singular girl, and it may be

said safely that she never went to or from school without feeling, perhaps in a sub-conscious way, the loveliness of the countryside, and that something in the child's immature mind responded to all the moods of the nature around her.

This afternoon, for instance, the warmth and the sunshine seemed to get into her young blood; and she wanted to sing, and did so. As she ran down the slope to the narrow footbridge which spanned the stream the song ceased; for there, leaning on the single handrail of the narrow plank bridge, was a boy whom she knew well and, if she did not exactly fear, disliked greatly.

He was a boy of her own age, a heavy, hulking lad, with a big head and clumsily-formed features. His name was Sampson Burridge, and he was the son of an attorney who had practised for some years in the neighbouring town of Dursley, but had recently retired and built himself a very ugly and pretentious stucco house on a conspicuous site in Summerleigh. Though he had ostensibly retired from business, the elder Burridge acted as agent for Sir Anson Frayne, of Summerleigh Court, and was said to be still, in a secret and stealthy way, engaged in money-lending, by which, it was generally believed, he had acquired his wealth.

He was not popular in Summerleigh, and was rather like a fish out of water there; for the gentry would not associate with him on anything like equal terms, and, of course, he would not condescend to make friends of the farmers and the tradespeople. The boy, his son, too, was unpopular with his schoolfellows, for, knowing that his father was sufficiently well-off to send him to a higher school, Sampson gave himself airs; besides, he was a loutish boy, who took no part in cricket and football, and found his chief amusement in bullying his smaller companions.

Ever since he had first come to the place, he had

pestered Cynthia with the rough and altogether unpleasant kind of attention characteristic of a boy of his nature, and expressed the attraction she had for him by alternate teasing and a loutish kind of persecution. Cynthia avoided him whenever she could do so, and now, as she saw his awkward figure there on the plank which served as a bridge, she looked about her for some way of escape; but she knew that she would have to cross the bridge to reach the cottage, and Sampson, too, knew it, for he stretched his gash of a mouth into a smile, and his small eyes twinkled tauntingly. Cynthia was not afraid of him, and, with her brows drawn straight and her lips set tightly, she went slowly down towards the bridge.

"Hullo, Cynthia!" he said. "Been kep' in again? My! you're always in trouble! Shouldn't wonder if you was expelled one day. But there! I rather like you for it; it shows you've got some spirit; you're different to the rest of the girls; they're a puling lot. Yes, I like you, Cynthia Drayle. Here, give us your bag of books; I'll carry it up the hill for you."

Cynthia's hand closed tightly on the bag, and she shook her head decisively.

"No, thank you, Sampson," she said. "I can carry it myself."

She stood at the end of the plank waiting for him to come off, so that she might cross; for there was not room to pass him; but Sampson leant against the rail, stuck his hands in his pockets, and thrust his feet forward, completely barring the way.

"You're uppish to-day, Cynthia," he said tauntingly; "got a temper on you, I suppose, because you've been kep' in. Give me hold of the bag and come along; you're late already, and you've got to get the tea; for you don't keep a servant, not a regular one, do you?" he added with a sneer.

"Yes, I am late," said Cynthia, quietly enough, but with a flash of her grey eyes, "so please move off the bridge and let me pass."

"What'll you give me if I do?" he said, with an uneasy laugh. "I'll strike a bargain with you; you give me a kiss—of your own free will, mind!—and I'll let you go by."

The girl's face went white, then crimson, and her eyes darted lightnings of indignation and loathing at his heavy face.

"I'd rather die," she said in a low voice. "I'd rather stay here till—till Doomsday than let you touch me, Sampson Burrige."

"Oh, we'll see about that," he said, reddening angrily under the scorn of her tone and eyes. "I'm going to kiss you, whether you like it or not; so there!"

He lumbered across the bridge towards her, and there was nothing for Cynthia to do but to turn and fly. She had not much of a start, for he had moved towards her as he had uttered the threat, and had almost touched her; but she was fleet of foot than the ungainly boy, and would have been able to escape him if she had not tripped on a furze root. She did not actually fall; but the pause gave Sampson the advantage, and he was upon her and had flung his arms round her almost before she could utter the cry for help which she tried hard to suppress.

At this psychological moment arrived on the scene a Perseus in the shape of a young lad riding a diminutive pony. They were coming down the opposite hill at a trot, and the boy saw the two figures struggling, and heard the girl's cry; he did not shout in response; he drove the pony hard down the hill, ran it through the stream, and before his presence had been realised by the other actors in the little tragi-comedy, he was upon them, and

with his hunting-crop had dealt Sampson a good, practical blow on the back of his head.

Sampson dropped Cynthia like a hot coal and swung round. The new-comer had got off his pony and stood ready for him.

"Here, girl!" he cried. "Hold my horse. I'll settle with this chap for you!"

The command was issued in the tone of one who was accustomed to obedience; mechanically, Cynthia clutched at the reins with one hand, while she thrust the hair from her face with the other, and, panting and trembling, awaited results.

The two boys looked each other over; the lad with the pony with a cool and critical gaze, Sampson with a covert and cautious eye. He saw that the boy who had so unwarrantably interfered with his amusement was smaller than himself, not shorter, but more slightly built, and Sampson, who was fully sensible of the advantage of weight and muscle, left off rubbing the back of his head and, eyeing his opponent vindictively, began to take off his coat, muttering with sullen ferocity—

"I'll teach you to hit me!"

"You want to fight?" said the other lad scornfully, but cheerfully. "I'm glad to hear it. You're a brute and a bully, and if you hadn't been ready to fight I'd have given you a jolly good whipping."

He threw down his hunting-crop and took off his coat; then, as if he had suddenly remembered her, he turned to Cynthia and said—

"Girl, you take the pony round the hill there, where you can't see. I'll come for it when I've finished with him."

"When I've finished with you, you won't be able to ride no pony," said Master Sampson, with a sneer.

"We shall see," said the lad. "Go away, girl."

But Cynthia shook her head. Now that her rescuer had got his jacket off he looked, to her, very slight indeed beside his heavily built opponent.

"Don't fight him!" she said in a low voice. "And it isn't fair. If you'll stay here while I get away——"

"Oh, she ain't going to save you, don't you fear," cried Sampson tauntingly. "Come on, if you're going to fight; but I expect you're in a blue funk."

The other lad contradicted this assertion in the most emphatic way by striking the first blow, which landed smartly on Sampson's puggish nose. This was the beginning of the battle. It was a good fight; and it was a pity there was not a larger audience and a more appreciative one, for it was, in a sense, a first-rate set-to completely wasted. Sampson possessed weight and strength, but, though he did his best, he could not box. His opponent could, and, while he evaded Sampson's heavily aimed blows, every now and then planted in one of his own which took good effect. Then, again, he was as light and springy on his feet as the Exmoor pony he rode; he was here, there, and everywhere at once, distributing blows on Sampson's head, face, and chest, with a rapidity and directness which were extremely disconcerting to the sufferer from them.

Cynthia and the pony looked on with varied emotions. The pony was at first startled, and tried to make a bolt of it; but Cynthia gripped the reins tightly and managed to hold him. Her face was very white, her lips were parted, her breath laboured and painful. She had forgotten herself, the cause of the fray, and all her thoughts, her fears, were for her champion; for it seemed to her that weight and strength must tell in the end. Every now and then Sampson contrived to get in a blow; and soon blood was streaming down her rescuer's

face—so it was down Sampson's also, but she only shuddered for that on the other lad's.

Suddenly the slighter lad slipped on the close turf, Sampson caught his opportunity, closed with and hugged his opponent with the grip of a bear and forced him back, so that it seemed as if the other one must go down, and Sampson would be victorious; but, as Cynthia bit her lip to prevent herself from crying out, her champion, in some marvellous way, with some movement of his leg, managed not only to recover his position, but to throw Sampson on his back.

It really was a dexterous throw, and delivered with such force and suddenness that Sampson lay prone and gasping like a porpoise. The victor was breathing hard also, and it was some seconds before he could demand of Sampson whether he wanted any more. Apparently Sampson was quite satisfied; for he got up slowly and stiffly and picked up his coat.

"Oh, all right!" remarked the rescuer cheerfully, as he also went for his coat. "It was a fair fight, and I hope you aren't much hurt; though, now I come to think of it, you deserved a jolly good hiding for bullying a girl, and if ever I hear of you doing it again I'll give you another one."

He made this encouraging assertion pleasantly enough; for a decent boy or man always feels friendly towards his beaten foe; but it was not in Sampson's nature to respond, and as he strove to wipe the blood from his swollen face he glowered with his small eyes vindictively at the victor and muttered sullenly—

"I'll make you pay for this. I'll be even with you some way or other. I don't know who you are, and I don't care. My name's Sampson Burrige, and my father will make you suffer for this."

"My name is Frayne, Darrel Frayne," said the

other lad, "and I shan't tell my father anything about it. And he wouldn't worry you if I did."

As he spoke, Cynthia's eyes went instinctively to a clump of trees on the brow of the hill, in the midst of which stood the stately mansion of the squire of the place, Sir Anson Frayne. Sampson seemed impressed by the name; and, still muttering threats of future vengeance, he slouched off.

CHAPTER II

CYNTHIA AT HOME

WITH his coat on his arm and his handkerchief wiping at his face, young Frayne turned to the pony and Cynthia.

"I hope you haven't been frightened," he said with the inoffensive condescension of the superior male. "I told you to go out of sight, but you wouldn't, you know. You'd much better have done so."

Cynthia was still white, still trembling a little; her eyes were downcast; and when she raised them and they fell on his face she shuddered and caught her breath; for it must be confessed that at that moment the lad was an appalling sight. His lip was cut and bleeding freely; one eye was closing rapidly and was displaying several of the more prominent colours of the rainbow; also his cheek was swollen.

"He's hurt you badly," she said with acute dismay.

"Not at all; it's nothing," he assured her, as he dabbed away with his handkerchief. "He's cut my lip—I know when he did it, he broke down my guard—and I think I've got a black eye; but they don't matter. I shall put a bit of steak on the eye, and it will be all right in no time; nothing like steak; we always use it at school."

"You've fought before—you seem to like it!"

remarked Cynthia with feminine surprise and a reluctant admiration.

"Oh, I don't mind," he responded boyishly. "You've got to sometimes, you know. You didn't suppose I was going to stand by and see that hulking chap bully you! What did he do it for? What did he want? Had you been cheeking him?—girls will sometimes."

Cynthia shook her head; but he still seemed to be waiting for a reply, and she faltered out, her eyes lowered, her face crimson—

"He—he wanted to kiss me."

"Did he really!" observed the young gentleman with unflattering astonishment. "Well, he must be a fool. I mean"—hastily explaining—"fancy any one taking the trouble to try and kiss a girl when she didn't want him to! Well, I'm glad I came up. I'll be off now. I was going to ride to Dursley for some fishing-tackle; but I suppose my face would be noticed, and I'd better go home again."

He stretched out his hand for the reins; but Cynthia did not relinquish them.

"Come down to the stream," she said, "and wash your face. You look—horrid; and your father would be frightened."

He laughed at this statement. "Not he!" he said, with a jerk of his head. "It's evident you don't know my governor. What's he got to be frightened at? But perhaps I'd better go and have a wash-up. Come on."

They went down to the stream, and Darrel knelt down at the brink and bathed his battered face. The water felt deliciously cool and reviving, and presently he looked up at Cynthia, who was standing beside him and regarding him with intense interest.

"How's that?" he demanded.

"It's off your face," she said, "but you've still got some on your neck." She hitched the reins on to the rail of the bridge and took out her handkerchief. "Let me," she said; "you won't find the place."

She knelt beside him, dipped her handkerchief in the water, and wiped away the offending stain. The boy endured her ministrations for an impatient moment or two, then he sprang up.

"That'll do," he said. "I'm all right now."

He got the pony; but just as he was mounting he looked at her, with no great interest or curiosity, but as if he had remembered his manners and the claims of politeness.

"Oh, I say," he said; "I didn't thank you for holding the pony. It was very kind of you. And, I say, I think you've no end of pluck, especially for a girl. Might I ask your name?" he added, with an attempt at courtesy which was quite comic.

"Cynthia Drayle," said Cynthia.

"Oh, thanks," he said, regarding her across the saddle. "You know mine. I live up the hill there, at the Court, you know. I only came back last night; and, of course, that's why I don't know you; for you live about here, I suppose?"

Cynthia jerked her head in the direction of the cottage.

"Up there," she said.

"Why, we're kind of neighbours," he remarked absently; for as he gazed at her it struck him that she was rather pretty, as girls go, and he began to have a glimmering of an idea why Sampson had wanted to kiss her. "Oh, well," he said awkwardly, "I'll go now. I say, you won't tell anybody—I mean, I hate a fuss; don't you? But there! I suppose the other chap will go blubbering to his father and will blab it all over the place. Good-bye."

He sprang on the pony, put it through the water, and went up the hill at a canter; but presently he stopped, turned, and shouted down to her—

“Here, I say, you come along! I’ll stop here till you get home. He might come back; though it’s not very likely,” with a grin; “but you can’t be sure; he looked a sly kind of beast.”

She obeyed, and he held the fretting pony in hand until Cynthia, with downcast eyes, had mounted the hill and reached the cottage.

It stood, prettily embowered by trees, on the edge of the moor that rose and stretched behind it. In front of the cottage there was a simple, charmingly simple, garden, running over with ordinary flowers, which filled the air with their perfume; there was an orchard and a kitchen garden at the back; the house itself was old, with low, timbered ceilings, thick doors, and wide fireplaces; it was very comfortable and cosy. Cynthia loved it.

She ran into the kitchen, tossed her hat on the settle, and hastened to get the tea, which she laid on the end of the long table that figures in every Devonshire kitchen.

Presently her father came in from the garden, in which he had been working. Bradley Drayle was a small and neatly made man, with a keen face, calm but observant eyes, and a shrewd mouth, from which proceeded strange and unconventional opinions, expressed with the pleasant cynicism of the modern philosopher. His manner was a singular compound of acute intelligence and natural indolence. The Summerleigh folk liked him, but did not understand him; they said they never knew when he was serious or joking, and were given to shaking their heads when he had departed from them after one of his unintelligible remarks.

Cynthia herself did not always understand him;

she was too young as yet ; but she loved him with a surpassing affection, and these two were all in all to each other—indeed, they almost lived to and for themselves.

Drayle washed his hands at the pump in the outer kitchen, then sank on to the form beside the table with the sigh of a man who is pleasantly tired with congenial work.

“Rather late, Cynthy, aren’t you?” he observed ; then, as he glanced at her, he added, “Anything the matter?”

“Yes,” said Cynthia at once. She never concealed anything from her father ; and he had taught her to tell the truth about even the smallest trifles. “It saves time and trouble in the end, you see, Cynthy ; a liar is the hardest worked man in the world, and gets less for his work than any other.”

“I was kept in ; had to do an imposition—but Miss Angelica let me off half of it ; I like Miss Angelica.”

“What was the trouble?” asked her father.

“Put my tongue out at Lucy Grimes ; she made a face at me.”

“Strange how often our tongue gets us into trouble,” mused Drayle. “It is at once the most useful and the most unruly member we possess. It would be better for some of us if we could go about with our tongues out ; because then we couldn’t speak. But the attitude would not add to one’s personal appearance, I think. Would you oblige me by putting your tongue out now, Cynthy?”

Cynthia, who was accustomed to her father’s strange remarks and always obeyed him implicitly, projected her pink tongue through the pinker lips.

“No,” said Drayle, after regarding her gravely and critically, “it is not an improvement to the human face divine ; put it back, Cynthy.”

"There was something else, dad," she said. "As I was coming home, that horrid boy, Sampson Burridge, stopped me at the bridge and wouldn't let me pass; he wanted to kiss me, and I ran away."

Drayle glanced at a whip hanging over the ancient fireplace.

"I shall have to speak to Master Sampson," he said in a low voice; "speak to him very emphatically."

"There's no need, father," said Cynthia, who had seen the glance; "he has had a thrashing already."

"From you? Did you use a stone in a sling, like David, or stab him with your sharp elbow, Cynthia?"

"No," she replied. "Young Darrel Frayne came up on his pony just in time, and he and Sampson fought; it was a terrific battle, but Darrel Frayne won, and Sampson went off. They were both covered with blood, and Darrel Frayne's lip was cut, and he's got a black eye; but he says that he's going to put some steak on it, and that it will soon be all right. It was very kind of him, dad, wasn't it?"

"Very," responded Drayle. He took a drink of tea, then sat gazing thoughtfully at the cup and rubbing his eyebrow; a habit so frequent with him that, encouraged by the friction, his right eyebrow was much more plentiful than its companion, and gave a peculiar appearance to the side of the face to which it belonged. "Very kind indeed," he said after a pause, "and I am much obliged to him. He has saved me a considerable amount of trouble and an unpleasant task; for though I admit that many of one's acquaintances deserve to be whipped at the cart's tail, I have no desire to be the executioner. I am very much obliged to Master Darrel Frayne—but all the same, I wish you could have chosen another avenger."

"Why?" asked Cynthia with surprise; for, though Darrel's manner towards her had been anything but flattering, she thought him rather a nice boy than otherwise. "Don't you like him?"

"I don't dislike the lad," said Drayle; "but his father does not like me. I am sorry for it, for his sake; because dislike is such an unpleasant and wearing sentiment. It is bad for the digestion; in fact, few things are worse. You see, Cynthy, every time you meet the man you dislike, you have an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of your stomach; the blood runs up to your head, and your nerves are switched off the straight line. It is worse than wicked to dislike a man, especially a neighbour; it is foolish."

"But why does he dislike you, dad? I notice that whenever you meet Sir Anson and bow to him, he only just touches his hat, and always looks another way."

"It's rather a long story, Cynthy," said Drayle, carefully folding a slice of bread and butter and regarding it thoughtfully before taking a bite; "and, like most long things, should be avoided. But perhaps I can condense it into tabloid form. I will not begin with 'Once upon a time,' or 'In the year so and so,' but I will state shortly that Sir Anson wants something that I've got, that I'm not prepared to part with. Permit me to remark in parenthesis, Cynthy, that to want something, and to keep on wanting it, when you know you can't get it, is childish and futile."

"What is it that Sir Anson wants?" asked Cynthia, deeply interested.

"My land," replied Drayle succinctly. "He has what is called the earth-hunger, which, of all hungers, is the most insatiable; it grows on what it feeds upon; the more you have, the more you want. Sir Anson has several thousand acres of land; so many that it would tire and bore him to death to circumambulate it."

"Daddy, what a terrifically long word!"

"I crave pardon, Cynthia. We will say, walk round it. Now, really all the earth Sir Anson wants, or will want in a few short years, will be about six feet by four; just enough to lie down in comfortably. But all the same, he wants to buy my moor land. His father had this same earth-hunger, and did succeed in buying from my father the greater portion of our land; but though my father was very hard up—he took to farming scientifically, or what he thought was scientifically, with the usual result—and yielded so far as to sell a greater portion of the land, he clung on to the moor which I now possess. See, Cynthia?"

Cynthia nodded. "Of course I do, father; but why should Sir Anson dislike you and be angry with you because you won't sell him the land that is left you?"

"Because Sir Anson thinks it is like my impudence to refuse him," said Drayle. "He is a baronet, the great man of the place, the squire; while I am just Bradley Drayle—a yeoman, I think I ought to call myself; though I always picture a yeoman as a kind of giant with a red face and a cord riding suit. Naturally enough, Sir Anson cannot understand why I refuse a good offer; for he has made me a very good one; and he thinks me an obstinate, pig-headed fellow: which, quite between ourselves, I really believe I am."

He paused and held out his cup for some more tea. Cynthia did not speak; for she knew by her father's manner and expression that he had not finished the explanation.

"Then again," said Drayle, looking hard at his teacup, "there was another thing. Your mother—" his voice dropped, there was a slight twitch of his thin, intellectual lips—"your mother— She was a very beautiful girl, Cynthia. I am somewhat puzzled to account for your plainness, my child."

"Perhaps I take after you, daddy," said Cynthia meekly and innocently.

"Probably," assented Drayle gravely, enjoying her unconsciousness of her budding beauty. "Your mother was extremely pretty; and she was a lady, above me in station. She was a Leycester. Ah, yes; you don't know what that means. No matter. Sir Anson had met her, and—I have never heard any one impugn Sir Anson's good taste."

"You mean that he fell in love with mother?" said Cynthia, almost in a whisper.

"He did," replied Drayle. "But she married me."

"I'm very, very glad she did, daddy!" exclaimed Cynthia, with a long breath of satisfaction.

"Thank you, my dear," said her father. "That is one of the nicest compliments that I have ever had paid me. But I must admit that I have not received many. I take it that you wish me to infer that if you had been given the choice of a father—which, when you come to think of it, every person ought to have—you would have selected the humble individual who now addresses you?"

"Yes; I should certainly have chosen you, daddy," said Cynthia emphatically. "But, of course, Sir Anson must have been dreadfully disappointed; though he ought to have forgiven you by this time."

"I agree with you, Cynthia; but I am afraid he hasn't. Here endeth the explanation of the fact that Sir Anson only touches his hat and always looks away when I greet him courteously."

Cynthia looked before her thoughtfully for a minute or two, then she said—

"I suppose you don't want me to have anything to do with young Darrel Frayne, father?"

"Why not?" he replied. "That would be perpetuating, or, rather, imitating, Sir Anson's folly. There is no reason why you should not be friends. Yes; there is a reason, and Sir Anson will doubtless

provide it. You will find that when you next meet young Frayne he will look away and pretend he doesn't see you. Being a gentleman, he will also blush and appear extremely uncomfortable; but all the same, he will remember his father's commands and will cut you."

Cynthia laughed; but her colour rose slightly, and her eyes were downcast.

"Who cares!" she said.

"You do, my dear Cynthia," retorted Drayle; "and I should be sorry if you didn't; because it would argue that you were capable of ingratitude towards your heroic rescuer. But all the same you will return the cut by looking straight before you and pretending that you do not see him."

"I can do that, father, very well," said Cynthia.

"I never doubted it," said Drayle emphatically. "The Committee will now adjourn; a portion of it will return to the arduous task of encouraging the growth of parsnips by the sweat of his brow, and will sweeten his toil with a fragrant pipe. I think I left it in the sitting-room. No, don't trouble, I will get it."

He went into the next room, which, unlike the ordinary sitting-room of the farmer class, was homely and comfortable, because Drayle and Cynthia sat in it in the evenings and did not keep it for show, and got his pipe; but as he was about to light it he paused, laid it down, and, going to an old-fashioned safe built into the wall, unlocked it and took out a paper. He studied this for some time, his lips pursed up, his finger rubbing his eyebrow, then he muttered—

"Is it worth while, I wonder? No, it isn't."

With a shrug of the shoulders and a sigh, as if the decision had brought him relief, he tossed the paper back into the safe, with the air of a man throwing something off his mind. It was a pity, because if, instead of throwing the paper into the safe and off his mind, he had taken it to the lawyer at Dursley,

Cynthia's future would have been made much easier for her, and would not have been tangled up by Fate, who, in playing with the skein of our lives, is sometimes like a playful kitten, but more often like a spiteful cat.

CHAPTER III

DARREL'S FATHER

HAVING waited until Cynthia had reached the point of safety, Darrel made for home. He rode into the stableyard as quietly as possible; for, when you have a black eye and a cut and swollen lip, you do not court observation. Fortunately, the men-servants were at tea. Darrel stabled his pony and, meeting no one, went through the back hall and was stealing up the stairs to his own room, when his father came out of his den, as he called the room where he kept his guns, fishing-rods, and other implements of the chase, and caught sight of the back of his son and heir.

The Fraynes had always been as kings in Summerleigh and the district. Their word had been law for centuries, there was no one to say them nay; the fact that Bradley Drayle, a mere nobody compared with the owner of the Court, should set his will against a Frayne's, was gall and wormwood to the representative of that ancient race, good-natured and genial as he was. It seemed absurd to Sir Anson that a man living in a "tumble-down old cottage" should refuse to sell his land, and, so to speak, defy the owner of Summerleigh Court; and, no doubt, it seemed absurd to Drayle that the owner of a magnificent country mansion and thousands of acres should be nasty because he could not buy a bit of moorland; the great difference between the two men's views of the case lay in the fact that while Drayle could

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see the humour of the affair, Sir Anson's sense of the comic had for once deserted him.

"Hullo, Darrel!" he said cheerfully. "Where have you been?"

"Been for a ride, sir," said Darrel, still mounting the broad stairs and still keeping his back on view.

"Come and have some tea; I'll tell them to put it in the den," said Sir Anson.

"Down directly, father," responded Darrel. As he spoke he turned a corner of the staircase, forgetting that the damaged side of his face was now presented to view.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Sir Anson. "Hi! What's the matter? Here, come down!"

Darrel, with a shrug of the shoulders and a grin of resignation, turned and descended slowly and followed his father into the den.

"Where did you get that face?" demanded Sir Anson, by no means angrily, but with pardonable curiosity.

"In a fight, sir," replied Darrel in a matter-of-fact tone, as if fighting, with its facial results, were a everyday affair with him. "I'll go and have a wash and come down presently."

"I'll be down on a minute," said Sir Anson, seating himself on the edge of the writing-table and swinging his leg. "What was it about? Whom did you fight? Let's have the whole thing, Darrel. My word, but you've got an eye!"

"I know, sir," said Darrel cheerfully; "but there is nothing else the matter. I saw a chap worrying a girl coming home from school, and I had it out with him."

"Of course," said Sir Anson, with prompt approval. "Was he a big chap, bigger than you?"

"Yes; a bit heavier," said Darrel, unconsciously drawing himself up.

"Did you beat him?" inquired his father, with a touch of anxiety.

Darrel nodded somewhat reluctantly; for, according to his code, it was caddish to brag about a victory.

"That's all right," said Sir Anson with a smile.

"Oh, he showed fight all right enough," observed Darrel, with a desire to do justice to his late opponent; "but he couldn't box for nuts; and so I had the pull of him."

"He seems to have got in one or two notwithstanding," said Sir Anson, viewing the injured countenance of his son with expert criticism.

"Yes, he did," admitted Darrel; "and if he had got in one or two more I should have been downed instead of him."

Sir Anson drew a sovereign from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to his son, who promptly pouched it.

"You can buy that new whip you were bothering me about," said this exemplary father. "Now you'd better go and get the cook to give you a piece of steak—all lean, of course—and stick it on; all the same you'll have a nice eye for a day or two. Was the other fellow much punished?" he asked, with poorly affected indifference.

Darrel's grin was answer enough. Sir Anson nodded and laughed.

"That's all right, my boy," he said; "always give as good as you get, and a little better if you can. Well, off with you; I'll wait tea for you!"

Darrel had reached the door when his father stopped him with a question.

"By the way, who was the other chap? Do you know him?"

"I don't know him, sir," replied Darrel; "he said his name was Sampson Burrige."

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The smile slowly vanished from Sir Anson's face, which grew serious, not to say lengthy.

"The deuce!" he muttered under his breath. "Burrige's son. H'm." He rubbed his chin meditatively and stared at the carpet with extreme gravity. "Yes; he's much bigger than you. And he was bullying a girl, was he? The young bouncer! Do you know the girl? Who was she?"

"Cynthia Drayle is her name; she lives at the cottage on the moor——"

Sir Anson sprang from the table, his face flushed, his eyes angry.

"What!" he cried, "Cynthia Drayle! You've been fighting for that fellow's daughter! Confound——!"

Darrel regarded his father with surprise.

"Why not, sir?" he asked. "Why shouldn't I? She wanted some one to help her, and I happened to be there—she was only a girl, and no match for that hulking fellow."

Sir Anson appeared to swallow his wrath; and as he turned away to the window, his hands thrust in his pockets, his face still moody and frowning, he said half apologetically—

"That's all right, Darrel. Of course, you didn't know—I mean, you couldn't help yourself. Her father is no friend of mine. But there! she was a girl and in distress, and you couldn't do any other. All the same"—he rubbed his chin again—"I wish it had been some other boy and some other girl. Sampson Burrige and Cynthia Drayle!" he muttered ruefully. "Never mind; it can't be helped. Confound it!"

Sir Anson mused, with a troubled countenance, until Darrel came down again. He had been under the combined ministrations of the cook, Mrs. Bowles the housekeeper, the butler, and two of the young maid servants, who were terribly shocked and

warmly indignant at the treatment he had received ; for all the servants at the Court admired and were proud of their high-spirited young master, indeed, the maids almost worshipped him ; and one of them actually shed tears as she viewed the wreck which Sampson had made of Master Darrel's handsome face ; but the butler and the footman were somewhat consoled, as Sir Anson had been, by Darrel's admission that he had given as good as he had got.

"The idea of that young Sampson daring to have the impudence to lay a finger on the young master !" said Mrs. Bowles, with a toss of her head and a snort.

"Them Burridges," said Priestly, the butler, severely, "have impudence enough for anything. I hate 'em both, father and son ; and if I catch that Sampson trespassing in the woods I'll lay a stick across his back."

"Oh, no, you won't, Priestly," said Darrel. "Don't be an old ass. It was a fair fight, I tell you. I wish you'd all go away and let me alone ! What on earth is Mary Jane sniffing for ? Any one would think she'd never seen a black eye before. I've had scores of 'em —"

"Oh, Master Darrel," sobbed Mary Jane.

"Well, half a do. . . . said Darrel. "Clear out, all of you ; I'm going to have a bath."

He went down to the den after a while ; and he and his father had tea together. The cloud had left Sir Anson's face—it was never clouded for long ; for he possessed the Irish mercurial temperament, and the enviable capacity of throwing troubles from his mind as a Newfoundland dog shakes the water from its back--and they had a very pleasant meal. Nothing more was said of the fray ; they talked sport, and the boy listened and joined in with enthusiasm ; for he was a true chip of the old block.

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They had just finished the cosy meal when a footman entered and said that Mr. Burr ridge would like to see Sir Anson. Sir Anson's face fell again; he rubbed his chin and looked at Darrel.

"You'd better go, Darrel," he said.

Darrel rose, but hesitated, his face flushing.

"I think I'd rather stay, sir, for a minute, if I may."

"Right!" responded Sir Anson with approval.

"Always face the music, however ugly the tune. Show Mr. Burr ridge in."

That gentleman entered. Josiah Burr ridge was as unlike the ordinary and familiar type of an attorney as can well be imagined; he was neither thin, hatchet-faced, nor weasely; but an immense man, with a huge frame, which, had he been fat, would have made him elephantine. He had a big, round face, with a gash of a mouth—reproduced in Sampson—light blue eyes, with an innocent and almost child-like expression; his huge head was crowned by a reddish thatch; he moved heavily, and walked with a shambling gait, as if his great bones were scarcely under his control; in fact, he looked like a big and somewhat stupid farmer; and only the careful observer would have noticed that now and again the childish eyes grew sharp like steel, and that one corner of the silly-looking mouth had a habit of twitching downwards; for at most times Josiah Burr ridge held his countenance under complete control.

It had been a very useful one to him; for it had inspired confidence in most of his clients, who argued that a man with such a face, though an attorney—a person who is always eyed askance and with suspicion by country folk—couldn't be anything but honest, not to say benevolent; and not a few had left his office under the impression that they had actually got the better of him, and were quite

surprised and chagrined when, later on, they discovered that the boot was on the other leg, and that Josiah Burrige was not so simple as he looked.

As he entered, Burrige stretched his mouth in a smile and bowed, not only to Sir Anson, but to Darrel; and neither of the two noticed the momentary hardening of the blue eyes.

"How are you, Burrige?" said Sir Anson genially; but with just an undertone of anxiety. "Come to see me about this little affair of the two boys, eh?"

"Not at all, Sir Anson," said Burrige with a smile; "though, now you mention it, and Mr. Darrel is present, I may take the opportunity of expressing my regret that Sampson should have so forgotten himself and injured a boy younger and smaller than himself."

Darrel grew red, and stared at Mr. Burrige with a mixture of surprise and indignation; and Sir Anson could not refrain from exclaiming:

"Oh, but from what I hear, Sampson hasn't got off scot free!"

"By no means," admitted Mr. Burrige placidly; "he's about as badly marked as Master Darrel; but he doesn't bear any grudge, and I am sure Master Darrel doesn't."

"Of course not!" burst out Darrel. "I'll fight him again any day he likes," he added with quite friendly generosity, as if to prove the truth of the assertion that there was no grudge on his part.

"No, no, young sir," said Mr. Burrige, smiling and wagging his big head. "Sampson has got something else to do than fighting with his betters; he has his living to get, his way to make in the world. I hope there won't be any more unpleasantness between you.—I stepped up about that lease of Simpson's, Sir Anson."

Sir Anson nodded at Darrel, who went out and

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left the two men alone. Mr. Burrige sat down at the invitation of Sir Anson, drew the draft of a lease from the pocket of his huge, loose coat, and proceeded to discuss the terms. Sir Anson listened and spoke rather absently, and presently he broke in on the discussion and said—

"Look here, Burrige. I think you've taken this affair of the two boys very well. To be quite candid, I expected you to cut up rough about it."

"Why?" asked Burrige, with his eyes wide open; "you weren't angry with my boy, I suppose, Sir Anson?"

"Not a bit," replied Sir Anson promptly. "I am sure it was a fair fight; and it won't do either of them any harm."

"I'm not complaining of Master Darrel," said Burrige, with his eyes on the lease; "boys will be boys, as you say; and, of course, I understand the cause of the quarrel."

"There is always a woman in it, eh, Burrige?" said Sir Anson with a chuckle.

Burrige nodded. "Yes; it was that minx of Drayle's," he said; and there was just a hint of malignancy in his tone. "She's the most troublesome girl in the village; always in mischief and drawing others into it. From what Sampson tells me, she made an unnecessary fuss over a bit of girl-and-boy larking; in fact, she was playing to the gallery, or, rather, to Master Darrel. He's young, and didn't see through her, of course, and, being impulsive and quick-tempered like——"

"Like his father," said Sir Anson, with a smile and a nod. "You're right, I'm afraid, Burrige."

"He took up her quarrel, much to her delight, I've no doubt. She must have enjoyed herself. She's like that father of hers, and wants watching. I've no doubt he's grinning over the affair at this moment; for he bears neither you nor me any good

will; and it will be nuts to him to know that your son and my son have knocked each other about for the sake of his girl."

Sir Anson's face flushed, and he rubbed his chin. Burridge paused to let his words soak in, then said in a casual way—

"I wrote the other day, making him another and an increased offer for his land. He declined it, with his compliments."

Sir Anson grunted. "I felt sure he wouldn't accept," he said.

Burridge gazed before him thoughtfully and with a perfectly vacuous countenance for a moment or two; then he said, rather to himself than to Sir Anson—

"I wonder why he clings on so? The land is poor, and he does nothing with it; and we've offered him twice its value. You'd think that he would be glad of a chance of providing for that young she-cat of his. What's the reason, I wonder?"

"Pride," said Sir Anson laconically.

Burridge shook his head. "I'm not sure," he said meditatively. "Drayle doesn't strike me as being the kind of man who would sacrifice a large sum of money for the mere sake of holding on to a stretch of moorland. I wonder whether he has any ulterior motive?"

"What other motive can he have?" asked Sir Anson in surprise.

"That's what I don't know," said Burridge slowly; and now again his eyes grew hard and keen. "Drayle is a shrewd man, though he plays the part of philosopher. I've got my eye on him, and I shall watch him very closely. They tell me that he has been clearing out the stream-course that runs at the bottom of the moor; I shouldn't be surprised if he diverted it."

"He can't!" exclaimed Sir Anson quickly, up

in arms at once. "It's illegal. I can stop him; and I will do so. You will serve him with a writ." He sprang to his feet and paced up and down angrily. "I won't have it! You tell him, Burrige, that I'll bring an action at once."

Burrige, with a twitch of his mouth, watched his agitated client; and the faintest gleam of satisfaction flashed in the blue eyes.

"Quite so, Sir Anson," he said. "I'll look into the matter; but we mustn't be over hasty; we must proceed carefully and not exceed our rights; we don't want Drayle to crow over us. You may leave the matter to me and rest assured that I will protect your interests."

He rose and buttoned his coat; then, as if suddenly remembering another subject, said casually:

"The interest on Trevecott is overdue, Sir Anson."

Sir Anson cooled down in a moment. "Eh, what?" he said uneasily. "Overdue is it? Tut, tut! I had quite forgotten it. I suppose you can arrange for it, Burrige? Eh, what?"

"Oh, yes, Sir Anson," Burrige replied. "I merely mentioned it."

"That's all right," said Sir Anson with a sigh of relief, as he dismissed the matter from his mind with his usual facility. "Must you go? A glass of wine?"

Mr. Burrige declined, took up his hat and left the room. There was no one in the hall, and he paused, with his hat crushed in his big hand, and looked round with a vacuous gaze. The Court was a very fine building, and the hall might be described, without exaggeration, as magnificent; at any rate, it is one of the finest in the kingdom, and a consistent introduction to the beautiful rooms which open out of it. Vacant as the glance seemed, it took in every detail, the carved panels, the stupendous fireplace of white marble, the oriel stained window, the men

in armour, the antique cabinets, the family portraits by great English masters, the stand of arms and trophies, everything.

Mr. Burrige looked at them all, and appraised them in the keen mind which worked behind those simple-looking eyes of his. The butler entered from the back hall, and Mr. Burrige said suavely :

"How do you do, Priestly ?"

"Very well, I thank you, sir ; hopin' you're the same," responded Priestly with episcopal dignity, as he went to the door and stood beside it in the proper attitude.

"Good day, Priestly," said Mr. Burrige, passing out.

"Good day to you, sir," responded Priestly with additional dignity, adding, almost before the departing visitor had got out of earshot : "Lor', 'ow l'ate that man !"

Mr. Burrige slouched and shambled, like a thin elephant, down the drive ; but at the bend he turned, and looking back at the great house, licked his lips ; very much as a big dog might do at sight of a particularly succulent bone, which he was compelled to leave—for the present.

CHAPTER IV

BOY-AND-GIRL LOVE

HER rescue by Darrel Frayne, and the fight of the two boys, being the most striking incident in her hitherto uneventful life, Cynthia's mind naturally dwelt upon it ; and as she went to school the next day she kept a look out for Darrel ; though no one would have suspected her of doing so ; for, like most of her sex, she possessed the valuable faculty of seeing what was going on around her while apparently keeping her eyes straight.

She wanted to meet him, this son of the great Sir Anson who had the impudence to dislike her father, so that she might look as if she didn't see him ; for she was determined that he shouldn't have the chance of avoiding her ; and she was quite disappointed for that reason, and perhaps others of which she was not conscious, when the day passed without her coming across him. It should be mentioned that, though rather absent-minded over her lessons, her general conduct had been exemplary ; so markedly good that Miss Todd was led to hope that Cynthia had turned over a new leaf, while Cynthia's school-fellows had regarded her with surprise and some misgiving ; for they knew by experience that Cynthia's quiet fits were often the prelude to some outburst of audacity and wildness of mischief, some practical joke of which they would be the victims.

But Cynthia had not long to wait : the following afternoon, as she was coming down the hill towards

the bridge, she saw Darrel seated on the bank of the stream. He was smoking a cigarette with the air of a boy who is doing a manly but rather risky thing; and was so absorbed in the perilous occupation that he did not see Cynthia until she was on the bridge; then he raised himself, and was perhaps so startled—for a boy likes to make his early experiments in smoking in solitude—that he gazed at her and did not for the moment raise his cap.

It was the cue Cynthia was looking out for. She paused for a moment, bent over the rail, gazed at the water absently, then passed on, as if she had not observed the recumbent figure; and she did it so well that she defeated her own purpose; for Darrel, thinking that she had not seen him, rose and called after her—

“Hullo! I say, Miss Drayle!”

Cynthia gave a beautiful little start and looked over her shoulder with an admirable air of surprise; she did not stop, but her pace grew slower. Darrel went after her briskly, flinging his cigarette away.

“How do you do?” he said.

“Oh, it’s you!” returned Cynthia with affected surprise.

“Yes; I thought you didn’t see me,” he responded complacently. “Seen any more of that fellow? I hope he hasn’t bothered you again.”

“Oh, no,” said Cynthia. She had stopped now, and was gazing with a preoccupied air at the surrounding scenery; but, of course, she had looked at his face, and as she saw the remains of the marks of the combat, she felt her mood melting towards her preserver. Besides, it was evident that he had not intended to cut her, that he meant to be friendly, notwithstanding the quarrel between his father and hers.

“Ah, I don’t suppose he will,” said Darrel. “If he does, you tell me, and I’ll give him another hiding.”

He looked at her meditatively : she really was a nice sort of girl ; he had been rather bored before she came up, and he now felt like talking. " I say, are you in any particular hurry ? Come down to the stream for a minute or two ; there's an awful lot of young trout in it ; they're too young to catch, of course ; but it's rather jolly to see them darting about."

Cynthia hesitated ; she wanted very badly to go with him ; but with the instinct of her sex, she wanted to be pressed to do so.

" Come for a minute or two," he said, " and I'll walk up the hill with you afterwards."

With an air of faint reluctance, Cynthia turned, and they went down to the stream.

" You sit down and keep quiet," he said ; " we've startled them, but they'll come back again." He dropped full length beside her, his chin in his hands, his eyes screwed up as he peered into the clear water. " Here they come ! " he said in a whisper.

Of course, Cynthia bent forward, and the young trout, startled, fled again.

" There ! you've driven them away ! " he said. " It's a funny thing, but girls never can keep still for two minutes together. Oh, it's no use waiting ; they won't come back for ever so long." He sat up and took out his silver cigarette case and lit up, with a fine air of familiarity with the operation.

" Do you like smoking ? " asked Cynthia, with interest and curiosity.

" Rather ! " he replied. " Why ? "

" I thought it was bad for boys," replied Cynthia.

" Why do you like it ? "

It is a question which puzzles most men ; and Darrel may be forgiven for looking nonplussed.

" Oh, I don't know," he said ; " it's rather jolly, you know ; it's soothing, and it passes the time ; you can't understand unless you've done it."

" Girls don't smoke," said Cynthia.

"Oh, yes, they do, some of 'em," he said; "but most of 'em can't stand it; it makes them ill, you know."

He presented the information with so superior an air that Cynthia was nettled: whenever one of the girls wanted to stir her up to mischief, it was quite sufficient to dare her to do something dangerous and desperate.

"I don't believe it would make me ill," she said confidently. "Why should it? I'm as old as you are."

No healthy boy could have resisted such a temptation. Gravely, but with a twinkle in his eye, Darrel opened his cigarette case and extended it.

"Try one," he said. "But mind, don't forget that I warned you."

That was sufficient. Cynthia, who a moment before had no desire or intention of experimenting with the goddess, Nicotine, as gravely took a cigarette, and was proceeding to put it between her lips when Darrel arrested the action by crying—

"That's the wrong end! And you must knock it on your hand, like this; it keeps the tobacco together. That's right. Here, I'll give you a light. Don't draw at it like that; pull slowly and softly: that's better."

Cynthia took several whiffs, but though she endeavoured to obey his instructions, the smoke got down her throat, up her nostrils and into her eyes; and though she endeavoured to refrain from displaying her discomfort, she was presently obliged to emit a little cough and to draw her hand across her eyes. Darrel, who had been gazing fixedly at the stream, so as not to embarrass her, turned his head at the sound of the cough: he knew it well.

"How are you getting on?" he asked presently, with affected carelessness, but with a touch of anxiety.

"Oh, first-rate," said poor Cynthia; "but I don't think it's very amusing, or—or very nice."

"Better throw it away," he said earnestly, as he noticed a slight pallor stealing over her face; "it's just as well not to go in for too much of it at starting."

Cynthia stuck to the cigarette manfully for another minute or two; then it dropped from her fingers, and she stared in front of her with a troubled expression.

"There you are!" he exclaimed with much concern. "You're feeling queer. I was sure you would; but I didn't think it would come on so quickly. I say, you're not going to be really ill, are you?"

Cynthia shook her head; she was incapable of speech; and Darrel watched her with a mixture of anxiety and remorse.

"I was a beast to let you try it," he said remorsefully. "But I did warn you, didn't I? I'm awfully sorry! Do you feel faintish and as if something inside you had turned upside down? Look here, I'll sit beside you, and you lean up against me. It will pass off in a minute or two. I felt just like you are doing the first time I tried, and—and once or twice since. It's just a toss up, you know,—and the kind of tobacco."

He drew himself near her; and, in quite a boyish way, would have drawn her towards him; but Cynthia put out her hand and pushed him back.

"I'm coming all right now," she said, with an attempt at a smile; "I shall be all right in a minute or two; don't speak to me or touch me."

"A'l right," he said, not at all offended; and he sat quite still, his gaze averted.

Cynthia quite recovered within the declared time, the faint colour stole back to her cheeks, she stretched out her arms and laughed.

"I think it's beastly," she said. "I can't think what you see in it. And that's the second one you've smoked this morning."

"How do you know?" he demanded quickly.

"Why, you must have seen me when you stood on the bridge! Why did you pretend you didn't?"

Cynthia coloured and bit her lip softly; but there was nothing for it but to out with the truth.

"I didn't know whether you wanted me to," she said. "I thought you were going to cut me; and I waited to see."

"Oh, that was it, was it? You thought that because there was a row on between your father and mine I should shy off you? You must have thought me a cad; it's only a cad that cuts a lady without sufficient cause. I happen to be a gentleman—at least, I hope so. I say, you did it very well; I could have sworn you didn't see me. I'm awfully glad I saw you and followed you. You won't do such a silly thing again, will you? It's rather dull here, and I haven't any pals. I should like you to be a pal of mine, if you don't mind. Of course, it would be better if you were a boy: but"—with an air of noble resignation—"you can't help being a girl; and you're rather a jolly kind of girl, you know. We might go for some walks together; I'll teach you to fish, if you like. But I say," he broke off gravely, "your father won't mind, will he?"

"Oh, no!" replied Cynthia. "It isn't he who has quarrelled with Sir Anson, but Sir Anson with him; and my father says that it is foolish to dislike a person, and that I might be friends with you—if I cared to."

"And do you care?" he inquired ingenuously.

Cynthia shrugged her shoulders in quite the proper fashion; but with masculine complacency, he took her silence for assent.

"Let's shake hands on it," he said.

She slid her long fingers into his extended palm, and he gave her hand a boyish grip and a hearty shake. They sat and talked for some time; that is, of course, he talked and she listened, as is generally

BOY-AND-GIRL LOVE

the way with men and women. He told her about his school and school-fellows, of his first fight, which he described with enjoyment and in detail; and Cynthia was requested to believe that his recent encounter with Sampson was nothing compared with it.

Cynthia listened with an intense interest; he was the first nice, really nice boy, she had met; and he was opening out vistas to her which had hitherto been closed. At parting they arranged a meeting for the morrow; in fact, for a week or more they met every day and became real pals. He brought a rod for her, and taught her to throw a fly; and though the lesson was by no means a gentle one or the teacher patient, Cynthia bore the boyish masterfulness very well; and only looked sorrowful and penitent when he informed her, more than once, that girls were stupid things, and it had always been a wonder to him why they were created.

Cynthia invariably told her father of her outings with Darrel Frayne; and Drayle listened and nodded with his queer, cynical smile; he knew that there was no harm in the lad and none in Cynthia; and to him their boy-and-girl friendship represented a pleasing ideal of childhood.

One evening, as the two were slowly ascending the road which led to the village—they were going to buy chocolate—they heard the roll of wheels behind them, and were overtaken by a post-chaise coming from Dursley; they moved aside to allow it to pass, and stopped to look at it. The ramshackle fly was open, and seated in it was an old lady. She was such an odd-looking person that the boy and girl stared at her open-eyed for a minute.

Cynthia had never seen any one like her. She was richly and extravagantly dressed, with a wizened face, the wrinkles of which showed through a thick coating of powder and paint; she wore a wig which

had got shifted on one side; a valuable diamond ornament sparkled on the bosom of her dress; her fingers were loaded with rings, which flashed as she raised an old-fashioned eyeglass with a handle; warm as was the evening, a cloak of costly fur partly enveloped her, and a bear-skin rug covered her knees.

She leant back in the carriage with the serene air of an old-fashioned aristocrat, and surveyed the surrounding scenery with a kind of complacent toleration, as if she were good enough to rather approve of it. Her eyes fell upon the boy and girl standing by the roadside, and a faint smile curved her withered lips, as if the keen, shrewd eyes had noticed their youthful comeliness and grace. Cynthia still regarded her with wonder; but Darrel, who had seen grand ladies before, was, of course, not so awestruck. Suddenly the old lady said, sharply and impatiently:

“Stop!”

The coachman pulled up his sweating horses with a jerk, and she leant forward very slightly and beckoned to the boy and girl with her gold eyeglasses. Darrel advanced to the carriage and raised his cap; but Cynthia remained where she was, her interest increased, her colour rising.

“Can you tell me how far we are from Summerleigh?” asked the old lady, in a clear, sharp voice which rang a trifle imperiously; but she wrinkled her face with a smile.

“It is quite close; at the top of the hill,” said Darrel.

“I thank you,” she said. “The driver is an idiot,” she added without lowering her voice; “and I was afraid he might go the wrong way. You live here? Will you tell me your name?”

“Darrel Frayne,” replied the owner of it, raising his cap again.

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The old lady stretched her lips in a courteous grin and nodded.

"I know the name," she said. "You come of a good family, young man. Is that your sister?" Her glass fixed itself on Cynthia, who turned her head aside, and so unconsciously afforded a view of the almost perfect profile.

"No," replied Darrel. "She is a p.¹—I mean, a friend of mine."

"Permit me to remark that you display some taste in the choice of a friend," said the lady. "Will you be kind enough to tell that fool on the box to go on. Thank you. Good evening."

The carriage disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving Cynthia and Darrel to discuss its occupant.

"Rummy old lady," he said. "Wonder who she is? She looks like one of the old pictures in the hall at our place. Perhaps she is going there; but no, she would have asked for the Court instead of Summerleigh."

"She looked like a very great lady," observed Cynthia; "but I wish she hadn't stared so hard; she made me quite uncomfortable."

"You should have stared back," said Darrel instructively.

"Well, I did try," pleaded Cynthia; "but she stared so hard, and her eyes were like gimlets through her glasses; and, of course, she's old and been staring all her life."

"Funny old person," Darrel summed up, and they let her slip out of their youthful minds.

They bought their chocolate after a quarrel as to whether it should be plain or with cream, and went down to the stream to eat it; they lingered over it, because it was such a beautiful evening and they were perfectly happy; but at last, declaring for the tenth time that she must go, Cynthia wiped her mouth, sprang up and went

homewards, nodding her head in response to Darrel's shouted :

"Same time to-morrow, Cynthia?"

She was running through the passage to the kitchen to get the tea, when she was arrested by the sound of voices in the parlour. She opened the door, and stood stock-still with surprise; for, reclining in the easy chair, was the old lady of the post-chaise; and opposite her, in his shirt-sleeves and quite at his ease, sat Cynthia's father. He nodded and smiled at Cynthia; the old lady put up her eyeglasses, her face screwed itself into a smile, her lips stretched almost from ear to ear.

"This, of course, is Cynthia? We have met before, have we not, my dear? Good Lord, now I come to look at her, how like she is to Emily!"

"This lady is a relation of yours, Cynthia," said Drayle. "She is your mother's aunt, Lady Westlake."

Lady Westlake nodded, and her sharp eyes ran up and down Cynthia, from top to toe.

"How do you do, my dear?" she said. "Come and kiss me." Cynthia hesitated; she hated the thought of kissing any one, excepting her father. Lady Westlake's keen eyes noted the hesitation; and, with a grin and a slight shrug of the shoulders, she said, "Well, perhaps you had better put it off; for I'm all over powder and dust."

Cynthia, deeply grateful for the reprieve, said :

"I'll get the tea, father," and left the room.

"She is a pretty child," remarked Lady Westlake, when the door had closed. "Thank God, she takes after our family and not yours, Bradley! She is exactly what her mother was at her age, and I fancy—and, mind you, I am very seldom wrong—that she is going to grow into a beauty. All the more reason that you should accept my proposal. A plain, gauche girl might be left to

vegetate here with you; but not a creature like that. Now, just consider; say that I'm right and that she is going to be a beauty; what on earth can you do with her here? She wouldn't have a chance. You would marry her to the village blacksmith or carpenter, or, worse, the curate or the local lawyer. You can't give her a chance. You say that you are poor, and from what I know of you I should say you always will be. You were always eccentric, you know, Bradley; and you appear to me"—she looked round the room and at his shirt-sleeves—"as if you were living like a small farmer or squatter; and were bringing up this girl to correspond. That may be all very well for a Drayle; but you mustn't forget that the girl—what's her name? Ah, yes; Cynthia—has some of *our* blood in her. I don't want to hurt your feelings, Bradley—"

"You couldn't," said Drayle serenely.

"But you must see that it isn't fair to consign her to a life which is not worthy of her. You were always a sensible man—in some things—"

"Thank you," put in Drayle blandly.

"And you must see that I am right. I am all alone in the world, and I am ridiculously rich. As I told you just now, I want some one to keep me company in my old age; if I were sentimental, which I am not, I should say I wanted some one to love. I am willing to adopt your girl; I'll treat her as my daughter, will give her every opportunity of making her way in the world, and will leave her my money when I am gone, which I hope to goodness will be some time hence; for the world is rather a decent and amusing place, and I have no desire to exchange it for one of which I know little or nothing. Upon my word, I think it is a good offer; and, for the sake of the child, I really don't think you ought to refuse it."

Drayle bit at the stem of his empty pipe and rubbed hard at his right eyebrow.

"I don't suppose I ought," he said, very quietly and in so low a tone that Lady Westlake was obliged to lean forward to catch his words. "I suppose it's my duty to help her on in the world. The trouble is that we are very fond of each other. Sounds ridiculous to you, of course; but there it is, and you can't brush it aside. Without extravagance, I might say that we are all in all to each other; I have no one but Cynthia, she has no one but me."

"My good man, do you suppose I don't understand that?" said her ladyship. "And I am not proposing to take her from you altogether—though, mind you, I think it would be the better course—you can come and see her in London or wherever we are whenever you like; and she can come and visit you. I am not the heartless ogre I'm supposed to be. You give her to me and—well, her fortune's made, her future's secured. Look here, Bradley, have you ever thought what will happen to her if you died? Sorry to put it so bluntly, but we are all mortal at present. Things are moving so rapidly that I suppose science will eventually find a way of making us live for ever; but at present we've all got to die; it's a nuisance; but there you are."

Drayle nodded gravely. He was silent for a moment or two; then he said:

"We will leave it to Cynthia."

Lady Westlake laughed scornfully. "Who will, of course, say 'No!' No, my good Bradley, you must make her understand the advantages I am offering her. Come, be sensible for the girl's sake!"

Cynthia opened the door. "Tea is ready," she said.

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"Do you mind coming into the kitchen?" asked Drayle. "We always have it there; and I forgot to ask Cynthia to lay it here."

"Not at all," responded Lady Westlake promptly. "It will be a new and refreshing experience."

She gathered up her long skirts and followed him into the kitchen. During the meal, which she appeared to enjoy, her ladyship laid herself out to win Cynthia. All her life Gwendoline, Countess of Westlake, had been in the habit of ruling people; it was impossible that Cynthia should resist her; and before the tea was over, the girl was listening with all her ears, as she leant forward, her elbows on the table, her chin clasped in her hands, to the voice, the harsh, yet siren, voice of the old worldling.

Bradley Drayle sat silently looking from one to the other. He saw Lady Westlake's game, and, in his cynical way, appreciated and admired the way in which she was playing it; though his heart was sore; for he knew that he and Cynthia stood no chance and that her ladyship would win.

"Now I'm going back to the parlour to have a snooze in that rickety old chair of yours," said her ladyship. "I have been making a proposal to your father. I want you to come and live with me; you and he shall talk it over, and tell me the conclusion you have arrived at when I have had my nap."

"What on earth does she mean, father?" said Cynthia, when the great lady had gathered up her satin skirts and trailed out.

Calmly, repressing all signs of feeling, Drayle told her. Cynthia laughed, and eyed him with surprise and indignation.

"What! leave you, father?"

"Only for a time, Cynthia," he reminded her.

"I shall be all right. And, look here, I want you to go."

"You—want—me—to—go!"

"Yes; because I think it's good for you. And, besides, I'm thinking of travelling for a bit, to places where I couldn't take you. Cynthia, this old lady is your mother's kinswoman; she is a decent sort, and I believe a good-hearted woman, though she does look as if she had come out of a waxwork show; and she can educate you properly, introduce you to the great world to which, mind you! you belong, as your mother's daughter. You can't understand—how should you?—what all this means; but I tell you, Cynthia, that I dare not refuse this offer. You must go, my dear!"

They argued for an hour. At first Cynthia declared that nothing would induce her to leave her father; but gradually he wore down her opposition; and, with tears on her part, and huskiness of voice on his, he gained her consent; but she yielded on the distinct understanding that she should come back the first moment she wanted to do so, and that he should come and see her at frequent intervals.

The following afternoon Darrel went down to the bridge to meet his pal. She did not come; he was very much disappointed and very much bored. With his hands in his pockets and a frown on his face—for at quite an early age your man does not like to be kept waiting—he sauntered down to the roadside. A carriage, enveloped in dust, rolled past him; it contained the 'rum old lady' and some one who actually looked like Cynthia, with a handkerchief held to her eyes; but, of course, it could not be she.

But it was; for, as he was returning to the Court, a groom met him with a letter. Darrel opened it and read:

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"DEAR DARREL,—I am going away with a
relatif. I am so sorry I could not say good-
bye; but she would not wate. I hope I shall
see you again soon.

"Yours sincerely,

"CYNTHIA DRAYLE

"P.S.—Oh, I am so sorry to go!"

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CHAPTER V

CYNTHIA TRANSLATED

CYNTHIA cried, at intervals, nearly all the way to London. Lady Westlake did not attempt to console her; for her ladyship knew that the more quickly tears flowed from young eyes, the sooner the tears ceased; so, enveloped in her furs, she leant back in her corner and looked out of the window, or read the magazines with which the seat of the carriage was strewn, exclaiming "Pshaw!" and snorting at intervals at the literature.

Cynthia was not too overwhelmed by grief to observe what was going on around her; and she noticed that her ladyship demanded and received deference from every one they came in contact with, and that she bore herself as one of the most important individuals in a world specially constructed for persons of rank and wealth; for instance, she calmly held up the train while she sent for a glass of milk for Cynthia, and the guard, though he took out his great watch and paced impatiently up and down the platform, did not venture to offer a remonstrance; for Lady Westlake, unlike some members of her exalted class, looked what she was.

When they reached the great London terminus, the porters, who knew her well, hastened forward obsequiously; not that there was any occasion for their services, because a tall footman in handsome livery was ready to receive his mistress.

"Here we are, Cynthia!" said her ladyship. "If you can leave off crying while we drive through the streets, I shall be obliged; it's an open carriage; and if the people see you mopping your eyes, they'll think I've been ill-treating you and probably give me in charge; you can begin again when you get home, if you like."

This not particularly encouraging speech was not spoken in an unkind tone; and, indeed, Lady Westlake did not mean to be unkind; she was just simply an unsympathetic old worldling who prided herself upon being an eminently practical woman whose one aim and object in life had been, and still was, notwithstanding her age, to get everything she could out of that same life. She flattered herself that she thoroughly understood men and women; and she told herself that any attempt to soothe or console the heart-broken girl would not only prove futile, but increase her suffering. Let her have her cry out—when she got home.

Obediently, Cynthia gave a last mop to her eyes, rolled her handkerchief into a ball which she concealed in her hand, and held down her white and swollen face. It was the first time she had left home and her father, and she bitterly regretted having done so. Then, again, she had not said good-bye to Darrel; the letter was all very well; but she would like to have seen him, to have shaken hands with him, before she departed.

A very large barouche, drawn by a pair of gigantic greys, was waiting at the station. Cynthia thought the coachman must be a very old man, until a second glance showed her that his hair was powdered; so also was the footman's; the whole turn-out was marked by an old-fashioned stateliness and grandeur, which harmonised with the stateliness and grandeur of its owner. The carriage was hung on Cee springs, and to Cynthia, who had hitherto never known anything

easier than a village cart, it seemed as if she were reclining on a movable feather bed.

The equipage made its way through the streets as if it were saying to the passers-by, who gazed at it, "Yes, pray look. We are worth looking at; we are one of the biggest things in carriages and servants, and the lady inside is one of the grandest things in ladies." Now and again they passed some one on the pavement who raised his hat, to which salutation her ladyship deigned a short nod; or they passed another carriage whose occupants bowed and smiled; sometimes the old lady stretched her lips in a responding smile; but more often only vouchsafed the little sharp nod; but presently a carriage came towards them rapidly with servants in blue liveries; a beautiful lady was seated in it, a lady with a serene, placid face and exquisite violet eyes.

Lady Westlake woke up as if she had been galvanised, and bent almost double; and as the lady in the carriage smiled gently and bowed, her ladyship said,

"The Queen, Cynthia. You will know her the next time you meet her; you will bend forward, as you saw me do."

Cynthia gasped. "You know the Queen?" she asked in a voice rendered thick by her sobbing.

Lady Westlake nodded and grinned. "Yes; my child," she said; "and so will you some day, I hope. I devoutly trust she didn't see you, for you are looking a perfect sight. Thank God, here we are!"

The carriage had turned into Belgrave Square, that holy of holies of the aristocracy, and drew up with stately deliberation at a house in the best position, the outer door flew open, two footman appeared with well-regulated alacrity; in the hall stood the housekeeper, a dignified-looking lady in a black silk dress, her customary afternoon attire. Cynthia thought it was another relative, and was prepared to

shake hands ; but the wearer of the silk dress inclined her head respectfully and murmured,

" I hope your ladyship is well ? "

Beside the housekeeper stood an imposing-looking personage with grey hair and side whiskers ; he was in evening dress and reminded Cynthia of the Bishop she had once seen on his way to church to hold a confirmation. She thought that he really must be a relative, or at any rate a friend of the family, and got her hand ready ; but he was only the butler, and he murmured Mrs. Stone's greeting in exactly the same words, the same manner, the same tone.

" Thanks," said her ladyship. " Oh, yes ; I am well ; but I am tired and bored to death. It's been a trying journey." She glanced at Cynthia. " You got my telegram, Stone ? This is Miss Cynthia. Her room is ready, I suppose ? "

" Quite ready, your ladyship. Parsons will wait on Miss Cynthia."

" Go, Cynthia," said her ladyship.

Cynthia followed Mrs. Stone, the housekeeper, up the broad and massive staircase, along a still broader corridor adorned with pictures and lined with cabinets and statuary, up another flight of stairs and into a spacious and very handsomely furnished room. Cynthia looked round her with wonder and pardonable bewilderment ; she had never imagined such a room ; for she had never been inside the Court at Summerleigh, had never known anything larger or more luxurious than her own plain little room at the cottage. A pleasant-faced maid, attired in black alpaca, with spotless collars and cuffs, approached her, exchanging glances with Mrs. Stone as she did so, and began to take off Cynthia's hat and coat ; but as Cynthia attempted to do the same thing, Parsons said—

" Better let me, Miss " ; and Cynthia, with an air of resignation, submitted.

Parsons surveyed the flushed, swollen, and tear-

stained face with barely concealed dismay. She poured out some cold water in the silver basin and gently bathed the face.

"The dust do get in your eyes travelling, don't it, miss?" she said, with a respectful sympathy. "I've always noticed it myself. If you'll let me bathe it long enough, your face will come quite right presently—or nearly right."

Cynthia gave a gulp: she was honest or nothing. "It isn't the dust," she said; "I've been c-r-y-ing."

"Yes, miss," murmured Parsons still more sympathetically. "You can't help it. I always cry when I leave home, or come back from my fortnight: but, lor', miss, you get over it."

"Do you think I shall, do you really think I shall?" sniffed Cynthia anxiously, incredulously.

"Why, of course, miss," said the experienced Parsons cheerily. "You see, you can't go on crying for ever; and there would be no use in it if you could. Besides, her ladyship wouldn't allow it. None of us would dare to do it; you mustn't have even the toothache or headache; it gets on her ladyship's nerves; and very natural, because her ladyship never has anything of the kind herself; and as to crying, I don't suppose her ladyship has cried since she was a baby. But, I beg your pardon, miss, I'm making free with her ladyship. Ah, here's your box," she broke off, as one of the footmen softly deposited the tin trunk on the mat outside and as softly knocked on the door to intimate that he had done so: already Cynthia had noticed that all the movements and speech in this great house were hushed, as if by awe.

Parsons opened the modest box, and, with the slightest elevation of her brows, surveyed the equally modest contents. There had been no time to replenish Cynthia's wardrobe, and her best dress revealed itself in the shape of a plain blue serge, which Parsons, as she lifted it, saw at a glance was too short and small

for its owner ; but, fortunately for Cynthia, Parsons was a good-hearted and good-tempered girl ; and she was able to say without an apparent effort—

“ What a pretty dress, miss ; you’ll wear this, this evening ? ”

“ It’s my best,” said Cynthia ; “ I haven’t any other. I can put it on myself, thank you.”

“ Yes, miss ; but I think you had better let me help you ; I can fasten it up much quicker ; besides, I’ve got to wait on you ; I’m to be your maid.”

Cynthia turned from a somewhat unsatisfactory inspection of herself in the glass and stared at the smiling Parsons.

“ Do you mean that you are going to undress me and dress me always, as you have been doing just now ? ” she asked, her eyes opening with astonishment.

“ Certainly, miss,” said Parsons in a matter-of-fact but pleasant way, “ and do your hair, and keep your clothes neat, and bring you tea in the morning, and wait on you generally.” She put a chair in front of the glass, and Cynthia, still too amazed to remonstrate, sank into it. Parsons deftly threw a wrap round her and proceeded to brush her hair with an ivory brush with a silver coronet on the back : there was a coronet marked or stamped on everything in the room, or so it appeared to Cynthia.

“ You’ve lovely hair, miss,” said Parsons, as she drew the brush through it and handled it admiringly.

“ Have I ? ” said Cynthia. “ I’ve never noticed it ; it’s very troublesome ; it will get into my eyes.”

“ I think I had better do it up into a pig-tail, miss,” said Parsons ; “ with a scarlet bow. You’ll soon be having it up, miss ; and very pretty it will look. Now we’ll put on the dress.”

Cynthia submitted in a kind of torpor, and presently Parsons exclaimed—

“ There ! Shall I put a little scent on your hand-

kerchief, miss?" she asked, as she unfolded one of the useful but coarse squares purchased at the Summerleigh village shop for the modest sum of sixpence-halfpenny.

"I don't know," said Cynthia. "If you like."

Parsons did like; she handed Cynthia the perfumed handkerchief, with as much deference as if it were of cobweb lawn and Brussels lace; then she opened the door of the adjoining room.

"You'd like to wait in your sitting-room, miss, until the bell rings?" She shook up a down cushion on a sofa. "Perhaps you'd like to lie down, miss, and rest."

"But I'm not tired," said Cynthia; "I'm never tired; besides, I've been sitting all day. Is—is this my room too?" she asked, looking round her with astonishment; for the sitting-room was as luxurious as the bedroom.

"Certainly, miss," replied Parsons; "you want your own room; you want a room to read and write in, to sit in when you want to be alone."

Cynthia shrugged her shoulders and gave it up as a bad job. She went to the window. It looked on to the square; many carriages, all of them handsome, but none of them quite so grand as Lady Westlake's, were rolling by, taking people home or out to dinner; beautifully dressed men and women walked slowly along the pavement, as if they had all the time in the world; the height and size of the houses, their imposing porticoes, the richly liveried servants, the general air of wealth and grandeur, stole upon the girl's senses and impressed her with the vastness of the change which had come into her life. Summerleigh, the school-house, the bridge over the stream, the cottage, even her father and Darrel Frayne seemed to have receded miles away, as if she had parted from them months, years, ago, instead of a few hours.

The tears began to well up in her eyes, a lump rose in her throat; but she checked the tears and the sob; for she knew that, as Parsons had said, Lady Westlake did not like the persons about her to cry; she succeeded in checking the outward manifestation of her grief, but it was only by promising herself that she could cry as much as she wanted to do when she got to bed.

Presently Parsons knocked at the door, opened it, and with a smile and nod of encouragement, said:

"Will you come down now, please, Miss Cynthia?"

They went down to the drawing-room, Parsons on the way giving a final touch to Cynthia's hair and dress. The drawing-room was a large one, furnished very richly, and opening into a spacious, semicircular conservatory, in which palms and tropical plants were flourishing and sending out a faint, heavy perfume; it was all very grand, but the room and its appointments seemed to Cynthia, young as she was, old and shabby. She seated herself on an amber satin chair, and presently Lady Westlake entered. She was in evening dress of an old-fashioned style, and plentifully bediamonded; at sight of the girl's plain and obviously short frock, her ladyship raised her thick eyebrows and stretched her lips.

"Humph!" she said to herself. "To-morrow morning, the first thing." Then, to Cynthia, "Are you hungry, child?"

"No," said Cynthia in her direct fashion. She looked at the old lady gravely. "Am I to say, Lady Westlake, when I speak to you, please?" she asked. "I don't know."

Her ladyship grunted. "You can call me Aunt Gwen," she said. "My name is Gwendoline; but my friends mostly call me 'Lady Gwen'; my enemies, and I have plenty of them, thank good-

ness, call me Lady Grim, behind my back, I believe."

"Why?" asked Cynthia with interest.

Lady Westlake grinned at her. "You'll soon find out, I daresay," she said. "Do you like your rooms, do you like Parsons? I'll discharge her if you don't; the world is full of ladies'-maids."

"Oh, no, no!" said Cynthia eagerly, earnestly. "I like her very much, she is very kind."

Lady Westlake gave a little snort. "Oh, kind, eh? Of course, she is; she is paid for being so."

Mr. Supley, the butler, entered, stood by the door in the attitude and with the expression of a person about to perform a religious ceremony, and said in subdued tones:

"Dinner is served, my lady."

Cynthia followed her ladyship into the dining-room on the other side of the hall. It was a large apartment, very handsome, but dull and gloomy. The furniture was of the awful, Early Victorian period, massive, heavy, lumbering; the side-board looked like a mahogany tomb; the table was large enough to dine twenty persons; the chairs required a man to lift them; the mantelpiece was of carved cedar, and on its shelf were bronzes which looked as if they weighed a ton; most of the pictures on the walls were portraits of dead-and-gone Westlakes; persons with plain and forbidding countenances which frowned upon the table, as if their owners were predicting indigestion.

Notwithstanding that daylight was still bright, the heavy curtains were drawn, and the darkened room was lighted by wax candles in brackets round the walls and in ponderous silver candelabra on the table, which was heavily weighted by other exceedingly ugly and massive articles in the same precious metal.

There were two footmen in attendance, in ad-

dition to Mr. Supley; and all the three moved about noiselessly, and with faces so impassive that they might have been carved out of wood. Lady Westlake sat at the head of the table, one of the footmen had inducted Cynthia to the chair at the end; the candelabra and an enormous épergne cut off Lady Gwen from her; so that Cynthia had a sense of dining alone in the vast and gloomy apartment. She looked at the number of knives and forks and spoons neatly arranged before her and at the array of wine-glasses at her side with a kind of wonder and dismay, which increased as dish after dish was brought to her by the footman, who got them from Mr. Supley, who was carving at the massive side table; and she got quite tired of saying, "No, thank you," or "I don't want any, thank you."

Lady Westlake plodded through the elaborate dinner, occasionally grumbling at one of the dishes, and apparently oblivious of the girl in her solitude at the end of the long table. After a time, Cynthia simply shook her head when a dish was brought to her, and leant back in the chair, which was much too vast for her slight figure, her eyes downcast, her thoughts wandering to the cottage on the hill; her father would have had his tea long before this: would Betsy Jane, who had been engaged to take her, Cynthia's, place, get him a nice supper? Her heart ached, a tear forced itself between her lids and hung on an eyelash, from whence it rolled slowly down her cheek.

After what seemed an age, Lady Westlake rose, a footman opened the door, the other crossed the hall to open the door of the drawing-room; slowly, and with due state, Lady Gwen repaired thither, followed by Cynthia, like a little forlorn lamb. Her ladyship pointed to an easy chair big enough for two Cynthias, and the unhappy girl sank into it.

"Do you play the piano?" asked Lady Gwen.

"No," replied Cynthia. "We haven't got a piano."

"I suppose you can read?" said her ladyship.

"Very well, then; amuse yourself by looking at some of the books; but don't make a noise, because I'm going to sleep."

Cynthia took up a book from the table beside her. It was a history of the county families of Wiltshire, with illustrations of their various seats. She turned over the pages listlessly; but presently her eyelids got heavy, closed altogether, her grasp of the huge book relaxed, and the heavy volume, heavy in more senses than one, slipped to the ground. Lady Westlake awoke, stretched herself and stared at the sleeping girl; then she raised her gold eye-glasses and surveyed the pale, tear-stained face minutely.

"Yes," she said to herself, "she's pretty already; she's going to be a beauty. What am I going to do with her, I wonder? Well, I've got her on my hands. I was a fool, I suppose, to hamper myself with her. One has to pay for one's whims."

Cynthia slept with the soundness of a healthy girl, absolutely tired out; she looked as if she were going to sleep for ever. Lady Westlake rang the bell.

"Send Parsons," she said.

Parsons entered, and Lady Westlake jerked her head towards Cynthia.

"Take her up to bed," she said.

Parsons roused Cynthia and led her away; the poor child was scarcely awake, and looked round her in a confused way; but, seeing the grim old figure in the chair, she remembered, and, going up to her with an unsteady gait, bent to kiss her.

"Good night, Aunt Gwen," she said.

CYNTHIA TRANSLATED

Lady Westlake grunted and suffered the kiss; and Cynthia was led away by the sympathetic Parsons, who, without any protest from the somnolent Cynthia, undressed her charge and tucked her up snugly in the big bed.

CHAPTER VI

CYNTHIA IN SILK ATTIRE

CYNTHIA slept like a dormouse until Parsons brought her a cup of tea somewhere about nine o'clock. With the cup of tea were two very thin slices of bread-and-butter, which Cynthia eyed with obvious misgiving.

"Is this my breakfast?" she asked. "I'm awfully hungry-----"

Parsons explained that the tea and the bread-and-butter were to be regarded as a merely temporary restorative, and that breakfast would be awaiting her downstairs.

"I've filled your bath, miss," she said; "half and half; I mean, loo-warm."

"I want it cold, quite cold, please," said Cynthia. "I have it cold all the year round."

"Lor, do you now, miss," said Parsons with a shudder, as she went to reduce the temperature of the water.

Cynthia had her bath, and Parsons helped her to dress; then she went down to the breakfast-room, a comparatively small room overlooking some mews. She could scarcely tear herself away from the window, because a man was grooming a horse, and a dog was frisking about, pretending to bite the same horse's heels. Cynthia loved animals. Mr. Supley and one footman only were in attendance; and that dignified personage, when Cynthia said that she would wait for Lady Westlake, informed

CYNTHIA IN SILK ATTIRE

her, more in sorrow than surprise, that her ladyship always had her breakfast in bed, and did not appear before half-past eleven.

The young are blessed in one particular, at any rate; grief does not for long interfere with their appetite. Cynthia made a good breakfast; the first food she had tasted practically for twenty-four hours. As she had been at the dinner, she was amazed at the number of dishes which were presented to her; the footman placed a copy of "The Times" beside her plate; but Cynthia only stared at it. When she had finished her breakfast, she wandered about the great house. It looked grander than it had looked the night before, but, in the sunlight, still dustier and shabbier.

The house had been furnished by Lady Westlake's grandfather; and her ladyship would as soon have thought of changing the colour of her wig as of changing the furniture or altering its position. There was a library, the walls of which were lined with books; it looked, with some reason, as if no one ever entered it. Cynthia resolved that she would sit there on wet days; though she was not particularly fond of books.

She made her way to the conservatory; it was flooded by sunlight and beautifully warm; she wandered about the palms in a kind of dream; she felt very much like a wild bird caught and imprisoned in a comfortable but oppressive cage. She drew a long breath; she missed the clean, sharp air of the moors, the freedom of space and unbounded sky.

Suddenly Lady Westlake appeared in the opening between the drawing-room and the conservatory.

"Oh, you're here," she said. "Tell Parsons to put your outdoor things on. I am going to take you to a dressmaker's. Be quick, please."

Cynthia ran upstairs and came down presently

in her ancient golf cape and her rustic straw hat. The stately and old-fashioned barouche was at the door, the footman ushered them into it. They left the aristocratic regions and pulled up in a quiet street, at a door with a brass plate which bore the name of "Madame Cerise." They went into a room littered with ladies' costumes in all stages; and presently Madame Cerise herself appeared.

She was very dark and very stout, and, as Lady Westlake waved her hand towards Cynthia, Madame's eyes grew keen yet speculative.

"My niece," said Lady Westlake succinctly. "Dress her properly."

Madame surveyed Cynthia with eager and bulging eyes; she seemed to suppress a shudder at the girl's present attire.

"Mam'seile will want walking, evening—everything?" she said, with a comprehensive gesture.

Madame Cerise called in the assistance of a subordinate. They walked round Cynthia as if she were a statue or a block of wood; they measured her, drew off a little and conferred; they produced materials of various colours and placed them next her face and her hair; then, with a sigh, as if she had grasped and overcome the difficulties of the problem, Madame nodded.

"It will be all right, my lady," she said. "How soon do you want—?"

"At once," said Lady Westlake firmly.

They drove home. By this time Cynthia's healthy appetite was rampant, and she made her way to the drawing-room to wait, with eagerness, for the announcement of lunch. As she was standing by the window, looking into the square at the procession of carriages and the passers-by on the pavement, she heard the door open. She turned her head and saw a lad enter. She was so surprised that she stood and stared at him as if he were an apparition.

He looked to be about her age ; he was dressed like a public schoolboy, that is to say, in an Eton jacket and waistcoat with the regulation grey trousers. It was a novel form of attire to Cynthia ; but her attention was attracted by his face rather than his dress.

He was very pale, and he had a rather supercilious expression, which was indicated by his eyebrows, which were drawn close together, and by his lips, which seemed like a shadow of Lady Gwen's. He had come into the room very softly ; his air was that of a person who has himself well in hand and is repressing himself, an air of one who is on guard and ready for any emergency. His eyes were blue, very pale blue, and as he looked round the room and they rested on Cynthia, they resembled that of a bird, a very cautious bird desirous of not being taken at a disadvantage.

Cynthia had been startled by his noiseless entrance, by a certain stealthy manner which characterised it, but she recovered after a moment or two and bent her dark brows on him ; there was something in the fixed regard of the light eyes that annoyed and almost angered her, and she coloured slightly and turned to the window again. Presently, though she had not heard him move, she felt him at her side ; he looked out of the window in silence for a moment or two, then he said, in a low voice which, somehow or other, seemed to match his eyes, "How do you do ? Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Standish. Percy Standish."

He said this as primly and formally as a man of forty, and Cynthia turned and looked at him with surprise and interrogation ; and it may be said that she was not the first person who had been moved to these emotions by the strange lad. Seeing that he was waiting for a response she said, after a pause which would have embarrassed most boys,

but apparently did not disturb Percy Standish's self-possession in the slightest,

"My name is Cynthia Drayle."

He echoed the name in a murmur; then said:

"I'm afraid I don't know——"

"I'm Aunt Gwen's niece," explained Cynthia.

"Ah!" he said with a polite smile. "I am her nephew; cousin once removed is, I believe, the accurate description of our relationship; so that I have the felicity to claim you as a kind of connection, though, I fear, a distant one."

Cynthia stared at him; she had never seen any boy like him, never heard any boy speak in such a fashion. Of course she compared him with Darrel Frayne, and equally, of course, much to Percy Standish's disadvantage.

"You've not been here long!" he said, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the country-made blue serge.

Cynthia felt the glance and coloured. "No," she replied laconically.

"Your first visit to London?" he continued suavely. "I hope you are enjoying it?"

"Yes—I think so," said Cynthia in her candid way. "I suppose you live here?"

"Yes," he said, "in Eaton Square; my father is Lord Spencer Standish; you may have heard of him?" Cynthia shook her head. He smiled as if her ignorance indicated her position, or rather, her lack of position. "He is well known on the turf." Cynthia stared, and he explained. "He goes in for racing and that kind of thing. It doesn't interest me. I hope you are going to make a long stay in London?"

"I am going to live here," said Cynthia, stifling a little sigh.

His thin lips came together, he shot a glance at her, and an apology for a flush rose to his pale face.

"I am delighted to hear it," he said, with a courtesy which was as cold as it was precocious. "I hope I may have the pleasure of seeing a great deal of you; Eaton Square is comparatively near—Ah, here is dear Aunt Gwen!" he broke off.

Cynthia thought he must have very sharp ears, for her own were by no means dull, and she had not heard Lady Westlake come into the room. He turned and advanced to her ladyship with a quite old-fashioned bow; and she surveyed him with a gleam of satire in her terrible old eyes and a twitch of her long lips.

"Oh, you're here, Percy, are you?" she said sharply, as she extended two bony fingers, which he took as gratefully as if they had been a whole hand. "I suppose you have come to lunch?"

"I came to inquire after you; the long journey, you know, dear aunt; but I shall be delighted to remain to lunch, as you so kindly ask me."

Lady Gwen grinned; then she said sharply: "Who told you I was going on a long journey?"

"I really forget," he said, as if he were endeavouring to remember. "Did you not tell me so yourself, dear aunt?"

"No, I didn't," retorted her ladyship curtly. She looked from Cynthia to him, her eyes like needle points; her lips twisted. "That's my niece, Cynthia Drayle," she said.

"I have just had the happiness of making Miss Drayle's acquaintance," he said with a smile and a little inclination of his head towards Cynthia.

Supley announced lunch, and Percy advanced to her ladyship and said, "Let me offer you my arm, Aunt Gwen."

Her ladyship looked at him sideways, then she let him take her arm and lead her to the dining-room; at the door she paused and looked over her shoulder at Cynthia.

"Hasn't he beautiful manners, my dear?" she said with the most offensive sarcasm; but Percy did not wince, and only smiled and murmured remonstratingly:

"My dear aunt!"

To Cynthia the meal was a new and an amazing one. She sat silent, listening and looking from the old lady to the lad. Lady Gwen was evidently in a vixenish mood, and was obviously set upon drawing Master Percy out for her own amusement, and perhaps for Cynthia's; and young as Cynthia was, she enjoyed the operation. She was quick enough to see that, notwithstanding the disparity of their ages, they were pretty equally matched, and that the lad met all the old woman's pointed sarcasms—some of them were anything but pointed and of quite bludgeon-like thickness—with an unruffled equanimity, and with his thin, conventional smile, which seemed to irritate the terrible Lady Gwen, as a bull is irritated by a red flag.

"And how is your precious father?" she asked suddenly.

"Very well indeed, I am glad to say," was the prompt and smooth reply. "He asked me to give you his love, dear Aunt Gwen."

Her ladyship grunted. "I suppose he's been losing money, as usual?" she said. "I should have thought he would have been broke by this time. Wasn't there some unpleasantness at the Grand National between him and the stewards?"

Percy raised his brows and shook his head. "I really don't know, dear aunt," he replied. "I've heard nothing about it; but, as you know, I do not read the sporting papers."

Lady Gwen, who did, grinned and showed her teeth.

"Estimable youth!" she said. "You are quite the paragon, Percy. Isn't he?" she demanded, turning her eyes suddenly on Cynthia, who had been

listening so intently and with such absorbing interest that her lunch had suffered.

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

"You precious soon will, if you see much of him," said Lady Gwen, jerking her head at the self-possessed Percy. "I am going up to my room. I shan't see you again Percy; good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear aunt. Thank you so much for asking me to lunch; it has been delightful," he responded, as he glided to the door and opened it for her. "How you must enjoy being here! Aunt Gwen is always so bright and charming," he remarked to Cynthia, as he went back to the table and poured himself out a glass of claret: he had drunk water while Lady Gwen had been present. "I suppose our dear aunt went down to the country to fetch you?" he said in a casual way. "Let me see, you come from — ? Dear me, how stupid of me; I've forgotten the name!"

Cynthia gave him the required information; in his gentle, insinuating way he got her to talk, and before she was aware of it Cynthia had told him many things of her past life: by the way, she said nothing about Darrel Frayne. Percy listened, as he sipped his second glass of Chateau Lafitte, encouraging her every now and then with a word or a nod of comprehension; presently, looking at his watch, he murmured:

"I had no idea it was so late; the time has passed so quickly; you have been so charming, if you will allow me to say so, Miss Drayle." He paused and smiled at her. "We are relatives, are we not? Would you object to my calling you Cynthia? It is so sweet, so musical a name."

"No," said Cynthia.

"And you must call me Percy," he said. "I am sure we shall be great friends; indeed, I am sorry to run away, but I have to attend a meeting of the

Young Men's Philosophical Society. Good-bye, Cynthia."

He bent over her hand, as he had bent over Lady Gwen's; and Cynthia stared at the retreating form with the same amazement with which she had watched and listened to the encounter between him and Lady Gwen.

She went into the drawing-room, and was surprised to find her aunt there, just awakened from her afternoon nap.

"Has he gone?" she asked. "I thought I heard the door go; but he's so quiet that I wasn't sure. Well, what do you think of him?"

"I don't know," replied Cynthia.

"Yes, you do," said the old lady with a grin. "You think he's a conceited, affected young puppy and prig. And you're right. He's all that, is Master Percy; but he's something more. You buy him for a fool, and you'll lose all your money, my girl. I know his breed." It was obvious to Cynthia that the old lady had forgotten her for the moment and was talking to herself. "They are all alike; I never see Master Percy, but I think of that line in Hamlet—'One may smile and smile, and still be a villain.'"

"He's only a boy," said Cynthia, in common justice.

Her ladyship grinned malignantly. "Villains are made when they're young, my girl; in fact, they are born so." She was silent for a moment; then she said meditatively, "His father, Spencer, is the best of a bad lot; for he's an open scoundrel and ruffian, and doesn't wear a mask; perhaps because he is too much of a fool to do so." She mused again; then with a movement of irritation she burst out with, "Good Lord, child, don't stand there staring at me like a Gorgon! Here, go and find Parsons and tell her to take you somewhere; to a circus, if there is such a thing; she'll know. There! Go, go!"

Later in the afternoon, Percy, having distinguished

himself at the meeting of the Young Men's Philosophical Society, went slowly to the parental home. It was one of the smallest and dingiest of houses in the Square; in fact, it was just round the corner of a street leading out of it; but he and his father always gave their address as Eaton Square. He let himself in with a latch-key, went down a narrow passage and opened the door of a room. The scent of a strong cigar issued out to meet him; wherever Lord Spencer was, there also were acrid the fumes of a strong cigar, and generally an odour of equally strong whisky.

His lordship was reclining on an old and battered sofa; he was in his shirt sleeves; he wore breeches and gaiters, and held a sporting paper in his hand. He looked a cross between a respectable groom and a trainer; he had once been handsome and was still good-looking; but a long course of the strong cigars and equally strong spirits had told upon the human face divine and bestowed upon it a raffish and disolute appearance.

He turned over on his side as his son entered, yawned and said—

"You're back then, Perce. Been to see the old Griffin? All teeth and claws, I suppose, as usual. Had your lunch, I suppose? By George, and paid for it, I should imagine! I would rather take a meal alone with a she-devil, if there is such a thing, than with the Griffin."

"Aunt Gwen was not alone," said Percy, going to the window and looking out at the view with a thoughtful and serious air. "There was a young girl there, Cynthia Drayle."

"Cynthia Drayle?" said Lord Spencer, with another yawn. "Drayle? That must be poor Emily's brat. What's she like, Perce?"

"Rather a nice sort of girl," replied Percy, in the tone of one addressing an equal in age. "She is pretty, but er—er—quite rough and uncouth."

"She would be," commented Lord Spencer mus-
ingly. "Emily married beneath her, I believe. She
has come on a visit, I suppose?"

"No; she has come to stay," said Percy quietly.

Lord Spencer swung his legs from the sofa and sat
bolt upright.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to
say—you don't mean to tell me that the old Griffin
has adopted her? By gad, Perce, this is serious! This
will put your nose out of joint, my boy. Why, this
beastly girl will come between you and the old
woman's money! The old harridan! She has done
it to spite us. By George, Perce, you'll have to look
out!"

A faint smile curled the lad's lips, and his eyebrows
went up.

"Yes; I shall have to look out, sir," he said, with
such precocious significance, with such a cold-blooded,
evil expression in his light eyes, that his father stared
at him and continued to stare until Percy sauntered
from the window and out of the room.

CHAPTER VII

CYNTHIA GROWS

ONE morning some three years later a young girl ran down the broad stairs of Lady Westlake's house in Belgrave Square; she wore a perfectly fitting riding habit, a regulation bowler hat, and carried a gold-mounted and jewelled whip in her hand; she looked radiant, and she hummed the air of the latest in drawing-room ballads. From the corridor above Parsons craned over and looked at her with a loving air of worship and proprietorship, as if she had made her.

It was difficult to recognise, in this glorious specimen of young womanhood, the Cynthia Drayle, all legs and wings, who had sobbed her way to London as Lady Westlake's ward. But Time works wonders, especially when such a person as her ladyship has the control of it. Prompted by a sneaking and reluctant fondness for the girl and pride in her beauty and grace, or by a desire to spite and exasperate the Spencer Standishes, Lady Westlake had certainly carried out the promise she had made to Cynthia's father, and had given to Cynthia all those advantages which fall to the lot of a girl of rank and position.

Cynthia had had rather a strenuous time of it; Lady Westlake did not approve of boarding-schools, even of the most aristocratic and exclusive kind, and, therefore, masters had been engaged to educate the girl in accordance with her ladyship's views.

To general knowledge the Griffin attached little or no importance.

"It doesn't matter how badly a lady spells," she had informed Cynthia, "so that she can say what she wants to say, and say it like a lady. History and geography and all the other kinds of things they teach the lower classes in the Board Schools are of no earthly consequence to you. What does it matter what happened hundreds of years ago? It's what is taking place to-day that concerns us. And as to geography, who cares where a place is? You go to those absurd people, Cook's, they find out the place, and give you a ticket. I know nothing of these things; but I have been able to hold my own in the world; and so will you. As a rule, men hate clever, well-educated girls; they are afraid of them, and small blame to 'em. No; what they want for a wife is a girl who can play the piano, talk French, sit a horse as a lady should, preside at the dinner tables, and talk commonplace. An intellectual woman is out of it; men, who are mostly fools, don't want to spend their lives in the company of a superior mind. The 'maternal' woman is out of it, too; though two or three idiotic mothers have tried to set the fashion of babies, and brought them into evidence. You can hire a superior nurse, who has gone through a proper training and knows all about children, and you leave them to her, and don't neglect your husband and your friends and get dowdy and slipshod, as the old-fashioned, Early-Victorian and extremely stupid wife used to be."

So, as Cynthia had no choice in the matter, she devoted herself to music, dancing, French, and riding; and, strange to say, she did very well; for she had inherited her father's intelligence, and was suddenly awakened to an eagerness to take advantage of the opportunities offered her. She

was also quick to take the tone of her surroundings; and half-unconsciously she caught the intonation of voice, the little mannerisms of the aristocratic set to which Lady Westlake belonged. For instance, she, who was one of the most restless of girls by nature, had acquired the art of standing and sitting still; an art which sounds easy enough unless you have achieved it by practice, or it has come to you by birth and breeding.

During the three years Cynthia had seen her father two or three times. She had paid one visit to Summerleigh; and it must be confessed that she would have found it dull but for her father. Darrel was away. The place seemed half-asleep compared with the rush and ceaseless stir of London; there was nothing to do, and she missed the visits of her various professors. Once or twice her father had come up to see her in Belgrave Square; but his visits had been short ones of a few hours only. He had borne himself with the ease and self-possession which never deserted him, and Lady Westlake had treated him with a kind of amused and tolerant respect; but he hated the life of Belgrave Square, and soon set off on his roamings again.

However, he approved of all that had been done for Cynthia and was grateful.

"It's all going smoothly, my dear Cynthy," he told her; "they are making 'a young lady' of you, and I rather fancy they will turn out quite a superior article. They are doing what I should never have been able to do, and what it is only right you should have done for you; for, after all, you are your mother's child and belong to these people. But, look here, Cynthy, don't let them polish and polish away until there's no heart in you; there ought to be something behind a fine lady—and that's the Woman."

At this, Cynthia had thrown her arms round

her father's neck and hugged him in the old fashion ; so that Bradley Drayle had gone away satisfied.

Of Darrel Frayne, her old comrade and playmate, Cynthia had seen and heard nothing—he had been at Sandhurst when she went down to Summerleigh—but she thought of him often ; indeed, the old times she had spent with him were still vivid and precious in her memory. The other youth, Percy Standish, she saw frequently ; he was at Oxford now, quite a promising light there, and paid frequent visits to Belgrave Square during the vacations. He had grown into a handsome and striking-looking young man ; his voice was softer and, if anything, more musical, and his manner as polished and ingratiating as ever. Though Lady Westlake treated him with sarcastic tolerance and spared him no gibe or taunt, she allowed him the run of the house ; and Percy met her insolence with his old bland equanimity, and was careful not to forfeit his privileges.

He expressed a profound admiration for Cynthia and paid her devoted attention ; and the old Griffin looked on with an amused grin, which she did not take the trouble to conceal. Sometimes Cynthia, who was a just young person, took Percy's part, and once she remonstrated with Lady Westlake on her treatment of the young man—for Cynthia was not afraid of the Griffin ; but her ladyship had only grinned and shown her teeth.

"You're a little fool," she said. "You don't know the Standishes as well as I do ; you don't see Master Percy's little game. He's as cunning as a monkey. He thinks I'm going to leave you all my money, and so he's 'hedging,' as his precious father would say, and is making up to you. And he'll get you, if you don't mind. But you'll be a fool if he does ; for he's half monkey and half tiger, like all the Standishes. You need to keep both

your eyes open when you are dealing with them. Beware of Master Percy, my girl !”

Cynthia had blushed a little and laughed a little ; for, to her young mind, love-making and marriage seemed a very, very long way off, so far away as not to be worth thinking of. Besides, she happened not to like Percy Standish, notwithstanding that she had sometimes spoken in his defence.

All this while we have been keeping her waiting on the stairs. She ran down them and across the hall and into the drawing-room, where Lady Westlake was waiting for her—for it was a rule that Cynthia should never go out without passing under the old lady’s inspection. Cynthia stood before the Griffin, and the keen, hawk-like eyes passed slowly up and down her. Her ladyship had had one or two attacks of the gout, the aristocratic family complaint, and she moved about with a little difficulty and by the aid of an ebony stick with a crutch handle of gold.

“ Turn round,” she said, waving the stick. “ Yes ; you’ll do ; though that jacket is a trifle short in the waist.”

“ Is it ? ” responded Cynthia carelessly. “ I suppose I’ve grown.”

“ Pull your hat a little more forward on your forehead,” said her ladyship sharply ; “ and when you mount keep the horse standing for a minute, so that I can see whether you are sitting upright or not. I hate girls to lounge and flop in the saddle, like a sack of flour. And always remember to keep your chin in ; if you keep your chin in you’ll sit up straight of your own accord. And hold that foolish horse of yours in hand, please. I won’t have you galloping around the Row like some of the bounders I see there ; Jackson tells me that you were stopped by a policeman the other day.” Jackson was the groom who was holding the horses outside.

"Jackson ought not to tell tales," said Cynthia, colouring.

The Griffin showed her teeth. "He didn't; I got it out of him," she retorted. "I know everything that goes on; so please understand that you can't play any tricks without my knowing it, young lady."

"I don't want to play any tricks," said Cynthia with a laugh. "Polly did happen to bolt and get out of hand for a minute, and the policeman stopped us; but he was a very nice policeman, and was quite pleasant and friendly."

The Griffin snarled at her. "You have a foolish and ill-bred habit of being familiar with your inferiors," she said. "Get rid of it; it's bad form. Keep people in their places. I hear you speaking to Parsons sometimes as if she were your equal, not to say bosom friend; you seem to forget that the girl is a common servant."

"Oh, no," said Cynthia with a smile. "Parsons is anything but common, and I am very fond of her, Aunt Gwen; and it would be very strange if I weren't, seeing how good she is to me."

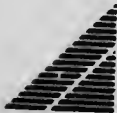
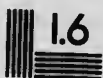
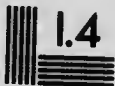
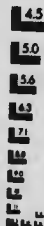
"Bah!" exclaimed the Griffin. "She puts it on and takes you in, you little fool. There! You're keeping the horses waiting. Go!"

She hobbled to the window, watched Cynthia mount, and gazed at the girl as she sat bolt upright in the saddle, with her bright and beautiful young face turned with a half-defiant smile towards the window. The old lady's eyes rested on her with a curious expression; she waved her stick, and Cynthia started the fidgeting and fretting horse. Lady Westlake watched her out of sight, and the withered and maliciously-curved lips moved inaudibly. Ambition never dies in some hearts, and the old woman was forming ambitious plans for this girl she had adopted.



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CYNTHIA GROWS

She knew, and inwardly gloated over, every point of Cynthia's beauty; she was keen enough to know that, in addition to physical loveliness, Cynthia possessed a charm which most men would find irresistible. Notwithstanding the atmosphere of worldliness which Cynthia was now breathing, she was up to the present untainted, unspoiled by it; her simple nature, fostered in the sleepy village of Summerleigh and cherished by her father in the little cottage on the hill, had served to protect her against the enervating and deteriorating influences of her present mode of life and the people with whom she came in daily contact. Whatever she might become in the future, Cynthia was as yet a fresh and sweet-hearted girl, incapable of guile, and as open and frank as she had been when she looked on at the fight between Darrel Frayne and Sampson Burrige on the hillside at Summerleigh.

She turned into the Park, followed by Jackson, whose well-trained, impassive countenance displayed no sign of the fact that he was conscious and proud of the admiring glances that were cast at his young mistress, who was too fully occupied in controlling Polly to notice the attention which she attracted. There were a number of persons in the Row, and here again eyes were turned upon the girl with curiosity and admiration; sometimes she met an acquaintance or a friend of the family, but Lady Westlake did not like her to stop and talk, so she had to be content with her quick little nod and her bright smile.

It was a glorious morning, the trees were in their vernal beauty, the flower beds were glowing with tulips; Cynthia looked about her, enjoying the brightness, the sunshine, the gaiety of the scene, with all a young girl's zest, when suddenly her eye fell upon a young man who was coming along the walk towards her. He was worthy of notice; for he

was remarkably good-looking and carried his light tweed suit with that grace and ease which is the special property of youth; one hand was in his pocket, the other swung a stick in a light-hearted kind of way; he was smoking a cigarette and looking about him with the alert and yet serene air of a young fellow who has just come into the inheritance of the whole earth.

Cynthia glanced at him at first with an unconscious sympathy; for was she not young, and was not the earth hers also? But in a moment or two her interest quickened and concentrated; the colour rose to her face, involuntarily she checked Polly, rode her close to the rail, and awaited the approach of the Adonis. Her heart beat fast with expectancy as he came up to her; for his part, he turned his serene gaze on her, it swiftly changed to one of admiration, but to her infinite disappointment and mortification he passed on.

She bit her lips, swung Polly round, and called softly and a little tremulously—

“Dar—Mr. Frayne!”

He turned quickly, stared at her and, now as crimson as herself, raised his hat and hurried to her side.

“Why! It’s Cynthia! Yes, it *is* Cynthia!” he exclaimed with amazement, and so obvious a delight that he brought the smile flashing into Cynthia’s eyes.

She held out her hand and he gripped it, not in the fashionable way, but with a grip she remembered of old, when he was dragging her through the stream or showing her how to throw a fly. The grip seemed to go straight to her heart and made it beat in a tumult; it told her how glad she was to see him.

“You didn’t know me,” she said reproachfully.

"Good heavens, no!" he retorted. "How should I? Why, you've changed—oh, you've changed in the most marvellous way. I can scarcely believe it's you." His eyes ran over her with unabated surprise and as unabated an admiration.

"You haven't changed a bit," she said; "you've only grown older."

He laughed, slipped under the rail, and stood stroking her horse, his face turned up to her with an eager light in his eyes.

"I suppose you've forgotten me," he said; "forgotten our old times together? What jolly times they were! I've often thought of them."

"No; I've not forgotten," said Cynthia quietly.

"Have you been at the Court lately? You were not there when I went to Summerleigh."

"I know," he said regretfully. "I was awfully mad at missing you. No; I've not been down lately. I've been at Sandhurst. I've got my commission," he added with a dash of colour and a touch of pride. "You are living in London, Cynthia? But I suppose I mustn't call you that now; it must be 'Miss Drayle'?"

Cynthia laughed and blushed prettily. "Why shouldn't you?" she said. "We are old friends—playmates. Yes; I'm living with my aunt, Lady Westlake."

"I know her; I mean, I know of her," he said eagerly. "I may call, mayn't I, Cynthia? I'm in the South Surrey Regiment—splendid regiment!—we are near town, and I can get plenty of leave at present. Oh, I hope I shall see a great deal of you! I say! you—you have changed, you know!" The implied compliment was so obvious that Cynthia blushed again. "You're an awful swell, and—and—I wonder whether you'd mind if I said that you grown prettier than ever? You were nice-looking as a kid, but now you are simply stunning!"

With her face quite crimson now, Cynthia laughed and inquired—

“Do you say that to every girl you meet?”

“No, by George!” he protested earnestly; “I don’t often have the excuse. And it’s like my cheek to say it now,” he added rather shyly; “but we’re old friends, pals, aren’t we, Cynthia? I say, do you think I might call this afternoon?”

“I daresay you might,” she replied, but with a little hesitation. “Aunt Gwen is—rather peculiar,” she added by way of warning. “She is sometimes cross and sharp; it’s gout and nature combined; and—and—you mayn’t like her; some people don’t.”

“Oh, I don’t care, I’m not afraid,” he said. “I’d face a griffin——”

Cynthia laughed. “That’s what they call her; isn’t it a shame?”

At this moment a young man with a pretty girl beside him came towards them. The young man was heavily built, with a stolid face and roughly cut features; he wore his straw hat on the back of his head, which was thrust forward, giving him a round-shouldered appearance. He was looking straight before him with an absent air and a somewhat vacuous expression. This peculiar-looking young man—who, by the way, could never be taken for anything but a gentleman—was Lord Northam, the son and heir of his Grace, the Duke of Torbridge, and the girl beside him was his sister, Lady Alicia. He was also in the South Surrey.

“There’s Darrei Frayne,” said Lady Alicia, in an undertone, and with a slight blush which increased her prettiness; for she was a blonde with china-blue eyes and delicately-cut features.

Lord Northam did not hear her, and plodded on with his absent-minded air, and when she gave him a nudge and repeated her information he seemed to awake slowly and looked round him laboriously.

"There, you stupid!" she said rather sharply, "talking to that girl on the horse."

"Oh, ah, yes," he said slowly and heavily. "Deuced pretty girl, deuced pretty!"

He clutched at his hat and raised it clumsily, and would have passed on; but Lady Alicia laid her hand on his arm and stopped in front of our pair. Darrel turned and greeted the brother and sister, but with no great heartiness; for, you see, they were interrupting his *tête-à-tête* with his old pal and playmate.

"How do you do, Lady Alicia? how are you, Northam?" he said, hoping that they would go on their way; but Lady Alicia held out her hand, and looked, with a smile, at Cynthia—and, of course, he had to introduce them to Cynthia—and said, in the sweetest of voices—

"I am so glad to know you, Miss Drayle, for I have been admiring your horse for the last five minutes—and you, if you will allow me to say so."

To this candid avowal Cynthia could only bow and smile. Her grey, and sometimes painfully candid eyes, had, with a woman's comprehensive acuteness, scanned Lady Alicia's fair and pretty face; and, somehow or other, she was not at first sight pleasantly impressed by it, notwithstanding that it was indeed a very pretty face and that the eyes were as blue and apparently as innocent as those of a child; perhaps it was a certain downward curve of Lady Alicia's cupid-like lips which failed to gain our fastidious Cynthia's liking.

Lord Northam leant upon his heavy stick, his prominent blue eyes glued on Cynthia's face; he looked like a waxwork figure waiting for the showman to wind him up and set him going.

"Jolly horse you've got," he said at last, slowly, and as if with difficulty.

"Isn't she?" responded Cynthia. "I am very

fond of her; but she's rather troublesome sometimes, and is apt to bolt."

"Ride her with an indiarubber bit," he said laconically.

"Lord Northam is great on horses," said Darrel, in an explanatory fashion. "What he doesn't know would fill a large book."

"Most interestin' things they are," remarked Lord Northam, who cut his g's; not because it was the fashion to do so, but because speech was always a trouble to him, and he economised in it as much as possible.

"More than men and women?" asked Cynthia with a smile.

"You don't know where you are with men and women," replied Lord Northam, "but you do with horses." He called them "'osses."

"Where are you staying, Mr. Frayne?" asked Alicia.

"In my old rooms in Duke Street," replied Darrel. "I'm keeping them on. You see, I shall be so much in Town."

Lady Alicia nodded, appeared to consider for a moment, then said, with a bright smile all round:

"Will you come and dine with us at the Savoy one evening? Say Tuesday. I hope you will join us, Miss Drayle?"

"Thank you very much, but I don't know whether I may," said Cynthia wistfully. "I must ask my aunt, Lady Westlake."

"Well, come if you can," said Lady Alicia with a laugh. "Tell her I am chaperoning you."

With a nod of farewell she roused her brother, whose eyes had never left Cynthia's face, and they went on.

"What a pretty girl, and what an odd man!" said Cynthia, as she looked after them.

"Yes; she is rather pretty," assented Darrel.

"And Northam is all right. He's a decent chap, but he's always got his head in the clouds; it takes a charge of dynamite to move him. He takes after his father, the Duke. They call him—the Duke, I mean—The Sheep, because he's—well, just like Northam. But Northam is not such a fool as he looks; he's a rattling good soldier in a stodgy kind of way—he's in my regiment, you know; captain. I say," he went on eagerly, "do you think Lady Westlake will let you dine at the Savoy, Cynthia?"

"I don't know," replied Cynthia doubtfully. "You'd better ask her—that is," with a blush, "if you want—I mean——"

"I'll ask her right enough," he said promptly. "Oh, Cynthia, I hope we shall see a great deal of each other. I can't tell you how glad I am to have met you! It sort of brings back old times and all that. Do you remember the day you climbed the beech tree by the river and nearly fell off into the water?"

Cynthia laughed, and her eyes rested on him a trifle shyly; for those days were long ago, and a great change had taken place since then.

"I must be going," she said. "Aunt does not like my being in late for lunch; besides, Polly won't stand another minute; she'll bolt, and I shall have the policeman after me."

"I shall call this afternoon," he said, holding her hand and pressing it.

"Oh—well!" she responded, with the shrug of the shoulders he remembered so well.

He stood and looked after her until she had turned a bend in the road, and when he went on his way he murmured—

"Little Cynthy! That lovely creature, little Cynthy!"

CHAPTER VIII

DARREL CALLS ON THE GRIFFIN

CYNTHIA fortunately arrived in time for lunch, though not in time to change her habit. She waited until Lady Westlake had got through a couple of plover's eggs and a sole—for she knew that the Griffin was not approachable until she was fed—before she said—

“I met an old friend in the Park, Aunt Gwen—Darrel Frayne. Perhaps you may remember him; he was with me the day you drove to Summerleigh in the Dursley fly.”

“I remember him very well,” said the Griffin sharply; “but that's no reason why you should dock him of his ‘Mr.’”

“I've known him ever since I was a child,” pleaded Cynthia.

“You're no longer a child, but a young woman,” retorted her ladyship; “therefore be good enough to give him his prefix. I hate this modern habit some women have of calling every man by his simple name; it's vulgar and bad form, and is only permitted to the lower orders. Remember that for the future, please. Frayne? I suppose he's the son of Sir Anson Frayne of Summerleigh Court?”

“Yes,” said Cynthia. “He's going to call on you this afternoon, Aunt Gwen.”

“Oh, is he?” grimly. “Frayne. It used to be a good property. This young man is the only child, is he? Well, I'll see him.”

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Cynthia went upstairs after lunch, her heart beating gaily; it was nice to have met Darrel again; how handsome he looked; how well his light suit became him; and he was just like his old self; and he was a soldier; she had always admired soldiers; and he was pleased to see her; oh, yes, he was just the same.

"I will wear my prettiest frock, Parsons," she said brightly. "An old friend is going to call this afternoon; an old friend I haven't seen for some time. My hair is full of dust; would you mind brushing it out for me?"

Parsons did not mind in the least; indeed, was delighted to do so. Cynthia hummed during the operation, and went down to the drawing-room, perhaps a little conscious that she was looking her best. It seemed a long while till four o'clock, and though she tried to occupy the time with a book, it is to be feared that the unfortunate author received but little attention. Fortunately for himself, Darrel did not arrive until the Griffin had had her afternoon slumber.

He had been wise enough to come in full fig: frock coat, patent boots, a dazzlingly shining hat, the whole afternoon kit complete. Lady Gwen received him in an attitude of armed neutrality, and extended two fingers as she surveyed him from top to toe with an unmasked scrutiny.

"Oh, so you're Darrel Frayne, are you?"—it appeared that she considered herself privileged to drop the prefix. "I met your father some years ago, when I was a girl. I've an idea that he was one of the men who proposed to me; but I am not sure; there were so many. And pray, what are you doing?"

"I'm in the Service," replied Darrel, with a touch of pride, which caused the Griffin to show her teeth in an ironical smile.

"What do you mean—Army, Navy, or just a clerk in the Civil Service?"

"I'm in the army," replied Darrel; "in the South Surrey."

"A walking regiment," commented her ladyship with a sniff. "Well, it will keep you out of mischief, if I remember rightly."

Cynthia sat in silence during this formidable inspection and examination. The footman brought in the tea, and she poured out a cup which Darrel carried to her aunt.

"Let me see," said Lady Gwen, as she took it, "your father has the Summerleigh estate, hasn't he? What's the rent roll?"

"I haven't the least idea, Lady Westlake," replied Darrel a trifle carelessly.

"Then you ought to have," retorted the Griffin. "It's unencumbered, I suppose?"

"I suppose so; I don't know," said Darrel with a smile.

"Then you ought to know," retorted her ladyship. "Put you're like most young men of the present day; you know nothing and you care nothing for anything but the pleasure of the moment. And small blame to you," she added with grim candour. "What does your father allow you?"

"A thousand a year," replied Darrel, pleasantly enough, but with rather a heightened colour; for he remembered Cynthia's warning, and had resolved not to be offended by her aunt and guardian.

"Too much!" declared her ladyship. "Of course, you spend every penny of it. So should I, if I were in your place. Put the cover on those tea-cakes; they're getting cold."

During the call Darrel had few chances of conversation with Cynthia, for Lady Westlake asked innumerable questions and talked incessantly. Towards the close of the regulation twenty minutes

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Darrel began to get slightly nervous; for he had to propose to this grim and forbidding old lady the projected dinner at the Savoy. After much beating about the bush, he approached it, as he thought, delicately and diplomatically.

"Did you ever dine at the Savoy, Lady Westlake?" he asked.

"Good lord, no!" snapped her ladyship. "Why should I? I don't approve of this dining at public-houses."

"The Savoy is scarcely a public-house," he submitted.

"I think it is," she snapped, still more sharply.

"I am quite aware that it's the fashion of the day to dine at these places; but I prefer to eat my dinner in my own house or those of my friends. Why do you ask such a silly question?"

"Oh, well," said poor Darrel, "because some friends of mine have asked me and Cyn—Miss Drayle to dine with them at the Savoy next Tuesday."

"Like their impudence!" said the Griffin, showing her teeth. "I shouldn't think of allowing Cynthia. The idea!"

"Lord Northam and Lady Alicia, his sister, will be disappointed," said Darrel with an air of resignation.

"Lord Northam, did you say?" demanded the Griffin, pricking up her ears. "Do you mean Torbridge's son? Humph! The Duke is an old friend of mine. It's Lord Northam's party, is it? What's the day? And, pray, who is going to be chaperon? Lady Alicia? Ahem! Well, I don't know.—I suppose you said you'd go?" turning to Cynthia.

"Yes, aunt, if you approved," replied Cynthia.

"Well, if you have accepted, I suppose you must go," said the old lady with an affectation of reluctance.

"Of course, you'll have tinkers and tailors all around

you ; probably dine at the next table with my boot-maker ; but, if you've set your heart upon it, you must have your way, I suppose. Must you really go ? " she said, turning upon Darrel, who had shown no desire to take his departure.

He got his hat and took the two fingers extended to him. At the door he found an opportunity to whisper to Cynthia.

" She's not so bad as she looks. Tuesday—Cynthia ! "

When they were left alone Lady Westlake mused for a time ; then she said, as if to herself—

" Torbridge is one of the oldest and richest of the dukedoms. The Duke—I remember him—must be getting on. Humph !—Has that new evening dress come home from Madame Cerise's ? You'd better wear it on Tuesday. I ought to go with you, I suppose. You're not ' out ' yet. You can tell Lord Northam that he can call on me. Good lord, how times have changed ! My people would no more have thought of allowing me to dine at your age at a public restaurant than they would have thought of permitting me to dance on a tight-rope." She shrugged her shoulders and snorted. " Society is going to the devil ; and we ourselves are to blame."

It seemed a long time to Tuesday, but the day came at last ; and as Cynthia stood before the glass, surveying the new dress, she was compelled to admit that it deserved the encomiums which Parsons enthusiastically bestowed upon it. Respecting her evening dresses, Cynthia had fought a battle royal with Aunt Gwen, who wanted the bodices cut much lower than Cynthia approved of ; this dress, though by no means *décolleté*, was extremely pretty ; it had the unmistakable Parisian touch and style, and it became Cynthia very well. Her aunt had been lavish in the matter of jewellery ;

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and Parsons that night fastened round the white and slim throat of her mistress a pearl necklace, which was costly enough to rouse the envy of most women.

The brougham carried her to the Savoy, in the ante-room of which Alicia, Lord Northam, and Darrel were awaiting her. Cynthia's heart was beating fast with anticipation. It was her first outing without having the Griffin at her elbow; she was going to spend the evening in an entirely novel manner with young people of her own age. It was a glimpse of a life which she had read of, but had not known.

Darrel came forward to her eagerly.

"Oh, here you are!" he exclaimed. "Come on!"

Lady Alicia greeted her warmly, not to say affectionately. Lord Northam, in a wooden, vacant kind of fashion, led the way to the table which he, or, rather, Lady Alicia, had engaged. The well-known dining-room was full; the band was playing softly; all the tables were occupied, the women were resplendent in exquisite frocks; diamonds, rubies, and sapphires flashed in the subdued light.

Cynthia looked round her with a mild excitement, a sensation of strangeness, of novel enjoyment. Two obsequious waiters attended on them. Darrel, who had manœuvred to get a seat next her, pointed out to Cynthia the various celebrities seated near them. Lady Alicia talked incessantly, and gradually, with woman's cunning, engrossed Darrel's attention. Lord Northam ate his way through the meal with the stolid air of a man who had a duty to perform and intended to do it; but between the courses he fixed his absent-minded gaze on Cynthia and regarded her as if she were an entrée of which he was especially fond. He addressed scarcely a word to her; but once, when a waiter brought a dish

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which Cynthia had refused, Northam said in a sleepy, absent-minded way—

“I should take this, if I were you; it’s good, stunnin’.”

It has been said that the room was full; but, as a matter of fact, a table at a little distance from them was vacant; and presently two gentlemen took their seats at it. They were Percy and his father, Lord Spencer. Percy, with a glance, had seen Cynthia; but he let the soup pass before he rose and went up to greet her. Introductions were made, and after a little conventional chat, Percy returned to his father.

“Who are your friends, Perce?” asked the father, drinking off a glass of champagne.

“Lord Northam and his sister, a man I don’t know, and Cynthia Drayle,” said Percy.

“Phew!” emitted his father, with a quizzical glance at Percy’s countenance. “So that’s it, is it? Northam; Torbridge’s son! And the little Cynthia, eh? The odds are against you, my boy?”

Percy leant back; there was a gleam in his eye, which the lids instantly concealed.

“I rather like the odds against me, sir,” he said. “It makes the race worth winning.”

“And you mean to win, Perce?” asked Lord Spencer, eyeing the impassive countenance of his son curiously.

Percy raised his eyes for a moment; they looked like those of a weasel in pursuit of a rabbit.

“Yes, I mean winning, sir,” he said.

His father bestowed an approving, an admiring glance on Cynthia.

“By gad!” he exclaimed under his breath. “She’s worth trying for!”

Percy opened his lips as if to correct a misapprehension of his father’s; but he checked himself and

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merely smiled with a kind of contemptuous tolerance of his parent's obtuseness and elementary cunning. As Percy watched Cynthia out of the corners of his eyes, he reflected that there were several ways of snaring a bird.

CHAPTER IX

SEEING THE WORLD

It is to be feared that Cynthia did not properly appreciate the exquisite art which had gone to the making of the dainty dishes that were brought to her at the Savoy by the well-trained waiters, who offered each course with a deferential bending of the head, a grave earnestness, as if their happiness depended upon her approval, and who received her frequent "No, thanks," with an air of pained resignation which partook of the pathetic.

Needless to say, the party attracted attention. Lord Northam and his pretty sister were, of course, known by several in the crowded room, and Lady Alicia's blonde beauty did not lack admirers; but Cynthia received the lion's share of the admiration; for, with her eyes radiant, her usually colourless face slightly flushed, and her air of youthful and undisguised enjoyment, she was without doubt the loveliest girl at the Savoy that evening. Inquiries concerning her were whispered, but few could answer that she was old Lady Gwen's niece and ward.

Lady Alicia, though she desired to engross Darrel's attention, was too well-bred to neglect her lady guest, and now and again she leant across the table to talk with her.

"Don't you want to know who some of the people are, Miss Drayle?" she asked.

"Yes," said Cynthia, in her direct fashion; "but I am so interested in the whole scene—Oh, yes, I would like to know, please."

"There is a good sprinkling of celebrities to-night," said Lady Alicia, glancing round without seeming to do so. "The dark man at the table behind us—the close-shaven man with the sallow, wrinkled face—is Edgar Thorne, the actor—"

Cynthia opened her grey eyes with girlish wonder; she had seen Mr. Thorne in the character of a young man of twenty-one; and he had then looked almost too young for that by no means mature age.

"I thought he was quite a young man," she said in a careful undertone. "That gentleman is quite—isn't he old?"

Lady Alicia laughed. "All the famous actors are old," she replied, with a little *moue* of amusement at Cynthia's innocence. "Yes; he looks old to-night; his present piece is not doing very well; but in half an hour—he is just going, you see—he will look five and twenty, and be five-and-twenty; so much for powder, paint, a fair wig and—art. The old lady with the diamonds and the lace, who is sitting beside him, is the Baroness Winsey, who helped Edgar Thorne in the early stages of his career, and helps him now. She is made of money, so that if you knocked against her you might chip off a fleck of gold. At the table on the left is Mr. Moses Lazarack; he is worth two million, and, as you see, is worrying a chop and drinking toast and water, because his doctors have sentenced him to death if he eats anything richer or drinks a single glass of champagne. That's Lady Arabella Stagbourne and her mother who are dining with him; they are trying to launch him in decent society, and in return he gives them Stock Exchange tips."

Cynthia looked rather puzzled, and, as Lady Alicia glanced to the other side, Cynthia inquired, with a frank and eager admiration in her voice—

"That young girl at the next table but one;

how pretty she is; she is perfectly lovely! And she looks so young, like a child. Who is she?"

Lady Alicia smiled. "That is Rosie Dormount—she is called the Dormouse; she is the dancer at the Frivolity. Yes; she is young; but she isn't exactly a—er—child. Look! That's Mr. Radleigh Yorke, the novelist," she went on rather quickly, diverting Cynthia's attention from the angelic Miss Dormount. "He is evidently thinking out his next plot. But surely you recognise him by his long hair and the way he leans his cheek on his finger and stares at the ceiling. He knows we are looking at him, and he is posing for all he is worth, for our benefit; very nice of him, isn't it? The other long-haired man is Bolaski, the violinist. You see how the women near him gaze at him with worshipping eyes? When he plays, they mob the platform, and fight like cats for the honour of shaking his hand, and the one who succeeds in sticking a flower in his button-hole is made happy for life."

Cynthia looked at her doubtfully and laughed.

"Are you making fun of me?" she asked.

"Not a bit; it is all true. But there are really some good people here. That old gentleman—the one who has just bowed to me—is Lord Rockby, the Cabinet Minister. He is a friend of Lady Westlake's, I know. He is admiring you ever so; shall I beckon him?"

Cynthia coloured, shrank back a little, and shook her head. She was not gauche, but she was feeling a trifle shy.

"You know so much, so many people," she said.

Alicia shrugged her shoulders. "And yet I am not much older than you, you mean? But then, I haven't been shut up with a griffin—I really beg your pardon!"

Cynthia smiled; but Lady Alicia's manner jarred

on her somewhat; she did not like to hear Lady Alicia speak of Lady Westlake so familiarly; it sounded disrespectful; Cynthia was fond of her aunt. Lady Alicia saw her mistake and changed her tone with practised facility.

"I wish Lady Westlake were with us," she said, with an air so sincere that it dispelled Cynthia's discomfort.

"Oh, so do I!" she responded, with a sincerity which caused Lady Alicia's under lip to droop. "But she would not like the crowd, and she cannot sit for very long. I must remember the names of the famous people and tell her——"

"You might tell her that you saw the Duchess of Clanfield—there she is, near the door—and Lord Rockby," said Alicia quickly. "I—don't think I should mention the Dormouse."

"Why not?" asked our Miss Innocent.

Lady Alicia laughed and turned away with a shrug. Darrel, whose eyes had been fixed on Cynthia's face with a gaze of scarcely veiled ardour, seized his opportunity. For him there was only one girl in the room, and she was close to him.

"Are you happy, Cynthia?" he asked in a low voice.

She turned to him with a radiant smile, drew a quick breath, and nodded thrice.

"It is delightful! Don't you think it is?" she demanded eagerly. "Ah, but you are used to it; you have been here before; often perhaps; and this is my first time! I have never seen anything like it; and everybody seems so bright and gay, as if they had nothing in the world to trouble them."

They moved to the lounge—the other diners looked after them with interest, as they passed between the tables—and Darrel found seats beneath a spreading palm. The waiters brought coffee and cigars and liqueurs, and Cynthia leant back

in her deep-seated, satin-cushioned chair and again gave herself up to a frank and girlish enjoyment of the scene. Lady Alicia had seated herself between Darrel and Cynthia, who was thus left to Lord Northam; but he did not appear to feel it incumbent to talk to her, and smoked with half-closed eyes for some time. Presently he said—

“There’s that chap who came up and spoke to you in the dining-room, Miss Drayle. Isn’t that Lord Spencer Standish with him?”

“Yes,” replied Cynthia, catching Percy’s eye at the moment and smiling. “He is Percy Standish; the young man, I mean; he is Lord Standish’s son.”

Northam grunted and eyed Percy with a kind of disfavour.

“Good-looking chap,” he said. “Pity he can’t swop fathers—Beg pardon; he’s a friend of yours p’raps?”

“No; I only know Percy,” said Cynthia, colouring a little; “he is a nephew of Lady Westlake’s; and so he’s a kind of cousin of mine.”

“Looks clever,” commented Northam sleepily.

“He is!” assented Cynthia. “Very clever.”

Northam grunted again.

“What is the time?” asked Lady Alicia. “Why, it’s quite early! Shall we drop in at the Frivolity? You will see your interesting Miss Dormount dance, Miss Drayle.”

Cynthia looked up eagerly; but checked the impulse to exclaim—“Oh, yes!”

“Thank you, I should like it very much; but I must go home. My aunt would not like me to be late,” she said a trifle regretfully.

“Yes; I am afraid you must,” said Darrel, glancing at his watch and sighing.

“But you mustn’t let me keep you from going,” said Cynthia quickly. “I ought to have gone before;

but I have been so happy—it has been so delightful.”

Lady Alicia pressed her to go on with them; but with a sigh and a shake of the head Cynthia rose. They went to the cloak-room. Lord Northam, who had been the last to rise, opened his lips as if about to urge Cynthia to remain; but he caught a glance from his sister, shrugged his shoulders, and kept silence.

As they were standing at the entrance, waiting for Cynthia's carriage—the Northams had come in a taxi-cab—Darrel drew to Cynthia's side.

“I mustn't come with you?” he said with a wistful sigh.

“Oh, no, no!” she assented quickly. “You mustn't leave Lady Alicia; besides, Aunt Gwen would not like——”

“I know,” he murmured with an air of resignation. “When shall I see you again, Cynthia?”

“I don't know,” she replied, looking up at him and then away, with a touch of colour in her cheeks.

“See here!” he said quickly and eagerly. “I shall have to call on Lady Westlake; I'll call the day after to-morrow—here's the carriage!—half-past four? Quick, Cynthia!”

She made an affirmative gesture; and he drew her arm within his and led her through the small crowd which had collected by the door. In doing so he collided with a man who was emerging from the entrance. He was a heavily built young fellow, with coarse features and reddish hair and a moustache of the same colour and of the blacking-brush order, which called attention to, rather than masked, a mouth that was like a gash in his flushed face.

A more orderly place than the Savoy it would be difficult to find; but sometimes, though very rarely, some one will dine not wisely but too well; this plain young man had certainly had more champagne

than was good for him, and his face and manner proclaimed the fact most obviously.

Darrel, feeling the concussion, drew Cynthia, who had seen nothing of the affair, closer, and murmured over his shoulder: "Sorry!" in the conventionally apologetic tone; but the young man declined to accept the expression of regret, and, pushing close against Darrel, stuttered aggressively—

"Who are you shoving? D'you think you've bought the place?"

Surprised, Darrel glanced at him, and in a half-conscious way noticed that the man looked like the typical provincial up for a holiday. He wore a badly fitting dress suit, a made-up tie—a sure and certain mark of his class—and a bowler hat a size too large for him. Darrel knew, by the casual glance, that the man had taken too much, and that he was confused by the unaccustomed brilliance and excitement, and, thinking no more of him, was putting Cynthia into the carriage when a huge red hand was laid on his arm.

Darrel turned with surprise, stared at the angry face, said in an undertone, "One moment, please!" then, closing the carriage door, leant over it, his hand on Cynthia's, and murmured to her—"Good night, Cynthy! The day after to-morrow—half-past four; you'll remember? Right, coachman!"

When he turned, after watching the carriage make its way through the crowd of vehicles, the young countryman was still standing, rather unsteadily, at Darrel's elbow and staring at him with an air of offence and belligerence.

"What do you want?" demanded Darrel, rather sharply, but calmly enough; for the man's condition called for consideration.

"Want—want an apology!" stammered the other. "Don't think you can knock people about just as you like, do you?"

"My good sir, if I knocked against you, I'm sorry," said Darrel, with, it is to be admitted, that suggestion of superiority which is so exasperating to an inferior. "It was an accident—the crowd——"

"You did it on purpose," was the half-sullen, half-furious retort of the aggrieved person. "If you think you're going to get off so easily——!" He made a gesture too significant to be mistaken.

Attracted by the man's loud voice and expressive attitude, some of the persons near them stopped and looked at them furtively, evidently expecting a row. At this moment Northam approached.

"I've got a taxi——" he began; then he stopped and stared at the two. "What's up, Frayne?"

At the name, Darrel's opponent gave a start and a lurch and opened his huge mouth.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he exclaimed. "I know you—I haven't forgotten you. It's the kind of thing you would do!"

Lady Alicia touched Darrel on the arm. "Who is it, Mr. Frayne?" she said in a disgusted undertone.

"I haven't the least idea," replied Darrel as disgustedly.

"Darrel Frayne'; yes; that's all right," stutted the other man, nodding knowingly. "Guessed right the very first time. You think yourself somebody, I suppose; shovin' and pushin', as if no one had any right to be here but yourself. And it's no use your pretendin' not to know me; it won't wash. You remember me well enough——"

"Pray come away!" said Lady Alicia, pressing Darrel's arm. "He is—— Oh, you can see!"

"I know," said Darrel. "Please leave my arm alone," he added sternly to the man, who had caught it as if to prevent his foe escaping him.

"You wait a bit," he retorted thickly. "There's no hurry. You're Darrel Frayne, and you're swelling

it up here in London, as if you were a cock of the walk; but I could make you climb down, I could take the shine out of you—if—if I was to tell 'em what—what I could tell 'em. It's no use your tryin' the high and mighty with me. You know me well enough. I'm Sampson—Mr. Sampson Burridge; my father could let the nonsense out of you like—like gas from a bal—balloon."

Darrel exclaimed with astonishment. "Why—yes, it is!" he said, his anger swallowed up in surprise. "Upon my word, I didn't recognise you, Burridge! It's a long time since—But I remember you now! I'm sorry I can't stop and have a chat with you. You're staying in town, I suppose? Come and see me——" He took a card from his waistcoat pocket and held it out with a tolerant contempt.

But Sampson declined to be placated. He was too far gone to think of consequences, to remember his father's position as Sir Anson's steward; he forgot everything but his old hatred of Darrel, a hatred which had been lying dormant all the years since they had fought, as boys, at the old bridge at Summerleigh. He snatched at the card, and, tearing it in pieces, flung them on the ground.

"This is no place——" he said with a tipsy man's futile attempt at dignity. "Can't explain here! But you'll find, Mr. Darrel Frayne, that I've got the whip hand of you, me and my father——"

Northam, who had stood silently looking from one to the other, laid his hand on Darrel's shoulder.

"Come on," he said phlegmatically. "You'll have the police here directly."

Darrel turned rather reluctantly. "I know him," he said with an attempt at explanation; "he comes from our place. I wish there was some one to take him home, look after him——"

"Thank you," broke in Sampson with a sneer;

he had overheard Darrel's charitable aspiration, and, of course, resented it. "I can take care of myself. I don't want any assistance from you——"

"Oh, come on!" ejaculated Northam wearily, and Darrel, still reluctant, followed the Northams into the taxi-cab. Sampson stood waveringly, his huge mouth twisting all ways, as he muttered resentful threats, and he swung round savagely as a hand lightly touched his arm.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded furiously of the handsome, beautifully dressed young man who had touched him.

"Excuse me," said Percy, who until that moment had been standing just within the entrance, and had seen and heard all that had passed. "I think I have the pleasure of knowing you? You are Mr.—er—er—Burridge of Summerleigh?"

"I am," admitted Sampson with heavy surprise; he had quite forgotten that he had shouted his name loud enough to be heard across the street; "but I am dashed if I know you!"

"I have the advantage, you see," said Percy in his smooth voice. "Will you come and—er—have a cigar and a chat? We will take a cab." He turned to his father, who was standing by them and looking on with an air of amusement and curiosity. "Go home, sir," he said in a low voice. "Don't wait for me; I have met a friend——"

Lord Standish nodded and grinned; he always did what his clever son bade him; you see, there was generally some reason for Percy's most apparently reasonless actions.

"You come with me—my hotel," said Sampson with dignity.

"With pleasure," assented Percy pleasantly.

"Here is a cab."

"The Loamshire," stuttered Sampson haughtily,

as if he were giving the name of the most exclusive and aristocratic hotel in London. "Get in, Mister—I didn't catch your name; we'll make a night of it. I want something to wash the taste of that—that upstart out of my mouth."

CHAPTER X

MR. SAMPSON MAKES A FOOL OF HIMSELF

THEY drove to the Loamshire, Percy having paid the fare and, under the pretence of taking the lurching Sampson's arm in a friendly fashion, assisted that gentleman to mount the steps and make his way into the smoking-room. It chanced to be empty; Sampson, dropping into a chair, hammered the table until a scared and untidy waiter came to them.

"A bottle of your best fizz and some—some cigars; and look mighty sharp about it," Sampson commanded in a lordly way.

"And a syphon of soda-water," added Percy in an undertone. "Thank you—I'll take a cigarette, Mr. Burridge. Will you try one of mine?" he asked sweetly, as he concealed a shudder at the appearance of the Loamshire's cigars.

"Not me!" replied Sampson contemptuously. "They're no use to me. I prefer—I mean prefer—a cigar; and I like it strong. I can stand it; I've got a strong stomach."

"And as strong a head, I am sure," said Percy. Sampson winked, smiled fatuously, and tossed off a glass of the inferior champagne which was the Loamshire's best.

"First-rate stuff this," he said.

"Very good indeed," assented Percy. "I always take a little soda-water with mine; it's the fashion now."

He pushed the syphon towards Sampson, whom

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he did not wish quite speechlessly drunk ; and Sampson condescended to take some of the chastening soda.

" You are paying a visit to town for a little change, Mr. Burrige ? " said Percy in his silkiest and most ingratiating manner.

" Yes," said Sampson with a knowing nod. " I'm up on a little spree ; and I've earned it too ; for the governor keeps me pretty close. He doesn't believe in anything but work ; likes to see a young fellow on the treadmill all the time ; but all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, eh, mister ? "

" I cannot imagine you dull at any time, Mr. Burrige," said Percy ; and Sampson winked and nodded again. " You appear to me to be one of those men who are always capable of enjoying themselves."

" That's me ! " said Sampson with immense self-satisfaction. " I'm on the spot all the time ; everything comes easy to me from—from dancing to cock-fighting."

" I very much regret that your pleasure should have been temporarily spoiled to-night," said Percy sympathetically. " It was a most unpleasing incident ; and, but for your wonderful self-restraint and command of temper, it might have ended seriously."

Sampson's face grew redder, and he pushed his lips out angrily.

" Yes ; I'd have knocked his blessed head off, if it hadn't been for ladies being present," he said.

" Of course he did it on purpose ; it was a distinct shove. And he knew me right enough ; I saw it in his eye ; but he pretended that he didn't."

Percy shook his head in reprehension of Darrel's conduct.

" Mr. Frayne behaved very badly, I must admit," he said ; " and I am not surprised at your resent-

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ment. I think you behaved admirably, Mr. Burrige. Let me see, you and Mr. Frayne come from the same place, Summerleigh ? ”

“ Of course,” assented Sampson thickly. “ My governor manages the Court estate—But I thought you said you knew me ? ” he broke off with a touch of suspicion.

“ Quite so,” said Percy smoothly. “ And no doubt there is an old grievance between you and Mr. Frayne ? ”

Sampson jerked his head cavalierly. “ Oh, we’ve never liked each other,” he said ; “ we used to fight as boys. He thinks a precious sight too much of himself ; you might be dirt under his feet by the way he treats you. But I’ll be even with him some day,” he added threateningly.

“ I am quite sure you will,” said Percy, with an admiring smile. “ I am quite sure you would prove a match for any one. I should not like to have you for an enemy, Mr. Burrige ; no, indeed ! ”

Sampson, visibly swelling under this flattery, wagged his big head solemnly, as he peered under his heavy lids at the pale face, which was now beginning to float hazily in his vision. Percy saw that his man would soon be dead asleep, and he stealthily refilled Sampson’s glass with a very little champagne and a great deal of soda. He must be quick, if he wanted to get anything definite out of the tipsy fool.

“ I am rather a judge of character, Mr. Burrige, and I should say, from my knowledge of you, that you could bide your time and wait until you could strike home,”

“ That’s me,” said Sampson, banging his fist on the table and startling the timid waiter, who was dozing behind the screen at the other end of the room. “ I can wait until the psycho—psycho—what d’you call it—moment, and then come down

a crusher ; and that's what I'm going to do with his royal highness, Mr. Darrel Frayne."

"Yes," said Percy, lowering his voice impressively. "I understand that you have him in the hollow of your hand, Mr. Burrige ?"

"I have," said Sampson, opening his huge fist and closing it slowly with an air of malignant satisfaction.

"You know something ?" Percy insinuated confidentially.

Sampson nodded and leant forward. "Look here," he said in a thick whisper, and breathing heavily ; "if my father liked, he could smash up the Fraynes, swallow 'em body and bones. They're rotten, rotten to the core ; have been for years. And the funny thing is, that that old fool, Sir Anson, don't know it. You see, my father is one of the leary ones, and he can keep his mouth shut. And so can I." He winked with an assumption of acuteness and discretion which would have almost amused the cynical Percy if he had not been so intent on his purpose.

"Your father holds all the mortgages ?" he said in a still lower voice.

"He does," replied Sampson significantly. "He could come down upon 'em at any moment. I know, because I'm in the office——" He stopped suddenly, smitten by a half-consciousness of his foolish communicativeness to a comparative stranger, yawned, stretched his arms, and rose unsteadily. "I'm confounded sleepy somehow," he said. "I shall be all right if I have a five minutes' snooze."

He attempted to fill his glass, missed his aim, and poured some of the wine on the table. With a foolish laugh, he sank back on the seat, his head fell forward, and in a little less than a moment he was fast asleep.

With a gesture of disgust and loathing, Percy

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rose, and, seating himself in an arm-chair at some distance from his unpleasant companion, leant back with closed eyes, his legs crossed, his hands folded on his knee. He looked as soundly asleep as was Sampson; but his brain was hard at work.

Percy Standish was a clever young man and ambitious; and few clever and ambitious young men were so heavily handicapped. He was the son of a man with an evil reputation, a man who, but for his rank, would have been outlawed by society. He and his father were hideously poor; they literally lived from hand to mouth, and they were always in debt; Lord Standish enjoyed quite a reputation amongst his boon companions for dodging writs and bailiffs.

Most young men in Percy's position received assistance from their fathers; Percy's was of no use to him; he must rely upon himself. In only one direction could he look for help, in the direction of Lady Westlake. From early boyhood he had regarded himself as her heir; but Cynthia, the girl from Summerleigh, had come to Belgrave Square, and Percy knew that in all probability Lady Westlake would leave her large fortune to Cynthia, and that he might consider himself lucky if he were mentioned in the will.

If Cynthia were out of the way, if he could only oust her from Lady Westlake's favour, he would in all likelihood come in for the Griffin's money; for there was no one else to whom she could leave it; she was the last woman in the world to bequeath it to charities. He had at one time thought of marrying Cynthia himself; but he was astute enough to feel that his chances of doing so were small; for, with all her innocence and inexperience, Cynthia was quick-witted, and, he knew, had instinctively taken his true measure. Besides, she was in love, or was going to be, with Darrel Frayne.

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Percy had watched her that night, and had seen her eyes melt as she turned them on Darrel. He had determined to prevent their marriage, by fair means or foul; the revelation of the parlous condition of the Fraynes' affairs which this tipsy fool had made rendered the breaking off of the proposed match quite easy. Percy had only to go to Lady Westlake and make her acquainted with all he had learnt that night to render the threatened engagement impossible. He would go round to Belgrave Square to-morrow and put a spoke in Darrel Frayne's wheel.

He flung his cigarette in the grate, rose and took up his opera hat and overcoat; he had no intention of waking Mr. Sampson Burridge, had no more need of him, and sincerely trusted that he would never have the misfortune to meet him again. With scarcely a glance at the heaped-up form on the settee, he had reached the door, when suddenly there flashed across his mind one of those ideas which come so frequently to clever men like Percy Standish. It sent the blood to his face, his pale eyes gleamed, his thin lips drew together tightly. He went back to his chair and pondered, turning over the idea this way and that, enlarging, developing it.

When his little scheme was rounded off and neatly completed, he rose and, approaching the snoring Sampson with a little shudder of disgust, clutched the huge shoulder and shook him roughly; then, as Sampson woke slowly with heavy writhings of his limbs, Percy slipped into the chair beside the table, as if he had not moved from it.

"Eh, what's the time?" yawned Sampson, stretching himself. "Oh, there you are, Mister! I thought I was in bed. What were we talkin' about? Blest if I didn't fall asleep!"

Percy saw that his snooze had partially sobered Sampson, and knew that he must be treated warily.

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"It is getting late, Mr. Burrige," he said, not suavely now, but gravely. "I think we had better go to bed."

"Right you are!" said Sampson with another yawn. He stretched out his hand towards the champagne bottle; but Percy drew it away from him.

"If I were you, I wouldn't drink any more to-night, Mr. Burrige. If you will forgive me for saying so, you have an inconvenient and rather dangerous habit of talking too freely when you have taken too much wine."

"Eh, what?" demanded Sampson uncomfortably, as he noticed the change in the manner and tone of his companion. "What have I been sayin'?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders with an affectation of reluctance.

"Well, if you insist, Mr. Burrige—you have been talking rather openly of the affairs of Sir Anson Frayne."

Sampson's mottled face grew rather less red, he screwed up his eyes, pursed his thick lips, and peered suspiciously at Percy's now serious countenance. He tried to remember what had happened, how it chanced that he should be hob-nobbing in this familiar fashion with a stranger, and what he had said to him; but his slumber, short as it had been, had acted as a sponge, and had wiped from his memory, at any rate for the present, all but the faintest records of their conversation.

"You've forgotten, I see," said Percy, still gravely. "Mr. Frayne, who is a friend of mine, had an altercation with you outside the Savoy——"

"I remember, curse him!" growled Sampson.

"Quite so. It might have ended seriously for you, for you were—not quite yourself. Mr. Frayne is a friend of mine, and I got you away before the police came up. You asked me to come to your

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hotel here and insisted upon having some more wine. You had already had quite enough. And Mr. Burrige, wine, especially champagne, affects men in various ways; some it renders secretive, it loosens the tongues of others. It loosened yours. Outside the Savoy, you had said, or rather, shouted, several things relating to the private affairs of the Frayne family——”

“The devil I did!” ejaculated Sampson.

“Indeed you did,” said Percy. “But I think you may console yourself with the reflection that no one took any notice; indeed, I doubt whether Mr. Darrel Frayne heard it.”

Sampson heaved a hiccoughing sigh and looked somewhat relieved.

“But when you came on here with me,” resumed Percy, “you repeated those threats. You intimated that, to use your own words, you or your father held the fortunes of the Fraynes in the hollow of your hand. You said that they were completely ruined, that your father held the mortgages of the estate, and that you could smash them—‘body and bones,’ I think was your expression—whenever you chose.”

Sampson’s jaw fell, he thrust his clumsy fingers through his red hair until it stood on end, and stared apprehensively at the pale, handsome, and now almost stern face opposite him. And he was growing more sober every moment.

“I must have been a fool!” he muttered.

“Most men are, especially when they are drunk,” remarked Percy cynically, and rather to himself than to Sampson. “Now I need scarcely tell you, Mr. Burrige, that you have been very indiscreet. I am quite sure that your father, who is a business man, would strongly object to your communicativeness.”

“Rather!” said Sampson sullenly.

“Quite so. I am not sure that it is not my duty

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to repeat to Mr. Darrel Frayne what you have said——”

“Here, don’t do that!” protested Sampson hastily.

“Whether I do or not depends upon you,” said Percy very gravely. “If I refrain from doing so I must extract a promise from you, Mr. Burridge.”

“What is it?” asked Sampson with craven eagerness. “I can see I’ve opened my mouth too wide; and to a stranger, too. For—now I’m sober—I’m dashed if I remember you. I don’t b’lieve I’ve ever seen you before. Come to that, who are you?”

“My name is Standish,” said Percy. “I know something of you—but really it doesn’t matter. The point to consider is whether I ought to go to Mr. Frayne and acquaint him with all you have told me.”

“You wouldn’t be so mean?” urged Sampson. “I was half-screwed, or I shouldn’t have said it. When a man’s tight he opens his mouth wide—it’s natural. But I’m sober now, sober as a judge. You wanted me to promise something; what is it?”

Percy leant forward, inwardly shrinking from the heated, wine-laden breath of his companion.

“I wanted you to promise,” he said impressively, “that you will not call upon Mr. Darrel Frayne, that you will not tell any one what you have told me——”

“You bet your life I don’t!” said Sampson emphatically. “I’ve been an awful fool—I see that now. My governor would be in a fearful wax if he knew that I had spouted out all that about the Fraynes.”

“So I should imagine,” said Percy sententiously. “Now, Mr. Burridge, we understand each other. Let there be no mistake, please. If you take my advice you will return to Summerleigh, you will

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keep your mouth"—for the life of him he could not refrain from the coarse taunt—"your inconveniently large mouth, closed about the Fraynes' affairs. It will be as well if you will drop a hint to your father to the same intent. It is not impossible that I may go down to Summerleigh to see your father. Oh, do not be afraid," for Sampson's jaw had fallen again, "I shall not mention your little indiscretion. So far as I am concerned, I shall treat your confidences as if they had never been made. You understand? Quite so."

"I understand," responded Sampson gratefully, his hand wandering to the champagne bottle; and this time Percy did not stay him. "I'm awfully obliged to you, Mr. — haven't got your name yet. I'm mum."

"Believe me, you had better remain so," said Percy gravely.

He took up his opera hat, and, with the curtest of nods left the room, the odour and appearance of which had been a torture to his delicate senses.

CHAPTER XI

PASSION SLAVE

DARREL and the Northams were fortunate enough to get a box at the Frivolity; it was the only empty one in the huge house, for the Frivolity was doing good business. Darrel would have much preferred to go home to his rooms, to smoke a pipe, and think in quiet and solitude of Cynthia; for love was taking full possession of him, and his heart was throbbing with a commingling of emotions; that mixture of hope and fear, of happiness and wistfulness, of the desire to be near the loved one, to listen to her voice, to touch her hand, the sleeve of her dress.

Darrel was young, very young; but the deeper impulses of manhood were stirring within him. It seemed to him that there was no one in the world like her; she was so innocent, so pure, so unaffected, so—true; yes, that was the word—true. Naturally enough, he compared her with Lady Alicia, who was leaning back in her chair beside him, so close that her bare, white arm nearly touched his, and he could breathe the subtle perfume of the delicate scent which she alone used. If he had not met Cynthia again, he might have been moved by the proximity of the beautiful girl who leant towards him as if unconsciously, glancing at him through her long lashes; but Cynthia filled the whole of his horizon; young and inexperienced as he was, he knew that Lady Alicia, notwithstanding her blonde and delicate

beauty, was, compared with Cynthia, as common delf to purest porcelain.

There were moments when he actually forgot the siren at his side. He looked at the stage and watched the gorgeous ballet, in which the Dormouse was dancing to the frenzied delight of the vast audience. He could think of nothing but Cynthia; and he forgot the fracas with Sampson Burrige, though the meeting with him had recalled all his old times with Cynthia at Summerleigh.

Who could have guessed that his little playmate, the mischievous tom-boy, all legs and wings, would have grown into such a perfect, lovely woman!

The performance at the Frivolity, good and clever as it always is, does not inflict too great a mental strain upon the spectator, and Darrel was free to indulge his reverie. Lady Alicia scarcely spoke; she knew when to be silent; and Northam was soundly and obviously asleep.

"Is it over?" said Darrel, as the curtain went down for the last time.

"Yes," said Lady Alicia with a faint smile. "Awfully good show, isn't it? Wake Northam, will you? We'll go and get some supper. That ballet has made me quite hungry."

They went round to Prince's, and Darrel tried to rise to the occasion; he drank two or three glasses of champagne, and succeeded in responding to Lady Alicia's unforced gaiety. She did her best to fascinate him; and it must be admitted that Lady Alicia's best in that direction was very good indeed. She succeeded in enchaining his attention, and provoked him to laughter by some of her sallies, and as they made their way through the still crowded room she wore a radiant smile and the air of a girl full of happiness and contentment; but when she and Northam were alone in the taxi-cab she dropped back into her corner, the smile left her face, which

suddenly grew pale and discontented, and her eyes as she watched Darrel walking along the pavement were wistful and moody.

Northam promptly went to sleep again; he appeared to be able to sleep whenever he wanted to do so. They reached the small house in Burton Crescent in which Lady Alicia lived, nominally under the care of an elderly cousin, a nonentity whose poverty rendered her only too glad to occupy the position of chaperon to a young lady who knew a great deal more about the world than did Mrs. Clinton, and who was perfectly well able to take care of herself.

"I am going straight to bed, Northam," said Lady Alicia. "I am tired to death."

"You look it," said Northam with brotherly candour. "Been rather a jolly evening, though," he added, as he sauntered heavily into the dining-room and mixed himself a brandy-and-soda.

She leant against the table in an attitude of weariness and lassitude, as if she were suffering from the reaction of a tremendous effort.

"Do you think so?" she said, the corners of her mouth drooping. "I have been bored to death."

Northam looked at her over the edge of his glass, with the stolid, impassive look which concealed a considerable amount of shrewdness.

"Thought you weren't having much of a time," he said; "but the rest of us enjoyed it, I fancy. I can answer for two, Frayne and Miss Drayle."

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently and raised her brows.

"Yes, she was like a girl at a Sunday-school treat," she said with slow contempt.

Northam laughed. He was silent for a moment, then he said:

"That's a bit nasty, Alicia. She is just young and innocent; and the whole thing was fresh to

her. Somehow it did me good to watch her. You don't often meet a girl like that. She was the pick of the basket there to-night; prettiest girl in the room, present company excepted."

"Mr. Frayne did not except even me," she said with a kind of defiance.

Northam nodded. "It's plain to see what's the matter with him," he said. "He's head over heels in love with her."

Her face flamed and then went pale.

"Why do you tell me that?" she asked. "Do you think I've become suddenly blind?"

Northam was fond of his sister, and the bitterness that rang in her tone touched him. He laid his heavy hand on her white shoulder and shook her gently.

"Pull yourself together, old girl," he said. "I know how it is with you. But it's no use; he's booked, he's up to his neck in love. Don't think any more of him."

She shook her shoulder free; her face was quite white, her eyes glittering coldly as stars.

"Don't be a brute, Northam," she said. "You mean well, but—it hurts. It's good advice, I've no doubt; but, like most good advice, it comes too late. Oh, yes, you needn't frown; you know how it is with me, as you say. I'm 'up to my neck' too, over my head. It's no use scowling; I can't help myself. I ought to be ashamed of myself, I suppose. And so I am. I'm so ashamed that I'm tingling all over. Do you think I wouldn't give it up, if I could? But I can't. That's just it. And, what is more, I wouldn't, if I could. Oh, yes, I know—do you think I haven't been watching them all the evening; do you think I haven't seen his eyes when they rested on her? Yes; he's in love with her, as you say—but she hasn't got him yet."

Northam frowned and pushed out his lips.

"That's not fair," he said roughly. "You speak as if—as if she were lying low for him."

"No, it's not fair," she admitted. "I'll do her that justice. She doesn't want him yet; she doesn't care for him; but she will unless——"

Her voice died away, and she looked above his head, beyond him.

"Unless what?" he demanded bluntly.

She remained silent for another moment or two; then she lowered her eyes and looked at him steadily.

"Unless something happens to help me," she said, in a low voice, but very clearly.

"I don't know what you mean," he said. "You're too clever for me sometimes, Alicia. What have you got in your head now?"

"I wonder whether I had better tell you," she said, with a faint smile, a slight curve of the lips.

"Darrel Frayne was not the only person I was watching to-night; your countenance can be pretty expressive sometimes, Northam, wooden as it usually is."

Northam grinned, but watched her rather uneasily.

"Get on," he said; "I want to go to bed. What was it you saw in my—my beauteous face?"

"Something like that which Darrel Frayne's wore," she said, rather defiantly. "It's no use your denying it, Northam. You admire the girl."

"That's so," he admitted, with an attempt at indifference. "Everybody must, including yourself."

"You'd go further than admiration," she said.

"Oh, yes, you would! Do you think I don't know?

Do you think I don't know what a man means when he looks at a girl as you looked at her to-night?

Why, you were struck with her the first time we met her in the Park! Northam," she leaned forward and laid her hand upon his arm, "why shouldn't

you help me—and yourself?"

He thrust his hands in his pockets and stared down at his boots, so that she could not see his eyes; but a faint colour had spread over his face.

"Why not?" she persisted, slowly, persuasively. "You'd make a better match for her than he would. You know there isn't a man in London who wouldn't be out of the race for any girl, if you took up the running."

He shook his head without raising his eyes.

"Not with this one," he said quietly. "That sort of thing wouldn't count with her. She'd take the man she wants and no other. The fact of my being the next duke wouldn't weigh an ounce with Cynthia Drayle."

She pushed his arm from her and laughed contemptuously.

"What fools men are!" she said scornfully. "You are all alike, you are all taken in by any schoolgirl; you think them—oh, everything that's pure and disinterested. Take my word for it, that Miss Cynthia Drayle, with all her childish, bread-and-butterish ways, is as keen as the rest."

"You're wrong," he said. "You don't understand her, that's evident, for all your cleverness."

She laughed again. "Do I not? We shall see. Besides, you are forgetting that old cat, her aunt. Do you think she won't count? Oh, yes, she will! Do you think she would let the girl refuse the future Duke of Torbridge? Not she! I know the Griffin by repute. Of course, she is ambitious for the girl. She'd like to have the running of the future Duchess of Torbridge."

Northam's face had gradually grown redder. He lifted his eyes, and they were angry ones.

"What are you driving at, Alicia?" he said. "You don't mean to say you want me to—to force the girl, through Lady Westlake, to marry me? I

wouldn't do it. Besides, there's Frayne: he's a pal of mine."

"All is fair in love and war," she said, with barely concealed contempt for his scruples. "And there's another thing—did you hear what that bouncer said outside the Savoy, when he was rowing with Darrel Frayne?"

"Oh, yes, I heard," said Northam, with a gesture of indifference. "The chap was screwed and didn't know what he was saying."

"Oh, yes, he did," she said quickly, "and he meant every word of it. He was threatening Darrel Frayne, talked about ruining him. I heard him distinctly; and I'm certain there was something in it."

"Not a bit of it," said Northam, "the man was just gassing, as a drunken bouncer will. What could there be in it? Frayne's father is one of the biggest men in those parts. You're a bit off colour to-night, old girl, and don't know what you're talkin' about. And, besides," he added with a grin, "if there was any truth in that fellow's maunderings, it would queer your pitch with Darrel Frayne."

"Do you think so?" she said, her voice suddenly soft, but thrilling in its intensity. "You don't know much of me, Northam; you don't know much about women. When they're as far gone as I am, they marry their man, though he were a pauper and were left with nothing but the clothes he stands in."

He flushed with a kind of shame for her, but there was no answering flush in her cheek; her eyes shone with passion now.

"You forced me to speak the truth, Northam," she said. "I am in love with Darrel Frayne—and I mean to have him, with your help or without it— Oh, don't be foolish, Northam!" Her voice was now pleading, persuasive. "She is lovely,

as you say; I admit it. She is good—you have a weakness for good women, you know—she would make an admirable duchess; any man might be proud of her. And she's yours, for the asking. Oh, Billy!"—it was only in moments of intense strain or affection that Lady Alicia called her brother by his old boyish name—"don't be hard on me and yourself! Why should you give way to Darrel Frayne? She doesn't care for him; she'd soon come to care for you; she's just that sort of girl. Think of her as your wife, your very own!"

She had put her arms round his neck, her eyes were looking into his temptingly, pleadingly, yet forcefully. He unlinked the white arms and put her from him almost roughly.

"You're talking through your hat," he said angrily, and yet with a note in his voice which revealed the strength of the temptation. "For heaven's sake, go to bed!"

She went without a word, but at the door she looked over her shoulder. He had dropped into a chair, his legs were stretched out, his hands were thrust deep into his pockets, his heavy face was pressed against his chest, his lips were compressed tightly, and his brows knit together with a frown.

She knew that her words had gone home, that they were working within him, and a faint smile passed across her weary face.

CHAPTER XII

DARREL SPEAKS

LIKE Northam, Darrel attached no importance to Sampson Burrige's threats. They did recur to Darrel's mind the next morning, in his first waking moments, but he put them down to drunken vapouring and dismissed them and Sampson from his mind. All that day he devoted to his military duties; of course, thinking of Cynthia at intervals; and his men, who were attached to him—for your Tommy is a keen judge of character, and can prophesy the future of any young subaltern with almost unerring accuracy—reflected his cheerful countenance and exchanged approving remarks about him when they went off parade and drill.

"He's the best of our lot," said Sergeant Crowe, in the confidence of the sergeants' mess. "I mean of the young 'uns. He's as keen as mustard, is Mr. Frayne, and he's got the men body and soul. He don't spare 'em, and he's down on the slouchers and the slackers; but he don't spare himself, either: he works like a nigger; and yet if you meet him when he's off duty swinging along in his careless, who-the-devil-cares-for-anybody kind of way, you'd think he was just one of the ornamental brigade."

"I know that sort too," remarked another sergeant. "I've fought beside 'em against the 'Fridis, and out in Egypt, when it's been as hot as Hades, all give and take, and no quarter; and the young gentlemen who went about at home here in pretty clothes, flowers

in their buttonholes, and voices as soft as gals', fought like tigers—worse than tigers, because they know when they've had enough, and slink off when their belly's full."

Sergeant Crowe nodded comprehendingly. "Yes, our Mr. Frayne is one of that kind," he said. "He don't know what fear is. I was sittin' on a stile smoking a pipe the other morning, when he comes across the meadow, riding that black horse of Captain Northam's. Now, if ever there was a fiend on four legs, he's one of them—the horse, I mean, stupid!—and I knew by the way his eyes rolled that he was up to mischief. He come along mincing, like the cove in the Bible, tryin' to persuade Mr. Frayne that he was a lamb; but Mr. Frayne was ready for him, I could see, by the way he kept his knees in; and presently when the Sultan began to play his usual tricks Mr. Frayne had got him well in hand, sticking to him like a leech and talkin' to him chaffing like. Presently I see him put the horse at a bank; horse refuses with a swerve that would have chucked nine men out of ten, and old hands, too. Mr. Frayne got 'im up to it three times, sent him over, turned him sharp, and brought him back at it full pelt. That horse can jump like a frog; he went over clean as a whistle; then he stopped suddenly, gives that twist of his, and off goes Mr. Frayne."

"I know that twist," said Sergeant Pole.

"Yes; it would throw a circus rider. I got off the stile, thinking to run to him; but before I could start he was on Sultan's back again. He wasn't a bit out of temper; he laughed so that I could hear him where I stood. 'That's one to you, old man!' he said, quite cheerful like. You know his way of speakin' with a laugh in it? It makes you want to laugh yourself, though you don't know why. Then ensued a reg'lar barney. He rode that horse round and round that blessed field till I was almost giddy watchin'

'em ; he pulled him up on his haunches, turned him round half a dozen times, then swung him about sharp and put him at the bank."

"I'd 'a' given a pound to see it," mused Sergeant Pole wistfully.

"Well, it would 'ave been worth it. There wasn't any sense left in that horse ; though, mind you, Mr. Frayne never struck him once, and never used the spurs. The Sultan was what he looked like at first, a lamb ; and when I stood up and saluted as they passed, Mr. Frayne said, laughin' like a schoolboy, 'Capital horse, Sergeant !' 'Yes, sir,' says I, 'when you know how to manage him, which you do, sir.' 'Oh,' says he, with another laugh, 'he's not half so bad as an Exmoor pony when he's got his monkey up.'"

"Yes, he comes from Devonshire," commented Sergeant Pole ; "they breed a fine lot there, 'osses and men ; and our Mr. Frayne's one of the best."

"Our Mr. Frayne" was a trifle restless and impatient the next morning ; for was he not going to see Cynthia in the afternoon, and was it not only natural that, notwithstanding the work which his soul loved, the hours should drag, and that he should find it difficult to fix his mind on anything but the beautiful vision which came between him and his men as they manœuvred before him ? The men were patient and bore with him willingly ; it is more than possible that, as they would have put it, they guessed he "had a girl on his mind."

At last he was free ; and he changed into mufti, deliberating over his choice of a suit and a necktie, as if the fate of an empire depended on the right decision, and sped up to town. His heart beat apprehensively as he rang the bell, and fell to bottomless depths as the stately porter, with what seemed brutal indifference to Darrel, said—

"Her ladyship is not at home, sir."

Darrel turned away, feeling that all the brightness of the world had suddenly become clouded; then, as a man faces a forlorn hope, he inquired in a voice which he strove to keep steady, if Miss Drayle were in, and his heart gave a bound as the porter replied in the affirmative, and with the same brutal indifference, led him to the drawing-room. There was no one there; but in the ante-room, partially disclosed by the open curtains, he saw a long lace veil—he concluded it was a veil—and other articles of millinery lying on a chair and on the ground, as if they had been dropped from the hand of some one who had hastily fled from the room.

He ventured to approach, and looked at them with a sudden keen interest; for might they not be Cynthia's? To the man in love, there is a subtle charm, an indescribable fascination, in everything his mistress wears; and Darrel was gazing at them—he would not have dared to touch them—with a tender and an envious smile—for were they not going to be near her, to touch her, to be touched by her?—when the door opened and Cynthia ran in. He turned quickly and caught her hand.

Her face was wreathed in smiles, her eyes were dancing, her sweet lips were apart with pleasant emotion.

"Oh, you've come!" she said, innocently giving herself away; "I thought you were coming quite early; and it's nearly tea-time, and Aunt Gwen will be back. And you mustn't stay, because she's in an awful temper, and she'll snap your head off, very likely turn you out."

"What's the trouble?" he asked, still holding her hand, as if he had forgotten he had got it.

"Oh, I'm going to be presented next week," said Cynthia, laughing and blushing and nodding at him joyously, as a child nods at the prospect of a new doll. "Yes! she made up her mind all in a

hurry — she generally does. She told me when I came home the other night. Oh, how I enjoyed myself! She said I had better be presented at once, because I am one of those girls who go off very quickly."

"So you will, I'm afraid," said Darrel rather glumly.

Cynthia stared at him perplexedly; then her blush grew deeper.

"Oh, she didn't mean that; she meant that I should go off in looks; grow old and plain quickly."

"Amiable old lady!" remarked Darrel. "But I don't think much of her judgment. So you are going to Court and going to be a great swell, Cynthy," he said, stifling a sigh. "You'll have a busy time of it then: dinners, dances, receptions. There won't be much chance of a fellow getting near you."

"Don't be foolish, Darrel!" she said. "I shall only be one of scores, and you—I mean, any one— Oh, I'll show you my veil, now you are here. Isn't it altogether too lovely! It's Brussels; it's the one Aunt Gwen was presented in. Isn't it beautiful?"

She had twisted round to see herself in the glass, and she did not see the ardent look in his eyes as they rested on her face.

"Very lovely!" he assented, as if he had suddenly lost his breath. "But I should like to see you in all your war paint, Cynthy," he added wistfully.

"Should you really?" she asked, turning to him with open eagerness. "Why, so you can! Aunt Gwen is going to give a ball on the night of the Court. Ever so many of the *débutantes* are coming. You must come, Darrel. Oh, I should like you to!"

"What about an invitation?" asked Darrel anxiously. "Lady Westlake doesn't know me very well; it is not at all likely that she will ask me."

Cynthia looked down, and the colour stole to her face.

"I—I think I can manage it," she said, her eyes still downcast. "I—I am sending out the cards, and I could——"

"You are a brick, Cynthia!" he exclaimed, his eyes brightening. In his relief and joy he caught at her hand, just as he used to catch at it in the old days, when she had done something that had specially pleased him, climbed a particularly difficult tree, thrown a good fly, or waded through the stream to save the walk of a mile.

She let him have her hand, with the same sweet unconsciousness, and he had only time to drop it hastily, as the door opened and Lady Gwen came in, leaning on her stick. The two had been so engrossed with each other that they had not heard the carriage drive up. Lady Gwen looked hot and out of temper; she glared from one to the other as if she had caught them in the perpetration of some crime; indeed, Darrel looked somewhat guilty.

"Oh!" grunted the terrible old lady, leaning on her stick with both hands and working her under lip, a significant sign to Cynthia. "So you're here.—Cynthia, what are you doing with that veil?—Mr. Frayne, are you qualifying for a dressmaker or a lady's maid?"

"Miss Drayle was good enough to show me——" began Darrel fearsomely.

"Miss Drayle might find some more profitable and agreeable occupation for her time," snarled Lady Gwen. "And so could you, sir. Why aren't you with your regiment?"

"Got leave," said Darrel humbly.

"They give too much leave nowadays," remarked Lady Gwen sternly; "they were much more sensible in my time. Cynthia, take those things up to your own room.—I am afraid my thoughtless niece has wasted too much of your time, Mr. Frayne."

Darrel took the hint—he had a feeling that the

old Griffin was quite capable of calling a couple of footmen and having him thrown out. Cynthia, quite abashed, had fled, but, dodging Lady Westlake's eye, had thrown him a glance as she departed. Lady Westlake gave him one finger, Darrel pressed it, and fled likewise.

Five minutes afterwards the footman announced Lord Northam. The Griffin had been lying back in her chair with her eyes closed by her heavy lids, for she had been interviewing dressmakers and Court officials; but at the sound of Lord Northam's name she sat up and blinked keenly enough. Northam came in in his heavy way, and she greeted him cordially.

"You've come just in time for tea," she said. "We're awfully busy, so you mustn't stay long. Cynthia," she spoke of her as "Cynthia" to Northam, though she laid stress upon the "Miss Drayle" to poor Darrel, "is going to be presented."

"Rather sudden, isn't it?" remarked Northam, staring at the carved head of his stick, as if he had never seen it before, and was intensely interested to find it there.

"Yes, it is," assented Lady Gwen with a grin. "I've just woke up to the fact that the child's grown up. When she takes to dining at public-houses——"

"You mean the Savoy, the other evening?" said Northam stolidly.

"Same thing," said Lady Gwen with a grunt. "It's time she was out. She seems to have had a very pleasant evening, thanks to Lady Alicia—and you." There was a significance in the slight emphasis which she laid on the "you" that did not escape Northam, though he looked as slow-witted as an owl. "It was very kind of both of you. By the way, we are having a dance on the night of the Court. I have just sent Lady Alicia and you a card."

"Much obliged; glad to come."

The footman brought in tea, and Lady Gwen said—

"Tell Miss Drayle tea is ready, and ask her to come down."

Cynthia entered almost immediately. She was pleased to see Lord Northam; she was grateful to him for her outing the other night. As she poured out the tea, which one footman handed while the other followed with the bread and butter and the cake, she talked of that never-to-be-forgotten night; and while she talked Lady Westlake leant back and went to sleep, or seemed to go to sleep; she was tired, you know.

Northam did not say much; he never did; but he listened with half-closed eyes kept most of the time on the surprising handle of his stick.

"I thought I saw Mr. Frayne as I was coming in," he said presently, and rather suddenly. He raised his eyes as he spoke, and he saw the blush which suddenly suffused Cynthia's face.

"Oh, yes," she said. "He called."

Northam was silent for a moment; the blush had not been lost upon him; then he rose.

"I'm coming to your dance," he said, in his abrupt yet slow fashion.

"Oh, I'm glad," she said brightly.

"Are you?" he remarked, looking at her straight.

"Well, I must be going. Don't wake Lady Westlake."

Curiously enough, the Griffin woke the moment he had left the room. "Lord Northam gone?" she inquired with a yawn. "Remarkably nice young man. Always be at home when he calls, Cynthia. I think I have told you that he will be the next Duke of Torbridge. A most worthy young man in every sense of the word. The Torbridge is not a mushroom dukedom; they go back a long way; and they have

not played the fool with the estate. This young man will come into one of the finest rent-rolls in England. I hope you like—appreciate him," she said sternly, meaningly. But the significance of her tone was lost on Cynthia ; she was thinking of Darrel and the card for the dance she was going to send him.

On the night of the twelfth, so great was the crowd of carriages and motors, you could not have crossed the road in front of Lady Westlake's house in Belgrave Square, excepting at the peril of life and limb ; indeed, the services of two policemen were required to keep in order the small mob of spectators which had gathered on the pavement to see the guests arrive. This mob was mostly composed of women and girls, many of the dressmakers and shop-hands, who had come to inspect and obtain hints from the splendid attire of the young girls who had that day been presented at Court.

The great ballroom was crowded, men and women, the former in Court suits, the latter in dazzling ball frocks, were lining the stairs, awaiting their turn to gain the great *salon*, famous for its political and social gatherings. Lady Westlake stood just within the entrance of the ante-room which led to the principal magnificent apartment, leaning on her stick with one hand, the other held out like that of an automaton, to greet her guests.

The whole resources of the vast establishment had been enlisted, even strained, for the occasion ; for the Griffin was once more in her element. She had a beautiful girl, a connection of the great family, in hand ; and she meant to dispose of her to the highest bidder. And that the bidding would be high, the Griffin knew ; for Cynthia had achieved a great success at Court that day. She had attracted the attention of every one, one gracious Majesty had even murmured to the other gracious Majesty, and both had smiled more than graciously as the young

girl had bent before them. Lady Westlake was almost staggered by Cynthia's success; for, of course, notwithstanding the tuition she had received, she was still, in Lady Westlake's eyes, something of the unsophisticated tom-boy she had appeared when Lady Westlake stopped the fly on the Summerleigh road. But there it was; the effect of Cynthia's exquisite beauty and still more striking freshness and girlishness could not be ignored.

The old Griffin was full of triumph that night, her keen eyes shone and glittered under their heavy lids, there was a natural flush beneath her rouge and powder. She saw herself the aunt, the guardian of the future Duchess of Torbridge. She had never been so amiable, and her graciousness was startling to her old friends.

Meanwhile, Cynthia was in the ballroom itself surrounded by courtiers, by the men and women who are quick to note the rising of an ascending star. She looked radiantly happy, but she was not perfectly so; for every now and then her eyes wandered wistfully towards the crowd at the entrance. She had been told a hundred, two hundred, times that evening, and sometimes quite openly, that she was beautiful, that her exquisite dress was perfect; but she wanted Darrel to see her in all her finery, just as in the old days she had wanted him to see a new hat she had bought at the general shop at Summerleigh and trimmed with her own hands.

Strangely enough, those old, girlish days were vividly in her mind that night; and once, when the famous band was playing a slow and almost mournful waltz, there flashed into her mind the memory of a day when she had fallen from a tree and hurt herself, and Darrel had put his arm round her—he had not kissed her, because he knew that she hated kisses—and had comforted and petted her.

Why did he not come? It was nice to be told that she was pretty, that she was the prettiest, the belle, of the *débutantes*; but she wanted him to be here, to say, in his old way, "You're looking stunning to-night, Cynthia!"

Lady Alicia came up to her, Northam following close behind. Lady Alicia, who had been presented two years ago, was not in Court costume, but wore an exquisite dress, which set off her blonde beauty to perfection.

"My dear Cynthia!" she exclaimed. She and Cynthia had met several times since the dinner at the Savoy, and Lady Alicia professed a great friendship for Lady Westlake's ward. "I've had quite a fight to get to you, you famous young person. Here's Northam. I'm going to ask for a dance for him; he's too *gauche* and shy to ask for himself."

Cynthia nodded at Northam. "I've only two left," she said brightly and yet a trifle wistfully. Oh, why did not Darrel come!

"Give me one of them," said Northam, "though I warn you, I dance like a bear on hot bricks, or an elephant with chilblains."

"I'll give you the first," said Cynthia.

He put his initials on her programme; and she was presently borne off by a young *attaché*. Lady Alicia looked after her and whispered quickly, as her own partner approached.

"Don't dance with her. Take her out on to the balcony."

Northam scowled and bit his moustache; but he knew that it was good advice.

The *attaché* had his dance; it was the dance of his life, and he boasted of it when he was an old man. Cynthia was standing by him, fanning herself with a jewelled fan which Lady Westlake had given her, when her heart gave a great leap; Darrel had emerged from the crowd at the entrance. There were many

good-looking men there that night ; but in her eyes no man looked handsomer, nicer—it is the woman's expressive word—than her old playmate. Her heart beat apprehensively, her colour rose and fell as she saw him looking distractedly round the crowded room. She wanted to cry out : “ Here I am, Darrel ! I am waiting ; oh, be quick ! ”

He disappeared, came into sight again, saw her and made for her straight, actually pushing some persons aside. He was looking pale and anxious ; but a sudden change came into his face as he saw her. She lifted her eyes—all at once her lids seemed heavy—and looked up at him questioningly, but with welcome in them.

“ I am late,” he said, “ there was a court-martial ; thought I should never get away. Have you a dance left ? Oh, Cynthy, don't tell me they are all gone ! ”

“ I've one, this one,” she said in a low voice ; it seemed to her as if speech were difficult.

He put his arm round her instantly and led her amongst the other dancers. The Surrey Regiment are famous for their waltzing ; Darrel waltzed very, very well ; and she gave herself up to the ecstasy of the poetry of motion. They danced as if they were one ; he held her firmly, she felt secure in his arms ; his breath moved the tendrils of her hair, she could feel his heart beating against her bosom. She had been happy in the old times, but she had never known perfect happiness until now. And yet Darrel's face was white and drawn ; there was a strained look about his lips, his brows met as if he were frowning.

The music died away softly like a sigh ; they stopped, and her eyes were lifted to his heavily, surcharged with something that made the passion swell in his heart till it seemed nearly bursting.

“ Come—come outside, anywhere,” he said thickly.

She looked a little frightened ; for there was that in his voice which tells a woman that a man is

suffering for her. Almost blindly, he led her through one of the ante-rooms to the palm-house. There were several couples there; he sat down doggedly beside Cynthia and waited until they were alone. Then he turned to her, with his hands outstretched, his face white, his lips quivering.

"Cynthy!" he said brokenly, hoarseiy. "Oh, Cynthy!"

She waited, trembling, as he was trembling. Her heart, her soul, was stealing from her, going out with a shameful willingness to meet his. She tried to smile, to turn away from him; but the smile died away, his eyes held hers; her face grew almost as white as his, her lips as tremulous.

"Cynthia!" he panted, "I love you! Cynthia, dear, I love you! Oh, Cynthia, what do you say? I tell you I love you. I've always loved you. Cynthia, speak to me!"

CHAPTER XIII

“ FOR LOVE’S SAKE ”

CYNTHIA’S heart beat so fast that she could not speak ; she was overwhelmed by a joy, a happiness which seemed almost too great for her to bear ; it was as if she had suddenly been lifted from this vulgar, commonplace world into an ether transfused with a heavenly light, in which she floated, with Darrel’s arm round her ; the music sounded as if it were far away, the brilliant throng of people were but shadows ; she and Darrel were alone in a world of their own, a world in which there was nothing but an exquisite joy.

In all her life, happy though it may be, for a woman there stands out one supreme moment ; that in which she hears from the lips of the man she loves the passionate avowal of his love for her.

Cynthia could not speak, though she wanted to tell him how much she loved him ; but she slid her hand into his and drew near to him, so that her cheek touched his shoulder. With scarcely a glance around he gathered her to him, crushing all her dainty finery, and gave her actually the first kiss she had gotten from him.

“ Oh, Cynthy, Cynthy ! ” he murmured. “ And you love me—you beautiful creature ! How wonderful it seems ! When—when did it begin ? When did you first think you cared for me ? ”

It is the first question the accepted lover puts ; he wants to know, to be told, that he had been

loved for a long time, that he and she had been drawn towards each other, kindred spirits, from the beginning of things—that their union has been immutably decreed by a benevolent Providence.

Cynthia gave a little laugh that was more like a happy sigh.

"I don't know," she whispered. "Perhaps from the very first; but I didn't know then. I was too young then, wasn't I, Darrel? But I think—I am sure—th^t: I loved you before you—you thought of me. You remember you often scolded me because I couldn't do things like a boy—indeed, you were often quite rude, sir."

"I must have been a little beast," he muttered, indignant with his past self.

"And I dare say you forgot me," she went on a little pensively. "You see, you had so many things to think of: getting into the army; and all your friends. But I had not forgotten you. I often thought of you, Darrel; and when I saw you in the Park, quite grown up, quite a man, but still the same Darrel somehow, I knew, by the way my heart jumped—by a little warm feeling that came over me that made me feel glad, oh, very glad, to see you—that I had cared for you all the time, and that I wanted you to care for me."

"You angel!" he said, gazing at her with rapt emotion. "It was then, when I met you in the Park, that I knew I loved you, Cynthia. But I was so startled by the change. You were the same Cynthia I used to play with, and yet quite different. You had grown so beautiful, so— Oh, I can't explain. I suppose it was because you had become a woman, and a very charming one. I wanted you from that moment, dearest. I was frightened out of my life lest I shouldn't get you. You seemed so far above me in every way, and I knew that there must be many other fellows who must admire you and want

you ; and so there are, no doubt. But you belong to me now, darling—my very own ! Are you happy, Cynthia ? ”

She nodded ; indeed, she was too happy to reply. Fortunately, she did not need any words ; her eyes, which met his with a frank, girlish confession of love, the pressure of her fingers as they quivered in his, spoke eloquently enough for her.

“ And so you shall always be, Cynthia,” he said with boyish gravity. “ I will watch over you all my life and make you happy, or perish in the attempt.”

“ It will be an easy task, Darrel,” she said, smiling up at him. “ I shall only want to be near you, to know that you love me. That will be quite enough.”

“ I will come round and speak to Lady Westlake to-morrow,” he said after a pause. “ I’m afraid she’ll cut up rather rough, Cynthia.”

“ Why should she ? ” she asked innocently.

“ Well, for one thing, I’m afraid she doesn’t care very much for me ; and I’m perfectly sure she will think that I am not good enough for you. She knows that you could make a tremendous match. Everybody is saying that you were the most beautiful girl at Court to-day, everybody is talking about you. At the Club they were saying that you would be the belle of the season. It was almost hard to believe that the beautiful Miss Drayle, who had turned all the fellows’ heads, was the little girl I used to play with down there at Summerleigh.”

“ You are trying to make me vain, Darrel,” she said reprovingly, but with a happy smile ; for what girl, however innocent and unworldly, but loves to hear from her sweetheart that other men think her worth taking ? “ But why should Aunt Gwen object ? I am only Cynthia Drayle ; my father is quite poor. I should have been nobody, nothing at all, if she had not adopted me ; while you, Darrel, are the son of Sir Anson Frayne of

Summerleigh Court, and will be a baronet and a rich man. It is more than likely that Sir Anson will object to your marrying me. You do not forget that he and my father are not friendly?"

"My father will be glad enough," said Darrel. "He was talking to me only the other day about marrying."

"I must write to my father," said Cynthia, almost to herself. "He will be glad, I know; he is always glad when I am happy. The letter will take a long time to get to him; for he is in South America."

"What is he doing there?" asked Darrel in rather an injured tone, for, of course, he would have been glad to have gone to Mr. Drayle the next morning; and it seemed to him quite unfair that that gentleman should be some thousands of miles away at such an important moment.

"He is doing something with some mines," said Cynthia; "he told me about it when he came to see me last. He wants to know something about mining. to understand it, I don't know why," she added in reply to the expression of surprise in Darrel's eyes.

"You must write to him at once, dearest," he said. "Tell him you have set your heart——" He stopped and laughed shamefacedly.

"But it will be true, Darrel," she said gravely. "I have set my heart on you, and it will never move."

"Whatever happens?" he asked, lightly enough; for what could come between them excepting a temporary objection from Lady Westlake?

"Whatever happens," she repeated with a smile and yet solemnly, as if she were pledging herself. "Oh, here comes my partner for this dance!" she said woefully, as a heated young man plunged into the conservatory and gazed about him with desperate excitement.

“ Confound——! ” muttered Darrel. “ Can’t you draw back farther? Oh, it’s no use, the fellow has seen you! Remember, dearest, we are pledged to one another—you are mine! ” he went on hurriedly, as the young man, catching sight of her, broke into smiles of satisfaction and relief and came towards them. “ I will see Lady Gwen to-morrow—you write to your father—— ”

“ To-night, before I go to bed, ” she whispered. “ Oh, Darrel, shall I see you again before we go? If not, it is good night, good night, Darrel, dear, dear, dear! ”

He managed to press her hand amidst the folds of her dress; then she was carried off, and he was left to scowl at the decent young fellow, who was now radiant, for was not he going to dance with the beautiful Miss Drayle?

Darrel hung about the ballroom for some hours, a delightful and yet a painful time; for though it was a joy to watch his beautiful darling, to catch the love that beamed from her eyes as she passed, it was a torture to watch her in other men’s arms. As the guests began to take their departure he hung about the entrance to the ballroom, hoping to get a word with her; but she was engaged to the very last dance, and was always surrounded by a circle of admirers. He saw Northam standing by her side, and once he caught sight of Lady Westlake beaming quite benevolently upon Northam and Cynthia.

The Griffin gave him one finger when he took his leave; and it must be confessed that Darrel felt his heart sink as she scowled at him when he said good-night and assured her that he had spent a delightful evening. He was, of course, staying the night, or what remained of it, at his rooms in Bury Street; but, late though it was when he reached them, he did not go to bed until he had written to his father. He told Sir Anson that he had met Cynthia

Drayle again, that he loved her, and had proposed to her. He explained that she was the ward of Lady Westlake, and hinted that no doubt her ladyship would require—indeed, insist upon—a handsome settlement.

With the frankness which existed between them, with the confidence of an only and well-loved son, he assured his father that Cynthia had grown into a most beautiful woman, that he loved her with all his heart and soul, and that if he didn't get her there would never be any other woman in the world for him.

"Dear dad," he wrote impulsively, "you will know what I feel, for you have been in love yourself. She is not only beautiful, but the sweetest girl you can imagine. All London is raving about her. And she loves me. I am the luckiest fellow upon earth. Write me at once and wish me joy I shan't be quite happy until I hear from you."

Almost at the same time Cynthia was writing, in a somewhat similar strain, to her father. She, too, dilated upon her lover's worth and charm. He was everything that was handsome and good and noble; he was a prince amongst men, and he loved her! Wonderful, wasn't it! They had only one regret—that her dear, dear dad should be so far away and not able to share in their happiness. Would he write or cable just a "Yes"? There was much more than this. It was a long letter in which she poured out something of the joy of her young heart, and her eyes filled with tears, happy tears, as she wrote her letter.

Strangely enough, she fell asleep directly her head touched the pillow, though she had meant to lie awake for quite a long time and think of the "prince amongst men" who had condescended to love her.

She was rather pale when she came down the

next morning; for, while Parsons had been dressing her, she had been picturing the interview between Darrel and Lady Westlake, and it had assumed a graver and more fearful import than it had borne on the preceding night with Darrel's arm round her to encourage her. As Darrel had said, the Griffin had not regarded him with favour; and the Griffin could be very hard, very stubborn, when she liked.

She moved about the house restlessly, like the dove of the Ark, finding no place in which to rest her feet. But, at any rate, she could think of Darrel, of his love-fraught words, of his dear eyes, warm with passion and adoration; and she thought of him all the time. Lady Westlake did not appear until lunch. She seemed in a particularly good humour, and nodded with a grim smile at Cynthia, and even chucked her under the chin.

"You did very well last night, my dear," she said graciously. "You made quite a success of it—thanks to Madame Corise. That dress of hers was really clever. Lord Northam admired it very much. By the way, he is coming to lunch. You had better"—she looked Cynthia up and down with a keen, critical scrutiny—"no, perhaps you had better keep on that morning dress; it's pretty and simple and suitable; I suppose your head is quite turned, eh?"

"Why should it be, Aunt Gwen?" said Cynthia. "Every one was kind to me; but it was because it was my presentation, and everybody is kind on such an occasion, aren't they? And it was a very pretty frock you had made for me; and that lovely veil of yours—there was not another like it in the room!"

"Humph!" grunted the Griffin, but still graciously. "Frocks and veils are all very well, but— Good morning, Lord Northam," she brc'e

off, as Northam lounged in with his usual sang-froid. "We were just talking about last night. I was telling Cynthia not to be vain."

"Good advice: quite unnecessary," said Northam in his slow yet curt fashion. "Miss Drayle couldn't be vain if she tried."

"Oh, couldn't she?" retorted the Griffin with a grin. "That's all you know! We women are vain in our cradles; but I'll admit that we're not as vain as men."

They went in to lunch. The Griffin's good-humour was still maintained. She did most of the talking. In a casual way she spoke of Torbridge, the family place, and in a subtle fashion she managed to convey to Cynthia the splendour and importance of that magnificent seat of the ducal family. Northam said little, and enjoyed his lunch with his usual heartiness; but every now and then he paused and looked at Cynthia exactly as he had looked at her during the dinner at the Savoy.

When the far too elaborate meal was over—Cynthia ate but little, and paid as little attention to her companions, for she was thinking of Darrel and wondering what time he would call—they went into the drawing-room.

"You can smoke if you like," said the Griffin amiably; "a cigarette. No bar cigars—they make the curtains smell."

But Northam wouldn't smoke. He leant back in his chair, crossed his legs, and gazed just above Cynthia's head. The Griffin hobbled about the room for a while; then she went out, muttering something about orders for the dinner; an excuse which appeared to Cynthia absolutely futile, for ordering the meals—in fact, the whole direction of the household—fell to the housekeeper.

Cynthia went to the window and drummed softly on the sill: Darrel might appear at any moment.

She was aroused from her reverie by Northam's slow, half-sleepy voice.

"Great success last night, Miss Drayle," he said.

"Came round this morning to congratulate you. Lots of people be here presently, no doubt. Should like to speak to you while I have the chance."

"To speak to me?" said Cynthia, leaving the window and abandoning her hope of seeing Darrel approach.

She went back to her chair, seated herself, and leant forward with her arms embracing her knees in a girlish fashion, and regarding him with an absent air.

"Yes," he said slowly, heavily, his eyes fixed on the coal-scuttle beside her. "Fact is, came on important business—well, important to me. I want to ask you a question."

"A question? What is it?" asked Cynthia with a smile. She thought he was going to ask her to go for a drive with him and Lady Alicia in his four-in-hand, or to accompany them to the opera or a picnic.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, abstractedly. "Fact is, I wanted to ask you, Miss Drayle, if you thought you'd care to be my wife."

Cynthia's arms unlocked; she sat bolt upright; her eyes opened wide, and she stared at him with amazement.

"Sorry I've been so abrupt," he said penitently.

"Hope you'll excuse me. I'm not much of a hand at this kind of thing, and it comes rather difficult. Sort of refuse my fence, don't you know. Should like to have broken it to you, led up to it with a good take-off; but it's always the way with a nervous man—and I'm as nervous as a cat, though perhaps I don't look it. What I mean is, do you think you care enough for me to marry me?"

"No, I don't!" gasped poor Cynthia, too alarmed

to be anything but candid. "I—I like you very much; you have been very kind to me, you and Lady Alicia; but—I don't—I don't care for you as much as that."

Northam's heavy countenance did not change in the least. He looked round the room slowly, and his prominent blue eyes as slowly returned to her startled countenance.

"Oh," he said. "Like that, is it? I'm sorry. Suppose I ought to say 'Thank you: very sorry,' and take my leave. Been a bit sudden, haven't I?—That's the worst of me, I look such a con-founder!—beg pardon, I mean silly fool—that people don't give me credit for being serious. But, give you my word, I'm serious enough now. I want to marry you very badly. I'm not such a bounder as to remind you that I've got things which some women might attach a value to.—Shouldn't like you to marry me because I'm the next Duke; no, not at all. No; should like to be cared for just for myself, as the novelist chaps say. But there you are—I'm asking you to marry me, not only because I love you, but because I know you'd make a first-rate Duchess. Got to think of that, you know; because it's what my people expect. You'd fill the bill first-rate. But don't you run away with the idea that I'm thinking of that only. No; I want to marry you because you—are you. Hope you understand?"

This was a tremendously long speech for Northam, and he got it out with great difficulty, and yet with an earnestness and sincerity which touched Cynthia, all absorbed and engrossed though she was by her love for Darrel. She turned red and white by turns; there was a suspicious moisture in her eyes. She knew that, with all his heaviness, his seeming stupidity, the man who was asking her to be his wife was a good man and true; and, made hyper-sensitive

by her own happiness, her own heart passion, she was tenderly sorry for him.

"I'm sorry!" she murmured rather brokenly. "I didn't know—I never guessed; but, Lord Northam, I must say 'No.' I—I couldn't care for you—I couldn't marry you. Besides," try as she would, a smile, a gleam of happiness would break on her face, beam from her eyes, "I—I am already engaged."

He nodded two or three times, his heavy chin sank on his breast.

"That so?" he said. "Well, I half guessed it would be. He's a deuced lucky chap. I fancy I can guess his name. Begins with an F, doesn't it?"

Cynthia blushed a hot crimson, her eyes glowed, and she nodded ecstatically.

"Thought so," said Northam with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Awfully decent fellow, Frayne. Wish him joy—and you."

He rose slowly, as if his huge frame were an impediment, and held out his hand. With girlish impulsiveness Cynthia took the big hand in both her small ones.

"How good you are!" she said brokenly and with tears in her eyes.

"Not a bit," he said, nodding at her. "Frayne's a far better chap than I am in every way; and he deserves you. I thought there might be a chance for me, and I went for it. Look here, don't let this foolishness of mine make any difference between us. We can be friends, if we can't be husband and wife. Frayne's a pal of mine; and I don't want to lose both of you; you understand?"

"Oh, I quite understand," responded Cynthia, a tear rolling down her cheek. "You must be a very kind and good man, Lord Northam——"

"No," he said slowly. "Ordinary kind of man;

but I'm not such a fool as to want what I can't get, especially when another man's got it. I may be an ass, but I'm not a silly ass. If I can't have you for a wife, I would like to keep you for a friend. Frayne, too. Good-bye. Here, I say," he added, with his hand on the door, and a shrewd look came for a moment into his dull countenance, "shouldn't let the old lady know what's passed between us. What? eh?"

He bestowed a knowing and significant nod on Cynthia and lurched heavily out of the room.

So, for love's sake, Cynthia had refused to become the future Duchess of Torbridge.

CHAPTER XIV

LADY WESTLAKE'S RAGE.

CYNTHIA had scarcely dried her eyes before the Griffin came into the room. She looked round with an affectation of surprise.

"Lord Northam gone?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Cynthia; and there was something in her tone which caused the old lady to turn on her sharply.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "You seem upset about something. Has Lord Northam been saying—anything to you?"

Cynthia had gone to the window to escape the Griffin's hawk-like eyes. There had been something in the interview with Northam, something unselfish and chivalrous on his part, which had touched Cynthia's heart, and she vaguely resented the intrusion of the old worldling.

"Something has happened I can see by your manner, my dear child," said Lady Gwen invitingly. "Tell your old aunt; do not keep me in suspense, my dear Cynthia. Or shall I guess?" she went on, as Cynthia still kept her face averted. "Lord Northam has proposed to you."

"Yes," admitted Cynthia in a low voice, shrinking and blushing.

Lady Westlake struck the floor with her ebony stick; it was like the triumphant tap of a drum.

"My dear girl!" she exclaimed, her features stretched with so wide and self-satisfied a smile

that the enamel, the rouge, and the powder were cracked in creases. "I knew he would; I could see he was *épris* with you; trust these old eyes! My dear Cynthia, I congratulate you! He is the best match of the season, and you will be the Duchess of Torbridge. You have behaved very well, Cynthia, very well indeed; that quiet, mousey way of yours has proved most effective. Men do not like to be run after; and Northam has been hunted ever since he left Eton. You might have confided in your loving old aunt.—But I don't blame you, my child; after all, it is best to be discreet and hold one's tongue, and it is never wise to holloa until one has secured one's fox. Come and kiss me, my dear; I am very proud of you. Now, see how wise it was of that eccentric father of yours to hand you over to me! As I told him, you would have married the village carpenter, or worse, the local curate. Now——" She drew herself up and laughed, her small eyes glittering with triumph.

Her aunt had spoken so rapidly that Cynthia, overwhelmed, had had no opportunity of interrupting her; but at this point she turned with a gesture of dismay, her face pale, her brows knit.

"But—but I have refused Lord Northam," she faltered.

The Griffin moved as if she had been struck across the face, which went white under its mass of paint; she was incapable of speech for a moment or two, and glared at Cynthia, her lips writhing. At last she exclaimed shrilly—

"What do you say? You have refused Lord Northam! You can't know what you are saying; you must be mad!"

Cynthia shook her head.

"Come, come!" said Lady Westlake with a ghastly grin, and in the tone of one who is compelled to humour an idiot. "You don't know

what you are talking about, my dear. Of course, you are a little taken aback, overwhelmed; only natural, only natural! Any girl would be. What you mean is that you haven't given Lord Northam a decided answer; that he is coming again, to-morrow, perhaps this evening?"

"No," said Cynthia, "he will not come again; I mean, ask me again. He quite understands that I cannot marry him." She was still pale, but there was a touch of dignity, a maidenly reserve in her voice and her manner. The old nature had not been trained and drilled out of Cynthia, and the spirit of independence which she had inherited from her father unconsciously asserted itself.

The grin died away from Lady Gwen's face; it grew hard and strained; her eyes narrowed until they became like steel.

"Let us be quite calm," she said, though the long claws which grasped her stick shook and her lips twitched. "You wish me to understand that you have actually refused Lord Northam? Will you permit me to ask you why you have done so foolish, so wicked a thing? I am really curious to know; and I think I have a right to know."

"Yes," said Cynthia in a low voice. "Of course, I should tell you. Do not be angry with me, Aunt Gwen. I cannot help it. I do not love Lord Northam." The colour rose to her face, and she looked away from the hard eyes glaring at her.

"You do not love Lord Northam," repeated Lady Gwen, with a short laugh which was like a bark. "And pray, who said you did? Who expected you to do so? You talk like a congenital idiot, instead of a girl who has been sensibly brought up. You little fool, do you think that the fact of your loving him or not loving him has anything to do with it?"

"Aunt Gwen!" murmured Cynthia shrinkingly.

"Don't 'Aunt Gwen' me!" snarled the Griffin,

the fury which she had been trying to keep in hand gradually getting the better of her. "And for God's sake don't talk such utter rot! You've had the best offer of the season; you've only to stretch out your hand to take what all the other girls are mad to get; and you dare to tell me that you have refused the future Duke of Torbridge because you 'don't love him'! Give me leave to tell you that you ought to be ashamed of yourself for talking so—so indecently. And why can't you love him, as you call it? He's a gentleman as well as a nobleman—and that's not too common, my girl!—and he's a decent and respectable young man—and that's not too common either. Let me remind you also that he's far too good for you. I suppose," she went on coarsely and with a sneer—for there is not very much difference between your Lady Westlake and the 'Arriet of Bethnal Green, when they are both in a fury—"you have been so pampered while you have been here, that you have forgotten what you were when I came across you and picked you out of the mud of a village——?"

She paused for breath; and at that moment the door opened and the footman announced Mr. Percy Standish. Percy, beautifully dressed as usual, with his usual smile, came in softly and bowed to them. Then he stopped short and looked from one to the other with a little air of deprecation.

"I am afraid I am intruding," he murmured.

Lady Westlake turned upon him, as if she were glad of a second person upon whom she could vent her rage.

"Who told you that I was at home, sir?" she snarled. "You walk in as if the house belonged to you; it belongs to me—and to no one else," she added significantly.

"A thousand pardons, my dear aunt," he said penitently. "It was my fault, do not blame James—I will go at once."

"No!" snapped her ladyship sharply. "You can stay, now you are here. You are always pleased to see people quarrelling; you can enjoy yourself this afternoon. This girl, Cynthia, and I are having a row," she went on grimly; "a serious row for her, let me tell her——"

"I will go," murmured Cynthia, moving towards the door; but Lady Westlake held up her gnarled hand.

"Stop where you are!" she said sharply. "You think I am unreasonable in calling you a fool; wait and hear what Percy thinks of it. He, Cynthia, is a man of the world and a sensible one." She turned to Percy, her head bobbing furiously. "Cynthia—you'll scarcely believe it—has refused Lord Northam!"

Percy's head was slightly bent, his lids were lowered deprecatingly; neither the raging woman nor the agitated girl could see the gleam of satisfaction which for one instant shone in his pale eyes. He raised his lids and looked from one to the other, with a gentle, appealing glance.

"I—I am surprised," he said in a low voice. "I thought——" he paused, as if confused.

Lady Gwen sprang at him, so to speak. "You thought she had been making for him?" she said. "So did I. Of course, she encouraged him; he wouldn't have spoken if she hadn't done so; he's too shy. Oh, yes, she has encouraged him; and now, for some fool's reason, she throws him over. Do you think she is mad, Percy?"

Percy put up his white hand with a suggestion of reproach.

"Are you not a little hard upon Cynthia, dear aunt?" he murmured. "She may have some reason, good reason——"

Lady Gwen glared at him. "Don't you talk like a fool, please!" she adjured him wrathfully. "What

reason can there be? Oh, I forgot," with a sneer; "she has just been good enough to inform me that she doesn't love him!"

Cynthia winced at the diabolical mockery in the hard, harsh voice. Percy nodded his head once or twice.

"Surely that is a reason, dear aunt——" he began in a tone which he knew would act as fuel to the fire of the Griffin's rage.

She glared from one to the other. "So you abet her!" she gasped hoarsely, as if she were astounded by his temerity.

"Dear aunt!" he murmured softly, "surely love must count, especially with a girl so young, so innocent, so unworldly, as Cynthia!"

"So rubbish and fiddlesticks!" retorted her ladyship, almost stuttering.

"Forgive me," he said gently, "but may I suggest," he glanced at Cynthia apologetically, "there may be some one else. I only suggest."

"Some one else!" echoed the Griffin, as if she were almost incapable of speech. "Rubbish! How could there be when Lord Northam comes forward?"

Cynthia's face was scarlet; Lady Gwen looked at her piercingly.

"Why are you reddening like a barmaid?" she demanded. "Is there anything in what Percy says? Do you mean to tell me——?"

Again the door opened. The footman announced Mr. Frayne. The eyes of the three persons already in the room were fixed upon Darrel as if he had dropped from the ceiling or risen through the floor. He was rather pale and appeared anxious; and as he took in the signs of the battle and saw that something was wrong, he stopped and looked from one to the other with natural confusion. But it is at such moments that men like Darrel show the pluck that

is in them. With just one loving, encouraging glance at Cynthia he looked steadily at Lady Gwen and said—

“I came to see you, Lady Westlake——”

“So I perceive, sir,” she broke in, her head erect, her eyes fixing him haughtily; “but it does not follow that I will receive you. You should have left your card with my servant.”

“No,” said Darrel very quietly, but with something in his voice, in the straightening of his lips, which made Cynthia’s heart leap with a woman’s admiration for the man whose purpose is strong and not to be thwarted. “I wanted to see your ladyship on a matter of importance. I understood that you were alone; I will come again, if you will permit me.”

He bowed, and, with another glance at Cynthia, turned to leave the room; but Lady Westlake stopped him as she had stopped Percy.

“I cannot imagine what business you can have with me, Mr. Frayne,” she said; “but, whatever it may be, I prefer to hear it here—and as briefly as possible.—Stay where you are, Percy. Mr. Frayne’s business cannot be of so private a nature that you, my nephew, should not hear it. Now, sir, if you please?”

Darrel possessed a temper, and, but for Cynthia, it would have risen and displayed itself at this piece of insolence on the part of the terrible old woman; but he kept his temper down with an iron hand; for was not he contending for the most glorious prize in the world, his Cynthia, the sweet, the beautiful girl, who stood there, her eyes downcast, her brows drawn together with pain and indignation at the treatment he was receiving? He knew he must be calm.

“I have not the least objection to saying what I have come to say before the whole world. I have

come to ask you to give me your niece for my wife, Lady Westlake," he said quietly.

She stood perfectly still for a moment; it looked as if she were going to have a fit of some kind; for her face was drawn and looked like a mask, a very hideous one; her lips were stretched wide, showing her teeth, her eyes were fixed on Darrel as if, had she the power, she would have stricken him dead at her feet. Watching her, spell-bound, they wondered if she would ever speak; but at last her mouth opened, and a weird sound that was like a laugh came from between her teeth.

"Very succinctly stated, sir!" she said. "My reply shall be as short and to the point. You ask me whether I will consent to my niece's marriage with you. My answer is No! and I will add that I would rather see her dead here at my feet than your wife."

There was a moment's silence; then Cynthia uttered a faint cry; she went to Darrel and took his hand, looked up into his face with an indescribable look and then turned, still holding his hand, which, be sure, grasped hers tightly, and confronted her aunt.

"Cynthia has shown what I wanted to tell you, Lady Westlake," said Darrel quietly. "I spoke to her last night at the ball, and told her that I loved her. It was because she consented to be my wife that I came here this afternoon. I do not know what I have done to displease you. I do not know why you refuse your consent, and so harshly——"

"Then permit me to tell you, Mr. Frayne," she said, her voice grating as it passed through her closed teeth. "This foolish girl, whose silly brain you have turned with your love-making, has just declined an offer from Lord Northam. You understand? But for you——"

"Northam," said Darrel, almost to himself, as if

he had not heard the rest of her speech. "I did not know." He looked down at the white face beside him. "Cynthia?"

"Yes," she whispered, "he asked me, Darrel; but he understood, and was very kind and good. He was not angry; he promised to be my friend——"

Lady Gwen broke in between the lovers' murmured confidences.

"You have received my answer, Mr. Frayne," she said insolently. "I do not give my consent to your marriage with my niece; I never will do so. I gather from your manner, which partakes of too much pretension for my fancy, that you were certain of being a welcome suitor. I confess I fail to understand why the son of an impecunious baronet——"

"Impecunious? My father?" said Darrel, not resentfully, but with genuine surprise.

Lady Gwen glanced out of the extreme corner of her eye at Percy, who had seated himself at the farther end of the room and was apparently absorbed in one of the morocco-bound volumes which he had taken from the table. He had, of course, told her of the scene between Darrel and Sampson Burrige, and the threats which the latter had let drop. She checked herself and bit her lip.

"However, that is a point which is of little consequence in our discussion," she said. "Emphatically, I refuse my consent. I must ask you now to withdraw; and I must also request you to discontinue your pursuit of my niece. There must be no meetings, open or clandestine; and there must be no correspondence. I warn you, Mr. Frayne, that all Miss Drayle's letters will be brought to me before she receives them, and that I shall withhold any from you. I think our business is now completed. Be good enough to ring the bell, Percy."

Percy, however, did not appear to hear her.

"One moment, Lady Westlake," said Darrel, his

face white, his eyes flashing, his grasp on Cynthia's hand tightening until it almost hurt her. "You cannot expect me to accept your decision. I love Cynthia; she loves me, God bless her! I can't give her up, I won't give her up; and"—his voice broke for a moment—"I don't think she will give me up—"

"No, no!" said Cynthia, speaking for the first time; and with a voice that, though it trembled, was eloquent of devotion and determination. "I will not give him up. I can't, Aunt Gwen!—Oh, don't be angry, don't be so hard. I love him. We love each other. He is all the world to me. I should never be happy, but miserable, miserable all my life, if we were separated. I can't help it. Don't be hard on me, Aunt Gwen!" She released her hand from Darrel's grip, sprang to the old woman's side, and caught at her arm. "Don't be hard on me, Aunt Gwen! I love him so. I can never love any one else. And I love you too. You have been very, very good to me. You are trying to do your best for me now, I know; but you'll only make me miserable if you try to part me from him. We can't be happy unless we are together—unless I am his—wife."

The old woman looked down at her ardent face, the quivering lips, the imploring eyes. It is just possible that at that moment the ties of blood asserted themselves, that the Griffin remembered the younger sister, whom she had loved, but who had passed out of her life when she married this girl's father. A spasm of reluctant tenderness ran through the old world-worn frame, but, like Pharaoh, the Griffin hardened her heart.

She flung the imploring hands from her, drew herself erect, and extended a gnarled and shaking hand.

"Do as I tell you!" she croaked hoarsely. "Marry

Lord Northam, and I will be your friend for life ; I will leave you all my money——”

“ I can't, I can't ! ” broke in Cynthia. “ I love Darrel ! ”

“ Then go to him ! ” cried the Griffin in a terrible voice. “ Go to him ! I have nothing more to do with you. I picked you out of the mud ; go back to it and wallow in it with him ! ”

Cynthia recoiled and remained motionless for a moment ; then she went to Darrel, placed both her trembling hands on his shoulders, and looked up at him. To the credit of his manhood he forgot the eyes that were watching them, put his arms round her, and gathered her to him and kissed her. The sight infuriated the Griffin almost to madness. She raised her ebony stick as if she would actually strike them.

“ Out of my sight ! ” she cried hoarsely, almost unintelligibly. “ I give you twenty-four hours to get out of my house, girl ! I have done with you ! ”

She brought her stick to the ground, and, leaning on it heavily, limped out of the room. There was a pause ; then Cynthia, still clinging to Darrel, said, scarcely knowing what she said—

“ Oh, what shall I do ? ”

Percy closed his book and replaced it on the table softly. Everything was going beautifully for him. The girl who had supplanted him was ruined, an outcast ; he was once again Lady Westlake's probable heir. He came forward slowly, his attitude, his face, expressive of the deepest sympathy.

“ I am sorry to be present at so painful a scene,” he said. “ I am on Cynthia's side, I need scarcely say. Will you come with me, Mr. Frayne ? It will be well for Cynthia to go to her room and rest ; it has been a trying scene for her.”

Cynthia drew apart from Darrel. “ Yes, go with him, Darrel,” she said with a sob. “ Percy is very

clever and he is very kind ; he may be able to help us."

Percy delicately and discreetly left the room and went into the hall, where he waited with a grave countenance, but with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

"Oh, it is terrible!" said Cynthia, as she clung to Darrel. "She will never consent, she will never forgive me! I must leave here. In twenty-four hours she said—that is a day, isn't it? What shall I do, Darrel dear?"

"I don't know," he said, confused, bewildered; but he smiled down at her with a man's confidence, a man's self-reliance. "You are mine, and that's enough for me. I must think, consider——"

"Perhaps Percy will be able to think of something to help us," she said. "But don't grieve, Darrel. I am yours, whatever happens, yours till death. Oh, Darrel, I love you better than ever! You were so brave, you were not frightened, you faced her—and all for my sake! I am not worth it!"

He pressed her to him still more closely.

"You are worth everything, Cynthy," he said. "I will write to you, send to you. I must go now. Perhaps Mr. Standish will suggest something"—he laughed, a mirthless laugh—"I'm a bit off my head. Good-bye, darling. I shall find some way of sending to you, letting you know."

Their lips met in a lingering, clinging kiss. He let her go at last, and went out—she, with her hand on the door, watching him with love-laden eyes till the last moment.

Percy was waiting in the hall.

"Come with me, Frayne," he said. "I have thought of something. It may not be of much use, but——"

CHAPTER XV

THE SNAKE IN THE GRASS

"I do hope you will not think me intrusive, my dear Frayne," murmured Percy as they went down the steps. "It was very painful for me to have to remain in the room, an unwilling spectator, I assure you, of the distressing scene; but I ventured to hope that my presence would in some way restrain Lady Westlake; but, as you know, her wrath is absolutely unbridled when she gives way to it. She is a very terrible old lady, and I must confess that I myself have always a sneaking fear of her."

"Do you think she will carry out her threat, and turn Cynthia out of the house in twenty-four hours?" asked Darrel rather hoarsely.

Percy shook his head gravely. "I'm very much afraid she will," he said. "Aunt Gwen is capable of anything when she is in one of her furies, and I have never seen her more furious than she was this afternoon."

Darrel stopped and stared at the ground, biting his lip. His brain was in a whirl. What was to become of Cynthia? Where could she go?

"The notice is very short," said Percy with a sideways glance at his companion; "but Cynthia could go to her people——"

"She has no people," said Darrel a trifle bitterly. "She has only her father; and he is travelling in South America."

"Surely she has some friends?" suggested Percy with another glance.

"I know of none to whom she could go," replied Darrel moodily. "I have never heard her speak of any. She has plenty of acquaintances, I've no doubt, friends of Aunt Gwen's; but she could scarcely go to any of them. It would make trouble. She couldn't go home to Summerleigh; there is no one there. The place, the cottage in which she and her father live, is shut up; besides, she could not live alone."

"It is a difficult position," mused Percy. "Of course, there is one way out of it; but it is of so desperate a nature that I do not like to suggest it. Besides, no doubt you have already thought of it."

Darrel laughed grimly. "I'm scarcely able to think," he said; "I'm too confused, bewildered, by Lady Westlake's cruelty to Cynthy. How any one calling herself a woman——! But what was it you were going to suggest? I'm awfully grateful to you for your kindness to me, and to her, Standish; and please speak right out. I'm ready to jump at anything."

"If you insist," murmured Percy. "Has it occurred to you—that there is one, and I'm afraid only one, way out of this impasse—an immediate marriage?"

Darrel stopped short again, his face suddenly crimson, his eyes fixed on Percy's face.

"I never thought of it!" he said under his breath, and with a leap of his heart. "Of course! But—but is it possible to do it so soon?"

"Everything is possible," said Percy softly, and linking his arm in Darrel's. "It is only a matter of a special license and a clergyman. I happen to know something about it, because a friend of mine had to marry as suddenly as you will be doing; his regiment was ordered abroad, and he wanted to get married before he left. It is quite easy when you know the ropes; and I shall be glad to help you if you will permit me to do so. I have a very warm

regard for my cousin Cynthia, and, if you will allow me to say so, I deeply sympathise with you, Frayne."

"You have been, are being, very good to both of us," said Darrel with feeling, "and I accept your offer of assistance very gratefully; but I am afraid you will get into trouble with Lady Westlake and all her friends, your friends, by taking sides with us."

"I am quite ready to risk that," said Percy. "I think Aunt Gwen is behaving shamefully; but, if you would rather that nothing was said about my share in the matter, she need not know."

"Of course, I shall say nothing," said Darrel.

"The whole affair will have to be kept secret," suggested Percy; "there is no need for any one but our three selves to know anything about it. I do not know whether it is too late to get a license, but we can try, if you like?"

Darrel instantly hailed a taxi-cab. "Tell the man where to drive," he said, his face flushed, his whole manner changed from that of doubt, perplexity, and dismay to one of hope and resolution. They were fortunate enough to reach the office in Doctors' Commons before it was closed. Guided and prompted by Percy, Darrel made the necessary application, signed the usual form—certainly not knowing to what he had subscribed—and came out with the precious license in his breast pocket.

He felt as if a load had been lifted off his heart, his eyes were bright, there was a smile on his lips; and yet it seemed to him as if he were moving in a dream; for could it be possible that Cynthia would be his before another day had passed! What would she say when she learnt of this desperate plan of his? But how was she to know? As if he had seen what was passing through Darrel's mind, Percy said—

"You'll have to let Cynthia know. I think I can help you here, Frayne. I will go back to Aunt Gwen's and ask to see her. I shall, of course, say

that I have come to plead on Cynthia's behalf. It won't be a bit of use, and it is more than likely that Aunt Gwen will have me turned out; but I will try and manage to see Cynthia, and ask her to meet you, say, at the Park gates at half-past six. If I can't get to see her, I could send a note to her by her maid or one of the servants. You might write a line or two. Come on to my Club."

They went to the Club, and Darrel made at once for a writing-table. Percy ordered a soda-and-whisky for both of them, had Darrel's put beside his elbow, and drank his own, seated at a little distance, his eye fixed on the floor thoughtfully. If his luck stood by him, Cynthia and Darrel Frayne would be married, and Cynthia out of his way for ever.

Darrel only wanted to write three or four lines, and yet before he succeeded in doing so he had torn up half a dozen sheets of note-paper. He handed the precious missive to Percy, who took it and rose at once.

"I will let you know the result," he said. "Shall I come to your rooms with it? You will want to pack?"

"Yes," said Darrel briskly. "I shall have to go down to quarters to-night and arrange for leave, and so on. I can never thank you enough, Standish, for all you are doing for us. You have been a true friend."

He held out his hand and gripped Percy's soft and delicate one with a grip that made its sensitive owner wince. Darrel rushed out of the Club and into a hansom; and Percy calmly smoked a cigarette, then as calmly repaired to Belgrave Square.

"Her ladyship is not at home to any one, sir," said the footman impassively.

"I have brought some tickets for a concert for Miss Drayle, James," said Percy blandly. At

this moment, Percy's luck still standing by him, Parsons happened to cross the hall. "Ah, there is Parsons!" said Percy; "I will give them to her, if you please."

As he went towards her he saw that her eyes were red, as if she had been crying.

"Can I see Miss Cynthia?" he asked in an undertone.

"Oh, no, sir," said Parsons, shaking her head. "She is too ill, upset. I've got her to lie down."

"Quite right," he said quickly and approvingly. "Please give her these tickets at once, and ask her not to be late. Give them to her—and not to—er—Lady Westlake. You understand?"

Parsons shot a sharp glance at him, nodded, and went upstairs quickly. Cynthia was lying on the bed, her face on one arm, her eyes closed. It was the collapse after the terrible scene. She was trying to realise that she was going to be parted from Darrel, that in twenty-four hours she would have to leave Aunt Gwen's and go—where? Parsons approached the bed softly.

"Here are some tickets from Mr. Percy, Miss Cynthia."

Cynthia opened her eyes, gazed at her vacantly, and shook her head; but Parsons had looked at the envelope and saw the writing on it was not Mr. Percy's.

"I think you had better open it, miss," she said significantly; and, half unconsciously, Cynthia took the envelope and, without looking at it, opened it.

She had to draw her hand across her burning eyes before she could manage to read the note; then she uttered an exclamation, sat up, and sprang from the bed. Her eyes, a moment before dull with crying, suddenly became bright, a flush rose to her tear-stained cheeks. She had not parted from him for ever; she was to meet him, and soon, again!

Half-past six! What was the time? Had Parsons kept back the letter for fear of disturbing her? Was she too late?"

"Give me a walking dress, Parsons," she said. "I am going out—I must go. Oh, be quick! Give me some eau-de-Cologne. Oh, look at my eyes, how swollen they are! Oh, be quick, be quick, Parsons!"

Now, you cannot play melodrama in the drawing-room without its reaching the servants' hall. Parsons knew that there had been a terrific scene between Lady Westlake and Cynthia and Mr. Frayne; and it is very probable that when Cynthia had gone up to her room she may, in her misery and confusion, have let out a few words to confirm Parsons' suspicion of what had occurred. It is scarcely necessary to say that the girl, who was devoted to Cynthia, was entirely on her side, as were all the other servants.

"It's all right, miss," she said soothingly, as she bathed Cynthia's face. "What time do you want to be there?"

"Half-past six, the Park gates," said Cynthia, too excited to be secretive.

"There's plenty of time, miss; there's plenty of time," murmured Parsons caressingly. "Now, don't you be worried and flurried, dear Miss Cynthia; it will all come right! You let me bathe your pretty eyes. And try and be calm."

"I will, I will. I'm in great trouble, Parsons. Ah, you don't know."

"Perhaps not, Miss Cynthia," said Parsons soothingly; "but we aren't all deaf and blind, we servants, though her ladyship thinks that we ought to be. But I mustn't speak like that about my betters. Now, miss, you sit down quiet in the chair and let me do your hair nicely. You don't want to go to your young gentleman—I mean into the streets—

lookin' untidy. That's better, Miss Cynthia!" as Cynthia smiled and blushed. "Lor, miss, if I was a gentleman, as strong and brave and handsome as Mr. Frayne, I wouldn't let any one, no, not even her ladyship, come between me and such a beautiful, sweet creature!"

"Oh, hush!" murmured Cynthy. "You mustn't say that, Parsons. And do be quick; I know I shall be late!"

She put on a motor veil, though there was no earthly reason for her doing so; and was at the Park gate ten minutes before her time; but, early as she was, Darrel was there, pacing up and down, impatiently awaiting her. They looked into each other's eyes; she gave him her hand for a moment, and then walked by his side till they reached a seat amongst the trees and away from all beholders.

"Oh, Darrel!" she breathed. "Ah, you mustn't; some one will see us!" for he had drawn her to him for a moment and kissed her. "How clever of you to think of this!"

"Well, I didn't," he said honestly, and a little regretfully; "it was Percy Standish. Cynthia, he has proved a true friend. He's a clever chap, and it was he who thought of—— Now, Cynthy, you mustn't be startled, and you mustn't argue; you must say 'Yes' at once. Cynthia, my dear darling, will you marry me to-morrow?"

She started, drew her hand from his, and stared at him, her lips apart, her breath coming quickly.

"Will I——! Oh, Darrel, you can't mean it!" she gasped.

"But I do," he said. "Cynthy, there is no other way out of it. We are in a fix. Lady Westlake will carry out her threat; Percy Standish says so. There is no place for you to go. But there is no need to think, to talk of that. There is no reason why we shouldn't be married."

"But—but we can't be!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"Can't we?" he retorted with a happy laugh. "Here's something that will do the trick!" He drew the license from his pocket. "Percy Standish thought of it, helped me to get it. To-morrow, dearest! What?"

Her eyes were downcast; then she raised them and looked at him; and they radiated trust and love.

"If—if you say so, Darrel," she said in a whisper.

Darrel would have caught her to him in his passion of gratitude and joy; but a nursemaid with a perambulator was passing at the time, and he was compelled to restrain himself; but he pressed her hand and murmured incoherently.

"You are an angel, Cynthia!" he said at last distinctly. "We will get married at once. You must meet me to-morrow; we will——" He stopped suddenly, not unnaturally confused; for the scheme had been Percy's, and Darrel himself had formed no plans. "I must see Percy Standish; he will know what we ought to do, and has promised to help us. I don't know his address, by George!"

Cynthia gave it to him.

"I will go round at once when I leave you; and I'll send you word where to meet me. But why not meet me here? Say at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, dearest?" he added.

"I will come," said Cynthia faintly. She was still bewildered by the prospect which had opened out to her. To be married to Darrel to-morrow! "I must go now, Darrel; Aunt Gwen may miss me. Oh, Darrel, I don't like deceiving her! She has been very good to me up to now; I think she is fond of me. I feel wicked, very wicked. Is there no other way?"

"There is no other way, dearest," he said gravely.

They separated after many attempts to do so, and Darrel went straight to the Standishes' house. He met Percy, who was just coming out; and that amiable young man listened sympathetically to Darrel's partial account of his meeting with Cynthia. Percy appeared to have all the details of the plan at his fingers' end.

"I will be at the Park gates at eleven o'clock," he said; "we will take a taxi-cab to a little place in Surrey. I know the vicar there; he was up at Oxford with me, and got pitchforked into a living early; he will make no difficulty; indeed, he can't; a special license does everything. You can be married and away on your honeymoon before Aunt Gwen is up."

Vainly endeavouring to express his gratitude, Darrel parted from this true friend in need, and just succeeded in catching the train which carried him to Aldershot.

CHAPTER XVI

TWO WOMEN OF THE WORLD

CYNTHIA returned to the home that was to be hers for only a few hours longer, and reached her room undetected; for Lady Gwen was shut up in her own apartments. The Griffin was having a bad time of it; for she was suffering from a defeat which had been the greatest, the most difficult to endure, in all her long and intriguing life. She had gloated over the prospect of being aunt, guide, monitor and friend of the future Duchess of Torbridge; and Cynthia, by her sickly sentimentality and mulish obstinacy, for so Lady Gwen characterised to herself Cynthia's conduct, had destroyed, shattered, this delightful fabric.

For a time she gave way to her rage and disappointment; but presently she began to think of some means of repairing matters. No doubt Cynthia had dismissed Lord Northam definitely; but would it not be possible for her, Lady Gwen, to qualify Cynthia's refusal? Girls as young as Cynthia had no right to dispose of their own destinies in the ridiculous way in which Cynthia had disposed of hers. It was obviously Lady Gwen's duty to save her ward and niece from the disastrous step which she proposed to take.

The Griffin, sending for her maid, caused herself to be be-wigged, rouged, and carefully made up, ordered the carriage, and had herself driven to Burton Crescent. The footman, who received her with the

respect and reverence due to her rank and position, informed her that Lord Northam was not at home, but that Lady Alicia was; and the Griffin was shown up to the drawing-room.

Lady Alicia appeared almost immediately, and Lady Westlake went straight to the point.

"I've come to see you about Northam and that girl of mine, Cynthia," she said in her direct way—a way which often disconcerted her friends and struck terror to her foes. "I understand that Lord Northam has proposed to her, and that the silly child has refused him. Of course, she is an idiot and doesn't know her own mind. It appears that there is, or she thinks there is, some one else. I may as well be candid, Lady Alicia, and tell you that the other man is—is——" she seemed to find it difficult to pronounce the name.

Lady Alicia, reclining gracefully amidst the cushions which had been chosen to match her faultless complexion, smiled comprehendingly.

"You mean Mr. Frayne, dear Lady Westlake," she said sweetly.

"I do," assented the Griffin grimly. "A young man who is quite unsuitable, quite ineligible. He is the son of a country baronet who is, so I am informed, very much embarrassed; in fact, up to his neck in debt. I could not consent to such a match; and I have told Cynthia so. All my sympathies are with your brother. He is an admirable young man——"

"He will be the Duke of Torbridge," murmured Alicia, looking straight at the painted face.

"Quite so," said Lady Gwen, unabashed by this candour. "A very good match for Cynthia. And she would make a very good Duchess. Now, my dear Lady Alicia, I want you to give Lord Northam to understand that Cynthia's refusal of him is not final. You know what girls are; at any rate, I do.

They are full of whims and fancies. For the moment, Cynthia's fancy is set on this young fellow; but if she were to marry him she would bitterly repent her folly. On the other hand, if she married Lord Northam——"

"She would learn to appreciate my brother's good qualities," murmured Alicia, like a machine.

"Quite so," said Lady Gwen approvingly. "You put it very nicely, my dear. I wish you would tell Lord Northam that he need not give up all hope. I have had a long talk with Cynthia; in fact, I—I told her my mind pretty plainly. I told her she was a little fool, and I threatened to turn her out of the house; in fact, I gave her twenty-four hours in which to pack and take her departure."

Lady Alicia sat upright and looked hard at the floor, two red spots appearing on her porcelain-like cheek.

"You told her that!" she said.

"I did," replied the Griffin grimly.

Lady Alicia was silent for a minute or two; then she said quietly, gravely—

"Was that wise, do you think? I mean, don't you think that was driving her to extremities? She is a peculiar kind of girl; very impulsive, very impetuous, I should think. Mr. Frayne is a rather hot-headed young man. They might—you can't tell what they might do."

Lady Gwen started and peered at the fair face before her with a sudden apprehension.

"Do you mean that they——?"

"I don't know," replied Lady Alicia; "but I know what I should do in his place, in hers. I should go off and be married out of hand."

Lady Gwen gasped. The idea had never occurred to her.

"You would!"

"Most certainly," said Lady Alicia with a smile;

but the two spots of red had disappeared from her face, and she was now very pale. "Forgive me, but I think you have made a very great mistake. I don't know very much of Miss Drayle, but from the little I do know of her I should think she was the last girl in the world to be driven, as you have attempted to drive her. She is the sort of girl to make a clandestine marriage."

Lady Gwen started up, her face pale under its rouge, her eyes flashing fire.

"I'll soon stop that!" she exclaimed.

"How?" asked Lady Alicia, still smiling.

"I'll shut her up; I'll keep a watch on her!"

"Love laughs at locksmiths," said Lady Alicia with a mirthless laugh. "And one can't do that sort of thing nowadays, Lady Westlake. Miss Drayle is perfectly free to walk out of your house and marry whom she pleases."

"But—but——" stuttered the Griffin furiously.

Lady Alicia laughed again and shook her head. She was silent for a moment or two, then she said—

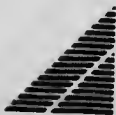
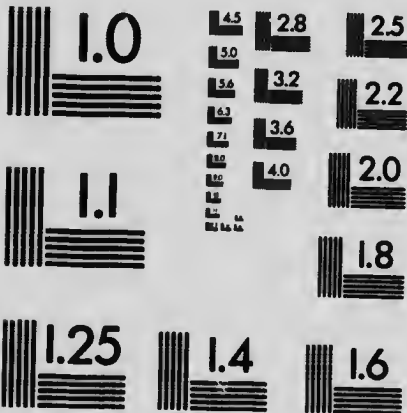
"I wonder whether you would let me help you, Lady Westlake? Of course, I am not nearly so clever as you are; every one knows you are the cleverest woman in London; but still—well, there are various ways of looking at things, of dealing with them. I am nearer Miss Drayle's age than you are; I know how a girl in her situation would feel, would act. Let me make a suggestion. Ask me to dinner to-night, and leave me alone with her."

Lady Gwen openly jumped at the offer; but while she was thanking Lady Alicia, with a profuseness in which she did not often indulge, her mind, as keen as Alicia's, was at work; she was asking herself why Lady Alicia, who did not appear to be the kind of girl who would be likely to take an interest in the welfare of a mere acquaintance, should be so ready to offer her assistance. It is



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needless to say, the Griffin guessed the reason; this exquisite piece of Dresden china was herself in love with Darrel Frayne!

However, that was no business of the Griffin's.

"I wonder whether you know that my objection to Mr. Frayne as a husband for my niece is based on something more than the fact that I want her to marry your brother? I have heard the rumour that his father's affairs are involved."

"Mr. Percy Standish told you?" said Lady Alicia smoothly.

The Griffin stared at her. "You seem to know everything, my dear," she said. "How did you know that?"

"Does it matter?" asked Lady Alicia pleasantly.

"Of course, I am going to work on that rumour—which, by the way, I believe to be quite accurate."

"Very well, my dear," said the Griffin. "I shall leave myself entirely in your hands."

"Do you really mean that?" inquired Lady Alicia smilingly. "Would you be prepared to start for the Continent to-morrow morning, if it were necessary to do so? Lucerne is a very pretty place; and the change would do Miss Drayle good. Northam is very fond of Lucerne; and I shouldn't be surprised if he ran over there presently."

"You are really a very clever girl, my dear," said Lady Gwen admiringly. "We can start to-morrow quite easily; why not?"

"It will not be necessary to say anything to Miss Drayle," intimated Alicia. "I mean until to-morrow. I will tell you to-night, when I am leaving, if it will be necessary for you to go."

When the Griffin had taken her departure the calmness and serenity of her fellow-conspirator disappeared. Lady Alicia sank back, gazing before her into vacancy, her hands clenched, her face red and white by turns; her breath came in laboured

gasps, she looked as if she were going to faint ; she had nearly lost Darrel ; even now she might lose him.

Lady Gwen went home, and, hearing that Cynthia was still in her room, climbed up to it. She knocked at the door with her stick, and presently Cynthia opened it. At sight of her, the Griffin almost started ; for she had expected to see Cynthia with red and swollen eyes and tear-washed cheeks ; but, though Cynthia's face was pale, her eyes were bright, and there was an expression of confidence and resolution which told the Griffin that Lady Alicia had not been wrong in her conjecture. It was evident that Cynthia was not crushed, that she was going to do something desperate.

"Oh, there you are !" said the old lady with a conciliatory grunt. "I have come to tell you that I made rather a fool of myself downstairs just now ; we both made fools of ourselves. I don't want to say any more about it ; but my bark is worse than my bite, as you know. We'll talk it all over later on——"

Cynthia's face flushed, her eyes grew softer.

"Oh, Aunt Gwen——" she began gratefully, affectionately ; but the Griffin waved her hand, as if to prevent further speech.

"No, no !" she said ; "don't let us begin on it again ; we shall only quarrel." She turned away, as Cynthia's face fell, and then said casually, "By the way, Lady Alicia dines here to-night ; of course you will come down."

"Yes, I will come down," responded Cynthia at once.

When she descended to the drawing-room, Lady Alicia had arrived. She greeted Cynthia in an ordinary tone and manner, giving no indication that she was aware of what was going on ; they went into dinner, and Lady Alicia was as bright as usual ;

and Lady Gwen, if not exactly affectionate with Cynthia, treated her with a graciousness which seemed to imply that she had regretted her harshness. Cynthia was almost silent during the dinner, and scarcely listened to the other two; for she was thinking of the morrow and all it meant to her; every now and then a tremor ran through her, her face flushed, her eyes grew heavy; was it really true that she was going to be married to Darrel to-morrow morning!

They went into the drawing-room; and after a few minutes Lady Gwen leant back in her chair and closed her eyes. Lady Cynthia glanced at her and then smiled at Cynthia.

"Let us go into the conservatory; we shall disturb her if we talk here," she said in a whisper.

There were some comfortable chairs in the palm-house, and Lady Alicia reclined in one and patted another beside her invitingly.

"How well these things grow," she said; "they do better here than at Torbridge. Speaking of Torbridge reminds me, Cynthia—you don't mind me calling you Cynthia?—that I want to tell you that I am sorry you and I are not going to be more than friends. Poor Northam! He is fearfully cut up. He is not the sort of man to wear his heart on his sleeve; but of course I know how deeply he feels your refusal. All the same, I am sure you are quite right, dear. Of all the foolish things men do, and we women too, there is nothing so idiotic as marrying a person for whom you do not care."

Cynthia glanced at her shyly and with some surprise; she had not expected to hear such a sentiment from Lady Alicia's lips.

"Yes, you did quite right," continued Lady Alicia. "There is only one thing that is more idiotic, and that is for a girl to marry an absolutely poor man."

"Not if she loved him," murmured Cynthia.

"My dear, that only makes it worse," retorted Lady Alicia with a laugh, "because, don't you see, she suffers all the more keenly for the ruin she has brought upon him."

"Ruin—she has brought upon him?" repeated Cynthia, turning her grave eyes upon her companion.

"Why, certainly," said Lady Alicia, raising her brows. "It's bad enough for a man to be poor when he's single; but it's infinitely worse, it's a hell upon earth, for him when he is hampered with a wife and children, especially when he cares for the girl; because he knows that he has dragged her down."

"I see," said Cynthia thoughtfully. The argument had no personal interest for her; for Darrel would be rich; a throb of gratitude to Providence stirred her heart at the thought.

Lady Alicia settled herself still more comfortably in the deck chair.

"I am always so sorry for poor young men, especially when they belong to our class," she said with a little yawn, as if she were pursuing the subject merely to pass the time; "there they are, awfully good fellows, just the kind of men one would like to marry; but, of course, they are quite impossible. Now, take our mutual friend, Mr. Frayne, for instance"—Cynthia started, her face was suffused by a blush; but Alicia's eyes were half closed, and she did not appear to notice these signs of her companion's emotion—"he is one of the most charming of men—awfully good-looking, and in our own class. There must be any number of girls in love with him, girls who would marry him out of hand if it were not for his circumstances."

The colour faded from Cynthia's face, her brows came together with a perplexed frown, she gazed at Alicia with surprise, incredulity; but the blue eyes were closed, their owner seemed half asleep

"What—what circumstances; what do you mean?" asked Cynthia.

"Oh, well, perhaps I ought not to speak about Mr. Frayne's private affairs," said Lady Ancia apologetically, "especially as I became acquainted with them by a kind of accident. His father's estates are terribly encumbered—in fact, it is a wonder that Sir Anson can carry on. It is always a mystery to me how people in their position find the ready money which they appear to possess. Poor Mr. Frayne! If his father died he would be left absolutely penniless, or something like it."

Cynthia's eyes opened wider; she was startled and amazed. The great Sir Anson, the king of Summerleigh, poor; her Darrel penniless!

"I—I don't think that's true," she said in a low voice.

"Absolutely true, you may depend upon it," said Alicia with another little yawn. "My authority is unimpeachable. I am rather nervous about Mr. Frayne; he is so young and impulsive. He is a great friend of Northam's, you know, and I have seen a great deal of him lately and quite like him; and, as I say, he gets on my nerves. I mean, that he is just the sort of man to fall in love with some penniless girl and marry her. Love in a cottage and that kind of thing, you know. It would mean ruin, of course; he had far better buy a revolver and shoot himself, and shoot her into the bargain. Fancy Darrel Frayne, whom we have all made a kind of pet of, who has always had plenty of money and done what he liked, dragged down by a wife and children and living from hand to mouth, with the prospect of a workhouse before him! Picture him in shabby clothes, wheeling a perambulator, and dining, when he could afford to dine at all, on cold mutton!"

Cynthia was very pale now; her breath laboured, a cold hand seemed to grasp her heart.

"Are you—sure?" she asked almost inaudibly.

"Quite sure," said Lady Alicia, in a tone that implied that she was beginning to lose interest in the subject. "I dare say he doesn't know how he stands. It is very probable that his father does not realise the fix he is in; but I am absolutely certain that I am right in saying that they are quite ruined. Of course, while he remains unmarried Mr. Frayne has a chance of recovering his footing. He is young and strong, and has all the world before him. There are heaps of things a man can do—if he is not hampered by a wife. If I were in love with him I would rather cut off my hand than let him marry me——"

This emphatic assertion was broken by a strange sound from Cynthia. It was not a cry nor a sob; it was the inarticulate moan of a woman in agony. She had risen and was standing wringing her hands, her face averted. Lady Alicia leant forward and looked at her with a fine assumption of astonishment and alarm.

"My dear Cynthia! What is the matter?" she exclaimed.

For a moment or two Cynthia seemed incapable of speech. The blow had been struck so suddenly, so heavily, that she was stunned, bewildered; but not too stunned and bewildered to realise the injury she had been going to inflict, all unwittingly, on her beloved.

"What is the matter?" repeated Lady Alicia, and now her tone was full of sympathy, of affected tenderness. "Have I said anything——? Won't you tell me, Cynthia? I've grown quite fond of you. Pray, tell me if I have said anything to wound you?"

Cynthia faced round upon her, tortured by the sudden anguish which demands expression

"I was going to marry Darrel to-morrow," she said, scarcely knowing what she said.

Lady Alicia caught her hand; there was something almost savage, ferocious, in the grasp.

"You — were — going — to — marry — him — to-morrow!" she exclaimed, fighting for breath. "Oh, I am sorry! I didn't know, I didn't guess. I would not have told you."

"It doesn't matter," said Cynthia, her bosom heaving, her lips set, her brows drawn together. "It is better that I should know before it was too late. I—I should have ruined him. I am quite poor, I have no money; Aunt Gwen would cast me off. I should drag him down. I won't do that—for I love him, oh, I love him!"

"My poor Cynthia!" murmured Lady Alicia. Her own heart was beating fast, there was a gleam of anticipatory triumph in the steel-blue eyes. "Perhaps, after all if you love him and he loves you——"

Cynthia winced, but she shook her head, and a dull, despairing look came into her eyes.

"No, no!" she said. "It is quite true what you say. I remember something Aunt Gwen said. She said Sir Anson was 'impecunious'; I should be a drag on him. I must tell him at once. But I shall not see him until to-morrow!"

Lady Alicia laughed softly, sympathetically.

"And he would laugh at your prudence. He would persuade you that you were wrong. You won't be able to resist, and you will be married; and really I shouldn't blame him or you. You see, you are so beautiful, my dear, and he is very much in love with you."

Cynthia dropped into her chair and covered her face with her hands. She was young, and, notwithstanding the Griffin's training, was innocent and unworldly. To say that she would lay down her life for Darrel is but to utter a truism; that she, who loved him, should be a drag upon him, should ruin him, was simply impossible to her. She knew that

what Lady Alicia had said to her was true—that if she saw Darrel, if she heard his voice pleading with her, if he touched her but once with his little finger, she would yield. She must not see him. What should she do? Lady Alicia watched her closely. Would the girl slip through her fingers after all?

“Don’t grieve so, dear,” she murmured sympathetically. “You will set me off crying presently. What will you do?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know!” broke from Cynthia in a kind of wail. “What—what would you do?”

“Oh, my dear, my dear, it isn’t fair to ask me,” responded Lady Alicia, as if shrinking from the burden Cynthia would lay upon her. “You see, I don’t love him”—as she spoke the words the lie seemed to scorch her tongue—“but if I did—mind, you asked me, Cynthia!—I would write and tell him——”

Cynthia shook her head. She knew Darrel.

“It would be no use,” she said almost inaudibly. “He would not let me go——”

“Not if you told him that you had discovered that he was poor,” said Lady Alicia. “He wouldn’t accept that as a reason for breaking the engagement. He might kick you up if you told him”—despite herself, she added—“if you told him that you had changed your mind, that you did not care for him enough to marry him.”

Cynthia winced and quivered as if she had been struck; she held her breath and gazed straight before her; and then she said suddenly, hoarsely—

“Yes, I will do that; it—it is the only way! Oh, am I doing right?”

The cry broke from her in her anguish. Lady Alicia was silent for a moment, as if she were struggling with her feelings; then she said, with an assumed reluctance—

"My dear, if you ask me, if you insist upon my answering, I must say that you are. If I were in your place I should feel as you are feeling. I could not drag down to ruin the man I loved."

"I will—I will write at once," said Cynthia, looking round helplessly. "But I don't know where to write—he has gone to his regiment to-night."

"Write to his quarters," said Lady Alicia. "But hadn't you better speak to Lady Westlake——"

"No, no!" said Cynthia, pushing the hair from her forehead with a trembling hand. "I must do it by myself—I must do it at once—before—— Oh, if I don't do it at once, if I wait, I shall never do it!"

Unsteadily, as if she were half blind, she went into one of the small rooms into which the conservatory led, and sat down before a writing-table. The room seemed to be whirling round about her, she could scarcely see the note-paper, hold a pen; but at last she was able to write. She folded the paper, addressed the envelope, and looked up to find Lady Alicia standing beside her.

"You have quite made up your mind?" murmured Lady Alicia.

Cynthia bowed her head and crouched in the chair, as if she had surrendered life itself. Lady Alicia bent and bestowed a Judas kiss on the bowed head.

"Dear, you have done a wise thing," she said soothingly. "It is precious hard for you now, but you will be glad afterwards. You have acted very nobly; for all my talk I don't know that I could have done it. I am afraid I should have stuck to him—and been sorry for it the rest of my life, as you would have been. But think, Cynthia, before you post the letter!"

"I have thought," said Cynthia in a dull, toneless

voice. "Will you—will you post it for me, at once, please?" She rose and stood, her hand gripping the edge of the table. "I am very—tired. I—I want to go to my room. Will you tell Aunt Gwen that—that I have a headache? You have been very kind—I want to thank you."

She held out her hand; Lady Alicia took it, and made to draw Cynthia to her. Cynthia yielded for an instant, then, struggling for breath, went out of the room. Lady Alicia stood for a moment or two with her fingers gripping the letter tightly, her under lip caught in her teeth. No woman is quite merciless; not even Lady Alicia could look on unmoved at such agony as Cynthia's. There stirred within her bosom an almost irresistible desire to run after Cynthia, to tear up the letter; but it is scarcely necessary to say that she resisted the desire. Jealousy, her passion for Darrel, were too strong for the stirrings of pity.

She went into the drawing-room. The Griffin sat up and stared at her questioningly.

"Well?" she demanded eagerly, her lips moving spasmodically.

Lady Alicia nodded. It seemed as if she found it difficult to speak, but at last she said in a dry voice—

"She has gone to her room. I have a letter to post for her. You can start for the Continent tomorrow. Will you be so kind as to order my carriage, Lady Westlake?"

CHAPTER XVII

BAD NEWS

DARREL reached his quarters in a frame of mind which does not need description; Cynthia would be his on the morrow. As he was rushing to his rooms, his man met him with a letter; Darrel thrust it into his pocket, but his man called his attention to the fact that it was marked "Immediate"; and he opened it.

It was from Mr. Burrige, and, as Darrel read it, the flush of happiness faded from his face, he grew pale and stared before him apprehensively.

"Not bad news, sir, I hope?" murmured his man, who was fond of him.

"Yes; it is," said Darrel brokenly. "My father has been thrown from his horse, he is badly hurt. I must go at once——"

The man hurried off to pack; but Darrel stood hesitatingly. How could he leave Cynthia! He read the letter again. Mr. Burrige said that Sir Anson had been injured; to what extent the doctors would not say; it might not be necessary for Darrel to come down at once; but Mr. Burrige had thought it incumbent upon him to write: he would wire in the morning.

Darrel spent a sleepless night, trying to decide between his love for Cynthia and his duty to his father whom he also loved. He tried to comfort and quiet himself with the reflection that it would be possible for him to marry Cynthia and to go down to Summerleigh by the afternoon train. He knew

what his father would say if the decision rested with him; with Sir Anson the woman he loved and to whom he owed a duty would come first.

As soon as the office was open, he sent a telegram saying that he would come down by the midday train, and begging for news; then he got leave—alas! that was easy now, with such an excuse; and ordered his dog-cart to take him to the station. The cart was at the door, when an orderly came up with a letter and a telegram; he opened the latter first and uttered a groan. "Come at once; much worse." What should he do? Cynthia would be waiting for him; how could he let her know? He could catch the early train to Summerleigh, if he started at once.

Mechanically he glanced at the letter in his hand; and his face flushed; for the address was in Cynthia's writing. With a strange presentiment, he shrank from opening the envelope. Why had she written? had anything happened? He took out the letter slowly, and as he read the few lines his heart seemed to cease beating.

"DEAR DARREL,—I do not know how to write what I have to say. The fewest words are best. I cannot marry you; I have changed my mind. Nothing will make me alter it again. Please do not try and see me or even write to me.

"CYNTHIA."

At first he could not grasp the meaning of the words; and he read them over and over again; but at last their full significance crashed down upon him. They did not present any problem to him; he jumped at the only conclusion they seemed to convey. Cynthia had found that she did not love him; she had been carried away by the impetuosity of his passion, had, in the excitement of the moment, persuaded herself that she

loved him ; but on reflection had discovered that she did not care enough for him to become his wife. There was no longer any reason for him to hesitate between his father and the woman he loved ; she had decided for him !

He drove to the station, caught the branch train, and picked up the express at Salisbury. His brain was in a whirl, he scarcely knew what he was doing or where he was going ; at one moment his heart was racked by the thought of his father's danger, the next it was tortured by the loss of Cynthia.

The carriage was waiting at Summerleigh station. To Darrel's broken, stammering question, "How is my father, Giles?" the old coachman merely sadly shook his head. The railway journey had been long ; but it seemed ages to Darrel before the sweating horses pulled up at the entrance of the Court. Priestly was at the door, his face as sad and grave as Giles's ; Mrs. Bowles, the housekeeper, came forward, trying to keep back her tears ; Mr. Burrige, his huge head thrust forward, his small eyes downcast, stood at the library door. Darrel scarcely spoke to any of them, and went quickly up the stairs into the darkened room.

The doctor and the nurse stood beside the bed on which Sir Anson lay. His face was grey, his eyes closed ; Darrel bent over him and spoke the dear, sacred name—

"Father !"

The doctor shook his head. "He is unconscious," he said.

Darrel looked up at him beseechingly. "Is he— is he very much hurt?" he asked hoarsely.

The doctor, deeply moved, for he had brought Darrel into the world, laid his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"He is very badly hurt, Darrel," he said. "My poor boy, there is no hope."

Darrel dropped his face on his father's arm. The minutes—were they hours?—dragged along slowly. Occasionally the doctor and the nurse ministered to the dying man. The intense silence, the darkness of the room, held Darrel in a terrible spell, from which it seemed to him he would never awake. They tried to persuade him to go downstairs to get some food; but he mutely refused to leave his father. Presently the nurse whispered something to the doctor, and they bent over the still form with renewed anxiety.

"He is coming to," said the doctor. "You will not excite him, Darrel?"

The dying man opened his eyes, a gleam of intelligence cleared their dullness; he saw and recognised his beloved son.

"Darrel!" he said faintly, with a last effort. "Darrel! You have come. It's all up, dear boy; I've got my call. It was the young mare—not her fault—don't—don't—shoot her: a good horse."

There was silence for a moment, as he fought for breath, then he breathed painfully, "Oh, Darrel, my boy—I'm afraid—I'm afraid—— Forgive me, Darrel! Oh, my poor boy!"

His eyes were full of the anguish of self-reproach, of dread; not of death, but of life, Darrel's future life.

"Oh, don't, father!" pleaded Darrel hoarsely and brokenly. "What have I got to forgive? You have been the best, the dearest father——!"

Sir Anson shook his head and drew a sigh.

"Not—not the best, Darrel," he gasped with labouring breath. "I have been—a fool. But forgive me, Darrel, and—don't—forget me!"

They were poor, reckless, careless, Sir Anson's last words. His hands closed tightly on Darrel's; then the grasp relaxed, and Darrel felt Death's chill.

They got him out of the room at last, and he sat in

the library, his eyes fixed on vacancy, his hands gripping each other, as if he were vainly trying to contend with the grief that threatened to deprive him of his senses. He thought of all the happy days that had passed in the close companionship of the father who had loved, well nigh worshipped him. He could not realise that he was dead, that the stalwart, breezy, light-hearted man was still for ever.

He had not realised it when, after the funeral, at which nearly all the district was present, he sat in the library, still going over the old days, still fancying that he could hear his father's voice, his step as he crossed the hall, followed by his dogs. All the funeral guests had gone, Darrel had stolen into the library to indulge in grief in solitude for a short time. He looked up, but was scarcely roused from his reverie, as Mr. Burridge entered.

Half an hour ago he had read Sir Anson's will, a will made when Darrel was an infant. Darrel had scarcely listened to Burridge's droning voice, with its almost childish, squeaking treble. He had thought Burridge had left the Court, and was dully surprised at seeing him there before him in the room.

"Is there anything else to be done?" he asked listlessly.

"No, Sir Darrel," replied Burridge; "but I thought I should like to see you, to have a talk with you." He stood just within the room, his head thrust forward in its usual attitude, his long arms hanging at his side, his big hands opening and shutting. Somehow or other, the man's huge bulk, his attitude, the small eyes protruding from their lids, jarred on Darrel; he craved to be alone.

"Please sit down," he said. "What is it you want to say to me, to talk about?"

"About the estate," replied Burridge, sinking into the chair and folding his hands across his stomach,

his eyes fixed on Darrel in an absolutely expressionless stare. "I thought perhaps you would like to tell me what you intended to do, Sir Darrel?"

Darrel gazed at him vaguely.

"What I intend to do——? I don't know exactly what you mean, Mr. Burridge. I suppose I shall have to send in my papers, retire from the Service." He sighed; for he had taken kindly to his profession, as we know, and he was fond of it. It would be painful to leave the regiment; but, of course, his duty lay here, at Summerleigh. He was, alas!—Sir Darrel now, and master of the Court. Well, he would try to follow in the footsteps of the father he admired and loved. He would try to do his duty.

"Do you think you will?" asked Mr. Burridge doubtfully. "You know best, of course; but I should have thought that under the circumstances it would be as well for you to stick to the Army. You know best, of course, but I don't see what else you could do."

"I should not have time," said Darrel absently. "I shall have to live here, take my father's place——"

Burridge emitted a dry cough, scratched his head and pursed out his lips.

"I'm afraid you don't quite understand, Mr.—Sir—Darrel," he said. "I thought perhaps you might have got an idea of how things stood.—Perhaps I'd better look in to-morrow," he broke off, beginning to raise his bulk from the chair; but Darrel, by a gesture, motioned him to remain seated.

"What do you mean?" he asked wearily. "What circumstances? You want to talk business with me; please do so. I would like to know at once anything you think I ought to be told. I want to do my duty. My father's death was so—sudden, I was so unprepared, that I feel rather bewildered and confused; but I shall understand, if you tell me plainly."

"Yes; that's far the best," said Burridge, pro-

jecting his under lip. "You ought to know how you stand; and I am sorry to say that you stand very badly. The fact is, Mr. Darrel, Sir Anson left his affairs in a very bad state. When he came into the property it was heavily mortgaged; and Sir Anson made bad worse. I did my best, but I could never get him to understand the condition of affairs; he seemed to think that while he could raise money on this bit of land or the other that everything was all right. I don't blame him——"

"Blame him!" said Darrel haughtily, with a flash of the eyes. How dared this man speak in this patronising, apologetic way of Darrel's father?

"I say I don't blame him," continued Burrige stolidly; "it was his nature, his temperament. Some men are born to squander money, others to take care of it and save it. I make every allowance for Sir Anson."

"You make every allowance!" said Darrel, scarcely believing his ears. Was the man mad to talk in this tone of disrespect of his dead employer?

"It was the Irish blood in him, I suppose," went on Mr. Burrige, apparently unmoved by Darrel's indignation. "Anyhow, I did my best to put the drag on; but I didn't succeed; no one could have succeeded; Sir Anson was resolved upon rushing downhill; though I told him what the end would be. And, of course, it's come now, and, equally of course, you've got to bear the brunt of it, I'm afraid, Sir Darrel."

Darrel began to have a faint glimmer of the meaning of the man's words. He drew himself up, set his face, and said quietly—

"You are trying to tell me something, some bad news, Mr. Burrige? Will you speak straight out, please?"

"Yes, it's better," said Burrige, with a nod of his heavy head. "The fact is, Sir Darrel, that

Sir Anson was—ruined; the will I read just now isn't worth the parchment it was engrossed on, for the simple reason that there was nothing to leave. Sir Anson had mortgaged everything, every stick and stone, every acre; there's even a bill of sale on the furniture." He looked round the room with the appraising air of a broker's man.

Two hectic spots appeared on Darrel's white cheeks, his hands gripped each other tightly; but he met steadily the gaze, the covertly triumphant gaze, of Mr. Burridge's childlike eyes.

"You mean that I am ruined?" he said in a low voice, but a voice as steady as his eyes; for a Frayne should not quail before a Burridge.

"I'm afraid that's so," said Burridge, in exactly the tone he was wont to use when he was selling up a small farmer. "I'm afraid when we've settled up that there won't be a penny for you; quite the reverse, in fact."

"But I don't understand," said Darrel slowly. "The house and the land, the estate, are mine. They are—entailed, don't you call it?"

Mr. Burridge shook his head. "Entail was cut off by Sir Anson's father; he was the same kind of man as Sir Anson."

There was silence for a moment or two. Darrel sat perfectly still. He uttered no cry, no exclamation. Men are tried by fire; Darrel was passing through an exceedingly fiery furnace now. Boyhood was passing from him, shorn from him by the flames: would he emerge into full manhood, hardened, purified, steeled by the ordeal? It looked as if he would. As Burridge gloatingly watched him, he saw that instead of collapsing, as he expected him to do, Darrel was bracing himself.

The young fellow's face was white, his brows were drawn, as if by physical pain; but his lips were tightly set, his eyes were fixed steadily, unflinchingly

on the man who had been his and his father's secret foe, the man who had been undermining them for years; and there was no weakness in the gaze, no appeal, no sign of surrender.

"This is bad news—for me, Mr. Burrige," Darrel said at last. "You say that I am penniless, that the estate, everything, is mortgaged? Who holds the mortgages, to whom do we owe all this money, the money you say I cannot pay?"

A reddish flush stained Burrige's heavy face, his glance shifted from side to side, he moistened his thick lip.

"It doesn't much matter——" he said hesitatingly.

"I wish to know," said Darrel quietly.

"Well, if you must——" replied Burrige, with a shake of his shoulders and a twist of his pendulous under lip, "it's me."

CHAPTER XVIII

OFF TO THE FRONTIER

DARREL was not surprised ; he remembered incidents, quite small things, which had occurred in the past—scraps of conversation between his father and Mr. Burrige, certain covert insolences which Burrige had occasionally displayed ; there also flashed across his mind at that moment the words, the threats, Sampson had tipsily uttered outside the Savoy, Lady Westlake's taunt of "impecunious baronet." He was not surprised, but his gorge rose at the thought of Burrige's duplicity, the complete and skilful way in which his poor father and he had been engulfed by that voracious boor.

Poor Darrel knew nothing of business ; but he had sense enough to put the question—

"You mean that you hold the mortgages on the Court and the estate, and that they must be sold to pay your debt ?"

Mr. Burrige nodded ; his face still wore its unhealthy flush, there was a gleam of triumph in his eyes. He had waited a great many years for this moment, and was inwardly enjoying that reward which, we are told, comes to all who can wait.

"There will have to be a sale," he said, with a very poor show of regret, "but I'm afraid that it won't realise the amount of the mortgages ; there has been a great depreciation in real property lately, a tremendous shrinkage of values ; and I fancy there will be a considerable deficit. I shall be a heavy loser. I bought up the rest of the mortgages, because

they became pressing, and I wanted to stave off the smash-up as long as possible—but I must put up with that.”

Darrel was acute enough to see what the man's object had been, and how completely he had obtained it. His face grew hot, his eyes burned.

“You mean that you will buy-in the Court and the estate, that they will belong to you, that you will be master here?”

Mr. BurrIDGE shrugged his shoulders with a deprecatory air; he tried to look like a martyr, a person who had sustained a heavy loss for the sake of a friend; but his eyes glowed and his lips worked in his endeavour to suppress a smile.

“I suppose so,” he said; “no one would give the money I have advanced. I must put up with a loss.”

At this moment footsteps sounded in the hall, the library door opened, and Sampson BurrIDGE, pausing for a moment on the threshold, walked in. He, too, had been waiting for this moment, and had come prepared to enjoy himself; but it required a certain amount of courage, and he had braced himself by a glass or two of whisky. His face, a youthful replica of his father's, was almost as red as his hair; his eyes openly gloated, his huge mouth was twisted with a smile of triumph, of insolence.

“Hope I don't intrude,” he said, with an assumption of confidence and ease, which weakened somewhat under Darrel's steady eyes. “A telegram has just come for you, gov'nor, and I thought I'd bring it up. Knew you were here—— Good evenin', Mr. Frayne—Sir Darrel, I mean. Father and you been havin' a long talk, I suppose? He's been tellin' you how the land lies. Awfully sorry for you. Comes as a bit of a shock, doesn't it? I've known it all along; but it wasn't for me to speak.”

Darrel regarded him calmly. "You spoke—as plainly as you could—the other night in London," he said quietly; "but I didn't understand, I didn't pay any attention. I see now that I was wrong in not doing so. You wish to talk to your father; pray do so; I will leave you."

"Oh, it's nothing much," said Sampson. "Don't go, Mr. Frayne—Sir Darrel. The place doesn't belong to us—yet."

Darrel started as if he had been stung, as, indeed, he had.

"You are right," he said; "it does not. For to-day, at least, this house is mine. Be good enough to leave it, both of you."

With white face and flashing eyes he pointed to the door. The old man scrambled to his feet; he was a servant and servile at heart; he felt the bonds of his servitude enclosing him at that moment; he stood with bowed head for a second or two, then moved towards the door; but, warmed by the whisky, Sampson's blood was up, as he would have put it; he laid his hand on his father's arm and stared insolently across the elder man's bent figure at Darrel.

"So you're going to ride the high horse, are you?" said Sampson. "Goin' to carry it with a high hand, eh? You're ordering us out of the house as if we were dogs, cattle? All right! We're going; but it won't be for long; we shall be back soon. And we shall come back as masters. There's an end of you and your lot; and you may thank your stars that we've given you as much rope as we have done; we could have kicked you out long ago, if we'd liked, couldn't we, father?"

"Hold your tongue, Sampson!" growled Burridge.

"Oh, it's all very well," retorted Sampson; "but who's goin' to stand his impudence? I won't,

at any rate. Let him know his place. He's our debtor, he owes us more money than he can pay; he ought to recognise the fact that we've held our hands for years, for years; that, so to speak, he's been living on us, actually living on us——. You may stare, Sir Darrel, but it's true enough; and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it."

Darrel's hand fell to his side, and he sank into his chair. Perhaps the sight of his humiliation touched Burrige; for he pushed Sampson towards the door, and, looking back at the bent figure on the chair, muttered—

"Another time, Sir Darrel, another time. Go out, Sampson."

The door closed on them, and Darrel, free to indulge his misery, let his head fall upon his arm, and gave way to his anguish; but not for long. He was young, and he was a Frayne. His manhood called to him in no uncertain voice, and he responded to it. He arose, a little shaky, but supported by a firm resolution; the blow had been a crushing one; but he would not consent to be crushed. His ancestral home, the home he had loved so dearly, was passing, had already passed, from him; he was an intruder in the house in which he had thought himself master; he was, as Mr. Burrige had said, penniless; but his youth and his strength and the girl he loved remained to him—— Then suddenly he remembered the most crushing blow of all: Cynthia also had gone: there was absolutely nothing left.

Instantly he asked himself the question: Had she known, before she wrote her letter dismissing him, that he was ruined? His whole soul recoiled from the thought; Cynthia, his old playmate—whose pure, innocent, unworldly heart he thought he could read, as if it were an open book—to jilt him, throw him off, because he was a poor man! It was

impossible; he knew her too well. And yet she might have heard of his ruin, Lady Westlake might know of it; in his drunken fury Sampson had spat out his venom very plainly that night; she might have heard him. And yet, if she had, how to account for her acceptance of his love, for her promise to marry him, her refusal of Northam?

He paced up and down in a whirl of confusion, one moment accusing Cynthia of the most sordid worldliness, the next acquitting her. But suddenly he realised that whether Cynthia were true or false, were actuated by base motives or simply obeying the dictates of her heart, the separation between them was final; for how could he ask her, permit her, to marry a penniless man! She was lost to him for ever; he must accept her letter of dismissal.

He dined that night with the quiet state habitual at the Court; but he ate little and drank less. Priestly hovered about him with a kind of paternal affection; the other servants eyed him commiseratingly. Darrel considered it incumbent upon him to acquaint the old man with the changes which were about to take place. As Priestly, having put on the dessert, was about to leave the room with his usual deferential bow, Darrel said, in a voice which he endeavoured to keep steady—

“I ought to tell you, Priestly, that I am going to leave the Court, that I shall not come back. I—I think it will be sold. Of course, your wages, and the other wages, will be paid——”

Priestly—he had been in the service of the Fraynes since boyhood—page, footman, valet, butler—caught his breath with a kind of sob.

“Oh, Mr. Darrel!” he gasped. “I beg your pardon—Sir Darrel—it isn’t true, sir, is it? They are saying——”

“That I am ruined,” said Darrel quietly, but

with something like a sob in his own voice. "I'm afraid it's true, Priestly. Mr. Burrige——"

"Don't you mention that man's name to me, sir," broke in Priestly agitatedly. "It's all his doings. I've had a suspicion for a long time——"

"I'm afraid there were grounds for your suspicion," said Darrel. "But we won't talk of it; what's the use? I am sorry to part with you, Priestly—but I'm going myself. I shall never come back."

He held out his hand. Priestly took it; and the tears, that did not disgrace the old man's manhood, ran down his cheeks. He was devoted to the family, had been fond of Sir Anson; but the love of Priestly's heart had been spent upon the boy whom he had held in his arms as an infant—Darrel's mother had placed him there—and the thought of Darrel's ruin was an agony to this faithful servitor; but he was a well-trained servant, he knew that he must not give way to his grief, and, after wringing Darrel's hand in mute agony, he went out of the room.

Darrel spent another sleepless night; but from the chaos of his thoughts one resolution stood out clearly: he must leave the Court at once; indeed, it no longer belonged to him, but to the Burridges, and he could not remain as their guest. He rose early and went round the place. Everywhere he met sorrowful faces; the very horses he had ridden and driven seemed to look and neigh a sad farewell to him; he stood on the terrace and looked at the well-kept gardens, at the park which stretched beyond them, at the smoke rising from the home farm.

He had always loved the Court; but now, this morning when he was saying farewell to it, it seemed part and parcel of himself; parting with it meant parting with a portion of his own body. And with all this agony of farewell mingled the thought of Cynthia; she too, was a part of his body, of his innermost self.

The dogcart he had ordered came up; he had expected that the groom would drive him to the station, but Giles was on the box-seat, his old face drawn with sorrow. Darrel could not speak to him, and Giles looked before him with tears in his bleared eyes.

There was another long and sorrowful journey to London; Darrel reached Aldershot, and the first man he met as he entered his quarters was Northam. He had a newspaper in his hand, and stuck it in his pocket as he greeted Darrel.

"You've got back," he said, in his slow, wooden way. "Awfully sorry for you, Frayne. No use saying anything. Going away for a bit, I suppose? Quite right. You look awfully seedy; very natural. Come and have something to eat at my rooms."

Darrel accepted with a nod, and then went in. Northam was awkward and constrained, as a man always is in the presence of a friend's grief. As for Darrel, he moved and spoke like a man in a dream; indeed, he was benumbed by his trouble, his many troubles.

"Jolly bad news this," remarked Northam, as he helped Darrel to some food. "They've had a tit-up on the Indian frontier; some of our men have had a bad time of it. Usual game: not half enough men sent; and, of course, they got chawed up. You know the sort of thing? The Twenty-fifth and the Rexford Fusiliers—they're out there, you know—have been ordered to the front. I wish I were with 'em; for it looks as if there was going to be a regular scrimmage."

Darrel scarcely listened; what did it matter to him if there were another of our little troubles on the Frontier? But Northam gave him some more particulars of the affair, just for talking's sake and to lure Darrel for a time from his grief. They smoked a cigar, and then Darrel went about his work. His

men saw by his face, his voice, that he was in trouble, that something had happened, and they were more than usually painstaking. He worked himself into bodily weariness, and managed to get some sleep that night. He dreamed of Cynthia.

The next morning he went up to London. He had no clearly defined object in doing so; but at the back of his mind was the irresistible desire to see Cynthia, to say good-bye to her for ever. He wanted to tell her that he did not blame her for throwing him over; that he was ruined and could not marry her, and therefore that he gave her the freedom which was due to her, which she had claimed.

He went to the house in Belgrave Square; it seemed to him to present a stern, a forbidding aspect; he did not notice that the blinds were down. When he rang the bell the door was opened by the hall porter, who was not in livery, but wore an ill-fitting, ordinary morning suit, in which he looked quite a different person to that with whom Darrel was acquainted.

"Lady Westlake in?" asked Darrel.

"Her ladyship has gone abroad, sir," replied the man.

"And—and Miss Drayle?" asked Darrel, his voice faltering.

"Miss Drayle has accompanied her ladyship, sir," replied the man in the proper, impassive fashion.

Darrel turned away, his heart like lead. She had gone. Because she had feared to meet him, been afraid to listen to his pleadings, his reproaches? With bent head he walked across the Square, and started when a voice accosted him. The voice belonged to Percy Standish. The two men stood and regarded each other in silence for a moment; the one calm and serene, but with an acute questioning in his eyes; the other, white to the lips, with drawn and haggard face and troubled eyes.

Percy was the first to speak.

"My dear Frayne! I've been expecting to see you, to hear from you! What has happened——?"

"I'm sorry; I ought to have written," said Darrel moodily. "But I have been in trouble. My father died—suddenly——" His voice broke.

"I'm sorry," said Percy, with the conventional tone of sympathy. "But—Cynthia? I waited at our meeting-place——"

Darrel, with a set face, with clenched teeth, met Percy's gaze steadily.

"Our engagement is broken off," he said. "Cynthia—Miss Drayle—wrote to me—— I'm grateful for all the trouble you've taken, Standish; but we are not going to be married. Cynthia has gone——"

Percy did not start; starting was not a weakness of his; but he looked at the haggard face with narrowed eyes.

"Gone? What do you mean?"

"She has gone abroad with Lady Westlake," said Darrel, in a dull, toneless voice.

"They must have left suddenly," said Percy, his eyes downcast. "I think I will go on to the house and inquire. I am awfully sorry for you, Frayne I waited at our rendezvous for some time—— But I quite understand. Yes, I will go on to the house and inquire."

They shook hands, and Darrel, still benumbed, went to his club. It was a club at which he was popular; but he only nodded in a forbidding way to the greetings accorded him, and, going to the smoking-room, took up a paper, rather to conceal his sorrow-laden face than to acquaint himself with the news; but presently, as he turned the pages of the paper, he happened on the telegrams from India.

This Frontier trouble appeared to be a serious one. He read all the details; he wished himself there; he envied the men who were ordered to the scene

of action. The poor fellow knew that action, violent action of some kind, was the only thing that would bring him relief from the trouble that gnawed at him. Suddenly an idea occurred to him; he stared at the paper, stared at the wall opposite him. These men who were going out were going out to fight; they were going to do things; they were to be in danger, peril, they were going to take risks, chances. Why couldn't he be one of them? He looked at his watch. There was still time—the War Office wouldn't be closed.

He flung the paper aside, paid his bill, and went with a quick pace towards the entrance. As he reached the door Northam entered.

"Hullo!" said Northam. "Come and dine with me and Alicia; it will help to pass the time."

"Thanks," said Darrel hurriedly. "I will, if I can. I am going to the War Office. I want to exchange——"

He left Northam gazing at him vaguely, and yet with an expression of comprehension. Darrel went to the War Office, where he had to unwind the usual amount of red tape, but at last he reached the personage he sought and made his request. There was, as usual, a scarcity of officers; but the personage, also as usual, made the stereotyped difficulties. By dint of much talking, Darrel obtained his object. He found that it was possible to exchange into the Rexford Fusiliers. He was going to the front; there was fighting, delicious fighting, before him.

With a throb of the heart he left the War Office and returned to his club. It was not till some time afterwards that he remembered that he had accepted Northam's invitation to dine with him and Lady Alicia.

CHAPTER XIX

“GOOD-BYE—NOT SWEETHEART”

DARREL was almost sorry that he had given a conditional promise to dine with Northam and his sister; but he went; for one reason, because he wanted to speak to Northam about the exchange. He bore Northam no ill-will for proposing to Cynthia; it was only natural that he, or any man, should fall in love with her and want to marry her. Darrel was not jealous—indeed, he had been so sure of Cynthia's love that he had been able to pity Northam: what greater disaster could befall a man than to be rejected by Cynthia?

He was shown into the drawing-room at Burton Crescent, and in a minute or two Lady Alicia came to him. She could scarcely speak for a moment; for the change in him struck to her heart. He was pale and haggard, there were dark marks under his eyes, and he looked thinner and slighter in his mourning suit of black serge; but there was a greater alteration in him than that of face and dress. There was a stern expression in his eyes and about his mouth; he had the look of a man who had passed through the fire of adversity and had come out of it badly burned but hardened. There was no smile in his usually bright eyes; the lightness had gone out of his voice. His very attitude indicated the change that had taken place; for he held himself erect, and his movements were slow and seemed to have lost their old freedom. She took his hand, and as she

pressed it softly she looked at him as if in doubt and fear, with veiled scrutiny; but at his first words, at his tone, she knew that he had not discovered the part she had played in separating him from Cynthia, and she drew a long breath, a sigh of relief. He took it for one of sympathy, and he said in a low voice—

"It is very good of you to let me dine with you to-night, Lady Alicia; I am not likely to prove a very cheerful guest."

"It is very good of you to come," she said, and her voice shook a little; for she loved him, in her way, as passionately as did Cynthia, and she had all the woman's craving to draw him to her, to press his face to her bosom, to comfort him as only a woman in love can comfort the man she loves. "We are so sorry for you. Northam is a great friend of yours, and I"—her voice faltered, her eyes were raised to his with tenderest pity, then drooped—"I am more sorry than I can say. If there was only something one could do! But the best, the dearest friends are helpless in such a case, though they would give everything, their very lives, to console, to lighten——"

Darrel was touched by this demonstration of her regard. Of course, he thought it was only friendship; but friendship was very precious to poor Darrel at that moment. Northam came in; he was in morning dress, and explained that he was returning to Aldershot that night. They went in to dinner. Mrs. Clinton, the chaperon, had gone to a Girl's Friendly, in which and similar philanthropic movements the poor lady escaped for a time from her position of nonentity in the Burton Crescent household.

It was a dainty little dinner; but Darrel could not eat much, and Lady Alicia did not press him.

"I've been to the War Office," said Darrel to

Northam. "They've got a sick man in the Rexford Fusiliers, and I've gone some way to make arrangements to take his place. Poor beggar! He'll be pretty mad; for he'll miss the fighting, and, from what I heard at the War Office to-day, there'll be plenty of it."

Lady Alicia was raising her glass, but she set it down suddenly, her face grew pale, her eyes closed, and a shudder of apprehension ran through her.

"What is that?" she asked sharply.

"I didn't tell you," said Northam. "The Rexford Fusiliers are ordered to the Frontier, and Frayne is exchanging into them. There's trouble there with some of the outlying tribes. Wish to goodness I was going; but I shall have to stick to the regiment, worse luck!"

"But—but——" said Lady Alicia, trying to speak steadily, though her bosom was heaving and a lump had risen in her throat which made speech difficult; "but why should Mr. Frayne go? There are plenty of other men.—There is a terrible risk. I know these Frontier wars—there are never enough men—there is always sniping— Oh, why should he go?"

Darrel regarded her with some surprise; he was rather embarrassed by her show of feeling.

"I'm the very man to go, Lady Alicia," he said, forcing a laugh. "I don't know whether you two know it, but I am a ruined man; I'm quite stony broke. My father"—he caught his breath—"my father died a poor man, worse. I don't suppose I shall be able to stay in the regiment. This is a splendid chance; most men will envy me—Northam does—and I shall enjoy it."

He talked to Northam of the exchange, of the probability that the Rexfords would sail at once; and Lady Alicia listened and said nothing; nor did she eat any more. Her face had grown very pale,

her lips were drawn together, her eyes were fixed on the tablecloth. She rose presently when the dessert appeared and went to the drawing-room, so that the men might smoke their cigars. She closed the door and flung herself down on the couch, her face on her arm; but presently she sprang up and fell to pacing up and down.

We are told that the way of the transgressor is hard; and certainly Lady Alicia was finding it very hard at that moment. With almost ruthless cunning she had succeeded in separating Cynthia from Darrel, and in doing so she had very probably driven the man she loved to his death. In her mind's eye she could see him stretched out, shot dead in some hideous bullet-ridden Pass, and the mental vision tortured her. And she was so helpless! She could not plead with him, could not reveal her heart, could not use her love as an argument, a lever. She would have to let him go without a word, without even letting him know of her all-absorbing love for him; for she knew that this was not the moment in which to show him her heart—that, if she did so, he would recoil from her with a kind of loathing disgust.

Even Cynthia, if she had been aware of Alicia's duplicity, could almost have found it possible to pity the woman who paced up and down, her lips writhing, her hands strained together, almost distraught in her agony.

Meanwhile Darrel and Northam drank their wine in silence; Northam could sit mute and motionless for quite a lengthy period. At last Darrel, with some embarrassment, said—

"I didn't tell Lady Alicia the whole truth, Northam; I didn't give her the whole reason, though that which I gave her was enough. I'd better tell you—in fact, I ought to do so. My engagement with Cynthia—Miss Drayle—is broken off."

Northam finished his glass of claret deliberately before he asked—

"Oh! Why?"

"Because—because she changed her mind," said Darrel, with a touch of colour in his pale face.

"Changed her mind?" said Northam in his wooden way. "That doesn't sound like Miss Drayle."

"No," assented Darrel a trifle bitterly; "but she has. She made a mistake and found it out before it was too late. You see," he went on slowly, as if he were accounting to himself rather than to Northam for Cynthia's action, "you see, we were old friends, old playmates. We used to meet each other as boy and girl at Summerleigh, at my place—I mean, a place that used to be ours. We were like brother and sister, and I suppose she regarded me as a kind of brother, and was—was carried away for the moment, but on thinking it over she—she saw that she did not care enough for me to marry me."

"Do you think that was it?" asked Northam stolidly.

"What else could it be?" said Darrel. "It wasn't because I had lost my money. Cynthia wouldn't care about that; she's not that sort of girl."

"No; she's not that sort of girl," agreed Northam.

There was a pause, then Darrel said, with a touch of embarrassment—

"Look here, Northam, I'd better out with all that's on my mind. I know that you proposed to Cynthia. She didn't tell me——"

"No; she wouldn't," said Northam in exactly the same tone.

"No; Lady Westlake blurted it out. It was that that made her so furious when I asked her for her consent. Of course, even if I had not lost Summerleigh and all my money, I shouldn't have been in the running with you in Lady Westlake's eyes. It is

only fair that I should tell you how matters stand; we've been good friends. I'm out of the running now——" He tried to speak steadily, stoically, but his voice broke somewhat.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Northam, as he refilled Darrel's glass and his own.

"Oh, yes," said Darrel gravely. "Cynthia knows her own mind now; she's not likely to go back upon it. I'm done for. But I—I care for her all the same. I want her to be happy—it doesn't matter about me." The poor fellow gulped down some claret. "She is very young; she is in the power of that old dev—I mean, Lady Westlake. All sorts of men will come to her, like wasps after honey. She hasn't any one to take care of her, to watch over her; her father is away, globe-trotting somewhere or other, and she has no other friend in the world excepting you. You're a decent chap, Northam"—it is the highest praise which men of their class permit themselves—"and I should be—I could feel more at ease about her if I knew you were going to be a friend of hers and keep guard over her. Will you? I'm afraid you'll think it a rum kind of request."

"It is rather rum," assented Northam, twisting his cigarette between his lips, "but I think I know what you mean. Seems to me, though, you haven't much consideration for me, Frayne. Don't want to talk sentiment, but you know how I feel towards her; and 'pears to me that you don't only want to tell me that the course is open, but to chuck me into a position in which—— Dash it all!" he exclaimed after a pause, "do you think I'm a block of wood? You're proposing that I should act as a kind of guardian of hers. D'you think I haven't any feeling?—d'you think——"

"I don't know exactly what I think," said Darrel with a sigh. "I only know that I am going away, that the odds are that I may not come back, and

that I am leaving her without a friend—for I don't call Lady Westlake a true friend—and that I am anxious about Cynthia. Look here, Northam; there are two or three kinds of love. I don't want to talk high falutin', but the kind I feel for Cynthia is the sort which would rather see her happy, even if I can't have her myself. I'm nervous about her. As I said, she's so young, so innocent, so unworldly. Lady Westlake is a griffin, as they call her; she will force her to marry some fellow who isn't worthy of her——"

"And you think I am, eh?" said Northam dryly.

Darrel choked something down, then he blurted out—

"Yes, I do. I'm out of the running. She won't have me; she couldn't marry me under the circumstances. And"—his voice broke—"I'd rather—if anything happens to me, I could hand in my checks much more comfortably if I thought——"

Northam nodded. "I think I understand," he said. "It's rather a hard row to hoe; but I'll take it on. I'll look after her as much as I can. But keep your pecker up, Frayne. All sorts of things turn up in this rummy world of ours; you may come back with a V.C., get a swagger appointment. She doesn't care a blow for me, and she's gone on you." Darrel shook his head and tried to smile. "D'you think I don't know? I'm noi such a fool as I look. But have it your own way. Heaven knows what will come of it. Let's go into the drawing-room; we might talk our heads off and get no nearer the point. Look here, old chap, I'm deuced sorry for you. I took my dismissal all right, and was quite prepared to take a back seat. Between you and me, I'd lay a hundred to one that Cynthia—Miss Drayle—feels all right towards you. There's some mystery about—there always is where women are concerned. But I'm no hand at mysteries—never was."

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They both rose, but Northam laid his hand on Darrel's arm.

"Look here," he said, "you are up a tree for the moment, I know; if any coin is wanted——?"

But Darrel drew his arm away and shook his head.

"Thanks very much," he said rather thickly, "but I've enough to carry on with. You're very good, Northam."

"Good be blowed!" grunted Northam.

They went into the drawing-room; Lady Alicia was at the piano, striking the notes softly. She came forward and gave them their coffee. They talked in a perfunctory way; nothing was said of Darrel's exchange. Presently Northam said, "I'll go and see if my man has packed my bag," and he left the room, Darrel saying as he did so, "I'll go down to the station with you."

Lady Alicia stood by the mantelpiece, leaning her arm on the shelf. She looked round at Darrel for a moment, then she said in a low voice—

"You have quite made up your mind?"

"Oh, yes, quite," he said, with a slight start; for he had been thinking of his talk with Northam.

"Is there no other way?" she asked in a still monotone. "It seems such—such a pity. There are so many other ways—I mean——"

She had a handkerchief in her hand, and she dropped the dainty square of cambric and lace. Darrel picked it up and held it out to her. She took it, their hands met; hers closed on his, a tremor shook her, her lips parted as if she were breathing with difficulty; her eyes were fixed on his pleadingly, a dull despair in hers.

"Don't go!" she murmured. "Ah, don't go!"

She leant towards him invitingly; the faint perfume which she affected stole out towards him. Darrel was touched, deeply moved; a flush rose to his face, his hand closed on hers.

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"I must go," he said rather hoarsely; "there is nothing else for me to do."

"There is——!" she panted. "If you would only stay! I—I——"

The door opened; Northam came in.

"The cab's outside," he said.

"Right!" said Darrel. "I'm ready."

He pressed Lady Alicia's fingers; they clung to his in a last appeal. Confused, embarrassed, conscious of the electric emotion which emanated from her, he stammered—

"Good-bye, Lady Alicia."

They went out; she stood listening to the departing cab; then she threw herself down on the couch, her hands clasped, her whole body writhing with misery.

CHAPTER XX

"THE COCKNEY'S PARADISE"

THE beauties of Lucerne have often been drawn, photographed, and sung—perhaps, in the opinion of some persons, rather too liberally; and these same persons have conferred upon the beautiful place the uncomplimentary title of The Cockney Tourists' Paradise; but even the mobs which pour down upon its lake's side from the excursion trains and steamers cannot spoil the charm of one of the most beautiful places in Europe; and, of course, there are periods when the exquisite lake is not troubled by the tourist, and the quiet of the mountains is not broken by his cheery shout and Cockney accent.

Fortunately for them, Lady Westlake and Cynthia arrived at Lucerne in one of these quiet periods. In other circumstances, Cynthia would have been delighted and enraptured by the magnificent scenery and the historic and picturesque old town; but, alas! she was incapable of admiring anything or thinking of anything but Darrel.

It had been a long and wearisome journey, and the Griffin had slept, or appeared to sleep, during most of its course; so that Cynthia was free to indulge in her grief almost without interruption. She shed no tears, her eyes were not red and swollen as they had been on the memorable journey from Summerleigh to Belgrave Square; for her sorrow was too deep for tears. It seemed to her that her

life was ended, that nothing again could ever matter now that Darrel had gone out of that life.

There had not been time to hear from him, to get any response to her letter ; but her vivid imagination could picture the misery it must have inflicted upon him. Would he write ? Much as she longed for a line from him, a single word, she hoped that he would not write ; for he could send her nothing but reproaches, appeals, which could have no other result than to intensify her anguish.

They stayed at Paris for a day to enable Lady Westlake to do some shopping ; and in her relief at what she called Cynthia's narrow escape, the Griffin would willingly have bought Cynthia anything ; but Cynthia displayed a complete lack of interest in Parisian novelties, and quietly begged to be excused the shopping expeditions. The Griffin displayed an amount of patience remarkable in her—and left the girl alone ; she had seen several cases like that of Cynthia, and had always found that the sufferer had come round in time ; so would Cynthia, the worldly-wise old woman told herself.

As a rule, when the Countess of Westlake travelled on the Continent she was accompanied by a courier, who directed and managed the journey and all its troublesome details ; but on this occasion she had started so suddenly that there had been no time to engage a courier, and she had perforce to content herself with her own maid and l'arsons.

They reached Lucerne at last and went to the principal hotel. The weather happened to be fine, and the Griffin was condescending enough to take a fancy to the place ; it seemed to her just the kind of one—quiet, beautiful, and yet not dull—which would suit a young girl moping over an unfortunate love affair. After all, Cynthia was a healthy young person, and her spirit, now trailing in the dust of disappointed love, would soon pick itself up ; and

by the time Lord Northam appeared on the scene would be as bright and charming as ever.

But her ladyship did not like the hotel; though it would have been difficult for any reasonable person to have complained of that beautifully situated and admirably managed establishment, at which she received the marked attention and owed respect which she considered due to a personage of her exalted rank.

"I rather like this place, Cynthia," she said, as, on the third morning, she hobbled along the balcony to where Cynthia was leaning, gazing at the brilliantly blue lake below them. Cynthia started slightly and turned her face, which was pale and looked curiously nipped, as if she had suddenly grown thinner; and her dark grey eyes wore an absent and absolutely indifferent expression. "It's pretty, and I should think it was healthy," continued the Griffin condescendingly, as if one of the most glorious views in Europe were being offered her "on approval." "I'm sick of London, and we may as well stay here for a time. I hate travelling, and I detest rushing about from one place to another, like a shop-girl or a cheap holiday. Yes; we shall remain here. I suppose you have no objection

"None whatever," said Cynthia dully. It mattered nothing to her where she went.

"That's all right, then," remarked her ladyship in a matter-of-fact way. "But I can't stand this hotel; there are too many bagmen in it; too much noise; and the whole place smells of tobacco, bad tobacco. I'm old-fashioned, I dare say, and I'm devoutly thankful that I am; but I can't stand living in herds and flocks, especially such herds and flocks as these," she added, nodding her old head contemptuously at some eminently respectable people in the beautiful garden below. "I noticed some quite nice houses—chalets, as they call them, I suppose—

on our drive yesterday ; some were to let furnished, and I shall take one and send for some of the servants ; we may as well be comfortable while we are here."

When the Griffin wanted anything, she wanted it at once, and generally got it ; for money is a magic wand ; and in less than a week they were settled in the largest and best appointed of the chalets, which was sufficiently removed from the haunts of objectionable tourists and where, surrounded by her servants, her ladyship found it possible to live in her accustomed way. Cynthia had a charming room with a large window opening on to the balcony, which ran along the front of the house, and afforded a view of the lake and Pilatus frowning above it. Next to Cynthia's rooms was a smaller one fitted up as a sitting-room ; it was furnished with a writing-desk, of the roll-top kind, at which Lady Westlake wrote her letters, and in which she kept the dispatch box which always accompanied her wherever she went

Beyond this small room were her ladyship's bed and dressing-rooms ; on the other side of Cynthia's, round the corner, so to speak, was Parsons', with a door between the two rooms, so that Parsons could come to her young mistress whenever Cynthia wanted her. Through that door Parsons often heard her mistress pacing up and down in the still watches of the night, causing the devoted maid much grief.

The days passed uneventfully ; Cynthia spent most of her time in her room or on the balcony ; she accompanied her aunt in her daily drives and appeared at every meal ; and she did not flaunt the willow ; but the salubrity of Lucerne, on which the Griffin had descanted with reason, did not appear to effect any improvement on Cynthia's health or spirits. She was not lugubrious, she did not sigh frequently and she certainly did not weep ;

but she was curiously still and quiet. To tell the truth, she was in a kind of coma; not even yet had she fully realised her great loss.

Sometimes she went out for a walk by herself, wandered by the side of the lake or explored the quaint, old-world town; but she moved like a person engrossed, absorbed in some dominant emotion, and it is to be feared that Lucerne spread its varied beauties before her in vain. One morning she was starting on one of these walks, and, as usual, went in search of Lady Westlake to tell her that she was going. She found the Griffin in the sitting-room; she was seated at the desk with the dispatch box open at her elbow and something that looked like a legal document before her. She held a copy of "The Times" in her hand, and was reading it; and, as Cynthia entered, the Griffin made a curious movement as if to conceal both the document on the desk and the newspaper.

The latter contained an account of Sir Anson's Frayne's death, and a hint, more than a hint, of the lamentable state of his affairs. She looked up as Cynthia stood in the doorway, and a natural red colour struggled to show itself through the layers of paint and powder as she crushed the newspaper in her hand and thrust it into an empty pigeon-hole of the desk.

"I am going for a walk, Aunt Gwen," said Cynthia, in the almost expressionless monotone which had now become habitual to her.

"Very well, my dear," said the Griffin. "If you are going into the town, you might get me some ribbon for my hat." Since her arrival at Lucerne, her ladyship had worn a huge hat of the mushroom description, which had excited the amazement of the inhabitants. "I'll give you the pattern."

She rose and took a step or two; but came back, locked up the document in her [dispatch box, and,

taking up "The Times," carried it away with her. With the pattern in her gloves, Cynthia went down to the town. She spoke French fluently, and was able to get the ribbon without difficulty, and then strolled along the walk which runs beside the Reuss, the river which runs out of the lake, and dully wondering why the former should always be green whatever the colour of the latter may be, she saw a young man approaching her.

There was something familiar about his figure which struck her; and, as he came nearer, she saw that it was Percy Standish. It could not be said that she was glad to see him; for there was no one on earth, excepting her father, whose presence could bring gladness to her; but she remembered Percy's kindness to her and Darrel, how he had endeavoured to help them, and she moved towards him with a shadow of a smile.

Percy approached her with a responsive smile and an expression of surprise.

"Why, Cynthia!" he exclaimed in well-modulated accents. "This is a surprise! I knew you were in Switzerland with Aunt Gwen; but I had no idea you were here! I hope you are well?" he added, rather gravely and with a touch of anxiety; for the colour had faded from Cynthia's face by this time, and it looked worn and drawn.

"I am quite well, Percy," she said. "What brings you here?"

"The beastliest train I have ever travelled by," he replied with a semi-humorous smile. "I had a month's holiday—I've been in for the Bar, you know—and I thought I would like to do Switzerland. So, you behold me. How is Aunt Gwen? Are you staying here?"

"We have taken a chalet on the hill," said Cynthia. "Did you not know that?"

"How should I?" he responded gravely.

"You must come up at once," said Cynthia.
 "Aunt Gwen will be glad to see you."

"I will go into the hotel," said Percy hesitatingly.

"Oh, but you must not," said Cynthia. "We have a spare room, too, at the chalet; I am sure there will be room for you."

They went up to the chalet. The Griffin was seated on a bench on the lawn, and she opened her black, keen eyes as she saw Cynthia's companion.

"Oh, it's you, Percy, is it?" she said not ungraciously; for Percy, whom she read as *early*, she would a book, amused her—for a time. I thought you wouldn't be long before you found us out. Well, you may as well stay, as you are here," she remarked, as Percy explained how he had come to Lucerne by chance. "You can keep Cynthia company and amuse her. We are living here almost incognita. What is the news from London?"

Percy retailed the latest news of the class to which they belonged, which, all-important to itself, was really of little consequence to the world at large.

"And how is Lord Northam?" inquired the Griffin. "Have you seen him lately?"

"I met him at a dinner-party two nights before I started," replied Percy. "He is quite well; just as usual. Lady Alicia was with him, and was most charming. Lord Northam is very busy; they are making some alterations at the camp; and he sticks to Aldershot."

The Griffin grunted. "Ridiculous!" she said. "What on earth is Lord Northam doing in a marching regiment? I should think he would find it much more amusing to—to travel and see things. If anything happened to his father he would have to leave the army. And the Duke is an old man. Yes; you can stay here—if Cynthia can put up with you," she added gruffly.

Percy murmured his thanks, and became a guest

at the chalet. He was a charming guest ; it seemed as if he knew by instinct when to present and when to efface himself. He accompanied the Griffin on her drives, he sometimes went with Cynthia on her walks ; not always, for frequently Cynthia liked to be alone. There were times when she longed for solitude, to be free to think of Darrel, to dwell upon her misery, which no time, no change of scene, could alleviate. Percy seemed to understand, and he never intruded upon her. In his soft and subtle way he became like a tame cat in the house ; he was always ready to play *écarté* with the Griffin, and equally as ready to lounge on the balcony with Cynthia, to take steamer trips on the lake, or to go down to the town with her. His manner to Cynthia was eloquent of unobtrusive sympathy ; and, though they never spoke of Darrel, he displayed a mute sympathy with her trouble.

"A very clever young man, Percy," remarked the Griffin one evening, with a cynical curve on her thin lips, to Cynthia, who was sitting on the balcony, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed on Pilatus, the huge mountain over which the setting sun was drawing a crimson veil. "Of course, he knew we were here and followed us ; but no one would guess it from his manner."

"He has been—he is very kind to me," said Cynthia absently.

"My dear, he would be very kind to any one if it suited his purpose. My good girl, you don't think he imposes on me ! I know these Standishes from root to branch ; he has some move in hand, you may depend on it. What it is, I don't know ; but it's there, it's there. I warned you against him some time ago. He was a boy then ; he is a man now, but he hasn't changed. He is 'devilish sly,' is Master Percy, as Dickens said of one of his characters."

Percy might be sly; but he hid his slyness with admirable art. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely; and the Griffin found him both useful and amusing. She sent him on errands, she made him write letters for her; he seemed to fill the part of general utility; and he played the part to perfection; he was always pleasant, good-tempered, amusing; and nothing, Cynthia's abstraction, the Griffin's sarcasm and cynicism, put him out. He moved about the house as if he belonged to it.

One evening he went into the sitting-room to ask Lady Westlake if they would like to take a steamer trip to Küsnach. There was no one in the room, and he stood and looked round him casually. The roll-top desk was open; Lady Westlake had been writing there; she had been called away suddenly, and the dispatch box, with the key in it, was standing on the writing-pad. He walked towards it and looked down at it in the same casual manner in which he had entered the room. He was turning away when a thought seemed to strike him.

He went to the door and closed it, and then returned to the desk. He was familiar with that dispatch case, worn by constant travel and use; he had often wondered what it contained. Here was an opportunity of informing himself. He stood quite still and listened; Cynthia was playing on the piano in the drawing-room below; Lady Westlake must be in her own room or in the garden. With a certain hesitation, reluctance—for even Percy paused before rifling the contents of another person's dispatch case—he unlocked the thing and examined its contents.

It appeared to contain nothing but letters and memoranda; but presently he found in one of its pockets a legal-looking document. With a glance around him, as if he feared detection, he took out the document and opened it. He at once saw the im-

portance of the thing. It was Lady Westlake's will. With a heightened colour, a gleam of intense curiosity, of more than curiosity, in his eyes, he carried the paper to the window and read it.

It began in the usual way; there were bequests to executors, friends, and servants. Only small sums were involved. Then, with a furious beating of the heart and a pallor replacing the flush of shame, he came to the all-important clause which disposed of the residue, the major part of Lady Westlake's immense fortune. He read—

"I leave the remainder of all moneys, land or whatever I am possessed of, to my——"

Then followed a blank; there was also a blank left for the name of the person to whom this vast sum of money was left. Lady Westlake had obviously not decided upon the person who should receive this tremendous fortune. She had evidently had the will prepared in this fashion so that she might fill in the relationship and the name as she pleased. For instance, she might write in the blank spaces "to my nephew, Percy Standish," or "to my niece, Cynthia Drayle."

Percy stood as if he were turned to stone. Two, three words would make him one of the richest men in England. Or they would make Cynthia one of the wealthiest of women. The blood came and went in his face, his eyes grew wolfish, the parchment shook in his hand. He heard a step in the corridor; he sprang to the desk and placed the incomplete will in the dispatch case; then he sauntered on to the balcony and lit a cigarette. The step was Cynthia's.

"Will you come for a walk, Percy?" she asked. "But you look tired——"

"I'm not in the least tired," he said, in his soft voice and with his amiable smile. "Let us go, by all means."

CHAPTER XXI

A LITTLE WAR

"THANK goodness, that's the last of you for to-day!" exclaimed Darrel fervently, as he peered reproachfully at the red ball of fire which was disappearing behind the peak of one of the hills that towered above the Dighru Pass.

"Yes; he's done his work for to-day," remarked the young fellow who trudged at his side; "and a very good day's work he has put in! He's reduced half the men to pulp, and exasperated the other half to such an extent that a battalion of bears with sore heads would seem amiable in comparison with the Rexford Fusiliers. Did you ever notice, Frayne, that the men always grouse in fine weather? Give 'em a good drenching rain that keeps them wet to the skin, and every mother's son of 'em is as cheerful as a bullfinch in a cherry orchard. I'm told it was the same thing in South Africa, where the sun doesn't scorch and burn and sweat the soul of you as it does here. How do you account for it?"

"I don't know," said Darrel, with his grave smile. "Perhaps it's because all our men are Irish, and, like ducks and Devonshire men, they enjoy getting wet. Besides, it's soothing and stimulating—if you don't get too much of it. I've known our men at home work in their shirt-sleeves in a regular down-pour, and if you remark that it's raining and suggest that they should get under shelter, or at least put their coats on, they look up at the sky and round about them as if they had not been aware that it was

a replica of the Deluge, until you mentioned it. We don't think anything of getting wet at home——” He stopped at the word, and the smile faded from his face and left it grim and reflective. “But it's only the sun and the heat our men complain of,” he added after a pause; “though, heaven knows, there are plenty of other things to grumble at.”

“I know,” assented Dunton with a nod. “When I was a kid—and much later, by George!—I used to get thrills out of the stories of the big battles, the charges, the forlorn hopes, and all the rest of it; but I know better than to thrill at them now. This is what I call pluck, the genuine see-that-you-get-it-pluck.” He scowled up at the hills with a resentful and a reproachful eye. “To tramp with sore feet through an open tunnel with rocky mountains miles high on each side, and every rock a possible ambush for some beggar of a Pathan who lolls on his stomach and snipes at you in a lazy way—and gets you three times out of five! It will give fifty up to any charge, from the Balaclava one downwards.”

Darrel nodded and frowned. The Rexford Fusiliers certainly had been having a trying time of it for some days past; and not one of the men had felt it more than the officers who commanded them. In the most favourable circumstances the expedition could not be regarded as a picnic, and no one would choose an Afghan pass for a pleasant promenade; indeed, the march had been very like that through a valley of the shadow of death; a march on which every man carried his life in his hands, or, rather, held it at the chance of a shot. Death, when it is visible and comes out to meet you in the open, can be, very often is, faced with a cheerful countenance and a resolute heart; but the death that lurks behind a rock, that darts out suddenly with a little puff of smoke, one sharp ping of a Mauser bullet, threatens to become a hideous, nerve-destroying terror.

Every possible precaution was taken, the scouting was excellent; but they were fighting in a land where every native is a born scout, where such a war as this is regarded as a glorious and amusing game, where your foe would rather fight than eat or drink, or make love, and where men snipe at an enemy as nonchalantly as a Swiss shoots at a target in a rifle gallery for nuts or brass brooches. All day, and not seldom at night, men dropped before their officers' eyes under the deadly firing of the hill-men. And not the men only. Promotion amongst the officers had been rapid, though the horrible little game had been running so short a time. Darrel was captain now; but the joy that should have been his at getting his company was marred and embittered by the thought of the dear, good, gallant friend into whose place he had stepped, and who had died in Darrel's arms, gasping with a smile, "Jolly good aim, Frayne! The beggars can shoot! —You've got your company!"

Every now and then the Colonel, who loved his men, and who suffered almost the agonies of a parent as they dropped, sometimes under his very eyes, ordered a charge in the attempt to avenge them; but long before the men, eager as hounds unleashed, could reach the rocks from whence the shots had come, their hidden, sinister foes had stolen away, and, gaining some higher and still less accessible spots, had got in a last shot or two before disappearing altogether. Sometimes a solitary Afridi was run down, and would pay over the stakes quite cheerfully, but there could be no doubt that at present the Afridis were getting all the innings.

The expedition was making for a fort which had been seized and held by the Afridis, and, as a man dying of thirst in a desert longs for water, as the Arctic explorer longs for the warmth of a London pavement in August, so the Rexfords longed for a

sight of that rough and rude fort, stuck up on the hill-side, and the foe that held it.

"We ought to make it in a couple of days," said Dunton wistfully, and more to himself than to Darrel. "It's the one thing I'm on the stretch for. Give me an hour or two's hand-to-hand scuffle with these genry, no questions asked and no quarter given, and I shall feel that I have not lived in vain, as the old goody book prefaces used to say. All I'm dreading, Frayne, is that they'll clear out of it and bolt like rabbits, as they've been doing all along, before we get to them."

Darrel shook his head. "They won't do that," he said quietly. "They'll give us a fair fight there. They're looking forward to it as much as we are."

"That's so," assented Dunton with a grin. "This is their regular prelude, I know; a kind of pleasant little overture before the opera begins; but it's been a pretty long one, and the men, to say nothing of ourselves, are getting a bit sick of it. If we'd only foreseen, been prepared, and got a bigger force in hand——"

"It is difficult to foresee this kind of trouble," Darrel broke in quietly but quickly. There was no reproof or rebuke in his tone; but Dunton took the hint and colouring said, as quietly as Darrel had spoken—

"Of course. I wasn't grousing. The fewer the merrier, so far as I am concerned; and the men think the same, I'll bet."

As he spoke, his hand went up to the salute; the Colonel had ridden up, his small, wiry figure erect, his mouth half-hidden by the grizzled moustache, grave, yet with a cheerful expression which shone in his cool, grey eyes. He glanced at the two young fellows, reined in his horse and beckoned Darrel. Darrel, attempting to hide a limp, went forward all alert and eager.

"Feet bad, Frayne?" said the old man.

"Not at all, sir!" replied Darrel promptly, and with an admirable air of respectful surprise.

A shadow of a smile crossed the thin, bony face, yellow save for a red scar down one cheek.

"Sorry. Thought I saw you limp; my mistake. We shall camp on the next long stretch. The hills are pretty clear; the hillsmen are making for the fort, where they'll join the others and show fight, I hope. Tell the men to get all the rest they can; you'll have to call on them to-morrow for a long march. I want to attack at dawn the next day, if possible. Get the doctor to look at your feet, Frayne——"

"There's really no need to trouble him, sir," rose to Darrel's lips, but he checked himself and saluted; for it was an order, and obedience is the first and last virtue in a soldier; but as he saluted he wondered whether, if he got his shrunken boots off, he would ever get them on again.

Darkness falls rapidly in such a defile as that through which the expedition were marching; but before it had closed down upon the valley the camp was made—there were no tents to offer a mark to the wily foe—and an hour or two later the doctor was examining Darrel's feet.

"Pretty bad," he said. "Let your man wash them and rub on this stuff. When we reach the point of fighting with automatic figures of metal and whalebone and the rest of it, instead of men, they'll make the feet of the machine of the very best steel. It's the part of your blessed bodies that gives me more trouble than any other. Some one, Wellington—or was it Napoleon?—said that an army marches on its stomach. That's just one of those smart sayings that make me mad. You might fill a man up to his back teeth with beef and beer; but if he's got sore feet he's done for. Epigrams are all very

well for literary chaps who get their living by firing them off; but they're out of place in a general.—Rub it in well and use plenty of it; first-rate stuff.”

“It smells bad enough,” remarked Darrel with a smile.

“It's the smell that half does it,” retorted the doctor with a grin. “Hullo, how's your *poor* feet?” he demanded of Dunton, who came up to them at that moment.

“Oh, first-rate!” replied that youth with prompt and cheerful mendacity.

“Humph! you'll follow the same prescription, my gentle youth. There's enough of the stuff for both of you.—What's that?” he asked sharply, as his eye caught a red mark just below the calf which Darrel's native servant, Lal Sef, had exposed. “Shot? Cut? Let me see.”

“Oh, go away!” exclaimed Darrel with nearly real impatience. “It's been there since I was a kid. Got it fooling with an axe.”

Dunton grinned. “Had you there, Doc!” he remarked gloatingly.

The doctor grunted good-humouredly, and Darrel pulled down his trousers over the scar; for the sight of it awoke too many memories. It was in Cynthia's company that he had stolen the axe the woodmen had left while they went to dinner, and it was to show off before her that he had attempted to fell a small tree and had gone near to felling himself. How long ago it seemed, and yet how plainly he saw the boy and girl—the girl who had at first watched him with scoffs and jeers, which had given place to grief and terror when the axe had slipped and the blood had run!

“It must have been a pretty bad cut,” remarked Dunton casually. “Wonderful how long a scar lasts, and how plainly it shows. You'll carry that as long as you carry anything, Frayne, you bet.

It will stick closer than a brother and prove more faithful than a woman——”

Darrel's brows knit and his lips drew straight.

“That will do,” he said to Lal Sef curtly. “Take the rest of it to Mr. Dunton's man. And for heaven's sake get me some water—not much of it,” he added quickly; for water was not too plentiful; and he thought of the men who needed it more than he did.

An hour later he was going the rounds. Cheerfulness reigned over all the camp, notwithstanding the occasional ping of a Mauser on the hills; Mr. Thomas Atkins was reclining in various easy positions, with the song and the story which are as necessary as bread and meat, beer, and tobacco, to your soldier; and Darrel rolled himself in his blanket to seek the repose which a day's march over a rocky pass under a molten copper sun and the sniping of the crafty Pathan had earned for him.

But, dog-tired as he was, he found it difficult to sleep. The memories started into life by the reference to the scar haunted him, and when he closed his eyes it was to see a mental vision of the girl kneeling beside him, the tears half blinding her as she made a childish and ineffectual attempt to staunch the wound. They dropped on his foot and felt hot, he remembered; he could feel again the touch of her quivering little hands on his bare leg, could hear her sobbing breath——

He lay and cursed the precious gift of memory, and prayed for forgetfulness, as he had prayed—how often? Not one word of Cynthia had he heard since the night—his last night in England—he had dined with the Northams. And that was months ago. He counted them up, and they seemed ages. Had she become engaged to Northam? Perhaps they were married—it was quite possible: Lady Gwen would know how to apply the pressure, the

daily, hourly, insidious pressure which wears down opposition, as the continual dropping of water wears away a stone. Yes; perhaps she was married! —Oh, he wouldn't think of her; he would not! He'd got something better to think of; there was the fort, the fight a couple of days ahead. Let him think of that, let him dwell upon the men, the comrades he had lost, the dear good fellows whom, as they lay in the quiet and peace of Death, he had sometimes envied. He didn't want to die before they got to the fort, to close quarters with the enemy. He strongly objected to being sniped by a dirty savage behind a rock; but if he could have the luck to end the game of life in a hand-to-hand fight——

With a hot flush of shame—for a soldier's life belongs not to himself, but to his King and country—he drove his ignoble longing from him and at last fell asleep

CHAPTER XXII

MISSING

It may be easy for a well-seasoned soldier, a toughened veteran, to sleep soundly in any circumstances—is there not a story of Suvaroff, the great Russian general, who, when awakened and told that the attack by the foe had commenced, turned over and, with a yawn, requested that he might be called when a certain regiment in the forefront of the battle had gained a given point?—but Darrel was young and his nerves highly strung, and he could not forget the stealthy foe surrounding him.

He woke in a couple of hours and lay for a time on his back, looking up at the wonderful sky: a cobalt blue, in which the stars shone like burnished silver; then he got out of his blanket and noiselessly went round about his men, most of whom were sleeping like infants from whose lips the feeding bottle had just dropped. No lights nor fires had been lit; for even the striking of a match might serve as a mark for the man behind the rock. For the same reason every glittering object, a sword, the epaulettes of the officers, were either set aside or concealed.

The expeditionary force was, in accordance with the latest idea, a dull, yellowish drab body whose colour, or lack of colour, was fused into that of the hills. Not long since we marched to a certain battle with flags flying and bands playing, while our foe picked us off from the top of the hill we were attacking; but we have learned by costly experience

that this spectacular display is more suitable for the Ninth of November, for the Lord Mayor's Show, than for modern warfare.

Darrel seated himself behind a rock and sucked at his unlit pipe, wrapt in a silence broken only by the occasional complaint of a camel suffering, like himself, from insomnia; and presently another form crept up to him. It was Dunton, as wide awake as Darrel; and he, too, was sucking at a precious briar.

"I saw you get up," he said in a whisper, as if he were under the spell of the silence. "I thought I was tired enough, when I lay down, to sleep through a regular bombardment, but it was no go. How the men snore! And why shouldn't they? They haven't anything on what they call their minds; they've only got to do what they're told, and so where they're ordered."

"And they do it," said Darrel.

"Rather! I say, have you any idea how many of those gentry we have to tackle?"

Darrel thought a moment. "Difficult to say," he replied. "I think it must be between six and seven hundred. Some of them are spread around on the hills keeping pace with us; and, of course, there are others in and about the fort. The fellows who, on the hills above there, have been hanging on to us will do so until we reach the fort."

"And we're, all told——? Let's see. There's four hundred of the Rexfords; there's the battalion of the Native Infantry, four hundred; half a company of miners and sappers, forty; and the two Mountain Batteries, say, eight hundred. And the transports—but you can't count them in as fighters. Pretty even, as far as numbers go; but the Afridis will have the pull, or will have until we come to close quarters; for they can, and do, thin us out as 'we go marching along.'"

"Yes; I suppose we're not so strong as we should be," said Darrel; "but we shall worry through all right."

"Some of us," said Dunton with a grin. "I wonder whether any of the arm-chair strategists and Club warriors, who've never smelt powder, have any idea of the seriousness of these little Frontier scraps? They think they know, because some Johnnie, who generally mugs up his information from a book, writes about it as if he had been there all the time. That's a ball from a Schneider," he broke off, as something went "bleurr" and a splinter flew from a rock near them. "I've learned the different sounds. The Schneider has its 'bleurr, bleurr,' the Martini-Henry its 'crack, click,' and the Mauser its 'tack, tick.'"

"They make very good Mausers in Cabul," remarked Darrel a trifle cynically. "We taught 'em. And the native gunsmith—they call him a 'musti'—can turn out a very good imitation of a small bore rifle; its only fault being that the bore is generally too small, and gets choked pretty soon; so if he can't buy, borrow, or steal a Mauser from Cabul he prefers a Martini-Henry or a Schneider."

Dunton glanced at the serious face beside him.

"You seem to have picked up a great deal of information, Frayne," he remarked.

Darrel shrugged his shoulders. "My man, Lal Sef, talks sometimes," he said, "and I've a decent memory."

"Lal and you are rather pals, aren't you?" said Dunton. "He appears to be devoted to you."

"Lal's a good sort. I happened to be of some use to him a little while back——"

"I know, I heard," said Dunton. "You got a daughter of his out of a tight place. I heard him telling my man about it. Saved the girl from a double-dyed scoundrel of the Adelphi type, and got her safely married to her own fancy man."

"Yes, she's married all right," said Darrel in a tone which closed the subject.

"These chaps never forget a benefit or an injury; I'll say that for them," remarked Dunton. "They can be grateful as well as cruel—and, by George! they can be the latter. Potts, of the sappers, who has played this game before, says that when the fighting is over the women come out with carefully sharpened knives and—— But it isn't a very cheerful subject; it doesn't seem to chime in with this peaceful scene. And it is peaceful, isn't it? If it weren't for those ugly nine-pounders these blessed mules have been squealing under all day, you'd fancy this was a scene in a pastoral play."

He moved as if he were going away, but paused, and, looking away from the motionless figure beside him, said awkwardly—

"I say, Frayne, we—you or I—one of us may not come through this."

"The odds are even," said Frayne absently.

"That's about it," assented Dunton. "I suppose you've written home?"

"No," replied Darrel rather curtly.

Dunton coloured under his tan. "Oh, I didn't know; thought perhaps we might exchange messages, don't you know." As he spoke he fingered a piece of paper folded like an envelope. "I've got a little screed here that I should be glad for my mother to get if I don't come up to the roll call——"

Darrel held out his hand without a word, and without a word Dunton slipped the paper into it. Then he waited; but Darrel, having put the message in his pocket, made no sign.

"Want a pencil, piece of paper?" asked Dunton suggestively.

Darrel shook his head; but suddenly his lips drew straight and he frowned reflectively. The wedding ring he had bought the night he had parted

from Cynthia lay snugly in a corner of one of his pockets. If he fell—well, it would not be pleasant to think that the thing would adorn the blood-stained finger of an Afridi woman.

He took it out, accepted a sheet of paper from Dunton, folded the ring, and addressed the tiny packet to Cynthia. He gave it to Dunton with an apologetic laugh that sounded rather grim.

"Both messages to be returned if we come through all right, of course," he said.

"Of course," assented Dunton, also with a laugh; for he was just a little ashamed of this exchange of farewell messages. "The dear old mater" would like to have a last word——"

Darrel rose and almost stretched out his hand to recover the ring. Why should he harrow Cynthia with the gruesome token? But Dunton had stolen away, and Darrel did not call him back.

Darrel returned to his blanket and got another sleep. He was awakened by the stir of the camp. In the shimmer of the heat rising from the ground the various objects moved like figures in a dissolving view. The camels sighed and groaned as they were loaded up with the dry fodder and long water tins; the mules kicked and whinnied as the leather skins, also containing the precious fluid, were adjusted to their sleek sides, or the nine-pounders were strapped across their backs. The expeditionary force was about to start for the long day's march, to toil in the heat, to offer a mark to the half-naked gentlemen behind the rocks on the hills above; but every man bore himself cheerfully, for on the morrow—just before dawn, so it was rumoured—they would cease to be targets for the unseen Afridi marksman, and would—oh, happy reflection!—come to close quarters with him.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FIGHT

THE men were cheerful and patient, though the sniping was very frequent, and now and again a man fell to rise no more or was carried off to be patched up by the doctor. Darrel's feet were better, as Lal Sef remarked with profound satisfaction. Darrel looked at the man as he held one of the sore members in his hand.

"You will meet some of your friends to-morrow, Lal," he said.

Lal turned up his dark eyes to his master and made a little gesture which indicated assent and dissent.

"Some, sahib," he said, "and some not. Friends to-day, foes to-morrow. It no matter. It all the same."

"Yes, I really think it is," said Darrel almost to himself. "It's the game, the spree, eh? It's a kind of cricket match, Lal?"

"I've seen the cricket," said Lal. "Yes; it's the same. The hillmen get tired if there no fighting, same as the Tommy if there no cricket. That is right, sahib. And the women—do not the mem sahibs like the fighting, the sports, sahib? The great mem sahib that died"—he meant Queen Victoria—"she like it? And the great sahib, her son, he too? The white men always in good temper when the word comes that the tribes are moving."

"I believe you're not far wrong, Lal," admitted

THE FIGHT

Darrel "It's human nature all round, I suppose; and there's not much to choose between us; most of the time we're spoiling for a fight."

As the sun went down and the hills were clothed in the purple light which would presently melt into an exquisite violet, the sniping, which had gradually grown less persistent, ceased altogether; an indication that the enemy had gone on, to gather round the fort.

The Colonel had decided to attack at the dawn which would creep above the eastern hill about three o'clock; and Darrel, with a sense of relief, with a kind of excitement in every vein, rolled himself in his blanket and found sleep. There was no fear of a night attack by the enemy; for the scouts were out, and they had signalled by heliograph that the Afridis had left the hills—had, indeed, disappeared.

It was a short sleep; for at one o'clock the English force was moving, quietly, stealthily in the dark, and as the welcome dawn broke through the darkness they saw the fort. It formed a square with a tower at each corner, and, unlike the forts in the North-West, which are built of sand bricks, was of solid stone.

At sight of this objective of their march the men would have liked to cheer as of old, but in something like silence they formed up, the infantry to the front, the battery at the rear. Not a foe could be seen; but they were there right enough, behind the wicked little loopholes with which the towers and the upper parts of the walls of the quadrangle were pierced, the main body being hidden behind the adjacent rocks. The nine-pounders came into action first, and one would have given the fort a fair five minutes; but your nine-pounder is a difficult animal to manage, and his aim is not particularly good. The infantry waited with impatient patience while the battery pounded away, apparently with little

effect; but presently the eagerly longed for order came, and the dash was made.

It was close quarters now, and the men were enjoying themselves hugely. It was difficult, well-nigh impossible to hold them in hand, for they were thirsting to get even with the gentry for whom they had served as targets for so many almost intolerable days. The nine-pounders still poured their shrapnel on or about the fort, the Lee-Metfords barked continuously, and the Schneiders and the Martini-Henrys of the foe bleurred and clicked in a responsive chorus.

Darrel, as he pressed on with his men, felt the blood move in him as it had never moved before. He was conscious of only one desire, a hungry, savage longing which seemed to have been with him all his life; and all the hideous noises around and above him joined in one shrieking, ear-splitting music to the words, "Get on, get on! Oh, get on!"

Every now and then one of his men would throw up his arms and pitch forward on his face or fall on his back, as if some one had pushed him playfully; a camel would scream in its death agony; a mule rear and topple over, its heels with their last kick scattering the sand and the stones. Strangely enough, Darrel felt no fear now; that had come, not once or twice only, on the march, when a bullet, passing so close that he could feel the wind of it on his face, sped past him to spatter on the rock behind him. There was no fear now, nothing but the intense longing to grip one of the murderous, bloodthirsty Pathans by the throat and fight him inch by inch.

And the game was well played, played for all it was worth, by both sides. If Tommy was enjoying himself, so also was the half-clad hillman, to whom this scrimmage was a kind of test match; for he

knew—was there any of our movements that he did not know?—that behind him were moving two other contingents of the expeditionary force, marching down on him as flies walk down the horns of a cow to meet a third on the forehead. To escape the foes creeping upon their flank and rear, the Afridis knew they must destroy or cut their way through the force before them.

And the British were creeping closer, though the Schneiders and the Martini-Henrys, the small bores made by the clever village "musti," bleurred and clicked and tacked without intermission. The Afridi commander knew it well. He gave the signal, and from the hills on either side of the fort poured the wild, half-clad mob, longing for the fight, thirsting for blood.

With a leap of his heart Darrel saw the living torrent sweeping down upon them; the moment he was longing for had come at last.

With an uplifted arm he waved his men forward to meet the onslaught. He had but to dispose of this rabble, and the "Get on, get on!" which the shrapnel shrieked would be obeyed, and he would be inside those four grim walls. His men—perhaps they too heard the "music" of the song?—responded to his signal with a hoarse, grating cheer, the cheer which means "Kill, kill!" and rushed forward to stem the torrent.

For one delirious minute, a minute worth living for, they were face to face, hand to hand, with their foe. The Afridis fought as they have always fought, will always fight—no quarter asked or given—but the Rexfords—ah, but this is no time to sing the praises of one battalion when all were fighting as if life were nothing and death a bagatelle. Let me remind the reader that the Rexfords were Irish, that not even the men against whom they played this hideous game of blood were braver or had a keener

passion for the sport, and let that remark serve for all analysis and futile attempts at description. Nothing, not even a Pathan, who sucks the love of battle at his mother's breast, could stand against the courage, the discipline, the dogged, the stubborn, the half-mad persistence of Irishmen when their blood is up and their nostrils are distended with the scent of blood.

Slowly, at first even insensibly, the Afridis gave way. Inch by inch, taking the men where and how they could, firing, stabbing with their razor-like knives, their hands wrenching the lives from their foes' throats, they gave way.

Half-mad, like the foe, the Irishmen pressed on. Suddenly, so suddenly that they seemed to drop from the sky or spring from the outraged earth, a second body of Afridis reinforced that engaged with the Rexfords. The Colonel, who was apparently watching the affair with the calmness of a man who had by accident dropped in at a football match between two first-class teams, issued an order, and a company of the Scottish Rifles sprang forward to support the Irishmen. Scots and Irish! Not even a Pathan can stand against them. Shoulder to shoulder the Celts plunged at the foe, and the foe gave.

Darrel, with a sharp pain in his shoulder, a sharp taste in his throat like that which comes from acute indigestion, felt the enemy give. In a few short moments he would gain his heart's desire, he would be inside that fort, hand to hand with the unseen foe who had been dealing death to his men, his men whom he knew, man by man, whom he loved as a hen loves her chicks.

A voice sounded in his ear. It was the Colonel's. "Take your men up that right hill, Frayne. They're too strong for us there."

Darrel caught his breath. It was the fort he

wanted, not the hill—Well, so be it! He gave the order hoarsely from his parched throat, and his men obeyed like machines. They had to meet a strong force; for the Afridis had held themselves in reserve for this attack on the flank of the foe.

It seemed to Darrel, if he thought at all, if he were conscious of self and the emotions that move it, that it was hours, days, before he came in touch with the howling, cheerfully howling, mass that moved down upon him; but in truth it was only a few minutes before he and his men met them and took grip of them.

There is no deadlier, no fiercer foe than your Afridi with his stocking-cap, his shirt-like tunic, his bare and way-worn feet, when he is at close quarters. Darrel took the first man that came to hand, and fought as men fight for life, for home, for the women they love. As he dug and thrust, there moved in his mind the memory of the men who had fallen by his side during that awful march, in which they had dropped like rabbits in a Devonshire field. It was not vengeance he craved, but just to be even with the stealthy foe who had held them at its mercy during all those hideous days. He felt as if he possessed the strength of a demoniac; for the stories Dunton, and others more experienced, had told him of the fiendish cruelties of the Afridis surged through his veins. These men he was fighting had broken their promises, their vows; fighting was a game, a pastime for them. So be it. They should have the rigour of the game.

He killed his man and turned to receive the next. There seemed no end of them; no limit to their courage, no satiating of their thirst for blood. His new foe held him by the throat. He looked into the man's distended, bloodshot eyes; he could feel the murderous knife touching his side as his foe essayed to strike. Suddenly the man's knife fell,

he gurgled, spluttered in his throat, and fell back. He had been struck by a bullet.

Darrel shook him off and looked round. An Afridi sprang at him; but as Darrel met him he felt something—it was not like that of a weighty object, but quite a slight kind of blow—strike him in the chest. For a moment it scarcely caused him any inconvenience, but suddenly he felt faint; a kind of nausea seized him; he was conscious of a desire to retch, to be sick; his legs gave way, and he pitched head foremost upon his foe. The Afridi struck with his knife, then pushed him aside carelessly, indifferently, and darted on to his next quarry.

Darrel lay where he had fallen; the tide of battle swept over and past him. He lay stretched out like one dead, with quite a peaceful expression, but for a faint frown, on his face. The stifling, choking heat of the day—and can any one adequately describe the heat of an autumn day on an Afghan hill?—the day itself passed; the purple eve, sliding into violet, fell on hill and plain.

As the moon rose he came to, became conscious of an overmastering fact—that he was thirsty, so thirsty that he would give the life that had returned to him for one long swig of water. He was as stiff as if he had been playing football for six days running; there was a pain in his chest which caught him every time he breathed; there was also a humming and buzzing in his head as if he had loaned it out as a hive for a swarm of bees. Also, to particularise, his mouth was full of blood, and his eyes burnt as if scorched in a furnace.

With a tremendous effort he cast the burning eyes to left and right of him, and he saw, with a pang that dully smote across his apathy, some of his men stretched out beside him. He closed his eyes, but presently he felt, rather than saw, that something was moving near him, something that glided stealthily,

mysteriously. He watched it through his half-closed lids.

It was an Afridi woman with a sharp knife in her hand. He saw her bend over a man within ten yards of him. Up went the knife ; there was a sob, a gulp, from the body the knife had struck, a quiver of the helpless frame, and then stillness. The human fiend, with gleaming eyes, approached him. Darrel was powerless to move, to utter a sound, even a whimper. She bent over him, knife upraised. It flashed down in the direction of his heart. He could almost feel the needle-like point of the cold steel, could feel his side wince from the impending thrust ; but the poor woman was tired, her aim was uncertain. The knife pierced his side, clear of his heart. He felt her hand moving about him after the loot to which she, no doubt, felt herself entitled ; then he fell into a swoon, so like death that the Afridi woman spurned him with her foot and passed on.

When he awoke from his dream of blood-tinged death his eyes met the stone wall of a sangar, a kind of wall built out from the hill, and pierced by loop-holes. He stared at this for some minutes, then dragged his eyes down, and, by a tremendous effort, brought them to bear to the side of him. And, to his dull amazement, they met the dark, fierce, yet contemplative eyes of a woman who was sitting on her hams and watching him.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CHANCE OF LIFE

DARREL'S intelligence came back more slowly than his sight, and for a minute or two he stared vacantly at the motionless woman sitting beside him; he tried to move, to sit up, but he could not stir an inch, and he shut his eyes again and feverishly hoped that she would be quick about her gruesome business and put him out of his misery at once.

There was a sharp, stinging pain in his shoulder, and as sharp an aching in every inch of his body; he would have liked to have groaned, but he was reluctant to offer her the satisfaction which he knew any complaint on his part would afford her, and he set his teeth hard and crushed back the desire. Presently the silence, which was growing well nigh intolerable, was broken by the sounds of desultory firing and shouting; but they came from a distance and soon ceased, and he concluded that the fight must be over or had drifted up the Pass.

Suddenly he felt a hand upon his forehead, and, with a shudder, he prepared himself for the knife. He tried to think of the few words of the Afridi language he knew, so that he might beg her to hasten his dispatch, but as he opened his lips her hand glided down on them warningly.

The nullah, or depression in the hill-side, in which he lay was almost hidden by a sangar, a rough wall built of stone, which had served to conceal an Afghan marksman, but he caught a glimpse of a woman,

similar to the one beside him, moving on the hill, caught the gleam of a knife and heard a muffled cry of agony, and knew that other women were out and still at their sanguinary work. The figure passed, the silencing hand left his lips, and he said feebly—

“ Kill ! quickly ! ”

A faint smile crossed the swarthy face above him, and the long, coffee-coloured hands began to unbutton his khaki tunic.

“ Ought to know where my heart is,” he thought ; “ but she understood, and is going to make sure the first stab.”

He closed his eyes again ; but opened them quickly as he felt something cold and damp strike the wound, which felt like a spot of raging fire. Was she washing it ? Not only washing it, but bandaging it, it appeared. She did it neatly—your hill-women have plenty of practice at rough surgery,—gave him a drink from the water-bottle and, rising, made a sign to him to be silent, and stole stealthily into the open.

Puzzled, afraid to hope, lest this should be merely a respite, he lay motionless and waited. She came back presently, as stealthily as she had gone, examined his bandage, and went over him with her supple hands. Then she nodded as if satisfied ; and, taking from the folds of her robe the remains of a chapati, which is nothing more nor less than the familiar pancake, made thick, held it to him invitingly ; and though he was far from feeling hungry, he thought it wise to accept her hospitality.

She nodded again and squatted down beside him with an air that was not at all a bad imitation of that of a civilised nurse. There was silence for a while ; for he felt reluctant to again exhort her to a merciful dispatch after her seeming kindness ; then suddenly, in a low voice, she said in Hindustani, with a display of glittering teeth—

“ You no know me, sahib ? ”

Darrel almost started, and he stared at her in a bewildered fashion. The sound of the Hindustani was grateful to his ears; for he knew enough of the language to understand her and to make himself understood.

"No!" he replied, and he peered at her in the dim light of the nullah. "Who are you? You are a hill-woman, an Afghan? But you speak the language of the plains. What are you going to do with me? Why do you tend my wound and feed me? Who are you?"

"I am Lal Sef's daughter, sahib," she replied quietly, but with a gleam of her teeth and eyes. "I am the wife of Abdurmahn, to whom the sahib gave me."

"What!" exclaimed Darrel. "Lal Sef's daughter!—Turn to the light! Yes, it is! I remember now. And you have saved me, Khasti; I remember your name now! It is Khasti, isn't it? How—how did you manage it? The fight—how has it gone with it? Have we won—or lost?"

"The sahibs have won," she said simply and with a kind of dignity. "They have the fort. The hill-men have flown, scattered. The women, too; they are all gone; the one you saw, sahib, was the last of them; she saw the man outside and risked her life to reach him and kill him. My people have gone to the hills, and your people are following them."

"Thank God!" murmured Darrel. "We've won—! I beg your pardon, Khasti; I—I was forgetting; you belong to the other side. Your husband—is he alive?"

She nodded and touched her forehead, with a gesture of thanksgiving.

"He is alive," she said. "It was he who found you. He carried you here, where I was waiting." Darrel shuddered; he knew what she had been waiting for; the long knife shone dully in the dull

light. "He knew you—how should he forget, sahib?—and he bade me watch and care for you. He has gone with the rest; but he will return, if it is possible."

She spoke slowly, repeating, simplifying the words she saw that he did not understand; and while she spoke she took off his boots, and washed the wound on one of his feet caused by a spent bullet.

"What luck!" he murmured.

She opened her eyes and shut them twice.

"It is fate, sahib," she said quietly. "Allah has helped us to pay our debt."

"You're right, Khasti," responded Darrel gravely and with self-reproach. "It's the mercy of Providence. Am I much hurt? Can I go back to the fort, to my people, soon?"

She was silent a moment; then she shook her head regretfully.

"No, sahib; you cannot go back," she said reluctantly.

"But——?" urged Darrel eagerly.

"Not all my people have gone," she explained; "some are watching on the hills. They would know that Abdurmahn had saved you, and——"

"Of course! What a selfish beast I am!" muttered Darrel. "His life—yours, Khasti—would not be worth a moment's purchase if they knew you had saved, succoured me. Oh, I know! But can you send a message?"

She shook her head again. "There are watchers," she said.

Darrel stifled a sigh. "My people will think me dead," he said, rather to himself than to her.

"It is better than being dead, sahib," she reminded him.

"You're right, Khasti!" he responded emphatically; for, strange to stay, he no longer wished for Death. He had been so near to it as to have acquired

a wholesome dislike of it. "What do you mean to do? I see you have set your mind on saving me."

"The sahib will remain here till Abdurmahn comes to us. He will know the rest; it is in his hands. But the sahib must not talk any more or he will get the fever. The wound is a good one, good and clean; the bullet—I will take it out when the sahib pleases——"

"Now, now, please!" said Darrel quickly.

She put her hand on his brow—her primitive way of taking his temperature—then she drew out the knife—Darrel was doomed to feel it after all!—and, with a deftness acquired by a lifelong practice, probed for the bullet, found it and extracted it. Darrel fainted during the operation, and, when he came to, he saw Khasti, calm and unmoved, sitting beside him, her hands crossed in her lap, her eyes fixed on his.

"I'm sorry," he said apologetically; for he knew that one of her hillmen would have borne the torture unmoved and in full consciousness.

She held up the bullet, then slipped it into the receptacle that served her for a pocket.

"The sahib will soon get well. He will sleep now," she said, as she took off the thick blanket-like robe in which she was enveloped and arranged it over him.

Darrel tried to remonstrate, to push it from him; but the exhaustion that follows hard upon extreme pain got hold of him, his eyes closed, and he fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, he found himself alone; the marvellous dawn, that daily miracle in every land, was stealing down from the hills and pouring a yellow light into the nullah. His wound was painful, he felt as stiff as if he had been engaged in a Rugby footer; and he was consumed by thirst. It was some time before he was able to think. Here he lay

helpless—no, not helpless; that were ingratitude—but unable of himself to move; and here he must remain—how long? His fellows would deem him dead; for the hill-women show no mercy to the wounded, and his case was an exceptional one, one of a strange coincidence.

He would be reported as dead. Dunton, if he were alive, would take the ring— He turned over on his side, and his hands clenched. What a sentimental fool he had been to give Dunton that ring! But there might still be an opportunity for him to get it back. He thought of Cynthia—she was doubtless asleep at this moment— Ah, what folly it was to think of her, to dwell upon his hopeless love!

A shadow darkened the entrance to the nullah, and Khasti bent over him.

“Is it well with the sahib?” she inquired gravely.

“It is well, Khasti,” he replied. “Your husband—?”

“Has not returned,” she said. “The sahibs are pursuing his people; they have gone far up the Pass. See, I have brought you food and water; you will eat and drink before I dress your wound.”

She had brought him a mess of beans, soaked in some goat's milk, and Darrel ate and drank with an appetite which brought a smile of satisfaction to Khasti's grave face.

“Where, how far, will your people go, Khasti?” he inquired.

She waved her hand. “To the villages beyond the hills, sahib,” she replied.

“To gather and fight again?”

“It may be so, for my people are brave; but it may not be so, for they have lost much men. But who shall say! My people are brave, and they love fighting; it is meat and drink to them, sahib, and they like to please their women. It is so with the English sahibs likewise, is it not?”

"I suppose it is," admitted Darrel; "and that's all to be said about it. Have your men killed many of us, do you know?"

She nodded, as she replied gravely—

"Yes, sahib; they killed the sahib colonel"—Darrel turned his face away and clenched his teeth—"and many others. It was kill and kill; the way it always is," she added in a matter-of-fact fashion, as she moistened the bandage and bathed his face. "It will always be so. The sahib will sleep now?"

Darrel dozed and thought and brooded through the long day; at intervals, which seemed very long to him, Khasti brought him a chapati or some of the dried beans, with cool draughts of the sour goat's milk, and cared for him with the tenderness and the skill of a duly certificated nurse. The days dragged along slowly; his wound was on the road to healing, and he was able to walk; but Khasti would not permit him to go beyond the sangar, and he inwardly chafed with impatience at the restraint, the deadly dullness of his benevolent imprisonment.

He had almost lost count of time, and had begun to feel as if he were doomed to be shut up in this hill-side nullah for the remainder of his life, when one morning, soon after dawn, he felt himself gently shaken by a rougher hand than Khasti's and, opening his eyes, saw a wild, half-clad Pathan bending over him. It was Khasti's husband, Abdurmahn. Darrel remembered him and started up. Abdurmahn saluted respectfully, but Darrel caught at his hand and wrung it.

"At last!" he said with a quick breath of relief. "I thought you were never coming! I want to thank you! You have saved my life, Abdurmahn, and I am grateful. What news? Where is the force? Can I get to them?"

Abdurmahn shook his touzled head.

"No, sahib. It has gone on. To reach it the sahib

would have to travel many miles ; he would be seen by our tribesmen, and——” He paused abruptly, significantly. “No, sahib, you cannot join the force ; but there is a way over the hills to Bhareli. I will show it you, I will go with you. There is danger ; the sahib might be detected by our people. But one must run the risk ; there is no other way. See, sahib, I have brought you clothes to put on ; you will pass as a hillman, and I as your servant, brother——”

“That’s the word,” broke in Darrel earnestly ; “you have proved yourself a blood-brother, Abdurmahn. But you and Khasti—will it be safe for you ? ”

“We do not forget, sahib,” said Abdurmahn with dignity. “You gave me Khasti. It is I who am grateful. There are the clothes, the knife——”

Darrel tore off his khaki and donned the long shirt, the puggree which distinguishes the Pathan of the North-West from the Afridis of the South, who wear the stockingette cap, and, thrusting the long, keen-edged knife in his girdle, stood up, a very good imitation of the real article, as he thought ; but Abdurhman eyed Darrel’s bare legs and feet doubtfully, and daubing him with a mixture of mud and water, coloured them “to fancy,” as painters have it.

“The sun will make them right, sahib,” he said encouragingly. “We will start at nightfall. I know the way blindfold.”

The hours dragged their weary length along, but the sun dropped behind the hills at last, the purple light fell aslant the valleys and was quickly followed by the darkness for which they were waiting.

Khasti glided into the nullah as the two men were preparing to start. She took Darrel’s hand and was for placing it on her head in token of humble farewell ; but Darrel caught both her hands and held them in a close grip ; his face paling, his lips twitching.

"Good-bye, Khasti," he said, his voice thick and rather hoarse. "I owe my life to you and Abdurmahn here; and I cannot find words with which to thank you."

"We but pay back, sahib," she said quietly. "If you see Lal Sef, my father, again, tell him that we did not forget."

Darrel turned away with a lump in his throat, and followed Abdurmahn, who had watched the parting with grave impassivity. Your Afridi, like the Arab, disdains any display of emotion. He was paying his debt, and that was sufficient for Abdurmahn.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SLEEPING POWDERS

LADY WESTLAKE stayed on at Lucerne; the inhabitants grew accustomed to the stately carriage as it rolled past their doors, and the Countess's huge mushroom hat, and no longer rushed out to gaze at the equipage with its powdered coachman and footman; though the more or less simple Lucerners lost no opportunity of pointing out "La Comtesse de la Vestlake" to visitors, and dilated with pride on the fact that la Comtesse was so charmed with the lake and the place generally that she had decided to reside at the chalet for the remainder of her life.

And Cynthia was quite content to remain. Existence went on for her as it must for all of us while we remain on this terrestrial globe; one must eat and breathe and sleep, though the interest in these actions have waxed so faint as almost to cease. Time, we are told in consolatory prose and verse, heals all wounds; if it did not heal Cynthia's, at least it deadened its pain. She was like a person who has been suddenly deprived of one of the senses; its loss is a poignant agony at first, but in time one grows accustomed to blindness, to deafness, the lack of power to smell or taste.

She was surrounded by the beauties of Nature; devoted servants were at her beck and call; she was clothed in remarkably fine linen, and could have worn purple every day, if she had chosen to

do so; but she could find no enjoyment in these things for which most people are content to toil and toil all their lives; a shadowy, superficial pleasure was all she could get out of them; she seemed to be living in a past over which a veil had fallen, to be waiting for something that she knew could never come. If she read a novel, and she read many, the story seemed unreal, and often, alas! rather tame; for her own life held so great a tragedy that fiction paled its ineffectual fires before those of her own experience.

Just at this time the desire for solitude was strong within her; but solitude was not quite so attainable as it had been; for Percy Standish still remained, if not a welcome, at any rate a tolerated, visitor at the chalet; and he appeared to be very desirous of her company; indeed, he was so attentive to Cynthia that she herself was somewhat puzzled; for she knew all Percy's actions were prompted by some deliberate purpose.

He stayed on, though the place did not appear to agree with him. He obviously grew thinner, and the constitutional paleness of his refined and intellectual countenance was changed for a pallor which his aunt unkindly attributed to bile.

"You look as if you wanted a tonic, Percy," she remarked one morning as she and Cynthia came upon him in the garden, where he was sitting with his arms crossed, his head bent, and his eyes scarcely perceptible under their lowered lids.

He started up with the proper expression of pleasure at their presence, and for a moment his face was flushed.

"I assure you I am quite, perfectly well, dear aunt," he hastened to assure her with his usual forced and dutiful smile. "I was indulging in a fit of dreaming——"

"Humph!" grunted the Griffin, eyeing him

do so; but she could find no enjoyment in these things for which most people are content to toil and toil all their lives; a shadowy, superficial pleasure was all she could get out of them; she seemed to be living in a past over which a veil had fallen, to be waiting for something that she knew could never come. If she read a novel, and she read many, the story seemed unreal, and often, alas! rather tame; for her own life held so great a tragedy that fiction paled its ineffectual fires before those of her own experience.

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He stayed on, though the place did not appear to

mockingly. "Then some one's ears ought to burn. I had a monkey once, Cynthia, and whenever it sat quiet and looked as Percy did just now, I used to glance round the room to see what it had broken or what it was likely to break. A quiet monkey always means mischief."

Percy coloured again, and his eyes pierced keenly and covertly through his smile; there was, too, an involuntary twitch of his nether lip, as if his accustomed urbanity were broken by a touch of irritation; but he responded good-humouredly enough.

"I was contemplating no worse mischief than a row on the lake, dear aunt. Will you come, Cynthia?"

"We'll row down to the town, if you don't mind," she said; "I want to post a letter."

Percy took the sculls and pulled slowly along the edge of the lake and out of the current, and both he and Cynthia were silent. She looked at him with faint curiosity; for of late she had observed that he had become almost as preoccupied as she herself was.

"If you prefer to stay in the boat, I will post your letter, Cynthia," he remarked, as they reached the landing-place; but Cynthia said she would like the little walk, and she went off with her letter.

Percy moored the boat, dropped into the stern seat and lit a cigarette; but his face was lined with thought and he allowed the cigarette to go out. He was asking himself to whom Cynthia had written. Of late, ever since he had come upon Lady Westlake's will with its significant blank spaces, he had become watchful of every person at the chalet, and had taken note of every incident, however trivial, that occurred in connection with the household; it seemed as if he were obsessed by some secret fear, by the dread of something happening without his knowledge.

"Posted your letter?" he asked, as he helped Cynthia into the boat. "Was it of so much im-

portance that you could not entrust it to my unreliable custody?" he added with a bantering smile.

"It was to my father," she said very quietly, and with a touch of anxiety. "I have had no answer to one I wrote some months ago, and I felt—I wanted to post this with my own hand."

He nodded. "I understand. You wrote to tell him of—of the breaking of your engagement to Darrel Frayne?" he said in a low and sympathetic voice.

The colour mounted to her face for a moment, as she replied calmly—

"No, I did not tell him. It would only have grieved him. The last time I heard from him," she went on quickly, as if to get away from the other subject. "he wrote from a place in Burmah; but that was long ago, and it is probable that he may have left there; he does not stay long in one place."

"He may be on his way home," Percy suggested.

She looked up quickly, her eyes lightened, and she caught her breath.

"It is too good to hope for," she said with a quiver in her voice. "I wish—I wish he were here!"

"You must want to see him," he murmured. "What is he doing? just travelling about for amusement?"

"I don't know; I can't imagine my father travelling or doing anything without an object, he is so practical; for instance, he has been taking a great deal of interest in mines."

"Indeed?" responded Percy, interested in spite of his obsession. "I didn't know Mr. Drayle cared for that sort of thing, for money-getting, to put it bluntly."

"He doesn't," said Cynthia with a smile. "He cares very little about money, less than any one I

know ; but he would be interested in the manner in which it was got, the men who found it, dug for it, in the mines."

"The machinery, not the results," murmured Percy. "May I say that you take after him, Cynthia?"

"I?" she responded casually. "No, I don't think money is worth half the trouble and fuss most people make over it. I have noticed that the richest persons are generally the most unhappy, or, at any rate, the most dissatisfied."

"That is because they don't know what to do with their wealth," he remarked, looking thoughtfully at the bottom of the boat. "Take Aunt Gwen, for instance——"

"Aunt Gwen does a great deal of good," broke in Cynthia quickly and with a sudden flush. "Think how kind she has been to me——"

"And to me," he said with a smile. "I was not criticising Aunt Gwen, much less condemning her; I was only about to observe that I should not call her a happy, contented woman."

"Who is happy, or even content?" said Cynthia, almost to herself.

"Of course, she is not in good health," he went on, ignoring the pregnant question, "and I fear that it is not improving. She is so rash—I mean that she is not careful as to what she eats and drinks, that her habits, the habit of late hours——" He paused and pulled steadily and in silence for a minute or two; then, with his eyes downcast, he said, "Do you think the place suits her?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," replied Cynthia. "Indeed, I don't agree with you, for she seems to me to be better here than in London."

"Perhaps you are right," he said; "but I must confess that I am sometimes anxious about her."

"Anxious?" Cynthia turned to him with instant and genuine anxiety.

He leant forward to arrange the stretcher, as he replied in a low voice—

"I have always a dread lest she should—she should go off suddenly; she is stout, and has the thick neck which indicates—er—apoplexy, paralysis— Pray, don't be alarmed!" he hastened to add. "It may be only my fancy—"

"Oh, I am sure, quite sure it is!" said Cynthia, accepting his qualification with a long breath of relief.

"I trust I am mistaken," he said piously. "Aunt Gwen has been very good to me, and I am very fond of her, though she is sometimes—er—rather trying."

"She does not mean it," said Cynthia, forcing herself to believe the assertion. "It is the gout that is answerable for her sharp sayings."

"Quite so," he assented cheerfully. "I always attributed them to that cause. Oh, I've no doubt Aunt Gwen will outlast most of us; but one may be excused a little anxiety concerning a woman of her age."

"Aunt Gwen seems to reciprocate your fears," said Cynthia, "and is anxious about you; and, really, Percy, you are not looking well."

"Oh, I'm all right, as I assured her," he said quickly, with the faintest tinge of impatience, not to say resentment, in his tone. "I am never very robust, and I fancy this is rather a relaxing place—not that I should be any better anywhere else," he added swiftly. "I am enjoying my stay here, and should like to remain a little longer—if I am not boring you, Cynthia."

"Indeed, you are not," she responded sincerely; for, alas! it was beyond the power of any person to bore her, and it mattered nothing to her whether he stayed on or went. "I am sure Aunt Gwen would

miss you very much if you left us, for she likes you to talk with and to read to her."

"Then I will stay; thank you very much," he said gratefully.

They fell into silence, reached the landing-stage, and went up to the chalet. Notwithstanding her refusal to share Percy's misgivings respecting Aunt Gwen's health and his fear of her sudden taking off, Cynthia was conscious of a vague uneasiness on Lady Westlake's account, and when she had taken off her out-door things she hastened to her aunt's room with the unacknowledged desire to see with her own eyes that Percy's melancholy suggestion was groundless.

As she passed the sitting-room she glanced in to see if Lady Westlake was there. She was not; but Percy was standing at the writing-table with the dispatch box at his elbow.

"Do you know where Aunt Gwen is?" she asked, in the doorway.

He looked round slowly and began to turn over the stationery in the pigeon-holes.

"In her room, I think," he replied. "I am looking for a large envelope," he added.

"There are some in the bottom drawer," she said. "Here they are."

She went to the desk and pulled out the drawer; and, as she did so, Percy pushed the dispatch case from him, as if to take it out of her way.

"Oh, thanks, thanks! So kind of you!" he murmured.

Cynthia went out, and he settled himself at the desk, as if to write; but he wrote nothing, and presently he drew the case towards him softly and examined the lock. There was a minute dab of wax on the upper part of the keyhole; and, as he saw it, his lips drew together with an expression of satisfaction; for the wax, which he had dropped

there, could not have remained if the dispatch box had been unlocked.

Cynthia passed on, and met Parsons in the corridor with the post bag.

"It's late, miss," she said, as Cynthia took it.

She opened it and took out the contents eagerly. There was nothing for her; and, with Lady Westlake's letters and newspapers in her hand, she went on to her ladyship's room. The maid, who was tidying up, told her that Lady Westlake was at that moment coming up the garden to the house, and Cynthia seated herself by the window and took the wrapper from the "Times."

She turned it over listlessly, indifferently, and was putting it down, when her eyes caught the heading, "The Frontier War," and she read the paragraphs that followed, which stated, with the curtness of a telegraphic message from "Our own correspondent," that the expeditionary force which had been dispatched to punish and subdue the insurgent tribesmen had started; and it gave the names of the corps that formed the expedition. This piece of intelligence roused but a faint and transient interest in Cynthia, and she laid the paper down. She had heard nothing of Darrel, nothing whatever of his movements, and was consequently ignorant that he was one of the Rexford Fusiliers who were marching upon the Afridis. She was soon lost in the reverie which always took possession of her when she was alone—and not seldom when others were present—and she was awakened from it by the entrance of Lady Westlake.

"Oh, you've got back," said her ladyship. "Where's Percy? I want him to answer some letters for me."

"He is in the sitting-room," said Cynthia. "Shall I write them for you?"

"No, let him do it," snapped the Griffin. "He

may as well do something useful for his bed and board; he is getting soft and sleepy with idleness."

She stumped, with the aid of her stick, to the sitting-room, and found Percy busy writing; he had heard her approach.

"Oh, you're here," she said ungraciously. "I want you to answer these." She threw a couple of letters on the table, almost in front of him.

"Certainly, dear Aunt Gwen," he responded suavely.

She told him what she wanted written, and with her keen eyes watched his thin face with its secretive expression.

"Thanks," she said when he had finished. "Very charmingly expressed. You have the knack of saying unpleasant things in a nice and apparently pleasant fashion."

"It runs in the family, Aunt Gwen," he said suavely.

She grinned at the neat hit; then eyed him sharply; it was not often Percy indulged himself with a retort to her sarcasms. She did not guess at the carefully hidden irritation that tortured him like a skin disease.

"Did you get that tonic?" she asked suddenly, as if attributing his unwonted rebellion to his ill-health.

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"No, dear aunt. To tell the truth, I forgot your kind suggestion; and if I had thought of it, I should not have had the temerity to visit the local chemist."

"Humph!" she said. "I suppose you don't sleep well?"

"Why should you think that?" he asked casually.

"Because I heard you walking up and down your room last night," she retorted with a grin. "I was

awake myself. I often am ; but that's only to be expected of a woman of my age and habits." He shot a glance at her ; it was almost as if she had overheard his conversation with Cynthia. " Sir Alford gave me a prescription a little while ago. I think I've got it somewhere. Wait here. I can't have my rest broken by a person perambulating up and down like a restless animal in a menagerie."

As she went out Percy pushed with his foot the dispatch box, which he had set down against the other side of the desk, still further out of sight. Lady Westlake returned in a few minutes and dropped a piece of paper in front of him.

" Better get a couple of dozen powders made up," she said ; " some for both of us."

" Certainly," he said. " I will go down to the town after lunch."

When she had gone out again, he took the prescription from its envelope and listlessly read it ; and as he did so he raised his brows ; for it contained an unusually large quantity of a drug which was not only of a poisonous character, but dangerously so. He reflected for a moment or two : it was evident that Sir Alford was acquainted with the fact that Lady Westlake took soporifics frequently, and had therefore felt warranted in prescribing so large a dose of this drug, a dose which would have probably proved fatal to one unaccustomed to taking it.

His brow was furrowed by thought as he bent over the prescription ; and presently his lips drew straight, his eyes grew hard and keen, and the pallor of his face was broken by a hectic flush. He stretched out his hand for a pen, his eyes still on the paper, and having got hold of the pen kept it poised above the sign indicating the quantity of the dangerous drug. Once, twice, thrice, the point of the pen touched the sign, as he hesitated ; then, with the perspiration standing on his blanched forehead, he delicately

altered the writing ; so delicately that a magnifying-glass would have been required to detect the changed figure.

He slipped the prescription in his breast pocket, and went down to lunch ; but it appeared that he had little or no appetite ; and in an answer to the Griffin's sarcastic banter he remarked casually that he had a headache.

" Oh, you'll be all right after you've had one of Sir Alford's sleeping powders," she said.

" I am sure I shall," he said with cheerful gratitude; adding, as he turned to Cynthia—" Aunt Gwen has been so good as to give me an infallible remedy for insomnia."

He left the chalet soon after lunch ; but he did not walk straight down to the town. It seemed as if he were possessed by a restless kind of indolence ; for he wandered down the road to the water, and then up again to the cathedral. The organ was playing—it happened to be the afternoon of the weekly recital—and he sauntered in, stole into one of the pews and listened, or seemed to listen, to the grand, solemn music ; and with it still surging in his ears, mingling with his thoughts, haunting him in an irritating way, he walked slowly back to the town and entered the well-known chemist's.

As visitors to Lucerne know, the principal of the establishment speaks English fluently ; but he was absent on this occasion, and the assistant who waited on Percy addressed him in French. Percy's knowledge of that polite language was perfect, but this afternoon he appeared to have forgotten it ; and he knit his brows in a puzzled fashion as the man endeavoured to explain that the quantity of one of the drugs set down was rather, not to say dangerously, large.

With laboured speech and elegant courtesy, Percy stated that the prescription was drawn up by a

famous physician, as the assistant would see, and that he, Percy, knew nothing about its ingredients; and he added that the lady for whom it was intended had often taken the powders.

The man, after a flood of rapid French, shrugged his shoulders, requested monsieur to honour him by taking a seat, and disappeared behind the usual partition.

"You will request madam to be careful, very careful, monsieur," he said, as he came out again with a packet in his hand. "One powder only—only one be so obliging as to observe—and an interval of at least one night between the doses."

"Certainly I will acquaint madam," said Percy; "but, for the sake of safety, be so kind as to write the same on the outer package."

The man did so, and Percy departed.

When he came into the drawing-room, just before dinner, he held the parcel in his hand; it was not the whole parcel, but minus its outer wrapper. Lady Westlake was seated in her chair, her eyes fixed on the clock, for he was five minutes late; Cynthia was standing by the mantelpiece, her arm resting on the shelf.

"Here are your powders, Aunt Gwen," he said with a pleasant smile. "By the way, the man at the chemist's requested me to warn you that they were rather strong; indeed, he seemed to be rather nervous about them."

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped the Griffin. "The man's a nervous idiot. I've taken them for months, off and on. Are they all here? You'd better keep some of them for yourself. Do you know, Cynthia, that this interesting youth suffers from insomnia? Wonder what's on his conscience—but I needn't wonder; the Standishes never had a conscience, any one of them."

She tore open the inner wrapper, took out some

of the small white packets, and held them out to him.

"Where is the prescription?" she demanded irritably.

"The prescription? Isn't it there?" he said. "I thought the man had enclosed it. I suppose he kept it, with a view to 'repeat orders,' as they call it."

"Humph! You'd better get it back from him," said the Griffin. "What fools men are; they can't even go on a simple errand without making a mess of it! 'Is that the dinner?' Of course, it is. It's been waiting for the last ten minutes; and the soup will be lukewarm; and if there is anything I detest——"

She stamped in, using her crutch with unnecessary violence; and Percy, with his little courteous bow, offered his arm to Cynthia. The Griffin's ill-humour, roused by waiting for what was the event of the day for her, did not vanish until after the lake trout had disappeared; and a chance remark of Cynthia's roused it again.

"I see that there is a war in the Frontier, Aunt Gwen," she said, with a desire to start an impersonal topic of conversation. "Some of the tribes—Afridis, don't they call them?—are giving trouble, and an expedition has started to subjugate them. I saw an account of it in the 'Times' while I was waiting for you this morning——"

"For heaven's sake"—Lady Westlake used a stronger expression—"don't retail the newspapers, Cynthia," she snapped. "I can see 'em for myself; and if I couldn't I shouldn't want extracts from them; for they're mostly lies!" She was silent for a moment after this outburst, then she said: "I had a letter from Alicia Northam. Northam's travelling on the Continent; it is not unlikely he may come our way and look in upon us."

"Oh? I hope he will!" said Percy.

Cynthia said nothing. The sight, the presence, of Lord Northam would, she knew, open her wound anew and make it smart and burn, whereas now it only ached dully.

"So do I," said Lady Gwen emphatically. "He—any one—would wake us up. I feel as if I had been hypnotised. Percy, come and play *écarté* with me."

Cynthia gave her aunt her coffee, then went out on to the balcony. It was a lovely, a perfect night, and to know what that means one needs to have seen a place like Lucerne. She leant on the balcony rail and gazed dreamily at Pilatus; and, of course, she wandered back to the past, and wondered what Darrel was doing. Had he forgotten her? He had made no sign; she had heard nothing of him. Probably, indeed most likely, he had got over the wound she, in all truth and honesty, had dealt him. There would be much, many to console him, to wipe his memory of her and her love from his mind. She was roused from her reverie by the sound of Aunt Gwen's voice. She was evidently in a passion.

"You played like a fool," she was remarking. "If you hadn't the devil's own luck you couldn't have won. For heaven's sake"—again Lady Westlake's language was stronger than that set down—"don't smile! You remind me of your blackguard of a father——"

"Dear Aunt Gwen!" Cynthia heard Percy murmur patiently, remonstratingly.

"Don't 'Dear Aunt Gwen' me!" stuttered the old woman. "You remind me of Uriah Heep, Hoop, or whatever the man's name was. You think that by waiting your time, by blarneying, you will get my money. But you are mistaken. I'd sooner leave it to a scoundrelly charity——"

Cynthia entered the room. It was not the first

time she had listened to one of the Griffin's frenzied, hysteric outbursts. Percy was standing by the card-table, his face white, his pale eyes flaming like "blue lights," his hands clenched on the cards which the Griffin had allowed to remain on the table.

"Dear Aunt Gwen!" he murmured. "I played according to the rules——"

"You played!—you cheated!" she shrieked. "A Standish couldn't play without cheating. I hate, I loathe the whole of you. You're a Standish through and through. Cynthia, mark my words! This smiling hyena will be too many for you; he——"

Cynthia made a sign to Percy to control himself, and drew the vibrating arm of the old woman within her own strong and steady one.

"You are tired, Aunt Gwen," she said. "I am sure Percy——"

"Don't you stand up for him!" snarled the terrible old woman. "You'll be sorry if you do! Do you think he means you well, you young fool? He'd give the world, if he had it, to get the best of you. He's been trying to do so all the time he's been here. But I'll take care; I say, I'll take care——"

Cynthia, with another glance at Percy, imploring patience, led the frantic old woman to her room. Percy lit a cigarette and leant against the mantelshelf, his brows knit, his face like porcelain; his eyes hidden behind the thick lids. Cynthia came back presently.

"I am so sorry, Percy," she said sadly, apologetically. "She is not well; it's the gout—you yourself said so. She will not sleep, I am afraid. Where are those powders?"

Percy, by a nod, indicated the small packet on the table. Cynthia took it up and went towards the door. As she went out she paused, and looking over her shoulder, said—

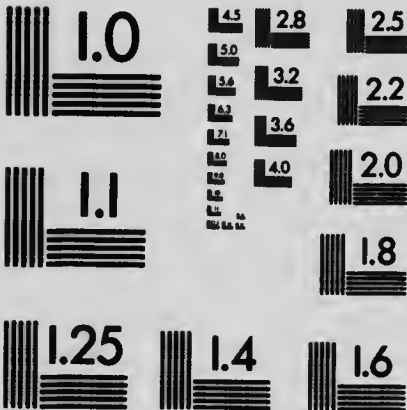
"I am sorry, Percy. Have you some of these for yourself?"

"Oh, yes," he said, his eyes still hidden. "Yes, thanks. Good night, Cynthia. Do not distress yourself."



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CHAPTER XXVI

THE WILL

NEXT morning Parsons knocked at Cynthia's door as the cathedral clock chimed five o'clock; and scarcely waiting for the turning of the key, entered hurriedly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to disturb you, miss," she said. "But Mr. Percy is very ill. Supley heard him groaning, and going to see what was the matter, found Mr. Percy very bad indeed."

"What is the matter with him?" asked Cynthia, as she slipped on her dressing-gown.

"I don't know, miss; but he says he's in great pain; and he has been very sick. Supley wanted to send for the doctor, but Mr. Percy wouldn't allow him to do so; he said that he was better; but he looks dreadfully white still, and is shaking all over."

"Would he like me? I'd better come and see him," said Cynthia.

Parsons hurried off to prepare Percy for the visit, and Cynthia followed almost immediately. She found Percy seated on the edge of the bed, his face drawn and startingly white against the purple of his dressing-gown.

"It is very good of you to come, dear Cynthia," he murmured feebly and gratefully. "No; I do not know what is the matter. I have been very ill, quite ill; but I am much better now, though still rather shaky."

"It is something you have eaten?" suggested Cynthia.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I have eaten nothing unusual," he said, "nothing that you have not eaten; but I certainly feel as if I had been poisoned."

Cynthia glanced at the small table beside the bed; one of the papers which had enclosed a powder was lying conspicuously on the table.

"The powders! Did you take one?" she asked quickly.

He nodded. "Yes, or rather half of one. I remembered what the chemist said, and thought it better to take half——"

Cynthia frowned apprehensively. "I am afraid it was that," she said.

"But Aunt Gwen takes them regularly—a whole one——" he murmured.

"But she is used to them," broke in Cynthia; "and I think that would make all the difference."

"Perhaps so," he assented. "I am better now; I have been awfully sick. I think I will turn in again and try to get some sleep. I can't tell you how sorry I am that you should have been disturbed."

"The doctor?" she suggested as she moved to the door. "Don't you think you had better let him be sent for?"

But Percy declared that there was no need to send for him, that he certainly would, if not quite recovered later on, summon him, and Cynthia went back to her room. It did not occur to her that Lady Westlake might also have been affected by the powder; but she could not sleep again, and lay awake until Parsons came to call her at the usual hour.

"Mr. Percy's sleeping like a top, miss," said Parsons. "It must have been something he'd eaten; he's very fond of those green figs, and sometimes they disagree——"

Her voice was drowned by a shrill scream coming

from the direction of Lady Westlake's room, and a moment or two afterwards her ladyship's maid rushed into Cynthia's room, panting and screaming.

"My lady! Oh, my lady! Her ladyship——!"

Cynthia and Parsons rushed to Lady Westlake's room; and Cynthia, the moment her eyes fell upon the old woman's face, knew what it was that had struck terror to the maid's heart. Lady Westlake was lying motionless, with her eyes staring vacantly at the ceiling, her hands clutching the counterpane.

In an instant, as it seemed, the household was convulsed with excitement and horror. Kneeling beside the bed, with some of the servants crouching behind her, Cynthia was conscious of a tall, purple-clad figure at her elbow. It was that of Percy, with haggard and ashen face.

"Is—is—she——" he whispered hoarsely.

"Yes!" she answered almost inaudibly.

"My God!" he said. "It—it was the powder!"

The doctor arrived in the midst of the confusion; the room was cleared, and he made his examination. Lady Westlake had been dead some hours; in his opinion, she had died from syncope of the heart caused by—— At this point he stopped abruptly and took possession of the powders; and when later on he was told of Percy's seizure, he knew that an analysis of the concoction would crystallise conjectures into a certainty.

The doctor was an elderly man with a good and fashionable practice, and, like professional men of his class and standing, knew that the exalted family of which Lady Westlake was a member would be most anxious to avoid any such fuss or scandal as would be inevitable if the cause of the death were made the subject of a public inquiry. He questioned Percy about the purchase of the powders, and appeared to be satisfied that the death was caused by an over-dose of the narcotic; and he opened his

eyes widely after peering short-sightedly at Sir Alford's formula.

"Much stronger than I should be inclined to prescribe," he said gravely. "But no doubt Sir Alford knew Lady Westlake's constitution," he added with professional caution and courtesy. "Her ladyship was in a precarious state of health; syncope might have occurred at any moment, and without the impulse given to it by the powder. For myself, I deprecate the use of narcotics, especially those of this character; but——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"There will have to be an inquest?" said Percy.

They were seated in his room, and his face was half-hidden by his hand, which shook like a leaf.

"No; I think not," replied the doctor. "Fortunately I had the honour of being consulted by her ladyship a few days since——"

"I did not know that," said Percy quickly.

"Her ladyship did not wish it to be known. She came to my house in preference to seeing me here. No doubt, with the consideration always displayed by persons of her ladyship's position, she desired to avoid alarming those near and dear to her. No, there need be no inquest. I am quite satisfied as to the cause of death, and I can therefore give a certificate. And now, Mr. Standish, I must not forget that you require my attention. You are still feeling the effects of the poison—of the powder, I should say. I will send you a draught; yes, yes! Terribly sad, terribly! Pray, let this be a warning to you to avoid these sedative drugs which, though apparently harmless, are, on the contrary, in some cases, most—er—dangerous."

A week later, Cynthia, in her deep mourning, sat in the library at the house in Belgrave Square; for Lady Westlake's body had been brought home and was buried, and the world, seemingly none the poorer for its loss of "this, our sister," was gliding

on in its accustomed way. To Cynthia, as she gazed out of the window on the familiar Square, the passers-by on its aristocratic pavement, it was hard to believe that the self-willed, cynical old woman who had played so dominant a part in her life had disappeared from the little circle of human beings for whom she had been at once a source of amusement and a scourge.

To many of her acquaintances—for the Griffin had no friends—her death came as a positive relief; but Cynthia had no room for anything but tender feelings towards the woman who had, according to the rules of her social code, done her best for the girl she had adopted. Cynthia forgot all she had suffered at Aunt Gwen's hands, and remembered only the occasional, spasmodic kindness. Even if Cynthia had known of Lady Westlake's conspiracy with Lady Alicia, which had separated her from Darrel, she would have found it possible to pardon her: for death wipes out all offences.

Her thoughts were turning to Darrel, as the dove turns through storm and stress of wind and weather to its rest, when Supley opened the door, and in the sepulchral tone which he had assumed since his mistress's death, announced Mr. Percy Standish. As he came across the room to her, Cynthia felt a thrill of vague apprehension; for his face was so haggard and drawn, so absolutely colourless, that he had the appearance of a man on the verge of a serious illness; and the apprehension was intensified by the touch of his icy cold hand.

"You have got back, Percy?" she said; for he had gone away from town directly after the funeral for an obviously imperative need of change and rest.

"Are you better—stronger?"

"Yes," he said, and his tone was as colourless as his face. "Oh, yes; I am much better. And you, I trust, dear Cynthia, are stronger? I am early,

I know; but I thought you would like me to come before the others. There might be something you would like to say to me. Of course, we all know that you will be—that poor Aunt Gwen must have made you her heiress——”

Cynthia shook her head. “Why should you think so?” she said in a low voice.

He smiled sadly. “There can be little doubt that it is so,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice. “With all her faults, Aunt Gwen had a strong sense of justice; and everybody knows that she regarded you as her adopted daughter. But what I wanted to say was really to advise you to seek a change, a complete change, as soon as possible. You must not, you really must not, remain in this gloomy house any longer. You must go away to the seaside, or abroad. If I can help you with the estate, the house and the rest of it, you know I shall be only too glad to do so.”

Cynthia thanked him. “But,” she reminded him, with a mirthless smile, “there is an old and useful adage about counting one’s chickens, Percy.”

“Well, we shall soon know,” he said, looking at his watch.

He stood beside her, his eyes fixed vacantly on the street, and again Cynthia noticed the change in him; it was not only that he was paler and thinner and looked terribly worn, but the old, only half-concealed air of self-satisfaction and sufficiency had gone, and in its place was an expression of brooding unrest; the look a man wears when he has lost self-reliance, and is suddenly doubtful of his own powers. But Cynthia attributed the change in him to the suddenness of Lady Westlake’s death, and the worry consequent upon the tragic circumstances surrounding it. Though no inquest had taken place, the story of the powders had leaked out, and a certain amount of curiosity had been displayed by society; but the

interest stopped at curiosity, and no suspicions had been expressed; death by an overdose of one of the too popular and easily procured drugs is too common nowadays to occasion much comment.

Presently they both heard steps and subdued voices in the hall, and at short intervals Supley announced the persons whom Cynthia expected. Mr. Lorton, the Westlakes' lawyer, was the first to arrive. He was an old man, but of the new type of family solicitor; bland but keen, and with the exceedingly polished manner which is necessary to a solicitor whose clients belong to the aristocracy. After greeting the two young people, he went to the table and arranged his papers.

Lord Spencer Standish was the next to arrive; he looked rather more rakish than usual in his mourning suit, and he brought with him an odour of the strong cigar he had flung away as he entered, and the stiff whisky-and-soda he had taken at his club to brace him for the occasion. A distant relation of Lady Westlake's, a cousin who had long looked forward to this moment, with the hope that some crumb from the table of her august relative might fall to her share, entered in company with a still more distant cousin, a remote Standish, also by the same hope. Cynthia whispered to the first to call the servants, and they filed into the room, and with respectfully lowered eyes.

Mr. Lorton glanced round and opened the will. Cynthia's eyes were still fixed on the Square; Percy had drawn almost behind the curtain, his eyes directed to his boots, his arms folded. He had the air of a man who had no special, personal interest in the proceedings. Mr. Lorton began in the dry, monotonous tone which is always adopted by a lawyer reading a will, and the servants flushed and stirred with an irrestrainable satisfaction as he came to their names and slowly enumerated the sums left

them by their dead mistress. There followed bequests to one or two of the well-known charities ; then, after a pause, the monotonous voice read on calmly, and Cynthia heard her own name and the sum of one thousand pounds. A moment afterwards the stir that the other auditors had made was increased ; for they understood that Lady Westlake had left the bulk of her enormous fortune to her nephew, Percy Standish.

The faint movement, murmur of surprise, were followed by an intense silence ; every eye wandered from Cynthia to Percy and back again. Supley was the first to recover ; and with a stunned and shocked expression he rose and marshalled the other servants out of the room. The maiden cousin was the first to speak.

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand," she stammered, quivering with disappointment and indignation. "Isn't my name mentioned at all ?"

"No, madam," replied Mr. Lorton gravely.

"Nor mine ?" said the male Standish cousin.

"No, sir," he replied in the same tone.

They rose up in their wrath, and in silence departed, shaking from their feet the dust of the unhallowed Westlake mansion.

Mr. Lorton got up, and, approaching Percy, held out his hand with the conventional smile.

"I congratulate you, Mr. Standish," he said ; and in the same breath he added to Cynthia : "At the same time I may be allowed to express my surprise, and to sympathise with you, Miss Drayle."

"But—but—I don't understand !" said Percy hoarsely. "Do you mean—is it possible that my aunt——"

"Has made you her ladyship's residuary legatee ? Certainly it is," replied Mr. Lorton.

"But—Cynthia, Miss Drayle !" said Percy with

a gesture that was almost one of indignation. "I expected, every one expected, that she would have the largest portion of Lady Westlake's estate. She was my aunt's adopted daughter——"

Mr. Lorton shook his head and significantly touched the will he held in his hand. Percy wiped the perspiration from his pallid brow.

"It—it can't be!" he exclaimed in a low voice. "It is unjust, monstrous! The will—surely it is not valid! My aunt's intentions were well known—it was a kind of promise, when she adopted Cynthia, that she should be provided for——"

Cynthia laid her hand on his arm with a touch, half-grateful, half-repressive.

"Aunt Gwen had the right to do what she pleased," she said almost inaudibly.

"When was this will made?" demanded Percy almost fiercely.

"The will was drawn in our office on March the tenth last," replied Mr. Lorton. "It was true it was incomplete then; for Lady Westlake insisted upon certain blanks being left in the deed. The blanks were filled in by her on the 12th of June in this year——"

Cynthia drew a quick breath, it was the date Lady Westlake had threatened to turn her out of the house, the date of the violent scene between her aunt and Darrel. She thought she understood how those blank spaces had been filled in with the name of Percy Standish instead of Cynthia Drayle; understood that though her aunt might have intended to alter her will in Cynthia's favour, she had postponed doing so—until it was too late!

"May I see it?" said Percy, and he took the will from Mr. Lorton's hand and stared at it for a moment or two with a confused, bewildered air; then he turned to Cynthia.

"I cannot but suppose that it is all right, valid,"

he said thickly; "but I need not say, Cynthia, that I refuse to accept—that I must insist—insist upon your receiving a share, the half——"

Cynthia rose, her face crimson; but she touched his arm again and smiled faintly.

"No, Percy," she said. "But we will not speak of it, discuss it any further just now. You will come into the dining-room, Lord Spencer, Mr. Lorton?"

Both men looked at her as she led the way; the lawyer with a compassionate expression, Lord Spencer with an admiration which shone quite plainly in his dull, blood-flecked eyes, and thick, pursed lips. The meal was one of painful and embarrassing pretence; no one could eat, not even Lord Spencer; though he drank glass after glass of claret. The strange mixture of respectful admiration and pity gleamed in his now shining eyes as he glanced from time to time at Cynthia's pale face. They rose in a very few minutes; and Mr. Lorton, as he took his departure, said to Percy—

"Will you be good enough to call at my office to-morrow at eleven, Mr. Standish? There is a good deal of business to be got through."

Lord Spencer Standish watched the lawyer out, then went up to Cynthia.

"I'd better take myself off now, Miss Drayle," he said, his usually raucous voice subdued and full of an awkward sympathy. "I'm not much of a hand at fine speeches; can't sling the usual kind of language proper to these kind of occasions; but I want to say that what Percy said just now was good common-sense and justice. Of course, he'll hand over half the plunder.—And don't you stick out against it," he went on with sudden vehemence. "The whole thing's a mistake. The damned old woman—beg pardon!—meant you to have the money right enough, but happened to cut up rough over something or other, and spat out her spite in

that rotten will. Just like her! But Percy will do the square thing. Eh?"

The last word was shot at Percy, who stood white and haggard. He inclined his head.

"Cynthia knows that I shall do so, that I will take no refusal from her. I will go now, Cynthia. You will like to be alone for a time. This—the scene has doubtless tried you severely; I—I too am—am overwrought. I will come to-morrow, after I have seen Mr. Lorton."

His hand was cold no longer, but burnt like fire as he took Cynthia's; burnt so fiercely, with so dry a heat that it seemed to scald hers. Lord Spencer gave her a nervous grip, and held her hand for a moment.

"You buck up, Miss Drayle," he said encouragingly, almost angrily. "We'll see you through. We're all curs—confounded bad lot we Standishes!—but there's a limit; we don't ride a man down to the ropes—much less a woman."

Father and son went out, and passed out of the Square in silence; but as they emerged in the crowded thoroughfare, Lord Spencer stopped, and, looking straight in front of him, said in a dry voice—

"So you've got the Griffin's money after all, Percy!"

"It—it appears so, sir," responded Percy, moistening his lips, and casting down his eyes. There was a pause; Lord Spencer still continued to gaze before him with a glassy stare; then Percy said slowly, as if with difficulty: "I—I am greatly surprised. I—think the will is a very unjust one, unjust to Cynthia——"

Lord Spencer nodded, his lips pressed together.

"You're right," he said with a twist of the lips. "It's a cursed shame. But you'll do the straight thing, as you said. What?"

"Certainly, sir, certainly," assented Percy quickly.

"Shall we go on? I—I want to get home, to rest——"

He linked his arm in his father's; but Lord Spencer, instead of pressing his son's arm to his side sympathetically, drew his own arm away, and, still avoiding Percy's face, said curtly and distinctly: "I'm going to the club," and marched off with his head bent, his shoulders rounded, as if he were escaping from an unpleasant companion.

Percy stood motionless where he had been left, and looked after his father; and as he looked a hectic flush came into his face, a gleam of something like terror shot into his eyes, and remained some moments.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN OFFER OF MARRIAGE

CYNTHIA stood at the door of the great shabby drawing-room—which the new owner of Westlake House, Mr. Percy Standish, intended decorating, with the rest of the house, in the latest art fashion—waiting till her boxes were brought down, under the immediate directions of the faithful Parsons, who had by dint of tearful entreaties persuaded Cynthia into taking her to the cottage at Summerleigh.

Exactly ten days had elapsed since the reading of the will; and Cynthia's plans had been made, even as she listened to Mr. Lorton's dry voice and learned that she was not the heiress of Aunt Gwen's vast fortune.

She would go back home. How sweet the unaccustomed word sounded!—for though she had been surrounded by luxury, neither Westlake House nor the chalet had spelt "home" for her; she would go to the beloved and hallowed little house on the Summerleigh hill, and wait for her father. For she had just heard that he was making for England; that his wanderings were drawing to an end, and that he could no longer endure the longing for a sight of his little Cynthy. No one can tell how the reading of his letter, read by her through a mist of tears, cheered and encouraged her.

She looked round the room she was leaving, perhaps for the last time, and felt almost ashamed

that no pang of regret accompanied the farewell glance. Aunt Gwen had promised her a life of ease and luxury, and had kept her promise up to the day of her death; but Cynthia knew, now that she was leaving that life behind her, that it had brought little happiness.

"Everything is ready, miss," said Parsons, who was a trifle excited, and inwardly marvelled at her young mistress's calm. "I want one more label, miss, if you'd be so kind as to write it."

Cynthia took the label to the desk, and was addressing it when some one entered the room, and she heard Lord Northam's voice—

"Cynthia—Miss Drayle."

She started and looked up at him as he stood close beside her, and his huge hand closed over hers with a close pressure. He was breathing hard, as a man who has run some distance breathes, and his eyes were fixed on her compassionately and gravely.

"I've just come back," he said, drawing a chair forward and seating himself, his body bent towards her. "Sicily—with Alicia; she's been queer. Only heard the news the day before yesterday. Came at once. I'm sorry!"

Cynthia turned her eyes away. It was the first real friend she had seen since Aunt Gwen's death; and the tears rose at the pity in his voice, at his attitude, the expression of his face. She knew that he was talking to give her time, and she remained silent as he went on—

"Beastly slow train or I should have been here before. You are going away?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I am going home. I am so glad to see you—but my train——"

"I know. All right; I won't keep you. I'll go with you to the station. It's true then that—that the old lady——?"

Cynthia smiled gravely as she helped him out.

"Yes, Aunt Gwen left most of her money to Percy; but she did not forget me; she was too kind to do so; and I have quite a fortune: a thousand pounds."

Northam did not swear—at least audibly; but his eyes grew dark, and he stared over her head for a moment or two in silence.

"Why did she do it?" he asked at last and in quite an impassive voice. "—But it doesn't matter."

"No, it doesn't matter," echoed Cynthia with another smile; "for my father—I have just heard from him—is coming home, and I am going there to wait for him. I am sorry Lady Alicia has been ill. Is she better? It is nothing serious, I hope?"

He bit at his moustache and looked at her questioningly and then away from her. Was it possible that she had not heard of the fight on the Frontier, of the rumours that several of the officers of the Rexford Fusiliers were wounded, and some dead or missing? No, she could not have heard the news which had stricken Alicia to the ground. And he dared not tell her.

"She's getting better, pulling round," he replied laconically. "I left her there; but she'll follow soon. I wanted to get back at once. Wanted to hear the whole truth, to see you."

"It's very kind of you," murmured Cynthia rather quaveringly. "But you're always kind and thoughtful for others, Lord Northam."

"No, I'm not," he said gruffly. "Not for most people; can generally look after themselves; but you— Cynthia, look here; I'd made up my mind to keep my mouth shut; but the sight of you, the— the black dress, the sound of your voice, the thought of your being all alone—has broke me down. Cynthia, I wish you'd let me take care of you! Hold on!

I know what you're going to say ; but I promised Darrel Frayne——”

She started, and the smile and colour left her face as she shrank from his gaze. The sound of the beloved name smote on her senses like a blow.

“ I promised him that—that I'd look after you ; and now he's not here—may not come back——”

He blundered into a momentary silence, and looked at her fearsomely ; but he saw that she did not understand the full significance of his words, and, with averted eyes, he said—

“ I mean—that—well, he's not here ; and you are alone, and I—Cynthia, you know I love you, that I haven't got over it ; never shall, in fact. Let me keep my promise for—for his sake as well as for my own. Be my wife, Cynthia, and give me the right to—to look after you !”

She did not blush, her eyes did not leave his face ; but as she held out her hand to him he knew that she could not grant his prayer. His face paled and his lips twitched, and he looked hard into her eyes for a moment ; then he rose slowly.

“ All right. We'll go on to the station. I've got a cab outside,” he said as casually as he could. “ Parsons goin' wit' you ? That's right ; good sort, Parsons. She'll look after you.”

He did not stay to witness the farewell between Cynthia and the servants, some of whom were visibly affected ; Supley particularly so ; indeed, his struggle to remain calm and composed before his subordinates was quite a painful sight. Northam went with her to the station, his face sombre and anxious ; for he was asking himself whether it would not be better for her to learn the news from him rather than from a less sympathetic informant. But he decided that it was not the place or the time to deal so cruel a blow, and that he would go down to Summerleigh in a day or two.

He engaged a carriage, bought a stock of magazines and illustrated papers, tipped the guard to an extent that startled even that often and liberally tipped official, and stood beside the door like a soldier on guard. Cynthia did not thank him—indeed, she felt that her only safety lay in silence; but her hand lingered in his and her eyes rested on his homely face with a full understanding, a profound gratitude.

“You’re off,” he said, as the train moved. “You’ll send for me if—if you want me, however little. And, I say, try and forget that I—spoke to you. That’s all right. Good-bye!”

Cynthia drew down her veil hastily and lay back in a corner of the carriage; and Parsons made no foolish attempt to comfort her. A fly awaited them at the station, and the faithful Betsy, who had been engaged as “general,” was waiting at the garden gate to welcome them; and Cynthia was home again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOME

Tired as Cynthia was, she lay awake a great part of the night in her old bed in her old room; and at times in those still watches she was almost yielding to a belief that all that had passed in the days since she had left the cottage was the phantasmagoria of a dream. If only her father were there with her, to comfort and console her, to encourage her, with his cynical but gentle humour, to take up her life again!

Much to Cynthia's relief—for she had misgivings on the point—Parsons was delighted with her new quarters.

"You see, miss," she remarked, as she brushed Cynthia's hair—for the last time, Cynthia insisted; for there would be plenty of more important duties for Parsons now—"You see, Miss Cynthia, I'm country-born and bred like yourself, and I've never been really happy up there in London; there's always been a feeling in my heart that I didn't belong there, but was only waiting to get back. And it's such a lovely place, Miss Cynthia! I was up early this morning—I wouldn't wake . . . for I knew that you'd lie awake most of the night, as was only natural—and I took a walk and a look around. It's perfectly beautiful; and the house is just like one of those at home. The smell of the flowers came in at my window and woke me, if you'll believe me, miss! And Betsy's such a nice, cheerful girl. And

handy! Lor', Miss Cynthia, when I think of all the servants that was wanted to run the London house! And to see that that bit of a girl had got everything neat and tidy before I was up, early as I was; it fair astounded me."

"I am glad you are pleased, Parsons," said Cynthia gratefully. "And I hope you will be happy; the change from Westlake House——"

"Don't you speak or think of it, Miss Cynthia," broke in Parsons earnestly. "And, besides, if it's good enough for my betters, it ought to be good enough for me. If this air—why, it's like champagne!—will only bring the colour back to your cheeks—not that you ever had much, miss; but you know what I mean?"

"Yes," said Cynthia, with an attempt at her old brightness of speech and manners. "I am going to get quite well, so that when my father comes back——"

For the first two days she kept to the house and garden; not at once could she dare to go to the hillside from which she could see the stream and the bridge, the chimneys of the Court rising above the trees; but on the third day, towards evening, she ventured to leave the precincts of home, and, avoiding the path to the bridge, went round by the moor—that moor which her father had refused to sell to Darrels'—it was hard to realise that Sir Anson had indeed gone to his heritage of six feet by four, as her father had put it—and made her way towards the village; but she did not reach it on this occasion; for, suddenly, on a wall, she came upon a large bill headed—

"To be sold, by order of the Mortgagee, the Estate of Summerleigh Court."

She stopped and gazed at it, reading no more than the bold-faced heading; then she turned back towards the cottage, her heart aching painfully.

Darrel was poor, homeless ; it was well that he was absent, that his eyes should not be seared by that horrible, staring placard. But surely her sacrifice was not a vain one, and he would reap the reward ! She had left him free to win his way back to fortune, to his proper place—no, her sacrifice would not be in vain.

As she came in sight of the cottage, she saw a big, clumsy figure lounging against the gate. It was Sampson Burridge's ; and involuntarily she stopped and hesitated ; and at that instant she remembered, with the pain of a sudden heart-stab, the day he had lounged on the bridge ; and the vision of the boy-preserver rose before her. But she stopped for a moment only ; for she knew that she must meet Sampson sooner or later ; and grief and misfortune had not robbed Cynthia of her old spirit.

He did not come forward to meet her, but held the gate open—as if the cottage were his rather than hers—with one hand, and extended the other. He, too, had changed ; and for the worse ; his big face had grown fatter and coarser, and his resemblance to his father was closer than ever ; an evil-smelling cigar was stuck in the corner of his thick lips, stretched in a grin that was meant for one of welcome, and his small, cunning eyes stared at her with insolent admiration and a covert triumph.

“How d'y do, Cynthia ?” he cried. “My ! you're looking pale and pecky, an' no mistake ! Been having a bad time, ain't you ? Heard the news, of course. The old lady played it low down on you, went back on you, didn't she ? Somehow, I always thought she would. No, I wasn't a bit surprised. There's no trusting the best of her sort ; and she wasn't the best by any means ; though she was such an out an' out swell.”

Cynthia touched the red, flabby hand and made a murmured response, and after a moment she passed

on to the house, hoping that he would go; but Sampson, the admiration growing bolder in his eyes, followed her into the sitting-room, and, plumping into a chair, said—

“I’ll sit down and have a chat with you for a minute or two, Cynthia; can’t stop long, because we’re busy with the sale, you know.”

Cynthia stood by the table, refraining from removing even her gloves; but Sampson did not appear at all abashed by his reception.

“I suppose you saw the bills?” he inquired with a grin. “Fine, ain’t they? I drew ’em up. Biggest sale we’ve had in these parts. Ought to have got the thing through before; but the governor muddled the notice, got behindhand with it—he’s getting old, you know, old and a bit shaky—and he wouldn’t leave it to me. If he had, I’d have put it through before this. I suppose you’ll come to the sale? All the county will be there——” Cynthia shook her head. “No? You oughter! But if you’d rather not—and, of course, I can understand your feelings—you can look round the place before the day; and if you like to pick out one or two things you fancy, I’ll have ’em bought in for you. Not many, of course; for we mean to buy the whole show as it stands; we mean to keep the old furniture, that is, the best of it, and carry on the Court in the good old way. The gov’nor was for letting it, but I stuck out against that. Not me! I’m going to be master of Summerleigh Court, and one of the county gentry.”

He grinned with a mixture of cunning and satisfaction that made the blood tingle in Cynthia’s veins; but she remained silent.

“Father not back yet?” he said after a pause, during which he flung the butt-end of his foul cigar into the fire-place. “He’s a regular wandering Jew, isn’t he? I’m wishing to see him, Cynthia;

for I want to buy the piece of m. land he and old Sir Anson used to quarrel about."

"My father is on his way home," said Cynthia. "I don't want to seem discourteous, Sampson; but—I am tired; I do not desire to see visitors——"

He rose, but laughed banteringly. "Oh, come, I'm not an ordinary visitor, Cynthia," he retorted. "You and me are old friends. I'm not forgetting that you've been a kind of a swell, and treated me that night we met outside that place in London as if I was beneath your notice; but I'm a good-hearted chap and don't bear malice. I should be ashamed to drop a friend because I happened to be up in the world and she's down. Well, I'll be off. But I'll look in now and again for a talk over old times; jolly, weren't they? Lor', little did either of us think of the changes that were coming! But don't you be down-hearted, Cynthia! Your luck may take a turn!"

With a nod and a wink, a leering smile, he lurched to the door, but paused on the threshold and added over his shoulder——

"Don't forget to go over the house and pick out them things; but not many, mind!"

When he had quite gone, Cynthia said to Parsons, who, from the passage, was staring with amazement and indignation at the departing Sampson——

"If that—gentleman should call again, please say that I am not at home, Parsons."

"I should think so, indeed!" responded Parsons, scarcely inaudibly.

But though repulsed, Sampson was not abashed or beaten off; and one evening he waylaid Cynthia as she was returning from a walk. She would have turned aside and avoided him, but Sampson lurched in front of her and held out his hand. She saw that he had been drinking, and with a shudder of loathing she tried to pass him; but he cried——

"Hi, stop! Don't carry it too far, Cynthia. I want to see you. They always tell me you're not at home when I come; but I'm not to be put off in that hoity-toity fashion. I've got something to say to you. I've been thinking about you a good deal since you came back, thinking about you and me——"

"Please let me pass, Sampson," said Cynthia, anger added to the loathing. "I do not want to hear you, to talk to you——"

"Oh, come!" he said with a grin. "Those airs won't wash with me, Cynthia. I know you too well to be put off with 'em. What I was thinkin' was that you and me would step together well in double harness. Don't you understand?" For Cynthia was looking at him in a kind of stupor of surprise and incredulity. "I'm making you a regular proposal of marriage. That's what it is, and no mistake, Cynthia. I'm not surprised that you're taken aback. Suppose you thought I was only flirting with you? Well, that's what I thought at first; but I'm serious, Cynthia; I mean what I say. Of course, I know I could do better—bless you, I could aim at one of the best families!—but I'm only speaking the truth when I say that there isn't one of 'em that could hold a candle to you; or could queen it better at the Court up there. What do you say, Cynthia; shall we make a match of it?"

Cynthia, red with shame—for was not such a proposal an insult and an outrage?—opened her lips to crush the wretch with one word, if that were possible; but Sampson misinterpreted the crimson flush, the indignant flashing of her eyes, and with a nod and a grin went on fatuously—

"Takes your breath away, doesn't it? But I'm serious. And I want to have you soon——"

Her voice found itself at last.

"Stand out of my way!" she said quietly, calmly

enough, but with an accent that penetrated even Sampson's thick hide.

"Oh, that's it!" he said between his teeth. "Riding the high horse, are you? I'm not good enough for you! Sampson Burrige of Summerleigh Court not good enough for a beggarly Drayle!" He laughed insolently, with a touch of rage, of malignant desire to wound. "I suppose your fancy's still set on that Frayne fellow? There now, don't blaze up!" Cynthia's eyes seemed to scorch—and sober—him. "What's the use of dwelling on him? He's a back number even if he's alive; and the odds are that he's a dead 'un."

Cynthia had turned away; but she stopped suddenly and looked over her shoulder at her tormentor. There was something in the expression of her face which shamed him into silence for a moment; and he went on in a half-apologetic manner—

"Looks as if you hadn't heard? But you must have. No? Do you mean to say that you don't know Darrel Frayne was killed—or missing, it's all the same, I expect—after that fight out there in India?—Hi! Stop, Cynthia! I didn't mean to spring it on you. Here, you aren't going to faint——"

Cynthia, with blind eyes, warded him off with her shaking hands, and after a moment walked on.

CHAPTER XXIX

'TIS A SMALL WORLD

ONE evening, in the vivid violet light which precedes the deeper shades of an Afghan night, Darrel and his preserver and guide, Abdurmahn, toiled slowly up the hill which casts its shadows over the small station of Dhinpur. To recount their adventures since they left the mullah and started on their perilous way through the Afridis' country towards safety would but bore the reader with a recital of deadly monotony, rendered hideous by insufficient food and water, and alarms which were not seldom false, but always disquieting and irritating.

Darrel would have proposed a more daring and open course; but Abdurmahn, true to his sacred vow, would not permit his charge to imperil his life by foolhardiness. He knew that should they be seen and detected by the Afridis, neither his nor Darrel's existence would be worth a melon seed; and even now, when they were passing through the last miles of the danger zone and would soon sight the station from the top of the hill, he did not relax his vigilance and caution; and his dark eyes were turned in every direction, as if he still expected an ambush and were ready to repel an attack.

But, indeed, with all the will in the world, Darrel could not have made the journey much more quickly;

for his wound still troubled him, and the scarcity of food kept him weak. Abdurmahn foraged with all the skill of a hillman, obtaining supplies in the villages they passed, or even purchasing them from the stray travellers they met, half-wild men trudging beside their mules laden with the merchandise in which their owners were trading; but a mess of dried beans, a chapati, or an occasional draught of goat's milk, though apparently quite sufficient for Abdurmahn, was scarcely the kind of diet for a man in Darrel's condition. But, of course, he professed complete satisfaction; and Abdurmahn, in the course of that exceedingly trying and nerve-destroying journey, began to understand why it was that the English are so hard a nut to crack, even for an Afridi, and why those apparently weak white men always win in the long run.

"I should think we could make it to-night," said Darrel wistfully, as he looked up the steep ascent which had still to be made before they could see the haven of little huts which, Abdurmahn assured him, lay in the valley on the other side. "You know the way, and we're good for another ten miles surely."

Abdurmahn shook his head gravely and glanced at the slight and considerably wasted figure toiling beside him.

"No, sahib," he said. "It is not so near as you think; and it is dangerous to travel in this land by dark; there are always badmasi"—he meant bad characters—"on the look-out for chance plunder. It will be wise to sleep in a nullah and go on with the dawn."

Darrel stifled a sigh. "A pretty pair we shall look when we do reach it," he remarked with a grim smile, as he surveyed their travel-stained rags. "Perhaps you're right; for I should think it very likely that the sentry would fire on us at

night, and without challenging; and the stiffest court-martial would exonerate him. Do you know what is the first thing I shall howl for, Abdurmahn, when we do get there?"

"Food that the sahib likes," ventured Abdurmahn; "bullock's meat, white bread, and whisky pawnee?"

"Not a bit of it," retorted Darrel. "They're all good things in their way, and I shan't say 'No' to them; but what my soul craves for is a cake of soap and a bath. I'd swap all the rest for 'em."

The Afridi looked at him pensively. "It is always so, sahib," he remarked with the air of a man who muses over an extraordinary fact. "It is always the first thing the English soldiers ask for when they come to a village; they love to wash themselves; the bath first and then the food. With an Afridi it is the meat and then the bath." He shrugged his shoulders. "It waits."

Darrel laughed. "A mere matter of habit, Abdurmahn," he said absently, as he surveyed his hands, black with the sun and the grime, and knew that his face was a capital match for his paws.

They toiled upwards in silence, each occupied by his thoughts; the Afridi doubtless thinking of Khasti, the Englishman also dwelling on the eternal feminine, the woman he had loved and lost. There were boulders in the way, and Darrel's feet, hardened though they were by the long march, often missed their aim and caused him to stumble; and presently Abdurmahn, whose watchful eyes had noticed the signs of the fatigue which comes close on exhaustion, called a halt.

"There is a nullah there, sahib," he said, pointing to a cave-like depression in the hill-side. "We will rest there; it is our last night. To-morrow we reach the station, and the sahib will be safe, I will go and

find some water, some food, perhaps; for this is the road the merchants use."

Darrel dropped down and began to remove the remains of his boots—stockings had disappeared long since—and Abdurmahn went off on his quest. Weary as he was, Darrel could not sleep; for "the little devil in his stomach," as the Afridis put it, was calling, "Feed me, feed me!" and he propped himself up on the edge of the nullah and looked vacantly down on the way they had come. The silence which broods over these solitudes, a silence which, like the Egyptian darkness, can be felt, enveloped him like a cloak; but through it he could hear Cynthia's voice sounding as if in a mist, and, as had often been the case, he could almost feel her presence near him.

Hungry as he was, he had almost fallen asleep, when he heard footsteps. They were not Abdurmahn's, for his stealthy feet made no sound; and, instinctively—for Darrel had learnt to dread a foe in every approaching man—he dropped full length and strained his eyes and ears watchfully. Presently a slight form was silhouetted against the deep purple of the sky, and a man stood within fifty yards of the nullah and looked upwards, as if hesitating whether to continue his way or to take shelter for the night.

Darrel judged the new-comer to be an elderly, rather than a young, man, and was puzzled by his appearance and manner; for the man was dressed like a native, and yet held himself erect and with an air quite unlike that of the men Darrel had met on his way. There was no mule; there was nothing to indicate the object which had brought the man to so lonely and perilous a spot at an hour when, according to Abdurmahn, thieves were on the prowl.

Darrel cast his eye round in search of Abdurmahn,

but there was no sign of him ; and he was debating whether he should give the signal, a night bird's note, which should convey a warning to his guide, when the man slowly put his hand to his pocket.

"He has seen me and is going to fire," thought Darrel, and he drew himself still farther into the nullah ; but the stranger took out a pipe instead of a revolver, and proceeded to light it. "Is it madness or pluck ?" Darrel asked himself ; for the tiny light of the match had offered a mark for any scoundrel who might be lurking near.

Even as he asked himself the question, he heard sounds—faint and stealthy, but audible to his now keenly trained ears—and a moment afterwards two figures sprang up from behind one of the boulders, and, without a word, threw themselves upon the contemplative traveller. Darrel was scarcely surprised ; but the onslaught was so swift, so sudden, that he lay still while one could count twenty, then he sprang up and flung himself into the fight—for a fight it had already become, the attacked closing manfully with his assailants.

As Darrel rushed down upon the three he caught the gleaming of knives, heard the deep breathing of the combatants, and, as he did not break the silence, his sudden participation in the trouble caused an amazement which for a moment brought about a cessation of hostilities. The man who had been set upon turned his eyes to see whether this was an additional foe, and the thieves also stared at him.

Something in Darrel's face reassured the assailed, and he turned his revolver, which he had swung round on Darrel, on the nearest assailant ; but the man knocked it up and struck with his knife. The aim was necessarily cramped and uncertain, and missed ; but the force of the blow caused the traveller to stumble. He fell, and "the subsequent pro-

ceedings would have interested him no more" if Darrel had not at that moment thrown the thief he was grappling with and turned his attention to the man lunging at his victim.

For a minute or two the issue hung on the knees of the gods; but Darrel, whose blood was up, had got his man by the throat, and was squeezing the life out of him with a persistence of which Darrel himself was quite unconscious, though he was fully sensible of a knife-thrust from the other ruffian, which had penetrated his arm. Relieved of the grip which had kept him down, the stranger got to his feet. The next instant there was the sharp sound of a revolver, a deep, guttural cry from above, and, as if the assailants had been blown into the sky, they disappeared.

When Abdurmahn came up with his smoking revolver in his hand he saw Darrel and the stranger staring at each other in the semi-darkness, and, breathing hard, too hard for immediate speech. At last the rescued person held out his hand, much to Darrel's amazement, and, to his still greater astonishment, said in good, delicious English—

"I'm much obliged to you, sir."

Darrel gasped, and the blood rushed to his face; for how sweet the old tongue sounded!

"You—you are English!" he panted.

The stranger nodded. "Yes; but I should have been a citizen of a still better land if you had not cut in as you did just now. I'm very grateful; but I won't bore you with thanks, especially as I am anxious to know whether you are seriously hurt." He pointed to the blood which was dripping from Darrel's sleeve. But Darrel was in no mood to worry about a mere flesh wound.

"How did you know that I was English?" he asked.

The stranger smiled. "A native would have

waited to see which side was winning before joining in the fun ; and, again, you did not use the knife, but took to your fists ; and, besides—well, I suppose it is difficult for an Englishman when he is off his guard to conceal his nationality."

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CHAPTER XXX

A STRANGE MEETING

ABDURMAHN interrupted the conversation by seizing Darrel's arm and leading him to the nullah, where he made Darrel impatiently prove to him that the wound was of no consequence. The rescued person seated himself and calmly took out the precious pipe, which he had managed to slip into his pocket at the moment he was attacked, and was proceeding to light it, when he caught Darrel's eye fixed on it longingly. With a word of comprehension, he handed the pipe to Darrel, and Darrel, who was not devoid of tact, at once with a murmur of gratitude accepted the priceless loan.

"Been without a smoke some time?" asked the gentleman; for at his first words Darrel had known him for one—"By their voice ye shall know them."

"For weeks—months—years, it seems," replied Darrel, with a kind of sigh as he drew in the fragrant baccy. "Ever since I left the Barajh Pass——"

"You were in the fight for the fort, then?"

"Yes," said Darrel with a different kind of sigh.

The stranger nodded. "A fierce bit of work," he said gravely. "I read of it in a stray paper at Dhinpur, where I have been staying for a few days. What is your regiment?"

"The Rexford Fusiliers," replied Darrel. "Are you in the Service?" he inquired with the usual shyness.

"No; I'm a civilian; a globe-trotter, I'm afraid.

I've come through from Burmah. How is it you are not with your regiment?"

Darrel told the story of the fight, his wound, and his rescue by Abdurmahn; and he was listened to with evident interest.

"You have had a wonderful, a miraculous escape," said the stranger; "an escape which not one man in a thousand left wounded on an Afridi hill-side ever makes."

"I know," said Darrel with an involuntary shudder. "And I'm afraid I'm reported dead as well as missing."

"You can wire from the station," said the newcomer.

Darrel nodded, but with no great eagerness; for to whom should he wire?

"I was going to tell you how I came to be out to-night and alone," continued the stranger. "I am interested in mining affairs; I suppose I might call myself a prospector; and I find that it is much safer, excites less curiosity, if I look round in the quiet of the evening. I was warned that I ran some risks in doing so in this country; but—oh, well, one forgets or gets careless. To-night, but for you, would have been my last 'little wander,' as the Afridis call it."

"Oh, that's all right," said Darrel hastily, and with the embarrassment of the man who is being thanked by another equally brave. "It's all in the day's work; and you'd have done the same for me. Oh, here's Abdurmahn with the grub; you know the sort of thing. It's getting pitchy dark."

"The easiest way to find is the way to one's mouth," remarked the stranger cheerfully, as he took his share of parched peas and the chapati, and the lukewarm acrid fluid which Abdurmahn poured from a leather skin and called "water."
"You'll be glad of a square meal when you get to

the station, and it will afford me one of the greatest pleasures of my life to see that you get it."

They talked in undertones for a little while longer, discussing the wild country and its still wilder inhabitants, and avoiding personal matters; then Abdurmahn, with a grunt of dissatisfaction, reminded Darrel that they must rise early, and that he had better turn in. Darrel laughed so he stretched himself out obediently, remarking apologetically, "Abdurmahn and I get on very well as long as I refrain from shaking his conviction that he has a kind of orphan child to take care of."

In less than five minutes he was fast asleep. The stranger, not so tired as his rescuer and host, lay with open eyes, which rested with rather a strange expression on the stars which shone through the mouth of the cave. Suddenly Darrel stirred in his sleep and uttered a word—one word only.

It was "Cynthia."

The man beside him started and raised himself on his elbow, to find Abdurmahn's fierce eyes flaming through the darkness at him; and, knowing that if he made a movement which the Afridi might deem suspicious he would probably never make another, he dropped down again.

When Darrel woke he found the stranger sitting up and regarding him with intense gravity.

"Good sleep?" he asked. "I wonder whether you will think me intrusive if I ask you your name?"

"Not at all," said Darrel, stifling a yawn and stretching himself. "My name's Frayne—Darrel Frayne."

"I thought so," observed his companion calmly. "I knew your father; and now that I can see you, I see that you resemble him."

"You—knew—my father!" said Darrel sharply. "Who—what is your name, sir?"

"Bradley Drayle," was the quiet answer.

Darrel sprang to his feet, his sudden movement causing Abdurmahn to spring towards them, knife in hand.

"Bradley Drayle!" echoed Darrel in a husky voice; for the poor fellow was almost certain that he was dreaming; "Bradley Drayle! Then—then you are Cynthia's father!"

Drayle nodded with his pleasantly cynical smile.

"Yes. The world is a small place. You have heard the remark before, no doubt. Here are you and I on a hill-side in the great Goola Pass; we meet as strangers; you have saved my life—sorry to remind you of it—have slept side by side—at least, you have slept, I am glad to know—and in the morning light we find that we both come from a little village in old England, a place not one Englishman in fifty thousand has ever heard of. How do you do, Mr. Frayne?"

He held out his hand, and Darrel caught it and pressed it. Drayle felt the young man's hand shaking like a leaf. Suddenly Darrel withdrew his hand and covered his face; for he was stunned, well-nigh unmanned—remember he was weak still—by the meeting. Drayle looked straight in front of him and kept silence for a minute or so; then he said in a low voice—

"I understand, Frayne. The sight of me has brought back—I was sorry, very sorry, to hear of Sir Anson's death, and—your misfortune."

Darrel nodded, but he could not speak yet. His heart was thumping, the blood was surging through his veins. "Cynthia's father, Cynthia's father!" he repeated to himself mutely.

"Can you give me any news of my daughter?" asked Drayle, as quietly as before, and still with his eyes set straight.

Darrel shook his head. "No," he replied hoarsely. "She was well when I saw her last, there in England"

Oh, Mr. Drayle"—his voice broke for a moment.—
"I must tell you! You know—she must have written to you—I love her. She was all the world to me. I—I lost her! She did not care for me. She promised to marry me, but she found that she did not care enough; she wrote and told me so——"
His voice failed, and he averted his head.

"It is not like Cynthy not to know her own mind, and it is still less like her to change it," said Drayle gravely.

"Don't blame her," exclaimed Darrel quickly and almost angrily. "It was a mistake, and she found it out in time. It was like Cynthia to face the truth."

Drayle shook his head and rubbed his eyebrow.

"I don't understand," he said simply. "And I must admit that I am curious to learn the reason of her action; for Cynthia, unlike most of her sex, has generally a reason, and a good one, for her proceedings. How strange that you and I should be discussing them, and in this place!"

"Of course she had a reason," said Darrel with something between a sigh and a groan. "But we won't talk of it, Mr. Drayle, please."

"We won't," said Drayle laconically. "We will forget it until we remember to remember it when we get back."

"Forget!" cried poor Darrel between his teeth. "That's easier said, sir. Forget! Why, there isn't an hour in the day that I don't think of her; for, you see, Mr. Drayle, that I—I love her still!"

Drayle laid his hand upon Darrel's shoulder and pressed it.

"So you told me in your sleep last night, lad!" he said gently. "No, my good Abdurmahn"—for Darrel's vigilant guardian had approached them threateningly—"I am not quarrelling with your master, and I've no intention of killing him. Come,

Darrel—yes, it must be 'Darrel,' lad—we'll make a bee-line for England and get Cynthia's explanation, though I've a shrewd notion of what it will be. You see, I've known our little Cynthia longer than you have, and I'll venture to go bail for her!"

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CHAPTER XXXI

A LOVE-INSPIRED HOPE

CYNTHIA reached the cottage; she walked slowly, her hand stretched out as if she were still blind, still groping her way. Parsons saw her from an upper window, and, with a cry of alarm, rushed down the stairs and caught her.

"Oh, you are ill, faint, Miss Cynthia?" she asked apprehensively, and, as Cynthia seemed incapable of speech, Parsons led her into the sitting-room; Cynthia's hand closing tightly on Parsons' arm as if she felt the need of some support.

"I am not ill," she said in a dull, mechanical way. "No; I am not ill, and yet—have I fainted? I met Mr. Sampson Burridge—he told me—what was it he told me, Parsons?—Ah!"

She remembered, and uttered the sound of a mortally stricken person; then she smiled and put out both hands as if to thrust back some dreadful threat, some great calamity. "It was only Sampson Burridge; it is not true—he said it to pain me, in revenge."

Parsons had deftly removed Cynthia's hat, and was plying the eau-de-Cologne bottle—her panacea for all sudden attacks of faintness, headache, and the nervous ills of life.

"What is it he told you, miss?" she asked soothingly. "Whatever it was, I'll be bound it was a lie. Everybody here hates that man and his father; and I've got to hate them myself already. To think

that he should have the impudence to stop you, and speak to you after being told not to——!"

Cynthia had been staring vacantly at the floor, and suddenly she raised her head.

"Get a telegraph form, Parsons, please," she said.

With a trembling hand she wrote, "Please tell me where Sir Darrel Frayne is," and was addressing it to Lord Northam when the reflection smote her swiftly that she had no right to inquire; she had given Darrel up long ago! She crushed the telegram in her hand and sat brooding over the torture Sampson had inflicted. Was it a lie? She had heard nothing of Darrel; she had not had the courage to ask after him, to pronounce the name which was engraven on her heart; she had, since Lady Westlake's death, scarcely read a line in a newspaper.

She was so absorbed in the vague terror of the dread Sampson's words had evoked that she did not hear the sound of footsteps on the garden path; but Parsons did, and exclaimed—

"It is Lord Northam, Miss Cynthia. Shall I tell him you are ill—ask him to wait?"

But Cynthia rose and went towards the door, and Northam saw her as he entered the little hall. He stopped short; for her face was that of one who is prepared for a death-blow. Without speaking, she held out the crushed telegram. He took it, read it, and raised his eyes to her; and his face was that of the man who is doomed to deal the blow.

"Come inside," he said, and he followed her into the sitting-room. "You were going to send that? The answer would have been, 'I don't know.' Cynthia, you will be brave; you'll bear in mind that nothing is known for certain. He was in this last expedition—you didn't know that? I thought not. There was fighting—won't you sit down?" She shook her head.

"Tell—tell me quickly," she said in a low voice. "It is the suspense——!"

He nodded. "A man has come down with me, one of the Rexfords which Frayne joined; he has some news, some message."

She looked over her shoulder; and after a moment's pause, as if to give her time to summon her strength, he turned to the window and beckoned. A thin, worn-looking young man came limping up the path and stood in the doorway of the room.

"Come, Dunton," said Northam in a low voice. "This is Mr. Drayle. Yes, you'd better tell her now, at once," he added; for Dunton, shrinking from his painful task, had looked from one to the other aghast.

"I'm—I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Miss Drayle," he said, almost inaudibly. "But—but I promised. I've—I've a message from Captain Frayne. It was entrusted to me the night before the attack on the fort, you know. We exchanged messages."

Cynthia held out her hand; it trembled no longer; her face was calm, but deadly white; her eyes were fixed on his with an expression which poor Dunton remembered for the rest of his life. He placed the tiny packet in her hand, and both men turned aside. She undid the wrapper and looked down at the ring as it lay in her hand. Then she spoke. To their relief—and yet to their alarm—her voice was as calm as her face, curiously and unnaturally calm.

"He gave you this to give to me if—if he died, if he were killed?" she asked.

Dunton turned his head. "He did," he said huskily.

"And he is killed? You saw him—dead?"

"No," he replied, "he is—missing. But"—he did not go on, but strove faintly for words that should conceal the horror of the story—"but we

searched for him ; we did not find him. The Afridis are brutes after a fight—the women——”

Northam stopped him by a gesture.

“ You understand, Cynthia ? ” he said gravely.

She went to the window and looked out, seeing nothing ; then she opened her hand and looked at the ring as if she were striving to gain some information from it—something more convincing than Dunton’s words ; and at last, as the two men were beginning to feel that the strain of the situation was intolerable, she said, as if she were speaking to herself—

“ He is not dead ! ”

“ Not dead ! ” echoed Dunton, startled ; for there was absolute conviction in her tone, in her eyes, which wore the expression of a seer.

“ No,” she said, “ not dead. Do you think I should not know ? ” She smiled on them and struck fresh terror to their hearts, for they feared that the shock had overturned her mind. “ Do you think that I could hold this ”—she held out her hand with the ring in it—“ and not feel, if—if he were dead ? ”

Northam took the other hand—she drew back the one which held the ring, as if she feared he was going to take it from her.

“ Try and—and think so until—Ah, no, Cynthia, I can’t pretend ; I can’t let you deceive yourself ; it would only be the harder to bear when you realised the truth. Poor Frayne is——”

“ No, no, no ! ” she broke in. “ He is not dead. If he were, I should know it—be sure of it. And I do not, I do not. If he had been killed I should have felt it the moment he died. You don’t believe ; you think I do not know what I am saying ? ” She smiled ; then her eyes flashed from face to face. “ You searched for him, you—— ? ”

“ Did everything that mortal men could do, Miss Frayne, I beg you to believe ! ” broke in Dunton

with sad eagerness. "We left no place unsearched; we sent out parties; we wired in every direction. A big reward was offered, is still on offer; it has been increased"—he glanced at Northam—"it is a sum large enough to tempt even an Afridi."

She drew her hand across her forehead, and stood for a moment looking before her; then she said with all the old sweetness—

"Will you sit down? I beg your pardon—oh, pray sit down! You—you were wounded?"

Dunton waved the question aside as he took a chair. Northam still stood beside her; for he feared that she might break down, fall suddenly.

"I am sorry! Now, will you tell me everything, please, Captain Dunton—it is 'Dunton,' is it not?—do not keep anything back; do not be afraid; I am quite strong and calm. I want to know—ah, can you not guess how badly I want to know? Wait, I will tell you," she went on, with a simple pathos which brought the tears to Dunton's eyes and made Northam bite his lip. "Mr. Frayne and I were engaged to be married. We—we loved each other when we were quite little—we used to play on the hill-side together—you can see the place from where you sit; there is a bridge over the stream——"

"You are trying yourself too severely," muttered Northam.

"No; let me go on. We were to be married; but the day before—yes, actually the day before—I was told that he was ruined, and that I should only make his ruin more complete, mar his future, drag him down, if I married him."

Northam did not start, but his brows came together, and he looked at her keenly, as if a suspicion as to who had been her informant was dawning on him.

"I wrote to tell him that I could not marry him—I did not give the real reason; I knew he would not

accept it. I—I let him think—Oh, God forgive me!—that I had ceased to care for him. Ceased to care for him!” she repeated with an anguished smile. “And so I—I sent him—no, not to his death, but to risk his life, to get wounded——” She shuddered, and her hand went to her throat as if she were choking. “Now you know that I have the right to hear everything. I have, have I not? It is part of the punishment which I have borne. Please, Captain Dunton!” she implored, as she sank into a chair beside him.

Northam signed to him, and Dunton told his story. He could not tell her everything—could not speak of the conduct of the Afridi women after the fight—but he dwelt on his affection and admiration for Darrel, and Darrel’s splendid courage and the qualities which had endeared him to his men and his brother-officers.

“He didn’t know what fear was——”

“He never did, he never will!” she breathed.

“It was his extraordinary pluck that led him into danger; he was in the thick of the scrimmage and fighting.—Oh, but you know!”

“I know,” her eyes responded mutely.

“He would have been first at the fort, but the Colonel gave him the order to charge the hill on the flank; the Afridis were strong there, and—and—Frayne went too far. Some of his men saw him fall—and would have gone to him, but they were surrounded. The rush carried them away, Miss Drayle. God knows that I’ve wished many and many a time since that I could have changed places with him, and—and I wish it now more than ever.”

She stretched out her hand and laid it on his wasted one; for the first time her eyes were wet.

“You—you said that very well; and I—I know you spoke the truth,” she said in a whisper. “Everybody loved him——”

“Not one of his men but would have died for him,”

he broke in hoarsely. "I—I think I'll go now, Miss Drayle."

Her hand closed on his. "Not yet. I am cruel. I am making you suffer. You will forgive me? He gave you this ring the night before——?" He inclined his head; he could not speak. "And you have brought it to me. Not as a death token; no, no! It is a token of hope. Yes, of hope. I—I shall keep it until he comes to claim it—and I shall give myself with it."

Her gaze was fixed above his head, her voice was like that of a prophetess of old, who sees into the future. There was silence for a moment; then she seemed to awake.

"But I am forgetting! What will you think of me? You have come all this way to bring me his token—and I have offered you nothing. I am ashamed! You shall have some tea—what time of the day is it?—Yes, tea!"

She rose and went towards the bell, and, before they could beg her to let them refuse, she had rung it. Parsons came in, pale with anxiety and apprehension.

"Some tea, Parsons, please!" she said; then her hand went up to her head, her eyes closed, and she staggered. Northam caught her in his arms and carried her to her room.

For days after she had recovered from the fainting fit, she lay in a state of collapse; a merciful state, in which the overstrained brain was incapable of connected thought, the over-tortured heart almost as incapable of suffering. Northam, who remained at the inn, was afraid that she would die; but the doctor did not share his dread.

"A sudden shock, even of the worst kind, does not kill the young and strong, Lord Northam," he said, "But Nature has its limits, and Miss Drayle has overstepped one of them. She will pull round in

time, for one reason, if for no other. She has no wish to die; she wants to live. A person who takes enough interest in life to ask for the back numbers of 'The Times'—"

"She must not have them!" said Northam anxiously.

"Indeed but she must," said the doctor quietly. "To refuse would bring about a condition much more to be dreaded than her present one. Will you please get them?"

Northam got the papers, and Cynthia read the account of the expedition and the battle; and the doctor's judgment was justified; for when she had gone through the special correspondent's letters, the graphic description of the engagement, she took a turn for the better; and one morning she told Parsons she intended getting up.

"I want to get well quickly," she said in response to Parsons' remonstrances and entreaties. "I have a long journey before me—I am going out to India, to the Frontier, Parsons. Will you come with me?"

Instead of replying, Parsons stole from the room and dispatched Betsy for the doctor and Lord Northam. To her amazement and indignation, the former, who arrived first, received the information with calmness and acquiescence.

"Not at all a bad idea, my dear," he said, patting her hand. "A complete change of scene——"

Cynthia smiled wanly, her eyes fixed on his kindly ones.

"I am going out to find him," she said simply.

He nodded. "Well, why not? Your emancipated sex can travel anywhere nowadays. You shall go to India, if you like——"

She nodded at him gratefully.

"You are wise as well as kind," she murmured. "You understand. He is not dead, and I shall find him."

"I really believe you will, if he is alive!" he said. "But you will have to be quite well and strong before you can start on so trying a journey and mission."

"How long?" she asked, with a flushed face and shining eyes.

"Not for a year, if you excite yourself," he retorted. "But if you will keep your mind cool, and eat three square meals a day, presently—we'll say in a couple of months."

Northam stared aghast when the doctor informed him of Cynthia's resolution.

"Going to look for him! Why—why, it's madness! And the poor fellow's dead!"

"Is he?" said the doctor, screwing up his eyes. "Well, upon my word, I'm not sure of it. You see, I've listened to her so often that I'm beginning to believe that she may be right. Anyhow, there's a month before us; and, my dear Lord Northam, I'm old enough to know that much may happen in a month. Are you going to the sale to-morrow?" he broke off.

"What sale?—Oh, the Fraynes', the Court? I don't know. Why should I?"

"To employ your mind," responded the wise old man. "Go and buy something. I shall have you on my hands directly; and, to tell you the truth, my lord, I've already got a patient who demands all the attention I can spare from my regular ones. Yes; I should go to the sale, if I were you."

Northam gazed vacantly at the boots which enclosed his big and useful feet; then he looked up with a look of intelligence in his placid eyes.

"I understand!" he said. "Right you are! I'll go!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE REPENTANT SINNER

THAT same afternoon Parsons arranged the table beside the sofa to which Cynthia had promoted herself, and was pouring out the tea for her beloved young mistress when she saw the only station fly draw up at the gate. A lady stepped out and stood looking up at the windows; and Parsons, in the subdued and cautious manner appropriate towards an invalid recovering from a collapse, said—

"Here's a visitor, Miss Cynthia; but, of course, you won't see her."

"Her?" said Cynthia with faint surprise. "Who is it, Parsons?"

"Lady Alicia, miss.—Bless my heart, and how bad she looks! She's that thin and white! I'll go down and tell her that you're not well enough——"

"No," said Cynthia quietly. "I will see her. Ask her to come up; and bring another teacup."

"The doctor——" remonstrated Parsons; but Cynthia shook her head. "Well, miss, of course, I can't help myself, if you insist; but I hope you'll tell him it isn't my fault; he's such a fiery-tempered old gentleman——"

Cynthia sat up and waited. She had suffered too much to be overcome by a visit from Lady Alicia; but she knew that the sight of her would bring back that night before the wedding, when Lady Alicia had, alas! persuaded her that it was her duty to break her engagement with Darrel.

Lady Alicia entered, and stood for a moment

looking at Cynthia, who, though she had been prepared by Parsons' remark, was struck by the alteration in Lady Alicia's appearance. As Parsons had said, Alicia Northam was but a shadow of her former self; her bright, vivacious air had given place to one of settled melancholy, and the dark shadows under her eyes, the pallor of the lips, spoke of sleepless nights and brooding days.

"Are you sure you are well enough to see me?" were her first words.

"I am quite sure," said Cynthia. "Sit down there and pour out the tea for us. Yes; I've been ill—but you, too, have been ill, have you not?"

Lady Alicia drew off her gloves and kept her eyes on Cynthia's face, with the expression of one doggedly carrying out a painful resolution.

"Yes," she replied. "I look what I am, a wreck."

"Are you well enough to come such a distance, to travel?"

"Perhaps not; but I had to come. I've heard of you from Northam. He does not know I am here——"

"Not know!" echoed Cynthia with surprise.

"No," said Lady Alicia slowly, "and I do not wish him to know. I shall return by the night train. A meeting between us would not be pleasant. You told him that it was I who advised you, persuaded you to—to jilt Darrel Frayne?"

Cynthia coloured. "No," she said simply.

"Then he guessed it," said Lady Alicia. "He is quicker than most people think. He wrote to me——" She took a letter from her pocket, but thrust it back again. "No, I won't show it to you. Northam can be angry when he likes; and he has not spared me. And I'm not in the humour to spare myself. I've come to make confession, Cynthia."

"To make confession——?"

"Yes; perhaps it isn't necessary; very probably you have hit upon the truth before this. Cynthia, you may say what you like, curse me with your lips as no doubt you have cursed me in your heart. I deserve it, and, if you can understand, it would be a kind of relief; though, God knows, I have been punished enough."

"I don't understand——" said Cynthia, pale again now, but trying to suppress her agitation; for she had to get well and strong quickly. She must not permit herself to be thrown back; she would need all her strength for the journey that lay before her.

Lady Alicia looked at her with a kind of dull curiosity.

"You do not? Cynthia, you will remain a child all your life! You are unlike any woman I have ever met. Even as a girl I was never so simple or unsuspecting as you; and it was this simplicity that helped me to get my way with you. Another woman would have been suspicious, have asked herself why I should have taken the trouble to dine with you that night, to talk to you as I did. You thought I had come to dinner in the ordinary, casual way? It was arranged between me and Lady Westlake; and I came with the intention of separating you from Darrel Frayne."

Cynthia's face flushed for a moment. "My aunt acted for the best according to her lights," she said in a low voice. "She is dead——"

"And I wish I were dead also!" said Lady Alicia quietly. "You think that I played the part I did out of friendship for her? I saw that I performed my part well; my friends call me a good actress. I was brought up in a different school from yours, Cynthia, and learnt to lie at an early age. I was lying to you that night. If I had been in your place I would have married Darrel Frayne if he had not possessed a coat to his back."

Cynthia stared at her. "And yet——"!

"I persuaded you that it was for his own good that you should jilt him. Oh, don't you see?" for there was no comprehension in Cynthia's steady gaze. "I had an object in what I did; every word was uttered with a purpose. I wanted to separate you from him, because, because——"

Her hard voice faltered and her eyes sank; but no colour came to her face. The truth dawned on Cynthia at last, and she shrank back involuntarily.

"Don't—don't say any more!" she breathed.

"Yes; you see now," said Lady Alicia bitterly. "It was because I loved him and wanted him for myself; I would have moved heaven and earth, would have gone through fire to snatch him from you. You look as if you were startled, amazed. You did not deem me capable of so much feeling? You are still so innocent that you do not know that we cold-natured women are more passionate when our hearts are touched than women of warmer natures. With us it is one love, one love in a life! Darrel Frayne was mine. The first time I saw you and him together—in the Park, you remember?—I saw that you were in love with each other. Trust a woman to know in an instant when another woman loves the man she wants. And I had loved him the first time I met him; had set myself to win him. And you, a bit of a girl just freed from the school-room, were to take him from me! Do you wonder that I planned and schemed, set all my wits to work, to baulk you?"

Cynthia leant back, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her eyes fixed on Lady Alicia's.

"But—but you spoke the truth; your advice was—was sensible."

Lady Alicia laughed almost scornfully.

"The truth! You didn't see that, robbed of you, Darrel Frayne was more likely to rush headlong to

ruin, ruin of body and soul, than to work his way back to his old place! I knew that, and I counted upon his turning to me when his ruin was complete; and I would have taken him all too gladly, thankfully, if he had sunk as low as a man could sink. You were a fool to take my advice, Cynthia."

"Yes," said Cynthia quietly. "I was a fool. I know it now; and that makes my punishment harder to bear."

"It is not harder than mine," said Lady Alicia; "for my remorse is keener, more bitter. We sent him to his death between us; but it is I who must answer for his life; it was I who prompted, persuaded you. Day and night I am conscious of that. I know what a murderer feels when he is haunted by his victim."

"He is not dead!" breathed Cynthia almost inaudibly.

Lady Alicia started and caught her breath.

"You have heard—news?" she panted.

"No; nothing that you have not heard," said Cynthia with a sigh, "but——"

Lady Alicia shook her head. "It is only a hope, an idea——?"

"A conviction," said Cynthia solemnly.

Lady Alicia stared at her; then she shook her head.

"There is no hope," she said in a hollow voice.

"He is dead. And my heart, all that to me is worth living for, died with him. I meant to keep from you the knowledge of the part I played; but—but I have been ill; I was half mad for a time; and Northam's letter worked on me. I felt that, if I were to have any peace, I must come and tell you, Cynthia. You will think hardly of me, won't understand——"

Cynthia leant forward, her eyes moist, her breath coming painfully.

"Ah, but I do, I do!" she said with sad earnestness. "You acted wickedly, selfishly; but—but—oh, do you think I do not know, I who love him, how greatly you were tempted? To lose Darrel! To see a chance of winning him—Oh, I understand. I understand!"

Lady Alicia stared at her. "Then you—forgive me, Cynthia!" she faltered.

"Yes; forgive and—pity!" responded Cynthia gravely, her eyes dwelling pityingly on the white face, the twitching lips.

Lady Alicia rose. "You—you are a good woman, Cynthia; I had almost said a saint," she murmured brokenly. "Another woman, hearing of what I had done, would have cursed me——"

Cynthia shuddered and held up her hand.

"Don't!" she breathed. "I have no bitterness in my heart. There is no room for that," she added with simple pathos. "It is too full of him. I know that he is not dead; I am going to find him——"

Lady Alicia's self-possession broke up, and the tears welled slowly to her eyes.

"God help you; help us both, Cynthia," she said in a low voice. "You have still more to suffer; for—for—you will not accept the dreadful truth. It will be all the harder to bear when it is forced on you. I will go now. I—I am glad I came, though you will never know the effort it cost me to face you, to confess."

She stood for a moment, looking at Cynthia; then she turned away; but Cynthia rose and laid her hand on her arm.

"When I said 'forgive,' I meant that I forgave you fully," she said in a low voice. "You asked God to help us. If I did not believe that He will—ah, but I must keep on hoping, I must, I must! Good-bye, Lady Alicia——"

Summoning all her strength of will, she drew her

fellow-sinner towards her and kissed her. Lady Alicia quivered in every limb; then suddenly her head dropped on Cynthia's bosom, and the two women held each other in a mutual embrace; then Lady Alicia drew herself from Cynthia's arms, made her way to the door, and passed out—passed out of Cynthia's life for many years.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SALE

ON his way to the sale the next morning, Northam called at the cottage to inquire after Cynthia, and heard that she was better; that, indeed, she was dressed and downstairs; but he did not go in; for the sight of the tearless misery and, worse, the baseless hope, as he considered it, which alleviated that misery, were too hard for him to bear.

As he drew near to the entrance to the Court, he saw that the sale had attracted a large number of people, who were now strolling about the drive or clattering over the house. The hall in which the sale was to take place was crowded, and a murmur of excited talking and laughing rose like the hum of a hive of bees. His entrance, of course, attracted considerable attention, and Northam got to a corner of the hall and leant against the wall, his face and manner as impassive as usual; so listless and uninterested, in fact, that the other spectators concluded that he had come to look on merely.

Presently he saw Mr. Burrige and Sampson, accompanied by the auctioneer, emerge from the library. Old Burrige's face wore its usual child-like expression; his thick lips hung loosely, and his eyes regarded the crowd, which stared back at him with interest, as if he wondered why they had all come. Sampson, on the other hand, was undisguisedly elevated; he had a half-smoked cigar in his lips, and he bestowed an arrogant, condescending nod here and there, as he pushed his way through

the crowd towards a chair at the table below the auctioneer's rostrum. He suddenly caught sight of Lord Northam in his comparatively quiet corner. Mr. Sampson's never at any time pleasing countenance was rendered still more unprepossessing by a scowl; but presently, forcing a smile, he turned and thrust his way to Northam's side.

"Mornin', my lord," he said, with a mixture of covert insolence and servility which made Northam's big toe itch. "Glad to see you, of course; but I'm afraid if you thought of picking up a bargain or two you'll be disappointed."

"As how, Mr. Burrige?" asked Northam with his impassive drawl; but with a certain something in his look which drove the insolence from Sampson's manner and voice as he answered—

"Well, you see, the conditions of the sale have been altered, my lord. The auctioneer—a first-rate man, my lord, one of the best—and my father, who is the mortgagee, have decided to offer the whole thing in two lots; the estate first, and the furniture and effects in a second lot; the purchaser of the first to take the second by the usual valuation, if he cares to do so. You see, the person who buys the house and estate may like to purchase the furniture and the rest of it—to take the whole show, you know."

"I see," said Northam. "A very good arrangement, Mr. Burrige."

"Glad you think so, my lord," said Sampson, his insolence coming back to him. "Hope you'll make a good bid for the whole thing. 'Fraid we shall come out badly, however high the bidding goes. Real estate is ruling low on the market, just now; in fact, properties are going for next to nothing; and I'm afraid we shall be left with the rickety old place on our hands, worse luck!"

"Yes? Wish you all the luck—you deserve, Mr.

Burridge," said Northam in an utterly expressionless voice.

Sampson glanced with his small, shifty eyes at him, forced a smile, and pushed his way back to the table. The auctioneer, a keen, hawk-faced man, rapped with his hammer for silence, and opened the sale with a very curt and brief eulogium of the property.

"No need for me to say more, gentlemen," he said in a perfunctory fashion. "You all know the Court—it's well known as one of the grandest and most beautiful estates in England; fine ancestral mansion standing in extensive and grandly wooded grounds, with several good farms attached, and all let to responsible tenants. Late the property of Sir Anson Frayne, deceased. And to be sold at the instance of the mortgagee. I shall offer the estate in one lot, and give the purchaser the option of taking the second lot at valuation——"

Murmurs rose; for many persons had come, some from London, in the hope of buying portions of the furniture, some of the pictures, and so on; but the auctioneer used his hammer again and silenced the complainers.

"Now for Lot 1," he said, his harsh, strident voice echoing through the grand old hall. "I'll take a bid for Lot 1. You all know about what it's worth; though, to speak frankly, times are bad. Give us a bid, please." Silence. "Is it cautiousness or shyness? No one ventures? Then I'll open the ball."

He named a sum which represented about a quarter of the value; but no one bettered the bid for some moments, and the hammer was going down when Northam nodded. The auctioneer looked surprise, but instantly called out the sum. Old Burridge just raised his eyes, and the auctioneer raised the amount by a hundred pounds; Northam

nodded again. The people craned their necks to get a sight of the man who possessed the temerity to bid against Mr. Burrige, but were puzzled; for Northam's face was like that of one carved in wood.

Mr. Burrige raised his eyes again, and continued to raise them, as Northam persistently bid against them. Burrige was as calm as a block of ice; but Mr. Sampson was getting hot and restless, and he bent his head and whispered in his father's huge ear—

“What's his game? Is he going to outbid us? What?”

Old Burrige's thick lips moved slowly.

“Keep quiet,” he muttered, as he nodded again.

Northam's higher bid promptly followed; the bidding rose quickly but steadily; half the value was reached; the sum increased, nearly the whole value had been bid by Northam. For the first time Burrige glanced in the direction of his opponent; and the old man's eyes were bland and childlike no longer. The spectators of the duel were growing more excited at every bid.

“Dear me, if old Burrige ain't met his match!” muttered an old farmer, one of the old tenants of the Court; and his wrinkled face grew still more wrinkled by the grin of hope. “I'd give my best cow, aye, that I would! to see him bested!”

“Not he!” retorted a fellow-tenant who stood beside him. “He won't let the old place be snatched from his claws. T'other chap—he's a fine gentleman, as all can see—will give in 'fore Burrige. The old devil won't lose his hold of the Court. We all do know that he's set his heart on it, he and Master Sampson; dang 'em both!”

The auctioneer, evidently ill at ease and by no means elated by the vigour of the contest, called the latest bidding and waved his hammer.

"Going, going!" he shouted; but before the hammer could fall, a voice, a voice this time, named the higher sum.

The auctioneer turned his eyes upon the spot from which the bid had come, and Sampson twisted in his chair and half rose, his face red, his eyes gleaming with excitement and dread; but the crowd was thickest in that part of the room, and he could not see the person who had spoken. Burrige sat immovable, his heavy jowl set square, his eyes fixed on the table. Northam looked in the direction of the last bidder, but he could not distinguish him in the crowd.

Northam bid another thousand pounds—for the advance was by a thousand now!—and waited. Burrige raised his eyes instantly; and the auctioneer, who was under Burrige's thumb and in his power, swung up the hammer and was bringing it down with the blow which would proclaim Mr. Burrige master of the Court, when the voice from the farther end of the room rose again quietly, but firmly.

The excitement was intense, almost intolerable; the crowd swayed and surged in its attempt to see who was bidding, bidding not only against cunning old Burrige and his overbearing son but Lord Northam; but only those who were near the man could get a glimpse of him, and they were too excited to reply to the murmurs of "Who is it? Who is it?"

Northam watched Burrige; would he raise those now strained and blood-shot eyes again? Suddenly the old man, on whom the gaze of all was fixed, drooped forward, as if some one had smitten him on the back. There was a commotion amongst those near the table; Sampson rose and caught his father's shoulder; the auctioneer, alarmed, confused, dropped the hammer, mechanically crying, "Gone!"

Sampson turned with a yell of fury, shouted

something and held up his hand almost threateningly; but a shout, it was almost a roar, rose from the crowd.

"It's sold, it's sold!" they cried. "You're too late, Master Sampson!" "The hammer had gone down." "It's sold!" "The Court's sold!" "Where's the man that bought it?" "Make way there; make way!"

Amidst the shouts, the yells of satisfaction and derision, a small but well-knit figure advanced through the press to the table.

"What—what name?" gasped the confused and now terrified auctioneer.

But there was no need for the purchaser to declare himself; a hundred voices shouted—

"Mr. Drayle! Mr. Drayle!" "Yes, 'tis Mr. Drayle!"

At the sound of the name, shouted again and again, as if the crowd could not cease to proclaim its excitement, old Burridge raised his head slowly and glared at his opponent; then his large mouth outlined with froth, he fell forward on the table. Utterly disregarding his father's collapse, Sampson, his face purple, his hands clenched, sprang at the auctioneer.

"I protest!" he shrieked. "I protest——"

"No, no; 'twas a fair sale!" yelled one of the crowd. "The hammer fell, the auctioneer cried 'Gone!' right enough!"

"I protest!" repeated Sampson. "This man—this Drayle is a pauper. *He* buy the Court!" He gave a cracked, insolent laugh. "He hasn't money enough to buy a pigsty!"

A roar of anger, of indignation, rose from a hundred throats; the auctioneer, remembering that he was amenable to the law, knowing that he had legally and validly sold the property, plucked up courage.

"That will soon be seen, Mr. Sampson," he said, facing Sampson's furious eyes. "The property goes to the highest bidder; he is required to pay a deposit——" He turned to his clerk, white of face and shaking; a calculation was made, a sum stated.

Amidst an intense silence, the silence of suspense, Bradley Drayle, who had stood at the table quietly, calmly, and with his old pleasant, cynical smile, drew a bundle of bank-notes from his breast pocket and handed it to the auctioneer.

"You will find more than sufficient there, sir," he said quietly.

Relieved of their suspense, the crowd shouted triumphantly, and those nearest Drayle held out their hands, or, carried away by their excitement, clapped him on the back. Still quite calmly, Drayle responded as best he could to their congratulations.

"Thanks, thanks!" he said. "But look to Mr. Burridge there. He is ill."

They carried the old man into the open air, and Sampson followed his prostrate father; but at the door he turned and shook his fist at Drayle.

"No sale! No sale!" he cried hoarsely. "I'll—I'll——"

"What name do you give as purchaser, sir?" asked the shaking clerk formally, though he had heard it often enough during the last few minutes to remember it for the remainder of his life.

"Sir Darrel Frayne," replied Mr. Drayle quietly.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HER OWN TRUE LOVE AGAIN

A LARGE part of the crowd had gone out ; but those who still lingered to see the last of the house, perhaps the one chance of their lives, gasped and stared as they heard the name.

" Sir Darrel Frayne ! " said the unhappy auctioneer. " But—but he is deceased——"

" Then he must have died suddenly, within the last hour," said Drayle with his quaint smile. " Put down the name I have given you, please, and give me a receipt for that deposit."

He turned as he spoke, for a tall, thickly made gentleman with an impassive face and prominent eyes stood beside him.

" Permit me to congratulate you, Mr. Drayle," said Northam, with an unusual touch of excitement in his voice ; " not so much on your victory, but your announcement of my friend's, Frayne's, existence. My name's Northam——"

Mr. Drayle held out his hand, and there was now no cynicism in his smile nor his greeting.

" I have heard of you, Lord Northam," he said ; " and everything to your credit. Yes ; Darrel Frayne is alive——"

" Where is he ? " demanded Northam, for the first time in his life breaking into another man's speech.

" Where do you think he is ? " asked Mr. Drayle.

" Well, I can guess," said Northam after a moment. Drayle nodded. " Yes ; he went there from the

station. I came on here first. I'm only the father, you see, Lord Northam; and therefore I very properly left the first place to the lover and future husband. Yes; we arrived at the nick of time. We have travelled from India at a speed which will, I think, make a record; and we reached here, as I say, just in the nick of time. Now let me thank you for your part in this business. I take it you were bidding—to save the Court from these Burridges?"

"That's so," said Northam. "I thought Frayne was dead; but—he was a friend of mine—and there was a kind of sacrilege in the idea of the old place falling into the hands of that kind of people. Besides"—he paused and stared before him—"there was another to think of."

"I understand," said Drayle, with gratitude in his eyes and voice. "Lord Northam, there is just at present, and in some quarters, an outcry against the House of Lords; but for my part, though Cynthia sometimes tells me that I hold rather advanced opinions, I'd be quite content to uphold the House of Peers—if they were all Lord Northams! And that is all I will permit myself, and, doubtless, all you will permit me, to say regarding your kindness to my child. You have given a fresh significance to your old battle-cry, '*Noblesse Oblige*.' It's nice to be a nobleman, it's still nicer to act as one— But I said I'd say no more, didn't I?" he broke off, as Northam, reddening and looking shy and uncomfortable, held out his hand.

A little while before this dramatic meeting of these two original individuals, Parsons, who had gone into the garden to pick some flowers for her mistress's table, observed a man coming down the road. For a moment, a moment only, be it added in justice to Parsons' perspicacity, she thought he was a tramp; for his clothes were old and travel-

stained, his hat was of the soft, "bendable" kind, favoured by the Colonial, and he limped slightly; but, as he drew nearer, something in his figure and gait drew her closer attention; and suddenly, when he had stopped by the gate and was opening it, she dropped the flowers and opened her mouth. But before she could scream Darrel was upon her, and, with one arm round her shoulders, clapped his hand on her mouth.

"No, you don't, Parsons!" he said in a kind of whisper, and with the old smile which had long ago won the maid's heart as well as the mistress's. "Keep quiet, Parsons." He gave her a little shake. "I'm not a ghost, I assure you.—Promise not to cry out, then! Right. Now, my girl, where is she?"

"In the sitting-room, sir," gasped Parsons. "Ch, whatever shall I do! You mustn't run in upon her. She's been ill, Mr. Darrel—Sir Darrel, I mean, begging your pardon——"

"Ill!" echoed Darrel, his smile vanishing. "Ill and alone here—I beg your pardon, not alone, Parsons; of course, you're with her——"

"My dear young mistress has been very bad," said Parsons, half incoherent with excitement, "but she's better. And she hasn't been alone; Lord Northam——"

She stopped; for Darrel's face had gone white and his hand had dropped from her shoulder.

"Er—ah, yes!" he said huskily and averting his face. "Quite so. I'll—I'll go on to the inn——"

Parsons actually caught him by the coat—and, blushed for a week afterwards, whenever she remembered it.

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Darrel!" she cried in a hushed voice. "You mustn't, you mustn't! She's expecting you, as you say; she wouldn't have it that you were dead! You must go in, Mr. Darrel. But I must go first and prepare her, break the news. You wait in

the porch there, and I'll come to the window and wave my hand——"

She turned towards the open door, but slackened her pace discreetly before entering. Cynthia was at the old-fashioned and much-battered writing-table, and did not look up as Parsons came into the room and stood behind her.

"Flowers! I can smell them!" said Cynthia. "Put them on the desk where I can see them; for I shall be at work for some time, Parsons."

"Yes, miss," said Parsons as steadily and casually as she could. "Writing letters, miss? The doctor said——"

"I'm almost tired of hearing 'the doctor said,'" retorted Cynthia with a smile. "He is the most quoted man in this district, I think. Yes, I am writing letters, and going over some; I am trying to tidy up, so that there may be that little less to do when we start."

"Yes, Miss Cynthia," murmured Parsons. "But I suppose you won't start at once——"

"The moment this tyrant of a doctor will let me," replied Cynthia.

"You—you won't wait till you hear?—I mean that—such extraordinary things do happen—you can't tell——"

At the note of confusion, of suppressed agitation, in Parsons' voice, Cynthia raised her head and sat quite still for a moment; then she rose, and, growing very pale, caught Parsons' arm and gazed into her eyes. There was a silence for a breath or two; then she said in a low voice that thrilled the trembling girl—

"You have heard something! You have heard—that he is alive! Oh, don't keep me in suspense! Do you think that I shall be frightened? Tell me, tell me at once!"

"There—there is news," faltered poor Parsons,

still striving to break the shock; but Cynthia's grasp tightened, and her eyes grew dark and brilliant as she asked almost inaudibly—

"Where is he?"

Parsons was for going to the window at this, but Cynthia still held her.

"One—one moment!" she breathed, closing her eyes and setting her lips tight. "Just—just while I realise—— You can go now!"

She gave her a little push, Parsons flew to the window, and Cynthia moved quickly towards the door. Darrel must have grown impatient; for he was there to meet her. He stood looking at her with all his long pent-up love in his eyes; and yet with drawn brows and working mouth. Had he fought his way back to life to find her lost to him? She seemed to read his doubt in his face; for she moved slowly to him, her eyes devouring him, then, when she had come within reach of him, his name rose in a whisper from her lips, "Darrel!" and she opened her arms.

In an instant he had caught her, and they were locked in a close embrace; so close that it was another instant before he could find his way to those dear, sweet lips. Parsons slipped by them unseen, unnoticed; for those two long-parted souls, coming together again, stood alone in a world of their own. Not a word was spoken by them for some time, as they gazed into each other's eyes, and straining together, as if they feared even now some malign influence should separate them; then, at last, Cynthia whispered—

"I knew! I knew, Darrel!"

He drew her to the old sofa and still held her tightly, and she locked her arms round his neck and laid her head on his breast.

"You knew, dearest?"

"Yes." She nodded up at him and smiled with

ineffable pride and tenderness in her occult wisdom, the wisdom and faith of love. "They all said—but I felt that you were not—and I knew that you would come back to me. But I could not wait; I was going to find you, dear!"

There is a sweetness, a pathos, in the old-fashioned, the hackneyed word, "dear," when it is voiced by such a girl as Cynthia, which has power to thrill all hearts; how deeply it thrilled Darrel's, let the reader imagine.

"You were going to find me—you—then you cared for me all the time, Cynthy?"

"Yes," she responded. "All the time, every hour and moment of it, Darrel; and never more so than when I wrote to you. I want to tell you—yes, dearest, I have vowed to myself that I would tell you that, first and before everything."

She told him of her mistaken self-sacrifice; but she did not mention Lady Alicia's share in the business, be sure; and Darrel listened in silence, and understood. He nodded, and kissed her—of course; it is the way lovers signify without words that they really do understand fully, completely; then he laughed rather ruefully.

"I'm afraid folks, the world, will say that you did quite right when you wrote that letter, and are acting quite foolishly now," he said gravely; "for I'm a poor man still——"

"And I'm a poor woman," she broke in with a little laugh of infinite content and boundless joy; for what fear have true lovers of poverty? "Aunt Gwen left nearly all her money to Percy Standish; but she left me a thousand pounds. We'll buy a—what shall we buy, Darrel?" she continued, still laughing, "a farm! Yes, that's it! We'll buy a farm, and we—and father will—'go back to the land.' He is coming home, dearest. Oh, how I wish——"

332 HER OWN TRUE LOVE AGAIN

She stopped ; for the shadow of some one standing in the doorway fell across the room, and a voice, a pleasantly cynical voice, with a note of tender humour in it, drawled—

“Should I be deemed intrusive if I ventured to greet a daughter from whom I have been separated for a somewhat lengthy period——”

“Father !” cried Cynthia, springing to him, her arms outstretched, the tears running down her cheeks, her voice broken by sobs and laughter. “Oh, both of you—both of you ! It’s like having two birthdays on one day !”

CHAPTER XXXV

MR. DRAYLE'S DOINGS

CYNTHIA sat between her lover and her father on the old sofa; and looked from one to the other, like the "donkey between two bundles of hay," as Mr. Drayle remarked.

"What troubles you, of course, is that you can't listen and speak to both at the same time," he said. "But I think the best way out of the difficulty would be for you to talk, Cynthy, and us to listen; at any rate, it would be in conformity with the usual practice of your sex."

"But, dear, I've nothing to say!" she responded; "excepting that I am not Aunt Gwen's heiress, as I've already told Darrel"—here she lifted Darrel's hand to her soft, warm cheek—"and that, like a certain dairymaid, my face—and what is left of the thousand pounds which aunt bequeathed me—are all my fortune."

"Hem!" said Drayle. "Faces are all very well, and I am not prepared to admit that they have not a certain value; but a thousand pounds are soon spent. When they are, I presume you contemplate a sweet retirement to that luxurious home for the thriftless, misnamed 'the Workhouse.'"

"Oh, dear, no!" said Cynthia, with uplifted chin. "We are going to take a farm——"

"How far do you propose to take it?" inquired Drayle politely.

"All the way," retorted Cynthia promptly, her

old knack of meeting her father's humorous thrusts coming back to her. "We are going to make a great success of it. You, father, will keep the accounts, I will keep the dairy, and Darrel will keep the cows and sheep—and other things."

"And who is to keep us?" asked Drayle with bland interest. "My dear Cynthia, you have not, I perceive, grown out of your old habit of dreaming. As an experiment in a novel, your farm is admirable; but—Cynthy," with a change of tone, "do you know why I always refused to sell the moor to Sir Anson? Can you guess, Darrel?" Cynthia shook her head, and Darrel smiled a negative. "Because I made a certain discovery: copper. To persons of such marked intelligence and acuteness I need say no more."

Cynthia exclaimed with surprise and pleasure; then her face fell.

"Oh, father, you don't mean that you intend to—to—what do you call it?—sink a shaft, dig a mine, on the moor!" she faltered, quite aghast at the idea.

"I certainly do not," he replied emphatically. "And I have no intention of permitting any one else to do it; Mr. Burrige, for instance."

"Then—then I don't see—"

"I am now about to explain. Please sit tight both of you, and don't scream, Cynthy; my nerves have not been improved by my trampings. A long while ago I knew that the land contained copper. I had an assay made—I remember looking at it one night, and deciding that I would not trouble to mine for the stuff. Then your Aunt Gwen adopted you. I had my doubts as to how the thing would pan out—you appreciate, I trust, the mining phrase, which seems particularly appropriate. I have known similar instances of the slip 'twixt the cup and the lip which has befallen you; and I was therefore glad that I had the moor land up my sleeve. As I

might want, or rather be compelled, to sink for that copper, I thought I had better become acquainted with the mining business; so I went abroad to study it. It is an extremely interesting, not to say absorbing, study; and it took me, as you are aware, to South America, Australia, and India. In the course of my travels, I was thrown amongst men who were not only working mines, but dealing in them."

Cynthia clapped her hands. "And you digged a mine for nothing, and it turned out to be gold!" she cried.

"Well—er—not exactly," he said, rubbing his eyebrows, "that, again, is the novelist's way of putting the thing. What I really bought was a quantity of shares in gold mines, silver mines, ruby mines, all sorts of mines; and some of these shares have turned out all right."

"And you have come home a millionaire!" said Cynthia.

"Er—not exactly a millionaire, Cynthy," he drawled; "but enough to save me from 'going back to the land.' I haven't mentioned this before, Darrel, because I shrank from the expression which your face wears at this moment."

Darrel coloured and tried to look cheerful.

"Of course I'm surprised and rather taken aback, sir," he stammered.

"Yes," drawled Mr. Drayle. "Extraordinary young man! Most men would have been pleased at learning that they were going to marry an heiress."

"As if Darrel could possibly care, father!" said Cynthia.

"Of course not, of course not!" Mr. Drayle hastened to assent. "But there it is. And now what are your plans?—Though it's scarcely fair to put the question without due notice."

"Our plans? W'nat are they, dear?" asked

Cynthia, nestling up to Darrel. "Why, of course, we shall all go somewhere and live together. Please let it be somewhere in the country, gentlemen; this little girl has had enough of London for a long, long time."

"A month or two in the season, perhaps," murmured Mr. Drayle. "With such a beautiful place as yours, you will not care to leave it for long, I dare say."

"What place are you talking of?" demanded Cynthia. "Do you mean that you have already bought a house for us, father?"

"Not I. Certainly not. I should as soon think of buying a bonnet for you, my dear Cynthia. I allude, of course, to Darrel's estate, Summerleigh Court."

Darrel coloured and bit his lip.

"I'm—I'm afraid you have not heard the news, are not aware that the Court is no longer mine, sir," he said rather huskily. "It was sold to-day—by the mortgagee, Mr. Burrige, who no doubt bought it and intends to live in it."

"I think you are misinformed, my dear boy," said Drayle meekly and somewhat nervously. "I was present at the sale, and I distinctly heard the auctioneer announce that Sir Darrel Frayne was the purchaser——"

They stared at him speechlessly for a moment; then Cynthia sprang up and threw herself upon him and hugged him.

"Oh, you dear, good, clever father!" she cried, with a choking break in her voice. "You really are clever, and I'm p-proud of you!"

"Thank you very much for this spontaneous and overwhelming testimonial to my intelligence, Cynthia," said Drayle with his whimsical smile. "But would you—er—mind transferring your embraces to a person who is sitting near us, and who, ap-

parently, is indifferent to the crushing of his collar? Yes," he went on, as he took the hand Darrel extended to him, "Yes, I was very fortunate. I reached the Court just in time to thwart Messrs. Burrige and Son, and earn the approval and applause which have been so lavishly bestowed upon me." He tried to straighten his collar.

"What can I say, sir?" said Darrel almost inaudibly.

"Well, you could say a great deal," replied Mr. Drayle. "You could remark that I have saved your ancestral home——"

"Which would be true!" said Darrel.

"Admitted. But then I might retort that you had saved my life—which would also be true—and that one good turn deserves another——"

"Saved your life! Oh, father! Oh, Darrel! Father, tell me—instantly! He has said nothing about it!"

"Ashamed of it, no doubt," remarked Mr. Drayle dryly. "Yes; at the risk of lowering your young man to the level of a melodramatic hero, I must tell you the story."

He proceeded to do so, still with a touch of whimsicality—put on for Darrel's sake—and Cynthia sat and listened, holding her breath, and with her eyes fixed on Darrel's face, which was as downcast and embarrassed as if he were listening to the recountal of a crime; then she took his hand and raised it to her lips, from which not a word passed.

"And now," said Mr. Drayle plaintively; "if you'll excuse me for mentioning so commonplace a matter, I happen to be on the verge of starvation——"

This announcement cleared the air and relieved the tension of the situation. Cynthia, with a "Oh, you poor, dear father!" sprang up and made for the door, calling on Parsons; and on Parsons appearing,

threw her arms round her and gave her a good hug.

"Parsons, I'm the happiest woman in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland; and, you—poor dear, I can't spare the time to tell you what it all means, for my father—Father, this is Parsons, my friend and protector!—is starving. I'll come and help you get in the tea, and tell you everything while we are doing it! But watch me closely, Parsons, for I'm so—so confused that I shall probably put the butter in the teapot——"

She broke off, for Lord Northam appeared in the passage.

"Hope I don't intrude——" he began; but she took both his hands, looked into his eyes—were there tears in her own?—and drew him towards the sitting-room, and without a word closed the door upon the three men.

CHAPTER, XXXVI

PERCY'S REPENTANCE

CYNTHIA and Darrel had returned from their honeymoon, and had for some weeks been settled down at the newly decorated and partly refurnished Court—partly, for the old “study” had been held as sacred, and had not been touched—when, one afternoon, as Darrel and Cynthia were seated on the terrace, listening to Mr. Drayle’s story of one of the incidents in his wanderings, Cynthia saw a carriage coming up the drive.

“Visitors,” remarked Darrel, stifling a sigh; for there had been a long succession of callers since the return of the happy pair. “I think I’d better go and write those letters——”

“And I must go and look at—er—the new pigsties,” said Mr. Drayle quickly.

“No, you don’t escape, either of you!” said Cynthia laughingly. “Yes, you shall! Poor dears, you have suffered enough! But you must make haste, or they’ll see you.—Why, it’s Lord Spencer!” she broke off.

Her two men, as she called them, stopped in their flight; and Lord Spencer, seeing the group, came up the steps towards them. He walked slowly, and Cynthia at once saw that he was, in some way or other difficult to describe, much changed; his face had lost its florid colour, his clothes, though still trim and fashionable, hung loosely upon him, he had become much bowed, and his eyes, once so bold and confident, were grave and downcast.

Cynthia went forward to greet him.

"How do you do, Lord Spencer?" she said.

"I am glad to see you." And she spoke the truth; for, notwithstanding his raffishness, she liked Lord Spencer. "This is my father. Darrel you know."

Lord Spencer nodded to the other men, and held her hand for a moment or two before he responded, his eyes fixed on her face gravely.

"'Fraid you'll think it rather cool of me to drop in on you like this," he said in a voice from which the old devil-may-care tone had gone. "But—but Percy's come home."

"Oh, I'm glad! We were so sorry that he was not well enough to be at my wedding. I hope he is all the better for the change," said Cynthia gravely; for she saw that some serious business had brought Lord Spencer down so unexpectedly.

"No," he replied. "He's worse. I'm afraid—— He wants to see you, Lady Frayne; wants to see you badly. I don't know whether I've any right——"

Cynthia looked at Darrel quickly, and he nodded.

"Of course I will come!" she said simply.

"Thanks." He hesitated. "I'm afraid you will have to come at once——"

Again Cynthia looked at Darrel. He took out his watch, and with another nod went into the house.

"I will come at once," she said. "Darrel has gone to order a carriage, and I will get ready now. Father, see that Lord Spencer has something to eat."

But Lord Spencer shook his head.

"Got something on the train, thanks," he said.

"A whisky-and-soda will do for me."

Mr. Drayle took him into the house and got him a drink and a cigar, and Lord Spencer sat looking before him in an absent, preoccupied way.

"Nice place," he said with a sigh. "Cynthia's come through it all very chippily, thanks to you,

Mr. Drayle; and no one is more glad than I am; for she's a white 'un all through. I saw that the first moment I set eyes on her; I know a good woman—and, by George! I've paid pretty dearly for my knowledge. Frayne's a clipper too; and they're a good pair. Looked as if they were going to be jockeyed out of the stakes; but you were one too many for the wrong 'uns. I wish 'em a clear course and all the prizes."

"It's very kind of you to express yourself in this way, and I appreciate it," said Mr. Drayle. "I'm scrry to hear of your son's illness."

Lord Spencer's face, which had lightened somewhat, fell again; and he bit hard at his cigar.

"Yes; he's fallen on the ropes," he said moodily; "and I'm afraid he's a dead 'un. He's my only son, only kid——" He took a long drink, and coughed as if some of the liquor had gone the wrong way. "A clever chap, Percy; too clever, p'raps. Ah, well, it doesn't matter. Clever as you may be, you can't run against the Dark Horse, and that's entered against him.—Shootin' good here? Looks as if Frayne kept it up."

Drayle made some kind of reply, and the conversation dragged—for what could be said between two men of such opposite natures?—and presently, doubtless to the relief of both, Darrel and Cynthia appeared; the carriage came up, and the three were driven to the station.

For some reason or other, Lord Spencer would not talk of Percy during the night journey; and, when they reached Waterloo, they were driven, to Cynthia's surprise, to Lord Spencer's, and not to the big house in Belgrave Square.

"I brought him to my place," explained Lord Spencer. "Fact is, though he had his own—the other house—done up to the nines, he never lived there; seemed to have taken a dislike to it. Here

we are. 'Fraid the place smells of 'bacca; I'm given to smoking occasionally. I'll go up and see if he's well enough to see you. You'll have something to eat before you go up?"

Darrel and Cynthia made a pretence of eating; and presently Lord Spencer came down. His face looked grey and worn in the sharp morning light, and he stood in the doorway, glancing from one to the other hesitatingly.

"Wants to see Cynthia alone," he said huskily. "You don't mind, do you?"

Darrel signed assent with his hand, and Cynthia followed the unhappy father up the narrow stairs. He opened the door, stood back to allow her to enter, and, without a word, closed the door on her. Percy was propped up in bed; and as Cynthia saw his face, prepared as she was, she was startled and horrified by the change in him. She knew at the first glance that he was dying. He kept his eyes fixed on her, and stretched out a thin and wasted hand; but before Cynthia could take it in her warm one, he drew it back.

"Better wait," he said in a hollow voice; "wait until I have told you. It was good of you to come. But I knew you too well to be afraid that you would refuse. Sit there—where I cannot see your face. I'm dying, Cynthia. And I'm glad. I will tell you why."

Half an hour later Cynthia came downstairs. Her face was white, her eyelids were swollen with weeping, and there was a tense look in them which made Darrel spring to his feet and hurry to her side. Lord Spencer stood silent with his head on his breast; but he raised his eye and scanned Cynthia's face for a moment, then drew a long breath and nodded. Cynthia went to him and took his hand.

"What—what can I say?" she sobbed brokenly.

"Nothing," he responded hoarsely. "That's best!"

And she knew he spoke wisely. He went with them to the door, and as the cab started Cynthia saw him standing on the steps, his head still drooping, his once jaunty figure like that of an old man.

Darrel held her hand, and she cried quietly. He said nothing, asked no questions, and she did not speak; but when they were alone in their room at the hotel, she hid her face on his breast, and, a shudder shaking her, whispered—

"Darrel, I can't tell you; I can't, I can't!"

"All right, dearest," he said soothingly. "It must be the one secret between us. I won't guess——"

"No, no, no! You must not even guess!" she implored him. "What—what he told me—oh, poor wretched Percy!—must be buried with him!"

"Agreed," he said. "But you must forget it, Cynthia."

"Forget! Yes, yes, I will forget it. You must help me, Darrel! We will never speak of it again, never!"

He petted and soothed her, and at last got her to bed; but more than once in the night she woke with a start and a cry of terror and, clinging to him, hid her face against him, as if to shut out some dreadful vision.

When they went down to their private room next morning they found Lord Spencer waiting there. Cynthia uttered a cry and shrank back, gripping Darrel's hand.

"Sorry," said Lord Spencer. "Thought I ought to come and tell you. Percy's dead."

Cynthia drew a long breath; it sounded to Darrel like one of relief.

"Died in the night, in his sleep," continued Lord Spencer.

There was silence for a moment, then Darrel, not knowing what to say, murmured—

“It—it was sudden, was it not?”

“Y-es. Sudden? Oh, yes. But it wasn't the illness—consumption; he—took—an—overdose of sleeping draught. No fault of the nurses or any one. No. He'd got it hidden away; crawled out of bed—Lord knows how!—to his dispatch box. Powders. Powders from—from a chemist at Lucerne——”

Cynthia uttered a moan, and fell in a dead swoon into Darrel's arms. Lord Spencer stood for a moment, then, with bent head and drooping shoulders, went out.

Percy left, in a beautifully expressed will drawn up by his own hand, the Westlake fortune to “Cynthia Drayle, the ward of the late Countess of Westlake.”

“Of course, we couldn't take it,” Cynthia said to Darrel when he told her. “Darrel, we couldn't touch a penny of it.”

He shook his head. “Of course not, dearest,” he responded; for though Cynthia had told him nothing of Percy's secret, Darrel guessed at the awful truth, or something near it.

“Besides,” she said in a whisper, “it—it wasn't his to leave.”

Darrel pondered for a moment. “Can't give it to the hospitals—it isn't ours to give. Why!” he smiled; “it's easy enough; we've got to share it amongst the relatives, as if Lady Westlake had made no will——”

“But leaving ourselves out,” she added in a low voice.

“Of course!” he acquiesced promptly.

So the poor cousins who had shaken the dust of the family mansion in Belgrave Square from their feet were invited to enter it again, and were overwhelmed with joy by the wondrous windfall; and

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on this visit lingered to call down blessings on the sweet head of their benefactor, blessings which Cynthia received with not a little embarrassment and some pain ; but her lips were locked, and she dared not disclose Percy's secret, even when the newspapers lauded to the skies her generosity and unselfish action.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST OF THE BURRIDGES

AFTER his collapse at the sale Josiah Burrige was carried to his aggressively new house, and was confined to his bed for several months; but after a while he recovered sufficiently to be able to move downstairs. He was quite incapable of attending to business, and it was whispered in the village that "some'ut had gone wrong wi' his mind." Sampson, his son, reigned in his stead. But it was by no means a satisfactory reign; for, at the sale, the Burridges had shown their hands too plainly; the innocent, childlike mask had fallen from the old man's face, and revealed his true character too startlingly and distinctly for further concealment; and now both father and son were regarded by the county with distrust and suspicion.

Distrust and suspicion in his clients' minds mean ruin to a solicitor; the business dropped off, dwindled and threatened to disappear altogether; and, of course, Sampson flew to alcohol to console himself. Once or twice he had been seen in the village in a state of intoxication, which not even the easy-going policeman could overlook. He gave the offender a warning, and, for a time, Sampson confined his drinking bouts to his house; but one day he created so great a disturbance in, and out of, the inns that the constable was compelled to summon him; and, to Darrel's annoyance and embarrassment, the next morning Sampson was brought before him,

charged with being drunk and disorderly. Darrel instantly left the bench; his fellow-magistrates fined Sampson, and the painful incident would have been closed by the conviction and the payment of the fine, but Sampson uttered sundry threats as he left the dock, and that same evening indulged in another drinking bout.

"I don't know what is to be done," said Darrel to Cynthia and Mr. Drayle. "The fellow appears to be bent on ruining himself; besides, he is upsetting the village——" he added frowning; you see, it was now his own village again, and therefore Sampson's misconduct was a personal matter to Darrel.

Mr. Drayle rubbed his eyebrow and glanced at Cynthia, who was looking much distressed.

"I'll step round and have a talk with him," he said.

"And I'll go with you," said Cynthia in a low voice.

They went round to the Burridges' house. Already signs of the ruin Sampson was bringing about so persistently were observable in the once trim place; the garden had been neglected, the windows had not been cleaned for some time, the steps were dirty. Cynthia looked round with a sigh, then laid her hand on her father's arm quickly; for she had caught sight of old Burrige seated on one of the benches. He was leaning forward, his huge hands resting on his stick; his loose mouth was working, his face twisted with a smile of cunning and satisfaction.

"We will speak to him," said Drayle.

As they approached the old man looked up, and shading his eyes, stared at them vacantly; then he rose slowly to his feet and nodded patronisingly.

"How d'ye do? Mr. Drayle, I think, and Miss Drayle, Cynthia Drayle? Glad to see you!" he said, with a catch in his voice peculiar to the sufferer

from that most awful visitation—paralysis of the insane. "Come to look round, eh?" he chuckled, and waved his stick as if indicating a vast space. "Yes, great changes. Sampson and I have had hard work, but we've nearly finished. You see, we'd got the plans out before the crash came. The whole place has been restored. Cost a lot of money, Mr. Drayle; a lot of money! But we'd made up our minds to spare no expense, once the Court was ours. You remember what it was, of course, Mr. Drayle?"

He scarcely paused for a reply, but quavered on, looking about him with an air of pride.

"You remember what it was in Sir Anson's time; and you see what it is now, what we've made of it; a credit to the county, eh? Oh, Sampson's a clever boy; he knows what's what. He'll make a solid place and a name for himself, mark my words. The gentry may look down upon him and ignore him for a bit, but they'll give in and accept him as one of 'em before long. Money's everything nowadays, Mr. Drayle, eh?"

Suddenly the smile of satisfaction and triumph vanished, and he shuffled up to them and caught Mr. Drayle by the coat sleeve.

"But perhaps you've come on business, Mr. Drayle? About the moor, isn't it? Well, now, I'm ready to talk to you; we're still willing to buy; but you must be reasonable."

At this moment Sampson came from the house. At sight of the visitors, his bloated face grew redder, and he advanced with a blustering air.

"Anything you've got to say to my father, you'd better say to me," he said. "He's not fit for business."

"So I perceive," said Mr. Drayle, with a pitying glance at the huge yet shrunken figure which had sunk on the seat again. "We will go into the house,

if you will allow me. Cynthia, you had better go home."

But Cynthia shook her head. "I will wait for you here," she said; and she seated herself beside the stricken old man. Half an hour elapsed before Mr. Drayle returned to her; he was alone. He did not speak until they had passed through the gateway; then he said quietly—

"Exit Mr. Josiah Burrige; exit also his son, Sampson."

"You mean——?" she asked as quietly, but pressing his arm.

"Yes, I've bought them out," he replied. "They will trouble us no longer. Cynthy, you will do me the justice to admit that I do not often preach, therefore permit me to call your attention to the fact, that, notwithstanding this progressive and sceptical age, virtue is still sometimes triumphant and vice consistently punished; also that a certain remark of the psalmist yet holds good—'The wicked flourish as the bay tree——' It is not necessary to finish the quotation. In this instance the Burridges have finished it for us. The village—to say nothing of Captain Sir Darrel Frayne, D.S.O.—can now rest in peace."

"Father," said Cynthia, "I have always had a sneaking fondness for you; but at this moment I don't know whether I love or admire you most."

"Thank you, Cynthy," he responded dryly. "May you never be able to decide!"

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