The BRIGHTENER

C·N·&A·M·
WILLIAMSON

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THE BRIGHTENER

BY C. N. & A. M. WILLIAMSON

FRONTISPIECE
BY WALTER DE MARIS

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"A SLIGHT SOUND ATTRACTED OUR ATTENTION TO THE HISTORIC STAIRWAY"

PREFACE

To the Kind People Who Read Our Books:

I want to explain to you, in case it may interest you a little, why it is that I want to keep the "firm name" (as we used to call it) of "C. N. & A. M. Williamson," although my husband has gone out of this world.

It is because I feel very strongly that he helps me with the work even more than he was able to do in this world. I always had his advice, and when we took motor tours he gave me his notes to use as well as my own. But now there is far more help than that. I cannot explain in words: I can only feel. And because of that feeling, I could not bear to have the "C. N." disappear from the title page.

Dear People who may read this, I hope that you will wish to see the initials "C. N." with those of

A. M. WILLIAMSON

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BOOK I

THE YACHT

CHAPTER I

DOWN AND OUT

"I wonder who will tell her," I heard somebody say, just outside the arbour.

The somebody was a woman; and the somebody else who answered was a man. "Glad it won't be me!" he replied, ungrammatically.

I didn't know who these somebodies were, and I didn't much care. For the first instant the one thing I did care about was, that they should remain outside my arbour, instead of finding their way in. Then, the next words waked my interest. They sounded mysterious, and I loved mysteries—*then*.

"It's an awful thing to happen—a double blow, in the same moment!" exclaimed the woman.

They had come to a standstill, close to the arbour; but there was hope that they mightn't discover it, because it wasn't an ordinary arbour. It was really a deep, sweet-scented hollow scooped out of an immense *arbor vitæ* tree, camouflaged to look like its sister trees in a group beside the path. The hollow contained an old marble seat, on which I was sitting, but the low entrance could only be reached by one who knew of its existence, passing between those other trees.

I felt suddenly rather curious about the person struck by a "double blow," for a "fellow feeling makes one wondrous kind"; and at that moment I was a sort of modern, female Damocles myself. In fact, I had got the Marchese d'Ardini to bring me away from the ball-room to hide in this secret arbour of his old Roman garden, because my mood was out of tune for dancing. I hadn't wished to come to the ball, but Grandmother had insisted. Now I had made an excuse of wanting an ice, to get rid of my dear old friend the Marchese for a few minutes.

"She couldn't have cared about the poor chap," said the man in a hard voice, with a slight American accent, "or she wouldn't be here to-night."

My heart missed a beat.

"They say," explained the woman, "that her grandmother practically forced her to marry the prince, and arranged it at a time when he'd have to go back to the

Front an hour after the wedding, so they shouldn't be *really* married, if anything happened to him. I don't know whether that's true or not!"

But I knew! I knew that it was true, because they were talking about me. In an instant—before I'd decided whether to rush out or sit still—I knew something more.

"*You* ought to be well informed, though," the woman's voice continued. "You're a distant cousin, aren't you?"

"'Distant' is the word! About forty-fourth cousin, four times removed," the man laughed with frank bitterness. (No wonder, as he'd unsuccessfully claimed the right to our family estate, to hitch on to his silly old, dug-up title!) Not only did I know, now, of whom they were talking, but I knew one of those who talked: a red-headed giant of a man I'd seen to-night for the first time, though he had annoyed Grandmother and me from a distance, for years. In fact, we'd left home and taken up the Red Cross industry in Rome, because of him. Indirectly it was his fault that I was married, since, if it hadn't been for him, I shouldn't have come to Italy or met Prince di Miramare. I did not stop, however, to think of all this. It just flashed through my subconscious mind, while I asked myself, "What has happened to Paolo? Has he been killed, or only wounded? And what do the brutes mean by a 'double blow'?"

I had no longer the impulse to rush out. I waited, with hushed breath. I didn't care whether it were nice or not to eavesdrop. All I thought of was my intense desire to hear what those two would say next.

"Like grandmother, like grand-daughter, I suppose," went on the ex-cowboy baronet, James Courtenaye. "A hard-hearted lot my only surviving female relatives seem to be! Her husband at the Front, liable to die at any minute; her grandmother dying at home, and our fair young Princess dances gaily to celebrate a small Italian victory!"

"You forget what's happened to-night, Sir Jim, when you speak of your '*surviving*' female relatives," said the woman.

"By George, yes! I've got but one left now. And I expect, from what I hear, I shall be called upon to support her!"

Then Grandmother was dead!—wonderful, indomitable Grandmother, who, only three hours ago, had said, "You *must* go to this dance, Elizabeth. I wish it!"

Grandmother, whose last words had been, "You are worthy to be what I've made you: a Princess. You are exactly what I was at your age."

Poor, magnificent Grandmother! She had often told me that she was the greatest beauty of her day. She had sent me away from her to-night, so that she might die alone. Or—had the news of the *other* blow come while I was gone, and killed her?

Dazedly I stumbled to my feet, and in a second I should have pushed past the pair; but, just at this moment, footsteps came hurrying along the path. Those two moved out of the way with some murmured words I didn't catch: and then, the Marchese was with me again. I saw his plump figure silhouetted on the silvered blue dusk of moonlight. He had brought no ice! He flung out empty hands in a despairing gesture which told that he also *knew*.

"My dear child—my poor little Princess——" he began in Italian; but I cut him short.

"I've heard some people talking. Grandmother is dead. And—Paolo?"

"His plane crashed. It was instant death—not painful. Alas, the telegram came to your hotel, and the Signora, your grandmother, opened it. Her maid found it in her hand. The brave spirit had fled! Mr. Carstairs, her solicitor, and his kind American wife came here at once. How fortunate was the business which brought him to Rome just now, looking after your interests! A search-party was seeking me, while I sought a mere ice! And now the Carstairs wait to take you to your hotel. I cannot leave our guests, or I would go with you, too."

He got me back to the old palazzo by a side door, and guided me to a quiet room where the Carstairs sat. They were not alone. An American friend of the ex-cowboy was with them—(another self-made millionaire, but a *much* better made one, of the name of Roger Fane)—and with him a school friend of mine he was in love with, Lady Shelagh Leigh. Shelagh ran to me with her arms out, but I pushed her aside. A darling girl, and I wouldn't have done it for the world, if I had been myself!

She shrank away, hurt; and vaguely I was conscious that the dark man with the tragic eyes—Roger Fane—was coaxing her out of the room. Then I forgot them both as I turned to the Carstairs for news. I little guessed how soon and strangely my life and Shelagh's and Roger Fane's would twine together in a Gordian knot of trouble!

I don't remember much of what followed, except that a taxi rushed us—the Carstairs and me—to the Grand Hotel, as fast as it could go through streets filled with crowds shouting over one of those October victories. Mrs. Carstairs—a mouse of a woman in person, a benevolent Machiavelli in brain—held my hand gently, and said nothing, while her clever old husband tried to cheer me with words. Afterward I learned that she spent those minutes in mapping out my whole future!

You see, *she* knew what I didn't know at the time: that I hadn't enough money in the world to pay for Grandmother's funeral, not to mention our hotel bills!

A clock, when you come to think of it, is a fortunate animal.

When it runs down, it can just comfortably stop. No one expects it to do anything else. No one accuses it of weakness or lack of backbone because it doesn't struggle nobly to go on ticking and striking. It is not sternly commanded to wind itself. Unless somebody takes that trouble off its hands, it stays stopped. Whereas, if a girl or a young, able-bodied woman runs down (that is, comes suddenly to the end of everything, including resources), she mayn't give up ticking for a single second. *She* must wind herself, and this is really quite as difficult for her to do as for a clock, unless she is abnormally instructed and accomplished.

I am neither. The principal things I know how to do are, to look pretty, and be nice to people, so that when they are with me they feel purry and pleasant. With this stock-in-trade I had a perfectly gorgeous time in life, until—Fate stuck a finger into my mechanism and upset the working of my pendulum.

I ought to have realized that the gorgeousness would some time come to a bad and sudden end. But I was trained to put off what wasn't delightful to do or think of to-day, until to-morrow; because to-morrow could take care of itself and droves of shorn lambs as well.

Grandmother and I had been pals since I was five, when my father (her son) and my mother quietly died of diphtheria, and left me—her namesake—to her. We lived at adorable Courtenaye Abbey on the Devonshire Coast, where furniture, portraits, silver, and china fit for a museum were common, every-day objects to my childish eyes. None of these things could be sold—or the Abbey—for they

were all heirlooms (of *our* branch of the Courtenayes, not the Americanized ex-cowboy's insignificant branch, be it understood!). But the place could be let, with everything in it; and when Mr. Carstairs was first engaged to unravel Grandmother's financial tangles, he implored her permission to find a tenant. That was before the war, when I was seventeen; and Grandmother refused.

"What," she cried (I was in the room, all ears), "would you have me advertise the fact that we're reduced to beggary, just as the time has come to present Elizabeth? I'll do nothing of the kind. You must stave off the smash. That's your business. Then Elizabeth will marry a title with money, or an American millionaire or someone, and prevent it from *ever* coming."

This thrilled me, and I felt like a Joan of Arc out to save her family, not by capturing a foe, but a husband.

Mr. Carstairs did stave off the smash, Heaven or its opposite alone knows how, and Grandmother spent about half a future millionaire husband's possible income in taking a town house, with a train of servants; renting a Rolls-Royce, and buying for us both the most divine clothes imaginable. I was long and leggy, and thin as a young colt; but my face was all right, because it was a replica of Grandmother's at seventeen. My eyes and dimples were said to be Something to Dream About, even then (I often dreamed of them myself, after much flattery at balls!), and already my yellow-brown braids measured off at a yard and a half. Besides, I had Grandmother's Early Manner (as one says of an artist: and really she *was* one), so, naturally, I received proposals: *lots* of proposals. But—they were the wrong lots!

All the good-looking young men who wanted to marry me had never a penny to do it on. All the rich ones were so old and appalling that even Grandmother hadn't the heart to order me to the altar. So there it *was*! Then Jim Courtenaye came over from America, where, after an adventurous life (or worse), he'd made pots of money by hook or by crook, probably the latter. He stirred up, from the mud of the past, a trumpery baronetcy bestowed by stodgy King George the Third upon an ancestor in that younger, less important branch of the Courtenayes. Also did he strive expensively to prove a right to Courtenaye Abbey as well, though not one of *his* Courtenayes had ever put a nose inside it and I was the next heir, after Grandmother. He didn't fight (he kindly explained to Mr. Carstairs) to snatch the property out of our mouths. If he got it, we might go on living there till the end of our days. All he wanted was to *own* the place, and have the right to keep it up decently, as we'd never been able to do.

Well, he had to be satisfied with his title and without the Abbey; which was luck for us. But there our luck ended. Not only did the war break out before I had a single proposal worth accepting, but an awful thing happened at the Abbey.

Grandmother had to keep on the rented town house, for patriotic motives, no matter *what* the expense, because she had turned it into an *ouvroir* for the making of hospital supplies. She directed the work herself, and I and Shelagh Leigh (Shelagh was just out of the schoolroom then) and lots of other girls slaved seven hours a day. Suddenly, just when we'd had a big "hurry order" for pneumonia jackets, there was a shortage of material. But Grandmother wasn't a woman to be conquered by shortages! She remembered a hundred yards of bargain stuff she'd bought to be used for new dust-sheets at the Abbey; and as all the servants but two were discharged when we left for town, the sheets had never been made up.

She could not be spared for a day, but I could. By this time I was nineteen, and felt fifty in wisdom, as all girls do, since the war. Grandmother was old-fashioned in some ways, but new-fashioned in others, so she ordered me off to Courtenaye Abbey by myself to unlock the room where the bundle had been put. Train service was not good, and I would have to stay the night; but she wired to old Barlow and his wife—once lodge-keepers, now trusted guardians of the house. She told Mrs. Barlow (a pretty old Devonshire Thing, like peaches and cream, called by me "Barley") to get my old room ready; and Barlow was to meet me at the train. At the last moment, however, Shelagh Leigh decided to go with me; and if we had guessed it, this was to turn out one of the most important decisions of her life. Barlow met us, of course; and how he had changed since last I'd seen his comfortable face! I expected him to be charmed with the sight of me, if not of Shelagh, for I was always a favourite with Barl and Barley; but the poor man was absent-minded and queer. When a stuffy station-cab from Courtenaye Coombe had rattled us to the shut-up Abbey, I went at once to the housekeeper's room and had a heart-to-heart talk with the Barlows. It seemed that the police had been to the house and "run all through it," because of reports that lights had flashed from the upper windows out to sea at night—"*signals to submarines*!"

Nothing suspicious was found, however, and the police made it clear that they considered the Barlows themselves above reproach. Good people, they were, with twin nephews from Australia fighting in the war! Indeed, an inspector had actually apologized for the visit, saying that the police had pooh-poohed the reports at first. They had paid no attention until "the story was all over the

village"; and there are not enough miles between Courtenaye Abbey and Plymouth Dockyard for even the rankest rumours to be disregarded long.

Barley was convinced that one of our ghosts had been waked up by the war—the ghost of a young girl burned to death, who now and then rushes like a column of fire through the front rooms of the second floor in the west wing; but the old pet hoped I wouldn't let this idea of hers keep me awake. The ghost of a nice English young lady was preferable in her opinion to a German spy in the flesh! I agreed, but I was not keen on seeing either. My nerves had been jumpy since the last air-raid over London, consequently I lay awake hour after hour, though Shelagh was in Grandmother's room adjoining mine, with the door ajar between.

When I did sleep, I must have slept heavily. I dreamed that I was a prisoner on a German submarine, and that signals from Courtenaye Abbey flashed straight into my face. They flashed so brightly that they set me on fire; and with the knowledge that, if I couldn't escape at once, I should become a Family Ghost, I wrenched myself awake with a start.

Yes, I *was* awake; though what I saw was so astonishing that I thought it must be another nightmare. There really was a strong light pouring into my eyes. What it came from I don't know to this day, but probably an electric torch. Anyhow, the ray was so powerful that, though directed upon my face, it faintly lit another face close to mine, as I suddenly sat up in bed.

Instantly that face drew back, and then—as if on a second thought, after a surprise—out went the light. By contrast, the darkness was black as a bath of ink, though I'd pulled back the curtains before going to bed, and the sky was sequined with stars. But on my retina was photographed a pale, illumined circle with a face looking out of it—looking straight at me. You know how quickly these light-pictures begin to fade, but, before this dimmed I had time to verify my first waking impression.

The face was a woman's face—beautiful and hideous at the same time, like Medusa. It was young, yet old. It had deep-set, long eyes that slanted slightly up to the corners. It was thin and hollow-cheeked, with a pointed chin cleft in the middle; and was framed with bright auburn hair of a curiously *unreal* colour.

When the blackness closed in, and I heard in the dark scrambling sounds like a rat running amok in the wainscot, I gave a cry. In my horror and bewilderment I wasn't sure yet whether I were awake or asleep; but someone answered. Dazed as I was, I recognized Shelagh's sweet young voice, and at the same instant her

electric bed-lamp was switched on in the next room. "Coming!—coming!" she cried, and appeared in the doorway, her hair gold against the light.

By this time I had the sense to switch on my own lamp, and, comforted by it and my pal's presence, I told Shelagh in a few words what had happened. "Why, how weird! I dreamed the same dream!" she broke in. "At least, I dreamed about a light, and a face."

Hastily we compared notes, and realized that Shelagh had not dreamed: that the woman of mystery had visited us both; only, she had gone to Shelagh first, and had not been scared away as by me, because Shelagh hadn't thoroughly waked up.

We decided that our vision was no ghost, but that, for once, rumour was right. In some amazing way a spy had concealed herself in the rambling old Abbey (the house has several secret rooms of which we know; and there might be others, long forgotten), and probably she had been signalling until warned of danger by that visit from the police. We resolved to rise at daybreak, and walk to Courtenay Coombe to let the police know what had happened to us; but, as it turned out, a great deal more was to happen before dawn.

We felt pretty sure that the spy would cease her activities for the night, after the shock of finding our rooms occupied. Still it would be cowardly—we thought—to lie in bed. We slipped on dressing-gowns, therefore, and with candles (only our wing was furnished with electric light, for which dear Grandmother had never paid) we descended fearsomely to the Barlows' quarters. Having roused the old couple and got them to put on some clothes, a search-party of four perambulated the house. So far as we could see, however, the place was innocent of spies; and at length we crept into bed again.

We didn't mean or expect to sleep, of course, but we must all have "dropped off," otherwise we should have smelt the smoke long before we did smell it. As it was, the great hall slowly burned until Barlow's usual getting-up hour. Shelagh and I knew nothing until Barl came pounding at my door. Then the stinging of our nostrils and eyelids was a fire alarm!

It's wonderful how quickly you can do things when you have to! Ten minutes later I was running as fast as I could go to the village, and might have earned a prize for a two-mile sprint if I hadn't raced alone. By the time the fire-engines reached the Abbey it was too late to save a whole side of the glorious old "linen fold" panelling of the hall. The celebrated staircase was injured, too, and several

suits of historic armour, as well as a number of antique weapons.

Fortunately the portraits were all in the picture gallery, and the fire was stopped before it had swept beyond the hall. Where it had started was soon learned, but "*how*" remained a mystery, for shavings and oil-tins had apparently been stuffed behind the panelling. The theory of the police was, that the spy (no one doubted the spy's existence now!) had seen that the "game was up," since the place would be strictly watched from that night on. Out of sheer spite, the female Hun had attempted to burn down the famous old house before she lost her chance; or had perhaps already made preparations to destroy it when her other work should be ended.

There was a hue and cry over the county in pursuit of the fugitive, which echoed as far as London; but the woman had escaped, and not even a trace of her was found.

Grandmother openly claimed that HER inspiration in sending for some dust-sheets had not only saved the Abbey, but England. It was most agreeable to bask in self-respect and the praise of friends. When, however, we were bombarded by newspaper men, who took revenge for Grandmother's snubs by publishing interviews with Sir "Jim" (by this time Major Courtenaye, D. S. O., M. C., unluckily at home with a "Blighty" wound), the haughty lady lost her temper.

It was bad enough, she complained, to have the Abbey turned prematurely into a ruin, but for That Fellow to proclaim that it wouldn't have happened had *he* been the owner was *too* much! The democratic and socialist papers ("rags," according to Grandmother) stood up for the self-made cowboy baronet, and blamed the great lady who had "thrown away in selfish extravagance" what should have paid the upkeep of an historic monument. This, to a woman who directed the most patriotic *ouvroir* in London! And to pile Ossa on Pelion, our Grosvenor Square landlord was cad enough to tell his friends (who told theirs, etc., etc.) that he had never received his rent! Which statement, by the way, was all the more of a libel because it was true.

Now you understand how Sir James Courtenaye was responsible for driving us to Italy, and indirectly bringing about my marriage; for Grandmother wiped the dust of Grosvenor Square from our feet with Italian passports, and swept me off to new activities in Rome.

Here was Mr. Carstairs' moment to say, "I told you so! If only you had left the Abbey when I advised you that it was best, all would have been well. Now, with

the central hall in ruins, nobody would be found dead in the place, not even a munition millionaire." But being a particularly kind man he said nothing of the sort. He merely implored Grandmother to live economically in Rome: and of course (being Grandmother!) she did nothing of the sort.

We lived at the most expensive hotel, and whenever we had any money, gave it to the Croce Rossa, running up bills for ourselves. But we mixed much joy with a little charity, and my descriptive letters to Shelagh were so attractive that she persuaded Mr. and Mrs. Pollen, her guardians (uncle and aunt; sickening snobs!), to bring her to Rome; pretext, Red Cross work, which covered so much frivolling in the war! Then, not long after, the cowboy's friend, Roger Fane, appeared on the scene, in the American Expeditionary Force; a thrilling, handsome, and mysteriously tragic person. James Courtenaye also turned up, having been ordered to the Italian Front; but Grandmother and I contrived never to meet him. And when our financial affairs began to rumble like an earthquake, Mr. Carstairs decided to see Grandmother in person.

It was when she received his telegram, "Coming at once," that she decided I must accept Prince di Miramare. She had wanted an Englishman for me; but a Prince is a Prince, and though Paolo was far from rich at the moment, he had the prospect of an immediate million—liras, alas! not pounds. An enormously rich Greek offered him that sum for the fourteenth-century Castello di Miramare on a mountain all its own, some miles from Rome. In consideration of a large sum paid to Paolo's younger brother Carlo, the two Miramare princes would break the entail; and this quick solution of our difficulties was to be a surprise for Mr. Carstairs.

Paolo and I were married as hastily as such matters can be arranged abroad, between persons of different nations; and it was true (as those cynics outside the arbour said) that my soldier prince went back to the Front an hour after the wedding. It was just after we were safely spliced that Grandmother ceased to fight a temperature of a hundred and three, and gave up to an attack of 'flu. She gave up quite quietly, for she thought that, whatever happened, I would be rich, because she had browbeaten lazy, unbusinesslike Paolo into making a will in my favour. The one flaw in this calculation was, his concealing from her the fact that the entail was not yet legally broken. No contract between him and the Greek could be signed while the entail existed; therefore Paolo's will gave me only his personal possessions. These were not much; for I doubt if even the poor boy's uniforms were paid for. But I am thankful that Grandmother died without realizing her failure; and I hope that her spirit was far away before the ex-

cowboy began making overtures.

If it had not been for Mrs. Carstairs' inspiration, I don't know what would have become of me!

CHAPTER II

UP AND IN

You may remember what Jim Courtenaye said in the garden: that he would probably have to support me.

Well, he dared to offer, through Mr. Carstairs, to do that very thing, "for the family's sake." At least, he proposed to pay off all our debts and allow me an income of four hundred a year, if it turned out that my inheritance from Paolo was nil.

When Mr. Carstairs passed on the offer to me, as he was bound to do, I said what I felt dear Grandmother would have wished me to say: "I'll see him d—d first!" And I added, "I hope you'll repeat that to the *Person*."

I think from later developments that Mr. Carstairs cannot have repeated my reply verbatim. But I have not yet quite come to the part about those developments. After the funeral, when I knew the worst about the entail, and that Paolo's brother Carlo was breaking it wholly for his *own* benefit, and not at all for mine, Mrs. Carstairs asked sympathetically if I had thought what I should like to do.

"Like to do?" I echoed, bitterly. "I should like to go home to the dear old Abbey, and restore the place as it ought to be restored, and have plenty of money, without lifting a finger to get it. What I *must* do is a different question."

"Well, then, my dear, supposing we put it in that brutal way. Have you thought—er——"

"I've done nothing except think. But I've been brought up with about as much earning capacity as a mechanical doll. The only thing I have the slightest talent for being, is—a detective!"

"Good gracious!" was Mrs. Carstairs' comment on that.

"I've felt ever since spy night at the Abbey that I had it in me to make a good detective," I modestly explained.

"'Princess di Miramare, Private Detective,' would be a distinctly original sign-

board over an office door," the old lady reflected. "But I believe *I've* evolved something more practical, considering your name—and your age—(twenty-one, isn't it?)—and your *looks*. Not that detective talent mayn't come in handy even in the profession I'm going to suggest. Very likely it will—among other things. It's a profession that'll call for all the talents you can get hold of."

"Do you by chance mean marriage?" I inquired, coldly. "I've never been a wife. But I suppose I *am* a sort of widow."

"If you weren't a sort of widow you couldn't cope with the profession I've—er—invented. You wouldn't be independent enough."

"Invented? Then you *don't* mean marriage! And not even the stage. I warn you that I solemnly promised Grandmother never to go on the stage."

"I know, my child. She mentioned that to Henry—my husband—when they were discussing your future, before you both left London. My idea is *much* more original than marriage, or even the stage. It popped into my mind the night Mrs. Courtenaye died, while we were in a taxi between the Palazzo Ardini and this hotel. I said to myself, 'Dear Elizabeth shall be a Brightener!'"

"A Brightener?" I repeated, with a vague vision of polishing windows or brasses. "I don't——"

"You wouldn't! I told you I'd invented the profession expressly for you. Now I'm going to tell you what it is. I felt that you'd not care to be a tame companion, even to the most gilded millionairess, or a social secretary to a——"

"Horror!—no, I couldn't be a tame anything."

"That's why brightening is your line. A Brightener couldn't *be* a Brightener and tame. She must be brilliant—winged—soaring above the plane of those she brightens; expensive, to make herself appreciated; capable of taking the lead in social direction. Why, my dear, people will fight to get you—pay any price to secure you! *Now* do you understand?"

I didn't. So she explained. After that dazzling preface, the explanation seemed rather an anti-climax. Still, I saw that there might be something in the plan—if it could be worked. And Mrs. Carstairs guaranteed to work it.

My widowhood (save the mark!) qualified me to become a chaperon. And my Princesshood would make me a gilded one. Chaperonage, at its best, might be

amusing. But chaperonage was far from the whole destiny of a Brightener. A Brightener need not confine herself to female society, as a mere Companion must. A young woman, even though a widow and a Princess, could not "companion" a person of the opposite sex, even if he were a *hundred*. But she might, from a discreet distance, be his Brightener. That is, she might brighten a lonely man's life without tarnishing her own reputation.

"After all," Mrs. Carstairs went on, "in spite of what's said against him, Man *is* a Fellow Being. If a cat may look at a King, Man may look at a Princess. And unless he's in her set, he can be made to pay for the privilege. Think of a lonely button or boot-maker! What would he give for the honour of invitations to tea, with introductions and social advice, from the popular Princess di Miramare? He might have a wife or daughters, or both, who needed a leg up. *They* would come extra! He might be a widower—in fact, I've caught the first widower for you already. But unluckily you can't use him yet."

"Ugh!" I shuddered. "Sounds as if he were a fish—wriggling on a hook till I'm ready to tear it out of his gills!"

"He is a fish—a big fish. In fact, I may as well break it to you that he is Roger Fane."

"Good heavens!" I cried. "It would take more electricity than I'm fitted with to brighten his tragic and mysterious gloom!"

"Not at all. In fact, you are the only one who can brighten it."

"What are you driving at? He's dead in love with Shelagh Leigh."

"That's just *it*. As things are, he has no hope of marrying Shelagh. She likes him, as you probably know better than I do, for you're her best pal, although she's a year or so younger than you——"

"Two years."

"Well, as I was going to say, in many ways she's a child compared to you. She's as beautiful as one of those cut-off cherubs in the prayer-books, and as old-fashioned as an early Victorian sampler. These blonde Dreams with naturally waving golden hair and rosebud mouths, and eyes big as half-crowns, *have* that drawback, as I've discovered since I came to live in England. In *my* country we don't grow early Victorian buds. You know perfectly well that those detestable snobs, the Pollens, don't think Fane good enough for Shelagh in spite of his

money. Money's the *one* nice thing they've got themselves, which they can pass on to Shelagh. Probably they forced the wretched Miss Pollen, who was the male snob's sister, to marry the old Marquis of Leigh just as they wish to *compel* Shelagh to marry some other wreck of his sort—and die young, as her mother did. The girl's a dear—a perfect *lamb*!—but lambs can't stand up against lions. They generally lie down inside them. But with *you* at the helm, the Pollen lions could be forced——"

"Not if they knew it!" I cut in.

"They wouldn't know it. Did *you* know that you were being forced to marry that poor young prince of yours?"

"I wasn't forced. I was persuaded."

"We won't argue the point! Anyhow, the subject doesn't press. The scheme I have in my head for you to launch Fane on the social sea (the *sea* in every sense of the word, as you'll learn by and by) can't come off till you're out of your deepest mourning. I'll find you a quieter line of goods to begin on than the Fane-Leigh business if you agree to take up Brightening. The question is, *do* you agree?"

"I do," I said more earnestly than I had said "I will" as I stood at Paolo's side in church. For life hadn't been very earnest then. Now it was.

"Good!" exclaimed Mrs. Carstairs. "Then that's *that*! The next thing is to furnish you a charming flat in the same house with us. You must have a background of your own."

"You forget—I haven't a farthing!" I fiercely reminded her. "But Mr. Carstairs won't forget! I've made him too much trouble. The best Brightening won't run to *half* a Background in Berkeley Square."

"Wait," Mrs. Carstairs calmed me. "I haven't finished the whole proposition yet. In America, when we run up a sky-scraper, we don't begin at the bottom, in any old, commonplace way. We stick a few steel girders into the earth; then we start at the top and work down. That's what I've been doing with my plan. It's perfect. Only you've got to support it with something."

"What is it you're trying to break to me?" I demanded.

The dear old lady swallowed heavily. (It must be something pretty awful if it

daunted *her*!)

"You like Roger Fane," she began.

"Yes, I admire him. He's handsome and interesting, though a little too mysterious and tragic to live with for my taste."

"He's not mysterious at all!" she defended Fane. "His tragedy—for there *was* a tragedy!—is no secret in America. I often met him before the war, when I ran over to pay visits in New York, though he was far from being in the Four Hundred. But at the moment I've no more to say about Roger Fane. I've been using him for a handle to brandish a friend of his in front of your eyes."

My blood grew hot. "*Not* the ex-cowboy?"

"That's no way to speak of Sir James Courtenaye."

"Then *he's* what you want to break to me?"

"I want—I mean, I'm *requested*!—to inform you of a way he proposes out of the woods for you—at least, the darkest part of the woods."

"I told Mr. Carstairs I'd see James Courtenaye d—d rather than——"

"*This* is a different affair entirely. You must listen, my dear, unless I'm to wash my hands of you! What I have to describe is the foundation for the Brightening."

I swallowed some more of Grandmother's expressions which occurred to me, and listened.

Sir James Courtenaye's second proposition was not an offer of charity. He suggested that I let Courtenaye Abbey to him for a term of years, for the sum of one thousand five hundred pounds per annum, the first three years to be paid in advance. (This clause, Mrs. Carstairs hinted, would enable me to dole out crumbs here and there for the quieting of Grandmother's creditors.) Sir James's intention was, not to use the Abbey as a residence, but to make of it a show place for the public during the term of his lease. In order to do this, the hall must be restored and the once-famous gardens beautified. This expense he would undertake, carrying the work quickly to completion, and would reimburse himself by means of the fees—a shilling a head—charged for viewing the house and its historic treasures.

When I had heard all this, I hesitated what to answer, thinking of Grandmother,

and wondering what she would have said had she been in my shoes. But as this thought flitted into my mind, it was followed by another. One of Grandmother's few old-fashioned fads was her style of shoe: pattern 1875. The shoes I stood in, at this moment, were pattern 1918. In *my* shoes Grandmother would simply scream! And I wouldn't be at my best in hers. This was the parable which commonsense put to me, and Mrs. Carstairs cleverly offering no word of advice, I paused no longer than five minutes before I snapped out, "Yes! The horrid brute can have the darling place till I get rich."

"How sweet of you to consent so *graciously*, darling!" purred Mrs. Carstairs. Then we both laughed. After which I fell into her arms, and cried.

For fear I might change my mind, Mr. Carstairs got me to sign some dull-looking documents that very day, and the oddness of their being all ready to hand didn't strike me till the ink was dry.

"Henry had them prepared because he knew how *sensible* you are at heart—I mean *at head*," his wife explained. "Indeed, it is a compliment to your intelligence."

Anyhow, it gave me a wherewithal to throw sops to a whole Zooful of Cerberuses, and still keep enough to take that flat in the Carstairs' house in Berkeley Square. Of course to do all this meant leaving Italy for good and going back to England. But there was little to hold me in Rome. My inheritance from my husband-of-an-hour could be packed in a suitcase! Shelagh and her snobs travelled with us. And as soon as they were demobilized, Roger Fane and James Courtenaye followed, if not us, at least in our direction.

I don't think that Aladdin's Lamp builders "had anything on" Sir Jim's (as he himself said), judging by the way the restorations simply flew. From what I heard of the sums he spent, it would take the shillings of all England and America as sightseers to put him in pocket. But as Mr. Carstairs pointed out, that was *his* business.

Mine was to gird my loins at Lucille's and Redfern's, in order to become a Brightener. For my pendulum was ticking regularly now. I was no longer down and out. I was up and in. Elizabeth, Princess di Miramare, was spoiling for her first job.

CHAPTER III

THUNDERBOLT SIX

Looking back through my twenty-one-and-three-quarter years, I divide my life, up to date, into thunderbolts.

Thunderbolt One: Death of my Father and Mother.

Thunderbolt Two: Spy Night at the Abbey.

Thunderbolt Three: My Marriage to Paolo di Miramare.

Thunderbolt Four: The "Double Blow."

Thunderbolt Five: Beggary!

Which brings me along the road to Thunderbolt Six.

Mrs. Percy-Hogge was, and is, exactly what you would think from her name; which is why I don't care to dwell at length on the few months I spent brightening her at Bath. It was bad enough *living* them!

Now, if I were a Hogge instead of a Courtenaye, plus Miramare, I would *be* one, plain, unadulterated, and unadorned. *She* adulterated her Hogg with an "e," and adorned it with a "Percy," her late husband's Christian name. He being in heaven or somewhere, the hyphen couldn't hurt him; and with it, and his money, *and* Me, she began at Bath the attempt to live down the past of a mere margarine-making Hogg. Whole bunches of Grandmother's friends were in the Bath zone just then, which is why I chose it, and they were so touched by my widow's weeds that they were charming to Mrs. P.-H. in order to please me. As most of them—though stuffy—were titled, and there were two Marchionesses and one Duchess, the result for Mrs. Percy-Hogge was brilliant. She, who had never before known any one above a knight-ess, was in Paradise. She had taken a fine old Georgian house, furnished from basement to attic by Mallet, and had

launched invitations for a dinner-party "to meet the Dowager-Duchess of Stoke," when—bang fell Thunderbolt Six!

Naturally it fell on me, not her, as thunderbolts have no affinity for Hoggs. It fell in the shape of a telegram from Mrs. Carstairs.

She wired:

> Come London immediately, for consultation. Terrible theft at Abbey. Barlows drugged and bound by burglars. Both prostrated. Affair serious. Let me know train. Will meet. Love.
>
> CAROLINE CARSTAIRS.

I wired in return that I would catch the first train, and caught it. The old lady kept her word also, and met me. Before her car had whirled us to Berkeley Square I had got the whole story out of her; which was well, as an ordeal awaited me, and I needed time to camouflage my feelings.

I had been sent for in haste because the news of the burglary was not to leak into the papers until, as Mrs. Carstairs expressed it, "those most concerned had come to some sort of understanding." "You see," she added, "this isn't an ordinary theft. There are wheels within wheels, and the insurance people will kick up a row rather than pay. That's why we must talk everything over; you, and Sir James, and Henry—and Henry is never *quite* complete without me, so I intend to be in the offing."

I knew she wouldn't stay there; but that was a detail!

The robbery had taken place the night before, and Sir James himself had been the one to discover it. Complication number one (as you'll see in a minute).

He, being now "demobbed" and a man of leisure, instead of reopening his flat in town, had taken up quarters at Courtenaye Coombe to superintend the repairs at the Abbey. His ex-cowboy habits being energetic, he usually walked the two miles from the village, and appeared on the scene ahead of the workmen.

This morning he arrived before seven o'clock, and went, according to custom, to beg a cup of coffee from Mrs. Barlow. She and her husband occupied the bedroom and sitting room which had been the housekeeper's; but at that hour the two were invariably in the kitchen. Sir Jim let himself in with his key, and marched straight to that part of the house. He was surprised to find the kitchen

shutters closed and the range fireless. Suspecting something wrong, he went to the bedroom door and knocked. He got no answer; but a second, harder rap produced a muffled moan. The door was not locked. He opened it, and was horrified at what he saw: Mrs. Barlow, on the bed, gagged and bound; her husband in the same condition, but lying on the floor; and the atmosphere of the closed room heavy with the fumes of chloroform.

It was Mrs. Barlow who managed to answer the knock with a moan. Barlow was deeper under the spell of the drug than she, and—it appeared afterward—in a more serious condition of collapse.

The old couple had no story to tell, for they recalled nothing of what had happened. They had made the rounds of the house as usual at night, and had then gone to bed. Barlow did not wake from his stupor until the village doctor came to revive him with stimulants, and Mrs. Barlow's first gleam of consciousness was when she dimly heard Sir James knocking. She strove to call out, felt aware of illness, realized with terror that her mouth was distended with a gag, and struggled to utter the faint groan which reached his ears.

As soon as Sir Jim had attended to the sufferers, he hurried out, and, finding that the workmen had arrived, rushed one of them back to Courtenaye Coombe for the doctor and the village nurse. The moment he (Sir Jim) was free to do so, he started on a voyage of discovery round the house, and soon learned that a big haul had been brought off. The things taken were small in size but in value immense, and circumstantial evidence suggested that the thief or thieves knew precisely what they wanted as well as where to get it.

In the picture gallery a portrait of King Charles I (given by himself to a General Courtenaye of the day) had been cleverly cut out of its frame, also a sketch of the Long Water at Hampton Court, painted and signed by King Charles. The green drawing room was deprived of its chief treasure, a quaint sampler embroidered by the hand of Mary Queen of Scots for her "faithful John Courtenaye." From the Chinese boudoir a Buddha of the Ming period was gone, and a jewel box of marvellous red lacquer presented by Li Hung Chang to my grandmother. The silver cabinet in the oak dining room had been broken open, and a teapot, sugar bowl, and cream-jug, given by Queen Anne to an ancestress, were absent. The China cabinet in the same room was bared of a set of green-and-gold coffee cups presented by Napoleon I to a French great-great-grandmother of mine; and from the big dining hall adjoining, a Gobelin panel, woven for the Empress Josephine, after the wedding picture by David, had

vanished.

A few *bibelots* were missing also, here and there; snuff boxes of Beau Nash and Beau Brummel; miniatures, old paste brooches and buckles reminiscent of Courtenaye beauties; and a fat watch that had belonged to George IV.

"All my pet things!" I mourned.

"Don't say that to any one except me," advised Mrs. Carstairs. "My dear, *bits of a letter torn into tiny pieces—a letter from you—were found in the Chinese Room*, and the Insurance people will be hatefully inquisitive!"

"You don't mean to insinuate that they'll suspect me?" I blazed at her.

"Not of stealing the things with your own hands; and if they did, you could easily prove an alibi, I suppose. Still, they're bound to follow up every clue, and bits of paper with your writing on them, apparently dropped by the thieves, *do* form a tempting clue. You can't help admitting it."

I did not admit it in the least, for at first glance I couldn't see where the "temptation" lay to steal one's own belongings. But Mrs. Carstairs soon made me see. Though the things were mine in a way, in another way they were not mine. Being heirlooms, I could not profit by them financially, in the open. Yet if I could cause them to disappear, without being detected, I should receive the insurance money with one hand, and rake in with the other a large bribe from some supposititious purchaser.

"On the contrary, why shouldn't our brave Bart be suspected of precisely the same fraud, and more of it?" I inquired. "If I could steal the things, so could he. If they're my pets, they may be his. And he was on the spot, with a lot of workmen in his pay! Surely such circumstantial evidence against him weighs more heavily in the scales than a mere scrap of paper against me? I've written Sir Jim once or twice, by the way, on business about the Abbey since I've been in Bath. All he'd have to do would be to tear a letter up small enough, so it couldn't be pieced together and make sense——"

"Nobody's weighing anything in scales against either of you—yet," soothed Mrs. Carstairs, "unless you're doing it against each other! But we don't know what may happen. That's why it seemed best for you and Sir James to come together and exchange blows—I mean, *views*!—at once. He called my husband up by long-distance telephone early this morning, told him what had happened, and

had a pow-wow on ways and means. They decided not to inform the police, but to save publicity and engage a private detective. In fact, Sir J—— asked Henry to send a good man to the Abbey by the quickest train. He went—the man, I mean, not Henry; and the head of his firm ought to arrive at our flat in a few minutes now, to meet you and Sir James."

"Sir James! Even a galloping cowboy can't be in London and Devonshire at the same moment."

"Oh, I forgot to mention, he must have travelled up by *your* train. I suppose you didn't see him?"

"I did not!"

"He was probably in a smoking carriage. Well, anyhow, he'll soon be with us."

"Stop the taxi!" I broke in; and stopped it myself by tapping on the window behind the chauffeur.

"Good heavens! what's the matter?" gasped my companion.

"Nothing. I want to inquire the name of that firm of private detectives Sir James Courtenaye got Mr. Carstairs to engage."

"Pemberton. You must have seen it advertised. But why stop the taxi to ask that?"

"I stopped the taxi to get out, and let you run home alone while I find another cab to take me to another detective. You see, I didn't want to go to the same firm."

"Isn't one firm of detectives enough at one time, on one job?"

"It isn't one job. You're the shrewdest woman I know. You *must* see that James Courtenaye has engaged *his* detective to spy upon me—to dog my footsteps—to discover if I suddenly blossom out into untold magnificence on ill-got gains. I intend to turn the tables on him, and when I come back to your flat, it will be in the company of my very own little pet detective."

Mrs. Carstairs broke into adjurations and arguments. According to her, I misjudged my cousin's motives; and if I brought a detective, it would be an insult. But I checked her by explaining that my man would not give himself away—he would pose as a friend of mine. I would select a suitable person for

the part. With that I jumped out of the taxi, and the dear old lady was too wise to argue. She drove sadly home, and I went into the nearest shop which looked likely to own a directory. In that volume I found another firm of detectives with an equally celebrated name. I taxied to their office, explained something of my business, and picked out a person who might pass for a pal of a (socialist) princess. He and I then repaired to Berkeley Square, and Sir James and the Pemberton person (also Mr. Carstairs) had not been waiting *much* more than half an hour when we arrived.

I don't know what my "forty-fourth cousin four times removed" thought about my dashing in with a strange Mr. Smith who apparently had nothing to do with the case. And I didn't care. No, not even if he imagined the square-jawed bull-dog creature to be a choice specimen of my circle at Bath. In any case, my Mr. Smith was a dream compared with his Pemberton. As to himself, however—Sir Jim—I had to acknowledge that he was far from insignificant in personality. If there were to be any battle of wits or manners between us, I couldn't afford to despise him.

When I had met him before, I was too utterly overwhelmed to study, or even to notice him much, except to see that he was a big, red-headed fellow, who loomed unnaturally large when viewed against the light. Now I classified him as resembling a more-than-life-size statue—done in pale bronze—of a Red Indian, or a soldier of Ancient Rome. The only flaws in the statue were the red hair and the fiery blackness of the eyes.

My Mr. Smith, as I have explained, wasn't posing as a detective, but he was engaged to stop, look, listen, for all he was worth, and tell me his impressions afterward—just as, no doubt, Mr. Pemberton was to tell Sir James *his*.

We talked over the robbery in conclave; we amateurs suggesting theories, the professionals committing themselves to nothing so premature. Why, it was too early to form judgments, since the detective on the spot had not yet been able to report upon fingerprints or other clues! The sole decision arrived at, and agreed to by all, was to keep the affair among ourselves for the present. This could be managed if none but private detectives were employed and the police not brought into the case. When the meeting broke up and I was able to question Mr. Smith, I was disappointed in him. I had hoped and expected (having led up to it by hints) that he would say: "Sir James Courtenaye is in this." On the contrary, he tactlessly advised me to "put that idea out of my head. There was nothing in it." (I hope he meant the idea, not the head!)

"I should say, speaking in the air," he remarked, "that the caretakers are the guilty parties, or at least have had some hand in the business. Though of course I might change my mind if I were on the spot."

I assured him fiercely that any one possessed of a mind at all would change it at sight of dear old Barl and Barley. Nothing on earth would make me believe anything against them. Why, if they didn't have Almost-Haloes and Wings, Sir James and the insurance people would have objected to them as guardians. The very fact that they had been kept on without a word of protest from any one, when Courtenaye Abbey was let to Sir James was, I argued, the best of testimonials to the Barlows' character. Nevertheless, my orders were that Mr. Smith should go to Devonshire and take a room at the Courtenaye Arms, dressed and painted to represent a landscape artist. "The Abbey is to be opened to the public in a few days, in spite of the best small show-things being lost," I reminded him, from what we had heard Sir Jim say. "You can see the Barlows, and judge of them. But what is *much* more important, you'll also see Sir James Courtenaye, who lodges in the inn, and can judge of *him*. In my opinion he has revenged himself for losing his suit to grab the Abbey and everything in it, by taking what he could lay his hands on without being suspected."

"But you do suspect him?" said Mr. Smith.

"For that matter, so does he suspect me," I retorted.

"You *think* so," the detective amended.

"Don't you?"

"No, Princess, I do not."

"What *do* you think, then? Or don't you think *anything*?"

"I do think something." He tried to justify his earning capacity.

"What, if I may ask?"

He—a Smith, a mere Smith!—dared to grin.

"Of course you may ask, Princess," he replied. "But it's too early yet for me to answer your question in fairness to myself. About the theft I have not formed a firm theory, but I have about Sir James Courtenaye. I would not have ventured even to mention it, however, if you had not drawn me out, for it is indirectly

concerned with the case."

"Directly or indirectly, I wish to know it," I insisted. "And as you're in my employ, I think I have the right."

"Very well, madam, you shall know it—later," he said.

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK THING IN THE SEA

I went back to Bath, and Mrs. Percy-Hogge; but I no longer felt that I was enjoying a rest cure. Right or wrong, I had the impression of being *watched*. I was sure that Sir James Courtenaye had put detectives "on my track," in the hope that I might be caught communicating with my hired bravos or the wicked receiver of my stolen goods. In other days when a man stared or turned to gaze after me, I had attributed the attention to my looks; now I jumped to the conviction that he was a detective. And in fact, I began to jump at anything—or nothing.

It was vain for Mrs. Carstairs (who ran down to Bath, after I'd written her a wild letter) to guarantee that even an enemy—(which she vowed Sir James *wasn't*!)—could rake up no shred of evidence against me, with the exception of the torn letter. She couldn't deny that, materially speaking, it *would* be a "good haul" for me to sell the heirlooms, and obtain also the insurance money. But then, I hadn't done it, and nobody could accuse me of doing it, because no one knew the things were gone. Oh, well, *yes*! Some detectives knew; and the poor old Barlows had bitter cause to know. A few others, too, including Sir James Courtenaye. None of them *counted*, however, because none of them would talk.

Mrs. Carstairs said it was absurd of me to imagine that Sir James was having me watched. But imagination and not advice had the upper hand of my nerves; and, seeing this, she prescribed a change of air.

"I meant Mrs. Percy-Hogge only for a stop-gap," she explained. "You've squeezed her into Society now; and for yourself, you've come to the time when you can lighten your mourning. I've waited for that, to start you on your new job. You'll go what my cook calls 'balmy on the crumpet' if you keep fancying every queer human being you meet in Milsom Street a detective on your track. The best thing for you is, not to *have* a track! And the way to manage that, is to be at *sea*."

I was at sea—figuratively—till Mrs. Carstairs explained more. She recalled to my mind what she had said in our first chat about Brightening: how she had

suggested my "taking the helm," to steer Roger Fane into the Social Sea.

"I think I mentioned then that I referred to the sea, in the literal sense of the word," she went on. "I promised to tell you what I meant, when the right moment came, and now it has come. I haven't been idle meanwhile, I assure you, for I like Roger Fane as much as *you* like Shelagh Leigh. And between us two, we'll marry them over the Pollens' snobby heads."

In short, Mr. Carstairs had a client who had a yacht at Plymouth. The client's name was Lord Verrington. The yacht's name was *Naiad*, and Lord Verrington wished to let her for an absurdly large sum. Roger Fane didn't mind paying this sum. It was the right time of year for a yachting trip. If I would lend éclat to such a trip by Brightening it, the Pollens would permit their precious Shelagh to go. Mr. Pollen (whom Grandmother had refused to know) would even join the party himself. Indeed, no one would refuse if asked by me, and the Pollens would be so dazzled by Roger Fane's sudden social success that their consent to the engagement was a foregone conclusion.

I snapped at the chance of escape. To be sure, it was a temporary escape, as the guests were invited for a week only; still, lots of things may happen in a week. Why look beyond seven perfectly good days? Besides, I was to be given a huge "bonus" for my services, enough to pay the rent of my expensive flat for a year. But I wasn't entirely selfish in accepting. I've never half described to you the odd, reserved charm of that mysterious millionaire, Roger Fane, whose one fault was his close friendship with Sir James Courtenaye. And for his sake, as well as dear little Shelagh's, I would gladly have done all I could to bring the two together.

Knowing that titles impressed the Pollens, I secured several: one earl with countess attached (legally, at all events), a pretty sister of the latter; a bachelor marquis, and ditto viscount. These, with Shelagh, myself, Roger Fane, and Mr. Pollen, would constitute the party, should all accept.

They all did, partly for me, perhaps, and partly for each other, but largely from curiosity, as the *Naiad* had the reputation of being the most luxuriously appointed small steam yacht in British waters, (She had been "interned" in Spain during the war!) Also, Roger had secured as *chef* a famous Frenchman, just demobilized. Altogether, the prospect offered attractions. The start was to be made from Plymouth on a summer afternoon. We were to cruise along the coast, and eventually make for Jersey and Guernsey, where none of the party had ever

been. My things were packed, and I was ready to take a morning train for Plymouth—a train by which all those of us in town would travel—when a letter arrived for me. It was from Mrs. Barlow, announcing the sudden death of her husband, from heart failure. He had never recovered the shock of the robbery, or the heavy dose of chloroform which the thieves had administered. And this, Barley added, as if in reproach, was not all Barlow had been forced to endure. It had been a cruel blow to find himself supplanted as guardian at the Abbey. The excuse for thus superseding him and his wife was, of course, the state of their health after the ordeal through which they had passed. Nevertheless, Barlow felt (said his wife) that they were no longer trusted. They had loved the lodge, which was home to them in old days; but they had been promoted from lodge-keeping to caretaking, and it was humiliating to be sent back while strangers usurped their place at the Abbey. This grievance (in Barley's opinion) had killed her husband. As for her, she would follow him into the grave, were it not for the loving care of Barlow's nephews from Australia, the brave twin soldier boys she had often mentioned to me. They were with her now, and would take her to the old family home close to Dudworth Cove, which the boys had bought back from the late owner. Barlow's body would go with them, and be buried in the graveyard where generations of Barlows slept.

It was a blow to hear of the old man's death, and to learn that I was blamed for heartlessness by Barley. Of course I had nothing to do with the affair. The Barlows were not really suspected, and had in truth been removed for their own health's sake to the lodge where their possessions were. The new caretakers had been engaged by Sir James, in consultation, I believed, with the insurance people: and my secret conviction was, that they had been supplied by Pemberton's Agency of Private Detectives. My impulse was to rush to the Abbey and comfort Mrs. Barlow, even at the risk of meeting my tenant engaged in the same task. But to do this would have meant delaying the trip, and disappointing everyone, most of all Shelagh and Roger Fane; so, advised by Mrs. Carstairs, I sent a telegram instead, picked up Shelagh and her uncle, and took the Plymouth train. This was the easier to do, because the wonderful old lady offered to go herself to the Abbey on a mission of consolation. She promised to send a telegram to our first port, saying how Barley was, and everything else I wished to know.

Shelagh was so happy, so excited, that I was glad I'd listened to reason and kept the tryst. Never had I seen her as pretty as she looked on that journey to Devon: her eyes blue stars, her cheeks pink roses. But when the skies began to darken

her eyes darkened, too. Had she been a barometer she could not have responded more sensitively to the storm; for a storm we had, cats and dogs pelting down on the roof of the train.

"I was sure something horrid would happen!" she whispered. "It was too good to be true that Roger and I should have a whole, heavenly week together on board a yacht. Now we shall have to wait till the weather clears. Or else be sea-sick. I don't know which is worse!"

Roger met us, in torrents of rain and gusts of wind, at Plymouth. But things were not so black as they looked. He had engaged rooms for everyone, and a private salon for us all, at the best hotel. We would stay the night and have a dance, with a band of our own. By the next day the sea would have calmed down enough to please the worst of sailors, and we would start. Perhaps we could even get off in the morning.

This prophecy was rather too optimistic, for we didn't get off till afternoon; but by that time the water was flat as a floor, and one was tempted to forget there had ever been a storm. We were not to forget it for long, alas! Brief as it had been, that storm was to leave its lasting influence upon our fate: Roger Fane's, Shelagh Leigh's, and mine.

By four-thirty, the day after the downpour, we had all come on board the lovely *Naiad*, had "settled" into our cabins, and were on deck—the girls in white serge or linen, the men in flannels—ready for tea.

If it had arrived, and we had been looking into our tea cups instead of at the seascape, the whole of Roger Fane's and Shelagh's life might have been different—mine, too, perhaps! But as it was, Shelagh and Roger were leaning on the rail together, and her gaze was fixed upon the blue water, because somehow she couldn't meet Roger's just then. What he had said to her I don't know; but more to avoid giving an answer than because she was wildly interested, the girl exclaimed: "What can that dark thing be, drifting—and bobbing up and down in the waves? I suppose it couldn't be a dead *shark*?"

"Hardly in these waters," said Roger Fane. "Besides, a dead shark floats wrong side up, and his wrong side is white. This thing looks black."

In ordinary circumstances I wouldn't have broken in on a *tête-à-tête*, but others were extricating themselves from their deck chairs, so I thought there was no harm in my being the first.

"More like a coffin than a shark," I said, with my elbows beside Shelagh's on the rail.

At that the whole party hurled itself in our direction, and the nearer the *Naiad* brought us to the floating object, the more like a coffin it became to our eyes. At last it was so much like, that Roger decided to stop the yacht and examine the thing, which might even be an odd-shaped small boat, overturned. He went off, therefore, to speak with the captain, leaving us in quite a state of excitement.

Almost before we'd thought the order given, the *Naiad* slowed down, and came to rest like a great Lohengrin swan in the clear azure wavelets. A boat was quickly lowered, and we saw that Roger himself accompanied the two rowers.

A few moments before he had looked so happy, so at peace with the world, that the tragic shadow in his eyes had actually vanished. His whole expression and bearing had been different, and he had seemed years younger—almost boyish, in his dark, shy, reserved way. But as he went down in the boat, he was again the Roger Fane I had known and wondered about.

"If he's superstitious, this will seem a bad omen," I thought. "That is, if the thing *does* turn out to be a coffin."

None of us remembered the tea we'd been pining for, though a white-clad steward was hovering with trays of cakes, cream, and strawberries. We could do nothing but hang over the rail and watch the *Naiad's* boat. We saw it reach the Thing, in whose neighbourhood it paused with lifted oars, while a discussion went on between Roger and the rowers. Apparently they argued, with due respect, against the carrying out of some order or suggestion. He was not a man to be disobeyed, however. After a moment or two, the work of taking the black thing in tow was begun.

We were very near now, and could plainly see all that went on. Coffin or not, the mysterious object was a long, narrow box of some sort (the men's reluctance to pick it up pretty well proved *what* sort, to my mind), and curiously enough a rope was tied round it. There appeared to be a lump of knots on top, and a loose end trailing like seaweed, which made the task of taking the derelict in tow an easy one. To this broken rope Roger deftly attached the rope carried in the boat, and it was not long before the rescue party started to return.

"Is it a coffin or a treasure chest?" girls and men eagerly called down to Roger. Everyone screamed some question—except Shelagh and me. We were silent, and

Shelagh's colour had faded. She edged closer to me, until our shoulders touched. Hers felt cold to my warm flesh.

"Why, you're shivering, dear!" I said. "You're not *afraid* of that wretched thing—whatever it is?"

"We both *know* what it is, without telling, don't we?" she replied, in a half whisper. "I'm not *afraid* of it, of course. But—it's awful that we should come across a coffin floating in the sea, on our first day out. I feel as if it meant bad luck for Roger and me. How can they all squeal and chatter so? I suppose Roger is bound to bring the dreadful thing on board. It wouldn't be decent not to. But I wish he needn't."

I rather wished the same, partly because I knew how superstitious sailors were about such matters, and how they would hate to have a coffin—presumably containing a dead body—on board the *Naiad*. It really wasn't a gay yachting companion! However, I tried to cheer Shelagh. It would take more than this to bring her bad luck *now*, I said, when things had gone so far; and she might have more trust in me, whom she had lately named her *mascotte*.

All the men frankly desired to see the *trouvaille* at close quarters, and most of the women wanted a peep, though they weren't brutally open about it. If there had been any doubt, it would have vanished as the Thing was being hauled on board by grave-faced, suddenly sullen sailors. It was a "sure enough" coffin, and —it seemed—an unusually large one!

It had to be placed on deck, for the moment, but Roger had the dark shape instantly covered with tarpaulins; and an appeal from his clouded eyes made me suggest adjourning indoors for tea. We could have it in the saloon, which was decorated like a boudoir, and full of lilies and roses—Shelagh's favourite flowers.

"Let's not talk any more about the business!" Roger exclaimed, when Shelagh's uncle seemed inclined to mix the subject with food. "I wish it hadn't happened, as the men are foolishly upset. But it can't be helped, and we must do our best. The—er—it sha'n't stop on deck. That would be to keep Jonah under our eyes. I've thought of a place where we can ignore it till to-morrow, when we'll land it as early as we can at St. Heliers. I'm afraid the local authorities will want to tie us up in a lot of red tape. But the worst will be to catechize us as if we were witnesses in court. Meanwhile, let's forget the whole affair."

"Righto!" promptly exclaimed all three of the younger guests; but Mr. Pollen was not thus to be deprived of his morbid morsel.

"Certainly," he agreed. "But before the subject is shelved, *where* is the 'place' you speak of? I mean, where is the coffin to rest throughout the night?"

Roger gave a grim laugh, and looked obstinate. "I'll tell you this much," he said. "None of you'll have it for a near neighbour, so none of you need worry."

After that, even Mr. Pollen could not persist. We disposed of an enormous tea, after the excitement, and then some of us played bridge. When we separated, however, to pace the deck—two by two, for a "constitutional" before dinner—one could see by the absorbed expression on faces, and guess by the low-toned voices, what each pair discussed.

My companion, Lord Glencathra, thought that Somebody must have died on Some Ship, and been thrown overboard. But I argued that this could hardly be, because—surely—bodies buried at sea were not put into coffins, were they? I had heard that the custom was to sew them up in sailcloth or something, and weight them well. Besides, there was the broken rope tied round the coffin, which seemed to show that it had been tethered, and got loose—in the storm, perhaps. How did Lord Glencathra account for that fact? He couldn't account for it. Nor could any one else.

CHAPTER V

WHAT I FOUND IN MY CABIN

I did all I could to make dinner a lively meal, and with iced Pommery of a particularly good year as my aide-de-camp, superficially at least I succeeded. But whenever there was an instant's lull in the conversation, I felt that everyone was asking him or herself, "*Where* is the coffin?"

The plan had been to have a little moonlight fox-trotting and jazzing on deck; but with that Black Thing hidden somewhere on board, we confined ourselves to more bridge and star-gazing, according to taste. I, as professional Brightener, nobly kept Mr. Pollen out of everybody's way by annexing him for a stroll. This deserved the name of a double brightening act, for I brightened the lives of his fellow guests by saving them from him; and I brightened his by encouraging him to talk of Well-Connected People.

"Who *was* she before she married Lord Thingum-bob?" ... or, "Yes, she was Miss So-and-So, a cousin of the Duke of Dinkum," might have been heard issuing sapiently from our lips, had any one been mentally destitute enough to eavesdrop. But I had my reward. Dear little Shelagh Leigh and Roger Fane seemed to have cheered each other. I left them standing together, elbows on the rail, as they had stood before the affair of the afternoon. The moonlight was shining full upon Shelagh's bright hair and pearl-white face, as she looked up, eager-eyed, at Roger; and *he* looked—at least, his *back* looked!—as if there were nobody on land or sea except one Girl.

Having lured Mr. Pollen to make a fourth at a bridge table where the players were too polite to kill him, I ventured to vanish. There being no one on board with whom I wished to flirt, my one desire after two hard hours of Brightening was to curl up in my cabin with a nice book. I quite looked forward to the moment for shutting myself cosily in, for the cabin was a delicious pink-and-white nest—the biggest room on board, as a tribute to my princesshood.

Hardly had I opened the door, however, when my dream-bubble broke. A very odd and repellent odour greeted me, and seemed almost to push me back across the threshold. I held my ground, however, and sniffed with curiosity and disgust.

Somebody had been at my perfume—my expensive pet perfume, made especially for me in Rome (one drop exquisite; two, oppressive), and must have spilt the lot. But worse than this, the heavy fragrance was mingled with a reek of stale brandy.

Anger flashed in me, like a match set to gun-cotton. Some impertinent person had sneaked into my stateroom and played a stupid practical joke. Or, if not that, one of the pleasantly prim, immaculate women (a cross between the stewardess and ladies'-maid type) engaged to hook up our frocks and make up our cabins, was secretly a confirmed—*ROTTER*!

I switched on the light, shut the door smartly without locking it, and flung a furious glance around. The creature had actually dared to place a brandy bottle conspicuously upon my dressing table, among gold-handled brushes and silver gilt boxes, and, as a crowning impertinence, had left a tumbler beside the bottle, a quarter full of strong-smelling brown stuff. Close by lay my lovely crystal flask of "Campagna Violets," empty. I could get no more anywhere, and it had cost five pounds! I could hardly breathe in the room. Oh, evidently a stewardess must have gone stark mad, or else some practical joker had waited to play the *coup* until the stewardesses were in bed!

As I thought this, my eyes as well as my nostrils warned me of something strange. The rose-coloured silk curtains which, when I went to dinner, had been gracefully looped back at head and foot of my pretty bed (a real bed, not a mere berth!) were now closely drawn with a secretive air. This made me imagine that it was a practical joke I had to deal with, and my fancy flew to all sorts of weird surprises, any one of which I might find hidden behind the draperies.

I trust that I have a sense of humour, and I can laugh at a jest against myself as well as any woman, perhaps better than most. But to-night I was in no mood to laugh at jests, and I wondered how anybody had the heart (not to mention the *cheek*!) to perpetrate one after the shock we had experienced. Besides, I couldn't think of a person likely to play a trick on me. Certainly my host wouldn't do so. Shelagh, my best and most intimate pal, was far too gentle and sensitive-minded. As for the other guests, none were of the noisy, bounding type who take liberties even with distant acquaintances, for fun.

All this ran through my mind, as a cinema "cut-in" flashes across the screen; and it wasn't until I'd passed in review the characters of my fellow guests that I summoned courage to pull back the bed-curtains. When I did so, I gave a jerk

that slipped them along the rod as far as they would go. And then—I saw the last thing in the world I could have pictured.

A woman, fully dressed, was stretched on the pink silk coverlet fast asleep, her head deep sunk in the embroidered pillow.

It was all I could do to keep back a cry—for this was no woman I had seen on board, not even a drunken or sleep-walking stewardess. Yet her face was not strange to me. That was the most horrible, the most mysterious part! There was no mistake, for the face was impossible to forget. As I stared, almost believing that I dreamed, another scene rose between my eyes and the dainty little cabin of the *Naiad*.

It also was a scene in a dream. I knew it was a dream, but it was torturingly vivid. I was a prisoner on a German submarine, in war-time, and signals from my own old home—Courtenaye Abbey—flashed into my eyes. They flashed so brightly that they set me on fire. I wakened from the nightmare with a start. A strong light dazzled me, and, striking my face, lit up another face as well. Just for an instant I saw it; then the revealing ray died into darkness. But on my retina was photographed those features, in a pale, illumined circle.

A second sufficed to bring back to my brain this old dream and the waking reality which followed, that night at the Abbey, long ago—the night which Shelagh and I called "Spy Night." For here, in my cabin on the yacht *Naiad*, on the crushed pillow of my bed, was that face.

As I realized this, without benefit of any doubt, a faint sickness swept over me. It was partly horror of the past; partly physical disgust of the brandy-reek—stronger than ever now—hanging like an unseen canopy over the bed; and partly cold fear of a terrifying Presence.

There she lay, sunk in drugged and drunken sleep, the Woman of Mystery, in whose existence no one but Shelagh and I had ever quite believed: the woman who had visited us in our sleep, and who—almost certainly—had fired the Abbey, hoping that we and the Barlows might suffocate in our beds.

The face was just the same as it had been then: "beautiful and hideous at the same time, like Medusa," I had described it; only now it was older, and though still beautiful, somehow *ravaged*. The hair still glowed with the vivid auburn colour which I had thought "unreal looking"; but now it was tumbled and unkempt. Loose locks strayed over the dainty pillow, and at the bottom of the

bed, pushed tightly against the footboard by a pair of untidy, high-heeled shoes, was a dusty black toque half covered with a very thick motor-veil of gray tissue. There was a gray cloak, too, in a tumbled mass on the pink coverlet, and a pair of soiled gloves. Everything about the sleeper was sordid and repulsive, a shuddering contrast to the exquisite freshness of the bed and room—everything, that is, except the face. Its half-wrecked beauty was still supreme, and even in the ruin drink or drugs had wrought, it forced admiration.

"*A German spy*—here in my cabin—on board Roger Fane's yacht!" I said the words slowly in my mind, not with my tongue. Not a sound, not the faintest whisper, passed my lips. Yet suddenly the long, dark lashes on bruise-blue lids began to quiver. It was as if my *thought* had shaken the woman by the shoulder, and roused what was left of her soul.

I should have liked to dash out of the room and with a shriek bring everyone on board to my cabin. But I stood motionless, concentrating my gaze on those trembling eyelids. Something inside me seemed to say: "Don't be a coward, Elizabeth Courtenaye!" It was exactly like Grandmother's voice. I had a conviction that *she* wanted me to see this thing through as a Courtenaye should, shirking no responsibility, and solving the mystery of past and present without bleating for help.

The fringed lids parted, shut, quivered again, and flashed wide open. A pair of pale eyes stared into mine—wicked eyes, cruel eyes, green as a cat's. Like a cat, too, the creature gathered herself together as if for a spring. Her muscles rippled and jerked. She sat up, and in chilled surprise I thought I saw recognition in her stare.

CHAPTER VI

THE WOMAN OF THE PAST

"Oh, you've come at last!" she rasped, in a harsh, throaty voice roughened by drink. "I know you. I——"

"And I know you!" I cut her short, to show that I was not cowed.

Sitting up in bed, hugging her knees, she started at my words so that the springs shook. Whatever it was she had meant to say, she forgot it for the moment, and challenged me: "That's a lie!" she snapped. "You *don't* know me yet—but you soon will."

"I've known you since you came into my room at Courtenaye Abbey the night you tried to burn down the house," I said. "You were spying for the Germans in the war. Heaven knows all the harm you may have done. I can't imagine for whom you're spying now. Anyhow, you can't frighten me again. The war's over, but I'll have you arrested for what you did when it was on."

The woman scowled and laughed, more Medusa-like than ever. I really felt as if she might turn me to stone. But she shouldn't guess her power.

"Pooh!" she said, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "You won't want to arrest me when you hear who I am, Lady Shelagh Leigh!"

"Lady Shelagh Leigh!" It was on my lips to cry, "I'm not Shelagh Leigh!" But I stopped in time. The less I let her find out about me, and the more I could find out about her before rousing the yacht, the better. I spoke not a word, but waited for her to go on—which she did in a few seconds.

"That makes you sit up, doesn't it?" she sneered. "That hits you where you *live*! Why did you think I chose your cabin? I didn't select it by chance. I confess I was taken back at your remembering. I thought I hadn't given you time for much study of my features that other night. But it doesn't matter. You can't do anything to me. I'll soon prove *that*! But I had a good look at *you*, there in your friend's old Devonshire rat-trap. I knew who you both were. It was easy to find out! And the other day, when I heard that Lady Shelagh Leigh was likely to marry Roger

Fane, I said to myself, 'Gosh! One of the girls I saw at the darned old Abbey!'"

"Oh, you said *that* to yourself!" I echoed. And, though my knees failed, I kept to my feet. To stand towering above the squatting figure on the bed seemed to give me moral as well as physical advantage. "How did you know, pray, which girl I was?"

"I knew, 'pray,'" she mocked, "because you've got the best room on this yacht. Roger'd be sure to give that to his best girl. Which is how I'm sure you're not Elizabeth Courtenaye."

"How clever you are!" I said.

"Yes—I'm clever—when I'm not a fool. Don't think, anyhow, that you can beat me in a battle of brains. I've come on board this boat to succeed, and I *will* succeed in one of two ways, I don't care a hang which. But nothing on God's earth can hold me back from one or the other—least of all, can *you*. Why, you can ask any question you please, and I'll answer. I'll tell the truth, too—for the more I say, and the more you're shocked, the more helpless you are—do you see?"

"No, I don't see," I drew her on.

"Don't you guess yet who I am?"

"I've guessed what you *were*—a German spy."

"That's ancient history. One must live—and one must have money—plenty of money. I must! And I've had it. But it's gone from me—like most good things. Now I must have more—a lot more. Or else I must die. I don't care which. But *others* will care. I'll make them."

Looking at her, I doubted if she had the power; though she must have had it in lost days of gorgeous youth. Yet again I remained silent. I saw that she was leading up to something in particular, and I let her go on.

"You're not much of a guesser," she said, "so I'll introduce myself. Lady-who-thinks-she's-going-to-marry Roger Fane, let me make known to you the lady who *has* married him—Mrs. Fane, *née* Linda Lehmann. I've changed my name since, more than once. At present I'm Katherine Nelson. But Linda Lehmann is the name that matters to Roger. You're nothing in looks, by the by, to what *I* was at your age. *Nothing!*"

If my knees had been weak before, they now felt as if struck with a mallet! She might be lying, but something within me was horribly sure that she spoke the truth. I'd never heard full details of Roger Fane's "tragedy," but Mrs. Carstairs had dropped a few hints which, without asking questions, I'd patched together. I had gleaned that he'd married (when almost a boy) an actress much older than himself; and that, till her sudden and violent death after many years—nine or ten at least—his life had been a martyrdom. How the woman contrived to be alive I couldn't see. But such things happened—to people one didn't know! The worst of it was that *I did* know Roger Fane, and liked him. Besides, I loved Shelagh, whose happiness was bound up with Roger's. It seemed as if I couldn't bear to have those two torn apart by this cruel creature—this drunkard—this *spy*! Yet—what could I do?

At the moment I could think of nothing useful, because, if she was Roger's wife, her boast was justified: for his sake and Shelagh's she mustn't be handed over to the police, to answer for any political crime I might prove against her—or even for trying to burn down the Abbey. Oh, this business was beyond what I bargained for when I engaged to "brighten" the trip on board the *Naiad*! Still, all the spirit in me rallied to work for Roger Fane—even to work out his salvation if that could be. And I was glad I'd let the woman believe I was Shelagh Leigh.

"Roger's wife died five years ago, just before the war began," I said. "She was killed in a railway accident—an awful one, where she and a company of actors she was travelling with were burned to death."

The creature laughed. "Have you never been to a movie show, and seen how easy it is to die in a railway accident?—to *stay* dead to those you're tired of, and to be alive in some other part of this old world, where you think there's more fun going on? It's been done on the screen a hundred times—and off it, too. I was sick to death of Roger. I'd never have married a stick like him—always preaching!—if I hadn't been down and out. When I met him, it was in a beastly one-horse town where I was stranded. The show had chucked me—gone off and left me without a cent. I was sick—too big a dose of dope, if you want to know. But *Roger* didn't know—you can bet. Not then! I took jolly good care to toe the mark, till he'd married me all right. He *was* a sucker! I suppose he was twenty-two and over, but Peter Pan wasn't in it with him in some ways. He kept me off the stage—and tried to keep me off everything else worth doing for five years. Then I left him, for my health and looks had come back, and I got a fair part in a play on tour. There I met a countryman of mine—oh! don't be encouraged to hope! I never gave Roger any cause to divorce me; and if I had, I'd have done it

so he couldn't prove a thing!"

"When you say the man was your countryman, I suppose you mean a German," I said.

"Well, yes," she replied, with the flaunting frankness she affected in these revelations. "German-American he was. I'm German by birth, and grew up in America. I've been back often and long since then. But this man had a scheme. He wanted me to go into it with him. I didn't see my way at first though there was big money, so he left the show before the accident. When I found myself alive and kicking among the dead that day, however, I saw my chance. I left a ring and a few things to identify me with a woman who was killed, and I lit out. It was in the dead of night, so luck was on my side for once. I wrote my friend, and it wasn't long before I was at work with him for the German Government. The Abbey affair was after he'd got out of England and into Germany through Switzerland. He was a sailor, and had been given command of a big new submarine. If it hadn't been for the row you and your pal kicked up, we—he on the water and I on land—might have brought off one of the big stunts of the war. You tore it—after I'd been mewed up in the old rat-warren for a week, and everything was working just right! I wish to goodness the whole house had burned, and I did wish *you'd* burned with it. But I don't know if to-night isn't going to pay me—and you—just as well. There's a lot owing from you to me. I haven't told you all yet. My friend's submarine was caught, and he went down with her. I blame that to you. If I hadn't failed him with the signals, he might be alive now."

"I was more patriotic than I knew!" I flung back. "As you're so confidential, tell me how you got into the Abbey, and where you hid."

She shook her dyed and tousled head. "That's where I draw the line," she said. "I've told you what I have told to please myself, not you. You can't profit by a word of it. That's where my fun comes in! If I split about the Abbey, you might profit somehow—or your friend the Courtenaye girl would. I want to punish her, too."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Perhaps in that case you won't care to explain how you came on board the *Naiad*?"

"I don't mind that," the ex-spy made concession. "I went out of England after the Abbey affair—friends helped me away—and I worked in New York till things grew too hot. Then I came over as a Red Cross nurse, got into France, and

stopped till the other day. I'd be there still if I hadn't picked up a weekly London gossip-rag, and seen a paragraph about a certain rumoured engagement! You can guess *whose*! It called Roger—*my* Roger, mind you!—a 'millionaire.' He never was poor, even in my day; he'd made a lucky strike before we met, with an invention. I said to myself: 'Linda, my girl, 'twould be tempting Providence to lie low and let another woman spend his money.' I started as soon as I could, but missed him in London, and hurried on to Plymouth. If it hadn't been for that bally storm I shouldn't have caught him up! The yacht would have sailed. As it was, before you came on board this afternoon I presented myself, thickly veiled. I had a card from a London newspaper, and an old card of Roger's which was among a few things of his I'd kept for emergencies. I can copy his handwriting well enough not be suspected, except by an intimate friend of his, so I scribbled on the card an order to view the yacht. I got on all right, and wandered about with a notebook and a stylo. I soon found the right place to hide—in the storeroom, behind some barrels. But I had to make everyone who'd seen me think I'd gone on shore. That was easy! I told a sailor fellow by the gang plank I was going, and said I'd mislaid an envelope in which I'd slipped a tip for him and another man. I thought I'd left it on a table in the dining saloon, and he'd better look for it, or it might be picked up by somebody. He went before I could say 'knife!' and the envelope really *was* there, so he didn't have to hurry back. Two minutes later I was in the storeroom, and no one the wiser. Lord! but I got the jumps waiting for the stewardesses to be safe in bed before I could creep out to pay your cabin a call!"

"So, to cure the 'jumps' you annexed a whole bottle of brandy," I said.

"I did—for that and another reason you may find out by and by. But I'm hanged if you're not a cool hand, for a young girl who has just heard her lover's a married man. I thought by this time you'd be in hysterics."

"Girls of *my* generation don't have hysterics," I taunted her. By the dyed hair and vestiges of rouge and powder which streaked the battered face I guessed that a sneer at her age would sting like a wasp. I wanted to rouse the woman's temper. If she lost her head, she might show her hand!

"You'll have worse than hysterics, you fool, before I finish," she snapped. "I'm going to make Roger Fane acknowledge me as his wife and give me everything I want—money, and motor cars, and pearls—and, best of all, a *position in society*. I'm tired of being a free lance."

"He won't do it!" I cried.

"He'll have to—when he hears what will happen if he doesn't. If I can't live a life worth living, I'll die. Roger Fane will go off this yacht under arrest as my murderer."

"You deserve that he should kill you, but he will not," I said.

"He'll *hang* for killing me, anyhow. You see, the more *motive* he has to destroy me, the more impossible for him—or you—to prove his innocence. Do you think I'd have told you all this, if any one was likely to believe such a cock-and-bull story as the truth would sound to a jury? But I'm through now! I've said what I came to say. I'm ready to act. Do you want a row, or will you go quietly to the door of Roger's cabin (he must be there by this time) and tell him that his wife, Linda Lehmann, is waiting for him in your stateroom? *That*'ll fetch him!"

I had no doubt it would. My only doubt was what to do! But if I refused, the woman was sure to keep her word, and rouse the yacht by screams. That would be the worst thing possible for Shelagh and Roger. I decided to go, and break to him the news with merciful swiftness.

If I could, I would have turned a key upon the creature, but the doors of the *Naiad's* cabins were furnished only with bolts. My one hope, that she'd keep to my room, owed itself to the fact that she was too drunk to move comfortably, and that, despite her bluff, the best trump she had was quiet diplomacy with Roger.

Softly I closed the door, and tiptoed to his, three staterooms distant from mine. My tap was so light that, if he had gone to sleep, I should have had to knock again. But he opened the door at once. He was fully dressed, and had a book in his hand.

"Something has happened," I whispered in answer to his amazed look. "Let me come in and explain. I can't talk out here."

He stood aside in silence, and I stepped in. Then I motioned him to shut the door.

CHAPTER VII

THE SECRET BEHIND THE SILENCE

This was the first time I'd seen Roger's cabin, and I had no eyes now for its charm of decoration; but I saw that it was large, and divided by a curtained arch into a bedroom and a tiny yet complete study fitted with bookshelves and a desk.

"You're pale as death!" He lowered his voice cautiously. "Sit down in this chair." As he spoke he led me through the bedroom part of the cabin to the study, and there I sank gratefully into the depths of a big chair, where, no doubt, he had sat reading under the light of a shaded lamp.

"Now what is it?" he asked, bending over me. As I stammered out my story, for a few seconds I forgot the fear of being followed. Our backs were turned to the door. But I had not got far in the tale when I felt that *she* had come into the room. I glanced over my shoulder, and saw her—a shabby, sinister figure—hanging on to the curtain that draped the archway.

Roger's start and stifled exclamation proved that, whatever else she might be, the woman was no imposter.

"You devil!" he gasped.

"Your wife!" she retorted.

"Hush," I whispered. "For every sake let's keep this quiet!"

"*I'll* be quiet for my own sake, if he accepts my terms," said the woman. "If not, the whole yacht——"

"Be silent!" Roger commanded. "Princess, I've got to see this through. You'd better go now, and leave me alone with her."

He was right. My presence would hinder rather than help. I saw the greenish eyes dart from his face to mine when he called me "Princess"; but she must have fancied it a pet name, for no question flashed from her lips as I tiptoed across the room.

When I got back to my own quarters, I noticed at once that the brandy bottle and the tumbler which had accompanied it were gone from my dressing table. Nor were they to be found in the cabin. The woman must have taken them to Roger's room, and placed them somewhere before I saw her. "Disgusting!" I murmured, for my thought was that the debased wretch had clung lovingly to the drink. Even though I'd sharpened my wits to search all her motives, I failed over that simple-seeming act.

"Oh, poor Roger!" I said to myself. "And poor Shelagh!"

I sat miserably on the window seat (for the rumpled bed was now abhorrent), and wondered what would happen next. But I had not long to wait. A few moments passed—how many I don't know—and the crystalline silence of the gliding *Naiad* was splintered by a scream.

'Scream' is the word one must use for a cry of pain or fear. Yet it isn't the right word for the sound that snatched me to my feet. It was not shrill, it was not loud. What might have ended in a shriek subsided to a choked breath, a gurgle. My heart's pounding seemed louder as I listened. My ears expected a following cry, but it did not come. Two or three doors gently opened, that was all. Again dead silence fell; and I felt in it that others listened, fearing to speak lest the sound had been no more than a moan in a dream. Presently the doors closed again, each listener afraid of disturbing a neighbour. And even I, who knew the secret behind the silence, prayed that the choked scream might have come when it did as a mere coincidence. Someone might really have had nightmare!

As time passed, I almost persuaded myself that it was so, and that, at worst, there would be no crime to mark this night with crimson on the calendar. But the next quarter hour was the *deadest* time I'd ever known. I felt like one entombed alive, praying to be liberated from a vault. Then, at last—when those who'd waked slept again—came a faint knock at my door.

I flew to slip back the bolt, and pulled Roger Fane into the room. One would not have believed a face so brown could bleach so white!

For an instant we stared into each other's eyes. When I could speak, I stammered a question—I don't know what, and I don't think he understood. But the spell broke.

"You *heard*?" he faltered.

"The cry? Yes. It was——"

"She's dead."

"*Dead!* You killed her?"

"My God, no! But if you think that, what will—*others* think?"

"If you had killed her, you couldn't be blamed," I tried to encourage him. "Only ——"

"Didn't she make some threat to you? I hoped she had. She told me——"

"Yes, there was something—I hardly remember what. It was like drunkenness. She said—I think—that if you wouldn't take her back, you'd be arrested—as her murderer."

"That was it—her ultimatum. She must have been mad. I offered a big allowance, if she'd go away and not make a scandal. I'd have to give up Shelagh, of course, but I wanted to save my poor little love from gossip. That devil would have no compromise. It should be all or nothing. I must swear to acknowledge her as my wife on board this yacht—to-morrow morning—before Shelagh—before you all. If I wouldn't promise that, she'd kill herself at once, in a way to throw the guilt on me. She'd do it so that I couldn't clear myself or be cleared. I wouldn't promise, of course. I hoped, anyhow, that she was bluffing. But I didn't know her! When nothing would change me, she showed a tiny phial she had in her hand, and said she'd drink the stuff in it before I could touch her. It was prussic acid, she told me—and already she'd poured enough to kill ten men into a tumbler she'd stolen from my cabin on purpose. She'd mixed the poison with brandy from the storeroom. Even if I threw the tumbler through the porthole, mine would be missing. There's one to match each room, you see. A small detail, but important.

"'Now will you promise?' she repeated. I couldn't—for I should not have kept my word. She looked at me a second. I saw in her eyes that she was going to do the thing, and I jumped at her—but I was too late. She nearly drained the phial. And she'd hardly flung it away before she was dead—with an awful, twisted face—and that cry. If I hadn't caught her, she'd have fallen with a crash. This is the end of things for me."

"Oh, no—don't say that!" I begged.

"What else is there to say? There she lies, dead in my cabin. There's prussic acid on the floor—and the phial broken. The room reeks of bitter almonds. No one but you will believe I didn't kill her—perhaps not even Shelagh. Just because the woman made my past life horrible—and I had a chance of happiness—the temptation would be irresistible."

"Let me think. Do let me think!" I persisted. "Surely there's a way out of the trap."

"I don't *see* one," said Roger. "Throwing a body overboard is the obvious thing. But it would be worse than——"

"Wait!" I cut him short. "I've thought of another thing—*not* obvious. But it's hard to do—and hateful. The only help I could lend you is—a hint. The rest would depend on yourself. If you were strong enough—brave enough—it might give you Shelagh."

"I'm strong enough for anything with the remotest hope of Shelagh, and—I trust—brave enough, too. Tell me your plan."

I had to draw a long breath before I could answer. I needed air! "You're right." I said. "To give the body to the sea would make things worse. You couldn't be sure it would not be found, and the woman traced by the police. If they discovered who she was—that she'd been your wife—you would be suspected even if nothing were proved through those who saw a veiled woman come on board."

"That's what I meant. Yet you must see that even with your testimony, my innocence can't be proved if the story of this night has to be told."

"I do see. You might not be proved guilty, but you'd be under a cloud. Shelagh would still want to marry you. But she's very young, and easy to break as a butterfly. The Pollens——"

"I wouldn't accept such a sacrifice even if they'd let her make it. Yet you speak of hope!—--"

"I do—a desperate hope. Can you open that coffin you brought on board to-day, take out—whatever is in it—and—and——"

"My God!"

"I warned you the plan was terrible. I hardly thought you would——"

"I would—for Shelagh. But you don't understand. That coffin will be opened by the police at St. Heliers to-morrow, and——"

"I do understand. It's you who do not. Everyone on board knows that the coffin was floating in the sea—that we came on it by accident. You could have had nothing to do with its being where it was. If you had, you wouldn't have taken it on board! The body found in that coffin to-morrow won't be associated with you. *She*—must have altered horribly since old days. And she has changed her name many times. The initials on her linen won't be L.L. There'll be a nine-days' wonder over the mystery. But *you* won't be concerned in it. As for what's in the coffin now, *that* can safely be given to the sea. Whatever it may be, and whenever or wherever it's found, it won't be connected with the name of Roger Fane. If there's the name of the maker on the coffin, it must come off. Oh, don't think I do not realize the full horror of the thing. I do! But between two evils one must choose the less, if it hurts no one. It seems to me it is so with this. Why should Shelagh's life and yours be spoiled by a cruel woman—a criminal—whose last act was to try to ruin the man she'd injured, sinned against for years? As for—*the other*—the unknown one—if the spirit can see, surely it would be glad to help in such a cause? What you would have to do, you'd do reverently. There must be tarpaulin on board, or canvas coverings that wouldn't be looked for, or missed. There must be a screw-driver—and things like that. The great danger is, if the coffin's in plain sight anywhere, and a man on watch——"

"There's no danger of that kind. The coffin is in the bathroom adjoining my cabin."

"Then—doesn't it seem that Fate bade you put it there?"

For a moment Roger covered his face with his hands. I saw him shudder. But he flung back his head and looked me in the eyes. "I'll go on obeying Fate's orders," he said.

Without another word between us, he left me. The door shut, and I sat staring at it, as if I could see beyond.

I had spoken only the truth. There was no sin against living or dead in what I had urged Roger to do. Yet the bare thought of it was so grim that I felt like an up-to-date Lady Macbeth.

I had forgotten to beg that he would come back and tell of his success or—failure. But I was sure he would come, sooner or later, whatever happened, and I

sat quite still—waiting. I kept my eyes on the door, to see the handle turn, or gazed at my little travelling clock to watch the dragging moments. I longed for news. Yet I was glad when time went on without a sign. The quick coming back of Roger would have meant that he had failed—that all hope was ended.

Twenty minutes; thirty; forty; fifty, passed, seeming endless. But when with the sixtieth minute came the faint tap I awaited, down sank my heart. Roger could not have finished his double task in an hour!

I dashed to the door, and the light from my cabin showed the man's face, ashy pale. Yet I did not read despair on it.

Without a word I dragged him into the room once more; and only when the door was closed did I dare to whisper "*Well?*"

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT SURPRISE

"*There was no body in the coffin,*" Roger said.

"Empty?" I gasped.

"Not empty. No. There was something there. Will you come to my cabin and see what it was? Don't look frightened. There's nothing to alarm you. And—Princess, the rest of the plan you gave me has been—*carried out*. Thanks to your woman's wit, I believe that my future and Shelagh's is clear. And, before Heaven, my conscience is clear, too."

"Oh, Roger, it's thanks to your own courage more than to me. Is—is all *safe*?"

"The coffin—isn't empty now. It is fastened up, just as it was. The broken rope is round it again. It's covered with the tarpaulin as before. No one outside the secret would guess it had been disturbed. There's no maker's mark to trace it by. I owe more than my life—I owe my very *soul*—to you. For I haven't much fear of what may come at St. Heliers to-morrow or after."

"Nor I. Oh, I am *thankful*, for Shelagh's sake even more than yours, if possible. Her heart would have broken. Now she need never know."

"She must know—and choose. I shall tell her—everything I did. Only I need not bring you into it."

"If you tell her about yourself, you must tell her about me," I said. "I'd like to be with you when you speak to her—if you think you must speak."

"I'm sure I must. If all goes well to-morrow, she can marry me without fear of scandal—if she's willing to marry me, after what I've done to-night."

"She will be. And she shall hear from me that this woman who killed herself and our spy of the Abbey were one. As for to-morrow—all *must* go well! But—the thing you found—in the coffin. You'll have to dispose of it somehow."

"It's for *you* to decide about that—I think."

"For me? What can it have to do with me?"

"You'll see—in my cabin. If you'll trust me and come."

I went with him, my heart pounding as I entered the room. It seemed as if some visible trace of tragedy must remain. But there was nothing. All was in order. The brandy bottle had disappeared—into the sea, no doubt. The tumbler so cleverly taken from this cabin was clean, and in its place. There were no bits of broken glass from the phial to be seen. And the odour of bitter almonds with which the place had reeked was no longer very strong. The salt breeze blowing through two wide-open portholes would kill it before dawn.

"But where is the *thing*?" I asked.

"In the study," Roger answered. He motioned me to pass through the curtained archway, as I had passed before; and there I had to cover my lips with my hand to press back a cry. The desk, the big chair I had sat in, and a sofa were covered with objects familiar to me as my own face in a looking-glass. There was Queen Anne's silver tea-service and Napoleon's green-and-gold coffee cups. There were Li Hung Chang's box of red lacquer and the wondrous Buddha; there were the snuff-boxes, the miniatures, the buckles and brooches; the fat watch of George the Fourth; half unrolled lay Charles the First's portrait and sketch, and the Gobelin panel which had been the Empress Josephine's. In fact, all the treasures stolen from Courtenaye Abbey! Here they were in Roger Fane's cabin on board the *Naiad*, and they had come out of a coffin found floating in the sea!

When I could think at all, I tried to think the puzzle out, and I tried to do it alone, for Roger was in no state to bend his mind to trifles. But, in his almost pathetic gratitude, he wished to help me; and when we had locked up the things in three drawers of his desk, we sat together discussing theories. Something must be planned, something settled, before day!

It was Roger who unfolded the whole affair before my eyes, unfolded it so clearly that I could not doubt he was right. My trust—everyone's trust—in the Barlows had been misplaced. They were the guilty ones! If they had not organized the plot, they had helped to carry it through as nobody else could have carried it through.

I told Roger of the two demobilized nephews about whom—if he had heard—he had forgotten. I explained that they were twin sons of a brother of old Barlow's, who had taken them to Australia years ago when they were children. Vaguely I recalled that, when I was very young, Barlow had worried over news from Australia: his nephews had been in trouble of some sort. I fancied they had got in with a bad set. But that was ancient history! The twins had evidently "made good." They had fought in the war, and had done well. They must have saved money, or they could not have bought the old house on the Dorset coast which had belonged to the Barlows for generations. It was at this point, however, that Roger stopped me. *Had* the boys "saved" money, or—had they got it in a way less meritorious? Had they needed, for pressing reasons of their own, to possess that place on the coast? The very question called up a picture—no, a series of pictures—before my eyes. I saw, or Roger made me see, almost against my will, how the scheme might have been worked—*must* have been worked!—from beginning to end; and how at last it had most strangely failed. Again, the Fate that had sailed on the Storm! For an hour we talked, and made our plan almost as intricately as the thieves or their backers had made theirs. Then, as dawn paled the sky framed by the open portholes, I slipped off to my own cabin. I did not go to bed (I could not, where *she* had lain!) and I didn't sleep. But I curled up on the long window seat, with cushions under my head, and thought. I thought of a thousand things: of Roger's plan and mine, of how I could return the heirlooms yet keep the secret; of what Sir Jim would say when he learned of their reappearance; and, above all, I thought of what our discovery in the coffin would mean for Roger Fane.

Yes, that was far more important to him even than to me! For the fact that the coffin had been the property of thieves meant that no claim would ever be made to it. The mystery of its present occupant would therefore remain a mystery till the end of time, and—Roger was safe!

The next day we reached St. Heliers, after a quick voyage through blue, untroubled waters; and there we came in for all the red tape that Roger had foreseen, if not more. But how inoffensive, even pleasing, is red tape to a man saved from handcuffs and a prison cell!

The body of an unknown woman in a coffin picked up at sea gave the chance for a dramatic "story" to flash over the wires from Jersey to London; and the evident fact that death had been caused by poison added an extra thrill. Every soul on board the *Naiad* was questioned, down to the *chef's* assistant; but the same tale was told by all. The coffin had first been sighted at a good distance, and

mistaken for a dead shark or a small, overturned boat. The whole party were agreed that it must be brought on board, though no one had wanted it for a travelling companion, and the sailors especially had objected. (Now, by the way, they were revelling in reflected glory. They would not have missed this experience for the world!) I quaked inwardly, fearing that someone might mention the veiled female journalist who had arrived before the start, with an order to view the *Naiad*. But so completely was her departure from the yacht taken for granted, that none who had seen her recalled the incident.

There was no suspicion of Roger Fane, nor of any one else on board, for there was no reason to suppose that any of us had been acquainted with the dead.

The description wired to London was of "a woman unknown; probable age between forty and fifty; hair dyed auburn; features distorted by effect of poison; hands well shaped, badly kept; figure medium; black serge dress; underclothing plain and much torn, without initials or laundry-marks; no shoes."

It was unlikely that landlords or chance acquaintances should identify the woman newly arrived from France with the woman picked up in a coffin at sea. And the gray-veiled motor toque, the gray cloak worn by the "journalist," and even the battered boots, with high, broken heels, were safely hidden with the heirlooms from the Abbey.

All through the week of our trip the three drawers in Roger's desk remained locked, the little Yale key hanging on Roger's key ring. And all that week (there was no excuse to make for home before the appointed time) our Plan had to lie in abeyance. I was impatient. Roger was not. With Shelagh by his side—and very often in his arms—the incentive for haste was all mine. But I was happy in their happiness, wondering only whether Roger would not be tempting Providence if he told the truth to Shelagh.

Nothing, however, would move the man from his resolution. The one point he would yield was to postpone the confession (if "confession" is a fair word) until the last day, in order not to disturb Shelagh's pleasure in the trip. She was to hear the story the night before we landed; and I begged once more that I might be present to help plead his cause. But Roger wanted no help. And he wanted Shelagh to decide for herself. He would state the case plainly, for and against. Hearing him, the girl would know what was for her own happiness.

"At worst I shall have these wonderful days with her to remember," he said to me. "Nothing can rob me of them. And they are a thousand times the best of my

life so far."

I believed that, equally, nothing could rob him of Shelagh! But—I wasn't quite sure. And the difference between just "believing" and being "quite sure" is the difference between mental peace and mental storm. I had gone through so much with Roger, and for him, that by this time I loved the man as I might love a brother—a dear and somewhat trying brother. As for Shelagh, I would have given one of my favourite fingers or toes to buy her happiness. Consequently, the hour of revelation was a bad hour for me.

I knew that, till it was over, I should be incapable of Brightening. Lest I should be called upon in any such capacity, therefore, I went to bed after dinner with an official headache.

"Now he must be telling her," I groaned to my pillow.

"Now he must have told!"

"Now she must be making up her mind!"

"Now it must be *made* up. She'll be giving her answer. And if it's 'no,' he won't by a word or look plead his own cause. *Hang* the fool! And bless him!"

Then followed a blank interval when I couldn't at all guess what might be happening. I no longer speculated on the chances. My brain became a blank. And my pillow was a furnace.

I was striving in vain to read a book whose pages I scarcely saw, and whose name I've forgotten, when a tap came at the door. Shelagh Leigh burst in before I could answer.

"Oh, *Elizabeth*!" she gasped, and fell into my arms.

I held the girl tight for an instant, her beating heart against mine. Then I inquired: "What does 'Oh, Elizabeth!' mean precisely?"

"It means, of course, that I'm going to marry poor, darling Roger as soon as I possibly can, to comfort him all the rest of his life. And that you'll be my 'Matron of Honour,' American fashion," she explained. "Roger is a hero, and you are a heroine."

"No, a Brightener," I corrected. But Shelagh didn't understand. And it didn't matter that she did not.

CHAPTER IX

THE GAME OF BLUFF

When the trip finished where it had begun, instead of travelling up to London with most of my friends, I stopped behind in Plymouth. If any one fancied I was going to Courtenaye Abbey to wail at the shrine of lost treasures, why, I had never said (in words) that such was my intention. In fact, it was not.

What I did, as soon as backs were turned, was to make straight for Dudworth Cove, on the rocky Dorset Coast. I went by motor car with Roger Fane as chauffeur; and by aid of a road map and a few questions we drove to the old farmhouse which the Barlow boys had lately bought.

Of course it was possible that Mrs. Barlow and the two Australian nephews had departed in haste, after their loss. They might or might not have read in the papers about the coffin containing the body of a woman picked up at sea by a yacht. Probably they had read of it, since the word "coffin" at the head of a column would be apt to catch their guilty eyes. But even so, they would hardly expect that this coffin, containing a corpse, and a certain other coffin, with very different contents, were one and the same. In any case, they need not greatly fear suspicion falling upon them, and Roger and I thought they would remain at the farm engaged in eager, secret search. As for Barlow, for whom the coffin had doubtless been made, he, too, might be there; or he might have left the Abbey at night, about the time of his "death," to wait in some agreed-upon hiding place.

The house was visible from the road; rather a nice old house, built of stone, with a lichened roof and friendly windows. It had a lived-in air, and a thin wreath of smoke floated above the kitchen chimney. There were two gates, and both were padlocked, so the car had to stop in the road. I refused Roger's companionship, however. The fact that he was close by and knew where I was seemed sufficient safeguard. I climbed over the fence with no more ado than in pre-flapper days, and walked across the weedy grass to the house. No one answered a knock at the front door, so I went to the back, and caught "Barley" feeding a group of chickens.

The treacherous old thing was in deep mourning, with a widow's cap, and her

dress of black bombazine (or some equally awful stuff) was pinned up under a big apron. At sight of me she jumped, and almost dropped a pan of meal; but even the most innocent person is entitled to jump! She recovered herself quickly, and called up the ghost of a welcoming smile—such a smile as may decently decorate the face of a newly made widow.

"Why, Miss—Princess!" she exclaimed. "This is a surprise. If anything could make me happy in my sad affliction it would be a visit from you. My nephews are out fishing—they're very fond of fishing, poor boys!—but come in and let me give you a cup of tea."

"I will come in," I said, "because I must have a talk with you, but I don't want tea. And, really, Mrs. Barlow, I wonder you have the *cheek* to speak of your 'sad affliction.'"

By this time I was already over the threshold, and in the kitchen, for she had stood aside for me to pass. Just inside the door I turned on her, and saw the old face—once so freshly apple-cheeked—flush darkly, then fade to yellow. Her eyes stared into mine, wavered, and dropped; but no tears came.

"'Cheek?'" she repeated, as if reproving slang. "Miss—Princess—I don't know what you mean."

"I think you know very well," I said, "because you have *no* 'sad affliction.' Your husband is as much alive as I am. The only loss you've suffered is the loss of the coffin in which he *wasn't* buried!"

The woman dropped, like a jelly out of its mould, into a kitchen chair. "My Heavens! Miss Elizabeth, you don't know what you're saying!" she gasped, dry-lipped.

"I know quite well," I caught her up. "And to show that I know, I'm going to reconstruct the whole plot." (This was bluff. But it was part of the Plan). "Barlow's nephews were expert thieves. They'd served a term for stealing at home, in Australia. They spent a short leave at Courtenaye Coombe, and you showed them over the Abbey. Then and there they got an idea. They bribed you and Barlow to help them carry it out and give them a letter of mine to tear into bits and turn suspicion on me. Probably they worked with rubber gloves and shoes—as you know the detectives have found no fingermarks or footprints. Every man is said to have his price. You two had yours! Just how much more than others you knew about old secret 'hidie-holes' in the Abbey I can't tell, but

I'm sure you did know more than any of us. There was always the lodge, too, which was the same as your own, and full of your things! I'm practically certain there's a secret way to it, through the cellars. Ah, I thought so!" (As her face changed.) "Trusted as you were, a burglary in the night was easy as falling off a log—and all that binding and gagging business. The trouble was to get the stolen things out of the country—let's say to Australia, where Barlow's nephews could count upon a receiver, or a buyer, maybe some old associate of their pre-prison days. Among you all, you hit on quite a clever plan. Only a dear, kind creature like you, respected by everyone, could have hypnotized even old Doctor Pyne into believing Barlow was dead—no matter *what* strong drug you used! You wouldn't let any one come near the body afterward. You loved your husband so much you would do everything for him yourself—in death as in life. How pathetic—how estimable! And then you and the two 'boys' brought the coffin here, to have it buried in the old cemetery, with generations of other respectable Barlows. The night after the funeral the twins dug it up, as neatly as they dug trenches in France, and left the case underground as a precaution. Perhaps Barlow's 'ghost' watched the work. But that's of no importance. What was of importance was the next step. They took the coffin to a nice convenient cave (that's what made this house worth buying back, isn't it?) and tethered the thing there to wait an appointed hour. At that hour a boat would quietly appear, and bear it away to a smart little sailing ship. Then—ho! for Australia or some place where heirlooms from this country can be disposed of without talk or trouble. I would bet that Barlow is on that ship now, and you meant to join him, instead of waiting for a better world. But there came the storm, and a record wave or two ran into the cave. Alas for the schemes of mice and men—and Barlow's!"

Not once did she interrupt. I doubt if the woman could have uttered a word had she dared; for the game of Bluff was new to her. She believed that by sleuth-hound cunning I had tracked her down, following each move from the first, and biding my time to strike until all proofs (the coffin and its contents) were within my grasp. By the time I had paused for lack of breath, the old face was sickly white, like candle-grease, and the remembrance of affection was so keen that I could not help pitying the creature. "You realize," I said, "everything is known. Not only do *I* know, but others. And we have all the stolen things in our possession. I've come here to offer you a chance of saving yourselves—though it's compounding a felony or something, I suppose! We can put you in the way of replacing the heirlooms in the night, just as they were taken away—by that secret passage you know. If you try to play us false, and hope to get the things back, we won't have mercy a second time. We shall find Barlow before you can

warn him. And as for his nephews——"

"Yes! *What* about his nephews?" broke in a rough voice.

I started (only a statue could have resisted that start!) and turning my head I saw a tall young man close behind me, in the doorway by which I'd entered. Whether or not Mrs. Barlow had seen him, I don't know. She did not venture to speak, but a glance showed me a gleam of malicious relief in the eyes I had once thought limpid as a brook. If she'd ever felt any fondness for me, it was gone. She hated and feared me with a deadly fear. The thought shot through my brain that she would willingly sit still and see me murdered, if she and her husband could be saved from open shame by my disappearance.

The man in the doorway was sunburned to a lobster-red, and had features like those of some gargoyle. He must have been eavesdropping long enough to gather a good deal of information, for there was fury in his eyes, and deadly decision in the set of his big jaw.

Where was Roger Fane? I wondered. Without Roger I was lost, and my fate might never be known. Suddenly I was icily afraid—for something might have happened to Roger. But at that same frozen instant a very strange thing happened to me. *My thoughts flew to Sir James Courtenaye!* I had always disliked him—or fancied so. But he was so strong—such a giant of a man! What a wonderful champion he would be now! What *hash* he would make of the Barlow twins! Quickly I controlled myself. This was the moment when the game of Bluff (which had served me well so far) might be my one weapon of defence.

"As for Barlow's nephews," I echoed, with false calmness, "theirs is the principal guilt, and theirs ought to be the heaviest punishment."

The Crimson Gargoyle shut the door, deliberately, with a horrid, purposeful kind of deliberation, and with a stride or two came close to me. I stepped back, but he followed, towering above me with the air of a big bullying boy out to scare the life from a little one. To give him stare for stare I had to look straight up, my chin raised, and the threatening eyes, the great red face, seemed to fill the world—as a cat's face and eyes must seem to a hypnotized mouse.

I shook myself free from the hypnotic grip. Yet I would not let my gaze waver. Grandmother wouldn't, and no Courtenaye should!

"Who is going to punish us?" barked the Gargoyle.

"The police," I barked back. And almost I could have laughed at the difference in size and voice. I was so like a slim young Borzoi yapping at the nose of a bloodhound.

"Rot!" snorted the big fellow. "Damn rot!" (and I thought I heard a faint chuckle from the chair). "If the police were on to us, you wouldn't be here. This is a try-on."

"You'll soon see whether it's a try-on or not," I defied him. "As a matter of fact, out of pity for your two poor old dupes, we haven't told the police yet of what we've found out. I say 'we,' for I'm far from being alone or unprotected. I came to speak with Mrs. Barlow because she and her husband once served my family, and were honest till you tempted them. But if I'm kept here more than the fifteen minutes I specified, there is a man who——"

"There isn't," snapped the Gargoyle. "There was, but there isn't now. My brother Bob and me was out in our boat. I don't mind tellin' you, as you know so much, that we've spent quite a lot of time beatin' and prowlin' around these shores since the big storm." (The thought flashed through my brain: "Then they haven't read about the *Naiad*! Or else they didn't guess that the coffin was the same. That's *one* good thing! They can never blackmail Roger, whatever happens to me!") But I didn't speak. I let him pause for a second, and go on without interruption. "Comin' home we seen that car o' yourn outside our gate. Thought it was queer! Bob says to me, 'Hank, go on up to the house, and make me a sign from behind the big tree if there's anythin' wrong.' The feller in the car hadn't seen or heard us. We took care o' that! I slid off my shoes before I got to the door here, and listened a bit to your words o' wisdom. Then I slipped out as fur as the tree, and I made the sign. Bob didn't tell me what he meant to do. But I'm some on mind readin'. I guess that gentleman friend of yourn has gone to sleep in his automobile, as any one might in this quiet neighbourhood, where folks don't pass once in four or five hours. Bob can drive most makes of cars. Shouldn't wonder if he can manage this one. If you hear the engine tune up, you'll know it's him takin' the chauffeur down to the sea."

My bones felt like icicles; but I thought of Grandmother, and wouldn't give in. Also, with far less reason, I thought of Sir James. Strange, unaccountable creature that I was, my soul cried aloud for the championship of his strength! "The sea hasn't brought you much luck yet," I brazened. "I shouldn't advise you to try it again."

"I ain't askin' your advice," retorted the man who had indirectly introduced himself as "Hank Barlow." "All I ask is, where's the stuff?"

"What stuff?" I played for time, though I knew very well the "stuff" he meant.

"The goods from the Abbey. I won't say you wasn't smart to get on to the cache, and nab the box out o' the cave. Only you wasn't quite smart enough—savez? The fellers laugh best who laugh last. And we're those fellers!"

"You spring to conclusions," I said. But my voice sounded small in my own ears—small and thin as the voice of a child. (Oh, to know if this brute spoke truth about his brother and Roger Fane and the car, or if he were fighting me with my own weapon—Bluff!)

Henry Barlow laughed aloud—though he mightn't laugh last! "Do you call yourself a 'conclusion'? I'll give you just two minutes, my handsome lady, to make up your mind. If you don't tell me then where to lay me 'and on you know *what*, I'll spring at *you*."

By the wolf-glare in his eyes and the boldness of his tone I feared that his game wasn't wholly bluff. By irony of Fate, he had turned the tables on me. Thinking the power was all on my side and Roger's, I'd walked into a trap. And if, indeed, Roger had been struck down from behind, I did not see any way of escape for him or me. I had let out that I knew too much.

Even if I turned coward, and told Hank Barlow that the late contents of his uncle's coffin were on board the *Naiad,* he could not safely allow Roger or me to go free. But I *wouldn't* turn coward! To save the secret of the Abbey treasures meant saving the secret of what that coffin now held. My sick fear turned to hot rage. "Spring!" I cried. "Kill me if you choose. *My* coffin will keep a secret, which yours couldn't do!"

He glared, nonplussed by my violence.

"Devil take you, you cat!" he grunted.

"And you, you hound!" I cried.

His eyes flamed. I think fury would have conquered prudence, and he would have sprung then, to choke my life out, perhaps. But he hadn't locked the door. At that instant it swung open, and a whirlwind burst in. The whirlwind was a man. And the man was James Courtenaye.

I did not tell Sir Jim that my spirit had forgotten itself so utterly as to call him. It was quite unnecessary, as matters turned out, to "give myself away" to this extent. For, you see, it was not my call that brought him. It was Roger's.

As Shelagh Leigh was my best friend, so was, and is, Jim Courtenaye Roger Fane's. All the first part of Roger's life tragedy was known to my "forty-fourth cousin four times removed." For years Roger had given him all his confidence. The ex-cowboy had even advised him in his love affair with Shelagh, to "go on full steam ahead, and never mind breakers"—(alias Pollens). This being the case, it had seemed to Roger unfair not to trust his chum to the uttermost end. He had not intended to mention me as his accomplice; but evidently cowboys' wits are as quick as their lassoes. Jim guessed at my part in the business, thinking, maybe—that only the sly sex could hit upon such a Way Out. Anyhow, he was far from shocked; in fact, deigned to approve of me for the first time, and hearing how I had planned to restore the stolen heirlooms, roared with laughter.

Roger, conscience-stricken because my secret had leaked out with his, wished to atone by telling me that his friend had scented the whole truth. Jim Courtenaye, however, urged him against this course. He reckoned the Barlow twins more formidable than Roger and I had thought them, and insisted that he should be a partner in our game of Bluff. Only, he wished to be a silent partner till the right time came to speak. Or that was the way he put it. His real reason, as he boldly confessed afterward, was that, if I knew he was "in it," I'd be sure to make a "silly fuss"!

It was arranged between him and Roger that he should motor from Courtenaye Coombe to Dudworth Cove, put up his car at the small hotel, and inconspicuously approach the Barlows' farm on foot. In some quiet spot which he would guarantee to find, he was to "lurk" and await developments. If help were wanted, he would be there to give it. If not, he would peacefully remove himself, and I need never know that he had been near the place.

All the details of this minor plot were well mapped out, and the only one that failed (not being mapped out) was a tyre of his Rolls-Royce which stepped on a nail as long as Jael's. Wishing to do the trick alone, Jim had taken no chauffeur; and he wasn't as expert at pumping up tyres as at breaking in bronchos. He was twenty minutes past scheduled time, in consequence, and arrived at the spot appointed just as Bob Barlow had bashed Roger Fane smartly on the head from

behind.

Naturally this incident kept his attention engaged for some moments. He had to overpower the Barlow twin, who was on the alert, and not to be taken by surprise. The Australian was still in good fighting trim, and gave Sir James some trouble before he was reduced to powerlessness. Then a glance had to be given Roger, to make sure he had not got a knock-out blow. Altogether, Hank Barlow had five minutes' grace indoors with me, before—the whirlwind. If it had been *six* minutes——But then, it wasn't! So why waste thrills upon a horror which had not time to materialize? And oh, how I *did* enjoy seeing those twins trussed up like a pair of monstrous fowls on the kitchen floor! It had been clever of Sir Jim to place a coil of rope in Roger's car in case of emergencies. But when I said this, to show my appreciation, he replied drily that a cattleman's first thought is rope! "That's what you are accustomed to call me, I believe," he added. "A cattleman."

"I shall never call you it again," I quite meekly assured him.

"You won't? What will you call me, then?"

"Cousin—if you like," I said.

"That'll do—for the present," he granted.

"Or 'friend,' if it pleases you better?" I suggested.

"Both are pretty good to go on with."

So between us there was a truce—and no more Pembertons or even Smiths: which is why "Smith" never revealed what *he* thought about what Sir Jim thought of me. And I would not try to guess—would you? But it was only to screen Roger, and not to content me, that Sir James Courtenaye allowed my original plan to be carried out: the heirlooms to be mysteriously returned by night to the Abbey, and the Barlow tribe to vanish into space, otherwise Australia. He admitted this bluntly. And I retorted that, if he hadn't saved my life, I should say that such friendship wasn't worth much. But there it was! He *had* saved it. And things being as they were, Shelagh told Roger that I couldn't reasonably object if Jim were asked to be best man at the wedding, though I was to be "best woman."

She was right. I couldn't. And it was a lovely wedding. I lightened my mourning for it to white and lavender—just for the day. Mrs. Carstairs said I owed this to

the bride and bridegroom—also to myself, as Brightener, to say nothing of Sir Jim.

BOOK II

THE HOUSE WITH THE TWISTED CHIMNEY

CHAPTER I

THE SHELL-SHOCK MAN

"Do you want to be a Life Preserver as well as a Brightener, Elizabeth, my child?" asked Mrs. Carstairs.

"Depends on whose life," I replied, making a lovely blue smoke ring before I spoke and another when I'd finished.

I hoped to shock Mrs. Carstairs, in order to see what the nicest old lady on earth would look like when scandalized. But I was disappointed. She was not scandalized. She asked for a cigarette, and took it; my last.

"The latest style in my country is to make your smoke ring loop the loop, and do it through the nose," she informed me, calmly. "I can't do it myself—yet. But Terry Burns can."

"Who's Terry Burns?" I asked.

"The man whose life ought to be preserved."

"It certainly ought," said I, "if he can make smoke rings loop the loop through his nose. Oh, you know what I *mean*!"

"He hardly takes enough interest in things to do even that, nowadays," sighed Mrs. Carstairs.

"Good heavens! what's the matter with the man—senile decay?" I flung at her. "Terry isn't at all a decayed name."

"And Terry isn't a decayed man. He's about twenty-six, if you choose to call that senile. He's almost *too* good-looking. He's not physically ill. And he's got plenty of money. All the same, he's likely to die quite soon, I should say."

"Can't anything be done?" I inquired, really moved.

"I don't know. It's a legacy from shell shock. You know what *that* is. He's come to stay with us at Haslemere, poor boy, because my husband was once in love with his mother—at the same time I was worshipping his father. Terry was with

us before—here in London in 1915—on leave soon after he volunteered. Afterward, when America came in, he transferred. But even in 1915 he wasn't exactly *radiating* happiness (disappointment in love or something), but he was just boyishly cynical then, nothing worse; and *the* most splendid specimen of a young man!—his father over again; Henry says, his *mother*! Either way, I was looking forward to nursing him at Haslemere and seeing him improve every day. But, my *dear*, I can do *nothing*! He has got so on my nerves that I *had* to make an excuse to run up to town or I should simply have—*slumped*. The sight of me slumping would have been terribly bad for the poor child's health. It might have finished him."

"So you want to exchange my nerves for yours," I said. "You want me to nurse your protégé till *I* slump. Is that it?"

"It wouldn't come to that with you," argued the ancient darling. "You could bring back his interest in life; I know you could. You'd think of something. Remember what you did for Roger Fane!"

As a matter of fact, I had done a good deal more for Roger Fane than dear old Caroline knew or would ever know. But if Roger owed anything to me, I owed him, and all he had paid me in gratitude and banknotes, to Mrs. Carstairs.

"I shall never forget Roger Fane, and I hope he won't me," I said. "Shelagh won't let him! But *he* hadn't lost interest in life. He just wanted life to give him Shelagh Leigh. She happened to be my best pal; and her people were snobs, so I could help him. But this Terry Burns of yours—what can I do for him?"

"Take him on and see," pleaded the old lady.

"Do you wish him to fall in love with me?" I suggested.

"He wouldn't if I did. He told me the other day that he'd loved only one woman in his life, and he should never care for another. Besides, I mustn't conceal from you, this would be an unsalaried job."

"Oh, indeed!" said I, slightly piqued. "I don't want his old love! Or his old money, either! But—well—I might just go and have a look at him, if you'd care to take me to Haslemere with you. No harm in seeing what can be done—if anything. I suppose, as you and Mr. Carstairs between you were in love with all his ancestors, and he resembles them, he must be worth saving—apart from the loops. Is he English or American or *what*?"

"American on one side and What on the other," replied the old lady. "That is, his father, whom I was in love with, was American. The mother, whom Henry adored, was French. All that's quite a romance. But it's ancient history. And it's the present we're interested in. Of course I'd care to take you to Haslemere. But I have a better plan. I've persuaded Terry to consult the nerve specialist, Sir Humphrey Hale. He's comparatively easy to persuade, because he'd rather yield a point than bother to argue. That's how I got my excuse to run up to town: to explain the case to Sir Humphrey, and have my flat made ready for Terence to live in, while he's being treated."

"Oh, that's it," I said, and thought for a minute.

My flat is in the same house as the Carstairs', a charming old house in which I couldn't afford to live if Dame Caroline (title given by me, not His Gracious Majesty) hadn't taught me the gentle, well-paid Art of Brightening.

You might imagine that a Brightener was some sort of patent polisher for stoves, metal, or even boots. But you would be mistaken. *I* am the one and only Brightener!

But this isn't what I was thinking about when I said, "Oh, that's it?" I was attempting to track that benevolent female fox, Caroline Carstairs, to the fastness of her mental lair. When I flattered myself that I'd succeeded, I spoke again.

"I see what you'd be at, Madame Machiavelli," I warned her. "You and your husband are so fed up with the son of your ancient loves, that he's spoiling your holiday in your country house. You've been wondering how on earth to shed him, anyhow for a breathing space, without being unkind. So you thought, if you could lure him to London, and lend him your flat——"

"Dearest, you are an ungrateful young Beastess! Besides, you're only half right. It's true, poor Henry and I are worn out from sympathy. Our hearts are squeezed sponges, and have completely collapsed. Not that Terry complains. He doesn't. Only he is so horribly bored with life and himself and us that it's killing all three. I *had* to think of something to save him. So I thought of you."

"But you thought of Sir Humphrey Hale. Surely, if there's any cure for Mr.——"

"Captain——"

"Burns. Sir Humphrey can——"

"He can't. But I had to *use* him with Terry. I couldn't say: 'Go live in our flat and meet the Princess di Miramare. He would believe the obvious thing, and be put off. You are to be thrown in as an extra: a charming neighbour who, as a favour to me, will see that he's all right. When you've got him interested—not in yourself, but in life—I shall explain—or confess, whichever you choose to call it. He will then realize that the fee for his cure ought to be yours, not Sir Humphrey's, though naturally you couldn't accept one. Sir Humphrey has already told me that, judging from the symptoms I've described, it seems a case beyond doctor's skill. You know, Sir H—— has made his pile, and doesn't have to tout for patients. But he's a good friend of Henry's and mine."

"You have very strong faith in *me*!" I laughed.

"Not too strong," said she.

The Carstairs' servants had gone with them to the house near Haslemere; but if Dame Caroline wanted a first-rate cook at a moment's notice, she would wangle one even if there were only two in existence, and both engaged. The shell-shock man had his own valet—an ex-soldier—so with the pair of them, and a char-creature of some sort, he would do very well for a few weeks. Nevertheless, I hardly thought that, in the end, he would be braced up to the effort of coming, and I should not have been surprised to receive a wire:

Rather than move, Terry has cut his throat in the Japanese garden.

Which shows that despite all past experiences, I little knew my Caroline!

Captain Burns—late of the American Flying Corps—did come; and what is more, he called at my flat before he had been fifteen minutes in his own. This he did because Mrs. Carstairs had begged him to bring a small parcel which he must deliver by hand to me personally. She had telegraphed, asking me to stop at home—quite a favour in this wonderful summer, even though it was July, the season proper had passed; but I couldn't refuse, as I'd tacitly promised to brighten the man. So there I sat, in my favourite frock, when he was ushered into the drawing room.

Dame Caroline had told me that "Terry" was good-looking, but her description had left me cold, and somehow or other I was completely unprepared for the real Terry Burns.

Yes, *real* is the word for him! He was so real that it seemed odd I had gone on all

my life without having known there was this Terence Burns. Not that I fell in love with him. Just at the moment I was much occupied in trying to keep alight an old fire of resentment against a man who had saved my life; a "forty-fourth cousin four times removed" (as he called himself), Sir James Courtenaye. But when I say "real," I mean he was one of those few people who would seem important to you if you passed him in a crowd. You would tell yourself regretfully that there was a friend you'd missed making: and you would have had to resist a strong impulse to rush back and speak to him at any price.

If, at the first instant of meeting, I felt this strong personal magnetism, or charm, or whatever it was, though the man was down physically at lowest ebb, what would the sensation have been with him at his best?

He was tall and very thin, with a loose-boned look, as if he ought to be lithe and muscular, but he came into the room listlessly, his shoulders drooping, as though it were an almost unbearable bore to put one foot before another. His pallor was of the pathetic kind that gives an odd transparence to deeply tanned skin, almost like a light shining through. His hair was a bronzy brown, so immaculately brushed back from his square forehead as to remind you of a helmet, except that it rippled all over. And he had the most appealing eyes I ever saw.

They were not dark, tragic ones like Roger Fane's. I thought that when he was well and happy, they must have been full of light and joy. They were slate-gray with thick black lashes, true Celtic eyes: but they were dull and tired now, not sad, only devoid of interest in anything.

It wasn't flattering that they should be devoid of interest in me. I am used to having men's eyes light up with a gleam of surprise when they see me for the first time. This man's eyes didn't. I seemed to read in them: "Yes, I suppose you're very pretty. But that's nothing to me, and I hope you don't want me to flirt with you, because I haven't the energy or even the wish."

I'm sure that, vaguely, this was about what was in his mind, and that he intended getting away from me as soon as would be decently polite after finishing his errand. Still, I wasn't in the least annoyed. I was sorry for him—not because he didn't want to be bothered with me, but because he didn't want to be bothered with anything. Millionaire or pauper, I didn't care. I was determined to brighten him, in spite of himself. He was too dear and delightful a fellow not to be happy with somebody, some day. I couldn't sit still and let him sink down and down into the depths. But I should have to go carefully, or do him more harm than

good. I could see that. If I attempted to be amusing he would crawl away, a battered wreck.

What I did was to show no particular interest in him. I took the tiny parcel Mrs. Carstairs had ordered him to bring, and asked casually if he'd care to stop in my flat till his man had finished unpacking.

"I don't know how *you* feel," I said, "but I always hate the first hour in a new place, with a servant fussing about, opening and shutting drawers and wardrobes. I loathe things that squeak."

"So do I," he answered, dreamily. "Any sort of noise."

"I shall be having tea in a few minutes," I mentioned. "If you don't mind looking at magazines or something while I open Mrs. Carstairs' parcel, and write to her, stay if you care to. I should be pleased. But don't feel you'll be rude to say 'no.' Do as you like."

He stayed, probably because he was in a nice easy chair, and it was simpler to sit still than get up, so long as he needn't make conversation. I left him there, while I went to the far end of the room, where my desk was. The wonderful packet, which must be given into my hand by his, contained three beautiful new potatoes, the size of marbles, out of the Carstairs' kitchen garden! I bit back a giggle, hid the rare jewels in a drawer, and scribbled any nonsense I could think of to Dame Caroline, till I heard tea coming. Then I went back to my guest. I gave him tea, and other things. There were late strawberries, and some Devonshire cream, which had arrived by post that morning, anonymously. Sir James Courtenaye, that red-haired cowboy to whom I'd let the ancestral Abbey, was in Devonshire. But there was no reason why he should send me cream, or anything else. Still, there it was. Captain Burns, it appeared, had never happened to taste the Devonshire variety. He liked it. And when he had disposed of a certain amount (during which time we hardly spoke), I offered him my cigarette case.

For a few moments we both smoked in silence. Then I said, "I'm disappointed in you."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you haven't looped any loops through your nose."

He actually laughed! He looked delightful when he laughed.

"I was trying something of the sort one day, and failing," I explained. "Mrs. Carstairs said she had a friend who could do it, and his name was Terence Burns."

"I've almost forgotten that old stunt," he smiled indulgently. "Think of Mrs. Carstairs remembering it! Why, I haven't had time to remember it myself, much less try it out, since I was young."

"That *is* a long time ago!" I ventured, smoking hard.

"You see," he explained quite gravely, smoking harder, "I went into the war in 1915. It wasn't *our* war then, for I'm an American, you know. But I had a sort of feeling it ought to be everybody's war. And besides, I'd fallen out of love with life about that time. War doesn't leave a man feeling very young, whether or not he's gone through what I have."

"I know," said I. "Even we women don't feel as young as we hope we look. I'm twenty-one and a half, and feel forty."

"I'm twenty-seven, and feel ninety-nine," he capped me.

"Shell shock is—the *devil*!" I sympathized. "But men get over it. I know lots who have." I took another cigarette and pushed the case toward him.

"Perhaps they wanted to get over it. I don't want to, particularly, because life has rather lost interest for me, since I was about twenty-two; I'm afraid that was one reason I volunteered. Not very brave! I don't care now whether I live or die. I didn't care then."

"At twenty-two! Why, you weren't grown up!"

"*You* say that, at twenty-one?"

"It's different with a girl. I've had such a lot of things to make me feel grown up."

"So have I, God knows." (By this time he was smoking like a chimney.) "Did *you* lose the one thing you'd wanted in the world? But no—I mustn't ask that. I don't ask it."

"You may," I vouchsafed, charmed that—as one says of a baby—he was "beginning to take notice." "No, frankly, I didn't lose the one thing in the world I wanted most, because I've never quite known yet what I did or do want most. But not knowing leaves you at loose ends, if you're alone in the world as I am."

Then, having said this, just to indicate that my circumstances conduced to tacit sympathy with his, I hopped like a sparrow to another branch of the same subject. "It's bad not to get what we want. But it's dull not to want anything."

"Is it?" Burns asked almost fiercely. "I haven't got to that yet. I wish I had. When I want a thing, it's in my nature to want it for good and all. I want the thing I wanted before the war as much now as ever. That's the principal trouble with me, I think. The hopelessness of everything. The uselessness of the things you *can* get."

"Can't you manage to want something you might possibly get?" I asked.

He smiled faintly. "That's much the same advice that the doctors have given—the advice this Sir Humphrey Hale of the Carstairs will give to-morrow. I'm sure. 'Try to take an interest in things as they are.' Good heavens! that's just what I *can't* do."

"*I* don't give you that advice," I said. "It's worse than useless to *try* and take an interest. It's *stodgy*. What I mean is, *if* an interest, alias a chance of adventure, should breeze along, don't shut the door on it. Let it in, ask it to sit down, and see how you like it. But then—maybe you wouldn't recognize it as an adventure if you saw it at the window!"

"Oh, I think I should do that!" he defended himself. "I'm man enough yet to know an adventure when I meet it. That's why I came into your war. But the war's finished, and so am I. Really, I don't see why any one bothers about me. I wouldn't about myself, if they'd let me alone!"

"There I'm with you," said I. "I like to be let alone, to go my own way. Still, people unfortunately feel bound to do their best. Mrs. Carstairs has done hers. If Sir Humphrey gives you up, she'll thenceforward consider herself free from responsibility—and you free to 'dree your own weird'—whatever that means!—to the bitter end. As for me, I've no responsibility at all. I don't advise you! In your place, I'd do as you're doing. Only, I've enough fellow feeling to let you know, in a spirit of comradeship, if I hear the call of an adventure.... There, you *did* the 'stunt' all right that time! A *lovely* loop the loop! I wouldn't have believed it! Now watch, please, while I try!"

He did watch, and I fancy that, in spite of himself, he took an interest! He laughed out, quite a spontaneous "Ha, ha!" when I began with a loop and ended with a sneeze.

It seems too absurd that a siren should lure her victim with a sneeze instead of a song. But it was that sneeze which did the trick. Or else, my mumness now and then, and not seeming to care a Tinker's Anything whether he thought I was pretty or a fright. He warmed toward me visibly during the loop lesson, and I was as proud as if a wild bird had settled down to eat out of my hand.

That was the beginning: and a commonplace one, you'll say! It didn't seem commonplace to me: I was too much interested. But even I did not dream of the weird developments ahead!

CHAPTER II

THE ADVERTISEMENT

It was on the fourth day that I got the idea—I mean, the fourth day of Terry Burns' stay in town.

He had dropped in to see me on each of these days, for one reason or other: to tell me what Sir Humphrey said; to sneer at the treatment; to beg a cigarette when his store had given out; or something else equally important; I (true to my bargain with Caroline) having given up all engagements in order to brighten Captain Burns.

I was reading the *Times* when a thought popped into my head. I shut my eyes, and studied its features. They fascinated me.

It was morning: and presently my Patient unawares strolled in for the eleven-o'clock glass of egg-nogg prescribed by Sir Humphrey and offered by me.

He drank it. When he had pronounced it good, I asked him casually how he was. No change. At least, none that he noticed. Except that he always felt better, more human, in my society. That was because I appeared to be a bit fed up with life, too, and didn't try to cheer him.

"On the contrary," I said, "I was just wondering whether I might ask you to cheer *me*. I've thought of something that might amuse me a little. Yes, I'm sure it would! Only I'm not equal to working out the details alone. If I weren't afraid it would bore you...."

"Of course it wouldn't, if it could amuse you!" His eyes lit. "Tell me what it is you want to do?"

"I'm almost ashamed. It's so childish. But it would be *fun*."

"If I could care to do anything at all, it would be something childish. Besides, I believe you and I are rather alike in several ways. We have the same opinions about life. We're both down on our luck."

I gave myself a mental pat on the head. I ought to succeed on the stage, if it ever

came to that!

"Well," I hesitated. "I got the idea from an article in the *Times*. There's something on the subject every day in every paper I see, but it never occurred to me till now to get any fun out of it: the Housing Problem, you know. Not the one for the working classes—I wouldn't be so mean as to 'spoof' them—nor the *Nouveaux Pauvres*, of whom I'm one! It's for the *Nouveaux Riches*. They're fair game."

"What do you want to do to them?" asked Terry Burns.

"Play a practical joke; then dig myself in and watch the result. Perhaps there'd be none. In that case, the joke would be on me."

"And on me, if we both went in for the experiment. We'd bear the blow together."

"It wouldn't kill us! Listen—I'll explain. It's simply idiotic. But it's something to *do*: something to make one wake up in the morning with a little interest to look forward to. The papers all say that *every*body is searching for a desirable house to be sold, or let furnished; and that there *aren't* any houses! On the other hand, if you glance at the advertisement sheets of *any* newspaper, you ask yourself if every second house in England isn't asking to be disposed of! Now, is it only a 'silly-season' cry, this grievance about no houses, or is it true? What larks to concoct an absolutely adorable 'ad.', describing a place with every perfection, and see what applications one would get! Would there be thousands or just a mere dribble, or none at all? Don't you think it would be fun to find out—and reading the letters if there were any? People would be sure to say a lot about themselves. Human nature's *like* that. Or, anyhow, we could force their hands by putting into the 'ad.' that we would let our wonderful house only to the right sort of tenants. 'No others need apply'."

"But that would limit the number of answers—and our fun," said Terry. On his face glimmered a grin. After all, the "kid" in him had been scotched, not killed.

"Oh, no," I argued. "They'd be serenely confident that they and they alone were the right ones. Then, when they didn't hear from the advertiser by return, they'd suppose that someone more lucky had got ahead of them. Yes, we're on the right track! We must want to let our place furnished. If we wished to sell, we'd have no motive in trying to pick and choose our buyer. Any creature with money would do. So our letters would be tame as Teddy-bears. What *we* want is human documents!"

"Let's begin to think out our 'ad.'!" exclaimed the patient, sitting up straighter in his chair. Already two or three haggard years seemed to have fallen from his face. I might have been skilfully knocking them off with a hammer!

Like a competent general, I had all my materials at hand: Captain Burns' favourite brand of cigarettes, matches warranted to light without damns, a notebook, several sharp, soft-leaded pencils, and some illustrated advertisements cut from *Country Life* to give us hints.

"What sort of house *have* we?" Terry wanted to know. "Is it town or country; genuine Tudor, Jacobean, Queen Anne, or Georgian——"

"Oh, *country*! It gives us more scope," I cried. "And I think Tudor's the most attractive. But I may be prejudiced. Courtenaye Abbey—our place in Devonshire—is mostly Tudor. I'm too poor to live there. Through Mr. Carstairs it's let to a forty-fourth cousin of mine who did cowboying in all its branches in America, coined piles of oof in something or other, and came over here to live when he'd collected enough to revive a little old family title. But I adore the Abbey."

"Our house shall be Tudor," Terry assented. "It had better be historic, hadn't it?"

"Why not? It's just as easy for us. Let's have the *oldest* bits earlier than Tudor—what?"

"By Jove! Yes! King John. Might look fishy to go behind *him*!"

So, block after block, by suggestion, we two architects of the aerial school built up the noble mansion we had to dispose of. With loving and artistic touch, we added feature after feature of interest, as inspirations came. We were like benevolent fairy god-parents at a baby's christening, endowing a beloved ward with all possible perfections.

Terry noted down our ideas at their birth, lest we should forget under pressure of others to follow; and at last, after several discarded efforts, we achieved an advertisement which combined every attribute of an earthly paradise.

This is the way it ran:

"To let furnished, for remainder of summer (possibly longer), historic moated Grange, one of the most interesting old country places in England, mentioned in Domesday Book, for absurdly small rent to desirable tenant; offered practically free. The house, with foundations, chapel, and other features dating from the

time of King John, has remained unchanged save for such modern improvements as baths (h. & c.), electric lighting, and central heating, since Elizabethan days. It possesses a magnificent stone-paved hall, with vaulted chestnut roof (15th century), on carved stone corbels; an oak-panelled banqueting hall with stone, fan-vaulted roof and mistrels' gallery. Each of the several large reception rooms is rich in old oak, and has a splendid Tudor chimney-piece. There are over twenty exceptionally beautiful bedrooms, several with wagon plaster ceilings. The largest drawing-room overlooks the moat, where are ancient carp, and pink and white water-lilies. All windows are stone mullioned, with old leaded glass; some are exquisite oriels; and there are two famous stairways, one with dog gates. The antique furniture is valuable and historic. A fascinating feature of the house is a twisted chimney (secret of construction lost; the only other known by the advertiser to exist being at Hampton Court). All is in good repair; domestic offices perfect, and the great oak-beamed, stone-flagged kitchen has been copied by more than one artist. There are glorious old-world gardens, with an ornamental lake, some statues, fountains, sundials; terraces where white peacocks walk under the shade of giant Lebanon cedars; also a noble park, and particularly charming orchard with grass walks. Certain servants and gardeners will remain if desired; and this wonderful opportunity is offered for an absurdly low price to a tenant deemed suitable by the advertiser. Only gentlefolk, with some pretensions to intelligence and good looks, need reply, as the advertiser considers that this place would be wasted upon others. Young people preferred. For particulars, write T. B., Box F., the *Times*."

We were both enraptured with the result of our joint inspirations. We could simply *see* the marvellous moated grange, and Terry thought that life would be bearable after all if he could live there. What a pity it didn't exist, he sighed, and I consoled him by saying that there were perhaps two or three such in England. To my mind Courtenaye Abbey was as good, though moatless.

We decided to send our darling not only to the *Times*, but to five other leading London papers, engaging a box at the office of each for the answers, the advertisement to appear every day for a week. In order to keep our identity secret even from the discreet heads of advertising departments, we would have the replies called for, not posted. Terry's man, Jones, was selected to be our messenger, and had to be taken more or less into our confidence. So fearful were

we of being too late for to-morrow's papers, that Jones was rushed off in a taxi with instructions, before the ink had dried on the last copy.

Our suspense was painful, until he returned with the news that all the "ads." had been in time, and that everything was satisfactorily settled. The tidings braced us mightily. But the tonic effect was brief. Hardly had Terry said, "Thanks, Jones. You've been very quick," when we remembered that to-morrow would be a blank day. The newspapers would publish T. B.'s advertisement to-morrow morning. It would then be read by the British public in the course of eggs and bacon. Those who responded at once, if any, would be so few that it seemed childish to think of calling for letters that same night.

"I suppose, if you go the rounds in the morning of day after to-morrow, it will be soon enough," Terry remarked to the ex-soldier, with the restrained wistfulness of a child on Christmas Eve asking at what hour Santa Claus is due to start.

I also hung upon Jones' words; but still more eagerly upon Captain Burns' expression.

"Well, sir," said the man, his eyes on the floor—I believe to hide a joyous twinkle!—"that might be right for letters. But what about the telegrams?"

"Telegrams!" we both echoed in the same breath.

"Yes, sir. When the managers or whatever they were had read the 'ad.,' they were of opinion there might be telegrams. In answer to my question, the general advice was to look in and open the boxes any time after twelve noon to-morrow."

Terry and I stared at each other. Our hearts beat. I knew what his was doing by the state of my own. He who would have sold his life for a song (a really worthwhile song) was eager to preserve it at any price till his eyes had seen the full results of our advertisement.

Telegrams!

Could it be possible that there would be telegrams?

CHAPTER III

THE LETTER WITH THE PURPLE SEAL

I invited Terry to breakfast with me at nine precisely next day, and each of us was solemnly pledged not to look at a newspaper until we could open them together.

We went to the theatre the night before (the first time Terry could endure the thought since his illness), and supped at the Savoy afterward, simply to mitigate the suffering of suspense. Nevertheless, I was up at seven-thirty A. M., and at eight-forty-eight was in the breakfast room gazing at six newspapers neatly folded on the flower-decked table.

At eight-fifty-one, my guest arrived, and by common consent we seized the papers. He opened three. I opened three. Yes, there it *was*! How perfect, how thrilling! How even better it appeared in print than we had expected! Anxiously we read the other advertisements of country houses to let or sell, and agreed that there was nothing whose attractions came within miles of our, in all senses of the word, priceless offer.

How we got through the next two and a half hours I don't know!

I say two and a half advisedly: because, as Jones had six visits to pay, we thought we might start him off at eleven-thirty. This we did; but his calmness had damped us. *He* wasn't excited. Was it probable that any one else—except ourselves—could be?

Cold reaction set in. We prepared each other for the news that there were no telegrams or answers of any sort. Terry said it was no use concealing that this would be a bitter blow. I had not the energy to correct his rhetoric, or whatever it was, by explaining that a blow can't be bitter.

Twelve-thirty struck, and produced no Jones; twelve-forty-five; one; Jones still missing.

"I ought to have told him to come back at once after the sixth place, even if there wasn't a thing," said Terry. "Like a fool, I didn't: he may have thought he'd do

some other errands on the way home, if he'd nothing to report. Donkey! Ass! Pig."

"Captain Burns' man, your highness," announced my maid. "He wants to know ——"

"Tell him to come in!" I shrieked.

"Yes, your highness. It was only, should he bring them all in here, or leave them in Mr. Carstairs' apartment below."

"*All!*" gasped Terry.

"Here," I commanded.

Jones staggered in.

You won't believe it when I tell you, because you didn't see it. That is, you won't unless *you* have inserted *the* Advertisement of the Ages—the Unique, the Siren, the Best yet Cheapest—in six leading London journals at once.

There were eight bundles wrapped in newspaper. Enormous bundles! Jones had two under each arm, and was carrying two in each hand, by loops of string. As he tottered into the drawing room, the biggest bundle dropped. The string broke. The wrapping yawned. Its contents gushed out. Not only telegrams, but letters with no stamps or post-marks! They must have been rushed frantically round to the six offices by messengers.

It was true, then, what the newspapers said: all London, all England, yearned, pined, prayed for houses. Yet people must already be living *somewhere*!

Literally, there were thousands of answers. To be precise, Captain Burns, Jones, and I counted two thousand and ten replies which had reached the six offices by noon on the first day of the advertisement: one thousand and eight telegrams; the rest, letters dispatched by hand. Each sender earnestly hoped that his application might be the first! Heaven knew how many more might be *en route*! What a tribute to the Largest Circulations!

Jones explained his delay by saying that "the stuff was coming in thick as flies"; so he had waited until a lull fell upon each great office in turn. When the count had been made by us, and envelopes neatly piled in stacks of twenty-four on a large desk hastily cleared for action, Terry sent his servant away. And then began

the fun!

Yes, it was fun: "fun for the boys," if "death to the frogs." But we hadn't gone far when between laughs we felt the pricks of conscience. Alas for all these people who burned to possess our moated grange "practically free," at its absurdly low rent! And the moated grange didn't exist. Not one of the unfortunate wretches would so much as get an answer to his S. O. S.

They were not all *Nouveaux Riches* by any means, these eager senders of letters and telegrams. Fearing repulse from the fastidious moat-owner, they described themselves attractively, even by wire, at so much the word. They were young; they were of good family; they were lately married or going to be married. Their husbands or fathers were V. C.'s. There was every reason why they, and they alone, should have the house. They begged that particulars might be telegraphed. They enclosed stamps on addressed envelopes. As the moated grange was "rich in old oak," so did we now become rich in new stamps! Some people were willing to take the house on its description without waiting to see it. Others assured the advertiser that money was no object to them; he might ask what rent he liked; and these were the ones on whom we wasted no pity. If this was what the first three hours brought forth, how would the tide swell by the end of the day—the end of the *week*? Tarpeia buried under the shields and bracelets wasn't *in* it with us!

Terry and I divided the budget, planning to exchange when all had been read. But we couldn't keep silent. Every second minute one or other of us exploded: "You *must* hear this!" "Just listen to *one* more!"

About halfway through my pile, I picked up a remarkably alluring envelope. It was a peculiar pale shade of purple, the paper being of rich satin quality suggesting pre-war. The address of the newspaper office was in purple ink, and the handwriting was impressive. But what struck me most was a gold crown on the back of the envelope, above a purple seal; a crown signifying the same rank as my own.

I glanced up to see if Terry were noticing. If he had been, I should have passed the letter to him as a *bonne bouche*, for this really was *his* show, and I wanted him to have all the plums. But he was grinning over somebody's photograph, so I broke the seal without disturbing him.

I couldn't keep up this reserve for long, however; I hadn't read far when I burst out with a "By Jove!"

"What is it?" asked Terry.

"We've hooked quite a big fish," said I. "Listen to this: 'The Princess Avalesco presents her compliments to T. B., and hopes that he will——' but, my goodness *gracious*, Captain Burns! What's the matter?"

The man had gone pale as skim-milk, and was staring at me as though I'd turned into a Gorgon.

CHAPTER IV

THE TANGLED WEB

"Read the name again, please," Terry said, controlling his voice.

"Avalesco—the Princess Avalesco." I felt suddenly frightened. I'd been playing with the public as if people were my puppets. Now I had a vague conviction at the back of my brain that Fate had made a puppet of me.

"I thought so. But I couldn't believe my own ears," said Terry. "Good heavens! what a situation!"

"I—don't understand," I hesitated. "Perhaps you'd rather not have me understand? If so, don't tell me anything."

"I must tell you!" he said.

"Not unless you wish."

"I do! We are pals now. You've helped me. Maybe you can go on helping. You'll advise me, if there's any way I can use this—this *amazing* chance."

I said I'd be glad to help, and then waited for him to make the next move.

Captain Burns sat as if dazed for a few seconds, but presently he asked me to go on with the letter.

I took it up where I'd broken off. "Compliments to T. B., and hopes that he will be able to let his moated grange to her till the end of September. The Princess feels sure, from the description, that the place will suit her. T. B. will probably know her name, but if not, he can have any references desired. She is at the Savoy and has been ill, or would be glad to meet T. B. in person. Her companion, Mrs. Dobell, will, however, hold herself free to keep any appointment which may be made by telephone. The Princess hopes that the moated grange is still free, and feels that, if she obtains early possession, her health will soon be restored in such beautiful surroundings. P. S.—The Princess is particularly interested in the *twisted chimney*, and trusts there is a history of the house."

I read fast, and when I'd finished, looked up at Terry. "If you have a secret to tell, I'm ready with advice and sympathy," said my eyes.

"When the Princess Avalesco was Margaret Revell, I was in love with her," Terry Burns answered them. "I adored her! She was seven or eight years older than I, but the most beautiful thing I ever saw. Of course she wouldn't look at me! I was about as important as a slum child to her. In America, the Revells were like your royalties. She was a princess, even then—without a title. To get one, she sold herself. To think that *she* should answer that fool advertisement of ours! Heavens! I'm like Tantalus. I see the blessed water I'd give my life to drink, held to my lips, only to have it snatched away!"

"Why snatched away?" I questioned.

"'Why?' Because if there *were* a moated grange, I could meet her. Her husband's dead. You know he was killed before Roumania'd been fighting a week. Things are very different with me, too, these days. I'm a man—not a boy. And I've come into more money than I ever dreamed I'd have. Not a huge fortune like hers, but a respectable pile. Who knows what might have happened? But there's *no* moated grange, and so——"

"Why shouldn't there be one?" I broke in. And while he stared blankly, I hurried on. I reminded Captain Burns of what I had said yesterday: that there were houses of that description, more or less, in England, *real* houses!—my own, for instance. Courtenaye Abbey was out of the question, because it was let to my cousin Jim, and was being shown to the public as a sort of museum; but there were other places. I knew of several. As Captain Burns was so rich, he might hire one, and let it to the Princess Avalesco.

For a moment he brightened, but a sudden thought obscured him, like a cloud.

"Not places with twisted chimneys!" he groaned.

This brought me up short. I stubbed my brain against that twisted chimney! But when I'd recovered from the blow, I raised my head. "Yes, places with twisted chimneys! At least, *one* such place."

"Ah, Hampton Court. You said the only other twisted chimney was there."

"The *advertisement* said that."

"Well——"

"It's a pity," I admitted, "that I thought of the twisted chimney. It was an unnecessary extravagance, though I meant well. But it never would have occurred to me as an extra lure if I hadn't known about a house where such a chimney exists. The one house of the kind I ever heard of except Hampton Court."

Terry sprang to his feet, a changed man, young and vital.

"Can we get it?"

"Ah, if I knew! But we can try. If you don't care what you pay?"

"I don't. Not a—hang."

I, too, jumped up, and took from my desk a bulky volume—Burke. This I brought back to my chair, and sat down with it on my lap. On one knee beside me, Terry Burns watched me turn the pages. At "Sc" I stopped, to read aloud all about the Scarletts. But before beginning I warned Terry: "I never knew any of the Scarletts myself," I said, "but I've heard my grandmother say they were the wickedest family in England, which meant a lot from *her*. She wasn't exactly a *saint*!"

We learned from the book what I had almost forgotten, that Lord Scarlett, the eleventh baron, held the title because his elder brother, Cecil, had died in Australia unmarried. He, himself, was married, with one young son, his wife being the daughter of a German wine merchant.

As I read, I remembered the gossip heard by my childish ears. "Bertie Scarlett," as Grandmother called him, was not only the wickedest, but the poorest peer in England according to her—too poor to live at Dun Moat, his place in Devonshire, my own county. The remedy was marriage—with an heiress. He tried America. Nothing doing. The girls he invited to become Lady Scarlett drew the line at anything beneath an earl. Or perhaps his reputation was against him. There were many people who knew he was unpopular at Court; unpopular being the mildest word possible. And he was middle-aged and far from good-looking. So the best he could manage was a German heiress, of an age not unsuited to his own. Her father, Herr Goldstein, lived in some little Rhine town, and was supposed to be rolling in marks (that was six or seven years before the war); however, the Goldsteins met Lord Scarlett not in Germany but at Monte Carlo, where Papa G. was a well-known punter. Luck went wrong with him, and later the war came. Altogether, the marriage had failed to accomplish for Bertie

Scarlett's pocket and his place what he had hoped from it. And apparently the one appreciable result was a little boy, half of German blood. There were hopes that, after the war, Herr Goldstein's business might rise again to something like its old value, in which case his daughter would reap the benefit. Meanwhile, however, if Grandmother was right, things were at a low ebb; and I thought that Lord Scarlett would most likely snap at an offer for Dun Moat.

Terry was immensely cheered by my story and opinion. But such a ready-made solution of the difficulty seemed too good to be true. He got our advertisement, and read it out to me, pausing at each detail of perfection which we had light-heartedly bestowed upon our moated grange. "The twisted chimney and the moat aren't everything," he groaned. "Carp and water-lilies we might supply, if they don't exist; peacocks, too. Nearly all historic English houses are what the agents call 'rich in old oak.' But what about those 'exquisite oriels,' those famous fireplaces, those stairways, those celebrated ceilings, and corbels—whatever they are? No one house, outside our brains, can have them *all*. If anything's missing in the list she'll cry off, and call T. B. a fraud."

"She'll only remember the most exciting things," I said. "I don't see her walking round the house with the 'ad.' in her hand, do you? She'll be captured by the *tout ensemble*. But the first thing is to catch our hare—I mean our house. You 'phone to the companion, Mrs. Dobell, at once. Say that before you got her letter you'd practically given the refusal of your place to someone else, but that you met the Princess Avalesco years ago, and would prefer to have her as your tenant, if she cares to leave the matter open for a few days. She'll say 'yes' like a shot. And meanwhile, I'll be inquiring the state of affairs at Dun Moat."

"How can you inquire without going there, and wasting a day, when we might be getting hold of another place, perhaps, and—and *building* a twisted chimney to match the 'ad.'?" Terry raged, walking up and down the room.

"Quite simply," I said. "I'll get Jim Courtenaye on long-distance 'phone at the Abbey, where he's had a telephone installed. He doesn't live there, but at Courtenaye Coombe, a village close by. However, I hear he's at the Abbey from morn till dewy eve, so I'll ring him up. What he doesn't know about the Scarletts he'll find out so quickly you'll not have time to turn."

"How do you know he'll be so quick?" persisted Terry. "If he's only your forty-fourth cousin he may be luke-warm——"

I stopped him with a look. "Whatever else Jim Courtenaye may be, he's *not* luke-

warm!" I said. "He has red hair and black eyes. And he is either my fiercest enemy or my warmest friend, I'm not sure which. Anyhow, he saved my life once, at great trouble and danger to himself; so I don't think he'll hesitate at getting a little information for me if I pay him the compliment of calling him up on the 'phone."

"I *see*!" said Terry. And I believe he did see—perhaps more than I meant him to see. But at worst, he would in future realize that there *were* men on earth not so blind to my attractions as he.

While Terry 'phoned from the Carstairs' flat to the companion of Princess Avalesco, I 'phoned from mine to Jim. And I could not help it if my heart beat fast when I in London heard his voice answering from Devonshire. He has one of those nice, drawly American voices that *do* make a woman's heart beat for a man whether she likes him or hates him!

I explained what I wanted to find out about the Scarletts, and that it must be "quite in confidence." Jim promised to make inquiries at once, and when I politely said: "Sorry to give you so much bother," he replied, "You needn't let *that* worry you, my dear!"

Of course, he had no right to call me his "dear." I never heard of it being done by the *best* "forty-fourth cousins." But as I was asking a favour of him, for Terry Burns' sake I let it pass.

These Americans, especially ex-cowboy ones, *do* seem to act with lightning rapidity. I suppose it comes from having to lasso creatures while going at cinema speed, or else getting out of their way at the same rate of progress! I expected to hear next morning at earliest, but that evening, just before shutting-up time for post offices, my 'phone bell rang. Jim Courtenaye was at the other end, talking from the Abbey.

"Lord and Lady Scarlett are living at Dun Moat," he said, "with their venomous little brute of a boy; and they must be dashed hard up, because they have only one servant in their enormous house, and a single gardener on a place that needs a dozen. But it seems that Scarlett has refused several big offers both to sell and let. Heaven knows why. Perhaps the man's mad. Anyhow, that's all I can tell you at present. They say it's no good hoping Scarlett will part. But I might find out *why* he won't, if that's any use."

"It isn't," I answered. "But thanks, all the same. How did you get hold of this

information so soon?"

"Very simply," said Jim. "I ran over to the nearest town, Dawlish, in the car, and had a pow-wow with an estate agent, as if I were wanting the house myself. I'm just back."

"You really are good!" I exclaimed, rather grudgingly, for Grandmother and I always suffered in changing our opinions of people, as snakes must suffer when they change their skins.

"I'd do a lot more than that for you, you know!" he said.

I did know. He had already done more—much more. But my only response was to ring off. That was safest!

Next morning Terry Burns and I took the first train to Devonshire, and at Dawlish hired a taxi for Dun Moat, which is about twelve miles from there.

We were going to beard the Scarlett lion in his den!

CHAPTER V

THE KNITTING WOMAN OF DUN MOAT

"I must and *shall* have this place!" Terry said, as our humble taxi drove through the glorious old park, and came in sight of the house.

There were the old-world gardens; the statues; the fountains (it was a detail that they didn't fount!); there were the white peacocks (moulting); there was the moat so crammed with water-lilies that if the Scarletts had eaten the carp, they would never be missed. There were the "exquisite oriels," and above all, there was the twisted chimney!

An air of tragic neglect hung over everything. The grass needed mowing; the flowers grew as they liked. Glass was even missing from several windows. Still, it was miraculously the twin of the place we had described in our embarrassingly perfect "ad."

As we stood in front of the enormous, nail-studded door, and Terry pressed again and again an electric bell (the one modern touch about the place), he had the air of waiting a signal to go "over the top."

"You look fierce enough to bayonet fifty Boches off your own bat!" I whispered.

"Lady Scarlett *is* a Boche, isn't she?" he mumbled back. And just then—after we'd rung ten times—an old woman opened the door—a witch of an old woman; a witch out of a German fairy-book.

The instant I saw her, I felt that there was *something wrong* about this house. From under wrinkled lids the woman peered out, ratlike; and though her lips were closed—leaving the first word to us—her eyes said, "What the devil do you want? Whatever it is, you won't get it, so the sooner you go the better."

We had planned that I should start the ball rolling, by mention of my grandmother's name. But Terry was bursting with renewed interest in life, and the woman was answering his question before I had time to speak. "Let the place? No, sir! His lordship refuses all offers. It is useless to make one. He does not see strangers."

"We are not strangers," I rapped out with all Grandmother's haughtiness. "Tell Lord Scarlett that the Princess di Miramare, grand-daughter of Mrs. Raleigh Courtenaye, wishes a few words with him."

That was the way to manage her! She came of a breed over whom for centuries Prussian Junkers had power of life and death; and though she spoke English, it was with the precise wording of one who has learned the language painfully. In me she recognized the legitimate tyrant, and yielded.

We were admitted with reluctance into a magnificent hall which magically matched our description: stone-paved, with a vaulted roof, and an immense oriel window the height of two stories. While our gaze travelled from the carved stone chimney-piece to ancient suits of armour, and such Tudor and Jacobean furniture as remained unsold, a slight sound attracted our attention to the "historic staircase," with its "dog-gates."

A woman was coming down. She had knitting in her hand, and had dropped one of her needles. It was that which made the slight noise we'd heard; and Terry stepped quickly forward to pick it up.

His back was turned to me as he offered the stiletto-like instrument to its owner, so I could not see his face. But I could imagine that charming smile of his, as he looked up at the figure on the stairs. Just so might Sir Walter Raleigh have looked when he'd neatly spread his cloak for Queen Bess; and if he had happened to ask a favour then, it would have been hard for the sovereign to resist!

The woman coming downstairs did not resemble any portrait of the Virgin Queen. She was stout and short-necked; and with her hard, dark face, her implacable eyes, and her knitting, was as much like Madame Defarge in modern dress as a German could be. But even Madame Defarge was a woman! And probably she used her influence now and then in favour of some handsome male head, preferring to see female ones pop into the sawdust!

Her face softened slightly as she accepted the needle, and stiffened again as I came forward.

"My husband is occupied," she said, in much the same stilted English as that of her old servant. "He sends his compliments to the Princess di Miramare and her friend, and hopes both will excuse him. If it is an offer for our place you have come to make, I must refuse in his name. We do not wish to move."

Her tone, her expression, gave to her words the solemnity of an oath sworn by a houseful of Medes and Persians.

It seemed that there was nothing left for us to do, save bow to Lady Scarlett's decision, and retire defeated to our taxi. But I felt that my reputation as a Brightener was at stake, with Terry's hopes. If we failed, instead of brightening I should have blighted him for ever! That couldn't, shouldn't be!

All there was of me yearned for an inspiration, and it came.

"My friend, Captain Burns, wouldn't ask you to move," I heard myself saying. "He's so anxious to have Dun Moat that he'd offer you any rent within reason, and would invite you to select some retired rooms for yourselves, where you might live undisturbed by the tenant. This house is so large it occurs to me that such an arrangement wouldn't be uncomfortable."

Terry flashed me a look of amazement, which turned to acquiescence; and the surprise on Lady Scarlett's face was encouraging. Evidently no one else had made such a suggestion. She seemed not only astonished, but tempted.

For a moment she reflected; then admitted that my proposal was a new one. She would submit it to her husband. They would talk it over if we cared to wait. We did care to; and the lady vanished like a stout ghost into the dimness of stony shadows.

Terry said that he felt his head growing gray, hair by hair, with suspense; but when Lady Scarlett came back at last no change could be seen by the naked eye.

"My husband and I will consider your proposal," she said, "provided the price is satisfactory, and taking it for granted that we agree on the rooms for our occupation. We should want those known as the 'garden court suite.' And we should ask one hundred and fifty pounds a week, for a possible term of ten weeks, on the proviso that we could terminate the tenancy with a fortnight's notice at any time after the first month."

I was dumbfounded. The place, unique and beautiful as it was, had been allowed to run down so disastrously, and everything outside and inside seemed to be in such a state of disrepair, that it was worth at most a rent of thirty guineas a week. Terry might call himself rich, but surely he'd not consent to being rooked to that extent, in order to be landlord to his love. I expected him to protest, to bargain, and beat the lady down. But he brushed the financial question away like a

cobweb, and began to haggle about the rooms.

"The money part will be all right," he said. "But I want a lady to come here—a lady who's been ill. She must have the prettiest rooms there are: something overlooking the moat, with jolly oriel windows and plenty of old oak."

Lady Scarlett smiled. "There is no obstacle to that! The suite I specify is at the far end of the house, in a comparatively modern wing, and most people would think it the least desirable. We like it because it is compact and private. We can keep it going with one servant. It is called the 'garden court suite' because it is built round a small square. There is a separate outside entrance, as well as one door communicating with the house. The suite has generally been occupied by a bachelor heir."

As she talked, Terry reflected. "Look here, Lady Scarlett!" he exclaimed, just contriving not to break in. "I've half a mind to confide in you. The truth is, I want to pose as the owner of this place. I suppose you wouldn't sell it?"

"We could not if we would," replied the daughter of the German wine-seller. "It is entailed and the entail cannot be broken till our son comes of age."

"That settles *that*! But you said beforehand, nothing would induce you to turn out——"

"No money you could offer: not a thousand, not ten thousand a week—at least, at present. The garden court suite is the one solution."

"Well, so be it! But—I beg your pardon if I'm rude—could you—er—seem not to be there? Could I say I'd lent the rooms to someone I didn't like to turn out? If you'd consent, I'd make it two hundred a week."

Lady Scarlett's blackberry-and-skim-milk eyes lit. "You want the lady to believe that you have bought Dun Moat?"

For answer, he told her of our advertisement, and the result. I thought this a mistake. You'd only to look at the woman to see that she'd no sense of humour; and to confide in a person without one is courting trouble. Besides, I still had that impression of *something wrong*. I had no definite suspicion; but why had the Scarletts, poor as they were, determined to stick to the house? However, I could no more have stopped Terry Burns when he got going than I could have stopped a torrent by throwing in rose-petals. Which shows how he had changed. The worry a few days ago would have been to get him going!

As Lady Scarlett listened she knitted, with strong, predatory hands. Language, they say, is used to conceal thought. So, it occurred to me, is knitting. I felt, watching her as a wise mouse should watch a cat, that she was making up her mind to some action more beneficial to herself than Terry. But for my life I couldn't guess what. She seemed to weave a knitted screen between my mind and hers!

In the end, however, she announced that for two hundred pounds a week her family could—to all intents and purposes—blot itself temporarily out of existence, in the suite of the garden court. The American lady might believe them to be poor relations of Captain Burns, or even servants, for all she cared! Having arrived at this conclusion, she proposed fetching her husband, that an agreement of an informal kind might be drawn up. Again she vanished; and when Lord Scarlett appeared, it was alone.

There were a number of ancestral portraits hanging on the walls of the great hall: fox-faced men, most of them, with a prevailing, sharp-nosed, slant-eyed type; and "Bertie" Scarlett was no exception to the rule. As he came deliberately down the stairway which his wife had descended, I remembered a scandal of his youth that Grandmother had sketched. He'd been in a crack regiment once, and though desperately poor had tried to live as a smart man about town. At some country-house party he'd been accused of cheating at baccarat. The story was hushed up, but he had left the army; and people—particularly royalties—had looked down their noses at him ever since. His tweeds were shabby now, and he was growing middle-aged and bald; all the same he had the air of the leading man in a *cause célèbre*. I hadn't liked his wife, and I liked him as little!

He made the same point as hers: that the agreement might be terminated by him (*not* by the tenant) with a fortnight's notice, given at any time after the first month. This was a queer proviso, as queer as the family resolve to remain on the spot. And it seemed to me that one was part and parcel of the other, though I couldn't see the link which united the two.

As for Terry, he puzzled over none of these things. He wanted the place even on preposterous terms. When Lord Scarlett had drawn up an agreement, his signature flashed across the paper like a streak of lightning, so wild was he to rush back to London bearing the news to his princess. Lord Scarlett—sure of his mad client—offered to have the agreement polished up in legal form without further bother for Captain Burns, and we were free to go.

Terry could talk of nothing on the way home but his marvellous luck. *Hang* the money! He'd have paid twice as much, if need be. The next thing was to smarten the place: buy some more "historic" furniture to fill the gaps made by sales, send down a decorator to see what beds, etc., needed renovating, have an expert look at the drains and the central heating (long unused) which had been put in with German money, engage a staff of servants for indoors and out; get hold of two or three young peacocks whose tails hadn't moulted.

"If I don't care how much I spend, don't you think we can make an earthly paradise of the place in a week?" he appealed.

"We?" I echoed. "Why, I thought my part was played!"

His grieved eyes reproached me. What? After going so far, I was going to desert him in the midst of the woods? He begged me to stand by him till all was ready to receive the Princess. If I didn't, something was sure to go wrong.

Well, once a Brightener, always a Brightener, I suppose! And acting on this principle I yielded. I promised to stop for a week at Dawley St. Ann, a village within a mile of Dun Moat (there's a dear old inn there!), and superintend preparations for the beloved tenant. When she was safely installed, I would go home—or elsewhere, and Terry could take my rooms at the inn. Being her neighbour as well as landlord, he'd easily find excuses to see the Princess every day, and thus get his money's worth of Dun Moat.

All this was settled before we reached London; and the first thing Terry thought of on entering the flat (mine, not his!) was to ring up the Savoy. The answer came quickly; and I saw a light of rapture on his face. The Princess herself was at the telephone!

CHAPTER VI

THE LIGHTNING STROKE

It was amazing what Terry and I accomplished in the next few days, I at Dawley St. Ann, close to Dun Moat, he flashing back and forth between there and London!

My incentive and reward in one consisted of the all but incredible change for the better in him. Terry's, was the hope of meeting the Adored Lady; for he had not met her yet. Her voice thrilled him through the telephone, saying that of *course* she "remembered Terry Burns," but it was her companion, Mrs. Dobell, who received him at the Savoy. She it was who carried messages from the still-ailing Princess Avalesco to him, and handed on to the Princess his vague explanations as to how he had acquired Dun Moat. But Terry had seen, in the two ladies' private sitting room at the hotel, an ivory miniature of the Princess, and its beauty had poured oil on the fire of his love. At what period in her career it had been painted he didn't know, not daring or caring to ask Mrs. Dobell; but one thing was sure—it showed her lovelier than of old.

Seeing the boy on the way to such a cure as twenty Sir Humphrey Hales could never have produced, I was happy while wrestling for his sake with the servant problem, placing brand-new "antique" furniture in half-empty rooms, and watching neglected lawns rolled to velvet. But not once during my daily pilgrimage to Dun Moat did I catch sight of Lord or Lady Scarlett or their old German servant. True to the bargain, they had officially ceased to exist; and my one tangible reminder of the family was a glimpse of a little boy who stared through a closed window of the end wing—the "suite of the garden court."

I'd been passing that way to criticize the work of the gardeners, and looked up to admire the twisted chimney, which rose practically at the junction of the oldest part of the house with the newest. Just for an instant, a small hatchet face peered at me, and vanished as if its owner had been snatched away by a strong hand; but I had time to say to myself, "Like father like son!" And I smiled in remembering that Jim Courtenaye had called the Scarlett's heir a "venomous little brute."

At last came the day when the Princess Avalesco, Mrs. Dobell, and a maid were

to motor down and take possession of Dun Moat. Terry (much thanked through the telephone for supplying the place with servants, etcetera) was on the spot before them. He had dashed over to see me at Dawley St. Ann (where I was packing for my return to town), looking extremely handsome; and had excitedly offered to run back and tell me "all about her" before I had to take my train.

"I shall go with you to the station," he said. "You've been the most gorgeous brick to me! You've given me happiness and new life. And the one thing which could make to-day better than it is, would be your stopping on."

I merely smiled at this, for I'd pointed out that my continued presence would be misunderstood by the Princess Avalesco, to his disadvantage; and he reluctantly agreed. So when he had gone to meet his Wonder-of the-World I continued to pack.

Very likely he would forget such a trifle as the time for my train, I thought, and if he did turn up it would be at the last minute. I was surprised, therefore, when, after an hour, I saw him whirling up to the inn door in the one and only village taxi.

A moment later I was bidding him enter my sitting room. A question trembled on my lips, but the sight of his face choked it into a gasp.

Terry came in, and flung himself into a chair.

"Good heavens, what's happened?" I ventured.

He did not answer at first. He only stared. Then he found his voice. "I don't know how to tell you what's happened," he groaned. "You'll despise me. You'll want to kick me out of your room."

"I won't!" I spoke sharply, to bring him to himself. "What *is* it? Hasn't she come?"

"She has come. *That's* it!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, my dear Pal, I—I don't love her any more."

If I hadn't been sitting in a chair I should have collapsed on to one—or the floor.

"You don't *love* her?" I faltered.

"No. And that's not all. It's perhaps not even the worst!"

"If you don't tell me at once, I shall scream."

"I hardly know how. I—oh, good lord!—I—I've fallen in love with someone else."

I must now make a confession as shameful as his. My mind jumped to the conclusion that Terry Burns was referring to me. I expected him to explain that, on seeing his ideal after these many years, he found that after all it was his faithful Pal he loved! I was conceited enough to think this quite natural, though regrettable, and my first impulse was to spare us both the pain of such an avowal.

"Good gracious!" I warded him off. "So hearts can really be caught in the rebound? But what I most want to know is, why have you unloved Princess Avalesco?"

"It's most horribly disloyal and beastly of me. If you *must* know, it's because she's lost her beauty, and has got fat. I wouldn't have believed that a few years could make such a difference. And she can't be thirty-five! But she's a mountain. And her hair looks jolly queer. I think it must have come out with some illness, and she's got on her head one of those things you call a combination."

"We don't! We call it a transformation," I corrected him in haste. "Oh, this is awful! Think of the fortune you've spent to offer Dun Moat to your lady-love for a few weeks, only to discover that she *isn't* your lady-love! What a waste! I suppose now you'll go up to London——"

"No," said Terry, "I shall stay here. And—I can't feel that the money's wasted in taking Dun Moat. Just seeing such a face as I've seen is worth every sovereign."

"Face?" I echoed.

"Yes. I told you I'd fallen in love. You must have guessed it was with someone at Dun Moat, as I've been nowhere else."

I hadn't guessed that. But I wasn't going to let him know that my guesses had come home to roost! "It can't be Mrs. Dobell," I said, "because you've seen her before, and she's old. Has the Princess got a beautiful Cinderella for a maid, and ____"

"No—no!" Terry protested. "I almost wish it were like that. It would be humiliating, but simple. The thing that's happened—this lightning stroke—is far from simple. I may have gone mad. Or, I may have fallen in love with a ghost."

Relieved of my first suspicion, I pressed him to tell the story in as few words as possible.

It seemed that Terry had arrived at Dun Moat before the Princess; and to pass the time he began strolling about the gardens. His walk took him all round the rambling old house, and something made him glance suddenly up at one of the windows. There was no sound; yet it was as if a voice had called. And at the window stood a girl.

She was looking down at him. And though the window was high and overhung with ivy, Terry's eyes met hers. It was, he repeated, "a lightning stroke!"

"She was rather like what Margaret Revell used to be years ago, when I was a boy and fell in love with her," Terry went on. "I mean, she was that type. And though she looked even lovelier than Margaret in those days—*lots* lovelier, and younger, too—I thought it must be the Princess. You see, there didn't seem to be any one else it could be. And at that distance, behind window glass, and after all these years, how could I be sure? I said to myself, 'So the auto must have come and I've missed hearing it. She's making her tour of the house without me!' I couldn't stand that, so I sprinted for the door. And I was just in time to meet the motor drawing up in front of it. Great Heligoland! The shock I got when—at that moment of all others, my eyes dazzled with a dream—I saw the real Princess! Somehow I blundered through the meeting with her, and didn't utterly disgrace myself. But I made an excuse about taking a friend to a train, and bolted as soon as I could. I didn't come straight here. I went back to the window where I'd seen the face—the vision—the ghost—whatever it was. No one was there. A curtain was pulled across. And I remembered then that I'd always seen it covered. Say, Princess, do you think I'm going mad—just when I hoped I was cured? Was it the spirit of Margaret Revell's lost youth I saw, or—or——"

"At which window was the—er—Being?" I cut in sharply.

"It was close under the twisted chimney."

"Ah! In the wing where the Scarletts are: the suite of the garden court!"

"Yes. I forgot when I thought it must be Margaret, that the window was in the

Scarletts' wing. Of course, Margaret couldn't have gone there. Princess, you're afraid to tell me, but you *do* think I'm off my head!"

"I don't," I assured him. "Just what I think I hardly know myself. But I shouldn't wonder if you'd stumbled on to the key of the mystery."

"What mystery?"

"The mystery of Dun Moat; the mystery of the Scarletts; why they wouldn't let or sell the place until I happened to think of bribing them with the suggestion that they should stay on. Captain Burns, it wasn't a ghost you saw, never fear! It was a real live person—the incarnate reason why at all costs the Scarletts must stay at Dun Moat."

Terry blushed with excitement. "Oh, if I could believe you, I should be almost happy! If that girl—that heavenly girl!—exists at Dun Moat, and I'm the tenant, I shall meet her. I——"

He went on rhapsodizing until the look in my eyes pulled him up short! "What is it?" he asked. "Don't you approve of my wanting to meet her? Don't you——"

"I approve with all my heart," I said. "But I'm wondering—*wondering*! Why are the Scarletts hiding a girl? Has she done something that makes it wise to keep her out of sight? Or is it *they* who don't wish her to be seen, for reasons of their own?"

"Madam, the porter is asking if your luggage is ready to go down," announced a maid.

"Luggage!" Terry and I stared at each other. I had forgotten that I was going to London.

"But you can't leave me now!" he implored.

"I've changed my mind," I explained to the maid. "I shall take another train!"

CHAPTER VII

THE RED BAIZE DOOR

It ended in my deciding to stop on at the inn, while Terry Burns went into lodgings. I felt that he was right. I *had* to stand by!

It wasn't only the romance of Terry falling out of love with his Princess, and in love with a face, which held me. There was more in the affair than that. The impression I had received when the old servant first opened the door of Dun Moat came back to me sharply—and indeed it had never gone—an impression that there was something *wrong* in the house.

I didn't for a moment believe that Terry had "seen a ghost," or had an optical illusion. He'd distinctly beheld a girl at the window—evidently the same window from which the Scarlett boy had looked at me. Though he had seen her for a moment only, by questioning I got quite an accurate description of her appearance: large dark eyes in a delicate oval face; full red lips, the upper one very short; a cleft chin; a slender little aquiline nose, and auburn hair parted Madonna fashion on a broad forehead. She had worn a black dress, Terry thought, cut rather low at the throat. In order to look out, she had held back the gray curtain; and recalling the picture she made, it seemed to him that she had a frightened air. His eyes had met hers, and she had bent forward, as if she wished to speak. He had paused, but as he did so the girl started, and drew hastily back. It was then that Terry ran toward the door, thinking a rejuvenated, rebeautified Margaret Revell was making a tour of exploration without him.

Now that he was out of love with the Princess Avalesco, there was no longer a pressing reason to keep me in the background. For all he cared, she might misunderstand the situation as much as she confoundedly pleased! It was decided, therefore, that I should promptly call. I would be nice to her, and try to get myself invited often to Dun Moat. I would wander in the garden, where I must be seen by the Scarletts; and as their presence in the "suite of the garden court" was no secret from me, it seemed that there would be no indiscretion in my visiting Lady Scarlett. Once in that wing, it would go hard if I didn't get a peep at all its occupants!

I knew that the Scarletts kept up communication with the outer world, so far as obtaining food was concerned, through the old German woman, whose name was Hedwig Kramm. She lived in the main part of the house, and was ostensibly in the service of the tenant, but most of her time was spent in looking after her master and mistress. I thought that she might be handy as a messenger.

I went next day to Dun Moat, Terry having explained me as a friend who'd helped get the house ready for guests, and thus deserved gratitude from them. If I had inwardly reproached him for fickleness when he confessed his *volte face*, I exonerated him at sight of his old love. On principle, regard for a woman shouldn't change with her looks. But a man's affection can't spread to the square inch!

Not that the Princess Avalesco's inches *were* square. They were, on the contrary, quite, quite round. But there were so terribly many of them, mostly in the wrong place! And what was left of her beauty was concentrated in a small island of features at the centre of a large sea of face; one of those faces that ought to wear *stays*! Luckily she needed no pity from me. She didn't know she was a tragic figure—if you could call her a figure! And she didn't miss Terry's love, because she loved herself overwhelmingly.

I succeeded in my object. She took a fancy to me as (so to speak) a fellow princess. I sauntered through garden paths, hearing about all the men who wanted to marry her, and was able to get a good look at *the* window. There was, however, nothing to see there. An irritating gray curtain covered it like a shut eyelid.

"Captain Burns has put some sort of old retainers into that wing it seems," said Princess Avalesco, seeing me glance up. "He has a right to do so, of course, as I'm paying a ridiculously low rent for this wonderful house, and I've more rooms anyhow than I know what to do with. He tells me the wing is comparatively modern, and not interesting, so I don't mind."

I rejoiced that she was resigned! I'm afraid, if *I'd* been the tenant of Dun Moat, I should have felt about that "suite of the garden court" as Fatima felt about Bluebeard's little locked room. In fact, I *did* feel so; and though I was able to say "Yes" and "No" and "Oh, really?" at the right places, I was thinking every moment how to find out what that dropped curtain hid.

At first, I had planned to send Lady Scarlett a message by Kramm; but I reflected that a refusal to receive visitors would raise a barrier difficult to pass

except by force. And force, unless we could be sure of an affair for the police, was out of the question.

"*L'audace! Toujours l'audace!*" was the maxim which rang through my head; and before I had been long with the Princess Avalesco that day I'd resolved to try its effect.

My hostess and her companion had arranged to motor to Dawlish directly after tea. They invited me to go with them, or if I didn't care to do that, they offered to put off the excursion, rather than my visit should be cut short. I begged them to go, however, asking permission to remain in their absence to chat with the housekeeper, and learn whether various things ordered at Captain Burns' request had arrived.

With this excuse I got rid of the ladies, and as the new servants had been engaged by me, I was *persona grata* in the house. Five minutes after the big car had spun away, I was hurrying through a long corridor that led to the end wing. As it had been built for bachelors, there was only one means of direct communication with the house. This was on the ground floor, and all I knew of it by sight was a door covered with red baize. I judged that this door would be locked, and that Kramm would have a key. If I could make myself heard on the other side, I hoped that the Scarletts would think Kramm had mislaid her key, and would come to let her in.

I was right. The red door was provided with a modern Yale lock. This looked so new that I fancied it had been lately supplied; and, if so, the Scarletts—not Terry—had provided it! Now, a surface of baize is difficult to pound upon with any hope of being heard at a distance. I resorted to tapping the silver ball handle of my sunshade on the door frame; and this I did again and again without producing the effect I wanted.

The sole result was a horrid noise which I feared might attract the attention of some servant. With each rap I threw a glance over my shoulder. Luckily, however, the long passage with its stone floor, its row of small, deep windows, and its dark figures in armour, was far from any part of the house where servants came and went.

At last I heard a sound behind the baize. It was another door opening, and a child's voice squeaked, "Who's there? Is that you, Krammie?"

For an instant I was taken aback—but only for an instant. "No," I confessed in

honeyed tones, "it isn't Krammie; but its someone with something nice for you. Can't you open the door?"

A latch turned, and a cautious crack revealed one foxy eye and half a freckled nose. "Oh, it's *you*, is it?" was the greeting. "I saw you in the garden."

"And I saw you at the window," said I. "That's why I've brought you a present. I like boys."

"*What* have you brought?" was the canny question.

Ah, what *had* I brought? I must make up my mind quickly, for to cement a friendship with this boy might be important. "A wrist-watch," I said, deciding on a sacrifice. "A ripping watch, with radium figures you can see in the dark. It's on a jolly gray suède strap. I'll give it to you now—that is, if you'd like it.'

"Ye—es, I'd like it," said little Fox-face. "But my mother and father don't want any one except Kramm to come in here. I'd get a whopping if I let you in."

The door was wider open now. I could easily have pushed past the child; but I was developing a plan more promising.

"Are your parents at home?" I primly asked.

"Yes. They're home, all right. They're never anywhere else, these days! But they're in the garden court. I was going up to my room when I heard the row at this door. I thought it must be Krammie."

"Look here," I said, "would your mother mind if you came out with me? I know her, so I don't see why she should object. I'd give you the watch, and a tophole tip, too. I think boys like tips! What do you say?"

"I'll come for a bit," he decided. "Mother'd be in a wax if she knew, and so'd Father! But what I was going upstairs for when I heard you was a punishment. I was sent to my room. Nobody'll look for me till food time, and then 'twill only be Kramm. *She's* all right, Krammie is! She won't give me away. She'll let me in again with her key, and they won't know I've been out. But we've got to find her."

"I'll find her," I promised. "Come along!"

He came, sneaking out like the little fox he was. I caught a glimpse of two steps leading down to a stone vestibule, and beyond that a heavy wooden door which

the boy had shut behind him before beginning to parley with me. Gently as I could, I closed the baize door, which locked itself automatically; and the child being safely barred out from his own quarters, I broke it to him that we must delay seeing Kramm. She'd be sure to fuss, and want to bundle him back! We'd better have our fun first. There was time.

Fox-face agreed, though with reluctance, which showed his fear of that "whopping." But he brightened when I proposed foraging in the big hall for some cakes left from tea. To my joy they were still on the table, and, seizing a plate of chocolate éclairs, I rejoined the boy on the terrace. We sat on a cushioned stone seat, and Fox-face (who said that his name was "the same as his father's, Bertie") began industriously to stuff. He did not, however, forget the watch or the tip. With his mouth full he demanded both, and got them. In his delight, he warmed to something more than fox, and I snatched this auspicious moment. Delicately, as if walking on eggs (at sixpence each), I questioned him. How did he like being mewed up in one wing of his own home? What did he do to amuse himself? Wasn't it dull with no one to play with?

"Well, of course, there's Cecil," he said, munching. "I liked her at first. She's pretty, about as pretty as you are, or maybe prettier. And she brought me presents, just like you have. But she's in bed most of the time now, so she's no fun any more. I sit with her sometimes, to see she keeps still, and doesn't go to the window. She did go one day, when I went out for a minute, because I thought she was asleep. But Mother came and caught her at it."

"Oh, yes, Cecil!" I echoed. "That pretty girl with dark eyes, and hair the colour of chestnuts. What relation is she to you?"

"I s'pose she's my cousin," said Bertie. "That's what she told me the day she came—when she brought the presents. But Mother says she's no *proper* relation. How do *you* know about her hair and eyes? You didn't see her, did you? Mother'll have a fit if you did! She and Father don't want any one to see Cecil. The minute she told them all about herself they made her hide."

I was thinking hard. "Cecil" was the girl's name! That Lord Scarlett who died in Australia had been Cecil. Grandmother had talked of him, and said he was the "only decent one of the lot, though a ne'er-do-weel." Now, the likeness of the name, and the boy's babblings, made me suspect the plot of an old-fashioned melodrama.

"Oh, I guessed about her hair and eyes, because you said she was so pretty; and

dark eyes and auburn hair are the prettiest of all," I assured him gaily. "I'm great at guessing things; I can guess like magic! Now, I guess the presents she brought you were from Australia."

"So they were!" laughed Bertie. "That's what she said. And she told me stories about things out there, before she got so weak."

"Poor Cecil! What's the matter with her?" I ventured.

"I don't know," mumbled the boy, interested in an éclair. "She cries a lot. Mother says she's in a decline."

"Oughtn't she to see a doctor?" I wondered.

"Mother thinks a doctor'd be no good. Besides, I don't 'spect she'd let one see Cecil, anyhow. I told you she won't allow any one in."

"Why does your mother give Cecil a room whose window looks over the moat, if it's so important she should hide?" I persisted.

"All the rooms in that wing where we live are like that," Bertie explained. "They've windows on the little court inside, and windows outside, on the moat. But the outside window in Cecil's room is nailed shut now, so she couldn't open it if she tried. And those little old panes set in lead are thick as *thick*! I don't believe you could smash one unless you had a hammer. Father says you couldn't. I mean, he says *Cecil* couldn't. And since the day Mother scolded Cecil for looking out, the curtain's nailed down. It doesn't matter, though. Plenty of light comes from the garden side."

"Where was Cecil before you went to live in the wing?" I asked. "Was she in the house?"

"Oh, she'd been in that wing for weeks before Father and I moved in," said the boy. "Mother slept there at night. And Cecil could look out as much as she liked, because there was no one about except us, and Krammie. Krammie doesn't count! She's the same as the family, because she's so old—she nursed Mother when Mother was a baby. Seems funny she *could* have been a baby, doesn't it? But Krammie loves her better than any one, except me. She never splits on me to them if I do anything. But now I've eaten all the cakes, so we'd better go and find Krammie. If we don't, she may go into the wing first. There'd be the *devil* to pay then!"

It seemed to me that there was the devil to pay already—a devil in woman's form—unless my imagination had made a fool of me. I shivered with disgust at the thought of those two witches—the middle-aged one and the hag. I hope I didn't take their wickedness for granted because they were both *Germans,* though we have got into that habit in the last five years, with all we've gone through, and with the villains who used to be Russian in novels now being German!

If I did hand over my prize to the elder witch, the boy was lost to me. I should never get a second chance to catch my fox with cake! And even were I sure that he wouldn't blab, or that Kramm wouldn't, the secret of our meeting was certain to leak out. In that case, the red baize door would never again open to my knock. So what was I to do?

"Come along," urged the boy. Having got all he could get out of me, he began to sulk. "I don't want to stay with you any more."

"Wait a minute," I pleaded. "I'm thinking of something—something to do for *you*."

Though I wasn't a German, the most diabolical plot had just jumped into my head!

CHAPTER VIII

"WHEN IN DOUBT, PLAY A TRUMP"

It was a case of now or never!

"Look here, Bertie," I said, "what I've been thinking of is this: you'd better hide, and let me go alone to find Krammie. *Suppose* your mother has looked in your room! She'll know from Kramm that the ladies are motoring, so she may come out to speak with Kramm and ask for you. Squeeze into this clump of lilac bushes at the end of the terrace! Trust me to make everything right, and be back soon."

The picture of his mother on the warpath transformed Bertie to a jelly. He was in the lilac bushes almost before I'd finished; and I hurried off, ostensibly to seek Kramm. I did not, however, seek far, or in any direction where she was likely to be. Presently I came back and in my turn plunged into the bushes. I broke the news that I hadn't seen Kramm. It looked as if the worst had happened. But Bertie must buck up. I'd thought of a splendid plan! "How would you like to stay with me," I wheedled, "until your mother is ready to crawl to get you back, cry and sob, and swear not to punish you?"

The boy looked doubtful. "I've heard my mother *swear*," he said, "but never cry or sob. Do you think she would?"

"I'm sure," I urged. "And you'll have the time of your life with me! All the money you want for toys and chocolates. And you needn't go to bed till you choose."

"What kind of toys?" he bargained. "Tanks and motor cars that go?"

"Rath*er*! And marching soldiers, and a gramophone."

"Righto, I'll come! And I don't care a darn if I never see Mother or Father again!" decided the cherub.

I would have given as much for a taxi as Richard the Third for a horse; but I'd walked from the village, and must return in the same way. We started at once, hand in hand, stepping out as Bertie Scarlett the second had never, perhaps,

stepped before. It was only a mile to Dawley St. Ann, and in twenty minutes I had smuggled my treasure into the inn by a little-used side door. This led straight to my rooms, and I whisked the boy in without being seen. So far, so good. But what to do with him next was the question!

I saw that, in such an emergency, Terry Burns would hinder more than help. He was cured of the listlessness, the melancholia, which had been the aftermath of shell shock; but he was rather like a male Sleeping Beauty just roused from a hundred years' nap—full of reawakened fire and vigour, though not yet knowing what use to make of his brand-new energy. It was my job to advise *him*, not his to counsel me! And if I flung at his head my version of the "Cecil" story, his one impulse would be to batter down the sported oak of the garden court suite.

He and I had agreed, in calm moments, that it would be vain and worse than vain to appeal to the police. But calm moments were ended, especially for Terry. *He* might think that the police would act on the story we could now patch together. *I* didn't think so, or I wouldn't have stolen the heir of all the Scarletts.

Well, I *had* stolen him. Here he was in my small sitting room, stuffing chocolates bestowed on me by Terry. On top of uncounted cakes they would probably make him *sick*; and I couldn't send for a doctor without endangering the plot.

No! the child must be disposed of, and there wasn't a minute to waste. Terry's lodgings were as unsuited for a hiding-place as my rooms at the inn. Both of us were likely to be suspected when Bertie was missed. I didn't much care for myself, but I did care for Terry, because my business was to keep him out of trouble, not to get him into it, even for his love's sake.

Suddenly, as I concentrated on little Fox-face, and how to camouflage him for my purpose, Jim Courtenaye's description of the child drifted into my head.

Jim! The thought of Jim just then was like picking up a pearl on the way to the poor-house!

Dear Jim! I hadn't been sure what my feeling for him was, but at this minute I adored him. I adored him because he was a wild-western devil capable of lassoing enemies as he would cows. I adored him because the fire of his nature blazed out in his red hair and his black eyes. Jim was an anachronism from some barbaric century of Courtenayes. Jim was a precious heirloom. He had called the Scarlett boy a "venomous little brute!" I could hear again his voice through the telephone "*I'd do more than that for you*."

Idiot that I was, in that I'd *rung him off*! And I hadn't made a sign of life since, though he was sure to have heard that I was at Dawley St. Ann, within forty miles of the Abbey and Courtenaye Coombe.

I could have torn my hair, only it's too pretty to waste. Instead, I ran into the next room, pulled the bell-rope and demanded the village taxi immediately, if not sooner. Then I flew back to Bertie and made him up for a new part.

This was done—to his mingled amusement and disgust—by means of a tight-fitting, veiled motor-hood of my own and a scarlet cape, short for a grown-up girl, but long for a small boy. This produced a fair imitation of what the police would call "a female child," should they catch sight of my companion. But as it happened, they did not; nor did any one else at Dawley St. Ann, so far as I was aware. By my instructions the taxi drew up at the side door, and while Timmins, the chauffeur, was starting the engine (he'd stopped it, as I kept him waiting), I rushed Bertie into the car. Once in, I squashed him down on the floor, seated tailor fashion, with a perfectly good, perfectly new box of burnt almonds on his lap.

"Drive as fast as you dare without being held up," I ordered; and Timmins, lately demobbed from the Tank Corps, obeyed with violence. The distance was forty miles; the hour of starting, six; and at seven-thirty we were spinning up the long avenue at Courtenaye Abbey; good going for Devonshire hills!

I took the chance that Jim might be at the Abbey rather than at Courtenaye Coombe, where he lodged. The way was shorter and—there were as many hiding-places in the Abbey as at Dun Moat. Luck was with me! It had been one of the days when Jim opened the Abbey to tourists, and he was late because he'd gone the rounds with the guardian. His small car, which he drove himself, stood before the door, and from that door he flew like a Jack-in-the-box as we dashed up.

"Elizabeth! I mean Princess!" he exclaimed.

"Call me *anything*!" I whispered, recklessly, bending out of the car as we shook hands. "Mum's the word! But look what I've brought; something I want you to *store* for me."

A jerk of my head introduced him to a red-cloaked, gray-veiled child asleep on the taxi floor.

Most men would have shown some sign of surprise or other emotion. But Jim Courtenaye's *sang-froid* is a tribute to the cinema life he must have led even before he burst into the war. Whether he thought that the object in red was my own offspring, concealed from the world till now, I don't know and probably never shall. All I do know is that, judging from his expression, it might have been a borrowed shoulder of veal.

Deftly he scooped Bertie up without rousing him, and had borne the bundle gently through the open door before it occurred to Timmins to turn his head. "Hurray!" thought I. "Not a soul has seen the little wretch between Dun Moat and here!"

I jumped out of the car and followed Jim into the house, which I'd never entered since it had been let to him. He had not paused in the great hall, but was carrying his burden toward a small room which Grandmother had used for receiving tenants, and such bothersome business. I flashed in after him, and realized that Jim had fitted it up as a private sanctum.

Somehow I didn't like him to go on fancying quaint things about my character, and by the time he'd deposited Bertie on a huge sofa like a young bed, I had plunged into my story.

I told him all from beginning to end; and when I'd reached the latter, to my surprise Jim jumped up and shook my hands. "Are you congratulating me?" I asked.

"No. It's because I'm so pleased I don't need to!"

"You mean?"

"Well, let's put it that I'm glad Burns may have to be congratulated some day on being engaged to the Baroness Scarlett, instead of to—the Princess Miramare."

So, he *had* known of my activities, and had misunderstood my interest in Terry! Brighteners alas! are always being misunderstood.

"I'd forgotten," I said, primly, "that the *women* of the Scarlett family inherit the title if there's no son. That would account for a *lot*!... And so you don't think my theory of what's going on at Dun Moat is too melodramatic?"

"My experience is," said Jim, "that nothing is ever quite so melodramatic as real life. I believe this Cecil girl must be a legitimate daughter of the chap who died

in Australia. She must have proofs, and they're probably where the Scarlett family can't lay hands on them, otherwise she'd be under the daisies before this. That Defarge type you talk about doesn't stop at trifles, especially if it's made in Germany. And we both know Scarlett's reputation. I needn't call him 'Lord Scarlett' any more! But what beats me is this: why did the fly walk into the spider-web? If the girl had common sense she must have seen she wouldn't be a welcome visitor, coming to turn her uncle out of home and title for himself and son. Yet you say she brought presents for the kid."

"I wonder," I thought aloud, "if she could have meant to suggest some friendly compromise? Maybe she'd heard a lot from her father about the marvellous old place. Grandmother said, I remember, that Cecil Scarlett was so poor he lived in Australia like a labourer, though his father died here, while he was there, and he inherited the title. Think what the description of Dun Moat would be like to a girl brought up in the bush! And maybe her mother was of the lower classes, as no one knew about the marriage. What if the daughter came into money from sheep or mines, or something, and meant to propose living at Dun Moat with her uncle's family? I can *see* her, arriving *en surprise*, full of enthusiasm and loving-kindness, which wouldn't 'cut ice' with Madame Defarge!"

"Not much!" agreed Jim, grimly. "*She'd* calmly begin knitting the shroud!"

So we talked on, thrashing out one theory after another, but sure in any case that there *was* a prisoner at Dun Moat. Jim made me quite proud by applauding my plot, and didn't need to be asked before offering to help carry it out. Indeed, as my "sole living relative" (he put it that way), he would now take the whole responsibility upon himself. The police were not to be called in except as a last resort: and that night or next day, according to the turn of the game, the trump card I'd pulled out of the pack should be played for all it was worth!

CHAPTER IX

THE RAT TRAP

Did you ever see a wily gray rat caught in a trap? Or, still more thrilling, a *pair* of wily gray rats?

This is what I saw that same night when I'd motored back from Courtenaye Abbey to Dawley St. Ann.

But let me begin with what happened first.

Jim wished to go with me, to be on hand in case of trouble. But the reason why I'd hoped to find him at the Abbey was because we have a secret room there which everyone knows (including tourists at a shilling a head), and at least one more of which no outsiders have been told. The latter might come in handy, and I begged Jim to "stand by," pending developments.

I'd asked Terry to dine and had forgotten the invitation; consequently he was at the inn in a worried state when I returned. He feared there had been an accident, and had not known where to seek for my remains. But in my private parlour over a hasty meal (I was starving!) I told him the tale as I had told it to Jim.

Of course he behaved just as I'd expected—leaped to his feet and proposed breaking into the wing of the garden court.

"They may kill her to-night!" he raged. "They'll be capable of anything when they find the boy gone."

I'd hardly begun to point out that the girl had never been in less danger, when someone tapped at the door. We both jumped at the sound, but it was only a maid of the inn. She announced that a servant from Dun Moat was asking for me, on business of importance.

Terry and I threw each other a look as I said, "Give Captain Burns time to go; then bring the person here."

Terry went at my command, but not far; he was ordered to the public parlour—to toy with Books of Beauty. Of course it was old Hedwig Kramm who had come.

Her eyes darted hawk glances round the room, seeming to penetrate the chintz valances on chairs and sofa! She announced that the son of Lord Scarlett was lost. Search was being made. She had called to learn if I had seen him.

"Why do you think of *me*?" I inquired arrogantly.

The boy had been noticed peeping out of the window when I walked in the garden. He had said that I was "a pretty lady," and that he wished he were down there with me. He would get me to take him in my motor, if I had one.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I can't tell you where he is," I said, "and even if I could, why should I? Let Lord and Lady Scarlett call, if they wish to catechise me."

"They cannot," objected the old woman. "Her ladyship is prostrated with grief. His lordship is with her."

"As they please," I returned. "I have nothing more to say—to you."

The creature was driven to bay. She loved the "venomous little brute!" "Would you have something more to say if they did come?" she faltered. "*Something about the child?*"

"I might," I drawled, "rack my memory for the time when I saw him last."

"You *do* know where he is!" she squealed.

"I'm afraid," I said, "that I must ask you to leave my room."

She bounced out as if she'd been shot from an air gun!

It was ten o'clock, but light enough for me to see her scuttling along the road as I peered through the window. When she had scuttled far enough, I called to Terry.

"The Scarletts are coming!" I sang to the tune of "The Campbells." "Whether it's maternal instinct or a guilty conscience or *what*, Madame Defarge has guessed that I've got the child. She'll be doubly sure when Kramm reports my gay quips and quirks. To get here by the shortest and quietest way, the Scarletts must pass your lodgings. The instant you see them, take Jones and race to Dun Moat. When you reach there you'll know what to do. But in case they hide the girl as a Roland for my Oliver, I'm going to play the most beautiful game of bluff you ever saw."

"I wish I *could* see it!" said Terry.

"But you'd rather see Cecil! You'd better start now. It's on the cards that the Scarletts came part way with Kramm to wait for her news."

Whether they had done this or not, I don't know. But the effect on Terry of the suggestion was good. And certainly the pair did arrive almost before it seemed that Kramm's short legs could have carried her to Dun Moat.

They gloomed into my sitting room like a pair of funeral mutes.

"My servant tells me you have seen my son," the woman I had known as Lady Scarlett began.

"She has imagination!" I smiled.

"You mean to say you have *not* seen him?" blustered Fox-face Père.

"I say neither that I have nor that I haven't," I replied. "The little I know about the child inclines me to believe he wasn't too happy at home, so why——"

"Oh, you *admit* knowing something!" The woman caught me up like a dropped stitch in her knitting. "I believe you've got the child here. We can have you arrested for kidnapping. The police——"

I laughed. "Have the police ever *seen* the little lamb? If they have, they might doubt the force of his attraction on a woman of my type. And you have no *proof*. But I'll let the local police look under my bed and into my wardrobes, if you'll let them search the suite you occupy at Dun Moat on proof *I* can produce."

"What are you hinting at?" snapped the late Lord Scarlett. "Do you intimate that we've hidden our own child at home and come to you with some blackmailing scheme——"

"No," I stopped him. "I don't think you're in a position to try a blackmail 'stunt.' My 'hints,' as you call them, concerned the *real* Lady Scarlett; the legitimate daughter of your elder brother Cecil, and his namesake."

As I flung this bomb I sprang up and stood conspicuously close to the old-fashioned bell rope.

The man and woman sprang up also. The former had turned yellowish green, the latter brick-red. They looked like badly lit stage demons.

"So *that's* it!" spluttered the German wine merchant's daughter, when she could speak.

"That's it," I echoed. "Now, do you still want to call the police and charge me with kidnapping? You can search my rooms yourselves if you like. You'll find nothing. *Can you say the same of your own?*"

"Yes!" Scarlett jerked the word out. "We can and do say the same. Do you think we're fools enough to leave the place alone with only Kramm on guard, if we had someone concealed there?"

"Ah, the cap fits!" I cried. "I didn't accuse you. As you said, I merely 'hinted.'"

I scored a point, to judge by their looks. But they had scored against me also. I realized that my guess had not been wrong. There was a secret hiding-place to which the garden court suite had access. That was one reason why the Scarletts had chosen the suite. By this time Terry Burns was there, with Kramm laughing in her sleeve while pretending to be outraged at his intrusion. If only *I* were on the spot instead of Terry, I might have a sporting chance to ferret out the secret, for I—so to speak—had been reared in an atmosphere of "hidie-holes" for priests, cavaliers, and kings, of whom several in times of terror had found asylum at our old Abbey. But Terry Burns was an American. It wasn't in his blood to detect secret springs and locks!

I ceased to depend on what Terry might do, and "fell back upon myself."

"You talk like a madwoman!" sneered Madame Defarge. But her hands trembled. She must have missed her knitting!

"Mine is inspired madness," said I. And then I did feel an inspiration coming—as one feels a sneeze in church. "Of course," I went on, "if you've hidden the poor drugged girl in that cubby-hole under the twisted chimney——"

The woman would have sprung at me if Scarlett had not grabbed her arm. My hand was on the tassel of the bell rope; and joy was in my heart, for at last I'd grabbed their best trump. If Bertie The Second was the Ace, the twisted chimney had supplied its Jack!

"Keep your head, Hilda," Scarlett warned his wife. "There's a vile plot against us. This—er—lady and her American partner have tricked us into letting Dun Moat, with the object of blackmail. We must be careful——"

"No," I corrected him, "you must be *frank*. So will I. We knew nothing of your secret when we came to Dun Moat. We got on the track by accident. As a matter of fact, Captain Burns saw the real Lady Scarlett at the window, and she would have called to him for help if she could. No doubt by that time she'd realized that you were slowly doing her to death——"

"What a devilish accusation!" Scarlett boomed. "Since you know so much, in self-defence I'll tell you the true history of this girl. We *have* taken my brother's daughter into the house. We have given her shelter. She is *not* legitimate. My brother was married in England before going to Australia, and his wife—an actress—still lives. Therefore, to make known Cecil's parentage would be to accuse her father of bigamy and soil the name. Hearing the truth about him turned her brain. She fell into a kind of fit and was very ill, raving in delirium for days on end. My wife was nursing her in the garden court rooms when you came with Burns and begged us to let the house. My poverty tempted me to consent. For the honour of my family I wished to hide the girl! And frankly (you ask for frankness!), had she died despite my wife's care, I should have tried to give the body—*private burial*. Now, you've heard the whole unvarnished tale."

"Doubtless I've heard the tale told to that poor child," I said. "At last I understand how you persuaded her to hide like a criminal while you two thoroughly cooked up your plot against her. But the tale *isn't* unvarnished! It's all varnished and nothing else. I'm not my grandmother's grand-daughter for nothing! What *she* didn't know and remember about the 'noble families of England'—especially in her own country—wasn't worth knowing! I inherit some of her stories and all of her memory. The last Lord Scarlett, your elder brother, went to Australia because that actress he was madly in love with had a husband who popped up and made himself disagreeable. Oh, I can prove *everything* against you! And I know where the true Lady Scarlett is at this minute. You can prove *nothing* against me. You don't know where your son is, and you won't know till you hand that poor child from Australia over to Captain Burns and me. If you do that, and she recovers from your wife's '*nursing*,' I can promise for all concerned that bygones shall be bygones, and your boy shall be returned to you. I dare say that's 'compounding a felony' or something. But I'll go as far as that. What's your answer?"

The two glared into one another's eyes. I thought each said to the other, "This was *your* idea. It's all your fault. I *told* you how it would end!" But wise pots don't waste time in calling kettles black. They saved their soot-throwing for me.

"You are indeed a true descendant of old Elizabeth Courtenaye," rasped the man. "You're even more dangerous and unscrupulous than your grandmother! My wife and I are innocent. But you and your American are in a position to turn appearances against us. Besides, you have our son in your power; and rather than the police should be called into this affair by *either* side, my brother's daughter—ill as she is—shall be handed over to you when Bertie is returned to us."

"That won't do," I objected. "Bertie is at a distance. I can't communicate with—his guardian—till the post office opens to-morrow. On condition that Lady Scarlett is released *to-night*, however, and *only* on that condition, I will guarantee that the boy shall be with you by ten-thirty A. M. Meanwhile, you can be packing to clear out of Dun Moat, as I hardly think you'll care to claim your niece's hospitality longer, in the circumstances."

"We have no money!" the woman choked.

"You've forgotten what you took from Lady Scarlett. And six weeks' advance of rent paid you by Captain Burns: twelve hundred pounds. He'll forget, too, if you offer the right inducement. You could have had more from him, if you hadn't insisted on the clause leaving you free to turn your tenant out at a fortnight's notice after the first month. I understand *now* why you wanted it. If the girl had signed her name to a document you'd prepared, leaving her money to you—shares in some Australian mine, perhaps—it would have been convenient to you for her to die. And then——"

"Why waste time in accusations?" quailed Scarlett. "*We* won't waste it defending ourselves! If you're so anxious to get hold of the girl, come home with us and we'll turn over all responsibility to you."

"Very well," I said, and pulled the bell.

The woman started. "What are you doing that for?" she jerked.

"I wish to order the taxi to take us to Dun Moat," I explained. "I confess I'm not so fond of your society that I'd care to walk a mile with you at night along a lonely road. I'm not a coward, I hope. But you'd be two against one. And you might hold me up——"

"As you've held us up!" the man snapped.

"Exactly," I agreed.

Wolves in sheep's clothing have to behave like sheep when they're in danger of having their nice white wool stripped off. No doubt this is the reason that, when we arrived at the outside entrance of the bachelor's wing, my companions were meek as Mary's lamb.

Inside the suite of the garden court we found Terry Burns and his man raging, and Kramm sulking, in a room with a broken window. Terry had smashed the glass in order to get in, but his search had been vain. To do the old servant justice, she had the instinct of loyalty. I believe that no bribe would have induced her to betray her mistress. It remained for the Scarletts to give themselves away, which they did—with the secret of the room under the twisted chimney.

The room was built into the huge thickness of the wall which formed a junction between the old house and the more modern wing. The wonderful chimney was not a true chimney at all, but gave ventilation and light, also a means of escape by way of a rope ladder over the roof. But the rope had fallen to pieces long ago, and the prisoner of these days might never have found means of escape, had it not been for that trump-card named Bertie. The room under the twisted chimney would have been a convenient home substitute for the family vault.

Fate was for us, however—and for her. Even the Lady with the Shears might have felt compunction in cutting short the thread of so fair, so sweet a life as Cecil Scarlett's. Anyhow, that was what Terry said in favour of Destiny, when some days had passed, and it was clear that with good care the girl would live.

We didn't take her to the inn, as I had planned when keeping the taxi, for Terry—caring less than nothing now for the night's rest of Princess Avalesco—ruthlessly routed the ladies from their beauty sleep. What they thought about us, and about the half-conscious invalid, I don't know; for true to my bargain with the Scarletts, no explanations detrimental to them were made. I think it passed with the ladies that the girl had arrived ill, in a late train; and that Terry, emboldened by love of her, begged his tenant's hospitality. So, you see, they were partly right. Besides, the Princess Avalesco had lived in Roumania, where *anything* can happen.

When Jim brought back Bertie, he brought also a doctor—by request. The doctor was his friend; and Jim's friends are generally ready to—well, to overlook unconventionalities.

I told you Princess Avalesco loved herself so much that she didn't miss Terry's love. She missed it so little that after a few weeks' romance she proposed a bedside wedding at Dun Moat, with herself as hostess; for, of course, nothing would induce her to shorten her tenancy!

Cecil had confessed to falling in love with Terry through the window, at first sight.

Therefore the wedding did take place, with Jim Courtenaye as best man, and myself as "Matron of Honour," as Americans say. Cecil looked so divine as a bride that no woman who saw her could have helped wishing to be married against a background of pillows! I almost envied her. But Jim said that he didn't envy Terry. His ideal of a bride was entirely different, and he was prepared to describe her to me some day when I was in a good humour!

BOOK III

THE DARK VEIL

CHAPTER I

THE GIRL WITH THE LETTER

Brightening continued to be fun. As time went on I brightened charming people, queer people, people with their hearts in the right place and their "H's" in the wrong one. I was an expensive luxury, but it paid to have me, as it pays to get a good doctor or the best quality in boots.

After several successful operations and some lurid adventures, I was doing so well on the whole that I felt the need of a secretary. How to hit on the right person was the problem, for I wanted her young, but not too young; pretty, but not too pretty; lively, not giddy; sensible, yet never a bore; a lady, but not a howling swell; accomplished, but not overwhelming; in fact, perfection.

This time I didn't hide my light under a bushel of initials, nor in a box at a newspaper office. I announced that the "Princess di Miramare requires immediately the services of a gentlewoman (aged from twenty-one to thirty) for secretarial work four or five hours six days of the week. Must be intelligent and experienced typist-stenographer. Salary, three guineas a week. Apply personally, between 9:30 and 11:30 A. M. No letters considered."

I gave the address of my own flat and awaited developments with high hope; for I conceitedly expected an "ad." under my own name to attract a good class of applicants.

It appeared in several London dailies and succeeded like a July sale. I wouldn't have believed that there were such crowds of pretty typists on earth! Luckily, the lift boy was young, so he enjoyed the rush.

As for me, I felt like a spider that has got religion and pities its flies; there were so many flies—I mean girls—and each in one way or other was more desirable than the rest! I might have been reduced to tossing up a copper or having the applicants draw lots, if something very special hadn't happened.

The twenty-sixth girl brought a letter of introduction from Robert Lorillard.

Robert Lorillard! Why, the very name is a thrill!

Of course I was in love with Robert Lorillard when I was seventeen, just before the war. Everybody was in love with him that year. It was the fashionable thing to be. Whenever Grandmother let me come up to town I went to the theatre to adore dear Robert. Women used to boast that they'd seen him fifty times in some favourite play. But never did he act on the stage so stirring a part as that thrust upon him in August, 1914! I *must* let the girl with the letter wait while I tell you the story, in case you've not heard the true version.

While she hung upon my decision, and I gazed at Lorillard's signature (worth guineas as an autograph), my mind raced back along the years.

Oh, that gorgeous spring before the war!

I wasn't "*out*"; but somehow I contrived to be "*in*." That is, in all the things that I'd have died rather than miss.

We were absurdly poor, but Grandmother knew everyone; and that April, while she was looking for a town house and arranging to present me, we stayed with the Duchess of Stane. Her daughter, Lady June, was *the* girl in Society just then. She had been The Girl for several years. She was the prettiest, the most original, and the most daring one in her set. She wasn't twenty-three, but she'd picked up the most extraordinary reputation! I should think there could hardly have been more interest in the doings of "professional beauties" in old days than was taken in hers. No illustrated weekly was complete without her newest portrait done by the photographer of the minute; no picture Daily existed that wouldn't pay well for a snapshot of Lady June Dana, even with a foot out of focus, or a hand as big as her head! And she *loved* it all! She lived, lived every minute! It didn't seem as if there could be a world without June.

I was only a flapper, but I worshipped at the shrine, and the goddess didn't mind being worshipped. She used to let me perch on her bed when she took her morning tea, looking a dream in a rosebud-wreathed bit of tulle called a boudoir cap, and a nighty like the first outline sketch for a ballgown. She reeled off yards of stuff for my benefit about the men who loved her (their name was legion!), and among others was Robert Lorillard.

All the clever people who "did" things came to Stane House, provided they were good to look at and interesting in themselves. Lorillard was there nearly every Sunday for luncheon, and at other times, too. I couldn't help staring at him, though I knew it was rude, for he was so handsome, so—almost divine!

One laughs at writers who make their heroes "Greek statues," but really Lorillard *was* like the Apollo Belvedere, in the Vatican: those perfect features, that high yet winning air (someone has said) "of the greatest statue that ever was a gentleman, the greatest gentleman that ever was a statue."

I think June met Lorillard away from home often: and once, when Grandmother and I had gone to live in our own house, and I'd been presented, June took me behind the scenes after a matinée at his theatre. He was charming to me, and I loved him more than ever, with that delicious, hopeless, agonizing love of seventeen.

People talked about June with Lorillard, but no more than with a dozen other men. Nobody dreamed of their marrying, and none less than she herself. As for him, though he was madly in love, he must have known that as an eligible he'd have as much chance with a royal princess as with Lady June Dana.

It was in this way that matters stood when the war broke out. And among the first volunteers of note went Robert Lorillard. No doubt he would have gone sooner or later in any case. But being taken up, thrown down, smiled at, and frowned on by June was getting upon his nerves, as even I could see, so war—fighting, and dying perhaps—must have been a welcome counter-irritant.

The season was over, but Grandmother kept on the house she had taken, as an *ouvroir*, where she mobilized a regiment of women for war work. It was in the same square as Stane House, where the Duchess was mobilizing a rival regiment. June and I worked under our different taskmistresses; but I saw a good deal of her—and all that went on. The moment she heard that Lorillard had offered himself, and was furiously training for a commission, she was a changed girl. She was like a creature burning with fever; but I thought her more beautiful than she'd ever been, with that rose-flame in her cheeks and blue fire in her eyes.

One afternoon she got me off from work, asking me to shop with her. But instead of going to Bond Street, we made straight for Robert Lorillard's flat in St. James's Square. How he could have been there that day I don't know, for he was in some training camp or other I suppose; but she'd sent an urgent wire, no doubt, begging him to get a few hours' leave.

Anyhow, there he *was*—waiting for us. I shall never forget his face—though he forgot my existence! June forgot it also. I'd been dragged at her chariot wheels (it was a taxi!) to play propriety; my first appearance as a chaperon. I might as well have been a fly on the wall for both of them!

Robert opened the door of the flat himself when we rang (servants were superfluous for that interview!) and they looked at each other, those two. Eyes drank eyes! Lorillard didn't seem to see me. I drifted vaguely in after June, and effaced myself superficially. The most rarefied sense of honour couldn't be expected, perhaps, in a flapper whose favourite stage hero was about to play *the* part of his life—unrehearsed—with the said flapper's most admired heroine.

Instead of shutting myself up in a cupboard or something, or at the least closing my eyes and stuffing my fingers into my ears, I hovered in a handy background. I saw June burst out crying and throw herself into Lorillard's arms. I heard her sob that she realized now she couldn't live without him; that he was the only person on earth who mattered—ever had, or ever would matter. I heard him gasp a few explosive "Darlings!" and "Angels!" And then I heard June coolly—no, hotly!—propose that they should be married at once—*at once*!

Even *I* floated sympathetically on a rose-coloured wave of love, as I listened and looked; so where must Lorillard have floated—he who had adored, and never hoped?

In one of his own plays the noble hero would have put June from him in super-unselfishness, declaiming "No, beloved. I cannot accept this sacrifice, made on a mad impulse. I love you too much to take you for my own." But, thank God, real men aren't built on those stiff lines! As for this one, he simply *hugged* his glorious, incredible luck (including the giver) as hard as he could.

It took the two about one hour to come to themselves, and remember that they had heads as well as hearts; while I, for my part, remembered mostly my right foot, which had gone to sleep during efforts of self-obliteration. I *had* to stamp it at last, which drew surprised attention to me; so I was officially offered the rôle of confidante, and agreed with June that the wedding *must* be secret. The Duchess and four *terrifically* powerful uncles would make as much fuss as if June were Queen Elizabeth bent on marrying a commoner, and it would end in the lovers being parted.

Well, they were married by special license three days later, with me and a man friend of Lorillard's as witnesses. When the knot was safely tied, June and Robert went together and broke it to the Duchess—not the knot, but the news. The Duchess of Stane is supposed to know more bad words than any other peeress in England, and judging from June's account of the scene, she hurled them all at Lorillard, with a few spontaneous creations for her daughter. When

the lady and her vocabulary were exhausted, however, common sense refilled the vacuum. The Duchess and the Family made the best of a bad bargain, hoping, no doubt, that Lorillard would soon be safely killed; and a delicious dish of romance was served up to the public.

I was the only one beyond pardon, it seemed. According to the Duchess I was a wicked little treacherous cat not to have told her what was going on, so that it could have been stopped in time. A complaint was made to Grandmother. But that peppery old darling—after scolding me well—took my part, and quarrelled with the Duchess.

June was too busy being *The* Bride of All War Brides to bother much with me, and Lorillard was training hard for France. So a kind of magic glass wall arose between the Affair and me. Months passed (everyone knows the history of those months!) and then the air raids began: Zeppelins over London!

It was *smart*, you know, not to be frightened, but to run out and gape, or go up on the roof, when one of those great silver shapes was sighted in the night sky. June went on the roof. Oh poor, beautiful June! A fragment of shrapnel pierced her heart and killed her instantly, before she could have felt a pang.

The news almost "broke Lorillard up," so his pal who witnessed the marriage with me put the case. Robert hadn't even once been back in "Blighty" since he first went out. Ninety-six hours' leave was due just then. He spent it coming to June's funeral, and—returning to the Front.

Since that tragic time long ago he had seen a great deal of fighting, had been wounded twice, had received his Captaincy and a D. S. O. Four years and a half had been eaten by Hun locusts since he'd last appeared on the stage, and more than three since the death of June. Everyone thought that Lorillard would take up his old career where he had laid it down. But he refused several star parts, and announced that he never intended to act again. The reason was, he said, that he did not wish to do so; that he could hardly remember how he had felt at the time when acting made up the great interest of his life.

He bought a quaint old cottage near the river, not many miles from a house the Duchess owned—a happy house, where he had spent week-ends that wonderful summer of 1914. June had loved the place, and her body lay (buried in a glass coffin to preserve its beauty for ever) in the cedar-shaded graveyard of the country church near by. Once she had laughingly told Lorillard she would like to lie there if she died, and he had persuaded the Duchess to fulfil the wish. Instead

of a gravestone there was a sundial, with the motto "All her days were happy days and all her hours were hours of sun."

Robert Lorillard's cottage was within walking distance of the churchyard, and I imagine he often went there. Anyhow, he went nowhere else. After some months an anonymous book of poems appeared—poems of such extreme beauty and pure passion that all the critics talked about them. Bye and bye others began to talk, and it leaked out through the publisher that Lorillard was the author.

I loved those poems so much that I couldn't resist scribbling a few lines to Robert in my first flush of enthusiasm. He didn't answer. I'd hardly expected a reply; but now, long after, here was a letter from him introducing a girl who wanted to be my secretary!

He wrote:

> DEAR PRINCESS DI MIRAMARE,
>
> I don't ask if you remember me. I *know* you do, because of one we have both greatly loved. I meant to thank you long ago for the kind things you took the trouble to say about my verses. The thoughts your name called up were very poignant. I put off acknowledging your note. But you will forgive me, because you are a real friend; and for that reason I venture to send you a strong personal recommendation with Miss Joyce Arnold, who will ask for a position as your secretary. I saw your advertisement in the *Times*, and showed it to Miss Arnold, offering to introduce her to you. She nursed me in France when she was a V. A. D. (she has a decoration, bye the bye, for her courage in hideous air raids), and she has been my secretary for some months. All I need say about her I can put into a few words. *She is absolutely perfect.* It will be a great wrench for me to lose her valuable help with the work I give my time to nowadays, but I am going abroad for a while, and shall not need a secretary.
>
> You too have lived and suffered since we met! Do take from me remembrances and thoughts of a friendship which will never fade.
>
> Yours sincerely always,
>
> ROBERT LORILLARD.

I'd been too much excited when she said, "I have an introduction to you from

Captain Lorillard," to do more than glance at the girl, and ask her to sit down. But as I finished the letter I looked up, to meet the gaze of a pair of gray eyes.

Caught staring, Miss Arnold blushed; and what with those eyes and that colour I thought her one of the most delightful girls I'd ever seen.

I don't mean that she was one of the prettiest. She was (and is) pretty. But it wasn't entirely her *looks* you thought of, in seeing her first. It was something that shone out from her eyes, and seemed to make a sweet, happy brightness all around her. Eyes are windows, and something *must* be on the other side, but, alas! it seldom shines through. The windows are dim, or the blinds are down to cover dulness. Joyce Arnold had a living spirit behind those big, bright soul-windows that were her eyes!

As for the rest, she was tall and slim, and delicately long-limbed. She had milk-white skin with a soft touch of rose on the cheek bones; a few freckles which were like the dust from tiger-lily petals, and a charming, sensitive mouth, full and red.

"Why, of course I want you!" I said. "I'm lucky to secure you, too! How glad I am that you didn't come after I'd engaged someone else! But even if you had, I'd have managed to get rid of her one way or other."

Miss Arnold smiled. She had the most contagious smile!—though it struck me even then that it wasn't a *merry* smile. Her face, with its piquant little nose, was meant to be gay and happy I thought; yet it wasn't either. It was more plucky and brave; and the eyes had known sadness, I felt sure. I guessed her age as twenty-three or twenty-four.

She said that she would love to work for me. The girls who were waiting to be interviewed were sent politely away in search of other engagements while I settled things with Miss Arnold. The more I looked at her, the more I talked with her, the more definite became an impression that I'd seen her before—a long time ago. At last I asked her the question: "Can it be that we've met somewhere?"

Colour streamed over her pale face. "Yes, Princess, we have," she said. "At least, we didn't exactly *meet*. It couldn't be called that."

"What was it then, if not a meeting?" I encouraged her.

"I was in my first job as secretary. I was with Miss Opal Fawcett. When it was

Ben Ali's day out—Ben Ali was her Arab butler, you know—I used to open the door. I opened it for you and—and Lady June Dana when you came. I remember quite well, though I never thought *you* would."

Why did the girl blush so? I wondered. Could it be that she was ashamed of having been with Opal Fawcett, or—was it something to do with the mention of June? Miss Arnold had evidently just left her place with Robert Lorillard and probably the name of his wife had been "taboo" between them, for I couldn't fancy Robert talking of June with any one—unless with some old friend who had known her well.

"Ah, that's it!" I exclaimed. "Now I do remember. June and I spoke of you afterward, as we were going away. We said, 'What an interesting girl!' Nearly five years ago! It seems a hundred."

Miss Arnold didn't speak, and again my thoughts flew back.

Opal Fawcett suddenly sprang into fame with the breaking out of the war, when all the sweethearts and wives of England yearned to give "mascots" to their loved men who fought, or to get news from beyond the veil, of those who had "gone west." Opal had, however, been making her weird way to success for several years before. She had a strange history—as strange as her own personality.

A man named Fawcett edited a Spiritualistic paper, called the *Gleam*. One foggy October night (it was All Hallow E'en) he heard a shrill, wailing cry outside his old house in Westminster. (Naturally it was a *haunted* house, or he wouldn't have cared to live in it!) Someone had left a tiny baby girl in a basket at his door, and with it a letter in a woman's handwriting. This said that the child had been born in October, so its name must be Opal.

Fawcett was a bachelor; but he imagined that spirit influences had turned the unknown mother's thoughts to him. For this reason he kept the baby, obligingly named it Opal, and brought it up in his own religious beliefs.

Opal was extremely proud of her romantic début in life, and when she had decided upon a career for herself, she wrote her autobiography up to date. As she was quite young at the time—not more than twenty-five—the book was short. She had a certain number of copies bound in specially dyed silk supposed to be of an opal tint, changeable from blue to pinkish purple, and these she gave to her friends or sold to her clients.

I say "clients," because, after being a celebrated "child medium" during her foster father's life, and then failing on the stage as an actress, she discovered that palmistry was her forte. At least it was one among several others. You told her the date when you were born, and she "did" your horoscope. She advised people also what colours they ought to wear to "suit their aura," and what jewels were lucky or unlucky. Later, when the war came, she took to crystal gazing. Perhaps she had begun it before, but it was then that she suddenly "caught on." One heard all one's friends talking about her, saying, "Have you ever been to Opal Fawcett? She's *absolutely wonderful*! You must go!" Accordingly we went.

When June and Lorillard were waiting in secret suspense for their special license, June implored Robert to let Opal look into the crystal for him, and read his hand. He tried to beg off, because he had met Miss Fawcett during her disastrous year on the stage. In a play of ancient Rome in which he was the star, Opal Fawcett had been a sort of walking-on martyr, and he had a scene with her in the arena, defending her from a doped, milk-fed lion. Opal had acted, clung, and twined so much more than necessary that Robert had disliked the scene intensely, always fearing that the audience might "queer" it by laughing. He would not complain to the management, because the girl had been given the part through official friendship, and was already marked down as prey by the critics. He hadn't wished to do her harm; but neither did he care to have his future foretold by her.

June was so keen, however, that he consented to be led like a lamb to the sacrifice. I heard from her how they went together to the old house which the spiritualist had left to his adopted daughter; and I heard what happened at the interview. June was vexed because Opal *would* see Robert alone. She had wanted to be in the room, and listen to everything! Opal was most ungrateful, June said, because she (June) had sent lots of people to have their "hands read," and get special jewels prescribed for them, like medicines. Robert had laughed to June about what Opal claimed to see for him in her crystal, but had pretended to forget most of the "silly stuff," and be unable to repeat it. June had worried, fearing lest misfortunes had appeared in the crystal, and that Robert wished to hide the fact from her.

"I'll get it all out of Opal myself!" she exclaimed to me, and took me with her to Miss Fawcett's next day.

The excuse for this visit was to have my hand "told," and to order a mascot for Robert, to take with him to the front: his own lucky jewel set in a design made to

fit his horoscope!

I was delighted to go, for I'd never seen a fortune teller; but June was too eager to talk about Robert to spare me much time with the seeress. My hand-telling was rather perfunctory, for Miss Fawcett didn't feel the same need to see me alone which she had felt with Lorillard, and June was very much on the spot, sighing, fussing, and looking at her wrist-watch.

Opal was as reticent about the interview with Lorillard as Robert had been, though, unlike him, she didn't laugh. So poor June got little for her pains, and I learned nothing about my character that Grandmother hadn't told me when she was cross. Still, it was an experience. I'd never forgotten the tall, white, angular young woman wearing amethysts and a purple robe, in a purple room: a creature who looked as if she'd founded herself on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and overshot the mark. It seemed, also, that I'd never forgotten her secretary, though perhaps I'd not thought of the girl from that day to this.

"Do tell me how you happened to be with Opal Fawcett," I couldn't help blurting out from the depths of my curiosity. "You seem so—so—absolutely *alien* from her and her 'atmosphere'."

"Oh, it's quite simple," said Joyce Arnold, not betraying herself if she considered me intrusive or rude. "An aunt of mine—a dear old maid—was a great disciple of Mr. Fawcett. She thought Opal the wonder of the world, at about ten or twelve, as 'the child medium,' and she used to take me often to the house. I was five or six years younger than Opal, and Aunt Jenny hoped it would 'spiritualize' me to play with her. We never quite lost sight of each other after that, Opal and I. When she went into business—I mean, when she became a hand-reader and so on—I was beginning what I called my 'profession.' She engaged me as her secretary, and I stayed on till I left her to 'do my bit' in the war, as a V. A. D. That's the way I met Captain Lorillard, you know. It was the most splendid thing that ever happened, when he asked me to work for him after he was invalided back from the Front. You see, I was dead tired after four years without a rest. We'd had a lot of air raids at my hospital, and I suppose it was rather a strain. I was ordered home. And oh, it's been Paradise at that heavenly place on the river, helping to put down in black and white the beautiful thoughts of such a man!"

As she spoke, an expression of rapture, that was like light, illumined the girl's face for an instant, bright as a flash of sunshine on a white bird's wing. But it passed, and her eyes darkened with some quick memory of pain. She looked

down, thick black lashes shadowing her cheeks.

"By Jove!" I thought. "There's a *story* here!"

Robert Lorillard wrote that Miss Arnold was "perfect." Yet he had sent her away. He said he was going away himself. But I felt sure he wasn't. Or else, he was going on purpose. He had *searched the newspapers to find a place for her*. If he hadn't done that deliberately, he would never have seen my advertisement.

And she? The girl was breaking her heart at the loss of her "Paradise."

What did it mean?

CHAPTER II

THE HERMIT

Joyce Arnold was ready to begin work at once.

She had, it seemed, already given up her lodgings in the village near Robert Lorillard's cottage. Opal Fawcett had offered the hospitality of her house for a fortnight, and while there Joyce would pay her way by writing Opal's letters in spare hours, the newest secretary being absent on holiday. In the meantime, now that it was decided she should come to me, Miss Arnold would look for rooms somewhere in my neighbourhood.

I let it go at this for a few days. But when just half a week had passed I realized that Joyce Arnold wasn't merely a perfect secretary, she was a perfect companion as well. Not perfect in a horrid, "high-brow" way, but simply adorable to have in the house.

It was on a Wednesday that she brought me Lorillard's letter. On the following Saturday, at luncheon, I suddenly said, "Look here, Miss Arnold, how would you like to live with me instead of in lodgings?"

She blushed with surprise. (She blushed easily and beautifully.)

"Why, I—should love it, of course," she stammered, "if you're really sure that you——"

"Of course I'm sure," I cut her short. "What I'm beginning to wonder is, how I ever got on without you!"

She laughed.

"You've known me only three days and a half! And——"

"Long enough to be sure that you're absolutely IT," said I. "If already you seem to me indispensable, how *could* Robert Lorillard have made up his mind to part with you, after *months*?"

I didn't mean to be cruel or inquisitorial. The words sprang out—spoke

themselves. But I could have boxed my own ears when I saw their effect on the girl. She grew red, then white, and tears gushed to her eyes. They didn't fall, because she was afraid to wink, and stared me steadily in the face, hoping the salt lake might safely soak back. All the same I saw that I'd struck a hard blow.

"Captain Lorillard was very nice, and really sorry in a way to lose me, I think," she replied, rather primly. "But he told you, didn't he, that he was going away?"

"Oh, of course! Stupid of me to forget for a minute," I mumbled, earnestly peeling a plum, so that she might have time to dispose of those tears without absorbing them. I was more certain than ever that here was a "story" in the broken connection between Joyce Arnold and Robert Lorillard: that if he were really leaving home it was for a reason which concerned *her*.

It wasn't all curiosity which made me rack my brain with mental questions. It was partly old admiration for Robert and new affection for his late secretary. "Why should he want to get rid of such a girl?" I asked myself, as at last I ate the plum.

The fruit was more easily swallowed than the idea that he hadn't *wanted* Joyce Arnold to go on working for him. It wouldn't be human for man or woman—especially man—*not* to want her. But—well—I tried to put the thought aside for the moment, in order to wrestle with it when those eyes of hers could no longer read my mind.

I turned the subject to Opal Fawcett.

"Could you leave Miss Fawcett at once, and come to me?" I asked. "Would she be vexed? Or would you rather stay with her over Sunday?"

"I could come this afternoon," Joyce said. "I'd be glad to. And I don't think Opal would mind. She wanted me at first. But—but——Well, I'm beginning to bore her now; or anyhow, we're getting on each other's nerves."

This reply, and the embarrassed look on Joyce's face, set me going upon a new track. Was Opal Fawcett in the "story" which my imagination had begun to write around Miss Arnold and Robert Lorillard? If so, what could be her part in it?

I found no satisfactory answer. Years ago, when she was on the stage and acting with Lorillard, Opal had perhaps been in love with him, like hundreds of other women. But since then he'd married, and fought in the war, and later had led the life of a hermit, while she pursued her successful "career" in town. It was

unlikely that they had seen much of each other, even if their old, slight acquaintance had been kept up at all. Still, Opal might have been curious about Lorillard and the "simple life." She might have welcomed Joyce for the sake of what she could tell of him, and Joyce might have rebelled when she saw what Opal wanted from her.

I thanked my own wits for giving me this "tip." Without it, I mightn't have resisted the strong temptation to proceed with a little dextrous "pumping" on my own—just a word wedged into some chink in the armour now and then, to find out if poor Joyce had fallen a victim to Lorillard's undying charm.

As it was, I determined to shut up like a clam, and do as I would be done by were I in the girl's place. If she'd slipped into loving her employer, and he had thought best to banish her, for her own good, the wound in poor Joyce's self-respect must be as deep as that in her heart. Every sensitive nerve must throb with anguish, and only a *wretch* would deliberately probe the hurt with questions, in mere selfish curiosity.

"It's not your business," I said to myself. And I vowed to do all I could to make Joyce Arnold forget—whatever it was that she might want to forget.

She did come to me that afternoon. I had one spare room in my flat, and I made it as pretty and homelike as I could with flowers and books and little things I stole from my own quarters. The girl was pathetically grateful! She opened out to me like a flower—that is, in affection. I felt in her a warm, eager anxiety to serve and help me, not for the wages I gave, but for love. It was like a perfume in the place. And Joyce Arnold was intelligent as well as sweet. She had been highly educated, and there seemed to be few things she hadn't thought about. Most of the old aunt's money had been spent in making the girl what she was, so there was little left; but Joyce would always be able to earn her living.

If she tired of secretarial work, she could quite well teach music, both piano and voice production. She had taken singing lessons from a famous and successful man. Had her voice been strong enough, she might have got concert engagements, it was so honey-sweet, so exquisitely trained. But she called it a "twilight voice"; which it really was, and often I gave up going out for the joy of having her sing to me alone in the dusk.

It was only at those times that I knew—actually *knew*!—how sad she was, to the point of heartbreak. By day, when we worked or talked together, her manner was charmingly bright. She was interested in my affairs, and her quiet, delicious

sense of humour was one of her greatest attractions for me. But at the piano, before the lights were on, the girl was at the mercy of her secret, whatever it might be. It came like a ghost, and stared her in the eyes. It said to her: "You can't shut me out. It is to *me* you sing. I *make* you sing!"

To hear that "twilight voice" of hers, half crooning, half chanting, those passion-flower songs of Laurence Hope's, or "Omar," would have waked a soul in a stone image!

Good heavens! how could Robert Lorillard have sent her away? How, on the contrary, could he have helped wanting this noble, brave, sweet creature to warm his life for ever?

That's what I asked myself over and over again. And on top of that question another. What if—he *hadn't* helped it?

It was one evening, while she improvised a queer little "song of sleep" for me that this thought came. It burst like a bombshell in my brain; and the reason it hadn't burst before was because my mind always pictured June and Robert together.

I was lying deep among cushions on a sofa, and involuntarily I started up.

Joyce broke off her song in the midst.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said; "only—it just popped into my head that I'd forgotten to telephone for—for a car to-morrow."

"For a car?" Joyce echoed. "How stupid of me, if you mentioned it! I can't remember——"

"No, I didn't mention it," I said. (No wonder, when I hadn't even *thought* of it until this minute!) "But I—I *meant* to. I'd made up my mind to go to 'Pergolas,' the Duchess of Stane's place on the river; you must have seen it when you were working for Robert Lorillard."

It was the first time I'd uttered his name since that impulsive break at the luncheon table, over a fortnight ago now!

Whether or not her face blushed I couldn't see in the twilight, but her *voice* blushed as she said:

"Oh, yes! I've seen—the gates. Surely the duchess isn't there at this time of the year?"

"She generally takes a 'rest cure' of a week or two at Pergolas this month. It's perfect peace, and you know how dreamlike the river is in autumn."

"I—know," Joyce murmured. "The woods all golden, and mists like creamy veils across the blue distance. I know!"

There was a passion of suppressed longing and regret in her tone.

"Wouldn't you like to go with me?" I coaxed. "It's such lovely country for a spin. And—I've never been there; but I suppose we must pass close to Robert Lorillard's cottage? We go through Stanerton village. We could stop and see if he's still at home, or if he's gone——"

"No—no, thank you, Princess," Joyce said, hastily, "I don't—care very much for motoring. If you're to be away to-morrow I'll get through some mending, and some letters of my own."

I didn't argue. I should have been surprised if she'd accepted. It would have made the thing commonplace. And it would have upset my plan. I can't call it a "deep-laid plan," because I'd laid it on no firmer foundation than the spur of the moment; but I was wildly excited about it. Fully armoured like Minerva it had leapt into my brain while I said to myself, "What *if*——?"

Joyce 'phoned to the garage where I hired cars occasionally, and ordered something to come at ten o'clock next morning. For me to take this joy ride meant throwing over a whole day's engagements like so many ninepins. But I didn't care a rap!

I could see when I was ready to start that Joyce was even more excited than I. No doubt she was thinking that, when I came back, I might bring news of *him*. We spoke, however, only of the duchess.

To me, a harmless, necessary fib isn't much more vicious than a cat of the same description; that is, if the fib is for the benefit of a friend. But I'd rather tell the truth if it can be managed, so I really intended to call on the Duchess. The village of Stanerton—on the outskirts of which Lorillard lived—happened to be on my way to Pergolas. I couldn't help *that*, could I? So I told my chauffeur to ask for River Orchard Cottage—the address on Robert's note introducing Miss Arnold.

Everyone seemed to know the place. It was half a mile out of the village, and you went to it up a side road: a very old cottage altered and modernized. The name was old, too: it really was an orchard, and it was really on the river. That was what half a dozen people informed us in a breath, and they would have added much information about Lorillard himself if I'd cared to hear. But all I wanted to learn about him from them was whether he had gone away. He hadn't. He had been seen out walking the day before.

"I *told* you so!" I said to myself.

As the car slowed down and stopped before a white gate I seemed to lose my identity for a moment. It became merged with that of Joyce Arnold. I felt as if she—the *real* Joyce—had raced here in some winged vehicle of thousand-spirit power, travelling far faster than any road-bound earthly car, and, having waited for me, now slipped into my skin.

The sight of that gate made my heart beat as it must have made hers beat every day when she came in the morning to work. Yes! As I laid my hand on the latch I wasn't my somewhat blasée and sophisticated self: I was the girl to whom this place was Paradise.

The white gate was flanked by two tall clipped yews. Inside, a wide path of irregular paving-stones, with grass and flowers sprouting between, led to a low thatched cottage—oh, but a glorified cottage: a cottage that looked as if it had died and gone to heaven! The flagged path had tubs on either side. In them grew funny little Dutch treelets shaped like birds and animals of different sorts; and the lawn kept all the noble, gnarled giants that once had made it an orchard. The cottage was yellow, like cottages in Devonshire, and the old thatch had the gray satin sheen of chinchilla. A huge magnolia was trained over the front, and climbing roses and wisteria, all in the sere and yellow leaf or bare now; but I could picture the place in spring, when the diamond-paned bow windows sparkled through a canopy of flowers, when the great apple trees were like a pink-and-white sunrise of blossom, and underneath spread a carpet of forget-me-nots and tulips.

How sweet must have been the air then, how blue the river background, and how melodious the low song of a distant weir!

To-day, the air was faintly acrid with the scent of bonfire smoke—the odour of autumn; and the sounds of wind and water over the weir were sad as a song of homesickness.

I tapped an old-fashioned knocker upon a low green door. An elderly maid appeared. I saw by the bleak glint of a pale eye that she meant to say, "Not at home," and hastened to forestall her.

"See if Captain Lorillard is in, and if so tell him that Princess di Miramare has come from town on purpose for a talk with him," I flung in the stolid face.

There was no answer to that except obedience! The woman left me waiting in a delightful little square hall furnished with a very few, very beautiful, old things. And in a minute Robert Lorillard almost bounded out of a room into which the maid had vanished.

It was the first time we had seen each other since the day he married June Dana.

I had sat down on a cushioned chest in the hall. At sight of him I jumped up, and meaning to hold out a hand, found myself holding out two! He took both, pressed them, and without speaking we looked long at each other. For both of us the past had come alive.

He was the same, yet not the same. Certainly not less handsome, but changed, as all men who have been through the war are changed—anyhow, imaginative men. Though he had been back from the Front for over a year (he was invalided out after his last wound, just before the Armistice) the tan wasn't off his face yet, perhaps never would be. There were a few lines round his eyes and a few silver threads in his black hair. He smiled at me; but it was the smile of a man who has suffered, and known a hell of loneliness.

It was Robert who spoke first, saying entirely commonplace things in the beautiful voice that used to thrill London. He was so glad to see me! How nice it was of me to come! Then, suddenly, he remembered something. I could *see* him remembering. He remembered that he was supposed to be away.

"I ought to be in France," he said. "All my arrangements are made to go. Yet I haven't got off. I'm glad now that I haven't."

"So am I, very glad," I echoed. "I should have been too disappointed! But—I *felt* you wouldn't be gone."

He looked somewhat startled.

"I always was a procrastinator," he said. "Come into my study, won't you?"

Still holding me by the hand he led me like a child into the room out of which he had shot—an adorable room, with a beamed ceiling and diamond-paned windows looking under trees to the river. In front of his desk—where he could glance up for inspiration as he wrote—was a life-sized portrait of June, by Sargent; June in the gray dress and hat she had worn the day she promised—no, *offered*—to marry Robert.

"You see!" he said, with a slight gesture toward the picture, with its bunched red-bronze hair and brilliant eyes of blue, "this is where I sit and work."

"And where used Joyce Arnold to sit and work?" something in me blurted out.

The man winced—just visibly—no more. His eyes flashed to mine a kind of challenge. There was sudden anger in it, and pleading as well. Then, of course, I *knew*—all I had come to find out. And he must have known that I knew!

But I'd come for a great deal more than finding out.

I don't think I'm a coward, yet I was dreadfully frightened—in a blue funk of doing or saying the wrong thing at a moment when it might be "now or never." My knees felt like badly poached eggs with no toast to repose upon. I lost my head a little, and what I did I didn't do really, because it did itself.

I looked as scared as I felt, and gasped: "Oh, *Robert*!" (I'd never called him "Robert" to his face before; only behind his back.)

My face of fright deflected his rage. You can't be furious with a quivering jelly! But he didn't speak. The challenge in his eyes softened to reproach. Then he looked at the portrait.

"Miss Arnold sat where she, too, could see June," he answered quietly.

"Poor, poor Joyce!" I said. "And poor you!"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why, I mean—and I, too, can see June while I say it!—I mean that you are making a terrible mistake. Oh, Robert Lorillard, don't pretend not to understand. We're not two strangers fencing! I'm not just a bold creature rushing in where angels fear to tread. I know!—I *have* rushed in, but I'm not bold. I'm frightened to death. Only—I had to come. Every day I see that glorious girl breaking her heart. She hasn't said a word, or looked a look, or wept a weep. She's a *soldier*.

But she's like a lost soul turned out of Paradise. The more I got to know of her the more I felt you *couldn't* have sent her away and found another place for her because you were bored. So I came to see you. And you needn't mind my knowing the real reason you sent her out of your house. I won't tell her. If any one does that it must be you. And it *ought* to be you. You love each other. You belong to each other. You'd be divinely happy together. You're wretched apart."

"*You* say that?" Robert exclaimed, when by sheer force of lungs I'd made him hear me through. "You—June's friend!"

"Yes. It's because I was her friend, and knew her so well, that I want you to listen to your own heart; for if you don't, you'll break Joyce Arnold's. June wouldn't want you to sacrifice your two lives on the shrine of her memory. She loved happiness, herself. And she liked other people to be happy."

Robert's eyes lit, whether with joy or anger I couldn't tell.

"You think June would be willing to have me marry another woman?" he said.

"Yes, I do, if you loved the woman. And you do love her. It would be useless to tell me you don't."

"I'm not going to tell you I don't. I've tried not to. I hoped she didn't care."

"She does. Desperately, frightfully. I do believe it's killing her."

"God! And she saved my life. Elizabeth, I'd give mine for her, a dozen times over, but——"

"What she needs is for you to give it *to* her, not for her: give it once and for all, to have and to hold while your heart's in your body."

I fired advice at him like bullets from a Maxim gun, and every bullet reached its billet. I was so carried away by my wish for joy to rise from tragedy that I hardly knew what I said, yet I felt that I had caught Lorillard and carried him with me. The next thing I definitely knew with my mere brain, I was sitting down with elbows on Robert's desk, facing him as he leaned toward me. My whole self was a listening Ear, while he told—as a man hypnotized might tell the hypnotizer—the tale of his acquaintance with Joyce Arnold.

I'd already learned from his letter and from words she had let drop that Joyce had nursed him in a hospital in France, when she was "doing her bit" as a V. A. D.

But she had been silent about the life-saving episode, which had won for her a decoration and Robert Lorillard's deep admiration and gratitude.

It seemed that during an air raid, when German machines were bombing the hospital, Joyce had in her ward three officers just operated upon, and too weak to walk. A bomb fell and killed one of these as Joyce and another nurse were about to move his cot into the next ward. Then, in a sudden horror of darkness and noise of destroying aeroplanes, she had carried Robert in her arms to a place of comparative safety. After that she had returned to her own ward and got the other man who lay in his cot, though her fellow nurse had been struck down, wounded or dead.

"How she did it I've never known, or she either," said Lorillard, dreaming back into the past. "She's tall and strong, of course, and at that time I was reduced to a living skeleton. Still, even in my bones I'm a good deal bigger than she is. The weight must have been enough to crush her, yet she carried me from one ward to another, in the dark, when the light had been struck out. And the wound in my side never bled a drop. It was like a miracle."

"'Spect she loved you lots already, without quite knowing it," I told him. "There've been miracles going on in the world ever since Christ, and they always will go on, because love works them, and *only* love. At least, that's *my* idea! And I don't believe God would have let Joyce work that one, the way she did, if He hadn't meant her love to wake love in you."

"If I could think so," said Robert, "it would make all the difference; for I've been fighting my own heart with the whole strength of my soul, and it's been a hard struggle. I felt it would be such a hideous treachery to June—my beautiful June, who gave herself to me as a goddess might to a mortal!—the meanest ingratitude to let another woman take her place when her back is turned—even such a splendid woman as Joyce Arnold."

"I know just how you feel," I humoured him. "You remember, I was with June when she threw herself into your arms and offered to marry you. You were in love with her, and you'd never dreamed till that minute there was any hope. But that was a different love from this, I'm sure, because no two girls could be more different, one from another, than June Dana and Joyce Arnold. Your love for June was just glorious romance. Perhaps, if she'd lived, and you and she had passed years together as husband and wife, the wonderful colours of the glory would have faded a little. She tired so of every-day things. But Joyce is born to

be the companion of a man she loves, and she would never tire or let him tire. You and June hardly had enough time together to realize that you were married. And it's over three years and a half since she—since the gods who loved her let her die young. She can't come to this world again. She basked in joy herself; and she won't grudge it to you, if she knows. And for you, joy and Joyce are one, for the rest of both your lives."

Lorillard sprang up suddenly and seized my hands.

"Portia come back to life and judgment—I believe you're right!" he cried. "Take me to town with you. Take me to Joyce!"

As we stood, thrilled, hand in hand, the door opened. The same servant who had let me in announced acidly: "*Another* lady to see you, sir."

The lady in question had come so near the door that she must have seen us before we could start apart.

I knew her at first glance: Opal Fawcett.

CHAPTER III

THE CHAIR AT THE SAVOY

It was five years since I'd seen Opal Fawcett—for the first and last time, that day I went to her house with June.

Then she had gleamed wraithlike in the purple dusk of her purple room, with its purple-shaded lamps. Now she stood in full daylight, against the frank background of a country cottage wall. Yet she was still a mere film of a woman. She seemed to carry her own eerie effect with her wherever she went, as the heroines of operas are accompanied by their special spot-light and *leitmotif*.

Whether the servant was untrained, or spiteful because a long-standing rule had been broken in my favour, I can't tell. But I'm sure that, if he'd been given half a chance, Robert would have made some excuse not to see Opal. There she was, however, on the threshold, and looking like one of those "Dwellers on the Threshold" you read of in psychic books.

As he had no invisible cloak, and couldn't crawl under a sofa, poor Robert was obliged to say pleasantly, "How do you do?"

Standing back a little, trying to look about two inches tall instead of five foot ten, I watched the greeting. I wanted to judge from it, if I could, to what extent the old acquaintance had been kept up. But I might have saved myself waste of brain tissue. Robert was anxious to leave no mystery.

"Princess," he said, hastily, when he had taken his guest's slim hand in its gray glove, "Princess, I think you must have heard of Miss Opal Fawcett."

"Oh, yes. And we have met—once," I replied.

Opal's narrow gray eyes turned to me—not without reluctance I thought.

"I remember well," she murmured, in her plaintive voice. "I never forget a face. You were Miss Courtenaye then. Lately I've been hearing of you from Miss Arnold, who used to be my secretary, and is now yours."

I was thankful she didn't bring in *June's* name!

"Miss Fawcett and I have known each other a good many years," Robert hurried on. "She was once in a play with me, before she found her real *métier*. She kindly comes to see me now and then, when she can take a day off."

"I want to bid you good-bye—if you are really going out of England," Opal said.

She had ceased to look at me now, but I went on looking hard at her. She was in what might be a spirit conception of a motor costume: smoke gray velvet, and yards of long, floating veil shot from gray to mauve. She wore a close toque with two little jutting Mercury wings, from behind which those yards of unnecessary chiffon fell. She had a narrow oval face, which Nature and (I thought) Art combined to make pale as pearl. Her hair, pushed forward by the toque, was so colourless a brown that it looked like thick shadow. She had a beautifully cut, delicate nose, but her lips were thin and the upper one rather long and flat, otherwise she would have been pretty. Even as it was she had a kind of fascination, and I thought her the most graceful, willowy creature I'd ever seen.

"Well," said Robert, "as it happens I've put off going abroad, through a kind of mental laziness. But in the ordinary course of events you'd have come to-day only to find me gone—which would have been a pity. When I answered your letter, I told you——"

"Yes, but I *felt* you'd still be here," she cut him short. "Apparently the Princess had the same premonition."

"Oh, I just happened to be passing," I fibbed, "and took my chance. Fortunately, I came in the nick of time to give Captain Lorillard a lift to town in my car. It will save him a journey by train."

"Then I am in the nick of time, too!" said Opal. "If I'd been ten minutes later I might have missed him. I felt *that*, too! I told my taxi man to drive at least as fast as the legal limit."

I guessed she was longing to get Robert to herself, and that he was glad there was no chance of it. Was he *really* going abroad? she wanted to know. Or only just to London for a change?

Robert was restive under her uncanny questionings, but answered that he wasn't quite sure about the future. Travelling in France and Italy seemed to be disagreeable at the moment. Passports, too, were a bother. He'd be more certain of his plans in a few days, and would let her know.

Opal betrayed no crude emotion. Yet I was sure that, under her restrained manner—soft as a gentle breeze on a summer night—she would have enjoyed stamping her foot and having hysterics. Instead, she asked Robert about a psychic play she wanted him to write (he hadn't written a line of it!), told him a little news concerning people they both knew, and bethought herself that she "mustn't keep us."

Not more than twenty minutes after she had floated in Miss Fawcett floated forth again. Robert took her to her taxi, and then could hardly wait to get off in my car. As for me, I'd forgotten all about the Duchess. We chose the longer of the two roads to London, hoping to miss Opal; but soon passed her taxi going at a leisurely pace. The Wraith must have had another of her mystic "feelings," and counted on our choice of that turning!

"She says she has 'helpers' from beyond," Robert explained, when we were flying on, far ahead. "She asks their advice, and they tell her what to do in daily life. She wanted to provide me with one or two, but I wasn't 'taking any.' Not that I'm a convinced materialist, or that I don't believe the dark veil can ever be lifted—I'm rather inclined the other way round—but I prefer to manage my own affairs without 'helpers' I've never known or seen on earth. Of course, it would be different if——Oh, you know what I mean. But even then—well, I should be afraid of being deceived. It's better not to begin anything like that when you can't be sure."

"Did Opal Fawcett ever try to persuade you to—to——?" Courage failed me. But Robert understood only too well what was in my mind.

"Yes, she did," he admitted. "She wrote me—after—that awful thing happened. I hadn't heard from her for a long time till then. I'd almost forgotten her existence. She said in the letter that June's spirit had come to her with a message for me."

"*Cheek!*" I exclaimed.

"Well, I'm afraid that's rather the way I felt about it, though probably Opal meant well, and a lot of people think she's wonderful. Several friends begged me in urgent letters to go to Opal Fawcett: assured me she'd given them indescribable comfort, put them in touch with those they loved who'd 'passed on.' But somehow I couldn't be persuaded, Princess. A voice inside me always used to say: 'Why should June want to talk to you through Opal Fawcett? If she can come back, why shouldn't she speak with you direct, instead of through a third person?'"

"That's how I should have argued it out in your place," I agreed. "And—and June never——?"

"No. She never came, never made me realize her near presence, never seemed to influence me in favour of Opal—though Opal didn't give up till months had passed. When she first came after writing to say she must see me, it was to beg me to visit her for *June's sake*. Afterward, when she saw she was making me uncomfortable, she stopped her persuasions. Since then—fairly often when Joyce Arnold was here—she has turned up at the cottage: sometimes just for a friendly chat like an ordinary human being (though I never feel she is one), sometimes to discuss that 'psychic play'—as she calls it—an idea of hers she wants me to work out for the stage."

"Is it a good idea?" I wanted to know.

"Yes. Mysterious and dramatic at the same time. Yet I've always made excuses. I don't fancy collaborating with Miss Fawcett, though that may sound ungrateful."

It didn't, to my ears, especially as Opal's object seemed transparent as the depths of her own crystal. Of course she was still in love with Robert, and had seized first one chance, then another, of getting into touch with him. I was rather sorry for her, in a vague, impersonal way; for to love Robert Lorillard and lose him would hurt. I could realize that, without the trouble and pain of being seriously in love with him myself.

"It's a good thing," I thought, "that Joyce Arnold's stopping with me at this time and not with Opal Fawcett! It would be as much as the girl's life is worth to be engaged to Robert in *that* house!"

Could Opal suspect, I wondered, the truth about the broken love story? Somehow I thought not. I might be mistaken, but the rather patronizing way in which she'd spoken of Joyce didn't seem like that of a jealous woman. If Joyce and she had got upon each other's nerves lately because of Robert, I imagined that suspicion had been on the other side. Joyce would have been more than human if she could go on accepting hospitality from a woman who so plainly showed her love for Robert Lorillard.

We raced back to London, for I feared that Robert's mood might change for the worse—that an autumn chill of remorse might shiver through his veins.

All was well, however—very well. I made him talk to me of Joyce nearly the

whole way; and at the end of the journey I had him waiting for her in the drawing room of my flat before he quite knew what had happened to him.

My secretary was in her own room, writing her own letters as she'd said she would do.

"Back already, Princess?" she exclaimed, jumping up when I'd knocked and been told to come in. "Why, you've hardly more than had time to get there and back, it seems, to say nothing of lunch!"

"I haven't had any lunch," I said.

"No lunch? Poor darling! Why——"

"I was too busy," I broke in. "And I wanted to get back."

"Only this morning you were longing to go!"

"I know! It does sound chameleon-like. But second thoughts are often best. Come into the drawing room and you'll see that mine were—much best."

She came, in all innocence. I opened the door. I thrust her in. I exclaimed: "Bless you, my children!" and shut the two in together.

This was taking it boldly for granted that Joyce was as much in love with Robert as he with her. But why be early Victorian and ignore the lovely, naked truth, instead of late Georgian and save beating round the bush for both of the lovers?

Those words of mine figuratively flung them into each other's arms, where—according to my idea—the sooner they were the better!

I should think if my words missed fire, their eyes didn't miss, judging from what I'd seen in hers when speaking of him, in his when speaking of her! And certainly the pair of them couldn't have wasted *much* time in foolish preliminaries; for in about half an hour Joyce appeared in the dining room, where I was eating an *immense* luncheon.

"Oh, Princess!" she breathed, hovering just over the threshold; and instantly Robert loomed behind her. "It's too wonderful. It can't be true."

Robert didn't speak. He merely gazed. Years had rolled off him since morning. He looked an inspired boy, with a dash of silver powder on his hair. Slipping his arm round Joyce's waist he brought her to me. As I sat at the table they both

knelt down close to my feet, and each earnestly kissed one of my hands! It would have been a beautiful effect if I hadn't choked, trying wildly to bolt a mouthful of something, and had to be slapped on the back. That choke was a disguised blessing, however, for it made us all laugh when I got my breath; and when you're on the top pinnacle of a great emotion, it's a safe outlet to laugh!

My suggestion was, that nobody but our three selves should share the secret, and that the wedding—to be hurried on—should be sprung as a surprise upon the public. Robert and Joyce agreed on general principles; but each made one exception.

Robert said that he felt it would be "caddish" to make a bid for happiness without telling the Duchess of Stane what was in his mind. She couldn't reasonably object to his marrying again, and wouldn't object, he argued; but if he didn't confide in her she'd have a right to think him a coward.

Joyce's one exception—of all people on earth!—was Opal Fawcett! And when I shrieked "Why?" she'd only say that she "owed a debt of gratitude to Opal." Therefore Opal had a right to know before any one else that she was engaged.

The girl didn't add "to Robert Lorillard," but a flash of intuition like a searchlight showed me the meaning behind her words. Living in the same house with Opal, eating Opal's bread and salt (very little else, I daresay!), Joyce had guessed Opal's secret—or had been forced to hear a confidence. That, and nothing else, was the reason why she wouldn't be engaged to Robert "behind Opal's back!"

Well, I hope I'm not precisely a coward myself, but I didn't envy Joyce Arnold and Robert Lorillard their self-appointed tasks. They were carried out, however, with soldierly promptness the day after the engagement, and nothing terrific happened—or at least, was reported.

"Opal was very sweet," Joyce announced, vouchsafing no details of the interview.

"The—Duchess was very sensible," was Robert's description of what passed between him and his exalted ex-mother-in-law.

"I suppose you asked them not to tell?" was my one question.

"Oh, Opal *won't* tell!" exclaimed Joyce; and I believed that she was right. According to Opal's view, *telling* things only helped them to happen.

"I begged the Duchess to say nothing to anybody," answered Robert. Our eyes met, and we smiled—Robert rather ruefully.

Of course the Duchess did the contrary of what she'd been begged to do, and said something to everybody. In less than a week the world was aware that Robert Lorillard, its lost idol, was coming back to life; that he who had been for a few months the husband of wonderful June Dana—the Duchess of Stane's daughter—was engaged to a "V.-A.-D. girl who'd nursed him in the war, and had been his secretary or something."

But, after all, the talk mattered very little to those most concerned. They were divinely happy, the two who were talked about, though they would have liked to be let alone. I suppose, for Robert, it was a different kind of happiness from that which the condescension of his goddess had given him: less dazzling perhaps; more like the warm sweetness of early spring and its flowers, compared with a tropical summer of scented magnolias and daturas. June had been a goddess stepping down from her golden pedestal, and Joyce was a loving, adoring human girl, ready for all that wifehood might mean.

Robert shut up the little place by the river (where they planned to live later), and stopped at an hotel in town, though he had never let the flat in St. James's Square, the scene of his engagement to June.

I began helping Joyce choose a trousseau that could be got together in haste, for they were to go to the south of France and Italy for their honeymoon; and one day, after shopping the whole morning and part of the afternoon, we were to meet Robert for tea at the Savoy.

You know that soft amber light there is in the big *foyer* of the Savoy at tea-time, like the beautiful subdued light in dreams? Since the war it brings back to me ghosts of all the jolly, handsome boys one used to see there, whose bodies sleep now under the poppies and *bluets* of France; and as Joyce and I walked in, rather late, the thought of those boys and those days came over me with the sobbing music of the violins.

"It's like the beat, beat of invisible hearts," I said to myself. And suddenly I was sad.

There sat Robert, waiting for us. He had taken a table for three, and one of the chairs, I noticed, was a noble one covered with velvet brocade—a chair like a Queen's throne.

He rose at sight of us, and I saw that a little woman at a table close by was looking at him with intense interest. In fact, her interest in Robert gave her a kind of fictitious interest of her own, in my eyes, she seemed so absorbed in him.

She was one of those women you'd know to be American if you met them crawling up the North Pole; and as she was in travelling dress I fancied that it was not long since she had landed.

"She probably admired him on the stage when she was here before the war, and hasn't been in England since till now," I thought, to be interrupted by Robert himself.

"That armchair's for you, Princess," he said, as I was going to slip into a smaller one and leave the "throne" for the bride-elect.

For an instant we disputed; then I was about to yield, laughing, when the little woman in brown jumped up with a gasp.

"Oh, you *can't* sit in that chair!" she exclaimed. "Don't you *see*—there's someone there?"

We all three started and stared, thinking, of course, that the creature was mad. But her face looked sane, and pathetically pleading.

"Do forgive me!" she begged. "I forget that everyone doesn't see what I see. *They* are so clear to me always. I'm not insane. But I couldn't let you sit in that chair. You may have heard of me. I am Priscilla Hay Reardon, of Boston. I can't at this moment give you the name of the lovely girl—the lady in the chair—but she would tell me, I think, if I asked her. I must describe her to you, though, she's so beautiful, and she so wants you all—no, not *all*; only the gentleman—to recognize her. She has red-brown hair, in glossy waves, and immense blue eyes, like violet flame. She has a dainty nose; full, drooping red lips, the upper one very short and haughty; a cleft in her chin; wonderful complexion, with rosy cheeks, the colour high under the eyes; a long throat; a splendid figure, though slim; and she is dressed in gray, with an ostrich plume trailing over a gray hat that shades her forehead. She has a string of gray pearls round her neck—*black* pearls she says they are; she wears a chiffon scarf held by an emerald brooch, and on her hand is a ring with a marvellous square emerald."

Robert, Joyce, and I were speechless. The description of June was exact—June in the gray dress and hat she had worn the day we went to Robert's rooms, the

day they were engaged; the dress he had made her wear when Sargent painted her portrait.

CHAPTER IV

THE SPIRIT OF JUNE

Before one of us could utter a word, the little woman hurried on.

"Ah, the lovely girl has begun to talk very fast now! I can hardly understand what she says, because she's half crying. It's to you she speaks, sir; I don't know your name! But, yes—it's *Robert*... 'Robert!' the girl is sobbing. 'Have you forgotten me already?'... Do those words convey any special impression to your mind, sir, or has this spirit mistaken you for someone else?"

Robert was ghastly, and Joyce looked as if she were going to faint. Even I—to whom this scene meant less than to them—even I was flabbergasted. That is the *one* word! If you don't know what it means, you're lucky, because in that case you've never been it. I should translate from experience: "FLABBERGASTED; astounded and bewildered at the same time, with a slight dash of premature second childhood thrown in."

I heard Robert answer in a strained voice:

"The words do convey an impression to my mind. But—this is too sacred—too private a subject. We can't discuss it here. I——"

"I know!" the woman breathlessly agreed. "*She* feels it, too. She wouldn't have chosen a place like this. She's explaining—how for a long time she's tried to reach you, but couldn't make you understand. Now I've given her the chance. She's suffering terribly because of the barrier between you. I pity her. I wish I could help! Maybe I could if you'd care to come to my rooms. I'm staying in this hotel. I've just arrived in England from Boston, the first visit in my life. I haven't been in London much more than two hours now! I've got a little suite upstairs."

If she'd got a "little suite" at the Savoy, the woman must have money. She couldn't be a common or garden medium cadging for mere fees. Besides, no common or garden person, an absolute stranger to Robert Lorillard, met by sheer accident, could have described June Dana and that gray dress of four years ago; her jewels, too! Robert's name she might have picked up if Joyce or I had let it drop by accident; but the last was inexplicable. The thing that had happened—

that was happening—seemed to me miraculous, and tragic. I felt that Fate had seized the bright bird of happiness and would crush it to death, unless something intervened. And what could intervene? I struggled not to see the future as a foregone conclusion. But I could see it in no other way except by shutting my eyes.

Robert turned to Joyce. He didn't say to her, "What am I to do?" Yet she read the silent question and answered it.

"Of course you must go," she said. "It—whether it's genuine or not, you'll have to find out. You can't let it drop."

"No, I can't let it drop," he echoed. He looked stricken. He, too, saw the dark, fatal hand grasping the white bird.

He had loved June passionately, but the beautiful body he'd held in his arms lay under that sundial by the riverside. Her spirit was of another world. And he'd not have been a human, hot-blooded man, if the reproachful wraith of an old love could be more to him than the brave girl who'd saved his life and won his soul back from despair.

I saw, as if through their eyes, the thing they faced together, those two, and suddenly I rebelled against that figure of Destiny. I was wild to save the white bird before its wings had ceased to flutter. I didn't know at all what to do. But I had to do something. I simply *had* to!

Miss Reardon rose.

"Would you like to come with me now?" she asked, addressing Robert, not Joyce or me. She ignored us, but not in a rude way. Indeed, there was a direct and rather childlike simplicity in her manner, which impressed one with her genuineness. I was afraid—horribly afraid—and almost sure, that she *was* genuine. I respected her against my will, because she didn't worry to be polite; but at the same time I didn't intend to be shunted. I determined to be in at the death—or whatever it was!

"Aren't you going to invite us, too?" I asked. "If the—the apparition is the spirit we think we recognize, she and I were dear friends."

Miss Reardon's round, mild eyes searched my face. Then they turned as if to consult another face which only they could see. It was creepy to watch them gaze steadily at something in that big, *empty* armchair.

"Yes," she agreed. "The lady—Lady——Could it be 'June'?—It sounds like June—says it's true you were her friend. But she says '*Not the other.*' The other mustn't come."

"I wouldn't wish to come," Joyce protested. She was waxen pale. "I'll go home," she said to Robert. "Don't bother about me. Don't think about me at all. Afterward you can—tell me whatever you care to tell."

"No!" Robert and I spoke together, moved by the same thought. "Don't go home. Wait here for us."

"Very well," the girl consented, more to save argument at such a moment, I think, than because she wished to do what we asked.

She sank down in one of the chairs we had taken and Robert and I followed Miss Reardon. She appeared to think that we were sure to know her name quite well. I didn't know it, for I was a stranger in the world of Spiritualism. But her air of being modestly proud of the name seemed to prove that her reputation as a medium was good—that she'd never been found out in any fraud. And going up in the lift the words spoke themselves over and over in my head: "She couldn't know who Robert is, if it's true she's never been in England before, and if she has come to London to-day. At least, I don't see how she could."

In silence we let Miss Reardon lead us to the sitting room of her suite on the third floor. It was small but pretty, and smelt of La France roses, though none were visible, nor were there any other flowers there. Robert and I looked at each other as this perfume rushed to meet us. La France roses were June's favourites, and belonged to the month of her birth. Robert had sent them to her often, especially when they were out of season and difficult to get.

"*She* is here, waiting for us!" exclaimed Miss Reardon. "Oh, *surely* you must see her—on the sofa, with her feet crossed—such pretty diamond buckles on her shoes!—and her lap full of roses. She holds up one rose, she kisses it, to you—Robert—Robert—some name that begins with L. I can't hear it clearly. But Robert is enough."

Yes, Robert was enough—more than enough!

Miss Reardon asked in an almost matter-of-fact way if he would like to sit down on the sofa beside June, who wished him to do so. He didn't answer; but he sat down, and his eyes stared at vacancy. I knew from their expression, however,

that he saw nothing.

"What will be the next thing?" I wondered.

I had not long to wait to find out!

"*She* asks me to take your hand and hers. Then she will talk to you through me," Miss Reardon explained. As she spoke, she drew up a small chair in front of the sofa, leaned forward, took Robert's right hand in hers, and held out the left, as if grasping another hand—a hand unseen.

As the medium did this, with thin elbows resting on thin knees, she closed her eyes. A look of *blankness* came over her face like a mist. I can't describe it in any other way. Presently her chin dropped slightly. She seemed to sleep.

Neither Robert nor I had uttered a word since we entered the room. We waited tensely.

Just what I expected to happen I hardly know, for I had no experience of "manifestations" or séances. But what did happen surprised me so that I started, and just contrived to suppress a gasp.

A voice. It did not sound like Miss Reardon's voice, with its rather pleasant American accent. It was a creamy English voice, young and full-noted. "*June!*" I whispered under my breath, where I sat across the length of the room from the sofa. I glanced at Robert. There was surprise on his face, and some other emotion deep as his heart. But it was not joy.

"Dearest, have you forgotten me so soon?" the voice asked. "Speak to me! It's I, your June."

It was a wrench for Robert to speak, I know. There was the pull of self-consciousness in the opposite direction—distaste for conversation with the Invisible while alien eyes watched, alien ears listened. And then, to reply as if to June, was virtually to admit that he believed in her presence, that all doubt of the medium was erased from his mind. But after a second's pause he obeyed the command.

"No," he said, "I've not forgotten and I never can forget."

"Yet you are engaged to marry this Joyce Arnold!" mourned the voice that was like June's.

I almost jumped out of my chair at the sound of Joyce's name. It was another proof that the medium was genuine.

Robert's tone as he answered was more convinced than before I thought. And the youth had died out of his eyes. They looked old.

"Do you want me to live all my life alone, now that I've lost you, June?" he asked.

"Darling, you are not alone!" answered the voice. "I'm always with you. I love you so much that I've chosen to stay near you, and be earth bound, rather than lead my own life on the plane where I might be. I thought you would want me here. I thought that some day, if I tried long enough, you would feel my touch, you would see my face. After a while I hoped I was succeeding. I looked at you from the eyes of my portrait in your study. Now and then it seemed as if you *knew*. But then that girl interfered. Oh, Robert, in giving up my progression from plane to plane till you could join me, has the sacrifice been all in vain?"

The voice wrung my heart. It shook as with a gust of fears. Its pleading sent little stabs of ice through my veins. So what must Robert have felt?

"No, no! The sacrifice isn't in vain!" he cried. "I didn't know, I didn't understand that those on the other side came back to us, and cared for us in the same way they cared on earth. I am yours now and always, June, of course. Order my life as you will."

"Ah, my dear one, I thank you!" The voice rose high in happiness. "I felt you wouldn't fail me if I could only *reach* you, and at last my prayer is answered. Nothing can separate us now through eternity if you love me. You won't marry that girl?"

"Not if it is against your wish, June. It must be that you see things more clearly, where you are, than I can see them. If you tell me to break my word to Joyce Arnold, I must—I will do so."

"I tell you this, my dearest," said the voice. "If you do *not* break with her, you and I are lost to each other for ever. When I chose to be earth bound I staked everything on my belief in your love. Without it in *full*, I shall drift—drift, through the years, through ages, I know not how long, in expiation. Besides, I am not *dead*, I am more alive than I was in what you call life. You are my husband, beloved, as much as you ever were. Think what I suffer seeing another

woman in your arms! My capacity for suffering is increased a thousandfold—as is my capacity for joy. If you make her your wife——"

"I will not!" Robert choked. "I promise you that. Never shall you suffer through me if I can help it."

"Darling!" breathed the voice. "My husband! How happy you make me. This is our true *marriage*—the marriage of spirits. Oh, do not let the barrier rise between us again. Put Joyce Arnold out of your heart as well as your life, and talk to me every day in future. Will you do that?"

"How can I to talk to you every day?" he asked.

"As we are talking now. Through a medium. This one will not always be near you. But there will be somebody. I've often tried to get word through to you. I never could, because you wouldn't *believe*. Now you believe, and we need not be parted again. You know the way to *open the door*. It is never shut. It stands ajar. Remember!"

"I will remember," Robert echoed. And his voice was sad as the sound of the sea on a lonely shore at night. There was no warm happiness for him in the opening of a door between two worlds. The loss of Joyce was more to him than the gain of this spirit-wife who claimed him from far off as all her own. It seemed to me that a released soul should have read the truth in his unveiled heart. But perhaps it did read—and did not care.

The voice was talking on.

"I am repaid for everything now," it said. "My sacrifice is no sacrifice. For to-day I must say good-bye. Power is leaving me. I have felt too much. I must rest, and regain vitality—for to-morrow. *To-morrow*, Robert, my Robert! By that time we can talk with no restraint, for you will have parted with Joyce Arnold. After to-day you will never see her again?"

"No. After to-day I will never see her again, voluntarily, as that is your wish."

"Good! What time to-morrow will you talk with me?"

"At any time you name."

"At this same hour, then, in this same room."

"So be it. If the medium consents."

"I shall make her consent. And you and I will agree upon someone else to bring us together, when she must go elsewhere, as I can see through her mind that she soon must. Good-bye, dearest husband, for twenty-four long hours. Yet it isn't really good-bye, for I am seldom far from you. Now that you *know*, you will feel me near. I——"

The voice seemed to fade. The last words were a faint whisper. The new sentence died as it began. The medium's eyelids quivered. Her flat breast rose and fell. The "influence" was gone!

CHAPTER V

THE BARGAIN

That night was one of the worst in my life. I was so fond of Robert Lorillard, and I'd grown to love Joyce Arnold so well that the breaking of their love idyll hurt as if it had been my own.

Never shall I forget the hour when we three talked together at my flat after that séance at the Savoy, or the look on those two faces as Robert and Joyce agreed to part! Even I had acquiesced at first in that decision—but only while I was still half stunned by the shock of the great surprise, and thrilled by the seeming miracle. At sight of the two I loved quietly giving each other up, making sacrifice of their hearts on a cold altar, I had a revulsion of feeling.

I jumped up, and broke out desperately.

"I don't believe it's true! Something *tells* me it isn't! Don't spoil your lives without making sure."

"How can we be surer than we are?" Robert asked. "You recognized June's voice."

"I *thought* then that I did," I amended. "I was excited. Now, I don't trust my own impression."

"But the perfume of La France roses? Even if the woman could have found out other things, how should she know about a small detail like June's favourite flower? How could she have the perfume already in her room when we came—as if she were sure of our coming there—which of course she couldn't have been," Robert argued.

"I don't *see* how she could have been sure," I had to grant him. "I don't see through any of it. But they're so deadly clever, these people—the fraudulent ones, I mean. They couldn't impress the public as they do if they weren't up to every trick. All I say is, *wait*. Don't decide irrevocably yet. The way the voice talked didn't seem to me a bit like June. Only the tones were like hers; and they might have been imitated by anybody who'd known her, or who'd been coached

by someone."

"Dear Princess, you're so anxious for our happiness that I fear you're thinking of impossible things. Who could have an object in parting Joyce and me? I can think of no one. Still less could this stranger from America have a motive, even if she lied, and really knew who I was before she spoke to us at the Savoy."

"I admit it does sound just as impossible as you say!" I agreed, forlornly. "But things that *sound* impossible may be possible. And we must find out. In justice to Joyce and yourself—even in justice to June's spirit, which I *can't* think would be so selfish—we must find out!"

"What would you suggest?" Joyce asked rather timidly. But there was a faint colour in her cheeks, like a spark in the ashes of hope.

"Detectives!" I said. "Or rather *a* detective. I know a good man. He served me very well once, when some of our family treasures disappeared from Courtenaye Abbey, and it rather looked as if I'd stolen them myself. He can learn without any shadow of doubt when Miss Reardon did land, and when she came to London. Besides, he's sure to have colleagues on the other side who can give him all sorts of details about the woman: how she's thought of at home, whether she's ever been caught out as a cheat, and so on. Will you both consent to that? Because if you will, I'll 'phone to my man this moment."

They did consent. At least, Robert did, for Joyce left the decision entirely to him. She was so afraid, poor girl, of seeming determined to *hold* him at any price, that she would hardly speak. As for Robert, though he felt that I was justified in getting to the bottom of things, I saw that he believed in the truth of the message he'd received. If it were not the spirit of June who had come to command his allegiance, he still had a right to his warm earthly happiness with Joyce Arnold. But if it were indeed her spirit who claimed all he had to give for the rest of life, it was a fair debt, and he would pay in full.

I received the detective (my old friend Smith) alone, in another room, when he came. The necessary discussion would have been torture for Robert and intolerable for Joyce. When Smith left I had at least this encouragement to give the two: it would be simple to learn what I wished to learn about Miss Reardon, on both sides of the Atlantic.

That was better than nothing. But it didn't make the dark watches of the night less dark. I had an ugly presentiment that Smith, smart as he was, would get hold

of little to help us, if anything. Yet at the same time I felt that there *was* something to get hold of—somewhere!

If I hadn't implored them to wait, Joyce and Robert would have decided to publish the news that their marriage (which somehow everyone knew about!) would "not take place." This concession they did make to me; but they agreed together that they mustn't meet. My cheerful flat felt like a large grave fitted with all modern conveniences, when it had been deprived of Robert. And Joyce trying to be normal and not to shed gloom over me, her employer, was *too* agonizing!

Robert didn't even write to Joyce. I suppose he couldn't trust himself. But he wrote to me, and gave the history of his second interview with Miss Reardon. June had come again, and had reminded him of incidents about which, he said, "no outsider could possibly know."

"I can't help believing now that there are more things in heaven and earth than I'd dreamed of in my philosophy," he ended his letter. "There's no getting round the fact that what I should have thought a miracle has happened. The spirit of June has claimed me from the 'other side.' And even if I were brutal enough, disloyal enough, to disown the claim, to pretend to Joyce and myself that I *didn't* believe, neither Joyce nor I could have a moment's happiness, married. She knows that as well as I do. As my wife her life would be spoiled. June would always stand between us, separating us one from the other. I think I should be driven mad. Joyce's heart would be broken!

"I've promised to talk with June through a medium every day. Miss Reardon has to leave London in a fortnight, but June's voice asked me to go to Opal Fawcett. You remember my telling you that Opal suggested this long ago, saying that June wanted to get in touch with me? I wouldn't hear of it then, because at that time I had no reason to believe in the genuineness of visits from one world to another. Now it's different. I shall go to Opal.

"Tell Joyce that I'll write her to-night. It won't be a letter such as I should wish to write. But she will understand."

Yes, she would understand! One could always trust Joyce to understand, even if she were on the rack!

It was the next day—the third day after the unforgettable one at the Savoy—when my tame detective brought his budget. He would have come even sooner, he said, if there hadn't been a delay in the cable service.

Miss Reardon, Smith learned, had never been exposed as an impostor. She was respected personally, and had attained a certain amount of fame both in Boston (where she lived) and New York. She had been several times invited to visit England, but had never been able to accept until now. She had arrived by the ship and at the time stated. When we met her at the Savoy, she could not have been more than two hours in London. Therefore her story seemed to be true in every detail, and what was more, she had not been met at ship or train by any one.

I simply *hated* poor dear little Smith. He ought to have nosed out *something* against the woman! What are detectives *for*?

"You've been an angel to fight for my happiness," Joyce said. "I adore you for it. And so does Robert, I know—though he mustn't put such feelings into words, or even *have* feelings if he can help it. There's nothing more to fight about now. The best thing I can pray for is that Robert may forget our—dream, and that he may be happy in this other dream—of June."

"And you?" I asked. "What prayer do you say for yourself? Do *you* pray to forget?"

"Oh, no!" she answered. "I don't want to forget. I wouldn't forget, if I could. You see, it wasn't a dream to me. It was—it always will be—the best thing in my life—the glory of my life. In my heart I shall live it all over and over again till I die. I don't mind suffering. I've seen so much pain in the war, and the courage that went with it. I shall have my roses—not La France; deep red roses they'll be, red as blood, and sharp with thorns, but sweet as heaven. There!" and her voice changed. "Now you know, Princess! We'll never speak of this again, because we don't need to, do we?"

"No—o," I agreed. "You're a grand girl, Joyce, worth two of——But never mind! And I'll try to make you as happy as I can."

She thanked me for that; she was always thanking me for something. Soon, however, she broke the news that she must go away. She loved me and her work, yet she couldn't stop in London; she just couldn't. Not as things were. If Robert had been turning his back on England she might have stayed. But his promise to communicate with June daily through Opal bound him to London. Joyce thought that she might try India. She had friends there in the Army and in the Civil Service. She might do useful work as a nurse among the purdah women and their babies, where mortality was very high, she'd heard. "I *must* be busy—busy every

minute of the day," she cried, hiding her anguish with that smile of hers which I'd learned to love.

What Robert had said to her in his promised letter, the only one he wrote, she didn't tell. I knew no more than that it had been written and received. Probably it wasn't an ideal letter for a girl to wear over her heart, hidden under her dress. Robert would have felt it unfair to write that kind of letter. All the same I'm sure that Joyce *did* wear it there!

As for me, I was absolutely *sick* about everything. I felt as if my two dearest friends had been put in prison on a false charge, and as though—if I hadn't cotton wool for a brain—I ought to be able to get them out.

"There's a clue to the labyrinth if I could see it," I told myself so often that I was tired of the thought. And the most irritating part was that now and then I seemed to catch a half glimpse of the clue dangling back and forth like a thread of spider's web close to my eyes. But invariably it was gone before I'd *really* caught sight of it. And all the good that *concentrating* did was to bump my intelligence against the pale image of Opal Fawcett.

I didn't understand how Opal, even with the best—or worst—will in the world, could have stage-managed this drama, though I should have liked to think she had done it.

Miss Reardon frankly admitted having heard of Opal (who hadn't heard of her), among those interested in spiritism, during the last few years; but as the American woman had never before been in England, and Opal had never crossed to America, the Boston medium hardly needed to say that she'd never met Miss Fawcett. As for correspondence, if there *were* a secret between the pair, of course they'd both deny it. And so, though I longed to fling a challenge to Opal, I saw that it would be stupid to put the two women, if guilty, on their guard. Besides, how *could* they, through any correspondence, have contrived the things that had happened?

Suddenly, through the darkness of my doubts, shot a lightning flash: the thought of Jim Courtenaye.

Superficially judging, Sir James Courtenaye, wild man of the West, but lately transplanted, appeared the last person to assist in working out a psychic problem. All the same a great longing to prop myself against him (figuratively!) overwhelmed me; and for fear the impulse might pass, I wired at once:

Please come if you can. Wish to consult you.

ELIZABETH DI MIRAMARE.

Jim was, as usual, hovering between Courtenaye Coombe and Courtenaye Abbey. There were hours between us, even by telegraph, and the best I expected was an answer in the afternoon to my morning's message. But at six o'clock his name was announced, and he walked into the drawing room of my flat as large as life, or a size or two larger.

"Good gracious!" I gasped. "You've *come*?"

"You're not surprised, are you?" he retorted.

"Why, yes," I said. "I didn't suppose——"

"Then you're not so brainy as I thought you were," said he. "Also you didn't look at time-tables. What awful catastrophe has happened to you, Elizabeth, to make you want to see me?"

I couldn't help laughing, although I didn't feel in the least like laughter; and besides, he had no right to call me Elizabeth.

"Nothing has happened to *me*," I explained. "It's to somebody else——"

"Oh, somebody you've been trying to 'brighten,' I suppose?"

"Yes, and failed," I confessed.

He scowled.

"A man?"

"A man and his girl." Whereupon I emptied the whole story into the bowl of Jim's intelligence.

"Do you see light?" I asked at last.

"No," he returned, stolidly. "I don't."

Oh, how disappointed I was! I'd hardly known how much I'd counted on Jim till I got that answer.

"But I might find some," he added, when he'd watched the effect of his words on

me.

"How?" I implored.

"There's only one way, if any, to get the kind of light you want," said Jim. "It might be a difficult way, and it might be a long one."

"Yet you think light *could* be got? The kind of light I want?" I clasped my hands and deliberately tried to look irresistible.

"Who can tell? The one thing certain is, that trying would take all my time away from everything else, maybe for weeks, maybe for months."

His tone made my face feel the way faces look in those awful concave mirrors: about three feet in length and three inches in width.

"Then you won't undertake the task?" I quavered.

"I don't say that," grudged Jim.

"You *wouldn't* say it if you could meet Joyce Arnold," I coaxed. "She's such a darling girl. Poor child, she's out now, pulling strings for a job in India."

"Meeting her wouldn't make any difference to me," said Jim. "It's for you I'd try to bring off this stunt—if I tried at all."

"Oh, then do it for me," I broke out.

"That's what I was working up to," he replied. "I wouldn't say 'yes' and I wouldn't say 'no' till I knew what you'd do for me in return if I succeeded."

"Why, I'd thank you a thousand times!" I cried. "I'd—I'd never forget you as long as I live."

"There's not much in that for me. I hate being thanked for things. And what good would it do me to be remembered by you at a distance, perhaps married to some beast or other?"

"But if I marry I sha'n't marry a beast," I sweetly assured my forty-fourth cousin four times removed.

"I should think any man you married a beast, if he wasn't me," said Jim.

"Good heavens!" I breathed. "Surely *you* don't want to marry me!"

"Surely I do," he retorted. "And what's more, you know it jolly well."

"I don't."

"You do. You've known it ever since that affair of the yacht. If you hadn't, you wouldn't have asked me to hide the Scarlett kid. I knew then that you knew. And you'd be a fool if you hadn't known—which you're not."

I said no more, because—I was found out! I *had* known. Only, I hadn't let myself think about it much—until lately perhaps. But now and then I *had* thought. I'd thought quite a good deal.

When he had me silenced, Jim went on:

"Just like a woman! You're willing to let me sacrifice all my engagements and inclinations to start off on a wild-goose chase for you, while you give nothing in return——"

"But I would!" I cut in.

"What would you give?"

"What do you want?"

"Yourself, of course."

"Oh!"

"If you'll marry me in case I find out that someone's been playing a devil's trick on Lorillard," said Jim, "I'll do—my damnedest! How's that?"

I shrugged my shoulders, and looked debonair; which was easy, as my nose is that shape. Yet my heart pounded.

"You seem to think the sacrifice of your engagements and inclinations worth a big price!"

"I know it's a big price," he granted. "But every man has his price. That happens to be mine. You may not have to pay, however, even in the event of my success. Because, in the course of my operations I may do something that'll land me in quod. In that case, you're free. I wouldn't mate you with a gaol bird."

I stared, and gasped.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know me intimately enough to be sure that once I'm on the warpath I stop at nothing?" he challenged.

"I don't think you'd be easy to stop," I said. "That's why I've called on you to help me. But really, I can't understand what there is in the thing to send you to prison."

"You don't need to understand," snorted Jim. "I sha'n't get there if I can keep out, because that would be the way to lose my prize. But I suppose from your point of view the great thing is for your two dearest friends to be happy ever after."

"Not at a terrible cost to you," I just stopped myself from saying. Instead, I hedged: "You frighten me!" I cried. "And you make me curious—*fearfully* curious. What *can* you be meaning to do?"

"That's my business!" said Jim.

"You've got a plan—already?"

"Yes, I've got a plan—already, if——"

"If what?"

"If you agree to the bargain. Do you?"

I nodded.

He seized my hand and squeezed it hard.

"Then I'm off," he said. "You won't hear from me till I have news, good or bad. And meanwhile I have no address."

With that he was gone.

I felt as if he had left me alone in the dark.

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST SÉANCE

The only way in which I could keep Joyce with me for a little while longer was by pretending to be ill. *That* fetched her. And it wasn't all pretense, either, because I was horribly worried, not only about her and Robert, but about Jim. And about myself.

I said not a word to Joyce of Jim and his mission. So far as she knew I'd abandoned hope—as she had. We heard nothing from Robert, or concerning him, and each day that built itself up was a gloomier *cul de sac* than the last.

Bye and bye there came the end of Miss Reardon's fortnight in London. "Now Robert will be turned over to Opal," I groaned to myself. And I was sure that the same thought was in the mind of Joyce. Just one or two days more, and after that a long monotony of bondage for him, year in and year out!

As I waked in the morning with these words on my lips, Joyce herself knocked, playing nurse, with a tray of coffee and toast.

"I would have let you sleep on," she said, "but a note has come by messenger for you, with 'Urgent' on the envelope in such a nice handwriting I felt you'd want to have it. So I brought your breakfast at the same time."

The nice handwriting was Jim's. He had vowed not to write till there was "news, good or bad." My fingers trembled as I tore open the letter. I read:

> Make Lorillard invite you and Miss Arnold *and your fiancé* to a séance before Miss Reardon goes. It will have to be to-day or to-morrow. Don't take "no" for an answer. Manage it somehow. If you insist, Lorillard will force Reardon to consent. When the stunt's fixed up, let me hear at once.
>
> Yours, JIM.
>
> L—— is at his flat. You know the address.

By Jove! This was a facer! Could I bring the thing off? But I simply *must*. I

knew Jim well enough to be sure that the clock of fate had been wound up by him, ready to strike, and that it wouldn't strike if I didn't obey orders.

I pondered for a minute whether or no to tell Joyce, but quickly decided *no*. The request must first come from Robert.

I braced myself with hot coffee, and thought hard. Then I asked Joyce for writing materials, and scribbled a note to Robert. I wrote:

> There is a reason why you *must* get us invited by Miss Reardon to the last séance she gives before leaving. When I say "us," I mean *Joyce* as well as myself, and the man I've just promised to marry. I know this will seem shocking to you, perhaps impossible, as you agreed not to see Joyce again, "*voluntarily*." But oh, Robert, trust me, and *make* it possible for the sake of a brave girl who once saved your life at the risk of her own. Seeing her this time won't count as "voluntary" on your part. It is necessary.

When the note was ready I said to Joyce that I'd just had news of Robert Lorillard from a great friend of mine who was much interested in his welfare. This news necessitated my writing Robert, and as I was still in bed I must request her to send the letter by hand.

"Go out to the nearest post office yourself, and have a messenger take it," I directed.

While she was gone I got up, bathed, and put on street dress for the first time since I'd been "playing 'possum."

I felt much better, I explained when Joyce came back, and added that, later in the day, I might even be inclined "for a walk or something."

"If you're so well as that, you'll be ready to let me go to India soon, won't you, dear?" she hinted. No doubt my few words about Robert, and the sight of his name on a letter, had made the poor girl desperate under her calm, controlled manner.

I was desperate, too, knowing that her whole future depended on the success of Jim's plan. If it failed, I should have to let her go, and all would be over!

"You must do what's best for you," I answered. "But don't talk about it now. Wait till to-morrow."

Joyce was dumb.

Hours passed, and no reply from Robert. I began to fear he'd gone away—or that he was hideously offended. We'd got through a pretence of luncheon, when at last a messenger came. Thank heaven, Robert's handwriting was on the envelope!

He wrote:

> I don't understand your wish, dear Princess. It seems like deliberate torture of Joyce and me that she should be present when I am visited by the spirit of June—for that is what actually happens. June materializes. I see her, as well as hear her voice. Can Joyce bear this? You seem to think she can, and so I must. For you are a friend of friends, and you wouldn't put me to such a test without the best of reasons.
>
> I expected that Miss Reardon would refuse to receive strangers on such an occasion. But rather to my surprise she has consented, and a séance is arranged for this evening at nine o'clock in her rooms. To-morrow would have been too late, as she is leaving for the south of France, to stay with some American millionairess at Cannes, who hopes to get into touch with a son on the Other Side. You see, I don't use that old, cold word "dead." I couldn't now I know how near, and how like their earthly selves, are those who go beyond.
>
> So you are engaged to be married! Don't think I'm indifferent because I leave mention of your news till the last. I'm deeply interested. Bless you, Princess!
>
> Yours ever, R. L.

I read this letter, destroying it (in case Joyce became importunate), and then broke it to her that Robert earnestly wished us to attend the last séance with Miss Reardon.

She turned sickly white.

"I can't go!" she almost sobbed. "I simply can't."

Then I said that it would hurt Robert horribly if she didn't. He wouldn't have asked such a thing without the strongest motive. I would be with her, I went on; and tried to pull her thoughts up out of tragic gulfs by springing the news of my

engagement upon her. It may have sounded irrelevant, almost heartlessly so, but it braced the girl. And she little guessed that the engagement would not exist save for Robert and her!

I 'phoned Jim at the address on his letter, a house in Westminster which—when I happened to notice—was in the same street as Opal Fawcett's. It was a relief to hear his voice answer "Hello!" for he had demanded immediate knowledge of our plans; and goodness knew what mysterious preparations for his *coup* he might have to elaborate.

He would meet us at the Savoy, he said, at 8:45, and I could introduce him to Miss Reardon before the séance began.

Joyce and I started at 8:30, in a taxi, having made a mere stage pretence of dinner. We hardly spoke on the way, but I held her hand, and pressed it now and then.

Jim was waiting for us just inside the revolving doors of the hotel.

"I'd have liked to come for you in a car," he said aside to me, "but I thought it would be hard on Miss Arnold—and maybe on you—to have more of my society than need be, you know!"

"Why on me?" I hastily inquired.

His black eyes blazed into mine.

"Well, I've sort of blackmailed you, haven't I?"

"Have you?"

"Into this engagement of ours."

"Oh, I haven't got time to think of that just now!" I snapped. "Let's go to Miss Reardon's rooms."

We went. Jim said no more, except to mention that Captain Lorillard had already gone up.

Joyce may have imagined Jim to be the "great friend interested in Robert's welfare," but as for me, I wondered how he knew Robert by sight. Then I scolded myself: "Silly one! Hasn't he been watching—playing detective for you?"

It was poignant, remembering the last time when Robert, Joyce, and I had met in Miss Reardon's sitting room—the last day of their happiness. But we greeted each other quietly, like old friends, though Joyce's heart must have contracted at sight of the man's changed face. All the renewed youth and joyous manhood her love had given him had burned out of his eyes. He looked as he'd looked when I saw him that day at River Orchard Cottage.

Miss Reardon was slightly nervous in manner, and flushed like a girl when I introduced Sir James Courtenaye to her. But soon she recovered her prim little poise, and began making arrangements for the séance.

"Mr. Lorillard has already tested my *bona fides* to his own satisfaction," she said. "He has examined my small suite, and knows that no person, no theatrical 'properties' are concealed about the place. If any of you would like to look around, however, before we start, I'm more than willing. Also if you'd care to bind my hands and feet, or sit in a circle and hold me fast, I've no objection."

As she made this offer, she glanced from one to the other of us. Pale, silent Joyce shook her head. Jim "left it to Princess di Miramare," and I decided that if Captain Lorillard was satisfied, we were.

"Very well," purred Miss Reardon. "In that case there's nothing more to wait for. Captain Lorillard, will you switch off the lights as usual?"

"Oh!" I broke in, surprised, "I thought you'd told us that the 'influence' was just as strong in light as darkness?"

"That is so," replied the medium, "except for materialization. For that, darkness is essential. There's some *quality* in darkness that They need. They can't get the *strength* to materialize in light conditions."

"How can we see anything if the room's pitch-black?" I persisted.

"Explain to your friends, Captain Lorillard, what takes place," bade Miss Reardon.

"When—June comes—she brings a faint radiance with her—seems to evolve it out of herself," Robert said in a low voice.

As he spoke he switched off the light, and profound silence fell upon us.

Some moments passed, and nothing happened.

Joyce and I sat with locked cold hands. I was on the right of the medium, and from my chair quite close to hers could easily have reached out and touched her, if I'd wished. On her left, at about the same distance, sat Robert. Jim was the only one who stood. He had refused a chair, and propped his long length against the wall between two doors: the door opening into the hall outside the suite, and that leading to Miss Reardon's bedroom and bath.

We could faintly hear each other breathe. Then, after five or six minutes, perhaps, I heard odd, gasping sounds as if someone struggled for breath. These gasps were punctuated with moans, and I should have been frightened if the direction and nearness of the queer noise hadn't told me at once that it came from the medium. I'd never before been to a materializing séance, yet I felt instinctively that this was the convulsive sort of thing to expect.

Suddenly a dim light—oh, hardly a light!—a pale greenish glimmer, as if there were a glowworm in the room—became faintly visible. It seemed to swim in a delicate gauzy mist. Its height above the floor (this was the thought flashing into my mind) was about that of a tall woman's heart. A perfume of La France roses filled the room.

At first our eyes, accustomed to darkness, could distinguish nothing except this glowworm light and the surrounding haze of lacy gray. Then, gradually, we became conscious of a figure—a slender shape in floating draperies. More and more distinct it grew, as slowly it moved toward us—toward Robert Lorillard; and my throat contracted as I made out the semblance of June Dana.

The form was clad in the gray dress which Miss Reardon had so surprisingly described when we met her first—the dress June had worn the day of her engagement—the dress of the portrait at River Orchard Cottage. The gray hat with the long curling plume shaded the face, and so obscured it that I should hardly have recognized it as June's had it not been for the thick wheel of bright, red-brown hair on each side bunching out under the hat exactly as June had worn her hair that year. A long, thin scarf filmed like a cloud round the slowly moving figure, looped over the arms, which waved gracefully as if the spirit-form swam in air rather than walked. There was an illusive glitter of rings—just such rings as June had worn: one emerald, one diamond. A dark streak across the ice-white throat showed her famous black pearls; and—strangest thing of all—the green light which glimmered through filmy folds of scarf was born apparently in a glittering emerald brooch.

At first the vision (which might have come through the wall of the room, for all we could tell) floated toward Robert. None save spirit-eyes could have made him out distinctly in the darkness that was lit only by the small green gleam. But I fancied that he always sat in the same seat for these séances; he had taken his chair in a way so matter of course. Therefore the spirit would know where to find him!

Within a few feet of distance, however, the form paused, and swayed as if undecided. "She has seen that there are others in the room besides Robert and the medium," I thought. "Will she be angry? Will she vanish?"

Hardly had I time to finish the thought, however, when the electricity was switched on with a click. The light flooding the room dazzled me for a second, but in the bright blur I saw that Jim Courtenaye had seized the gray figure. All ghostliness was gone from it. A woman was struggling with him in dreadful silence—a tall, slim woman with June Dana's red-bronze hair, June Dana's gray dress and hat and scarf.

She writhed like a snake in Jim's merciless grasp, but she kept her head bent not to show her face, till suddenly in some way her hat was knocked off. With it—caught by a hatpin, perhaps—went the gorgeous, bunched hair.

"A wig!" I heard myself cry. And at the same instant Joyce gasped out "*Opal!*"

Yes, it was Opal, disguised as June, in the gray dress and hat and scarf, with black pearls and emeralds all copied from the portrait—and the haunting fragrance of roses that had been June's.

The likeness was enough to deceive June's nearest and dearest in that dimmest of dim lights which was like the ghost of a light, veiled with all those chiffon scarves. But with the room bright as day, all resemblance, except in clothes and wig and height, vanished at a glance.

The woman caught in her cruel fraud was a pitiable sight, yet I had no pity for her then. Staring at the whitened face, framed in dishevelled, mouse-brown hair, the long upper lip painted red in a high Cupid's bow to resemble June's lovely mouth, I was sick with disgust. As at last she yielded in despair to Jim's fierce clutch, and dropped sobbing on the sofa, I felt I could have struck her. But she had no thought for me nor for any of us—not even for Jim, who had ruined the game, nor for Miss Reardon, who must have sold her to him at a price; for no one at all except Robert Lorillard.

When she'd given up hope of escape, and lay panting, exhausted, flung feebly across the sofa, she looked up at Robert.

"I loved you," she wept. "That's why I did it; I couldn't let you go to another woman. I thought I saw a way to keep you always near me—almost as if you were mine. You can't *hate* a woman who loves you like that!"

Robert did not answer. I think he was half dazed. He stood staring at her, frozen still like the statue of a man. I was frightened for him. He had endured too much. Joyce couldn't go to him yet, though he would be hers—all hers, for ever—bye and bye—but *I* could go, as a friend.

I laid my hand on his arm, and spoke his name softly.

"Robert, I always felt there was fraud," I said. "Now, thank Heaven, we know the truth before it's too late for you to be happy, as June herself would want you to be happy, if she knew. She wasn't cruel—the *real* June. She wasn't like this false one at heart. Go, now, I beg, and take Joyce home to my flat—she's almost fainting. You must look after her. I will stay here. Jim Courtenaye'll watch over me—and later we'll bring you explanations of everything."

So I got them both away. And when they were gone the whole story was dragged from Opal. Jim forced her to confess; and with Robert out of sight—lost for ever to the wretched woman—the task wasn't difficult. You see, Miss Reardon *had* sold her beforehand. Jim doesn't care what price he pays when he wants a thing!

First of all, he'd taken a house that was to let furnished, near Opal's. She didn't know him from Adam, but he had her description. He followed her several times, and saw her go to the Savoy; even saw her go to Miss Reardon's rooms. Then, to Miss Reardon he presented himself, *en surprise*, and pretended to know five times as much as he did know; in fact, as much as he suspected. By this trick he broke down her guard; and before she had time to build it up again, flung a bribe of two thousand pounds—ten thousand dollars—at her head. She couldn't resist, and eventually told him everything.

Opal and she had corresponded for several years, it seemed, as fellow mediums, sending each other clients from one country to another. When Opal learned that the Boston medium was coming to England, she asked if Miss Reardon would do her a great favour. In return for it, the American woman's cabin on shipboard and all expenses at one of London's best hotels would be paid.

This sounded alluring. Miss Reardon asked questions by letter, and by letter those questions were answered. A plan was formed—a plan that was a *plot*. Opal kept phonographic records of many voices among those of her favourite clients—did this with their knowledge and consent, making presents to them of their own records to give to friends. It was just an "interesting fad" of hers! Such a record of June's voice she had posted to Boston. Miss Reardon, who was a clever mimic (a fine professional asset!) learned to imitate the voice. She had a description from Opal of the celebrated gray costume with the jewels June wore, and knew well how to "work" her knowledge of June's favourite perfume.

As to that first meeting at the Savoy, Opal was aware that Joyce and I met Robert there on most afternoons. A suite was taken for Miss Reardon in the hotel, and the lady was directed to await developments in the *foyer* at a certain hour—an old stage photograph of Robert Lorillard in her hand-bag. The rest had been almost simple, thanks to Opal's knowledge of June's life and doings; to her deadly cleverness, and the device of a tiny electric light glimmering through a square of emerald green glass on the "spirit's" breast, under scarves slowly unfolded. If it had not been for Jim, Robert would have become her bond-slave, and Joyce would have fled from England.

"Well, are you satisfied?" Jim asked, spinning me home at last in his own car.

"More than satisfied," I said. "Joyce and Robert will marry after all, and be the happiest couple on earth. They'll forget this horror."

"Which is what you'd like to do if I'd let you, I suppose," said Jim.

"Forget! You mean——?"

"Yes. The promise I dragged out of you, and everything."

"I never forget my promises," I primly answered.

"But if I let you off it? Elizabeth, that's what I'm going to do! I love you too much, my girl, to blackmail you permanently—to get you for my wife in payment of a bargain. I may be pretty bad, but I'm hanged if I'm as bad as that."

I burst out laughing.

"*Idiot!*" I gurgled. "Haven't you the wits to see I *want* to marry you? I'm in love with you, you fool. Besides, I'm tired of being matron of honour, and you being best man every time people I 'brighten' marry!"

"It sha'n't happen again!" said Jim.

And then he almost took my breath away. *What* a strong man he is!

BOOK IV

THE MYSTERY OF MRS. BRANDRETH

CHAPTER I

THE MAN IN THE CUSHIONED CHAIR

"Nice end of a honeymoon I'm having!" Jim grumbled. "With my wife thinking and talking all the time about another fellow."

"My darling, adored man!" I exclaimed. "You know perfectly well that you're the background and undercurrent and foundation of all my thoughts, every minute of the day and night. And this 'other fellow' is *dying*."

Yes; "darling, adored" were my adjectives for Jim Courtenaye, whom I had once abused.

All the same, if a cat may look at a king, a bride may just glance at a man who isn't her bridegroom.

"Ruling passion strong in—marriage, I suppose," said Jim. "I bet you'd like to try your hand at 'brightening' that chap—though judging from his face, he's almost past even your blandishments. *I* wouldn't be past 'em—not in my *coffin*! But it isn't every blighter who can love as I do, you minx."

"And 'tisn't every blighter who has such a perfect woman to love," I capped him with calm conceit.

"But I wish I *could* 'brighten' that poor fellow. Or else I wish that someone else would!"

And at this instant my wish was granted in the most amazing way!

A girl appeared—but no, I mustn't let her arrive upon the scene just yet. First, I must explain that Jim and I were on shipboard, coming back to England from America, where we had been having the most wonderful honeymoon. Jim had taken me out West, and showed me the places where he had lived in his cowboy days. We had ridden long trails together, in the Grand Canyon of Arizona, and in the Yosemite Valley of California. I had never imagined that life could be so glorious, and our future together—Jim's and mine—stretched before us like a dream of joy. We were going to live in the dear old Abbey which had been the home of the Courtenayes for hundreds and hundreds of years, and travel when

we liked. Because we were so much in love and so happy, I yearned to make a few thousand other people happy also—though it did seem impossible that any one on earth could be as joyous as we were.

This was our second day out from New York on the *Aquitania*, and my spirits had been slightly damped by discovering that two fellow-passengers if not more were extremely miserable. One of these lived in a stateroom next to our suite. In my cabin at night I could hear her crying and moaning to herself in a fitful sleep. I had not seen her, so far as I knew, but I fancied from the sound of those sobs that she was young.

When I told Jim, he wanted to change cabins with me, so that I should not be disturbed. But I refused to budge, saying that I *wasn't* disturbed. My neighbour didn't cry or talk in her sleep all through the night by any means. Besides, once I had dropped off, the sounds were not loud enough to wake me. This was true enough not to be a fib, but my *realest* reason for clinging to the room was an odd fascination in that mysterious sorrow on the other side of the wall; sorrow of a woman I hadn't seen, might perhaps never see, yet to whom I could send out warm waves of sympathy. I felt as if those waves had colours, blue and gold, and that they would soothe the sufferer.

Her case obsessed me until, in the sunshine of a second summer day at sea, the one empty chair on our crowded deck was filled. A man was helped into it by a valet or male nurse, and a steward. My first glimpse of his face as he sank down on to carefully placed cushions made my heart jump in my breast with pity and protest against the hardness of fate.

If he'd been old, or even middle-aged, or if he had been one of those colourless characters dully sunk into chronic invalidism, I should have felt only the pity without the protest. But he was young, and though it was clear that he was desperately ill, it was clear, too, in a more subtle, psychic way, that he had not been ill long; that love of life or desire for denied happiness burned in him still.

Of course Jim was not really vexed because I discussed this man and wondered about him, but my thoughts did play round that piteously romantic figure a good deal, and it rather amused Jim to see me forget the mystery of the cabin in favour of the cushioned chair.

"Once a Brightener, always a Brightener, I suppose!" he said. Now that I'd dropped my "Princesshood" to marry James Courtenaye, I need never "brighten" any one for money again. But I didn't see why I should not go sailing along on a

sunny career of brightening for love. According to habit, therefore, my first thought was: What *could* be done for the man in the cushioned chair?

Maybe Jim was right! If he hadn't been young and almost better than good-looking, my interest might not have been so keen. He was the wreck of a gorgeous creature—one of those great, tall, muscular men you feel were born to adorn the Guards.

The reason (the physical reason, not the psychic one) for thinking he hadn't been ill long was the colour of the invalid's face. The pallor of illness hadn't had time to blanch the rich brown that life in the open gives. So thin was the face that the aquiline features stood out sharply; but they seemed to be carved in bronze, not moulded in plaster. As for the psychic reason, I found it in the dark eyes that met mine now and then. They were not black like those of my own Jim, which contrasted so strikingly with auburn hair. Indeed, I couldn't tell whether the eyes were brown or deep gray, for they were set in shadowy hollows, and the brows and thick lashes were even darker than the hair, which was lightly silvered at the temples. Handsome, arresting eyes they must always have been; but what stirred me was the violent *wish* that seemed actually to speak from them.

Whether it was a wish to live, or a haunting wish for joy never gratified, I could not decide. But I felt that it must have been burnt out by a long illness.

I had only just learned a few things about the man, when there came that surprising answer to my prayer for someone to "brighten" him. My maid had got acquainted with his valet-nurse, and had received a quantity of information which she passed to me.

"Mr. Tillett's" master was a Major Ralston Murray, an Englishman, who had gone to live in California some years ago, and had made a big fortune in oil. He had been in the British Army as a youth, Tillett understood, and when the European war broke out, he went home to offer himself to his country. He didn't return to America till after the Armistice, though he had been badly wounded once or twice, as well as gassed. At home in Bakersfield, the great oil town where he lived, Murray's health had not improved. He had been recommended a long sea journey, to Japan and China, and had taken the prescription. But instead of doing him good, the trip had been his ruin. In China he was attacked with a malady resembling yellow fever, though more obscure to scientists. After weeks of desperate illness, the man had gained strength for the return journey; but, reaching California, he was told by specialists that he must not hope to recover.

After that verdict his one desire was to spend the last days of his life in England. Not long before a distant relative had left him a place in Devonshire—an old house which he had loved in his youth. Now he was on his way there, to die.

So this was the wonderful wish, I told myself. Yet I couldn't believe it was all. I felt that there must be something deeper to account for the burning look in those tortured eyes. And of course I was more than ever interested, now that his destination proved to be near Courtenaye Abbey. Ralston Old Manor was not nearly so large nor so important a place historically as ours, but it was ancient enough, and very charming. Though we were not more than fifteen miles away, I had never met the old bachelor, the Mr. Ralston of my day. He was a great recluse, supposed to have had his heart broken by my beautiful grandmother when they were both young. It occurred to me that this Ralston Murray must be the old man's namesake, and the place had been left him on that account.

Now, at last, having explained the man in the cushioned chair, I can come back to the moment when my wish was granted: the wish that, if not I, someone else might "brighten" him.

CHAPTER II

MRS. BRANDRETH

You know, when you're on shipboard, how new people appear from day to day, long after you've seen everyone on the passenger list! It is as if they had been dropped on deck from stealthy aeroplanes in the dark watches of the night.

And that was the way in which this girl appeared—this girl who worked the lightning change in Major Murray. It didn't seem possible that she could have come on board the ship nearly two days ago, and we not have heard of her, for she was the prettiest person I'd ever seen in my life. One would have thought that rumours of her beauty would have spread, since *someone* must have seen her, even if she had been shut up in her cabin.

Heads were turned in her direction as she came walking slowly toward us, and thanks to this silent sensation—like a breeze rippling a field of wheat—I saw the tall, slight figure in mourning while it was still far off.

The creature was devastatingly pretty, too pretty for any one's peace of mind, including her own: the kind of girl you wouldn't ask to be your bridesmaid for fear the bridegroom should change his mind at the altar!

"Jim," I exclaimed, "the prettiest girl in the world is now coming toward you."

"Really?" said he. "I was under the impression that she sat beside me."

I suppose I must have spoken rather more loudly than I meant, for my excited warning to Jim caught the ear of Major Murray. My deep interest in the invalid had woven an invisible link between him and me, though we had never spoken, nor even smiled at each other: for sympathy inevitably has this effect. Therefore his hearing was attuned to my voice more readily than to others in his neighbourhood. He had apparently been half asleep; but he opened his eyes wide just in time to see the girl as she approached his chair. Never had I beheld such a sudden change on a human face. It was a transfiguration.

The man was very weak, but he sat straight up, and for a moment all look of illness was swept away. "Rosemary!" he cried out, sharply.

The girl stopped. She had been pale, but at sight of him and the sound of his voice she flushed to her forehead. I thought that her first impulse was to escape, but she controlled it.

"Major Murray!" she faltered. "I—I didn't dream of—seeing you here."

"I have dreamed many times of seeing you," he answered. "And I wished for it—very much."

"Ah," thought I, "*that* is the real wish! *That's* what the look in his eyes means, not just getting back to England and dying in a certain house. Now I *know*."

Everyone near his chair had become more or less interested in Murray, romantic and pathetic figure that he was. Now, a middle-aged man whose chair was near to Murray's on the right, scrambled out of a fur rug. "I am off to the smoking room," he said. "Won't you" (to the girl) "take my chair and talk to your friend? I shall be away till after lunch, maybe till tea-time."

I fancied that the girl was divided in her mind between a longing to stay and a longing to flee. But of course she couldn't refuse the offer, and presently she was seated beside Major Murray, their arms touching. I could hear almost all they said. This was not eavesdropping, because if they'd cared to be secretive they could have lowered their voices.

Soon, to my surprise, I learned that the girl was married. She didn't look married, or have the air of being married, somehow, and in the conversation that followed she contradicted herself two or three times. Perhaps it was only because I confused my brain with wild guesses, but from some things she said one would think she was free as air; from others, that she was tied down to a rather monotonous kind of existence. She spoke of America as if she knew it only from a short visit. Then, in answer to a question of Murray's, she said, as if reluctantly, that she had lived there, in New York, and Baltimore, and Washington, for years.

It was quite evident to me—whether or not it was to Murray—that Mrs. Brandreth (as he called her after the first outburst of "Rosemary!") disliked talking of herself and her way of life. She wanted to talk about Major Murray, or, failing that subject, of almost anything that was remote from her own affairs.

I gathered, however, that she and Murray had known each other eight years ago or more, and that they had met somewhere abroad, out of England. There had been an aunt of Rosemary's with whom she had travelled as a young girl. The

aunt was dead; but even the loss of a loved relative didn't account to my mind for this girl's sensitiveness about the past.

"They must have been engaged, these two, and something happened to break it off," I thought. "But *he* can bear to talk of old times, and she can't. Odd, because she must have been ridiculously young for a love affair all those years ago. She doesn't look more than twenty-one now, though she must be more, of course—at least twenty-four. And he is probably thirty-two or three."

I am often what Jim calls "intuitive," and I had a strong impression that there was something the beautiful Mrs. Brandreth was desperately anxious to conceal, desperately afraid of betraying by accident. Could it have to do with her husband? I wondered. She seemed very loth to speak of him, and I couldn't make out from what she said whether the man was still in existence. Her mourning—so becoming to her magnolia skin, great dark eyes, and ash-blonde hair—didn't look like widow's mourning. Still, it might be, with the first heaviness of crêpe thrown off. Or, of course, the girl's peculiar reticence might mean that there had been, or was to be, a divorce.

I didn't move from my deck-chair till luncheon time, but I had to go then with Jim; and we left Mrs. Brandreth ordering her food from the deck steward. She would have it with Major Murray, who, poor fellow, was allowed no other nourishment than milk.

When we came back on deck it was to walk. We had been below for an hour or more, but the girl and the man were still together. As Jim and I passed and repassed those chairs, I could throw a quick glance in their direction without being observed. Mrs. Brandreth's odd nervousness and shy distress seemed to have gone. The two were talking so earnestly that a school of porpoises might have jumped on deck without their knowing that anything out of the way had happened.

Later in the afternoon, the owner of Mrs. Brandreth's chair appeared; but when she would blushingly have given up her place, he refused to take it. "I've only come to say," he explained, "that one seat on deck is the same to me as any other. So why shouldn't I have *your* chair, wherever it is, and you keep mine? It's very nice for the Major here to have found a friend, and it will do him a lot of good. I'm a doctor, and if I were his physician, such society would be just what I should prescribe for him."

Mrs. Brandreth had a chair, it seemed, though she said she'd come on board so

tired that she had stayed in her cabin till this morning. Whether or not she were pleased at heart with the proposal, she accepted it after a little discussion, and Murray's tragic eyes burned with a new light.

I guessed that his wish had been to see this beautiful girl again before he died. The fact that he was doomed to death no doubt spiritualized his love. He no longer dreamed of being happy in ways which strong men of his age call happiness; and so, in these days, he asked little of Fate. Just a farewell sight of the loved one; a new memory of her to take away with him. And if I were right in my judgment, this was the reason why, even if Mrs. Brandreth had a husband in the background, these hours with her would be hours of joy for Murray—without thought of any future.

That evening, as Jim and I were strolling out of our little salon to dinner, the door of the cabin adjoining mine opened, and it was with a shock of surprise that I saw Mrs. Brandreth. So *she* was my mysterious neighbour who cried and moaned in her sleep!... I was thrilled at the discovery. But almost at once I told myself that I ought to have Sherlocked the truth the moment this troubled, beautiful being had appeared on deck.

Mrs. Brandreth was in black, of course, but she had changed into semi-evening dress, and her white neck was like swansdown in its folded frame of filmy black gauze. Over the glittering waves of her ash-blonde hair she had thrown a long black veil of embroidered Spanish lace, which fell nearly to her knees, and somehow, before she could close the door, a gust blew it back, shutting in the veil. The girl was struggling to free herself when Jim said, "Let me help you."

Naturally, she had to thank him, and explain how she ought to have fastened her window, as ours was the windy side of the ship to-night. She and I smiled at each other, and so our acquaintance began. I guessed from the veil that she was dining in Murray's company, and pictured them together with the deck to themselves, moonlight flooding the sea.

Next day the smile and nod which Mrs. Brandreth and I exchanged won a pleasant look from Major Murray for me. We began speaking soon after that; and before another day had passed Jim or I often dropped into the empty chair, if Mrs. Brandreth was not on deck. Murray was interested to know that we would be neighbours of his, and that I was the grand-daughter of the famous beauty his old bachelor cousin had loved.

I remember it was the night after my first real talk with him that I met Mrs.

Brandreth again as we both opened our doors. Jim was playing bridge or poker with some men, and hadn't noticed the dressing bugle. I was ready, and going to remind him of the hour; yet I was charmed to be delayed by Mrs. Brandreth. Hitherto, though friendly when we were with our two men, or only one of them, she had seemed like a wild bird trying to escape if we happened to be alone. It was as if she were afraid I might ask questions which she would not wish to answer. But now she stopped me of her own accord.

"I—I've been wanting to tell you something," she began, with one of her bright blushes. "It's only this: when I'm tired or nervous I'm afraid I talk in my sleep. I came on board tired out. I had—a great grief a few months ago, and I can't get over the strain of it. Sometimes when I wake up I find myself crying, and have an impression that I've called out. Now I know that you're next door, I'm rather worried lest I have disturbed you."

I hurried to reassure her. She hadn't disturbed me at all. I was, I said, a splendid sleeper.

"You haven't heard anything?" she persisted.

I felt she would know I was fibbing if I did fib, so it wasn't worth while. "I *have* heard a sound like sobbing now and then," I admitted.

"But no words? I hope not, as people say such *silly* things in their sleep, don't they?—things not even true."

"I think I've heard you cry out 'Mother!' once or twice."

"Oh! And that is all?"

"Really, that's all—absolutely!" It was true, and I could speak with such sincerity that I forced belief.

Mrs. Brandreth looked relieved. "I'm glad!" she smiled. "I hate to make myself ridiculous. And I'm trying very hard now to control my subconscious self, which gets out of hand at night. It's simply the effect of my—grief—my loss I spoke of just now. I'm fairly normal otherwise."

"I hope you're not entirely normal!" I smiled back. "People one speaks of as 'normal' are so bromidic and dull! You look far too interesting, too individual to be normal."

She laughed. "So do you!"

"Oh, I'm not normal at all, thank goodness!"

"Well, you're certainly interesting—and individual—far more than *I* am."

"Anyhow, I'm sympathetic," I said. "I'm tremendously interested in other people. Not in their *affairs*, but in themselves. I never want to know anything they don't want me to know, yet I'm so conceited, I always imagine that I can help when they need help—just by sympathy alone, without a spoken word. But to come back to you! I have a lovely remedy for restlessness at night; not that I need it often myself, but my French-Italian maid carries dried orange leaves and blossoms for me. She thinks *tisanes* better than doctor's medicines. May she make some orange-flower tea for you to-night at bedtime?"

Mrs. Brandreth had shown signs of stiffening a little as I began, but she melted toward the last, and said that she would love to try the poetic-sounding tea.

It was concocted, proved a success, and she was grateful. Perhaps she remembered my hint that I never wanted to know things which my friends didn't want me to know, because she made some timid advances as the days went on. We had quite intimate talks about books and various views of life as we walked the deck together; and I began to feel that there was something else she longed to say—something which rose constantly to her lips, only to be frightened back again. What could it be? I wondered. And would she in the end speak, or decide to be silent?

CHAPTER III

THE CONDITION SHE MADE

I think she meant to be silent, but desperation drove her to speak, and she spoke.

I had a headache the last day out but one, and stayed in my cabin all the afternoon. It seems that Mrs. Brandreth asked Jim if she might visit me for a little while, and he consented.

I was half dozing when she came, with a green silk curtain drawn across the window. I suggested that she should push this curtain back, so that we might have light to see each other.

"Please, no!" she said. "I don't want light. I don't want to be seen. Dear Lady Courtenaye—may I really call you 'Elizabeth,' as you asked me to do?—I need so much to talk to you. And the darker it is, the better."

"Very well—Rosemary!" I answered. "I've guessed that you are worried—or not quite happy. There's nothing I should like so much as to help you if I could. I believe you know that."

"Yes, I know—I feel it," she said. "I want your advice. I think you're the only person whose advice I would take whether I liked it or not. I don't understand why that is so. But it is. You're probably younger than I am——"

"I'm getting on for twenty-three," I informed the girl, when I had made her sit down beside my bed.

"And I'm nearly twenty-six!"

"You look twenty-one."

"I'm afraid I look lots of things that I'm not," she sighed, in a voice too gloomy for the half-joking words. "Oh, now that I'm trying to speak, I don't know how to begin, or how far to go! I must confess one thing frankly: and that is, I can't tell you *everything*."

"Tell me what you want to tell: not a word more."

"Thank you. I thought you'd say that. Well, suppose you loved a man who was very ill—so ill he couldn't possibly get well, and he begged you to marry him—because then you might be in the same house till the end, and he could die happily with you near: what would you do?"

"If I loved him *enough*, I would marry him the very first minute I could," was my prompt answer.

"I do love him enough!" she exclaimed.

"But you hesitate?"

"Yes, because——Oh, Elizabeth, there's a terrible obstacle."

"An obstacle!" I echoed, forgetting my headache. "I can't understand that, if—forgive me—if you're free."

"I am free," the girl said. "Free in the way you mean. There's no *man* in the way. The obstacle is—a woman."

"Pooh!" I cried, my heart lightened. "I wouldn't let a woman stand between me and the man I loved, especially if he needed me as much as—as——"

"You needn't mind saying it. Of course you know as well as I do that we're talking about Ralston Murray. And I believe he does need me. I could make him happy—if I were always near him—for the few months he has to live."

"He would have a new lease of life given him with you," I ventured.

The girl shook her head. "He says that the specialists gave him three months at the most. And twelve days out of those three months have gone already, since he left California."

For an instant a doubt of her shot through me. Ralston Murray had been a get-rich-quick oil speculator, so I had heard, anyhow, he was supposed to be extremely well off. Besides, there was that lovely old place in Devonshire, of which his widow would be mistress. I knew nothing of Rosemary Brandreth's circumstances, and little of her character or heart, except as I might judge from her face, and voice, and charming ways. Was I *wrong* in the judgment I'd impulsively formed? Could it be that she didn't truly care for Murray—that if she married him in spite of the mysterious "obstacle," it would be for what she could get?

Actually I shivered as this question asked itself in my mind! And I was ashamed of it. But her tone and look had been strange. When I tried to cheer her by hinting that Murray's lease of life might be longer because of her love, she had looked frightened, almost horrified.

For the first time I deliberately tried to read her soul, whose sincerity I had more or less taken for granted. I stared into her eyes through the green dusk which made us both look like mermaids under water. Surely that exquisite face couldn't mask sordidness? I pushed the doubt away.

"All the more reason for you to make radiant the days that are left, if you're strong enough to bear the strain," I said. And Rosemary answered that she was strong enough for anything that would help him. She would tell Ralston, she added, that she had asked my advice.

"He wanted me to do it," she said. "He thought I oughtn't to decide without speaking to a sweet, wise woman. And *you* are a sweet, wise woman, although you're so young! When you are better, will you come on deck and talk to Ralston?"

"Of course I will, if you think he'd care to have me," I promised. And it was extraordinary how soon that headache of mine passed away! I was able to talk with Ralston that evening, and assure him that, in my opinion, he wasn't *at all* selfish in wanting Rosemary Brandreth to "sacrifice" herself for him. It would be no sacrifice to a woman who loved a man, I argued. He had done the right thing, it seemed to me, in asking Mrs. Brandreth to marry him. If Jim were in his place, and I in Rosemary's, I should have proposed if he hadn't!

But while I was saying these things, I couldn't help wondering underneath if she had mentioned the "obstacle" to Ralston, and if he knew precisely what kind of "freedom to marry" her freedom was—whether Mr. Blank Brandreth were dead or only divorced?

Somehow I had the strongest impression that Rosemary had told Major Murray next to nothing about herself—had perhaps begged him not to ask questions, and that he had obeyed for fear of distressing—perhaps even losing—the woman he adored.

"Of course, I shall leave her everything," he announced, when Mrs. Brandreth had strolled away with Jim in order to give me a few minutes alone with Major Murray. "While she's gone, I'd like to talk with you about that, because I want

you to consult your husband for me. Rosemary can't bear to discuss money and that sort of thing. I had almost to force her to it to-day; for you see, I haven't long at best—and the time may be shorter even than I think. At last I made her see my point of view. I told her that I meant to make a new will, here on shipboard, for fear I should——Well, you understand. I said it would be in her favour, as Rosemary Brandreth, and then, after we were married—provided I live to marry her, as I hope to do—I ought to add a codicil or something—I don't quite know how one manages such things—changing 'Rosemary Brandreth' to 'my wife, Rosemary Murray.'"

"Yes," I agreed. "I suppose you would have to do that. I don't know very much about wills, either—but I remember hearing that a legacy to a wife might be disputed if the will were in her favour as an engaged girl, and mentioning her by her maiden name."

"Brandreth isn't Rosemary's maiden name," he reminded me. "That was Hillier. But it's the same thing legally. And disputes are what I want to avoid. Still, I daren't delay, for fear of something happening to me. There's a doctor chap in Devonshire, who would have inherited Ralston Old Manor and the money that goes with it if my cousin hadn't chosen to leave all he had to me instead. I believe, as a matter of fact, he's my only living relative. I haven't seen him many times in my life, but we correspond on business. Every penny I possess might go to Paul Jennings, as well as the Ralston property—by some trick of the law—if I don't tie it up for Rosemary in time. You see why I'm impatient. I want you and Sir Jim to witness a will of sorts this very night. I shall sleep better if it's done. But—there's a funny thing, Lady Courtenaye: a whim of Rosemary's. I can't see light on it myself. Perhaps you could lead up to the subject, and get her to explain."

"What is the funny thing?" I asked.

"Why, at first she implored me not to leave money to her—actually begged, with tears in her eyes. However, I explained that if she didn't get what I have, a stranger would, which would make me unhappy. My being 'unhappy' settled the matter for her! But she made a queer condition. If she allowed me to leave everything to her, the legacy must be arranged somehow without altering it to her married name when she is my wife. It must be in favour of 'Rosemary Brandreth,' not 'Rosemary Murray.' I begged her to tell my why she wanted such an odd thing, and she said it was a prejudice she had about women changing their names and taking their husbands' names. Well, as a matter of fact, I believe

a woman marrying *can* keep her own name legally if she likes. Taking the husband's name is a custom, not a necessity for a woman, I remember hearing. But I'm not sure. Sir Jim may know. If not, he'll find out for me. I haven't much strength, and it would be the greatest favour if he would get some first-rate legal opinion about carrying out this wish of Rosemary's."

"Jim will be glad to do anything he can," I said, warmly. "We shall be neighbours, you know."

"Yes, thank Heaven!" he exclaimed. "I used not to think much about such things, but I do feel as if you two had been sent me in my need, by Providence. There was the wonderful coincidence of Rosemary being on my ship—at least, one *calls* it a coincidence, but it must be something deeper and more mysterious than that. Then, finding such friends as you and Sir Jim—neighbours on deck, and neighbours on shore. I can't tell you the comfort it is to know that Rosemary won't be left alone when I'm gone."

"Count on us," I repeated, "now and always."

"I do," Murray answered. "As for the present, my first will in favour of Rosemary Brandreth will be clear sailing. It is the second one—or the codicil—after marriage, that raises a question. I suppose I needn't worry about that till the time comes: yet I do. I want to be sure that Rosemary is safe. I wish you could persuade her not to stick to the point she's so keen on."

"If you can't persuade her, it's not likely that I can," I objected. I tried to keep my voice quite natural, but something in my tone must have struck him.

"You have an idea in your mind about this condition Rosemary makes!" he challenged.

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD LOVE STORY

"Oh—one simply wonders a little!" I stammered.

Major Murray's face changed. "Of course, there's one idea which presents itself instantly to the mind," he said. "But it's such an obvious one! I confess I had it myself at first—just for a moment. I even asked Rosemary, because—well, she might have been in trouble that wasn't her fault. I asked her if she were sure that she was free to marry—that there was no legal hitch. I said that if there were, she must tell me the truth without fear, and I would see if it couldn't be made right. But she assured me that, so far as the law is concerned, she's as free as though she were a girl. I believe her, Lady Courtenaye; and I think you would believe if you could have looked into her eyes then. No, there's another reason—not obvious like the first; on the contrary, it's obscure. I wish you'd try to get light on it."

"I'll try if you want me to," I promised. "But I don't expect to succeed."

Major Murray looked more anxious than I had seen him since Mrs. Brandreth appeared on deck that second day at sea. "Hasn't she confided in you at all?" he asked.

"Only"—I hesitated an instant—"only to tell me of her love, and her engagement to you." This was the truth, with one tiny reservation. I couldn't give Rosemary away, by mentioning the "obstacle" at which she'd hinted.

"She never even told you about our first engagement, eight years ago?" he persisted.

"No."

"Well, I'd like to tell you that, if the story won't bore you?"

"It will interest me," I said. "But perhaps Mrs. Brandreth mightn't——"

"She won't mind; I'm sure of that, from things she's said. But it's a subject easier for me to talk about than for her. She was travelling in Italy with an aunt—a

sister of her mother's—when we met. She was just seventeen. I fell in love with her at first sight. Do you wonder? It was at Bellagio, but I followed her and the aunt from place to place. The aunt was a widow, who'd married an American, and I imagined that she wasn't kind to her niece—the girl looked so unhappy. But I did Mrs. Brandreth an injustice——"

"Mrs. Brandreth?" I had to interrupt. "Rosemary was already——"

"No, no! The aunt's name was Mrs. Brandreth. The man Rosemary married a few weeks later was the nephew of her aunt's American husband. When I asked Rosemary to be my wife, I heard the whole story. Rosemary told me herself. The aunt, Mrs. John Brandreth, came to England to visit her sister. It wasn't long after her husband had died, and she wasn't strong, so the nephew—Guy Brandreth—travelled with her. He was a West Point graduate, it seems; probably you know that West Point is the American Sandhurst? He was still in the Army and on long leave. He and the aunt both stayed at Mrs. Hillier's house in Surrey, and—I suppose you can guess what happened?"

"A—love affair?" I hesitated.

"Yes. It didn't take Brandreth long to make up his mind what he wanted, and to go for it. He proposed. Rosemary said 'Yes.' It was her first love. But Brandreth had been practically engaged to an American girl—a great heiress. He hadn't much himself beyond his pay, I fancy. Money was an object to him—but Rosemary's beauty bowled him over, and he lost his head. Bye and bye, when he began to see the light of common sense again, and when he realized that Rosemary wouldn't have a red cent of her own, he weakened. There was some slight lover's quarrel one day. Rosemary broke off the engagement for the pleasure of hearing Brandreth beg to be taken back. But he didn't beg. He took her at her word and went to London, where the American girl had arrived. That same night he wrote Rosemary that, as she didn't want him, he had offered himself to someone who did. So ended the love story—for a time. And that's where I came in."

"Rosemary went to Italy?" I prompted him.

"Yes. Her aunt felt responsible, and carried the girl away to help her to forget. Rosemary told me this, but thought she had 'got over it,' and said she would marry me if I wanted her. Of course, I did want her. I believed—most men would—that I could teach her to love me. She was so young. And even then I wasn't poor. I could give her a good time! The poor child was keen on letting Brandreth

know she wasn't mourning his loss, and she'd heard he was still in London with his fiancée and her millionaire papa. So she had our engagement announced in the *Morning Post* and other London papers."

"Well—and then?" I broke into a pause.

"Guy Brandreth couldn't bear to let another fellow have the girl. He must have loved her really, I suppose, with what was best in him. Anyhow, he asked for his release from the heiress, and found out from Mrs. Hillier where her daughter was. As soon as he could get there, he turned up at the Villa d'Este, where Rosemary and her aunt were staying then."

"And you—were you there?"

"No. If I had been, perhaps everything would have been different. I was in the Army, and on leave, like Brandreth. I had to go back to my regiment, but Rosemary'd promised to marry me on her eighteenth birthday, which wasn't far off. I'd made an appointment to go and see Mrs. Hillier on a certain day. But before the day came a telegram arrived from the aunt, Mrs. Brandreth, to say that Rosemary had run away with Guy.

"It was a deadly blow. I went almost mad for a while—don't know what kept me from killing myself, except that I've always despised suicide as a coward's way out of trouble. I chucked the Army—had to make a change—and went to California, where an old pal of mine had often wanted me to join him. I knew that Brandreth was stationed down south somewhere, so in California I should be as far from him and Rosemary as if I stayed in England. Well—now you know the story—for I never saw Rosemary or even heard of her from that time till the other day on board this ship. Does what I've told help you at all to understand the condition she wants me to make about her name, in my will?"

"No, it doesn't," I had to confess. "You must just—*trust* Rosemary, Major Murray."

"I do," he answered, fervently.

"I wish I did!" I could have echoed. But I said not a word, and tried to remember only how sweet Rosemary Brandreth was.

Before it was time for us to witness the will I repeated to Jim all that Murray had told me, and watched his face. His eyebrows had drawn together in a puzzled frown.

"I hope she isn't going to play that poor chap another trick," he grumbled. "It would finish him in an hour if she did."

"Oh, she *won't*!" I cried. "She loves him."

I was sure I was right about *that*. But I was sure of nothing else.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN WITH THE BRILLIANT EYES

Jim and I witnessed Ralston Murray's will, which left all he possessed to "Mrs. Rosemary Brandreth." No reference was made in the document to the fact that Rosemary was engaged to marry him.

Next day we landed, and Murray was so buoyed up with happiness that he was able to travel to London without a rest. He stayed at a quiet hotel in St. James's Square, and we took Rosemary Brandreth with us to the Savoy. Murray applied for a special licence, and the marriage was to take place in town, as soon as possible, so that they two might travel to Devonshire as husband and wife. Jim and I both pined for Courtenaye Abbey, but we wouldn't desert our new friends. Besides, their affairs had now become as exciting to us as a mystery play. There were many questions we asked ourselves and each other concerning obscure and unexplained details. But—if Murray didn't choose to ask them, they were no business of ours!

Jim consulted a firm considered to be among the smartest solicitors in London; and thanks to their "smartness," by hook or by crook the difficulty of the codicil was got over.

The wedding was to take place at Major Murray's hotel, in the salon of his suite, as he was not able to go through a ceremony in church. Jim and I were the only invited guests; but at the last moment a third guest invited himself: the cousin to whom the Ralston property would have gone if its owner hadn't preferred Ralston Murray for his heir.

It seemed that the distant relatives had always kept up a correspondence—letters three or four times a year; and I imagine that Murray made the disappointed man a consolation allowance, though he hinted at nothing of the kind to me. In any case, Doctor Paul Jennings (who lived and practised at Merriton, not far from Ralston Old Manor) reported unofficially on the condition of the place at stated intervals. Murray had wired the news of his arrival in England to Jennings, and that he would be bringing a wife to Devonshire; whereupon the doctor asked by telegram if he might attend the wedding. Neither Murray nor the bride-elect

could think of any reason why he should not come, so he was politely bidden to be present.

I was rather curious about the cousin to whom Murray had referred on shipboard; and as the acquaintanceship between the two men seemed to be entirely impersonal, I thought it "cheeky" of Jennings to wangle himself to the wedding. Jim agreed with me as to the cheekiness. He said, however, that the request was natural enough. This poor country doctor had heard, no doubt, that Murray was doomed to death, and had accordingly hoped great things for himself. There had seemed to be no reason why these great things shouldn't happen: yet now the dying man was about to take a wife! Jennings had been too impatient to wait till the couple turned up in Devonshire to see what the lady was like.

"Besides," Jim went on (with the shrewdness I always accused him of picking up in America), "besides, the fellow probably hopes to make a good impression on the bride, and so get taken on as family physician."

"He'll be disappointed about *that*!" I exclaimed, with a flash of naughty joy, for somehow I'd made up my mind not to like Doctor Jennings. "Major Murray has promised Rosemary and me to consult Beverley Drake about himself. It's the most perfect thing that Sir Beverley should be in Exeter! Not to call him to the case would be tempting Providence!"

Jim doesn't know or care much about doctors, but even he knew something of Sir Beverley Drake. He is the man, of course, who did such wonders in the war for soldiers who'd contracted obscure tropical diseases while serving in Egypt, India, Mesopotamia, Salonika, and so on.

You could bet pretty safely that a person named Drake would be of Devonshire extraction, and you would not lose your money on Beverley of that ilk.

He had spent half his life in the East, and hadn't been settled down as a Harley Street specialist for many years when the war broke out. Between 1914 and 1919 he had worn himself to a thread in France, and had temporarily retired from active life to rest in his native town, Exeter. But he had known both my wonderful grandmother and old Mr. Ralston. He wasn't likely to refuse his services to Ralston Murray. Consequently, I didn't quite see Doctor Paul Jennings getting a professional foothold in Major Murray's house, no matter what his personal charm might be.

As it turned out, the personal charm was a matter of opinion. Jennings had the brightest eyes and the reddest lips ever seen on a man. He was youngish, and looked more like a soldier than a doctor. Long ago some Ralston girl had married a Jennings; consequently, the cousinship, distant as it was. But though you can't associate Spain with a "Jennings," there was Spanish blood in the man's veins. If you had met him in Madrid, he would have looked more at home than as a doctor in a Devonshire village. Not that he had stuck permanently to the village since taking up practice there. He had gone to the Front, and brought back a decoration. Also he had brought back a French wife, said to have been an actress.

I heard some of these things from Murray, some from Jennings himself on the day of the wedding. And they made me more curious about the man than I should have been otherwise. Why, for instance, the Parisian wife? Do Parisian women, especially actresses, marry obscure English doctors in country villages which are hardly on the map?

No. There must be a very special reason for such a match; and I sought for it when I met Paul Jennings. But his personality, though attractive to many women, no doubt, wasn't quite enough to account for the marriage. I resolved to look for something further when I got to Devonshire and met Mrs. Jennings.

You wouldn't believe that a wedding ceremony in a private sitting room of an old-fashioned hotel, with the bridegroom stretched on a sofa, could be the prettiest sight imaginable; but it was. I never saw so charming or so pathetic a picture!

Jim and I had sent quantities of flowers, and Doctor Jennings had sent some, too. Rosemary and I arranged them, for there was no conventional nonsense about this bride keeping herself in seclusion till the last minute! Her wish was to be with the man she loved as often as she could, and to belong to him with as little delay as possible.

We transformed the room into a pink-and-white bower, and then taxied back to the Savoy to dress. There had been no time for Rosemary to have a gown made, and as she had several white frocks I advised her to wear one which Murray hadn't seen. But no! She wouldn't do that. She must be married in something

new; in fact, *everything* new, nothing she'd ever worn before. The girl seemed superstitious about this: and her pent-up emotion was so intense that the least opposition would have reduced her to tears.

Luckily she found in a Bond Street shop an exquisite model gown just over from Paris. It was pale dove-colour and silver, and there was an adorable hat to match. The faint gray, which had a delicate suggestion of rose in its shadows, enhanced the pearly tints of the bride's complexion, the coral of her lips, and the gold of her ash-blonde hair. She was a vision when I brought her back to her lover, just in time to be at his side before the clergyman in his surplice appeared from the next room.

To see her kneeling by Murray's sofa with her hand in his sent the tears stinging to my eyes, but I wouldn't let them fall. She looked like an angel of sweetness and light, and I reproached myself bitterly because I had half suspected her of mercenary plans.

Once during the ceremony I glanced at Doctor Jennings. He was gazing at the bride as I had gazed, fixedly, absorbedly, with his brilliant eyes. So intent was his look that I wondered its magnetism did not call Rosemary's eyes to his; but she was as unconscious of his stare as he of mine. He must have admired her; yet there was something deeper than admiration; and I would have given a good deal to know what it was—whether benevolent or otherwise. His expression, however, told no tale beyond its intense interest.

There was a little feast after the wedding, with an imposing cake, and everything that other, happier brides have. It seemed a mockery to drink health to the newly married pair, knowing as we did that Ralston Murray had been given three months at most to live. Yet we drank, and made a brave pretence at all the conventional wedding merriment; for if we hadn't laughed, some of us would have cried.

An hour later Major and Mrs. Murray started off on the first stage of their journey to Devonshire. They went by car, a magnificent Rolls-Royce rather like a travelling boudoir; and in another car was Murray's nurse-valet, with the comfortable elderly maid I had found for Rosemary.

They were to travel at a moderate pace, to stay a night at Glastonbury, and go on next morning to Ralston Old Manor, which they expected to reach early in the afternoon. As for Jim and me, we were too keen on seeing the dear old Abbey together, as our future home, to waste a minute more than need be *en route*, no

matter how beautiful the journey by road.

Our packing had been done before the wedding, and we were in a fast express tearing westward an hour after the Murrays had set off by car.

Ours had been such a long honeymoon—months in America—that outsiders considered it over and done with long ago. We two knew that it wasn't over and done with, and never would be, but we couldn't go about proclaiming that fact; therefore we made no objection when Doctor Jennings proposed travelling in the train with us. We reflected that, if he were in the same train he would be in the same compartment, and so it happened; but, though I didn't warm to the man, I was interested in trying to study the character behind those brilliant eyes.

Some people's eyes seem to reveal their souls as through clear windows. Other eyes conceal, as if they were imitation windows, made of mirrors. I thought that Paul Jennings' were the mirror windows; but he had a manner which appeared almost ostentatiously frank. He told us of the difficulties he had had in getting on, before the war, and praised Ralston Murray's generosity. "Ralston would never tell you this," he said, "but it was he who made it possible for me to marry. He has been awfully decent to me, though we hardly know each other except through letters; and I only wish I could do something for him in return. All I've been able to do so far is very little: just to look after the Manor, and now to get the place ready for Murray and his bride: or rather, my wife has done most of that. I wish I were a great doctor, and my joy would be to put my skill at Ralston's service. But as it is, he'll no doubt try to get an opinion from Beverley Drake?"

Jennings put this as a question rather than stating it, and I guessed that there had been no talk on the subject between him and Murray. But there could be no secret: and Jim answered promptly that we were staying in Exeter on purpose to see Sir Beverley. We'd made an appointment with him by telegram, Jim added, and would go on the rest of the way, which was short, by car. Even with that delay we should reach the Abbey in time for dinner.

"My wife is meeting me at Exeter, as I have business there," Doctor Jennings replied. "She will come to the train. I hope you will let me introduce her to you, Lady Courtenaye?"

I murmured that I should be charmed, and felt in my bones that he hoped we would invite them to motor with us. Jim glanced at me for a "pointer," but I looked sweetly blank. It would not have taken us far out of our way to drop the

Jenningses at Merriton. But I just didn't want to do it. So *there*!

All the same, I was curious to see what the Parisian wife was like; and at Exeter we three got out of the train together. "There she is!" exclaimed Jennings suddenly, and his face lit up.

"He's in love!" I thought, and caught sight of the lady to whom he was waving his hand.

"Why, you've married Gaby Lorraine!" I cried, before I had stopped to think.

But the doctor was not offended. "Yes, I have, and I'm jolly proud of her!" he said. "It's she, not I, who keeps dark in Merriton about her past glories.... She wants only to be Mrs. Paul Jennings here in the country. Hello, chérie! Here I am!"

Gaby Lorraine was a well-known musical comedy actress; at least *had* been. Before the war and even during the first year of the war she had been seen and heard a good deal in England. Because of her pretty singing voice and smart recitations, she had been taken up by people more or less in Society. Then she had disappeared, about the time that Grandmother took me to Rome, and letters from friends mentioning her had said there was some "hushed-up scandal." Exactly what it was nobody seemed to know. One thought it had to do with cocaine. Another fancied it was a question of kleptomania or "something really weird." The world had forgotten her since, but here she was, a Mrs. Jennings, married to a Devonshire village doctor, greeting her husband like a good wife at the railway station.

Nothing could have been more perfect than her conception of this new part she'd chosen to play. Neat, smooth brown hair; plain tailor-made coat and skirt; little white waistcoat; close-fitting toque; low-heeled russet shoes; gloves to match: admirable! Only the "liquid powder" which gives the strange pallor loved in Paris suggested that this *chic* figure had ever shown itself on the stage.

"I wish I knew *what* the scandal had been!" I murmured half to myself and half to Jim, as we parted in the station after introductions.

"That sounds unlike you, darling," Jim reproached me. "Why should you want to know?"

"Because," I explained, "whatever it was, is the reason why she married this country doctor. If there'd been no scandal, Mademoiselle Gaby Lorraine

wouldn't be Mrs. Paul Jennings."

CHAPTER VI

THE PICTURES

Our interview with Sir Beverley Drake was most satisfactory. Because he had known old Mr. Ralston and Grandmother, the great specialist granted my earnest request.

"I had almost vowed not to receive one solitary patient," he laughed, "yet here I am promising to motor thirty miles for the pleasure of calling on one."

"You won't regret it," I prophesied. "You will find Major Murray an interesting man, and as enthralling a case as you ever met. As for the bride, you'll fall in love with her. Every man must."

It was finally arranged that he should visit Ralston Murray early in the following week. He could not go before, as he was expecting visitors; but it was already Wednesday, so there were not many days to wait.

Jim and I had decided not to run over to see the Murrays at once, but to give them time to "settle in." We would go on Sunday afternoon, we thought; but on Saturday I had a telegram from Rosemary. "Would Sir Beverley be offended if we asked him not to come, after all? Ralston thinks it not worth while."

I was utterly amazed, for in London she had seemed as keen on consulting the specialist as I was, and had thanked us warmly for the offer of breaking our journey at Exeter.

"We can't force Sir Beverley on Murray," Jim said. "It wouldn't be fair to either of them." But I insisted.

"There's something odd about this," I told him. "Let's spin over to-day instead of to-morrow, and tell the Murrays that Sir Beverley *would* be offended. I shall say to Rosemary that as we asked him to call, it would be humiliating to us to have him treated in such a way."

I think Jim has laid down for himself a certain line of action with me. He yields to me on all matters as to which he's comparatively indifferent, so that I won't notice much when he turns into the Rock of Gibraltar over big issues.

This was one of the occasions when he yielded, and we flashed to Ralston Old Manor directly after luncheon. There wasn't time for a telegram to be delivered there before our arrival, and the Manor had no 'phone, so we appeared *en surprise*. And the "surprise" was a double one, for I was amazed to come upon Mrs. Jennings walking with Rosemary down the elm avenue. Evidently the visitor was going home, and her hostess was accompanying her as far as the gate. Our car running along the drive startled them from what seemed to be the most intimate talk. At sight of us they both looked up, and their manner changed. Rosemary smiled a welcome. Gaby smiled, in politeness. But before the smile there was the fraction of a second when each face revealed something it didn't mean to reveal—or I imagined it. Rosemary's had lost the look of exalted happiness which had thrilled me on her wedding day. For that instant it had a haunted look. As for Gaby, the fleeting expression of her face was not so hard to understand. For some reason she was annoyed that we had come, and felt an impulse of dislike toward us.

"Can those two have met before?" I asked myself. It seemed improbable: yet it was odd that strangers who had known each other only a couple of days should be on such terms.

They parted on the spot, when we had slowed down, Mrs. Jennings walking on alone the short distance to the gate, and Rosemary getting into the car with us, to drive to the house. I couldn't resist asking the question, "Had you ever seen Mrs. Jennings before she was married?" For, after all, there was no reason why I should not ask it. But Rosemary looked me full in the face as she answered:

"No, I never met her until she and her husband called the day before yesterday. She had been very kind about getting the house beautifully ready for us, and finding servants. I feel I know her quite well, because she has come in every day to explain about repairs that have had to be made, and that sort of thing."

"Do you like her?" I asked.

"I think she's tremendously clever," Rosemary said.

I was inclined to think so, too. "It's *she* who has been trying to persuade the Murrays not to have Sir Beverley Drake," I told myself. "She wants the job for her husband."

Happiness had had a wonderful effect upon Murray, even in this short time. It seemed to have electrified him with a new vitality. He had walked a few steps

without any help, and for the first time in many weeks felt an appetite for food.

"If I didn't *know* there was no hope for me, I should almost think there was some!" he said, laughing. "Of course there isn't any! This is only a flash in the pan, but I may as well enjoy it while it lasts, and it makes things a little less tragic for my angel of mercy. I feel that it might be best to 'let well alone,' as they say, and not disturb myself with a new treatment. All the American specialists agreed that nothing on earth could change the course of events, so why fuss, as I'm more comfortable than I hoped to be? If you don't think it would be rude to Sir Beverley——"

But there I broke in upon him, and Jim helped me out. We *did* think it would be rude. Sir Beverley would be wounded. For our sakes, if for nothing else, we asked that Sir Beverley should be allowed to make his call and examination as arranged.

Murray did not protest much when he saw how we took his suggestion; and Rosemary protested not at all. She simply sat still with a queer, *fatal* look on her beautiful face; and suspicions of her began to stir within me again. Did she not *want* to give her husband a chance of life?

The answer to that question, so far as Sir Beverley came into it, was that she could easily have influenced Murray not to heed us if she had been determined to do so. But that was just the effect she gave; lack of determination. It was as if, in the end, she wanted Murray to decide for himself, without being biassed by her.

"That Gaby Lorraine *is* in it somehow, all the same," I decided. "She was able to make Rosemary send us the telegram, and if we hadn't come over, and argued, she would have got her away."

It seemed rather sinister.

Ralston Murray was charmed with his heritage, and wanted Rosemary to show us all over the house, which she did. It was beautiful in its simple way: low-ceilinged rooms, many with great beams, and exquisite oak panelling of linen-fold and other patterns. But the fame of the Manor, such as it was, lay in its portraits and pictures by famous artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Rosemary frankly confessed that she knew very little about Old Masters of any age; and Jim had been, as he said, in the same boat until the idea had struck him of renewing the past glories of the family place, Courtenaye

Abbey. After renting the Abbey from me, and beginning to restore its dilapidations, he had studied our heirlooms of every sort; had bought books, and had consulted experts. Consequently, he had become as good a judge of a Lely, a Gainsborough, a Romney, a Reynolds, and so on, as I had become, through being my grandmother's grand-daughter.

I wondered what was in his mind as we went through the hall and the picture gallery, and began to be so excited over my own thoughts that I could hardly wait to find out his.

"Well, what is your impression of the famous collection?" I asked, the instant our car whirled us away from the door of Ralston Old Manor. "What do you think of everything?"

"*Think*, my child?" echoed Jim. "I'm bursting with what I think; and so, I expect, are you!"

"I wonder how long it is since the pictures were valued?" I muttered.

"I suppose they must have been done," said Jim, "at the time of old Ralston's death, so that the amount of his estate could be judged."

"Yes," I agreed; "I suppose the income-tax people, or whoever the fiends are that assess heirs for death duties, would not have accepted any old estimates. But that would mean that the pictures were all right ten months ago."

We looked at each other. "There's been some queer hocus-pocus going on," mumbled Jim.

"It sounds like black magic!" I breathed.

"Black fraud," he amended. "Ought we to speak to Murray—just drop him a hint, and suggest his getting an expert to have a look round?"

"It would worry him, and he oughtn't to be worried now," I said.

"Still, he wants everything to be all right for his wife when he goes west."

"I know," said I; "but I don't feel that these happy days of his—his last days, perhaps—ought to be disturbed. If—if Rosemary loves him as much as we believe she does, she'd rather have a fuss after he's gone than before. We might be breaking open a wasp's nest if we spoke. And it isn't our *business*, is it?"

"Unless we could find out something on the quiet," thoughtfully suggested Jim. "For instance, is there anybody in this neighbourhood who's a pretty good artist and a smart copyist—anybody, I mean, who could have had the run of the Manor while the house was unoccupied except by a caretaker?"

"Yes, we might set ourselves to find out that," I assented. "And, by the way—apropos of nothing, of course!—I think we might call on the Jenningses, don't you?—as the doctor intimated that they didn't 'feel grand enough' to call on us."

"I think we might," echoed Jim. "And why not to-day, while we're close to Merriton?"

Quick as a flash I seized the speaking-tube and directed the chauffeur. We had gone only a mile out of the way, and that was soon retraced.

Both the doctor and his wife were at home, in their rather ugly modern villa, which was one of the few blots on the beauty of Merriton. But there were no pictures at all in the little drawing room. The distempered walls were decorated with a few Persian rugs (not bad, though of no great interest) given to Doctor Jennings, it seemed, by a grateful patient now dead. By round-about ways we tried to learn whether there was artistic talent in the family, but our efforts failed. As Jim said later, when the call had ended in smoke, "There was nothing doing!"

CHAPTER VII

SIR BEVERLEY'S IMPRESSIONS

Jim is not a bad amateur detective, and he didn't abandon his efforts to get behind the portrait mystery. But we had decided that, for Murray's sake, "discretion was the better part of valour" for us; and the care with which he had to work added a lot to his difficulties. Besides, there were a good many other things to think of just then: things concerning ourselves, also things concerning the Murrays. And those things which concerned them were a thousand times more important than any faked heirlooms.

Sir Beverley Drake gave some faint hope that Ralston Murray's life might be saved. There was a serum upon which he had been experimenting for years, and in which he had begun enthusiastically to believe, for obscure tropical maladies resembling Murray's.

We had asked him to motor on to the Abbey and luncheon, after his visit to Ralston Old Manor, hardly daring to think that he would accept. But he did accept; and I saw by his face the moment we met that the news he had to give was, at the worst, not bad. I was so happy when I heard what he had to say that I could have danced for joy.

"Mind, I don't promise anything," Sir Beverley reminded me. "But there *is* hope. Murray must have had a marvellous constitution to have gone through what he has, in the war and since. If he hadn't had that, he'd be dead now. And then, of course, this amazing romance of his—this deathbed marriage—as you might call it—has given him a wonderful fillip. Happiness is an elixir of life, even in the most desperate cases at times, so I've got something hopeful to work on. I don't feel *sure* even of a partial success for my treatment, and I told them that. It's an experiment. If it fails, Murray may burn out rather than flicker out, and go a few weeks sooner than he need if let alone. If it succeeds—why, there's no limit to the success it *might* have!"

"You mean, he might be entirely cured—a well man again?" I almost gasped.

"Yes, it's just on the cards," Sir Beverley answered.

"Of course, Murray decided at once to run the risk?" asked Jim.

"Of course," replied the specialist. But he looked thoughtful.

"And Rosemary?" I added. "Couldn't she have kissed your feet for the blessed message of hope you gave her?"

Sir Beverley smiled at the picture. "I saw no sign of such a desire on the part of the beautiful lady," he said.

"She's rather shy of expressing her emotions," I explained Rosemary to the great man. "But she has the *deepest* feelings!"

"So I should judge," he answered rather drily. "Perhaps, though, she has no great faith in the experiment, and would prefer for her husband's peace to let 'well enough alone,' as people vaguely say."

Again I felt the disagreeable shock I'd experienced when Rosemary had first spoken to me of Murray's death as certain. "It must be that," I said, quickly. "She adores him."

"She gave me proof of that, in case I'd doubted," Sir Beverley answered. "I told them that before beginning the hypodermic injections of serum I should like to change and purify Murray's blood by transfusion, and so give him an extra chance. Mrs. Murray instantly offered her blood, and didn't flinch when I told her a pint would be necessary. Her husband refused to let her make such a sacrifice for him, and was quite indignant that I didn't protest against it. But she begged, coaxed, insisted. It was really a moving scene, and—er—went far to remove my first impression."

"What was your first impression?" I catechized. "Oh, don't think I ask from curiosity! I'm Rosemary's friend. Jim and I are both as much interested in Ralston Murray's case as if he were our brother. In a way, we're responsible for the marriage—at least, we advised it. I know Rosemary well, I believe, though she has a hard nature to understand. And if you had an unfavourable impression of her, perhaps out of my knowledge I might explain it away."

"Well, to tell the truth," said Sir Beverley bluntly, "when I gave the verdict which I'd thought would enchant her, Mrs. Murray seemed—not happy, but terrified. I expected for a second or two that she would faint. I must confess, I felt—chilled."

"What—did she say?" I faltered.

"She said nothing at all. She looked—frozen."

"I hope poor Murray didn't get the same impression you got?" said Jim.

"I don't think he did. She was sitting on the edge of his sofa, holding his hand, after I'd made my examination of the patient, and had called her back into the room. And when I told them what I hoped, I saw Mrs. Murray squeeze his fingers suddenly very tight with her small ones. To me—combined with the staring look in her eyes—the movement seemed convulsive, such as you might see in a prisoner, pronounced guilty by the foreman of the jury. But naturally no thought of that kind jumped into Murray's head! When she pressed his hand, he lifted hers to his lips and kissed it. All the same, my impression remained—like a lump of ice I'd swallowed by mistake—until Mrs. Murray so eagerly offered her blood for her husband. Then I had to acknowledge that she must be truly in love with him—for some women, even affectionate wives, wouldn't have the physical or mental courage for such an ordeal."

"I hope she won't weaken when the time comes!" exclaimed Jim.

"I don't somehow think she will weaken," Sir Beverley replied, a puzzled frown drawing his thick eyebrows together.

I was puzzled, too, but I praised Rosemary, and gave no hint of my own miserable, reawakened suspicions. What I wanted to do was to see her as soon as possible, and judge for myself.

CHAPTER VIII

WHILE WE WAITED

When Sir Beverley Drake undertakes a case, he puts his whole soul into it, and no sacrifice of time or trouble is too much. I loved the dear man when he quietly announced that he would live at Ralston Old Manor, coming in the day before the transfusion, and remaining till what he called the "end of the treatment, first phase."

This meant that he would be on the spot for a month. By that time he could be practically certain whether or not the serum had "gripped" the disease, and would at last conquer it. If "success" were the verdict, Sir Beverley would instruct another doctor how to continue the hypodermics and other treatment, and observe results.

"Selfishly, I should have liked to put the patient into a nursing home at Exeter," he said, "where I could stay at home and visit him once a day. But I didn't feel that would be giving the man his best chance. He's in love with his wife, and in love with his house. I wouldn't separate him from either."

This was splendid of Sir Beverley, and splendid for Murray—except for one possibility which I foresaw. What if Rosemary or Murray himself should suggest Paul Jennings as the doctor understudy? I was afraid that this might happen, both because Jennings lived so near the Manor, and because of the friendship which Rosemary had oddly struck up with the French wife.

I dared not prejudice Sir Beverley against Murray's distant cousin, for I'd *heard* nothing to Paul's disadvantage—rather the contrary. He was said to be a smart doctor, up to date in his methods, and "sure to get on." Still, I thought of the changed portraits, and tried to put the microbe of an idea into Sir Beverley's head. I told him that, if it hadn't been for Ralston Murray, Jennings would without much doubt have inherited the Manor, with a large sum of money.

The specialist's quick brain caught what was in mine as if I'd tossed it to him, like a ball. "I suppose, if Murray died now, Jennings could hope for nothing," he said, "except perhaps a small legacy. Murray will have made a will in his wife's favour?"

"Yes," I replied, "or he made a will when he was engaged to her, and has added a codicil since. But it's unusual in some ways, and might be disputed."

Sir Beverley smiled. "Well, don't worry," he reassured me. "I have my own candidate to take over the job when I leave the Manor. I wouldn't trust a stranger, no matter how good a doctor he might be. So that's that."

It was! I felt satisfied; and also more than satisfied with Rosemary. I went to see her the day before the transfusion experiment, and found her radiant in a strange, spiritual way. It seemed to me more like exaltation than any earthly sort of happiness; and her words proved that my feeling about it was right.

"Whether Ralston lives or dies, I shall always be so thankful that I could do this thing for him. I don't think it's a *big* thing, though he does, and it was hard to persuade him. But to do it gives me the most divine joy, which I can't describe. If I'd been born for that and nothing else, it would be enough."

"How you love him!" The words broke from me.

"I do love him," she answered in a low voice, as if she spoke more to herself than me. "Whatever may happen, I have loved him, and always will in this world and the next."

"Aren't you frightened?" I asked.

"Frightened?" she echoed. "Oh, *no*!"

And quite a new sort of respect for her grew up within me—respect for her physical courage. She was such a tall lily-in-silver-moonlight creature, and so sensitive, that one could not have been disgusted with her, as one can with some women, for cowardice; but she was brave in her love. When she said that she was not frightened, I knew she wasn't trying to make herself think so. She had no fear at all. She was eager for the moment when she could make the gift.

Jim and I were allowed to be in the house when the experiment was tried, not with the hope of seeing Murray or Rosemary afterward, but in order to know the result without waiting.

We sat in the library, and were presently joined by Paul Jennings and Gaby. They had grown so fond of "the hero and heroine of this romance" (as Gaby put it) that they hadn't been able to keep away.

Jennings explained to us in detail the whole process of transfusion, and why it was more effectual in a case like Murray's than the saline injections given by some modern men. I felt rather faint as I listened, seeing as if in a picture what those two devoted ones were going through. But I knew that they were in the hands of a master, and that the assistant and nurses he had brought would be the most efficient of their kind.

"Would you do for me what your friend is doing for her husband?" Paul Jennings suddenly flung the question at his wife. And she answered him, not in words, but with a smile. I couldn't read what that smile meant, and I wondered if he could.

Jim would not have needed to *ask* me a thing like that!

After what seemed a long time of suspense Sir Beverley came to tell us the news —looking like a strong-faced, middle-aged pierrot in his surgeon's "make-up."

"All's well," he said. "They've both stood it grandly; and now they're asleep. I thought you'd like to hear it from me, myself."

Then he looked from us to the Jenningses, whom he had never seen before. I introduced them, and for the first time I became aware of what Gaby Lorraine could be when she wished intensely to charm a man. She radiated some subtle attraction of sex—deliberately radiated it, and without one spoken word. She hadn't tried that "stunt" on my Jim, and if she had on Ralston Murray I hadn't been there to see. There was something she wanted to get out of Sir Beverley!

CHAPTER IX

THE GOOD NEWS

I thought I knew what that "something" was. I thought that Gaby wished to "tame" Sir Beverley, and make him so much her slave that he would appoint Paul to understudy him with Murray. I chuckled as I "deduced" this ambition, for poor Gaby was in blissful ignorance of a certain conversation I'd had with Sir Beverley.

"She'll find him a hard nut to crack," I said to myself. Still, I suffered some bad moments in the month that followed. The Jenningses were as often at the Manor as we were, and Gaby came frequently alone, seldom failing to see Sir Beverley. He did seem to admire her, and to like Paul well enough to worry me.

"Will he stick to his point about his own doctor?" I wondered. But when the time came to prove his strength of mind, he did stick.

When he had been at Ralston Old Manor four weeks and two days there was a letter for me from him in my morning post at the Abbey. "I want you to come along as soon as you can and break something to Mrs. Murray," he wrote. "I think she would rather hear it from you than me."

I hardly waited to finish breakfast; but I was more excited than frightened. If the news had been bad, I thought that Sir Beverley was the man to have told it straight out. If it were good, he wouldn't mind tantalizing me a little.

Sir Beverley was walking under the elms, his hands behind his back, taking his early stroll, when my car drove up. I got out at once and joined him.

"The man's going to get well—*well*, I tell you!" he joyously announced. "No dreary semi-invalid for a devoted wife to take care of, but a man in the prime of life, for a woman to adore. I'm sure of it."

"But how wonderful!" I cried, ecstatically squeezing his arm. "What a triumph, after dozens of great doctors had given him up! Does he know yet?"

Sir Beverley shook his head. "I'm going to tell him this morning. I wanted to wait till Mrs. Murray had been told."

"Why on earth didn't you tell her yourself—tell them both together?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I only thought she'd rather get the good news from an intimate friend like you. If it makes her break down a bit she won't mind before you as she would before me, and it wouldn't be wise to surprise her in front of the invalid. When Murray hears from my lips, and Mrs. Murray from yours, there won't have to be any preliminaries: they can just fall into each other's arms."

I argued no further. Indeed, there was no need. I knew as well as if he'd had the embarrassment of putting it into words, how Sir Beverley had feared that Rosemary might disappoint her husband, if the great news were told in his presence. I thought also that if she were "strange" in the way she had been strange before, he didn't want to see her being it!

All my lurking suspicions of Rosemary had died an ignominious death at the moment when, radiant with the light of her own devotion, she had tried to define the love she felt. I was sure that what Sir Beverley had mistaken for "horror" was only an effort at self-control when—perhaps rather suddenly—he had given his first hint of hope. But I didn't insist to Sir Beverley. Rosemary would soon prove to him that I was right.

He and I walked into the house together, and as he went to his patient, I inquired for Mrs. Murray. Her boudoir opened off a corridor which ran at right angles out of the panelled hall where many of the once famous, now infamous, portraits hung. Murray had been moved down to a wing on the ground floor after Sir Beverley came to the Manor, and this boudoir of Rosemary's had a door opening into that wing. It was a charming, low-ceilinged room, with a network of old beams, leaded windows with wide sills where bowls of flowers stood, and delightful chintz chosen by Rosemary herself. She came almost at once, through the door leading from the invalid's wing; and as the sunlight touched her bright hair and white dress I was thrilled by her ethereal beauty. Never had she been more lovely, but she looked fragile as a crystal vase.

"Darling!" I exclaimed, snatching her in my arms. "You are a dream to-day—but I want to see you more solid. You *will* be soon—a strong pink rose instead of a white lily—because there's the most gorgeous news to-day. I met Sir Beverley and he gave me leave to tell you, because I love you so much. Your dear man is saved. *You've* helped to save him, and——"

The words died on my lips. I had to put out all my strength with a sudden effort

to keep her from falling. She didn't faint, but her knees collapsed. I held her for an instant, then supported her till she had sunk into a chair which was luckily near. If she hadn't been in my arms I think she would have fallen. Her head lay against the high back of the grandfather chair, and her face was so white that she reminded me of a snow-wreath flitting past one's window, ghostlike at twilight.

Her eyes were half closed. She didn't look at me, nor seem to be any longer conscious of my presence; but I dropped on my knees beside her, and covered her cold hands with my own.

"I oughtn't to have told you so abruptly," I said. "Sir Beverley trusted me. I've betrayed his trust. But I thought, as you knew there was hope, hearing that now it was certainty wouldn't excite you too much. Oh, Rosemary, dear, think how glorious it will be! No more fears, no more anxieties. Instead of saying to yourself, 'I have him only for a few weeks,' you will know that you have years together to look forward to. You will be like Jim and me. You can travel. You can——"

"Yes," Rosemary almost whispered. "Yes, it is glorious—for Ralston. I am thankful. You are—good to sympathize so much, and I'm grateful. I—I'd hardly dreamed before that he *could* get well. All those specialists, they were so sure; many of them very celebrated—as celebrated as Sir Beverley—and he is only one against a dozen. That's why it is—a surprise, you see."

She was making so violent an effort to control herself that I felt guiltily conscious of my eyes upon her face. One would have thought that, instead of giving her the key to happiness, I had handed her that of a dungeon where she would be shut up for life.

"Would you rather I'd go?" I stammered. "Would you like to be alone?"

She nodded, moistening her lips. "Yes, thank you, Elizabeth," she breathed. "I—yes, for a little while I'd like to be alone—with my joy—to pray."

I jumped up like a marionette. "Of course," I said. "I understand."

But I didn't understand, as perhaps she guessed from my quivering voice.

"I wish I could make you—*really* understand," she sighed. "I—I'm different from other women. I can't take things as they do—as you would. But—I told you once, before, *whatever happens I love him*."

"I'm sure you do," I answered, as I opened the door and slipped softly out. Yet that wasn't so true as it had been a few minutes ago. I felt as if I'd been through an earthquake which had shaken me up without warning.

"I'm glad that it was I and not Sir Beverley who told her," I said to myself. But I said it sadly. The sunshine was dimmed. I longed like a child to escape from that house—escape quickly, and run to Jim's arms as to a fortress.

Sir Beverley kept his promise, and sent for a man who had worked with him in his experiments. Then he went back to Exeter, promising to return if he were sent for, or in any case to look in once a fortnight.

There was no need, however, to send for him. Ralston Murray got on—as the new man, Doctor Thomas, said—"like a house on fire."

At first there was little change to be noticed in his appearance. It was only that the bad symptoms, the constant high temperature, the agonizing pains in all the bones, and the deadly weakness, diminished and presently ceased. Then, the next time Jim and I called, I cried out: "Why, you are *fatter*!"

Murray laughed with a gay, almost boyish ring in his laugh. "Transformation of the Living Skeleton into the Fat Man!" he cried. "What a happy world this is, after all, and I'm the happiest man in it; that is, I would be, if Rosemary weren't shrinking as rapidly as I increase. What *are* we to do with her? She says she's perfectly well. But look at her little face."

We looked at it, and though she smiled as brightly as she could, the smile was camouflage. Always pearly, her skin was dead white now. Even the lips had lost their coral red, though she bit them to bring back the blood, and a slight hollow had broken the exquisite oval of her cheeks. Her eyes looked far too big; and even her hair had dulled, losing something of its moonlight sheen.

"I'm perfectly all right!" she insisted. "It's only the reaction after so much anxiety. *Anybody* would feel it, in my place."

"Yes, of course," I soothed her. But I knew that there must be more than that. She looked as if she never slept. My heart yearned over her, yet I despaired of doing any good. She would not confide in me. All my confidence in myself as a

"Brightener" was gone.

CHAPTER X

THE CLIMAX

From that time on I was haunted by Rosemary's thin, beautiful face, the suppressed anguish in her eyes, and the wretched conviction that I was of no use—that I'd stumbled against a high, blank wall. Often at night I dreamed of her in a feverish way, queer dreams that I couldn't remember when I waked, though they left me depressed and anxious. And then, one night nearly four weeks after Murray had been pronounced a saved man, came the climax.

As usual, I was thinking of the Murrays when I went to bed—how well and handsome and happy he was, how mysteriously and silently the girl was fading. I must have dropped off to sleep with these thoughts in my mind, and how long I slept I don't know, but I waked, sitting up, hearing loud sobs. At first I imagined they were Rosemary's. Then I realized that they were my own.

In a moment Jim was with me, holding me tight, as if I were a child. "Darling one, what is it? Tell Jim!" he implored.

"I don't know," I wailed. "Except the letter—or was it a telegram? And then that dark precipice! She was on the edge. She called to me: 'Elizabeth—help! help!' But the whole ocean came rolling between us. Oh, Jim, I *must* get to her!"

"I suppose it's Rosemary you're talking about," Jim said. "But it was only a dream, dearest child. You're not awake yet. Nothing has happened to Rosemary."

But I couldn't be consoled. "I suppose it was a dream," I wept. "But it's true; I know it is. I *know* something has happened—something terrible."

"Well, let's hope it hasn't," soothed Jim. "What could happen in the middle of the night? It's a quarter to three. We can't do anything till morning. Then, if you still feel anxious, I'll take you over to the Manor in the car as early as you like. That is, I will if you're good and do your best to go to sleep again now."

How I adored him, and how sorry I was for Rosemary because a black cloud obscured the brightness of her love, which might have been as sweet as mine!

I couldn't sleep again as Jim wished me to do, but he comforted me, and the dark

hours passed. As soon as it was light, however, I bounded up, bathed and dressed, and Jim did the same for the sake of "standing by"; which was silly of us, perhaps, because it would be hardly decent to start before half-past nine. If we did we should reach the Manor at an absurd hour, especially as Ralston and Rosemary were lazy creatures, even now, when he was rejoicing in this new lease of life. She hated to get up early, and he liked to do what she liked.

"If anything had been wrong, I think we should have got a telegram by this time," said Jim, as he tried to make me eat breakfast. "You know how quickly a wire is delivered at our office from Merriton, and——"

At that instant a footman appeared with a brown envelope on a silver tray. It was addressed to "Lady Courtenaye," but I asked Jim to open it and read the message first.

"Rosemary has—gone," he told me. "Murray asks if, by any chance, she has come here. There's a 'reply-paid' form; but he wants us to run over to him if we can."

Jim scrawled an answer:

Deeply regret she is not here. Will be with you shortly.

and sent it off by the post-office boy who waited, though it was probable that we should see Murray before our response to his question reached him.

I think I was never so sorry for any man in my life!

"I have been too happy!" he said, when he had come to meet us in the hall—walking firmly in these days—and had led us into his study or "den." "She's such a friend of yours, Elizabeth. Has she consciously or unconsciously given you some clue?"

"No real clue," I told him, regretfully; "though I may think of a forgotten hint when we've talked things over. But you must tell us exactly what has happened."

Poor Murray held himself in iron control. Perhaps he even "hoped for the best," as Jim urged him to do. But I saw through the false calmness into a despairing soul. Already the newly lit flame of restored vitality burned low. He looked years older, and I would have given much if Sir Beverley or even the understudy had been in the house. Doctor Thomas had gone a week ago, however, Sir Beverley judging that Murray could now get on by himself. Alas, he had not guessed how

literally the man would be left alone to do this!

The morning of yesterday had passed, Murray said, in an ordinary way. Then, by the second post, which arrived after luncheon, a registered letter had come for Rosemary. Such letters appeared now and then, at regular intervals, and Rosemary had explained that they were sent on by her bank in London, and contained enclosures from America. Rosemary never talked to him of these letters, or of America at all, having told him once, before their marriage, that her one link with that country now was her sister. Whether or not she was fond of the sister he could not say; but she always seemed restless when one of these registered letters arrived.

Yesterday was no exception to the rule. When the letter was handed to Rosemary she and her husband were having coffee and cigarettes in her boudoir. She flushed at sight of the envelope, but tossed it aside unopened, as though she took no interest in its contents, and continued the conversation as if it had not been broken off. Murray felt uneasily conscious, however, that she was thinking of the letter, and made an excuse to leave her alone so that she might read it in peace. Depressed and anxious, he strolled out on the lawn with the dogs. One of them made a rush at the open bay window into the boudoir; and, snatching the animal back by its collar, Murray caught a glimpse of Rosemary burning something in the grate.

Soon after she had joined him out of doors, and had made an effort to be gay. He had thought, however, that she was absent-minded, and he longed to ask what the trouble was; but America as a subject of conversation was taboo.

For the rest of the day they were mostly together, and never had Rosemary been so loving or so sweet.

At night Ralston had remained with his wife in her room till twelve. They had talked of their wonderful meeting on the *Aquitania*, and the life to which it had led. Then the clock striking midnight reminded Rosemary that it was late. She had a headache, she said, and would take some aspirin. Murray was banished to his own room, which adjoined hers, but the door was left open between.

It was some time before Ralston went to sleep, yet he heard no sound from Rosemary's room. At last, however, he must have slumbered heavily, for he knew no more till dawn. Somehow, he had got into the habit of rousing at six, though he generally dozed again. This time he waked as usual, and, remembering Rosemary's headache, tiptoed to the door and peeped into the

darkened room. To his surprise she was not in bed. Still, he was not worried. His thought was that she had risen early and stealthily, not to rouse him, and that she had gone to the bathroom next door to bathe and dress for an early walk.

He tapped at the bathroom door, but getting no answer, turned the handle. Rosemary was not in the room, and there were no towels lying about.

Murray's next move was to draw back the curtains across one of the open windows; and it was then that he saw an envelope stuck into the mirror over the dressing table. His name was on it, and with a stab of apprehension he broke the seal.

The letter which this envelope had contained he showed to Jim and me. It was written in pencil, and was very short. It said:

> Good-bye, my Beloved. I must go, and I cannot even tell you why. You may find out some day, but I hope not, for both our sakes. It would only make you more unhappy. You would hate me, I think, if you knew the truth. But oh, try not to do that. I love you so much! I am so happy that you are growing well and strong, yet if I had known I should not have dared to marry you, because from the first this that has happened was bound to happen. Forgive me for hurting you. I didn't mean to do it. I thought only to make your last days on this earth happier, and to keep a blessed memory for myself. While I live I shall love you, but it will be best for you to forget.
>
> ROSEMARY.

In spite of this farewell, Ralston had hoped to hear something of Rosemary from me. At all events, he wanted our advice, Jim's and mine.

It was a blow to him that we had no news to give; and it was hard even to offer advice. What could we say? I had known for long that the girl was miserable, and this sudden break-up of everything was more of a shock than a surprise. I was afraid to say: "Get her back at any price!" for—the price (not in money but in heart's blood) might prove too high. Instead I hedged.

"What if Rosemary is right?" I ventured. "What if it *would* be best as she says, for both your sakes, to let her go?"

Murray's eyes flashed rage. "Is that your *real* advice?" he flung at me. "If it is, you're not the woman I thought you. I'll move heaven and earth to get Rosemary

back, because we love each other, and nothing else matters."

"Well, that's what I wanted to find out!" I exclaimed in a changed tone. "That's the way I should feel in your place——"

"I, too!" chimed in Jim.

"And since that *is* the way you feel," I went on, "I've thought of something, or rather, *someone*, that may help. Mrs. Paul Jennings."

Ralston stared, and repeated the name.

"Mrs. Paul Jennings? What is she likely to know about Rosemary's secrets that you don't know?"

"That's for you to find out," I answered. "It's an impression I have. I may be mistaken. But it's worth trying. I should send for Mrs. Paul Jennings if I were you."

"I will!" cried Murray. "I'll send a note now—and the car to fetch her here."

CHAPTER XI

WHAT GABY TOLD

It seemed to us that hours dragged heavily by, between the time that the motor left and the time when we heard it draw up at the front door. A moment later, and Gaby Jennings was shown into Murray's den, where we three were waiting.

Ralston had said in his short note that Rosemary had gone away suddenly, and that he was most anxious. But there was no sign of distress on the Frenchwoman's face. On the contrary, those big dark eyes of hers, which could be so languorous, looked hard as glass as she smiled at me and nodded at Jim.

Her voice was soft, however, when she answered Ralston's question.

"Ah, my poor Major!" she gently bleated. "You have all my sympathy. I could say nothing. But I always feared—I feared this would come!"

Ralston braced himself. "You know something, then?" he exclaimed. "You have something to tell me!"

"I do know something—yes," she said. "But whether I have something to tell—ah, that is different. I must think first."

"You mean, you wish to consult Paul," he prompted her. "But I can't wait for that. For heaven's sake, Mrs. Jennings, speak out; don't keep me in suspense."

"I did not mean to consult Paul," Gaby replied. "When I read your note I told Paul you asked me to come over alone, though it was not true. It is better that we talk without Paul listening."

"Shall Jim and I go away?" I asked quickly, speaking not to her, but to Ralston.

"No," he answered. "Mrs. Jennings can have nothing to say about Rosemary which I wouldn't care for you and Jim to hear."

I saw from Gaby's face that this verdict annoyed her, but she shrugged her pretty shoulders. "As you will," she said. "For me, I would rather Sir James and Lady Courtenaye were not here. But what matter? You would repeat to them what

passes between us."

"Doubtless I should," Ralston agreed. "Now tell me what you have to tell, I beg."

"It is a very big thing," Gaby began. "Rosemary did not want me to tell. She offered me bribes. I refused, because I would not bind myself. Yet there is a favour you could do for me—for us—Major Murray. If you would promise—I could not resist giving up Rosemary's secret."

Ralston's face had hardened. I saw his dislike of her and what she suggested. But he could not afford to refuse, and perhaps lose all chance of finding his wife.

"Will what you have to tell help me to get Rosemary back?" he asked.

"Yes—if after you have heard you still want her back," Gaby hedged. "I can tell you where she is likely to be."

"Nothing on God's earth you could tell would make me not want her back!" he cried. "What is this favour you speak of?"

"It is only that I ask you to take my husband as your doctor. Oh, do not think it is from Paul I come! He does not know Rosemary's secret, or that I make a price for this. If you do this—and why not, since Paul is a good doctor, and you have now finished with others?—I will tell you all I know about your wife."

As she went on I was thinking fast. Poor Rosemary! I was sure that Gaby had tried to work upon her fears—had promised secrecy if Mrs. Murray would get Doctor Jennings taken on as Ralston's physician. At first Rosemary had been inclined to yield. That must have been at the time when she wired to stop Sir Beverley's visit, if not too late. Then we had appeared on the scene, saying that it *was* too late, and urging that Sir Beverley might offer Ralston a chance of life. At this Rosemary's love for her husband had triumphed over fears for her own sake. She had realized that by keeping Sir Beverley away she might be standing between her husband and life itself. If there were a ray of hope for him, she determined to help, not hinder, no matter what the cost.

Once she had refused Mrs. Jennings' request, she had been at the woman's mercy; but Gaby had waited, expecting the thing that had happened to-day, and seeing that her best chance for the future lay with Murray. As for Jennings, it might be true that he wasn't in the plot; but if my theory concerning the portraits were correct, he certainly *was* in it, and had at least partially planned the whole scheme.

I was so afraid Ralston might accept the bargain without stopping to think, that I spoke without giving him time to open his lips. "Before you decide to take Paul Jennings as your doctor, send for an expert to look through your collection of portraits!"

"What have the portraits to do with Doctor Jennings?" asked Ralston, astonished.

I stared at Gaby Jennings as I answered; but a woman who uses liquid powder is fortified against a blush.

"That's what I want you to find out before making a bargain with his wife. All I know is, there are modern copies in the frames which once held your greatest treasures. Only a person free to come and go here for months could bring off such a fraud without too much risk. And if Doctor Jennings *had* brought it off, would he be a safe person to look after the health of the man he'd cheated?"

Gaby Jennings sprang to her feet. "Lady Courtenaye, my husband can sue you for slander!" she cried.

"He can; but will he?" I retorted.

"I go to tell him of what he is accused by you!" she said. "There is no fear for us, because you have no proof. But it is finished now! I leave this house where I have been insulted, and Major Murray may search the world. He will never find his lost wife!"

"Stop, Mrs. Jennings!" Murray commanded, sharply. "The house is mine, and *I* have not insulted you. I thank Lady Courtenaye for trying to protect me. But I don't intend to make any accusations against your husband or you. Tell me what you know, and I will write a letter asking Jennings to attend me as my doctor. That I promise."

Gaby Jennings threw me a look of triumph; and I am ashamed to say that for a minute I was so angry at the man's foolhardiness that I hardly cared what happened to him. But it was for a minute only. I felt that Jim would have done the same in his place; and I was anxious to help him in spite of himself.

The Frenchwoman accepted the promise, but suggested that Major Murray might now wish to change his mind: he might like to be alone with her when she made her revelations. Ralston was so far loyal to us, however, that he refused to let us go. We were his best friends, and he was deeply grateful, even though he had to act against our advice.

"Let them hear, then, that Rosemary Brandreth is Rosemary Brandreth to this hour—not Rosemary Murray," Gaby Jennings snapped out. "She is not your wife, because Guy Brandreth is not dead, and they are not divorced. She does not even love you, Major Murray. She loves madly her real husband, and left him only because she was jealous of some flirtation he had with another woman. Then she met you—on shipboard, was it not?—and this idea came into her head: to go through a ceremony of marriage, and get what she could to feather her nest when you were dead, and she was free to return home."

"My God! You lie!" broke out Ralston.

"I do not lie. I can prove to you that I do not. I knew Guy and Rosemary Brandreth before I left the stage. I was acting in the States. People made much of me there, as in England, in those days. In a big town called Baltimore, in Maryland, I met the Brandreths. I met them at their own house and at other houses where I was invited. There could be no mistake. But when I saw the lady here, as your wife, I might have thought her husband was dead; I might have thought that, and no more—except for one thing: she was foolish: she showed that she was afraid of me. Because of her manner I suspected something wrong. Letters take ages, so I cabled to a man who had been nice to me in Baltimore. It was a long message I sent, with several questions. Soon the answer came. It told me that Captain Guy Brandreth is now stationed in Washington. He is alive, and not divorced from his wife. They had a little quarrel, and she sailed for Europe, to stay three or four months, but there was not even gossip about a separation when she went away. My friend said that Captain Brandreth talked often about being anxious for his wife to come back, and instead of taking advantage of her absence, he no longer flirted with the lady of whom Mrs. Brandreth had been jealous. Now you have heard all—and you *see* all, don't you? I know about the codicil added to your will. You remember, my husband witnessed it, one day when Sir James Courtenaye had meant to come over, but could not? Mrs. Brandreth arranged cleverly. If you had died, as she was sure you would die before the time when she was expected back, she could easily have got your money—everything of which you had been possessed. She waited—always hoping that you might die. But at last she had to give up. She could stay no longer without fear of what her American husband might do. If you don't believe, I will show you the cablegrams I have received. But, in any case, you must read them!" And pulling from her hand-bag several folded papers, Gaby forced them upon Ralston.

Oh, with what horrible plausibility the story hung together! It fitted in with

everything I had ever guessed, suspected, or known of Rosemary—except her ethereal sweetness, her seeming love for the man she had now deserted. Could she have pretended well enough to deceive me in spite of my suspicions? Above all, would she have offered the blood from her veins to save Ralston Murray if she had not wanted him to live?

My head buzzed with questions, and no answers were ready. Still I could see, confusedly, that the terrible imposture Rosemary was accused of might have been committed by a woman who loved its victim. Meeting him on shipboard, old feelings might have crept back into her heart. On a mad impulse she might have agreed to make his last weeks on earth happy. As for the money, that extra temptation might have appealed to the worst side of her nature.

When Ralston implored desperately, "Do *you* believe this of Rosemary?" I could not speak for a moment. I glanced from his despairing face to Jim's perplexed one. Almost, I stammered, "I'm afraid I do believe!" But the look I caught in Gaby's eyes as I turned stopped the words on my lips.

"No, I *don't* believe it of her—I can't, and won't!" I cried.

"God help me, I do!" groaned Ralston, and breaking down at last, he covered his face with his hands.

CHAPTER XII

THE WOMAN IN THE THEATRE

Well, there we had to leave matters for the moment.

Ralston Murray loved us very much, but he didn't wish for our advice. Indeed, he wished for nothing at all from any one—except to be let alone.

He had said to Gaby Jennings that he would always want Rosemary back whatever he heard about her past; but now, believing Gaby's story with its additional proofs, at all events he had no more hope of getting her back. In his eyes she was another man's wife. He did not expect to see her again in this world.

Jim and I could do nothing with him: Jim was helpless because he also, at heart, believed Gaby, and defended Rosemary only to please me; I had ceased to be of use, because I could give no reason for my faith in her. What good to say: "There must be some awful misunderstanding!" when there were those cablegrams from Baltimore and Washington? Gaby would not have shown copies of her own messages with the address of her correspondent, if she hadn't been willing that Murray should make inquiries as to the man's identity and bona fides.

We could not persuade him to wait, before keeping his promise to Mrs. Jennings, until he had heard from America. He knew what he should hear, he said. Besides, a promise was a promise. He didn't care whether Paul had stolen his heirlooms or not, but there was no proof that he had, and people must be presumed innocent until they were found to be guilty. Nor did he care what Jennings' designs on him might be. It was too far-fetched to suppose that the man had any designs; but no greater kindness could now be done to him, Ralston, than to put him for ever out of his misery.

This was mad talk; but in a way Ralston Murray went mad that day when he lost Rosemary. No doctor, no alienist, would have pronounced him mad, of course. Rather would I have seemed insane in my defence of Rosemary Brandreth. But when the man's heart broke, something snapped in his brain. All was darkness there. He had turned his back on hope, and could not bear to hear the word.

We did persuade him, in justice to Rosemary, to let us cable a New York detective agency whose head Jim had known well. This man was instructed to learn whether Gaby's friend had told the truth about Captain Brandreth and his wife: whether she had sailed for Europe on the *Aquitania*, upon a certain date; and whether the pair had been living together before Mrs. Brandreth left for Europe.

When news came confirming Gaby's story, and, a little later, mentioning that Mrs. Brandreth had returned from abroad, Ralston said: "I knew it would be so. There's nothing more to do." But I felt that there was a great deal more to do; and I was bent on doing it. The next thing was to induce Jim to let me do it.

To my first proposition he agreed willingly. Now that I had shot my bolt, there was no longer any objection to employing detectives against the Jenningses. Indeed, there was a strong incentive. If their guilt could be proved, Ralston Murray would not be quite insane enough to keep Paul on as his doctor.

We both liked the idea of putting my old friend Mr. Smith on to the case, and applied to him upon our own responsibility, without a word to Murray. But this was nothing compared with my second suggestion. I wanted to rush over to America and see for myself whether Rosemary was living in Washington as the wife of Guy Brandreth.

"What! You'd leave me here, and go across the Atlantic without me on a wild-goose chase?" Jim shouted.

"Who said anything about my going without you?" I retorted. "Oh, darling Man, *do* take me!"

That settled it: and as soon as the thing was decided, we were both keen to start. Our one cause for hesitation was fear for Ralston Murray's safety, now that he had so recklessly flung himself into Paul Jennings' hands. Still, in the circumstances, we could do little good if we stayed at home. Ralston had shut himself up, refusing to see any one—including ourselves. His mental state was bad enough to sap his newly restored health, even if I did Doctor Paul Jennings a grave injustice; and Mr. Smith could watch the Jenningses better than we could.

I did take the precaution to write Sir Beverley that his late patient had fallen into the clutches of the Merriton doctor, and beg him to call at the Manor some day, declining to take 'no' for an answer if he were refused at the door: and then we sailed. It was on the *Aquitania* again, and every moment brought back some

recollection of Rosemary and Ralston Murray.

We travelled straight to Washington after landing, and were met at the station by the young detective Jim's friend had engaged. He had collected the information we needed for the beginning of our campaign, and had bought tickets for the first performance of a new play that night.

"The Brandreths have a party going," he said, "and your places are next to theirs. Yours are at the end of the row, so they'll have to pass you going in, if you're early on the spot."

I liked that detective. He had "struck" a smart idea!

We had only just time to dress and dine at our hotel, and dash to the theatre in a taxi, if we wished to arrive when the doors were opened.

It was lucky we did this, for the audience assembled promptly, in order to hear some music written for the new play by a popular composer. We had hardly looked through the programme after settling down in our chairs when a familiar fragrance floated to me. It was what I had always called "Rosemary's *leitmotif*," expressed in perfume. I turned my head, and—there she was in great beauty coming along the aisle with three or four men and as many pretty women.

I had got myself up that night expressly to attract attention—Rosemary's attention. I was determined that she should not, while laughing and talking with her friends, pass me by without recognition. Consequently, I was dressed more suitably for a ball than a play. I had on a gown of gold tissue, and my second best tiara, to say nothing of a few more scattered diamonds and a double rope of pearls. It was impossible for the most absent-minded eye to miss me, or my black-browed, red-haired giant in evening dress—Jim. As I looked over my shoulder at Rosemary, therefore, she looked at me. Our gaze encountered, and—my jaw almost dropped. She showed not the slightest sign of surprise; did not start, did not blush or turn pale. Her lovely face expressed good-natured admiration, that was all.

She glanced at Jim, too—as all women do glance—with interest. But it was purely impersonal interest, as if to say, "There's a *man*!"

Those black brows of his drew together in disapproval, because she had no right to be so rosy and happy, so much more voluptuous in her beauty than she had been when with Ralston Murray. Rosemary, however, seemed quite unconscious

of Jim's disgust. She had an air of conquering, conscious charm, as if all the world must love and admire her—such an air as she had never worn in our experience. Having looked us over with calm admiration she marshalled her guests, and was especially charming to one of the women, a dark, glowing creature almost as beautiful as herself. Something within me whispered: "*That's* the woman she was jealous of! This party is meant to advertise that they're the best of friends."

"Guy, you're to sit next Mrs. Dupont," she directed; and at the sound of her voice my heart gave a little jump. There was a different quality about this voice—a contralto quality. It was heavier, richer, less flutelike than Rosemary's used to be.

Mrs. Dupont and Guy Brandreth passed us to reach their chairs. Guy was a square-jawed, rather ugly, but extremely masculine young man of a type intensely attractive to women.

"She wants to show everyone how she trusts him now!" I thought. "She's giving him Mrs. Dupont practically to himself for the evening."

All the party pushed by, Rosemary and an elderly man, who, it appeared, was Mr. Dupont, coming last. He sat between her and me, and they chatted together before the music began; but now and then she looked past him at me, without the slightest sign of embarrassment.

"Jim," I whispered, "*it isn't Rosemary*!"

"Well—I was wondering!" he answered. "But—it *must* be."

"It simply *isn't,*" I insisted. "To-morrow I'm going to call on Mrs. Guy Brandreth."

"Supposing she won't see you?"

"She will," I said. "I shall ring her up early before she can possibly be out, and make an appointment."

"If it is Rosemary, when she knows who you are she won't——" began Jim, but I cut him short. I repeated again the same obstinate words: "It is *not* Rosemary."

I called up Mrs. Guy Brandreth at nine o'clock next morning, and heard the rich contralto voice asking "*Who* is it?"

"Lady Courtenaye at Willard's Hotel," I boldly answered. "I've come from England on purpose to see you. I have very important things to say."

There was a slight pause; then the voice answered with a new vibration in it: "When can you come? Or—no! When can you have me call on you? That would be better."

"I can have you call as soon as you care to start," I replied. "The sooner the better."

"I'm not dressed," said the quivering voice. "But I'll be with you at ten o'clock."

I told Jim, and we arranged that he should be out of the way till ten-thirty. Then he was to walk into our private sitting room, where I would receive Mrs. Brandreth. I thought that by that time we should be ready for him.

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. BRANDRETH'S STORY

She came—into a room with all the blinds up, the curtains pushed back, and floods of sunshine streaming in.

Just for an instant I was chilled with doubt of last night's impression, for her face was so pale and anxious that she was more like Rosemary than had been the red-rose vision at the theatre. But she was genuinely surprised at sight of me.

"Why!" she exclaimed. "You are the lovely lady who sat next us at the play!"

"Does my name suggest nothing to you?" I asked.

"Nothing," she echoed.

"Then we'll sit down, and I'll tell you a story," I suggested.

I began with the *Aquitania*: the man in the cushioned deck-chair, going home condemned to die; the beautiful girl who appeared on the second day out; the recognition. I mentioned no names. When I said, however, that years ago the two had been engaged, a sudden light flashed into my visitor's eyes. She would have interrupted, but I begged her to let me go on; and she sat silent while I told the whole story. Then, before she had time to speak, I said: "There's just *one* thing I know! You are not the woman who came to England and married Ralston Murray. If you have a heart in your breast, you'll tell me where to find that woman. He will die unless she goes back to him."

Her lips parted, but she pressed them tightly together again. I saw her muscles stiffen in sympathy with some resolve.

"The woman, whoever she was, must have personated me for a reason of her own," she answered. "It's as deep a mystery to me as to you."

I looked her in the eyes. "That's not true. Mrs. Brandreth," I flung at her, brutally. "In spite of what I've said, you're afraid of me. I give you my most sacred word that you shall be protected if you will help, as you alone can, to save Ralston Murray. It is only if you *refuse* your help that you may suffer. In that case, my

husband and I will fight for our friend. We won't consider you at all. Now that we have a strong clue to this seeming mystery, and it is already close to our hands, everything that you have done or have not done will soon come out."

The beautiful woman broke down and began to cry. "What I did I had a right to do!" she sobbed. "There was no harm! It was as much for the sake of my husband's future happiness as my own, but if he finds out he'll never love or trust me again. Men are so cruel!"

"Tell me who went to England in your place, when you pretended to sail, and he sha'n't find out. Only ourselves and Ralston Murray need ever know," I urged.

"It was—my twin sister," she gasped, "my sister Mary-Rose Hillier, who sailed on the *Aquitania* as Mrs. Guy Brandreth. It was the only way I could think of, so that I could be near my husband and watch him without his having the slightest suspicion of what was going on. Mary-Rose owed me a lot of money which I couldn't really afford to do without. It was when she was still in England, before she came to America, that I let her have it. My mother was dreadfully ill, and Mary-Rose adored her. She wanted to call in great specialists, and begged me to help her. At first I thought I couldn't. Guy and I are not rich! But he was flirting with a woman—a cat of a woman: you saw her last night. I was nearly desperate. Suddenly an idea came to me. I sold a rope of pearls I had, first getting it copied, and making my sister promise she would do whatever I asked if I sent her the thousand pounds she wanted. You look shocked—I suppose because I bargained over my mother's health. But my husband was more to me than my mother or any one else. Besides, Mother hadn't wished me to marry Guy. She didn't want me to jilt Ralston Murray. I couldn't forgive her for the way she behaved, and I never saw her after my runaway wedding."

"So it was you, and not your sister, who was engaged to Ralston Murray eight years ago!" I couldn't resist.

"Yes. It happened abroad—as you know, perhaps. Mary-Rose was away at a boarding school, and they never met. The whole affair was so short, so quickly over, I doubt if I ever even told Ralston that my sister and I were twins. But he gave me a lot of lovely presents, and refused to take them back—wrote that he'd burn them, pearls and all, if I sent them to him. Yes, the pearls I sold were a gift from him when we were engaged. And there were photographs of Ralston that Mary-Rose wouldn't let me destroy. She kept them herself. She was sorry for Ralston—hearing the story, and seeing some of his letters. She was a romantic

girl, and thought him the ideal man. She was half in love, without having seen him in the flesh."

"That is why she couldn't resist, on the *Aquitania*," I murmured. "When Ralston asked her to marry him, she fell in love with the reality, I suppose. Poor girl, what she must have gone through, unable to tell him the truth, because she'd pledged herself to keep your secret, whatever happened! I begin to see the whole thing now! When your mother died in spite of the specialists, you made the girl come over to this side, without your husband or any one knowing. You hid her in New York. You planned your trip to Europe. You left Washington. Your cabin was taken on the *Aquitania*, and Mary-Rose Hillier sailed as Rosemary Brandreth, wearing clothes of yours, and even using the same perfume."

"You've guessed it," she confessed. "We'd arranged what to do, in case Guy went to the ship with me. But he and I were rather on official terms because of things I'd said about Mrs. Dupont, and he let me travel to New York alone. I learned from a famous theatrical wig-maker how to disguise myself, and I lived in lodgings not half a mile from our house for three months, watching what he did every day. At first I didn't find out much, but later I began to see that I'd done him an injustice. He didn't care seriously for the Dupont woman. It was only a flirtation. So I was in a hurry to get Mary-Rose over here again, and reappear myself."

"Why did you have to insist on her coming back to America?" I asked, trying not to show how disgusted I was with the selfishness of the creature—selfishness which had begun long ago, in throwing Ralston over, and now without a thought had wrecked her sister's life.

"Oh, to have her book her passage in my name and sail for home was the only safe way! All had gone so well, I wouldn't spoil it at the end."

"All had gone well with *you*," I said. "But what about *her*?"

"She didn't tell me what you've told me to-day. I supposed till almost the last that she was just travelling about, as we planned for her to do. The only address I had was Mother's old bank, which was to forward everything to Mary-Rose, on her own instructions. Then, a few weeks ago, she wrote and asked if I could manage without her coming back to America. She said it would make a lot of difference in her life, but she didn't explain what she meant. If she'd made a clean breast of everything I might have thought of some other way out; but——"

"But as *she* didn't, *you* didn't," I finished the sentence. "Oh, how different Mary-Rose Hillier is in heart from her sister Rosemary Brandreth, though their faces are almost identical! She was always thinking of you, and her promise to you. That promise was killing her—that and her love for Ralston Murray. She didn't want his money, and when she found he was determined to make a will in her favour she thought of a way in which everything would come to *you*. It was you he really loved—no doubt she argued with herself—and he wanted you to inherit his fortune. Oh, poor tortured girl!—and I used to suspect that she was mercenary. But, thank Heaven, Ralston didn't die, as he expected so soon to do when he made that hurried will. The woman he truly loves was never married before, and is his legal wife. Now, when she goes back to him and he hears the whole truth he will be so happy that he'll live for years, strong and well."

"I don't believe even you can induce Mary-Rose to go back to Ralston Murray," Mrs. Brandreth said. "She wouldn't think he could forgive her for deceiving him."

"He could forgive her anything after what he went through in losing her," I said. "When you've told me where to find your sister, I will tell her that—and a lot more things besides."

"Well, if you can make her see your point of view!" Mrs. Brandreth grudged. "If *my* secret is kept, I hope Mary-Rose may be happy. I don't grudge her Ralston Murray or his fortune; but when she feels herself *quite* safe as his wife she can pay me my thousand pounds."

"She *has* paid you, and more, with her heart's blood!" I exclaimed. "Where is she?"

"In New York. She told me she could never go to England again after what had happened there. She seems awfully down, and I left her deciding whether she should enter a charitable sisterhood. They take girls without money, if they'll work in the slums, and Mary-Rose was anxious to do that."

"She won't be when she understands what work lies before her across the sea," I retorted.

Even as I spoke—and as Mrs. Guy Brandreth was writing down her sister's address—I mentally marshalled the arguments I would use: the need to save Ralston from himself, and above all from Paul and Gaby Jennings. But, oh, the sudden stab I felt as those names came to my mind!

How keep the secret when Gaby Jennings had known the real Rosemary Brandreth in Baltimore? All the complications would have to be explained to her, if she were not to spread scandal—if she were not to whisper revengefully among her friends: "Ralston Murray isn't really married to his wife. I could have her arrested as a bigamist if I chose!"

It was an awful question, that question of Gaby Jennings. But the answer came like balm, after the stab, and that answer was—"*The pictures.*"

By the time Jim and I reached England again, taking Mary-Rose with us, my tame detective would have got at the truth about the stolen treasures, and who had made the copies. Then all that Ralston need do would be to say: "Tell the lies you want to tell about my wife (who *is* my wife!); spread any gossip at all—and you go to prison, you and your husband. Keep silence, and I will do the same."

Well, we found Mary-Rose in New York. At first she was horrified at sight of us. Her one desire had been to hide. But after I had talked myself nearly dumb, and Jim had got in a word or two edgewise, she began to hope. Even then she would not go back, though, until I had written out her story for Ralston to read. He was to decide, and wire either "Come to me," or "I cannot forgive."

We took her to our hotel, to await the answer; but there something happened which changed the whole outlook. A long cablegram was delivered to me some days before it would be possible to hear from Ralston. It was from Mr. Smith, and said:

> G. J. and husband proved guilty portrait fraud. Woman's father clever old Parisian artist smuggled to England copy pictures. Her career on stage ruined by cocaine and attempt to change friend's jewels for false. When she attempted nursing in war, went to pieces again; health saved by P. J., but would not have married him if he had not pretended to be R. M.'s heir. R. M. so ill I took liberty send for Sir B. D. as you directed. Sir B. D. proved nothing positive against P. J., but suspicion so strong I got rid of couple by springing portrait discoveries on them and threatening arrest. They agreed leave England if allowed do so quietly. Consulted R. M., who wished them to go, and they have already gone. Sir B. D. installed at Manor. Things going better but patient weak. Hope you think I did right.—
>
> SMITH.

I showed this message to Ralston's wife; and she said what I knew she would say: "Oh, let's sail at once! Even if he doesn't want me, I must be *near*."

Of course he did want her. He loved her so much that—it seemed to him—the only person who had to be forgiven was that creature in Washington. Her he forgave because, if it hadn't been for her selfish scheme he would never have met his "life-saving angel."

Yes, that is his name for her now. It is a secret name, yet not so sweet as Jim's for me. But that's a secret! And it's better than "The Brightener."

THE END

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