The Wicked Marquis

E. Phillips Oppenheim

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FRONTISPIECE. See page 92.

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THE WICKED MARQUIS

BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
WILL GREFÉ

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Luncheon at Grosvenor Square was an exceedingly simple meal . . . *Frontispiece*

"Richard Vont was head-keeper at Mandeleys when I succeeded to the title and estates"

"I expect we are all as bad, though," she went on rather gloomily, "even if we are not quite so blatant"

"You're very hard, father," she said simply

THE WICKED MARQUIS

CHAPTER I

Reginald Philip Graham Thursford, Baron Travers, Marquis of Mandeleys, issued, one May morning, from the gloomy precincts of the Law Courts without haste, yet with certain evidences of a definite desire to leave the place behind him. He crossed first the pavement and then the street, piloted here and there by his somewhat obsequious companion, and turned along the Strand, westwards. Then, in that democratic thoroughfare, for the first time since the calamity had happened, his lips were unlocked in somewhat singular fashion.

"Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed, with slow and significant emphasis.

His companion glanced up furtively in his direction. The Marquis, as Marquises should be, was very tall and slim, with high well-shaped nose, very little flesh upon his face, a mouth of uncertain shape and eyes of uncertain colour. His companion, as solicitors to the aristocracy should be, was of a smaller, more rotund and insignificant shape. He had the healthy complexion, however, of the week-end golfer, and he affected a certain unlegal rakishness of attire, much in vogue amongst members of his profession having connections in high circles. In his heart he very much admired the ease and naturalness with which his patron, in the heart of professional London, strode along by his side in a well-worn tweed suit, a collar of somewhat ancient design, and a tie which had seen better days.

"The judge's decision was, without doubt, calamitous," he confessed gloomily.

The Marquis turned in at the Savoy courtyard with the air of an habitué.

"I am in need of a brief rest and some refreshment," he said. "You will accompany me, if you please, Mr. Wadham."

The lawyer acquiesced and felt somehow that he had become the tail end of a procession, the Marquis's entrance and progress through the grillroom towards the smoking-room bar was marked by much deference on the part of porters, cloak-room attendants and waiters, a deference acknowledged in the barest possible fashion, yet in a manner which his satellite decided to make a study of. They reached a retired corner of the smoking room, where the Marquis subsided into the only vacant easy chair, ordered for himself a glass of dry sherry, and left his companion to select his own refreshment and pay for both.

"What," the former enquired, "is the next step?"

"There is, alas!" Mr. Wadham replied, "no next step."

"Exactly what do you mean by that?" the Marquis demanded, knitting his brows slightly as he sipped his sherry.

"We have reached the end," the lawyer pronounced. "The decision given by the Court to-day is final."

The Marquis set down his glass. The thing was absurd!

"Surely," he suggested, "the House of Lords remains?"

"Without a doubt, your lordship," Mr. Wadham assented, "but it is of no use to us in the present instance. The judge of the Supreme Court—this is, by-the-by, our third appeal—has delivered a final decision."

The Marquis seemed vaguely puzzled.

"The House of Lords," he persisted, "remains surely a Court of Appeal for members of my order whose claims to consideration are not always fully recognised in the democracy of the common law court."

"I fear," Mr. Wadham replied, with a little cough, "that the House of Lords is supposed to have other functions."

"Other functions?"

"In an indirect sort of fashion," Mr. Wadham continued, "it is supposed to assist in the government of the country."

"God bless my soul!" the Marquis exclaimed.

There was a queer, intangible silence. The lawyer was quite aware that a storm was brewing, but as his distinguished client never lost his temper or showed annoyance in any of the ordinary plebeian ways, he was conscious of some curiosity as to what might happen next.

"You mean to say, then," the Marquis continued, "that for the rest of my days, and in the days of those who may succeed me, that edifice, that cottage which for generations has sheltered one of the family retainers, is to remain the property of—of an alien?"

"I fear that that is the decision of the court," the lawyer admitted. "The deed of gift was exceptionally binding."

The Marquis shook his head. The thing was incomprehensible.

"I can stand upon the roof of Mandeleys," he said, "and I can look north, south, east and west, and in no direction can I look off my own land. Yet you mean to tell me that almost in my garden there is to remain a demesne which can be occupied by any Tom, Dick or Harry which its nominal owner chooses to place in possession?"

The lawyer signed to the waiter for their glasses to be replenished.

"It is certainly not justice, your lordship," he admitted,—"it is not even reasonable—but it is the law."

The Marquis produced a gold cigarette case, absently lit a cigarette, and returned the case to his pocket without offering it to his companion. He smoked meditatively and sipped his second glass of sherry.

"A state of things," he declared, "has been revealed to me which I cannot at present grasp. I must discuss the matter with Robert—with my son-in-law, Sir Robert Lees. He is an intensely modern person, and he may be able to suggest something."

"Sir Robert is a very clever man," the lawyer acknowledged, "but failing an arrangement with the tenant himself, I cannot see that there is anything further to be done. We have, in short, exhausted the law."

"A process," the Marquis observed sympathetically, "which I fear that you must have found expensive, Mr. Wadham."

"The various suits into which we have entered on behalf of your lordship, and the costs which we have had to pay," the latter hastened to announce, "amount, I regret to say, to something over eighteen thousand pounds."

"Dear me!" his companion sighed. "It seems quite a great deal of money."

"Since we are upon the subject," the lawyer proceeded, "my firm has suggested that I should approach your lordship with regard to some means of—pardon me—reducing the liability in question."

So far as the face of Mr. Wadham's client was capable of expressing anything, it expressed now a certain amount of surprise.

"It appears to me, Mr. Wadham," he remarked, "that you are asking me to attend to your business for you."

The lawyer knitted his brows in puzzled fashion.

"I am not sure that I quite follow your lordship," he murmured.

"Do I employ you," his patron continued, "to manage my estates, to control my finances, to act as agent to all my properties, and yet need to keep a perspective myself of my various assets? If eighteen thousand pounds is required, it is for your firm to decide from what quarter the money should come. Personally, as you know, I never interfere."

Mr. Wadham coughed in somewhat embarrassed fashion.

"As a matter of fact, your lordship," he confessed, with a most illogical sense that it was his duty to apologise for his client's impecuniosity, "as a matter of fact, neither my partners nor I can at the present moment see where a sum of eighteen thousand pounds can be raised."

The Marquis rose to his feet and shook the cigarette ash carefully from his coat.

"Our conversation, Mr. Wadham," he said, "is reaching a stage which bores me. I have just remembered, too," he added, with a glance at the clock, "that my daughter is entertaining a few friends to lunch. You must write to Merridrew. He is really a most excellent agent. He will tell you what balances are likely to be available during the next few months."

Mr. Wadham received the suggestion without enthusiasm.

"We made an application to Mr. Merridrew some few weeks ago," he remarked, "as we needed some ready money for the purpose of briefing the barristers. Mr. Merridrew's reply was not encouraging."

"Ah!" the Marquis murmured. "Merridrew is a gloomy dog sometimes. Try him again. It is astonishing how elastic he can be if he is squeezed."

"I am afraid your lordship has done all the squeezing," the solicitor observed ruefully.

A little trill of feminine laughter rang through the room. Two smartly attired young ladies were seated upon a divan near the door, surrounded by a little group of acquaintances. One of them leaned forward and nodded as the Marquis and his companion passed.

"How do you do, Marquis?" she said, in distinctly transatlantic accents.

The behaviour of his client, under such circumstances, remained an object lesson to Mr. Wadham for the rest of his life. The Marquis gazed with the faintest expression of surprise at, or perhaps through, the young person who had addressed him. Fumbling for a moment in his waistcoat pocket, he raised a horn-rimmed monocle to his eye, dropped it almost at once, and passed on without the flicker of an eyelid. On their way to the outside door, however, he shook his head gravely.

"What a singular exhibition," he murmured,—"demonstration, perhaps I should say—of the crudeness of modern social intercourse! Was it my fancy, Wadham, or did the young person up there address me?"

"She certainly did," the other assented. "She even called you by name."

They were standing in the courtyard now, waiting for a taxi, and the Marquis sighed.

"In a public place, too!" he murmured. "Wadham, I am afraid that we are living in the wrong age. I came to that conclusion only a few days ago, when I was invited, actually invited, to dine at the house of— But I forget, Wadham, I forget. Your grandfather would appreciate these things. You yourself are somewhat imbued, I fear, with the modern taint. A handful of silver, if you please," he added, holding out his hand. "I am not accustomed to these chance conveyances."

The lawyer searched his trousers pockets, and produced a couple of pink notes and a few half-crowns. In some mysterious fashion, the whole seemed to pass into the Marquis's long, aristocratic hand. He turned to the porter who was standing bare-headed, and slipped a ten-shilling note into his palm.

"Well, good morning, Wadham," he said, stepping into his taxicab. "I have no doubt that you did your best, but this morning's unfortunate happening will take me some time to get over. My compliments to your senior partner. You can say that I am disappointed—no more."

The Marquis crossed his legs and leaned back in the vehicle. Mr. Wadham remained upon the pavement, gazing for a moment at his empty hand.

"Taxi, sir?" the hall porter asked obsequiously.

Mr. Wadham felt in all his pockets.

"Thank you," he replied gloomily, "I'll walk."

CHAPTER II

Lady Letitia Thursford, the only unmarried daughter of the Marquis, stood in a corner of the spacious drawing-room at 94 Grosvenor Square, talking to her brother-in-law. Sir Robert, although he wanted his luncheon very badly and, owing to some mistake, had come a quarter of an hour too soon, retained his customary good nature. He always enjoyed talking to his favourite relation-in-law.

"I say, Letty," he remarked, screwing his eyeglass into his eye and looking around, "you're getting pretty shabby here, eh?"

Lady Letitia smiled composedly.

"That is the worst of you *nouveaux riches*," she declared. "You do not appreciate the harmonising influence of the hand of Time. This isn't shabbiness, it's tone."

"*Nouveaux riches*, indeed!" he repeated. "Better not let your father hear you call me names!"

"Father wouldn't care a bit," she replied. "As for this drawing-room, Robert, well, sixty years ago it must have been hideous. To-day I rather like it. It is absolutely and entirely Victorian, even to the smell."

Sir Robert sniffed vigorously.

"I follow you," he agreed. "Old lavender perfume, ottomans, high-backed chairs, chintzes that look as though they came out of the ark, and a few mouldy daguerreotypes. The whole thing's here, all right."

"Perhaps it's just as well for us that it is," she observed. "I have come to the conclusion that furniture people are the least trustful in the world. I don't think even dad could get a van-load of furniture on credit."

Sir Robert nodded sympathetically. He was a pleasant-looking man, a little under middle age, with bright, alert expression, black hair and moustache, and perhaps a little too perfectly dressed. He just escaped being called dapper.

"Chucking a bit more away in the Law Courts, isn't he?"

Letitia indulged in a little grimace.

"Not even you could make him see reason about that," she sighed. "He is certain to lose his case, and it must be costing him thousands."

"Dashed annoying thing," Sir Robert remarked meditatively, "to have a cottage within a hundred yards of your hall door which belongs to some one else."

"It is annoying, of course," Letitia assented, "but there is no doubt whatever that Uncle Christopher made it over to the Vonts absolutely, and I don't see how we could possibly upset the deed of gift. I am now," she continued, moving towards a stand of geraniums and beginning to snip off some dead leaves, "about to conclude the picture. You behold the maiden of bygone days who condescended sometimes to make herself useful."

The scissors snipped energetically, and Sir Robert watched his sister-in-law. She was inclined to be tall, remarkably graceful in a fashion of her own, a little pale, with masses of brown hair, and eyes which defied any sort of colour analysis. But what Sir Robert chiefly loved about her were the two little lines of humour at the corners of her firm, womanly mouth.

"Yes, you're in the setting all right, Letty," he declared, "and yet you are rather puzzling. Just now you look as though you only wanted the crinoline and the little curls to be some one's grandmother in her youth. Yet at that picture show the other night you were quite the most modern thing there."

"It's just how I'm feeling," she confided, with a little sigh, standing back and surveying her handiwork. "I have that rare gift, you know, Robert, of governing my personality from inside. When I am in this room, I feel Victorian, and I am Victorian. When I hear that Russian man's music which is driving every one crazy just now—well, I feel and I suppose I look different. Here's Meg coming. How well she looks!"

They watched the motor-car draw up outside, and the little business of Lady Margaret Lees's descent carried out in quite the best fashion. A footman stood at the door, a grey-haired butler in plain clothes adventured as far as the bottom step; behind there was just the suggestion of something in livery.

"Yes, Meg's all right," Sir Robert replied. "Jolly good wife she is, too. Why

don't you marry, Letty?"

"Perhaps," she laughed, leaning a little towards him, "because I did not go to a certain house party at Raynham Court, three years ago."

"Are you conceited enough," he inquired, "to imagine that I should have chosen you instead of Meg, if you had been there?"

"Perhaps I should have been a little too young," she admitted. "Why haven't you a brother, Robert?"

"I don't believe you'd have married him, if I had," he answered bluntly. "I'm not really your sort, you know."

Lady Margaret swept in, very voluble but a little discursive.

"Isn't this just like Bob!" she exclaimed. "I believe he always comes here early on purpose to find you alone, Letty! Who's coming to lunch, please? And where's dad?"

"Father should be on his way home from the Law Courts by now," Letitia replied, "and I am afraid it's a very dull luncheon for you, Meg. Aunt Caroline is coming, and an American man she travelled over on the steamer with. I am not quite sure whether she expects to let Bayfield to him or offer him to me as a husband, but I am sure she has designs."

"The Duchess is always so helpful," Robert grunted.

"So long as it costs her nothing," Lady Margaret declared, "nothing makes her so happy as to put the whole world to rights."

"Here she comes—in a taxicab, too," Sir Robert announced, looking out of the window. "She is getting positively penurious."

"She is probably showing off before the American," Lady Margaret remarked. "She is always talking about living in a semi-detached house and making her own clothes. Up to the present, though, she has stuck to Worth."

The Duchess, who duly arrived a few moments later, brought with her into the room a different and essentially a more cosmopolitan atmosphere. She was a

tall, fair woman, attractive in an odd sort of way, with large features, a delightful smile, and a habit of rapid speech. She exchanged hasty greetings with every one present and then turned back towards the man who had followed her into the room.

"Letty dear, this is Mr. David Thain—Lady Letitia Thursford. I told you about Mr. Thain, dear, didn't I? This is almost his first visit to England, and I want every one to be nice to him. Mr. Thain, this is my other niece, Lady Margaret Lees, and her husband, Sir Robert Lees. Where's Reginald?"

"Father will be here directly," Letitia replied. "If any one's famished, we can commence lunch."

"Then let us commence, by all means," the Duchess suggested. "I have been giving the whole of the morning to Mr. Thain, improving his mind and showing him things. We wound up with the shops—although I am sure Alfred's tradespeople are no use to any one."

Letitia moved a few steps towards the bell, and on her way back she encountered the somewhat earnest gaze of her aunt's protégé. Even in those few moments since his entrance, she had been conscious of a somewhat different atmosphere in the faded but stately room. He had the air of appraising everything yet belonging nowhere, of being wholly out of touch with an environment which he could scarcely be expected to understand or appreciate. He was not noticeably ill-at-ease. On the other hand, his deportment was too rigid for naturalness, and she was conscious of some quality in his rather too steadfast scrutiny of herself which militated strongly against her usual toleration. He seemed to stand for events, and in the lives which they mostly lived, events were ignored.

The butler opened the door and announced luncheon. They crossed the very handsome, if somewhat empty hall, into the sombre, mahogany-furnished dining room, the walls of which were closely hung with oil paintings. Letitia motioned the stranger to sit at her right hand, and fancied that he seemed a little relieved at this brief escape from his cicerone. Having gone so far, however, she ignored him for several moments whilst she watched the seating of her other guests. Her brother-in-law she drew to the vacant place on her left.

"I dare say father will lunch at the club," she whispered. "Aunt Caroline always ruffles him."

"I am afraid he will have found something down Temple Bar way to ruffle him a great deal more this morning," Sir Robert replied.

The door of the dining room was at that moment thrown open, however, and the Marquis entered. Pausing for a moment on the threshold, in line with a long row of dingy portraits, there was something distinctly striking in the family likeness so mercilessly reproduced in his long face, with the somewhat high cheek bones, his tall, angular figure, the easy bearing and gracious smile. One missed the snuffbox from between his fingers, and the uniform, but there was yet something curiously unmodern in the appearance of this last representative of the Mandeleys.

"Let no one disturb themselves, pray," he begged. "I am a little late. My dear Caroline, I am delighted to see you," he went on, raising his sister's fingers to his lips. "Margaret, I shall make no enquiries about your health! You are looking wonderfully well to-day."

The Duchess glanced towards her protégé, who had risen to his feet and stood facing his newly arrived host. There was a moment's poignant silence. The two men, for some reason or other, seemed to regard each other with no common interest.

"This is my friend, Mr. David Thain," the Duchess announced,—"my brother, the Marquis of Mandeleys. Mr. Thain is an American, Reginald."

The Marquis shook hands with his guest, a form of welcome in which he seldom indulged.

"Any friend of yours, Caroline," he said quietly, "is very welcome to my house. Robert," he added, as he took his seat, "they tell me that you were talking rubbish about agriculture in the House last night. Why do you talk about agriculture? You know nothing about it. You are not even, so far as I remember, a landed proprietor."

Sir Robert smiled.

"And therefore, sir, I am unprejudiced."

"No one can talk about land, nowadays, without being prejudiced," his father-in-law rejoined.

"Father," Letitia begged, "do tell us about the case."

The Marquis watched the whiskey and soda with which his glass was being filled.

"The case, my dear," he acknowledged, "has, I am sorry to say, gone against me. A remarkably ill-informed and unattractive looking person, whom they tell me will presently be Lord Chief Justice, presumed not only to give a decision which was in itself quite absurd, but also refused leave to appeal."

"Sorry to hear that, sir," Sir Robert remarked. "Cost you a lot of money, too, I'm afraid."

"I believe that it has been an expensive case," the Marquis admitted. "My lawyer seemed very depressed about it."

"And you mean to say that it's really all over and done with now?" Lady Margaret enquired.

"For the present, it certainly seems so," the Marquis replied. "I cannot believe, personally, that the laws of my country afford me no relief, under the peculiar circumstances of the case. According to Mr. Wadham, however, they do not."

"What is it all about, anyway, Reginald?" his sister asked. "I have heard more than once but I have forgotten. Whenever I look in the paper for a divorce case, I nearly always see your name against the King, or the King against you, with a person named Vont also interested. Surely the Vont family have been retainers down at Mandeleys for generations? I remember one of them perfectly well."

The Marquis cleared his throat.

"The unfortunate circumstances," he said, "are perhaps little known even amongst the members of my own family. Perhaps it will suffice if I say that, owing to an indiscretion of my uncle and predecessor, the eleventh Marquis, a gamekeeper's cottage and small plot of land, curiously situated in the shadow of Mandeleys, became the property of a yeoman of the name of Vont. This ill-advised and singular action of my late uncle is complicated by the fact that the inheritors of his bounty have become, as a family, inimical to their patrons. Their present representative, for instance, is obsessed by some real or fancied

grievance upon which I scarcely care to dilate. For nearly twenty years," the Marquis continued ruminatively, "the cottage has been empty except for the presence of an elderly person who died some years ago. Since then I have, through my lawyers, endeavoured, both by purchase and by upsetting the deed of gift, to regain possession of the property. The legal owner appears to be domiciled in America, and as he has been able to resist my lawsuits and has refused all my offers of purchase, I gather that in that democratic country he has amassed a certain measure of wealth. We are now confronted with the fact that this person announces his intention of returning to England and taking up his residence within a few yards of my front door."

Sir Robert laughed heartily.

"Upon my word, sir," he exclaimed, "it's a humorous situation!"

The Marquis was unruffled but bitter.

"Your sense of humour, my dear Robert," he said, "suffers, I fear, from your daily associations in the House of Commons."

The man by Letitia's side suddenly leaned forward. After the smooth and pleasant voice of the Marquis, his question, with its slight transatlantic accent, sounded almost harsh.

"What did you say that man's name was, Marquis?"

"Richard Vont," was the courteous reply. "The name is a singular one, but America is a vast country. I imagine it is scarcely possible that in the course of your travels you have come across a person so named?"

"A man calling himself Richard Vont crossed in the steamer with me, three weeks ago," David Thain announced. "I have not the least doubt that this is the man who is coming to occupy the cottage you speak of."

"It is indeed a small world," the Marquis remarked. "I will not inflict this family matter upon you all any longer. After lunch, perhaps, you will spare me a few moments of your time, Mr.—Mr. Thain. I shall be interested to hear more about this person."

Letitia rose, presently, to leave the room. Whilst she waited for her aunt to

conclude a little anecdote, she glanced with some interest at the man by her side. More than ever the sense of his incongruity with that atmosphere seemed borne in upon her, yet she was forced to concede to him, notwithstanding the delicacy of his appearance, a certain unexpected strength, a forcefulness of tone and manner, which gave him a certain distinction. He had risen, waiting for her passing, and one lean brown hand gripped the back of the chair in which she had been sitting. She carried away with her into the Victorian drawing-room, with its odour of faded lavender, a queer sense of having been brought into momentary association with stronger and more vital things in life.

CHAPTER III

Sir Robert preferred to join his wife and sister-in-law in the drawing-room after luncheon. The Marquis, with a courteous word of invitation, led his remaining guest across the grey stone hall into the library beyond—a sparsely furnished and yet imposing looking apartment, with its great tiers of books and austere book cases. On his way, he drew attention carelessly to one or two paintings by old masters, and pointed out a remarkable statue presented by a famous Italian sculptor to his great-grandfather and now counted amongst the world's treasures. His guest watched and observed in silence. There was nothing of the uncouth sight-seer about him, still less of the fulsome dilettante. They settled themselves in comfortable chairs in a pleasant corner of the apartment.

A footman served them with coffee, a second man handed cigars, and the butler himself carried a tray of liqueurs. The Marquis assumed an attitude of complete satisfaction with the world in general.

"I am pleased to have this opportunity of a few words with you, Mr. Thain," he said. "You are quite comfortable in that chair, I trust?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"And my Larangas are not too mild? You will find darker-coloured cigars in the cabinet by your side."

"Thank you," David Thain replied, "I smoke only mild tobacco."

"Personally," the Marquis sighed, "I can go no further than cigarettes. A vice, perhaps," he added, watching the blue smoke curl upwards, "but a fascinating one. So you came across this man Vont on the steamer. Might I ask under what circumstances?"

"Richard Vont, as I think he called himself," was the quiet reply, "shared a cabin in the second class with my servant. I was over there once or twice and talked with him."

"That is very interesting," the Marquis observed. "He travelled second class, eh? And yet the man has many thousands to throw away in these absurd lawsuits with me."

"He may have money," Thain pointed out, "and yet feel more at home in the second class. I understood that he had been a gamekeeper in England and was returning to his old home."

"Did he speak of his purpose in doing so?"

"On the contrary, he was singularly taciturn. All that I could gather from him was that he was returning to fulfill some purpose which he had kept before him for a great many years."

The Marquis sighed. On his high, shapely forehead could be traced the lines of a regretful frown.

"I was sure of it," he groaned. "The fellow is returning to make himself a nuisance to me. He did not tell you his story, then, Mr. Thain?"

"He showed no inclination to do so—in fact he avoided so far as possible all discussion of his past."

"Richard Vont," the Marquis continued, raising his eyes to the ceiling, "was one of those sturdy, thick-headed, unintelligent yeomen who have been spoiled by the trifle of education doled out to their grandfathers, their fathers and themselves. A few hundred years ago they formed excellent retainers to the nobles under whose patronage they lived. To-day, in these hideously degenerate days, Mr. Thain, when half the world has moved forward and half stood still,

they are an anachronism. They find no seemly place in modern life."

David Thain sat very still. There was just a little flash in his eyes, which came and went as sunlight might have gleamed across naked steel.

"But I must not forget," his host went on tolerantly, "that I am speaking now to one who must to some extent have lost his sense of social proportion by a prolonged sojourn in a country where life is more or less a jumble."

"You refer to America?"

"Naturally! As a country resembling more than anything a gigantic sausage machine wherein all races and men of all social status are broken up on the wheel, puffed up with false ideas, and thrown out upon the world, a newly fledged, cunning, but singularly ignorant race of individuals, America possesses great interest to those—to those, in short," the Marquis declared, with a little wave of the hand, "whom such things interest. I am English, my forefathers were Saxon, my instincts are perhaps feudal. That is why I regard the case of Richard Vont from a point of view which you might possibly fail to appreciate. Would it bore you if I continue?"

"Not in the least," David Thain assured him.

"Richard Vont was head-keeper at Mandeleys when I succeeded to the title and estates, an advent which occurred a few years after my wife's death. He was already occupying a peculiar position there, owing to the generosity of my predecessor, whose life he had had the good fortune to save. He had very foolishly married above him in station—the girl was a school mistress, I believe. When I came to Mandeleys, I found him living there, a widower with one daughter, and a little boy, his nephew. The girl inherited her mother's superiority of station and intellect, and was naturally unhappy. I noticed her with interest, and she responded. Consequences which in the days of our ancestors, Mr. Thain, would have been esteemed an honour to the persons concerned, ensued. Richard Vont, like an ignorant clodhopper, viewed the matter from the wrong standpoint.... You said something, I believe? Pardon me. I sometimes fancy that I am a little deaf in my left ear."

"Richard Vont was head-keeper at Mandeleys when I succeeded to the title and estates."

"Richard Vont was head-keeper at Mandeleys when I succeeded to the title

and estates."

The Marquis leaned forward but David Thain shook his head. His lips had moved indeed, but no word had issued from them.

"So far," his host went on, "the story contains no novel features. I exercised what my ancestors, in whose spirit I may say that I live, would have claimed as an undoubted right. Richard Vont, as I have said, with his inheritance of ill-bestowed education, and a measure of that extraordinary socialistic poison which seems, during the last few generations, to have settled like an epidemic in the systems of the agricultural classes, resented my action. His behaviour became so intolerable that I was forced to dismiss him from my service, and finally, to avoid a continuance of melodramatic scenes, which were extremely unpleasant to every one concerned, I was obliged to leave England for a time and travel upon the Continent."

"And, in the meantime, what happened at Mandeleys?" David Thain asked.

"Richard Vont and his nephew appear to have left for the United States very soon after my own departure from England. The cottage he left in the care of an elderly relative, who gave little trouble but much annoyance. She attended a Primitive Methodist Chapel in the village, and she passed both myself and the ladies of my household at all times without obeisance."

"Dear me!" David Thain murmured under his breath.

"After her death, I instructed my lawyers to examine the legal title to the Vont property and to see whether there was any chance of regaining it. Its value would be, at the outside, say six or seven hundred pounds. I advertised and offered two thousand, five hundred pounds to regain, it. My solicitors came into touch with the man Vont through an agent in America. His reply to their propositions on my behalf does not bear repetition. I then instructed my lawyers to take such steps as they could to have the deed of gift set aside, sufficient compensation of course being promised. That must have been some eight years ago. My efforts have come to an end to-day. The cottage remains the property of Richard Vont. My own law costs have been considerable, but by some means or other this man Vont has contrived to defend his property at the expenditure of some five or six thousand pounds. One can only conclude that he must have prospered in this strange country of yours, Mr. Thain."

"To a stranger," the latter observed, "it seems curious that this man should have set so high a value upon a property which must be full of painful associations to him."

"The very arguments I made use of in our earlier correspondence," his host assented. "I have told you the story, Mr. Thain, because it occurred to me that this man might have communicated to you his reason for returning after all these years to the neighbourhood."

"He told me nothing."

"Then I have wasted your time with a long and, I fear, a very dull story," the Marquis apologised gracefully. "Shall we join the others?"

"There was just one question, if I might be permitted," David Thain said, "which I should like to ask concerning the story which you have told me. The girl to whom you have alluded—Vont's daughter—what became of her?"

The Marquis for a moment stood perfectly still. He had just risen to his feet and was standing where a gleam of sunlight fell upon his cold and passionless features. His silence had, in its way, a curious effect. He seemed neither to be thinking nor hesitating. He was just in a state of suspense. Presently he leaned forward and knocked the ash from his cigarette into the grate.

"The lady in question," he replied, "has found that place in the world to which her gifts and charm entitle her. I fear that my sister will be getting impatient. My daughter, too, I am sure, would like to improve her acquaintance with you, Mr. Thain."

David Thain was, in his way, an obstinate and self-willed man, but he found himself, for those first few moments, subject to his host's calm but effectual closure of the conversation. Nevertheless, he recovered himself in time to ask that other question as they left the room.

"The lady is alive, then?"

"She is alive," the Marquis acquiesced, in a colourless tone.

A servant threw open the door of the drawing-room. The Marquis motioned to his guest to precede him.

"As I imagined," he murmured, "I see that my sister is impatient. You will forgive me, Caroline," he went on, turning to the Duchess. "Mr. Thain's conversation was most interesting. Letitia, my dear, do press Mr. Thain to dine with us one evening. This afternoon I fear that I have been unduly loquacious. I should welcome another opportunity of conversing with him concerning his wonderful country."

Letitia picked up a little morocco-bound volume from the table and consulted it. Sir Robert drew the prospective guest a little on one side.

"For heaven's sake," he whispered, "don't give the Marquis any financial tips. He has a fancy that he is destined to restore the fortunes of the Mandeleys on the Stock Exchange. He is a delightfully ornamental person, but I can assure you that as a father-in-law he is a distinct luxury."

David Thain smiled grimly.

"I shall be careful," he promised.

CHAPTER IV

The Marquis devoted the remainder of that afternoon, as he did most others, to paying a call. Very soon indeed after David Thain's departure, he left the house, stepped into the motor-car which was waiting for him, and, with a little nod to the chauffeur which indicated his indulgence in a customary enterprise, drove off towards Battersea. Here he descended before a large block of flats overlooking the gardens, stepped into the lift and, without any direction to the porter, was let out upon the sixth floor. He made his way along the corridor to a little mahogany front door, on which was a brass plate inscribed with the name of *Miss Marcia Hannaway*. He rang the bell and was at once admitted by a very trim parlourmaid, who took his hat and cane, and ushered him into a remarkably pleasant little sitting room. A woman, seated before a typewriter, held out two ink-stained hands towards him with a little laugh.

"I've been putting a ribbon in," she confessed. "Did you ever see such a mess!

Please make yourself comfortable while I go and wash."

The Marquis glanced with a slight frown at the machine, and, taking her wrists, stooped down and kissed them lightly.

"My dear Marcia," he expostulated, "is this necessary!"

She shook her head with a droll smile.

"Perhaps if it were," she confessed, "I should hate to do it. There's a *Nineteenth Century* on the sofa. You can read my article."

She hurried out of the room, from which she was absent only a very few moments. The Marquis, with a finger between the pages of the review which he had been reading, looked up as she re-entered. She was a woman of nameless gifts, of pleasant if not unduly slim figure. Her forehead was perhaps a little low, her eyes brilliant and intelligent, her mouth large and exceedingly mobile. She was not above the allurements of dress, for her house gown, with its long tunic trimmed with light fur, was of fashionable cut and becoming. Her fingers, cleansed now from the violet stains, were shapely, almost elegant. She threw herself into an easy chair opposite her visitor, and reached out her hand for a cigarette.

"Well," she asked, "and how has the great trial ended?"

"Adversely," the Marquis confessed.

"You foolish person," she sighed, lighting the cigarette and throwing the match away. "Of course you were bound to lose, and I suppose it's cost you no end of money."

"I believe," he admitted, a little stiffly, "that my lawyers are somewhat depressed at the amount."

She smoked in silence for a moment.

"So he will go back to Mandeleys. It is a queer little fragment of life. What on earth does he want to do it for?"

"Obstinacy," the Marquis declared,—"sheer, brutal, ignorant obstinacy."

"And the boy?" she asked, pursuing her own train of thought. "Have you heard anything of him?"

"Nothing. To tell you the truth, I have made no enquiries. Beyond the fact that it seems as though, for the present, Richard Vont will have his way, I take no interest in either of them."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"If only we others," she sighed, "could infuse into our lives something of the marvellous persistence of these people whom in other respects we have left so far behind!"

"My dear Marcia," he protested, "surely, with your remarkable intelligence, you can see that such persistence is merely a form of narrow-mindedness. Your father has shut in his life and driven it along one narrow groove. To you every day brings its fresh sensation, its fresh object. Hence—coupled, of course, with your natural gifts—your success. The person who thinks of but one thing in life must be indeed a dull dog."

"Very excellent reasoning," she admitted. "Still, to come back to this little tragedy—for it is a tragedy, isn't it?—have you any idea what he means to do when he gets to Mandeleys?"

"None at all!"

"Let me see," she went on, "it is nineteen years ago last September, isn't it?—nineteen years out of the middle of his life. Will he sit in the garden and brood, I wonder, or has he brought back with him some scheme of mediaeval revenge?"

"There was a time," the Marquis reflected, "when several of my Irish tenants used to shoot at me every Saturday night from behind a hedge. It was not in the least a dangerous operation, and I presume it brought them some relief. With Vont, however, things would be different. I remember him distinctly as a most wonderful shot."

"Psychologically," Marcia Hannaway observed, "his present action is interesting. If he had shot you or me in his first fit of passionate resentment, everything would have been in order, but to leave the country, nurse a sullen feeling of revenge for years, and then come back, seems curious. What shall you

do when you see him sitting in his garden?"

"I shall address him," the Marquis replied. "I fear that his long residence in such a country as America will have altered him considerably, but it is of course possible that the instincts of his class remain."

"How feudal you are!" she laughed.

The Marquis frowned slightly. Although this was the one person in the world whom he felt was necessary to him, who held a distinct place in his very inaccessible heart, there were times when he entertained a dim suspicion that she was making fun of him. At such times he was very angry indeed.

"In any case," he said, "we will not waste our time in speculating upon this man's attitude. I am still hoping that I may be able to devise means to render his occupancy of the cottage impossible."

"I should like to hear about the boy."

"If," the Marquis promised, "I find Vont's attitude respectful, I will make enquiries."

"When are you going to Mandeleys?" she asked.

"I am in no hurry to leave London," he replied.

"When you go," she told him, "I have made up my mind to take a little holiday. I thought even of going to the South of France."

The lines of her companion's forehead were slightly elevated.

"My dear Marcia," he protested gently, "is that like you? The class of people who frequent the Riviera at this time of the year—"

She laughed at him delightfully.

"Oh, you foolish person!" she interrupted. "If I go, I shall go to a tiny little boarding house, or take a villa in one of the quiet places—San Raphael, perhaps, or one of those little forgotten spots between Hyères and Cannes. Phillis Grant would go with me. She isn't going to act again until the autumn season."

Her visitor's expression was a little blank.

"In the case of your departure from London," he announced, in a very even but very forlorn tone, "I will instruct Mr. Wadham to make a suitable addition to your allowance. At the same time, Marcia," he added, "I shall miss you."

His words were evidently a surprise to her. She threw away her cigarette and came and sat on the sofa by his side.

"Do you know, I believe you would," she murmured, resting her hand upon his. "How queer!"

"I have never concealed my affection for you, have I?" he asked.

This time the laugh which broke from her lips was scarcely natural.

"Concealed your affection, Reginald!" she repeated. "How strangely that sounds! But listen. You said something just now about my allowance. If I allude to it in return, will you believe that it is entirely for your sake?"

"Of course!"

She rose from her chair and, crossing the room, rummaged about her desk for a moment, produced a letter, and brought it to him. The Marquis adjusted his horn-rimmed eyeglass and read:

Dear Madam:

We feel that some explanation is due to you with regard to the non-payment for the last two quarters of your allowance from our client, the Marquis of Mandeleys. We have to inform you that for some time past we have had no funds in our possession to pay this allowance. We informed his lordship of the fact, some time back, but in our opinion his lordship scarcely took the circumstance seriously. We think it better, therefore, that you should communicate with him on the subject.

Faithfully yours,
WADHAM, SON AND DICKSON.

The Marquis deliberately folded up the letter, placed his eyeglass in his pocket, and sat looking into the fire. There was very little change in his face. Only Marcia, to whom he had been the study of a lifetime, knew that so far as suffering was possible to him, he was suffering at that moment.

"You mustn't think it matters," she said gently. "You know my last novel was quite a wonderful success, and for that article in the *Nineteenth* you were looking at, they gave me twenty guineas. I am really almost opulent. Still, I thought it was better for you to know this. The same thing might refer to other and more important matters, and you know, dear, you are rather inclined to walk with your head in the air where money matters are concerned."

"You have been very considerate, but foolishly so, my dear Marcia," he declared. "This matter must be put right at once. I fear that a younger element has obtruded itself into the firm of Wadham, an element which scarcely grasps the true position. I will see these people, Marcia."

"You are not to worry about it," she begged softly. "To tell you the truth—"

Marcia was a brave woman, and the moment had come up to which she had been leading for so long, which for many months, even years, had been in her mind. And when it came she faltered. There was something in the superb, immutable poise of the man who bent a little courteously towards her, which checked the words upon her lips.

"It will be no trouble to me, Marcia, to set this little affair right," he assured her. "I am only glad that your circumstances have been such that you have not been inconvenienced. At the same time, is it entirely necessary for you to manipulate that hideous machine yourself?" he enquired, inclining his head towards the typewriter.

"There are times," she confessed, "when I find it better. Of course, I send a great deal of my work out to be typed, but my correspondence grows, and my friends find my handwriting illegible."

"I have never found it difficult," he remarked.

"Well, you've had a good many years to get used to it," she reminded him.

His hand rested for a moment upon her shoulder. He drew her a little towards him. She suddenly laughed, leaned over and kissed him on both cheeks, and jumped up. The trim little parlourmaid was at the door with tea.

"Yes," she went on, "you have learned to read my handwriting, and I have learned how you like your tea. Just one or two more little things like that, and life is made between two people, isn't it? Shall I tell you what I think the most singular thing in the world?" she went on, pausing for a moment in her task. "It is fidelity to purpose—and to people, too, perhaps. In a way there is a quaint sort of distinction about it, and from another point of view it is most horribly constraining."

"I interrupted you this afternoon, I imagine," he observed, "in the construction of some work of fiction."

"Oh, no!" she replied. "What I write isn't fiction. That's why it sells. It's truth, you see, under another garb. But there the fact remains—that I shouldn't know how to make tea for another man in the world, and you wouldn't be able to read the letters of any other woman who wrote as badly as I do."

"The fact," he remarked, "seems to me to be a cause for mutual congratulation."

She stooped down to place a dish of muffins on a heater near the fire, graceful yet as a girl, and as brisk.

"I can't imagine," she declared, "why it is that my sex has acquired the reputation for fidelity. I am sure we crave for experience much more than men."

The Marquis helped himself to a muffin and considered the point. There were many times when Marcia's conversation troubled him. He was by no means an ill-read or unintellectual man, only his studies of literature had been confined to its polished and classical side, the side which deals so much with living and so little with life.

"Are you preparing for a new work of fiction, Marcia," he asked, "or are you developing a fresh standpoint?"

"Dear friend," she declared, lightly and yet with an undernote of earnestness, "how can I tell? I never know what I am going to do in the way of work. I wish I

could say the same about life. Now I am going to ask you a great favour. I have to attend a small meeting at my club, at the other end of Piccadilly, at half-past five. Would you take me there?"

"I shall be delighted," he answered, a little stiffly.

She went presently to put on her outdoor clothes. The Marquis was disappointed. He realised how much he had looked forward to that quiet twilight hour, when somehow or other his vanity felt soothed, and that queer weariness which came over him sometimes was banished. He escorted Marcia to the car when she reappeared, however, without complaint.

"I see your name in the papers sometimes, Marcia," he observed as he took his place by her side, "in connection with women's work. Of course, I do not interfere in any way with your energies. I should not, in whatever direction they might chance to lead you. At the same time, I must confess that I have noticed with considerable pleasure that you have never been publicly associated with this movement in favour of Woman's Suffrage."

She nodded.

"I should like a vote myself," she admitted simply, "but when I think of the number of other women who would have to have it, and who don't yet look at life seriously at all, I think we are better as we are. Is it my fancy," she went on, a little abruptly, "or are you really troubled about the return of—of Richard Vont?"

"As usual, Marcia," he said, "you show a somewhat extraordinary perception where I am concerned. I am, as you know, not subject to presentiments, and I have no exact apprehension of what the word fear may mean. At the same time, you are right. I do view the return of this man with a feeling which you, as a novelist, might be able to analyse, but which I, as a layman, unused to fresh sentiments, find puzzling. You remember what a famous Frenchman wrote in his memoirs, suddenly, across one blank page of his journal—'To-day I feel that a great change is coming.'"

She smiled reassuringly.

"Personally," she told him, "I believe that it is just the call of England to a man who lived very near the soil—her heart. I think he wants the smell of spring

flowers, the stillness of an English autumn, the winds of February in the woods he was brought up in. It is a form of heart-sickness, you know. I have felt it myself so often. It is scarcely possible that after all these years he is still nursing that bitter hatred of us both."

The car had reached the great building in which Marcia's club was situated. The Marquis handed her out.

"I trust that you are right," he remarked. "You will allow me to leave the car for you?"

She shook her head.

"There are so many women here with whom I want to talk," she said. "I may even stay and dine. And would you mind not coming until Wednesday? To-morrow I must work all day at an article which has to be typed and catch the Wednesday's boat for America."

"Exactly as you wish," he assented.

She waved her hand to him and ran lightly up the steps. The Marquis threw himself back in his car and hesitated. The footman was waiting for an address, and his august master was suddenly conscious that the skies were very grey, that a slight rain was falling, and that there was nowhere very much he wanted to go.

The man waited with immovable face.

"To—the club."

CHAPTER V

Messrs. Wadham, Son and Dickson were not habited in luxury. Theirs was one of those old-fashioned suites of offices in Lincoln's Inn, where the passages are of stone, the doors of painted deal, and a general air of bareness and discomfort prevails. The Marquis, who was a rare visitor, followed the directions of a hand painted upon the wall and found himself in what was termed, an

enquiry office. A small boy tore himself away with apparent regret from the study of a pile of documents, and turned a little wearily towards the caller.

"I desire," the Marquis announced, "to see Mr. Wadham, Senior, or to confer at once with any member of the firm who may be disengaged."

The small boy was hugely impressed. He glanced at the long row of black boxes along the wall and a premonition of the truth began to dawn upon him.

"What name, sir?" he enquired.

"The Marquis of Mandeleys."

The office boy swung open a wicket gate and pointed to the hard remains of a horsehair stuffed easy-chair. The Marquis eyed it curiously—and remained standing. His messenger thereupon departed, exhibiting a rare and unlegal haste. He returned breathless, in fact, from his mission, closely followed by Mr. Wadham, Junior.

"This is quite an honour, your lordship," the latter said, hastily withdrawing his hand as he became aware of a certain rigidity in his visitor's demeanour. "My father is disengaged. Let me show you the way to his room."

"I should be obliged," the Marquis assented.

Mr. Wadham, Senior, was an excellent replica of his son, a little fatter, a little rosier and a little more verbose. He rose from behind his desk and bowed twice as his distinguished client entered. The Marquis indicated to Mr. Wadham, Junior, the chair upon which he proposed to sit, and waited while it was wheeled up to the side of the desk. Then he withdrew his gloves in leisurely fashion and extended his hand to the older man, who clasped it reverently.

"Your lordship pays us a rare honour," Mr. Wadham, Senior, observed.

"I should have preferred," the Marquis said, with some emphasis, "that circumstances had not rendered my visit to-day necessary."

The head of the firm nodded sympathetically.

"You will bear in mind," he begged, "our advice concerning these recent

actions."

"Your advice was, without doubt, legally good," his visitor replied, "but it scarcely took into account circumstances outside the legal point of view. However, I am not here to discuss those actions, which I understand are now finally disposed of."

"Quite finally, I fear, your lordship."

"I find myself," the Marquis continued sternly, "in the painful position of having to prefer a complaint against your firm."

"I am very sorry—very sorry indeed," Mr. Wadham murmured.

"I discovered yesterday afternoon, entirely by accident, that the allowance which you have my instructions to make to Miss Hannaway has not been paid for the last two quarters."

"Through no neglect of ours, I assure your lordship," Mr. Wadham insisted gravely. "You will remember that we wrote to you last October, pointing out that the yield from the estates was insufficient, without the help of the bank, to meet the interest on the mortgages, and that, amongst other claims which we were obliged to leave over, we should be unable to forward the usual cheque to the young lady in question."

The Marquis cleared his throat and tapped with his long forefingers upon the desk. It was a curious circumstance that, although both Mr. Wadham, Senior, and Junior had done more than their duty towards their distinguished client, each had at that moment the feeling of a criminal.

"You are, I believe, perfectly well aware, Mr. Wadham," the Marquis declared, "that I never read your letters."

Mr. Wadham, Senior, coughed. His son thrust both hands into his trousers pockets. The statement was unanswerable.

"I was therefore," the Marquis continued severely, "in complete ignorance of your failure to carry out my instructions."

Mr. Wadham, Junior, less affected than his father by tradition, and priding

himself more upon that negligible gift of common sense, interposed respectfully but firmly.

"We can scarcely be responsible," he pointed out, "for your lordship's indisposition to read letters containing business information of importance."

The Marquis changed his position slightly and looked at the speaker. Mr. Wadham, Junior, became during the next few seconds profoundly impressed with the irrelevance, almost the impertinence of his words.

"I should have imagined," the former said severely, "that my habits are well-known to the members of a firm whose connection with my family is almost historical."

"We should have waited upon your lordship," Mr. Wadham, Senior, admitted. "But with reference to the case of this young lady, not hearing from your lordship, we wrote to her, very politely, indicating the great difficulties which we had to face in the management of the Mandeleys estates, owing to the abnormal agricultural depression, and we promised to send her a cheque as soon as such a step became possible. In reply we heard from her—a most ladylike and reasonable letter it was—stating that owing to recent literary successes, and to your lordship's generosity through so many years, she was only too glad of the opportunity to beg us to cease from forwarding the quarterly amount as hitherto. Under those circumstances, we have devoted such small sums of money as have come into our hands to more vital purposes."

"I suppose it did not occur to you," the Marquis observed, "that I am the person to decide what is or is not vital in the disposition of my own moneys."

"That is a fact which we should not presume to dispute," the lawyer admitted, "but I should like to point out that, on the next occasion when we had a little money in hand, your household steward, Mr. Harrison, was here in urgent need of a thousand pounds for the payment of domestic bills connected with the establishment in Grosvenor Square."

"It appears to me," the Marquis said, with a trace of irritability in his tone, "that the greater part of my income goes in paying bills."

The complaint was one which for the moment left Mr. Wadham speechless. He was vaguely conscious that an adequate reply existed, but it eluded him. His

son, who had adopted the attitude of being outside the discussion, was engaged in an abortive attempt to appear as much at ease in his own office as this client of theirs certainly was.

"I will discuss the matter of Miss Hannaway's future allowance with that young lady, and let you know the result," the Marquis announced. "In the meantime, how do we stand for ready money?"

"Ready money, your lordship!" his interlocutor gasped.

"Precisely," the Marquis assented. "It is, I believe, a few days after the period when my tenants usually pay their rents."

"Your lordship," Mr. Wadham said, speaking with every attempt at gravity, "if every one of your tenants paid their full rent and brought it into this office at the present moment, we should still be unable to pay the interest on the mortgages due next month, without further advances from the bank."

"These mortgages," the Marquis remarked thoughtfully, "are a nuisance."

So self-evident a fact seemed to leave little room for comment or denial. The Marquis frowned a little more severely and withdrew his forefingers from the desk.

"Figures, I fear, only confuse me," he confessed, "but for the sake of curiosity, what do my quarterly rents amount to?"

"Between seven and eight thousand pounds, according to deductions, your lordship," was the prompt reply. "That sum I presume will be coming in from your agent, Mr. Merridrew, within the course of a few days. The interest upon the mortgages amounts to perhaps a thousand pounds less than that sum. That thousand pounds, I may be permitted to point out to your lordship, is all that remains for the carrying on of your Grosvenor Square establishment, and for such disbursements as are necessary at Mandeleys."

"It is shameful," the Marquis declared severely, "that any one should be allowed to anticipate their income in this way. Mortgages are most vicious institutions."

Mr. Wadham coughed.

"Your lordship's expenditure, some ten or fifteen years ago, rendered them first necessary. After that there was the unfortunate speculation in the tin mines —"

"That will do, Mr. Wadham," his client interrupted. "All I desire to know from you further is a statement of the approximate sum required to clear off the mortgages upon the Mandeleys estates?"

Mr. Wadham, Senior, looked a little startled. His son stopped whistling under his breath and leaned forward in his chair.

"Clear off the mortgages," he repeated.

"Precisely!"

"The exact figures," was the somewhat hesitating pronouncement, "would require a quarter of an hour's study, but I should say that a sum of two hundred and twenty thousand pounds would be required."

"I have not a head for figures," the Marquis acknowledged gravely, "but the amount seems trifling. I shall wish you good-day now, gentlemen. Two hundred and twenty thousand, I think you said, Mr. Wadham?"

"That is as near the amount as possible," the lawyer admitted.

The Marquis drew on his gloves, a sign that he did not intend to honour his adviser with any familiar form of farewell. He inclined his head slightly to Mr. Wadham, and more slightly still to Mr. Wadham, Junior, who was holding open the door. The small boy, who was on the alert, escorted him to the front steps, and received with delight a gracious word of thanks for his attentions. So the Marquis took his departure.

Mr. Wadham, Junior, closed the door and threw himself into the chair which had been occupied by their distinguished client. There was a faint perfume of lavender water remaining in the atmosphere. His eyes wandered around the further rows of tin boxes which encumbered the wall.

"I suppose," he murmured, "it's a great thing to have a Marquis for one's client."

"I suppose it is," Mr. Wadham, Senior, assented gloomily.

"Father, do you ever feel at ease with him?" his son asked curiously. "Do you ever feel as though you were talking to a real human being, of the same flesh and blood as yourself?"

"Never for a single moment," was the vigorous reply. "If I felt like that, John, do you know what I should do? No? Well, then, I'll tell you. I should have those tin boxes taken out, one by one, and stacked in the hall. I should say to him, as plainly as I am saying it to you—'We lose money every year by your business, Marquis. We've had our turn. Try some one else—and go to the Devil!'"

"But you couldn't do it!" Mr. Wadham, Junior, observed disconsolately.

"I couldn't," his father agreed, with a note of subdued melancholy in his tone.

CHAPTER VI

Lady Margaret, who chanced to be the first arrival on the night of the dinner party in David Thain's honour, contemplated her sister admiringly. Letitia was wearing a gown of ivory satin, a form of attire which seemed always to bring with it almost startling reminiscences of her Italian ancestry.

"So glad to find you alone, Letty," she remarked, as she sank into the most comfortable of the easy chairs. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you for weeks. Bob put it into my head again this afternoon."

"What is it, dear?" Letitia enquired.

"Why don't you marry Charlie Grantham?" her sister demanded abruptly.

"There are so many reasons. First of all, he hasn't really ever asked me."

"You're simply indolent," Lady Margaret persisted. "He'd ask you in five minutes if you'd let him. Do you suppose Bob would ever have thought of marrying me, if I hadn't put the idea into his head?"

"You're so much cleverer than I," Letitia sighed.

"Not in the least," was the prompt disclaimer. "I really doubt whether I have your brains, and I certainly haven't your taste. The only thing that I have, and always had, is common sense, common sense enough to see that girls in our position in life must marry, and the sooner the better."

"Why only our class of life?"

"Don't be silly! It's perfectly obvious, isn't it, that the daughters of the middle classes are having the time of their lives. They are all earning money. Amongst them it has become quite the vogue to take situations as secretaries or milliners or that sort of thing, and it simply doesn't matter whether they marry or not. They get all the fun they want out of life."

"It sounds quite attractive," Letitia admitted. "I think I shall take a course in typewriting and shorthand."

"You won't," Margaret rejoined. "You know perfectly well that that is one of the things we can never do. You've got to marry first. Then you can branch out in life in any direction you choose—art, travel, amours, or millinery. You can help yourself with both hands."

"Which have you chosen, Meg?"

"Oh, I am an exception!" Margaret confessed. "You see, Bob is such fun, and I've never got over the joke of marrying him. Besides, I haven't any craving for things at all. I am not temperamental like you. Where's father?"

"Just back from the country. He'll be here in time, though."

"And who's dining?"

"Charlie, for one," Letitia replied, "Aunt Caroline, of course, and Uncle, Mrs. Honeywell, and the American person. The party was got up on his account, so I expect father wants to borrow money from him."

"He doesn't look an easy lender," Lady Margaret remarked.

"There's no one proof against father," Letitia declared. "He is too exquisitely and transparently dishonest. You know, there's a man's story about the clubs that he once borrowed money from Lewis at five per cent. interest."

Margaret remained in a serious frame of mind.

"Something will have to be done," she sighed. "Robert went down and looked at the mortgages, the other day. He says they are simply appalling, there isn't an acre missed out. It's quite on the cards, you know, Letty, that Mandeleys may have to go."

Letitia made a little grimace.

"I am getting perfectly callous," she confided. "If it did, this house would probably follow, father would realise everything he could lay his hands upon and become the autocrat of some French watering place, and I should cease to be the honest but impecunious daughter of a wicked nobleman, and enjoy the liberty of the middle-class young women you were telling me about. It wouldn't be so bad!"

"Or marry—" Margaret began.

"Mr. David Thain," the butler announced.

The juxtaposition of words perhaps incited in Letitia a greater interest as she turned away from her sister to welcome the first of her guests. He had to cross a considerable space of the drawing-room, with its old-fashioned conglomeration of furniture untouched and unrenovated for the last two generations, but he showed not the slightest sign of awkwardness or self-consciousness in any form. He was slight and none too powerfully built, but his body was singularly erect, and he moved with the alert dignity of a man in perfect health and used to gymnastic training. His clean-shaven face disclosed nervous lines which his manner contradicted. His mouth was unexpectedly hard, his deep-set grey eyes steel-like, almost brilliant. These things made for a strength which had in it, however, nothing of the uncouth. The only singularity about his face and manner, as he took his hostess' fingers, was the absence of any smile of greeting upon his lips.

"I am afraid that I am a little early," he apologised.

"We are all the more grateful to you," Lady Margaret assured him. "Letitia and I always bore one another terribly. A married sister, you know, feels rather like the cuckoo returning to the discarded nest."

"One hates other people's liberty so much," Letitia sighed.

"I should have thought liberty was a state very easy to acquire," David Thain observed didactically.

"That is because you come from a land where all the women are clever and the men tolerant," Letitia replied. "Where is that husband of yours, Margaret?"

"I am ashamed to say," her sister confessed, "that he stayed down in the morning room while Gossett fetched him a glass of sherry. Look at him now," she added, as Sir Robert entered the room unannounced and came smiling towards them. "How can I have any faith in a husband like that. Doesn't he look as though the only thing that could trouble him in life was that he hadn't been able to get here a few minutes earlier!"

"Given away, eh?" the newcomer groaned, as he kissed Letitia's fingers.

"How are you, Mr. Thain? Your country is entirely to blame for my habits. I got so into the habit of drinking cocktails while I was over there that I really prefer my aperitif to my wine at dinner."

Sir Robert, who had discovered within the last few days exactly where Mr. David Thain stood amongst the list of American multi-millionaires, drew this very distinguished person a little on one side to ask about a railway. Then the Marquis made his appearance, and immediately afterwards the remaining guests. David Thain, of whom many of the morning papers, during the last few days, had found something to say, found himself almost insinuated into the position of favoured guest. He took Mrs. Honeywell—a dark and rather tired-looking lady—in to dinner, but he sat at Letitia's left hand, and she gave him a good deal of her attention.

"You know everybody, don't you, Mr. Thain?" she asked him, soon after they had taken their places.

"Except the gentleman on your right," he answered.

She leaned towards him confidentially.

"His name," she whispered, "is Lord Charles Grantham. He is the son of the Duke of Leicester, who is, between ourselves, almost as wicked a duke as my father is a marquis. Fortunately, however, his mother left him a fortune. Do you notice how thoughtful he looks?"

David Thain glanced across the table at the young man in question, who was exchanging rather weary monosyllables with his right-hand neighbour.

"He is perhaps overworked?"

Letitia shook her head.

"Not at all. He cannot make up his mind whether or not he wants to marry me."

"And can you make up your mind whether you wish to marry him?"

Letitia lost for a moment her air of gentle banter.

"What a downright question!" she observed. "However, I can't tell you before I answer him, can I, and he hasn't asked me yet."

"I should think," David Thain said coolly, "that you would make an excellent match."

Their eyes met for a moment. There was a challenging light in hers to which he instantly responded. Her very beautiful white teeth closed for a moment upon her lower lip. Then she smiled upon him once more.

"It is so reassuring," she murmured, "to be told things like that by people who are likely to know. Charles, talk to me at once," she went on, turning towards him. "Mr. Thain and I agree far too perfectly upon everything."

Thain was deep in conversation with his neighbour before Lord Charles was able to disentangle himself from the conversational artifices of the Duchess. Letitia took note of his aptness with a little, malicious smile. It was towards the close of dinner when she once more turned towards him.

"Have you been telling Mrs. Honeywell how you made all your millions?" she asked.

"I have been trying to point out," he replied, "that the first million is all one has to make. The rest comes."

"What a delightful country!" Letitia observed. "If I were to borrow from all my friends and collected a million, do you think I could go out there and become a multi-millionaire?"

"Women are not natural money-makers," he pronounced.

"What is her real sphere?" she asked sweetly. "I should so much like to know your opinion of us."

"As yet," he replied, "I have had no time to form one."

"What a pity!" she sighed. "It would have been so instructive."

"In the small amenities of daily life," he said thoughtfully, "in what one of our writers calls the insignificant arts, women seem inevitably to excel. They always

appear to do better, in fact, in the narrower circles. Directly they step outside, a certain lack of breadth becomes noticeable."

"Dear me!" she murmured. "It's a good thing I'm not one of these modern ladies who stand on a tub in Hyde Park and thump the drum for votes. I should be saying quite disagreeable things to you, Mr. Thain, shouldn't I?"

"You couldn't be one of those, if you tried," he replied. "You see, if I may be permitted to say so, nature has endowed you with rather a rare gift so far as your sex is concerned."

"Don't be over-diffident," she begged. "I may know it, mayn't I?"

"A sense of humour."

"When a man tells a woman that she has a sense of humour," Letitia declared, "it is a sure sign that he—"

She suddenly realised how intensely observant those steely grey eyes could be. She broke off in her sentence. They still held her, however.

"That he what?"

"Such a bad habit of mine," she confided frankly. "I so often begin a sentence and have no idea how to finish it. Ada," she went on, addressing Mrs. Honeywell, "has Mr. Thain taught you how to become a millionairess?"

"I haven't even tried to learn," that lady replied. "He has promised me a subscription to my Cripples' Guild, though."

"What extraordinary bad taste," Letitia remarked, "to cadge from him at dinner time!"

"If your father weren't within hearing," Mrs. Honeywell retorted, "I'd let you know what I think of you as a hostess! Why are we all so frightened of your father, Letitia? Look at him now. He is the most picturesque and kindly object you can imagine, yet I find myself always choosing my phrases, and slipping into a sort of pre-Victorian English, when I fancy that he is listening."

"I see him more from the family point of view, I suppose," Letitia observed,

"and yet, in a way, he is rather a wonderful person. For instance, I have never seen him hurry, I have never seen him angry, in the ordinary sense of the word; in fact he has the most amazing complacency I ever knew. Of course, Aunt Caroline," she went on, turning to the Duchess a few moments later, "if you want to stay with the men, pray do so. If not, you might take into account the fact that I have been trying to catch your eye for the last three minutes."

Thain drew up nearer to his host after the women had withdrawn, and found himself next Sir Robert, who talked railways with eloquence and some understanding. Lord Charles was frankly bored, and bestowed his whole attention upon the port. The Marquis discussed a recent land bill with his brother-in-law, but in a very few moments gave the signal to rise. He attached himself at once to David Thain.

"You play bridge?" he asked.

"Never if I can avoid it," was the frank reply.

"Then you and I will entertain one another," his host suggested.

The Marquis's idea of entertainment was to install his guest in a comfortable chair in a small den at the back of the house, which he kept for his absolutely private use, and to broach the subject which had led to David's welcome at Grosvenor Square.

"Let me ask you," he began, "have you seen anything more of this man Vont?"

"Nothing."

The Marquis looked ruminatively at the cedar spill with which he had just lit his cigarette.

"I am almost certain," he said, "that I saw him on the platform at Raynham—the nearest station to Mandeleys—yesterday. He seemed marvellously little altered."

"He has probably taken up his abode down there, then," David observed.

The Marquis's face darkened. He brushed the subject aside.

"There is a matter concerning which I wish to speak to you, Mr. Thain," he said. "You are one of the fortunate ones of the earth, who have attained, by your own efforts, I believe, an immense prosperity."

David listened in silence, watching the ash at the end of his cigar.

"Your money, my son-in-law, Sir Robert, tells me," the Marquis continued, "has been made in brilliant and sagacious speculation. There have no doubt been others who have followed in your footsteps, and, in a humbler way, have shared your success."

David had developed a rare gift of silence. He smoked steadily, and his expression was remarkably stolid.

"I find myself in need of a sum," the Marquis proceeded, with the air of a man introducing a business proposition, "of two hundred and twenty thousand pounds—there or thereabouts."

There was a momentary gleam of interest in David's eyes, gone, however, almost as soon as it had appeared. For the first time he made a remark.

"Over a million dollars, eh?"

The Marquis inclined his head.

"My position," he continued, "naturally precludes me from making use of any of the ordinary methods by means of which men amass wealth. I have at various times, however, made small but not entirely unsuccessful speculations—upon the Stock Exchange. The position in which I now find myself demands something upon a larger scale."

"What capital," David Thain enquired, "can you handle?"

The Marquis stroked his chin thoughtfully. He was aware of a pocketbook a shade fuller than usual, of three overdrawn banking accounts, and his recent interview with his lawyers.

"Capital," he repeated. "Ah! I suppose capital is necessary."

"In any gambling transaction, you always have to take into account the

possibility," David reminded him, "that you might lose."

"Precisely," the Marquis assented, selecting another cigarette, "but that is not the class of speculation I am looking for. I am anxious to discover an enterprise, either by means of my own insight into such matters, which is not inconsiderable, or the good offices of a friend, in which the chances of loss do not exist."

David was a little staggered. He contemplated his host curiously.

"Such speculations," he said at last, "are difficult to find."

"Not to a man of your ability, I am sure, Mr. Thain," the Marquis asserted.

"Do I gather that you wish for my advice?"

The Marquis inclined his head.

"That," he intimated, "was my object."

David smoked steadily, and his host contemplated him with a certain artistic satisfaction. He had been something of a sculptor in his youth, and he saw possibilities in the shape and pose of the great financier.

"The long and short of it is," David said at last, "that you want to make a million dollars, without any trouble, and without any chance of loss. There are a good many others, Marquis."

"But they have not all the privilege," was the graceful rejoinder, "of knowing personally a Goliath of finance. You will pardon the allegory. I take it from this morning's *Daily Express*."

"In my career," David continued, after a moment's pause, "you would perhaps be surprised to hear that I have done very little speculating. I have made great purchases of railways, and land through which railways must run, because I knew my job and because I had insight. The time for that is past now. To make money rapidly one must, as you yourself have already decided, speculate. I can tell you of a speculation in which I have myself indulged, but I do not for a moment pretend that it is a certainty. It was good enough for me to put in two million dollars, and if what I believe happens, my two millions will be forty

millions. But there is no certainty."

The Marquis fidgeted in his chair.

"By what means," he asked tentatively, "could I interest myself in this undertaking?"

"By the purchase of shares," was the prompt reply.

The Marquis considered the point. The matter of purchasing anything presented fundamental difficulties to him!

"Tell me about these shares?" he invited. "What is the nature of the undertaking?"

"Oil."

The Marquis grew a little more sanguine. There was an element of fantasy about oil shares. Perhaps they could be bought on paper.

"Large fortunes have been made in oil," he said. "Personally, I am a believer in oil. Where are the wells?"

"In Arizona."

"An excellent locality," the Marquis continued approvingly. "What is the present price of the shares?"

"They are dollar shares," David replied, "and their present price is par. You may find them quoted in some financial papers, but as practically the entire holding is in my possession, the market for them is limited."

"Precisely," the Marquis murmured. "To come to business, Mr. Thain, are you disposed to part with any?"

David appeared to consider the matter.

"Well, I don't know," he said, "I've made something like twenty million dollars out of my railways, and I have about reached that point when speculations cease to attract."

The Marquis held on to the sides of his chair and struggled against the feeling almost of reverence which he feared might be reflected in his countenance.

"A very desirable sum of money, Mr. Thain," he conceded.

"It's enough for me," David acknowledged. "There are two million shares in the Pluto Oil Company, practically the whole of which stand in my name. If the calculations which the most experienced oil men in the States have worked out materialise, those shares will be worth ten million dollars in four months' time. Let me see," he went on, "two hundred and thirty thousand pounds is, roughly speaking, one million, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. You can have two hundred thousand of my shares, if you like, at a dollar."

"This is exceedingly kind of you," the Marquis declared. "Let me see," he reflected, "two hundred thousand dollars would be—"

"A matter of forty thousand pounds."

"I see!" the Marquis ruminated. "Forty thousand pounds!"

"You are not, I am sure, a business man," his guest continued, "so you will pardon my reminding you that you can easily obtain an advance from your bankers upon the title deeds of property, or a short mortgage would produce the amount."

"A mortgage," the Marquis repeated, as though the idea were a new one to him. "Ah, yes! I must confess, though, that I have the strongest possible objection to mortgages, if they can in any way be dispensed with."

"I suppose that is how you large English landowners generally feel," David remarked tolerantly. "If you would prefer it, I will take your note of hand for the amount of the shares, payable, say, in three months' time."

The Marquis upset the box of cigarettes which he was handling. He was not as a rule a clumsy person, but he felt strongly the need of some extraneous incident. He stood on the hearthrug whilst the servant whom he summoned collected the cigarettes and replaced them in the box. As soon as the door was closed, he turned to his guest.

"Your offer, Mr. Thain," he said, "is a most kindly one. It simplifies the whole

matter exceedingly."

"You had better make the usual enquiries concerning the property," the latter advised. "I am afraid you will find it a little difficult over on this side to get exact information, but if you have any friends who understand oil prospecting—"

The Marquis held out his hand.

"It is not an occasion upon which a further opinion is necessary," he declared. "I approve of the locality of the property, and the fact that you yourself are largely interested is sufficient for me."

"Then any time you like to meet me at your lawyer's," David suggested, "I'll hand over the shares and you can sign a note of hand for the amount."

The Marquis considered the matter for a moment, thoughtfully. There was something about the idea of letting Mr. Wadham see him sign a promissory note for forty thousand pounds which occurred to him as somewhat precarious.

"Perhaps you have legal connections of your own here," he ventured. "To tell you the truth, I have been obliged to speak my mind in a very plain manner to my own solicitors. I consider that they mismanaged the Vont case most shamefully. I would really prefer to keep away from them for a time."

David nodded.

"I have a letter to some lawyers, at my rooms," he said. "I will send you their address, and we can make an appointment to meet at their office."

The Marquis assented gravely. He considered that the matter was now better dismissed from further discussion.

"I have no doubt," he said, "that my sister would like to talk to you for a time. Shall we join the ladies?"

David threw away his cigar and professed his readiness. They crossed the hall and entered the drawing-room. There was one table of bridge, and Letitia was seated with her sister on a divan near the window. The former sighed as she watched the entrance of the two men.

"Do look at father, Meg," she whispered. "I am perfectly certain he has been borrowing money."

Margaret shrugged her shoulders.

"What if he has, my dear!" she rejoined. "These people can afford to pay for their entertainment. I think it's rather clever of him."

Letitia groaned.

"You have such ignoble ideas, Meg," she said reprovingly. "Now I know I shall have to make myself agreeable to Mr. Thain, and I either like him or dislike him immensely. I haven't the least idea which."

"I shouldn't be surprised," her sister whispered, as Thain approached, "if he didn't help you presently to make up your mind."

CHAPTER VII

Marcia Hannaway called upon her publisher during the course of the following day. She found the ready entrée of a privileged client—with scarcely a moment's delay she was ushered into the presence of James Borden, the person who for some years now had occupied the second place in her thoughts and life.

"Anything happened, Marcia?" he enquired, after their quiet but familiar greeting. "You look as though you were bringing Fate with you."

She made herself comfortable in the easy-chair which he had drawn up to the fire. Outside, an unexpectedly cold wind made the sense of warmth doubly pleasant. She unfastened her simple furs and smiled at him a little dolefully.

"Just this," she replied, handing him a letter.

He spread it out, adjusted his eyeglasses and read it deliberately:

94, GROSVENOR SQUARE, Thursday.

My dear Marcia:

I have made enquiries with reference to the non-payment of your allowance for the last two quarters, and now enclose cheque for the amount, drawn by my agent in Norfolk and payable to yourself. I think I can promise you that no further irregularities shall occur.

I look forward to seeing you to-morrow afternoon, and I must tell you of a financial operation I am now conducting, which, if successful, may enable me to pay off the mortgages which render the Norfolk estates so unremunerative.

I trust that you are well, dear. I have ordered Carlton White's to send in a few flowers, which I hope will arrive safely.

Yours,
REGINALD.

James Borden read the letter carefully, glanced at the small coronet at the top of the paper, and folded it up.

"I'm sorry, Marcia," he said simply.

She made a little grimace.

"My dear man," she confessed, "so am I. After all, though, I am not sure that the money makes all the difference. You see, if he really were too poor—or rather if his lawyers couldn't raise the money to send to me—I fancy that I should feel just the same."

The publisher turned his chair round towards the fire. He was a man of barely middle age, although his black hair was besprinkled with grey and growing a little thin at the temples. His features were good, but his face was a little thin, and his clothes were scarcely as tidy, or the appointments of his office so comfortable as his name and position in the publishing world might have warranted. Marcia, who had been looking at him while he read, leaned forward and brushed the cigarette ash from his coat sleeve.

"Such an untidy man!" she declared, straightening his tie. "I am not at all sure that you deserve to have lady clients calling upon you. Were you late last night?"

"A little," he confessed.

"That means about one or two, I suppose," she went on reprovingly.

"I dined at the club and stayed on," he told her. "There was nothing else to do except work, and I was a little tired of that."

"Any fresh stuff in—interesting stuff, I mean?"

He shook his head.

"Three more Russian novels," he replied, "all in French and want translating, of course. The only one I have read is terribly grim and sordid. I dare say it would sell. I am going to read the other two before I decide anything. Then perhaps you'll help me."

"Of course I will," she promised. "I do wish, though, James, you wouldn't stay at the club so late. How many whiskies and sodas?"

"I didn't count," he confessed.

She sighed.

"I know what that means! James, why aren't you a little more human? You get heaps of invitations to nice houses. Much better go out and make some women friends. You ought to marry, you know."

"I am quite ready to when you will marry me," he retorted.

"But, my dear man, I am bespoke," she reminded him. "You know that quite well. I couldn't possibly think of marrying anybody."

"What are you going to do with that money?" he demanded.

"I think I shall keep it," she decided. "Not to do so would hurt him terribly."

"And keeping it hurts me damnably!" he muttered.

She shook her head at him.

"We've had this over so often, haven't we? I cannot leave Reginald as long as he wants me, relies upon me as much as he does now."

"Why not?" was the almost rough demand. "He has had the best of your life."

"And he has given me a great deal of his," she retorted. "For nineteen years I have been his very dear friend. During all that time he has never broken a promise to me, never told a falsehood, never said a single word which could grate or hurt. If he has sometimes seemed a little aloof, it is because he really believes himself to be a great person. He believes in himself immensely, you know, James—in the privileges and sanctity of his descent. It seems so strange in this world, where we others see other things. If I only dared, I would write a novel about it."

"But you don't care for him any more?"

"Care for him?" she repeated. "How could I ever stop caring for him! He was my first lover, and has been my only one."

"Let me ask you a question," James Borden demanded suddenly. "Don't you ever feel any grudge against him? He took you away from a very respectable position in life. He ruined all sorts of possibilities. He was fifteen or twenty years older than you were, and he knew the world. You pleased him, and he deliberately entrapped your affections. Be honest, now. Don't you sometimes hate him for it?"

"Never," she answered without hesitation. "I was, as you say, most respectably placed—a teacher at a village school—and I might have married a young farmer, or bailiff's son, or, with great luck, a struggling young doctor, and lived a remarkably rural life, but, as you have observed, in great respectability. My dear James, I should have hated it. I was, I think, nineteen years old when Reginald, in a most courtly fashion, suggested that I should come to London with him, and I have exactly the same feelings to-day about my acceptance of his proposal as I had then."

"You are a puzzle," he declared. "You wouldn't be, of course, only you're such a—such a good woman."

"Of course I am, James," she laughed. "I am good, inasmuch as I am faithful to any tie I may make. I am kind, or try to be, to all my fellow creatures, and I should hate to do a mean thing. The only difference between me and other women is that I prefer to choose what tie I should consider sacred. I claimed the liberty to do that, and I exercised it. As to my right to do so, I have never had the faintest possible shadow of hesitation."

"Oh, it all sounds all right when you talk about it," he admitted, "but let's come to the crux of this thing now we are about it, Marcia. I am eating my heart out for you. I should have thought that one of the great privileges of your manner of life was your freedom to change, if you desired to do so. Change, I mean—nothing to do with infidelity. You may have the nicest feelings in the world towards your Marquis, but I don't believe you love him any more. I don't believe you care for him as much as you do for me."

"In one sense you are perfectly right," she acknowledged. "In another you are altogether wrong."

"And yet," he continued, almost roughly, "you have never allowed me to touch your fingers, much more your lips."

"But, my dear man," she remonstrated, "you must know that those things are impossible. I would kiss you willingly if you were my friend, and if you were content with that, but you know it would only be hypocrisy if you pretended that you were. But listen," she went on. "I, too, sometimes think of these things. I will be very frank with you. I know that I have changed lately, and I know that the change has something to do with you. Reginald is sometimes a little restless about it. A time may come when he will provoke an explanation. When that time comes, I want to answer him with a clear conscience."

Mr. James Borden brightened up considerably.

"That's the most encouraging thing I've heard you say for a long time," he confessed.

She smiled.

"There are all sorts of possibilities yet," she said. "Now fetch a clothes brush and let me give you a good brushing, and you can take me out to lunch—that is to say, if you can find something decent to wear on your head," she went on,

pointing to a somewhat disreputable looking hat which hung behind the door. "I won't go out with you in that."

"That," he replied cheerfully, "is easily arranged. I can change my clothes in five minutes, if you prefer it."

She shook her head.

"You look quite nice when you're properly brushed," she assured him. "Send upstairs for another hat, and we'll go into the grill room at the Savoy. I want a sole colbert, and a cutlet, and some of those little French peas with sugar. Aren't I greedy!"

"Delightfully," he assented. "If you only realised how much easier it is to take a woman out who knows what she wants!"

They lunched very well amidst a crowd of cosmopolitans and lingered over their coffee. Their conversation had been of books and nothing but books, but towards the end Marcia once more spoke of herself.

"You see, James," she told him, "I have the feeling that if Reginald really does succeed in freeing the estates from their mortgages, he will have any quantity of new interests in life. He will probably be lord-lieutenant of the county, and open up the whole of Mandeleys. Then his town life would of course be quite different. I shall feel—can't you appreciate that?—as though my task with him had come naturally and gracefully to an end. We have both fulfilled our obligations to one another. If he can give me his hand and let me go—well, I should like it."

She looked so very desirable as she smiled at him that Borden almost groaned. She patted his hand and changed the conversation.

"Very soon," she continued, "I am going to undertake a painful duty. I am going down to Mandeleys."

"Not with him?"

She shook her head.

"My father is back in England," she explained. "He has come back from

America and is living in the cottage of many lawsuits. I must go down and see him."

"Has the boy returned, too?" he enquired.

"I have heard nothing about him," Marcia replied. "He was very delicate when he was young, and I am not even sure whether he is alive. My father probably doesn't want to see me in the least, but I feel I ought to go."

"You wouldn't like me to motor you down, I suppose?" Borden suggested diffidently. "The country is delightful just now, and it would do us both good. I could get away for three days quite easily, and I could bring some work with me to peg away at whilst you are being dutiful."

"I should love it," she declared frankly, "and I don't see the least reason why we shouldn't go. You won't mind," she went on, after a second's hesitation, "if I mention it to Reginald? I am sure he won't object."

James Borden bit through the cigarette which he had just lit, threw it away and started another.

"You must do whatever you think right," he said. "Perhaps you will telephone."

"As soon as I know for certain," she promised him.

CHAPTER VIII

It was obvious that the Marquis was pleased with himself when he was shown into Marcia's little sitting room later on that same afternoon. He was wearing a grey tweed check suit, a grey bowler hat, and a bunch of hothouse violets in his buttonhole. His demeanour, as he drew off his white chamois leather gloves and handed them, with his coat and cane, to the little parlourmaid, was urbane, almost benevolent.

"You look like the springtime," Marcia declared, rising to her feet, "and here

have I been cowering over the fire!"

"The wind is cold," her visitor admitted, "but I had a brisk walk along the Embankment."

"Along the Embankment?"

"I have been to one of those wonderful, cosmopolitan hotels," he told her, as he bent down and kissed her, "where they have hundreds of bedrooms and every guest is a potential millionaire."

"Business?"

"Business," he assented. "My lawyers—I am very displeased, by-the-by, with Mr. Wadham—having been unable for many years to assist me in disposing of the mortgages upon Mandeleys, I am making efforts myself in that direction, efforts which, as I believe I told you, show much promise of success."

"I am delighted to hear it," she replied. "From every point of view, it would be so satisfactory for you to have the estates freed once more. You would be able to entertain properly, wouldn't you, and take up your rightful position in the county?"

The Marquis seated himself in his favourite easy-chair.

"It is quite true," he confessed, "that I have been unable, for the last ten years, to exercise that position in the county to which I am entitled. I must confess, moreover, that the small economies which have formed a necessary and galling part of my daily life have become almost unendurable. You received my cheque, I hope?"

She nodded and laid it upon the table.

"It was dear of you, Reginald," she said, "but do you know it's astonishing how well I seemed to be able to get on without those last three payments. I am earning quite a great deal of money of my own, you know, and I do wish you would let me try and be independent."

His grey eyes were fixed almost coldly upon her.

"Independent? Why?"

"Oh, don't be foolish about it, please," she begged. "For nineteen years, I think it is now, you have allowed me six hundred a year. Do you realise what a great deal of money that is? Now that I am beginning to earn so much for myself, it is absurd for me to go on taking it."

"Do I understand it to be your desire, then, Marcia," he asked, "to effect any change in our relations?"

She came over and sat on the arm of his chair.

"Not unless you wish it, dear," she replied, "only the money—well, in a sense I've got used to having it all these years, because it was necessary, but now that it isn't necessary, I can't help feeling that I should like to do without it. I earned nearly six hundred pounds, you know, last year, by my stories."

The Marquis had half closed his eyes. He had become momentarily inattentive. Somehow or other, Marcia realised that her words had brought him acute suffering. There were tears in her eyes as she took his hand.

"Don't be silly about this, Reginald dear," she pleaded. "If it means so much to you to feel—I mean, if you look upon this money as really a tie between us—give me a little less, then—say three hundred a year, instead of six."

Her visitor was recovering his momentarily disturbed composure.

"You are still nothing but a child in money matters, dear," he said. "We will speak of this again before the end of the year, but in the meantime, if you have anything to spare, invest it. It is always well for a woman to have something to fall back upon."

Tea was brought in, and their conversation for a time became lighter in tone. Presently, however, Marcia became once more a little thoughtful.

"I have made up my mind," she declared abruptly, "to go down to Mandeleys to see my father."

The Marquis was silent for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, why not, if you really feel it to be your duty," he conceded. "Personally, I think you will find that Vont is unchanged. You will find him just as hard and narrow as when he disowned you."

"In that case," Marcia acknowledged, "I shall not trouble him very much, but when I think of all these years abroad—it was through me he left England, you know, Reginald—I feel that I ought to do my best, at any rate, to make him see things differently—to beg his forgiveness with my lips, even if I feel no remorse in my heart. I have a most uncomfortable conviction," she went on reflectively, "that I have grown completely out of his world, but, of course, in all this time he, too, may have changed. I wonder what has become of my little cousin."

"Vont came back alone, I believe," her visitor told her, "and he came back second class, too. I heard of him, curiously enough, from an American gentleman who crossed on the same steamer, and who happened to be a guest at my house the other night."

Marcia nodded.

"The boy left England too young," she remarked, "to miss his country. I suppose he has settled down in America for ever."

"I must say that I wish Vont had stayed with him," the Marquis declared. "Yes, go down and see him, by all means, Marcia. I should rather like to hear from you what his state of mind is. I gather that he is obdurate, as he resisted all my efforts to repossess myself of his cottage, but it would be interesting to hear."

"Should you mind," she asked, "if I motored down there with my publisher—Mr. James Borden? You have heard me speak of him."

"Not in the least," was the ready reply. "Has your friend connections in the locality?"

"None," Marcia admitted. "He would come simply for the sake of a day or two's holiday, and to take me."

"He is one of your admirers, perhaps?"

"He has always been very kind to me."

The Marquis was momentarily pensive.

"You are a better judge than I, Marcia," he observed, "but is such an expedition as you suggest—usual? I know that things have changed very much since the days when I myself found adventures possible and interesting, but have they really progressed so far as this?"

Marcia considered the matter carefully.

"On the whole," she decided, "I should say that our proposed expedition was unusual. On the other hand, Mr. Borden has no near relatives, and I myself enjoy a certain amount of liberty."

The Marquis smiled at her.

"As much liberty as you choose. If I hesitated then for a moment, it was for your own sake. I do not think that I have ever sought to curtail your pleasures, or to interfere in your mode of living."

"You have been wonderful," she admitted gratefully. "Perhaps for that very reason, because my fetters have been of silk, I have never realised but always considered them. Do you know that you are the only man who has ever sat down in this flat as my guest, during the whole sixteen years I have lived here?"

"I should never have asked you," he said, "but I am not in the least surprised to hear it. Sometimes," he went on, drawing her towards him in a slight but affectionate embrace, "you have perhaps thought me a little cold, a little staid and distant from you, even in our happiest moments. I was brought up, you must remember, in the school which considers any exhibition of feeling as a deplorable lapse. The thing grows on one. Yet, Marcia," he added, drawing her still closer and clasping her hand, "you have been my refuge in all these years. It is here with you that I have spent my happiest hours. You have been my consolation in many weary disappointments. I often wish that I could give you a different position than the one which you occupy."

"I should never be so contented in any other," she assured him, patting his hand. "In all these years I have felt my mind grow. I have read—heavens, how I have read! I have felt so many of the old things fall away, felt my feet growing stronger. You have given me just what I wanted, Reginald. To quote one of your own maxims, we have only one life, but it is for us to subdivide. We take up a

handful of circumstances, an emotion, perhaps a passion, and we live them out, and when the flame is burnt we are restless for a little time, and then we begin it all over again. That is how we learn, learn to be wise by suffering and change."

"I am afraid," the Marquis sighed, "that I do not live up to my own principles. All my life I have detested change. There could be no other home for me but Mandeleys, no other clubs save those where I spend my spare time, no other pursuits save those which I have cultivated from my youth, no other dear friend, Marcia, to whom one may turn in one's more human moments, than you."

Marcia shrugged her shoulders.

"It is queer," she admitted, "to hear such professions of fidelity from you."

"Had I a different reputation?" he asked. "Well, you see how I have outlived it."

Marcia's silence, natural enough at the time, puzzled him a little afterwards, puzzled him as he leaned back in his car, on his way homewards, puzzled him through the evening in the few minutes of reflection which he was able to spare from a large dinner party.

"Borden!" he muttered to himself. "I wonder what sort of a man he is."

In his library, where he lingered for a few moments before retiring to bed, he took down a volume of "Who's Who." Borden's name, rather to his surprise, was there. The man, it seemed, was of decent family, had done well at Oxford, both in scholarship and athletics. He was born—the Marquis counted his years. He was forty-one years old—nineteen years younger! He closed the book and sat down in his chair, forgetting for once to mix for himself the whiskey and soda which lay ready to his hand. It seemed to him that there was a tragedy in that nineteen years. Borden was of the age now that he himself had been when Marcia had first listened to his very courtly and yet uncommonly definite love-making. He rose almost like a thief, crossed the hall, and, opening softly the door of the drawing-room, turned up the two lights before a great gilt mirror. He stood and regarded himself thoughtfully, appraisingly, critically. He was tall and very little bowed. His figure was still the figure of a young man, and the court clothes which he was wearing became him. That he was handsome so far as regards his finely chiselled features, his high forehead and his soft grey hair, he granted himself. The world had given him few chances of forgetting it. But there was a

little whiteness about his cheeks, a slight dropping of the flesh under his eyes, just something of that tired look which creeps along with the years, a silent, persistent ghost. The Marquis switched off the lights and turned towards the door. He tiptoed his way across the hall and threw himself once more into his easy-chair. His eyes were fixed upon the opposite wall. He still saw that presentment of himself. And there was Marcia, barely in the prime of her life, the figure of her girlhood developed, yet not, even now, matronly; her bright complexion, her broad, intellectual forehead with its masses of brown hair, her humorous mouth, her dark, undimmed eyes, still hungry for what life might have to give. Those nineteen years remained a tragedy.

CHAPTER IX

David Thain, arrived at the end of his journey, seated himself on the second stile from the road, threw away his cigar and looked facts in the face. He who had run the gamut of the Wall Street fever, who in his earlier days had relied almost upon chance for a meal, who had stood the tests of huge successes as well as the anxieties of possible failures without visible emotion—in such a fashion, even, that his closest friends could scarcely tell whether he were winning or losing—found himself now, without any crisis before him, and engaged in the most ordinary undertaking of a stroll from the station across a few fields, suddenly the victim of sensations and weaknesses which defied analysis and mocked at restraint. It was the England of his boyhood, this, the sudden almost overpowering realisation of those dreams which had grown fainter and fainter during his many years of struggle in a very different atmosphere. Birds were singing in the long grove which, behind the high, grey-stone wall, fringed the road for miles. Rooks—real English rooks—were cawing above his head. A light evening breeze was bending the meadow grass of the field which his footpath had cloven, and from the hedge by his side came the faint perfume of hawthorn blossom. Before him was the park with its splendours of giant oaks, with deer resting beneath the trees, and in the distance the grey, irregular outline of Mandeleys Abbey. He had played cricket, when he was a boy, in the very field through which he was passing. Some time in that dim past, he had stood with his uncle, whilst he had issued with the beaters from that long strip of plantation, watching with all a boy's fervid admiration the careless ease with which the Lord

of Mandeleys was bringing the pheasants down from the sky. He had skated on the lake there, had watched at a respectful distance the antics of the ladies Letitia and Margaret, anxious to escape from their retinue of servants and attendants. A queer little vision came before him at that moment of Lady Letitia hobbling towards him upon the ice, with one skate unbuckled, and a firm but gracious entreaty that the little boy—he was at least a head taller than she—would fasten it for her. Strange little flashes of memory had come to him now and then in that new world where he had carved his way to success, memories so indistinct that they brought with them no thrills, scarcely even any longing. And now all his strength and hardness, qualities so necessary to him throughout his strenuous life, seemed to have passed away. He was a child again, breathing in all these simple sights and perfumes, his memory taking him even further back to the days when he sat in the meadow, in the hot sun, picking daisies and buttercups, and watching for the fish that sometimes jumped from the stream. It was an entirely unexpected emotion, this. When once more he strode along the footpath, he felt a different man. He had lost his slight touch of assurance. He looked about him eagerly, almost appealingly. He was ashamed to confess even to himself that he had the feeling of a wanderer who has come home.

He crossed the last stile and was now in the park proper. Several villagers were strolling about under the trees, and they looked at this newcomer, with his dark-coloured clothes and strangely-shaped hat, with some surprise. Nevertheless, he held uninterruptedly on his way until he reached the broad drive which led to the Abbey. He walked on the turf by the side of it, over the bridge which crossed the stream, through the inner iron gates, beyond which the village people were not allowed to pass, and so to the well-remembered spot. On his right was the house—a strange, uneven building, at times ecclesiastical, here and there domestic, always ancient, with its wings of cloisters running almost down to the moat which surrounded it. And just over the moat, crossed by that light iron handbridge, with its back against what he remembered as a plantation, but which had now become a wood, the little red brick cottage, smothered all over with creepers, its tiny garden ablaze with flowers, its empty rows of dog kennels, its deserted line of coops. David glanced for a moment at the drawn blinds of the Abbey. Then he crossed the footbridge and the few yards of meadow, lifted the latch of the gate and, walking up the gravel path, came to a sudden standstill. A man who was seated almost hidden by a great cluster of fox-gloves rose to his feet.

"It's you, then, lad!" he exclaimed, holding out both his hands. "You're

welcome! There's no one to the house—there won't be for a quarter of an hour—so I'll wring your hands once more. It's a queer world, this, David. You're back with me here, where I brought you up as a stripling, and yon's the Abbey. Sit you down, boy. I am not the man I was since I came here."

David Thain dragged an old-fashioned kitchen chair from the porch, and sat by his uncle's side. Richard Vont, although he was still younger than his sixty-four years, seemed to his nephew curiously changed during the last week. The hard, resolute face was disturbed. The mouth, kept so tight through the years, had weakened a little. There was a vague, almost pathetic agitation, in the man's face.

"You'll take no notice of me, David," his uncle went on. "I'm honest with you. These few days have been like a great, holy dream, like something one reads of in the Scriptures but never expects to see. There's old Mary Wells—she's doing for me up there. Just a word or two of surprise, and a grip of the hand, and no more. And there's the Abbey—curse it!—not a stone gone, only the windows are blank. You see the weeds on the lawn, David? Do you mark the garden behind? They tell me there's but two gardeners there to do the work of twenty. And the drive—look at it as far as you can see—moss and weed! They're coming down in the world, these Mandeleys, David. Even this last little lawsuit, the lawyers told me, has cost the Marquis nineteen thousand pounds. God bless you for your wealth, David! It's money that counts in these days."

David produced a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and handed it over to his uncle, who filled a pipe eagerly.

"That's thoughtful of you, David," he declared. "I'd forgotten to buy any, and that's a fact, for I can't stand the village yet. You're looking strange-like, David."

"And I feel it," was the quiet answer. "Uncle, hasn't it made any difference to you, this coming back?"

"In what way?" the old man asked.

"Well, I don't know. I walked across those fields to the park, and I seemed suddenly to feel more like a boy again, and I felt that somehow I was letting go of things. Do you know what I mean?"

"Letting go of things," Richard Vont repeated suspiciously. "No!"

"Well, somehow or other," David continued, as he filled his own pipe and lit it, "I found myself looking back through the years, and I wondered whether we hadn't both let one thing grow too big in our minds. Life doesn't vary much here. Things are very much as we left them, and it's all rather wonderful. I felt a little ashamed, as I came up through the park, of some of the things we've planned and sworn. Didn't you feel a little like that, uncle? Can you sit here and think of the past, and remember all that burden we carried, and not feel inclined to let it slip, or just a little of it slip, from our shoulders?"

Vont laid down his pipe. He rose to his feet. His fingers suddenly gripped his nephew's shoulder. He turned him towards the house.

"Listen, David," he said; "there's twilight an hour away yet, but it will soon be here. The blackbirds are calling for it, and the wind's dropping. Now you see. That was her room," he added, touching the window, "and there's the door out, just the same. You see that tree there? I was crouching behind that with my gun ready loaded, and there was murder in my heart—I tell you that, boy. I watched the Abbey. I was supposed to be safe in Fakenham Town, safe for a good two hours, and I lay there and watched because I knew, and no one came. And then I heard a whisper. I turned my head, although I was most afeared, and out of that door—that door from Marcia's room, David—I saw him come. I saw her arms come out and draw him back, and then I began to breathe hard, but the trees were thick that way—I'd been looking for him coming from the Abbey—-and they stole out together, arm in arm. I was so near them that they must have heard me groan, for Marcia started. And then, before I knew what was happening, he—the Marquis, mind—had struck up my gun, caught it by the barrel and sent it flying. My hand was on his throat, but he was as strong as I was, in those days, and a mighty wrestler. It's my shame, boy, after all these years to have to confess it, but he got the better of me. I was crazy with anger, and he had me down. And then he stood aside and bade me get up, and my strength seemed all gone. He stood there looking at me contemptuously. 'Don't make a fool of yourself, Vont,' he said. 'Your daughter and I understand one another, and our concerns have nothing to do with you. If you have anything to say to me, come up to the Abbey to-morrow. You'll find your gun in the thicket.' He turned round and he kissed Marcia's fingers, just like I'd seen them do in the distance at their fine parties up there, and he strolled away. There was the gun in the thicket, and he knew it, and I knew it, and I couldn't move, and he went. And all I could hear was Marcia crying, and those birds singing behind, and I just slipped away into the wood."

"Uncle, is it worth while bringing this all up again?" David interrupted.

"Aye, it's worth while!" the old man insisted fiercely. "It's worth while for fear I should forget, for the old place has its cling on me. That next day I went to the Abbey, and I saw the Marquis. He was quite cool, sent the servants out—he'd no weapon near—and he talked a lot that I don't understand and never shall understand, but it was about Marcia, and that she was his, and was leaving with him for London that evening. I just asked him one question. 'It's for shame, then?' I asked. And he looked at me just as though I were some person whom he was trying to make understand, who didn't quite speak the language. And he said —'Your daughter made her choice months ago, Vont. She will live the life she desires to live. I am sorry to take her away from you. Think it over, and try and feel sensible about it.' It was then I felt a strange joy, that I've never been able rightly to understand. I'd just remembered that the cottage was mine, and I had a sudden feeling that I wanted to sit at the end of the garden and watch the Abbey and curse it, curse it with a Bible on my knee, till its stones fell apart and the grass grew up from the walks and the damp grew out in blotches on the walls. And that's why I've come back after all these years."

"And you're just the same?" David asked curiously. "You feel just the same about him?"

"Don't you, my lad?" his uncle demanded. "You're not telling me that you're climbing down?"

David took the old man's arm.

"On the contrary, uncle," he said, "my promised share of the work is done. I hold his promissory notes for forty thousand pounds, due in three months. I have sold him some shares that aren't worth forty thousand pence, and won't be for many a year. I've cheated him, if you like, but when the three months comes you can make him a bankrupt, if you will. I'll give you the notes."

Richard Vont drew himself up. He turned his face towards the Abbey, growing a little indistinct now in the falling twilight.

"It's grand hearing," was all he said. "There's Mary, coming round with the supper, boy. I'll take the liberty of asking you to have a bite with me and a glass of ale, but I'll not forget that you're the great David Thain, the millionaire from America, who took kindly notice of me on the steamer. Come this way, sir," he

went on, throwing open the cottage door. "It's a queer little place, but it's a novelty for you American gentlemen. Step right in, sir. Mrs. Wells," he announced, "this is a gentleman who was kind to me upon the steamer, and he promised that if ever he was this way he'd drop in. He'll take some supper with me. You'll do your best for us?"

The old lady looked very hard at David Thain, and she dropped a curtsey.

"From America, too," she murmured. ""Tis a wonderful country! Aye, I'll do my best, Richard Vont."

CHAPTER X

Mr. Wadham, Junior, a morning or so later, rang the bell at Number 94 Grosvenor Square and aired himself for a moment upon the broad doorstep, filled with a comfortable sense that this time, at least, in his prospective interview, he was destined to disturb the disconcerting equanimity of his distinguished client. He was duly admitted and ushered into the presence of the Marquis, who laid down the newspaper which he was reading, nodded affably to his visitor and pointed to a chair.

"Your request for an interview, Mr. Wadham," the former said, "anticipated my own desire to see you. Pray be seated. I am entirely at your service."

Mr. Wadham paused for a moment and decided to cross his legs. He was already struggling against that enervating sense of insignificance which his client's presence inevitably imposed upon him.

"We heard yesterday morning from Mr. Merridrew," he commenced. "He made us a remittance which was four hundred pounds short of what we expected. His explanation was that your lordship had received that sum from him."

"Quite right, Mr. Wadham," the Marquis assented affably. "Quite right. I was in the neighbourhood, and, finding Mr. Merridrew with a considerable sum of

money in hand, I took from him precisely the amount you have stated."

"Your lordship has perhaps overlooked the fact," Mr. Wadham continued, "that we are that amount short of the interest on the Fakenham mortgage—Number Seven mortgage, we usually call it."

"Dear me!" the Marquis observed. "Surely such a trifling sum does not disturb your calculations? You do not run my affairs on so narrow a margin as this, I trust, Mr. Wadham?"

"It isn't a question of a narrow margin, your lordship," Mr. Wadham replied. "There is, as a rule, no margin at all. We usually have to make the amount up by overdrawing, or by advancing it ourselves. This time the firm wish me to point out that we are unable to do either."

"Dear me! Dear me!" the Marquis ejaculated, in a tone of some concern. "I had no idea, Mr. Wadham, if you will forgive my saying so, that your firm was in so impecunious a position."

"Impecunious?" the lawyer murmured, with his eyes fixed upon his client. "I scarcely follow your lordship."

"Did I not understand you to say," the Marquis continued, "that this trifle of four hundred pounds has upset your arrangements to such an extent that you are unable to make your customary payments on my behalf?"

"Will your lordship forgive my pointing out," Mr. Wadham explained, "that these payments are on your account, and that it is no part of the business of solicitors to finance their clients, without a special arrangement? We have our own more lucrative investments continually open to us, and we are at the present moment several thousand pounds out of pocket on account of recent law expenses."

"The whole thing," the Marquis pronounced, "seems to me very trifling. State in precise terms, if you please, Mr. Wadham, the object of your visit."

"To ask for your lordship's instructions as to the payment of twelve hundred pounds interest, due to-morrow," Mr. Wadham replied. "We have eight hundred pounds in hand from Mr. Merridrew. So far from having any other funds of your lordship's at our disposal, we are, as I have pointed out, your creditor for a

somewhat considerable amount."

The Marquis was leaning back in his chair, the tips of his long, elegant fingers pressed gently together.

"It appears to me, Mr. Wadham," he said quietly, "that your visit is, in a sense, an admonitory one. Your firm resents—am I not right?—the fact that I have found it convenient to help myself to a portion of the revenue accruing from my estate."

"We should not presume for a moment to take up such an attitude," the lawyer protested. "On the other hand, the four hundred pounds in question requires replacement by to-morrow."

"And you find the raising of that sum inconvenient, eh, Mr. Wadham?"

The young man was distinctly ill at ease. His instructions were to be firm and dignified but by no means to offend; to deliver a formal protest against this tampering with funds already dedicate, but to do or say nothing which would give the Marquis any excuse for reprisals against the firm. Mr. Wadham began to wonder whether perhaps he was a person of small tact, or whether these instructions were more than usually difficult to carry out.

"There is no sacrifice, your lordship," he said slowly, "which my firm would hesitate to make in your interests and the interests of the Mandeleys estate. At the same time, the unexpected necessity for finding these sums of money is, I must confess, at times a strain upon us."

The Marquis nodded sympathetically. He rose to his feet, crossed the room towards his desk, which he unlocked with a key attached to a gold chain, and returned with a bundle of scrip in his hand.

"I have here, Mr. Wadham," he announced, "scrip in a very famous oil company, the face value of the shares being, I believe, a trifle over forty thousand pounds. I, in fact, paid that price for them at the beginning of the week."

The young lawyer uncrossed his legs and swallowed hard. He was prepared for many shocks, but this one seemed outside the region of all human probability.

"Did I understand your lordship to say that you had paid forty thousand pounds for them?" he gasped.

The Marquis assented with an equable little nod.

"I was somewhat favoured in the matter," he admitted, "as the value of the shares has, I believe, already considerably increased. The amount I actually paid for them was, in round figures, forty thousand and one hundred pounds—transfer duty, or something of that sort. I have little head for figures, as you know, Mr. Wadham. You had better take these—not for sale, mind, but for deposit at one of my banks. You will probably find that, under the circumstances, they will permit you to overdraw an additional five hundred pounds on my account, without embarrassing your own finances."

Mr. Wadham, Junior, took the bundle of scrip into his hand, and glanced hastily through it.

"The Pluto Oil Company of Arizona," he murmured reflectively.

"The name of the company is doubtless unknown to you," the Marquis observed indulgently; "they are, in fact, only just commencing operations—but it is the opinion of my friend and financial adviser, Mr. David Thain, that the forty thousand pounds' worth of shares you have in your hand will be worth at least two hundred thousand before the end of the year."

"Mr. David Thain, the multi-millionaire?" Mr. Wadham faltered.

"The same!"

The lawyer gripped the bundle hard in one hand, closed his eyes for a moment, opened them again and struck out boldly.

"As your lordship's adviser," he said, "may I enquire as to the nature of the payment which you have made? Forty thousand pounds is not a sum which either of the banks with whom your lordship has credit—"

The Marquis waved his hand.

"My dear young friend," he explained, "it was not necessary for me to resort to banks. Mr. Thain suggested voluntarily that I should give him my note of hand

for the amount. He quite understood that a man whose chief interest in the country is land does not keep such a sum as forty thousand pounds lying at his banker's."

Mr. Wadham groped for his hat.

"The shares shall be deposited, and the interest, of course, paid," he murmured. "I am sorry to have troubled your lordship in the matter."

"Not at all, not at all," the Marquis replied genially. "Very pleased to see you at any time, Mr. Wadham, on any subject connected with the estates. Ah!" he added, glancing at a card which a footman at that moment had brought in, "here is my friend, Mr. David Thain. You must meet him, Mr. Wadham. Such men are rare in this country. They form most interesting adjuncts to our modern civilisation. Show Mr. Thain in, Thomas."

David Thain duly arrived. He shook hands with the Marquis and was by him presented to Mr. Wadham.

"Mr. Wadham is my legal advisor—or rather a junior representative of the firm who conduct my affairs," the Marquis explained. "I have just handed him over my shares in the Pluto Oil Company, for safe keeping."

"Very glad to know you, Mr. Thain," the young lawyer observed, reverently shaking hands. "One reads a great deal of your financial exploits in the newspapers just now."

"I really can't see," David replied, "that your press men are much better over here than in the States. In any case, Mr. Wadham, you mustn't believe all you read."

"You will give my regards to your father and the other members of your firm," the Marquis concluded, with the faintest possible indication of his head towards the door. "I shall probably have some instructions of an interesting nature to give you before long, with regard to the cancellation of, at any rate, the home estate mortgages. Ah, here is Thomas! Very much obliged for your attention, Mr. Wadham."

The lawyer made his adieux in somewhat confused fashion, and left the room with an ignominious sense of dismissal. The Marquis glanced at the clock.

"I am a creature of habit, Mr. Thain," he said. "At twelve o'clock I walk for an hour in the Park. Will you give me the honour of your company?"

"Anywhere you say," David assented. "There was just a little matter I wanted to mention—nothing important."

"Precisely," the Marquis murmured, ringing the bell. "You will return to lunch, of course? I shall take no denial. My daughter would be distressed to miss you. Gossett," he added, as they moved out into the hall, "my coat and hat, and tell Lady Letitia that Mr. Thain will lunch with us. Have you any idea, Gossett," he added, as he accepted his cane and gloves, "how to make cocktails?"

"I have a book of recipes, your lordship," was the somewhat doubtful reply.

"See that cocktails are served before luncheon," the Marquis instructed. "You see, we are not altogether ignorant of the habits of your countrymen, Mr. Thain, even if in some cases we may not ourselves have adopted them. A cocktail is, I gather, some form of alcoholic nourishment?"

Thain indulged in what was, for him, a rare luxury—a hearty laugh. He threw his head back, showing all his white, firm teeth, and the little lines at the sides of his eyes wrinkled up with enjoyment. Suddenly a voice on the stairs interposed.

"I must know the joke," Letitia declared. "How do you do, Mr. Thain? A laugh like yours makes one feel positively delirious with the desire to share it. Father, do tell me what it was?"

"To tell you the truth, my dear," the Marquis replied, quite honestly, "I am a little ignorant as to the humorous application of a remark I have just made."

"It was your father's definition of an American institution, Lady Letitia," David explained, "and I am afraid that its humour depended solely upon a certain environment which I was able to conjure up in my mind—a barroom at the Waldorf, say."

"Another disappointment," Letitia sighed.

"Mr. Thain is lunching with us, dear," her father announced.

"So glad," Letitia remarked, nodding to Thain. "We shall meet again, then."

She passed out of the front door, and David, who was very observant,

noticing several things, was silent for the first few moments after her departure. She appeared, as she could scarcely fail to appear in his eyes, charming even to the point of bewilderment. Yet, although the wind was cold, she had only a small and very inadequate fur collar around her neck. Her tailormade suit showed signs of constant brushings. There was a little—a very modest little patch upon her shoes, and a very distinct darn upon her gloves. David frowned in puzzled fashion as he turned into the Park. Some of his boyish antipathies, so carefully nursed by his uncle and fostered by the atmosphere in which they lived during his early days in America, flashed into his memory, only to be instantly discarded. He remembered the drawn blinds, the weedy walks of Mandeleys; the hasty glimpse which he had had of silent, empty rooms and uncarpeted ways in the higher storeys of the mansion in Grosvenor Square.

"I am not a person," the Marquis observed, as they proceeded upon their promenade, "who needs a great deal of exercise, but I am almost a slave to habit, and for many years, when in town, it has been my custom to walk here for an hour, to exchange greetings, perhaps, with a few acquaintances, to call at my club for ten minutes and take a glass of dry sherry before luncheon. In the afternoons," he went on, "I occasionally play a round of golf at Ranelagh. Are you an expert at the game, Mr. Thain?"

"I have made blasphemous efforts," David confessed, "but I certainly cannot call myself an expert. Perhaps what is known as the American spirit has rather interfered with my efforts. You see, we want to get things done too quickly. Golf is a game eminently suited to the British temperament."

"You are doubtless right," the Marquis murmured. "That loitering backward swing, eh?—the lazy indisposition to raise one's head? I follow you, Mr. Thain. Your call this morning, by-the-by," he went on. "You have some news, perhaps, of these Pluto Oils?"

David shook his head.

"I came to see you," he announced, "upon a different matter."

CHAPTER XI

The Marquis was occupied for several minutes in exchanging greetings with passing acquaintances. As soon as they were alone again, he reverted to his companion's observation.

"There was a matter, I think you said, Mr. Thain, which you wished to discuss with me."

"I was going to ask you about Broomleys," David replied.

The Marquis was puzzled.

"Broomleys? Are you referring, by chance, to my house of that name?"

"I guess so."

"But, my dear Mr. Thain, you surprise me," the Marquis declared. "When did you hear of Broomleys?"

"I should have explained," David continued, "that I spent this last week-end at Cromer. There I visited an agent and told him that I would like to take a furnished house in the neighbourhood. I motored over, at his suggestion, to see Broomleys, and the tenant, Colonel Laycey, kindly showed me over. He is leaving within a few days, I believe."

"Dear me, of course he is!" the Marquis observed genially. "I had quite forgotten the fact—quite forgotten it."

The Marquis saluted more acquaintances. He was glad of an opportunity for reflection. The Fates were indeed smiling upon him! A gleam of anticipatory delight shone in his eyes as he thought of his next interview with Mr. Wadham, Junior! On his desk at the present moment there lay a letter from the firm, announcing Colonel Laycey's departure and adding that they saw little hope of letting the house at all in its present condition.

"It would be a great pleasure to us, Mr. Thain," the Marquis continued pleasantly, "to have you for a neighbour. Did the agent or Colonel Laycey, by-the-by, say anything about the rent?"

"Nothing whatever," David replied. "The Colonel pointed out to me various repairs which certainly seemed necessary, but as I am a single man, the rooms affected could very well be closed for a time. It was the garden, I must confess, which chiefly attracted me."

"Broomleys has, I fear, been a little neglected," the Marquis sighed. "These stringent days, with their campaign of taxation upon the landed proprietor, have left me, I regret to say, a poor man. Colonel Laycey was not always considerate. His last letter, I remember, spoke of restorations which would have meant a couple of years' rent."

"If I find any little thing wants doing urgently when I get there," David promised carelessly, "I will have it seen to myself. If the rent you ask is not prohibitive, it is exactly the place I should like to take for, say, a year, at any rate."

"You are a man of modest tastes, Mr. Thain," the Marquis observed. "The fact that you are unmarried, however, of course renders an establishment an unnecessary burden. You will bear in mind, so far as regards the rent of Broomleys, Mr. Thain, that the house is furnished."

"Very uncomfortably but very attractively furnished, from what I saw," David assented.

The Marquis collected himself. Colonel Laycey had been asked three hundred a year and was paying two hundred, a sum which, somehow or other, the Marquis had always considered his own pocket money, and which had never gone into the estate accounts. A little increase would certainly be pleasant.

"Would five hundred a year seem too much, Mr. Thain?" he asked. "I cannot for the moment remember what Colonel Laycey is paying, but I know that it is something ridiculously inadequate."

"Five hundred a year would be quite satisfactory," David agreed.

"I will have the papers drawn up and sent to you at once," the Marquis promised. "You will be able to enter into possession as soon as you like. You would like a yearly tenancy, I presume?"

"That would suit me quite well."

"You will be able, also, to resume your acquaintance with that singular old man whom you met upon the steamer—Richard Vont," the Marquis remarked, with a slight grimace. "I hear that he is in residence there."

"I have already done so," David announced.

The Marquis raised his eyebrows.

"You have probably heard his story, then, from his own lips," he observed carelessly. "I am told that he sits out on the lawn of his cottage, reading the Bible and cursing Mandeleys. It is a most annoying thing, Mr. Thain, as I dare say you can understand, to have your ex-gamekeeper entrenched, as it were, in front of your premises, hurling curses across the moat at you. That class of person is so tenacious of ideas as well as of life. Here comes my daughter Letitia, already well escorted, I see."

Letitia, with Grantham by her side, waved her hand without pausing, from the other side of the broad pathway. David for a moment felt the chill of the east wind.

"Grantham," the Marquis told his companion confidentially, "is one of Lady Letitia's most constant admirers. My daughter, as I dare say you have discovered, Mr. Thain, is rather an unusual young woman. Her predilections are almost anti-matrimonial. Still, I must confess that an alliance with the Granthams would give me much pleasure. I should, in that case, be enabled to give up my town house and be content with bachelor apartments—a great saving, in these hard times."

"Naturally," David murmured.

"Often, in the course of our very agreeable conversations," the Marquis went on, "I am inclined to ignore the fact of your most amazing opulence. My few friends, I am sorry to say, are in a different position. Money in this country is very scarce, Mr. Thain—very scarce, at least, on this side of Temple Bar."

David answered a little vaguely. His eyes were lifted above the heads of the scattered crowd of people through which they were passing.

"May I ask—if it is not an impertinence," he said,—"is Lady Letitia engaged to Lord Charles Grantham?"

The Marquis's manner was perhaps a shade stiffer. Mr. Thain was just given to understand that about the family matters of such a personage as the Marquis of Mandeleys there must always be a certain reticence.

"There is no formal engagement, Mr. Thain," he replied. "The fashion nowadays seems to preclude anything of the sort. One's daughter just brings a young man in, and, in place of the delightful betrothal of our younger days, the date for the marriage is fixed upon the spot."

Luncheon at 94 Grosvenor Square, notwithstanding the cocktails, was an exceedingly simple meal, a fact which the Marquis himself seemed scarcely to notice. He kept his eye on his visitor's plate, however, and passed the cutlets with an unnoticeable sigh of regret.

"Charlie wouldn't come in to lunch, father," Letitia announced. "I think he was afraid you were going to ask him his intentions."

The Marquis glanced at the modicum of curry with which he was consoling himself.

"Upon the whole, my dear," he said, "I am glad that he stayed away. He is a most agreeable person, but not at his best at luncheon time. By-the-by, do you know who our new neighbour is to be at Broomleys?"

"You haven't let it?" she asked eagerly.

"This morning, my dear," her father replied, bowing slightly towards their guest. "Mr. Thain has been spending the week-end at Cromer, was offered Broomleys by the agent there, and he and I fixed up the matter only a few minutes ago."

"How perfectly delightful!" Letitia exclaimed.

David glanced up quickly. He looked his hostess in the eyes.

"That is very kind of you, Lady Letitia," he said. She laughed at him.

"Well, I meant it," she declared, "and I still mean it, but not, perhaps, exactly in the way it sounded. Of course, it will be very pleasant to have you for a neighbour, but to tell you the truth—you see, although we're poor we are honest

—our own sojourn at Mandeleys rather depends on whether we let Broomleys, and Colonel Laycey, although he has the most delightful daughter, with whom you are sure to fall in love, was a most troublesome tenant. He was always wanting things done, wasn't he, father?"

"It is certainly a relief," the Marquis sighed, watching with satisfaction the arrival of half a Stilton cheese, a present from his son-in-law, "a great relief to find a tenant like Mr. Thain."

"I asked your agent," David remarked a little diffidently, "about the shooting."

The Marquis touched his glass.

"Serve port, Gossett," he directed,—"the light wood port, if we have any," he added a little hastily, to the obvious relief of his domestic. "The shooting, eh, Mr. Thain?"

He sipped his wine and considered. First Broomleys, and then the shooting! The gods were very kind to him on this pleasant April morning.

"You haven't preserved lately, I understand," his guest observed.

"Not for some years," the Marquis acknowledged.

"I don't mind about that at all," David went on. "I am just American enough, you know, to find no pleasure in shooting tame birds. I shall have no parties, and I shall not be ambitious about bags. I like to prowl about myself with a gun."

His host nodded appreciatively.

"You shall have the refusal of the shooting," he promised. "At the moment I am not prepared to quote terms. My people of business can do that."

"Have you no friends in England, Mr. Thain?" Letitia asked, a little abruptly.

"Very few," David replied. "I do not make friends easily."

"I always thought Americans were so sociable," she remarked. "A great many of your compatriots have settled down here, you know."

David considered the matter for a moment.

"You would smile, I suppose," he said, "if I were to tell you that there are more so-called 'sets' in American Society than in your own. I am a very self-made man indeed, and I possess no womenkind to entertain for me. I am therefore dependent upon chance acquaintances."

"Such friends as may make your sojourn in Norfolk more agreeable, Mr. Thain," the Marquis promised genially, "you shall most certainly find. Mandeleys will always be open to you."

David made no immediate response. His teeth had come together with a little click. He felt a strange repugnance to lifting the glass, which the butler had just filled, to his lips. A queer little vision of Mandeleys and the cottage was there, Richard Vont, seated amongst those drooping rose bushes, his face turned towards the Abbey, his eyes full of that strange, expectant light. A sudden wave of self-disgust almost broke through a composure which had so far resisted all assaults upon it. Almost he felt that he must rise from his place, tell this strange, polished, yet curiously childlike being the truth—that he was being drawn into the nets of ruin—that he was entertaining an enemy unawares.

"You must really try that wine, Mr. Thain," he heard his host say gently. "I make no excuse for not offering you vintage port. At Mandeleys I have at least the remnants of a cellar. You shall dine with us there, Mr. Thain, and I will give you what my grandfather used to declare was 1838 vintage."

David roused himself with an effort. He brushed aside the uncomfortable twinge of conscience which had suddenly depressed him, and turning away from Letitia, looked his host in the eyes.

"You are very kind," he said. "I shall come with much pleasure."

CHAPTER XII

The Duchess waved her sugar tongs imperiously, and David, who had

hesitated upon the threshold of her drawing-room, made his way towards her. There were a dozen people sitting around, drinking tea and chatting in little groups.

"Now don't look sulky, please," she begged, as she gave him her left hand. "This is not a tea party, and it is quite true that I did ask you to come and have a chat with me alone, but I couldn't keep these people away. They'll all go directly, and if they don't I shall turn them out. Letitia has promised me to take care of you and to see that no one bites. Letitia, here is the shy man," she added. "There!"—thrusting a cup of tea into his hand. "Take that, help yourself to a muffin and go and hide behind the piano."

Letitia rose from her place by the side of an extremely loquacious politician, to whose animated conversation she had paid no attention since David's entrance.

"You hear my aunt's orders?" she said, nodding. "Don't try to shake hands, with that collection of things to carry. I am to pilot you into a corner and keep you quite safe until she is ready to take possession of you herself."

David looked longingly at some French windows which led out on to a wide stone terrace.

"Why not outside?" he suggested. "It's really quite warm to-day."

"Why not, indeed?" she assented. "Come along."

They passed out together, found two comfortable wicker chairs and a small table, on which, with a sigh of relief, David deposited his burden. Below them was a stretch of the Park, from which they themselves were screened by a row of tall trees.

"Don't sit down," she begged him. "Get me another of those small muffins first, and a cup of tea. If any one suggests coming out here, bolt the windows after you."

David executed his task as speedily as possible. Letitia watched him a little curiously as he returned.

"You aren't really a bit shy, you know," she told him. "I watched you through

the window there. How clever you were not to see that tiresome Mrs. Raymond!"

"Why should I see her?" he asked. "She is a perfect stranger to me. She came up to me at a party, the other night, and asked me, as a great favour, to dine at her house and to tell her how to invest some money so that she could double it."

"I know," Letitia assented, with her mouth full of muffin. "She does that to all the financiers and expects them to give her tips just because she has dark eyes and asks them to a tête-à-tête dinner. I expect we are all as bad, though," she went on rather gloomily, "even if we are not quite so blatant. What on earth have you been doing to father? He swaggers about as though he were already a millionaire."

"I expect we are all as bad, though," she went on rather gloomily, "even if we are not quite so blatant."

"I expect we are all as bad, though," she went on rather gloomily, "even if we are not quite so blatant."

David smiled a little sadly as he looked out across the tree tops.

"Your father has rather a sanguine temperament," he said.

"Well, don't encourage him to speculate, please," Letitia begged. "We couldn't afford to lose a single penny. As it is," she went on, "we are only able to come to Mandeleys because you've taken that ramshackle old barn close by and paid twice as much as it's worth. About the shooting, too! I almost laughed aloud when you mentioned it! Do you know, Mr. Thain, that we haven't reared a pheasant for years, and that we don't even feed the wild ones?"

"What about the partridges, though," he reminded her, "and the hares? I talked to a farmer when I was down there the other day, and he complained bitterly that there was only one vermin-killer on the whole estate and that the place was swarming with rabbits. I rather enjoy rabbit shooting."

"Oh, well, so long as you understand," Letitia replied, with a little shrug of the shoulders, "take the shoot, for goodness' sake, and pay dad as much as he chooses to ask for it. I've always noticed," she went on reflectively, "one extraordinary thing about people who haven't the faintest idea of business. They are always much cleverer than a real business man in asking ever so much more

than a thing is worth. A person with a sense of proportion, you see, couldn't do it."

"One would imagine," he complained, "that you were trying to keep me away from Mandeleys."

"Don't, please, imagine such a thing," she begged earnestly. "If there is anything I hate, it's London—or rather hate the way we have to live here. You are entirely our salvation. If you desert us now, I shall be the most miserable person alive. Only, you see, I know what father is, and what you do you must do with your eyes open."

He was silent for a moment. The echo of her words lingered in his ears. He moved a little uneasily in his place, more uneasily still when he found that she was watching him intently.

"You are really a very mysterious person, Mr. Thain," she declared, with a note of curiosity in her tone. "I hear that you decline to be interviewed, and you won't even tell the newspapers whether this is your first visit to England or not."

"I don't see what business it is of the newspapers," he rejoined. "I am not a person of any possible interest to any one. I have done nothing except make a great deal of money. That, too, was purely a matter of good fortune and a little foresight. In America," he went on, "one expects to meet with that personal curiosity. Over here, I must say that it surprises me."

"I suppose you are right," she admitted, "but, you see, under the present conditions of living, the possession of money does give such enormous power to any one. Then you must remember that our press has become Americanised lately. However, I am not a journalist, so will you answer me one question?"

"Certainly," he replied.

"Have you ever been in England before?"

"Once."

"Long ago?"

"A great many years ago."

"I don't really know why I am curious," she went on thoughtfully, "but there was a time, when I saw you first—doesn't this sound hackneyed, but it's quite true—when I fancied that I'd seen you before. It worried me for days. Even now it sometimes perplexes me."

He hated the lie which had risen so readily to his lips and choked it back.

"A dear lady, a friend of the Duchess, made the same remark to me when we were introduced," he said. "She excused herself gracefully by saying that people were so much alike, nowadays."

"I don't think that you are particularly like other people," she observed, studying him. "Would you like to hear what Ada Honeywell thinks about you?"

"So long as it leaves me still able to hold up my head," he murmured. "Mrs. Honeywell struck me as being rather severe in her strictures."

"It was only of your appearance she was speaking," Letitia continued. "She said that she could see three things in your face—a Franciscan monk, a head *maïtre d'hôtel* at the most select of French restaurants, and the modern decadent criminal, as opposed to the Charles Peace type."

"I am much obliged, I'm sure," he remarked, leaning back and laughing for once quite naturally. "My type of criminal, I presume, is one who brings art to his aid in working out his nefarious schemes."

"Precisely," she murmured. "Like Wainwright, the poisoner, or the Borgias. But at any rate we agreed upon something. There is purpose in your face."

"You speak as though that were unusual! I suppose we all have a set course in life."

She nodded.

"And a good deal depends upon the goal, doesn't it?"

There was a brief—to David, an enigmatic pause. Letitia's questions had puzzled him. She might almost have suspected his identity. They both listened idly for a few moments to the music of a violin, which some one was playing in the drawing-room.

"You've asked me a great many questions," he said abruptly. "What about you? What is your goal?"

"My dear Mr. Thain," she replied, "how can you ask! I am an impecunious young woman of luxurious tastes. It is my purpose to entrap somebody with a comfortable income into marrying me. I have been at it for several seasons," she went on a little dolefully, "but so far Charles Grantham is my only certainty, and he wobbles sometimes—especially when he sees anything of Sylvia Laycey."

"Sylvia Laycey," he repeated. "Is she the daughter of the present tenant of Broomleys?"

Letitia nodded.

"And a very charming girl, too," she declared. "You'll most certainly fall in love with her. Everybody does when she comes up to stay with me."

"Falling in love isn't one of my ordinary amusements," he observed a little drily.

"Superior person!" she mocked.

The Duchess suddenly appeared upon the balcony.

"Look here," she said, "there's been quite enough of this. Mr. Thain came especially to see me. Every one else has gone."

"I wonder if that might be considered a hint," Letitia observed, glancing at the watch upon her wrist. "All right, aunt, I'll go. You wouldn't believe, Mr. Thain," she added, buttoning her gloves, "that one's relations are supposed to be a help to one in life?"

"You're only wasting your time with Mr. Thain, dear," her aunt replied equably. "I've studied his character. We were eight days on that steamer, you know, and all the musical comedy young ladies in the world seemed to be on board, and I can give you my word that Mr. Thain is a woman-hater."

"I am really more interested in him now than I have ever been before," Letitia declared, laughing into his eyes. "My great grievance with Charlie Grantham is that he cannot keep away from our hated rivals in the other world. However,

you'll talk to me again, won't you, Mr. Thain?"

David was conscious of a curious fit of reserve, a sudden closing up of that easy intimacy into which they seemed to have drifted.

"I shall always be pleased," he said stiffly.

Letitia kissed her aunt and departed. The Duchess sank into her empty place.

"I am going to be a beast," she began. "Have you been lending money to my brother?"

"Not a sixpence," David assured her.

The Duchess was evidently staggered.

"You surprise me," she confessed. "However, so much the better. It won't interfere with what I have to say to you. I first took you to Grosvenor Square, didn't I?"

"You were so kind," he admitted.

"Now I come to think of it," she reflected, "I remember thinking it strange at the time that, though I couldn't induce you to go anywhere else, or meet any one else, you never hesitated about making Reginald's acquaintance."

"He was your brother, you see," David reminded her.

"It didn't occur to me," she replied drily, "that that was the reason. However, what I want to say to you is this, in bald words—don't lend him money."

David looked once more across the tops of the trees.

"I gather that the Marquis, then, is impecunious?" he said.

"Reginald hasn't a shilling," the Duchess declared earnestly. "Let me just tell you how they live. Letitia has two thousand a year, and so has Margaret, from their mother. Margaret's husband, who is a decent fellow, won't touch her money and makes her an allowance, so that nearly all her two thousand, and all of Letitia's, except the few ha'pence she spends on clothes, go to keeping an

establishment together. Reginald has sold every scrap of land he could, years ago. Mandeleys is the only estate he has left, and there isn't a square yard of that that isn't mortgaged to the very fullest extent. It's always a scramble between his poor devils of lawyers and himself, whether there's a little margin to be got out of the rents after paying the interest. If there is, it goes, I believe, towards satisfying the claims of a lady down at Battersea."

"A lady down at Battersea," David replied. "Is it—may I ask—an old attachment?"

"A very old one indeed," the Duchess replied, "and, to tell you the truth, it's one of the most reputable things I know connected with Reginald. He is inconstant in everything else he does, and without being in any way wilfully dishonest, he is absolutely unreliable. But this lady at Battersea—she belonged to one of his tenants or something—I forget the story—has kept him within reasonable bounds for more years than I should like to say— What do you see over there, Mr. Thain?" she broke off suddenly, following his steadfast gaze.

David dropped his eyes from the clouds. His fingers relaxed their nervous clutch of the sides of his chair.

"Nothing," he answered. "I am interested. Please go on."

"Reginald has stuck at nothing to get money," the Duchess continued. "He has been on the board of any company willing to pay him a few guineas for his name. I believe things have come to such a pitch in that direction that the most foolhardy investor throws the prospectus away if his name is on it. He has drained his relatives dry. And yet, if you can reconcile all these things, he is, in his way, the very soul of honour. Now, having told you this, you can do as you please. If you lend him money, you'll probably never get it back. If you've any to chuck away, I can show you a hundred deserving charities. Reginald without money is really a harmless and extraordinarily amusing person. Reginald in search of money is the most dangerous person I know. That is what I wanted to tell you, and if you like now you can run away. My hairdresser is waiting for me, and he is just a little more independent than my chef. Stop, though, there's one thing more."

The Duchess had rung a bell with her foot, and a servant was waiting at the windows to show David out. The latter turned back.

"You are not making a fool of yourself with Letitia, are you?"

David was very white and cold for a moment. He looked his hostess in the face, and, as she expressed it afterwards, froze her up.

"I am afraid that I do not understand you, Duchess," he said.

"Oh, don't be silly!" she replied. "Remember that I am your oldest friend in this country, and I say what I like to everybody. You avoid most women as you would the plague—most women except Letitia. I've warned you against the father. Now I am warning you against the daughter. And then you can go and lose your heart to one and lend a million to the other, if you want. Letitia, for all her apparent amiability, is the proudest girl I ever knew. I hope you understand me?"

"Perfectly!"

"Letitia will marry for money, all right," her aunt continued. "She understands that that is her duty, and she will do it. But it will be some one—you will forgive me, Mr. Thain—with kindred associations, shall I say? Letitia, fortunately, takes after her father. She has no temperament, but a sense of family tradition which will give her all the backbone she needs."

"Is there any other member of the family," David began—

"Don't be a silly boy," the Duchess interrupted, "because that's what you are, really, in this world and amongst our stupid class of people. You are just as nice as can be, though. Run along, and don't forget that you are coming to dine on Friday. You'll meet the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and he's going to try and persuade you to settle down here, for the sake of your income tax."

"Another plunderer!" David groaned. "I am beginning to feel rather like a lamb with an exceedingly long fleece."

"You would look better with your hair cut," the Duchess remarked, as she waved her hand. "Try that place at the bottom of Bond Street. The Duke always goes there. A Mr. Saunders is his man. Better ask for him. You'll find him at the top end of the room."

CHAPTER XIII

There was just one drop of alloy in the perfect contentment with which the Marquis contemplated his new prospects, and that was contained in a telephone message from Mr. Wadham, Junior, which he received upon the afternoon of David's call upon the Duchess.

"I must apologise for troubling your lordship," Mr. Wadham began. "I know your objection to the telephone, but in this instance it was quite impossible to send a message."

"I accept your apology and am listening," the Marquis declared graciously. "Be so good as to speak quite slowly, and don't mumble."

Mr. Wadham, Junior, cleared his throat before continuing. He was a little proud of his voice, although its rise and fall was perhaps more satisfactory from the point of view of a Chancery Court than from one who expected to gather the sense of every syllable.

"I am ringing up your lordship," he continued, "concerning the large batch of shares in the Pluto Oil Company of Arizona, which you entrusted to us for safe keeping, and for deposit with the bank against the advance required last Monday."

"I can hear you perfectly," the Marquis acknowledged suavely. "Pray continue."

"Your lordship's bankers sent for me this morning," Mr. Wadham went on, "in connection with these shares. They thought it their duty to point out, either through us or by communication with you direct, that according to the advice of a most reliable broker, their commercial value is practically nil."

"Is what?" the Marquis demanded.

"Nil—nix—not worth a cent," Mr. Wadham, Junior, proclaimed emphatically.

The Marquis, in that slang phraseology which he would have been the first to

decry, never turned a hair. He had not the least intention, moreover, of permitting his interlocutor at the other end of the telephone even a momentary sensation of triumph.

"You can present my compliments to the manager," he said, "and tell him that the value of the shares in question does not concern either him or his brokers. In any case, they could not possibly have any information concerning the company, as it is only just registered and has not yet commenced operations. You understand me, Mr. Wadham?"

"Perfectly, your lordship," was the smooth reply. "The fact remains, however, that the brokers do know something about the company and the persons interested in it, and that knowledge, I regret to say, is most unfavourable. We felt it our duty, therefore, to pass on these facts."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you for your anxieties on my behalf," the Marquis declared. "My legal interests are, I am quite sure, safe in your hands. My financial affairs—my outside financial affairs, that is to say—I prefer to keep under my own control. I might remind you that these shares are supported, and came into my hands, in fact, through the agency of Mr. David Thain, the great financier."

There was a moment's pause.

"I had not forgotten the fact," Mr. Wadham admitted diffidently, "and it certainly seems improbable that Mr. Thain would introduce a risky investment to your lordship within a few weeks of his arrival in this country. At the same time, we feel compelled, of course, to bring to your notice the broker's report."

"Quite so," the Marquis acquiesced. "Kindly let the people concerned know that I am acting in this matter upon special information. Good-day, Mr. Wadham. My compliments to your father."

So the conversation terminated, but the Marquis for the remainder of that day felt as though just the shadow of a cloud rested upon his happiness. Twice he stared at the address of David's rooms, which occupied a prominent place upon his study table, but on both occasions he resisted the impulse to seek him out and obtain the reassurance he needed. He buried himself instead in a Review.

Letitia came in to see him on the way back from her aunt's tea party. The

Marquis carefully made a note of his place and laid down his periodical.

"You found your aunt well, I trust, dear?"

"Oh, she was all right," Letitia replied. "She had an irritating lot of callers there, though."

Her father nodded sympathetically.

"The extraordinary habit which people in our rank of life seem to have developed lately for making friends outside their own sphere is making Society very difficult," he declared. "Members of our own family are, I am afraid, amongst the transgressors. Whom did you meet this afternoon?"

Letitia mentioned a few names listlessly.

"And Mr. Thain," she concluded.

Her father betrayed his interest.

"Mr. Thain was there, eh? I understood that he was much averse to paying calls."

"He looked as though he had been roped in," Letitia observed, "and aunt was all over herself, apologising to him for having other people there. She wanted to consult him, it seems, about something or other, and she turned him over to me until she was ready."

"And you," the Marquis enquired, with questioning sympathy, "were perhaps bored?"

"Not bored, exactly—rather irritated! I think I am like you, in some respects, father," Letitia went on, smoothing out her gloves. "I prefer to find my intimates within the circle of our own relatives and connections. A person like Mr. Thain in some way disturbs me."

"That," the Marquis regretted, "is unfortunate, as he is likely to be our neighbour at Mandeleys."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, it is of no consequence," she replied. "I shall never feel the slightest compunction in anything I might do or say to him. If he pays more for Broomleys than it is worth, he has the advantage of our countenance, which I imagine, to a person in his position, makes the bargain equal. Mr. Thain does not seem to me to be one of those men who would part with anything unless he got some return."

"Money, nowadays," the Marquis reflected, pressing the tips of his fingers together, "is a marvellously revitalising influence. People whose social position is almost, if not quite equal to our own, have even taken it into the family through marriage."

Letitia's very charming mouth twitched. Her lips parted, and she laughed softly. Nothing amused her more than this extraordinary blindness of her father to actual facts—such, for instance, as the Lees' woollen mills!

"I do hope," she remarked, "that you are not thinking of offering me up, dad, on the altar of the God of Dollars?"

"My dear child," the Marquis protested, "I can truthfully and proudly say that I am acquainted with no young woman of your position in connection with whom such a suggestion would be more sacrilegious. I have sometimes hoped," he went on, "that matters were already on the eve of settlement in another direction."

"I don't know, I'm sure," Letitia answered thoughtfully. "I sometimes think that I have a great many more feelings, dad, than the sole remaining daughter of the Right Honourable Reginald Thursford, Marquis of Mandeleys, ought to possess. The fact is, there are times when I can't stand Charlie anywhere near me, and as to discussing any subject of reasonable interest, well, he can only see anything from his own point of view, and that is always wrong."

"You and he, then," the Marquis observed, "appear to share—or rather to possess every essential for domestic happiness. The constant propinquity in which married people of the middle and lower classes are forced to live is no doubt responsible, in many cases, for the early termination of their domestic happiness."

"I always thought the middle classes were horribly virtuous," Letitia yawned. "However!—Thursday night, dad. You are dining out, aren't you?"

"Thursday night," the Marquis repeated, telling for the hundredth time, with bland ease, the falsehood which had almost ceased to have even the intention to deceive. "Yes, I dine at my club to-night, dear."

She bent over and kissed his forehead.

"Remember, my dear," he enjoined, "that I do not wish you to develop any feelings of positive dislike towards Mr. Thain. Such people have their uses in the world. We must not forget that."

Letitia laughed at him understandingly, but she closed the door in silence.

CHAPTER XIV

Marcia, more especially perhaps during these later days, felt her sense of humour gently excited every time she crossed the threshold of Trewly's Restaurant. The programme which followed was always the same. The Marquis rose from a cushioned seat in the small entrance lounge to greet her, very distinguished looking in his plain dinner clothes, his black stock, vainly imitated by the younger generation, his horn-rimmed eyeglass, his cambric-fronted shirt with the black pearls, which had been the gift of the Regent to his great-grandfather. The head waiter, and generally the manager, hovered in the background while their greetings were exchanged and Marcia's coat delivered to the care of an attendant. Then they were shown with much ceremony to the same table which they had occupied on these weekly celebrations for many years. It was in a corner of the room, a corner which formed a slight recess, and special flowers, the gift of the management, were invariably in evidence. The rose-shaded lamp, with its long, silken hangings, was arranged at precisely the right angle. The Marquis asked his usual question and waved away the menu.

"What you choose to offer us, Monsieur Herbrand," he would say, in his old-world but perfect French. "If Madame has any fancy, we will send you a message."

So the meal commenced. Trewly's was a restaurant with a past. In the days of

the Marquis's youth, when such things were studied more carefully than now, it was the one first-class restaurant in London to which the gilded youth of the aristocracy, and perhaps their sires, might indulge in the indiscretion of entertaining a young lady from the Italian chorus without fear of meeting staider relatives. The world of bohemian fashion had changed its laws since those days, and Trewly's had been left, high and dry, save for a small clientele who remembered its former glories and esteemed its cellar and cuisine. It belonged to the world which the Marquis knew, the world whose maxims he still recognised. After all these years, he would still have thought himself committing a breach of social etiquette if he had invited Marcia to lunch with him at the Ritz or the Carlton.

They drank claret, decanted with zealous care and served by a black-aproned cellarman, who waited anxiously by until the Marquis had gravely sipped his first glassful and approved. Their dinner to-day was very much what it had been a dozen years ago—the French-fed chicken, the artichokes, and strawberries served with liqueurs remained, whatever the season. And their conversations. Marcia leaned back in her chair for a moment, and again the corners of her lips twitched as she remembered. Faithfully, year after year, she could trace those conversations—the courtly, old-fashioned criticism of the events of the week, criticism from the one infallible standard, the standard of the immutable Whiggism upon which the constitution itself rested; conversation with passing references to any new event in art, and, until lately, the stage. To-night Marcia found herself tracing the gradual birth of her stimulating rebellion. She remembered how, years ago, she had sat in that same seat and listened as one might listen to the words of a god. And then came the faint revolt, the development of her intellect, the necessity for giving tongue to those more expansive and more subtle views of life which became her heritage. To do him justice, the Marquis encouraged her. He was as good a judge of wit and spirit as he was of claret. If Marcia had expressed a single sentence awkwardly, if her grammar had ever been at fault, her taste to be questioned, he would have relapsed into the stiffness of his ordinary manner, and she would have felt herself tongue-tied. But, curious though it seemed to her when she looked back, she was forced to realise that it was he who had always encouraged the birth of her new thoughts, her new ideals, her new outlook upon life, her own drastic and sometimes unanswerable criticisms of that state of life in which he lived. She represented modernity, seeking for expression in the culture of the moment. He, remaining of the ancient world, yet found himself rejuvenated, mentally refreshed, week by week, preserved from that condition of obstinate ossification

into which he would otherwise have fallen, by this brilliant and unusual companionship. In all the many years of their intimacy he had felt no doubts concerning her. He was possessed of a self-confidence wholly removed from conceit, which had spared for him the knowledge of even a moment's jealousy. In her company he had felt the coming and, as he now realised, the passing of middle age. It was only within these last few hours that certain formless apprehensions had presented themselves to him.

"You drink your wine slowly to-night," she observed. "I was just thinking how delicious it was."

He touched the long forefinger of his left hand, just a little swollen.

"A touch of gout," he said, "come to remind me, I suppose, that however much we set our faces against it, change does exist. You are the only person, Marcia, who seems to defy it."

She laughed at him, but not with entire naturalness. He found himself studying her, during the next few moments. Just as he was a celebrated connoisseur of *objets d'arts*, a valued visitor to Christie's, although his purchases were small, so he was, in his way, an excellent judge of the beautiful in living things. He realised, as he studied her, that Marcia had only more fully developed the charm which had first attracted him. Her figure was a little rounder but it had lost none of its perfections. Her neck and throat were just as beautiful, and the success of her work, and her greater knowledge of life, had brought with them an assured and dignified bearing. There was not a vestige of grey in her soft brown hair, not a line in her face, nor any sign of the dentist's handiwork in her strong, white teeth. Only—was it his fancy, he wondered, or was there something missing from the way she looked at him?—a half shy, half baffled appeal for affection which had so often shone out upon him during these evenings, a wholly personal, wholly human note, the unspoken message of a woman to her lover. He asked himself whether that had gone, and, if it had, whether the companionship which remained sufficed.

"So the journey down to Mandeleys has not materialised yet?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"To tell you the truth," she told him, "I rather shrank from it. I could not seem to bring it into perspective—you know what I mean. How am I to go to him? I

don't suppose he has changed. He is still splendidly faithful to the ideas of his earlier days. I do not suppose he has moved a step out of his groove. He is looking at the same things in the same way. Am I to go to him as a Magdalen, as a penitent? Honestly, Reginald, I couldn't play the part."

Their eyes met, and they both smiled.

"It is very difficult," he admitted, "to discuss or to hold in common a matter of importance with a person of another world. Why do you go?"

"Because," she replied, "he is, after all, my father; because I know that the pain and rage which he felt when he left England are there to-day, and I would like so much to make him see that they have all been wasted. I want him to realise that my life has been made, not spoilt."

"I should find out indirectly, if I were you, how he is feeling," the Marquis advised. "I rather agree with you that you will find him unchanged. His fierce opposition to my reasonable legal movements against him give one that impression."

"I shall probably be sorry I went," she admitted, "but it seems to me that it is one of those things which must be done. Let us talk of something else. Tell me how you have spent the week?"

"For one thing, I have improved my acquaintance with the American, David Thain, of whom I have already spoken to you," he told her.

"And your great financial scheme?"

"It promises well. Of course, if it is entirely successful, it will be like starting life all over again."

"There is a certain amount of risk, I suppose?" she asked, a little anxiously.

The Marquis waved his hand.

"In this affair quite negligible," he declared.

"It would make you very happy, of course, to free the estates," she ruminated.

The Marquis for a moment revealed a side of himself which always made Marcia feel almost maternal towards him.

"It would give me very great pleasure, also," he confessed, "to point out to my solicitors—to Mr. Wadham, Junior, especially—that the task which they have left unaccomplished for some twenty-five years I have myself undertaken successfully."

"This Mr. Thain must be rather interesting," Marcia said musingly. "Could you describe him?"

It was at that precise moment that the Marquis raised his head and discovered that David Thain was being shown by an obsequious *maître d'hôtel* to the table adjoining their own.

In the case of almost any other of his acquaintances, the Marquis's course of action would have been entirely simple. David, however, complicated things. With the naïve courtesy of his American bringing up, he no sooner recognised the Marquis than he approached the table and offered his hand.

"Good evening, Marquis," he said.

The Marquis shook hands. Some banalities passed between the two men. Then, as though for the first time, David was suddenly and vividly aware of Marcia's presence. Some instinct told him who she was, and for a moment he forgot himself. He looked at her steadily, curiously, striving to remember, and Marcia returned his gaze with a strange absorption which at first she failed to understand. This slim, nervous-looking man, with the earnest eyes and the slight stoop of the head, was bringing back to her some memory. From the first stage of the struggle her common sense was worsted. She was looking back down the avenues of her memory. Surely somewhere in that shadowland she had known some one with eyes like these!—there must be something to explain this queer sense of excitement. And then the Marquis, who had been deliberating, spoke the words which brought her to herself.

"Marcia, let me present to you Mr. David Thain, of whom we were speaking a few minutes ago. Mr. Thain, this is Miss Marcia Hannaway, whose very clever novel you may have read."

David's eyes were still eagerly fixed upon her face, but the introduction had

brought Marcia back to the earth. There could be no connection between those half-formed memories and the American millionaire whose name was almost a household word!

"I am very pleased to meet you, Miss Hannaway," David said. "I was just telling the Marquis that I was surprised to find any one here whom I knew. I asked a friend to tell me of a restaurant near my rooms where I should meet no one, and he sent me here."

"Why such misanthropy?" she asked.

"It is my own bad manners," he explained. "I accepted an invitation for this evening, and found at the last moment so much work that I was obliged to send an excuse."

"You carry your work about with you, then?"

"Not always, I hope," he replied, "only I am just now clearing out a great many of my interests in America, and that alone is sufficient to keep one busy."

He passed on with a little bow, and took his place at the table which the *maître d'hôtel* had indicated. The Marquis, to whom his coming had been without any real significance, continued his conversation with Marcia until he found to his surprise that she was giving him less than her whole attention.

"What do you think of our hero of finance?" he enquired, a little coldly.

"He seems very much as you described him," Marcia answered. "To tell you the truth, his sudden appearance just as we were talking about him rather took my breath away."

"It was a coincidence, without doubt," the Marquis acknowledged.

Her eyes wandered towards the man who had given his brief order for dinner, and whose whole attention now seemed absorbed by the newspaper which he was reading.

"It is Mr. Thain, is it not, who introduced to you this wonderful speculation?" she asked, a little abruptly.

"That is so," the Marquis admitted. "I have always myself, however, been favourably disposed towards oil."

Marcia suddenly withdrew her glance, laughed softly to herself and sipped her wine.

"I was indulging in a ridiculous train of thought," she confessed. "Mr. Thain looks very clever, even if he is not exactly one's idea of an American financier. I expect the poor man does get hunted about. A millionaire, especially from foreign parts, has become a sort of Monte Cristo, nowadays."

The subject of David Thain dropped. The Marquis, as their coffee was brought, began to wonder dimly whether it was possible that the thread of their conversation was a little more difficult to hold together than in the past; whether that bridge between their interests and daily life became a little more difficult to traverse as the years passed. He fell into a momentary fit of silence. Marcia leaned towards him.

"Reginald," she said, "do you know, there was something I wanted to ask you this evening. Shall I ask it now?"

"If you will, dear."

She paused for a moment. The matter had seemed so easy and reasonable when she had revolved it in her mind, yet at this moment of broaching it, she realised, not for the first time, how different he was from other men; how difficult a nameless something about his environment made certain discussions. Nevertheless, she commenced her task.

"Reginald," she began, "do you realise that during the whole of my life I have never dined alone with any other man but you?"

"Nor I, since you came, with any other woman," he rejoined calmly. "You have some proposition to make?"

She was surprised to find that he had penetrated her thoughts.

"Don't you think, perhaps," she continued, "that we are a little too self-enclosing? Thanks to you, as I always remember, dear, the world has grown a larger place for me, year by year. At first I really tried to avoid friendships. I was

perfectly satisfied. I did not need them. But my work, somehow, has made things different. It has brought me amongst a class of people who look upon freedom of intercourse between the sexes as a part of their everyday life. I found a grey hair in my head only the night before last, and do you know how it came? Just by refusing invitations from perfectly harmless people."

"I have never placed any restrictions upon your life," her companion reminded her.

"I know it," she admitted, "but, you see, the principal things between us have always been unspoken. I knew just how you felt about it. What I want to know is, now that the times have changed around you as well as around me, whether you would feel just the same if I, to take an example, were to lunch or dine with Mr. Borden, now and then, or with Morris Hyde, the explorer. I met him at an Authors' Club *conversazione* and he was immensely interesting. It struck me then that perhaps I was interpreting your wishes a little too literally."

The Marquis selected a cigarette from his battered gold case with its tiny coronet, tapped it upon the table and lit it. Marcia was already smoking.

"I fear that I am very old-fashioned in my notions, Marcia," he confessed. "I should find it very difficult to adapt myself to the perfectly harmless, I am sure, lack of restraint which, as you say, has opened the doors to a much closer friendship between men and women. The place which you have held in my life has grown rather than lessened with the years. It is only natural, however, that the opposite should be the case with you. I should like to consider what you have said, Marcia."

"You have meant so much to me," she continued, "you have been so much. In our earlier days, too, especially during that year when we travelled, you were such a wonderful mentor. It was your fine taste, Reginald, which enabled me to make the best of those months in Florence and Rome. You knew the best, and you showed it to me. You never tried to understand why it was the best, but you never made a mistake."

"Those things are matters of inheritance," he replied, "and cultivation. It was a great joy to me, Marcia, to give you the keys."

"Yes," she repeated, "that is what you did, Reginald—you gave me the keys, and I opened the doors."

"And now," he went on, "you have pushed your way further, much further into the world where men and women think, than I could or should care to follow you. Is it likely to separate us?"

She saw him suddenly through a little mist of tears.

"No!" she exclaimed, "it must not! It shall not!"

"Nevertheless," he persisted, "the thought is in your mind. I cannot alter my life, Marcia. I live to a certain extent by tradition, and by habits which have become too strong to break. There is a great difference in our years and in our outlook upon life. There is much before you, flowers which you may pick and heights which you may climb, which can have no message for me."

"Nothing," Marcia declared fervently, "shall disturb our—our friendship."

"That does not rest with you, dear, but rather with Fate," he replied. "You might control your actions, and I know that you would, but your will, your desires, your temperament, may still lead you in opposite directions. I have been your lover too long to slip easily into the place of your guardian. Hold out your hand, if you will, now, and bid me farewell. Try the other things, and, if they fail you, send for me."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," she objected. "We are both of us much too serious. The only question we are considering is whether you would object to my dining with Mr. Borden and lunching with Mr. Hyde?"

"It would give you an opportunity," he remarked, with a rather grim smile, "of seeing the inside of some other restaurant."

"How understanding you are!" she exclaimed. "Do you know, although I love our dinners here, I sometimes feel as though this room were a little cage, a little corner of the world across the threshold of which you had drawn a chalk line, so that no one of your world or mine might enter. The coming of Mr. Thain was almost like an earthquake."

With every moment it seemed to him that he understood her a little more, and with every moment the pain of it all increased.

"My dear Marcia," he said, "you have spoken the word. More than once

lately I have fancied that I noticed indications of this desire on your part. I am glad, therefore, that you have spoken. Dine with your publisher, by all means, and lunch with Mr. Hyde. Take to yourself that greater measure of liberty which it is only too natural that you should covet. We will look upon it as a brief vacation, which certainly, after all these years, you have earned. When you have made up your mind, write to me. I shall await your letter with interest."

"But you mean that you are not coming down to see me before then?" she asked, a little tremulously.

"I think it would be better not," he decided. "I have kept you to myself very stringently, Marcia. You see, I recognise this, and I set you free for a time."

He paid the bill, and they left the room together.

"You are coming home?" she whispered, as they passed down the vestibule.

He shook his head.

"Not to-night, if you will excuse me, Marcia," he said. "The car is here. I will take a cab myself. There is a meeting of the committee at my club."

They were on the pavement. She gripped his hand.

"Do come," she begged.

He handed her in with a smile.

"You will go down to Battersea, James," he told the chauffeur, "and fetch me afterwards from the club."

A queer feeling caught at her heart as the car glided off and left him standing there, bareheaded. It was the first time—she felt something like the snap of a chain in her heart—the first time in all these years! Yet she never for a moment deceived herself. The tears which stood in her eyes, the pain in her heart, were for him.

CHAPTER XV

The Duchess, a few mornings later, leaned back in her car and watched the perilous progress of her footman, dodging in and out of the traffic in the widest part of Piccadilly. He returned presently in safety, escorting the object of his quest. The Duchess pointed to the seat by her side.

"Can I take you or drop you anywhere?" she asked. "Please don't look as though you had been taken into custody. I saw you in the distance, walking aimlessly along, and I really wanted to talk to you."

David for a moment indulged in the remains of what was almost a boyish resentment.

"I have to go to the Savoy," he explained, "and I was rather intending to walk across St. James's Park."

"You can walk after your lunch," she insisted. "If you walk before, it gives you too much of an appetite,—afterwards, it helps your digestion, so get in with me, and I will drive you to the Savoy."

He took his place by her side with a distinct air of resignation. The Duchess laughed at him.

"You are a very silly person to dislike other people so," she admonished. "If you begin to give way to misanthropy at your time of life, you will be a withered up old stick whom no one will want to be decent to, except to get money out of, before you're fifty. Don't you know that the society of human beings is good for you?"

"There isn't a medicine in the world one can't take too much of," David ventured, smiling in spite of himself.

"To the Savoy, John," his mistress directed. "Tell Miles to drive slowly. To abandon abstruse discussions," she continued, leaning back, "have you regarded my warning?"

"Which one?" he demanded.

"I mean with reference to my brother. I happen to have come across him once

or twice, during the last few days. On Wednesday he was in the most buoyant spirits—for him. He had the air of a man who has accomplished some great feat. If you only knew how amusing Reginald is at such times! His manner isn't in the least different, but you know perfectly well that he is thinking himself one of the most brilliant creatures ever born. There is a note of the finest and most delicate condescension in the way he speaks. I am perfectly certain that if he had happened to come across the Chancellor of the Exchequer on Wednesday, he would have discussed finance with him in a patronising fashion, and probably offered him a few hints as to how to reduce the National Debt."

"On Wednesday this was," David murmured.

"And on Friday," the Duchess continued, "he was a different man. He carried himself exactly as usual, but his footsteps were falling like lead. He looked over the eyes of every one, and there was that queer, grey look in his face which helps one to remember that, notwithstanding his figure, he is nearly sixty years old. What have you been doing to him, Mr. Thain?"

"Nothing that would account for his latter state," David assured her.

"When did you see him last?" she asked.

"On Thursday."

"Where?"

David hesitated.

"At Trewly's Restaurant."

"He was lunching or dining with some one?"

"Dining."

The Duchess nodded.

"Of course! With a lady, wasn't it?"

"Is this a fair cross-examination?" David protested.

"My dear Mr. Thain, don't be absurd," his companion admonished. "Every one in London and out of it has known of my brother's friendship with Marcia Hannaway for years. As a matter of fact, we all approve of it immensely. The young woman, although she must be getting on now, is a very clever writer, and I think that the influence she has exercised upon Reginald, throughout his life, has been an excellent one. So that was Thursday night, eh?"

David assented. He was looking out of the window of the car, as though interested in the passing throngs.

"I will tell you something," the Duchess continued. "You have heard, I dare say, of the lawsuits down at Mandeleys, and of that keeper's cottage within a hundred yards from the lawn, and of the old man Vont, who has come back just as bitter as ever? That girl is his daughter."

"The Marquis seems to have displayed the most extraordinary fidelity," David remarked.

"My dear Mr. Thain," was the emphatic reply, "they have been the making of one another's lives. It is the sort of thing one reads more of in French memoirs than meets with in actual life, but I can assure you that Reginald would be absolutely miserable without her, and she—well, see what she has become through his influence and companionship. Yet they tell me that that old man has come back to his ridiculous cottage, and sits there in the front garden, reading the Bible and blasting the very gooseberry bushes with his curses against Reginald. Most uncomfortable it will be, I should think, when you all get down there."

"Nothing that you have said alters the fact," David reminded her, "that Vont's daughter has been all her life, and is to-day, in an invidious situation with regard to your brother."

The Duchess's eyebrows were slightly raised.

"And why not?" she asked, in genuine surprise. "Of course, I don't claim to be so absolutely feudal in my ideas as Reginald, but I still cannot find the slightest disadvantage which has accrued to the young woman from her position."

"I have been brought up myself in a different school," David said quietly, "in

the school Richard Vont was brought up in. I see no difference fundamentally between a Marquis and a gamekeeper, and to me the womenkind of the gamekeeper should be as sacred to the Marquis as the womenkind of the Marquis to the gamekeeper."

The Duchess laughed good-humouredly.

"I have always insisted," she declared, "that America is the most backward country in the world. So many of you come to Europe now, though, that one would have thought you would have attained to a more correct perspective of life. But you are certainly much more amusing as you are. No, be quiet, please," she went on. "I didn't call for you to enter into general discussions. I just wanted to know about Reginald. Of course, you have discovered already that I am ridiculously fond of him, and I am trying to find out what is depressing him so much. Do you know what I am most afraid of?"

"I have no idea," David confessed. "The workings of your mind seem to lead you to such unexpected conclusions."

"Don't be peevish," she replied. "What I am really more afraid of than anything is that Marcia Hannaway will leave him."

"Why?"

The Duchess shrugged her shoulders.

"She is twenty years younger than Reginald, and she has made for herself an entirely new place in life. That is the wonderful goal a woman reaches who has brains and is enabled to put them to some practical use. She has a circle of friends and admirers and sympathisers, already made. Now Reginald is a dear, but his outlook upon life is almost whimsical, and I have always wondered whether he would be able to hold a woman like this to the end. The only thing is," she concluded ruminatively, "that the affair has been going on for so long, and is so well known, that it would be positively indecent of her to break it off. Don't you think so, Mr. Thain?"

David looked at the Duchess and shook his head.

"Honestly," he admitted, "I can't give an opinion. I thought I understood something of human nature before I came into touch with you and those few

members of your aristocracy whom I have met through you. But frankly, to use a homely metaphor, you take the wind out of my sails. I don't know where I am when you lay down the law. There is something wrong between us fundamentally. I was brought up the same way Vont was brought up. Things were right or wrong, moral or immoral. You people seem to have made laws of your own."

"It's time some one revised the old ones," his companion laughed. "However, I can see that you can be no help to me about Reginald, and here we are at the Savoy. By-the-by, I've never seen you except with men. Have you no women friends? Are none of those charming little musical comedy ladies I see through the windows there expecting you as their host?"

"They look very attractive," David admitted, smiling back at his companion, "but I am, in reality, lunching alone. I came here because I know my stockbroker lunches every day in the grillroom, and I want to see him."

"How pathetic!" she sighed. "I really believe that I have a duty in connection with you."

"At any rate," he promised, as he held out his hand, "there is a man here who will serve us some American lobster which is very nearly the real thing."

"Don't make me feel too gluttonous," she begged, as she stepped out. "I really am not in the habit of inviting myself to luncheon like this, but the fact of it is—"

She hesitated. He passed behind her into the little vestibule.

"Well?"

"Well, I rather like you, Mr. David Thain," she whispered. "You won't be vain about it, will you, but all the financiers I have ever met have been so extraordinarily full of their money and how they made it. You are different, aren't you?"

"I am content if you find me so," he answered, with rare gallantry.

David ordered a thoroughly American luncheon, of which his guest heartily approved.

"If you Americans," she observed, "only knew how to live as well as you know how to eat, what a nation you would be!"

"We fancy that we have some ideas that way, also," he told her. "Wherein do we fail most, from your English point of view?"

"In matters of sex," the Duchess replied coolly. "You know so much more about lobster Newburg than you do about women. I suppose it is all this strenuous money-getting that is responsible for your ignorance. No one over here, you see, tries for anything very much."

"You certainly all live in a more enervating atmosphere," David admitted.

"Tell me about your younger days?" she demanded.

"There is nothing to tell in the least interesting," he assured her. "My people were poor. I was sent to Harvard with great difficulty by a relative who kept a boot store. I became a clerk in a railway office, took a fancy to the work and planned out some schemes—which came off."

"How much money have you, in plain English?" she asked.

"About four millions," he answered.

"And what are you going to do with it?"

"Buy an estate, for one thing," he replied. "Fortunately, I am very fond of shooting and riding, so I suppose I shall amuse myself."

"Are those your only resources?" she enquired, with a faint smile.

"I may marry."

"Come, this gets more interesting! Any lady in your mind yet?"

"None whatever," he assured her, with almost exaggerated firmness.

"You'd better give yourself a few years first and then let me choose for you," she suggested. "I know just the type—unless you change."

"And why should I change?"

"Because," she said, eying him penetratively, "there is at present something bottled up in you. I do not know what it is, and if I asked you wouldn't tell me, but you're not quite your natural self, whatever that may be. Is it, I wonder, the result of that twenty years' struggle of yours? Perhaps you have really lost the

capacity for generous life, Mr. Thain."

"You are a very observant person."

"Trust me, then, and tell me your secret sorrow?" she suggested. "I could be a very good friend, Mr. Thain, if friends amuse you."

"I have lived under a shadow," he confessed. "I am sorry, but I cannot tell you much about it. But in a sense you are right. Life for me will begin after the accomplishment of a certain purpose."

"You have a rival to ruin, eh?"

"No, it isn't that," he assured her. "It happens to be something of which I could not give you even the smallest hint."

"Well, I don't see how you are going to get on with it down at Broomleys," she observed. "What a horrid person you are to go there at all! You might as well bury yourself. You have the wealth of a Monte Cristo and you take a furnished villa—for that's all it is! Perhaps you are waiting till the mortgages fall in, to buy Mandeleys? Or did my warning come too late and is Letitia the attraction?"

He was conscious of her close observation, but he gave no sign.

"I have seen nothing of Lady Letitia," he said, "but even if she were content to accept my four millions as a compensation for my other disadvantages, it would make no difference."

"Any entanglements on the other side?" she asked airily.

"None!"

The Duchess finished her lobster and leaned back in her chair. Through her tiny platinum lorgnette she looked around the room for several moments. Then a little abruptly she turned again to him.

"Really," she said, "people are doing such mad things, now-a-days, that I am not at all sure that I am right in putting you off Letitia. It would be frightfully useful to have four millions in the family. And yet, do you know," she went on, "it's queer, isn't it, but I don't want you to marry my niece."

"Why not?"

"How crude!" she sighed. "I really shall have to take a lot of trouble with you, Mr. David Thain. However, if you persist—because Letitia is my niece."

"And you don't like me well enough," he asked, "to accept me as a husband for your niece?"

She laughed at him very quietly.

"Are you very ingenuous," she demanded, "or just a little subtle? Hadn't it occurred to you, for instance, that I might prefer to keep you to myself?"

"You must forgive me if I seem stupid," he begged, "or unresponsive. I don't wish to be either. I can understand that in America I might be a person of some interest. Over here—well, the whole thing is different, isn't it? Apart from my money, I know and realise how ignorant I am of your ways, of the things to do here and how to do them. I feel utterly at a disadvantage with every one, unless they happen to want my money."

"You are too modest, Mr. Thain," she declared, leaning a little towards him and dropping her voice. "I will tell you one reason why you interest me. It is because I am quite certain that there is something in your life, some purpose or some secret, which you have not confided to any living person in this country. I want to know what it is. It isn't exactly vulgar inquisitiveness, believe me. I am perfectly certain that there is something more of you than you show to people generally."

David was conscious of an odd sense of relief. After all, the woman was only curious—and it was most improbable that her curiosity would lead her in the right direction.

"You are very discerning, Duchess," he said. "Unfortunately, I have no confidence to offer you. The one secret in my life is some one else's and not my own."

"And you never betray a confidence?" she asked, looking at him steadfastly. "You could be trusted?"

"I hope so," he assured her.

Their lunch passed on to its final stages. The Duchess smoked a Russian cigarette with her coffee, and it seemed to him that imperceptibly she had moved a little nearer to him. Her elbows were upon the table and her hands clasped. She seemed for a moment to study one or two quaint rings upon her fingers.

"A few more questions, and I shall feel that we know one another," she said. "Just why have you left America and this wonderful pursuit of wealth?"

"Because there were no more railways in which I was interested," he answered, "nor any particular speculation or enterprise that appealed to me. I have more money than I can ever spend, and I know very well that if I remained in America I should have no peace. I should be a target for years for every man who has land to sell near railways, or shares to sell, or an invention to perfect. As soon as I decided to wind up, I decided also that it was necessary for me to clear right away. Apart from that, England and English life attracts me."

"And this purpose?" she enquired. "This secret—which is somebody else's secret?"

"Such as it is," he replied, "it belongs to this country."

"How old are you?" she asked suddenly.

"I am thirty-seven," he told her.

She sighed. Her slightly tired blue eyes seemed to be looking through the little cloud of cigarette smoke to the confines of the room.

"A magnificent age for a man," she murmured, "but a little ghastly for a woman. I was thirty-nine last birthday. Never mind, one has the present. So here are you, in the prime of life, with an immense fortune and no responsibilities. If Disraeli had been alive, he would have written a novel about you. There is so much which you could do, so much in which you could fail. Will you become just a man about town here, make friends partly in Bohemia and partly amongst some of us, endow a theatre and marry the first chorus girl who is too clever for you? Or—"

"I am more interested in the 'or,'" he declared rashly.

She turned her eyes slightly without moving her head, and knocked the ash

from her cigarette into her plate.

"Let us go," she said, a little abruptly. "I am tired of talking here. If you really wish to know, you can accept the invitation which I shall send you presently, and come to Scotland."

CHAPTER XVI

Letitia and her escort pulled up their horses at the top of Rotten Row. Letitia was a little out of breath, but her colour was delightful, and the slight disarrangement of her tightly coiled brown hair most becoming.

"It was dear of you, Charlie, to think of lending me a hack," she declared. "I haven't enjoyed a gallop so much for ages. When we get down to Mandeleys I am going to raid Bailey's stables. He always has some young horses."

"Want schooling a bit before they're fit to ride," Grantham observed.

"If I had been born in another walk of life," Letitia said, "I am sure horse-breaking would have been my profession. You haven't been in to see us for ages, Charles."

"You weren't particularly gracious the last time I did come," he reminded her gloomily.

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "You must have come on an irritating afternoon. I get into such a terrible tangle sometimes with my housekeeping accounts up here. You know how impossible dad is with money matters, and he leaves everything to me."

The young man cleared his throat.

"I think you've borne the burdens of the family long enough," he remarked. "I wish you'd try mine."

"You do choose the most original forms of proposal," Letitia acknowledged

frankly. "As a matter of fact, I have had enough of keeping accounts. I have almost made up my mind that when I do marry, if I ever do, I will marry some one enormously wealthy, who can afford to let me have a secretary-steward as well as a housekeeper."

"You've been thinking of that fellow Thain," he muttered.

"Oh, no, I haven't!" she replied. "Mr. Thain is a very pleasant person, but I can assure you that I have never considered him matrimonially. I suppose I ought to have done," she went on, "but, you know, I am just a little old-fashioned."

"I can't see what's the matter with me," the young man said disconsolately. "I've a bit of my own, a screw from my job, and the governor allows me a trifle. We might work it up to ten thousand a year. We ought to be able to make a start on that."

"It is positive wealth," Letitia acknowledged, "but I am sure you don't want me really, and I haven't the least inclination to get married, and heaven knows what would happen to dad if I let him go back to bachelor apartments!"

"He'd take care of himself all right," Letitia's suitor observed confidently.

"Would he!" she replied. "I am not at all sure. Our menkind always seem to have gone on sowing their wild oats most vigorously after middle age. Of course, if Ada Honeywell would marry him, I might feel a little easier in my mind."

"Ada won't marry any one," Grantham declared, "and I am perfectly certain, if she were willing, your father wouldn't marry her. She's too boisterous."

"Poor woman!" Letitia sighed. "She's immensely rich, but, you see, she has no past—I mean no pedigree. I am afraid it's out of the question."

"I wish you would chuck rotting and marry me, Letitia," he begged. "There's a little house in Pont Street—suit us down to the ground."

Letitia found herself gazing over the tops of the more distant trees.

"We are going down to Mandeleys in a few days," she said presently. "I'll take myself seriously to task there. I suppose I must really want to be married

only I don't know it. Don't be surprised if you get a telegram from me any day."

"I'd come down there myself, if I had an invitation," he suggested.

She shook her head.

"Charlie," she declared, "it couldn't be done. So far as I can see at present, unless some of the tenantry offer their services for nothing—and our tenantry aren't like that—we shall have to keep house with about half a dozen servants, which means of course, only opening a few rooms. As a matter of fact, we shan't be able to go at all, unless Mr. Thain pays his rent for Broomleys in advance."

They turned out of the Park and not a word passed between them again until Letitia descended from her horse in Grosvenor Square.

"You were a dear to think of this, Charles," she said, standing on the steps and smiling at him. "I haven't enjoyed anything so much for a long time."

"You wouldn't care about a theatre this evening?" he proposed.

"Come in at tea time and see how I am feeling," she suggested. "I have dad rather on my hands. He has been wandering about like a lost sheep, the last few afternoons. I can't think what is wrong."

She strolled across the hall and looked in at the study. The Marquis was seated in an easy-chair, reading a volume of Memoirs. She crossed the room towards him.

"Father," she exclaimed, "you ought to have been out a beautiful morning like this."

The Marquis laid down his book. He was certainly looking a little tired. Letitia came up to his side and patted his hand.

"How's the gout?" she asked.

"Better," he replied, examining the offending finger.

"You're just lazy, I believe," Letitia observed reprovingly. "The sooner we get down to Mandeleys the better."

The Marquis glanced at a silver-framed calendar which stood upon the table. He had glanced at it about a hundred times during the last few days.

"A little country air," he confessed, "will be very agreeable. I think perhaps, too," he went on, "that I am inclined to be weary of London. It is more of a city, after all, isn't it, for the bourgeois rich than for a penniless Marquis. Where did you get your mount from, dear?"

"Charlie lent me a hack," she replied. "I've had a perfectly delightful ride."

"You have not yet arrived, I suppose," her father went on, "at any fixed matrimonial intentions with regard to Charlie?"

She shook her head a little dejectedly.

"It's so hard," she confessed. "I am dying to say 'yes,' especially, somehow, during the last few days, but somehow I can't. I think it must be his fault," she added resentfully. "He doesn't ask me properly."

"You'll find some one will be taking him off your hands before long," her father warned her. "Personally, I have no objection to find with the alliance."

"Of course," Letitia complained, "it's very clear what you are thinking of! You want your bachelor apartments in the Albany again, and the gay life. I really feel that it is my duty to remain a spinster and look after you."

The Marquis smiled. Once more his eyes glanced towards the calendar.

"Better ask Charlie down to Mandeleys and settle it with him there," he suggested.

"That's just what he wants," she sighed. "If we begin a house party there, though, think what a picnic it will be! And besides, Sylvia Laycey is sure to be somewhere about, and he'll probably fall in love with her again. I do wish I could make up my mind. What are you doing to-night, dad?"

"I am dining with Montavon," her father replied, "at the club. He has a party of four for whist."

"Dear old things!" Letitia murmured affectionately. "I hope you have

Sheffield plate candlesticks on the table. Why not go in fancy dress—one of those Georgian Court dresses, you know—black velvet knickerbockers, a sword and peruke! Much better let me give you a lesson at auction bridge."

The Marquis shivered.

"You play the game?" he asked politely.

"I tried it as a means of subsistence," Letitia confessed, "but my partners always did such amazing things that I found there was nothing in it. If you are really dining out, dad, I shall go to the play with Charlie."

"Alone?"

"Don't be silly, dear," Letitia protested, flicking her whip. "Remember what that wicked old lady wrote in her memoirs—'Balham requires a chaperon, but Grosvenor Square never.' I shall try and get used to him this evening. I may even have wonderful news for you in the morning."

The Marquis took up his book again.

"I wish, my dear, that I could believe it," he told her fervently.

CHAPTER XVII

"I feel like the German lady," Marcia observed, as she stood before her little sideboard and mixed a whisky and soda, "who went on cutting bread and butter. The world falls to pieces before my eyes—and I press the handle of a syphon. There!"

She carried the tumbler to Borden, who was seated by her fireside, and threw herself into an easy-chair opposite to him.

"I know it's all wrong," she declared. "My instincts are so obstinate even about the simplest things. You see, I have even wheeled away his easy-chair so that you shan't sit in it."

"Women always confuse instincts with prejudices," Borden rejoined, calmly sipping his whisky and soda. "May I smoke a pipe?"

Marcia gave a little gesture of despair.

"I never knew a man," she exclaimed, "who exhibited such a propensity for making himself at home! Tell me," she went on, "did you notice a very aristocratic looking, almost beautiful girl, with large brown eyes and a pale skin, seated in the stalls just below our box?"

"The girl with Charles Grantham?"

Marcia nodded.

"That was Lady Letitia Thursford," she told him.

"Is she engaged to Grantham?"

"She wasn't last week," Marcia replied. "I think the Marquis would like it, but Lady Letitia is by way of being difficult. I saw her looking at me thoughtfully, once or twice. I was dying to send down word to her that I had permission."

Borden moved in his chair a little uneasily.

"You are bound to no one," he reminded her. "There is no one of whom you need to ask permission."

"Don't be silly," Marcia replied. "I asked permission, and without it I wouldn't have dined with you alone to-night or lunched with Morris Hyde on Tuesday."

"I trust that both entertainments," he ventured, "have been a success."

Marcia shook her head.

"Morris Hyde was very disappointing," she confessed. "I was looking forward to being tremendously entertained, but instead of telling me all about these unknown tribes in Central America, his only anxiety seemed to be to know if I was going to let him kiss me in the taxi afterwards. Explorers, I am afraid, are far too promiscuous."

"Publishers," Borden said firmly, "are renowned throughout the world for their fidelity."

"Fidelity to their cash boxes," Marcia scoffed.

Borden, who had lit his pipe, blinked at her through a little cloud of smoke. They had come straight from the theatre, and he was in the evening clothes of a man who cares nothing about his appearance,—the black waistcoat, the none-too-well fitting shirt, the plainest of studs, and the indifferently arranged white tie. Nevertheless, Marcia liked the look of him, seated at ease in her low chair, and it was very obvious that he, too, approved of his hostess. She was curled up now at the end of the sofa, a cigarette in her mouth, an expression of curious perplexity upon her face. She was dressed very plainly in black, having alternately tried on and discarded all her more elaborate evening gowns. She had had a queer, almost desperate fancy to make herself look as unattractive as possible, but the very simplicity of her dress enhanced the gleaming perfection of her throat and arms. Even her posture, which should have been ungraceful, suited her. Her disturbed and doubtful frame of mind had softened her firm mouth, and lit with a sort of sweet plaintiveness her beautiful eyes.

"Do you think," he asked, "that I look upon you as a promising investment?"

"Well, I am," Marcia replied. "You admit having made money out of me this spring."

"At any rate, I am willing to divide it," he suggested.

"Upon conditions!"

"No one in the world gives something for nothing," he reminded her.

"We seem to be mixing up business and the other things most shockingly," Marcia declared. "Do you really mean that you are willing to share the profits of my next novel with me?"

"I couldn't do that," he objected, "it would be too unbusinesslike. I am quite willing, however, to share my life and all I have with you."

"Mere rhetoric!" Marcia exclaimed uneasily.

"Solemn earnest," he insisted. "Will you marry me, Marcia?"

She looked across at him. Her eyebrows were a little raised, her eyes inclined to be misty, her mouth tremulous.

"James," she replied, "I believe I'd like to. I'm not quite sure—I believe I would. But just tell me—how can I?"

"He has kept you to himself for pretty well twenty years," Borden said gruffly.

She sighed.

"When I was a child of seventeen," she confided, "a young farmer down at Mandeleys kissed me. If I had been one year younger," she went on, "I should have spat at him. As it was, I never spoke to him again. Then, a few months after that, the schoolmaster at the school where I was teaching made an awkward attempt at the same thing. He missed me, but his lips just touched my cheek. Then Reginald came. Let me see, that was nineteen years ago, and since then no one else has kissed me."

"A record of fidelity," Borden observed, "at which, even in your own stories, you would scoff."

"But then, you see," she reminded him, "I never write about a person with queer ideas like mine, because they wouldn't be interesting. People like a little more resilience about their heroines."

"Couldn't we talk brutal common sense for once?" he asked impatiently. "I have never abused your Marquis. From your own showing, he has played the game, as you have. All I want to say is that the natural time has come for your separation. I have waited for you a good many years, and I am a domestic man. I want a home—and children. It's quite time you wanted the same."

Perhaps for a moment the light in her eyes was a shade softer. She moved uneasily in her place.

"Quite primitive, aren't you, James?" she murmured.

"Life's a primitive thing when we get down to the bone," he answered. "You

and I have wasted many an hour discussing the ologies, trying to thrust ourselves into the peculiar point of view of these neurotic Norwegians or mad Russians. When you come down to bedrock, though, for sober, decent people there is only one outlet to passion, only one elementary satisfaction for man and woman."

"You make things sound very simple."

"It isn't that," he persisted. "It's you who make them complex by being maudlin about this man. He has had what many would call the best part of your life. He has given up nothing for your sake, done nothing for your sake. He has kept you in the same seclusion that his grandfather would have done. He has treated you, so far as regards the outside world, as a man does—"

He stopped abruptly. Something in her eyes warned him.

"There are limits," she told him drily, "to my appreciation of unbridled speech. According to his lights, Reginald has been wonderful. To me there has been more romance than ignominy in many of his ideas. My trouble is something different. I can't quite make up my mind what it would mean for him if I were to strike out for myself now."

"You are like all women," he declared furiously. "You complicate every situation in life by thinking of other people. Think for yourself, Marcia. What about your own future? I promise you that your Marquis would think for himself, if he were up against a similar problem. He is getting all he wants. Are you? Of course you aren't!"

"Does anybody get all they want out of life?"

"It is generally their own fault if they don't get the main things," he insisted. "But, see here, I'll attack you with your own weapons. Here am I, forty-one years old, in love with you since I was thirty-two. What about those nine years? I am dropping into the ways of untidy, unsatisfactory bachelordom. I only order new clothes when some friend chaffs me into it, and if I do I forget the ties and shirts and those sorts of things. I've lost all interest in myself. I loaf at the club, play auction bridge when I might be doing something a great deal better, and drink a whisky and soda when any one asks me. I hang on to the business, but when I've finished my work I drift. In another five years' time I shall begin to stoop, I shall live with cigar ash all over my clothes, and I shall have to be taken home from the club every other night. Your doing, Marcia—your responsibility."

"I should think," she said severely, "that your self-respect—"

"Oh, don't bother about my self-respect!" he interrupted. "I am a human being, and I tell you, Marcia, that every man needs something in his life to lift him just a little, to live up to, not down to. There is only one person in the world can take that place for me. I'm a clear charge upon your hands. You know that I love you, that you've driven all thoughts of other women out of my head, that you keep me beating against the walls of my impotence every time we meet and part. I am perfectly certain, if you don't come down to the world of common sense, I shall sink into the world of melodrama and go and tackle your Marquis myself. He must let you go."

"Do you want me as much as all that?" she asked, a little wistfully.

He was by her side in a moment, inspired by the break in her tone, the sweet, soft look in her eyes. He sank on one knee by the side of her couch and took her hands in his, kissing them one after the other.

"Ah, Marcia," he murmured, "I want you more than anything else on earth! I want you so much that, when you come, you will make the years that have passed seem like nothing but a nightmare, and the minutes, as they come, years of happiness. I am awkward, I know, sometimes, and gruff and morose, but so is any man who spends his life fretting for the thing he can't get. I only ask you, dear, to be fair. I have never said an unkind word about the man for whom you have cared so long. I only say now that you belong to me. I am not a bit foolish—I am not even jealous—only your time has come, your time for that little home in the country, a husband always with you, and, I hope to Heaven, children."

She took his face between her hands and kissed him. He understood her so perfectly that, as she drew her lips away, he rose and stood on the hearthrug, a conqueror yet humble.

"You won't mind," she begged, "if I choose my own time? It may be very soon, it may be a little time. You will leave it to me, and you will trust me. From to-night, of course—"

She hesitated, but his gesture was sufficient. She knew that she was understood.

"You have made me the happiest man in the world," he said. "I can't stop a moment longer—I should simply say extravagant things. And I know how you feel. It isn't quite time for them yet. But you'll send for me?"

"Of course!"

"And about your visit to Mandeleys?" he asked. "I shan't begin to be busy again for another fortnight."

She hesitated.

"Somehow," she confessed, "it seems a little different now.

"It needn't," he replied. "I am content with what I have."

She glanced at the calendar.

"Tuesday?" she suggested.

"Tuesday would suit me admirably," he assented.

She let him out herself, and he kissed her fingers. He was never quite sure whether he walked down the stairs or whether he rang for the lift. He was never quite sure whether he looked for a taxi or decided to walk. He passed over the bridge, and the lights reflected in the dark waters below seemed suddenly like jewels. He made his way to his club because of the sheer impossibility of sleep. He stood on the threshold of the reading room and looked in at the little group of semi-somnolent men. In his way he was popular, and he received a good many sleepy greetings.

"What's the matter with Borden?" one man drawled. "He looks as though some one had left him a fortune."

"He has probably discovered another literary star," a rival publisher suggested.

"I wish to God some one would send him to a decent tailor!" a third man yawned.

Borden rang the bell for a drink.

"Dickinson was right," he said. "I've found a new star."

Letitia, on her return from the theatre that same evening, found her father seated in a comfortable corner of the library, with a volume of Don Quixote in his hand, a whisky and soda and a box of cigarettes by his side. He had exchanged his dinner jacket for a plain black velvet coat, and, as he laid his book down at her coming, she seemed to notice again that vague look of tiredness in his face.

"Quiet evening, dad?" she asked, flinging herself into a low chair by his side.

"A very pleasant one," he replied. "Montavon's party was postponed, but I have reopened an old fund of amusement here. With the exception of Borrow, none of our modern humourists appeal to me like Cervantes."

"You wouldn't call Borrow exactly modern, would you?"

"Perhaps not," the Marquis conceded. "I may be wrong to ignore the literature of the present day, but such attempts as I have made to appreciate it have been unsatisfactory. You enjoyed the play, dear?"

"Very much," Letitia acquiesced. "The house was crowded."

"Any one you know?"

She mentioned a few names, then she hesitated. "And that clever woman who wrote 'The Changing Earth' was there in a box—Marcia Hannaway. She was with rather a dour-looking man—her publisher, I think Charlie said it was."

The Marquis received the information with no signs of particular interest. Letitia stretched out for a cigarette, lit it and looked a little appealingly at her father.

"Dad," she said, "I've made an awful idiot of myself."

"In what direction?" the Marquis enquired sympathetically. "If it is a financial matter, I am fortunately—"

"Worse!" Letitia groaned. "I've promised to marry Charlie Grantham."

The Marquis stretched out his long, elegant hand and patted his daughter's.

"But, my dear child," he said, "surely that was inevitable, was it not? I have looked upon it as almost certain to happen some day."

"Well, I'm rather glad you take it like that," Letitia remarked. "Now I come to think of it, I suppose I should have had to say 'yes' sometime or another."

"Where is Charlie?"

"Gone home in a huff, because I wouldn't let him kiss me in the car or bring him in with me."

"Either course would surely have been usual," the Marquis ventured.

"Perhaps, but I feel unusual," Letitia declared. "It isn't that I mind marrying Charlie, but I know I shall detest being married to him."

"One must remember, dear," her father went on soothingly, "that with us, marriage is scarcely a subject for neurotic ecstasies or most unwholesome hysterics. Your position imposes upon you the necessity of an alliance with some house of kindred associations. The choice, therefore, is not a large one, and you are spared the very undignified competitive considerations which attach themselves to people when it does not matter whom on earth they marry. The Dukedom of Grantham is unfortunately not an ancient one, nor was it conferred upon such illustrious stock as the Marquisate of Mandeleys. However, the Granthams have their place amongst us, and I imagine that the alliance will generally be considered satisfactory."

"Oh, I hope so," Letitia replied, without enthusiasm. "I only hope I shall find it satisfactory. I didn't mean to say 'yes' for at least another year."

The Marquis smiled tolerantly.

"Then what, my dear child," he asked, "hastened your decision?"

Letitia became suddenly more serious. She bit her lip and frowned distinctly into the fire. At that moment she was furious with a thought.

"I can't tell you, dad," she confessed. "I'd hate to tell you. I'd hate to put it in plain words, even to myself."

He patted her hand tolerantly.

"You must not take yourself too hardly to task, Letitia," he said, "if at times you feel the pressure of the outside world. You are young and of versatile temperament. Believe me, those voices to which you may have listened are only echoes. Nothing exists or is real in life which the brain does not govern. I am quite sure that you will never regret the step which you have taken this evening."

Letitia stood up.

"I hope not, father," she sighed, a little wistfully. "There are times when I am very dissatisfied with myself, and to-night, I am afraid, is one of them."

"You analyse your sentiments, my dear, too severely," her father told her. "You are too conscientious. Your actions are all that could be desired."

"You won't be lonely if that idiot takes me away from you soon?" she asked.

The Marquis looked almost shocked.

"Loneliness is not a complaint from which I ever expect to suffer, dear," he said, as he rose and opened the door for her.

He returned to his empty chair, his half consumed whisky and soda, his vellum-bound volume, carefully marked. Somehow or other, the echoes of his last words seemed to be ringing in his ears. The fire had burned a little low, the sound of passing vehicles from outside had grown fainter and fainter. He took up his book, threw himself into his chair, gazed with vacant eyes at the thick black print. There was a sudden chill in his heart, a sudden thought, perhaps a fear. There was one way through which loneliness could come.

CHAPTER XVIII

Marcia, who had dreamed all night of blue skies flecked with little fragments of white cloud, a soft west wind and sun-bathed meadows, descended the creaking stairs of the Inn at Fakenham, paused upon the broad landing to admire the great oak chests and the cupboards full of china, and then made her way to the coffee room. She found Borden standing at the window, looking down into the country street and talking with a stranger, whom he left, however, at her entrance. They took their places at the breakfast table to which a waiter ushered them.

"Still lucky," her companion remarked, as he watched Marcia pour out the coffee. "It's going to be another delightful day."

She glanced out into the sunlit street. Just opposite was a house almost hidden in clematis, and in the background was a tall row of elm trees amongst the branches of which the rooks were cawing.

"I feel like Rip van Winkle," she whispered. "Do you know that twenty-five years ago I came to what is called a Farmers' Ordinary in this very room? Tell me," she went on, "who was the man with whom you were talking? His face is quite familiar to me."

He glanced around. Thain had taken his place at the further end of the room.

"The man of whom we were speaking the other day," he said,—"David Thain. I think that you have met him, haven't you?"

She nodded.

"Why, of course! I didn't recognise him in tweeds. Whatever is he doing down here? But I know before you can tell me," she continued quickly. "He has taken Broomleys, hasn't he?"

"He told me that he had taken a house in the neighbourhood," Borden replied. "He is going over there this morning to meet the present occupiers."

"It is a very small world," Marcia observed. "I wonder whether he recognised me."

"Without undue flattery, I think I might say that I should think it probable."

"And of course he is imagining all sorts of improper things,—chuckling about them, I dare say, in the way men do. He is being what I suppose he thinks tactful. He never glances in this direction at all. I'll give him a surprise in a minute or two!"

They finished their breakfast, and Marcia crossed towards David's table. As soon as he was conscious of her approach, he rose. He welcomed her, however, without a smile.

"From Trewly's at dinner to the Mandeleys Arms for breakfast," she remarked, smiling. "I feel quite flattered that you remembered me, Mr. Thain."

"Did I show any signs of remembering you?" he asked a little grimly.

"Of course you didn't," she acknowledged. "You ignored even my sweetest bow. That is why I felt sure that you recognised me perfectly."

David remained silent, standing still with an air of complete but respectful patience.

"You have taken a house down here, the Marquis tells me," she continued.

"I have taken Broomleys."

"I hope that you will like the neighbourhood," she said. "I used to live here once myself."

"So I understood."

She was for a moment taken aback, conscious now of a certain definitely inimical attitude in the man who stood looking coldly into her eyes.

"You know all about me, then? That is the worst of getting into 'Who's Who.'"

"I know more about you than I do about your companion, certainly," he admitted.

She laughed mockingly. To a downright declaration of war she had no objection whatever.

"That is Mr. Borden, who publishes my stories," she told him. "I don't suppose you read them, do you?"

"I am not sure," he replied. "I read very little modern fiction, and I never look at the names of the authors."

"Then we must take it for granted," she sighed, "that my fame is unknown to you. If you should see the Marquis before I do, please tell him that he was entirely wrong about the best route here. His advice has cost us nearly thirty miles and a punctured tire. You won't forget?"

"Certainly not," he promised.

She turned away with a little nod of farewell, to which David's response was still entirely formal. Left alone in the room he resumed his breakfast, finished it with diminished appetite, and within a few minutes was speeding through the country lanes in his great Rolls-Royce car. The chauffeur sat a little uneasily in his place. It was very seldom that his master showed such signs of haste. In a quarter of an hour they were in the avenue of Mandeleys. Instead of turning to the right, however, to Broomleys, he took the turning to the Abbey and pulled up short when within a hundred yards of the house.

"Wait here for me," he directed. "If you see another car coming up, blow your horn."

He walked across the smooth, ancient turf, stepped over the wire fence and raised the latch of Richard Vont's cottage gate. His uncle, a little disturbed, came hastily down the garden path. His clothes were stained with clay, and the perspiration was on his forehead. David looked at him in surprise.

"Working so early?"

Vont nodded.

"You forget," he said, "that this is not early for me. All my life I have risen with the sun and gone to bed with it. Come inside, David. I'll get this muck off my hands. You spoke of the afternoon."

"I came direct from the village," David replied, as he followed his uncle into the house. "I came because I thought you would like to know that there is

another visitor on the way to see you."

Richard Vont looked round and faced his nephew. His shirt was open at the throat, his trousers were tied up with little pieces of string. In whatever labour he had been engaged, it had obviously been of a strenuous character. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"What's that, David?" he demanded. "A visitor?"

"Marcia is at the Mandeleys Arms," David told him. "I am taking it for granted that she is on her way to see you."

Vont turned deliberately away, and David heard his heavy feet ascending the staircase. In a few moments he called downstairs. His voice was as usual.

"Step round this afternoon, lad, if you think it's well."

David passed out of the little garden, crossed the strip of park, and, taking the wheel, drove slowly round by the longer route to Broomleys. He passed before the front of the Abbey—a mansion of the dead, with row after row of closed blinds, masses of smokeless chimneys, and patches of weeds growing thick in the great sweep before the house. Even with its air of pitiless desertion, its severe, semi-ecclesiastical outline, its ruined cloisters empty to the sky on one wing, its unbroken and gloomy silence, the place had its atmosphere. David slackened the speed of his car, paused for a moment and looked back at the little creeper-covered cottage on the other side of the moat. So those two had faced one another through the years—the Abbey, silent, magnificent, historical, with all the placid majesty of its countless rows of windows; its chapel, where Mandeleys for generations had been christened and buried,—at its gates the little cottage, whose garden was filled with spring flowers, and from whose single stack of chimneys the smoke curled upwards. Even while he watched, Richard Vont stood there upon the threshold with a great book under his arm.

David shivered a little as he threw in the clutch, passed on round the back of the building and through the iron gates of the ancient dower house. He felt a little sigh of relief as he pulled up in front of the long, grey house, in front of which Sylvia Laycey was waiting to receive him. She waved her hand gaily and looked with admiration at the car.

"They are all here, Mr. Thain," she exclaimed,—"Mr. Merridrew and father

and your own builder. Come along and quarrel about the fixtures. I thought I had better stay with you because dad loses his temper so."

David descended almost blithely from his car. He was back again in a human atmosphere, and the pressure of the girl's fingers was an instant relief to him.

"I am not going to quarrel with any one," he declared. "I shall do exactly what Mr. Muddicombe tells me—and you."

She was a very pleasant type of young Englishwoman—distinctly pretty, fair-skinned, healthy and good-humoured. Notwithstanding the fact that their acquaintance was of the briefest, David was already conscious of her charm.

"You'll find me, in particular, very grasping," she declared, as they entered the long, low hall. "I want to make everything I can out of you, so that daddy and I can have a real good two months in London. I don't believe you know the value of things a bit, do you—except of railways and those colossal things? Cupboards, for instance? Do you know anything about cupboards? And are you going to allow us anything for the extra bathroom we put in?"

"Well, I am rather partial to bathrooms," he confessed, "and I should hate you to take it away with you."

She drew a sigh of relief.

"So long as you look upon the bathroom matter reasonably, I am quite sure we shan't quarrel. Tell me about Lady Letitia, please? Is she quite well—and the Marquis and all of them? And when are they coming down?"

"They are quite well," he told her, "and Lady Letitia sent you her love. They talk of coming down almost at once."

"I do hope they will," she replied, "because when we leave here dad and I are going to stay for a week or so with some friends quite near. There! Did you hear that noise? That's daddy stamping because he is getting impatient."

"Then perhaps—" David suggested.

"I suppose we'd better," she interrupted. "Be lenient about the bathroom, please. And if you could manage not to notice that the dining room wants

papering, you'd be an angel. This way."

CHAPTER XIX

David proved himself such a very satisfactory incoming tenant that the Colonel insisted upon his staying to lunch and hastened off into the cellar to find a bottle of old Marsala, of which he proposed that they should partake with a dry biscuit before Mr. Merridrew's departure. Sylvia sank into a low chair with a little exclamation of despair.

"Now daddy's done it!" she exclaimed. "Are you hungry, Mr. Thain?"

"Not very—yet," David replied, glancing at his watch. "You see, it's only half-past eleven."

"Because," she said impressively, "there are exactly three rather skinny cutlets in the house. All the servants left this morning—'all', I said. We only have two!—and an old woman from the village is coming up at half-past twelve to cook them. One was for me and two were for father. Perhaps you will tell me what I am to do?"

David smiled.

"Well," he observed, "I was distinctly asked to luncheon, and I accepted. Haven't you anything—"

"Anything what?" she asked patiently.

"Tinned in the house, or that sort of thing?" he suggested, a little vaguely.

"Of course we haven't," she replied. "Don't you know that we are all packed up and leaving to-morrow? It's the biggest wonder in the world that we have any biscuits to eat with that precious Marsala."

"Why not," he proposed hopefully, "put on your hat and motor into Fakenham with me? I suppose there is a butcher's shop there. We can buy

something together."

She sprang to her feet.

"And you can choose exactly what you like!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Thain, you are delightful! That is the best of you Americans. You are full of resource. I shan't be a minute getting a hat and a pair of gloves."

David strolled about the gardens of his new demesne until Sylvia reappeared. She had pinned on a blue tam-o'-shanter and was wearing a jersey of the same colour.

"I shall love a spin in your car!" she exclaimed. "And you drive yourself, too. How delightful!"

They swung off through the more thickly wooded part of the park, driving in places between dense clumps of rhododendrons, and coming unexpectedly upon a walled garden, neglected, but brilliant with spring and early summer flowers.

"Isn't it queer to have a garden so far away from the house," the girl remarked, "but I dare say you've heard that the late Marquis of Mandeleys was mad about underground passages. There is one existing somewhere or other to the summer house in that garden from the Abbey, and lots of others. I am not at all sure that there isn't one to Broomleys."

"Haven't you been afraid sometimes lest the ghosts of the dead monks might pay you an unexpected visit?"

She shook her head.

"They always held the funeral services in the chapel," she explained, "but the burying place is at the side of the hill there. You can see the Mandeleys vault from here."

"And the cypress trees," David pointed out. "I wonder how old they are."

"The American of you!" she scoffed. "You ought to love Mandeleys—and Broomleys. Everything about the place is musty and ancient and worn out. You know the Marquis, don't you?"

"Slightly," David assented.

"Is he really human," she asked, "or is he something splendidly picturesque which has just stepped out of one of the frames in his picture gallery? I can never make up my mind. He is so beautiful to look at, but he doesn't look as though he belonged to this generation, and why on earth they ever used to call him 'The Wicked Marquis' I can't imagine. I've tried him myself," she went on ingenuously, "in no end of ways, but he treats me always as though I were some grandchild, walking on stilts. Of course you're in love with Lady Letitia?"

"Must I be?"

"But isn't it all absolutely preordained?" she insisted, "in fact, it's almost depressingly obvious. Here are the Mandeleys estates, the finest in Norfolk, mortgaged up to the hilt, the Abbey shut up, the Marquis and all of them living on credit, the family fortunes at their lowest ebb. And here come you, an interesting American stranger, with more millions than the world has ever heard of before. Of course you marry Lady Letitia and release the estates!"

"Do I!" he murmured. "Well, it seems plausible."

"It has to be done," she decided, with a sigh. "It's a pity."

"Why?"

She shook her head.

"We mustn't flirt. We should be interfering with the decrees of Providence.—What an interesting-looking woman! You know her, too."

They passed Marcia and her companion, about half-way to Fakenham. Marcia bowed cheerfully and looked with interest at Sylvia.

"I know her very slightly," David admitted.

"She doesn't belong to these parts," Sylvia said. "We've lived here for nearly seven years, you know, and I know every one for miles round, by sight."

"She came originally from somewhere in the neighbourhood, I believe," David observed.

"Tell me everything about her, please?" his companion demanded. "I am a born gossip."

"You finish with the romance of Mandeleys first," he suggested evasively.

"Well, we've finished that, so far as you are concerned," she said, "but as soon as you have rescued the family and the wedding bells have ceased ringing, you'll find yourself faced with another problem. Did you notice a queer little cottage, right opposite the Abbey?"

"Of course I did."

"Well, there's an old man sits in the garden there," she went on, "reading the Bible and cursing the Marquis, most of the day. He used to do it years ago, and then he went to America. Now he's come back, and he's started it again."

"And what does the Marquis do about it?" David enquired.

"He can't do anything. The late Marquis made the old man a present of the cottage for saving his life, and they can't take it away from him now. I suppose he must have been really wicked when he was young—I mean the Marquis," she went on, "because, you see, he ran away with that old man's daughter. It's the sort of thing," she went on, "that Marquises are supposed to do in stories, but it doesn't make them popular in a small neighbourhood. Now tell me about the good-looking woman who bowed to you, please?"

"She is the daughter of the man of whom you have been speaking," David told her. "She is the lady with whom the wicked Marquis eloped nearly twenty years ago."

Sylvia's interest was almost breathless.

"You mean to say that you knew the story—you—an American?"

"Absolutely," he replied. "I came into touch with it in a queer way. The old man Vont came back from America on the same steamer that I did. I'll tell you another thing. The wicked Marquis, as you call him, and that lady whom we have just passed, dine together now at least one night a week, and the woman has become quite a famous authoress. She writes under the name, I believe, of Marcia Hannaway."

Sylvia threw herself back in her seat.

"Why, it's amazing!" she declared. "It turns a sordid little village tragedy into a piece of wonderful romance. Perhaps, after all, that is what makes the Marquis seem like a piece of wood to every other woman."

"I have heard it said," David continued, "that he has been entirely faithful to her all his life. Where do I stop, please?"

"Here," she replied, "at this shop. Please come in and choose your own meat. I feel in much too romantic a frame of mind to even know beef from mutton."

David followed her a little doubtfully into the shop.

"Perhaps," he ventured to suggest, "as the nucleus of your meal has already been decided upon—"

"Of course," she interrupted; "cutlets. We want more cutlets. You needn't bother. I'll see about it."

David slipped into the next shop and reappeared with a huge box of chocolates, which he handed over apologetically.

"I am not sure whether you'll find these up to much."

"For the first time," she exclaimed, as she accepted them, "I realise what it must be to be a millionaire! I have never seen such a box of chocolates in my life. Do you mind going over to the grocer's and letting him see me with you?" she went on. "It will be so good for our credit, and his is just one of the accounts we have to leave for a little time. Were you ever poor, Mr. Thain?"

"Poor, but not, alas! romantically so," he confessed. "To be the real thing, I ought to have earned my first few pounds, oughtn't I? You see, I didn't. I was educated by relatives, and when a great chance came my way I was able to take advantage of it. An uncle advanced me a thousand pounds, upon one condition."

"Had you to make him a partner?" she asked, in the intervals of giving a small order at the grocer's.

He shook his head.

"No," he answered gravely, "it wasn't a financial condition. In a way it was something more difficult."

She looked at him curiously.

"Whatever it was," she said, "if you promised, I am quite sure that you would keep your word."

They motored homewards and David was for a few minutes unexpectedly thoughtful. He deliberately approached Broomleys from the back, but even then it was impossible to avoid a distant view of the cottage. He looked towards it grimly.

"Conditions are stern things," he sighed.

"Haven't you kept that one yet?" she asked.

"The time is only just coming," he told her.

She looked up at him pleadingly.

"Don't bother about it now, please," she begged. "This is such a delightful day. And whatever you do, you mustn't let it interfere with your eating three cutlets."

CHAPTER XX

Borden's car came to a standstill in the avenue, and Marcia looked across the strip of green turf towards the cottage with a queer little thrill of remembrance.

"You are sure you won't mind waiting?" she asked, as she sprang down. "If there is any fatted calf about, I'll call you in."

Borden showed her his pockets, bulging with newspapers.

"I shall be perfectly content here," he said, "however long you may be. I shall

back the car on to the turf and read."

She nodded, turned away, lifted the latch of the gate and made her way towards the cottage,—curiously silent, and with no visible sign of habitation except for the smoke curling up from the chimney. As she drew nearer to the rustic entrance, she hesitated. A rush of those very sensations at which she had so often gently mocked swept through her consciousness, unsteadying and bewildering her. Mandeleys, imposing in its grim stillness, seemed to be throwing out shadows towards her, catching her up in a whirlpool of memories, half sentimental, half tragical. It was in the little cottage garden where she now stood, and in the woods beyond, that she had wandered with that strange new feeling in her heart of which she was, even at that moment, intensely conscious, gazing through the mists of her inexperience towards the new world and new heaven which her love was unfolding before her. A hundred forgotten fancies flashed into her brain. She remembered, with a singular and most unnerving accuracy, the silent vigils which she had spent, half hidden amongst those tall hollyhocks. She had seen the grey twilight of morning pass, seen the mists roll away and, turret by turret, the great house stand out like some fairy palace fashioned from space in a single night. She had seen the thrushes hop from the shrubberies and coverts on to the dew-spangled lawn, had heard their song, growing always in volume, had seen the faint sunlight flash in the windows, before she had crept back to her room. Another day in that strange turmoil which had followed the coming of her love! She had watched shooting parties assemble in the drive outside, her father in command, she herself hidden yet watchful, her eyes always upon one figure, her thoughts with him. And then the nights—the summer nights—when men and women in evening costume strolled down from the house. She could see their white shirt fronts glistening in the twilight. Again she heard the firm yet loitering step and the quiet, still voice which had changed the world for her. "Is Vont about, Miss Marcia?" she would hear him say. "I want to have a talk with him about the partridge drives to-morrow." She closed her eyes. The smell of the honeysuckle and the early cottage roses seemed suddenly almost stupefying. There were a few seconds—perhaps even a minute—before Vont had donned his brown velveteen coat and issued from the cottage—just time for a whispered word, a glance, a touch of the fingers.—Marcia felt her knees shake as she lingered underneath the porch. She was swept with recalcitrant memories, stinging like the lash of a whip. Perhaps this new wisdom of hers was, after all, a delusion, the old standards of her Calvinistic childhood unassailable. Then, for the first time, she was conscious of a familiar figure. Richard Vont was seated in a hard kitchen chair at the end of the garden, with a

book upon his knee and his face turned to Mandeleys. At the sound of her little exclamation he turned his head. At first it was clear that he did not recognise his visitor. He laid down the book and rose to his feet. Marcia came a few steps towards him and then paused. Several very ingenious openings escaped her altogether.

"Father," she began, a little hesitatingly, "you see, I've come to see you. Are you glad?"

He stood looking at her—a man of rather more than middle height but bowed, with silvery hair and a little patch of white whiskers. The rest of his face was clean-shaven, still hard and brown as in his youth, and his eyes were like steel.

"No," he answered, "I am not glad. Since you are here, though, take this chair. I will fetch another while I hear what you have to say."

"Shall we go inside?" she suggested.

He shook his head.

"Your mother lived and died there," he reminded her.

Marcia set her teeth.

"I suppose she walked in the garden sometimes," she said resentfully.

"The garden is different," he declared. "The earth changes from generation to generation, just as the flowers here throw out fresh blossoms and the weeds come and go. But my rooftree stands where it always did. Wait."

He disappeared into the house and returned in a few moments with a chair which he placed a few feet away from Marcia. Then he sat and looked at her steadily.

"So you are Marcia," he said. "You've grown well-looking."

"Marcia—your daughter," she reminded him gently. "Are you going to forget that altogether?"

"Not," he replied, "if you are in need of succour or help, but I judge from your appearance that you need neither. You are flesh of my flesh, as I well know."

"I want nothing from you, father, except a little kindness," she pleaded.

His hands trembled.

"Kindness," he repeated. "That's strange hearing. You are without friends, perhaps? You made some, maybe, and they heard of your disgrace, and they've cast you off?"

She shook her head.

"No, it isn't that at all. I have many friends, and they most of them know my history."

"Friends of your own sort, then!"

Marcia moved uneasily in her chair.

"Father," she said gently, "don't you sometimes think that your views of life are a little narrow? I am very sorry indeed for what I did, inasmuch as it brought unhappiness to you. For the rest, I have nothing to regret."

He was breathing a little harder now.

"Nothing to regret?" he muttered.

"Nothing," she repeated firmly. "For many years the man who took me away from you gave me everything I asked of him in life, everything he promised. He is still willing to do the same. If any change comes into our relations, now or in the future, it will be my doing, not his."

"Meaning," he demanded, "that you've seen the wickedness of it?"

"Meaning nothing of the sort," she replied. "I want you to try and realise, father, if you can, that I have passed into a larger world than you or this little village community here know very much about. I have written books and been praised for them by men whose praise is worth having. There are plenty of

perfectly good and well-living people who know what I have done and who are glad to be my friends. There is one who wants to marry me."

Richard Vont looked at her long and steadily. Marcia was, as usual, dressed with extreme simplicity, but her clothes were always good, and economy in boots and hats was a vice which she had never practised. When she told him that she had passed into a world apart from his, he realised it. The only wonder was that she had ever been his daughter!

"To marry you!" he repeated. "It's one of those of your own loose way of thinking, eh? One of those who have forgotten the laws of God and have set up for themselves some graven image in which there's nought of the truth?"

"The man who wishes to marry me, father," she said warmly, "is a man of honour and position. Can't you believe me when I assure you that there is another way of looking at what you consider so terrible? I have been as faithful to my vows as you to your marriage ones. The man whom I am told you still hate has never wavered in his loyalty to me, any more than I have in my fidelity to him. Can't you believe that to some extent, at least, we have sanctified our love?"

James Vont passed his hand a little wearily over his forehead.

"It's blasphemous gibberish that you're talking," he declared. "If you had come back to me, Marcia, in rags and in want, maybe there is something in my heart would have gone, and I'd have taken you and we'd have found a home somewhere far away. But to see you sitting there, soft and well-spoken, speaking of your success, pleased with your life, turns that very hatred you spoke of into fury! You and your learning and your writing of books! Why, you're ignorant, woman, more ignorant than the insects about you. You don't know right from wrong."

"Father," she pleaded—

"Aye, but listen," he went on. "You've children, eh?"

"No," she answered softly.

"No children to bear your shame, eh? And why not?"

She looked for a moment into his eyes, and then away.

"That may be the one weak spot," she confessed.

"The one weak spot!" he repeated bitterly. "Shall I tell you what you are, you women who live cheerfully with the men you sell yourselves to, and defy the laws of God and the teaching of the Bible? You're just wastrels and Jezebels. Ay, and there's the garden gate, Marcia, and my heart's as hard as a flint, even though the tears are in your eyes and you look at me as your mother used to look. It's no such tears as you're shedding as'll bring you back into my heart. Your very prosperity's an offence. You carry the price of your shame on your back and in your smooth speech and in this false likeness of yours to the world you don't belong to. If it's duty that's brought you here, you'd better not have come."

Marcia rose to her feet.

"You're very hard, father," she said simply.

"You're very hard, father," she said simply.
"You're very hard, father," she said simply.

"The ways of the transgressors are hard," he replied, pointing still towards the gate. "If you'd come here in shame and humiliation, if you'd come here as one as had learnt the truth, you'd have found me all that you sought. But you come here a very ignorant woman, Marcia, and you leave me a little harder than ever before, and you leave the curses that choke my throat a little hotter, a little more murderous."

His clenched fist was pointing towards Mandeleys, his face was like granite. Marcia turned and left him without a word, opened the gate, walked across the little strip of turf, and half shrank from, half clung to the hand which helped her up into the car.

"Get away quickly, please," she implored him. "Don't talk to me, James. Outside the gates as quickly as you can go!"

He started his engine, and they drove off, through the lodge gates into the country lane, where the hedges were beautiful with fresh green foliage and fragrant with early honeysuckle.

"To London," she begged. "Don't stop—anywhere yet."

He nodded and drove a little faster, his eyes always upon the road. It was not until they had reached the heath country and the great open spaces around Newmarket that a little colour came back into her cheeks.

"It wasn't a success, James," she said quietly.

"I was afraid it mightn't be," he admitted.

"Nothing but a Drury Lane heroine would have moved him," she went on, with an uneasy little laugh. "If I could have gone back in rags, in a snowstorm, with a child in my arms, he'd have forgiven me. As I am now, I am an offence to all that he holds right, and his ideas are like steel cables—you can't twist or bend them."

Borden nodded. He relaxed his speed a little and glanced towards his companion.

"You know what our friend said in that Russian manuscript I lent you," he reminded her: "'The primitive laws are for the primitive world.'"

"But what do we learn, Jim?" she asked him tremulously. "What is its value? Is it sophistry or knowledge? I lived in that little cottage once. I have smiled at the memory of those days so often. I did homely tasks and dreamed of books and learning. To me it seems, although my fingers are bleeding, that I have climbed. And to him—and he looked just like something out of the Bible, Jim—I am nothing more—"

"Don't," he interrupted. "He is of his world and you of yours. You can't work out the sum you are trying to solve, there isn't any common denominator."

"I don't know," she answered, a little pitifully. "There was a single second, as I saw him sitting there with his Bible on his knee and remembered that he was a clean, well-living, honest man, when my heart began to shake. I remembered that he was my father. It seems to me that it is all wrong that there should be any difference between us. I suddenly felt that a brain really didn't count for anything, after all, that all the culture in the world wasn't so beautiful as a single right feeling."

He slackened again the speed of the car. As far as they could see was a great open space of moorland, with flaming bushes of yellow gorse, little clumps of early heather, and, in the distance, a streak of blue from the undergrowth of a long belt of firs. She looked about her for a moment and closed her eyes.

"There," he said, "is one of the simplest phases of beauty, the world has ever given us—flowers and trees, an open space and a west wind. There isn't any one who can look at these things and be happy who isn't somewhere near the right path, Marcia."

She leaned back, her eyes fixed dreamily upon the blue distance.

"Just drive on, please, Jim," she begged.

CHAPTER XXI

David ate his three cutlets and, both as regards appetite and in other ways, was a great success at the little luncheon party. Afterwards, they finished the bottle of Marsala under a cedar tree, and whilst the Colonel indulged in reminiscences, Sylvia's eyes rested more than once upon the automobile drawn up before the door. It was quite an adventure in her rather humdrum life, and, after all, there was no reason why a fairy prince shouldn't be an American millionaire and come in a Rolls-Royce.

"I am sure I hope you'll like Broomleys, Mr. Thain," the Colonel said, as David rose to make his adieux. "I am delighted to leave the place in the hands of such a good tenant. It makes one almost sorry to go away when one realises what one is missing in the shape of neighbours, eh, Sylvia?"

Sylvia was unaccountably shy, but she raised her eyes to David's for a moment.

"It is most disappointing," she agreed. "Mr. Thain is such a sympathetic shopper."

David drove off a little gloomily.

"Why the devil couldn't I fall in love with a nice girl like that," he muttered to himself, "instead of—"

He pulled up short, set his heel upon that other vision, and braced himself for the immediate task before him. He drove around the park, drew up outside the cottage, and, descending from the car, approached the low hedge. At the further end of the garden he could hear his uncle's sonorous voice. He was seated in a high-backed chair, the Bible upon his knee, reading to himself slowly and with great distinctness the Ten Commandments. On the ground by his side were the remnants of another chair. As David came up the little path, his uncle concluded his reading and laid down the Bible.

"Bring out a chair and sit with me, David," he invited.

David pointed to the ground.

"Your furniture seems—"

"Don't jest," his uncle interrupted. "That chair I have broken to pieces with

my own hands because of the woman who sat upon it not many hours since."

David frowned.

"You mean Marcia?"

"I mean Marcia—the woman who was my daughter," was the stern reply, "the woman of whose visit you warned me."

"Come into the house with me," David begged, turning his back upon Mandeleys. "You sit and look at that great drear building and brood overmuch. I want to talk with you."

Richard Vont rose obediently to his feet and followed his visitor into the little parlour. David looked around him curiously.

"This place seems to have the flavour of many years ago," he said. "Sometimes I can scarcely realise that I have ever eaten my meals off that oak table. Sometimes it seems like yesterday."

"Time passes, but time don't count for much," the old man sighed. "Mary Wells will be up from the village soon, and she'll make us a cup of tea. Sit opposite me, lad. Is there any more news?"

"None!"

"Them shares, for instance?"

"There will be no change in them," David replied. "In two months' time he will know it."

"And he'll have forty thousand pounds to find, eh?—forty thousand pounds which he will never be able to raise!" Richard Vont muttered, his eyes curiously bright. "There isn't an acre of land here that isn't mortgaged over and over again."

"You'll make him a bankrupt, I suppose," David said thoughtfully.

"Ay, a bankrupt!" his uncle repeated, lingering over the word with a fierce joy. "But there's something more as'll fall to your lot, David," he went on,

—"something more—and the time's none so far off."

David moved in his chair uneasily.

"Something more?"

"Ay, ay!" the old man assented. "You'll find it hard, my boy, but you'll keep your word. You've got that much of the Vonts in your blood. Your word's a bond with you."

"Tell me," David begged, "about that something more?"

"The time's not yet," his uncle replied. "You shall know, lad, in good season."

David was silent for a moment, filled with nameless and displeasing apprehensions. He was brave enough, prepared to meet any ordinary emergency, but somehow or other the vagueness of the task which lay before him seemed appalling. Outside was Mandeleys, a grim and silent remembrance. Inside the cottage everything seemed to speak of changeless times. The pendulum of the tall clock swung drowsily, as it had swung thirty years ago. The pictures on the wall were the same, the china, the furniture, even its arrangement. And the man who sat in his easy-chair was the same, only that his whiskers and hair were white where once they had been black.

"Uncle," he begged, "let me know the worst now?"

"You'll know in good time and not before," was the almost fierce reply. "Don't weary me to-night, lad," Vent continued, his voice breaking a little. "The day has been full of trials for me. 'Twas no light matter to have a strange woman here—the strange woman, David, that was once my daughter."

David frowned a little.

"Uncle," he said, "I don't wish to pain you, but I am sorry about Marcia."

"You don't need to be, lad. She isn't sorry for herself. She is puffed up with the vanity of her brain. She came here in fine clothes and with gentle manners, and a new sort of voice. She has made herself—a lady! Poor lass, her day of suffering is to come! Maybe I was hard on her, but I couldn't bear the sight of her, and that's the truth. She talked to me like one filled with wisdom. It was me

whom she thought the ignorant one. Put Marcia out of your mind, David. We will talk of other things."

David leaned forward in his chair. His eyes were bright, his tone eager.

"Let us have this out, uncle," he begged. "I've been thinking of it—perhaps as much as you lately. They may have been wrong, those two; they may be sinners, but, after all, the world isn't a place for holy people only. The Bible tells you that. For nearly twenty years he has stood by her and cared for her. There has been no meanness, no backing out on his part. He is as much to her to-day as ever he was."

"Ay," his listener interposed scornfully, "she talked that way. Do you reckon that a man and woman who sinned a score of years ago are any the better because they are going on sinning to-day? Faithfulness to good is part of the Word of God. Faithfulness in sin is of the Devil's handing out."

David shook his head.

"I am sorry, uncle," he said earnestly, "I have come to look on these things a little differently. Many years ago, in America, I used to wonder what it was that kept you apart from every one else, kept the smile from your lips, made you accept good fortune or ill without any sign of feeling. I was too young to understand then, but I realise everything now. I know how you denied yourself to send me to school and college. I know how you left yourself almost a beggar when you gave me the chance of my life and trusted me with all your savings. These things I shall never forget."

"One word, lad," Vont interrupted. "It's the truth you say. I trusted you with well-nigh all I had that stood between me and starvation, but I trusted you with it on one condition. Do you mind that condition? We sat outside the little shanty I'd built with my own hands, up in the Adirondacks there, and before us were the mountains and the woods and the silence. We were close to God up there, David. You remember?"

"I remember."

"You'd come hot-foot from the city, and you told me your story. I sat and listened, and then I told you mine. I told you of the shame that had driven me from England, and I told you of the thoughts that were simmering in my mind.

As we sat there your wrath was as mine, and the oath which I had sworn, you swore, too. I lent you the money over that oath, boy. Look back, if you will. You remember the night? There was a hot wind—cool before it reached us, though—rushing up from the earth, rushing through the pine trees till they shook and bowed around us; and a moon, with the black clouds being driven across it, looking down; and the smell of the pines. You remember?"

"I remember," David repeated.

"We stood there hand in hand, and there was no one to hear us except those voices that come from God only knows where, and you swore on your soul that you would help me as soon as the time came to punish the man who had blasted my life. In my way you promised—not yours. There should be no will but mine. For this one thing I was master and you were slave, and you swore."

"I swore. I am not denying it," David acknowledged. "Haven't I made a start? Haven't I deceived the man at whose table I sat and laid a plot to ruin him? And I have ruined him! Do you want more than this?"

"Yes!" was the unshaken reply.

"Then what, in heaven's name, is it?" David demanded. "Out with it, for God's sake! I carry this whole thing about with me, like a weight upon my soul. Granted that you are master and I am slave. Well, I've done much. What is there left?"

"That you will be told in due season."

"And meantime," David continued passionately, "I am to live in a sort of prison!"

"You've no need to find it such," the old man declared doggedly.

David sprang to his feet. The time had come for his appeal. The words seemed to rush to his lips. He was full of confidence and hope.

"Uncle," he began, "you must never let a single word that I may say seem to you ungrateful, but I beseech you to listen to me. Life is like a great city in which there are many thoroughfares. It is an immense, insoluble problem which no one can understand. You never open another book except your Bible. You

have never willingly exchanged speech with any human being since you left here. In America you shunned all company, you lived in the gloomiest of solitudes. This little corner of the earth is all you know of. Perhaps there is more in life even than that Book can teach you."

"Marcia talked like this," Richard Vont said quietly. "She spoke of another world, a world for cleverer folk than I. Are you going to try and break my purpose, too?"

"I would if I could," David declared fervently. "This man is what his ancestors and his education have made him. He has led a simple, ignorant, and yet in some respects a decent life. He is too narrow to understand any one's point of view except his own. When he took Marcia away, she was the village girl and he the great nobleman. To-day Marcia holds his future in her hands. She is the strong woman, and he is the weak man. She has achieved fame and made friends. She has lived a happy life, she is at the present moment perfectly content. Every promise he made her he has kept. Well, why not let it go at that?"

"So you are another poor child who knows all about this wonderful world of which I am so ignorant," Richard Vont said bitterly. "Yet, my lad, I tell you that there's one great truth that none of you can get over, and that is that sin lives, and there is nothing in this world, save atonement, can wash it out."

"There's a newer doctrine than that, uncle," David insisted. "You talk with the voice of the black-frocked minister who dangles Hell in front of his congregation. There is something else can clear away sin, and the Book over which you pore, day by day, will teach it you, if you know where to look for it. There's love."

"Was it love, then, that brought him down through the darkness to dishonour my daughter?" Vont demanded, with blazing eyes.

"It didn't seem like it, but love must have been there," David answered. "Nothing but love could have kept these two people together all this time, each filling a great place in the other's life. I haven't thought of these things much, uncle, but I tell you frankly, I've read the Bible as well as you, and I don't believe in this black ogre of unforgivable sin. If these two started in wrong fashion, they've purified themselves. I hold that it's your duty now to leave them alone. I say that this vengeance you still hanker after is the eye for an eye and limb for a

limb of the Old Testament. There has been a greater light in the world since then."

"Have you done?" Vont asked, without the slightest change in his tone or expression.

"I suppose so," David replied wearily. "I wish you'd think over it all, uncle. I know I'm right. I know there is justice in my point of view."

"I'll not argue with you, lad," his uncle declared. "I'll ask you no'but this one question, and before you answer it just go back in your mind to the night we stood outside my shack, when the wind was blowing up from the valleys. Are you going to stand by your pledged word or are you going to play me false?"

The great clock ticked drearily on. From outside came the clatter of teacups. David walked to the latticed window and came back again. Richard Vont was seated in his high-backed chair, his hands grasping its sides. His mouth was as hard and tightly drawn as one of his own vermin traps, but his eyes, steadfastly fixed upon his nephew, were filled with an inscrutable pathos. David remembered that passionate outburst of feeling on a far-distant night, when the tears had rolled down this man's cheeks and his voice was choked with sobs. And he remembered—

"I shall keep my word in every way," he promised solemnly.

Vont rose slowly to his feet. His knees were trembling. He seemed to be looking into a mist. His hands shook as he laid them on David's shoulders.

"Thank God!" he muttered. "David, boy, remember. This light talk is like an April shower on the warm earth. Goodness and sin are the same now as a thousand years ago, and they will be the same in a thousand years to come. We may pipe a new tune, but it's only the Devil's children that dance to it—sin must be punished. There's no getting over that! Forgiveness later maybe—but first comes punishment."

CHAPTER XXII

A queer atmosphere of depression seemed about this time to have affected the two inhabitants of Number 94 Grosvenor Square. The Marquis had suddenly become aware of an aimlessness in life which not even his new financial hopes enabled him to combat. The night of his weekly dinner at Trewly's he spent in the entertainment of three ancient whist companions, and it was not until they had gone and he was left alone in the silent house that he realised how empty and profitless the evening had been. Day by day, after lunch, he sent out the same message to his chauffeur—five o'clock for the club instead of three o'clock for Battersea, and on each occasion the words seemed to leave his lips with more reluctance. He walked each morning in the Park, as carefully dressed and as upright as ever, but one or two of his acquaintances noticed a certain difference. There was an increased pallor, a listlessness of gait, which seemed to bespeak an absent or a preoccupied mind. He even welcomed the coming, one morning just as he was starting for his promenade, of Mr. Wadham, Junior. Here at least was diversion.

Mr. Wadham, Junior, had been rehearsing his interview and his prospective deportment towards the Marquis on the way up, and he started the enterprise to his own entire satisfaction. He entered the library with an exceedingly serious air, and he took great pains to be sure that the door was closed after the retreating butler before he did more than respond to his distinguished client's greeting.

"Anything fresh, Wadham?" the latter enquired.

"I have ventured to see your lordship once more," Mr. Wadham began, "with reference to the scrip which we deposited at the bank to meet certain liabilities on your behalf."

"Well, what about it?" the Marquis asked good-humouredly. "You lawyers know nothing of the Stock Exchange."

Mr. Wadham assumed an expression of great gravity.

"Would your lordship," he begged, "for the satisfaction of my firm, the members of which I think you will admit have always been devoted to your lordship's interests, ring up the stockbroking firm of—say—Messrs. Youngs, Fielden and Company, or any other you like, with reference to the value of those shares?"

"I am, unfortunately," the Marquis replied, "not in a position to do so. The

shares were sold me by a personal friend. I am content to believe that if they had not been of their face value, the transaction would not have been suggested to me."

"That," Mr. Wadham declared seriously, "is not business."

"It happens to be the only way in which I can look upon the matter," was the cool reply.

"To proceed a little further," the lawyer continued, "I am here to enquire, solely in your own interests and as a matter of business, whether you have made any definite agreement to pay for these shares? I am under the impression that your lordship mentioned a note of hand."

"I have signed," the Marquis acknowledged, "a bill, I believe the document was called, for forty thousand pounds, due in about two months' time."

"Has your lordship any idea as to how this liability is to be met?"

"None at all. It is possible that the shares will have advanced in value sufficiently to justify my selling them. If not, I take it that the bank will advance the sum against the scrip."

Mr. Wadham, Junior, could scarcely contain himself.

"Does your lordship know," he exclaimed, "that the bank hesitated about advancing a sum of less than a thousand pounds upon the security of those shares?"

The Marquis yawned.

"They will probably have changed their minds in two months' time," he remarked.

"But if they have not?" Mr. Wadham persisted.

"It is the unfortunate proclivity of you who are immersed in the narrow ways of legal procedure," his client observed, "to look only upon the worst side of a matter. Personally, I am an optimist. I rather expect to make a fortune on those shares."

"It is the belief of my firm, on the contrary," Mr. Wadham confessed gloomily, "that they will end in a petition in bankruptcy being presented against your lordship."

The Marquis shook out his handkerchief, wiped his lips and lit a cigarette.

"Yours appears to be rather a dismal errand, Mr. Wadham," he said coldly. "Is there any reason why I should detain you further?"

"None whatever, so long as I have made it quite clear that there is no prospect of raising a single half-penny in excess of the mortgages already completed. The matter of the forty thousand pounds draft is, of course, entirely in your lordship's hands. I thought it my duty to inform you as to the value of the shares, in case you were able to persuade the gentleman who sold them to you to cancel the transaction."

"You mean well, Wadham, no doubt," the Marquis declared, a little patronisingly, "but, as I said before, your turn of mind is too legal. My respects to your father. You will forgive my ringing, will you not? Lady Letitia is waiting for me to walk with her."

Mr. Wadham departed, saying blasphemous things all the way into Piccadilly, and the Marquis walked with Lady Letitia in the Park. As a rule their conversation, although mostly of personal matters, was conducted in light-hearted fashion enough by Letitia, and responded to with a certain dry though stately humour by her father. This morning, however, a silence which amounted almost to constraint reigned between them. The Marquis, realising this, finally dragged his thoughts with difficulty away from his own affairs.

"I had intended to speak to you, Letitia," he began, "concerning the announcement of your marriage. Some festivities must naturally follow, and a meeting between myself and the Duke."

"Whom you hate like poison, don't you, dad!" Letitia said, with a little grimace. "Well, so do I, for the matter of that."

"One's personal feelings are scarcely of account in such a case," the Marquis averred; "that is to say, any personal feelings with the exception of yours and Grantham's. The match is suitable in every way, and at a time when every young man of account is being chased by a new race of ineligible young women, it

must be a comfort to his family to contemplate an alliance like this."

Letitia shrugged her shoulders.

"With regard to the actual announcement, dad," she said, "we are going to keep it to ourselves for a few weeks longer, or at any rate until we are safely settled in the country. It's such a bore to have every one you have ever spoken to in your life come rushing round to wish you happiness and that sort of thing. Charlie rather agrees with me."

"The matter, naturally, is in your hands," the Marquis replied, with a slight air of relief.

"Of course, I am seeing rather more of Charlie," Letitia went on, "but people won't take any notice of that. There have been rumours of our engagement at least half a dozen times already. Aren't you getting just a little sick, dad, of this everlasting walk and these everlasting people we keep on bowing to and wish we didn't know?"

"I hadn't thought of it exactly in that way," her father confessed, "and yet perhaps London is a little wearisome this season."

"I think," Letitia sighed, "that I never felt so keen about leaving town and getting into the country. I suppose you wouldn't care to go down to Mandeleys a week earlier, would you?" she asked tentatively.

The Marquis looked upwards towards the tops of the trees. He thought of that particular spot on the hall table where notes were left for him, of the old-fashioned silver salver laid by his side on the breakfast table, upon which his letters were placed. He thought of the queer new feeling with which, day by day, he glanced them through, opening none, searching always, covering his disappointment by means of some ingenious remark; and of the days when he returned from such a walk as this, or from the club, his eyes glued upon the sideboard even while the butler was relieving him of his coat and gloves. This morning all the accumulated sickness, all the little throbs of disappointment, seemed to be lumped into one gigantic and intolerable depression, so that his knees even trembled a little while he walked, and his feet felt as though they were shod with lead. He remembered his sleepless nights. He thought of that dull ache which came to him sometimes in the still hours, when he lay and fancied that he could hear her voice, her cheerful laugh, the tender touch of her fingers.

He felt a sudden, overmastering desire to be free, at any rate, from that minute by minute agony. At Mandeleys there would be only the post. Or perhaps, if he made up his mind to leave town earlier than he had expected, he would not be breaking his word to himself if he sent just a line to tell her of his changed plans. The country, by all means!

"So far as I am concerned, Letitia," he said, "I think that I have never before felt so strongly the desire to leave London. I suppose that, if we were content to take things quietly, we could collect a few servants and be comfortable there?"

"I am sure of it, dad!" she exclaimed eagerly. "You don't need to bother. I could arrange it all," she went on, passing her arm through his. "Four or five women will be all that we need, and Mrs. Harris can collect those in the village. Then we need only take Gossett and Smith from here, and of course cook. The others can go on to board wages."

The Marquis smiled indulgently.

"You must not disperse the establishment too completely, my dear," he said. "I have great hopes that a certain business venture which I have made will place us in a very different financial position before very long."

She looked a little dubious.

"Was that what Mr. Wadham was worrying about this morning?" she asked.

"Mr. Wadham, Junior, is a most ignorant young man," her father proclaimed stiffly. "The venture, such as it is, is one which I have made entirely on my own responsibility."

A sudden thought struck her. Her arm tightened upon her father's.

"Has it anything to do with Mr. Thain?"

"It was Mr. Thain who placed the matter before me," he assented.

"And Mr. Wadham doesn't approve?"

"You really are a most intelligent young person," her father declared, smiling. "Mr. Wadham's disapproval, however, does not disturb me."

Letitia was conscious of a curious uneasiness.

"Are you quite sure that Mr. Thain is an honest man, father?" she asked.

The Marquis's eyebrows were slightly elevated.

"My dear!" he said reprovingly. "Mr. Thain's position as a financier is, I believe, beyond all question. Your aunt, who, you will remember, first brought him to us, spoke of his reputation in the States as being entirely unexceptionable."

"After all, aunt only met him on the steamer," Letitia observed.

"Consider further," the Marquis continued, "that he has taken Broomleys and will therefore be a neighbour of ours for some time. Do you think that he would have done this with the knowledge in his mind he had involved me in a transaction which was destined to have an unfortunate conclusion?"

Letitia was silent. Her fine forehead was clouded by a little perplexed frown. The problem of David Thain was not so easily solved. Then the Duchess called to them from her car and beckoned Letitia to her side.

"I have heard rumours, Letitia," she whispered.

Letitia nodded.

"I was coming round to see you, aunt," she replied. "We are not going to announce it until a little later on."

The Duchess smiled her approbation.

"I am delighted," she declared. "You are so difficult, Letitia, and there are so many girls about just now, trying to get hold of our young men. Some one was telling me only last night of an American girl—or was she South American; I don't remember—with millions and millions, who almost followed Charlie about. Of course, that sort of thing is being done, but it hasn't happened in our family yet. Dear people, both of you! When are you going to Mandeleys?"

"We have just decided," the Marquis told her, "to shorten our stay in London. Letitia's engagements are capable of curtailment, and my own are of no account.

We are thinking of going at once."

"And your neighbour," the Duchess enquired; "when is he going into residence?"

"I have not heard."

"I am expecting him to come to Scotland later on," she observed.

The Marquis was gently surprised.

"Won't he be just a little—"

"Not at all," the Duchess interrupted. "He shoots and fishes, and does everything other men do. I am not quite sure," she went on, "that you thoroughly appreciate Mr. Thain."

"My dear Caroline, you are entirely mistaken," the Marquis assured her. "What Letitia's sentiments with regard to him may be, I do not know, but so far as I am concerned, I consider him a most desirable acquisition to my acquaintances."

"If only I had your manner!" she said earnestly. "Poor Mr. Thain!"

With a little nod she drove off. The Marquis and Letitia continued their promenade.

"Why 'Poor Mr. Thain'?" the former mused. "Exactly what did Caroline mean, I wonder?"

"I think," Letitia replied, "that she was emphasising the distinction between your acceptance of Mr. Thain and hers."

Her father remained puzzled.

"Mr. Thain has been a guest at my house," he said, "and we shall treat him as a neighbour when we meet at Mandeleys."

"Those things are indications of a friendly feeling," Letitia observed, "but you yourself know where you have placed the barriers. Now Aunt Caroline doesn't

mean to have any barriers. If Mr. Thain can be awakened to his great opportunities, it is perfectly clear that she means to enter upon a flirtation with him."

The Marquis was a little shocked.

"You are somewhat blunt, my dear," he said. "So far as your Aunt Caroline is concerned, too, I fear that she has in a measure lost that fine edge—perhaps I should say that very delicate perception of the differences which undoubtedly do exist. I am pointing this out to you, Letitia," he continued, as they left the Park, "but it occurs to me that my doing so is unnecessary. I have noticed that since your entrance into Society, some four or five years ago, you have identified yourself entirely with my views. Nothing could have been more discriminating than your treatment of the various excellent people with whom you have been brought into contact."

Letitia did not speak for a moment. Then she turned to her father with a little sigh.

"An inherited weakness, I suppose," she murmured. "I sometimes rather envy other people their standpoint."

The Marquis made no reply. They were nearing Number 94, and he was conscious of that slight, nervous expectancy which required always a firm hand. The door was opened before they could ring. The young man who served under Gossett was already relieving him of his hat and gloves. With a perfectly leisurely step, the Marquis advanced towards the hall table. He glanced at the superscription of two or three notes, dropped his eyeglass, and turned away towards his study—empty-handed.

"Several notes for you, Letitia," he said, without looking around.

CHAPTER XXIII

Richard Vont, a few mornings later, leaned upon his spade and gazed over

towards Mandeleys with set, fixed eyes. His clothes and hands were stained with clay, the sweat was pouring down his face, he was breathing heavily like a man who has been engaged in strenuous labour. But of his exhausted condition he seemed to take no count. There was something new at the Abbey, something which spoke to him intimately, which was crowding his somewhat turgid brain with the one great imagining of his life. For Mandeleys had opened its eyes. A hundred blinds had been raised, long rows of windows stood open. Men were at work, weeding the avenue, and driving mowing machines across the lawns which stretched down to the ring fence and the moat. Flaming borders of yellow crocuses became miraculously visible as the dank grass disappeared, and many spiral wreaths of smoke were ascending into the misty stillness of the spring morning. Away behind, in the high-walled garden, were more gardeners, bending at their toil. Richard Vont was no reader of the *Morning Post*, but an item in its fashionable intelligence of that morning lay clearly written before him. The Marquis was coming back!

Vont turned slowly away, left his spade in the tool shed, entered the cottage by the back door, carefully changed his clothes, washed the clay from his face and hands, and descended into the sitting room, where his breakfast awaited him. Mrs. Wells looked at him curiously. She was a distant connection and stood upon no ceremony with him.

"Richard," she demanded, "where were you when I come this morning?"

"Sleeping, maybe," he answered, taking his place at the table.

"And that you weren't," she contradicted, "for I made bold to knock at your door to ask if you'd like a rasher of bacon with your eggs."

He raised his head and looked at her steadily.

"Well?"

"I'm not one to pry into other people's affairs," she continued, "but your goings on are more than I can understand. All day long you sit with the Book upon your knee, and if a neighbour asks why you never pass the gate, or seemingly move a limb, it's the rheumatics you speak of. And yet last night your bed was never slept in, my man, and I begin to suspect other nights as well. What's it mean, eh?"

Richard Vont rose to his feet and opened the door.

"Just that," he answered harshly, pointing to it. "I'll not be spied on. Inch for inch and yard for yard, this cottage and garden are mine, I tell you—mine with dishonour, maybe, but mine. I'll have none around me that watches and frets because of the things that I choose to do. I'll lie out in the garden at nights, if I will, and not account to you, Mary Wells; or sleep on the floor, if it pleases me, and it's no concern of any one but mine. So back to the village gossips, if you will, and spread your tale. Maybe I'm a midnight robber and roam the countryside at night. It's my affair."

"A robber you're not, Richard Vont," was the somewhat dazed reply, "and that the world knows. And there's summut more that the world knows, too, and that is that since you came back from Americy, never have you set foot outside that gate. There's friends waiting for you at the village, and there's them as smokes their pipe at night in the alehouse, whose company 'd do you no harm, but for some reason of your own you live like a hermit. And yet—yet—"

"Go on, Mary," he said sturdily. "Finish it."

"It's the nights that are baffling," Mrs. Wells declared. "There's some of your clothes in the morning wrings with sweat. There's sometimes the look in your face at breakfast time as though you'd had a hard day's work and done more than was good for your strength."

"I'm no sleeper," he declared, "no sleeper at all. If I choose to walk in the garden, what business is it of yours, Mary, or of any one down in th' village? Answer me that, woman?"

"Every man, I suppose, may please himself," she conceded grudgingly, "but I don't hold with mysteries myself."

"Then you full well know," he replied, "how to escape from them. If they're too much for you, Mary, I've fended for myself before, and I can do it again."

Mrs. Wells snorted.

"Keep your own counsel, then, Richard."

"And you keep yours," he advised. "You're my nearest of kin, Mary, though

you're but my cousin's widdy. If you can learn to keep a still tongue in your head and do what's asked of you, there may be a trifle coming to you when my time comes. But if you get these curious fits on you, and they're more than you can stand; if you're going bleating from house to house in the village, and spending your time in tittle-tattling, then we'll part. Them's plain words, anyhow."

Mrs. Wells became almost abject.

"You've said the word, Richard, and I'll bide by it," she declared. "You can run races with yourself round the garden all night long, if you've a will. I'll close my eyes from now. But," she added, as a parting shot, "that clay on your old clothes takes a sight of getting off."

Richard Vont ate his breakfast slowly and thoughtfully, entirely with the air of a man who accomplishes a duty. Afterwards, with the Bible under his arm, he took his accustomed seat at the end of the garden facing Mandeleys. There were tradesmen's carts and motor-vans passing occasionally on their way to and from the house, but he saw none of them. He was in his place, waiting, watching, perhaps, but without curiosity. Presently a summons came, however, which he could not ignore. He turned his head. David Thain, on a great black horse, had come galloping across the park from Broomleys, and had brought his restive horse with some difficulty up to the side of the paling. The greeting between the two was a silent, yet, so far as Vont was concerned, an eager one.

"You know what that means?" David observed, pointing with his crop towards the house.

"I know well," was the swift answer. "It's what I've prayed for. Move your horse out of the way, boy. Can't you see I'm watching?"

David looked at the old man curiously. Then he dismounted, and with his arm through the reins, leaned against the paling.

"There's nothing to watch yet," he said, "but tradesmen's carts."

"It's just the beginning," Vont muttered. "Soon there'll be servants, and then—him! If he comes in the night," the old man went on, his voice thickening, "I'll —"

Words seemed to fail him, but he had clenched his hands on the cover of the

book he had closed, and his blue veins stood out in ugly fashion. David sighed. Yet, notwithstanding his despair, some measure of curiosity prompted a question.

"Just why do you want to see him so much?" he asked.

"Hate," was the quiet reply. "It's twenty years since, and I've a kind of craving to see him that much older. There's hate and love, you know, David. They're both writ of here. But I tell you it's hate that lasts the longest. Love is like my flowers. Look at them—my tall hollyhocks, my bush roses, my snapdragon there. They blossom and they fade, and they lie dead—who knows where? And in the spring they come again, or something like them. And hate," he went on, pointing to a spade which lay propped against the paling, "is like that lump of metal. It's here winter and summer alike. It doesn't change, it doesn't die; there's no heat would melt it. It was there last year, it's there to-day, it will be there to-morrow."

David sighed, and looked for a moment wearily away. The old man watched him anxiously. Exercise had brought a slight flush to his pallid cheeks and an added brightness to his eyes. He sat his horse well, and his tweed riding-clothes were fashionably cut. His uncle's frown became deeper.

"You're young, David," he said, "and I know well that you and me look out on life full differently. But an oath—an oath's a sacred thing, eh?"

"An oath is a sacred thing," David repeated. "I've never denied it."

"You'll not flinch, lad?" the old man persisted eagerly.

"I shall not flinch."

"Then ride off now. There's no gain to either of us in talking here, for your mind is set one way and mine another. You'll have a score of years of youth left after you've done my behest."

David paused with his foot in the stirrup, withdrew it and returned to the paling.

"Let me know the worst," he begged. "I've beggared your enemy for you. I've soiled my conscience for the first time in my life. I've lied to and ruined the man who trusted in my word. What is this further deed that I must do?"

Richard Vont shook his head.

"When the time comes," he promised, "you shall know. Meanwhile, let be! It's a summer morning, and you are but young; make the most of it. Come when I send for you."

So David rode off, up the broad slopes of the great park, along the wonderful beech avenue and out on to the highway. He turned in his saddle for a moment and looked towards the road from London.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Marquis, with an after-breakfast cigarette in his mouth, strolled out of his front door, a few mornings later, to find himself face to face with Richard Vont. He called Letitia, who was behind.

"The worst has happened," he groaned.

Letitia stood by her father's side and looked across the stone flags, across the avenue, with its central bed of gay-coloured flowers, the ring fence, the moat, the few yards of park, to where, just inside his little enclosed garden, Richard Vont was seated, directly facing them.

"Well, you expected it, didn't you, father?" she observed.

"All the same," the Marquis declared, with a frown, "it's an irritating thing to have a man seated there within a hundred yards of your front door, with a Bible on his knee, cursing you. I am convinced now, more than ever, that my case against this man must have been grossly mismanaged. The law could never permit such an indignity."

Letitia stepped back for a moment to light a cigarette. Then she rejoined her father and contemplated that somewhat grim figure critically.

"If he is going to do that all the time," the Marquis went on, "I shall have nerves. I shall have to live in the back part of the house."

Letitia gravely considered the matter.

"Why don't you try talking common sense to him?" she suggested. "Perhaps a few words from you would make all the difference."

"He is probably sitting there with a gun," her father sighed. "However, it's an idea, Letitia. I'll try it."

He strolled across the avenue, through a little iron gate in the railings, and across the moat by a footbridge. When he had approached within a dozen paces of the palings, however, Richard Vont rose to his feet.

"You're nigh enough, Lord Mandeleys," he called out, "nigh enough for your own safety."

The Marquis advanced with his usual leisurely and aristocratic walk to the edge of the palings. Richard Vont stood glaring at him like a wild beast, but there was no signs of any weapon about.

"Vont," the former said, "we both have rights. This park is mine so far as your paling, just as your garden is yours where you are. I have no fancy for shouting, and I have a word to say to you."

"Say it and begone, then," Vont exclaimed fiercely.

"Really," the Marquis expostulated, "you are behaving in a most unreasonable manner. I am here to discuss the past. For any wrong which you may consider I have done you, I express my regret. I suggest to you that your daughter's present position in life should reconcile you to what has happened."

"My daughter's brains nor your money don't make an honest woman of her."

The Marquis sighed wearily.

"Your outlook, Vont," he said, "is full of prejudice and utterly illogical. I found qualities in your daughter which endeared her to me, and she has lived a perfectly reputable and engrossing life ever since she left your home, such a life as she could not possibly have lived under your roof or in this part of the world. In every way that counts, she has prospered. Therefore, I ask you to reconsider the matter. I claim that any wrong I may have done you is expiated, and I suggest

that you abandon an attitude which—pardon me—is just a little theatrical, put aside that very excellent Book or else read it as a whole, and give me your hand."

"I'd cut it off first," Vont declared savagely.

"This is rank prejudice," the Marquis protested.

"It seems so to you, belike," was the scornful answer. "You clever folk who can crowd your brain with thoughts and ideas from books—you've no room there for the big things. You've so many little weeds growing up around that the flower doesn't count. Nought that you can say about Marcia can alter matters. I'd sooner have seen her married to the poorest creature on your land than to know that she has lived as your dependent for all these years."

The Marquis shook his head sorrowfully.

"You're an obstinate old man, Vont," he said, "and a very selfish one. You are wrapped up in your own narrow ideas, and you won't even allow any one else to show you the truth. Marcia has been happy with me. She would have been the most miserable creature on earth married to a clod."

"Ay, she's been here to show herself," Vont muttered, "down in a motor-car, in furs and silks, like a creature from some world that I know not about. She's talked as you've talked. I've listened to the pair of you. I thrust my daughter out of the garden and bade her go away and learn the truth. And you—well, I just take leave to say that as I cursed you nigh on a score of years ago, and have cursed you in my heart ever since, so I curse you now!"

"But are you going to sit there every day doing it?" the Marquis enquired, a little irritably.

"This house and garden are mine," Richard Vont replied stolidly, "although you've done your best to beggar me by taking them away. When I choose, I shall sit here. When I choose, I shall sit and watch you with your guests, watch you morning, noon and night. I've one wish in my heart, hour by hour. Maybe that wish will reach home, Marquis of Mandeleys. If it does, you'll see them all in black along the churchyard path there, and hear the doors of your vault roll open."

"You're a little mixed in your similes, my friend," the Marquis remarked, "because, you know, if those things happen—to me, I shall be the one person who doesn't hear them. Still, I gather that you are implacable, and that is what I came to find out. What astonishingly fine hollyhocks!" he observed, as he turned away. "I must go and look at my own."

For a moment there was tragedy in Vont's clenched fists and fierce, convulsive movement forward. The Marquis, however, without a backward glance, lounged carelessly away and, finding Letitia, strolled with her to the walled garden.

"The man is impossible," he proclaimed. "It is obviously his intention to sit there and make himself a nuisance. Well, we get used to everything. I may get used to Richard Vont."

Letitia hesitated for a few moments.

"Father," she said, "there are certain subjects which are not, as a rule, mentioned, but if you will permit me—"

The Marquis stopped her.

"My dear, please not," he begged, a little stiffly. "Remember, if you will, that I have little in common with the somewhat modern school of thought indulged in by most of your friends. There are certain subjects which cannot be discussed between us. Let us hear what Mr. Hales has to say."

Hat in hand, the head gardener had hastened down to meet them, and under his tutelage they explored his domain. His master murmured little words of congratulation.

"I have done my best, your lordship," the man observed, "but Mr. Merridrew has been cruel hard on me for bulbs and seeds and plants, and as to shrubs and young trees, he'll not have a word to say."

The Marquis nodded sympathetically.

"We may be able to alter that next year, Hales," he promised. "Mr. Merridrew, I know, has had great trouble with the tenants for the last few quarters. Next year, Mr. Hales, we will see what we can do."

The gardener once more doffed his cap and received the intelligence with gratified interest. Over the top of the hill, a small governess' cart, drawn by a fat pony, came into sight, and Letitia waved her hand to the girl who was driving.

"It's Sylvia Laycey," she murmured. "Now how on earth can that child still be at Broomleys, if Mr. Thain is really here?"

Sylvia explained the matter as she drove into the great stableyard, Letitia walking on one side of her and the Marquis on the other.

"Of course we've left Broomleys," she told them, "but we are staying with the Medlingcourts for three or four days. They asked us at the last moment. And then your letter came, Letitia—just in time. I'm simply crazy to come and stay with you. Letitia, you lucky girl! You are going to be here all the time! I am simply foolish about him!"

"About whom?" Letitia asked indifferently.

"Why, Mr. David Thain, of course! He's the nicest thing I've ever talked to. He lunched with us on Thursday—but of course you're in love with him, too, so there'll be no chance for me."

Letitia's laugh was half amused, half scornful.

"If you are in earnest, Sylvia," she said, "which doesn't seem very likely, I can assure you that you need fear no rival. Mr. Thain does not appeal to me."

"We have nevertheless found Mr. Thain," the Marquis observed, suddenly reminding them both of his presence, "a very agreeable and interesting acquaintance."

Sylvia made a little grimace. She thrust her arm through Letitia's and drew her off towards the lawn, where some chairs had been brought out under a cedar tree.

"You are such a wonderful person, Letitia," she said, "and of course your father's a Marquis and mine isn't. But I thought, nowadays, Americans were good enough for anybody in the world, if only they had enough money."

"Both my father and I, you see," Letitia observed, "are a little old-fashioned. I

have never had any idea of marriage, except with some one whose family I knew all about."

"Of course," Sylvia declared, "I am a horrid Radical, and I think I'd sooner not know about mine. If Mr. Thain's antecedents were unmentionable, I should adore him just the same, but, as I know your father would remind me in some very delicate fashion if he were here, the situation is different. You don't mind talking about him, do you, Letitia, because that's what I've come for?"

"Well, I'll listen," Letitia promised, as she settled herself in an easy-chair. "I really don't know what I should find to say, except that he's moderately good-looking, has quite nice manners, and money enough to buy the whole county."

"You are fearfully severe," Sylvia sighed. "Of course, I've been talking rot, as I always do, but we did find him charming, Letitia, both Daddy and I. He was so simple and unaffected, and he drove me into Fakenham and bought cutlets for our luncheon. When I come to think of it," she went on, with a look of horror in her face, "I believe he paid for them, too."

"He can well afford to," Letitia laughed.

The Marquis came to them across the lawn. He held in his hand an open telegram.

"From Grantham, my dear," he said to Letitia. "It appears that he is bored with town and proposes to come down to-morrow night instead of waiting until Saturday. I have replied that he will be very welcome. Mrs. Foulds will really have to bestir herself. I have a line from Caroline, too, to ask if she may stay for a couple of days on her way to Harrogate."

Letitia rose to her feet. The cloud which had fallen upon her face was doubtless owing to housekeeping cares. The Marquis, shading his eyes with his hand, was gazing across the park.

"Really," he remarked, a little drily, "I shall have to hint to our new neighbour that turf which is several hundred years old is not meant to be cut up like prairie-land. He sits his horse well, though."

Sylvia jumped quickly up and Letitia gazed in the direction which her father had indicated. David, on his black horse, was riding across the park towards

Broomleys.

CHAPTER XXV

The Marquis, as he sat at his study table after lunch, was not inclined to regard his first day at Mandeleys as a success. The only post of the day had been delivered, and the letter for which he was waiting with an anxiety greater than he even realised himself, was still absent. There was a letter, however, from Mr. Wadham, which afforded him some food for thought. It was a personal letter, written by the head of the firm, and he perused it for the second time with a frown upon his forehead.

My dear Lord Mandeleys:

I have ventured, in your interests, to do what my son tells me you yourself felt some hesitation in doing—namely, I have made enquiry through a firm of stockbrokers who make a speciality of American oil shares, as to the Pluto Oil Company, Limited, of whose shares you have made so large a purchase. I find that no development of this property has taken place, very little, if any, machinery has been erected, no oil has ever been discovered in the locality or upon the estate. May I beg of you that, to avoid disastrous consequences, you at once see your friend from whom you purchased these shares, and endeavour to make some arrangement with him to take them off your hands, as they were doubtless tendered to you by false representations.

I am quite sure that I need not point out to your lordship that I write you this letter entirely without prejudice and in the interests of the Mandeleys name and estates.

There could be no possibility of the drafts executed by your lordship being met, unless the shares themselves provided the funds, which, under the existing conditions, appears impossible.

Respectfully yours,
STEPHEN WADHAM.

The Marquis looked out upon the lawn. There was in his memory, too, a recent and serious conversation with Mr. Merridrew, concerning the accumulating charges for dilapidations upon the property. He watched David playing croquet with Sylvia Laycey with a deepening frown upon his face, glanced from them to where Letitia sat, apparently absorbed in a book which she was reading, and from her he looked through a side window towards that hated little demesne across the moat, where Richard Vont, in his shabby brown velveteen suit, with his white hair and his motionless figure, seemed to dominate the otherwise peaceful prospect. Somehow or other, both outlooks irritated him almost as much as his own mental condition. The hard pressure of circumstances was asserting itself in his mind. He found himself struggling against an insidious longing to see Letitia in Sylvia's place. In his way he was superstitious. He even began to wonder whether that silent, ceaseless hate, that daily litany of curses, could really in any way be responsible for the increasing embarrassments by which he was surrounded, that great, dumb anxiety which kept him with wide-open eyes at night and sent him about in the daytime with a constant, wearing pain at his heart.

He turned at last wearily away from the window, rose to his feet, opened the French doors which led out into the gardens, and strolled across the lawn to where Letitia was seated. She laid down her book and welcomed him with a smile which had in it just a shade of fatigue.

"Our friend Thain," he observed, "seems to be a success with Miss Sylvia."

Letitia turned her head and watched them.

"Sylvia has already confided to me her ardent admiration."

The Marquis sighed as he sank into a chair. Letitia glanced at him a little anxiously.

"Anything wrong, dad?"

"Nothing that should depress one on such a wonderful day. It is more a state

of mind than anything. You and I, I fancy, were both born a few hundred years too late."

"Money again?"

He nodded.

"It is one of the most humiliating features of modern existence," he declared, "to find the course of one's daily life interfered with by the paltry necessities of pounds, shillings and pence. One inherits a great name," he went on ruminatively, "great traditions, an estate brimful of associations with illustrious ancestors. In one's daily life one's sense of dignity, one's whole position, is all the time affected, I may say poisoned, by the lack of that one commodity which is neither a proof of greatness or even deserving. We are very poor indeed, Letitia."

She sighed.

"Is it anything fresh?"

"Mr. Merridrew has been here this morning," her father continued, "and has spoken to me very seriously about the condition of the whole estate. No repairs or rebuilding have been effected for years. The whole of the rents, as they have been received, have been required to pay interests on the mortgages. Mr. Merridrew adds that he scarcely dare show himself before any one of the tenants, to whose just demands he is continually promising attention. He considers that unless the whole of the next quarter's rents are spent in making repairs, we shall lose our tenants and the property itself will be immensely deteriorated."

"There are those shares that Mr. Thain sold you," she reminded him hopefully.

"You must take this for what it is worth," he said. "I have a private letter from Mr. Wadham himself this morning, in which he tells me frankly that he has received reports indicating that those shares are worthless."

"Worthless?" Letitia exclaimed, bewildered.

Her father nodded.

"He begs me earnestly to appeal to Mr. Thain to take them off my hands.

Even if I could bring myself to contemplate such a step, we should even then be faced with the fact that, adopting Mr. Merridrew's views, there are no funds to provide the interest on the mortgages next quarter day."

Letitia glanced once more uneasily towards David Thain.

"Worthless!" she repeated. "I don't understand it, father. Do you really believe that Mr. Thain would do you an ill turn like this?"

The Marquis shook his head.

"I can conceive no possible reason for such an action," he declared. "We have not injured him in any way. On the contrary, we have, at your Aunt Caroline's solicitation, offered him a hospitality somewhat rarely accorded by you and me, dear, to persons of his nationality and position."

Letitia made a little grimace.

"Aunt Caroline looks at him from a different point of view, doesn't she!"

"Your aunt is intensely modern," the Marquis agreed. "She is modern, too, without any real necessity. Her outlook upon life is one which, considering her descent, I cannot understand."

"Don't you think, father," Letitia asked him squarely, "that, however, disagreeable it may be, you ought to speak to Mr. Thain about the shares? He could probably tell you something which would relieve your mind, or he might offer to take them back."

The Marquis was silent for a moment. Probably no one in the world except Letitia knew how much it cost him to say the next few words.

"I will do so," he promised. "I will find an early opportunity of doing so. At the same time, in the absence of any more definite information, I prefer to retain my belief in their value."

Sylvia and David came strolling towards them. The former was looking almost distressed.

"Letitia dear, isn't it horrid!" she said. "I must go now! I promised Mrs.

Medlingcourt that I'd be back to tea. She has some stupid people coming in. We've had such a wonderful game of croquet. I am quite sure I could make an expert of Mr. Thain in a very short time. Can I have my pony cart, please, Letitia? And what time shall I come on Thursday?"

"We shall be ready for you any time you like," Letitia replied, "so please suit yourself."

They all strolled round to see her start. She looked a little wistfully at the vacant place in the governess' cart, as she took her seat.

"I can't drop you at Broomleys gate, can I, Mr. Thain?" she asked.

He shook his head smilingly.

"I should never dare to face your pony again," he declared. "Bring your father over to see me, and we'll mark out a croquet court at Broomleys."

"We'll come," she promised.

She drove away. David, too, turned to take his leave.

"So nice of you to entertain our little visitor," Letitia said, smiling graciously upon him. "She is charming, isn't she?"

"Quite," he replied.

"I'll show you a way into the park from the flower gardens," she continued. "It saves you a little."

She led the way across the lawn, very erect, very graceful, very indifferent. David walked by her side with his hands behind him.

"You must find these country pursuits a relaxation after your more strenuous life," she observed.

"I find them very pleasant."

"To-morrow," Letitia told him, "my aunt arrives for a day or two. You are almost as popular with her, you know, as you seem to be with Sylvia."

"The Duchess," he repeated. "I did not know that she was coming here. She was kind enough to ask me to go to Scotland later on."

"You will be very foolish if you don't go, then," Letitia advised. "The Rossdale grouse moors are almost the best in Scotland. Aunt Caroline is staying here for two days on her way to Harrogate. You must dine with us on Thursday night. She will be so disappointed if she does not see you at once."

"You are very kind, Lady Letitia," he said. "I fear that I am inclined to encroach upon your hospitality."

She picked a rose and held it to her lips for a moment.

"We must amuse Aunt Caroline," she observed languidly. "It is many years since she imposed herself as a visitor here. We dine at a quarter past eight. This is the gate."

He passed through it and turned to make his farewells. Her left hand was resting upon the iron railing, her right supported her parasol. She nodded to him a little curtly.

"You promised," he reminded her, "that some day you would come over and help me about the garden."

"Did I?" she answered. "Well, remind me sometime, won't you?"

"Why not now?" he persisted.

She shook her head.

"I have to go and consult with Mrs. Foulds as to where to put all our visitors. Charlie Grantham is coming with aunt, I think, and we have so many rooms closed up. Don't fall into the moat. There's a bridge just to the left."

She turned away, and David watched her for several moments before he swung round. He was conscious of a sudden and entirely purposeless feeling of anger, almost of fury. From the higher slopes of the park he turned and looked once more towards Mandeleys. Letitia had evidently forgotten her household duties. She had thrown herself back in her chair and was once more apparently engrossed in her book.

CHAPTER XXVI

David Thain, a few hours later, lounged in a basket chair in the one corner of his lawn from which he could catch, through the hedge of yew trees, a furtive glimpse of Mandeleys. By his side stood a small coffee equipage and an unopened box of cigars; in the distance was the vanishing figure of the quiet-mannered and very excellent butler with whom a famous registry office had endowed his household. It was an hour of supreme ease. An unusually warm day was succeeded by an evening from which only the warmth of the sun had departed, an evening full of scents from flowers and shrubs alike, an evening during which the thrushes prolonged their music until, from somewhere in the distant groves at the back of the house, a nightingale commenced, like the tuning up of an orchestra, to make faint but sweet essays at continued song. It was as light as day but there were stars already in the sky, and a pale, colourless moon was there, waiting for the slowly moving mantle of twilight. David Thain was alone with his thoughts.

They had started somewhere in the background, in the first throb and excitement of life, in the moment when his lips had framed that horrible oath which held him now in its meshes. Then had come the real struggle, years of brilliant successes, the final coup, the stepping in a single day on to one of those pedestals which a great republic keeps for her most worshipped sons. Always it seemed to him that there was that old man in the background, waiting. At last had come the question. Yes, he was ready. He had come to England a little protesting, a little incredulous, always believing that those fierce fires which had burned for so long in the grey-haired, patient old man would have burned themselves out, or would become softened by sentimental associations as soon as he set foot in his native place. David's awakening was complete and disconcerting. The fury of Richard Vont showed no signs of abatement. He found himself committed already to one loathsome enterprise—and there was the future. He looked down gloomily at the magnificent pile below, with its many chimneys, its stretching front and far-reaching wings, and some echo of the bitterness which raged in the old man who sat and watched at its gates, found an echo in his own heart. He remembered the amusement with which that subtle but absolutely natural air of superiority, on the part of father and daughter alike, had first imbued him. Their very kindness, the frank efforts of the Marquis, as well as of Lady Letitia, to lead him into some channel of conversation in which he could easily express himself was the kindness of those belonging to another

world and fearing lest the consciousness of it might depress their visitor. And with his resentment was mingled another feeling; not exactly acquiescence—his American education had been too strong for that—but admiration for those inherent gifts which seemed to bring with them a certain grace, carried into even the smaller matters of life. Perhaps he exaggerated to himself their importance as he sat there in the soft gathering twilight, poured out his neglected coffee and still played with his unlighted cigar. The rooks had ceased to caw above his head. Some of the peace of night was stealing down upon the land. In the windows of Mandeleys little pinpricks of light were beginning to show.

The iron hand-gate which led from the park into his domain was suddenly opened and closed. The way led through a grove of trees and through another gate into the garden. He turned his head and watched the spot where the figure of his visitor must appear. It was curious that from the first, although his common sense should have told him how impossible such a thing was, he had an intuitive presentiment as to who this visitor might be. He laid down the unlighted cigar upon his table and leaned a little forward in his chair. First he heard footsteps falling softly upon a carpet of pine needles and yielding turf, slowly too, as though the movements of their owner were in a sense reluctant. And then a slim, tall figure in white—a familiar figure! He was up in a moment, striding forwards. She had already passed through the gate, however, and was moving towards him across the lawn.

"Lady Letitia!" he exclaimed.

She nodded.

"Please don't look as though I'd done anything so terribly unusual," she begged. "What a pleasant spot you have chosen for your coffee!"

David's new treasure proved fully equal to the occasion. From some unseen point of vantage he seemed to have foretold the coming of this visitor, and prepared to minister to her entertainment. Lady Letitia sank into her chair and praised the coffee.

"So much better than the stuff we have been trying to drink," she told David. "I must bring dad round one evening. He loves good coffee. How beautiful your trees are!"

"Your trees," he reminded her.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It seems ages since I was here," she remarked. "Sylvia was away when we were down last, and dad and Colonel Laycey were annoyed with one another about some repairs. You don't want any repairs, do you, Mr. Thain?"

"I have arranged to do whatever is necessary myself," David told her, "in consideration of a somewhat reduced rent."

"I am glad you consider it reduced!" Letitia observed. "Of course, you think I am mad to come and see you like this, don't you?" she added a little aggressively.

"Not in the least," he replied. "I should not have ventured to have expected such a visit, but now that you are here it seems quite natural."

"After all, why isn't it?" she agreed. "I walked round the garden once, thinking about a certain matter in which you are concerned, and then I walked in the park, and it occurred to me that you would probably be sitting out here, only a few hundred yards away, just as you are doing, and that you could, if you would, set my mind at rest."

"If I can do that," he said, "I am very glad that you came."

"I am going to unburden my mind, then," she continued. "It is about those shares you sold father, Mr. Thain."

His manner seemed, to her quick apprehension, instantly to stiffen. Nevertheless, he was expectant. He was willing to go through a good deal if only he could hear her voice for once falter, if even her tone would lose its half-wearied, half-insolent note, if she would raise her eyes and speak to him as woman to man.

"The Pluto Oil shares," he murmured. "Well?"

"Of course, father hadn't the least right to buy them," she went on, "because we haven't a penny in the world, and he couldn't possibly pay for them unless they fetched as much, when the payment fell due, as he gave for them. I am rather stupid at these things, Mr. Thain, but you understand?"

"Perfectly!"

Her long fingers stole into the cigarette box. She accepted a light from him and leaned back once more in her chair.

"Father," she proceeded, "has the most implicit faith in everybody. The fact that you are an American millionaire was ample proof to him that anything in the way of shares you possessed must be worth a great deal more than their face value. I do not know what led to his buying them—you probably do. Did he asked for any assurances as to their intrinsic value?"

"I warned him," David said, "that they were entirely a speculation. He asked my advice as to some way of raising a large sum of money, much larger than he could hope to gain by any ordinary enterprise. I presumed that he was willing to speculate and I suggested these shares. They certainly are as speculative as any man could desire."

"Are they worth any more now than when father bought them?" she enquired.

"To the best of my belief they have not moved," he replied. "As a matter of fact, they have not yet had a chance to prove themselves."

"They are still worth a dollar a share, then?"

"They are worth a dollar a share as much as they were when your father bought them."

She turned her head and looked at him.

"My father," she said, "declines to ask you any questions. He would consider it in bad taste to suggest for a moment that he felt any uneasiness with regard to the necessary payment for them. He is none the less, however, worried. He was foolish enough to tell his lawyers about them, and lawyers, I am afraid, have very little faith in him as a business man. The result of the enquiries they made was most depressing."

"It probably would be," David assented.

"Forty thousand pounds' worth of shares," Letitia continued, "which are worth as much now as when my father bought them, are, I suppose, nothing to

you. I wondered whether you would object to have them back again? I think that it would relieve my father's mind."

Thain was silent for a moment. He had lit a cigar now and was smoking steadily.

"You have not much idea of business, Lady Letitia," he remarked.

"Business?" she repeated, with a note of surprise in her tone. "How should I have? There are certain matters of common sense and of honour which I suppose are common to every one of reasonable intelligence. There did not seem to me to be any principle of business involved in this."

"Supposing," David said, "the shares had risen and were worth two dollars to-day, you would not in that case, I presume, have honoured me with this visit?"

"Certainly not," she replied.

"I did not sell those shares to your father as an act of philanthropy," he continued. "He asked me to show him a speculation, and I showed him this. Those shares, so far as I know, are as likely to be worth five times their value next week, or nothing at all. I am a very large holder, and it seemed to me that it would be a reasonable act of prudence to sell a few of them at a price which showed me a small margin of profit."

"Profit?" she repeated wonderingly. "Are you in need of profit?"

"It is the poison of wealth," he observed. "One is always trying to add to what one has."

She turned her head and looked at him intently. For a moment she was almost startled. There was something unreal in the sound of his words. Something that was almost a foreboding chilled her.

"Mr. Thain," she said calmly.

"Yes?"

"Had you any reason—any special reason, I mean—for selling those shares to my father?"

His face was inscrutable.

"What reason should I have, Lady Letitia?"

"I can't imagine any," she replied, "and yet—for a moment I thought that you were talking artificially. I probably did you an injustice. I am sorry."

David's teeth came together. There was lightning in his eyes as he glanced down through the trees towards Vont's little cottage.

"Don't apologise too soon, Lady Letitia," he warned her.

She raised her eyebrows.

"I am not accustomed to think the worst of people," she said. "I can scarcely picture to myself any person, already inordinately wealthy, singling out my father as a victim for his further cupidity. Let me return to the question which I have already asked you. Would you care, without letting my father know of this visit and my request, to return his cheque or promissory note, or whatever it was, in exchange for these shares?"

"I am not even sure, Lady Letitia," he reminded her, after a moment's pause, "that your father wishes this."

"You can, I think, take my word that it would be a relief to him," she asserted.

He pondered for a few moments. The light through the trees seemed to be burning brighter in Vont's sitting room.

"I will be frank with you, Lady Letitia," he said. "There has been no increase in the value of these shares. The news which I have expected concerning them has not arrived. The transaction, therefore, is one which at the present moment would probably entail a loss. Do you wish me to make your father a present of twenty or thirty thousand pounds?"

She rose deliberately to her feet and shook the few grains of cigarette ash from her dress. The cigarette itself she threw into a laurel bush.

"I understand," she remarked, "what you implied when you said that women did not understand business."

Her tone was unhurried, her manner expressed no indignation. Yet as she strolled towards the gate, David felt the colour drained from his cheeks, felt the wicker sides of his chair crash in the grip of his fingers. He rose and hurried after her.

"Lady Letitia," he began impulsively—

She turned upon him as though surprised.

"Pray do not trouble to escort me home," she begged.

"It isn't that," he went on, falling into step by her side. "You make me feel like a thief."

"Are you not a thief?" she asked. "I have been told that nearly all very rich men are thieves. I begin to understand that it may be so."

"It is possible to juggle with money honestly," he assured her.

"It is also possible, I suppose," she observed, with faint sarcasm, "to lower the standard of honesty. Thank you," she added, as she passed through the second gate, "you perhaps did not understand me. I should prefer to return alone."

"I am going your way," he insisted desperately.

"My way?" she repeated. "But there is nowhere to go to, unless you are proposing to honour us with a call at Mandeleys."

"I am going in to see old Richard Vont," he said.

She laughed in surprised fashion.

"What, the old man who sits and curses us! Is he a friend of yours?"

"He was on the steamer, coming home," David reminded her. "I told you so before. I take an interest in him."

His point now was momentarily gained, and he walked unhindered by her side. The soft twilight had fallen around them, little wreaths of mist were

floating across the meadows, the birds were all silent. The pathway led through another narrow grove of trees. As they neared the gate, Letitia hesitated.

"I think it is just as near across the meadow," she said.

He held open the gate for her.

"You had better stay on the path," he advised. "The grass is wet and your shoes are thin."

She looked into his face, still hesitating. Then she swiftly dropped her eyes. The man must be mad! Nevertheless, she seemed for a moment to lose her will. The gate had fastened behind them with a sharp click. They were in the grove. The way was very narrow and the fir trees almost black. There was only a glimpse of deep blue sky to be seen ahead and in front. The pigeons rustled their wings, and a great owl lumbered across the way. Something happened to Letitia then which had never happened before. She felt both her hands gripped by a man's, felt herself powerless in his grasp.

"Lady Letitia," he exclaimed feverishly, "don't think I'm a fool! I'll not ask for what you haven't got to give—me. You shall have your father's note—you shall have—for him—what will make him free, if you'll only treat me like a human being—if you'll be—kind—a little kinder."

Her eyes flashed at him through the darkness, yet he could see that one thing at least he had achieved. Her bosom was rising and falling quickly, her voice shook as she answered him. For the first time he had penetrated that intolerable reserve.

"Are you mad?" she cried. "Are you trying to buy me?"

"How else should I win even a kind glance?" he answered bitterly.

"You mistake me for a railroad system," she mocked.

"I have never mistaken you for anything but a woman," was the vibrating reply. "The only trouble is that to me you always posture as something else."

His hands were burning upon her wrists, but she showed no resentment.

"Is this the way," she asked, "that Americans woo? Do they imprison the lady of their choice in some retired spot and make a cash offer for their affections? You are at least original, Mr. Thain!"

"If I can't bring myself to ask you in plain words what I am craving for," he answered hoarsely, "you can guess why. I know very well that there is only one thing about me that counts in your eyes. I know that I should be only an appendage to the money that would make your father happy and Mandeleys free. And yet I don't care. I want you—you first, and then yourself."

"You have some faith, then, in your eligibility—and your methods of persuasion?" she observed.

"Haven't I reason?" he retorted. "You people here are all filled up with rotten, time-exploded notions, bound with silken bonds, worshippers of false gods. You don't see the truth—you don't know it. I am not sure that I blame you, for it's a beautiful slavery, and but for the ugly realities of life you'd prosper in it and have children just as wonderful and just as ignorant. But, you see, the times are changing. I am one of the signs of them."

"If this were an impersonal discussion," Letitia began, struggling to compose her voice—

"But it isn't," he broke in. "I am speaking of you and of me, and no one else. I'm fool enough to love you, to be mad about you! Fool enough to make you an offer of which any man with a grain of self-respect should be ashamed."

"I quite agree with you," she said smoothly. "Perhaps it will end this very interesting little episode if I tell you that I am engaged to marry Lord Charles Grantham, and that he is coming down to-morrow."

He released her hands—flung them from him almost.

"Is this the truth?" he demanded.

She laughed lightly.

"Why on earth," she asked, "should I take the trouble to tell you anything else?"

He pointed to the path.

"Get on," he ordered.

She found herself obeying him—without resentment, even. When they reached the gate that led into the park, he held it open and remained. She hesitated for a moment.

"You are going to leave me to brave the perils of the rest of the journey alone?" she asked.

He made no answer. She lifted her skirts a little, for the dew was becoming heavier, and made her graceful way down the slope and across the bridge to the postern gate. Arrived there, she looked round. David Thain had vanished back into the grove.

Letitia made her way into her own room and closed the door. She lit both of the candles upon her dressing table, pulled back the lace of her sleeves and looked at her wrists. There were two red marks there, red marks which, as she stared at them, seemed suddenly again to feel the iron pressure. She stared at them, half in surprise, without anger and yet with a curious emotion. Suddenly she found that she was trembling, obsessed with a strange yet irresistible impulse. She bent down and lightly kissed the flaming marks. Then she blew out the candles, threw herself into the easy-chair which, earlier in the day, she had drawn up to the window, and looked steadily back into the park now fast becoming a phantasy of shadowland.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Marquis, with several account books and Mr. Merridrew, who had ridden over from his office on a motor-bicycle, had settled down to a laborious evening. The former, for no particular reason, was enjoying a slight relapse into his customary optimism.

"I am not without expectation," the Marquis commenced by explaining to his

agent, "that at the end of the next two months I may find myself in possession of a large sum of money. Under those circumstances, it will not be a purposeless proceeding to work out what is really required in the way of repairs on the various farms. It will be a great pleasure for me to meet my tenants in any way possible. On the whole, I consider that they have been very reasonable and loyal."

Mr. Merridrew agreed with his lordship, agreed with him fervently.

"Some of them," he confessed, "have been very troublesome. A few of them have been driven to make some slight repairs themselves, but on the whole, your lordship, it would be a great relief if one were able to assist them so far as regards positive dilapidations."

The Marquis dipped his pen in the ink and settled down to his task. At that moment, however, Gossett knocked at the door, opened it and advanced towards his master with a card upon a salver.

"The gentleman is staying at Fakenham, I believe, sir, and has motored over."

The Marquis lifted the card. "Mr. James Borden" at first conveyed nothing to him. Then he felt a sudden stab of memory.

"The gentleman wishes to see me?" he enquired.

"He begs to be allowed a short interview with your lordship," Gossett replied.

"You can show him into the library," was the brief direction. "Mr. Merridrew," he added, turning to the agent, "you can proceed with the abstract without me. I shall return in time to go through the totals and learn the family records of the various tenants—I refer, of course, to those with which I am not acquainted."

Mr. Merridrew was quite sure that he could manage alone and settled down to his task. The Marquis presently left him and crossed the great hall, one of the wonders of Mandeleys, the walls of which were still hung with faded reproductions, in ornate tapestry, of mediaeval incidents. From somewhere amongst the shadows came Gossett, who gravely took up his stand outside the library. As though with some curious prescience of the fact that this was an unwelcome visitor, his bow, as he threw open the door, was lower even than

usual.

"Shall I light the lamp, your lordship?" he asked.

The Marquis glanced towards the oriel windows, through which the light came scantily, and at the figure of James Borden, advancing now from somewhere in the dim recesses of the room—an apartment which remained marvellously little altered since the days when it had contained the laboriously collected books of a Franciscan order of Monks.

"Perhaps it would be as well, Gossett," his master assented. "You wish to see me?" he added, turning towards his visitor.

James Borden had come posthaste from London, acting upon an impulse which had swept him off his feet. All the way down he had been the prey to turbulent thoughts. A hundred different ways of conducting this interview had presented themselves before him with such facility that he had come to look upon it as one of the easiest things on earth. Yet now the moment had arrived he was conscious of an unexpected embarrassment. The strange tranquillity of the house and this stately apartment, the personality of the Marquis himself—serene, slightly curious, yet with that indefinable air of good-breeding which magnifies the obligations of a host—had a paralysing effect upon him. He was tongue-tied, uncertain of himself. All the many openings which had come to him so readily faded away.

"My name is Borden," he announced. "I have come here, hoping for a short conversation with you."

The Marquis made no immediate reply. He watched the lighting of a huge lamp which Gossett silently placed in the middle of an ebony black writing table, to the side of which he had already drawn up two high-backed chairs.

"Is there anything else your lordship desires?" the man asked.

"Not at present, Gossett. I will ring."

The Marquis pointed towards one of the chairs, and seated himself in the other.

"I shall be very glad to hear of your business with me, Mr. Borden," he said

courteously.

His visitor had lost none of his embarrassment. The Marquis, in his old-fashioned dinner clothes, his black stock, the fob which hung from his waistcoat, his finely chiselled features, and that mysterious air of being entirely in touch with his surroundings, had him at a disadvantage from the first. Borden was wearing the somewhat shabby blue serge suit in which he had travelled all day, and which he had neglected to brush. He had been too much in earnest about his mission to do more than make the most hasty toilet at the hotel. The high-backed chair, which suited the Marquis so well, was an unfamiliar article of furniture to him, and he sat upon it stiffly and without ease. Nevertheless, he reminded himself that he was there—he must say what he had come to say.

"I am venturing to address you, Lord Mandeleys," he began, "upon a personal subject."

The Marquis raised his eyebrows gently. It was perhaps a suggestion of surprise that a personal subject should exist, lending itself to discussion between him and this visitor.

"And before I go any further," the latter continued, "I want to make it clear that I am here at my own initiative only—that the other person interested is entirely ignorant of my visit."

Mr. Borden paused, and the Marquis made no sign whatever. He was sitting quite upright in his chair, the fingers of his right hand toying lazily with an ancient paper knife, fashioned of yellow ivory.

"Nevertheless," the speaker went on, "I wish to tell you that my visit is a sequel to a conversation which I had last night with Miss Marcia Hannaway, a conversation during which I asked her, not for the first time, to be my wife."

The Marquis's fingers ceased to trifle with the paper knife. Otherwise, not a muscle of his body or a single twitch of the features betrayed any emotion. Nevertheless, his visitor realised for the first time that all his life he had had a wrong conception of this man. He knew quite well that he had altogether underrated the difficulties of his task.

"I am taking it for granted," he proceeded, "that you are broad-minded enough, Lord Mandeleys, to admit that we can discuss this, or any other matter,

on terms of equality. I am unknown to you. My father was a Dean of Peterborough; I was myself at Harrow and Magdalen."

The Marquis's fingers stretched out once more towards the paper knife.

"You mentioned, I believe," he said, "the name of a lady with whom I am acquainted."

"I am coming to that," was the eager reply. "I only wanted to have it understood that this was a matter which we could discuss as equals, as man to man."

"I am so far from agreeing with you," the Marquis declared calmly, "that I prefer to choose my own companions in any discussion, and my own subjects. It happens that you are a stranger to me."

Borden checked a hasty retort, which he realised at once would have placed him at a further disadvantage.

"Lord Mandeleys," he said, "I was at first Miss Hannaway's publisher. I have become her friend. I desire to become her husband. Her whole story is known to me, even from the day when you brought her away from the Vont cottage and chose her for your companion. I have watched the slow development of her brain, I know how much she has benefited intellectually by the forced seclusion entailed upon her by the conditions of your friendship. I realise, however, that the time has come when in justice to her gifts, which have not yet reached fruition, it is necessary that she should come into closer personal contact with the world of which she knows so little. She can attain that position by becoming my wife."

"Really!" his listener murmured, with a faint note of unruffled surprise in his tone.

Borden set his teeth. The task which had seemed to him so easy was presenting now a very different appearance. Nevertheless, he kept an iron restraint upon himself.

"I do not wish to weary you," he went on, "by making a long story of this. I am forty-one years old and unmarried. Marcia Hannaway is the first woman whom I have wished to make my wife, and I wish it because I—care for her. I

have been her suitor for nine years. During all that time she has given me no word of encouragement. I have never once, until these last few days, been permitted to dine alone with her, nor been allowed even the privilege of visiting her at her home. The restrictions upon our intercourse have been, I presume, in obedience to your wishes, or to Marcia's interpretation of them."

"If we could come," the Marquis said gently, "to the reason for this visit—"

The words supplied the sting that Borden needed.

"I believe," he declared, "that Marcia Hannaway in her heart wishes to marry me. I believe that she cares enough to marry me. Only a short time ago she admitted it, and within twelve hours I received a note, retracting all that she had promised."

There was a deep silence throughout the great room. The faces of the two men—a little closer now, for Borden had moved his chair—were both under the little circle of lamplight. For a single second something had disturbed the imperturbability of the Marquis's countenance—it seemed, indeed, as though some strange finger had humanised it, had softened the eyes and drawn apart the lips. Then the moment passed.

"Are we nearing the end of this discussion, Mr. Borden?"

"Every word brings us nearer the end," was the ready reply. "I am going to tell you the truth as I feel it in my heart. Marcia would be at her best in the life to which I should bring her. Mentally, spiritually and humanly, as my wife she would be happier. She has refused me out of loyalty to you."

"Are you suggesting," the Marquis enquired, "that I should intervene in favour of your suit?"

Borden struck the table with the flat of his hand.

"Damn it," he exclaimed, "can't you talk of this like a man! Don't you care enough for Marcia to think a little of her happiness? I want you to let her go—to let her believe, whether it is the truth or not, that she is not, as she seems to think, necessary to your life. Come! Life has its sacrifices as well as its compensations. You've had the best part of a wonderful woman's life. I am not saying a word about the conditions which exist between you. I don't presume. If

I did, I should have to remember that Marcia speaks always of your treatment of her with tears of gratitude in her eyes. But your time has come. Marcia has many years to live. There is something grown up within her which you have nothing to do with—a little flame of genius which burns there all the time, which at this very moment would be a furnace but for the fact of the unnatural life she is forced to lead as your—companion. Now you ask what I've come for, and you know. I want you to forget yourself and to think of the woman who has been your faithful and sympathetic companion for all these years. She hasn't come to her own yet. She can't with you. She can with me. Write and thank her for what she has given you, and tell her that for the future she is free. She can make her choice then, unfettered by these infernal bonds which you have laid around her."

The Marquis turned the lamp a little lower with steady fingers. The necessity for his action was not altogether apparent.

"You suggest, Mr. Borden, if I understand you rightly," he said, "that I am now too old and too unintelligent to afford Marcia the stimulating companionship which her gifts deserve?"

"There can't be a great sympathy between you," the other declared, "and, to be brutal, the place in life which she deserves, and to which she aspires, is not open to her under present conditions."

"You allude, I presume," the Marquis said, "to the absence of any legal tie between Miss Hannaway and myself?"

"I do," Borden assented. "The world is a broad-minded place enough, but there are differences and backwaters—I am not here to explain them to you. I don't need to. Marcia Hannaway, married to her publisher, going where she will, thinking how she will, meeting whom she will, would be a different person to Miss Marcia Hannaway, living in isolation in Battersea, with nothing warm nor human in her life except—"

"Precisely," the Marquis interrupted, with a little gesture which might have concealed—anything. "I am beginning to grasp your point of view, Mr. Borden."

"And your answer?"

"I have no answer to give you, sir. You have made certain suggestions, which I may or may not be prepared to accept. In any case, matters of so much

importance scarcely lend themselves to decisions between strangers. I shall probably allude to what you have said when I see or write Miss Hannaway."

"You've nothing more to say to me about it, then?" Borden persisted, a little wistfully.

"Nothing whatever! You may possibly consider my attitude selfish," the Marquis added, "but I find myself wholly indifferent to your interests in this matter."

"I should be able to reconcile myself even to that," was the grim reply, "if I have been able to penetrate for a single moment that accursed selfishness of yours—if I have been able to make you think, for however short a time, of Marcia's future instead of your own."

The Marquis rose without haste from his place, and rang the bell.

"You will permit me, Mr. Borden," he invited, "to offer you some refreshments?"

"Thank you, I desire nothing."

The Marquis pointed to the door, by which Gossett was standing.

"That, then, I think, concludes our interview," he said, with icy courtesy.

Mr. Borden walked the full length of the very long apartment, suffered himself to be respectfully conducted across the great hall, out on to the flags and into the motor-car which he had hired in Fakenham. It was not until he was on his way through the park that he opened his lips and found them attuned to blasphemy. At the top of the gentle slope, however, where the car was brought to a standstill while the driver opened the iron gate, he turned back and looked at Mandeleys, looked at its time-worn turrets, its mullioned windows, the Norman chapel, the ruined cloisters, the ivy-covered west wing, the beautiful Elizabethan chimneys. A strange, heterogeneous mass of architecture, yet magnificent, in its way impressive, almost inspiring. He looked at the little cottage almost at its gates, from which a thin, spiral column of smoke was ascending. Perhaps in those few seconds, and with the memory of that interview still rankling, he felt a glimmering of real understanding. Something which had always been incomprehensible to him in Marcia's story stood more or less revealed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Marquis, if he had been a keen physiognomist, might perhaps have read all that he had come to London to know in Marcia's expression as he made his unexpected entrance into her sitting room on the following day. She was seated at her desk, with a great pile of red roses on one side of her, and a secretary, to whom she was dictating, on the other. She swung round in her chair and for a moment was speechless. She looked at her visitor incredulously, a little helplessly, with some traces of an emotion which puzzled him. Her greeting, however, was hearty enough. She sprang to her feet and held out both her hands.

"My dear man, how unlike you! Really, I think that I like surprises. Give me both your hands—so! Let me look at you."

"I should have warned you of my coming," he said, raising the ink-stained fingers which he was clasping to his lips, "but to tell you the truth it was a caprice."

"I thought you were in the country, at Mandeleys!" she exclaimed.

"I was," he replied. "I have motored up from there this morning. I came to see you."

She dismissed her secretary, gazed at herself in the glass and made a grimace.

"And a nice sight I look! Never mind. Fancy motoring up from Mandeleys! What time did you start?"

"At six o'clock," he answered, with a little smile. "It was somewhat before my regular hour for rising. If you have no other arrangements, I should be glad if you would take luncheon with me."

"Bless the man, of course I will!" she assented, passing her arm through his and leading him to a chair. "You are not looking quite so well as you ought to after a breath of country air."

"I am passing through a time of some anxiety," he acknowledged.

She remained on the side of his chair, still holding his arm. The Marquis sank back with a little air of relief. There seemed to be something different, something warmer in the world. He was moved by a rare and unaccountable impulse—he drew her towards him and kissed her lips.

"I had a birthday last week," he said, with a very slight smile. "I think that it affected me. One begins to wonder after one has passed middle age, not what there is to look forward to, but how much it is worth while enduring."

"Of course," she declared, with a grimace, "you've been diving into musty old volumes at Mandeleys and reading the mutterings of one of those primitive philosophers who growled at life from a cave."

"I have found myself a little lonely at Mandeleys," he confessed.

"But this visit to London," she persisted. "Is it business? Is there anything wrong?"

"I came to see you."

"My head is going round," she declared. "This is Wednesday. Besides, I thought you were going to stay away until I wrote you—not that I wanted you to."

"I changed my mind," he told her, "in consequence of a visit which I received yesterday from a Mr. James Borden."

She gave vent to an exclamation of dismay.

"You mean that Jimmy has been down to see you?"

"If Jimmy and Mr. James Borden are identical," the Marquis replied, a little stiffly, "he undoubtedly has."

She looked at him helplessly.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed, "how could he be so foolish!"

"He wanted, it seems," the Marquis continued, "to have what he called a man-to-man talk. I am not the sort of person, as you know, Marcia, who appreciates man-to-man talks with strangers. I listened to all that he had to say, and because I gathered that he was your friend, I was polite to him. That is all. He gave me to understand that he was your suitor."

"He'd no right to tell you anything of the sort," she declared, "but in a sense I suppose it is true. He wants me to marry him. It's most fearfully unsettling. But that he should come to you! I wish he hadn't, Reginald."

"It appeared to me to be a quixotic action," the Marquis assented. "However, indirectly it has been conducive of good—it has brought me a great pleasure. I have missed you very much, Marcia. I am very happy to be here again, for however short a time."

"You are going back, then, to Mandeleys?"

"When we part, directly after luncheon. I have guests arriving there to-night —my sister and Grantham, and I believe some others. But after my talk with Borden, or rather his talk to me, I felt that I must see you."

"Well, I've missed you," she confessed frankly. "I seem to have had lots to do, and I have been going to the theatres, and I have quite made up my mind to write a play. But I have missed you.—Shall I go and put on my hat?"

"If you will," he answered. "We can talk in the car and at luncheon."

The Marquis watched her cross the room and sighed. At thirty-nine, he thought, she was wonderfully young. Her figure was a little more mature, but in all other respects she seemed only to have found poise and assurance with the passing years. He leaned back in his chair almost with a sense of luxury. He was back again in the atmosphere which had kept him young, the atmosphere which unconsciously had hung around him and kept him warm and contented—kept him, too, from looking over the edge into strange places. The room was deliciously feminine, notwithstanding a certain fascinating disorder. There were magazines, Reviews and illustrated papers everywhere in evidence, an open box of cigarettes upon the chimneypiece, an armful of flowers thrown loose upon the table, as well as the roses upon her desk. One of her gloves lay upon a chair by the side of a pile of proofs. It seemed to him that there were some new photographs on the mantelpiece, but his own, in the uniform of his county

yeomanry, still occupied the central position. There were songs upon the piano; on the sideboard a silver cocktail shaker, and, as he noticed with a little pang, two glasses. Nevertheless, he sat there waiting in great content until Marcia came in, dressed for the street. She was followed by a servant with some ice upon a tray, and bottles.

"Now for my new vice," she exclaimed gaily, taking up the cocktail shaker and half filling it with ice. "You are not going to be obstinate, are you?"

"I shall take anything you may give me, with great pleasure," he assured her, a little stiffly.

She saw him looking at the second glass, and laughed.

"It is Phyllis Grant who is responsible for this," she explained. "She lives in the next flat, you know, and she comes in most days, either before luncheon or before dinner, for an apéritif and a cigarette."

The Marquis's face cleared. He drank his cocktail and pronounced it delicious. On the threshold he paused and looked back.

"I like your little room, Marcia," he said. "I find it a strange thing to confess, but there is nowhere else in the world where I feel quite as much at home, quite as contented, as I do here."

She seemed almost startled, for a moment unresponsive. Such a speech was so unlike him that it seemed impossible that he could be in earnest. She walked down the stairs by his side with a new gravity in her face. Perhaps he noticed it. At any rate, as soon as they were seated in the car he began to talk to her.

"The object of Mr. Borden's visit to me, I gathered, was to impress upon me the fact that by marrying him you would gain many advantages from which you are at present debarred. I naturally made no comment, nor did I argue the matter with him. I have come to you."

She sat silent in her corner. Her eyes were fixed upon a nursemaid, with two or three young children, passing by. Suddenly she touched her companion on the arm and pointed to them.

"There is that, you know," she faltered.

The Marquis nodded.

"My great fear," he continued, "is that sometimes I am too much inclined to treat you as a contemporary, and to forget that you have never known those things which are a part of every woman's life. I must give Mr. Borden the credit for having had the good taste not to mention them."

"Oh, Jimmy isn't a cad," she answered, "but, without mentioning them, I cannot understand what he came to you for. As regards the other things you have spoken of, I don't care a rap about them, in fact I love my independence. I go where I choose, I have found no one indisposed to make my acquaintance, and the more I see of life—such life as comes to me—the more I love it. When Jim—Mr. Borden—uses such arguments, he bores me. They are directly against him instead of for him. If I were Mrs. James Borden, people would leave cards upon me and I should have to eat dinners with fellow-publishers' wives, and exchange calls, and waste many hours of my life in all the tomfoolery of middle-class respectable living. It doesn't appeal to me, Reginald. He is an idiot not to realise it."

"What does appeal to you, then?" he asked.

"That," she answered, moving her head backwards.

They crossed Battersea Bridge in silence.

"It's such a silly, ordinary problem," she went on presently, "and yet it's so difficult. It's either now or never, you know, Reginald. I shall say good-by to the thirties before long."

"It is your problem," he said sadly, "not mine."

She held his fingers in hers.

"If only, when we were both so much younger," she sighed, "we had had a little more courage. But I was so ignorant, and there was so much else, too, to distract. I shall never forget our first few months of travel—Paris, the Riviera, Italy. I was impressionable, too, and I loved it all so—the colour and the beauty, the rich, warm stream of life, after that wretched village school. I was so aching to understand, and you were such a good tutor. You fed my brain wonderfully. Oh, I suppose I ought to be content!"

"And I," he murmured, "I, too, ought to be ready to creep into my own little shelter and be content with—memories."

"Ah, no!" she protested, laying her hand upon his. "If you feel like that, it is ended.—Now come, this is a gala day. You have come so far to see me. I am seriously flattered. You must be starved, too. Not another word until we have lunched."

At Trewly's their entrance produced a mild sensation. Their usual table was fortunately unoccupied. The manager himself welcomed them with many compliments. Marcia glanced around her a little listlessly.

"There is something rather mausoleum-like about this restaurant in the daytime," she declared. "Won't you take me somewhere else one day, Reginald?"

"Why not?" he answered. "It is for you to choose."

"There are some queer, foreign little places," she went on hastily. "The things to eat, perhaps, are not so good, but the people seem alive. There is an air here, isn't there, of faded splendour about the decorations and the people, too."

"I will make enquiries," the Marquis promised.

"Don't," she begged. "You must leave it to me. I will find somewhere. And now let us be serious, Reginald. Here we are come to rather a late crisis in our lives. Tell me, how much do I really mean to you? Am I just a habit, or have you really in the background memories and thoughts about me which you seldom express?"

He leaned across the table.

"I will confess," he said, "that I have been surprised, during the last few days, to discover how much you do mean to me, Marcia. Your quicker apprehension, perhaps, finds fault with me, rebels against the too great passivity of my appreciation. You have been the refuge of my life. Perhaps I have accepted too much and given too little. That is what may reasonably happen when there is a disparity in years and vitality as great as exists between us. What seemed to you to be habit, Marcia, is really peace. I have forgotten what I should always have remembered—that you are still young."

Her eyes glistened as she looked at him. A ray of sunshine which found its way through an overhead window was momentarily unkind. The lines under his eyes, the wrinkles in his face, the thinning of his hair, were all a little more apparent. Marcia was conscious of an unworthy, a hateful feeling, a sensation of which she was hideously ashamed. And yet, though her voice shook, there was still self-pity in her heart.

"I am so glad that you came," she said. "I am so glad that you have spoken to me like this. You need have no fear. Those other things were born of just a temperamental fancy. They will pass. Be to me just what you have been. I shall be satisfied."

A cloud passed over the sun. His face was once more in the shadow, and curiously enough her fancy saw him through strangely different eyes. Age seemed to pass, although something of the helpless wistfulness remained. It was the pleading of a boy, the eager hope of a child, of which she suddenly seemed conscious.

"Do you think that you can be happy—as things are, Marcia?" he asked. "Your friend, Mr. Borden, doesn't think so. He came down—he was just a little melodramatic, I think—hoping to incite me to a great sacrifice. I was to play the part of the self-denying hero. I was to give away the thing I loved, for its own sake. I had no fancy for the rôle, Marcia."

"And I should hate you in it, dear," she assured him. "Mr. James Borden will always be a dear friend, but he must learn what every one else in the world has had to learn--a lesson of self-denial. He will find some one else."

"I am not jealous of the man," the Marquis said. "I am jealous of just one thought that his coming may have brought into your brain—one instinct."

"Don't be," she begged. "It will go just as it came. It is part of a woman's nature, I suppose. Every now and then it tortures."

Luncheon was served excellently but without undue haste. They fell to discussing lighter topics.

"You will be interested to hear," he told her, "that my daughter Letitia is engaged to be married to Charles Grantham. I am quite expecting that by Christmas I shall be alone. I find Letitia a charming and dutiful companion," he

went on, "but I must confess that I look forward to her marriage with some satisfaction. It has occurred to me that if it suited your work, we might travel for a time, or rather settle down—in Italy, if you prefer it. There is so much there to keep one always occupied. In Florence, for instance, one commences a new education every spring."

"I should love it," she answered, with an enthusiasm which still lacked something.

"A villa somewhere on the slopes of Fiesole," he continued, "with a garden, a real Italian garden, with fountains and statuary, and straight paths, and little strips of deep lawn, and a few cypress trees. And there must be a view of Florence. I think that you would work well there, Marcia. If things go as I expect, I thought that we might leave England about Christmas-time, and loiter a little on the Riviera till the season for the cold winds has passed. Browning wrote of the delights of an English spring, but he lived in Florence."

"There is so much there that I am longing to see again," she murmured.

"You shall see it all," he promised. "If you wish, you shall live with it. I do not know whether there is anything strange about me," he went on, after a moment's hesitation, "but I must confess that I find myself a little out of touch with modern English life. The atmosphere of my sister's house, for instance, invariably repels me. The last generation was amused by the efforts of those without just claims to penetrate into the circles of their social superiors. To-day the reverse seems to be the case. The men, and the women especially, of my order, seem to be perpetually struggling to imitate the manners and weaknesses of a very interesting but irresponsible world of Bohemia. I find myself with few friends, nowadays. The freedom and yet the isolation of foreign life, therefore, perhaps appeals to me all the more.

"But you would not care to leave Mandeleys, surely?"

"My dear Marcia," he said, "I am possessed, perhaps, of a peculiar temperament, but I can assure you that Mandeleys is spoiled for me so long as that—that ridiculous old man—you will forgive me—your father, sits at the end of his garden, invoking curses upon my head. To every one except myself, the humour of the situation is obvious. To me there is something else which I cannot explain. Whether it is a presentiment, a fear, an offence to my dignity, I cannot

tell. I have spent all the spare money I have in the world trying to get that Vont cottage back again into the family estates, but I have failed. Really, your father might just as well have Mandeleys itself."

"You know that I went to see him?" she asked.

"I remember your telling me that you were going," he replied.

"My mission was a dismal failure," she confessed. "I felt as though I were talking to a stranger, and he looked as though he were speaking to a Jezebel. We stood in different worlds, and called to one another over the gulf in different languages."

"Perhaps," the Marquis sighed, "it is as well that he is your father. The other morning I passed down the fencing gallery and examined my father's collection of rifles. There was one there with a range of six hundred yards, which was supposed in those days to be marvellous, and some cartridges which fitted it. The window was open. You think, Marcia, that I am too placid for impulses, yet I can assure you that I slipped a cartridge into the magazine of that rifle, closed it, and knelt down before the open window. I held your father covered by the sight until I could have shrieked. Then I turned away and fired at a log of wood in the park. I found the bullet afterwards, half a foot deep in the centre of it."

She shivered a little.

"For heaven's sake, don't go near that fencing gallery again!" she begged. —"You see the time?"

He rose to his feet, and they passed down the restaurant together. Outside, the car was waiting.

"Will you think me very discourteous," he asked, "if I send you back in a taxicab? I shall be hard pushed, as it is, to reach home before my guests."

"Of course," she assented.

He stood for a moment after she had taken her place in the vehicle, with her hand in his.

"My visit," he whispered, "has made me very happy."

She looked at him through a mist of unexpected tears.

"Come to me soon," she begged a little abruptly. "I shall want you."

"Early next month," he promised, "or, if you send for me, before."

She seemed restless, indisposed to let him go. "I wish you weren't going away at all," she declared with unusual fervour. "I wish—Come back with me now, won't you? Do!"

For a moment he hesitated. He felt an extraordinary impulse to throw everything on one side and accept her invitation. The crisis passed, however, before he could yield. Marcia, with a little laugh, became her normal self.

"What an idiot I am!" she exclaimed good-humouredly. "Of course, you must get down to Mandeleys as quickly as you can. Good-by!"

She threw herself back in the corner of the taxicab and waved her farewells. The Marquis stood for a moment bareheaded upon the pavement. He watched the vehicle until it became lost in the stream of traffic. The impulse of a few moments ago was stronger than ever, linked now, too, with an intolerable sense of depression. It was with an extraordinary effort of will that he took his place in his own car and motioned the chauffeur to proceed.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Duchess walked with Letitia in the high-walled garden at Mandeleys, on the morning after her arrival. She appeared to be in a remarkably good temper.

"I have not the least intention of boring myself, my dear Letitia," she said, in reply to some conventional remark of her niece's. "So long as I get plenty of fresh air during the day, good plain food, and my bridge between tea and dinner, I am always contented. Let me see," she went on, coming to a standstill and pointing with her stick to the little belt of tall elm trees and the fir plantation behind, "Broomleys is that way, isn't it? Yes, I can see the house."

Letitia nodded, but only glanced in the direction her aunt indicated.

"And Mr. Thain? Do you find him a pleasant neighbour?"

Letitia looked deliberately the other way. It was just as well that her aunt should not see the flash in her eyes.

"We do not see much of him," she replied. "He gallops round the park every day like a lunatic, and he spends a great deal of time, I think, in his car."

"My dear," the Duchess said impressively, "David Thain may have his peculiarities, but he is really a most simple and sincere person. I was attracted to him upon the steamer simply because of his shyness, and a good thing for you, dear, that I was. It must make quite a difference to have Broomleys properly let to a man who can pay a good rent for it."

"We have never denied that," Letitia admitted drily. "We are keeping house now upon the first quarter's rent."

"Is it my fancy," her aunt continued, stooping to pick herself a sprig of lavender, "or do you really dislike Mr. Thain?"

"Intensely!" Letitia confessed with emphasis.

The Duchess was surprised.

"Well, really!" she exclaimed. "And to me he seems such a harmless, inoffensive person, absolutely without self-consciousness and not in the least bumptious."

"What on earth has he to be bumptious about?" Letitia scoffed. "He has simply made a lot of money out of other people."

"That shows brains, at least," her aunt reminded her.

"Cunning!" Letitia retorted.

The Duchess twirled the sprig of lavender between her fingers. She could not remember ever to have heard her niece so much in earnest.

"Well, I hope you don't feel too strongly about him," she said. "I must have him asked to dinner while I am here."

"We have anticipated your wishes," Letitia remarked. "He is coming to-night."

"I am very glad to hear it," was the satisfied reply. "I shall do my best to persuade him to come up to Scotland later on. There is nothing that Henry enjoys more than a little flutter in American railways. Perhaps he will help us to make some money."

"Personally," Letitia said slowly, "I should be very careful how I trusted Mr. Thain."

The Duchess was shocked.

"You carry your aversions too far, my dear," she remonstrated.

"Perhaps, I only know that he sold father a lot of shares which it is my profound conviction are entirely worthless."

"Sold your father shares?" the Duchess repeated. "I don't understand. How on earth could Reginald pay for any shares!"

"He gave what is called an acceptance," Letitia explained. "It falls due in about six weeks."

The Duchess smiled. She had a great idea of her own capacity for business.

"My dear," she said, "if between now and then the shares have not improved sufficiently for your father to make a profitable sale, Mr. Thain can extend the time of payment by renewing the bill."

"You have more confidence in Mr. Thain than I have," Letitia remarked drily.

Her aunt was a little puzzled. She decided to change the conversation.

"Where is Charles this morning?" she enquired.

"In the library with father. They are discussing possible settlements. I thought

that sort of thing was always left to lawyers."

"I hope you are happier about your marriage than you seem," her aunt observed. "Charles is quite a *parti*, in a way, you know, although he is not rich."

"Oh, I suppose it may as well be Charles as any one else," Letitia assented, a little drearily.

The Duchess shook her head.

"You need a change, my dear," she declared. "I hate to hear you talk like that, especially as you are by way of being one of those single-minded young persons who must find everything in marriage or else be profoundly unhappy. I am not at all sure that you ought to have considered the question of marriage until you were in love."

"Thank you," Letitia retorted, "I have a horror of being an old maid."

Her aunt sighed.

"Now I come to think of it," she went on reminiscently, "there is a curious streak of fidelity, isn't there, in your father's character. You must take after him. It ought to make you very careful, Letitia. I don't want to say a word against Charles, but he doesn't carry his head quite so high as you do, you know. When are you going to announce your engagement?"

"As soon as he leaves here, I think."

"Hm! Is Charlie very much in love with you?"

"If he is, he hasn't mentioned it," Letitia observed. "Nowadays, men seem to reserve that sort of protestation for their musical comedy friends, and suggest a joint establishment, as a matter of mutual convenience, to us."

"Bitter, my dear—very bitter for your years!" her aunt sighed.

"What would you like to do this morning?" Letitia asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"I shall amuse myself," was the prompt reply. "First of all, I am going to

undertake a little mission on Reginald's account. I am going over to talk to that ridiculous old man Vont. Afterwards, I shall walk across to Broomleys."

"Most improper!" Letitia remarked.

"My dear," her aunt reminded her, "I am nearly forty years old, although no one in the world would guess it if it were not for those wretched Court Guides. I look upon Mr. Thain as a sort of protégé of mine, and I have an idea that you are not being so nice to him as you might be."

"I do my best," Letitia replied, "and I really don't think he has anything to complain of."

The Duchess parted from her niece as they neared the house and proceeded to pay her first visit. She crossed the moat by the little handbridge, walked briskly across the intervening strip of park, and approached the little enclosure in which the cottage was situated. Richard Vont, seated in his usual corner of the garden, remained motionless at her approach. He neither rose nor offered any sort of greeting.

"Good morning, Vont," she said briskly, as she reached the paling.

He was looking at her fixedly from underneath his bushy grey eyebrows. He sat bolt upright in his chair, and he kept his hat upon his head.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"My good man," she remonstrated, "you might as well be civil. Why don't you stand up and take off your hat? You know who I am."

"Yes, I know who you are," he replied, without moving. "You are Caroline, Duchess of Winchester. I keep my hat upon my head because I owe you no respect and I feel none. As to asking you in, no one of your family will ever, of my will, step inside these palings."

"You are a very obstinate old man, Vont," she said severely.

"I am what the Lord made me."

"Well," she continued, leaning slightly against the paling and looking down at

him, "I came down here to say a few words to you, and I shall say them, unless you run away. You are one of those simple, ignorant men, Vont, who love to nurse an imaginary injustice until the idea that you have been wronged becomes so fixed in your brain that you haven't room for anything else there. This behaviour of yours, you know, is perfectly ridiculous."

Vont made no sign even of having heard her. She continued.

"You haven't even a grievance. My brother took your daughter away from her home. Under some conditions, that would have been a very reprehensible thing. As things turned out, it has been the making of the young woman. She has received a wonderful education, has been taken abroad, and has been treated with respect and consideration by every one. My brother has devoted a considerable portion of his lifetime to ensuring her happiness. She is now a contented, clever, talented and respected woman. If she had remained here, she would probably have become the wife-drudge of a farmer or a local tradesman. You are listening, Richard Vont?"

"Yes, I am listening!"

"If the Marquis had betrayed your daughter, taken her away and deserted her," she continued, "there might have been some justification for this theatrical attitude of yours. Under the present circumstances, there is none at all. Why don't you rid yourself of the idea, once for all, that you or your daughter have suffered any wrong? You've only a few years to live. Take up your work again. There is plenty to be done here. Go and mix with your old friends and live like a reasonable man. This brooding attitude of yours is all out of date. Put your Bible away, light a pipe, and set to work and kill some of the rabbits. The farmers are always complaining."

"You have a niece up yonder," Vont said, knitting his shaggy grey eyebrows and gazing steadfastly at his visitor, "a well-looking young woman, they say—Lady Letitia Thursford. Would you like her to live with a man and not be married to him?"

"Of course," the Duchess replied, "that is simply impertinent. If you are going to compare the doings of your very excellent yeomen stock with the doings of the Thursfords, you are talking and thinking like a fool. A few hundred years ago, it would have been your duty to have offered your womenkind to your

master when you paid your rent. We have changed all that, quite properly, but not all the socialists who ever breathed, or all the democratic teachings you may have imbibed in America, can entitle you to talk of the Vonts and the Thursfords in the same breath."

The old man rose slowly to his feet. He leaned a little upon his stick, and pointed to Mandeleys.

"You are an ignorant, shameless woman," he said. "Get you home and read your Bible. If you want a last word to carry away with you, here it is. My daughter was just as much to me as the young woman who walked yonder with you in the garden is to her father. Let him remember that."

"But, you foolish person," she expostulated, "Lady Letitia enjoys all the advantages to which her station entitles her. Your daughter, with a mind and intelligence very much superior to her position, was employed in the miserable drudgery of teaching village children."

"Honest work," he replied, "hurts no one, unless they are full of sickly fancies. It's idleness that brings sin. They tell me you've new creeds amongst those in your walk of life, and a new manner of living. Live as you will, then, but let others do the same. I stand by the Book, and maybe, when your last days come, you will be sorry you cast it aside."

"So far as I remember," she reminded him, "the chief teaching of that Book is forgiveness."

"Your memory fails you, then," he answered grimly, "for what the Book preaches is justice to poor and rich alike."

The Duchess sighed. She was a good-hearted woman and full of confidence, but she recognised her limitations.

"My good man," she said, "I shall not argue with you any more. You won't believe it, but you are simply narrow and pig-headed and obstinate, and you won't believe that there may be a grain of reason in anybody else's point of view but your own. Just look at yourself! You can't be more than sixty-five or so, and you might be a hundred! You sit there nursing your grievance and thinking about it, while your whole life is running to seed. Why don't you get up and be a human being? Send for your daughter to come down and look after you—she'd

come—and choke it all down. Put the Book away for a time, or read a little more of the New Testament and a little less of the Old. Come, will you be sensible, and I'll come in and shake hands with you, and we'll write your daughter together."

Vont was still leaning on his stick. Save that his eyebrows were drawn a little closer together, his expression was unchanged. Yet his visitor, though the sunshine was all around them, shivered.

"Did he send you here?"

"Of course not," she replied. "I came of my own accord. I remembered the days when you used to take me rabbiting and let me shoot a pheasant if there was no one about. You were a sensible, well-balanced man then. I came, hoping to find that there was a little of the old Richard Vont left in you."

"There is just enough of the old Richard Vont left," he said, "to send you back to where you came from, with a message, if you care to carry it. Tell him—your brother, the Lord of Mandeleys—that I am not sitting here of idle purpose, that I don't hear the voices around me for nothing, that I don't look day and night at Mandeleys for nothing. Tell him to make the most of the sun that shines to-day and the soft bed he lies on to-night and the woman he kisses to-morrow, for he is very close to the end. I am an old man, but I'm here to see the end. It has been promised."

The Duchess, brimful of common sense and good humour, brave as a lion and ready of tongue as she was, felt a little giddy, and clung to the rail as she crossed the little bridge over the moat. She looked back only once. Richard Vont remained standing just as she had left him—grim, motionless, menacing.

CHAPTER XXX

The Marquis glanced at the note which was handed to him at luncheon time, frowned slightly and handed it across to Letitia.

"What have you people been doing to Thain?" he asked a little irritably. "He doesn't want to come to dinner."

The Duchess and Sylvia, who had just arrived on her projected visit, made no attempt to conceal their disappointment. Letitia picked, up the note and read it indifferently.

"I am very sorry, aunt," she said. "I gave him all the notice I could."

"There is perhaps some misunderstanding," the Marquis remarked. "In any case, he would not know that you were here for so short a time, Caroline. After luncheon I will walk across and see him."

"I will go with you," the Duchess decided. "I should like to see Broomleys again. As a matter of fact, I meant to go there this morning, but I found one call enough for me."

They took their coffee in the garden. Letitia followed her father to a rose bush which he had crossed the lawn to examine.

"Dad," she asked, passing her hand through his arm, "have you had any good news?"

He shook his head.

"Why?"

"Because you look so much better. I think that motoring must agree with you."

He patted her hand.

"I rather enjoyed the drive," he admitted. "As a matter of fact, perhaps I am better," he went on.

"You haven't any good news about the shares, I suppose?" she asked hesitatingly.

For a moment he was grave.

"I have no news at all," he confessed, "or rather what news I have is not good. I put an enquiry through an independent firm of stockbrokers with whom I have had some transactions; and their reply coincided with the information already afforded to me."

Letitia glanced across the park, and her face darkened.

"Has it ever struck you," she asked, "that there is something peculiar about Mr. Thain in his attitude towards us—as a family, I mean?"

The Marquis shook his head.

"On the contrary," he replied, "I have always considered his deportment unimpeachable."

Letitia hesitated, pulled a rose to pieces and turned back with her father towards where the Duchess was reclining in a wicker chair.

"I dare say it's my fancy. Why don't you all go," she suggested, "and take Mr. Thain by storm? He can scarcely resist you, aunt, and Sylvia."

"Why don't you come yourself?" the Duchess asked.

"My duty lies here," Letitia observed, with a little smile towards Grantham, who had just strolled up with Sylvia.

The Duchess rose to her feet.

"Dear me, yes!" she acquiesced. "You two had better go off and have a long country walk. If I sit for long after luncheon, I always go to sleep; so come along, Reginald, we'll beard the lion in his den."

The Marquis glanced towards Sylvia, but she shook her head.

"I must see after my unpacking," she said, "but I should very much like Mr.

Thain to come. Do try to persuade him."

The Duchess and her brother strolled up the garden and out of the postern gate into the park.

"That's a terrible old man of yours, Reginald," the former observed, glancing over her shoulder. "I never came across such a person off the boards at Drury Lane."

"He is an infernal nuisance," the Marquis grumbled. "It seems absurd, but he gets on my nerves. Day by day, there he sits, wet or fine. You can't see his lips move, but you can always feel sure that he is hunting up choice bits of damnation out of the Old Testament and hurling them across at me."

"I have come to the conclusion," his sister decided, "that he is out of his mind. An ignorant man who lives with one idea all his life is apt to lose his reason. He has never attempted any violence, has he?"

"Never," the Marquis replied, "but since you have mentioned it, Caroline, I always have a queer sensation when I am that side of the house. It is just about the distance to be picked off nicely with a rifle. I can't think why he doesn't do it —why he contents himself with abuse."

"I am going to consult Mr. Thain about him," his companion said. "A man of his robust common sense is much more likely to influence a lunatic like Vont than you or I.—So this is where our millionaire hermit is hidden," she went on, as they reached the gate. "Dear me, the place has changed!"

"It will soon be in order again," the Marquis observed. "Thain has a dozen men at work in the grounds, and he is having the rooms done up, one by one. He lives in the library, I think, and the bedroom over it."

They passed through the plantation and into the gardens. Thain was there, talking to one of the workmen. He came to meet them with a somewhat forced smile of welcome upon his lips.

"This is very unexpected," he declared, as he shook hands. "I should have called upon you this afternoon, Duchess."

"I should think so!" she replied severely. "Will you be so good as to tell me at

once what you mean by refusing my niece's invitation to dine?"

He hesitated for a moment, then he smiled. There was something very attractive about his visitor's frank directness of speech and manner.

"I refused," he admitted, glancing around to where the Marquis was engaged in conversation with a gardener, "because I didn't want to come."

"But I am there, you stupid person!" she reminded him. "You are invited to dine with me! I know you don't get on with Lady Letitia, and I know you don't like large parties, but there are only half a dozen of us there, and I promise you my whole protection. Show me something at once. I want to talk to you. Those Dorothy Perkins roses will do, at the other end of the lawn."

He walked in silence by her side. She waited until they were well out of earshot.

"David Thain," she said, "have I shown an interest in you or have I not?"

"You have been extraordinarily kind," he confessed.

"And in return," she continued, "you have decided to avoid me. I won't have it. Are you afraid that I might want you to make love to me?"

He shook his head.

"I am sure you wouldn't find that amusing," he declared. "In the society of your sex I generally behave pretty well as your brother would do if he were dumped down in an office in Wall Street."

"I honestly believe that you are diffident," she admitted. "I never met a millionaire before who was, and at first I thought it was a pose with you. Perhaps I was mistaken. You really don't think, then, that you have any attraction apart from your millions?"

"I'm quite sure that I haven't," he answered bitterly.

"A love affair!" she exclaimed, looking into his face scrutinisingly. "And I knew nothing of it!—I, your sponsor, your lady confessor, your—well, heaven knows what I might not be if you would only behave decently! A love affair,

indeed! That little yellow-haired chit, I suppose, who is down here raving about you all the time—Sylvia What's-her-name?"

He smiled.

"I know very little of Miss Sylvia Laycey," he said, "beyond the fact that she seems very charming."

"I suppose you ought to marry," she continued regretfully. "It seems a pity, but they'll never leave you alone till you do. What is your type, then? Sylvia Laycey is much too young for you. I suppose you know that."

"I don't think I have one," he answered.

"That's because I am married, of course," she went on. "If you were a sensible man, you would settle down to adore me and not think of anybody else at all. But you won't do it. You'll want to buy palaces and yachts and town houses and theatres, like all the rest of the superfluously rich, and you'll want a musical comedy star to wear your jewels, and a wife to entertain your friends."

"Well, you must admit that I haven't been in a hurry about any of these things yet," he observed.

She looked at him keenly.

"Look here, my young friend," she said, "you haven't made the one mistake I warned you against, have you? You haven't fallen in love with Letitia?"

He laughed almost brutally.

"I am not quite such a fool as that," he assured her.

"Well, I should hope not," she enjoined severely. "Besides, as a matter of fact, Letitia is engaged. Her young man is staying at Mandeleys now. Just answer me one question, David—why did you refuse that invitation to dinner?"

"Because I didn't feel like coming," he answered. "I thought it would probably be a large party, most of them neighbours, and every one would have to make an effort to entertain me because I am a stranger, and don't know their ways or anything about them."

"There you are again!" she exclaimed. "Just as sensitive as you can be, for all your millions! You'll come, David—please?"

"Of course I will, if you ask me like that," he assented.

She turned to her brother, who was approaching.

"Success!" she announced. "Mr. Thain has promised to dine. He refused under a misapprehension."

"We are delighted," the Marquis said. "At a quarter past eight, Mr. Thain."

CHAPTER XXXI

Gossett in the country was a very different person from Gossett in Grosvenor Square. An intimate at Mandeleys was not at all the same thing as a caller in town, and David found himself welcomed that evening with a grave but confidential smile.

"The drawing-room here is closed for the present, sir," he observed, after he had superintended the bestowal of David's coat and hat upon an underling. "We are using the gallery on the left wing. If you will be so kind as to come this way."

David was escorted into a long and very lofty apartment, cut off from the hall by some wonderful curtains, obviously of another generation. The walls were hung with pictures and old-fashioned weapons. At the far end was a small stage, and at the opposite extremity a little box which had apparently at some time been used by musicians. Some large beech logs were burning in an open fireplace. The room contained nothing in the way of furniture except a dozen or so old-fashioned chairs and a great settee.

"These large rooms," Gossett explained, "get a little damp, sir, so his lordship desired a fire here."

He had scarcely disappeared when a door which led into the gallery was opened, and Lady Letitia came slowly down the stairs. The place was lit only by

hanging lamps, and David's impression of her, as he turned around, were a little unsubstantial. All the way down the stairs and across that strip of floor, it seemed to him that he could see nothing but her face. She carried herself as usual, there was all the pride of generations of Mandeleys in her slow, unhurried movements and the carriage of her head. But her face.—David gripped at the back of one of the tall chairs. He made at first no movement towards her. This was the face of a woman into which he looked. The change there was so complete that the high walls seemed to melt away. It was just such a vision as he might have conceived to himself. Her words checked the fancies which were pouring into his brain. He became again the puzzled but everyday dinner guest.

"I am very glad that you have come, Mr. Thain," she said, giving him her hand, "and I am very glad indeed to see you alone, even if it is only for a moment, because I feel—perhaps it is my thoughts that feel—that they owe you an amende."

"You are very kind," he replied, a little bewildered. "I am glad to be here. What have you ever done which needs apology?"

"I spoke of my thoughts," she reminded him, with a little smile. "What I once thought, or rather feared, I am now ashamed of, and now that I have told you so I am more at ease."

She stood up by his side, little flashes of firelight lighting her soft white skin, gleaming upon the soft fabric of her gown. She wore no ornaments. The Mandeleys pearls, generally worn by the unmarried women of the family, were reposing in the famous vaults of a West End pawnbroker. Her strong, capable fingers were innocent of even a single ring, although upon her dressing table there was even at that moment reposing a very beautiful pearl one, concerning which she had made some insignificant criticism with only one object, an object which she refused to admit even to herself. David remained silent through sheer wonder. He had a sudden feeling that he had been admitted, even if for only these few moments, into the inner circle of her toleration—perhaps even more than that.

"I hurried down," she explained, "just to say these few words, and I see that I was only just in time."

The curtain had been raised without their noticing it, and the Duchess, with

Grantham by her side, had entered. There was a slight frown upon the latter's forehead; the Duchess was humming softly to herself.

"Well, Sir Anthony, so you've kept your word," she said to David, when he had shaken hands with Grantham. "I can see quite well what the country is going to do for you, unless you are looked after. The amiable misanthrope is the part you have in your mind. Gracious! Motors outside! Have we got a party, Letitia?"

Letitia, who to David's keen observation seemed already to have lost something of that strange new quality which she had shown to him only a few moments ago, shook her head.

"The Vicar and Mrs. Vicar, and the Turnbulls, and Sylvia's father."

"I am not going to be bored," the Duchess declared firmly. "I insist upon sitting next to Mr. Thain. How pretty Sylvia looks! And what a becoming colour! Now listen to me, David Thain," she went on, drawing him a little on one side, "you are not to flirt with that child. It's like shooting them before they begin to fly. You understand?"

"Not guilty," David protested. "I can assure you that I am a passive victim."

"Silly little goose," the Duchess murmured under her breath, "waiting there for you to go and speak to her, with all sorts of sentimental nonsense shining out of her great eyes, too. I shall go and talk to old General Turnbull till the gong goes. Why we can't have dinner punctually with a small party like this, I can't imagine."

Sylvia was certainly glad to welcome David. Her father came up in a few moments and shook hands heartily.

"Still buy your own cutlets, eh, Mr. Thain?" he asked. "Jolly good cutlets they were, too!"

"I suppose you have a housekeeper and all sorts of things," Sylvia laughed, "and live in what they call regal magnificence."

David's protest was almost eager.

"I have a man and his wife who came down with me from London," he said,

"and one or two servants—very few, I can assure you. Won't you come and try my housekeeping, Colonel, before you move on, and bring Miss Sylvia?"

"With pleasure, my boy," the Colonel declared. "We leave for town next Saturday. Any day between now and then that suits Sylvia."

Dinner was announced, and David found himself placed at a round table between the Duchess and Sylvia. The former looked around the banqueting hall with a shiver.

"Reginald," she protested, "why on earth do you plant us in the middle of a vault like this? Why on earth not open up some of the smaller rooms?"

The Marquis smiled deprecatingly. His extreme pallor of the last few days had disappeared. He seemed younger, and his tone was more alert.

"This room is really a weakness of mine," he confessed. "I like a vaulted roof, and I rather like the shadows. It isn't damp, if that is what you are thinking of, Caroline. We have had fires in it ever since we came down—timber being the only thing for which we don't have to pay," he added.

"It makes one feel so insignificant," the Duchess sighed. "If you were dining fifty or sixty people, of course, I should love it, but a dozen of us—why, we seem like spectral mites! Look at old Grand-Uncle Philip staring at us," she went on, gazing at one of the huge pictures opposite. "Pity you cannot afford to have electric light here, Reginald, and have it set in the frames."

"A most unpleasant idea!" her brother objected. "Confess, now, if you could see two rows of ancestors, all illuminated, looking at you while you ate, wouldn't it make you feel greedy?"

The conversation drifted away and became general. The Duchess leaned towards her neighbour.

"I think I am rather sorry I came here," she whispered.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I find you disappointing. I thoroughly enjoyed discovering you upon the steamer. You were delightfully primitive, an absolute cave-dweller, but

you quite repaid my efforts to make a human being of you. You were really almost as interesting when we first met in London. And now, I don't know what it is, but you seem to have gone thousands of miles away again. You don't seem properly human. Don't you like women, or have you got some queer scheme in your head which keeps you living like a man with his head in the clouds? Or are you in love?"

"I haven't settled down to idleness yet, perhaps," he suggested.

"Of course," she went on, "you ought to be in love with me, and miserable about it, but I am horribly afraid you aren't. I believe you have matrimonial schemes in your mind. I believe that your affections are so well-trained that they mean to trot all along the broad way to St. George's, Hanover Square."

"And would you advise something different?" he asked bluntly.

"My dear man, why am I here?" she expostulated. "I have a fancy for having you devoted to me. What I mean to do with it when I have captured your heart, I am not quite sure."

Every one was listening to a story which old General Turnbull was telling. Even Sylvia had leaned across the table. David turned and looked steadily into his companion's face.

"It seems to me," he said, "that only a very short time ago, Duchess, out of solicitude for my extreme ignorance, you warned me against setting my affections too high."

"I was speaking then of marriage," she replied coolly.

"I see! And yet," he went on, "I am not quite sure that I do see. Is there any radical difference between marriage and a really intimate friendship between a man and a woman?"

She smiled. Her slight movement towards him was almost a caress.

"My dear, unsophisticated cave-dweller!" she murmured. "Marriage is an alliance which lasts for all time. It is apt, is it not, to leave its stamp upon future generations. Great friendships have existed amongst people curiously diverse in tastes and temperament and position. A certain disparity, in fact, is rather the

vogue."

"I begin to understand," he admitted. "That accounts for the curious club stories which one is always having dinned into one's ears, hatefully uninteresting though they are, of Lady So-and-So entertaining a great fiddler at her country house, or some other Society lady dancing in a singular lack of costume for the pleasure of artists in a borrowed studio."

"You are not nearly so nice-minded as I thought you were," the Duchess snapped.

"It is just my painful efforts to understand," he protested.

"Any one but an idiot would have understood long ago," she retorted.

David turned to his left-hand neighbour.

"The Duchess is being unkind," he said. "Will you please take some notice of me?"

"I'd love to," she replied. "I was just thinking that you were rather neglecting me. I want to know all about America, please, and American people."

"I am afraid," he told her, "that I know much more about America than I do about American people. All my life, since I left Harvard, I have been busy making money. I never went into Society over there. I never accepted an invitation if I could help it. When I had any time to spare I went and camped out, up in the Adirondacks, or further afield still, when I could. We had lots of sport, and we were able to lead a simple life, well away from the end of the cable."

"And you killed bears and things, I suppose?" she said. "How lucky that you are fond of sport! It makes living in England so easy."

He smiled.

"I am not so sure," he confessed, "that I should consider England quite so much of a sporting country as she thinks herself."

"What heresy!" the Marquis exclaimed, leaning forward.

"Of course, I didn't know that I was going to be overheard," David said good-humouredly, "but I must stick to it. I mean, of course, sport as apart from games."

"Shooting?" the Marquis queried.

"I am afraid I don't consider that shooting at birds, half of them hand-reared, is much of a sport," David continued. "Have you ever tried pig-sticking, or lying on the edge of a mountain after three hours' tramp, watching for the snout of a bear?"

Letitia had broken off her conversation with Lord Charles and was leaning a little forward. The Marquis nodded sympathetically.

"Hunting, then?"

David smiled.

"You gallop over a pastoral country on a highly-trained animal, with a pack of assistant hounds to destroy one miserable, verminous creature," he said. "Of course, you take risks now and then, and the whole thing looks exceedingly nice on a Christmas card, but for thrills, for real, intense excitement, I prefer the mountain ledge and the bear, or the rounding up of a herd of wild elephants."

"Mr. Thain preserves the instincts of the savage," the Duchess observed, as she sipped her wine. "Perhaps he may be right. Civilisation certainly tends to emasculate sport."

"The sports to which Mr. Thain has alluded," the Marquis pointed out, "are the sports of the stay-at-home Englishman. Most of our younger generation—those whose careers permitted of it—have tried their hand at big game shooting. I myself," he continued reminiscently, "have never felt quite the same with a shotgun and a stream of pheasants, since a very wonderful three weeks I had in my youth, tiger hunting in India.—I see that Letitia is trying to catch your eye, Caroline."

The women left the room in a little group, their figures merging almost into indistinctness as they passed out of the lighted zone. David's eyes followed Letitia until she had disappeared. Then he was conscious that a servant was standing with a note on a salver by his side.

"This has been sent down from Broomleys, sir," the man explained.

David took it and felt a sudden sinking of the heart. The envelope was thin, square and of common type, the writing was painstaking but irregular. There was a smudge on one corner, a blot on another. David glanced at the Marquis, who nodded and immediately commenced a conversation with Grantham. He tore open his message and read it:

"The time has arrived. I wait for you here."

He crushed the half-sheet of notepaper in his fingers and then dropped it into his pocket.

"There is no answer," he told the servant.

CHAPTER XXXII

Grantham, who had been unusually silent throughout the service of dinner, slipped away from the room a few minutes before the other men. He found Letitia arranging a bridge table, and drew her a little on one side.

"Letitia," he said, "I am annoyed."

"My dear Charles," she replied, "was anything ever more obvious!"

"You perhaps do not realise," he continued, "that you are the cause."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well?"

"In the first place," he complained, "you are not wearing my ring."

"I thought I told you," she reminded him, "that I would prefer not to until we formally announced our engagement."

"Why on earth shouldn't we do that at once—this evening?" he suggested. "I can see no reason for delay."

"I, on the other hand, have a fancy to wait," she replied carelessly, "at least until your visit here is over.

"Your hesitation is scarcely flattering," he remarked with some irritation.

"Is there anything else you wish to say?" she enquired. "I really must get out those bridge markers."

He began to show signs of temper. Watching him closely for the first time, Letitia decided that he had most unpleasant-looking eyes.

"I should like to know the subject of your conversation with that Thain fellow when I came in this evening," he demanded.

"I am sorry," she said coolly. "We were speaking upon a private subject."

The anger in his eyes became more evident.

"Private subject? You mean to say that you have secrets with a fellow like that?"

"A fellow like that?" she repeated. "You don't like Mr. Thain, then?"

"Like him? I don't like him or dislike him. I think he ought to be very flattered to be here at all—and you are the last person in the world, Letitia, I should have expected to find talking in whispers with him, with your heads only a few inches apart. I feel quite justified in asking what that confidence indicated."

Letitia smiled sweetly but dangerously.

"And I feel quite justified," she retorted, "in refusing to answer that or any similar question. Are you going to play bridge, Charlie?"

"No!" he replied, turning away. "I am going to talk to Miss Laycey."

Sylvia was quite willing, and they soon established themselves on a settee. The Duchess, rather against her inclinations, was included in the bridge quartette. Letitia, having disposed of her guests, strolled over towards David, who was standing with his hands behind him, gloomily studying one of the paintings.

"I must show you our Vandykes, Mr. Thain," she said, leading him a little further away. "When these wonderful oil shares of yours have made us all rich, we shall have little electric globes round our old masters. Until then, I find it produces quite a curious effect to try one of these."

She drew an electric torch from one of the drawers of an oak cabinet and flashed a small circle of light upon the picture. Thain gave a little exclamation. The face which seemed to spring suddenly into life, looking down upon them with a faintly repressed smile upon the Mandeleys mouth, presented an almost startling likeness to the Marquis.

"Fearfully alike, all our menkind, aren't they?" she observed, lowering the torch. "Come and I will show you a Lely."

They passed further down the gallery. She looked at him a little curiously.

"Is it my fancy," she asked, "or have you something on your mind? The note which reached you contained no ill news, I hope?"

"I don't know," he answered, with unexpected candour. "I have a great deal on my mind."

"I am so sorry," she murmured.

They had reached the further end of the gallery now. She sank into the window seat and made room for him by her side. For a moment he looked out across the park. In the moonless night the trees were like little dark blurs, the country rose and fell like a turbulent sea. And very close at hand, ominously close at hand as it seemed to him, a bright light from Richard Vont's cottage was burning steadily.

"Let me ask you a question," he begged a little abruptly. "Supposing that you

had given your word of honour, solemnly, in return for a vital service rendered, to commit a dishonourable action; what should you do?"

"Well, that is rather a dilemma, isn't it?" she acknowledged. "To tell you the truth, I can't quite reconcile the circumstances. I can't, for instance, conceive your promising to do a dishonourable thing."

"At the time," he explained, "it did not seem dishonourable. At the time it seemed just an act of justice. Then circumstances changed, new considerations intervened, and the whole situation was altered."

"Is it a monetary matter?" she enquired, "one in which money would make any difference, I mean?"

He shook his head.

"Money has nothing to do with it," he replied. "It is just a question whether one is justified in breaking a solemn oath, one's word of honour, because the action which it entails has become, owing to later circumstances, hideously repugnant."

"Why ask my advice?"

"I do not know. Anyhow, I desire it."

"I should go," she said thoughtfully, "to the person to whom I had bound myself, and I should explain the change in my feelings and in the circumstances. I should beg to be released from my word."

"And if they refused?"

"I don't see how you could possibly break your word of honour," she decided reluctantly. "It is not done, is it?"

He looked steadily down the gallery, through the darkened portion, to where the soft, overhead lights fell upon the two card tables. There was very little conversation. They could even hear the soft fall of the cards and Sylvia's musical laugh in the background. All the time Letitia watched him. The strength of his face seemed only intensified by his angry indecision.

"You are right," he assented finally. "I must not."

"Perhaps," she suggested, "you can find some way of keeping it, and yet keeping it without that secondary dishonour you spoke of. Now I must really go and see that my guests are behaving properly."

She rose to her feet. Sylvia's laugh rang out again from the far corner of the gallery, where she and Grantham were seated, their heads very close together. Letitia watched them for a moment tolerantly.

"I will recall my fiancé to his duty," she declared, "and you can go and talk nonsense to Sylvia."

"Thank you," he answered, "I am afraid that I am not in the humour to talk nonsense with anybody."

She turned her head slightly and looked at him.

"Sylvia is such an admirer of yours," she said, "and she has such a delightful way of being light-hearted herself and affecting others in the same fashion. If I were a man—"

"Yes?"

"I should marry Sylvia."

"And if I," he declared, with a sudden flash in his eyes, "possessed that ridiculous family tree of Lord Charles Grantham's—"

"Well?"

"I should marry you."

She looked at him through half-closed eyes. There was a little smile on her lips which at first he thought insolent, but concerning which afterwards he permitted himself to speculate. He stopped short.

"Lady Letitia," he pleaded, "there is a door there which leads into the hall. You don't expect manners of me, anyway, but could you accept my farewell and excuse me to the others? I have really a serious reason for wishing to leave—a

reason connected with the note I received at dinner time."

"Of course," she answered, "but you are sure that you are well? There is nothing that we can do for you?"

He paused for a moment with his hand upon the fastening of the door.

"There is nothing anybody can do for me, Lady Letitia," he said. "Good-by!"

She stood for a moment, watching the door through which he had passed with a puzzled frown upon her face. Then she continued her progress down the room. Arrived at the bridge table, she stooped for a moment to look over her aunt's score.

"Finished your flirtation, my dear?" the latter asked coolly.

Letitia accepted the challenge.

"So effectually," she replied, "that the poor man has gone home. I am to present his excuses to every one."

The Duchess paused for a moment in the playing of her hand. Her brother, with unfailing tact, threw himself into the breach.

"I suppose," he said, "that we can scarcely realise the responsibilities which these kings of finance carry always upon their shoulders. They tell me that Mr. Thain has his telegrams and cables stopped in London by a secretary and telephoned here, just to save a few minutes. He receives sometimes as many as half a dozen messages during the night."

The Duchess continued to play her hand.

"After all," she remarked, "I fear that I shall not be able to ask Mr. Thain to Scotland. One would feel the responsibility so much if he were to lose anything he valued, by coming."

CHAPTER XXXIII

Richard Vont, as though he had been sitting there listening for the raising of the latch, was on his feet before David could enter the sitting room.

"The Lord's day has come," he muttered, dragging him in. "It's been a weary while, but it's come."

David threw off his overcoat in silence, and the old man looked wonderingly at his clothes.

"You've been taking your dinner up with them—at the house?" he asked.

David nodded.

"Yes," he assented. "Your note found me there. I came as soon as I could."

"I never doubted ye," the old man muttered. "I knew you'd come."

David, suddenly stifled, threw open the cottage window. When he came back into the little circle of lamp-light, his face was pale and set. He was filled with a premonition of evil.

"I want you to listen to me, uncle," he said earnestly. "I have something to say."

"Something to say?" the old man repeated. "Another time, my boy—-another time. To-night you have work to do," he added, with a fierce flash of triumph in his eyes.

"Work?"

"Aye!—to keep your oath."

"But to-night? What can I do to-night?" David exclaimed. "No, don't tell me," he went on quickly. "I'll have my say first."

"Get on with it, then. There's time. I'm listening."

"I have forgotten nothing," David began, "I am denying nothing. I remember

even the words of the oath I swore."

"With your hand upon the Bible," Vont interrupted eagerly,—"your hand upon the Book."

David shivered.

"I am not likely to forget that night," he said. "What I swore we both know. Well? I have begun to keep my word. You know that."

"Aye, and to-night you'll finish it!" Vont cried, with uplifted head. "After to-night you'll be quit of your oath, and you can go free of me. I've made it all easy for you. It's all planned out."

"I must finish what I have to say," David insisted. "It's been on my mind like lead. He's a ruined man, uncle—beggared to the last penny. I've dishonoured myself, but I've done it—for your sake. Beyond that I cannot go."

"You cannot go?" Vont muttered blankly.

"I cannot. I don't know what this scheme of yours is, uncle, but leave me out of it. I'm in Hell already!"

"You think—"

Vont was breathing heavily. The words suddenly failed him, his fingers seemed to grip the air. David had a momentary shock of terror. Then, before he could stop him, the old man was down upon his knees, holding him by the legs, his upraised face horrible with a new storm of passion.

"David, you'll not back out! You'll not break that oath you swore when I lent you the money—all my savings! And it might have gone wrong, you know. It might have beggared me. But I risked it for this! You don't know what I've been through. I tell you there isn't a night, from darkness till nigh the dawn, I haven't toiled with these hands, toiled while the sweat's run off my forehead and my breath's gone from me. And I've done it! I've made all ready for you—and to-night—it's to-night, boy! If you go back on me, David, as sure as that Book's the truth, you shall know what it is to feel like a murderer, for I'll sit and face you, and I'll die! I mean it. As God hears me at this moment, I mean it. If you falter to-night, you shall find me dead to-morrow, and if it blackens my lips, I'll die

cursing you as well as him—you for your softness because they've flattered you round, him because he still lives, with the wrong he did me unpunished."

David dragged him up by sheer force and pushed him back into his chair.

"What is it you want me to do?" he asked in despair.

"You can't refuse me," Vont went on, his voice strong enough now. "Watch me and listen," he added, leaning forward. "There's my hand on the Book. Here's my right hand to Heaven, and I swear by the living God that if you fail me, you shall find me to-morrow, sitting dead. That's what your broken oath will do."

"Oh, I hear," David answered drearily. "I'll keep my word. Come, what is it?"

Vont rose deliberately to his feet. All trace of passion seemed to have disappeared. He took an electric torch from his pocket and led the way to the door.

"Just follow me," he whispered.

They made their way down the little tiled path to the bottom of the garden. In the right-hand corner was what seemed to be the top of a well.

"You remember that, perhaps?"

David nodded.

"I know," he said. "I used to play down there once."

Vont rolled the top away, and, stooping down, flashed the light. There were stone steps leading to a small opening, and at the bottom the mouth of what seemed to be a tunnel. David started.

"It's one of the secret passages to Mandeleys!" he exclaimed.

"There are seven of them somewhere," his uncle replied, in a hoarse undertone—"one, they say, from Broomleys, but that's too far, and the air would be too foul, and maybe it don't lead where I want it to. I've made air-holes along this, David. You take the torch, and you make your way. There's nothing to stop you. It's dry—I've sprinkled sand in places—and there's air, too. When you come

to the end there's a door. Four nights it took me to move that door. It's wide open now. Then you mount a little flight of stairs. They go round and round, and at the top there's a little stone landing. You'll see before you what seems to be blank wall. You press your palms on it—so—and soon you find an iron handle. It'll turn easy—I've oiled it well—and you step right into the room."

"What room?" David demanded, in bewilderment.

The old man's fingers clutched his arm.

"Into the bedchamber of the Lady Letitia Mandeleys!" he proclaimed triumphantly. "Keep your voice low, boy. Remember we are out of doors."

"Into the—! Are you mad, uncle?" David muttered, catching at his voice as though it were some loose quality that had escaped from him.

"There's never a saner man in this county," was the fierce reply. "It's what I've worked for. It's the worst blow I can deal his pride. Oh, I know she is a haughty lady! You'll step into her chamber, and she'll see you, and she'll shriek for her servants, but—but, David," he added, leaning forward, "they'll find you there—they'll find you there! The Marquis—he'll be told. The nephew of Richard Vont will be found in his daughter's chamber! There'll be explanations enough, but those things stick."

David suddenly found himself laughing like a madman.

"Uncle," he cried, "for God's sake—for Heaven's sake, listen to me. This is the maddest scheme that ever entered into any one's head. I should be treated simply like a common burglar. I should have no excuse to offer, nothing to say. I should be thrown out of the house, and there isn't a human being breathing who'd think the worse of the Lady Letitia. You don't know what she's like! She's wonderful! She's—"

"I'll not argue with you, boy," Vont interrupted doggedly. "You think I know nothing of the world and its ways, of the tale-bearing and the story-telling that goes on, women backbiting each other, men grasping even at shadows for a sensation. You'll do your job, David, you'll keep your oath, and from to-night you'll stand free of me. There'll be no more. You can lift your head again after you've crossed that threshold. Make what excuse you like—come back, if you will, like a frightened hare after they've found you there—but you'll have stood

in her bedchamber!"

David shivered like a man in a fever. He was beginning to realise that this was no nightmare—that the wild-eyed man by his side was in sober and ghastly earnest.

"Uncle," he pleaded, "not this. Lady Letitia has been kind and gracious to me always. We can't strike through women. I'd rather you bade me take his life."

"But I don't bid you do anything of the sort," was the sullen reply. "Death's no punishment to any man, and the like of him's too brave to feel the fear of it. It's through her the blow must come, and you'll do my bidding, David, or you'll see me sitting waiting for you to-morrow, with a last message to you upon my dead lips."

David gripped the torch from his hand. After all, Hell might come to any man!

"I'll go," he said.

It was a nightmare that followed. Stooping only a little, flashing his torch always in front, he half ran, half scrambled along a paved way, between paved walls which even the damp of centuries seemed scarcely to have entered. Soon the path descended steeply and then rose on the other side of the moat. Once a rat paused to look at him with eyes gleaming like diamonds, and bolted at the flash of the torch. More than once he fancied that he heard footsteps echoing behind him. He paused to listen. There was nothing. He lost sense of time or distance. He stole on, dreading the end—and the end came sooner even than he had feared. There was the door that yielded easily to his touch, the steep steps round and round the interior of the tower, the blank wall before him. The iron handle was there. His hands closed upon it. For a moment he stood in terrible silence. This was something worse than death! Then he set his teeth firmly, pressed the handle and stepped through the wall.

Afterwards it seemed to him that there must have been something mortally terrifying in his own appearance as he stood there with his back to the wall and his eyes fixed upon the solitary occupant of the room. Lady Letitia, in a blue dressing gown, was lying upon a couch drawn up before a small log fire. There seemed to be no detail of the room which in those sickening moments of mental absorption was not photographed into his memory. The old four-poster bedstead,

hung with chintz; the long, black dressing table, once a dresser, covered carelessly with tortoise-shell backed toilet articles, with a large mirror in the centre from which a chair had just been pushed back. But, above all, that look in her face, from which every other expression seemed to have permanently fled. Her lips were parted, her eyes were round with horrified surprise. The book which she had been reading slipped from her fingers and fell noiselessly on to the hearth-rug. She sat up, supporting herself with her hands, one on either side, pressed into the sofa. She seemed denied the power of speech, almost as he was. And then a sudden wonderful change came to him. He spoke quite distinctly, although he kept his voice low.

"Lady Letitia," he said, "let me explain. I shall never ask for your forgiveness. I shall never venture to approach you again. I have come here by the secret passage from Vont's cottage. I have come here to keep an oath which I swore in America to Richard Vont, and I have come because, if I had broken my word, he would have killed himself."

He spoke with so little emotion, so reasonably, that she found herself answering him, notwithstanding her bewilderment, almost in the same key.

"But who are you?" she demanded. "Who are you to be the slave of that old man?"

"I am his nephew," David answered. "I am the little boy who played about the park when you were a girl, who picked you up on the ice once when you fell. All that I have I owe to Richard Vont. He sent me to college. He lent me the money upon which I built my fortune, but on the day he lent it to me he made me swear a terrible oath, and to-night he has forced me to keep it by setting foot within your chamber. Now I shall return the way I came, and may God grant that some day you will forgive me."

Almost as he spoke there was a little click behind. He started round and felt along the wall. There was a moment's silence. Then he turned once more towards Letitia, his cheeks whiter than ever, his sunken eyes filled with a new horror. Even the composure which had enabled him to explain his coming with some show of reason, had deserted him. He seemed threatened with a sort of hysteria.

"He followed me! Damn him, he followed me!" he muttered. "I heard

footsteps. He has fastened us in!"

He tore desperately at the tapestry, shook the concealed door and rattled it, in vain. Letitia rose slowly to her feet.

"You see what has happened," she said. "Richard Vont was more cunning than you. He was not content that you should make your little speech and creep back amongst the rats. Tell me, what do you propose to do?"

He looked around him helplessly.

"There is the window," he muttered.

She shook her head.

"We are on the second story," she told him, "and there is nothing to break your fall upon the flags below. To be found with a broken neck beneath my window would be almost as bad as anything that could happen."

"I am not afraid to try," he declared.

He moved towards the window. She crossed the room swiftly and intercepted him.

"Don't be absurd," she admonished. "Come, let us think. There must be a way."

"Let me out of your room on to the landing," he begged eagerly. "If I can reach the hall it will be all right. I can find a window open, or hide somewhere. Only, for God's sake," he added, his voice breaking, "let me out of this room!"

A flash of her old manner came back to her.

"I am sorry you find it so unattractive," she said. "I thought it rather pretty myself. And blue, after all, is my colour, you know, although I don't often wear it."

"Oh, bless you!" he exclaimed. "Bless you, Lady Letitia, for speaking to me as though I were a human being. Now I am going to steal out of that door on tiptoe."

"Wait till I have listened there," she whispered.

She stole past him and stooped down with her ear to the keyhole. She frowned for a moment and held out her hand warningly. It seemed to him that he could feel his heart beating. Close to where he was standing, her silk stockings were hanging over the back of a chair.—He suddenly closed his eyes, covered them desperately with the palms of his hand. Her warning finger was still extended.

"That was some one passing," she said. "I don't understand why. They all came to bed some time ago. Stay where you are and don't move."

They both listened. David seemed in those few minutes to have lost all the composure which had become the habit of years. His heart was beating madly. He was shaking as though with intense cold. Lady Letitia, on the other hand, seemed almost unruffled. Only he fancied that at the back of her eyes there was something to which as yet she had given no expression, something which terrified him. Then, as they stood there, neither of them daring to move, there came a sudden awful sound. It had seemed to him that the world could hold no greater horror than he was already suffering, but the sound to which they listened was paralysing, hideous, stupefying. With hoarse, brazen note, rusty and wheezy, yet pulled as though with some desperate clutch, the great alarm bell which hung over the courtyard was tolling its dreadful summons.

Letitia stood up, her cheeks ghastly pale. She, too, was struggling now for composure.

"Really," she exclaimed, "this is an evening full of incidents.—Don't touch me," she added. "I shall be all right directly."

For a single moment he knew that she had nearly fainted. She caught at the side of the wall. Then they heard a cry from outside. A spark flew past the window. A hoarse voice from somewhere below shouted "Fire!" And then something more alarming still. All down the corridor, doors were thrown open. There was the sound of eager voices—finally a loud knocking at the door which they were guarding. Letitia shrugged her shoulders.

"This," she murmured, "is fate."

She opened the door. There was a little confused group outside. The Marquis,

fully dressed, stood with his eyes fixed upon Thain at first in blank astonishment,—afterwards as one who looks upon some horrible thing. Grantham in a dressing gown, took a quick step forward.

"My God, it's Thain!" he exclaimed. "What in hell's name—?"

Letitia turned towards her father.

"Father," she began—

The Marquis made no movement, yet she was suddenly aware of something in his expression, something which shone more dimly in the face of her aunt, which throbbed in Grantham's incoherent words. Her brave little speech died away. She staggered. The Marquis still made no movement. It was David who caught her in his arms and carried her to the couch. He turned and faced them. In the background, Sylvia was clinging to Grantham's arm.

"You gibbering fools!" he cried. "What if an accursed chance has brought me here! Isn't she Lady Letitia, your daughter, Marquis? Isn't she your betrothed, Grantham? Your niece, Duchess? Do you think that anything but the rankest and most accursed accident could ever have brought me within reach even of her fingers?"

No one spoke. The faces into which he looked seemed to David like a hideous accusation. Suddenly Gossett's voice was heard from behind.

"The fire is nothing, your lordship. It is already extinguished. Some one seems to have brought some blazing brambles and thrown them into the courtyard."

"Get some water, you fools!" Thain shouted. "Can't you see that she is faint?"

The Duchess began to collect herself. She advanced further into the room in search of restoratives. The Marquis came a step nearer to Thain.

"Tell me how you found your way into this room, sir?" he demanded.

"By the foulest means on God's earth," Thain answered. "I came through the secret passage from Vont's cottage."

"Without Lady Letitia's knowledge, I presume?" Grantham interposed hoarsely.

"No one but a cad would have asked such a question," David thundered. "I broke into her room, meaning to deliver one brief message and to go back again. Vont followed me and fastened the door.—Can't you read the story?" he added, turning appealingly to the Marquis. "Don't you know who I am? I am Vont's nephew, the boy who played about here years ago. I lived with him in America. He paid for my education at Harvard; he lent me the money to make my first venture. He has been all the relative I ever had. Out there I pledged my word blindly to help him in his revenge upon you, Marquis, in whatever manner he might direct. To-night he sprung this upon me. I was face to face with my word of honour, and the certainty that if I refused to fulfil my pledge he would kill himself before morning. So I came. It was he who rang the alarm bell, he who planned the pretence of a fire to trap me here. This was to be his vengeance.—Be reasonable. Don't take this miserable affair seriously. God knows what I have suffered, these last few minutes!"

Letitia sat up, revived. She was still very pale, and there was something terrible in her face.

"For heaven's sake," she begged, "bring this wretched melodrama to an end. Turn that poor man out," she added, pointing to David. "His story is quite true."

Every one had gone except the Marquis and Grantham. Neither of them spoke for several moments. Then the Marquis, as though he were awaking from a dream, moved to the door, opened it and beckoned to David.

"Will you follow me," he invited.

Very slowly they passed along the great corridor, down the broad stairs and into the hall. The Marquis led the way to the front door and opened it. Neither had spoken. To Thain, every moment was a moment of agony. The Marquis held the door open and stood on one side. David realised that he was expected to depart without a word.

"There is nothing more I can say?" he faltered despairingly.

The Marquis stood upon his own threshold. He spoke slowly and with a curious lack of expression.

"Nothing. It is the times that are to blame. We open our houses and offer our hospitality to servants and the sons of servants, and we expect them to understand our code. We are very foolish.—Since you have broken this silence, let me spare myself the necessity of further words. If your contrition is genuine, you will break the lease of Broomleys and depart from this neighbourhood without further delay. My agent will wait upon you."

Without haste, yet before any reply was possible, the Marquis had closed the great door. David was once more in the darkness, staggering as though his knees would give way. The avenue stretched unevenly before him. He started off towards Broomleys.

CHAPTER XXXIV

At a few minutes after nine, the following morning, the Marquis entered the room where breakfast was usually served. The Duchess, in travelling clothes and a hat, was lifting the covers from the silver dishes upon the sideboard, with a fork in her hand. She welcomed him a little shortly.

"Good morning, Reginald!"

"Good morning, Caroline," he replied. "Are you the only representative of the household?"

She snorted.

"Charlie Grantham went off in his little two-seater at eight o'clock this morning," she announced. "He is motoring up to town. Left apologies with Gossett, I believe—telegram or something in the night. All fiddlesticks, of course!"

"Naturally," the Marquis assented, helping himself from one of the dishes and drawing his chair up to his sister's side. "So exit Charles Grantham, eh?"

"And me," the Duchess declared, returning to her place and pouring out the coffee. "I suppose you can send me to Fakenham for the ten o'clock train?"

The Marquis considered for a moment.

"I am not sure, Caroline," he said, "that your departure is entirely kind."

"Well, I'm jolly certain I don't mean it to be," she answered bitterly. "I ask no questions, and I hate scenes. A week ago I should have scoffed at the idea of David Thain as a prospective suitor for Letitia. Now, my advice to you is, the sooner you can get them married, the better."

"Really!" he murmured. "You've given up the idea, then, of taking the young man to Scotland?"

"Entirely," the Duchess assured him emphatically. "I was an idiot to ever consider it. When people of his class find their way amongst us, disaster nearly always follows. You see, they don't know the rules of the game, as we play it. Whilst we are on this subject, Reginald, what are you going to do about it?"

The Marquis unlocked his letter case and shook out the contents.

"You mean about last night?" he asked. "Well, as I don't want to be the laughing-stock of the county, I shall keep as quiet as I can. I knew that something ridiculous would happen, with that poor lunatic sitting in the garden, poring over the Bible all day long."

The Duchess looked distinctly malicious.

"I am not at all as sure as I should like to be," she said, "that the old man is to blame for everything."

The Marquis looked at his sister intently. She bent over the milk jug.

"You leave me in some doubt, Caroline," he observed coldly, "as to what frame of mind you are in, when you make such utterly incomprehensible remarks and curtail your visit to us so suddenly. At the same time, I hope that whatever your private feelings may be, you will not forget certain—shall I call them obligations?"

"Oh, don't be afraid!" she rejoined. "I am not likely to advertise my folly, especially at Letitia's expense. I don't care a jot whether the young man came through a hole in the wall or dropped down from the clouds. I only know that his

presence in Letitia's bedchamber—"

"We will drop the discussion, if you please," the Marquis interrupted.

There was just the one note in his tone, an inheritance, perhaps, from those more virile ancestors, which reduced even his sister to silence. The Marquis adjusted his eyeglass and commenced a leisurely inspection of his letters. He did so without any anxiety, without the slightest premonition of evil. Even when he recognised her handwriting, he did so with a little thrill of pleasurable anticipation. He drew the letter closer to him and with a word of excuse turned away towards the window. Perhaps she was wanting him. After all, it would be quite easy to run up to London for a day—and wonderfully pleasant. He drew the single sheet from its envelope. The letters seemed magnified. The whole significance of those cruel words seemed to reach him with a single mental effort.

Reginald, I was married to James Borden this morning. I suppose it is the uncivilised part of me which has been pulling at my heartstrings, day by day, week by week, the savage in me clamouring for its right before it is too late.

So we change positions, only whereas you have atoned and justified every one of your actions towards me since our eyes first met, I am left without any means of atonement.

Will you forgive?

Your very humble and penitent MARCIA.

The Marquis replaced the letter in the envelope. For several moments he stood looking across the park, beyond, to the well-cultivated farms rolling away to the distant line of hills. His brain was numbed. Marcia had gone!—There was a mist somewhere. He rubbed the windowpane, in vain. Then he set his teeth, and his long, nervous fingers gripped at his throat for a moment.

"Your coffee is getting cold," his sister reminded him.

He came back to his place. She watched him a little curiously.

"Any message from our pseudo-Lothario?" she asked.

The Marquis gathered up his other letters.

"There is nothing here from him," he said, "but I must ask you to excuse me, Caroline. There is an urgent matter which needs my attention."

He crossed the room a little more slowly than usual, and his sister, who was still watching him critically, sighed. There was no doubt at all that his walk was becoming the walk of an old man. The stoop of the shoulders was also a new thing. She counted up his age on her fingers, and, rising from her place, looked at herself in the mirror opposite. Her face for a moment was hard and set, and her fingers clenched.

"Years!" she muttered to herself. "How I hate them!"

The Marquis selected a grey Homburg hat of considerable antiquity, and a thicker stick than usual, from the rack in the hall. The front doors stood wide open, and he walked out into the pleasant sunshine. It was a warm morning, but twice he shivered as he passed down the broad sweep of drive and, with a curious sensation of unfamiliarity, crossed the little bridge over the moat, the few yards of park, and finally approached the palings which bordered Richard Vont's domain. The mist still seemed to linger before his eyes, but through it he could see the familiar figure seated in his ancient chair, with the book upon his knee. The Marquis drew close to the side of the palings.

"Richard Vont," he began, "I have come down from Mandeleys to speak to you. Will you listen to what I have to say?"

There was no reply. The Marquis drew the letter from his pocket.

"You are a cruel and stubborn man, Vont," he continued. "You have gone far out of your way to bring injury and unhappiness upon me. All your efforts are as nothing. Will you hear from me what has happened?"

There was silence, still grim silence. The Marquis stretched out his hand and

leaned a little upon the paling.

"I took your daughter, Richard Vont, not as a libertine but as a lover. It was perhaps the truest impulse my life has ever felt. If there was sin in it, listen. Hear how I am punished. Month followed month and year followed year, and Marcia was content with my love and I with hers, so that during all this time my lips have touched no other woman's, no other woman has for a moment engaged even my fancy. I have been as faithful to your daughter, Richard Vont, as you to your vindictive enmity. From a discontented and unhappy girl she has become a woman with a position in the world, a brilliant writer, filled with the desire and happiness of life to her finger tips. From me she received the education, the travel, the experience which have helped her to her place in the world, and with them I gave her my heart. And now—you are listening, Richard Vont? You will hear what has happened?"

Still that stony silence from the figure in the chair. Still that increasing mist before the eyes of the man who leaned towards him.

"Your daughter, Richard Vont," the Marquis concluded, "has taken your vengeance into her own hands. Your prayers have come true, though not from the quarter you had hoped. You saw only a little way. You tried to strike only a foolish blow. It has been given to your daughter to do more than this. She has broken my heart, Richard Vont. She grew to become the dearest thing in my life, and she has left me.—Yesterday she was married."

No exclamation, no movement. The Marquis wiped his eyes and saw with unexpected clearness. What had happened seemed so natural that for a moment he was not even surprised. He stepped over the palings, leaned for a single moment over the body of the man to whom he had been talking, and laid the palm of his hand over the lifeless eyes. Then he walked down the tiled path and called to the woman whose face he had seen through the latticed window.

"Mrs. Wells," he said, "something serious has happened to Vont."

"Your lordship!"

"He is dead," the Marquis told her. "You had better go down to the village and fetch the doctor. I will send a message to his nephew."

Back again across the park, very gorgeous now in the fuller sunshine, casting

quaint shadows underneath the trees, glittering upon the streaks of yellow cowslips on the hillside. The birds were singing and the air was as soft as midsummer. He crossed the bridge, turned into the drive and stood for a moment in his own hall. A servant came hurrying towards him.

"Run across the park to Broomleys as fast as you can," his master directed. "Tell Mr. Thain to go at once to Vont's cottage. You had better let him know that Vont is dead."

The young man hastened off. Gossett appeared from somewhere in the background and opened the door of the study towards which the Marquis was slowly making his way.

"The shock has been too much for your lordship," the man murmured. "May I bring you some brandy?"

The Marquis shook his head.

"It is necessary, Gossett," he said, "that I should be absolutely undisturbed for an hour. Kindly see that no one even knocks at my door for that period of time."

Gossett held open the door and closed it softly. He was a very old servant, and in great measure he understood.

CHAPTER XXXV

Richard Vont was buried in the little churchyard behind Mandeleys, the churchyard in which was the family vault and which was consecrated entirely to tenants and dependents of the estate. The little congregation of soberly-clad villagers received more than one surprise during the course of the short and simple service. The Marquis himself, clad in sombre and unfamiliar garments, stood in his pew and followed the little procession to the graveside. The new tenant of Broomleys was there, and Marcia, deeply veiled but easily recognisable by that brief moment of emotion which followed the final ceremony. At its conclusion, the steward, following an immemorial custom, invited the little crowd to accompany him to Mandeleys, where refreshments were provided in the back hall. The Marquis had stepped back into the church. David and Marcia were alone. He came round to her side.

"You don't remember me?" he asked.

"Remember you?" she repeated. "Aren't you Mr. David Thain?"

"Yes," he admitted, "but many years ago I was called Richard David Vont—when I lived down there with you, Marcia."

Emotion had become so dulled that even her wonder found scanty expression.

"I remember your eyes," she said. "They puzzled me more than once. Did he know?"

"Of course," David answered. "We lived together in America for many years, and we came home together. Directly we arrived, however, he insisted on our separating. You know the madness of his life, Marcia."

"I know," she answered bitterly. "Was I not the cause of it?"

"It was part of his scheme that I should help towards his revenge," he explained. "I did his bidding, and the end was disaster and humiliation."

They stood under the little wooden porch which led out into the park.

"You will come up to Broomleys?" he invited.

She shook her head.

"Just now I would rather go back to the cottage," she said. "We shall meet again."

"I shall be in England only for a few more days," he told her gloomily. "I am returning to America."

She looked at him in some surprise.

"I thought you had settled down here?"

"Only to carry out my share in that infernal bargain. I have done it, I kept my word, I am miserably ashamed of myself, and I have but one feeling now—to get as far away as I can."

"But tell me, David," she asked, "what was this scheme? What have you done to hurt him—the Marquis?"

"I have done my best to ruin him," David replied, "and through some accursed scheme in which I bore an evil and humiliating part, I have brought some shadow of a scandal upon—"

He broke off. Marcia waited for him to continue, but he shook his head.

"The whole thing is too insignificant and yet too damnable," he said. "Some day, Marcia, I will tell you of it. If you won't come with me, forgive me if I hurry away."

He was gone before she could remonstrate. She looked around and saw the reason. The Marquis was coming down the gravel path from the church in which he had taken refuge from the crowd. She felt a sudden shaking of the knees, a momentary return of that old ascendency which he had always held over her. Then she turned and waited for him. He smiled very gravely as he held her hand for a moment.

"You are going back to the cottage?" he asked. "I will walk with you, if I may."

They had a stretch of park before them, a wonderful, rolling stretch of ancient turf. Here and there were little clusters of cowslips, golden as the sunshine which was making quaint patterns of shadow beneath the oaks and drawing the perfume from the hawthorn trees, drooping beneath their weight of blossom. Marcia tried twice to speak, but her voice broke. There was the one look in his face which she dreaded.

"I shall not say any conventional things to you," he began gently. "Your father's life for many years must have been most unhappy. In a way, I suppose you and I are the people who are responsible for it. And yet, behind it all—I say it in justice to ourselves, and not with disrespect to the dead—it was his primeval and colossal ignorance, the heritage of that stubborn race of yeomen, which was responsible for his sorrow."

"He never understood," she murmured. "No one in this world could make him understand."

"You know that our new neighbour up there," he continued, moving his head towards Broomleys, "was his nephew—a sharer, however unwilling, in his folly?"

"He has just told me," she admitted.

"I was the first to find your father dead," he went on. "When I received your letter, Marcia, I took it to him. I went to offer him the sacrifice of my desolation. That, I thought, would end his enmity. And I read your letter to dead ears. He was seated there, believing that all the evil he wished me had come. I suppose the belief brought him peace. He was a stubborn old man."

Marcia would have spoken, but there was a lump in her throat. She opened her lips only to close them again.

"I wished to see you, Marcia," he continued, "because I wanted you to understand that I have only one feeling in my heart towards you, and that is a feeling of wonderful gratitude. For many years you have been the most sympathetic companion a somewhat dull person could have had. The memory of these years is imperishable. And I want to tell you something else. In my heart I approve of what you have done."

"Oh, but that is impossible!" she replied. "I cannot keep the bitter thoughts

from my own heart. I am ashamed when I think of your kindness, of your fidelity, of all that you have given and done for me throughout these years. And now I have the feeling that I am leaving you when you need me most."

He smiled at her.

"Your knowledge of life," he said gently, "should teach you better. The years that lay between us when you first gave me all that there was worth having of love in the world were nothing. To-day they are an impassable gulf. I have reached just those few years which become the aftermath of actual living, and you are young still, young in mind and body. We part so naturally. There is something still alive in you which is dead in me."

"But you are so lonely," she faltered.

"I should be lonelier still," he answered, "or at least more unhappy, if I dragged you with me through the cheerless years. Life is a matter of cycles. You are commencing a new one, and so am I, only the things that are necessary to you are not now necessary to me. So it is natural and best that we should part."

She pointed to the cottage, now only a few yards away. Its doors and windows were wide open, there was smoke coming from the chimney, a wealth of flowers in the garden.

"The cottage is mine," she said. "Sometimes I believe that it was left to me in the hope that I might come back with my heart, too, full of bitterness, and that I might take his place. It is yours whenever you choose to take it. I shall send the deeds to Mr. Merridrew."

He looked at it thoughtfully. For a moment the shadow passed from his face. He stood a little more upright, his eyes seemed to grow larger. Perhaps he thought of those days when he had stolen down from the house with beating heart, drawn nearer and nearer to the cottage, felt all the glow and fervour of his great love. There was a breath of perfume from the garden, full of torturing memories—a little wind in the trees.

"One of the desires of my life gratified," he declared. "Mr. Merridrew shall draw up a deed of sale. Look," he added, pointing to the drive, "there is some one waiting for you in the car there. Isn't it your husband?"

She glanced in the direction he indicated.

"Yes," she murmured.

"I will not stay and see him now," the Marquis continued. "You will forgive me, I know. Present to him, if you will," he went on, with some faint touch of his old manner, "my heartiest good wishes. And to you, Marcia," he added, raising the fingers of her ungloved hand to his lips, "well, may you find all that there is left in the world of happiness. And remember, too, that every drop of happiness that comes into your life means greater peace for me.—We talk too seriously for such a brilliant morning," he concluded, his voice measured, though kindly, his attitude suddenly reminiscent of that long, pictured line of gallant ancestors. "Take my advice and use some of this beautiful afternoon for your ride to London. There will be a moon to-night and you may enter it as the heroine in your last story—a fairy city."

He left her quite easily, but when she tried to start to meet her husband, her knees gave way. She clung to the paling and watched him cross the bridge and stroll up the little strip of turf, still erect, contemplating the great pile in front of him with the beneficent satisfaction of inherited proprietorship. She watched him pass through the front door and disappear. Then she turned around and drew her husband into the cottage.

"James," she cried, sobbing in his arms, "take me away—please take me away!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

During those few hours of strenuous, almost fierce work into which David threw himself after the funeral, he found in a collection of belated cablegrams which his secretary handed him an explanation of Letitia's half apology, an explanation, he told himself bitterly, of her altered demeanour towards him. The old proverb stood justified. Even this, the wildest of his speculations, had become miraculously successful. Pluto Oil shares, unsalable at a dollar a few weeks ago, now stood at eight. Oil had been discovered in extraordinary and

unprecedented quantities. Oil was spurting another great fortune for him out of the sandy earth. He paused to make a calculation. The Marquis's forty thousand pounds' worth were worth, at a rough estimate, three hundred thousand.

"Extraordinary news, this, Jackson," he remarked to the quiet, sad-faced young man, who had been his right hand since the time of his first railway deal.

"Most extraordinary," was the quiet reply. "I congratulate you, Mr. Thain. You do seem to have the knack of turning everything you touch into gold."

"Do I?" Thain murmured listlessly.

"I took the liberty of investing in a small parcel of shares myself, just to lock away," the young man continued. "I gave seventy cents for them."

"Not enough to make you a millionaire, I hope?" Thain asked, with some bitterness.

"Enough, with my savings, to give me a very comfortable feeling of independence, sir," Jackson replied. "I have never aspired any further than that."

Thain returned to his desk. He gave letter after letter, and more than once his secretary, who had received no previous intimation of his master's intended departure, glanced at him in mild surprise.

"I presume, as you are returning to the States, sir," he suggested, "that we must try to cancel the contracts which we have already concluded for the restoration of this place?"

Thain shook his head.

"Let them go on," he said. "It makes very little difference. I have a seven years' lease. I may come back again. The letters which I gave you with a cross you had better take into your own study and type. I shall be here to sign them when you have finished."

The young man bowed and departed. David listened to the closing of the door and turned his head a little wearily towards the night. The French windows stood open. Through the still fir trees, whose perfume reached him every now and then in little wafts, he could see one or two of the earlier lights shining from the great

house. Once more his thoughts travelled back to the ever-present subject. Could he have done differently? Was there any way in which he could have spared himself the ignominy, the terrible humiliation of those few minutes? There was something wrong about it all, something almost suicidal—his blind obedience to the old man's prejudiced hatred, his own frenzied tearing to pieces of what might at least have remained a wonderful dream. One half of his efforts, too, had fallen pitifully flat. The Marquis had only to keep the shares to which he was justly entitled, to free for the first time for generations his far-spreading estates, to take his place once more as the greatest nobleman and landowner in the county. If only it had been the other scheme which had miscarried!

His avenue of elms was sheltering now an orchestra of singing birds. With the slightly moving breeze which had sprung up since sunset, the perfume of his roses became alluringly manifest. Through the trees he heard the chiming of the great stable clock from Mandeleys, and the sound seemed somehow to torture him. His head drooped for a moment upon his arms.

The room seemed suddenly to become darker. He raised his head and remained staring, like a man who looks upon some impossible vision. Lady Letitia, bare-headed, a little paler than usual, a little, it seemed to him, more human, was standing there, looking in upon him. He managed to rise to his feet, but he had no words.

"I am not a ghost," she said. "Please come out into the garden. I want to talk to you."

He followed her without a word. It was significant that his first impulse had been to shrink away from her as one dreading to receive a hurt. She seemed to notice it and smiled.

"Let us try and be reasonable for a short time," she continued. "We seem to have been living in some perfectly absurd nightmare for the last few hours. I have come to you to try and regain my poise. Yes, we will sit down—here, please."

They sat in the same chairs which they had occupied on her previous visit. David had been through many crises in his life, but this one left him with no command of coherent speech—left him curiously, idiotically tongue-tied.

"I have thought over this ridiculous affair," she went on. "I must talk about it

to some one, and there is only you left."

"Your guests," he faltered.

"Gone!" she told him a little melodramatically. "Didn't you know that we had been alone ever since the morning afterwards? First of all, my almost fiancé, Charlie Grantham, drove off at dawn. He left behind him a little note. He had every confidence in me, but—he went. Then my aunt. She was the most peevish person I ever knew. She seemed to imagine that I had in some way interfered with her plans for your subjugation, and although she knew quite well that no woman of the Mandeleys family could ever stoop to any unworthy or undignified action, she decided to hurry her departure. She left at midday."

"But Miss Sylvia?"

"Sylvia was most ingenuous," Letitia continued, her voice regaining a little of its natural quality. "Sylvia came to me quite timidly and asked me to walk with her in the garden. She wondered—was it really settled between me and Lord Charles? If it was, she was quite willing to go into a nunnery or something equivalent,—Chiswick, I believe it was, with a maiden aunt. But if not, she believed—he had whispered a few things to her—he was hoping to see her that week in town. It was most extraordinary—-she couldn't understand it—but it seemed that their old flirtations—you knew, of course, that they had met often before—had left a void in his heart which only she could fill. He had discovered his mistake in time. She threw herself upon my mercy. She left by the three-thirty."

"My God!" he groaned. "And this was all my doing!"

"All your doing," she assented equably. "They were all of them perfectly content to accept your story. There is not one of them who disputes it for a single moment. But you were there, with the secret door closed behind you, and, as my aunt said, there is really no accounting for what people will do, nowadays. And now," she concluded, "I gather that you are leaving, too."

"I am motoring up to town to-morrow morning," he said. "I haven't ventured to speak of atonement, but your coming here like this, Lady Letitia, is the kindest thing you have ever done—you could ever do. I have tried, in my way," he went on, after a moment's pause, "to live what I suppose one calls a self-respecting life. I have never before been in a position when I have been ashamed

of anything I have done. And now, since those few minutes, I have lived in a burning furnace of it. I daren't let my mind dwell upon it. Those few minutes were the most horrible, psychological tragedy which any man could face. If your coming really means," he went on, and his voice shook, and his eyes glowed as he leaned towards her, "that I may carry away with me the feeling that you have forgiven me, I can't tell you the difference it will make."

"But why go?" she asked him softly.

His heart began to beat with sudden, feverish throbs. His eyes searched her face hungrily. She seemed in earnest. Her lips had lost even their usual, faintly contemptuous curl. If anything, she was smiling at him.

"Why go?" he repeated. "Can't you understand that the one desire I have, the one burning desire, is to put myself as far away as possible from the sight and memory of what happened that night? We have been telephoning through to London. I have taken my passage for America on Saturday. I shall go straight out to the Rockies. I just want to get where I can forget your look and the words with which your father turned me out of his house. And worse than that," he added, with a little shake in his tone, "their justice—their cruel, abominable justice."

Then what was surely a miracle happened. She leaned forward and took his hand. Her eyes were soft with sympathy.

"You poor thing!" she exclaimed. "You couldn't do anything else. I have been thinking it over very seriously. It was a horrible position for you, but you really couldn't do anything else, that I can see. You told your story simply and like a man. But wait. There is one thing I can't understand. Those shares—were they not to be part of that poor man's vengeance. You surely never intended that we should benefit by them in this extraordinary way?"

"I believed them," he told her firmly, "when I sold them to your father, to be, until long after he would have had to pay for them, at any rate, absolutely worthless. The wholly unexpected has happened, as it does often in oil. Your father's shares are worth a fortune. He can realise his idea of clearing Mandeleys. He can dispose of them to-day for three hundred thousand pounds. Lady Letitia, you have come to me like an angel. This is the sweetest thing any woman ever did. Be still kinder. Please make your father keep the shares. They are his. They were sold to ruin him. It is just the chance of something that happened many

thousand miles away, which has turned them in his favour. He accepts nothing from me. It is fate only which brings him this windfall."

"I promise," she said. "To tell you the truth, I think father is as much changed, during the last few days, as I am. When I saw him, about an hour ago, and told him that I was coming to see you, I was almost frightened at first. He looks older, and I fancy that something which has happened lately—something quite outside—has been a great blow to him."

"Does he know, then, how kind you are being to me?" David asked.

She nodded.

"He rather hoped," she whispered, leaning a little closer still to him and smiling into his face, "that you would come back with me and dine."

David suddenly clutched her hands. He was a man again. He threw away his doubts. He accepted Paradise.

On their way across the park, a short time later, he suddenly pointed down towards the little cottage.

"You haven't forgotten, Letitia," he said, "that I lived there? You haven't forgotten that that old man was my uncle!—that his father and grandfather were the servants of your family?"

"My dear David," she replied, "I have forgotten nothing, only I think that I have learned a little. I am still full of family tradition, proud of my share of it, if you will, but somehow or other I don't think that it is more than a part, and a very small part, of our daily life. So let there be an end of that, please. You have done great things and I am proud of you, and I have done nothing except suffer myself to be born into a very ancient and occasionally disreputable family.... Oh, I must tell you!" she went on, with a little laugh. "What do you think father was settling down to do when I came out?"

David shook his head.

"I have no idea."

"I left him seated at his desk," she told him. "He is writing a line to Mr.

Wadham, Junior, asking him to-day's price of the Pluto Oil shares."

THE END

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