LOVE AND HATRED

MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES

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LOVE AND HATRED By MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES Author of "Lilla," "Good Old Anna," "The Chink in the Armour," "The End of Her Honeymoon," etc. "Alas! The love of Woman! It is known To be a lovely and a fearful thing. "--BYRON. NEW YORK GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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PART ONE

LOVE AND HATRED

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

OH, but this is terrible——"

Laura Pavely did not raise her voice, but there was trembling pain, as well as an almost incredulous surprise, in the way she uttered the five words which may mean so much—or so little.

The man whose sudden, bare avowal of love had drawn from her that low, protesting cry, was standing just within the door of the little summer-house, and he was looking away from her, straight over the beautiful autumnal view of wood and water spread out before him.

He was telling himself that five minutes ago—nay, was it as long as five minutes?—they had been so happy! And yet, stop—*he* had not been happy. Even so he cursed himself for having shattered the fragile, to him the already long perished, fabric, of what she no doubt called their "friendship."

It was she—it always is the woman—who, quite unwittingly, had provoked the words which now could never be unsaid. She had not been thinking at all of him when she did so—she had spoken out of her heart, the heart which some secret, sure instinct bade him believe capable of depths of feeling, which he hoped, with a fierce hope, no man had yet plumbed....

What had provoked his avowal had been the most innocent, in a sense the most beautiful, feeling of which a woman is capable—love for her child.

"The doctor says Alice ought to have a change, that she ought to go to the sea, for a little while. I asked Godfrey if I might take her, but he said he didn't think it necessary." She had added musingly, "It's odd, for he really is devoted to the child."

They had been walking slowly, sauntering side by side, very close to one another, for the path was only a narrow track among the trees, towards the summerhouse where they were now—she sitting and he standing.

He had answered in what, if she had been less absorbed in herself and her own concerns, she might have realised was a dangerously still voice: "I think I can persuade Godfrey to let her go. Apart from the child altogether, you ought to have a change." And then—then she had said, rather listlessly, not at all bitterly, "Oh, it doesn't matter about me!"

Such a simple phrase, embodying an obvious truth, yet they had forced from him the words: "I think it does matter about you, Laura. At least I know it matters a good deal to me, for, as of course you know by now, I love you."

And if his voice had remained quite low and steady, she had seen the blazing, supplicating eyes....

But he had looked away, at once, when he had uttered those irrevocable words; and after a few moments, which had seemed to him an eternity, had come that low, heart-felt cry, "Oh, but this is terrible——"

"Terrible? Why, Laura?" He crossed his arms, and turning, gazed straight down at her bowed figure.

Again there came a long, unnatural pause.

And then she lifted up her face, and under the shadow cast by her wide-brimmed garden hat he saw that even her forehead was flushed. There was an anguished look in the large, deeply blue eyes, which were to him the most exquisite and revealing feature of her delicately drawn face.

"Perhaps I ought not to have said 'terrible,'" she said at last in a low voice, "but—but degrading, ignoble, *hateful*, Oliver." She added, her false calm giving way, "And to me such a bitter, bitter disappointment!"

"Why?" he asked harshly. "Why a disappointment, Laura? Most women, nay,

all wise human beings, value love—any kind of love offered by even the most unworthy—as the most precious thing in the world!"

His face had become expressionless, and the measured, carefully chosen words made her feel suddenly ashamed, but with a shame merged in an eager hope that she had cruelly misunderstood her—friend.

She stood up and took a step towards him. "Oliver," she said diffidently; "forgive me! I was stupid not to understand. Of course we love one another," she was on firm ground now. "All friends love one another, and you've been such a good friend to me, and more, far more, than a good friend to my poor brother—to Gillie."

He withdrew his gaze from her beseeching eyes, and looked away once more. Now was his chance to play the hypocrite, to eat the words which had given her so much offence....

Hardly knowing that he spoke aloud, he muttered hoarsely, "I can't!" And then he turned to her: "Listen, Laura. I owe you the truth. I have loved you, yes, and in the sense you think so ignoble and so degrading, almost from the first day we met. As time went on, I thought it impossible that you did not know that."

"I did not know it! I trusted you absolutely! I thought that we were all three, friends,—you and I and Godfrey! It was the very first time that Godfrey and I had ever had a friend in common, and it made me so happy."

"Did it indeed?" His words cut like a whip.

"But it's true that you are Godfrey's friend?" she spoke a little wildly. "I've never known him as fond of any man as he is now of you, Oliver."

"His fondness is not returned."

"Then it ought to be!" she cried. "For you've made him like you, Oliver."

She hardly knew what she was saying, distressed, humiliated, wounded as she was in her pride and sense of personal dignity. But what was he saying—this challenging, wrathful stranger who, but a few moments ago, had been her dear, dear friend?

"I would rather, Laura, that you did not bring your husband into this matter."

"But I must bring him in!" She became suddenly aware that here ready to her hand was a weapon with which she could hurt and punish this man who was looking at her with so inscrutable a look—was it a look of love or of hatred?

"I'm sorry now," she went on rapidly, "bitterly, bitterly sorry and ashamed that I ever said a word to you of Godfrey and his—his rather tiresome ways. I ought not to have done it. It was disloyal. I've never spoken of Godfrey to any other man—but somehow I thought *you* were different from other men."

"Different?" he interjected. "How so, Laura? What right had you to think me different from other men?"

"Because I trusted you," she said inconsequently. "Because somehow you seemed really to care for me—" her voice broke, but she forced herself to go on: "You're not the first man, Oliver, who's made love to me since I married—" she covered her face with her hands.

It seemed to her that some other woman was being driven to make these intimate confidences—not the fastidious, refined, reserved Laura Pavely, who had an almost morbid dislike of the betrayal of any violent or unseemly emotion. But this other woman, who spoke through her lips, had been, was being, wantonly insulted....

Hanging her head as a child might have done, she said defiantly: "I suppose you're surprised?"

"No, I'm not surprised. Why should I be? Go on—" He clenched his hands together. What was it she was going to tell him?

Speaking in short, broken sentences, she obeyed him:

"It was when we used to go about much more than we do now—in the first two or three years after our marriage. I suppose that every woman—who isn't quite happy with her husband—is exposed to that kind of thing. I used to loathe it when I saw it coming. I used to try and fend it off. Sometimes I succeeded—more often I failed. But I never, never expected anything of the sort to happen with you, Oliver. We were such friends—such good, happy friends—you and I and my little Alice," and then she burst into a passion of weeping.

And at that what self-control Oliver Tropenell had retained departed. A flood of burning, passionate words burst from his lips—of endearment, of self-abasement, and promises which he intended, come what might, should be kept.

And she listened shrinkingly, with averted face, absorbed in her own bewildered pain and disappointment.

"I must go back to the house," she said at last. "The doctor will be here in half an hour." And she forced herself to add: "Perhaps you'll be coming over this afternoon?" (How often she had said these words in the last three months—but in how different a tone!).

"I think not. My mother said something about wishing me to stay in to-day—Lord St. Amant may be coming over." As she made no comment, he concluded quietly, "Well, I suppose I had better be going now. Good-bye, Laura."

"Good-bye," she said. And without taking her hand he left her.

She watched his tall figure making its way quickly down through the rough ground to the wood where, ultimately, he would find a path which would lead him to his mother's house.

It was late in the afternoon of the same day. From where she was sitting, under a great cedar tree, Mrs. Tropenell at last saw her son Oliver and Godfrey Pavely come out of Freshley Manor.

Though the glory and warmth of the summer were now over, Mrs. Tropenell still spent many hours of each day in her garden. She had always been an out-of-door woman from the days when she was an eager, impetuous, high-spirited girl, till now, when youth had gone, though something of the eager impetuosity of youth remained with her concealed from strangers by a manner marked by a strong sense of personal dignity.

The two men began walking, slowly, down the grass path leading to the beech avenue which was the glory of Freshley Manor, as well as a short cut to Lawford Chase, Godfrey Pavely's larger property.

It was more than an hour since a servant had come out to say that Mr. Pavely was waiting to see Mr. Tropenell in the library. The man had added that Mr. Pavely had had tea before leaving the Bank, and only wanted to see Mr. Tropenell for a few minutes on his way home. And Oliver, with "I don't think he'll keep me long, mother; I suppose you'll still be here when I come back?" had stridden off with a certain reluctance towards the house.

It had always been his mother's joy, but now for many years past her infrequent joy, to fall in with even the least reasonable of her son's wishes, and so she had gone on sitting out there, waiting for him to come back, long after the tea-things had been taken away. There was a book on the low garden table by her side—such a book as she loved, telling of great adventure by one of the adventurers—but she left it where it was.

Mrs. Tropenell felt a vague, exasperating sense of restlessness and unease. At the back of her heart—that heart which, if no longer that of a young woman, could still thrill with many varied emotions and a very passion of maternal love—was the dull ache of a secret, unacknowledged sense of fear and pain.

She had every reason to be happy to-day—not only happy in her son's company, but in the coming back, after a long absence on the Continent, of her old friend, Lord St. Amant. To him she could, perhaps, bring herself to say something of what was touching her so deeply, and he, she knew, would reassure her and make light of her fears. St. Amant was what is called in ordinary parlance a man of the world—the last man, that is, to be horrified, still less frightened, by a tale of illicit love, especially when, as the mother honestly believed, it was a love likely to remain unrequited.

Yes, she would tell her one trusted friend of these besetting fears, of her more than suspicion that her son Oliver was deep in love with Laura Pavely, and St. Amant would laugh at her, persuade her maybe to laugh with him.

And yet? Yet, even so, she asked herself again and again during that long time of waiting, what these two men who, if of life-long acquaintanceship and now at any rate nominally intimate friends, were so unlike the one to the other, could have to talk about, indoors, for over an hour? Godfrey Pavely and Oliver Tropenell met very often—too often to her thinking—so why should Godfrey have pursued Oliver home to-day, just when Oliver had had an hour to spare for his mother?

It was now Thursday, and her son had already dined with the Pavelys twice this week. To-morrow night Godfrey Pavely was to be in London, and it had been arranged that his wife, Laura, should spend the evening here. But that, or so Mrs. Tropenell had quickly reminded herself, had been Laura's usual custom, long before Oliver had come home from Mexico for the holiday which had now already lasted nearly four months. In her long life Mrs. Tropenell had only had one beloved woman friend, and that friend, that more than sister, had been Laura's mother.

Even now Godfrey Pavely did not seem eager to go home. The two men were close to the furthest edge of the wide lawn, but they were still talking earnestly.

Mrs. Tropenell gazed across, with a painful scrutiny, at her son's visitor.

Godfrey Pavely was a neatly made, neatly dressed, neatly mannered man—in a way not ill-looking. His reddish-brown hair toned in oddly with his light, ginger-coloured eyes. He had become rather particular about his health of late, and went to some trouble to keep himself fit, and in good condition. Yet he looked more like a townsman than like the countryman he certainly was. For if the fortunate inheritor of a successful county banking business, which so far he had managed with such skill as to save it from any thought of amalgamation, he was also the owner of a fine old property.

Lawford Chase had belonged to Mrs. Tropenell's ancestors for centuries—for almost as many centuries as the years in which he, Godfrey, had owned it. But her father had been careless and extravagant during his long, happy life, so the owner of Pavely's Bank had bought up the mortgages on Lawford Chase, and finally foreclosed.

All this was ancient history now, and Mrs. Tropenell felt no bitterness on that account. Indeed, she had rejoiced, with a sense of real joy, when her friend's daughter had become mistress of her own old home.

The two men whom she was watching went on talking for what seemed to the onlooker a very long time; but, at last, Godfrey Pavely, turning on his heel, walked on, to be at once engulfed by the dark green arch formed by the high beech trees. Then Mrs. Tropenell saw her son, all her heart welcoming him, come striding towards her across the long stretch of short, green turf.

Once more she asked herself what possible link there could be between men

so utterly unlike. Her Oliver—more hers now, she felt, than ever before, and that though for the first time he was making her secretly, miserably jealous—was a creature of light and air, of open spaces, if need be of great waters. He was built, like herself, on a big and powerful plan; and yet so tall, so spare, so sinewy, that though he was broad he looked slim, and though four-and-thirty years of age he might have been taken, even at this small distance from where she sat, for a long-limbed youth. His life for the last twelve years had been one that often ages a man—but it had not aged him. His vigour was unbroken, his vitality—the vitality which had made him so successful, and which attracted men and women of such very different types—unimpaired.

Mrs. Tropenell had been touched, perhaps in her secret heart little surprised, at the pleasure—one might almost have said the enthusiasm—with which her neighbours for miles round had welcomed Oliver home again, after what had been so long an absence from England. The fact that he had come back a very wealthy man, and that during those years of eclipse he had managed to do some of them good turns, of course counted in his popularity, and she was too open-eyed a woman not to be well aware of that.

The mother knew that her son was not the downright, rather transparent, good-natured fellow that he was now taken to be. No man she had ever known—and she had ever been one of those women of whom men make a confidant—could keep his own or another's secrets more closely than could Oliver. He had once written to her the words: "You are the only human being, mother, to whom I ever tell anything," and she had instinctively known this to be true.

Yet their relationship was more like that of two friends than of mother and son. She knew all there was to know of his thoughts, and of his doubts, concerning many of the great things which trouble and disturb most thinking modern men. Of the outward life he led in the Mexican stretch of country of which he had become the administrator and practical ruler, she also knew a great deal, indeed surprisingly much, for he wrote by each mail long, full letters; and the romance of his great business had become an ever continuous source of interest, of amusement, and of pride to the mother who now only lived for him.

But of those secret things which had moved his heart, warred with his passions, perchance seared his conscience, he had never told her anything. Only once had the impenetrable mist of reserve been lightened, as it were pierced for a moment—and that was now a long time ago, on his second visit home five years

before. He had then come to England meaning to stay a month. But at the end of ten days he had received a telegram—what he called, in the American fashion, a cable—and within an hour he had gone, saying as he kissed his mother good-bye, "A friend of mine—a woman who has been ill a long time—is now dying. I must go, even if I'm not in time to see her alive."

In the letters which had followed his return to Mexico, there had been no word more—nothing even implying sorrow, or a sense of loss—only a graver note, of which the mother might have remained unaware but for that clue he had left to sink deep in her mother-heart.

He was now close to her, looking down out of his dark, compelling eyes—eyes which were so like her own, save that now hers shone with a softer light.

"Pavely stayed a long time," he said abruptly. "Are you tired? D'you want to go in yet, mother?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather stay out here till it's time to dress."

As she spoke she lifted her face to his, and he told himself what a beautiful, and noble face it was, though each delicate, aquiline feature had thickened, and the broad low forehead was now partially concealed by thick bands of whitening hair. It was a lined, even a ravaged face—the face of a woman who had lived, had loved, had suffered. But of that Oliver was only dimly conscious, for his mother's nature if impetuous and passionate was almost as reserved and secretive as was his own.

It may be doubted, even, if Oliver Tropenell knew how much his mother loved him, for it may be doubted if any son ever knows how much his mother—even if she appear placid or careless—loves him. One thing Oliver did know, or confidently believed he knew, and that was that his mother loved him more than she had ever loved anything in the world. There he was quite content to leave it.

"Pavely wants me to become trustee to Laura's marriage settlement, in succession to old Mr. Blackmore."

When with Godfrey Pavely, Oliver Tropenell always called the other man by his Christian name, but behind his back he always spoke of him as "Pavely."

As his mother remained silent, he went on, a little hurriedly: "The powers vested in the trustee are very wide, and it seems that money which was later added to the trust—a matter of seventeen thousand pounds or so—is invested in some queer form of security."

They both smiled—he a little drily, she with a kind of good-humoured contempt.

"He's cautious and successful—in spite of that odd, gambling propensity," she spoke a little defensively. Then, "I suppose you've consented to act?"

She waited anxiously for his answer; and at last it came, uttered in a tone of elaborate unconcern: "I said I'd think it over. But I think I'll take it on, mother. Pavely made rather a personal favour of it—after all, there's some kind of relationship."

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Tropenell, "yes, there is certainly a connection, hardly a relationship, between ourselves and Laura."

Her son sat down. He began poking about an invisible stone, lying in among the grass, with his stick.

"You cared for Laura's mother as if she had been your sister—didn't you, mother? And yet I can't imagine you with a great woman friend, I mean, of course, a friend of your own age."

She turned and looked at him. "Ah, my dear,—those are the friends that count!" and she nearly added, "Don't *you* find it so?" But, instead, she went on quickly, "Yes, I loved Laura's mother dearly, dearly—and it was for her sake that I asked you to be good to her son, to Gillie."

"Laura's extraordinarily fond of Gillie——" There always came a curious change over Oliver Tropenell's voice when he uttered the name "Laura." It became as it were softer, infused with feeling—or so his mother thought.

She waited a moment; then answered slowly, "Women generally are fond of their only brothers."

"Oh, but it's more than that!"

As she remained silent, he went on musingly: "And Gillie, in his queer way, is very fond of Laura—though I don't believe he writes to her once in three months!"

"I suppose Gillie still hates Godfrey?" she said hesitatingly. "Godfrey behaved so—so—well, not so much badly perhaps, as meanly and even stupidly—about that unfortunate affair." It was almost as if Mrs. Tropenell were speaking to herself. Her son turned and looked at her squarely.

"Yes! Gillie still hates Pavely. And yet, mother, since I came home this time I've wondered sometimes if Pavely was so very unreasonable about it after all. You see, Gillie must have been about the most troublesome and—well, the most dangerous brother-in-law an unlucky country banker could well have had!"

"And but for you he'd be so still," she said quietly. "From something Godfrey said the other day I gather that he's really grateful to you, Oliver?"

Oliver Tropenell got up. "Yes," he said shortly, "he's certainly grateful. In fact, he seems to think I've limitless power of getting people out of scrapes——" there was an undercurrent of triumph in his deep, even tones.

"I suppose the real reason he came to-day was that he's afraid to let a stranger be Laura's trustee?" There was only the slightest touch of interrogation in Mrs. Tropenell's voice, and she went on: "Perhaps he'd be kinder to poor Gillie *now*—" a curious smile played round her mouth. It was a full-lipped, generous mouth, but it was the least refined feature of her face.

"No, no. It's not as bad as that! But well, yes, Pavely *has* used this portion of Laura's fortune in a way he had no business to do, knowing it was trust money."

"And you——?"

"Oh, I'm going to buy out her interest in the concern."

"Will that cost you seventeen thousand pounds?"

"Yes, it will. But I don't mind—it's quite a likely gamble. Have you ever heard of Greville Howard?"

"You mean the great money-lender?"

"He's retired now. But Pavely and he seem to be in a kind of secret partnership—queer isn't it? Pavely's a clever chap about money, but oh, mother! he's such an insufferable cad!"

Mrs. Tropenell felt a sudden tremor of fear sweep over her. She had lately come to what she now realised was a quite wrong conclusion—she had believed, that is, that Oliver, in a queer, contemptuous way, had grown fond of Godfrey, as Godfrey had certainly grown fond of Oliver. But now, all at once, her son had opened a dark window into his soul—or was it into his heart? There was an under-current of hatred, as well as of the contempt to which she was accustomed, in the way Oliver had just spoken of his "friend"—of the man, at once fortunate and unfortunate, who was Laura Pavely's husband.

She stood up, and put her hand through her son's arm. "It's getting very cold," she said, and shivered.

He turned on her with quick concern: "I left you too long! I ought to have sent him away before—but he was such a long time getting it out—" under his breath he muttered "Damn him!"

CHAPTER II

MOTHER and son dined alone together, and then, rather early, Mrs. Tropenell went upstairs.

For a while, perhaps as long as an hour, she sat up in bed, reading. At last, however, she turned off the switch of her electric reading lamp, and, lying back in her old-fashioned four-post bed, she shut her eyes for a few moments. Then she opened them, widely, on to her moonlit room.

Opposite to where she lay the crescent-shaped bow-window was still open to the night air and the star-powdered sky. On that side of Freshley Manor the wide lawn sloped down to a belt of water meadows, and beyond the meadows there rose steeply a high, flat-topped ridge.

Along this ridge Oliver Tropenell was now walking up and down smoking. Now and again his mother saw the shadow-like figure move across the line of her vision.

At one moment, last winter, she had feared that he would not be able to come back this year, as troubles had arisen among his cattle-men. But, as was Oliver's way, he had kept his promise. That he had been able to so do was in no small measure owing to his partner, Gilbert Baynton.

Gilbert Baynton—*Laura Pavely's brother*? Of that ne'er-do-weel Oliver had made from a failure a success; from a waster—his brother-in-law, Godfrey Pavely, would have called him by a harsher name—an acute and a singularly successful man of business.

Lying there, her brain working quickly in the darkness, Oliver's mother told herself that the Pavelys, both Godfrey and Laura, had indeed reason to be grateful, not only to Oliver, but to her, Oliver's mother! It was to please her, not them, that Oliver, long years ago, had accepted the dubious gift of Gilbert Baynton, and the small sum Gilbert's brother-in-law had reluctantly provided to rid himself of an intolerable incubus and a potential source of disgrace. Godfrey Pavely was certainly grateful, and never backward in expressing it. And Laura? Laura was one of your silent, inarticulate women, but without doubt Laura must

be grateful too.

At last Oliver left the ridge, and Mrs. Tropenell went on gazing at the vast expanse of luminous sky which merged into the uplands stretching away for miles beyond the boundaries of her garden.

She lay, listening intently, and very soon she heard the cadence of his firm footfalls on the stone path below the window. Then came the quiet unlatching of the garden door. Now he was coming upstairs.

Her whole heart leapt out to him—and perchance it was this strong shaft of wordless longing that caused Oliver Tropenell's feet to linger as he was going past his mother's door.

Following a sudden impulse, she, who had trained herself to do so few things on impulse, called out, "Is that you, my darling?"

The door opened. "Yes, mother. Here I am. May I come in?"

He turned and shut out the bright electric light on the landing, and walked, a little slowly and uncertainly in the darkness, towards where he knew the bed to be. For a moment she wondered whether she should turn on the lamp which was at her elbow, then some sure, secret instinct made her refrain.

She put out her hand, and pulled him down to her, and he, so chary of caress, put his left arm round her.

"Mother?" he said softly. "This dear old room! It's years since I've been in this room—and yet from what I can see, it's exactly the same as it always was!"

And, as if answering an unspoken question, she spoke in very low tones, "Hardly altered at all since the day you were born here, my dearest, on the happiest day of my life."

His strong arm tightened about her a little, and, still looking straight before her, but leaning perhaps a little closer into the shelter of his arm, she said

tremulously, inconsequently it might have seemed: "Oliver? Are you going to accept Lord St. Amant's invitation?"

With a sharp shoot of hidden pain she felt his movement of recoil, but all he said was, very quietly, "I've not quite made up my mind, mother."

"It would give me pleasure if you were to do so. He has been a very good and loyal friend to me for a long, long time, my dear."

"I know that."

She waited a moment, then forced herself to go on: "You were never quite fair to St. Amant, Oliver."

"I—I feared him, mother."

And then, as she uttered an inarticulate murmur of pain and of protest, he went on quickly, "The fear didn't last very long—perhaps for two or three years. You see I was so horribly afraid that you were going to marry him." In the darkness he was saying something he had never meant, never thought to say.

And she answered, "It was a baseless fear."

"Was it? I wonder if it was! Oh, of course I know you are telling me the truth as you see it now—but, but surely, mother?"

"Surely no, Oliver. It is true that St. Amant wished, after his wife's death, that I should marry him, but he soon saw that I did not wish it, that nothing was further from my wish—then."

"*Then?*" he cried. "What do you mean, mother? Lady St. Amant only died when I was fifteen!"

"I would like to tell you what I mean. And after I have told you, I wish never to speak of this subject to you again. But I owe it to myself as well as to you, to tell you the truth, Oliver. Where is your hand?" she said, "let me hold it while I tell you."

And then slowly and with difficulty she began speaking, with a hesitation, a choosing of her words, which were in sharp contrast to her usual swift decision.

"I want to begin by telling you," her voice was very low, "that according to his lights—the lights of a man of the world and of, well yes, of an English gentleman—St. Amant behaved very well as far as I was concerned. I want you to understand that, Oliver, to understand it thoroughly, because it's the whole point of my story. If St. Amant had behaved less well, I should have nothing to tell—you."

She divined the quiver of half-shamed relief which went through her son. It made what she wished to say at once easier and more difficult.

"As I think you know, I first met St. Amant when I was very young, in fact before I was 'out,' and he was the first really clever, really attractive, and, in a sense, really noted man I had ever met. And then"—she hesitated painfully.

"And then, mother?" Oliver's voice was hard and matter-of-fact. He was not making it easy for her.

"Well, my dear, very very soon, he made of me his friend, and I was of course greatly flattered, but at that time, in the ordinary sense of the word, St. Amant never made love to me." She went on more firmly. "Of course I soon came to know that he cared for me in a way he did not care for the other women with whom his name was associated. I knew very soon too, deep in my heart, that if his wife—his frivolous, mean-natured, tiresome wife—died, he certainly would wish to marry me, and for years, Oliver, for something like six years, I daily committed murder in my heart."

And then something happened which troubled and greatly startled the woman who was making this painful confession. Her son gave a kind of cry—a stifled cry which was almost a groan. "God! How well I understand that!" he said.

"Do you, Oliver—do you? And yet I, looking back, cannot understand it! All that was best, indeed the only good that was in St. Amant to give I had then, and later, after I became a widow, I had it again."

"I suppose he was much the same then as later, or—or was he different then, mother?"

She knew what he meant. "He was the same then," she said quietly, "but somehow I didn't care! Girls were kept so ignorant in those days. But of course the whole world knew he was a man of pleasure, and in time I grew to know it

too. But still it wasn't that which made me unhappy, for I did not realise what the phrase meant, still less what was implied by it. But even so, as time went on I was very unhappy. Mine was a false position—a position which hurt my pride, and, looking back, I suppose that there must have soon been a certain amount of muffled talk. If I was not jealous, other women were certainly jealous of me."

She waited for a few moments; the stirring of these long-dead embers was hurting her more than she would have thought possible.

At last she went on: "Sometimes months would pass by without our meeting, but he wrote to me constantly, and on his letters—such amusing, clever, and yes, tender letters—I lived. My aunt, my father, both singularly blind to the state of things, were surprised and annoyed that I didn't marry, and, as for me, I grew more and more unhappy."

"Poor mother!" muttered Oliver. And she sighed a sigh of rather piteous relief. She had not thought he would understand.

"I don't know what I should have done but for two people, your father, who of course was living here then, our nearest neighbour, and, what meant very much more to me just then, Laura's mother, Alice Tropenell. Though she was only a very distant relation, she was like a daughter in this house. Alice was my one friend. She knew everything about me. She was—well, Oliver, I could never tell you what she was to me then!"

"I suppose," he said slowly, "that Laura is like her?"

"Laura?" Mrs. Tropenell could not keep the surprise out of her low voice. "Oh no, my dear, Laura is not in the least like her mother. But Laura's child is very like Alice—even now."

"Laura's child?" Oliver Tropenell visioned the bright, high-spirited, merry little girl, who somehow, he could not have told her why, seemed often to be a barrier between himself and Laura.

"Alice—my friend Alice—was full of buoyancy, of sympathy for every living thing. She possessed what I so much lacked in those days, and still alas! lack—sound common-sense. And yet she, too, had her ideals, ideals which did not lead her into a very happy path, for Robert Baynton, high-minded though he may have been, was absorbed in himself—there was no room for any one else." Had

she been telling her story to any one but her son, Mrs. Tropenell would have added, "Laura is very like him."

Instead, she continued, "No one but Alice would have made Robert Baynton happy, or have made as good a thing of the marriage as she did—for happy they were. I think it was the sight of their happiness that made me at last long for something different, for something more normal in my life than that strange, unreal tie with St. Amant. So at last, when I was four-and-twenty, I married your father." Oliver remained silent, and she said a little tremulously, "He was very, very good to me. He made me a happy woman. He gave me *you*."

There was a long, long pause. Mrs. Tropenell had now come to what was the really difficult part of the task she had set herself.

"You are thinking, my boy, of *afterwards*." And as she felt him move restlessly, she went on pleadingly, "As to that, I ask you to remember that I was very lonely after your father died. Still, if you wish to know the real truth"—she would be very honest now—"that friendship which you so much disliked stood more in the way of your having a stepfather than anything else could have done."

"I see that now," he said sombrely, "but I did not see it then, mother."

"Even if Lady St. Amant had not lived on, as she did, all those years, I should not have married St. Amant—I think I can say that in all sincerity. So you see, Oliver, you need not have been afraid, when at last he became free."

She sighed a long, unconscious sigh of relief.

"I gather you still see him very often when he's at Knowlton Abbey?"

"Yes, it's become a very comfortable friendship, Oliver. But for St. Amant I should often feel very lonely, my dear."

She longed to go on—to tell Oliver how hard it had been for her to build up her life afresh—after he had finally decided to stay on in Mexico. But she doubted if he would understand....

Suddenly he turned and kissed her.

"Good-night," he said. "I'm grateful to you for having told me all—all that

you have told me, mother."

Oliver Tropenell hurried up the silent house. By his own wish the large garret to which he had removed all his own treasures and boyish belongings after a delicate childhood spent in a room close to his mother's, was still in his room, and it had been very little altered.

It was reached by a queer, narrow, turning staircase across which at a certain point a beam jutted out too low. Tropenell never forgot to duck his head at that point—indeed he generally remembered as he did so how proud he had been the first time he had found himself to be too tall to pass under it straightly! But, strange to say, to-night he did forget—and for a moment he saw stars.... Fool! Fool that he was to allow his wits to go wool-gathering in this fashion!

With eyes still smarting, he leapt up the last few steps to the little landing which he shared with no one else. Opening the door he turned the switch of the lamp on the writing-table which stood at a right angle to the deep-eaved window.

Then he shut the door and locked it, and, after a moment of indecision, walked across to the book-case which filled up the space between the fireplace and the inner wall of the long, rafted room.

He did not feel in the mood to go to bed, and idly he let his eyes run over the long rows of books which he had read, in the long ago, again and again, for like most lonely boys he had been a great reader. They were a good selection, partly his mother's, partly his own, partly Lord St. Amant's. He knew well enough—he had always known, albeit the knowledge gave him no pleasure, that he had owed a great deal, as boy and man, to his mother's old friend. Lord St. Amant had really fine taste. It was he who had made Oliver read Keats, Blake, Byron, Poe, among poets; he who had actually given him *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Ali Baba of Ispahan*. There they were all together.

He had not taken his books with him when he had first gone to Mexico, for he had not meant to stay there. But at last he had written home to a great London bookseller and ordered fresh copies of all his old books at home. The bookseller had naturally chosen good editions, in some cases rare first editions. But those

volumes had never been read, as some of these had been read, over and over and over again.

But now, to-night, he did not feel as if he could commune with any comfort even with one of these comfortable, unexacting friends. He felt too restless, too vividly alive. So suddenly he turned away from the bookcase, and looked about him. A large French box-bed had taken the place of the narrow, old-fashioned bedstead of his youth; and his mother had had moved up to this room a narrow writing-table from the study on the ground floor which no one ever used.

He walked over to that writing-table now, and sat down. On it, close to his left hand, stood a large despatch-box. He opened and took out of it a square sheet of paper on which was embossed his Mexican address. Drawing two lines across that address, and putting in the present date, September 19th, he waited, his pen poised in his hand for a full minute.

Then he began writing rather quickly, and this is what he wrote:—

"My dear Laura,—Godfrey suggests that I should act as your trustee, in succession to Mr. Blackmore. Am I to understand that this suggestion has your approval? If yes, I will of course consent to act. But please do not think I shall be offended if you decide otherwise. You may prefer some woman of your acquaintance. Women, whatever Godfrey may tell you, make excellent men of business. They are, if anything, over-prudent, over-cautious where money is concerned; but that is a very good fault in a trustee."

His handwriting was small and clear, but he had left large spaces between the lines, and now he was at the end of the sheet of paper. There was just room for another sentence and his signature. He waited, hesitating and of two minds, till the ink was dry, and then he began again, close to the bottom of the sheet:—

"Before we meet again I wish to say one further thing."

He put this first sheet aside, and took another of the same size from the box by his side:—

"You said something to-day which affected me painfully. You spoke as if what I have done for your brother caused you to carry a weight of almost intolerable gratitude. So far as any such feeling should exist between us, the gratitude should be on my side. In sober truth Gillie has been invaluable to me.

"I remain,
"Yours sincerely,"

Then very rapidly Oliver Tropenell made an "O" and a "T," putting the T across the O so that any one not familiar with his signature would be hard put to it to know what the two initials were.

He read over the words he had just written. They seemed poor, inadequate, and he felt strongly tempted to write the letter again, and word it differently. Then he shook his head—no, let it stand!

Slowly he put the second sheet of the letter aside, and placed the first one, on which the ink was dry, before him. Then he looked round, with a queer, furtive look, and, getting up, made sure the door was locked.

Coming back to the writing-table, he took out of the despatch-box lying there

a small, square, crystal-topped flagon of the kind that fits into an old-fashioned dressing-case. The liquid in it was slightly, very slightly, coloured, and looked like some delicate scent.

From the despatch-box also he now brought out a crystal penholder with a gold nib. He dipped it in the flagon, and began to write in between the lines of the letter he had just written. As the liquid dried, the slight marks made by the pen on the paper vanished, for Oliver Tropenell was writing in invisible ink.

"The decks are cleared between us, Laura, for you know now that I love you. You said, 'Oh, but this is terrible!' Yes, Laura, love is terrible. It is not only cleansing, inspiring, and noble, it is terrible also. Why is it that you so misunderstand, misjudge, the one priceless gift, the only bit of Heaven which God or Nature—I care not which—has given to man and woman? What you, judging by your words to-day, take to be love is as little like that passion as a deep draught of pure cold water to a man dying of thirst, is like the last glass of drugged beer imbibed by some poor sot already drunk."

Oliver Tropenell waited awhile. There were still two spaces, before the bottom of the page of notepaper was reached, and again he dipped the pen into the strange volatile liquid.

"God bless you, my dear love," he wrote, "and grant you the peace which seems the only thing for which you crave."

He waited till the words had quite vanished, and then he took up the two sheets of paper, folded them in half, and put them in a large envelope which fitted the paper when so folded. He wrote on the outside, "Mrs. Pavely, Lawford Chase."

And then, turning out the light with a quick, nervous gesture, he got up and went over to the long, low, garret window.

For a few moments he saw nothing but darkness, then the familiar scene unrolled below him and took dim shape in the starlit night.

Instinctively his sombre eyes sought the place where, far away to the right, was a dark patch of wood. It was there, set amidst a grove of high trees, that stood Lawford Chase, the noble old house which had been his mother's early home, and which now contained Laura Pavely, the woman to whom he had just

written two such different letters, and who for nearly three months had never been out of his waking thoughts.

As his eyes grew more and more accustomed to the luminous darkness, he saw the group of elms under which this very day a word had unsealed the depths of his heart, and where he had had the agony of seeing Laura shrink, shudder, wilt as does a flower in a breath of hot, fœtid air, under his avowal of love.

Violently he put that memory from him, and staring out into the splendour of this early autumn night, he tried to recapture the mixture of feelings with which he had regarded Laura Pavely the first time they had met since her marriage—the first time indeed since she had been a shy, quiet little girl, and he an eager, highly vitalised youth, five years older than herself.

Looking back now he realised that what had predominated in his mind on that hot, languorous June afternoon was astonishment at her utter unlikeness to her brother, his partner, Gillie Baynton. It was an astonishment which warred with the beckoning, almost uncanny, fascination which her gentle, abstracted, aloof manner effortlessly exercised over him. And yet she had been (he knew it now, he had not known it then) amazingly forthcoming—for her! As Mrs. Tropenell's son he would have had a right to Laura Pavely's regard, but he knew now that what had set ajar the portals of her at once desolate and burdened heart had been his kindness to, even his business relationship with, her brother.

Gillie Baynton? Yes, it was to that disconcerting and discordant human chord that their two natures—his and Laura's—had perforce vibrated and mingled. Remembering this, Oliver Tropenell reproved himself for his past discontent with the partner who, whatever his failings, had always shown him both gratitude and a measure of such real affection as a man seldom shows another in a business relationship. In spite of Gillie's faults—nay, vices—he, Tropenell, now often found himself favourably comparing Laura's brother with Laura's husband.

Oliver Tropenell was acutely, intolerably, jealous of Godfrey Pavely—jealous in the burning, scorching sense which is so often the terrible concomitant of such a passion as that which now possessed him. Godfrey Pavely's presence in his own house, his slightly tyrannical, often possessive attitude to Laura, the perpetual reminder that he was, after all, the father of the child Laura had borne, and who seemed to fill her heart to the exclusion of all else—all this was for this

man who loved her an ever-recurring ordeal which might well have satisfied the sternest moralist.

That night Oliver Tropenell dreamt of Laura. He thought that he was pursuing her through a maze of flowering shrubs and trees. She was fleeing from him, yet now and again she would turn, and beckon....

His first waking thought was that they would meet to-night—here, in his mother's house. But before that happened a long day would have to be lived through, for he had made up his mind not to go to The Chase till Laura again asked him to do so.

CHAPTER III

THE door of Mrs. Tropenell's long low drawing-room opened very quietly, and Laura Pavely came through into the room.

She had left a brightly lighted hall for a room of which the only present illumination radiated from a shaded reading lamp standing on a little table behind which sat her hostess. Thus, for perhaps as long as half a minute, Laura thought herself alone.

During that half minute Mrs. Tropenell, with eyes well accustomed to the shaded light, gazed at her visitor with an eager, searching look, the look of one who wishes to see more, and to see further, than she has ever seen before.

But what she saw—all she saw—was the Laura she knew with a knowledge that was at once so superficially close, and so little intimate. A woman whose stillness of manner—a manner which at times made her appear almost inanimate—covered, as Mrs. Tropenell had secret reason to know, an extraordinary force of negative will power. It was a force which had even pierced Godfrey Pavely's complacency, and shattered his firm belief in all the rights that English law bestows on the man who has the good or ill fortune to be a husband.

As Laura advanced into the room her hostess saw that her visitor's beautifully shaped head, set proudly and freely on the slender shoulders, was thrown back in a characteristic gesture of attention, and, with a touch of reluctance, she admired afresh the masses of fair, *cendré* hair drawn back from the forehead in a way which to most women would have been trying, yet which to this woman lent an air of eighteenth-century charm and distinction.

There was no colour in Laura Pavely's face, but her eyes, heavy-lidded, and fringed with eyelashes darker than her hair, were deeply blue.

To-night she was wearing a very simple evening dress, a white chiffon tea-gown with a long black lace coat. The under dress was almost high to the throat, but beneath the black lace the wearer's arms, soft, dimpled, and rounded, were bare to the shoulder, and gleamed palely, revealingly.

Mrs. Tropenell wondered whether Laura knew that her arms were unusually lovely; then, for she was a very honest woman, her conscience rebuked her. Laura's faults with regard to men were faults of omission, not of commission. Of course she was aware—she could not help being aware—that she was a singularly attractive and distinguished-looking creature. But she had always taken her own beauty, her own distinction, just as she did the rare, distinctive features of her garden, and the perhaps over-studied charm of her house—as something to be tended and kept beautiful, but also to be guarded from alien indifferent eyes.

Perhaps because in these days every intelligent woman claims to be picturesque and witty—beauty, sheer beauty, is somewhat under the weather. Laura Pavely, to use the current jargon of her day, was not a "success." She was thought to be affected, "deep," prudish, whereas she was simply indifferent to the more commonplace human elements about her.

Her marriage had withdrawn her from the circle of the old friends and neighbours among whom she had been brought up, in a measure because none of them could "do," excepting in a very casual and cursory sense, with Godfrey Pavely. The world of his youth, the little world in and about the country town of Pewsbury, to which he had introduced her as a bride with such exultant complacency, found her not only disagreeably superior, but also dull. Besides, during the early days of her marriage she had been too bewildered by the conditions of her new life, and of her relationship with her husband, to trouble about making new friends, or even new acquaintances.

And so it was that in any intimate sense Mrs. Tropenell was still Laura's only close friend, but the younger woman was rather pathetically aware of how little she really possessed of the older woman's heart, how constantly she was compared, and ever to her detriment, to her dead mother, even how unconscious a rival in the older woman's favour was Laura's own child—merry, cheerful, loving little Alice.

"Aunt Letty? I didn't see you were there."

Laura Pavely had a delightful voice—low, clear, vibrating. It was a voice

which sometimes seemed to promise more depth of feeling than its owner ever chose to betray.

As she stooped to kiss Mrs. Tropenell, Laura let herself slide down on to the floor. She knelt there for a moment, and the light gleamed on her fair hair and upturned face. "Alice sent you her love," she said softly, "heaps of love. She's better to-night, though not quite well yet!" And then, as there came a sound of quick footsteps across the hall, she rose, and drew herself up to her full height, with the grace of movement and the absence of flurry which were both so characteristic of her.

Mrs. Tropenell looked up quickly. Had Laura flushed, as she sometimes did flush, with a deep, unbecoming reddening of her pale face, when moved or startled? No, she seemed, if anything, paler, more impassive than usual, and Oliver's mother asked herself, yet again, what of late she had so often asked herself—if Laura was capable of *any* feeling, *any* passion, save a feeling of horror, a passion of repugnance, for aught which seemed to smirch her own fastidious physical and spiritual entity.

That she loved her child, the high-spirited, happy-natured little girl, whose presence alone made life sweet and normal at Lawford Chase, Mrs. Tropenell could not doubt—she had had proof of how deeply Laura loved her child on the only occasion danger had come near to Alice—during a bout of some childish ailment, when for a few hours the little creature had been in danger of death. She, the older woman, had been frightened, awed, by Laura's terrible, dry-eyed agony....

Oliver Tropenell opened the door, and as he walked across the room, his mother's heart quivered with jealous pain, and even with a feeling of secret, impotent anger, as she saw the eager, rapt look which lighted up his dark face.

Laura held out her ringless right hand, but he only just touched it. "I'm sorry I'm late!" he exclaimed. "As a matter of fact I was reading a letter just come, by the second post, from Gillie."

"I've written to Gillie to-day," Laura said quietly. It seemed such a long, long time since yesterday morning. She felt as if the extraordinary thing which had happened then had been blotted out.

"Have you sent your letter off?"

"No, not yet," she was surprised at the question.

And then there fell a curious silence on those three people, till at last the door opened, and dinner was announced.

"Oliver! Take in Laura," said Mrs. Tropenell.

On the last occasion when the three had dined alone together there had been a little smiling discussion as to the order in which they should go into the dining-room. But that had been many weeks ago. They were not in such a light mood to-night, and yet—and yet, why should they not be? The hostess knew of no reason.

The two paired off together, and Oliver's mother asked herself, for perhaps the thousandth time in the last three months, why she had allowed this—this friendship between her son and Laura Pavely to come about? It would have been so easy to arrange that she and her son should spend the summer abroad! When he had first come home there had been a talk of their going away together to Italy, or to France—France, which they had both loved when he was a clever, ardent, headstrong boy, with a strength of brain and originality of mind too big for his boyish boots.

But the harm, what harm there was—sometimes she hoped it was not so very much harm after all—had been done quickly. By the end of that first month at home, Oliver had lost all wish to leave Freshley.

In those early days—or was it that already he was being unconsciously hypocritical as men are wont to be when in such case as that in which he now found himself?—he had seemed to have formed an even closer friendship with Godfrey Pavely than with Godfrey Pavely's wife. They had even made a joint business expedition to town together, Godfrey as Oliver's guest, staying in one of those luxurious hotels which seem equally attractive to the millionaire and the adventurer. But Oliver had at last thrown off, when alone with his mother, any pretence of liking, far less of respecting, Godfrey Pavely. Yet when with the other man he still kept up the sinister fiction. She knew that.

The three sat down in the pretty, octagon-shaped dining-room, and the mother and son talked, Laura saying very little, and never giving, always accepting—in that sense, perhaps, an elemental woman after all! Even so, she showed, when she did rouse herself to express an opinion, that there was a good deal of thought and of intelligence in her small, beautiful head.

Mrs. Tropenell, sitting at the top of the oval table, told herself that in a primeval sense such a woman as Laura might well be the complement of such a man as was Oliver. He had strength, passion, idealism, enough to furnish forth half a dozen ordinary human beings. And he had patience too—patience which is but another name for that self-control in the secret things of passion which often brings men's desires to fruition. It was patience and self-control which had been so lacking in Godfrey Pavely during those early days when Laura had at least desired to fulfil her duty as a wife.

And yet again and again during that uncomfortable half-hour Mrs. Tropenell caught herself wishing that Godfrey Pavely was there, sitting on her right hand. Godfrey always had plenty to say for himself, especially in that house, and when he felt secure of the discretion of those about him, he would often tell much that he ought, in his character of banker, to have left unsaid. He knew the private business of every one, gentle or simple, for miles round, and took an easy, unaffected interest in it all. It was only when he touched on wider matters, especially on politics, that he grew unbearably tedious and prosy. But then the only person whom Mrs. Tropenell ever listened to with pleasure on such subjects was her old friend, Lord St. Amant, who always knew what he was talking about, and always salted what he knew with happy flashes of wit and humour.

Oliver accompanied the two ladies back into the drawing-room, and his mother did not know whether to be glad or sorry that she had not had a few minutes alone with the younger woman. Sometimes it seemed as if she and Laura never were alone together now. Was it possible that of late Laura was deliberately avoiding her? As this half suspicion came into Mrs. Tropenell's mind she looked up and saw her son's eyes fixed on her face.

There was something imperious, imploring, commanding, in the look he bent on her. She saw that he was willing her to go away—to leave him, alone, with Laura....

Under the spell of that look she got up. "I must go upstairs for my work," she

said quietly. "And I have a letter to write too. I shan't be very long."

It was as if Oliver made but one swift step to the door, and, as he held it open, his mother turned her head away, lest he should see that tears had come into her eyes—tears of pain, and yes, of fear.

How was all this to end?

After walking slowly forward into the square brightly lighted hall she suddenly stayed her steps, and clasped her hands together.

A terrible temptation—terrible, almost unbelievable to such a woman as was Letitia Tropenell—held her in its grip. She longed with a fearful, gasping longing, to go back and listen at the door which had just closed behind her.

So strong was this temptation that she actually visualised herself walking across to a certain corner, turning down the electric light switch, then, in the darkness, creeping to the drawing-room door, and there gently, gently—pushing it open, say half an inch, in order to hear what those two were now saying, the one to the other....

At last, thrusting the temptation from her, she again began walking across the brightly lighted hall, and so, slowly, made her way up the staircase which led to her bedroom.

What Mrs. Tropenell would have heard, had she yielded to that ignoble temptation, would not have told her anything of what she had so longed to know.

After he had shut the door on his mother, Oliver Tropenell walked back to the place where he had stood a moment ago. But he did not come any nearer than he had been before to his guest, and his manner remained exactly what it had been when they had been three, instead of being, as they were now, two, in that dimly lighted room.

Still, both he and Laura, in their secret, hidden selves, were profoundly conscious that Mrs. Tropenell's absence made a great, if an intangible,

difference. It was the first time they had been alone that day, for it was the first day for many weeks past that Oliver had not walked over to The Chase, either in the morning or in the afternoon or, as was almost always the case, both after breakfast and about teatime.

At last, when the silence had become almost oppressive, he spoke, with a certain hard directness in his voice.

"In the letter I received from Gillie to-day he tells me that he can easily be spared for a few weeks, and I've already telephoned a cable telling him to start at once. I've said that if he thinks it advisable I myself will leave for Mexico as soon as I hear from him."

"Oh, but I don't want you to do that!" Laura Pavely looked up at him dismayed. "I thought you meant to stay in England right up to Christmas?"

"Yes, so I did, and I feel almost certain that he won't think it necessary for me to go back. But the important thing is Gillie's and your holiday. Why shouldn't he take you and Alice to France or Italy for a month?"

He saw her face, the face in which there had been a certain rigid, suffering gravity, light up, soften, and then become overcast again. Moving a little nearer to the low chair on which she was sitting—"Yes?" he asked, looking down at her. "What is it you wish to say, Laura?"

"Only that Godfrey would never let me go away with Gillie." She spoke in a sad, low voice, but she felt far more at her ease than she had yet felt this evening.

The last time she and Oliver had been alone, they had parted as enemies, but now there was nothing to show that he remembered their interchange of bitter, passionate words.

He answered quietly,

"I wonder why you feel so sure of that? I believe that if it were put to Godfrey in a reasonable way, he could not possibly object to your going abroad with your brother. It's time they made up that foolish old quarrel."

"Ah, if only I could get away with Gillie and my little Alice!"

Laura looked up as she spoke, and Oliver Tropenell was moved, almost unbearably so, by the look which came over her face. Was it the mention of her child, of her brother, or the thought of getting away from Godfrey for a while, which so illumined her lovely, shadowed eyes?

He went on, still speaking in the quiet, measured tones which made her feel as if the scene of yesterday had been an evil dream. "I've even thought of suggesting that Godfrey should come out with me to Mexico, while your little jaunt with Gillie takes place. We could all be back here by Christmas!"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid Godfrey would never go away except in what he considers his regular holiday time."

"Not even if I made it worth his while?"

She looked up, perplexed. And then a wave of hot colour flamed up in her face. Her conscience, in some ways a very delicate and scrupulous conscience, smote her.

Was it her fault that Oliver Tropenell had come so to despise Godfrey?

But he went on, speaking more naturally, that is quickly, eagerly—more like his pre-yesterday self, "No, I'm not joking! I think I can put Godfrey in the way of doing some really good business out there. We've spoken of it more than once—only yesterday afternoon we spoke of it."

"You don't mean with Gillie there?" There was a note of incredulity in Laura's voice.

"No." They were on dangerous ground now. "Not exactly with Gillie there—though it seems to me, Laura, that Godfrey ought to make it up with Gillie."

Slowly, musingly, as if speaking to herself, she said, "If Godfrey ever goes to Mexico I think he would want me to come too—he always does." And this was true, for Godfrey Pavely in some ways was curiously uxorious. Little as they were to one another, Laura's husband never allowed her to go away by herself, or even with her child, for more than a very few days.

"You come too—to Mexico?" There was surprise, doubt, in Oliver Tropenell's voice, and suddenly Laura did a strange thing, imprudent, uncalled-

for in the circumstances in which she found herself with this man; yet she did it with no trace of what is ordinarily called coquetry. Lifting up her head, she said rather plaintively, "Surely you wouldn't mind my coming too, Oliver?"

"Does that mean that you've forgiven me?" he asked.

She got up from the low chair where she had been sitting, and, facing him, exclaimed impulsively, "I want us both to forget what happened yesterday! I was wrong, very wrong, in saying what I did about Godfrey," her voice faltered, and slowly she added, "But with you, who seemed to somehow understand everything without being told, I felt, I felt——"

He raised a warning hand, for his ears had caught the sound of light footfalls in the hall. "Mother's coming back," he said abruptly. "Don't say anything to her of my cable to Gillie." And at once, without any change in his voice, he went on: "There's a great deal that would interest you, quite as much as Godfrey, out there ——"

The door opened, and he turned round quickly. "I'm trying to persuade Laura to come out to Mexico," he exclaimed. "Godfrey has practically promised to pay me a visit, and I don't see why she shouldn't come too!"

Mrs. Tropenell made no answer. She knew, and she believed that both the people standing there knew as well as she did, that such an expedition could never take place so long as Gilbert Baynton was Oliver's partner. Baynton and Pavely were bitter enemies. There had never been even the semblance of a reconciliation between them.

But as her son bent his eyes on her as if demanding an answer, she forced herself to say lightly: "I expect they both will, some day, and while they are away I can have my dear little Alice!"

When, a little later, Mrs. Tropenell accompanied Laura out into the hall, she said, "Do come in to-morrow or Sunday, my dear. I seem to see so little of you now."

"I will—I will!" and as she kissed the older woman, Laura murmured, "You're so good to me, Aunty Letty—you've always been so very, very good to me!"

Oliver opened wide the door giving into the garden. He was now obviously impatient to get Laura once more alone to himself....

After she went back to her drawing-room, Mrs. Tropenell walked straight across to a window, and there, holding back the heavy curtain, she watched the two figures moving in the bright moonlight across the lawn, towards the beech avenue which would presently engulf them.

What were their real relations the one to the other? Was Laura as blind to the truth as she seemed to be, or was she shamming—as women, God or the devil helping them—so often sham?

Slowly, feeling as if she had suddenly become very, very old, Mrs. Tropenell dropped the curtain, and walking back to her usual place, her usual chair, took up her knitting.

CHAPTER IV

LAURA and Oliver Tropenell walked across the grass in silence, and still in silence they passed through under the great dark arch formed by the beech trees.

Laura was extraordinarily moved and excited. Her brother, her dear, dear Gillie, coming home? She had taken the surprising news very quietly, but it had stirred her to the depths of her nature. Without even telling her of what he was going to do, the man now walking by her side had brought about the thing that for years she had longed should come to pass.

In her husband Laura had become accustomed to a man who was cautious and deliberate to a fault, and who, as so often happens, carried this peculiarity even more into the affairs of his daily life than into his business. Often weeks would go by before Godfrey would make up his mind to carry out some small, necessary improvement connected with the estate.

Yet here was Oliver, who, without saying a word to her about it, had decided that Gillie should come to England just to see the sister he had not seen for seven years! Laura began to think it possible that after all Godfrey *would* make it up with her brother. Oliver Tropenell had an extraordinary influence over Godfrey Pavely; again and again, as regarded small matters, he had, as it were, made Godfrey's mind up for him.

A feeling of deep gratitude welled up in her heart for the silent man by her side. She longed for him to speak now, as he had spoken to her, kindly, conciliatingly, but a few minutes ago, in the drawing-room.

But Oliver stalked along dumbly in the intense darkness.

And then suddenly she remembered, with a miserable feeling of discomfort, and yes, of shame, that she could hardly expect him to be as usual. And so it was she who, making a great effort, at last broke the unnatural silence.

"I've never thanked you for your letter," she said nervously. "But I'm very much obliged to you, Oliver, for consenting to be my trustee. And I know that Godfrey will be! I hope it won't give you much trouble—the trusteeship, I mean.

I know that Mr. Blackmore, for years past, left it all to Godfrey."

He answered slowly, meditatively, and to her intense relief, quite in his old way. "Yes, I think Godfrey will be pleased. To tell you the truth, Laura, I thought I would take advantage of his pleasure to suggest that plan about Gillie—I mean that you and Gillie and Alice should all go abroad together."

"If only you can persuade Godfrey to let me have Gillie here for a while, I shall be more than content!" She spoke with a rather piteous eagerness.

They were walking very, very slowly. Oliver had now turned on his electric torch, and it threw a bright patch of light on the path immediately before them, making all the darkness about them the blacker and the more intense.

In a hard voice he exclaimed: "Of course Gillie must come here, and stay here! His being anywhere else would be preposterous——" And then, once more, he fell into that strange, disconcerting silence.

The last time they two had walked down under the beeches at night had been some three weeks ago. Laura and Godfrey had dined with the Tropenells, and then Godfrey had said that he had to go home and do some work, leaving her to stay on, for nearly an hour, with the mother and son.

Oliver's torch had gone out that evening, and he had suggested, a little diffidently, that Laura should take his arm; smiling, she had laid the tips of her fingers lightly on his sleeve. She had felt so happy then, so happy, and absolutely at her ease, with her companion....

Tears welled up in her eyes. She was grateful for the darkness, but her trembling voice betrayed her as she exclaimed, "Oliver? I do again ask you to forget what happened yesterday, and to forgive me for the things I said. I'm very sorry that I spoke as I did."

He stopped walking, and put out his torch. "Don't be sorry," he said, in a low, constrained voice. "It's far better that I should know exactly how you feel. Of course I was surprised, for I'd always had a notion that women regarded love from a more ideal standpoint than men seem able to do. But I see now that I was mistaken." Some of the bitterness with which his heart was still full and overflowing crept into his measured voice. "I think you will believe me when I say that I did not mean to insult you——"

He was going on, but she interrupted him.

"—I'm sorry—sorry and ashamed too, Oliver, of what I said. Please—please forget what happened——"

He turned on her amid the dark shadows.

"If *I* forget, will *you*?" he asked sombrely.

And she answered, "Yes, yes—indeed I will! But before we put what happened yesterday behind us forever, do let me tell you, Oliver, that I *am* grateful, deeply grateful, for your——" she hesitated painfully, and then murmured "your affection."

But Oliver Tropenell did not meet her half-way, as she had perhaps thought he would. He was torn by conflicting feelings, cursing himself for having lost his self-control the day before, and yet, even so, deep in his subtle, storm-tossed mind, not altogether sorry for what had happened.

And so it was she who went on, speaking slowly and with difficulty: "I know that I have been to blame! I know that I ought never to have spoken of Godfrey as I have sometimes allowed myself to do to you. According to his lights, he is a good husband, and I know that I have been—that I am—a bitter disappointment to him."

He muttered something—she did not hear what it was, and she hurried on: "What I have wanted—and oh, Oliver, I have wanted it so much—is a friend," almost he heard the unspoken words, "not a lover."

She put out her hand in the darkness and laid it, for a moment, on his arm. And then, suddenly, in that moment of, to him, exquisite, unhoped-for contact, Oliver Tropenell swore to himself most solemnly that he would rest satisfied with what she would, and could, grant him. And so—

"I know that," he said in measured, restrained tones. "And I have made up my mind to be that friend, Laura. We will both forget what happened yesterday. If you are ashamed, I am a hundred times more so! And do believe me when I tell you that what you said about Godfrey—why, I've forgotten it already—had nothing to do with my outburst. I'm a lonely man, my dear, and somehow, without in the least meaning it, I know, you crept into my heart and filled it all.

But already, since yesterday, I've come to a more reasonable frame of mind."

He waited a moment, despising himself for uttering such lying words, and then he went on, this time honestly meaning what he said: "Henceforth, Laura, I swear that I'll never again say a word to you that all the world might not hear. I never did, till yesterday——"

"I know, I know," she said hurriedly. "And that was why I was so surprised."

"Let's put it all behind us and go back to 'as we were'!" He was speaking now with a sort of gruff, good-humoured decision, and Laura sighed, relieved, and yet—so unreasonable a being is woman—unsatisfied.

The light from his torch flashed again, and they walked on, under the dark arch of leaves and branches, till they were close to the open road.

And there Laura said, "I wish you would leave me here, Oliver. I feel sure that Aunt Letty is waiting up for you."

He answered her at once. "It won't make more than five minutes' difference. I'll only walk as far as the lodge. It's a lonely little stretch of road."

"Lonely?" she repeated. "Why, there isn't a bit of it that isn't within hail of Rosedean!"

And then, determined to go back to their old easy companionship, that companionship which had lately become so easy and so intimate that when with him she had often spoken a passing thought aloud, "Katty came home to-day. I must try and see her to-morrow. She's a plucky creature, Oliver! I wish that Aunt Letty liked her better than she does."

He answered idly, "There's nothing much either to like or dislike in Mrs. Winslow—at least so it always seems to me."

But she answered quickly, defensively, "There's a great deal to like in her—when I think of Katty Winslow I feel ashamed of myself. I've known her do such kind things! And then she's so good about Godfrey—I don't know what Godfrey would do without her. They knew each other as children. It's as if she was his sister. All that little Pewsbury world which bores me so, is full of interest to them both. I'm always glad when she's at Rosedean. I only wish she didn't go

away so often—Godfrey does miss her so!"

"Yes, I know he does," he said drily.

They walked on in silence till they were close to the low lodge.

Laura Pavely held out her hand, and Oliver Tropenell took it in his cool, firm grasp for a moment.

"Good-night," he said. "I suppose we shall meet some time to-morrow?"

She answered eagerly. "Yes, do come in, any time! Alice and I shall be gardening before lunch. Godfrey won't be back till late, for he's sure to go straight to the Bank from the station. He'll be so much obliged to you about that trusteeship, Oliver. It's really very good of you to take so much trouble."

Oliver Tropenell answered slowly, "Yes, I think Godfrey will be pleased; and as I've already told you, I'll certainly take advantage of his pleasure, Laura, to suggest the plan about Gillie."

Once more she exclaimed: "If only you can persuade Godfrey to let me have Gillie at The Chase for a while, I shall be more than content!"

There was a thrill of excitement, of longing, in her low voice, as, without waiting for an answer, she walked away, leaving him looking after her. The patch of whiteness formed by the hem of her gown moved swiftly along—against the moonlit background of grass, trees, and sky. He stood and watched the moving, fluttering bit of whiteness till it vanished in the grey silvery haze. Then, slowly, he turned on his heel and made his way back home.

It was nearly a quarter of a mile from the lodge to The Chase, as the house was always called, but there was a rather shorter way across the grass, through trees; and Laura, when she came to where she knew the little path to be, left the carriage way, and stepped up on to the grass.

She felt oppressed, her soul filled with a piteous lassitude and weariness of

life, in spite of the coming return home of her only brother. She had been moved and excited, as well as made acutely unhappy, by what had happened yesterday morning. Mrs. Tropenell, as almost always happens in such a case, was not fair to Laura Pavely. Laura had been overwhelmed with surprise—a surprise in which humiliation and self-rebuke were intolerably mingled—and yes, a certain proud anger.

The words Oliver had said, and alas! that it should be so, the bitter, scornful words she had uttered in reply, had, she felt, degraded them both—she far, far more than him. At the time she had been too deeply hurt, too instinctively anxious to punish him, to measure her words. And now she told herself that she had spoken yesterday in a way no man would ever forget, and few, very few men would ever forgive. Though he had been kind to-night—very, very kind—his manner had altered, all the happy ease had gone.

Tears came into Laura Pavely's eyes; they rolled down her cheeks. Suddenly she found herself sobbing bitterly.

She stopped walking, and covered her face with her hands. With a depth of pain, unplumbed till now, she told herself that she would never, never be able to make Oliver understand why she had said those cruel stinging words. Without a disloyalty to Godfrey of which she was incapable, she could not hope to make him understand why she had so profound a distaste, ay, and contempt, for that which, if he had spoken truly yesterday, he thought the greatest thing in the world. With sad, leaden-weighted conviction she realised that there must always be between a man and a woman, however great their friendship and mutual confidence, certain barriers that nothing can force or clear.

She had believed, though as a matter of fact she had not thought very much about it, that Oliver Tropenell, in some mysterious way, was unlike ordinary men. As far as she knew, he had never "fallen in love." Women, who, as she could not help knowing, had always played so great a part in her brother Gillie's life, seemed not to exist—so far as Oliver Tropenell was concerned. He had never even seemed attracted, as almost every man was, by pretty Katty Winslow, the innocent *divorcée* now living at his very gates. So she, Laura, had allowed herself to slip into a close, intimate relationship which, all unknowingly to her, had proved most dangerous to him....

Still crying bitterly, she told herself that she had been too happy all this

summer. Godfrey had been kinder, less, less—she shrank from putting it into words—but yes, less ill-tempered, mean, and tiresome than usual. Oliver had had such a good effect on Godfrey, and she had honestly believed that the two were friends.

But how could they be friends if—if it was true that Oliver loved her? Laura Pavely knew nothing of the well-worn byways of our poor human nature.

Suddenly she threw her head back and saw the starlit sky above her. Somehow that wonderful ever-recurring miracle of impersonal, unearthly beauty calmed and comforted her. Drying her eyes, she told herself that something after all had survived out of yesterday's wreck. Her friend might be a man—a man as other men were; but he was noble, and singularly selfless, for all that. On the evening of the very day on which she had grievously offended and wounded him, he had written her a kindly letter, offering to be her trustee.

There had been moments to-day when she had thought of writing Mrs. Tropenell a note to say she did not feel well—and that she would not dine at Freshley that night. But oh, how glad she was now that a mixture of pride and feminine delicacy had prompted her to behave just as if nothing had happened, as if words which could never be forgotten had not been uttered between herself and Oliver! She had thought he would punish her this evening by being sulky and disagreeable—that was her husband's invariable method of showing displeasure. But with the exception of a word or two uttered very quietly, and more as if she, rather than he, had something to forgive, he had behaved as if yesterday had never been. He had heaped coals of fire upon her head, making it plain that even now he was only thinking of her—of her and of Gillie, of how he could pleasure them both by securing her a holiday with her only brother.

Every word of that restrained, not very natural, conversation held just now under the beech trees re-echoed in her ears. She seemed to hear again the slowly uttered, measured words, "I am going to be your friend, Laura"....

And then there came over Laura Pavely an extraordinary sensation of moral and mental disturbance. Once more everything which had happened to-day was blotted out, and she went back to yesterday morning. Again she lived through those moments during which Oliver Tropenell had offered her what was to him the greatest thing man has it in him to bestow—love, even if illicit, unsanctified. And she had rejected the gift with a passion of scorn, spurning it as she would

have done a base and unclean thing.

Years and years ago, in her quiet, shadowed youth, she too had believed love to be the most precious, beautiful thing in life. Then, with marriage to Godfrey Pavely had come the conviction that love was not beautiful, but very, very ugly —at its best one of those dubious gifts to man by which old Dame Nature works out certain cunning designs of her own. And yet, when something of what she believed to be the truth had been uttered by her during that terrible tense exchange of words, she had seen how she, in her turn, had shocked, and even repelled, Oliver Tropenell.

Once more sobs welled up from her throat, once more she covered her face with her hands....

At last, feeling worn out with the violence of an emotion which, unknown to her, vivified her whole being, she walked on till the fine Tudor front of the old house which was at once so little and so much her home, rose before her. It was an infinite comfort to know that Godfrey would not be there waiting for her, and that she would be able to make her way up alone through the sleeping house to the room which opened into her child's nursery.

CHAPTER V

MRS. TROPENELL, waiting for Oliver to come back, lost count of time, and yet not much more than half an hour had gone by before she heard the sound of a glazed door, which opened on to the garden from a distant part of the house, burst open.

In that sound she seemed to hear all the impatience, all the pain, all the frustrated longing she divined in her son.

She got up from her chair and stood listening. Would he go straight upstairs —as she, in her stormy, passionate youth, would have done in his place?

But no—with a feeling of rushing, unreasoning joy she heard him coming across the hall. A moment later he walked through into the room and came and stood before her.

"Mother," he said, "it's a beautiful night. Would you care to come into the garden for a few minutes?"

As soon as they had stepped out of the French window into the darkness, she took his arm.

"You don't feel it cold?" he asked solicitously.

"Oh no," she said, surprised. "I'm so little cold, Oliver, that I shouldn't at all mind going over to the blue bench, and sitting down."

They went across the grass, to a curious painted Italian bench which had been a gift of the woman who was so much in both their thoughts.

And there, "I want to ask you a question," he said slowly. "What led to the marriage of Laura Baynton and Godfrey Pavely? From something she once said to me, I gather she thinks that you approved of it."

She felt as if his eyes were burning her in the darkness, and as she hesitated, hardly knowing what to say, he went on, and in his voice there was something

terribly accusing.

"Did *you* make the marriage, mother? Did you really advise her to take that fellow?"

The questions stung her. "No," she answered coldly. "I did nothing of the kind, Oliver. If you wish to know the truth, the person who was most to blame was your friend Gillie, Laura's brother. Laura adored her brother. There was nothing in the world she wouldn't have done for him, and she married Godfrey—it seems a strange thing to look back on now—to please Gillie."

"But she met Pavely here?"

"Yes, of course she did. As you know, she very often stayed with me after her father died, and when Gillie Baynton, instead of making a home for her, was getting into scrape after scrape, spending her money as well as his own."

He muttered, "Gillie knew she was to have money later."

She went on: "And then Godfrey Pavely in love is a very different person from Godfrey Pavely—well, out of love. He was set on marrying Laura, and that over years. He first asked her when she was seventeen, and they married when she was twenty-one. In the interval he had done Gillie many good turns. In fact Godfrey bought Laura from Gillie. That, Oliver, is the simple truth."

She waited for him to make some kind of comment, but he said nothing, and she went on, a tinge of deep, yearning sadness in her voice, "Don't let your friends, or rather their incompatibility of temper—" she hesitated, and then rather solemnly ended her sentence with the words, "affect *our* relations, my son."

"I'm sorry, mother." Tropenell's voice altered, softened. "Forgive me for the way I spoke just now! I had got it into my head—I didn't know quite exactly why—that you had promoted the marriage. I see now that you really had nothing to do with it."

"I won't say that! It's difficult to remember exactly what did happen. Godfrey never wearied in his slow, inexorable pursuit of Laura. I think that at last she was touched by his constancy. She knew nothing then of human nature—she knows nothing of it now."

He muttered, "Poor girl! Poor unfortunate girl!" and his way of uttering the commonplace words hurt his mother shrewdly.

Suddenly she made up her mind to say at least one true thing to him. It was a thing she knew well no one but herself would ever say to Oliver.

"I am in a position to know," she said, "and I want you to believe it when I tell you, that if Laura is to be as much pitied as you believe her to be—so too, I tell you, Oliver, is Godfrey! If I had known before the marriage, even an hour before the actual wedding, what I learnt afterwards—I mean as to their amazingly different ideals of life—I would have done *anything* to stop it!"

"What d'you mean exactly, mother, by different ideals of life?"

As he asked the question he moved away from her a little, but he turned round and bent his eyes on to her face—dimly, whitely, apparent in the starlit, moonlit night.

She did not speak at once. It seemed to her that the question answered itself, and yet she felt that he was quivering with impatience for her answer.

"The French," she said in a low voice, "have a very good phrase to describe the kind of man Godfrey is. Godfrey Pavely is a *le moyen homme sensuel*—the typical man of his kind and class, Oliver—the self-satisfied, stolid, unimaginative upper middle-class. Such men feel that the world, their English world at any rate, has been made for them, built up by the all-powerful entity they call God in their personal interest. They know scarcely anything of what is going on, either above or below them, and what is more, they do not really care, as long as they and their like prosper."

Oliver nodded impatiently. He knew all that well enough!

His mother went on: "Godfrey Pavely ought to have married some rather clever, rather vulgar-natured, rather pretty girl, belonging to his own little world of Pewsbury. Then, instead of being what he now is, an uncomfortable, not over contented man, he would have been, well—what his worthy father was before him. That odd interest in queer, speculative money dealings, is the unfortunate fellow's only outlet, Oliver, for what romance is in him."

"I wonder if you're right, mother?"

"I'm sure I am."

There came a long silence between them.

Mrs. Tropenell could see her son in outline, as it were, his well-shaped head, and long, lean, finely proportioned body. He was sitting at the further end of the bench, and he was now staring right before him. She found it easier—far easier—to speak of Godfrey than of Laura. And so, musingly, she went on:

"Looking back a dozen years, I can think of several young women whom Godfrey would have done well to consider——"

"I can certainly think of one, mother," he said, and in the darkness there came a bitter little smile over his face.

"You mean Katty Winslow? Yes—I think you're right, my dear. When Godfrey turned from Katty to Laura, he made a terrible mistake. Katty, in the old days, had very much the same ambitions, and the same social aspirations, as himself. She was really fond of him too! She would have become—what's the odious word?—'smart.' And Godfrey would have been proud of her. By now he would have stood for Parliament, and then, in due course, would have come a baronetcy. Yes, if the gods had been kind, Godfrey Pavely would have married poor little Katty—he didn't behave over well to her, you know!"

"It seems to me that Mrs. Winslow has made quite a good thing of her life, mother."

"Do you really think that, Oliver?"

"Yes, I do. She managed very cleverly, so I'm told, to get rid of that worthless husband of hers, and now she's got that pretty little house, and that charming little garden, and as much of Godfrey as she seems to want." He spoke with a kind of hard indifference.

"Katty's not the sort of woman to be really satisfied with a pretty little house, a charming little garden, and a platonic share in another woman's husband."

"Then she'll marry again. People seem to think her very attractive."

There was a long pause.

"Mother?"

"Yes, my dearest."

"To return to Laura—what should have been *her* fate had the gods been kind?"

She left his question without an answer so dangerously long as to create a strange feeling of excitement and strain between them. Then, reluctantly, she answered it. "Laura might have been happiest in not marrying at all, and in any case she should have married late. As to what kind of man would have made her happy, of course I have a theory."

"What is your theory?" He leant towards her, breathing rather quickly.

"I think," she said hesitatingly, "that Laura might have been happy with a man of the world, older than herself, who would have regarded his wife as a rare and beautiful possession. Such a man would have understood the measure of what she was willing and able to give—and to withhold. I can also imagine Laura married to a young idealist, the kind of man whose attitude to his wife is one of worship, whose demands, if indeed they can be called demands, are few, infrequent——"

Mrs. Tropenell stopped abruptly. What she had just said led to a path she did not mean to follow. But she soon realised with dismay that she had said too much, or too little.

"Do you mean," said Oliver hoarsely, "that Pavely—that Pavely——" he left his question unfinished, but she knew he meant to exact an answer and she did not keep him waiting long for it. Still she chose her words very carefully.

"I think that Godfrey Pavely, in the matter of his relations to his wife, is a very unfortunate, and, some would say, a very ill-used man, Oliver."

Oliver Tropenell suddenly diminished the distance between his mother and himself. The carefully chosen, vague words she had just uttered had been like balm poured into a festering and intolerably painful wound.

"Poor devil!" he said contemptuously, and there was a rather terrible tone of triumph, as well as of contempt, in the muttered exclamation.

Mrs. Tropenell was startled and, what she seldom was, frightened. She felt she was face to face with an elemental force—the force of hate.

She repeated his last words, but in how different a spirit, in how different a tone! "Poor devil? Yes, Oliver, Godfrey is really to be pitied, and I ask you to believe me, my son, when I say that he does do his duty by Laura according to his lights."

"Mother?" He put out his hand in the darkness and just touched hers. "Why is it that Laura is so much fonder of you than you are of Laura? You don't respect —or even like—Godfrey?"

She protested eagerly. "But I *am* fond of Laura—very, very fond, Oliver! But though, as you say, I neither really like nor respect Godfrey, I can't help being sorry for him. He once said to me—it's a long time ago—'I thought I was marrying a woman, but I've married a marble statue. I'm married to something like *that*'—and he pointed to 'The Wingless Victory' your father brought me, years ago, from Italy. Godfrey is an unhappy man, Oliver—come, admit that you know that?"

"I think she's far, far more unhappy than he is! No man with so thoroughly good an opinion of himself is ever *really* unhappy. Still, it's a frightful tangle."

He stopped short for a moment, then in a very low voice, he asked her, "Is there no way of cutting it through, mother?" Suddenly he answered his own question in a curiously musing, detached tone. "I suppose the only way in which such a situation is ever terminated is by death."

"Yes," she said slowly, "but it's not a usual termination. Still, I have known it happen." More lightly she went on: "If Laura died, Godfrey wouldn't escape Katty a second time. And one must admit that she would make him an almost perfect wife."

"*And if Godfrey died, mother?*"

Mrs. Tropenell felt a little tremor of fear shoot through her burdened heart. This secret, intimate conversation held in the starry night was drifting into strange, sinister, uncharted channels. But her son was waiting for an answer.

"I don't know how far Laura's life would alter for the better if Godfrey died. I

suppose she would go on much as she does now. And, Oliver——"

"Yes, mother."

"I should pity and—rather despise the man who would waste his life in an unrequited devotion."

He made an impatient movement. "Then do you regard response as essential in every relationship between a man and a woman?"

"I have never yet known a man who did not regard it as essential," she said quietly, "and that, however he might consciously or unconsciously pretend to be satisfied with—nothing."

"I once knew a man," he said, in a low, tense voice, "who for years loved a woman who seemed unresponsive, who forced him to be content with the merest crumbs of—well, *she* called it friendship. And yet, mother, that man was happy in his love. And towards the end of her life the woman gave all that he had longed for, all he had schooled himself to believe it was not in her to give—but it had been there all the time! She had suffered, poor angel, more than he—" his voice broke, and his mother, turning towards him, laid for a moment her hand on his, as she whispered, "Was that woman at all like Laura, my darling?"

"Yes—as far as a Spaniard, and a Roman Catholic, can be like Laura, she was like Laura."

Even as he spoke he had risen to his feet, and during their short walk, from the bench where they had been sitting through the trees and across the lawn, neither spoke to the other. But, as he opened the house door, he said, "Good-night. I'm not coming in now; I'm going for a walk. I haven't walked all day." He hesitated a moment: "Don't be worried—I won't say don't be frightened, for I don't believe, mother, that anything could ever frighten you—if you hear me coming in rather late. I've got to think out a rather difficult problem—something connected with my business."

"I hope Gillie hasn't been getting into any scrape since you've come home?"

But she only spoke by way of falling in with his humour. Nothing mattered to her, or to him, just now, except—Laura.

He said hastily, "Oh no, things have been going very well out there. You must remember, mother, that Baynton's scrapes never affect his work."

He spoke absently, and she realised that he wanted to be away, by himself, to think over some of the things she had said to him, and so she turned and went slowly up the staircase, and passed through into her own bedroom without turning up the light.

Walking over to her window, she gazed down into the moonlit space beneath. But she could see no moving shadow, hear no sound. Oliver had padded away across the grass, making for the lonely downs which encircled, on three sides, the house.

Before turning away from her window, Mrs. Tropenell covered her face with her hands; she was fearfully moved, shaken to the depths of her heart. For the first time Oliver had bared his soul before her. She thrilled with pride in the passionate, wayward, in a measure nobly selfless and generous human being whom she had created.

How strange, how amazing that Laura made no response to that ardent, exalted passion! But if amazing, then also, from what ought to be every point of view, how fortunate! And yet, unreasonable though it was, Mrs. Tropenell felt sharply angered with Laura, irritated by that enigmatic, self-absorbed, coldness of hers. What a poor maimed creature, to be so blind, so imperceptive, to the greatest thing in the world! Dislike, a physical distaste for the unlucky Godfrey which seemed sometimes to amount to horror, were this beautiful woman's nearest approach to passion.

CHAPTER VI

AT Rosedean, the small, mid-Victorian house which every one going to and fro between Freshley Manor and Lawford Chase was bound to pass by, Mrs. Winslow sat in her drawing-room waiting for Godfrey Pavely.

He was coming in to see her on his way home from Pewsbury, where, at the Bank, he spent each day at least six of his waking hours.

All the summer, up to to-day, Mrs. Winslow had always had tea in the garden, but there was now a freshness in the air, and she thought they would find it more comfortable indoors than out. Still, she had opened wide the long French window, and the wind blew in, laden with pungent autumnal scents.

Katty—the old childish name still clung to her—was a very clever woman. She possessed the power of getting the utmost out of the people round her, whether they were friends, acquaintances, or servants. Her little garden was exquisitely kept, and there was no month of the year when it did not look charming. Her little house, so far as was possible on very limited means, was perfectly ordered.

Perhaps one secret of her success lay in the fact that she was able to do everything herself that she asked others to do for her. Katty was a good gardener, an excellent cook, and an exceptionally clever dressmaker. Yet she was the last woman to make the mistake so many clever people make—of keeping a dog and doing the barking oneself. Katty was willing to show those she employed exactly how she wanted a thing done, but she expected them to learn how to do it quickly and intelligently. She had no use for the idle or the stupid.

Katty Winslow was thirty-one, but she looked much younger. She was an exceedingly pretty woman, with brown eyes, a delicately clear, white and pink complexion, and curling chestnut hair. She took great pains with her appearance, and with her health. Thus she ate and drank to rule, and almost walked to rule.

Early this last summer a bit of cruel bad luck had befallen Mrs. Winslow. She had caught scarlet fever while on a visit, and for some days had been very ill. But, perhaps as a result of the long, dull convalescence, she now looked even

prettier, and yes, younger, than she had done before.

The only daughter of a well-connected but exceedingly poor half-pay officer, Katherine Fenton, during a girlhood which lasted till she was four-and-twenty, had been undisputed belle of Pewsbury, and of a country-side stretching far beyond the confines of that fine old county town. Like all beauties, she had had her triumphs and her disappointments; and then, rather suddenly, she had made what had seemed the irretrievable mistake of an unhappy marriage.

Bob Winslow had been weak, vain, ill-tempered, and, to a certain extent, vicious. Thus his relations had welcomed his marriage to a clever, capable young woman, who it was supposed would make, and keep, him straight. The fact that she had no fortune had been regarded as unimportant—indeed, Bob Winslow had made on his bride what was regarded in the Pewsbury world as the splendid marriage settlement of twelve thousand pounds.

Four and a half per cent, on that sum was now Mrs. Winslow's only income, and out of that income there were still being paid off heavy divorce costs, for Bob Winslow, when it had come to the point, had put up a great fight for his Katty. Not only had he defended the case, but he had brought on his side vague counter-charges. The Judge, rather unkindly, had observed that the petitioner had been "somewhat imprudent," but even so Katty had come out of the painful ordeal very well—so much was universally allowed, even by the few people in Pewsbury who had always disliked her, and who did not think she had treated her husband well.

Godfrey and Laura Pavely had both been very kind to Katty over the matter of the divorce—indeed, Mrs. Winslow had actually stayed at Lawford Chase for many weeks during that troubled time, and Laura's countenance had been of great value to her. This was now three years ago, and, though they had nothing in common, the two women remained good friends, as well as what is sometimes less usual, good neighbours.

In nothing had Katty shown herself cleverer than in her management of Laura. In Laura Pavely's imagination Katty Winslow had her fixed place as a friend of Godfrey's childhood, and that though he was nine years older. Mrs. Pavely regarded Mrs. Winslow much as she would have done a pleasant-natured sister-in-law, and she had been glad to do all that she could for her. When some one had suggested that Katty should become Godfrey Pavely's tenant at

Rosedean, Laura had thought it an excellent idea.

It was the fashion to call Rosedean ugly. The house had been built in the 'sixties, by a retired butcher and grazier, and was of red brick with white facings. But it was well built, and had far more real distinction of appearance than the Queen Anne villas which now surrounded Pewsbury. Also, Rosedean had been built on the site of an old farmhouse, and Katty's lawn was fringed with some fine old trees, while a grand old holly hedge concealed a well-stocked kitchen garden. On the other side of the house were stabling for two horses, a coach-house, and a paddock.

Katty had devoted a great deal of successful thought to the arrangement of her dwelling. She knew she could neither compete with the stately beauty of Laura's Tudor mansion, nor with the old-fashioned eighteenth-century charm of Mrs. Tropenell's house, so she wisely made up her mind that her surroundings should be simply bright, pretty and cosy. Her drawing-room was in its way a delightful room, and those walking through into it, from the rather dark, early Victorian hall, gained an instant impression of coolness in summer, of warmth in winter, of cheerfulness and comfort at all times.

No one but Katty herself knew the trouble to which she had been to get the exact pattern of calendered chintz which she had made up her mind to obtain. Katty also kept to herself the amount which she had spent, out of her small reserve, on the thoroughly good, comfortable easy-chairs, of varying shape, height, and depth, which played such an important, if unobtrusive, part in the comfort of her visitors.

Every chair in Katty's sitting-room was an easy chair, with the exception of two gilt ones which were of their kind good, and which she had bought at a sale. They, however, were never moved away from the places where they stood, flanking a quaint, old-fashioned cabinet now filled with some beautiful old china which had come to Katty from a grandmother.

Yet another peculiarity of Katty's sitting-room was the absence of pictures. Their place was taken by mirrors. Above the mantelpiece on which stood six delicately charming Dresden china figures was a looking-glass of curious octagonal shape, framed in rosewood. Opposite the French window which opened into the garden was fixed a long, narrow mirror with a finely carved gilt wood frame. This mirror gave an air of distinction to the room which would

otherwise have been lacking, and it also enabled Katty to see at any moment how she was looking, whether her burnished chestnut-brown hair was quite tidy, and her gown fresh-looking and neat.

There had been a time in her life when Katty Winslow had been passionately fond of beautiful clothes, and able to indulge her taste. Now, all she could hope to attain was freshness and neatness. That she achieved these was to her credit, for they too cost, if not money, then a good deal of thought and time, on the part of their possessor.

Godfrey Pavely had walked out from Pewsbury. From the Bank in the High Street to Rosedean was rather over two miles, and he had gone along at a steady, jog-trot pace till he had come in sight of the little house. Then he quickened his footsteps, and a feeling of pleasurable anticipation came over him.

The banker was very, very fond of his old friend and sometime sweetheart. He believed it to be a straightforward, honest affection, though he could not but be aware, deep in his heart, that "to it" was just that little touch of sentiment which adds salt and savour to most of the close friendships formed between a man and a woman.

As a matter of fact, Godfrey Pavely was now happier in Katty Winslow's company than he was in that of any one else. Not only did she ply him with a good deal of delicate flattery, which caused him always to feel better pleased with himself when at Rosedean than when he was at The Chase, but a great and real bond between them was their mutual interest in all the local happenings and local gossip of the neighbourhood.

Laura was frankly indifferent to all that concerned the town of Pewsbury and the affairs of those whom Mrs. Tropenell called the Pewsburyites. She was not disagreeable about it; she simply didn't care. Katty, in spite of her frequent absences, for she was a popular visitor with a large circle of acquaintances, always came home full of an eager wish to learn all that had happened while she had been away.

Little by little, imperceptibly as regarded himself, the banker had fallen into

the way of telling this woman, who had so oddly slipped back into his life, everything which concerned and interested himself, every detail of his business, and even, which he had no right to do, the secrets of his clients.

But to this entire confidence there was one outstanding exception. Godfrey Pavely never discussed with Katty Winslow his relations with his wife. Laura's attitude to himself caused him, even now, sharp, almost intolerable, humiliation. Only to Mrs. Tropenell did he ever say a word of his resentment and soreness—and that only because she had been the unwilling confidant of both husband and wife during that early time in their married life when the struggle between Godfrey and Laura had been, if almost wordless, at its sharpest and bitterest.

On one occasion, and on one only, when with Katty Winslow, had Pavely broken his guarded silence. He had been talking, in a way which at once fascinated and tantalised Katty, of his growing wealth, and suddenly he had said something as to his having no son to inherit his fortune. "It's odd to think that some day there will come along a man, a stranger to me, who will benefit by everything I now do——" and as she had looked up at him, at a loss for his meaning, he had gone on, slowly, "I mean the man whom Mrs. Tropenell and Laura between them will select for my girl's husband."

Katty, looking at him very straight out of her bright brown eyes, had exclaimed, "You may have a son yet, Godfrey!"

She had been startled by the look of pain, of rage, and of humiliation that had come into his sulky, obstinate-looking face, as he answered shortly, "I think that's very unlikely."

Had Godfrey Pavely been a more imaginative man, he would probably by now have come to regret, with a deep, voiceless regret, that he had not married Katty instead of Laura—but being the manner of man he was, he had, so far, done nothing of the sort. And yet? And yet, at one time, say fifteen years ago, he had very nearly married Katty. It was a fact which even now he would have denied, but which she never forgot.

In those days Godfrey Pavely had been a priggish, self-important young man of twenty-six, with perhaps not so good an opinion of women as he had now, for a man's opinion of women always alters, one way or another, as he grows older.

Katty, at eighteen, had enjoyed playing on the cautious, judgematical

Godfrey's emotions. So well had she succeeded that at one time he could hardly let a day go by without trying to see and to be with her alone. But, though strongly attracted by her instinctive, girlish wiles, he was also, quite unknowingly to her, repelled by those same wiles.

Poor Katty had made herself, in those days that now seemed to both of them so very, very long ago, a little too cheap. Her admirer, to use a good old word, knew that her appeal was to a side of his nature which it behooved him to keep in check, if he was not "to make a fool of himself." And so, just when their little world—kindly, malicious, censorious, as the case might be—was expecting to hear of their engagement, Godfrey Pavely suddenly left Pewsbury to spend a year in a great Paris discount house.

The now staid country banker did not look back with any pride or pleasure to that year in France; he had worked, but he had also ignobly played, spending, rather joylessly, a great deal of money in the process. Then, having secretly sown his wild oats, he had come home and settled down to a further time of banking apprenticeship in London, before taking over the sound family business.

Almost at once, on his return to England, he had made up his mind to marry the beautiful, reserved, the then pathetically young Laura Baynton, who was so constantly with Mrs. Tropenell at Freshley Manor.

Time went on, and Laura held out; but little by little, perhaps because he saw her so seldom, he broke down her resistance. His father had bought the Lawford Chase estate as a great bargain, many years before, and had been content to let it on a long lease. Godfrey, on becoming his own master at thirty, determined to live there, and his marriage to Laura followed a year later.

During their honeymoon in Paris—a honeymoon which was curiously and painfully unlike what Godfrey had supposed his honeymoon would and must be—he saw in a paper a notice of Katty Fenton's engagement. Though not given to impulsively generous actions, he went out and bought for Katty, in the Rue de la Paix, a jewelled pendant Laura had just refused to allow him to buy for her. In return he had received what had seemed at the time a delightful letter of thanks, to which was the following postscript, "There's no harm in my saying *now*, that you, dear Godfrey, were my first love! I've always wanted you to know that. I've always been afraid that you only thought me a sad little flirt."

The confession, and the shrewd thrust, which was so much truer than he

thought Katty knew, moved him, and he had told himself sorely that Katty's husband at any rate would be a very lucky fellow.

Then once more he had forgotten Katty till one day, years later, "Mrs. Winslow" had suddenly been shown into his private room at the Bank.

Looking, as he had at once become aware, even prettier and more attractive than when he had last seen her, she had said quietly, "I'm in great trouble, Godfrey, and I've come down from London to consult you about it. Your father and mine were friends" (a rather exaggerated statement that—but Pavely was in no mood to cavil), "and I don't know who else to go to."

Shortly and simply she had described the dreadful existence she had led since her marriage—then, suddenly, she had rolled up her right sleeve and shown the livid bruises made by Bob Winslow the night before, in a fit of drunken anger, on the slender, soft, white arm.

Unwontedly moved, the more so that this now unfamiliar Katty seemed to make no excessive demand either on his pity or on his emotions, Godfrey Pavely had thrown himself into the complicated, unsavoury business, and very soon his old-new friend had brought him to advise her in the sense she wished. But it was Laura who had suggested that poor Mrs. Winslow should come and stay with them during the divorce proceedings, and while she had been at Lawford Chase, Katty had avoided, rather than sought out, the master of the house.

In the matter of Rosedean the banker had behaved in what he himself considered a very handsome manner. Not only had he let the house to Katty for about a third of what he could have got for it in the open market, but he had allowed her a hundred pounds for "doing it up." He believed himself to have also suggested the arrangement by which she obtained the free services, for a certain number of half-days each week, of a very intelligent Scotch under-gardener who was in his employ.

He had never had reason to regret his kindness. On the contrary, he and Katty had become, as time went on, closer and closer friends, and more and more had he come to miss her during her frequent absences from home.

Some months ago he had even ventured to tell her that he thought she gadded about a bit too much! Why couldn't she be content to stay quietly at Rosedean? "Look at me and Laura," he had exclaimed. "We hardly ever go away for a

holiday, and we very seldom pay a visit!" Katty had shaken her pretty head playfully: "Ah, but you don't know how lonely I am sometimes! Laura is most dear and kind to me, but you know, Godfrey, I don't see her often——"

He had not liked to remind her that he very often did.

Then something happened which quite curiously quickened Godfrey Pavely's unavowed feeling for Katty. Oliver Tropenell, a virtual stranger to them all, came home from Mexico to spend the summer in England with his mother. And three times, during Oliver's first fortnight in England, Godfrey arrived at Rosedean to find the then stranger there. On these three occasions each man had tried to sit the other out, and finally they had left the house together. As a result of these meetings Godfrey soon caught himself wondering with a mixture of feelings he did not care to analyse, whether Tropenell could possibly be thinking of marrying Katty?

He found the notion intolerable.

Then came a strange turn to the situation. Katty had gone away, on one of those tiresome little visits she was so fond of paying, and Providence, which means women, especially any woman placed in an ambiguous position, to stay quietly at home, had caught her out! She had fallen ill, when on a visit, of scarlet fever, and she had been compelled to stay away six weeks. During those weeks he, Godfrey Pavely, and Oliver Tropenell had become friends—on more intimate terms of friendship than Pavely had ever expected to find himself with any man. This was, of course, partly owing to the fortunate fact that Laura liked Oliver too, and didn't seem to mind how often he came and went to The Chase.

But Godfrey Pavely had a tenacious memory. He did not forget that for a little while, at any rate, Oliver had seemed to enjoy being in Katty's company. And when Laura, more than once since Mrs. Winslow's return to Rosedean, had suggested asking Katty in to dinner to meet Oliver, her husband coldly vetoed the proposal.

CHAPTER VII

ONLY Harber, the woman who, after having been maid to Katty during her troubled married life, had stayed on with her as house-parlourmaid and general factotum, was aware of how very often Mr. Pavely called at Rosedean on his daily walk home from Pewsbury. To-day he had hardly pressed the bell-knob before the front door opened. It was almost as if Harber had been waiting for him in the hall.

As he put down his hat and stick he was conscious of feeling very glad that he was going to see Katty. Mrs. Winslow had again been away, was it for four days, or five? It's true that for part of that time he himself had been to London, and very busy, but even so the time had seemed long. He told himself that he had a hundred things to say to her, and he even felt a little thrill of excitement as he followed the servant through the hall.

And Katty? Katty, who the moment she had heard the front-door bell had quietly begun making the tea—she always made tea herself, with the help of a pretty spirit lamp—Katty also felt a queer little thrill, but for a very different reason. Since they had last met she had come to a certain resolution with regard to Godfrey Pavely, and though she did not mean to say anything to-day even remotely bearing on it, still it affected her, made her regard him with rather different eyes.

It is a great mistake to think that coldness and calculation always go together. Katty Winslow was calculating, but she was not cold. For once she had been quite honest when writing that odd little postscript to her letter of thanks for Godfrey Pavely's wedding present. Godfrey had, in very truth, been her first love, and she had suffered acutely in her heart, as well as in her pride, when he had run away. Even now, she felt as if there were a strong, secret, passionate link between them, and there was no day when she did not tell herself that she would have made the banker a perfect, and yes—a very happy wife.

Godfrey came into the drawing-room with a pleased, eager look on his face. He took his hostess's hand in his, and held it for perhaps a thought longer than he would have held, say, Mrs. Tropenell's hand. But the hand he now held was a soft, malleable little hand, not thin and firm, like that of Oliver's mother.

Katty was smiling at him, such a bright, friendly, pretty smile. "Sit down," she said softly. "And before we begin talking, take a cup of tea. You look very tired—and you're late, too, Godfrey. I was beginning to think that you weren't coming at all!"

And then he said something which surprised her, but which somehow chimed in quite surprisingly with what had been filling her busy, active brain of late.

"Jim Beath has been with me most of the afternoon," he spoke wearily, complainingly. "I had to ask him to lunch at the Club, and he stayed on and on."

Now the Beaths were by way of being intimate friends of Katty Winslow, and Jim Beath was a client of Godfrey Pavely.

"Oh, but that's very interesting!" she cried. "I've been wondering so much how that affair is going on—I do so hope it will be all right!"

And then, as she saw a shocked look come over her visitor's narrow, rather fleshy face, she said in a low voice, "You know how I feel about the divorce laws, Godfrey. I can't help it. They're horribly unfair—so—so ridiculous, in fact!"

As he remained silent, she went on, insisting on her own point of view far more than was her usual way when talking to her self-opinionated friend: "Don't you realise how hard it is that two people utterly unsuited to one another should have to go through that sort of horrid farce just in order to get free?"

He looked at her uncomfortably. Sometimes, even now, Katty startled him by the things she said. But how pretty she looked to-day, bending over the tea-things! Her burnished hair was dressed in thick soft coils, her white, well-manicured hand busily engaged in pouring him out just the cup of tea he liked, with the exact proportions of milk, cream, and sugar that were right—and which Laura never remembered.

So it was mildly that he answered: "I don't think the Beaths ought to want to

get what you call 'free.' Divorce was not instituted to meet a case like theirs—" he hesitated, and then with a certain effort he went on: "Divorce was instituted to meet a case like yours, Katty."

Godfrey Pavely was weary of the Beaths and of their divorce plot—for so he called it to himself. There were other things he wanted to talk to Katty about. Besides, he did not think that that sort of affair was a nice subject of discussion between a man and a woman, however intimate. In some ways Godfrey Pavely was very old-fashioned.

But she wouldn't let it alone. "Divorce *ought* to meet a case like theirs," she went on obstinately.

"My dear Katty! What would happen to the country if all the married people who didn't get on with one another were to separate?"

And then, looking at her defiant face, a most extraordinary and disagreeable suspicion darted into Godfrey Pavely's mind. Was it possible, conceivable, that Katty was thinking of Jim Beath as a second husband for herself? The thought shook him with anger and with repugnance. He felt he must have that out—here and now.

"Do you like Jim Beath?" he asked slowly; "I know you've been seeing a great deal of them this last year. In fact, he mentioned you to-day."

She could read him like a book, and she remained silent long enough to make him feel increasingly suspicious and uncomfortable.

But to-day Katty was not in the mood for a cat-and-mouse game, so she answered deliberately: "No, Godfrey, I can't say that I do like Jim Beath! I've tried to like him. But—well, I do thoroughly understand Nita's feeling towards him. He's so sarcastic—so hard and unsympathetic!" She waited a moment, then added significantly: "Still, I think he's behaving awfully well now. He'd have been quite willing to go on—he told me that himself. But when he saw that Nita was *really* unhappy, and that she was getting fond of another man, he made up his mind that he would do all he could to make her free."

Katty was playing rather nervously with the edge of the pretty tea-cloth, and Pavely wondered whether she was telling him the whole truth. She was flushed, and she looked unwontedly moved.

"It's a very odd thing for a man to do," he said coldly. "I mean a man being willing to give up his wife to another man."

"Why shouldn't he? When he doesn't love her, and when she positively dislikes him! Nita never understood Jim Beath—she was always afraid of him, and of his sharp, clever tongue. Of course it's sad about their little boy. But they've made a very good arrangement—they're going to share him. Jim will have the child half the year, and Nita the other half, till he goes to school—when they will have him for alternate holidays."

"You talk as if it was all settled!" Katty's visitor exclaimed crossly. "If they say as much to other people as they seem to do to you, they will never get their divorce—the King's Proctor is sure to intervene!"

Katty gave a quick, curious look at her visitor. Godfrey went too far—sometimes.

The thought flashed through her mind that she was wasting her life, her few remaining years of youth, on a man who would never be more to her than he was now, unless—unless, that is, she could bring him to the point of putting himself imaginatively, emotionally into Jim Beath's shoes. *Then* everything might be changed. But was there any hope of such a thing coming to pass?

But all she said, in a constrained tone, was, "Of course I ought not to have said anything of the matter to you at all. But I'm afraid, Godfrey, that I often do tell you things I ought to keep to myself. You must try and forget what I said."

He was surprised, bewildered, by the sudden steely coldness of her tone. "Of course you can say anything you like to say to me. Why, Katty, I tell you all my secrets!"

"Do you?" She glanced over at him rather sharply. "I don't think you tell me *all* your secrets, Godfrey."

He looked at her puzzled. "You *know* that I do," he said in a low voice. "Come, Katty, you're not being fair! It's because I have such a high regard for you, that I feel sorry when you talk as you've been talking just now—as if, after all, the marriage bond didn't matter."

But even as he said these words, Godfrey Pavely felt a wild impulse to throw

over the pretty little gimcrack tea-table, take Katty in his arms, and kiss her, kiss her, kiss her! He came back, with an inward start, to hear her exclaim,

"I don't consider the peculiar relations which exist between Nita and Jim Beath a marriage at all! They have nothing in common the one with the other. What interests him doesn't interest her——"

She waited a moment, saw that he was reddening uncomfortably, and then hurried on, driven by some sudden instinct that she was at last playing on the hidden chord she had so often longed to find and strike in Godfrey Pavely's sore heart: "Nita can't bear Jim to touch her—she will hardly shake hands with him! Do you call *that* a marriage?"

As he remained silent, she suddenly said in a voice so low as to be almost a whisper, "Forgive me, Godfrey. I—I ought not have said that to you."

He answered loudly, discordantly, "I don't know what you mean, Katty! Why shouldn't you say anything you like about these people? They are nothing, and less than nothing to me, and I don't suppose they're very much to you."

Even as he spoke he had got up out of the easy chair into which he had sunk with such happy content a few minutes before. "I must be going now," he said heavily, "Oliver Tropenell's coming in for a game of tennis at six."

She made no effort to keep him, though she longed to say to him: "Oliver Tropenell's been in your house, and in your garden, all afternoon. Both he and Laura would be only too pleased if you stayed on here till dinner-time."

But instead of saying that, she got up, and silently accompanied him to the front door.

There poor Godfrey did linger regretfully. He felt like a child who has been baulked of some promised treat—not by his own fault, but by the fault of those about him. "Will you be in to-morrow?" he asked abruptly. "I think I might come in a little earlier to-morrow, Katty."

"Yes, do come to-morrow! I seem to have a hundred things to say to you. I'm sorry we wasted the little time we had to-day in talking over those tiresome people and their matrimonial affairs."

There was also a look of regret in her face, and suddenly he told himself that he might have been mistaken just now, and that she had meant nothing—nothing in the least personal or—or probing, in what she had said. "Look here!" he said awkwardly. "If there's anything you really want to say—you said you had a hundred things to tell me—would you like me to come back for a few minutes? There's no great hurry, you know—I mean about Tropenell and his game."

She shook her head, and to his moved surprise, the tears came into her pretty brown eyes. "No, not now. I'm tired, Godfrey. It's rather absurd, but I haven't really got over my journey yet; I think I shall have to take your advice, and stay at home rather more."

For a long moment they advanced towards one another as if something outside themselves was drawing them together. Then Godfrey Pavely put out his hand, and grasped hers firmly. It was almost as if he was holding her back—at arm's length.

Katty laughed nervously. She shook her hand free of his, opened the door wide, and exclaimed: "Well! Good-bye till to-morrow then. My love to Laura."

He nodded, and was gone.

She shut the door behind him, and, turning, went slowly upstairs. She felt tired, weak, upset—and, what she did not often feel, restless and unhappy as well. It irritated her—nay, it did more than irritate, it hurt her shrewdly—to think of those three people who were about to spend a pleasant couple of hours together. She could so easily, so safely, have made a fourth at their constant meetings.

If only Laura Pavely were a little less absorbed in herself, a little more what ordinary people called good-natured! It would have been so natural for Laura, when she knew that Oliver Tropenell was coming to dinner, to send across to Rosedean, and ask her, Katty, to make a fourth. It was not as if Laura was at all jealous. She was as little jealous of Godfrey and of Katty—and at that thought Katty gave a queer, bitter little laugh which startled her, for she had laughed aloud—as was Godfrey of Laura and Oliver! With as little or as much reason? Katty would have given a great deal to be able to answer her own question. She thought she knew half the answer—but it was, alas! by far the less important half.

She opened the door of her bedroom, went through into it, and without troubling to take off her pretty blouse and freshly ironed linen skirt, walked deliberately to her bed, lay down, and shut her eyes—not to sleep but to think.

What had been forced upon Katty Winslow's notice during the last few weeks had created a revolution in her mind and in her plans.

For a while, after her return from that dreary period of convalescence in a seaside home, she, who was generally so positive, had doubted the evidence of her own eyes and senses. But gradually that which she would have deemed the last thing likely to happen had emerged, startlingly clear. Oliver Tropenell, to use Katty's own expression, had fallen madly in love with Laura Pavely. No woman could doubt that who saw them together. When Katty had left Rosedean, there had been the beginnings of—well, not exactly a flirtation, but a very pleasant friendship between Tropenell and herself. Now he hardly seemed to know that she existed.

But if it was only too plain to see how matters stood with Oliver, this was far from being the case as regarded Laura. Katty owned herself quite ignorant of Laura's real nature, and, as is so often the case with those who know nothing, she was inclined to believe that there was nothing to know.

Perhaps, after all, it was only because this man was the son of her friend that Laura allowed him to be always with her. They were always together—not always alone, for Oliver seemed to be at The Chase quite as much when Godfrey was at home, as at other times. But with Katty, she being the manner of woman she was, it was the other times which impressed her imagination. In the six short weeks she, Katty, had been away, Oliver Tropenell had evidently become a component part of Laura Pavely's life.

She knew, vaguely, how the two spent their time, and the knowledge irked her—the more that it suggested nothing of their real relations. Thus gardening was one of Laura's favourite occupations and few pleasures; and Oliver, who could never have gardened before—what gardening could there be to do in Mexico?—now spent hours out of doors with Laura, carrying out her behests, behaving just as an under-gardener would behave, when working under his

mistress's directions.

And Godfrey, instead of objecting to this extraordinary state of things, seemed quite pleased. Oliver, so much was clear, had become Godfrey Pavely's friend almost as much as he was Laura's.

As she lay there, straight out on her bed, Katty told herself with terrible bitterness that it was indeed an amazing state of things to which she had come back—one which altered her own life in a strange degree. She had not realised, till these last few weeks, how much Godfrey Pavely was to her, and how jealous she could become even of such an affection as his cordial liking of Oliver Tropenell.

Yet when Godfrey was actually with her, she retained all her old ascendency over him; in certain ways it had perhaps even increased. It was as if his unsuspecting proximity to another man's strong, secret passion warmed his sluggish, cautious nature.

But that curious fact had not made his friend Katty's part any the more easy of late. Far from it! There was no pleasing Godfrey in these days. He was hurt if she was cold; shocked, made uneasy in his conscience, if she responded in ever so slight a way to the little excursions in sentiment he sometimes half-ashamedly permitted himself.

Tears came into her eyes, and rolled slowly down her cheeks, as she recalled what had happened a few moments ago in the hall. He had been aching to take her in his arms and kiss her—kiss her as he had been wont to do, in the old days, in the shabby little lodging where she lived with her father. Poor little motherless girl, who had thought herself so clever. At that time she had believed herself to be as good as engaged to "young Mr. Pavely," as the Pewsbury folk called him. Even now she could remember, as if it had happened yesterday, the bitter humiliation, as well as the pain which had shaken her, when she had learnt, casually, of his sudden disappearance from Pewsbury.

What hypocrites men were! The fact that often they were unconscious hypocrites afforded Katty little consolation.

It was plain that Godfrey was quite unaware of Oliver's growing absorption in Laura, but that surely was not to his credit. A man of his age, and with his experience of life, ought to have known, ought to have guessed, ought to have

seen—by now! Instead, he remained absorbed in himself, in the tiresome little business interests of his prosperous life, in his new friendship for Oliver Tropenell, and—in that ambiguous, tantalising friendship with herself.

Again she told herself that she was wasting what remained to her of youth and of vitality over a thoroughly unsatisfactory state of things, and painfully she determined that, if what she had gradually come to plan since her return home did not come to pass, she would leave Rosedean, and make another life for herself elsewhere.

The things Katty toiled and schemed for had a way of coming to pass. She had planned her divorce long before it had actually taken place, at a time indeed when it seemed impossible to believe that it ever could take place. Bob Winslow had been adoringly, slavishly devoted to her for more than two-thirds of their married life, and it had taken her trouble and time to drive him into the courses it was necessary he should pursue to procure her freedom.

She had no doubt—there could be no doubt—that were Godfrey free he would turn to her instinctively at once. She was well aware of her power over him, and till lately she had been virtuously proud of what she imagined to be her loyalty to Laura. Also she had had no wish to make her own position at Rosedean untenable.

Even as it was, Godfrey came far too often to see her. Had she lived nearer to Pewsbury, even a mile nearer, his frequent calls on her would have meant a flood of ill-natured gossip in the little town.

Yes, the situation, from Katty's point of view, was thoroughly unsatisfactory, and, as far as she was concerned, it was time it was ended or mended. And then, once more, for the hundredth time, her restless, excited mind swung back to what was to her just now the real mystery, the all-important problem—the relations between Oliver Tropenell and Laura Pavely.

Of course it was possible—though Katty thought not likely—that Tropenell was still unaware of his passion for Laura. Perhaps he still disguised it under the name of "friendship." But even if that were so, such a state of things could not

endure for very long. Any day some trifling happening might open his eyes, and, yes—why not?—Godfrey's.

CHAPTER VIII

GODFREY PAVELY was standing in his private room at Pavely's Bank. It was only a little after ten, and he had not been in the room many minutes, yet already he had got up from his writing-table and moved over to the middle one of the three windows overlooking the prim, exquisitely kept walled garden, which even nowadays reminded him of his early childhood. He had gazed out of the window for a few moments, but now he stood with his back to the window, staring unseeingly before him, a piece of note paper crushed up in his hand.

For close on a hundred years his well-to-do careful-living forbears had passed their pleasant, uneventful lives in this spacious Georgian house, set in the centre of the wide High Street of the prosperous market town of Pewsbury.

What was now known as "Mr. Pavely's own room" had been the dining-room of his grandparents. He himself had always known it as part of the Bank, but it still had some of the characteristics of a private living-room. Thus, on the dark green walls hung a number of quaint family portraits, his great-grandfather, his grandfather and grandmother, two uncles who had died in youth, and a presentation portrait of his own father. These were arranged about and above the mantelpiece, opposite the place where stood his wide, leather-topped writing-table.

Taking up most of the wall opposite the windows was a bookcase of really distinguished beauty. Godfrey Pavely had been gratified to learn, some five or six years ago, that this piece of furniture was of very considerable value, owing to the fact that it was supposed to have been, in a special sense, the work and design of Chippendale himself. But just now, at this moment, he felt as if he hated the substantial old house and everything in it.

He had come into this room, twenty minutes ago, to find the usual pile of open letters on the table. On the top of the pile was an unopened envelope marked *Private*, and it was the contents of that envelope that he now held crushed up—not torn up—in his hand.

And as he stood there, staring before him unseeingly at the bookcase, there suddenly flashed into his mind a vision of the first time he had brought Laura

here, to his own room at the Bank. They had only just became engaged, and he was still feeling an almost oppressive joy of having compassed that which he had so steadfastly desired.

He could see her graceful figure walking through the mahogany door, he could almost hear her exclaim, "What a charming room, Godfrey! I can't help wishing that we were going to live here, in Pewsbury!"

She had gone over and stood exactly where he was standing now, and then she had turned and gazed into the walled garden, at that time brilliant with tulips and wallflowers. Coming round behind her, he had put his arm, a little awkwardly, round her shoulders. At once she had slipped from beneath his grasp, but not unkindly—only with a gentle word that at any moment some one might come in, and he, poor fool that he had been, had admired her maidenly delicacy....

He glanced down at the piece of notepaper he held in his hand, and, smoothing it out, he read it through for the tenth or twelfth time. Then, as there came a knock at the door, he hastily thrust it into his pocket.

"Come in!" he cried impatiently; and his head clerk came into the room.

Mr. Privet had a delicate, refined, thoughtful face. He was very much respected in the town, and regarded as an important, integral part of Pavely's Bank. He was one of the very few people in the world who were really attached to Godfrey Pavely, and he perceived at once that there was something wrong.

"We promised to send over to Mr. Johnson to say when you would be ready to see him, sir. Shall I send over now?"

"Yes—no. Tell him I'll be ready in half an hour. And, Privet?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've a rather important letter to write. Will you see that I'm not disturbed till I ring?"

The old man shut the door quietly, and Godfrey Pavely drew irresolutely towards his writing-table, the table where he did so much hard, good, and profitable work each day.

But he did not sit down at once; instead, he took the letter he had been so nearly caught reading out of his pocket, and once more he read it through—

"This is to warn you that there is a great deal of talk going on in Pewsbury and the surrounding neighbourhood about your wife and a certain gentleman who is a near neighbour of yours. It is well not to be jealous, but confidence may be carried too far. Try going home when you are not expected, and you will surely find them together.

"A WELL-WISHER TO THE
"PAVELY FAMILY."

The words had been written, or rather printed, in ink, on a very common sheet of notepaper—the kind of notepaper which is sold in penny packets in every village and small sweetstuff shop in the kingdom.

Now in theory there is nothing easier than to despise and disregard an anonymous letter. But in practice such a missive as Godfrey Pavely had just received, however vulgar, and even, as in this case, obviously written by a malicious person, invariably produces a horrible sensation of discomfort and acute uneasiness. For one thing, the fact that some unknown human being has devoted so much unwonted thought and spiteful interest to one's private affairs is in itself an ugly revelation.

In theory again, most people, if asked what they would do if they received an anonymous letter, would reply (1) that they would put it straight in the fire, or (2) go straight with it to the police. But in practice an anonymous letter, unless the recipient at once guesses with certainty the identity of the writer, is the only clue to what may contain the germ of some ugly plot, or conspiracy to harm or injure the innocent. So it is surely foolish to destroy what may become evidence. As for going to the police, that is, for obvious reasons, the last thing any man would care to do if the anonymous communication deals with the character of a woman near and dear to him. Indeed, the thought of going to the police did not even enter Godfrey Pavely's mind, though it was probably the advice he would have given *to any one else* who had come to consult him about such a matter.

As he looked at the letter closely, turning it this way and that, he suddenly told himself that it did not read like the work of an illiterate person. Godfrey, and Laura too, were in their different ways very good employers; besides, they had not dismissed any one lately. No, no—it was far more likely to be some one living in Pewsbury, probably with whom he was scarcely acquainted. There were, as the banker could not but be aware, a good many people in the little town

who had reason to dislike him—not personally perhaps, but as the one money-dealer of the place.

At last he sat down at his writing-table and drew an envelope towards him. On it he wrote, "To be destroyed, unopened, in case of my death," and then he placed the poisonous little sheet of common notepaper in the envelope, and, fastening it down, put it in one of his inner pockets.

He intended to dismiss the whole thing from his mind, at any rate during this morning, but he found it very difficult, not to say impossible, to do that.

Laura and Oliver Tropenell? His thin lips curled at the thought.

Why, Oliver liked him, Godfrey, far better than he did Laura! He regarded that as certain. And Laura? He could have laughed aloud at the absurd suggestion. Laura was not only the coldest, she was also the most upright, of women.

Early in their married life, when they had gone about together far more than they had done recently, he, Godfrey, had never felt even a twinge of jealousy with regard to her. And yet—and yet in those days Laura had certainly excited a good deal of admiration. There are men who passionately admire that kind of proud, passionless beauty in a woman. Pavely himself had once been such a man. So he knew.

He looked up from the letter he was writing, and all at once, to his own surprise, his thoughts took quite another turn. He told himself suddenly that Tropenell's rather exceptional intimacy with them both might, after all, excite remark, in such a damned censorious, gossiping place as was Pewsbury. He, Godfrey Pavely, was well aware of what a nest of gossip a country town could be, and often is. He had experienced something of it years ago, when there had been all that foolish talk concerning the then Katty Fenton and himself. Once or twice he had felt slightly uneasy lest his *present* friendship with Katty should be misunderstood. Indeed, he had felt this so strongly to give her what he had thought to be a delicate hint—a hint that she had at once taken—as to the inadvisability of her coming, when in Pewsbury, to see him in his private room at the Bank. She had done that rather often at one time, when she was first his tenant at Rosedean. But now she never came to the Bank. She did not even keep her account at Pavely's, though it would have been a convenience to her to do so.

Mr. Johnson's call, which at any other time would have been a tiresome infliction, was welcome, for it enabled the banker to dismiss this odd, queer, unpleasant business of the anonymous letter from his mind for a while.

But after Mr. Johnson had gone, the trouble came back, and the morning—what was left of it—seemed very long.

He asked himself whether, after all, it might not be wisest to speak of that absurd letter to some one. Should he say anything to Mrs. Tropenell, or well, yes—to Laura? But impatiently he shook his head at the thought. Not only would such a thing shock and disgust his wife, but, what was of far more consequence to him, it might make her turn against Tropenell! Godfrey Pavely had been pleased and surprised at the way in which Laura had tolerated the other man being so much about the house. In Pavely's imagination Tropenell was *his* friend—not Laura's.

He was glad when he heard a quarter to one chime out from the Parish Church tower, for it meant that he could now get up and go across to the Club for luncheon. He put on his hat and went out into the square hall of the Bank.

As he did so, his head clerk came down the broad staircase.

Mr. Privet's room was only a little smaller, and a little less lacking in dignity, than that of Mr. Pavely himself—indeed, some people thought it a pleasanter room, for it looked out on to the High Street, and was on the first floor.

"If you'd been a minute earlier, sir," said the old man, smiling, "you'd have seen Mrs. Pavely go by! I think she must have been in Mrs. Tropenell's motor, for Mr. Tropenell was driving her himself."

Godfrey Pavely felt a queer little pang of annoyance and surprise.

"I daresay they're still in the town," he said quickly. "I thought it quite possible that they might come in this morning."

But he had thought nothing of the kind.

Mr. Privet shook his head. "Oh no, sir! They were going home sure enough—

and rather quickly, too. I thought the car *had* caught that youngest Sherlock boy, but Mr. Tropenell's a skilful driver, and he missed the child, but only by a few inches, as far as I could judge!"

Godfrey Pavely nodded, walked on, and so out and across the High Street. He could not help feeling a little vexed that Oliver and Laura should have driven into Pewsbury—this morning, of all mornings. He wondered if they often did so. It was fortunate that nothing had happened to that stupid child. It would have been very unpleasant for his wife to be compelled to give evidence at an inquest....

He did not enjoy his luncheon as much as he was wont to do. In a sense he was king of the old-fashioned County Club; every member of it was either on good terms with the prosperous banker, or desired to be so. But try as he might he could not get that odious, absurd, anonymous letter out of his mind! He told himself again and again that it was thoughtless and—and yes, unbecoming—of Laura, to drive in and out of Pewsbury with Oliver Tropenell. Somehow it was the sort of thing he would never have thought his wife was likely to do. Again he wondered if she did it often. If yes, such conduct would of course provide ample reason for low, vulgar gossip.

When, at last, Godfrey Pavely walked back across to the Bank, he had come to the point of asking himself whether after all it might not be best to say just a word of caution to Laura. It need not be more than a word—he knew her well enough to know that! She was the kind of woman to shrink with fastidious disgust from the thought of her name being connected, in any vulgar silly way, with that of a man.

But his mind swung backwards and forwards, like a pendulum. The possibility of his agreeable, cordial relations with Oliver Tropenell being in any way jarred or disturbed so upset him that, finally, he made up his mind to say nothing to Laura.

At three o'clock the banker walked up to his head clerk's room. "I think I'll go home early to-day, Privet," he said.

The old man got up from his chair. He was not only fond, he was proud too, of his employer. Mr. Pavely was a model banker, a model worker. He never went home before four, and often stayed on working till five.

"Very good, sir. It's a fine afternoon. I often wonder you stay as long as you do," he said, with that queer touch of affection in his voice which Godfrey Pavely valued perhaps more than he knew.

The walk home seemed much longer than usual. Two miles and a bit? He was proud of the fact that he could do it with ease in five minutes over the half-hour. To-day, as a matter of fact, he walked so quickly that he did it in twenty-seven minutes, but he was not aware of that.

For the first time for months, he passed by Rosedean without as much as giving Katty a thought, and he took a short cut into The Chase instead of going on, up through the great park gates, as he was wont to do. And then, as he went along one of the paths in the walled kitchen garden, he suddenly heard his wife's voice.

"I think that it would be best to have a mass of red and purple just here. Last year we had blues."

He felt a queer, rather unreasoning, shock of relief, of satisfaction. Laura was evidently speaking to one of the gardeners.

Then, as he came round the corner, he saw that the person to whom Laura was speaking was not a gardener, but Oliver Tropenell himself—Oliver, with a spud in his hand, kneeling before Laura, a basket of bulbs by his side. He was looking up eagerly—a jealous onlooker might have said ardently—into her face. In fact, Tropenell looked, so Godfrey Pavely told himself with some heat, "damned absurd." But before Godfrey came right upon the three of them—for little Alice was flitting about behind her mother—Oliver stood up, with the words, "Then I'd better go and get those other bulbs, hadn't I? Will you come too, Alice?"

Godfrey called out "Hullo! Doing some planting?" But his voice sounded odd to himself. Not so, however, to the others. Laura was honestly unaware that Godfrey was very much earlier than his wont, or, if aware, she did not attach any importance to the fact. Still, she felt afraid that Godfrey would interfere with her gardening scheme, and so she shook her head.

As for Oliver Tropenell, no one looking at his dark, set face could have guessed his thoughts. As a matter of fact, he had heard Pavely's footsteps some moments before Pavely spoke. And he had wondered, with quick irritation, why

he had come back from Pewsbury—or Rosedean—so much earlier than usual.

Alice, dark-haired, rosy-cheeked, quite curiously unlike either her father or her mother, was the only one of the four who was still happily at ease. She ran up to her father: "Come and see *my* garden, father!" she cried. "I'm growing some mustard and cress specially for you. You can take it to the Bank in an envelope and have some for your tea!"

The little girl was aware, deep in her sensitive, affectionate heart, that her father and mother were not quite like other fathers and mothers. They were not cosily loving together, as were the father and mother of the two little girls with whom she sometimes went to tea in Pewsbury, neither were they on the happy terms of easy comradeship which even Alice knew was usual with other children's parents.

But she loved her mother with a passionate, unswerving, admiring love, and her father with a stout, proprietary affection. For his sake, and his sake only, she would have liked to be a boy, for then, so she argued secretly within herself, she could be his office boy at the Bank. Up to now she had felt for Oliver Tropenell the easy, unquestioning liking children give to one who comes and goes. But lately she had become dimly aware that occasionally her mother and Mr. Tropenell were too busy talking together to take much heed of her, and this threw a little shadow across her heart.

For Godfrey Pavely there followed days full of discomfort, unease, and rising annoyance. The whole course of his life was changed. As he came and went about the quiet streets of his native town, as he granted business interviews to the townspeople, he was perpetually asking himself if the person he was speaking to was concerned with this odious matter, whether he or she was among those who took his beautiful wife's name lightly.

His object each afternoon was now to get home early, and see for himself what was going on there, and how far Laura was giving cause for low, vulgar gossip.

Laura was not a child! She must know, if she ever brought herself to think of such a thing, that if a married woman allows a man to hang about her, day after day, in the absence of her husband, there is sure to be talk. Pavely regarded Tropenell's share in the matter with a strange toleration—it was his wife whom he blamed with an increasing severity as the minutes, the hours, and the days

went by.

He still went to see Katty Winslow, but no longer as often as he had been wont to do. And when in her company he was distrait, uncomfortable, longing to ask if *she* thought Oliver's constant presence in his house odd or—or peculiar. But he kept a prudent guard over his tongue. One day Katty said something which would have made it easy for him to speak, and which, as a matter of fact, very nearly did cause him to unburden his heart to her. It was a little word, and said quite pleasantly, with, he felt sure, no ulterior motive of any kind.

"It's odd," she said musingly, "to see what good friends Laura has become with Oliver Tropenell! Who would have thought that she would ever like any man as much as she seems to like him? I suppose it's really owing to the fact that he's in partnership with her brother——"

She waited, and as he said nothing, she went on, with a smile, "But then, for the matter of that, you're just as fond of him as she is, aren't you? I can't see the attraction myself, but I admit that it must be there, for two people as unlike you and Laura are to each other both to like him so much."

"Yes, I do like Tropenell," Godfrey spoke very decidedly. "But I can't make out why he gets on so well with Gilbert Baynton. Gillie couldn't run straight if he tried."

"So I've always understood——"

Katty looked at him curiously. She had never been told the real story of the quarrel between the brothers-in-law, but she was clever enough to have reached a very shrewd notion of the truth. Baynton, so much was clear, had done something which Pavely could neither tolerate nor forgive. In the old days, as a girl, Katty had met Gillie Baynton several times, and he had struck her as a very amusing, agreeable sort of young man.

Godfrey had let slip this opportunity of saying anything, and afterwards, as is usually the case, he was glad that he had kept silence. Clever and sympathetic as she was, Katty could do nothing to help him in this horrid, rather degrading business.

And then, walking into his room at the Bank one morning, he saw on the top of the pile of his letters another common-looking envelope marked *Private*. He

took it up with a sick feeling of half eager, half shrinking, expectancy—

"A sincere well-wisher wishes once more to inform Mr. Pavely that all Pewsbury is discussing him and his private affairs. The lady and gentleman in question are more together than ever they were. The other day some one who met them walking together on the downs took them for an engaged couple."

This second anonymous letter greatly added to Godfrey Pavely's wretchedness and discomfort, all the more that it was so moderately worded. It seemed to confirm, to make certain, the fact of growing gossip and scandal.

At last something happened which to a small extent relieved the tension. Laura quietly informed him one evening that she much wished to go away for three days to see a friend of her childhood, who had written and begged her to come, and to bring little Alice with her.

She was surprised at the eagerness with which Godfrey assented to her wish. In certain ways Godfrey Pavely, from the modern point of view, was a tyrannical husband. He very much disliked Laura's paying visits by herself, and she had long ago given up even suggesting that she should do so. Also, she on her side much disliked asking him the smallest favour.

The day his wife left The Chase was the first happy day Godfrey had had for three weeks. He spent a pleasant hour with Katty; and on his arrival home his feeling of satisfaction was increased by a note from Mrs. Tropenell inviting him to come and spend at Freshley Manor the three nights Laura was to be away. He wrote accepting with more cordiality of phrase than was his wont, even with so old a friend as was Oliver's mother.

Surely he and Oliver Tropenell, at last alone together, could combine to put an end to this foolish, vulgar gossip? It would be so much easier to speak to and consult with Oliver in Laura's absence.

Once he had made up his mind to speak to the other man, Pavely was able, almost, to forget the whole hateful business. Still, he said nothing till the second morning of his visit. Then, at breakfast, he made a proposal.

"I feel as if I'd like to take this afternoon off. Would you care for a good long walk, eh? We might start about half-past two, have tea in Witanbury, and be back here for dinner."

Oliver nodded. He was at once glad and sorry that Godfrey was so entirely unaware of the growing tide of dislike, nay of hatred, that he felt for him. Secretive as he was by nature, and by the life he had now led for so long, Oliver Tropenell was yet no hypocrite. He loathed the part fate had forced on him, that of pretending a cordial friendship for this man whom he so utterly despised. His mother had invited Godfrey Pavely to stay with them for three nights without first telling Oliver that she was thinking of doing so; and then, when she had realised, too late, his annoyance, she could only explain that Godfrey had always stayed with her on the very rare occasions when Laura had been away.

Mother and son were together when Godfrey started off on his daily walk into Pewsbury.

"I wonder what he's going to talk to you about?" said Mrs. Tropenell a little nervously. The thought of the coming afternoon expedition made her vaguely uneasy.

"He's never at a loss for a word, though he very seldom says anything worth hearing."

Oliver was looking with unhappy, frowning eyes after the other man's trim, rather jaunty figure.

All that morning Mrs. Tropenell watched her son with anxious fear. He wandered restlessly in and out of the house, and though he never mentioned Laura, his mother knew that he was missing her with an almost agonised sense of loss.

Oliver was fighting a losing battle with himself—a battle in which no help from outside could be of any avail. He no longer spoke of going away; instead, he had told his mother of his scheme for bringing Gillie to Europe, and of sending Laura and her brother off to Italy, for a happy little holiday. She ventured to say that she thought that plan to be quite out of the question. Godfrey would never allow it—he had not forgiven Gillie, in spite of the fact that Gillie had now "made good."

It was nearer three than half-past two, when the two men started out, and they had been walking for a full hour, with snatches of talk, and such comfortable intervals of silence as is possible only between intimates, when suddenly Godfrey Pavely stopped walking.

Surprised, Tropenell also came to a stand. They were on a stretch of lonely upland, with nothing save a couple of birds in sight.

"Look here, Oliver, there's something I want to say to you! I hope you won't be offended. But we're such good friends, you and I, that I think you'll understand."

The colour rushed into Oliver Tropenell's face. He turned and faced the other squarely, but he felt tense with excitement, and a sense of challenge. He knew, instinctively, that Pavely was going to say something about Laura—Laura, and perhaps Gillie, her brother.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Yes, Godfrey? What is it? I can't imagine your saying anything to me that would offend me."

"I want you to read what's inside that," said Godfrey in a low voice, and he handed Oliver an envelope.

Oliver was relieved, but he looked down at the envelope suspiciously.

"But this isn't to be opened till you're dead!" he exclaimed.

"Open it now," said Godfrey roughly, "I only put that in case I met with an accident—you'll see why I did it, in a moment."

With a queer feeling of misgiving Oliver Tropenell drew the common little sheet of notepaper out of the envelope, and in silence read over what was written there in those deceitful, printed characters.

He read it once, twice—thrice. Then he handed the sheet of paper back, with a look of disgust and contempt on his dark face, to the man standing by his side.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what you expect me to say? If you'd had as many anonymous letters as I've had in my time—they rain in Mexico—you wouldn't give much thought to this kind of garbage!"

Holding out the letter as if it were something dirty, he handed it back to the other man.

"I haven't given much thought to it——" and then Godfrey stopped short. He

felt as if some other man, and not his sober self, were uttering the lie.

"No," said Oliver quickly, "I don't suppose you have. But still, I can't help being rather sorry you kept it, and—and that you showed it to me. There's nothing to be done! I suppose it's the work of some clerk whom you've dismissed in the last few weeks?"

"I've dismissed no one," said Pavely shortly. Somehow Tropenell was not taking this disagreeable business quite as he had meant him to take it.

In a rather different voice Oliver went on: "Show me the letter again. I want to see if there's a date to it."

"It arrived exactly three weeks ago to-day," said Pavely slowly, "and it was posted in Pewsbury."

Light broke in on Tropenell. This, then, was why Godfrey had taken to coming home at such odd hours, and why he had telephoned several times from the Bank, sending messages to Laura, and, on at least one occasion, a message to Tropenell himself!

He set his lips tightly together, and a flood of bitter wrath welled up from his heart.

"Then in my place you would do nothing?" asked Godfrey uncertainly.

More and more he was disappointed in the other's attitude. He had thought Oliver would suggest something which might be useful, or at any rate laugh the matter off.

But Oliver only looked grim—grim and angry.

"I don't see that you can do anything. It isn't the sort of thing about which you would care to go to the local police, and even if you knew who wrote that infamous scrawl I don't see how you could take action. We can't have Laura's name dragged into this kind of business."

Then he asked in a lower voice, "Have you said anything to her?"

The other shook his head. "I've no intention of saying anything to Laura. It

would distress and disgust her very much."

He was glad to see that Oliver, hearing these words, looked very much relieved.

They walked on a few paces, and then Godfrey exclaimed, "There's one thing I do think, Oliver—and I hope you won't be angry with me for saying it! It must be admitted that you've been a great deal at The Chase alone with Laura, and also, unfortunately, that that sort of thing always does make talk in a country town."

Tropenell turned on him sternly: "What sort of thing?" he asked. "I swear before God that there has never been anything in my attitude to Laura which should give the slightest rise to comment, or afford the basest scandalmonger excuse for a word."

And he believed every word of what he said.

"I know that—I know that, my dear fellow!" Godfrey put his hand out, and for a moment it lay heavily on his friend's shoulder.

But quickly, silently, Tropenell shook himself free of the other's touch. "If you know that," he was breathing hard now, not trying to disguise his anger, "then why did you allude just now to the fact that I am a good deal in your house? Does that mean you wish that I should give up coming to The Chase?"

"No, of course I don't mean that! You're the one real friend I've made—well, since I got to man's estate," said Pavely ruefully.

Everything was going wrong. The conversation was taking a turn he had never thought of or conceived as possible. "What I mean is that Laura——"

Tropenell stopped him with a passionate gesture: "Cannot we keep Laura's name out of our discussion?"

Godfrey stared at him, genuinely astonished.

"How can we keep Laura's name out of our discussion? The whole thing centres about Laura! This letter mentions Laura—ay, and I've had another letter, which I hadn't meant to show you, but which on second thoughts I should like

you to see."

He began fumbling in another pocket.

"I don't want to see it!" cried Oliver. "I'd rather not see it!"

"But I'd rather you saw it," said Godfrey obstinately.

Tropenell read the second anonymous letter through, and then handed it back, without comment.

Silently they both turned about, and walked quickly, in almost complete silence, back to Freshley. "We've come home to tea, after all, mother," said Oliver shortly, "we are neither of us in condition for a fifteen-mile walk."

Neither man referred again to the matter which when they were together filled both their minds, and on the day of Laura's return to The Chase, Oliver Tropenell went up to town, without having seen her. Four days later his mother received a rather cryptic telegram: "Arriving to-night with a friend."

A friend? Some sure, sombre instinct told Mrs. Tropenell that this would be Gillie Baynton.

CHAPTER IX

"GODFREY can't eat me! Besides, he'll have to see me some time. Not that I want to see anything of the fellow—I always hated him! Still, as things are, it's far better I should take him by surprise, in Laura's house, than go cap in hand, and ask his leave to see my sister."

It was Gilbert Baynton who was speaking, standing with his legs a little apart, his fair head thrown back, his hands in his pockets, early in the afternoon of the day he and Oliver had arrived from London.

Mother and son were both in the room, but it was really with Mrs. Tropenell that Baynton was having this rather unpleasant argument. He and Tropenell had had this all out before. Oliver had wanted Gillie to write to his sister, but he was set on taking her by surprise, and on stealing a march on Godfrey Pavely.

Mrs. Tropenell looked up at the man standing before her. Gillie was two years older than her Oliver, and she had been the first woman who had ever seen him, for it was to her that his mother's doctor had handed the lusty, already screaming baby. His mother had passionately loved him—loved him and spoilt him, and so had his rather lackadaisical father. Physically he was a queer mixture of the two. Gillie Baynton had his father's fair hair, grace of limb and movement, and plainness of feature, coupled with his mother's abounding vitality, and her charm of manner—that charm, that coming-on-ness, which his beautiful sister, born so many years later, had always lacked.

Gillie had early begun to get into various ugly scrapes, but as a youth he had always somehow managed to shuffle out of them, for he was popular, and "had a way with him," as country people say. Also he had never been lacking in courage of a sort, and courage carries even a rascal a long way.

Still, Gillie Baynton had been pretty well done for, as far as his own country was concerned, when he had been sent out, as a kind of forlorn hope, to Mexico and Oliver Tropenell....

Gillie began speaking again: "I think I know my worthy brother-in-law quite as well as you do, Mrs. Tropenell. It's much better to take a man like that by

surprise, and not to give him time to think! After all, he's *got* to let bygones be bygones."

And now Oliver interposed, for the first time. "Yes, mother, as things are, I think Gillie had perhaps better try and see Laura now, at once, before Godfrey Pavely knows he's in England."

"I'll go there right now."

Occasionally, not very often, Gilbert Baynton made use of some little phrase showing that he lived on the other side of the Atlantic. He had changed somehow, Mrs. Tropenell could hardly have told you how, for he had always had a very assured manner. But now Gillie looked what he was—a very prosperous man of business, though scarcely an English man of business. The long sojourn in Mexico had not altered her Oliver at all—not, that is, as far as she could see, but it had altered Gillie Baynton surprisingly. It had roughened him, and increased his natural self-assurance.

"Perhaps Laura and little Alice will come back with you to tea? Godfrey, too, if he seems in the humour for it," she said.

And he nodded. "Thank you, Mrs. Tropenell. That would be very pleasant."

He smiled, a good-humoured, triumphant smile, and was gone.

The other two looked at each other rather doubtfully. And then Oliver, as if answering her thought, exclaimed, "I don't think he'll stay on at The Chase till Pavely comes out from Pewsbury! Apart from everything else, Gillie's a restless creature. We may see him again within a very short time from now."

"But supposing he and Godfrey do meet?" asked Mrs. Tropenell anxiously.

"Well, if they do meet, I think it's quite on the cards there'll be a furious row. But that, after all, would clear the air. As Gillie said just now, Godfrey Pavely will *have* to put the past behind him. Perhaps, once they've had it out, they'll be better friends. There's a good deal to be said for a row sometimes, mother."

"Yes," she said uncomfortably. "I agree, there is."

Laura was sitting in what was still known as "the boudoir," by the household of Lawford Chase. It was a beautiful and stately room, furnished some ninety years ago, at the time of the marriage of Mrs. Tropenell's grandmother. The late Mr. Pavely's tenants had not cared to use it, for it was away from the other living-rooms of the house, and so nothing in the boudoir had been disturbed or renewed when The Chase had been prepared for the occupation of the strangers who had lived there for fourteen years.

The room suited Laura, and Laura suited the room. To-day she had had a fire lit, for it was beginning to be chilly. Alice had gone off into Pewsbury to spend the afternoon with two little friends, and now the mistress of this lovely, old-world room was trying to read a book; but soon she let the book rest open on her lap, and she stared mournfully, hopelessly, into the fire.

Things were not going well with Laura Pavely. They had begun going ill about a month ago, just after that—that unfortunate outburst on Oliver's part. Yet she had felt so sure, after the talk that she and he had had together, that they would slip back into their old, easy relationship! And for a while, perhaps for as long as a week, it had seemed as if they were going to do so.

But then there had come a change. Godfrey had fallen into the way of coming home early. In old days, both before the coming to England of Oliver Tropenell, and during the months that followed, Godfrey had generally stayed at the Bank rather late, and then, as often as not, he had gone in and had a chat with Katty on his way home. Now he always came back before five, and after his return home he and Oliver would engage in interminable singles on the big tennis court which had been Godfrey Pavely's one contribution to the otherwise beautiful gardens of The Chase.

Sometimes, and especially had this been true these last few days, Laura told herself that perhaps after all, the world, the cynical shrewd world of which she knew so little, was right, and that a close and confidential friendship between a man and a woman is an impossible ideal.

To-day, staring into the fire with dry, unseeing eyes, she felt miserably unhappy—too troubled and uneasy to occupy herself in any of her usual ways. More than had ever been the case before, life seemed to stretch before her in a terrible, dreary, unending monotony.

Something else had come to pass during the last week, the week during

which Oliver Tropenell had been away in London, which she scarcely liked to think of, or to make more real by dwelling on. Godfrey had altered in his manner to her, he had become kinder, and yes, more loverlike than he had been for years. He hung about her, when he was at home, indoors and out of doors. In an awkward, clumsy way he actually tried to make himself pleasant! He had even suggested that she should ask one or two people to stay at The Chase. But she had protested that she much preferred being alone, and with a shrug of the shoulders he had given in. After all, he didn't really care for strangers more than she did.

Several times during the last dreary week, he had astonished her by talking to her of Oliver in a rather fretful, complaining way, as if he thought it odd that the other man was staying on in England with his mother, instead of going back to Mexico. He had said that he thought it strange that such a big business as he understood Oliver Tropenell to have built up, could run by itself. She had answered coldly, "You forget that my brother is there." And to that he had made no reply.

Gillie? A pang of pain thrilled through Laura's lonely heart. Oliver had said nothing more concerning Gillie's visit to Europe. Everything which had happened, up to, and including, the evening when she and Oliver had had that curious, intimate conversation when he had promised so solemnly to be her friend, seemed now like a bright, happy dream compared with the drab reality of to-day.

And now, in a few minutes, Godfrey would be coming in, and she would have to rouse herself to listen and to answer, while they had tea together in the cedar drawing-room, for Godfrey did not care for the boudoir.

Suddenly she heard uttered in the corridor, outside the door, the eager words, "Is Mrs. Pavely there? You're sure? All right—I'll go straight in!" And before she could gather her mind together, the door opened, and her brother—the brother she had not seen for years, but of whom she had just been thinking—walked forward into the room, exclaiming heartily, resonantly: "Well, Laura? Well, little girl? Here I am again!"

She started up, and with a cry of welcoming, wondering delight, threw herself into his arms, half laughing, half crying, "Oh, Gillie—Gillie—Gillie! How glad I am to see you! Somehow I thought we were never going to meet again! Have

you only just come? Has Oliver Tropenell seen you? Why didn't you wire?"

Gillie was as touched and flattered as it was in him to be, for he remembered his sister as having been always quiet and restrained. And when they had parted, just before he had gone out to Mexico, she had seemed almost inanimate with—had it been vicarious?—shame and pain.

"I thought I'd take you by surprise." He looked round him with a pleased, measuring look. "Nothing altered!" he exclaimed, "and you've got a fire? That's good! I feel it awfully cold here, I mean in England. They haven't started fires yet, over at Freshley."

He repeated, "Nothing's altered—you least of all, Laura. Why, you don't look a day older!"

She sighed. "I feel," she said, "a lifetime older."

"I don't!" he cried briskly, "I feel younger. And Godfrey?" His voice altered, becoming just a little graver. "Time stood still with Godfrey too, eh?"

"I don't think Godfrey's altered much——" She was hesitating. And then, very carefully, she added the words, "Godfrey's quite good to me, you know, Gillie."

"Oh, well—of course he always liked you the best!" And then he laughed, but to them both his laughter sounded just a little hollow. "I gather that he and Tropenell don't quite hit it off?"

She turned on him quickly, and he was puzzled at the look of extreme astonishment which came over her face. "What makes you think that?" she exclaimed. "They're the greatest friends! Godfrey likes Oliver Tropenell better than I thought he'd ever like anybody."

And then, before Gillie Baynton could answer this, to him, surprising statement, the door opened, and the man of whom they were speaking stood gazing into the room as if he could not believe in the reality of the sight before him.

The brother and sister moved apart, and Gilbert Baynton held out his hand.

"Well, Godfrey," he exclaimed, "here I am again! I expect Tropenell told you that I was thinking of coming to Europe? But I can't be more than a month in the old country—if as long—unless Tropenell goes back leaving me behind for a bit. He did make some such suggestion, but I think we're more likely to go back together."

As he spoke on, he let his hand slowly drop to his side, for the man he was addressing had made no answering movement of welcome, or even of greeting.

Such a flood of wrath had mounted up into Godfrey Pavely's brain when he saw Gilbert Baynton standing there, with his arm round Laura's shoulder, that he was fearful the words he meant to utter would never get themselves said. He had never felt so angry before, and the sensation had a curious physical effect on him. He felt, as country folk so vividly put it, "all of a tremble."

A curious, ominous, sinister silence fell on the room. Laura, unconsciously, drew a little nearer to her brother; and Godfrey, who was staring straight at her, saw the movement, and it intensified the passion of anger which was working in his brain as wine does in the body.

"I must ask you to leave my house at once," he said in a low voice. "I have had no reason to change my mind as to what I said when you were last in this house, Gilbert Baynton."

"Godfrey!" There was a passionate protest and revolt in the way Laura uttered her husband's name.

But her brother put up his hand. "Hush, Laura," he said. "It's much better I should tackle this business alone. In fact, if you don't mind, you'd better leave the room."

She shook her head. "No, I mean to stay."

He shrugged his shoulders, and looked straight at Godfrey Pavely. "Look here!" he exclaimed, "isn't all this rather—well, highfaluting rot? It's quite true that when I left here I didn't mean ever to darken your doors again. But everything's altered now! I've paid you back every cent of that money—it wasn't even your money, it was my own sister's money. She didn't mind my having it—I heard her tell you so myself."

"You forged my signature to obtain it," said Godfrey. He spoke in a very low voice, almost in a whisper. He was the sort of man who always suspects servants of listening at the door.

"Yes, I own I was a damned fool to do that—though as a matter of fact you goaded me to it! However, it's a long time ago, and I suggest that we'd better let bygones be bygones. If I don't marry, and I'm not a marrying man, your child will be my heiress. Laura's my only sister, the only thing in the world I really care for——"

Laura put her hand through his arm when she heard him say that.

And then Godfrey spoke again, his voice a little raised: "That makes no difference," he said—"I mean your having paid the money back makes no difference. I won't have you in my house, and if Laura considers my wishes she won't see you again while you're in England."

Laura said at once: "I shall not consider your wishes, Godfrey. Of course I shall see my brother as often as I can."

But Godfrey went on, still directly addressing Gilbert Baynton, "I can't prevent Laura seeing you, if she insists upon it. She's a grown-up woman, and I can't turn the key on her. But she shan't see you in *my* house. And, as far as I'm concerned, this is the last time I'll ever set eyes on your face."

"Don't you be so sure of that!" Gillie muttered the words between his teeth. His fair face had turned a deep red-brick colour, his blue eyes were blazing.

Again there fell on the three of them that strange, ominous, sinister silence.

Then Gilbert Baynton turned to his sister. He actually laughed out loud. But even Pavely noticed, with bitter satisfaction, that the laughter sounded very forced.

"Ha! ha! ha! Godfrey's not a bit changed. He's just the same old narrow-minded, sanctimonious prig he always was!"

He took Laura in his arms, and kissed her two or three times very warmly. "Never mind, little girl," he said. "I shan't make trouble between you and Godfrey for long! I shan't be in England for more than a few days. I'm off to

Paris next week."

He disengaged himself gently from Laura's clinging arms, went to the door, opened it, then shut it very quietly behind him.

Laura turned away, and stared into the fire.

Godfrey began, awkwardly, conciliatingly, "Now, my dear Laura——"

She put up her hand. "Don't speak to me," she said, in what he felt to be a dreadful voice of aversion and of pain. "I shall never, never forgive you for this!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and went out of the room, into the long corridor. And then he walked quickly through it and so to the hall of the fine old house, of which, try as he might, he never felt himself, in any intimate sense, the master.

The hall was empty. Quietly he opened the front door. Yes, Gillie had kept his word this time! He really had gone. Pavely could see the alert, still young-looking figure of the man whom in his mind he always called "that scoundrel" hurrying down the carriage road which led to the great gates of The Chase.

CHAPTER X

KATTY WINSLOW stood by her open gate. She had wandered out there feeling restless and excited, though she hardly knew why. During the last fortnight she had spent many lonely hours, more lonely hours than usual, for Godfrey Pavely came much less often to see her than he had done in the old, easygoing days.

And yet, though restless, Katty was on the whole satisfied. She thought that things were going very much as she wished them to go. It was of course annoying to know so little, but she was able to guess a good deal, and she felt quite sure that the leaven was working.

But the suspense and the uncertainty had got on her nerves, and she had made up her mind to leave Rosedean perhaps for as long as a fortnight. Two days ago she had written to various friends who were always glad to see her. That was why, as she stood at the gate, she was able to tell herself that she was waiting for the postman.

She thought it very probable that Godfrey Pavely would be walking past her house about this time. A couple of days ago he had come in for about half an hour, but he had been dull and ill at ease, his mind evidently full of something he was unwilling or ashamed to tell. And she had watched him with an amused, sympathetic curiosity, wondering how long his cautious reticence would endure. If she had put her mind to it, perhaps Katty could have made him speak of that which filled his sore heart, but she felt that the time was not yet ripe for words between herself and Godfrey. She was afraid of jarring him, of making him say something to her which both of them afterwards might regret. No, not any words of love to herself—of that she was not afraid—but some dogmatic pronouncement on divorce, and perchance on re-marriage.

And then, as she stood there, glancing up and down the lonely country road, she suddenly saw a man walking quickly towards her—not from Pewsbury, but from the opposite direction, which led only from The Chase.

Katty's bright brown eyes were very good eyes, and long before the stranger could see her she had, as it were, taken stock of him. Somehow his clothes were

not English-looking, and he wore a kind of grey Homburg hat.

He was walking at a great pace, and as he came nearer, some vague feeling of curiosity made Katty step out of the gate, and look straight up the road towards him. All at once she made up her mind that he was American—a well-to-do and, according to his lights, a well-dressed American.

Now Katty Winslow looked very charming, as she stood out there, in her heather-mixture tweed skirt, and pale blue flannel blouse—charming, and also young. And the stranger—to her he seemed entirely a stranger—when he was quite close up to her, suddenly took off his hat and exclaimed, "Why, Miss Fenton! It is Miss Fenton, isn't it?"

He was now smiling broadly into her face, his bold, rather challenging eyes —the blue eyes which were the best feature of his face, and the only feature which recalled his beautiful sister—full of cordial admiration.

"You don't remember me?" he went on. "Well, that's quite natural, for of course you made a much deeper impression on me than I did on you!"

And then all at once it flashed across Katty who this pleasant, bright-eyed wayfarer must be. It must be, it could only be, Gilbert Baynton—the peccant Gillie!

"Mr. Baynton?" she said questioningly, and she also threw a great note of welcome and cordiality into her voice.

"Yes," he said. "Gilbert Baynton—very much at your service——?"

"—Mrs. Winslow," she said hurriedly. "I'm Mrs. Winslow now." She saw that the name conveyed nothing to him. "Do come in," she went on pleasantly, "if only for a moment, Mr. Baynton. Though it's early for tea, perhaps you'll stay and have a cup with me? I had no idea you were in England! I suppose you're staying with Laura, at The Chase?"

He shook his head, the smile faded from his face, and Katty, who was observant, saw that her question was ill-timed.

"It's delightful—seeing an old friend again, and I was feeling so bored—all by myself!"

As he followed her into the house, Gillie told himself that this was distinctly amusing—quite good fun! It would take the horrible taste of his interview with that—that *brute*—out of his mouth.

He looked round the little hall with quick interest and curiosity. There was no sign of a man about, only a lady's slender walking-stick and a bright red parasol, in the umbrella-stand. Was pretty little Katty a widow? Somehow she did not look like a widow!

She opened a door which gave out of the hall on the left, and called out, "Harber? I should like tea in about five minutes."

Then she shut the door, and led the way down the little hall, and through into her sitting-room.

Gillie again glanced about him with eager appreciation. This was the sort of room he liked—cosy, comfortable, bright and smiling like its attractive mistress.

"Sit down," she exclaimed, "and tell me everything that's happened to you since we last met! Why, it must be, let me see, quite twelve years ago?"

She took up a china box: "Have a cigarette—I'll have one too."

He waved the box aside, took out his own case, and held it out to her. "I think you'll like these," he said. Then he struck a match, and as their fingers touched, the lighting of her cigarette took quite a little while.

"This *is* jolly!" He sank back into one of Katty's well-cushioned easy chairs. "You've the prettiest room I've been in since I came to England, Mrs. Winslow."

"Oh, then you haven't been into Laura's boudoir?"

"Yes, I've just come from there." Again his face altered as he spoke, and this time there came a look of frowning anger over it. Then, almost as if he read the unspoken question in her mind, he said slowly, "Look here, Mrs. Winslow, as you seem to know my sister so well, I may as well tell you the truth. I've just been ordered out of her house by my brother-in-law, Godfrey Pavely. I suppose you know that he and I had a row years ago?" He was looking at her rather hard as he spoke, and she nodded her head.

"Yes," she said frankly, "I do know that, though I don't know what it was about."

He breathed a little more freely. "It was about money," he said bitterly. "Just what one would expect it to be with a man like Godfrey. He was furious because I got Laura to lend me some money. It was to pay a debt of honour, for I was a gambler in those days. But I'm a good boy now!"

"Yes," she said, and smiled. "I know you are! You're Oliver Tropenell's partner, aren't you, Mr. Baynton? He talks awfully nicely of you."

Gillie—his face was fair, his skin very clear, almost like a girl's—looked pleased. "Good old Tropenell!" he exclaimed. "Yes, he and I are tremendous pals. He's been the best friend to me man ever had."

"I am *so* sorry for Laura," said Katty gently.

She was playing with the edge of a piece of Italian embroidery which covered a small table close to her elbow, and she was thinking—hard.

At that moment the drawing-room door opened, and the tea appeared. While the table was being drawn up in front of her, the tray placed on to it, and a taper put to the spirit lamp, Katty's mind went on working busily. And by the time the maid was leaving the room, she had come to a decision. Even to her it was a momentous decision—how momentous to others she was destined never to know.

Again she said slowly, impressively, "Yes, Mr. Baynton, I am sorry indeed for poor Laura."

"I'm sorry too. Not that it much matters! I didn't want to stay at The Chase. I always thought it a gloomy place in the old days, when I was a child—I mean when it still belonged to Mrs. Tropenell's people. Of course I shall see Laura again—Godfrey can't prevent that! In fact he admitted that he couldn't."

There was a little pause. And then Katty, her eyes bent downwards, said, "I didn't quite mean that, Mr. Baynton. Of course I'm very sorry about your new row with Mr. Pavely, for it must be so hateful to Laura to feel she can't have her own brother in her own house. But—well——" She threw her head back, and gazed straight across at him. "Can you keep a secret?" she asked.

"Yes, of course I can!" He looked at her amused.

"I want you to keep what I'm going to say absolutely to yourself. I don't want you ever to hint a word of it to Laura—still less to Oliver Tropenell."

"Of course I won't!" He looked at her with growing curiosity. What was it she was going to tell him?

"I wonder if I ought to tell you," she murmured.

He laughed outright. "Well, I can't *make* you tell me!"

She felt piqued at his indifference. "Yes, I will tell you, though it isn't *my* secret!" she exclaimed. "But I feel that you ought to know it—being Laura's brother. Laura," her voice dropped, she spoke in a very low voice, "Laura is in love with Oliver Tropenell, Mr. Baynton. And Oliver is in love with Laura—a thousand times more in love with her than she is in love with him!"

She gave him a swift glance across the tea-table. Yes! Her shot had told indeed. He looked extraordinarily moved and excited. So excited that he got up from his chair.

"Good God!" he exclaimed incredulously. "Laura?" And then, "Tropenell? Are you sure of this, Mrs. Winslow?"

"Yes," she answered in a quiet, composed voice that carried conviction. "I am *quite* sure. They are both very, very unhappy, for they are good, high-minded people. They wouldn't do anything wrong for the world."

As he looked at her a little oddly, and with a queer little smile all over his face, she exclaimed, "I *know* Laura wouldn't." And he nodded, a little ashamed of that queer little smile.

Gilbert Baynton's face stiffened into deep gravity. His eyes were shining, and he was staring down at the little table, his half-finished cup of tea forgotten.

He sat down again. "Has Laura told you this?" he asked abruptly. "Are you her confidante?"

Katty hesitated. "No," she said at last. "I don't suppose Laura has spoken of

the matter to any living soul. But if you promise absolutely not to give me away —I can tell you how you can assure yourself of the truth. Ask Mrs. Tropenell. *She* knows. I won't say any more."

"And Pavely?" he asked. "What part does my fine brother-in-law play? Does proper Godfrey know? Is priggish Godfrey jealous?"

She answered slowly: "I think that Mr. Pavely suspects. He and Oliver Tropenell were great friends till quite lately. But there's a coldness now. I don't know what happened. But *something* happened."

"I see now why Tropenell has stayed here so long. I thought it must be a woman! I thought some prudish, dull, English girl had got hold of him——" He waited a moment.

"Well, I'm eternally grateful to you, Mrs. Winslow, for giving me this hint! You see, I'm very fond of Tropenell. It's a peculiar kind of feeling—there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for him. Good God! I only wish that he and Laura——"

He was going to say "would have the pluck to bolt together!" but Katty supplied a very different ending to his sentence.

"Ah," she exclaimed, "I only wish that Laura and Oliver *could* marry. They're made for one another. You can't see them together without seeing that!" She went on feelingly, "Laura was dreadfully unhappy with Godfrey Pavely even before Oliver Tropenell came into her life. She and Mr. Pavely are quite unsuited to one another."

There was a queer bitterness in her voice.

And then Gillie Baynton suddenly remembered—remembered the flood of gossip there had been at one time concerning those two—pretty Katty Fenton, as she had been then, and Godfrey Pavely, the man who later became his own brother-in-law.

He gave her a queer, shrewd glance, and Mrs. Winslow went on, rather quickly and breathlessly,

"You mustn't think that I dislike Godfrey Pavely! He's been very good to me

—as good as Laura. I'm what they call an innocent *divorcée*, Mr. Baynton, and they both helped me through the trouble. It was pretty bad at the time, I can tell you. But of course I can't help seeing—no one could help seeing—that Godfrey and Laura aren't suited to one another, and that they would each be much, much happier apart."

At the back of her clever, astute mind was the knowledge that it was quite on the cards that Oliver, or Oliver's mother, would say something to Gilbert Baynton concerning herself and her intimacy with Godfrey Pavely. She must guard against that, and guard against it now.

So she went on, pensively, "I don't know, to tell you the truth, for which of them I'm the more sorry—Laura, Godfrey, or Oliver! They're all three awfully to be pitied. Of course, if they lived in America it would be quite simple; Laura and Godfrey would be divorced by mutual consent, and then Laura would be able to be happy with Mr. Tropenell."

"And is nothing of that sort possible here?" asked Gillie Baynton curiously. "This old England *has* stood still!"

Katty shook her head regretfully. "No, there's nothing of the sort possible here. Of course there are ways and means——"

The other fixed his eyes on her. "Yes?" he said interrogatively.

"I fear that they are not ways and means that Godfrey or Laura would ever lend themselves to."

"Then there's no cutting the Gordian knot?"

But that wasn't quite what Katty meant to imply. "I don't know," she said hesitatingly. "Godfrey would do almost anything to avoid any kind of scandal. But then you see one comes up against Laura——"

He nodded quickly. "Yes, I quite understand that Laura would never do anything she thought wrong—queer, isn't it?"

Gilbert Baynton stayed on at Rosedean for quite another half-hour, but nothing more was said on the subject which was filling his mind and that of his hostess. They walked about the pretty, miniature garden, talking in a desultory

way over old times, and about some of the people they had both known years ago.

And then, at last, she took him to the gate. They looked at one another like two augurs, and he said under his breath, "Well, it's a pretty kettle of fish I've come home to, eh? I thought there was some sort of mystery. I'm very much obliged to you for having put me on the track to solve the riddle."

"Ah," she said, "but the riddle isn't solved yet, Mr. Baynton, is it?"

He answered, gravely for him, "No, those sorts of riddles are very hard to solve." He hesitated, then exclaimed in a meaning tone, "Still, they *are* solved sometimes, Mrs. Winslow."

It was late the same night, a warm, St. Martin's summer night, and Mrs. Tropenell, sitting alone after dinner, made an excuse of a telephone message to join her son and Gillie Baynton out of doors.

After Baynton's return from The Chase the two men had gone off for a long walk together over the downs, and they had come home so late that dinner had had to be put off for half an hour. Instead of joining her later, they had gone out again, but this time only into the garden.

Noiselessly she moved across the grass, and then, just as she was going to step under the still leaf-draped pergola, she heard her son's voice—a voice so charged with emotion and pain that, mastered by her anxiety, she stopped just behind one of the brick arches, and listened.

"You'll oblige me, Baynton, by keeping your sister's name out of this."

"Oh, very well! I thought you'd be glad to know what that woman said to me —I mean Mrs. Winslow."

"I'm not glad. I'm sorry. Mrs. Winslow is mistaken."

The short sentence came out with laboured breath as if with difficulty, and the

one who overheard them, the anguished eavesdropper, felt her heart stirred with bitter impotence.

How Oliver cared—how much Oliver cared!

"Why are you so sure of that?" Again she heard Baynton's full, caressing voice. "Laura's a very reserved woman! I'd rather believe her best friend—apparently Katty *is* her best friend—about such a thing as this. You've admitted that *you* love her."

And as the other made no answer, Gillie went on, speaking in a very low voice, but with every word clearly audible from the place where Mrs. Tropenell stood listening: "Of course I won't mention Laura—as it upsets you so much! But after all, my hatred for Pavely and my love for my sister are the two strongest things in my life. Surely you know that well enough, Tropenell? I can't bar Laura out!"

And then came the answer, muttered between the speaker's teeth: "I understand that, Baynton."

"I'm sorry I repeated Mrs. Winslow's tale. But of course it did impress me—it did influence me. I'd *like* to believe it, Tropenell."

The secret listener was surprised at the feeling which Gillie's vibrant voice betrayed.

Oliver muttered something—was it, "I'd give my soul to know it true"?

Then, in a lighter tone, Gillie exclaimed, "As to that other matter, I'd rather keep you out of the business altogether if I could! But I can't—quite."

What was it that Oliver answered then? The two men were now walking slowly away towards the further end of the pergola. Mrs. Tropenell strained her ears to hear her son's answer:

"I don't want to keep out of it." Was that what he said, in a very low, tense voice?

Gilbert Baynton was speaking again: "It is *my* idea, *my* scheme, and I mean to carry it through! I shan't want much help—only quite a little help from you."

And then she heard her son's voice again, and he was speaking more naturally this time. "Of course we'll go shares, Gillie! What d'you take me for? Am I to have all the profit, and you all the risk?"

Mrs. Tropenell breathed more freely. They were off from Laura now, and on some business affair. She heard Gillie Baynton laugh aloud. "I'm quite looking forward to it—but it will be a longish job!"

Oliver answered, "*I'm* not looking forward to it. You feel quite sure about this thing, Baynton? There's time to draw back—now."

"Sure? Of course I'm sure!" There was triumph, a challenge to fate, in the other's tone. "I've always liked playing for high stakes—you know that, eh?"

"Ay, I know that——"

"And I've never looked back. I've never regretted anything I've done in my life——" there was a ring of boastful assurance in Gilbert Baynton's tone.

"I can't say that of myself—I wish I could."

"You? Why, you've a milk-white record, compared to mine!"

Mrs. Tropenell moved away swiftly over the grass, till she stood at the end of the dark, arched walk. Then, "Oliver!" she called out, "there's a message from Lord St. Amant. He wants to know if you can go over to the Abbey next week, from Saturday till Tuesday. He says there'll be some shooting. I told him you'd ring up before going to bed—I hope that was right."

"Yes, mother. Of course I'll ring up. I'll go in and do it now, if you like. Gillie and I have been having a long business talk."

And then she heard Gilbert Baynton: "I'll stay out here a bit longer, Mrs. Tropenell. I'm getting quite used to the cold and damp of the old country. I don't mind it as much as I did a week ago."

Mother and son walked across the lawn to the house.

When they were indoors, he broke silence first: "Gillie had a bad row with Pavely this afternoon. I don't think it's any use his staying on here. Pavely won't

allow Laura to see him again at The Chase."

Mrs. Tropenell uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"Yes, it's unfortunate, I admit. And I don't think it was Gillie's fault! He's described the scene to me in great detail. He was quite willing to go as far as I think he could be expected to go in the way of apology and contrition. But Pavely simply didn't give him a chance. Pavely's a narrow-minded brute, mother."

"Is Gillie very upset? Is he much disappointed?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes, I think Gillie is upset—more upset than I should have expected him to be! He's disappointed, too, at not having seen little Alice. He's really fond of children, and, as he truly says, Alice is bound to be his heiress—unless of course he should marry, which is very unlikely."

Oliver was speaking in a preoccupied, absent voice, as if he was hardly thinking of what he was saying. "We're thinking, he and I, of going to the Continent next week. We've got business to do in Paris—rather important business, too. Of course I'll try and come back here before leaving for Mexico."

Mrs. Tropenell felt as if the walls of the room were falling about her. Oliver had always spoken of late as if he meant to stay on in England till after Christmas.

"How long d'you expect to be in France?"

"I can't tell yet, mother. I might be there a fortnight, or I might be there six weeks—it all depends on the business we're going to do. No dates are settled yet."

He waited a few moments, then said slowly, "I've been wondering whether you would mind going up with Laura to London for a few days? Somehow I think Pavely is more likely to let her go if you offer to go too."

There swept over her a feeling of recoil, but she let her son see nothing of that. "Very well," she said quietly. "I quite understand—I'll do my best. I agree that Laura ought to see her brother again. And what are *you* thinking of doing, my dear?"

"Oh, I thought of going up to town, too." He spoke with a detached air. "You and I could stay in that nice little hotel where we stayed years ago, mother. Of course I'm only thinking of a few days in town, before Gillie and I go off to Paris."

As they came through into the house, she was startled by the expression on her son's face. He looked as if he had had a shock; he was very pale, it was as if all the healthy colour had been drained out of his tan cheeks.

"Oliver?" she exclaimed. "Do you feel ill, my darling? When you came in before dinner you looked as if you had caught a chill."

"It was rather cold on the downs, but I feel very much as usual, thank you, mother. A talk with Gillie always tires me. I think he's got a rather——" he hesitated for a word, then found it—"obstreperous vitality."

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Godfrey Pavely arrived at the Bank next morning it seemed to him that days, instead of hours, had gone by, since that hateful and degrading scene had taken place between himself and his wife's brother.

Laura had not spoken to him again, except to utter the few sentences which were necessary to keep up the pretence that they two were on their usual terms, before the servants, and, what had been more difficult, before their little daughter.

After Alice had gone to bed, they had eaten their dinner in silence, and, in silence also, they had spent the evening reading up to eleven o'clock. At last Godfrey, getting up, had said in a nervous, conciliatory tone, "Well, good-night, Laura." But she had not answered him, for by that time the servants were gone to bed, and there was no longer any reason for hypocrisy.

Laura had always been an exceptionally silent woman, but this was the first time, in the long armed neutrality of their married life, that she had actually refused to answer when he spoke to her. Feeling acutely uncomfortable, because curiously helpless, Godfrey Pavely now wondered how long this state of things was to endure.

He asked himself whether he had said anything yesterday which could really justify Laura in this extraordinary attitude. Now and again there seemed to sound in his ears the voice in which she had uttered the last words which she had spoken to him of her own free will. "Don't speak to me," she had exclaimed passionately. "I shall never, never forgive you for this!"

Women were so unreasonable—ridiculously, absurdly unreasonable. Laura knew exactly what Gillie was like, for he, Godfrey, had gone to special pains to make Laura fully understand the mean, despicable and *dangerous* way in which her brother had behaved over the forged cheque—for forgery it was, though it had been difficult to persuade Laura of the fact. He remembered now, how, at last, after he had forced his wife to understand, she had abased herself, imploring him to save her brother from the consequences of his wicked action.

Godfrey also remembered sorely how grateful Laura had seemed to be after everything had been arranged, and Gillie had finally gone off to Mexico, a ruined and discredited man. He felt a glow of virtuous satisfaction when he recalled how she had thanked him—her kind, generous husband—for what he had done! True, the loan then advanced had been paid back, and Gillie—to use the stupid expression which seems to be creeping into the British language—had "made good." But that was no reason why he should come back and thrust himself into his, Godfrey's, home, and make friends with Godfrey's only child—after he had actually given an undertaking, in his own, melodramatic words, "never to darken Godfrey's door again."

Yet in his innermost heart Godfrey Pavely was sorry now that he had behaved as he had done yesterday. He had allowed his temper to get the better of him, always a silly thing for a sensible man to do. By behaving as he had done he had put a weapon into Laura's hands....

At one moment he considered the advisability of going into Freshley Manor on his way home to-day, to consult Mrs. Tropenell. And then he had suddenly remembered that his brother-in-law was actually her guest! That fact alone made a most disagreeable complication.

As he looked over his letters, and dictated some of the answers to them, he tried without success to put the matter out of his mind. It had taken there the place occupied by the unpleasantness connected with those absurd anonymous letters. For the first time, this morning he forgot them.

There came a knock at the door. "A letter, sir, has just been brought by Mrs. Tropenell's man. He said there was an answer, so he's waiting."

With quickened pulse, Godfrey Pavely opened the letter. He had long been familiar with Mrs. Tropenell's clear, flowing handwriting, and he wondered what she could have to say to him which she preferred to write, rather than telephone.

The banker was attached to Mrs. Tropenell. Always she had acted towards him in a high-minded, straightforward way, and on two occasions he had had reason to be specially grateful to her, for on each of these occasions she had intervened, successfully, between Laura and himself, and made Laura see reason. But she never alluded to the past, even in the remotest way, and he had come of late years to think and hope she had forgotten those now distant, painful, active misunderstandings.

If Mrs. Tropenell was now pleading with him for a reconciliation with Gilbert Baynton, then he knew that it would be very difficult for him to say "no" to a woman to whom he owed so much. It would also be a graceful way of getting out of the difficulty in which he had involved himself....

But the contents of the letter disagreeably surprised him, for they were quite other than what he had expected them to be—

"DEAR GODFREY:—Oliver and Gilbert Baynton have to go to the Continent on business. I think they will be away for some time, and Gilbert speaks of going straight back to Mexico from France.

"I write to know if you will allow Laura to come up to town with me for a few days? It would enable her to see something of her brother, before a separation which may last, as did their past separation, for years.

"I hope, dear Godfrey, you will see your way to granting this request of mine. It is in very truth my request—not Laura's.

"Your affectionate old friend,
"LETTICE TROPENELL."

The unfortunate man—for he was in the full meaning of the words an unfortunate man—stared down at the letter.

He felt moved and perplexed by the way it was worded. "Your affectionate old friend"—what a strange way to sign herself! Mrs. Tropenell had never signed herself so before. And what exactly did she mean by saying that it was her request, not Laura's? In spite of those words, he felt convinced that Laura, too proud to ask this favour of him after the shameful way she had behaved yesterday, had persuaded Mrs. Tropenell to ask it for her.

He sat down and drew a piece of notepaper towards him. He was glad of the opportunity of showing them all how magnanimous he was—how much of a *man*. Laura should go to London with his full permission. Of course he knew quite well, at the back of his mind, that if he refused it she would probably go just the same. But in all the circumstances it would be just as well to heap coals of fire on her head. She should go—but not taking their child with her. His little Alice must not be contaminated.

When his daughter was old enough, he, Godfrey, would tell her the truth about her mother's brother. He did not hold with concealing this sort of thing from young people. In *his* family, thank God, there had never been anything to hide. All had always been honest and above-board. Besides, if anything happened to him, Alice would be a very wealthy woman, and Gillie would almost certainly try and get hold of her and of her money. He, Godfrey, knew that well enough.

"MY DEAR MRS. TROPENELL:—Certainly it shall be as you ask——" He could not help adding, "though Laura knows that in doing this she is disregarding my formal wishes. Still, I admit that, Gillie being her brother, it is, I suppose, natural that she should wish to see him again before he leaves England."

Then he hesitated—indeed, he kept the messenger for whom he had already rung waiting for quite a long time. But at last he signed himself: "Your affectionate, and always grateful, Godfrey Pavely."

When the banker reached home rather early that afternoon—for he felt too much upset to go in and spend his usual pleasant hour with Katty at Rosedean—little Alice met him with the news that "Mummy" had gone to London, and that she, Alice, was going to be allowed to sit up to dinner to bear him company.

It was characteristic of the man that, if relieved, he was also sharply annoyed. He had hoped to extract from his wife some word of reluctant thanks for his magnanimity. But no, she had not even left a note telling him what day she would return!

Things had not fallen out at The Chase that morning as Godfrey Pavely had supposed. After breakfast Laura, still in a kind of stupor of pain and indignation, had gone into the garden. She had not been there a quarter of an hour when Mrs. Tropenell, who so seldom came to The Chase, had suddenly appeared, walking with stately, leisurely steps over the grass, to tell her of Oliver's and Gillie's coming departure for the Continent.

It was Mrs. Tropenell who had proposed sending that note to Godfrey, but Godfrey, who so little understood his wife, either for good or evil, was right in his belief that she would not have allowed her plans to be affected by his answer. At once Laura had determined to go to London, whether Godfrey gave his consent or no. Yet she was relieved when there came to her from Freshley the news that her husband's answer to Mrs. Tropenell's request was in the

affirmative.

The message was given to her over the telephone by Oliver Tropenell, and in giving it he used the allusive form of words which come naturally when a man knows that what he says may be overheard: "Mother has just had a note saying that it is quite all right. So we propose to call for you in time to get the five minutes to one from Langford Junction. Does that give you enough time?" And she had exclaimed, "Oh, yes, yes! I'm quite ready now."

To that he had made no answer, and she had felt a little chill at the heart. Oliver's voice had sounded curiously cold—but then the telephone does sometimes alter voices strangely.

Those eight days in London! Laura was often to live through each of those long days during the dull weeks which followed her return home. Yet, when she did look back on that time, she had to admit that she had not been really happy, though the first hours had been filled with a sort of excited triumph and sense of victory. It was such a relief, too, to be away from Godfrey, and spared, even if only for a few days, the constant, painful irritation of his presence.

But her brother, for whose sake, after all, she was in London, jarred on her perpetually. For one thing, Gillie was in extravagant, almost unnaturally high spirits, set on what he called "having a good time," and his idea of a good time was, as Oliver once grimly remarked, slightly monotonous.

Gillie's good time consisted in an eager round of business interviews, culminating each evening in a rich dinner at one of the smart grill-rooms which were then the fashion, followed by three hours of a musical comedy, and finally supper at some restaurant, the more expensive the better.

To his sister, each evening so spent seemed a dreary waste of precious time. For in the daytime the two ladies, who had taken rooms in an old-fashioned hotel in a small street off Piccadilly, saw very little of Gillie and Oliver. Gillie had insisted that Oliver and he should go and stay at what he considered the smartest and most modern hotel in London, and though the strangely assorted quartette always lunched together, the two partners had a good deal to do each morning and most afternoons.

To Mrs. Tropenell's surprise Oliver apparently had no wish to be with Laura alone. Was it because he was afraid of giving himself away to his coarse-minded,

jovial partner? Oliver looked stern, abstracted, and, when at the play, bored.

She admitted another possible reason for his almost scrupulous avoidance of Laura. With regard to the bitter feud between the brothers-in-law, Oliver had spoken to his mother with curious apathy. Perhaps he was honestly desirous of not taking sides. But on the whole Mrs. Tropenell swung more often to her first theory, and this view was curiously confirmed on the one Sunday spent by them in town.

Gillie, grumbling, a good deal at the dulness of the English Sunday, had motored off early to the country to spend the day with some people whom he had known in Mexico. And late that morning Oliver suddenly suggested that Laura and he should go out for a turn in the Green Park—only a stone's-throw from the rooms the two ladies were sharing.

And that hour, which was perhaps fraught with bigger circumstance than any one, save Oliver himself, was ever to know, did remain in Laura Pavely's memory as a strange and, in a sense, a delicious oasis, in her long, arid stay in London. For, as the two walked and talked intimately together in a solitude all the greater because peopled by the indifferent and unknown, they seemed to come nearer to one another—and to meet, for the first time, in an atmosphere of clarity and truth. Laura, perhaps because she had felt, during these last few days, so desperately lonely in a spiritual sense, talked more freely, albeit in a more detached way, to her devoted, considerate, and selfless friend, than she had ever been able to bring herself to do to any other human being.

For a while, after they had turned and begun pacing together under the now yellowing plane trees, neither of them spoke. Then Oliver said abruptly, "So all our schemes have vanished into air—I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," she said. "I always knew that Godfrey would never allow me to go away with Gillie, but I never, never thought that even he could behave as he did to my brother the other day——"

There was a sound of suppressed passion and revolt in her voice that he had never heard there before. It touched a chord in his own heart, but all he said,

slowly, was, "I suppose Gillie irritated him."

"No, I don't think so. There wasn't time for Gillie to do anything, for Godfrey at once refused to shake hands with him. That's how it began."

"Gillie ought to have written first. My mother begged him not to take Godfrey by surprise——"

"Your mother is always right," she said in a low voice. "I've never known her wrong yet, though her advice isn't always easy to follow, Oliver."

"I'm afraid she was right this time, anyhow."

"I know she was."

There fell between them a long, pregnant silence. And then Oliver said, in a low, moved voice, "I'm afraid that this last business has made you very unhappy, Laura?"

She answered, "Yes—foolishly so. I ought not to have been surprised, for by this time I know Godfrey so well." And she believed herself to be speaking the truth.

"It's not his fault," she went on painfully, "that he has nothing in common with me and with my brother, different as we, too, are the one from the other. Gillie and I might have been born on different planets from Godfrey."

Laura had not meant to speak of Godfrey to Oliver. Indeed, she had formed the resolution never to do so again. But somehow, to-day, she felt as if she might break that salutary rule.

His next words seemed to prove to her that she could trust him to understand, for, "Yes," he said quietly, "you're right there, Laura. You and Godfrey have nothing in common between you, and that being so, I suppose there's nothing to be done?"

"No, there's nothing to be done," she repeated hopelessly. And then once more she broke her wise resolution: "If it hadn't been for Alice, I should, even now, be tempted to do what I so nearly did at the time that Godfrey and Gillie"—she hesitated—"had their first misunderstanding."

"What you nearly did then, Laura?" There came an eager, questioning thrill in her companion's strained voice.

"Yes—" Why shouldn't she unburden her heart for once? "Yes, at the time of that first quarrel between my brother and my husband, I nearly left Godfrey. But for your mother, I should have done so. Alice was a tiny baby then, and I didn't realise, as I realise now, what an awful responsibility a woman takes on herself in breaking up a child's happy home. Only your mother stopped my doing it, and the fact"—she looked at him with a soundless depth of sadness in her face—"the fact that Gillie didn't really want me to go and live with him. Of course it was long before the question of his going to Mexico was raised."

"And have you never regretted that you did not carry out that purpose?"

Oliver Tropenell was looking straight before him as he asked the dangerous question. They were walking, slowly, slowly, along the broad path which runs just within the railings along the park side of Piccadilly. Between twelve and one on an autumn Sunday morning this path is generally deserted.

She did not answer at once, and he said quickly, "Forgive me! I ought not to have asked you that."

"Yes," she said again, "you can ask me anything you like, Oliver. But it's very difficult to answer such a question truthfully."

And again there fell between them one of those long silences which played a curious part in a conversation neither ever forgot.

At last Laura did answer Oliver's dangerous question. "I have always known in my heart that your mother was right in making me do what she did—I mean in persuading me that for my little girl's sake I must go on. Alice loves her father, though I think, perhaps foolishly, that of the two she cares for me best——"

"Of course she does!" he exclaimed.

"But whether that be so or not, I know what a terrible thing it would have been for Alice if Godfrey and I had lived apart. I've never doubted that—I don't doubt it now. But for that I could not go on—after what happened the other day."

"Then if, as is of course possible, you and I don't meet again for years and

years, am I to think of you as always going on in exactly the same way?" he asked.

Some cruel devil outside himself had seemed to force him to utter the hopeless question which he had already made up his mind should be, must be, answered by Fate in the negative.

They had stopped their slow pacing side by side, and he was now looking down into her sad, desolate eyes. He saw the word—the one word "Yes," form itself on her quivering lips.

"Do you really mean that, Laura? Answer me truly."

And then suddenly there came over Laura Pavely an extraordinary sensation. It was as if this man, whose burning eyes were fixed on her face, were willing her to say aloud something which, however true, were better left unsaid. "There will never come any change," she answered, feeling as if the words were being forced out of her, "till, as the Marriage Service says, 'death us do part.'"

"Do you ever think of that possibility?"

He put the probing question in a singularly detached, almost a light, tone of inquiry.

But she answered very solemnly, again as if impelled to tell him the truth—a truth she had never thought to tell to any human being:

"There was a time before Alice was born when I was so unhappy, largely, as I can see now, through my own fault, when I felt I could not bear it any longer, and——" Her voice dropped, and he bent down so that he might catch the almost whispered words, "I was strongly tempted to—to kill myself," she said. "I used to go and walk up and down that little path across the head of the lake, and plan out how I would do it. Even now I do not think that any one, except perhaps your mother, would ever have suspected. It would have been so easy to make it appear an absolute accident."

He remained silent, and she went on, more composedly:

"I had got into a selfish, morbid state, Oliver, and yet the temptation was not wholly selfish, for I knew that Godfrey was miserable too, and my sense told me

that if anything happened to me he would very soon marry again—some woman who would appreciate his good qualities, who would be happy with him, who would not be, as I knew I was, a bitter disappointment."

Once more her voice had become nearly inaudible, and once more Oliver bent his dark, convulsed face down to hear what she said.

Tears were rolling down Laura's face. But suddenly she made an immense effort over herself, and went on, calmly:

"It was your mother who helped me over that bad, foolish time. I don't know what I should have done but for Aunt Letty. I think she's the only person in the world to whom Godfrey ever listens—who can ever make any impression on him. It's strange in a way, for I know she doesn't really like either of us."

As he uttered a violent expression of dissent, she went on: "It's quite true, Oliver, and what is more, of the two she likes Godfrey the best. Why shouldn't she? She thinks I've behaved very unkindly to Godfrey. The only excuse she can make for me—she told me so once, long ago—is that I'm inhuman. I suppose in a way I *am* inhuman?" She looked at him plaintively, a strange, piteous expression in her beautiful, shadowed eyes.

And Oliver Tropenell caught his breath. God—how he loved her! Her inhumanity—to use that cruelly misleading term which she had just used herself—only made his passion burn with a purer, whiter flame. The one thing in the world that mattered to him now was this woman's deliverance from the awful death-in-life to which her sensitive conscience, and her moving love for her child, alone condemned her. Yes, Laura's deliverance was the only thing worth compassing—and that even if the deliverer were wrecked, soul as well as body, body as well as soul, in the process.

They began walking again, slowly, slowly, once more enwrapped in a silence which said so much more than words could have said, even to Laura's still numb, unawakened heart.

It was she who at last broke the kind of spell which lay on them both. They had come almost to the end of the broad path. Opposite to where they were standing, on the other side of the road, was a huge white and green building, handsome and showy, looking strangely un-English and out of place in the famous old London way.

"They pulled down such a wonderful, delightful house just there," she said regretfully. "I was once taken to it by my father, when I was quite a little girl. It was like going right back a hundred years—not only to another London, but to another England. It's a shame that any one should have been allowed to pull down such a bit of old London as that."

And Oliver agreed, absently.

So, talking of indifferent things, they walked back to the hotel where Mrs. Tropenell was awaiting them, and the three afterwards spent the rest of the day peacefully together. But the next day there began again for them all the same dreary round—that odd, artificial life of "having a good time," as Gillie jovially put it.

Somehow Laura did not mind it so much now as she had done before. Her talk with Oliver had shifted her burden a little, and made her feel as if he and she had gone back to their old, happy, simple friendship. It had also deadened her feeling of acute, unreasoning anger with Godfrey.

At last came the morning when Oliver and Gillie were to go to Paris. And at the last moment, standing on the platform at Charing Cross, there took place a rather pathetic, ridiculous little scene.

Gillie had bought for his sister a beautiful old jewel, and he thrust it—with a merry little word as to this being the first really nice present he had ever given her—into her hand. When she opened the case and saw the emerald and pearl heart, her eyes brimmed over with tears.

Even Gillie was moved. "There, there!" he exclaimed. "Nothing to cry about—'Nuff said,' Laura. Perhaps we'll meet again sooner than you think, my friends the Americans say."

And she tried to smile.

Then Gillie turned to Mrs. Tropenell, speaking with much greater sincerity of feeling than he was wont to do. "I'll never forget your kindness—in the past and in the present—to my sister and to me, Mrs. Tropenell. I'm not such a careless brute as I seem to be—I never forget a kindness—or an injury. Now then, Oliver!"

Laura felt her hand seized, closed on in a vice-like pressure which hurt, then dropped. "Good-bye, Laura," said Oliver in an almost inaudible tone. "Good-bye, till we meet again."

CHAPTER XII

AS so often happens after hours or days of crises, and even of quarrel, things went better for a while after Laura's return to The Chase.

True, life was now, even more than before, dull, sad, and difficult. She missed Oliver Tropenell's constant companionship and stimulating talk, more than she was willing to acknowledge even to her innermost self. And yet, when Godfrey spoke of the other man's absence from Freshley with regret, his words jarred on her, and made her feel vaguely ashamed. Yet surely, surely she had nothing to reproach herself with in the matter of Oliver Tropenell? She would so gladly have kept him as Godfrey's friend as well as her own.

They had made it up, those two ill-matched people—made it up, that is, after a fashion. They were now much where they had been six months ago, just before Oliver Tropenell with his strong, masterful personality had come into their joint lives.

And Godfrey? Godfrey Pavely was happier, more complacent than usual, during those late autumn days. He also was ashamed—though not unreasonably so—of the absurd importance he had attached to those two vulgar anonymous letters! He was sorry now that he had spoken of the matter to Oliver Tropenell, for that odd, rather awkward talk of theirs on the matter had been perhaps a contributory cause of the other man's sudden departure. If Oliver came home for Christmas, he, Godfrey, would "make it all right."

The banker had yet another reason for feeling life pleasanter than usual just now. He was engaged in a rather big bit of financial business of a kind his soul loved, for it was secret, immediately profitable, and with a gambling risk attached to it. The only person to whom he had said a word concerning the affair was Katty Winslow, and even to her, for he was a very prudent man, he had been quite vague.

With Katty he was becoming daily more intimate. Laura's cold aloofness made him seek, instinctively, a kinder, warmer, and yes, occasionally, a tenderer feminine presence. For the first time, lately, Godfrey had begun to tell himself that Katty would have made an almost perfect wife.... And Katty could have told

you almost the exact moment when that thought had first flashed upon Godfrey Pavely's brain. But she also knew that so far he was content, most irritatingly content, with the *status quo*. Not so she——And one evening Katty tried an experiment which was on the whole remarkably successful, though its effects were strangely different from what she had expected.

While dining alone with Godfrey and Laura at The Chase, she startled her host and hostess by throwing out a careless word as to the possibility of her leaving Rosedean—of letting the house furnished, for a year....

Laura was astonished to see how much this casual remark of Katty's upset Godfrey. He uttered an exclamation of deep surprise and annoyance, and his wife told herself bitterly how strange it was that Godfrey, feeling so strongly about Katty, should not understand how she, Laura, felt about Gillie. After all, Gillie was her own brother, and Katty was not Godfrey's sister—only an old playmate and friend!

Godfrey was, in very truth, much more than upset at those few careless words of his old friend—playmate, in the sense that Laura meant, she had never been. So disturbed and taken aback indeed that he lay awake much of that night.

The next morning he broke his walk into Pewsbury by going into Rosedean, this being the very first time he had ever done such a thing.

He was kept waiting a few moments—as a matter of fact only a very few moments—in the familiar little drawing-room, before Katty, wearing a charming, pale blue dressing-gown, edged with swansdown, joined him.

As was her way, she began speaking at once. "Why, what's the matter?" she exclaimed. "Has anything gone wrong, Godfrey?"

He answered irritably, "No, not that I know of. But I've something to say to you." He pulled out his big, old-fashioned gold repeater. "It's twenty to ten—I thought I'd find you down!"

"I always breakfast upstairs in my own room. But I didn't keep you waiting long——"

She was still a little breathless, for she had come down very quickly.

And then he began, with no preamble: "I want to know if you really meant what you said last night about letting this house furnished for a year? I'm by no means sure if the terms of your lease allow for your doing that; I shall have to look into it after I get to the Bank. Still, I thought I'd better come and see you first."

Katty grew very pink. "Oh, Godfrey!" she exclaimed. "Surely you wouldn't be so unkind——?"

There came over her pretty face that curious, obstinate look which he had already seen there often enough to dread. Also she made him feel ashamed of himself. But how attractive she looked—how fresh and dainty—like a newly opened rose! Katty had twisted up her hair anyhow, but that only made her look younger, and more natural.

"Let's come out into the garden," she said coaxingly. "Surely you can stay for a few minutes? This is the very first time you've ever been to see me in the morning! Why not telephone through and say you've been delayed,—that you can't be at the Bank till eleven?" She was edging him as she spoke towards the corner where, behind a screen, there stood the telephone instrument.

As if compelled to obey, he took up the receiver, and uttered the familiar words, "Pewsbury 4." And at once there came an answer.

"Is that you, Privet? What a comfort it is to know that I can always rely on your being there, whoever else isn't! This is only to say that I have been delayed, and that I don't expect to be at the Bank till eleven."

Then came the calming, comforting answer, "Very good. That'll be all right, sir. There's nothing much doing this morning, from what I could make out when I was looking over your letters just now."

So Godfrey Pavely, feeling rather as if he was being driven along by a pleasant fate, hung the receiver up, and followed the blue-garbed figure out of doors, into a little pleasance now filled with exquisite autumnal colouring, and pungent, searching scents.

In the furthest corner of the walled garden, which was so much older than the house itself, was a tiny lawn surrounded by high hedges. There they could talk without any fear of being overlooked or overheard; and, before her visitor could

stop her, Katty had dragged two cane-seated easy chairs out of her little summer-house.

They both sat down, but this time Katty warily remained silent. She was waiting for her companion to begin.

"You weren't serious, were you?" he said at last, and she felt the underlying pain and surprise in his voice. "You don't really mean that you want to go away, Katty? Where would you go to? What would you do? Have the Standens asked you to go abroad again—not for a whole year, surely?"

"No," she said slowly, "not the Standens. If you must know, I've been offered a furnished cottage rent-free by those friends of mine, the Haworths, who live near York. The truth is, I can't afford to keep up Rosedean! I hate saying this to you, but it's the truth."

"If you didn't go away so much——" he began irritably.

But she cut across him sharply, "After all, I've a right to go away if I like! But it isn't that, Godfrey. I've gone into it all—really I have! Even if I never left Rosedean I should still be too poor to go on living here comfortably."

"How much too poor?" he asked.

Katty drew a long breath. In a sense she was speaking at random, but no one would have known it from the tone in which she answered: "About a hundred a year—a little less, a little more."

And then Godfrey Pavely said something which very much surprised Katty. "About that thousand pounds which was left to you the other day," he said hesitatingly.

"Well? That'll only bring in thirty-five pounds a year; you made all the arrangements," she added wearily. "You wouldn't let me have it—as I wanted you to do."

"I couldn't, Katty, you know that! I didn't ask your aunt to make me your trustee."

"Well, that thirty-five pounds won't make any difference."

She was sorry now she had told him of the little house on her generous friends' estate. Perhaps he would offer to let her off the Rosedean rent. But Katty had quite made up her mind to cut the cable, and make a fresh start elsewhere.

"Wait a bit," he said slowly, "women always run on so fast! When I mentioned that thousand pounds, I was not thinking of giving it you, as you call it, to spend. I was thinking of that foreign investment I mentioned to you last week. If you're willing to take the risk, I might stretch a point, for if things go well that thousand pounds might easily be trebled in the course of the next two years. I'm so sure of that, that I'm quite willing to advance you, say, two hundred pounds."

He knew quite well that his proposal was utterly illogical, and bore, so to speak, no relation to the fact that the investment he was proposing might turn up trumps.

Katty's eyes sparkled. She was very fond of ready money, and it was such a long, long time since she had had any. "D'you mean you'd really give me two hundred pounds *now*?" she asked joyfully.

And Godfrey, with his eyes fixed on the grass, said in a shamed voice, "Yes—that is what I do mean."

Somehow it hurt him to feel how that sum of money, so trifling to him, affected her so keenly. He was better pleased with her next question.

"What sort of an investment exactly is it?"

"It's in the nature of a company promotion," he said slowly. "And of course you must regard anything I tell you about it as absolutely private."

"Yes, I quite understand that!"

He drew a piece of paper out of his pocket. "As a matter of fact I've got a few facts about it jotted down here."

She drew her chair rather nearer to his, and Godfrey Pavely, turning his narrow yet fleshy face towards her, began speaking with far more eagerness and animation than usual. Katty, who was by no means a fool where such things were concerned, listened absorbedly while he explained the rather big bit of

financial business in which he was now interested.

After he had been speaking to her without interruption for some minutes, Katty exclaimed: "Yes, I think I see now exactly what you mean! There certainly doesn't seem much risk attached to it—at any rate as regards the start off, as it were. But what made these French bankers pick *you* out, Godfrey? After all, they're doing you a very good turn."

"I don't exactly know why they picked me out, as you call it——" he spoke hesitatingly. "But during that year I spent in Paris I came across a great many of that sort of people. My father got me the best possible introductions."

The piece of paper on which he had jotted certain notes and calculations was a large piece of thin foreign notepaper covered with small handwriting in the diluted ink which some French business men use.

"Can you read French?" he asked doubtfully.

She answered rather sharply, "Yes, of course I can!" and held out her hand.

The letter, which bore a Paris address, and the date of a fortnight back, was from the French banking house of Zosean & Co. It explained at some length that a client of the bank, a wealthy South American of Portuguese extraction named Fernando Apra, had become possessed of an estate on the coast of Portugal to which was attached a gambling concession. The idea was to make the place a kind of Portuguese Monte Carlo, and the present possessor was very desirous that English capital and English brains should be put into the company. The returns promised were enormous, and there seemed to be little or no risk attached to the business—if it was run on the right lines.

"I have gone into the matter very thoroughly," said Godfrey Pavely, "and I have convinced myself that it's all right. This Fernando Apra already has a London office. I managed to see him there for a few minutes last week. His real headquarters are in Paris."

"And are you finding all the money?" asked Katty eagerly. "Will it be all your money and *my* thousand pounds, Godfrey? In that case I suppose we shall get all the profits?"

He smiled a little at woman's cupidity. "No," he said, "I haven't been able to

find it all myself. But I've managed to get in a very good man. Some one with whom I've done business before, Katty."

"What's his name?" she asked inquisitively.

Godfrey Pavely waited a moment. "I don't know that I ought to tell you—" he said uncomfortably. "He doesn't want to appear in the business."

"Of course you ought to tell me!" All sorts of strange ideas floated through Katty's mind. Was he going to say "Oliver Tropenell"? She rather expected he was.

"Well, I *will* tell you," he said, "for I know you can hold your tongue. The name of the man who's going into this business with me is Greville Howard."

"D'you mean the big money-lender?" Katty couldn't help a little tone of doubt, of rather shocked surprise, creeping into her voice.

"Yes," he said doggedly, "I do mean the man who was once a great money-lender. He's retired now—in fact he's living——" and then he stopped himself.

"Why, of course!" Katty felt quite excited. "He's living in Yorkshire, near the Haworths! They've often talked about him to me! They don't know him—he won't know anybody. He's a rather queer fish, isn't he, Godfrey?"

"He's absolutely straight about money," exclaimed Godfrey Pavely defensively. "I've had dealings with him over many years. In fact he's the ideal man for this kind of thing. He has all sorts of irons in the fire—financially I mean—on the Continent. He's a big shareholder in the company that runs the Dieppe and Boulogne Casinos."

He got up. "Well, I ought to be going now. It's all right isn't it, Katty? You won't talk again of going away?"

"Could you let me have that two hundred pounds this afternoon?" she asked abruptly.

Godfrey Pavely looked at her with a curious, yearning, rather sad look. Somehow he would have preferred that Katty should not be quite so—so—he hardly formulated the thought to himself—so ready to do *anything* for money.

"Very well," he said. "Very well, my dear"—he very seldom called her "my dear," but he had done so once or twice lately. "I'll bring it this afternoon, in notes."

"That *will* be kind of you," she said gratefully. "But look here, Godfrey, do take it out of my thousand pounds! Put eight hundred in this thing."

He shook his head and smiled. Women were queer, curiously unscrupulous creatures! "That would be right down dishonest of me, Katty."

They were now walking across the little lawn, which was so securely tucked away, out of sight of any prying window, and before going through the aperture which had been cut in the hedge, they both turned round and clasped hands. "Thank you so—so much," she said softly. "You've been a dear, kind friend to me always, Godfrey."

"Have I?" he said. "Have I, Katty? Not always, I fear."

"Yes, always," and her voice trembled a little.

He bent down and kissed her on the mouth with a kind of shamed, passionate solemnity which moved, and, yes, a little amused her. What *queer*, curiously scrupulous creatures men were!

"Go now, or you'll be late," she whispered.

And he went.

PART TWO

CHAPTER XIII

CERTAIN days become retrospectively memorable, and that however apparently uneventful they may have seemed at the time.

To Laura Pavely the 6th of January opened as had done all the other days during the last few weeks, that is, quietly, dully, and sadly.

There was one difference, trifling or not as one happened to look at the matter. Godfrey was away in London. He had been absent for over a week—since the 28th, and though he had been expected back last night, there had come a telephone message, late in the afternoon, to say that his business would keep him away a day longer.

This morning—it was a Friday morning—Laura, trying hard to shake off her depression, told herself that she and Alice might as well go for a ride. It was a beautiful day, and the wind blew soft. They would go across the downs to a certain lonely spot which Alice loved.

Laura was already in the hall in her riding habit, waiting for the child, when there came a telephone message through from Pewsbury. It was from the Bank asking what time Mr. Pavely would be there. A gentleman with whom he had made an appointment for ten o'clock, had been waiting for him since that hour. It was now nearly eleven.

Laura turned to the servant: "Did Mr. Pavely give you any message to send on to the Bank?" she asked.

The man answered, "No, ma'am, not that I understood. Mr. Pavely didn't come himself to the telephone."

"What was the message exactly?" Laura was always kind and courteous in her manner to her servants, and they were all attached to her.

"It was as how Mr. Pavely was being detained, and could not be home last night, ma'am. The person who gave the message was in a great hurry—he cut me off before I could say anything to him."

"I suppose we ought to have telephoned to the Bank early this morning," said Laura thoughtfully. But it had never occurred to her that it would be necessary for her to do so. Her husband was a very exact man of business. She had taken it as certain that he had also communicated with the Bank.

"Who was it telephoned just now?" she asked.

"I think it was Mr. Privet himself, ma'am. He said he felt sure Mr. Pavely intended to be back this morning, because of the gentleman he had arranged to see."

"Perhaps I had better speak to Mr. Privet myself," said Laura. "Is that you, Mr. Privet?"

"I wish you a very good morning, Mrs. Pavely. I didn't mean to put you to any trouble, but you see the matter is important——" Even through the telephone she could hear a mysterious tone in the old voice, though he was speaking in so low a tone that she could scarcely hear. "It's Lord St. Amant. He's been here since ten o'clock, and he says he can't stop any longer. Mr. Pavely made an appointment with his lordship over a week ago. It's very strange he should have forgotten, isn't it, Mrs. Pavely?"

"Yes, I think it *is* strange," she said slowly. "Will you tell his lordship that I'm exceedingly sorry that word was not sent him. If I had known of the appointment, of course I would have communicated with him either by telephone or by a note."

"Then I'm to put off all Mr. Pavely's appointments for to-day?"

"Well, yes, Mr. Privet, that seems to me the only thing you can do."

Laura smiled a little as she left the telephone. Mr. Privet's tone, if not his words, made it quite clear that he thought Mr. Pavely had committed a serious solecism, almost the worst solecism a country banker could commit, in not keeping an appointment with the great man of the neighbourhood, who was to be the new Lord Lieutenant of the county.

An hour and a half later, as mother and child were riding slowly home, Laura suddenly told herself that it was a long time since Mrs. Tropenell had seen Alice on pony-back. Why shouldn't they both go on to Freshley? And if Aunt Letty asked them to stay to lunch, as she very probably would, so much the better!

On their way to the front door of the house, they turned into the stable-yard to find a groom, and then, suddenly, Laura felt a queer, and to herself an utterly unexpected and new, sensation sweep over her. It was a sensation of eager, unreasoning joy.

Oliver Tropenell stood in the middle of the yard, talking to his mother's old groom. He looked ill and tired—dreadfully tired. But all at once, as he saw Laura and her child come riding in, a wonderful change swept over his dark face—there came over it a glowing expression of welcome and delight. He lifted Alice off her pony. Then he came forward to help Laura....

With a shock of surprise which seemed to make her heart stop beating, Laura felt her whole being responding to the ardent, and at once imperious and imploring look with which he gazed up into her eyes. She was shaken, awed by the passion he threw, perhaps unconsciously, into that long, beckoning look—stirred to the heart by the feeling of content his mere presence brought her.

But even in those few flashing moments, Laura Pavely quickly, almost fiercely, assured herself that this new, strange sensation of oneness, of surrender on her part, was "friendship," nothing more.

Yet her voice faltered in spite of herself, as she said, "Hadn't we better ride round? I only came in here to find some one to hold the horses, in case your mother wanted us to come in."

But with a muttered, "Mother has got Lord St. Amant to luncheon—I know she would like you both to stay, too," he lifted her off her horse.

They walked to a door which led into the back part of the house, and so by a corridor to a small room where Mrs. Tropenell generally sat in the morning. As they went along, Alice, alone, chattered happily.

At last Laura, more for the sake of proving to herself that she felt quite at ease than for anything else, asked suddenly, "I suppose you didn't see Godfrey on your way through London?"

Oliver waited a few moments—so long indeed that she wondered if he had heard her. But she knew in her heart that he had, for his face had darkened at the mention of her husband's name. At last he answered, very deliberately, "Is Godfrey away then?"

"Yes. He went off some days ago. We expected him home yesterday; but he sent a telephone message to say he wasn't coming back till to-night."

They were now before the door of Mrs. Tropenell's sitting-room. Her son opened it quietly, and for a moment the three stood there, gazing into the panelled, sunlit little room, which was part of the survival of a much older building than the eighteenth-century manor-house.

Mrs. Tropenell, sitting upright in a low chair, was looking up into the face of the man who stood before her, and they were both so absorbed in what they were saying that neither had heard the door open.

Laura gazed with new eyes, a new curiosity, at Lord St. Amant. She had seen him often in this house, though sometimes at comparatively long intervals, ever since she was a child, and always he had had a fixed place, in her mind and imagination, as Mrs. Tropenell's one man-friend.

To-day, seeing the two thus talking eagerly together she felt her interest oddly quickened. She was asking herself eagerly whether some such passage as that which had taken place between herself and Oliver Tropenell three months ago, and which had caused her so much pain, had ever occurred between those two in the days when Lady St. Amant, a fretful, selfish invalid whom every one disliked, was still alive. If yes, then Mrs. Tropenell had evidently known how to retain the friendship, the warm affections of a man who, younger, had been notoriously inconstant.

In Laura's eyes these two had always been old when she thought of them at all. But to-day she realised, as in a flash, that the man and woman before her had also been young, and that not so very long ago.

Even now, Lord St. Amant was a still vigorous and active-looking man. He was leaning over the back of a chair, looking eagerly into his old friend's face. Was it true, as some of the gossips said, that he had remained a widower for that same friend's sake?

Laura gazed at him with an almost hungry curiosity. She was absurdly surprised that he looked to-day exactly as he had always looked in her eyes—a pleasant, agreeable-mannered, amusing man of the world, not at all her notion of the one-time lover of many women.

Lord St. Amant's hair had now gone white, but, apart from that he looked just as he had been wont to look, when he came and went about Freshley Manor, when she, as a child, had stayed there with her mother. Some years later, she had become dimly aware—girls always know such things—that Mrs. Tropenell had had a fleeting notion of marrying her to Lord St. Amant. But Laura had also known that it was Mrs. Tropenell, not herself, who was the magnet which then drew him so often to Freshley Manor.

They had once, however, had an intimate talk together. It had been on one of the very rare occasions when Mrs. Tropenell was ill, confined to bed, upstairs, and she, Laura Baynton, had been left alone to entertain her Aunt Letty's old friend. And their talk—she remembered it now—had been all of Oliver: of Oliver and his mother.

Lord St. Amant had spoken with much heat of Oliver's having settled on the other side of the world, leaving Mrs. Tropenell lonely. Then he had smiled a curious little smile: "But that makes no difference. To a mother 'distance makes the heart grow fonder,' and also 'lends enchantment to the view.' An only son, Laura, is the most formidable of rivals."

The girl had been flattered, touched too, by the implied confidence.

She had yet another vivid memory of Lord St. Amant. He had sent her, immediately on hearing of her engagement to Godfrey Pavely, a magnificent wedding present; also he had come, at some inconvenience, to her marriage.

Godfrey had supposed the compliment due to regard for himself and for his father, but Laura, of course, had known better. Lord St. Amant had come to her marriage to please Mrs. Tropenell—because he regarded her, in a sense, as Mrs. Tropenell's adopted daughter.

Something of all this moved in quick procession through Laura Pavely's mind, as she stood in the doorway, looking more beautiful, more animated, more feminine, in spite of—or was it because of?—her riding dress, than Oliver Tropenell had ever seen her.

She moved forward into the room, and Lord St. Amant turned quickly round.

If Laura looked at Lord St. Amant with a new interest, a new curiosity in her beautiful eyes, he, on his side, now looked at Laura more attentively than he had done for a long time. He had been abroad for two months, and this was the first time he and Mrs. Tropenell had met since his return.

They had just had a long talk, and during that talk she had at last told him something which had amused, surprised, and yes, interested him very much; for Lord St. Amant, in the evening of his days, found himself more, not less, tolerant of, and interested in, human nature, and in human nature's curious kinks and byways, than at the time when he himself had provided his friends and contemporaries with food for gossip and scandal. But he had been very comforting in his comments on her story, and more than once he had made his old friend smile. Mrs. Tropenell had felt very, very glad to see Lord St. Amant. It was natural that she should be glad to have once more within easy reach of her the one human being in the world to whom she could talk freely, and who took an unaffectedly close, deep interest in all her concerns.

Not till they were all sitting at luncheon, was Laura able, in a low tone, to inquire after her brother. Little Alice knew nothing of her uncle's visit to England. Godfrey and Laura had tacitly agreed to keep the child in ignorance of it. But now Laura asked, with some eagerness, "And Gillie? What's happened to Gillie? Is he still abroad?"

Olive answered at once, "No, he's gone back to Mexico." And then, as he saw a look of blank disappointment shadow her face, he added, hastily, "He gave me a lot of messages for you—I was coming over this afternoon to deliver them. You know what Gillie's like—he never writes if he can help it!"

"Yes," she said, "I know that," and she sighed. "Did he go from a French port?" she asked.

Oliver hesitated. It was almost as if he had forgotten. But at last he answered, "Yes, he went from Havre. I saw him off."

And then something rather untoward happened. There came a violent ringing at the front door—a loud, imperious pulling at the big, old-fashioned iron bell-pull. To the surprise of his mother, Oliver flushed—a deep, unbecoming brick red. Starting up from table, he pushed his chair aside, and walked quickly to the door. It was almost as if he expected some one. "I'll see who it is!" he called out.

They heard him striding across the hall, and flinging open the front door....

Then he came back slowly, and Mrs. Tropenell saw that there was a look of immeasurable relief on his face. "It's a man who's brought a parcel from Pewsbury for one of the servants. He declared he couldn't make any one hear at the back, and so he came round to the front door—rather impudent of him, eh?" and he sat down again.

Coffee was served in the pleasant, low-ceilinged drawing-room, and then Oliver and Laura went out of doors, with Alice trotting by their side.

It was quite like old times. And the child voiced their unspoken feeling, when, slipping her hand into Oliver's, she exclaimed, "This is jolly! Just like what it used to be when you were here before!"

And he pressed the little hand which lay so confidingly in his. "Yes," he said, in a low voice, "the same—but nicer, don't you think so, Alice?"

And Alice answered with the downrightness of childhood, "I can't tell yet! I shall know that after you've been here a little while. We can't garden as much as we did then, for now the ground is too hard."

"But we can do other things," said Oliver, smiling down at her.

And Alice answered doubtfully, "Yes, I suppose we can."

They did not say very much. Oliver did not talk, as perhaps another man would have done, of his and Gillie's adventures in France and Italy. And after a comparatively short time Laura suggested that she and Alice had better now ride home.

"Will you come over to tea?" she asked.

And Oliver said yes, that he would.

"I daresay Godfrey will be back by then. He often takes the early afternoon train down from London."

But to that he made no answer, and Laura, with a rather painful sensation, saw the light suddenly die out of his face.

He came round to the stable. "I'll walk a little way with you," he said.

But she exclaimed rather hurriedly, "No, don't do that, Oliver! Stay with your mother and Lord St. Amant."

And without any word of protest he obeyed her.

It is strange what a difference the return of a friend may make to life! Laura Pavely felt another woman as she busied herself that afternoon, happily waiting for Oliver Tropenell. Honestly she hoped that Godfrey would come back by the early afternoon train; he, too, would be glad to see Oliver.

But the time went by, and there came no message through from London ordering the car to be sent to the station, and Laura told herself that perhaps Godfrey had gone straight to the Bank.

At last, a little after five, Oliver Tropenell came sauntering in, very much as he used to saunter in, during the long happy summer days when they had just become friends.

They had tea in Alice's day-nursery, and after tea, they all three played games till it was nearly seven. Then, reluctantly, Oliver got up, and said he must go home. And as he stood there, gazing down into her face, Laura was struck, as she had been that morning in the first moment of their meeting, by his look of fatigue and of strain. She, who was so little apt to notice such things, unless her little girl was in question, glanced up at him anxiously. "You don't look well," she said, with some concern. "You don't look as if you'd had a holiday, Oliver."

"I shall soon get all right," he muttered, "now that I'm here, with mother." And then, in a lower voice, he added the words, "and with you, Laura."

She answered, nervously determined to hark back to what had been their old, happy condition, "Alice and I have both missed you dreadfully—haven't we, my darling?"

And Alice said gaily, "Oh yes, indeed, we have, mother." Then the child turned, in her pretty, eager way to Oliver, "I hope you'll stay a long, long time at Freshley. If only it snows, father thinks it may soon, you and I can make a snow man!"

And Oliver, after a moment's pause, answered, "Yes, so we can, Alice. I'm going to stay at home some time now, I hope."

And again, on hearing those words, Laura felt that new, unreasoning thrill of joy which she had felt when she had seen Oliver standing in the middle of his mother's stable-yard. Till that moment, and now again, just now, she had not known how much she had missed her friend.

At last, when it was really time for him to go, Laura and Alice both accompanied their guest to the hall. Then he turned abruptly to Laura: "How about to-morrow? May I come to-morrow morning?"

And over Laura there came just a little tremour of misgiving. Surely Oliver was going to be—reasonable?

"Yes," she said hesitatingly, "I shall be very glad to see you—though of course I'm rather busy in the morning. To-morrow Mademoiselle is not coming. Perhaps I'd better telephone early and tell you our plans for the day. Godfrey will be so glad to see you, Oliver. He asked only the other day when Mrs. Tropenell expected you back."

But to that remark Oliver made no answer.

After the heavy front door had shut behind her visitor, and when Alice had already run out of the hall, Laura opened the front door again.

She called out: "Perhaps you'll meet Godfrey. He may be here any moment now; if he's been at the Bank, he will walk out from Pewsbury."

But Oliver did not turn round. He was evidently already out of hearing.

Feeling strangely restless, Laura walked out a little way, closing the door partly behind her. There was about a quarter of a mile of carriage road from the house to the gate, but the night was very clear, the ground hard and dry. Soon her eyes became accustomed to the darkness; she could see Oliver's tall figure rapidly growing less and less, dimmer and dimmer. Every moment she expected to see another, still more familiar, form emerge from out of the darkness. But, after pacing up and down for perhaps as long as ten minutes, she went back into the house. Godfrey was evidently coming home by the last train.

Moved by an indefinable feeling of peace as well as of contentment, Laura sat up long that night, waiting for her husband. She had made up her mind to tell him, not only that Oliver had come back, but also that her brother was on his way to Mexico. Half ashamedly she asked herself why they should not all three go back to the happy conditions which had lasted all the summer?

But there came neither Godfrey nor news of him, and Laura spent the evening of a day of which the date was to become memorable, not unhappily in reading.

When it came to half-past eleven, she knew that her husband would not be home that night, but, even so, she sat up till the tall lacquered clock in the hall struck out the chimes of midnight. Then, a little reluctantly, she went upstairs, telling herself that if in the morning there was still no news of Godfrey, she and Alice would stroll along to Rosedean. Katty might know something of Godfrey's movements, for when she had been last at The Chase an illusion had been made to a bit of business he was to do for her in London, which would necessitate some correspondence.

CHAPTER XIV

THERE are certain winter days when bed and bath seem to be the only two tolerable places in the world.

Katty Winslow, on waking up the next morning, that is, on Saturday, the seventh of January, knew at once, though she was snuggled down deep in her warm bed, that it was very much colder than it had been the evening before. She shivered a little, telling herself that perhaps she was not in as good condition as usual, for she had only just come back from spending Christmas and the New Year away.

The faithful Harber drew back the curtains, letting in gleams of red winter sun. And then she brought her mistress a nice cup of hot tea, and a pretty, wadded, pale-blue bed wrap.

Katty sat up. "I'm not in any hurry to-day," she said. "I'll ring when I want breakfast." And after having taken her tea she lay down again, and began to think.

Oddly, or perhaps naturally, enough, her thoughts turned to Godfrey Pavely. She wondered vaguely where he was, and if he would be home to-day.

There had been a kind of half arrangement between them that they would travel down from London together on the Thursday afternoon. That would have meant for Katty the benefit of The Chase motor—a pleasant as well as an economical plan—and its owner's company as far as Rosedean.

But Katty had not found Godfrey Pavely at the London station, though she had lingered about up to the very last moment before taking, regretfully, a third-class ticket. On arriving at Pewsbury she had also waited some minutes in the vague hope that Godfrey might have dashed up just as the train was leaving—not that he was apt to dash at any time, for he was always very careful of himself, and had a due regard for his personal dignity. But there was no sign of the familiar figure, and so Katty had had to take a fly—a slow, smelly, expensive fly—out to Rosedean.

Yesterday, Friday, had been a rather tiresome, dull day, spent in hearing from Harber all the disagreeable things which had happened while she had been away—how Harber's stupid, untrained girl-help had gone and broken a rather nice piece of china in the drawing-room, and also how it had come to pass that there were two slates off the roof.

Katty had rather expected Godfrey would come in, if only to apologise for having failed her during the journey. But the afternoon had gone slowly by, and at last she felt sure, knowing his ways, that he had not yet come home. Something must have delayed him—something, perhaps, connected with that pleasant Portuguese gambling concession which was to bring them both such a lot of money. But if that were so, she would almost certainly receive from him this morning one of his rather long, explanatory letters. Of late Godfrey had fallen into the way of writing to Katty almost every day when they were apart.

Though Mrs. Winslow meant to keep the fact strictly to herself—for it was one that might have somewhat surprised even the unsuspicious Laura—she and Godfrey had actually spent a long day together during their dual absence from home.

It had fallen out as such pleasant meetings sometimes do fall out, very naturally and innocently, just a week ago to-day.

Katty, on her way from the south to stay with her friends, the Haworths, had run up against Godfrey Pavely at King's Cross. That had been a really extraordinary coincidence, and one of which it would have been foolish not to take advantage. For it turned out that he also was going to Yorkshire, and on the business in which they were both interested, to spend a night with the ex-money-lender, Greville Howard. That gentleman, it seemed, was making certain difficulties about the matter—he wanted to stay his hand till he had seen the French bankers who were concerned with the affair. As he spent each spring in the south of France, that would not be such a difficulty as it seemed. Still, it was a bore, and the other had felt he had better go and see him.

After a pleasant journey together, as they were steaming into York station Godfrey suddenly asked: "Must you go on to your friends at once? Couldn't you telephone to them to meet you by a later train? I'm in no hurry." And, smilingly, she had consented.

Of late Katty's heart had become very soft to her old friend. For one thing he

was being so good to her in the matter of money. That two hundred pounds he had given to her some weeks ago had been followed by two fifty-pound notes. And yet, though she knew poor Godfrey was quite unaware of it, her original purpose—the purpose which had so distressed him, and which, as she well knew, had induced in him such extraordinary and unusual generosity—had not faltered at all. Katty still meant to cut the cable, and start a new life elsewhere.

Rosedean was all very well; her close friendship with Godfrey Pavely was all very well; though of late she had been disagreeably aware that Godfrey was ashamed—ashamed of giving her that money, ashamed of his increasing fondness for her, ashamed also of—well, of other little things which sometimes happened, things which Katty thought quite unimportant, which she regarded as part of the payment due from her to Godfrey. But she realised more rather than less, as time went on, that if she wanted to make anything of her life there must come a change. She would wait a while, wait perhaps till next autumn—so she had told those kind friends of hers, the Haworths.

Katty was sometimes surprised to find how sorry she was that things had not fallen out otherwise. But she had always tried, in all the great things of life, to look the truth squarely in the face. Only once had she been caught doing anything else—and that, as we know, had been years and years ago. She was not likely to make that sort of mistake now. She had come to see, with a rather painful clearness, that Godfrey and Laura, however ill they got on together, were not the sort of people to lend themselves to any kind of juggling with the law to obtain their liberty.

But she had been disappointed in Oliver Tropenell. She had felt in him accumulated forces of that explosive energy which leads to determined action—also she had thought that Gillie would do something.

But the two had disappeared together almost immediately after her talk with Laura's brother. That was over ten weeks ago now, and neither had given any sign of life since.

But Katty intended to keep up with Godfrey. For one thing she was keenly interested in that business in which they were, in a sense, both engaged. Also one never can tell what life—and death—may not bring forth. Whatever happened, the link between herself and Godfrey was too strong ever to be broken. Even if she married again, which she supposed she would do some time

or other, there seemed no reason, to her, at any rate, why she should not keep up with Godfrey. He was her trustee now, as well as her oldest friend.

So it was that she had very willingly assented to do him the trifling favour of spending some further hours in his company.

As they wandered about the old city, and lingered awhile in the great Minster, neither of them said a word that the whole world might not have overheard. They visited some of the curiosity shops for which York is famed, and Katty's companion, with that new generosity which sat on him so strangely, bought a beautiful, and very costly, old cut-glass pendant for Rosedean.

They did not meet a soul that either of them knew, excepting, yes, stop—— After they had said goodbye (Godfrey, with a rather shocked look on his face, for Katty, imprudent, foolish Katty, had woman-like seemed to expect that he would kiss her in a corner of an empty waiting-room where at any moment they might have been surprised by some acquaintance of one or the other of them!)— after, as arranged, they had said good-bye, and Katty was engaged in taking her ticket for the branch line station for which she was bound, a curious thing happened.

She suddenly heard a voice, a man's voice, which sounded pleasantly familiar.

Who could it be? The association evoked was wholly agreeable, but Katty could not place, in the chambers of her memory, the owner of the rather peculiar accents which were engaged in asking when the next train back to London would start.

She had turned round quickly, only to see a small queue of people behind her, among them surely the owner of that peculiar voice. But no, she did not know any one there—though among them a man attracted her attention, for the simple reason that he was staring at her very hard. He was obviously a foreigner, for his skin was olive-tinted, and he had a small, black, pointed beard. He stared at Katty with an air of rather insolent admiration. And then he broke away from the queue, and walked quickly off, out of the booking-office.

Katty always enjoyed admiration, whatever its source, and yet a queer kind of shiver had gone through her when this impertinent stranger's glance rested full on her face. She had had the odious sensation that the man saw something to be

jeered at, as well as admired, in her neat and attractive self.

At last, reluctantly, Katty got up and went into her well-warmed comfortable bathroom. It was nice to be home again, at no one's orders but her own. After she had dressed, she rang, and very soon came her breakfast, daintily served by the devoted Harber, also the one daily paper she felt she could afford to take.

Katty was one of the many women to whom the daily picture-paper supplied a long-felt, if unconscious, want. It gave her just the amount of news, and the kind of news, that her busy mind, absorbed in other things, could assimilate comfortably. She was no reader, though sometimes she would manage to gallop through some book that all the world was talking about. But newspapers had always bored her. Still, she had become very fond of the paper she now held in her hand. It only cost a halfpenny a day, and Katty liked small, sensible economies.

That liking of hers was one of the links which bound her to Godfrey Pavely, but unlike Godfrey, Katty did not care for money for money's sake. She only liked money for what money could buy. And sometimes, when she was in a cheerful, mischievous mood, she would tell herself, with a smile, that if ever her Castle in Spain turned out to have been built on a solid foundation—if ever, that is, she became Godfrey Pavely's wife, she would know how to spend the money he had garnered so carefully. She felt pretty sure, deep in her heart, that should such an unlikely thing come to pass, she would know how to "manage" Godfrey, and that, if surprised, he would not really mind what she did. She always got good value out of everything she acquired, and that would remain true if, instead of spending pence, she was ever able to spend pounds.

A little before eleven, just as Katty was beginning to think it was time for her to finish dressing, she heard the gate of her domain open, and the voice of little Alice Pavely rise up through the still, frosty air, mingling with the deeper, gentler tones of Laura.

It was an odd thing, considering that the two women were at any rate in theory intimate friends, that Laura very, very seldom came to Rosedean. In fact Katty could not remember a single time when Laura had come in the morning,

an uninvited, unexpected guest. So suddenly poor Katty felt a little chill of apprehension; she got up from her chair, and waited....

The front door was opened at once. Then came Harber's hurrying footfalls on the staircase—and, simultaneously, the garden door at the back of the house swung to. Laura had evidently sent her little girl out of doors, into the garden. What could she be coming to say?

Quickly Katty examined her conscience. No, there was nothing that Laura could possibly have found out. As to that half day spent with Godfrey in York, Laura was surely the last woman to mind—and if she did mind, she was quite the last woman to say anything about it!

There came a knock at the door: then Harber's voice, "Mrs. Pavely wants to know, ma'am, if she can come up and speak to you, just for a minute."

"Ask Mrs. Pavely to come up," said Katty, pleasantly.

A minute later, Laura walked forward into the room. It was the first time she had been in Katty's bedroom since Rosedean had been first furnished.

She looked round her with a smile. "Why, Katty," she exclaimed, "how charming and pretty you've made it all! You've added quite a number of things since I was here last."

"Only the curtains," said Katty quickly (oh, how relieved she felt!), "only the curtains, and perhaps that arm-chair, Laura."

"Yes, I suppose that *is* all, but somehow it looks more."

Laura looked exactly as she always looked, rather paler perhaps than usual, but then Laura was pale. She had that peculiar clear, warm whiteness of skin that is compared by its admirers to a camellia; this morning, her lovely, deep blue eyes looked tired, as if she had been sleeping badly.

"I've really come to ask if you know where Godfrey is? We expected him home on Thursday. Then he sent a telephone message saying that he couldn't be back till yesterday. No time was mentioned, but as he had a lot of appointments at the Bank we of course thought he would be back early. I myself sat up for him last night till after the last train, but now, this morning, I've heard nothing from

him—and Mr. Privet has heard nothing."

"What an odd thing!" exclaimed Katty. She really did think it very odd, for Godfrey was the most precise of men.

She waited a moment, then said truthfully, "No, I haven't the slightest idea where he is. He wrote me a line late last week about a little investment of mine. I've got the letter somewhere."

Katty was trying to make up her mind as to whether she should say anything concerning that joint journey to York. At last she decided not to do so. It had nothing to do with Godfrey's absence now.

"Doesn't Mr. Privet know where he is?" she asked. "That really *is* very odd, Laura."

"Of course Mr. Privet knows where Godfrey was up to Thursday morning. He stayed where he always does stay when in London, at the Hungerford Hotel, in Trafalgar Square. He's always stayed there—they know him, and make him very comfortable. But Mr. Privet telephoned through there yesterday—as a matter of fact I've only just heard this—and they told him that Godfrey had left the hotel on Thursday morning. But the extraordinary thing is," and now Laura really did look somewhat troubled—"that they were expecting him back there to pack, to leave for here—at least so the manager understood him to say. He went out in the morning, and then he didn't come back, as they thought he would do, to luncheon. All his things are still at the Hungerford Hotel."

Katty began to feel a little uneasy. "Perhaps he's had an accident," she said. "After all, accidents *do* happen. Have you done anything, Laura?"

Laura shook her head. "What seems to make the theory of an accident unlikely is that telephone message. You see, he telephoned quite late on Thursday saying that he would stay in town over the night. But he didn't send a similar message to the Bank, as any one knowing Godfrey would certainly have expected him to do, and he didn't let them know at the Hungerford Hotel that he would be away for the night. It's all rather mysterious."

"Yes, it is," said Katty.

"I wonder—" Laura grew a little pink—"I wonder," she said again, "if you

know on what business Godfrey went up to town? Mr. Privet would rather like to know that."

And then Katty grew a little pink, too. She hesitated. "No, I don't know what business took him away. You forget that I myself have been away for quite a long time—I only came back on Thursday afternoon."

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Laura. "I forgot that. You've been away nearly a fortnight, haven't you?"

"Yes. First I went right down to the south, and then up to Yorkshire."

Somehow she felt impelled to say this.

But Katty's visits were of no interest to Laura at any time, least of all just now. "Well, I thought I'd come and just ask you on the chance," she said.

She got up, and for a moment or two the two young women stood together not far from the bow window of Katty's bedroom.

Suddenly Katty exclaimed, "Why, there's Oliver Tropenell! What an extraordinary thing! I thought he was abroad."

"He came back yesterday morning," said Laura quietly.

Katty gave her visitor a quick, searching look. But there was never anything to see in Laura's face.

"Hadn't I better call out to him? He's evidently on his way to The Chase. Hadn't I better say you're here?"

And, as Laura seemed to hesitate, she threw open the window. "Mr. Tropenell?" she called out, in her clear, ringing voice.

The man who was striding past Rosedean, walking very quickly, stopped rather unwillingly. Then he looked up, and when he saw who it was that was standing by Mrs. Winslow, he turned in through the gate, and rang the door-bell.

"Will you go down to him, Laura? I can't come as I am."

"I'll wait while you put on your dress. We can tell him to go out into the

garden with Alice."

She bent over the broad, low bar of the window, and Oliver, gazing up at her, thought of Rossetti's lines: Heaven to him was where Laura was.

"Will you go through the house into the garden? Alice is there. We'll be down soon."

Katty lingered a little, though she only had to put on her blouse, her skirt, and a sports coat. "I feel quite anxious about Godfrey," she said hesitatingly.

And Laura, in an absent voice, said, "Yes, so do I. But of course by this time he may be at the Bank. He's quite fond of that very early morning train. He often took it last summer."

"Yes, but now he would have had to get up in the dark to take it."

"I don't think Godfrey would mind that."

At last the two went downstairs, and out into the garden where Oliver Tropenell and the child were talking together.

Oliver turned round, and after shaking hands with Mrs. Winslow, he asked Laura an abrupt question. "Did Godfrey come back last evening after all?"

Katty looked at him inquisitively. Then he had been at The Chase yesterday?

Laura shook her head. "No, I sat up for him till midnight. I thought it almost certain that he'd taken the last train. But we've had no news of him at all. Perhaps he's at the Bank by now—I'll ring up as soon as I get home. Come, Alice, my dear."

Katty heard Oliver Tropenell say in a low voice: "May I walk with you?"

And then Katty cut in: "You'll let me know, Laura, won't you, if you have any special news? Of course I don't want you to let me know if Godfrey's safe at the Bank—I'm not so anxious as all that!" She laughed, her rather affected, little ringing laugh. "But if there's any other news—especially if he's had an accident of any sort—well, I *should* like to know."

"Of course I'll send you word." And then Laura roused herself. "Why

shouldn't you come up to lunch, Katty? I wish you would! And then I could tell you anything I've heard this morning."

"Thanks, I'd like to do that. I'll follow you in about an hour. I've things to do, and letters to write, now."

She saw the three off, and once more, as had so often been the case in the past, her heart was filled with envy—envy, and a certain excitement.

Oliver Tropenell's return home just now was a complication. She felt sure it would upset Godfrey, but she could not quite tell how much. She wondered if Gilbert Baynton had come back too. She rather hoped that he had.

She wrote her letters, and then, so timing her departure as to arrive exactly at one o'clock, for at The Chase luncheon was at one, she went off, meeting, as she expected to do, Oliver Tropenell on his way home to Freshley.

"Any news?" she called out. And he shook his head. "No—no news at all." Then he added slowly: "But I don't see that there's any cause for alarm. Pavely telephoned the day before yesterday saying he was being detained in town."

"Still, it's odd he didn't write to Laura," said Katty meditatively. "As a rule he writes to Laura every day when he is in London."

She knew that was one of those half-truths which are more misleading than a lie. Godfrey was fond of sending home postcards containing directions as to this or that connected with the house or garden. But Katty saw the instinctive frown which came over Oliver Tropenell's face, and she felt pleased. She enjoyed giving this odd, sensitive, secretive man tiny pin-pricks. She had never really liked him, and now she positively disliked him. Why had he gone away just when things were looking promising? And, having gone away for so long, why had he now come back?

"How is Mr. Baynton?" she asked, smiling.

"He's gone back to Mexico."

And now Katty was really surprised. "Has he indeed?" she exclaimed. "And without seeing Laura again? I'm rather sorry for *that*!" And as Oliver made no answer, she went on a trifle maliciously: "I suppose you will be going off soon,

too?"

He hesitated, a very long time it seemed to her, before he answered, "Yes, I suppose I shall. But things go on all right over there as long as one of us is there."

Then, with a not over civil abruptness, he left her.

Katty stayed most of that cold wintry Saturday afternoon with Laura, and as was her way when she chose to do so, she made herself very pleasant to both the mother and child, and that though little Alice did not like her.

A little before four she asked Laura if she might telephone herself to the Bank, and Laura eagerly assented.

Explaining that she was really speaking for Mrs. Pavely, Katty had quite a long chat with Mr. Privet. She and the old head clerk had always been good friends, though they met seldom. He could remember her as a beautiful child, and then as the popular, because the always good humoured and pleasant-spoken, belle of Pewsbury.

"Yes, I feel very anxious indeed, Mrs. Winslow! I've been wondering whether it wouldn't be a good thing to communicate with the London police, if we don't have any news of Mr. Pavely to-morrow. Could you ascertain for me the exact feelings of Mrs. Pavely?"

"I agree with you, Mr. Privet, for after all, accidents *do* happen! Hold the line a moment. I'll go and inquire."

She hurried off to Laura's boudoir. "Mr. Privet suggests that the London police should be communicated with—if we don't have news of Godfrey by to-morrow morning."

Laura looked up, startled. "Oh, Katty, don't you think that would make him very angry—if he's all right, I mean?"

"Perhaps it would," Katty agreed uncomfortably.

She went back to the telephone. "Mrs. Pavely thinks we'd better wait a little longer before saying anything to the police," she called out.

And thus it was through Laura, as Katty reminded herself in days to come, that two more precious days were lost.

CHAPTER XV

"WELL, my dear—any more news?" But even as Mrs. Tropenell, looking up from her breakfast-table, asked the question, she knew what the answer would be.

It was the following Monday morning. The post had just come in, and at once, knowing that the postman called first at The Chase, Oliver had hurried off to the telephone. He had been there a long time—perhaps as long as ten minutes—and when he came back into the dining-room his mother was struck afresh by the look of almost intolerable strain and anxiety in his face and eyes.

They had spent a great part of Sunday with Laura, and during that long, trying day Mrs. Tropenell had felt very much more concerned about her son than she did about Godfrey Pavely.

Godfrey, so she told herself, with a touch of unreason not usual with her, would almost certainly turn up all right—even if, as she was inclined to believe possible, he had met with some kind of accident. But Oliver, her beloved, the only human being in the world that really mattered to her—what was wrong with him? Long after she had gone to bed each evening she had heard him, during the last three nights, wandering restlessly about the house.

After the first almost painful rush of joy which had come over her when he had suddenly walked into her presence last Thursday night, she had regretted, with unceasing bitter regret, his return home. It was so horribly apparent to her, his mother, that Laura, *belle dame sans merci*, held him in thrall.

"If you don't mind, mother, I think I shall go up to town to-day and see the Scotland Yard people. I think—don't you?—it would-be a comfort to Laura." There was a harassed, questioning note in his voice which surprised Mrs. Tropenell. As a rule Oliver always knew exactly what he meant to do.

She answered slowly, reluctantly (she hated so much his being mixed up in this odd, mysterious matter of Godfrey's temporary disappearance!): "Perhaps it would be. Still, I think Laura ought to communicate with Godfrey's cousins. Of course I know he didn't care for them. Still, after all, those people are his only

near relations."

"That old Mr. Privet, Pavely's confidential clerk, is going up to town to-day," observed Oliver inconsequently. "I thought he and I might travel together, and that while he goes to the hotel, I can go to Scotland Yard."

And then Mrs. Tropenell roused herself to try and give what help she could.

"Lord St. Amant knows the new Commissioner of Police very well," she said. "They met in India. Ask him to give you a note of introduction, Oliver. He's in town just now, you would certainly find him, either at his rooms or at his club."

There came a faint flush over her face. By her plate there lay Lord St. Amant's daily letter. On Mondays London letters always arrived by the second post, but yesterday her old friend had had a late-fee stamp put on his letter, so that she might get it the first thing this morning. He had suggested that Sir Angus Kinross—that was the name of the new Commissioner—should be approached. He had even offered—and it was good of him, for he hated taking trouble and he had always disliked Godfrey Pavely—to go to Scotland Yard himself.

Oliver was still standing, though his breakfast was only half eaten, and he was looking at his mother with that rather impatient, strained look on his face to which she had by now become accustomed. "That's a good idea," he said. And she felt glad that any idea proposed by her should seem to be good. Yesterday her son, who was always so kindly, so respectful in his manner to her, had—yes, snubbed her—when she had proposed something which it had seemed to her would be of use.

"I think I'll go over to The Chase now, mother. It's impossible to say all that one wants to say over the telephone."

She said nervously, "Won't you finish your breakfast?" and to her surprise he obeyed her. To her surprise also, when at last he did get up he seemed in no great hurry to go.

"Shall I come with you, my darling?" she said.

He shook his head. "No, mother. I'd rather discuss the matter with her alone, but I'll make her come over as early as I can. You know she said she would bring Alice to lunch to-day." And then, looking straight down into her troubled face,

he asked: "Mother? What do *you* think has happened to Godfrey Pavely?"

It was the first time he had asked her the direct question.

"I don't know what to think! But I suppose the most probable thing is—that he's had an accident. After all, people do meet with bad accidents, especially in wintry, foggy weather, in the London streets. If so, he may be lying unconscious in one of the big hospitals. I can't think why the London police shouldn't have been told of his disappearance on Friday—that, as I told Laura yesterday, is the first thing I should have done myself."

"Both Mrs. Winslow and Laura seemed to think he would dislike that so very much," said Oliver slowly.

There was a defensive note in his voice, for he had made no effort to back up his mother when she had strongly counselled Laura to communicate with Scotland Yard.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he said suddenly, "that Pavely may be dead, mother?"

"No, Oliver. That I confess has not occurred to me. In fact, I regard it as extremely unlikely."

"Why that?" he asked in a hard voice. "People are often killed in street accidents." Then, after a minute's pause: "Do you think Laura would mind much?"

"I think it would give her a great shock!" She added, hesitatingly. "They have been getting on rather better than usual—at least so it has seemed to me."

"Have they indeed?"

His words cut like a whip, and she got up and went and stood by him. "My son," she said very solemnly. "Oh, my darling, don't allow yourself to wish—to hope—for Godfrey Pavely's death!"

Looking straight into her face, he exclaimed, "I can't help it, mother! I do hope, I do wish, for Godfrey Pavely's death—with all the strength, with all the power that is in me. Why should I be hypocritical—with you? Am I the first man

that has committed murder," he waited a moment—"in his heart?"

"If that be really so—then don't let it ever be suspected, Oliver! For God's sake, try and look differently from what you have looked the last few days! If your wish is to be granted, your hope satisfied, then don't let any one suspect that the hope or the wish was ever there!"

She spoke with an intensity of feeling and passion equal to his own.

"You're right, mother," he said in a low voice. "I know you're right! And I promise you that I'll try and follow your advice. No man ever had a wiser and a better mother than I!"

He turned round quickly and left the room.

Mrs. Tropenell did not see her son again till late that night, and then not alone, for Laura spent the evening at Freshley, and after he had taken their guest home to The Chase, he did not come in again for hours.

Old Mr. Privet, Godfrey Pavely's confidential clerk, had been rather taken aback when he had learnt over the telephone, from Mrs. Pavely, that he was to have Mr. Oliver Tropenell as his travelling companion to London. But very soon, being a truly religious man, he came to see how well and wisely everything had been ordered. To begin with, Mr. Tropenell called for him at the Bank, thus saving him a very cold, easterly-wind kind of walk to Pewsbury station, which was some way from the town. And once there, Mr. Tropenell had taken two first-class return tickets—that again being the action of a true gentleman, for he, Mr. Privet, would have been quite content to go by himself third-class. Also, as it turned out, during the long journey to London they had some very pleasant and instructive conversation together.

Quite at first, in answer to a query as to what he thought of this extraordinary business of Mr. Pavely's disappearance, Mr. Oliver Tropenell had been perhaps a little short. He had replied that no one could possibly venture an opinion as to what had happened. But then had followed between them, in spite of the fact that the noise of the train was very trying, a most agreeable chat over old times—over those days when Mr. Godfrey Pavely's father, a fine type of the old country-town banker, was still alive.

Mr. Privet, as a younger man, had had a good deal to do with the final sale

and purchase of The Chase, and Mr. Tropenell, as was very natural in one whose own ancestors had lived there for hundreds of years, had shown the greatest interest in that old story. Mr. Tropenell had not been in the least over-curious or indiscreet, but Mr. Privet had been led on to talk of his companion's grandfather, a gentleman who, if rather wild, and certainly extravagant and headstrong, had been such a grand sportsman—quite a hero among the young men of Pewsbury! What had brought about the poor gentleman's undoing had been his taking over the hounds, when Lord St. Amant's great-uncle had given them up.

So pleasant had been that conversation in the first-class carriage shared by them, that for the first time since Thursday Mr. Privet had almost forgotten the business on which they two were going to London! But he had soon remembered it again—for at the station Mr. Oliver Tropenell had suggested that, instead of going to the Hungerford Hotel, he, Mr. Privet, should accompany him to Lord St. Amant's club, in order to get a letter of introduction from that nobleman to the Commissioner of Police.

Not long ago Mr. Privet had read an interesting book called *In London Club Land*. But he had little thought, when he was reading that book, that he would ever see the famous old political club to which a whole chapter had been devoted, and to which so many of his own special political heroes had belonged in their time!

And then, after Lord St. Amant, who also had treated Mr. Privet with rather exceptional civility, not to say courtesy, had written the letter, Mr. Tropenell suggested that they should go straight on to Scotland Yard—pointing out, what was true enough, that Mr. Privet knew far more of Mr. Godfrey Pavely's business and habits than any one else.

And so, together, they had driven off in a taxi—also a new, agreeable experience to Mr. Privet—to the famous Bastille-like building on the Thames Embankment.

But when there, the interview with the pleasant-spoken, genial gentleman who wielded such immense powers had been disappointing.

Sir Angus Kinross had listened very carefully to all that he, Mr. Privet, had had to say, and he had asked a number of acute, clever questions of both his visitors. But very soon he had observed that he feared much valuable time had been lost.

Later on, Mr. Privet, when he thought the interview over, could almost hear the voice of Sir Angus repeating slowly, inexorably: "Thursday? And it's now Monday afternoon! What a misfortune it is that Mrs.—ah, yes—Mrs. Pavely, did not communicate with us at once. If she had telephoned, here, when she first began to realise that there was something strange in her husband's prolonged absence, she would almost certainly have had some sort of news by now."

And then he, Mr. Privet, had answered quickly, "But we didn't begin to feel anxious till the Friday, sir."

"I quite understand that! But if you, Mr.—ah yes—Mr. Privet—had written then, we could have begun our inquiries on the Saturday morning. Did it not occur to you to let the London police know of Mr. Pavely's non-appearance?"

For a moment Mr. Privet had felt vaguely uncomfortable, for his questioner had given him such a very odd, keen look, as he asked that simple question. But he had answered, honestly enough, for after all 'Tho' truth may be blamed, it can never be shamed': "Mr. Pavely, sir, did not like to be interfered with when he was away on business, and we thought it would annoy him if we were to make too great a fuss. Once, many years ago now—Mr. Pavely went over to Paris for some days, and omitted to leave his address at the Bank. I couldn't help remembering last week that Mr. Pavely, on that former occasion, had seemed somewhat put out with me for expressing what I thought at the time a very natural anxiety, sir."

They hadn't been very long at Scotland Yard, a little under half an hour in all, and during the last ten minutes a shorthand writer had made some notes of the conversation, which, indeed, had been almost entirely carried on between him, Mr. Privet, and the Commissioner of Police. Mr. Oliver Tropenell, as was bound to be the case, had had very little to say, seeing that he was there merely as Mrs. Pavely's representative, she having her only brother in Mexico.

After leaving Scotland Yard they had gone on to the Hungerford Hotel, and there a lot of information had been afforded them. But it hadn't amounted to very much—when all was said and done! They already knew that all trace of Mr. Pavely had disappeared after eleven o'clock on the Thursday morning. His room was even now exactly as he had left it; neat, for he was always a most particular gentleman, but with nothing put away. In fact the only news of him after that morning had been that telephone message to The Chase—a message given by

some one, the butler by now wasn't even sure if it was a man or a woman, who was evidently in a great hurry.

One thing the manager of the hotel had done which had rather surprised and shocked both Mr. Privet and his companion. He had consulted a detective about the affair, and, at Mr. Tropenell's request, the detective was sent for.

Mr. Privet had thought this secret inquiry agent (as he called himself) a queer kind of chap—in fact he had seemed much more anxious to ascertain if a reward was going to be offered, than to offer any useful advice as to this perplexing matter of Mr. Pavely's disappearance.

He had, however, seemed to think that the Thursday evening telephone call was very important, and he had asked permission to come down to The Chase to cross-examine the servant who had taken the message. But that—so Mr. Tropenell had very properly said—was impossible, now that the matter had been placed in the hands of Scotland Yard. In answer to Mr. Privet's natural curiosity as to why the detective thought that telephone call so important, the man had answered, rather crossly: "You see, there's no record kept of telephone calls! There's a record kept of telegrams, so one can always recover the original of a telegram."

Mr. Tropenell had been quite surprised on hearing this.

"I should have thought telephone calls quite as important as telegrams?" he had exclaimed.

"So they are, with regard to *my* kind of work," the man had replied. "But even with regard to trunk-calls you've only got to go into a Post Office and plank down your money and wait till you're through! Still, the young woman at your country Exchange would probably have remembered the call if she had been asked sooner. But it's all such a long time ago."

A long time ago? What nonsense! He, Mr. Privet, felt quite put out with this detective, and he began to see why Mr. Tropenell thought the man ought not to have been brought into the business at all. It was certainly rather cool of the hotel manager to have gone and brought such a person into the affair, without asking Mr. Pavely's friends if he was at liberty to do so.

They had managed to catch the six o'clock express back to Pewsbury, and

then Mr. Tropenell very kindly insisted on driving Mr. Privet home. Mr. and Mrs. Privet owned a pretty, old-fashioned house on the other side of the town. When Mr. Privet had married—a matter of forty years ago now—he had made up his mind that it would do him good to be obliged to take a good walk to and from the Bank every day.

On their arrival at the house—which, funnily enough, was called Southbank—Mr. Tropenell, at the request of Mr. Privet, had come in for a few minutes to make the acquaintance of Mrs. Privet. He had said how much he liked their house, how much prettier it was, how much more dignified—that had been his curious word—than the red brick villas which had sprung up all over the outskirts of their beautiful old town. And Mr. Privet had been secretly rather pleased, for lately "Mother"—as he called Mrs. Privet—had become somewhat restless, being impressed by certain improvements those gimcrack villas possessed, which their house lacked, and that though he had put in a nice bathroom a matter of twenty years ago.

Yes, of the several people who, that day, had been engaged in trying to probe the mystery of Godfrey Pavely's disappearance, the only one who found a great deal of natural pleasure and simple enjoyment out of it all was Mr. Privet; and he, alone of them all, really cared for the missing man, and, perhaps, alone of them all, had a genuine longing to see him again.

Mr. Privet thought it was particularly kind of Mr. Oliver Tropenell to be taking all this trouble for poor Mrs. Pavely; though of course he, Mr. Privet, was well aware that Mrs. Pavely's brother was partner to Mr. Tropenell in Mexico. He knew the sad truth—the sad truth, that is, as to the disgraceful circumstances under which Gilbert Baynton had had to leave England. No one else in the Bank had known—at least he and Mr. Pavely hoped not. It had been very, very fortunate that the forged signature had been on one of their own cheques. But for that fact, nothing could have saved that good-for-nothing scoundrel—so Mr. Privet always called Gillie Baynton in his own mind—from a prosecution.

Do any of us ever think, reader, of the way in which our most secret business is known, nay, must be known, to a certain number of people of whose existence we ourselves are scarcely aware?

Laura, when she came and talked, as she sometimes did talk, kindly, if a little indifferently, to her husband's confidential clerk, would have been disagreeably

surprised had she been able to see into Mr. Privet's heart and mind. As for Godfrey Pavely, nothing would have made him credit, high as was his opinion of Mr. Privet's business acumen, the fact that his clerk had a very shrewd suspicion where those three hundred pounds in notes, lately drawn out by his employer for his own personal use, had made their way....

CHAPTER XVI

IT was the morning of the 15th of January, and already Godfrey Pavely's disappearance had excited more than the proverbial nine days' wonder.

Laura had gone to her boudoir after breakfast, and she was waiting there, sitting at her writing-table, feeling wretchedly anxious and excited, for all last night she had had a curious, insistent presentiment that at last something was going to happen. She had sent Alice off to her lessons, for there was no object in allowing the child to idle as she had idled during that first bewildering week.

At last she got up, pushed her chair aside, and went and lay down on a sofa. She felt very, very tired; worn out partly by suspense and anxiety, partly by the many interviews with strangers she had been compelled to have during the last ten days.

Oliver Tropenell was again in London, and since he had left Freshley, for the second time, it was as though a strong, protecting arm on which she leant had suddenly been withdrawn from her. And yet she knew that he was engaged upon her business, upon this extraordinary, unutterably strange business of her husband's disappearance.

Oliver wrote to her daily—brief, coldly-worded notes describing what had been, and was being, done both by the police and by the big firm of private detectives who were now also engaged in a search for the missing man. But there was very little to report—so far every one was completely baffled.

Against the wish and advice of both Oliver Tropenell and the Scotland Yard authorities, Laura had offered a reward of a thousand pounds for any information which would lead to the discovery of Godfrey Pavely, alive or dead. It had been Katty's suggestion, and Laura, somehow, had not liked to disregard it.

But now, to-day, Laura, as she moved restlessly this way and that, told herself that she was sorry she had assented to a suggestion that Katty Winslow should come and stay with her during those long days of waiting which were at once so dreary and so full of excitement and suspense. Katty had got hopelessly on Laura's nerves. Katty could not keep silent, Katty could not keep still.

Mrs. Winslow, in a sense, had taken possession of The Chase. It was she who saw to everything, who examined every letter, who went and answered the telephone when the police either at Pewsbury or from London rang up. She was apparently in a state of great excitement and of great anxiety, and some of the critics in the servants' wing said to each other with a knowing smile that Mrs. Winslow might have been Mrs. Pavely, so much did that lady take Mr. Pavely's disappearance to heart!

Katty had not seemed as worried as Laura had seemed the first two or three days, but now she appeared even more upset. Yesterday she had admitted to sleepless nights, and the hostess had felt greatly relieved when her guest had at last confessed that if dear Laura would not mind she would like to stay in bed every morning up to eleven o'clock; nothing ever happened before then.

The only person with whom Laura, during those long, dreary days, felt comparatively at ease was Mrs. Tropenell, for Mrs. Tropenell seemed to understand exactly what she, poor Laura, was feeling during those miserable days of waiting for news that did not come. But Laura did not see very much of the older woman—not nearly as much as she would have liked to do just now, for Mrs. Tropenell disliked Katty, and avoided meeting her.

The stable clock struck ten. And Laura suddenly heard the sound of firm steps hurrying down the passage. She got off the sofa, expecting to see the now disagreeably familiar blue uniform and flat blue cap of the Pewsbury Police Inspector. He came up to see her almost every day, but he had never come quite so early as this morning.

She gathered herself together to answer with calm civility his tiresome, futile questions. There was nothing—*nothing*—she could say that she had not said already as to Godfrey's usual habits, and as to his probable business interests outside Pewsbury. The Inspector had been surprised, though he had tried to hide the fact, to find that Mrs. Pavely knew so very little of her husband's business interests and concerns. The last two times he had been there Katty had been present, and she had been very useful—useful and tactful. Laura, feeling rather ashamed of her late uncharitable thoughts concerning Katty, wished that Katty

could be present at the coming interview, but unfortunately Katty was still in bed.

The door opened, and she stood up expectantly.

It was only Preston, the butler. There was a large envelope on the salver he held in his hand.

"It's from the Bank, ma'am. Marked 'Urgent,'" he said.

"Is there an answer?" she asked.

And he hesitated. "We have kept the messenger, ma'am."

Laura knew Mr. Privet's small, neat handwriting—if he marked an envelope "Urgent," then it was urgent.

There were two enclosures—a note and a letter.

She first read the note:—

"DEAR MRS. PAVELY,

"I found the enclosed on my arrival at the Bank this morning. It may be important, so I send it on at once.

"And let me take this opportunity, dear Madam, of assuring you of my very sincere sympathy. I, too, have known during the last few days what it was to feel that hope deferred maketh the heart sick.

"Yours respectfully,
"DAVID PRIVET."

She turned, with only languid interest, to the envelope. The address was typewritten:—

MRS. G. PAVELY,
C/O MESSRS. PAVELY & CO.,
BANKERS,
PEWSBURY.

It was marked "Private," "Immediate," but that, as Laura well knew, meant very little. A certain number of times, perhaps half a dozen times in all, during her married life, some unfortunate, humble client of her husband's had written to her a personal appeal. Each of these letters had been of a painful and disagreeable nature, often couched in pitiful, eloquent terms, and Godfrey had not allowed her to answer any one of them save in the most formal, cold way.

This typewritten envelope looked as if it might have come from some distressed tradesman. So she opened the envelope reluctantly, not taking heed, as a different type of woman would have done, to the postmark on it. Indeed, without thinking of what she was doing, she threw the envelope mechanically into the burning fire, and then opened out the large sheet of thin paper.

But, as she looked down at the lines of typewriting, she stiffened into instant, palpitating, horrified attention, for this is what she saw there:

"MADAME,—It is with the deepest regret that I acquaint you with the fact that your esteemed husband, Mr. Godfrey Pavely, of Messrs. Pavely & Co., Bankers, of Pewsbury, Wiltshire, is dead.

"If you will instruct the police to go to Duke House, Piccadilly, and proceed to Room 18 on the top floor—the only office which is at present let—they will find there Mr. Pavely's body.

"I am connected with important business interests in Portugal, and for some time I have been in business relations with Mr. Pavely. This fact you will easily confirm by searching among his papers. I am also, of course, well known at Duke House, for I have had an office there for a considerable number of weeks.

"The tragedy—for a tragedy it is from my point of view as well as from that of Mr. Pavely's unfortunate family—fell out in this wise.

"Mr. Pavely came to see me (by appointment) on the Thursday before last. There was a pistol lying on my desk. I foolishly took it up and began playing with it. I was standing just behind Mr. Pavely when suddenly the trigger went off, and to my intense horror the unfortunate man received the charge. I thought—I hoped—that he was only wounded, but all too soon I saw that he was undoubtedly dead—dead by my hand.

"I at first intended, and perhaps I should have been wise in carrying out my first intention, to call in the police—but very urgent business was requiring my presence in Lisbon. Also I remembered that I had no one who could, in England, vouch for my respectability, though you will be further able to judge of the truth of my story by going to the Mayfair Hotel, where I have sometimes stayed, and by making inquiries of the agent from whom I took the office in Duke House.

"My relations with Mr. Pavely were slight, but entirely friendly, even cordial, and what has happened is a very terrible misfortune for me.

"I came to England in order to raise a loan for a big and important business enterprise. Some French banking friends introduced me to Mr. Pavely, and I soon entered on good relations with him. Our business was on the point of completion, and in a sense mutually agreeable to us, when what I may style our fatal interview took place.

"Yours with respectful sympathy,
"FERNANDO APRA."

Laura sat down on the sofa. For the first time in her life she felt faint and giddy, and during the few moments that followed the reading of the

extraordinary letter she still held in her hand, it was, oddly enough, her peculiar physical state which most absorbed her astonished and anguished mind.

Then her brain gradually cleared. Godfrey—dead? The thought was horrible—horrible! It made her feel like a murderess. She remembered, with a sensation of terrible self-rebuke and shame, the feeling of almost hatred she had so often allowed herself to feel for her husband.

And then, before she had had time to gather her mind together sufficiently to face the immediate problem as to how she was to deal with this sinister letter, the door again opened, and Katty Winslow came into the room.

Katty looked ill as well as worried. There were dark circles round her eyes.

"Laura! Whatever is the matter? Have you heard anything? Have you news of Godfrey?"

"I have just had this. Oh, Katty, prepare for bad news!"

But Katty hardly heard the words. She snatched the tough, thin sheet of paper out of Laura's hand, and going across to the window she began reading, her back turned to Laura and the room.

For what seemed a long time she said nothing. Then, at last, she moved slowly round. "Well," she said stonily, "what are you going to do about it? If I were you, Laura, I shouldn't let that stupid Pewsbury inspector see this letter. I should go straight up to London with it." She glanced at the clock. "We've time to take the 11.20 train—if you hurry!"

She felt as if she would like to shake Laura—Laura, standing helplessly there, looking at her, mute anguish—yes, real anguish, in her deep, luminous blue eyes.

"If I were you," repeated Katty in a hoarse, urgent tone, "I should go straight with this letter to Scotland Yard. It's much too serious to fiddle about with here! We want to know at once whether what this man says is true or false—and that's the only way you can find out."

"Then you wouldn't tell anybody here?" asked Laura uncertainly.

"No. If I were you I shouldn't tell any one but the London police. It may be a stupid, cruel hoax."

Deep in her heart Katty had at once believed the awful, incredible story contained in the letter she still held in her hand, for she, of course, was familiar with the name of Fernando Apra, and knew that the man's account of himself was substantially true.

But even so, she hoped against hope that it was, as she had just said, a stupid, cruel hoax—the work perchance of some spiteful clerk of this Portuguese company promoter, with whose schemes both she and Godfrey had been so taken—so, so fascinated.

"Of course I'll go to town with you," she said rapidly. "Let's go up *now*, and dress at once. I'll order the car."

There was a kind of driving power in Katty. Her face was now very pale, as if all the pretty colour was drained out of it. But she was quite calm, quite collected. She seemed to feel none of the bewildered oppression which Laura felt, but that, so the other reminded herself, was natural. Katty, after all, was not Godfrey's wife, or—or was it widow?

The two went upstairs, and Katty came in and helped Laura to dress. "It will only make a fuss and delay if you ring for your maid." She even found, and insisted on Laura putting on, a big warm fur coat which she had not yet had out this winter.

"You'd better just tell the servants here that you think there may be a clue. It's no good making too great a mystery. They can send on some message of the sort to the Bank; also, if you like, to Mrs. Tropenell."

A few moments later Laura found herself in the car, and the two were being driven quickly to Pewsbury station.

"Shall I wire to Oliver Tropenell that we are coming?" asked Katty suddenly.

And Laura answered, dully, "No. He's in York to-day. They've found out that Godfrey went to York during that week we know he was in London. I only heard of that this morning, or I would have told you."

Laura will never forget that journey to London, that long, strange, unreal journey, so filled with a sort of terror, as well as pain. Somehow she could not bring herself to believe that Godfrey was dead.

When they were about half-way there, Katty suddenly exclaimed, "Let me look at that letter again!" And then, when Laura had taken it out of her bag, she asked, "Where's the envelope? The envelope's very important, you know!"

Laura looked at her helplessly. "I don't know. I can't remember. I've a sort of an idea that I threw the envelope into the fire."

"Oh, Laura! What a very, very foolish thing to do! Don't you see there must have been a postmark on the envelope? Can't you remember anything about it? What was the handwriting like?"

Again she felt she would like to shake Laura.

"The address was typewritten—I do remember that. I thought—I don't know what I thought—I can't remember now what I did think. It looked like a circular, or a bill. But it was marked 'Urgent and Confidential'—or something to that effect."

On their arrival in London a piece of good fortune befell Laura Pavely. Lord St. Amant had been in the same train, and when he saw her on the platform he at once put himself at her disposal. "Scotland Yard? I'll take you there myself. But Sir Angus Kinross would be out just now. It's no good going there till half-past two—at the earliest. I hope you'll both honour me by coming to luncheon in my rooms."

Reached by an arch set between two houses in St. James's Street, and unknown to the majority of the people who daily come and go through that historic thoroughfare, is a tiny square—perhaps the smallest open space in London—formed by eight to ten eighteenth-century houses. But for the lowness of the houses, this curious little spot might be a bit of old Paris, a backwater of the Temple quarter, beyond the Louvre and the Hôtel de Ville, which only those tourists who have a passion either for Madame de Sévigné or for the young Victor Hugo ever penetrate.

It was there that Lord St. Amant, some forty years back, when he was still quite a young man, had found a set of four panelled rooms exactly to his liking.

And through the many vicissitudes which had befallen the funny little square, he had always contrived to preserve these rooms, though at last, in order to do so, he had had to become the leaseholder of the house of which they formed a part. But he kept the fact of this ownership to himself and to his lawyers, and it was through the latter that the other rooms—the ground floor and the top floor—were let to various quiet, humble folk. His lawyers also, had found for him the intelligent couple who acted as his caretakers, and who managed to make him extremely comfortable during the comparatively short periods he spent in London each year.

Although his club was within a minute's walk, Lord St. Amant, very soon after his first occupancy of these rooms, had so arranged matters that, when he chose to order it, a cold luncheon or dinner could be sent in at a quarter of an hour's notice. And to-day the arrangement, of which he very rarely availed himself, stood him in good stead.

There are a certain number of people who go through life instinctively taking every chance of advancement or of useful friendship offered to them. Such a person was Katty Winslow.

Even in the midst of her real sorrow and distress, she did not lose sight of the fact that Lord St. Amant, with whom her acquaintance up to the present had been so slight as to be negligible, might prove a very useful friend in what now looked like her immediately dreary future. She was well aware that he was probably, nay, almost certainly, prejudiced against her, for she and Mrs. Tropenell had never been on cordial terms; but she set herself, even now, with this terrible thing which she feared, nay, felt almost sure, was true, filling up the whole background of her mind, to destroy that prejudice. To a certain extent she succeeded, during the few minutes, the precious ten minutes, she secured practically alone with her host, in compassing her wish.

Laura sat down, in the attractive, if rather dark, sitting-room into which Lord St. Amant had shown her, and, blind to everything about her, she was now staring into the fire, oppressed, stunned, by the terrible thing which perchance lay before her.

Lining the panelled walls, which were painted a deep yellow tint, hung a series of curious old colour-prints of London, and, on the writing-table—itself, as Katty's quick eyes had at once realised, a singularly fine piece of eighteenth-century English lacquer—were two portraits. The one was a miniature of a lady in the stiff yet becoming costume of early Victorian days—probably Lord St. Amant's mother; and the other was a spirited sketch of a girl in an old-fashioned riding habit—certainly Mrs. Tropenell forty years ago.

Katty had remained standing, and soon she wandered over to the open door of the room where, with noiseless celerity, the table was being laid for luncheon. It was from there that she almost imperceptibly beckoned to her host. With some prejudice and a good deal of curiosity, he followed her, and together they went over to the deep embrasured window overlooking the tiny square.

There, looking up earnestly into Lord St. Amant's shrewd, kindly face, she said in a low voice: "I want to ask you, Lord St. Amant, to do me a kindness—" she waited a moment, "a true kindness! I want you to arrange that I go to this place, to Duke House, with whoever goes there to find out if the news contained in that horrible letter is true!"

And as he looked extremely surprised, she hurried on, with a little catch in her voice, "Godfrey Pavely was my dear—my very dear, friend. When we were quite young people, when I was living with my father in Pewsbury——"

"I remember your father," said Lord St. Amant, in a softened, kindly tone, and his mind suddenly evoked the personality of the broken-down, not very reputable gentleman to whom the surrounding gentry had taken pains to be kind.

"In those days," went on Katty rather breathlessly, "Godfrey and I fell in love and became engaged. But his people were furious, and as a result—well, he was made to go to Paris for a year, and the whole thing came to an end. Later, after I had divorced my husband, when I was living at Rosedean, it—it——"

She stopped, and tears—the first tears she had shed this terrible morning—came into her eyes.

"I quite understand—you mean that it all began again?"

Lord St. Amant, hardened man of the world though he was, felt moved, really moved by those hurried, whispered confidences, and by the bright tears which

were now welling up in his guest's brown eyes.

Katty nodded. "He was unhappy with Laura—Laura had never cared for him, and lately she, Laura——" Again she broke off what she was saying, and reddened deeply.

"Yes?" said Lord St. Amant interrogatively. He felt suddenly on his guard. Was Mrs. Winslow going to bring in Oliver Tropenell? But her next words at once relieved and excessively surprised him.

"You know all about the Beath affair?"

And it was his turn to nod gravely.

"Well, there was something of the same kind thought of—between Godfrey and myself. If—if Laura could have been brought to consent, then I think I may say, Lord St. Amant, that Godfrey hoped, that I hoped——"

Once more she broke off short, only to begin again a moment later: "But I want you to understand—please, *please* believe me—that neither he nor I was treacherous to Laura. You can't be treacherous to a person who doesn't care, can you? I've only told you all this to show you that I have a right to want to know whether Godfrey is alive or—or dead."

And then Lord St. Amant asked a question that rather startled Katty—and put her, in her turn, on her guard. He glanced down at the letter, that extraordinary typewritten letter, which Laura had handed to him.

"Have you any reason to suppose that Godfrey Pavely was really associated in business with this mysterious man?" he asked.

Looking down into her upturned face he saw a queer little quiver wave across her mouth, that most revealing feature of the face. But she eluded the question. "I did not know much of Godfrey's business interests. He was always very secret about such things."

"She certainly knows there is such a man as Fernando Apra!" he said to himself, but aloud he observed kindly: "I presume Mr. Pavely wrote to you during the early days of his stay in London?"

Katty hesitated. "Yes," she said at last, "I did have a letter from him. But it was only about some business he was doing for me. I was not at Rosedean, Lord St. Amant. I was away on a visit—on two visits."

And then Katty flushed—flushed very deeply.

He quickly withdrew his gaze from her now downcast face, and—came to a quite wrong conclusion. "I see," he said lightly, "you were away yourself, and probably moving about?"

"Yes—yes, I was," she eagerly agreed.

She was feeling a little more comfortable now. Katty knew the great value of truth, though she sometimes, nay generally, behaved as if truth were of no value at all.

In a sense Lord St. Amant had known Katty from her childhood—known her, that is, in the way in which the great magnate of a country neighbourhood, if a friendly, human kind of individual, knows every man, woman and child within a certain radius of his home. He was of course well aware of Mrs. Tropenell's prejudice against Katty, and, without exactly sharing it, he did not look at her with the kindly, indulgent eyes with which most members of his sex regarded the pretty, unfortunate, innocent *divorcée*, to whom Mr. and Mrs. Godfrey Pavely had been so truly kind.

But now, as the upshot of Katty's murmured confidences, her present host certainly acquired a new interest in, and a new sympathy for, Mrs. Winslow. Of course she had not deceived him as completely as she believed herself to have done, for he felt certain that she knew more of Godfrey Pavely's movements, during the early days of his stay in London a fortnight ago, than she admitted. He was also quite convinced that they had met secretly during their joint absence from home.

But Lord St. Amant would have felt a hypocrite indeed had he on that account thought any the worse of Katty Winslow. He told himself that after all the poor little woman did not owe him *all* the truth! If Godfrey Pavely had indeed come to his death in this extraordinary, accidental way, then Katty, whatever Mrs. Tropenell might feel, was much to be pitied; nice women, even so broad-minded a woman as was his own, close friend, are apt to be hard on a woman who is not perhaps quite—nice!

It was therefore with a good deal of curiosity that he watched his two guests while they ate the luncheon prepared for them.

Laura practically took nothing at all. She tried to swallow a little of the delicious, perfectly cooked cold chicken and mousse-au-jambon, but in the end she only managed to drink the whole of the large glass of water her host poured out for her. Katty, on the other hand, made a good meal, and took her full share of a half-bottle of champagne. As a result she looked, when luncheon was over, more like her usual, pretty, alert self than she had looked yet. Laura grew paler and paler, and at last Lord St. Amant, with kindly authority, insisted on her taking a cup of coffee, and a tiny liqueur glassful of brandy poured into it French fashion.

"I'm afraid," he said feelingly, "that you have a very painful ordeal in front of you, my dear. You won't make it any better by going without food."

But she gazed at him as if she had not understood the purport of his words.

CHAPTER XVII

SIR ANGUS KINROSS, Chief Commissioner of Police, stood gazing down, with a look of frowning perplexity, at the sheet of typewritten paper he held in his hand.

For what seemed a very long time to the other three people now present in the big light room overlooking the Embankment, he remained silent. But at last he exclaimed, "I think it very probable that this is a hoax—a stupid, cruel hoax!" And, as no one spoke, he added slowly, "Whether it be so or not can soon be ascertained."

He saw a look of almost convulsive relief flash over Laura Pavely's face. It was Laura who attracted Sir Angus in the little group of people which now stood before him. He knew that it was this beautiful, tragic-looking young woman who had insisted, against his strongly expressed wish and judgment, on offering the reward which had already brought a swarm of semi-lunatics and adventurers into the case. As for the other woman there, he only looked upon her as a friend of Mrs. Pavely.

Ladies in the painful position of Mrs. Pavely generally bring a sister, or a close female friend, with them to Scotland Yard.

Sir Angus was keenly interested in this business of the country banker's disappearance, more interested than he had been in any other matter of the kind for a long time. He had all the threads of the affair very clearly set out in his shrewd, powerful mind, and only that morning he had learnt something which he believed none of the three people now standing before him—Mrs. Pavely, Mrs. Winslow, and Lord St. Amant—knew, or were likely ever to know, except, of course, if certain eventualities made the fact important.

Sir Angus had just learnt that Godfrey Pavely had spent some hours of a day he had passed at York in the company of a woman, and both he and the very able man he had put in charge of the case, had made up their minds that here, at last, was the real clue to the banker's disappearance. Godfrey Pavely, so they argued at "The Yard," was certainly alive, and either on the Continent, or hidden snugly in some English or Scottish country town—not alone.

As so often happens, the fact that Mr. Pavely had been in York with a lady had come to light in a very simple way. When the fact of the well-known country banker's disappearance had been announced in the Press, the manager of the Yorkshire branch of a London bank had written to Scotland Yard, and stated that on a certain afternoon about a fortnight ago—he could not remember the exact day, unfortunately—he had seen Mr. Godfrey Pavely, of Pewsbury, in the company of a lady whom he, the bank manager, had naturally supposed to be Mrs. Pavely. He had looked at the banker with a good deal of interest, owing to the fact that he and Mr. Pavely had for a while worked in the same bank in Paris about fifteen years ago.

He had not met the couple face to face, he had seen them pass by from the window of his private room at the bank. He could swear to Mr. Pavely, but he had not paid any special attention to the lady—for one thing, she had had her veil down, and he, feeling sure that she was Mrs. Pavely, had not troubled to observe her very particularly.

Sir Angus had sent some one down to York to see this gentleman, but nothing of further value had been elicited, excepting, yes, that the lady had struck him as being young and attractive.

So it was that the extraordinary typewritten letter received by Mrs. Pavely that morning very much upset the calculations and the theories of Sir Angus and of his staff.

With frowning brow he sat down at his table and touched the electric bell which lay concealed close to his hand.

"Ask Mr. Dowden to come to me," and a minute later Mr. Dowden came in.

"I want to know anything you can tell me about Duke House, if indeed there is such a place as Duke House in Piccadilly. I can't remember the name."

But at once the other answered: "It's that big new building they've erected on the site of St. Andrews House. It fell in to the Crown on the death of the Duke of St. Andrews, and an American syndicate bought the site. Duke House, as they call it, was only opened last October. The lower storeys are big bachelor flats, and the top half of the building contains offices. Mr. Biddle, the American millionaire, has taken the first floor, but he hasn't settled in yet, and I don't think any of the offices have been let at all. They are asking very big rents, and they

are justified, as it's one of the finest sites in the West End."

"I want you to get through to the porter of Duke House. Find out for me whether they have got an office let to a man—a Portuguese merchant I take him to be, of the name of Fernando Apra." He spelt out the name. "If you have any difficulty in getting the information, just go up there yourself in a taxi, and find out. But I'd like you to go back into your own rooms and try by telephone first."

There followed a long, painful ten minutes, during which Sir Angus, though as a rule he was a man of few words, tried to while away the time by explaining to the three people who were there why he thought it unlikely that the letter was genuine.

"You'd be amazed," he said, "to know the number of letters we receive purporting to contain important information which turn out to be false in every particular. There must be a whole breed of individuals who spend their time in writing annoying, futile letters, which, even if signed, are very seldom signed by the writer's real name. Some of those people are actuated by vulgar, stupid spite; others are hypnotised by the thought of a reward. And then, again, such letters are often written by people who have a grudge against the police, or, even more often, by some one who has a grudge against some ordinary person who has, maybe, done them a bad turn, or to whom they have done a bad turn! In the last few days we've had innumerable letters, from all over the kingdom, concerning Mr. Pavely's disappearance. It is just possible that this man"—he looked down again at the sheet of typewritten paper—"has an office in Duke House, but I think it very unlikely that Mr. Godfrey Pavely was even acquainted with him ____"

The door opened.

"Yes, sir, the party in question has got an office there right enough, but he hasn't been at Duke House for some time—some three weeks, the porter said. He took the office late in October, and for a time he was there, on and off, a good deal. The porter don't quite know what his business is, but as far as he knows he gives him a good character. His office is right at the very top of the house, the only one let on that floor."

An unpleasant little trickle of doubt came over Sir Angus's mind. When he had first read the typewritten letter, he had doubted very much if there was such a building in existence as Duke House, Piccadilly. Then, after he had heard that

the place was there, after, as a matter of fact, it had been recalled to his memory by his subordinate, he had fallen back on the belief that there would be no person of the name of Fernando Apra to be found in Duke House.

He now fell back on a third position. Doubtless this extraordinary letter had been written by some enemy of the man Apra who wished to cause him the unpleasantness of a visit from the police.

After a few moments' thought Sir Angus Kinross proposed something which none of the three people there knew to be a most surprising departure from his usual rule.

"What would you say, Lord St. Amant, if you and I were to go up there now, to Duke House—accompanied, of course, by two of my men? That, at any rate, would put an end to Mrs. Pavely's suspense. If she doesn't mind doing so, Mrs. Pavely and her friend can wait here, in my private room."

To Lord St. Amant the proposal seemed a most natural one. "I think that's a very good idea!" he exclaimed, and then he saw Katty's eyes fixed imploringly on his face.

Why, of course——!

He beckoned to Sir Angus, and the two men walked over to the big window overlooking the Embankment. "If it would not be greatly out of order," he muttered, "I think it might be a good thing if Mrs. Winslow—that is Mrs. Pavely's friend—were to go with us to Duke House. She might be useful—she has known Mr. Godfrey Pavely all her life."

Sir Angus looked very much surprised. "Of course she could come," he said hesitatingly. "Mrs. Winslow? I didn't realise that this lady is Mrs. Winslow. Didn't I see a letter written to her by Mr. Godfrey Pavely? She has some odd Christian name—if it's the person I have in my mind."

"Her Christian name is Katty," said Lord St. Amant quickly.

"Yes, that was it—'My dear Katty.' I remember now. It was a letter about an investment, written on the 30th of December, if I'm not mistaken. Certainly she can come with us. I have my car downstairs—she could drive in my car, and wait in it while we make the investigation."

The two came back to where the ladies were sitting, silently waiting.

"I have suggested to Sir Angus that it might be useful if Mrs. Winslow came with us—and you too, my dear Laura, if you desire to do so, of course."

But Laura shook her head, and an expression of horror came into her face. "Oh no," she exclaimed. "I would much rather stay here!"

Katty had already got up, and was drawing on the gloves she had taken off. She felt strung up, fearfully excited—and very, very grateful to Lord St. Amant.

She was quite unaware that for the first time the Commissioner of Police was looking at her with attention.

There were two entrances to Duke House, the one giving access to the four spacious flats, of which so far only one had been let, while the other simply consisted of a porter's lodge and a lift shooting straight up to the offices which were above the flats.

And now, within ten minutes of their leaving Scotland Yard, they were all standing just within the second door, filling up the small space in front of the lift, for Mrs. Winslow at the last moment had begged to be allowed to get out of the car. "I don't feel as if I *could* sit there—waiting," she had exclaimed, and after a moment's hesitation Sir Angus allowed the plea.

Lord St. Amant noticed with interest that the Police Commissioner took no part in the preliminary proceedings. He left everything to the elder of the two men he had brought with him. Still, he lent a very attentive ear to what his subordinate was saying to the porter, and to the porter's answers.

"I expect that it was you who answered the telephone message I sent half an hour ago, eh?"

"Yes, of course I did—you mean about Mr. Apra here? Well, I told you then everything there is to say about him. He's a foreigner, of course—but a very pleasant-mannered gentleman. He took an office on the second day we was

open. For a while he was here a good bit most days, and quite a number of people came to see him on business. Then he went abroad, I fancy I heard him say, and his office was shut up. He wouldn't let any one go in, not even to clean it, unless he was there. He explained as how his business was very secret—something to do with a Concession. He was nervous lest other folk should get hold of the idea."

"When was he here last?"

"Well, it's difficult for me to remember such a thing as that—I can't be sure that I could say he was here within the last fortnight, or perhaps ten days ago. Two or three people have called to see him. One gentleman came by appointment—I do remember that, because he'd been several times, and mostly this Mr. Apra was in to see him. But I don't see what call you have to ask me all these questions?"

The Scotland Yard man bent forward and said something in a low voice, and the porter exclaimed, with an air of astonishment, "What? You don't mean to say the gentleman's 'wanted'?"

Then the detective said something else in a joking way, and the porter shook his head. "I haven't got a key! He had another lock put on. Lots of business gentlemen do that." And then he asked anxiously, "D'you see any objection to my telephoning to Messrs. Drew & Co.—they're the agents, you know? 'Twould make me more comfortable in my own mind, because then I shouldn't get blamed—whatever happened. They'd send some one along in about five minutes—they've got a West End office."

The Scotland Yard official looked round for instructions from Sir Angus, and the latter imperceptibly nodded.

"All right—we'll wait five minutes. I've brought some tools along."

"Tools?" The porter stared at him.

"Sometimes, you know, we do find it necessary to burst open a door!"

The five minutes—it was barely more—seemed the longest time Katty had ever spent in waiting.

Lord St. Amant took pity on her obvious unease and anxiety. He walked out with her to the street, and they paced quickly up and down in the cold, wintry air.

"Do you think we shall find anything?" she murmured at last.

He answered gravely, "I confess that the whole thing looks very queer to me. I haven't lived to my time of life without becoming aware that amazing, astounding things *do* happen. Perhaps I am over-influenced by the fact that years and years ago, when I was a boy, a school-fellow of mine, of whom I was very fond, did shoot himself accidentally with a pistol. He was staying with us, and he had gone on in front of me into the gun-room—and I—I went in and found him lying on the ground—dead."

"How horrible!" murmured Katty. "How very horrible!" and her face blanched.

As they turned yet once more, a taxi drove quickly up to the door of Duke Mansion, and a young, clean-shaven man jumped out.

Instinctively he addressed himself to Sir Angus Kinross: "About this tenant of ours—Mr. Fernando Apra? To the best of my belief he is a perfectly respectable man. He gave a very good reference, that of a big Paris banker, and with us, at any rate, he was quite frank about his business. He has obtained a gambling concession from this new Portuguese Government, and he came to London to try and raise money for the building of a Casino, and so on. He's an optimistic chap, and his notion is to create a kind of Portuguese Monte Carlo. He told us quite frankly that he didn't intend to keep the office going here for more than six months, or possibly a year, and we arranged that he should be able to surrender his three years' lease—we don't let these rooms under a three years' agreement—on the payment of a rather substantial fine. I think the porter is sure to have a key which will admit you into his room—I understand you want to get into his office?"

And then, at last, Sir Angus answered, rather drily, "The porter cannot admit us to the office, for this Mr. Fernando Apra has had a second lock fitted. It seems he never allowed any one access to the room—unless he happened to be there himself."

"Well, he had plans there—plans of this Concession, and he was very secretive, as are so many foreigners. Still, he impressed both me and my father

more favourably than do most foreigners we come across. As a matter of fact, we twice lunched with him at the Berkeley. He is a man with a tremendous flow of good spirits—speaking English very well, though of course with a foreign accent. Has he got into any trouble?" he looked curiously at the gentleman standing before him. He was not aware of Sir Angus Kinross's identity, but he knew that he was from Scotland Yard.

"We shall know more about that when we have forced open the door of his office. I presume you would like to be present?"

And the young man nodded. A grave, uneasy expression came over his face; he wondered if he had said too much of his pleasant client, and that client's private affairs."

CHAPTER XVIII

THEY went up the lift in two parties: Sir Angus Kinross, the house agent, and the two men from Scotland Yard; then Lord St. Amant and Katty Winslow alone.

As they were going up, he said kindly, "Are you sure you are wise in doing this? I fear—I fear the worst, Mrs. Winslow!"

With dry lips she muttered, "Yes, so do I. But I would rather come all the same. I'll wait outside the door."

Poor Katty! She was telling herself that it was surely impossible—*impossible* that Godfrey Pavely should be dead.

Though his vitality had always been low, he had been intensely individual. His self-importance, his egoism, his lack of interest in anything but himself, Katty, and the little world where he played so important a part—all that had made him a forceful personality, especially to this woman who had possessed whatever he had had of heart and passionate feeling. She had felt of late as if he were indeed part of the warp and woof of her life, and deep in her scheming mind had grown a kind of superstitious belief that sooner or later their lives would become one.

The thought that he might be lying dead in this great new building filled her with a sort of sick horror. There seemed something at once so futile and so hideously cruel about so stupid an accident as that described in the Portuguese financier's letter.

They stepped out on to a top landing, from which branched off several narrow corridors. The agent led the way down one of these. "Room No. 18? This must be it—this *is* it! Look, there are the two keyholes!"

The younger and the brawnier of the two plainclothes detectives came forward. "If you'll just stand aside, gentlemen, for a minute or two, we'll soon get this door open. It's quite an easy matter."

He opened his unobtrusive-looking, comparatively small bag. There was a

sound of wrenching wood and metal, and then the door swung backwards into the room together with a thick green velvet curtain fixed along the top of the door on a hinged rod.

A flood of wintry sunshine, thrown by the blinking now setting sun of a London January afternoon, streamed into the dark passage, and Sir Angus Kinross strode forward into the room, Lord St. Amant immediately behind him.

Katty shrank back and then placed herself by the wall of the passage. She put her hand over her eyes, as if to shut out a dreadful sight, yet all there was to see was an open door through which came a shaft of pallid wintry afternoon light.

For a space of perhaps thirty seconds, Sir Angus's trained eyes and mind took in what he supposed to be every detail of the oblong room overlooking the now bare tree tops of the Green Park. He noted that the office furniture was extremely good—first-rate of its kind. Also that the most prominent thing in the room was an American roll-top desk of an exceptionally large size.

Placed at right angles right across the office, this desk concealed nearly half the room.

In the corner behind the door was a coat stand, on which there hung a heavy, fur-lined coat, and a silk hat. On the floor was a thick carpet. The only unbroken space of wall was covered by a huge diagram map of what looked like a piece of sea shore.

One peculiar fact also attracted the attention of the Commissioner of Police. Both the windows overlooking the Park were wide open, fixed securely back as far as they would go: and on the window seats, comfortably, nay luxuriously, padded, and upholstered in green velvet, there now lay a thick layer of grime, the effect of the fog and rain of the last fortnight. As they stood within the door, in spite of those widely opened windows, there gradually stole on the senses of the four men there, a very curious odour, an odour which struck each of them as horribly significant.

Yet another thing Sir Angus noted in that quick, initial glance; this was that the blind of the narrow window which gave on to the street side of Duke House was drawn down, casting one half of the room in deep shadow.

He turned, and addressing Lord St. Amant in a very low voice, almost in a

whisper, he said: "I think we shall find what we have come to seek over there, behind that desk."

Walking forward, he edged round by the side of the big piece of walnut wood furniture.

Then he started back, and exclaimed under his breath, "Good God! How horrible!"

He had thought to see a body lying at full length on the carpet, but what he did see, sitting upright at the desk, was a stark, immobile figure, of which the head, partly blown away, was sunk forward on the breast....

Great care had been taken to wedge the dead man securely back in the arm-chair, and a cursory glance, in the dim light in which that part of the room was cast, would have given an impression of sleep, not of death.

He beckoned to Lord St. Amant. "Come over here," he whispered, "you needn't go any nearer. Do you recognise that as being the body of Godfrey Pavely?"

And Lord St. Amant, hastening forward, stared with a mixture of curiosity and horror at the still figure, and answered, "Yes. I—I think there's no doubt about it's being Pavely."

"Perhaps you'd better go and tell Mrs. Winslow. Get her away as quick as you can. I must telephone at once for one of our doctors."

Lord St. Amant turned without a word, and made his way through the still open door into the queer, rather dark passage.

Katty's face was still full of the strain and anguish of suspense, but she knew the truth by now. Had nothing been found, some one would have come rushing out at once to tell her so. Three or four minutes had elapsed since she had heard the sudden hush, the ominous silence, which had fallen over them all, in there.

Her lips formed the words: "Then—they've found him?"

And Lord St. Amant nodded gravely. "It looks as if that Portuguese chap had told the simple truth."

"The moment that I read the letter this morning I *knew* that it was true," she muttered. Then, "I suppose I'd better go away now? They don't want me here."

She began walking towards the lift, and Lord St. Amant, following, felt very sorry for her. "Look here," he said earnestly, "I'm sure you don't wish to go straight back to poor Laura Pavely? Why should you? 'Twould only rack you. I suppose——" He stopped a moment, and she looked up at him questioningly.

"Yes, Lord St. Amant—what is it you suppose?"

Katty spoke in a cold, hard voice—all her small affectations had fallen away from her.

"I suppose," he said, "that Laura knew very little of your friendship with poor Godfrey Pavely?"

And she answered, again in that hard, cold voice, "Yes, Laura did know, I think, almost everything there was to know. She didn't care—she didn't mind. Laura has no feeling."

As he made no reply to that, she went on, rather breathlessly, and with sudden passion, "You think that I'm unfair—you think that Laura really cares because she looked so shocked and miserable this morning? But that's just what she was—*shocked,* nothing else. What is a piece of terrible, *terrible* bad luck for me, is good—very good luck for Laura!"

There was such concentrated bitterness in her tone that Lord St. Amant felt repelled—repelled as well as sorry.

But all he said was: "Would you like to go back to my rooms for an hour or two? They're quite near here."

"No, I'd rather face Laura now, at once. After all, I shall have to see her some time. I'm bound to be her nearest neighbour for a while, at any rate."

Late that same night the awful news was broken to Mrs. Tropenell by her son.

He had sent a message saying he would be down by the last train, and she had sat up for him, knowing nothing, yet aware that something had happened that morning which had sent Laura and Katty hurrying up to town.

Perhaps because the news he told was so unexpected, so strange, and to them both of such vital moment, the few minutes which followed Oliver's return remained stamped, as if branded with white hot iron, on the tablets of Mrs. Tropenell's memory.

When she heard his firm, hurried footsteps outside, she ran to let him in, and at once, as he came into the house, he said in a harsh, cold voice: "Godfrey Pavely is dead, mother. A foreigner with whom he had entered into business relations shot him by accident. The man wrote to Laura a confession of what he had done. She got the letter this morning, took it up to London to the police—the best thing she could do—and Pavely's body was found at the place indicated, a business office."

As Oliver spoke, in quick, jerky sentences, he was taking off his greatcoat, and hanging up his hat.

She waited till he had done, and then only said: "I've got a little supper ready for you, darling. I sent the servants off to bed, so I'm alone downstairs."

Oliver sighed, a long, tired sigh of relief—relief that his mother had asked no tiresome, supplementary questions. And she saw the look of strain, and of desperate fatigue, smooth itself away, as he followed her into their peaceful dining-room.

She sat with him, and so far commanded her nerves as to remain silent while he ate with a kind of hungry eagerness which astonished her.

He turned to her at last, and for the first time smiled a rather wry smile. "I was very hungry! This is my first meal to-day, and I seem to have lived in the train. I was up at York—we thought there was a clue there. I think I told you that over the telephone? Then I came back."

She broke in gently, "To be met with this awful news, Oliver?"

He looked at her rather strangely, and nodded.

"Have you seen Laura?" she ventured.

"Yes, just for a moment. But, mother? She's horribly unhappy. I—I expected her to be glad."

"Oliver!"

There was a tone of horror, more, of reprobation, in Mrs. Tropenell's low voice.

Oliver Tropenell was staring straight before him. "Surely one would have expected her to be glad that the suspense was over? And now I ask myself——" and indeed he looked as if he was speaking to himself and not to her—"if it would have been better for Laura if that—that fellow had been left to rot there till he had been discovered, two months, three months, perchance four months hence."

"My dear," she said painfully, "what do you mean exactly? I don't understand."

"Pavely's body was found in an empty office, and if the man who shot him hadn't written to Laura—well, of course the body would have remained there till it had occurred to some one to force open the door of the room, and that might not have happened for months."

"I'm very glad that Laura was told now," said Mrs. Tropenell firmly. "The suspense was telling on her far more than I should have expected it to do. Katty, too, became a very difficult element in the situation. I don't think there's much doubt that poor Katty was very fond of Godfrey."

He muttered: "Mean little loves, mean little lives, mean little souls—they were well matched!"

Then he got up.

"Well, mother, I must be off to bed now, as I have to get up early and go into Pewsbury. Laura, who's staying on in town, asked me to come down and tell those whom it concerned, the truth. She wants you to tell Alice. I said I thought you'd have the child here for a while."

"Certainly I will. She's been here all to-day, poor little girl."

"Do you really think she's to be pitied, mother?"

She hesitated, but his stern face compelled an answer.

"I don't think that Godfrey would have got on with Alice later on—when she grew to woman's estate. But now, yes, I do think the child's to be deeply pitied. It will be a painful, a terrible memory—that her father died like that."

"I can't see it! A quiet, merciful death, mother—one that many a man might envy." He waited a few moments, then went on: "Of course there will be an inquest, and I fear Laura will almost certainly have to give evidence, in order to prove the receipt of that—that peculiar letter."

"Have you got a copy of the letter?" asked Mrs. Tropenell rather eagerly.

Her son shook his head. "No, the police took possession of it. But I've seen it of course."

They were both standing up now. He went to the door, and held it open for her. And then, with his eyes bent on her face, he asked her a question which perhaps was not as strange as it sounded, between those two who were so much to one another, and who thought they understood each other so well.

"Mother," he said slowly, "I want to ask you a question.... How long in England does an unloving widow mourn?"

"A decent woman, under normal conditions, mourns at least a year," she answered, and a little colour came into her face. Then, out of her great love for him, she forced herself to add, "But that does not bar out a measure of friendship, Oliver. Give Laura time to become accustomed to the new conditions of her life."

"How long, mother?"

"Give her till next Christmas, my dear."

"I will."

He put his arms round her. "Mother!" he exclaimed, "I love you the better for

my loving Laura. Do you realise that?"

"I will believe it if you tell me so, Oliver."

He strode off, hastened up the staircase without looking round again, and she, waiting below, covered her face with her hands. A terrible sense of loneliness swept over and engulfed her; for the first time there was added a pang of regret that she had not joined her life to that of the affectionate hedonist who had been her true, devoted friend for so long.

CHAPTER XIX

AND so, in this at once amazing and simple way was solved the mystery of Godfrey Pavely's disappearance.

Inquiries made by the police soon elicited the fact that the Portuguese financier had told the truth as regarded his business in England, for a considerable number of persons voluntarily came forward to confirm the account the man had given of himself in his strange letter.

During his sojourn at the Mayfair Hotel, the now mysterious Fernando Apra had impressed those who came in contact with him pleasantly rather than otherwise. It was also remembered there that one morning, about three weeks ago, he had come in looking agitated and distressed, and that he had confided to the manager of the hotel that an accident of a very extraordinary nature had occurred to him. But there his confidences had stopped—he had not said what it was that had happened to him. A day or two later, he had gone away, explaining that his business in England was concluded.

Laura stayed up in town till the inquest, and so, rather to Laura's surprise, did Katty Winslow.

As is always the case when there is anything of the nature of a mystery, the inquest was largely attended by the ordinary public. But no sensational evidence was tendered, though person after person went into the witness-box to prove that they had come in contact with Fernando Apra, and that under a seal of secrecy he had informed them of his gambling concession and of the scheme for developing what he believed would be a hugely profitable undertaking. In fact, he had spoken to more than one man of business of a possible two hundred per cent. profit.

It also became clear, for the first time, why Mr. Pavely had gone to York. A gentleman who bore the aristocratic name of Greville Howard, and who was in too poor a state of health to come up to the inquest, volunteered the information that Fernando Apra had come to see him, Greville Howard, with an introduction from Mr. Godfrey Pavely. Further, that he, Mr. Howard, having gone into the matter of the proposed gambling concession, had suggested that the three should

meet and have a chat over the business. As a result, a rather odd thing had happened. Mr. Apra did not accept the invitation, but Mr. Pavely, whom he had known for some years, had come to see him, and they had discussed the project. Then he, Greville Howard, had heard nothing more till he had seen in a daily paper a casual allusion to the fact of Mr. Godfrey Pavely's disappearance!

But, though so much was cleared up, two rather important questions remained unanswered. There was no proof, through any of the shipping companies, that Fernando Apra had left England under his own name. Also, while there were apparently several men of that same rather common name in Lisbon, the Portuguese police seemed unable to give any clue as to this particular man's identity. But a plausible explanation of this was to be found in the fact that Portugal had lately changed her form of government.

Though the mystery was now in no sense any longer a mystery, a rather peculiar verdict was returned. The foreman of the jury, a tiresome, self-opinionated man, declared that he and his fellow jurymen were not really satisfied as to how Godfrey Pavely had come by his death, and they added a strong rider to their verdict, expressing an earnest hope that every effort would be made to find Fernando Apra.

The inquest lasted two days, and as Laura insisted on being present the whole time, the ordeal for her was severe. She was, however, supported by the companionship and presence of Mrs. Tropenell, who had come up on purpose to be with her.

After having put Mrs. Tropenell and Laura in a carriage, Lord St. Amant and Sir Angus Kinross walked away from the building where the inquest had been held. For a while neither man said anything.

Then, suddenly, Lord St. Amant exclaimed: "I don't know what *you* think about it, but in spite of all we have heard, I can't help having a suspicion that that man Fernando Apra's story is a bit too thin. I take it that he and Pavely may have had a quarrel—it's even possible that this Portuguese fellow may have wanted to get Pavely out of this exceedingly profitable business. But no man, least of all a man accustomed to carrying firearms, would play about with a pistol quite close

to the back of another man's head!"

"I've known stranger things than that happen," said Sir Angus slowly. "But in any case this Portuguese fellow is an uncommonly clever chap. He's clean covered up his tracks."

He hesitated a moment—and then added "I can tell you one queer thing, St. Amant. This man Pavely's pockets were very thoroughly gone through by whoever shot him. One side of his coat had the lining ripped open."

"Yet quite a good bit of money was found on him," observed Lord St. Amant.

"Whoever went through his pockets wasn't looking for money." Sir Angus spoke significantly.

He went on: "Though it was implied to-day that no papers or letters were discovered on the body, there was, as a matter of fact, an envelope found in an inner pocket. It was one of those inner pockets which some men have put into the inner lining of a waistcoat, the kind of pocket which is practically impossible to find—especially if you're in a hurry, and don't suspect its existence."

Lord St. Amant's curiosity was sharply aroused. He ventured a question: "And the contents of the envelope?"

"Well, between ourselves, the contents of the envelope astonished me very much. The envelope, stamped with the name of Pavely's Bank, contained two rather scurrilous anonymous letters. To me, the curious thing consisted in the fact that Pavely had thought it worth while to keep them. I should have destroyed them at once in his place."

"Do they throw any light on the mystery?"

"No, of course not, or they would have been produced in evidence to-day. But still, one never can tell. Of course we are keeping them." He added significantly, "They were not letters I should have cared to hand back to Mr. Pavely's widow."

And then the Commissioner of Police added something which very much surprised his companion: "By the way, talking of Mr. Pavely's widow, I do earnestly beg you to try and dissuade Mrs. Pavely from continuing that thousand pounds reward."

"Surely the reward has lapsed now? The only person entitled to it would be this man, Fernando Apra himself."

"Ah, but Mrs. Pavely—or so Mr. Tropenell tells me—is quite determined to keep the offer of the reward open. Whereas before the discovery of Mr. Pavely's body the reward was offered for any information leading to his discovery dead or alive, that same sum is now to be offered to any one who can bring us into communication with this Portuguese fellow himself. I'm bound to say that Mr. Tropenell saw at once all the inconvenience of such a course, and he has done his best to dissuade Mrs. Pavely. But she's quite set on it! I fancy she's been persuaded to go on with it by Mrs. Winslow."

"Ah!" said Lord St. Amant. "I can't say that that surprises me. Mrs. Winslow ——"

Then he stopped short, and the other looked quickly round at him, and exclaimed: "I wish you'd tell me a little more than I've been able to find out about this Mrs. Winslow. What exactly was her position in the Pavely *ménage*?"

Lord St. Amant hesitated. He felt bound to stand up for poor Katty. So, "Only that she and poor Godfrey Pavely were very old friends—friends from childhood," he answered slowly. "And since the time she divorced her husband Mrs. Winslow has lived close to The Chase—in fact, she was their tenant."

"Then Mrs. Winslow was Pavely's rather than Mrs. Pavely's friend?"

"Yes—if you care to put it that way."

"I've very little doubt—in fact I feel quite sure, St. Amant, that Mrs. Winslow knows a great deal more about the whole affair than she has chosen to reveal. When she and I talked the whole thing over, I brought her to admit that she *had* heard something of this secret business arrangement between Pavely and Fernando Apra. But if she was speaking the truth—and I think she was—there was a reason for her having been told. She was herself investing a small sum in the concern."

"The devil she was!" Lord St. Amant was very much surprised.

"Yes, and on Pavely's advice, of course. I take it that he was on more confidential terms with this lady than he was with his own wife?"

The other nodded, reluctantly. "Well, you must know by this time almost as well as I did that the Pavelys were not on very—well, happy terms, together!"

Sir Angus went on: "D'you remember something I told you concerning Mr. Pavely's day at York? Even before we knew all you have heard to-day, we felt quite convinced that he'd gone down there to see the old rascal who calls himself Greville Howard. But some further information about that journey to York is in our possession."

Lord St. Amant again nodded. There came a rather uneasy look over his face. He thought he knew the nature of the further confidence which was about to be made to him. He had never had any doubt in his own mind that Godfrey Pavely had not gone alone to Yorkshire.

"We feel quite certain that Mrs. Winslow was with Pavely in York. He was seen there, in the company of a lady, by a business acquaintance. We've ascertained that Mrs. Winslow went, on that same day, to stay with some rather well-known people in the neighbourhood. Mind you, I'm not for a moment suggesting that there was anything wrong."

"I wonder," said Lord St. Amant suddenly, "why Mrs. Winslow still desires the reward to be offered."

"I think I can tell you why."

The Commissioner of Police looked straight into the other man's eyes. "Mrs. Winslow wishes this reward to be offered because she has vague hopes of earning it herself."

Lord St. Amant uttered an exclamation of extreme astonishment.

The other smiled. "Yes—queer, isn't it? But, mind you, that's by no means an uncommon trait in the type of woman to which Mrs. Winslow belongs. Their motives are almost always mixed. They're subtle little devils for the most part, St. Amant. Mrs. Winslow was quite sufficiently fond of this unfortunate man to wish to avenge his death, and she also would be very glad suddenly to receive an addition to her fortune—which is, I understand, very small—of even a thousand pounds."

He added, in a graver tone: "It seems to me that the one chance we have of

influencing Mrs. Pavely is through you. And then again, the mere fact that you are one of her trustees may make a difference. Would you not have it in your power to *prevent* her continuing this reward?"

Lord St. Amant shook his head very decidedly. "No, I should not feel justified in doing that, even if I had the power. As a matter of fact, she has a certain amount of money at her own absolute disposal. I may tell you that I did my best to dissuade her from offering the reward when she first made up her mind to do so—you will remember when I mean?"

As Lord St. Amant made his way back to his own rooms, the rooms where he knew Mrs. Tropenell and Laura Pavely were now waiting for him, his mind was in a whirl of surprise and conjecture.

Katty Winslow acting the part of amateur detective? What an extraordinary notion! Somehow it was one which would never have crossed his mind. That, no doubt, was the real reason why she had been so determined to attend the inquest. But she had not sat with Mrs. Pavely, Mrs. Tropenell, and himself. She had chosen a place in a kind of little gallery behind the jurymen, and by her side, through the whole proceedings, had sat, with his arms folded, Oliver Tropenell.

Tropenell, since the discovery of Godfrey Pavely's body, had kept himself very much apart from the others. He had gone down to Pewsbury, and had broken the sad news to Mr. Privet—this by Laura's direct request and desire. But he had not shown even the discreet interest Lord St. Amant would have expected him to show in the newly-made widow and her affairs, and there was something enigmatic and reserved in his attitude.

One thing he had done. He had made a great effort to prevent Laura Pavely's being put into the witness-box. He had discovered that she shrank with a kind of agonised horror from the ordeal, and he had begged Lord St. Amant to join him in trying to spare her. But of course their efforts had been of no avail. Laura, in one sense, was the principal witness. But for her receipt of the letter, the body of her husband might not have been discovered for weeks, maybe for months. Fernando Apra would only have had to send a further instalment of rent, with the proviso that his room should not be entered till he returned, for the mystery to

remain a mystery for at any rate a long time.

The funeral of Godfrey Pavely was to take place the next day in the old Parish Church of Pewsbury, where the Pavely family had a vault. The arrangements had all been left to Mr. Privet, and the only time Lord St. Amant had seen Oliver Tropenell smile since the awful discovery had been made, had been in this connection.

"I'm very glad we thought of it," he said, "I mean that Mrs. Pavely and myself thought of it. Poor old Privet! He was one of the very few people in the world who was ever really attached to Godfrey Pavely. And the fact that all the arrangements have been left to him is a great consolation, not to say pleasure, to the poor old fellow."

CHAPTER XX

IT was the day of Godfrey Pavely's funeral, and more than one present at the great gathering observed, either to themselves or aloud to some trusted crony or acquaintance, that the banker would certainly have been much gratified had he seen the high esteem in which he was held by both the gentle and simple of the surrounding neighbourhood.

Even Lord St. Amant was a good deal impressed by the scene. Every blind in the High Street was down—a striking mark of respect indeed towards both the dead banker and his widow. Apart from that fact, the town looked as if it was in the enjoyment of a public holiday, but even that was in its way a tribute. The streets were full of people, and round the entrance to the churchyard was a huge crowd. As for the churchyard itself, it was overflowing, and presented a remarkable rather than a touching scene. Only a few of the town-folk were still allowed to be buried in the mediæval churchyard which lay just off the High Street, so a funeral actually taking place there was a very rare event.

The circumstances of Mr. Pavely's death had been so strange that the local paper had printed a verbatim report of the inquest, as well as a very flowery account of the departed, who had been, it was explained, so true and so loyal a townsman of Pewsbury. Yet, even so, there were those present at his funeral who muttered that Mr. Pavely had met his death just as might have been expected, through his love of money. It was also whispered that the job in which this queer foreigner had been associated with the banker had not been of the most reputable kind. This Fernando Apra—every one knew his queer name because of the big reward—had wanted to raise money for a kind of glorified gambling hell; that was the long and the short of it, after all, so much the shrewder folk of Pewsbury had already found out, reading between the lines of the evidence offered at the inquest.

In an official sense the chief mourners were two distant cousins of Godfrey Pavely—men with whom he had quarrelled years ago—but in a real, intimate sense, the principal mourners were old Mr. Privet, Lord St. Amant, who, though he was so fond of travel, never neglected the duties entailed by his position in the county, and last but by no means least Mr. Oliver Tropenell, who, as every

one present was well aware, had during the last few months become the one intimate friend of the dead man. Among the women there were several who knew that at this very moment Mrs. Pavely was being comforted by Mr. Oliver Tropenell's mother, a lady who stood high in public esteem, and with whom Mrs. Pavely as a girl, had spent much of her youth, and from whose house, picturesque Freshley Manor, she had been married to the man whom they were now engaged in burying.

Another person present who aroused even more interest among the good folk of Pewsbury than either Lord St. Amant or Oliver Tropenell, was Mrs. Winslow.

The older townspeople looked at Katty with a good deal of rather excited sympathy, for they remembered the gossip and talk there had been about pretty Katty Fenton and the dead man, and of how unkind old Mrs. Pavely, now dead many a year, had shown herself to the lovely, motherless girl.

There were even some there who whispered that poor Godfrey Pavely had again become very fond of his first love—and that, too, when they were both old enough to know better! But these busybodies were not encouraged to say the little they knew. These are things—natural human failings—which should be forgotten at a man's funeral.

Mrs. Winslow did not look unreasonably upset. There were no tears in her bright brown eyes, and her black frock, sable plumed hat, and beautiful black furs, intensified the brilliant pink and white of her complexion. Indeed, many of the people who gazed at Katty that day thought they had never seen her looking so attractive. The world belongs to the living—not to the dead, and poor Godfrey Pavely, with his big, prosperous one-man business, and his almost uncanny cleverness in the matter of making money, belonged henceforth very decidedly to the past. So it was that among the men and women who stared with eager curiosity and respectful interest at the group of mourners, several noticed that Mr. Oliver Tropenell seemed to pay special attention to Mrs. Winslow.

Once he crossed over, and stood close to her for a minute or two by the still open grave, and his dark handsome face showed far more trace of emotion than did hers.

After the funeral, Lord St. Amant dropped Mrs. Winslow at the gate of Rosedean, and, on parting with Katty, he patted her hand kindly, telling himself that she was certainly a very pretty woman. Lord St. Amant, like most

connoisseurs in feminine beauty, preferred seeing a pretty woman in black.

"You must try and forget poor Godfrey Pavely," he said feelingly.

He was startled and moved by the intensity with which she answered him: —"I wish I could—but I can't. I feel all the time as if he was there, close to me, trying to tell me something! I believe that he was murdered, Lord St. Amant."

"I'm sure you're mistaken. You must never think that!"

"Ah, but I do think so. I'm certain of it!"

Following the old custom, Godfrey Pavely's will was to be read after his burial, and Laura had written to Lord St. Amant asking him if he would be present.

In the great dining-room of The Chase, a dining-room still lined with the portraits of Mrs. Tropenell's ancestors, were two tables, one large long table which was never used, and a round table in the bow-window. To-day it was about the big table that there were gathered the five men and the one woman who were to be present at the reading of the will. Laura was the one woman. The men were Godfrey Pavely's lawyer, the dead man's two cousins—who had perhaps a faint hope of legacies, a hope destined to be disappointed, Oliver Tropenell, present as Laura Pavely's trustee, and Lord St. Amant, who had been a trustee to her marriage settlement.

Laura, in her deep black, looked wan, sad and tired, but perfectly calm. All the men there, with one exception, glanced towards her now and again with sympathy. The exception was Oliver Tropenell. He had shut her out, as far as was possible, from his mind, and he seemed hardly aware of her presence. He stared straight before him, a look of rather impatient endurance on his face—not at all, so argued Lord St. Amant to himself, the look of a man from whose path a hitherto impassable obstacle has just been removed.

Though rather ashamed of letting his mind dwell on such thoughts at such a time, Lord St. Amant told himself that Mrs. Tropenell had doubtless been

mistaken as to what she had confided to him on his return from abroad. Mothers are apt to be jealous where only sons are concerned, and Letty—his dear, ardent-natured friend Letty—had always been romantic.

Lord St. Amant was confirmed in this view by the fact that that very morning Mrs. Tropenell had told him that Oliver was going back to Mexico almost at once. To her mind it confirmed what she believed to be true. But her old friend and some-time lover had smiled oddly. Lord St. Amant judged Oliver by himself—and he had always been a man of hot-foot decisions. It was inconceivable to him that any lover could act in so cold-blooded, careful a fashion as this. No, no—if Oliver cared for Laura as his mother believed he cared, he would not now go off to the other end of the world, simply to placate public opinion.

To those who had known the man, Godfrey Pavely's will contained only one surprise, otherwise it ran on the most conventional lines. Practically the whole of his very considerable fortune was left, subject to Laura's life interest—an interest which lapsed on re-marriage—in trust for his only child.

The surprise was the banker's substantial legacy to Mrs. Winslow. That lady was left Rosedean, the only condition attaching to the legacy being that, should she ever wish to sell the little property, the first offer must be made to Alice Pavely's trustees. Also, rather to the astonishment of some of those present, it was found that the will had only been made some two months ago, and the lawyer who read it out was aware that in some important particulars it had been modified and changed. In the will made by Godfrey Pavely immediately after his marriage he had left his wife sole legatee. After Alice was born the banker had naturally added a codicil, but he had still left Laura in a far greater position of responsibility in regard to the estate than in this, his final will.

After the will had been read, Lord St. Amant spent a few moments alone with Laura. He felt he had a rather disagreeable task before him, and he did not like disagreeable tasks. Still he faced this one with characteristic courage.

"I've been asked by Sir Angus Kinross to undertake a rather unpleasant duty, my dear Laura—that of persuading you to withdraw the reward you are offering for the discovery of Fernando Apra. He points out that if Apra's story is true, it might easily mean that you would simply be giving a present of a thousand pounds to the person who killed your husband."

Laura heard him out without interruption. Then she shook her head. "I feel it

is my duty to do it," she said in a low voice. "Katty, who was Godfrey's greatest friend, says he would have wished it—and I think she's right. It isn't going to be paid out of the estate, you know. *I* will pay it—if ever it is earned."

She went on painfully. "I am very unhappy, Lord St. Amant. Godfrey and I were not suited to one another, but still I feel that I was often needlessly selfish and unkind."

Lord St. Amant began to see why Oliver Tropenell was going back to Mexico so soon.

PART THREE

CHAPTER XXI

THOSE winter and spring months which followed the tragic death of Godfrey Pavely were full of difficult, weary, and oppressive days to his widow Laura. Her soul had become so used to captivity, and to being instinctively on the defensive, that she did not know how to use her freedom—indeed, she was afraid of freedom.

Another kind of woman would have gone away to the Continent, alone or with her child, taking what in common parlance is described as a thorough change. But Laura went on living quietly at The Chase, feeling in a queer kind of way as if Godfrey still governed her life, as if she ought to do exactly what Godfrey would wish her to do, all the more so because in his lifetime she had not been an obedient or submissive wife.

As the Commissioner of Police had foretold, the large reward offered by Mrs. Pavely had brought in its train a host of tiresome and even degrading incidents. A man of the name of Apra actually came from the Continent and tried to make out that *he* had been the banker's unwitting murderer! But his story broke down under a very few minutes' cross-examination at Scotland Yard. Even so, Laura kept the offer of the thousand pounds in being. It seemed to be the only thing that she could still do for Godfrey.

Though she was outwardly leading the quiet, decorously peaceful life of a newly-made widow, Laura's soul was storm-tossed and had lost its bearings. Her little girl's company, dearly as she loved the child, no longer seemed to content her. For the first time in her life, she longed consciously for a friend of her own age, but with the woman living at her gate, with Katty Winslow, she became less, rather than more, intimate.

Also, hidden away in the deepest recess of her heart, was an unacknowledged pain. She had felt so sure that Oliver Tropenell would stay on with his mother through the winter and early spring! But, to her bewildered surprise, he had left for Mexico almost at once. He had not even sought a farewell interview to say good-bye to her alone, and their final good-bye had taken place in the presence of his mother.

Together he and Mrs. Tropenell had walked over to The Chase one late afternoon, within less than a week of Godfrey's funeral, and he had explained that urgent business was recalling him to Mexico at once. He and Laura had had, however, three or four minutes together practically alone; and at once he had exclaimed, in a voice so charged with emotion that it recalled those moments Laura now shrank from remembering—those moments when he had told her of his then lawless love—"You'll let me know if ever you want me? A cable would bring me as quickly as I can travel. You must not forget that I am your trustee."

And she had replied, making a great effort to speak naturally: "I will write to you, Oliver, often—and I hope you will write to me."

And he had said: "Yes—yes, of course I will! Not that there's much to say that will interest you. But I can always give you news of Gillie."

He had said nothing as to when they were to meet again. But after he was gone Mrs. Tropenell had spoken as if he intended to come back the following Christmas.

Oliver had so far kept his promise that he had written to Laura about once a fortnight. They were very ordinary, commonplace letters—not long, intimate, and detailed as she knew his letters to his mother to be. Mostly he wrote of Gillie, and of whatever work Gillie at the moment was engaged upon.

On her side, she would write to him of little Alice, of the child's progress with her lessons, of the funny little things that Alice said. Occasionally she would also force herself to put in something about Godfrey, generally on some matter connected with the estate, and she would tell him of what she was doing in the garden, or in the house which had been built by his, Oliver's, forbears.

She could not tell him, what was yet oddly true, that the spirit of Godfrey still ruled The Chase. He had inherited from his parents certain old-fashioned ways and usages, to which he had clung with a sort of determined obstinacy, and as to such matters, his wife, in the days which were now beginning to seem so far away and so unreal, had never even dreamt of gainsaying him.

One of these usages was the leaving off of fires, however cold the weather might be, on the first of May, and this year, on the eve of May Day, Laura remembered, and made up her mind that in this, as in so much else, she would now be more submissive to the dead than she had ever been to the living

Godfrey.

Laura sat up late that night destroying and burning certain papers connected with her past life. She had come to realise how transitory a thing is human existence, and she desired to leave nothing behind her which might later give her child a clue to what sort of unhappy, unnatural married life she and Godfrey had led.

But it is always a painful task—that of turning over long-dead embers.

Sitting there in the boudoir, close to the glowing fire, and with a big old-fashioned despatch-box at her side, she glanced at the letters which her husband had written to her during their brief engagement, and then she tied them up again and inscribed them with names and dates. They might give Alice pleasure some day, the more so that there was singularly little else remaining to tell Godfrey's child what he had been like at his best. She, Laura, only knew—Alice, thank God, would never know, would never understand—what melancholy memories these rather formal, commonplace love-letters evoked in the woman who as a girl had been their recipient.

The very few letters which her husband had written to her during their married life, when he happened to be in London or away on business, she had always destroyed as they came. They had been brief, business-life communications, generally concerning something he desired to be done on the estate, or giving her the instructions he wished to have telephoned to the Bank.

After glancing absently through them, she burnt many letters which she now wondered why she had kept—letters for the most part from friends of her girlhood who had gradually drifted away from her, and the memory of whom was fraught with pain. She put aside the meagre packet of her brother's letters, and then, at last she gathered up in her hands the score or more large envelopes addressed in Oliver Tropenell's clear, small, masculine handwriting.

Should she burn these too—or keep them?

Slowly she took out of its envelope the first of Oliver's letters which she had

kept—that in which he expressed his willingness to become her trustee. For the first time she forgot little Alice, forgot the day when her daughter would read all that she found here, in her mother's despatch-box, with the same eager interest and perchance the same moved pleasure, which she, Laura, had felt when reading the letters her own beloved mother had left behind her.

Consideringly she glanced over the first real letter Oliver Tropenell had ever written to her. Vividly she remembered the whole circumstances surrounding the sending and receiving of that letter, for it had followed close on the scene which, try as she might, she could not, even now, forget. It was in this letter that she now held open in her hand, that Oliver had heaped coals of fire on her head, by his quiet, kindly acceptance of the trusteeship. There was unluckily one passage she felt Alice should never have a chance of reading—for it concerned Gillie. So, though she was sorry to destroy the letter, she felt that on the whole it would be better to burn it, here and now.

Hesitatingly she held out the large sheet to the bright fire—and as she was in the act of doing so, quite suddenly there flashed between the lines of firm, black handwriting other lines—clear, brownish lines—of the same handwriting. What an extraordinary, amazing, incredible thing!

Laura slipped down on to the hearthrug from the low arm-chair on which she had been sitting with her despatch-box beside her, and bent forward, full of tremulous excitement—her heart beating as it had never beat before.

"The decks are cleared between us, Laura, for you know now that I love you. You said, 'Oh, but this is terrible!' Yes, Laura, love is terrible. It is not only cleansing, inspiring, and noble, it is terrible too. Why is it that you so misunderstand, misjudge, the one priceless gift, the only bit of Heaven, which God or Nature—I care not which—has given to man and woman?"

She stopped reading for a moment, then forced herself to go on, and the next few lines of that strange, passionate secret letter, burnt themselves into her brain.

She let the paper flutter down, and covered her face with her hands. Could she—should she believe what this man said?

"What you, judging by your words to-day, take to be love is as little like that passion as a deep draught of pure cold water to a man dying of thirst is like the last glass of drugged beer imbibed by some poor sot already drunk."

It was a horrible simile, and yet—yes, she felt that it was a true smile. For the first time Laura Pavely dimly apprehended the meaning of love in the same sense that Oliver Tropenell understood it.

She took up the sheet of paper again, and with the tears falling down her cheeks, she read the postscript which was superposed, as it were, on to the first.

"God bless you, my dear love, and grant you the peace which seems the only thing for which you crave."

After giving a shamed, furtive look round the empty room, Laura Pavely pressed the letter to her lips, and then she threw it into the fire, and watched it vanish into brilliant flame, feeling as if a bit of her heart were being burnt with it.

Slowly she got up and went to the door; opening it, she listened for a while.

The whole household was asleep, but even so, she locked the door before coming back to her station by the fire.

She put more coal on the now glowing embers, and then she took up another letter Oliver had written to her, a letter written from Paris just after he and her brother had left London together for that long holiday on the Continent. Outwardly it was a commonplace letter enough concerning a change in certain of her investments; but when she held it to the fire, between the black lines there again started into pulsing life another message, winged from his soul to hers....

"Laura, I have sworn not to speak to you of love, and even in this letter which you will never see, I will not break my oath. But as I go in and out of the old Paris churches (where alone I find a certain measure of solace and peace), in the women whom I see there praying I often seem to discover something akin to your spiritual and physical perfection.

"It is strange, considering the business on which I am engaged, that I should feel thus drawn to haunt these old, dim Paris churches, but there at least I can escape from Gillie, of Gillie who talks perpetually of Godfrey, your owner and your tyrant."

And as she read these last words, there came a cold feeling over Laura's heart. She realised, for the first time, how Oliver had hated Godfrey.

She read on:

"Gillie does not understand the reverence in which I hold you. Sometimes when he speaks of you—of you and Godfrey—I feel as if some day I shall strike him on the mouth.

"But he is your brother, Laura. According to the measure which is in the man he loves you, aye, and even reverences you too, in his fashion; but with this reverence is mingled a touch of pity, of contempt, that you should be what he calls 'good.'"

Good? Laura looked up and stared into the now glowing fire. Good in a narrow, effortless sense she had always been, but to the man who was so little her owner, though so much at times her tyrant, she had been, almost from the very first, hard, and utterly lacking in sympathy.

It was with relief that Laura burnt that letter.

The notes Oliver Tropenell had written to her in London while he was conducting the investigation into Godfrey Pavely's disappearance, held, to her disappointment, no secret writing in between. But the letters she had received from him since her widowhood all had an invisible counterpart.

The first was written on ship-board:

"Laura, I am now free to speak to you of love. The world would say that I must wait in spirit as I have waited in body, but I know at what a cost has been bought the relief from the vow which I faithfully kept.

"The past is dead, the future is my own. I look back, dear love, to the few moments we had by the great window in your drawing-room, when my mother was talking to Alice over by the fire. You were so gentle, so sweet, to me then. It was as if—God forgive me for my presumption—you were regretting my departure. Till that moment I had felt as if the man who had once called you wife stood between us, an angry, menacing shape. But he vanished then, in that house of which he had never been the real master. And since that day he has not haunted me as he haunted me during those long long days of waiting for the news I at once longed for and dreaded.

"When I come back I shall not ask you to love me, I shall only humbly ask

you to let me love you."

Laura went to her writing-table and turned on the light. She moved as one walking in her sleep, for she was in an extraordinary state of spiritual and mental exaltation. She drew a sheet of paper towards her, and before burning the letter she still held in her hand, she copied out, not all, but a certain part of what had been written there in that invisible ink which only flashed into being when held up against a flame.

Then she went back to the fire, and read the next letter—and the next. In a sense they were alike—alike in the measureless love, the almost anguished longing for her presence they expressed, and in their abhorrence, hatred, contempt for the man who had been her husband. It was as if Oliver, in spite of his confident words in the letter which had been written on shipboard, could not forget Godfrey—as if perpetually he felt the dead man's menacing presence to be there, between them.

Laura was amazed, troubled, and yet at the same time profoundly stirred and excited by Oliver's retrospective jealousy. It seemed to prove to her as nothing else could have done how passionately, exclusively he loved her, and had always loved her.

Though none of those about her were aware of it, the mistress of The Chase became henceforth a different woman. It was as though she had suddenly become alive where she had been dead, articulate instead of dumb.

Each night, when the house was plunged in darkness and slumber, Laura would light three candles, and read the words of longing and of love which Oliver had written in between the formal lines of the last letter she had received from him. And then, when a new letter came, she would burn the one that had come before—the one whose contents she had already long known by heart.

And as the spring wore into summer the thing that became, apart from her child, the only real thing in Laura Pavely's life, was her strong, secret link with this man who she knew was coming back to claim her, on whatever terms she chose to exact, as his own. And she fell into a deep, brooding peace—the peace of waiting. She was in no hurry to see Oliver again—indeed, she sometimes had a disturbing dread that his actual presence might destroy that amazing sense of nearness she now felt to him. Unconsciously her own letters to him became more intimate, more self-revealing; she wrote less of Alice, more of herself.

The only uneaseful element in Laura Pavely's life now was Katty Winslow. The two women never met without Katty's making some mention of Godfrey. And once Laura, when walking away with Katty from Freshley Manor, where the two had met unexpectedly, was sharply disturbed by something Katty said.

"I'm told Oliver Tropenell is coming back at or after Christmas. Somehow I always associate him with that awful time we had last January. I think I shall try and be away when he is here—I don't suppose he'll stay long."

Katty spoke with a kind of rather terrible hardness in her voice, fixing her bright eyes on Laura's quivering face.

"Instead of going away as he did, he ought to have stayed and tried to clear up the mystery."

"But the mystery," said Laura in a low voice, "*was* cleared up, Katty."

But Katty shook her head. "To me the mystery is a greater one than ever," she said decisively.

Early in September Laura received a letter written, as were all Oliver's letters, in sober, measured terms, and yet, even as she opened it, she felt with a strange, strong instinct that something new was here. And as she lived through the few hours which separated her from night and solitude, she grew not only more restless, but more certain, also, of some coming change in her own life.

His open letter ran:—

"I am writing in my new country house. Years ago, after I first came out to Mexico, I stumbled across the place by accident, and at once I made up my mind that some day I would become its possessor. Over a hundred years old, this little château, set on a steep hillside, is said to have been built by a Frenchman of genius who, having got into some bad scrape in Paris, had to flee the country, while the old *régime* was in full fling.

"When I first came here, the house had stood empty for over forty years. The

garden, beautiful as it was, had fallen into ruin. The fountains were broken, the water no longer played, the formal arbours looked like forest trees. White roses and jasmine mingled with the dense southern vegetation, fighting a losing fight.

"For a few brief weeks in '67 it was inhabited by Maximilian and his young Empress—indeed, it is said that the Emperor still haunts the cool large rooms on the upper floor—there are but two storeys. So far I have never met his noble ghost. I should not be afraid if I did.

"I am beginning to think that it is time I came back to Freshley for a while. But my plans are still uncertain."

At last came solitude, and the luminous darkness of an early autumn night. Laura locked herself into her room.

Yes, instinct had not played her false, for the first words of the secret letter ran:—

"Laura, I am coming home. I had meant to linger on here yet another month or six weeks, but now I ask myself each hour of the day and night—why wait?

"The room in which I am sitting writing to you, thinking of you, longing for you, was the room of those two great lovers, Maximilian and his Carlotta. The ghost of their love reminds me of the transience of life. I have just walked across to the window, thinking, thinking, thinking, my beloved, of you. For I am haunted ever, Laura, by your wraith. I walk up and down the terrace wondering if you will ever be here in the body—as you already seem to be in the spirit.

"I am leaving at sunrise, and in three days I shall be upon the sea. You will receive a cable, and so will my mother. The thought of seeing you again—ah, Laura, you will never know what rapture, so intense as to be almost akin to pain, that thought gives me. Lately your letters have seemed a thought more intimate, more confiding—I dare not say less cold. But I have sworn to myself, and I shall keep my oath, to ask for nothing that cannot be freely given."

Two days later Laura received a wireless message saying that Oliver would be at Freshley the next day.

CHAPTER XXII

A YEAR ago, almost to a day, Mrs. Tropenell had been sitting where she was sitting now, awaiting Laura Pavely. Everything looked exactly as it had looked then in the pretty, low drawing-room of Freshley Manor. Nothing had been added to, nothing withdrawn from, the room. The same shaded reading-lamp stood on the little table close to her elbow; the very chrysanthemums might have been the same.

And yet with the woman sitting there everything was different! Of all the sensations—unease, anxiety, foreboding, jealousy—with which her heart had been filled this time last year, only one survived, and of that one she was secretly very much ashamed, for it was jealousy.

And now she was trying with all the force of her nature to banish the ugly thing from her heart.

What must be—must be! If Oliver's heart and soul, as well as the whole of his ardent, virile physical entity, desired Laura, then she, his mother, must help him, as much as lay within her power, to compass that desire.

Since Godfrey Pavely's death, it had been as if Mrs. Tropenell's life had slipped back two or three years. All these last few months she had written to Oliver long diary letters, and Oliver on his side had written to her vivid chronicles of his Mexican life. Perhaps she saw less, rather than more of Laura than she had done in the old days, for Laura, since her widowhood, had had more to do. She took her duties as the present owner of The Chase very seriously. Still, nothing was changed—while yet in a sense everything had been changed—by the strange, untoward death of Godfrey Pavely.

Oliver's letters were no longer what they had been, they were curiously different, and yet only she, his mother, perchance would have seen the difference, had one of his letters of two years ago and one of his letters of to-day been put side by side.

The love he had borne for the Spanish woman, of whom he had once spoken with such deep feeling, had not affected his relations with his mother. But the

love he now bore Laura Pavely had. Not long ago Laura had shown Mrs. Tropenell one of Oliver's letters, and though there was really very little in it, she had been oddly nervous and queer in her manner, hardly giving the older woman time to read it through before she had taken it back out of her hand.

Laura had become more human since her husband's death; it was as if a constricting band had been loosened about her heart. Even so, Oliver's mother often wondered sorely whether Laura would ever welcome Oliver in any character save that of a devoted, discreet, and selfless friend. She doubted it. And yet, when he had written and suggested coming back now, instead of waiting till Christmas, she had not said a word to stop him. And the moment she had heard that he had reached England, and that he was to be here late on this very afternoon, she had sent a note to The Chase and asked Laura to share their first meal.

One thing had made a great difference to Mrs. Tropenell's life during the last few months. That was the constant, familiar presence of Lord St. Amant. Now that he was Lord Lieutenant of the county, he was far more at Knowlton Abbey than he had been for some years, and somehow—neither could have told you why—they had become even closer friends than they had been before.

It was well understood that any supplicant who had Mrs. Tropenell on his side could count on Lord St. Amant's help and goodwill. Though she was of course quite unaware of it, there were again rumours through the whole of the country-side that soon the mistress of Freshley Manor would become Lady St. Amant, and that then the Abbey would be opened as that great house had not been for close on forty years.

And now, to-night, Mrs. Tropenell suddenly remembered that Lord St. Amant was coming to dinner—she had forgotten it in the excitement of Oliver's return. But she told herself, with a kind of eagerness, that her old friend's presence might, after all, make things easier for them all! It is always easier to manage a party of four people than of three. Also, it made less marked the fact of Laura's presence on this, the first evening, of Oliver's return home.

Mrs. Tropenell had not been able to discover from her son's manner whether he was glad or sorry Laura was coming to-night. And sitting there, waiting for her guests, she anxiously debated within herself whether Oliver would have preferred to see Laura for the first time alone. Of course he could have offered to

go and fetch her; but he had not availed himself of that excuse, and his mother knew that she would be present at their meeting.

The door opened, quietly, and as had been the case a year ago, Mrs. Tropenell saw her beautiful visitor before Laura knew that there was any one in the darkened room.

Once more Mrs. Tropenell had a curious feeling as if time had slipped back, and that everything was happening over again. The only difference was that Laura to-night was all in black, with no admixture of white. Still, by an odd coincidence the gown she was wearing was made exactly as had been that other gown last year, and through the thin black folds of chiffon her lovely white arms shone palely, revealingly....

And then, as her guest came into the circle of light, Mrs. Tropenell realised with a feeling almost of shock that Laura was very much changed. She no longer had the sad, strained, rather severe look on her face which had been there last year. She looked younger, instead of older, and there was an expression of half-eager, half-shrinking expectation on her face—to-night.

"Aunt Letty? How good of you to ask me——" But her voice sank away into silence as the sound of quick footsteps were heard hastening across the hall.

The door opened, and Oliver Tropenell came in.

He walked straight to Laura, and took both her hands in his. "You got my cable?" he asked.

And then Laura blushed, overwhelmingly. She had had said nothing of that cable to Mrs. Tropenell.

And as they stood there—Oliver still grasping Laura's hands in his—the mother, looking on, saw with a mixture of joy and of jealous pain that Laura stood before him as if hypnotised, her heavy-lidded blue eyes fixed upwards on his dark, glowing face.

Suddenly they all three heard the at once plaintive and absurd hoot of Lord St. Amant's motor—and it was as if a deep spell had suddenly been broken. Slowly, reluctantly, Oliver released Laura's hands, and Mrs. Tropenell exclaimed in a voice which had a tremor in it: "It's Lord St. Amant, Oliver. I forgot that he

had asked himself to dinner to-night. He said he could not come till half-past eight, but I suppose he got away earlier than he expected to do."

And then with the coming into the room of her old friend, life seemed suddenly to become again normal, and though by no means passionless, yet lacking that curious atmosphere of violent, speechless emotion that had been there a moment or two ago. Of the four it was Laura who seemed the most moved. She came up and slipped her hand into Mrs. Tropenell's, holding it tightly, probably unaware that she was doing so.

After the first few words of welcome to Oliver, Lord St. Amant plunged into local talk with Mrs. Tropenell, and as he did so, he looked a little wryly at Laura. Why didn't she move away and talk to Oliver? Why did she stick close like that to Letty—to Letty, with whom he had hoped to spend a quiet, cosy, cheerful evening?

But Laura, for the first time in her life, felt as if she were no longer in full possession of herself. It was as if she had passed into the secret keeping of another human being; she had the sensation that her mind was now in fee to another human mind, her will overawed by another human will. And there was a side to her nature which rebelled against this sudden, quick transference of herself.

With what she now half-realised to have been a kind of self-imposed hypocrisy, she had told herself often, during the last few months, that Oliver and she when they again met would become dear, dear friends. He would be the adorer, she the happy, calm, adored. And that then, after a long probation, perhaps of years, in any case not for a long, long time, she might bring herself half reluctantly, and entirely for his sake, to consider the question of—re-marriage.

But now? Since Oliver had taken her hands in his, and gazed down speechlessly into her eyes, she had known that it was he, not she, would set the pace in their new relationship, and that however sincere his self-imposed restraint and humility. So it was that Laura instinctively clung to Mrs. Tropenell's hand.

The passion of love, which so often makes even quite a young man feel older, steadier, more responsible, has quite the opposite effect on a woman. To every woman love brings back youth, and the deeper, the more instinctive the love, the

greater the tremors and the uncertainties which, according to a hypocritical convention, belong only to youth.

The years which Laura had spent with Godfrey Pavely seemed obliterated. Memories of her married life which had been very poignantly present in the early days of her widowhood, filling her with mingled repugnance, pain, and yes, remorse, were now erased from the tablets of her mind. She felt as if it was the young, ignorant Laura—that Laura who had been so full of high, almost defiant ideals—who was now standing, so full of confused longing and hope, if yet also a little fearful, on the threshold of a new, wonderful life....

Good-breeding and the observance of certain long-established, social usages have an inestimable value in all the great crises of human existence. To-night each of the other three felt the comfort of Lord St. Amant's presence among them. His agreeable ease of manner, his pleasant, kindly deference to the older and the younger lady, all helped to lessen the tension, and make what each of his companions felt to be a breathless time of waiting, easier to live through.

He himself was surprised and shocked by the change he saw in Oliver Tropenell's face. Oliver looked worn, haggard, yet filled with a kind of fierce gladness. He appeared to-night not so much the happy, as the exultant, conqueror of fate. He talked, and talked well, of the political situation in Mexico, of certain happenings which had taken place in England during his absence, and though now and again Mrs. Tropenell joined in the talk, on the whole she, like Laura, was content to listen to the two men.

After dinner, while they were still alone in the drawing-room, Laura began to talk, rather eagerly, of her little Alice. She had begun to wonder whether it would not be well for the child to go to school as a weekly boarder. There was such a school within reasonable motoring distance. Alice was becoming rather too grown-up, and unchildlike. She had certain little friends in the town of Pewsbury, but they did not really touch her life.

But even as Mrs. Tropenell and Laura talked the matter over, they both felt their talk to be unreal. Each of them knew that Laura's second marriage, if ever marry she did, would completely alter the whole situation with regard to Alice.

Oliver was not the man to hang up his hat in another man's house—besides, why should he do so? The Chase belonged to Alice, even now.

And then rather suddenly, Laura asked a question: "How long is Oliver going to stay in England, Aunt Letty?"

And Mrs. Tropenell quietly answered, "I should think he would stay till after Christmas. I gather everything is going on quite well out there, thanks to Gillie." She waited a moment, and then repeated, thoughtfully: "Yes—I feel sure Oliver means to stay till after the New Year——"

And then she stopped suddenly. There had come a change over Laura's face. Laura had remembered what Mrs. Tropenell for the moment had not done—that early in January Godfrey Pavely would have been dead exactly a year.

As ten o'clock struck, the other two came in, still talking eagerly to one another.

Lord St. Amant sat down by Laura.

"I'm going to have a little shooting party later on—not now, but early in December," he said. "Mrs. Tropenell is coming, and I hope Oliver too. I wonder if you would do me the great pleasure of being there, Laura? It's a long, long time since you honoured the Abbey with your company——"

He was smiling down at her. "I would ask Alice to come too," he went on, "but I think she'd be bored! Perhaps you'll be bored too? I'm not having any very brilliant or wonderful people, just a few of the neighbours whom I feel I've rather neglected."

Laura laughed. "Of course I shall enjoy coming!" she exclaimed.

Oliver was standing by his mother. Suddenly he muttered, "Mother? Ask Lord St. Amant to come over and speak to you——"

But before she could obey him, Lord St. Amant got up and quickly came over to where Mrs. Tropenell was sitting, leaving a vacant place by Laura.

With his back to the two younger people he sat down close to Mrs. Tropenell, and all at once he saw that her dark eyes were full of tears. He took her hand and

patted it gently. "I feel dreadfully *de trop*," he murmured. "Can't we go off, we two old folk, to your little room, my dearest? I'm sure you've something you want to show me there, or consult me about?"

And while Lord St. Amant was saying this to his old love, the two on the other side of the room were silent, as if stricken dumb by the nearness each felt to the other.

And at last it was Laura who broke the silence. "I think I must be going home," she said uncertainly.

She looked across at her hostess. "I don't want to make Lord St. Amant think he ought to go too. Perhaps I can slip away quietly?"

"I'll walk back with you."

Oliver spoke with a kind of dry decision.

He got up. "Mother? I'm taking Laura home. I shan't be long. Perhaps Lord St. Amant will stay till I come back. It's quite early."

He turned to Laura, now standing by his side: "Say good-bye to them now. I'll fetch your shawl, and we'll go out through the window."

Laura obeyed, as in a dream. "Good-bye, Aunt Letty. Good-night, Lord St. Amant—I shall enjoy being at the Abbey."

She suffered herself to be kissed by the one—her hand pressed by the other. Then she turned as if in answer to an unseen signal.

Oliver was already back in the room, her Shetland shawl on his arm. He put it round her shoulders, taking care not to touch her as he did so; then he opened the long French window, and stood aside for a moment while she stepped through into the moonlight, out of doors.

They were now in the beech avenue, in a darkness that seemed the more

profound because of the streaks of silvery moonlight which lay just behind them. But even so, the white shawl Laura was wearing showed dimly against the depths of shade encompassing her.

All at once Oliver turned and said so suddenly that she, walking by his side, started: "Laura? Do you remember this time last year?"

And as she answered the one word "Yes," he went on: "It was to-night, just a year ago, that I promised to become your friend. And as long as you were another man's wife, I kept my promise, at any rate to the letter. If you tell me to go away for the next three months, I will do so—to-morrow. If I stay, I must stay, Laura, as your lover."

As she remained silent, he went on quickly: "Do not misunderstand me. I only ask for the right to love you—I do not ask for any return."

She was filled with an exquisite, tremulous joy. But that side of her nature which was restrained, and which had been so atrophied, was ignorant of the generosities of love, and shrank from quick surrender. So all she said, in a voice which sounded very cold to herself, was, "But that, Oliver, would surely not be fair—to you?"

"Quite fair!" he exclaimed eagerly—"quite fair. In no case would I ever wish to obtain what was not freely vouchsafed."

He muttered, in a voice so low as to be scarcely audible, some further words which moved her strangely, and vibrated to a chord which had never before been touched, save to jar and to offend.

"To me aught else were sacrilege," were the words Oliver Tropenell said.

By now Laura's eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. She could see her companion's tall, at once broad-shouldered and lean figure, standing at rights angles to herself, keeping its distance....

Taking a step forward, she put out her right hand a little blindly, and laid it on the sleeve of his coat. Laura had always been an inarticulate woman, but with that touch, that fleeting moment of contact between them, something of what she was feeling took flight from her heart to his——

"Laura?"

He grasped her hands as he had grasped them three hours ago when they had first met in his mother's presence. And then again he breathed her name. But this time the touch of doubting, incredulous joy had passed into something ardent, exultant, possessive, and she was in his arms—her self-absorption, her fastidiousness, her lifelong shrinking from any strong emotion, swept away by a force which she had once only known sufficiently to abhor and to condemn, but which she now felt to be divine.

And then Oliver Tropenell said a strange thing indeed. "To have secured this immortal moment, I would willingly die a shameful, ignoble death to-morrow," were the words he whispered, as he strained Laura to his heart, as his lips sought and found her lips....

At last they paced slowly on, and Laura found herself secretly exulting in the violence of Oliver's emotion, and in the broken, passionate terms of endearment with which he endowed her. That her response was that of a girl rather than that of a woman was to her lover an added ecstasy. It banished the hateful, earthy shade of Godfrey Pavely—that shade which had haunted Oliver Tropenell all that evening, even in his mother's house.

Just as they were about to step out from under the arch of the beech trees on to the high road, he again took her in his arms. "Laura?" he whispered. "May I tell my mother?" But as he felt her hesitating: "No!" he exclaimed. "Forget that I asked you that! We will say nothing yet. Secrecy is a delicious concomitant of love." She heard the added, whispered words, uttered as if to his own heart, "At least so I have ever found it." And they were words which a little troubled Laura. Surely she was the first woman he had ever loved?

"Aunt Letty has a right to know," she murmured. "But no one else, Oliver, must know, till January is past." And then she hung her head, perchance a little ashamed of this harking back to the conventions of her everyday life.

He was surprised to hear her say further and with an effort, "I would rather Lord St. Amant didn't know. We shall be staying at Knowlton Abbey together in December."

"We shall," he said exultantly. "For that I thank God!"

Then suddenly he released her from out of his strong encompassing arms, and stooping down very low he kissed the hem of her long black gown....

After they had parted Oliver Tropenell waited on and on in the dark garden till he heard Lord St. Amant's car drive away. Then he walked quickly across the lawn and back into his mother's drawing-room.

"Mother?" he said briefly. "Laura and I are going to be married. But we do not wish any one to know this till—till February."

Even now he could not wholly banish Godfrey Pavely's intrusive presence from his Laura-filled heart.

CHAPTER XXIII

TO any imaginative mind there is surely something awe-inspiring in the thought of the constant secret interlocking of lives which seem as unlikely ever to meet, in a decisive sense, as are two parallel lines.

How amazed, how bewildered, Laura Pavely would have been could she have visioned even a hundredth part of the feeling concerning herself which filled her nearest neighbour, Katty Winslow's, heart!

Even in the old days Katty had disliked Laura, and had regarded her with a mixture of contempt and envy. And now that Oliver Tropenell had come back—now that Katty suspected him of being Laura's potential, if not actual, lover—she grew to hate the woman who had always been kind to her with an intense, calculating hate.

It seemed as if she hardly ever looked out of one of her windows without seeing Oliver on his way to The Chase, or Laura on her way to Freshley—and this although the secret lovers behaved with great discretion, for Oliver was less, rather than more, with Laura than he used to be in the old days when Godfrey was alive. Also, wherever Laura happened to be, her child—cheerful, eager little Alice—was sure to be close by.

Laura, so much Katty believed herself to have discovered, was now happy, in her cold, unemotional way, in the possession of a man's ardent devotion, while she, Katty, who had asked so comparatively little of life, had been deprived of the one human being who could, and perhaps in time would, have given her all she wanted.

Poor Godfrey Pavely! No one ever spoke of him now, in that neighbourhood where once he had counted for so much. Already it was as if he had never been. But to Katty Winslow he was still an insistent, dominating presence. Often she brooded over his untimely death, and sometimes she upbraided herself for not having made some sort of effort to solve the mystery. The reward was still in being, but one day, lately, when she had made some allusion to it in Laura's presence, Laura, reddening, had observed that she was thinking of withdrawing it.

"Lord St. Amant and the Scotland Yard people never approved of it," she said, "and as you know, Katty, it has led to nothing."

Early in October, Laura, Oliver and Alice, passing by Rosedean one day, turned in through the gate. "Why shouldn't we go in and ask Katty to come to tea?" It was Laura's suggestion. Somehow she was sorry for Katty—increasingly sorry. Yet she could not help feeling glad when Harber coldly informed her that Mrs. Winslow had left home, and would not be back for ten days.

At the very time that happy little group of people was at her door, Katty herself was standing in a queue of people waiting to take her ticket at York station.

Though Mrs. Winslow would have been honestly surprised had any one told her she was sentimental, she had actually come down by an earlier train than was necessary in order that she might retrace the ways that she and her friend had trodden together a year ago in January.

She had first gone to the Minster, moving swiftly along the paved streets where she had walked and talked slowly, pleasantly, with the dead man. Then she had wandered off to the picturesque thoroughfare lined with curiosity shops. How kind, how generous Godfrey had been to her just here! Every time she looked up in her pretty little drawing-room at Rosedean, his gift met her eye.

While she was engaged on this strange, painful pilgrimage, there welled up in Katty's heart a flood of agonised regret and resentment. She told herself bitterly that Godfrey's death had aged her—taken the spring out of her. Small wonder indeed that in these last few weeks she should have come to hate Laura with a steady, burning flame of hate....

So it was that Katty Winslow was in a queer mental and physical state when she returned to the big railway station to complete her journey. She did not feel at all in the mood to face the gay little houseparty where she was sure of an uproarious, as well as of an affectionate, welcome.

As she stood in the queue of rather rough North-country folk, waiting to take

her third-class ticket, there swept over her a sudden, vivid recollection of that incident—the hearing of a voice which at the time had seemed so oddly familiar—which had happened on the day she had parted from Godfrey Pavely for the last time.

And then—as in a blinding, yet illuminating flash—there came to her the conviction, nay, more, the certain knowledge, as to whose voice it had been that she had heard on the last occasion when she had stood there, in the large, bare booking office. The voice she had heard—she was quite, *quite* sure of it now, it admitted of no doubt in her mind at all—had been the peculiar, rather high-pitched, voice of Gillie Baynton....

She visualised the arresting appearance of the man who had been the owner of the voice, and who had gazed at her with that rather impudent, jeering glance of bold admiration. Of course it was Gillie, but Gillie disguised—Gillie with his cheeks tinted a curious greenish-orange colour, Gillie with his fair hair dyed black, Gillie—her brain suddenly supplied the link she was seeking for feverishly—*exactly answering to the description of the sinister Fernando Apra—the self-confessed murderer of Godfrey Pavely*. Katty left the queue in which she was standing, and walked across to a bench.

There she sat down, and, heedless of the people about her, put her chin on her hand and stared before her.

What did her new knowledge portend? What did it lead to? Was Laura associated with this extraordinary, bewildering discovery of hers? But the questions she put to herself remained unanswered. She failed to unravel even a little strand of the tangled skein.

Slowly she got up again, and once more took her place in the queue outside the booking office. It would be folly to lose her train because of this discovery, astounding, illuminating, as it was.

She was so shaken, so excited, that she longed to confide in one of the Haworths, brother or sister, to whose house she was going—but some deep, secretive instinct caused her to refrain from doing that. Still, she was so far unlike herself, that after her arrival the members of the merry party all commented to one another on the change they saw in her.

"She's as pretty as ever," summed up one of them at last, "but somehow she

looks different."

All that night Katty lay awake, thinking, thinking—trying to put together a human puzzle of which the pieces would not fit. Gillie Baynton, even if he disliked his brother-in-law, had no motive for doing the awful thing she was now beginning to suspect he had done. She found herself floating about in a chartless sea of conjectures, of suspicions....

She felt better, more in possession of herself, the next morning. Yet she was still oppressed with an awful sense of bewilderment and horror, uncertain, too, as to what use she could make of her new knowledge.

Should she go straight up to town and tell Sir Angus Kinross of what had happened to her yesterday? Somehow she shrank from doing that. He would suspect her of simply trying to snatch the reward. Katty had never been quite at ease with the Commissioner of Police—never quite sure as to what he knew, or did not know, of her past relations to Godfrey Pavely. And yet those relations had been innocent enough, in all conscience! Sometimes Katty, when thinking of those terrible times last January, had felt sorry she had not told Sir Angus the truth as to that joint journey to York. But, having hidden the fact at first, she had been ashamed to confess it later—and now she would have to confess it.

She was still in this anxious, debating-within-herself frame of mind when, at luncheon, something happened which seemed to open a way before her.

Her host, Tony Haworth, was talking of the neighbourhood, and he said, rather ruefully: "Of course a man like that old rascal who calls himself Greville Howard is worse than no good as a neighbour! For one thing he's a regular recluse. He hardly ever goes outside his park gates. I suppose the conscience of a man who's done so many naughty deeds in a good world is apt to make him feel a bit nervous!"

"How far off does he live from here?" asked Katty slowly. The scene at the inquest rose up before her, especially that moment when "Greville Howard's" affidavit, accompanied by his doctor's certificate, had been read aloud amid a ripple of amusement from the general public present.

"About four miles—but no one ever sees him. He's more or less of an invalid. It's a beautiful old house, and they say he's got some wonderful pictures and furniture there."

"Does he live quite alone?"

Her host hesitated. "Well, yes—but sometimes he has a lady of sorts there. He brought one back from France last June (he has a villa at Monte Carlo), and then —" Tony Haworth hesitated again, but Katty was looking at him eagerly—"then something dreadful happened! The poor woman died. She got a chill, developed pneumonia, and, to do the old rascal justice, he got down the biggest man he could from town. But it was no good—she died just the same! As far as I know, he's quite alone now—and precious lonely he must find it!"

Katty was very silent for the rest of the meal, and after luncheon she drew her host aside.

"Look here," she said abruptly. "I've something to tell you, Tony. I want to see that person we were speaking about—I mean Greville Howard. I want to see him about Godfrey Pavely. You know he is one of the few people who actually saw the man who killed Godfrey. At the time of the inquest he was ill, and so couldn't attend—I think the police thought he shammed illness. Sir Angus Kinross was convinced (and so was Lord St. Amant) that this Greville Howard knew a great deal more about Fernando Apra than he was willing to tell."

Tony Haworth was much taken aback.

"My dear girl, I don't think there's a chance of your getting at him! However, of course you shall be driven over as soon as you like. He *may* see you—*you're* not the sort of person he's afraid of."

He looked at her a little sharply. "You never had any money dealings with him, had you, Katty? Now, honour bright——"

"Of course not," she laughed. "Is it likely? My husband may have had, in the long, long ago—but I, never!"

An hour or so later, Katty Winslow, alone in her friend's motor, found herself before the lodge of the big lonely place where the retired money-lender—a Yorkshireman by birth—had set up his household gods. The great gates were

closed and locked, but there was a bell, and she rang it.

After a certain interval the lodge-keeper came out.

"I've come to see Mr. Greville Howard," she explained, and smiled amiably at the man.

He looked at her doubtfully. "The master don't see no one excepting by appointment," he said gruffly.

"I think he'll see me."

And then an extraordinary piece of luck befell Katty Winslow. While she was standing there, parleying, she suddenly saw a man inside the park, walking towards the gates.

"I think," she said boldly, "that that *is* Mr. Greville Howard?" and she saw by the lodgekeeper's face that she was right in her guess.

Moving gracefully forward, she slid past him, and thus she stood just within the gates, while slowly there advanced towards her—and, had she but known it, towards many others—Fate, in the person of a tall, thin, some would have said a very distinguished-looking, elderly man.

As he came up, he looked at Katty with a measuring, thoughtful glance, and his eyes travelled beyond her to the well-appointed motor drawn up in the lonely country road outside.

Now this was the sort of situation to amuse and stimulate, rather than alarm, Katty, the more so that the stranger, who was now close to her, was looking at her pleasantly rather than otherwise.

She took a step towards him.

"Mr. Howard?" she exclaimed, in her full, agreeable voice. "I wonder if you would be so kind as to grant me a short interview? I want to see you about the late Mr. Godfrey Pavely. He was a great friend of mine."

As she uttered the dead banker's name, Greville Howard's face stiffened into sudden watchfulness. But he said slowly: "May I enquire your name, madam?"

"Oh yes," she said eagerly. "My name is Winslow—I am Mrs. Winslow. I was Godfrey Pavely's oldest friend—we were children together."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Your name comes back to me. I think you were mentioned at the inquest, Mrs. Winslow? But you did not give any evidence, if I remember rightly."

"No, I was not asked to give evidence," she answered. "And you yourself, Mr. Howard, were too ill to come and say what you knew about—about——"

"About Mr. Pavely's murderer," he said smoothly.

They were now walking side by side slowly away from the gate, down a broad, well-kept carriage road, the lodge-keeper staring after them.

"Do you know Sir Angus Kinross?" asked Katty's companion suddenly.

She gave him a curious, side-glance look. "I saw him several times last winter," she said hesitatingly. "But, Mr. Howard?—I don't like him!"

"Neither do I." He snapped the words out. "I could have told Scotland Yard a good deal if Kinross had taken the trouble to be civil to me—but he sent me down a fellow whose manner I exceedingly resented."

There followed a long pause. Katty became unpleasantly aware that this strange-looking man—she wondered how old he was—sixty-five?—seventy?—was looking at her with a rather pitiless scrutiny.

"I can see that you are anxious to know the truth," he observed. He added: "Are you aware that the reward has just been withdrawn?"

"No, I didn't know that. But I'm not surprised," she said.

She glanced at him, puzzled, and a little nervous. His keen eyes, grey-green in tint, were much younger than the rest of his face.

"I think I know part of the truth," he went on. "And perhaps you will be able to supply the other part, Mrs. Winslow. I confess to a certain curiosity about the matter."

They were now within sight of a charming-looking old house. It was

charming, and yet there was something forlorn about its very perfection. The low, oak, nail-studded front door was shut, not hospitably open—as is generally the case with the door of a Yorkshire country house. But Mr. Greville Howard pulled the bell, and at once the door was opened by a respectable-looking manservant.

"I am taking this lady to my study, and I do not wish to be disturbed till I ring. When I ring you can bring tea."

Katty followed her host through a short, vaulted passage into a square hall. It was a beautiful apartment, in keeping with the delicate, austere charm of the house outside. And round the hall there were some fine Dutch easel pictures.

Out of the hall there opened various doors. Greville Howard pushed open one, already ajar, and Katty walked through into what she at once realised was her companion's own habitual living-room.

With all her cleverness, and her acquaintance with the art-furnishing jargon of the day, Katty would have been surprised to know the value of the contents of this comparatively small room. It contained some notable examples of the best period of early French Empire furniture. This was specially true of the mahogany and brass inlaid dwarf bookcases which ran round three sides of the apartment. Above the bookcases, against the turquoise-blue silk with which the walls were hung, were a number of Meissonier's paintings of Napoleon.

On the mantelpiece was a marble bust of the young Cæsar as First Consul, and above it a delightful portrait of Mademoiselle Georges, by Gérard. As he briefly informed his visitor of the portrait's identity, Mr. Greville Howard felt just a little disappointed that Mrs. Winslow did not seem more interested.

During the last quarter of an hour he had recaptured what at the time of the affair had been a very definite impression as to the relations of his present visitor and the Wiltshire banker. But now, seeing Katty there before him, looking so much at her ease, so—so ladylike (Mr. Greville Howard's own word), he hesitated.

"Pray sit down," he said courteously, "and make yourself comfortable, Mrs. Winslow. It's getting rather chilly."

Her host put on another log as he spoke, and pulled a low, easy chair up close to the fire. And then he himself sat down, at right angles to his attractive guest, in a curiously-shaped winged chair which had once been part of the furniture in the Empress Joséphine's music-room at Malmaison.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT had been a little after three o'clock when Katty Winslow entered Mr. Greville Howard's study—and now it was half-past four. The room had grown gradually darker, but the fire threw out a glimmering light on the faces of the two sitting there.

All at once Katty realised, with a sense of acute discomfiture, that as yet her host had said nothing—nothing, at least, that mattered. He had drawn out of her, with extraordinary patience, courtesy, and intelligence, all that *she* could tell *him* —of what had happened before, and about the time of, Godfrey Pavely's death.

She had even told him of the two anonymous letters received by Godfrey Pavely—but with regard to them she had of course deliberately lied, stating that Godfrey had shown them to her, and that she still had no idea from whence they came.

Her listener had made very few comments, but he had shown, quite early in their conversation, a special interest in the personality of Oliver Tropenell. He had even extracted from Katty a physical description of the man she declared to be now Mrs. Pavely's lover, and probable future husband.

At first, say during the first half-hour, she had felt extraordinarily at ease with the remarkable old man who had listened to her so attentively, while the fine eyes, which were the most arresting feature of his delicate, highly intelligent countenance, were fixed on her flushed face. But now, with the shadows of evening falling, she could not see him so clearly, and there came a cold feeling about Katty Winslow's heart. There was very little concerning her own past relations with Godfrey Pavely that this stranger did not now know. She felt as if he had uncovered all the wrappings which enfolded her restless, vindictive, jealous soul. But she herself, so far, had learnt nothing from him.

She began to feel very tired, and suddenly, whilst answering one of his searching, gentle questions, her voice broke, and she burst into tears.

He leant quickly forward, and laid his thin, delicate right hand on hers. "My dear Mrs. Winslow, please forgive me! This has been a painful ordeal for you. I

feel like a Grand Inquisitor! But now I am going to bring you comfort—I ought not to say joy. But before I do so I am going to make you take a cup of tea—and a little bread and butter. Then, afterwards, I will show you that I appreciate your generous confidence in telling me all that you have done."

He waited a moment, and then said impressively, "I am going to put you in the way to make it possible for you to avenge your dead friend, I think I may also say *my* dead friend, for Mr. Godfrey Pavely and I had some very interesting and pleasant dealings with one another, and that over many years."

She was soothed by the really kind tone of his low voice, even by the caressing quality of his light touch, and her sobs died down.

Mr. Howard took his hand away, and pressed a button close to his chair. A moment later a tray appeared with tea, cake, bread and butter, and a little spirit lamp on which there stood what looked like a gold tea-kettle.

"You can put on the light, Denton," and there came a pleasant glow of suffused light over the room.

"Perhaps you will be so kind as to make the tea?" said Mr. Howard in his full, low voice.

Katty smiled her assent, and turned obediently towards the little table which had been placed by her elbow.

She saw that the kettle was so fixed by a clever arrangement that there was no fear of accident, though the water in it had been brought in almost boiling on the lacquer tray—a tray which was as exquisitely choice in its way as was everything else in the room.

Katty, as we know, was used to making afternoon tea. Very deftly she put three teaspoonfuls of tea into the teapot, and then poured out the boiling water from the bright yellow kettle. She was surprised at its weight.

"Yes," said Greville Howard, "it's rather heavy—gold always is. It's fifteen-carat gold. I bought that kettle years ago, in Paris. It took my fancy."

He looked at the clock. "We will give the tea three minutes to draw," he said thoughtfully.

And then he began to talk to her about the people with whom she was staying, the people who had never seen him, but who had so deep—it now seemed to her so unreasoning and unreasonable—a prejudice against him. And what he had to say about them amused, even diverted, Katty, so shrewd were his thrusts, so true his appreciation of the faults and the virtues of dear Helen and Tony Haworth. But how on earth had he learnt all that?

And then, at the end of the three minutes, she poured the tea into the transparent blue-and-white Chinese porcelain cups.

"No milk, no sugar, no cream for me," he said. "Only a slice of that lemon."

Greville Howard watched Katty take her tea, and eat the bread and butter and the cake—daintily, but with a good appetite. He watched her with the pleasant sensations that most men felt when watching Katty do anything—the feeling that she was not only very pretty, but very healthy too, and agreeable to look upon, a most satisfactory, satisfying feminine presence.

After she had finished, he again touched his invisible button, and the tray was taken swiftly and noiselessly away.

"And now," he said, "I am going to tell you *my* part of this strange story, and you will see, Mrs. Winslow, that the two parts—yours and mine—fit, and that the vengeance for which I see you crave, is in your hands. I shall further show you how to arrange so that you need not appear in the matter if Sir Angus Kinross prove kind, as I feel sure he will be—to you."

Katty clasped her hands together tightly. She felt terribly moved and excited. Vengeance? What did this wonderful old man mean?

"Dealers in money," began Mr. Greville Howard thoughtfully, "have to run their own international police, and that, my dear young lady, is especially true of the kind of business which built up what I think I may truly call my fame, as well as my fortune. During something like forty years I paid a large subsidy each year to the most noted firm of private detectives in the world—a firm, I must tell you, who have their headquarters in Paris. Though I no longer pay them this

subsidy, for mine was a one-man business, I still sometimes have reason to employ them. They throw out their tentacles all over the world, and their chief, a most intelligent, cultivated man, is by way of being quite a good friend of mine. I always thoroughly enjoy a chat with him when I am going through Paris on my way to my villa in the South of France. It is to this man that the credit of what I am about to tell you, the credit, that is, of certain curious discoveries connected with the mystery of Mr. Godfrey Pavely's death, is due."

Greville Howard waited a few moments, and then he spoke again.

"I must begin at the beginning by telling you that when this Fernando Apra came to see me, I formed two very distinct opinions. The one, which is now confirmed by what you have told me, was that the man was not a Portuguese; the other was that he was 'made up.' I felt certain that his hair was dyed, and the skin of his face, neck and hands tinted. He was a very clever fellow, and played his part in a capital manner. But I took him for an adventurer, a man of straw, as the French say, and I believed that Mr. Godfrey Pavely was being taken in by him. Yet there were certain things about this Apra that puzzled me—that I couldn't make out. An adventurer very rarely goes to the pains of disguising himself physically, for his object is to appear as natural as possible. There was yet another reason why the adventurer view seemed false. All the time we were talking, all the time he was enthusing—if I may use a very ugly modern word—about the prospects of this gambling concession, I had the increasing conviction that he was not serious, that he was not *out for business*—that he had come to see me with some other motive than that of wishing me to take an interest in his scheme."

Greville Howard leant forward, and gazed earnestly into his visitor's face. "I felt this so strongly that the thought did actually flash across me more than once—'Is this man engaged in establishing an alibi?' When I asked him for the name and address of the French references to which Mr. Pavely had made an allusion in his letter of introduction, I saw that he was rather reluctant to give me the names. Still he did do so at last, the bankers being——"

"Messrs. Zosean & Co.," exclaimed Katty. "I have sometimes thought of going to see them."

"You would have had your journey for nothing. As I shall soon show you, they were—they still are—an unconscious link in the chain. To return to Apra, as

we must still call him. So little was I impressed by this peculiar person that I expected to hear nothing more of him or of his gambling concern. But one day I received a letter from Mr. Godfrey Pavely, telling me that he himself wished to see me with reference to the same matter. I saw at once that *he* really did mean business. He was very much excited about the prospects of the undertaking."

Mr. Greville Howard paused. He looked attentively at his visitor, but Katty's face told him nothing, and he continued: "I cross-examined him rather carefully about this Fernando Apra, and I discovered that he had only seen the fellow twice, each time rather late in the evening, and by artificial light. I then told him of my conviction that Apra was playing a part, but he scouted the idea. Our unfortunate friend was a very obstinate man, Mrs. Winslow."

"Yes," said Katty in a low voice. "That is quite true."

"And then," went on the other thoughtfully, "Pavely was also exceedingly susceptible to flattery——"

Katty nodded. This Mr. Greville Howard knew almost too much.

"Well, as you know, he came down again to see me—and the next thing I heard was that he had disappeared! At once—days before Mrs. Pavely received that very singular letter—I associated Apra with the mystery. It was, however, no business of mine to teach the police their business, though I thought it probable that there would come a moment when I should have to intervene, and reveal the little that I knew. That moment came when Mr. Pavely's body was discovered in Apra's office at Duke House."

Greville Howard straightened himself somewhat in his easy chair.

"I at once wrote, as I felt in duty bound, to Sir Angus Kinross. I had met him, under rather unfortunate circumstances, some years ago, before he became Commissioner of Police. That, doubtless, had given him a prejudice against me. Be that as it may, instead of taking advantage of my offer to tell him in confidence all I knew, he sent a most unpleasant person down to interview me. This man, a pompous, ignorant fellow, came twice—once before the inquest, once after the inquest. I naturally took a special pleasure in misleading him, and in keeping to myself what I could have told. But though I was able to give him the impression I desired to convey, he was not able to keep anything he knew from *me;* and, at the end of our second interview, he let out that the police had

very little doubt that two men had been concerned in the actual murder—for murder the police by then believed it to be—of Mr. Godfrey Pavely."

Greville Howard stopped speaking for a moment.

"Two men?" repeated Katty in a bewildered tone.

And the other nodded, coolly. "Yes, that is the opinion they formed, very early in the day, at Scotland Yard. They also made up their minds that it would be one of those numerous murders of which the perpetrators are never discovered. And, but for you and me, Mrs. Winslow, the very clever perpetrators of this wonderfully well planned murder would have escaped scot-free."

He touched his invisible bell, and his man answered it.

"Make up the fire," he said, "—a good lasting fire."

When this had been done, he again turned to Katty. "We now," he said, "come to the *really* exciting part of my story. Up to now, I think I have told you nothing that you did not know."

"I had no idea," said Katty in a low, tense voice, "that the police believed there were *two* people concerned with Godfrey's death."

She was trying, desperately, to put the puzzle together—and failing.

"I crossed to France last March," went on Greville Howard musingly, "and, inspired I must confess by a mere feeling of idle curiosity, I stopped in Paris two days in order to see, first, Messrs. Zosean, and secondly Henri Lutin, the head of the Detective Agency with whom, as I told you just now, I have long been in such cordial relations. I called first on Henri Lutin and reminded him of the story of Mr. Pavely's disappearance, and of the subsequent finding of his body in this Fernando Apra's office. I also informed him that I would go up to a certain modest sum in pursuit of independent enquiries if he would undertake to make them. He consented, and as a preliminary, gave me some information with regard to Messrs. Zosean. Provided with a good introduction I called on these bankers, and this is what I learnt. Messrs. Zosean, with that curious incuriousness which is so very French, scarcely knew anything of what had happened, though they were vaguely aware that a man had been found killed by accident in their mysterious client's office, for Fernando Apra was their client, but only—note

this, for it is important—a client of a few weeks' standing. He had paid in to their bank, some two months before Mr. Pavely's death, the very considerable sum of one million francs, forty thousand pounds, on deposit. One of the junior partners saw him—only once, late in the afternoon."

Greville Howard waited a long moment—then he added impressively: "*And the man whom they to this day believe to be Fernando Apra bore no physical resemblance at all to the man who visited me here under that name*. In fact, the description given by the bankers exactly tallies with that of another man—of a man whom *you* described to me about an hour ago."

"I don't quite understand," faltered Katty.

"Don't you? Think a little, Mrs. Winslow, and you will agree with me that the real client of Messrs. Zosean was Oliver Tropenell, the man whom you believe to be the lover and future husband of Mrs. Pavely."

Katty uttered an inarticulate exclamation—was it of surprise or of satisfaction? Her host took no notice of it, and continued his narrative:

"One day—I soon found it to have been the day following that on which the murder of Mr. Pavely was presumably committed—a man who, I feel sure, was *my* Fernando Apra, turned up at Messrs. Zosean with a cheque, the fact that he was coming having been notified to the bank from London by telephone. He drew out the greater part of the money lodged in the name of Apra in Messrs. Zosean's bank—not all, mark you, for some eight thousand pounds was left in, and that eight thousand pounds, Mrs. Winslow, is still there, undisturbed. I doubt myself if it will ever be claimed!

"I then, following the plan laid down for me by Henri Lutin, asked Messrs. Zosean at what hotel Fernando Apra had stayed. I was given two addresses. These addresses I handed on to my friend the secret enquiry agent, and the rest of the story belongs to him, for it was Lutin who discovered all that I am now going to tell you."

Greville Howard stopped speaking. He looked thoughtfully at the woman who sat ensconced in the low arm-chair opposite him.

He felt rather as a man may be supposed to feel who is about to put a light to a fuse which will in due course blow up a powder magazine. There even came

over his subtle, tortuous mind a thrill of pity for the man whom he was about to sacrifice to this pretty woman's desire for vengeance and—as he could not help seeing—jealous hatred of another woman who might, for all he knew, be in every way more worthy of his interest, even of his admiration, than she who sat there looking at him with gleaming eyes and parted lips.

But Greville Howard, like all his kind, was a fatalist as well as something of a philosopher. He could not have lived the life he had led, and done the work which had built up his great fortune, had he been anything else, and Katty had come at a very fortunate psychological moment for him—as well as for herself. Greville Howard was becoming what he had rarely ever been—bored; he was longing consciously for a fresh interest and for a new companionship in his life. And so:

"Perhaps you will be disappointed at the meagreness of what I am about to tell you, but you may believe me when I say that it is information which will make the way of Sir Angus Kinross quite clear, and which may bring one, if not two, men to the gallows."

Katty gave a little involuntary gasp. But he went on:

"It did not take my friend Lutin very long to discover that a man of the name of Apra had stayed at each of the hotels indicated to me by the bankers. He also discovered that 'Apra' had with him a friend named Dickinson who put down his birthplace as New York. Do you follow me, Mrs. Winslow?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied hesitatingly.

"At the first hotel, a small, comfortable, rather expensive house in the Madeleine quarter, Fernando Apra was a tall, dark, good-looking man, and the other, the New Yorker, was fair and short. Though on the best of terms they lived very different lives. The American was out a great deal; he thoroughly enjoyed the gay, lively sides of Paris life. Fernando Apra on the other hand stayed indoors, reading and writing a good deal. At last the two men left the hotel, giving out that they were going to spend the winter in the South of France. But they only stayed a few days at Lyons and, doubling back to Paris, they settled in the Latin Quarter on the other side of the river.

"By that time, my dear Mrs. Winslow, *they had exchanged identities*. The tall, dark man was now Dickinson, and his fair friend had become Apra! It was Apra

who one day told the manager he was going to a fancy dress ball and asked him to recommend him a good theatrical costumier. When Lutin ran that costumier to earth, the man at once remembered the fact that a client he took to be an Englishman had come and had had himself made up as a Mexican, purchasing also two bottles of olive-coloured skin stain. Now Apra was out all night after this extraordinary transformation in his appearance had taken place, but one of the waiters at the hotel recognised him that same evening at Mabille. When the man spoke to him, he appeared taken aback, and explained that he had made a mistake in the day of the fancy dress ball. The next morning he left the hotel, distributing lavish tips to everybody. But Dickinson stayed on for a few days, and during those days he received each day a telegram from England. One of these telegrams is actually in my possession."

Katty's host got up. He went across to a narrow, upright piece of inlaid mahogany furniture, and unlocking a drawer, took from it an envelope. Having opened it, he handed Katty a blue strip of paper on which were printed the words: "Concession going well" and the signature "G."

Katty stared down at the bit of blue paper, and she flushed. Even she realised the significance of that "G."

"I think," said her host quietly, "that if you write down from my dictation certain notes, and hand them, *together with this telegram*, to the Commissioner of Police, he may be trusted to do the rest."

CHAPTER XXV

FIVE quiet weeks slipped by—weeks full of outward, as well as of inward, happiness at The Chase and at Freshley.

Katty Winslow had come back to Rosedean, and then, without even seeing Laura, had gone away again almost at once. She was still away when there took place early in December the gathering together, for the first time for many years, of a big shooting party at Knowlton Abbey.

Just before joining that pleasant party, Mrs. Pavely spent a week in London, and certain Pewsbury gossips, of whose very existence she was unaware, opined that she had gone up to town to buy clothes! In a little over a month, Godfrey Pavely would have been dead a year, and some of these same gossips thought it rather strange that Mrs. Pavely should be going to stay at the Abbey before her first year of widowhood was over. But the kinder of the busybodies reminded one another that Lord St. Amant had known the mistress of The Chase from childhood, and being, as he was, a very good-natured man, no doubt he had thought it would cheer up the poor lady to have a little change.

Yes, Laura, to Mrs. Tropenell's surprise, had gone up alone to London, and Oliver, after two days, followed her. But he had not waited to escort her back, as his mother expected him to do. He returned the day before Laura—in fact she was away a week, he only four days.

The gossips of Pewsbury had been right. Laura had gone up to town to get a few new clothes, but she was still wearing unrelieved black, if not exactly conventional widow's mourning, when she arrived at Knowlton Abbey.

Lord St. Amant's shooting party was a great success—a success from the point of view of the guests, and from that of the host. For the first time for many years, in fact for the first time since the death of Lady St. Amant, the house was quite full, for in addition to the neighbours whom the host specially wished to honour, there had come down certain more sophisticated folk from London. Among others asked had been Sir Angus Kinross; but Sir Angus, to his own and Lord St. Amant's regret, had had to decline. The two men had become intimate since last winter—each had a real respect, a cordial liking, for the other.

The housekeeper at the Abbey had been surprised to note his lordship's interest in every detail. He had himself seen, and at considerable length, the *chef* who had come down from London for the week; he had even glanced over the bedroom list, making certain suggestions as to where his various guests should sleep. Thus it was by his desire that Mrs. Tropenell had been given the largest bed-chamber in the house, one which had never been, in the present housekeeper's reign, occupied by a visitor. It had been, in the long, long ago, the room of his mother, the room in fact where his lordship himself had been born some seventy odd years ago. By his wish, also, there had been arranged for Mrs. Tropenell's occupation the old-fashioned sitting-room into which the bedroom opened.

Mr. Oliver Tropenell had been put nearly opposite Lord St. Amant's own sleeping apartment, in that portion of the house which was known as "his lordship's wing." And Mrs. Pavely had been given, in the same part of the house, but at the further end of the corridor, the room which had been always occupied, during her infrequent sojourns at the Abbey, by the late Lady St. Amant.

And now the long, though also the all too short, week-end, which had lasted from Thursday to Tuesday, was over, and all the guests had departed, with the exception of Lord St. Amant's three intimate friends—Mrs. Tropenell, that lady's son, and Mrs. Pavely. This smaller party was staying on for two more days, and then it would break up—Mrs. Tropenell and Mrs. Pavely returning in the morning to Freshley Manor and The Chase, while Mr. Tropenell stayed on to accompany his host to another big shoot in the neighbourhood.

Though all three had professed sincere regret at the departure of their fellow guests, each of them felt a certain sense of relief, and yes, of more than relief, of considerable satisfaction, when they found themselves alone together.

There is always plenty to talk about after the breakup of a country house party, and when at last the four of them found themselves together at dinner, they all did talk—even Laura, who was generally so silent, talked and laughed, and exchanged quick, rather shy jests with Oliver.

Laura and Oliver? Lord St. Amant had of course very soon discovered their

innocent secret. He had taxed Mrs. Tropenell with the truth, and she had admitted it, while explaining that they desired their engagement, for obvious reasons, to remain secret for a while.

During these last few days their host had admired, with a touch of whimsical surprise, Laura's dignity, and Oliver's self-restraint. Of course they had managed to be a good deal together, aided by Lord St. Amant's unobtrusive efforts, and owing to the fact that Mrs. Tropenell's charming sitting-room upstairs was always at their disposal.

But no one in the cheerful, light-hearted company had come within miles of guessing the truth; and Oliver Tropenell had done his full share in helping Lord St. Amant in the entertainment of his guests. He had also made himself duly agreeable to the ladies—indeed, Oliver, in a sense, had been the success of the party, partly because the way of his life in Mexico enabled him to bring a larger, freer air into the discussions which had taken place after dinner and in the smoking-room, and also because of his vitality—a vitality which just now burned with a brighter glow....

Lord St. Amant and Oliver only stayed on at the dining-table a very few minutes after Mrs. Tropenell and Laura had gone off into the drawing-room.

Though now on very cordial terms, the two men never had very much to say to one another. Yet Lord St. Amant had always been fond of Oliver. Being the manner of man he was, he could not but feel attached to Letty Tropenell's child. Still, there had been a time, now many long years ago, just after the death of his wife, when he had been acutely jealous of Oliver—jealous, that is, of Mrs. Tropenell's absorption, love, and pride, in her son. She had made it so very clear that she desired no closer tie to her old friend—and this had shrewdly hurt his self-esteem. But he had been too much of a philosopher to bear *rancune*, and such a friendship as theirs soon became had, after all, its compensations.

When Oliver settled in Mexico the time had passed by for a renewal of the old relations, and for a while the tie which had lasted for so long, and survived so many secret vicissitudes, appeared to loosen....

But now, again, all that was changed. Lord St. Amant had given up his wanderings on the Continent, and he had come once more very near to Mrs. Tropenell, during this last year. He and Oliver were also better friends than they had ever been; this state of things dated from last winter, for, oddly enough, what

had brought them in sympathy had been the death of Godfrey Pavely. They had been constantly together during the days which had followed the banker's mysterious disappearance, and they had worked in close union, each, in a sense, representing Laura, and having a dual authority from her to do what seemed best.

Still, to-night, excellent as were the terms on which each man felt with the other, neither had anything to say that could not be said better in the company of the ladies. And when in the drawing-room, which now looked so large and empty with only two, where last night there had been twelve, women gathered together about the fireplace, the four talked on, pleasantly, cheerfully, intimately, as they had done at dinner.

After a while Laura and Oliver slipped away into the smaller drawing-room, and Lord St. Amant and Mrs. Tropenell, hardly aware that the other two had left them, went on gossiping—harking back, as they now so often did, to the old stories, the old human tragedies and comedies, of the neighbourhood.

Soon after ten Laura and Oliver came back, walking side by side, and Oliver's mother looked up with a proud, fond glance.

They were a striking, well-matched couple—Laura looking more beautiful than ever to-night, perhaps because she seemed a thought more animated than usual.

"I've come to say good-night," she exclaimed. "I feel so sleepy! Oliver and I had such a glorious walk this afternoon."

She bent down and kissed Mrs. Tropenell. And then, unexpectedly, she turned to Lord St. Amant, and put up her face as if she expected him also to kiss her.

Amused and touched, he bent and brushed his old lips against her soft cheek: "My dear," he exclaimed, "this is very kind of you!"

And then Oliver stepped forward into the circle of light thrown by the big wood fire.

He said a little huskily, "My turn next, Laura——" And to the infinite surprise of his mother and of his host, Laura, with an impulsive, tender gesture, reached up towards him, and he, too, brushed her soft face with his lips.

Then he took her hand, and led her to the door. And Lord St. Amant, quoting Champmélé, turned to his old love: "'Ah! Madame—quelle jolie chose qu'un baiser!'" he murmured, and ere the door had quite closed behind Oliver he, too, had put his arm with a caressing gesture round her shoulder, and drawn her to him, with the whispered words, "Letty—don't think me an old fool!" And then, "Oh, Letty! Do you remember the first time——" And though she made no answer, he knew she did remember, like himself only too well, the wild, winter afternoon, nearer forty than thirty years ago, when they two had been caught alone, far from home, in a great storm—the wild weather responding to their wild mood. They had taken shelter in a deserted, half-ruined barn, a survival of the days when England had still great granaries. And there, throwing everything aside—the insistent promptings of honour, and the less insistent promptings of prudence—St. Amant had kissed Letty....

He remembered, even now, the thrill of mingled rapture, shame, gratitude, triumph, and stinging self-rebuke, which had accompanied that first long clinging kiss.

The next day he had left the Abbey for the Continent, and when, at last, he had come back, he had himself again well in hand....

Only yesterday the shooters had gone by that old seventeenth-century barn, of which nothing now remained but thick low walls, and as he had tramped by the spot, so alone with his memories, if outwardly so companioned, there had swept over his heart, that heart which was still susceptible to every keen emotion, a feeling of agonised regret for what had—and what had not been.

"Ah, Letty," he said huskily, "you've been the best friend man ever had! Don't you think the time has come for two such old friends as you and I have been never to part? It isn't as if I had a great deal of time left."

An hour later Lord St. Amant was sitting up in bed, reading the fourth volume of a certain delightful edition of the Memoirs of the Duc de Saint Simon. He was feeling happier than he had felt for a very long time—stirred and touched too, as he had not thought to be again.

Complacently he reminded himself of the successful, the brilliantly successful, elderly marriages he had known in his time. 'Twas odd when one came to think of it, but he couldn't remember one such which had turned out a failure!

Dear Letty—who had known how to pass imperceptibly from youth to age with such a fine, measured dignity, while retaining so much which had made her as a girl and as an older woman the most delightful and stimulating of companions. What an agreeable difference her presence would make to his existence as he went slowly down into the shadows! He shuddered a little—the thought of old age, of real old age, becoming suddenly, vividly repugnant.

Thank God, Letty was very much younger than himself. When he was eighty she would be sixty-three. He tried to put away that thought, the thought that some day he would be infirm, as well as old.

He looked up from his book.

How odd to think that Letty had never been in this room, where he had spent so much of his life from boyhood onwards! He longed to show her some of the things he had here—family miniatures, old political caricatures, some of his favourite books—they would all interest her.

He was glad he had arranged that she should have, on this visit, his dear mother's room. When he had married—close on fifty years ago—his parents had been alive, and later his wife, as the new Lady St. Amant, had not cared to take over her predecessor's apartments. She had been very little here, for soon, poor woman, she had become an invalid—a most disagreeable, selfish invalid. He told himself that after all he had had a certain amount of excuse for—well, for the sort of existence he had led so long. If poor Adelaide had only died twenty years earlier, and he had married Letty—ah, *then*, he would indeed have become an exemplary character! Yet he had been faithful to Letty—in his fashion....

No other woman had even approached near the sanctuary where the woman of whom now, to-night, he was able to think as his future wife, had at once become so securely enthroned. It had first been a delicious, if a dangerous, relationship, and, later, a most agreeable friendship. During the last few months she had become rather to his surprise very necessary to him, and these last few days he had felt how pleasant it would be to have Letty always here, at the Abbey, either in his company, or resting, reading, or writing in the room where

everything still spoke to him of the long-dead mother who had been so dear to him.

Of course they would wait till Oliver and Laura were married—say, till some time in February or March: and then, when those two rather tiresome younger people were disposed of, they, he and Letty, would slip up quietly to London, and, in the presence of perhaps two or three old friends, they would be made man and wife.

He reflected complacently that nothing in his life would be changed, save that Letty would be there, at the Abbey, as she had been the last few days, always ready to hear with eager interest anything he had to say, always with her point of view sufficiently unlike his own to give flavour, even sometimes a touch of the unexpected, to their conversation.

A knock at the door, and his valet came in, and walked close up to the bed.

"It's a telephone message, my lord. From Sir Angus Kinross—private to your lordship."

"Yes. What is the message?"

Lord St. Amant felt a slight tremor of discomfort sweep over him. What an odd time to send a trunk-call through—at close on midnight.

"Sir Angus has been trying to get on for some time, my lord; there was a fault on the line. Sir Angus would be much obliged if you would meet him at your lordship's rooms at one o'clock to-morrow. He says he's sorry to trouble your lordship to come up to London, but it's very important. He came himself to the telephone, my lord. He asked who I was. I did offer to fetch your lordship, but he said there was no occasion for that—if I would deliver the message myself."

"All right, Barrett."

"Sir Angus begs your lordship not to tell any one that your business to-morrow is with him."

"I quite understand that."

CHAPTER XXVI

"WE have solved the mystery of Godfrey Pavely's death!"

Such were the words with which Sir Angus Kinross greeted Lord St. Amant, when the latter, arriving at his rooms, found the Commissioner of Police already there.

"D'you mean that you've run Fernando Apra to earth?"

The speaker felt relieved, and at the same time rather discomfited. He had not associated the Commissioner of Police's summons with that now half-forgotten, painful story. Godfrey Pavely had vanished out of his mind, as he had vanished out of every one else's mind in the neighbourhood of Pewsbury, and in the last few months when Sir Angus and Lord St. Amant had met they had seldom alluded to the strange occurrence which had first made them become friends.

But now, seeing that the other looked at him with a singular look of hesitation, there came a slight feeling of apprehension over St. Angus's host.

"Have you actually got the man here, in England? If so, I suppose poor Mrs. Pavely is bound to have a certain amount of fresh trouble in connection with the affair?"

"We have not got the man who called himself Fernando Apra, and we are never likely to have him. In fact, I regard it as certain that we shall not even be able to connect him directly with the murder—for murder it certainly was, St. Amant."

"Murder?"

Lord St. Amant repeated the word reluctantly, doubtfully. He was beginning to feel more and more apprehensive. There was something so strange and so sombre in the glance with which the Commissioner of Police accompanied his words.

During that fortnight when they had so constantly seen one another last year,

Sir Angus had never once looked surprised, annoyed—or even put out! There had been about him a certain imperturbability, both of temper and of manner. He now looked infinitely more disturbed than he had done even at the moment when he had first seen Godfrey Pavely's dead body sitting up in Fernando Apra's sinister-looking office.

"Yes," he went on in a low, incisive voice, "it was murder right enough! And we already hold a warrant, which will be executed the day after to-morrow, this next Friday——"

He waited a moment, then uttered very deliberately the words: "It is a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Oliver Tropenell on the charge of having murdered Mr. Godfrey Pavely on or about the 5th of last January."

"I—I don't understand what you mean! Surely Oliver Tropenell was not masquerading as Fernando Apra?" exclaimed Lord St. Amant. "If one can believe a mass of quite disinterested evidence, the two men were utterly unlike!"

"That is so, and there was of course a man who masqueraded, and masqueraded most successfully, both in Paris and in London, as Fernando Apra. That man, St. Amant, was——"

Lord St. Amant bent forward eagerly while his mind, his still vigorous, intelligent, acute mind, darted this way and that. What name—whose name—was Sir Angus going to utter?

He was not long left in suspense.

"That man," said Sir Angus slowly, impressively, "was Mrs. Pavely's brother, a certain Gilbert Baynton, who is, we are informed, the business partner of Mr. Tropenell in Mexico. It was *he* who masqueraded as Fernando Apra. But it was not he who actually fired the pistol shot which killed Godfrey Pavely——"

When he had heard the name Gilbert Baynton, it was as if a great light had suddenly burst in on Lord St. Amant's brain. In spite of everything he felt a sharp thrill of relief.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "There's been a terrible mistake—but it's one that I can set right in a very few minutes. Believe me, you're on the wrong track altogether! If murder there was—murder, and not manslaughter, which I venture

to think much more probable—then Gilbert Baynton was Godfrey Pavely's murderer. The two men hated one another. It all comes back to me—not only had they a quarrel years ago, but that same quarrel was renewed not long before Godfrey Pavely's disappearance. Nothing—*nothing*—would induce me to believe that Oliver Tropenell is a murderer!"

"I'm afraid you'll soon be brought round to believe it," said Sir Angus ruefully. "I am of course well aware of what you say concerning Gilbert Baynton's relations to his brother-in-law. We've already found all that out, especially as we had a willing witness close to our hand. Unfortunately—I say unfortunately, St. Amant, for of course I know he is a thorough bad hat—we have irrefutable evidence that this man Baynton did *not* commit the murder. He was certainly in Paris at the time when Godfrey Pavely was killed in London."

Sir Angus took a turn up and down the room—then he came back to where the other man was sitting.

"You can take it from me, St. Amant, that there has never been, in the whole history of criminal jurisprudence, so far as I am acquainted with it, any crime planned out with such infinite care, ingenuity, and—and—well, yes, I must say it, a kind of almost diabolical cunning. So true is that that——" He took another turn up and down the room, and then once more he came and stood before his friend: "Well, I consider the murderer has a very good sporting chance of getting off—scot free! He will be able to command the best legal advice as well as the best intellects at the Criminal Bar—that he himself has no mean intellect he has proved over this business. Yes, I shouldn't be in the least surprised if he managed to scrape through! More fortunate than most of his kind, he has a new country to which he will be able to retire with the widow of the man he murdered—if she can be brought to believe in him. And, mind you, women can be brought to believe *anything* of those they love, or at any rate, they can be brought to *seem* to believe anything!"

He waited a moment, and then added abruptly, "I formed the opinion that Mrs. Pavely was a very unusual woman, St. Amant."

"But you don't think—surely you don't think——"

"No, no——" Sir Angus was very decided. "I certainly don't think Mrs. Pavely was in any way concerned in this appalling plot. And mind you—ill as I think of him, I must admit that Oliver Tropenell's a brave man. He did the job

himself—even if he was helped by his friend."

He waited a moment. Somehow St. Amant was taking the news far more to heart than he had expected.

"I'll tell you everything in time, but it's a long, complicated story; and of course I'm trusting entirely to your honour in the matter. What I tell you now must never go beyond these four walls."

Sir Angus sat down, and Lord St. Amant listened, half of his brain acutely, sensitively alive to the story that was being told him—the other half in a kind of stupor of grief, of shame, and of horror. That second half of his brain was dominated by one name, one thought, one heart-beat—Letty, the dear, the beloved woman who had just promised to marry him, to bring him the solace of her care and companionship in the evening of his days....

"Apart from certain most cleverly devised breaks in the story—to which I shall make allusion presently—Oliver Tropenell's best chance lies in the absence of adequate motive. Why should this millionaire wish to murder a man who, as he will easily be able to prove, was not only an intimate friend, but also a connection of his own? Our answer to that question will be to put in these two anonymous letters."

Sir Angus took out of his pocket the two letters which had caused poor Godfrey Pavely such acute discomfort just a year before.

Lord St. Amant read them through, carefully, in silence.

"Still, as I daresay you know, judges look very much askance at anonymous letters, and especially in a trial for murder. Also these prove so *very* little—the more so that there seems to have been no talk at all about Tropenell and Mrs. Pavely in the neighbourhood. She bears, and has always borne, a very high character. As for these letters, they were evidently written by a woman—and by an educated woman. Any one familiar with disguised handwriting could tell you *that* much. Of course I have my own theory as to who wrote them."

Lord St. Amant nodded. "Yes, so have I."

"Still, I'm not bound to give my theory to either side, am I? I foresee that very probably these letters will remain anonymous. A great many people who think themselves clever will put them down to some dismissed servant.

"The fact that Mr. Tropenell left England for Mexico so soon after the discovery of Mr. Pavely's body is a good point on his side. The judge will argue, above all the jury will argue, that if he had been in love with Mrs. Pavely—if he had loved her, that is, with a guilty passion—he would not have left her just after she had become a widow. Nothing compelled him to do so. It has been suggested, but from a person who does not intend to go into the witness-box if she can help it, that Tropenell and Mrs. Pavely are now secretly engaged. My answer to that is—why shouldn't they be? Many a man has married his best friend's widow without any one supposing that he committed murder in order to attain that satisfaction!"

"Have you proof—irrefutable proof—pointing to the guilt of Oliver Tropenell?"

"What is irrefutable proof? It can be proved that Oliver Tropenell spent many weeks on the Continent in the company of the man who undoubtedly masqueraded as Fernando Apra, and that for a certain portion of that time the two men exchanged identities. Nothing can shake that portion of the evidence. But there is no record of the two having met, later, in London—I mean during the time when the net was certainly being drawn round Godfrey Pavely. And, as I said before, Gilbert Baynton—*alias* Fernando Apra—has an absolute alibi. He was certainly in Paris on the day when all trace of Pavely was lost. There seems no doubt at all that the evidence of the London hotel manager was most artfully arranged for. The man's story was given in good faith, but the incident occurred a full week before Mr. Pavely was done to death."

"But where does Tropenell come in?"

"As to the movements of Mr. Oliver Tropenell, we have not been quite so fortunate in tracing them. But even so, we have evidence that during the fateful three days on one of which the murder was certainly committed, he was staying in London, having just arrived from the Continent. I personally have no doubt at all that it was on Thursday, January the 5th, that, lured by a cleverly concocted letter signed 'Fernando Apra,' the hapless Pavely went to Duke House to find

Tropenell lying in wait for him. The two men may have had words—they probably *did* have words. But whatever passed—and look at it as you may, St. Amant—it was deliberate murder."

Lord St. Amant stood up. His turn had come to astound the Commissioner of Police.

"Yes," he said, "yes, if your theory is correct, Kinross, it was deliberate murder—to me far the more terrible fact, because the murderer will soon be my stepson. I am to be married to Mrs. Tropenell by special licence next week."

And as the Commissioner of Police, transfixed with surprise, remained silent, the other went on, speaking rather quietly and coldly, "It is only fair on my part to tell you this. Indeed, perhaps I ought to have told you at once—I mean when I first gathered the purport of what you wished to say to me."

Sir Angus shook his head. He was filled with a great pity, as well as a great admiration, for the man—who now looked such an old man—standing there facing him.

"Look here," he said slowly. "I oughtn't perhaps to make such a suggestion to you—but we've become friends, St. Amant. That is why I venture to advise you that before this next Friday you should get these two unfortunate ladies, Mrs. Tropenell and Mrs. Pavely, out of the country. Take them away—hide them away—in France or in Spain! If you do that they will be spared a fathomless measure of anguish and of shame. The presence of neither of them is essential to the course of justice, and if they remain in England they will certainly each be called as witnesses, in which case Mrs. Pavely will go through—well, I can only describe it as *hell*. It is not as if the presence of either of them would be really beneficial to Oliver Tropenell."

"Can you say that quite truly about his mother?" asked Lord St. Amant searchingly.

Sir Angus looked up with a very troubled expression of face.

"No, I fear I can't," he answered, frankly, "for if Mrs. Tropenell can bring herself to believe her son absolutely innocent, then, in the hands of a skilful counsel, I have to admit that her evidence might be of great sentimental value to Tropenell. But the same cannot be said of Mrs. Pavely's presence in the witness-

box. Whichever way you look at it, Mrs. Pavely's presence is bound to be, in a judicial sense, detrimental to the man in the dock. She is, if I may say so, St. Amant, a singularly attractive woman, and ten out of every twelve of the men in Court would probably regard her as providing a very adequate 'motive'!"

There was a pause, and then Sir Angus began again:

"What would you say to our persuading Mrs. Pavely to leave England for a while, leaving only Mrs. Tropenell to face the music?"

"Mrs. Pavely," said Lord St. Amant thoughtfully, "would probably refuse to leave England. I think, I fear, that she loves Oliver Tropenell—passionately."

He added abruptly, "Are you having him watched?"

Sir Angus cleared his throat. "Well, no, not exactly *watched*. We are of course aware that he has been staying with you for the past week, and that he is going back to Freshley Manor—is it to-morrow, or the day after to-morrow? I take it that he would probably prefer to be arrested in his mother's house."

A feeling of sick horror came over the other man's heart. "I—I suppose so," he muttered.

And then Sir Angus Kinross dropped his voice: "You really know this man and I don't. Do you think it advisable that he should be prepared for what is coming—that *you*, for instance, St. Amant——"

"Do you mean," exclaimed Lord St. Amant, "that I may—warn him?"

The other nodded. "Yes, that is what I suggest that you should do. I take it that we can be quite sure that he will do nothing mad or foolish—that he will not try to get away, for instance? It would be quite useless, and I need hardly point out that it would ruin his chances—later. I think you are at liberty to tell him, as from yourself of course, that you have reason to think he has a sporting chance, St. Amant. But I am trusting, not only to your honour, but to your secrecy and—and discretion."

The other nodded gravely. "Tropenell's not the sort of man to run away."

"No, I don't think he is—once he knows the game is up," answered the

Commissioner of Police a trifle grimly.

CHAPTER XXVII

IT was now early, very early in the morning after the return of Lord St. Amant to the Abbey. Dead dark, and dead quiet too, in the great sleeping house. Not dead cold, however, in his lordship's comfortable bedroom, for he had built up the fire, as he sat on and on, still fully dressed, reading, or trying to read—his bed exactly in the same state as when he had gone upstairs from the drawing-room about eleven.

It was years and years since Lord St. Amant had last stayed up all night, but though he had made a great effort to forget himself in those ever fresh, even if familiar, memoirs of Saint Simon, he had found it impossible to banish from his mind—even for a few moments—the awful thing which he knew would, in a sense, never leave his mind again.

For the tenth time he put his book down, marking the page with a tiny strip of green watered ribbon, on a low table by his side, and then, staring into the fire, his memory lingered—not over his talk with Sir Angus Kinross, he was sick of thinking *that* over—but over the incidents which had marked the evening before.

He had returned from London only just in time to dress for dinner, and so he had not seen his guests till just before a quarter-past eight. Then had followed an hour passed, outwardly at least, peacefully and pleasantly.

But while he had been eating mechanically the food put before him, in very truth not knowing what it was, terrible thoughts had gone through his mind in a terrible sequence.

Once or twice he had caught, or thought he had caught, Oliver Tropenell's penetrating eyes fixed searchingly on his face, but he, the host, had avoided looking at his guest. Somehow he could neither look at Oliver, nor even think of Oliver—with Oliver and Laura there, the one sitting opposite to him, the other next him.

Laura? Laura, on Lord St. Amant's left, had looked lovely last night. She was wearing a white dress, almost bridal in its dead whiteness—a rather singular fact considering that she had till to-day worn unrelieved black. Looking back, her

host could not get her out of his mind. To think that she, proud, reserved, Laura Pavely was to be the heroine of a frightful tragedy which would bring not only shame and disgrace on herself and on the man whom Lord St. Amant had every reason to suppose she now loved, but—what was of so very much more concern to him—on that man's mother.

Looking at Laura, seeing that strange, haunting Mona Lisa smile on her lovely face, it had seemed incredible that she should be the central figure of such a story. But how could she escape being the central figure, the heroine of the story, at any rate in the imagination of all those, one might almost count them by millions, rather than thousands, who in a few days or a few weeks would be as familiar with the name "Mrs. Pavely" as they once had been with the names of—of Mrs. Bravo and Mrs. Maybrick?

Yes, Lord St. Amant, staring into the fire, told himself, that that three-quarters of an hour spent in his own dining-room had been the most painful time he had ever lived through in his long life. He felt as if every moment of it was indelibly stamped on his brain. And yet he had completely forgotten what the talk had been about! He supposed they had talked. Silence would have seemed so strange, so unnatural. Yet he could not remember a single thing which had been said.

But his vision of the three who had sat at table with him remained horribly clear.

Now he was haunted specially by Oliver. And then, after a while, Oliver left him, and he was haunted by his poor friend, soon to be his poor wife.

Mrs. Tropenell had been more silent than usual—so much he did remember. And he wondered uneasily if he had given her any cause for thinking, from his appearance or his manner, that there was anything wrong?

The thought of what was going to happen to Mrs. Tropenell on the day which was now to-morrow, became suddenly so intolerable to Lord St. Amant that he got up from his chair, and walked twice round the large, shadowed bedroom.

Then he sat down again, and groaned aloud.

It was as though a bridge had been thrown over the chasm of nearly forty years. His withered heart became vivified. Something of the passion which he

had left for the high-spirited and innocent, yet ardent-natured, girl whom he had loved, and whom he had saved from herself, stirred within him. Secretly, voicelessly, he had always been very proud of what he had, done—and left undone. It was the one good, nay, the one selfless, action of his long, agreeable, selfish life.

But he could not save her now! Some little shelter and protection he would be able to afford her, but what would it avail against the frightful cloud of shame and anguish which was about to envelop her?

He told himself suddenly what he had already told himself when with Sir Angus—namely, that he and Letty must be married at once. She would certainly acquiesce in any course which would benefit Oliver. Yes, Letty would think of nothing but her son, and, the world being what it is, Oliver would of course benefit by the fact that Lord St. Amant was his stepfather. It would add yet another touch of the unusual and the romantic to the story....

Once more his mind swung back to last evening. He and Oliver had stayed alone together some ten minutes after the ladies had gone into the drawing-room, and there had come over Lord St. Amant a wild, unreasoning impulse to unburden his heart. But of course he had checked, battened down resolutely, that foolish almost crazy impulse. As soon as Letty and Laura were safely gone tomorrow morning he must, of course, tackle the terrible task. And then he tried, as he had tried so often during the last twelve hours, to put himself in Oliver Tropenell's place.

He recalled the younger man's easy, assured manner, and what a real help, nay, more than help, he had been when the house was full of guests. More than one of their neighbours there had spoken warmly, with evident admiration, of Tropenell. "How well he's turned out! He was thought to be such a queer chap as a boy."

A queer chap? Oliver was certainly *that*.

Lord St. Amant forced himself to consider the man whom his intellect, if not his heart, was compelled to recognise as a cold-blooded murderer.

What had been his and Laura's real attitude to one another during Godfrey Pavely's lifetime? Was Laura absolutely innocent? Or, had she played with Tropenell as women sometimes do play with men—as a certain kind of

beautiful, graceful, dignified cat sometimes plays with a mouse? He was still inclined to think *not*,—before yesterday he would certainly have said not. But one never can tell—with a woman....

And what was going to happen now? Oliver had always been a fighter—no doubt Oliver would be prepared to take the "sporting chance."

When he and his guest had gone into the drawing-room last evening, Laura and Oliver had almost at once passed through into the smaller drawing-room. They had moved away unconcernedly, as if it was quite natural that they should desire to be by themselves, rather than in the company of Oliver's mother and Laura's host; and Lord St. Amant, looking furtively at Mrs. Tropenell, had felt a sudden painful constriction of the heart as he had noted the wistful glance she had cast on the two younger people. It had been such a touching look—the look of the mother who gives up her beloved to the woman who has become his beloved.

At ten o'clock tea had been brought in—an old-fashioned habit which was, perhaps, the only survival of the late Lady St. Amant's reign at the Abbey, and, to the surprise of Mrs. Tropenell, her companion had poured himself out a cup and had drunk it off absently.

She had smiled, exclaiming, "You shouldn't have done that! You know you never can take tea and coffee so near together!" And he had said, "Can't I? No, of course I can't. How stupid of me!"

And Laura, hearing the opening and the shutting of doors, had come back, and said that she felt sleepy. They had had another glorious walk, she and Oliver....

Yes, that had been how the evening had worn itself out, so quiet and pleasant, so peaceful—outwardly. It was, indeed, outwardly just the kind of evening which Lord St. Amant had promised himself only yesterday should be repeated many times, after his marriage to his old friend. But now he knew that that had been the last apparently pleasant, peaceful evening that was ever likely to fall to his share in this life. Even if Oliver Tropenell, aided by his great wealth and shrewd intellect, escaped the legal consequences of his wicked deed, his mother would ever be haunted by the past—if indeed the fiery ordeal did not actually kill her.

The old man, sitting by the fire, began to feel very, very tired—tired, yet excited, and not in the least sleepy. He turned and looked over at his bed, and then he shook his head. Yet he would have to get into that bed and pretend that he had slept in it, before his valet came into the room at half-past seven.

It was years, years, *years* since he had last tried to make an unslept-in bed look as if it had been slept in.

He told himself fretfully that it was odd how unwilling he felt to go over in his own mind the amazing story told him by Sir Angus Kinross. He had thought of nothing else on his long journey from London, but since he had arrived at the Abbey, since he had seen Oliver, he could not bear to think over the details of the sinister story. He forced himself to glance at them, as it were obliquely, for a moment. Yes, he could quite see what Sir Angus meant! Oliver certainly had a sporting chance, backed with the power of commanding the best legal advice and the highest talent at the Bar, coupled with the kind of sympathy which is aroused, even in phlegmatic England, by what the French call a *crime passionel*.

Once more Lord St. Amant took up the little faded red leather-bound volume, but he had hardly pushed aside the green ribbon which marked his place in it, when there struck on his ears the metallic sound of an alarum clock—one which he judged to have been carefully muffled and deadened, yet which must be quite sufficiently audible to fulfil its purpose of awakening any sleeper in the room where it happened to be.

Now, on hearing that sound, Lord St. Amant was exceedingly surprised, for, as far as he knew, only one other room was occupied on this side of the corridor. That room was that which his late wife had chosen in preference to the one which had been his mother's, and by an odd whim he had assigned it to Laura Pavely.

He turned slightly round in his chair, and glanced at the travelling clock which was on his dressing-table.

It was half-past five.

Why should Laura, or any one else in that great house for the matter of that, wish to be awakened on a winter's morning at such an hour?

While he was thinking this over, he heard the sound of a key turning quietly in a lock, and then there came that of the slow opening of a door on to the corridor.

He stood up, uncertain what to do, and feeling his nerves taut.

Though he was now an old man, his limbs had not lost all their suppleness, and after a moment of hesitation he sprang to his door and opened it.

Yes! He could hear the firm tread of footsteps coming down the corridor towards him, to his left.

He flung his door wide open, and into the stream of light thrown by his powerful reading lamp into the corridor, there suddenly appeared Oliver Tropenell——

For a flashing moment the tall figure loomed out of the darkness, and then was engulfed again....

Lord St. Amant shut the door and hurried back to the fireplace. He cursed the impulse, bred half of genuine alarm, half of eager curiosity, which had made him the unwilling sharer in another man's—and woman's—secret.

Laura? Laura?—*Laura?* He was so taken aback, so surprised, so utterly astounded, and yes, so shocked, that for a moment he forgot the terrible thing which had now filled his mind without ceasing for so many hours. Then it came back, a thousand-fold more vivid and accusing.

Laura? Good God, how mistaken he had been in her! Manlike, he told himself, most unfairly, that somehow what he had now learnt made everything—anything possible.

But before he had time to sit down, the door opened again, and Oliver Tropenell walked into the room.

"I wish you to know," he began, without any preamble, "that Laura and I were married a week ago in London. She wished to wait—in fact it had been

arranged that we should wait—till February or March. But to please me—only to please me, St. Amant—she put her own wishes, her own scruples aside. If there is any blame—the blame is entirely, *entirely* mine." He waited a moment, and then went on rapidly:

"As far as the rest of the world—the indifferent world—is concerned, it will believe that Laura and I were married when of course we should have been, after Godfrey Pavely had been dead a year. But Laura would like my mother to know. In fact she intends, I believe, to tell my mother to-morrow."

Lord St. Amant found himself debating, with a kind of terrible self-questioning, whether now was the moment to speak to Oliver.

"Of course I understand," he said shakily. "And I think Laura did quite right. But even so I suggest that nothing is said to your mother—yet. I have a very serious reason for asking you to beg Laura to keep your marriage absolutely secret."

He was looking earnestly, painfully into the face of the younger man.

Oliver Tropenell's countenance suddenly stiffened. It assumed a terrible, mask-like expression.

"Had your journey to London," he asked slowly, "anything to do with my affairs? I thought so once—at dinner. Did Sir Angus Kinross send for you?"

Lord St. Amant could not, did not, speak. But at last he bent his head.

Then Oliver asked another question, quickly, in a matter-of-fact tone: "How many hours have I left?"

"Till to-morrow, I mean till Friday, morning," the other answered in a stifled voice.

He longed to go on, to tell the man standing by his side what Sir Angus had said as to his having "a sporting chance." But there was something in the expression of the rigid, mask-like face which forbade his saying that.

And then Oliver Tropenell turned round and grasped his host's hand.

"I owe you a lot of kindness," he muttered. "I used not to be grateful, but I am grateful, *now*. We'll get Laura and mother off—and then you'll tell me what I have to know."

CHAPTER XXVIII

MRS. TROPENELL stood by the window of the pretty, old-fashioned sitting-room which she had now occupied for over a week, and which she knew would be, in a special sense, her own room, after she had became Lady St. Amant.

She was already dressed for the drive home with Laura Pavely. It was nearly twelve o'clock, and the car would be round in a few minutes. But she was waiting on, up here, for her son, for after breakfast Oliver had said casually: "I'll come up to your room for a moment, mother—I mean before you start for Freshley."

She looked round the room consideringly. Nothing in it had been altered for something like fifty years. Above the Italian marble chimney-piece was a good portrait, in oils, of Lord St. Amant's father, and on either side of the fireplace were crayon drawings of St. Amant as a little boy, and of his two sisters as little girls. Everything here epitomised the placid, happy life of the good and fortunate woman who had been Lord St. Amant's mother.

But the pretty, old-fashioned, peaceful-looking room told also of the strange transience of human life. With the exception of that early Victorian crayon drawing of the stalwart little boy, almost everything in the nature of a relic or memento spoke of some human being long dead.

Mrs. Tropenell felt curiously at peace. There was something almost final about the feeling which possessed her. Up to last night she had been anxious, restless, full of a secret, painful doubt as to whether she was doing right in marrying Lord St. Amant.

But now, this morning, her doubts had gone, partly owing to a very trifling thing, a quick perception of how well St. Amant and Oliver got on together—now. She had been alone with them at breakfast, and they had talked eagerly together, passing quickly from one subject to another, with no intervals of silence. When, at last, Oliver had got up, St. Amant also had risen, and put his arm with an affectionate gesture round the younger man's shoulder, and she had caught a strange look, a look of moved gratitude, on Oliver's dark face....

She had dreaded telling her son of her resolve—but the dread had left her, and she made up her mind to tell him this morning—not to wait, as she had half thought of doing, till he was at home again.

St. Amant and Oliver were going to shoot this afternoon over land belonging to little Alice Pavely. Laura had let The Chase shooting to a neighbour, and the neighbour, whose name was Buckhurst, had invited the other two to join his shooting party to-day, and to-morrow also. Oliver was coming home to Freshley in between....

The door opened. "Mother, may I come in?"

She turned quickly, all her heart, as always, welcoming him. With a little, unacknowledged pang she told herself that Oliver was growing older, that he was losing the look of buoyancy that he had kept so long. But what a fine, strong, vigorous-looking man he looked!—as he stood there, smiling rather gravely at her.

"Oliver?" she exclaimed, suddenly making up her mind to rush her fence—it was a simile which still often occurred to her—"Oliver, my dear, I want to tell you something. I have promised Lord St. Amant to marry him."

He looked moved and surprised—perhaps more than she had expected him to be. But his answer came instantly: "I am glad, mother. I'm very, very glad! I want to tell you, I've meant to tell you for some time, that I felt I've been very churlish in this matter of Lord St. Amant. He's always been good to me! Very, very good. I owed him a great deal as a boy. Lately, well, mother, you must have noticed it yourself, we've become really friends."

He looked swiftly round the pretty room. Till this morning he had always been here alone with Laura, having eyes only for her. He saw now what a charming room it was—so warm, so cosy too, on this chilly, wintry December day.

He exclaimed: "It will be good to think of you here—wherever I may be ____"

She felt a tremor go through her. Somehow she had thought that he meant to settle down in England; he had never said anything about it, but she had thought that that was his intention.

"Is Laura willing to spend a part of every year in Mexico, my dearest?"

He nodded, rather absently, as if the question hardly required an answer.

She moved closer to him. "You are very happy, are you not, Oliver?" she asked in a low voice, and looking up into his face.

And again he answered at once, almost as though he had seen the question in her eyes before she uttered it: "Very, very happy, mother! I don't suppose any man has ever been happier than I have been."

Again she put an intimate, probing question, wondering at her own courage, her own temerity, in doing so. "Laura wholly satisfies you?" she asked, allowing nothing of the doubt which was still in her heart to creep into her voice.

"Wholly," he said, again in that strong, confident voice. "And, mother—?" he waited a moment, and then, in a voice suddenly tense with emotion, he muttered —"what she is to me, I, all unworthy though I be, am to her. Do you know what —what response means to a man?"

"I think I do," she said in a low voice.

They remained silent. She felt as if she were, for the first time, fused in intense spiritual communion with her son.

He broke the spell. "There's something I want you to know," he said. And then he stopped short, and, looking away, exclaimed, "Laura shall tell you!" The carriage gong echoed through the great house. He opened the door, she passed through it, and so together they walked down to the large, rather bare hall. There they waited a few moments in silence, till there came the sound of light footsteps —Laura running downstairs, a small fur cap on her beautiful head.

She hurried towards them, smiling, and Mrs. Tropenell turned away—a twinge of jealous pain, of which she was ashamed, in her heart—and stared into the big log fire.

She heard Oliver exclaim, in accents at once imploring and imperious: "Laura? Come over here a moment."

At last she, the mother, turned slowly round, to see, through the half-open

door of Lord St. Amant's study, the two standing together, locked in each other's arms, Laura looking up into Oliver's face with an expression of rapt devotion, of entire absorption, in her blue, heavy-lidded eyes. As their lips met, Mrs. Tropenell looked quickly away. She asked herself if this exalted passion could last, and whether, after all, Oliver were not happier now than he could ever hope to be again?

Laura was very silent during the first half of their homeward drive, but at last she amazed Mrs. Tropenell by suddenly saying: "I want you to know—I feel I must tell you—that Oliver and I were married, in London, ten days ago. And I think—oh, Aunt Letty, I do think that he is happy—at last!"

She said the words very simply, and Mrs. Tropenell felt extraordinarily moved. This then was what Oliver had wanted her to know, and man-like had felt too—too shy to tell her.

"I am very grateful to you for what you have done," she exclaimed, and held the younger woman's hand tightly clasped in hers for a moment.

That was all. But before they parted Laura gave his mother a message from Oliver. It was quite an unimportant message, simply that on his way home he meant to look in at The Chase.

"You don't mind, do you?" Laura asked, a little hesitatingly. And Oliver's mother smiled.

"Of course not, my dear—I'm glad he should! Perhaps you'd like to come back with him, and stay on for dinner?"

But Laura, reddening with one of her rather rare, vivid blushes, shook her head. "I think I ought to stay at home the first evening," she said, "and put Alice to bed. She loves my putting her to bed. I don't want Alice ever to feel jealous."

But this time Mrs. Tropenell made no answer. Poor little Alice! It would be strange indeed if the child did not feel a little jealous as time went on—if, that is, Laura went on being, as she seemed to be, almost mystically absorbed in this wonderful, glowing thing which had come into her life.

It was the afternoon of the same day, and Mrs. Tropenell, after dealing with the various matters which had accumulated during her week's absence, had gone up to her room to rest before Oliver's return. Lying on her bed, in the fast-gathering twilight, thinking over all that had happened, and all that was happening, to herself and to those she loved, Mrs. Tropenell dozed off for a few moments. Then, in a long flash which seemed to contain æons of sensation, she went through an amazing and terrifying experience!

On the dead stillness which reigned both within and without the house there suddenly rang out a shot. At the same moment, if not indeed before, her whole being seemed to be bracing itself up to endure a great ordeal. It was as if her spirit, vanquishing a base, secret, physical terror of the unknown, was about to engage on a great adventure.

With a stifled cry she sat up, and then she realised, with a gasp of relief, that she had been dreaming, only dreaming—but her heart went on beating for a long time with the excitement, the mingled terror and exaltation of spirit, she had just gone through.

At last, feeling curiously languid and shaken, she went downstairs, and had tea in the drawing-room.

It was only a little after five; probably Oliver would not come in till just before it was time to dress for dinner.

The stillness of the house oppressed her. She got up, and moved restlessly about the room. The curtains had been drawn and the fire made up while she had been upstairs. She went across to one of the windows, and, behind the closed curtains, opened it widely. And as she opened the window, and stood by it, breathing in the cold, moist air, she heard the sound of branches being pushed aside across a little-used path which was even a shorter cut to The Chase than was the beech-wood avenue.

Then Oliver was coming home earlier than Laura had thought he would?

She stepped out quickly into the open air, on to the flagged path.

She could hear quick footsteps now—but they were not Oliver's footsteps. It was probably a maid coming back from the village which lay beyond The Chase. But even so there crept a slight feeling of anxiety over her heart. "Who's there?"

she called out.

Close out of the twilit darkness there came the instant hoarse answer: "It's Laura, Aunt Letty."

"Laura? Oh, my dear, you'll catch cold!" for Laura, without hat or cloak, was now there, before her.

"Aunt Letty? I've brought bad news—there's been an accident."

"To Oliver?" But she knew, even as she asked the question, what the answer would be.

"Yes—Oliver. They went on too long in the twilight—he stumbled, and his gun went off. They're bringing him home—now."

Laura was staring before her, her eyes veiled, glassy, like those of a blind woman.

"They wanted to bring him to The Chase. But there was a doctor there, and he said nothing would be of any use. So I told them to bring him home—to you."

Both women waited in the grateful darkness, dry-eyed and still.

At last Mrs. Tropenell said uncertainly: "Come indoors, Laura."

But Laura shook her head. "No, I'd rather stay out here, if you don't mind, Aunt Letty."

Not quite knowing what she was doing or why, Mrs. Tropenell walked forward and opened the door into the hall. There she took down a cloak, and coming out again, she put it round Laura. And they stood there waiting—till there broke on their ears the heavy tramp of men's feet carrying a burden.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT was arranged between Lord St. Amant and the coroner—who was his lordship's own medical attendant (when he required a medical attendant, which was seldom)—that the inquest should be held at Freshley Manor.

The body had been placed in Mrs. Tropenell's own room, that is, in the very room, as the cook, who had been in the house close on thirty-five years, explained to some of the members of the jury, where poor Mr. Oliver had been born.

So it was there, in that peaceful, old-fashioned, lady's bedchamber, that the twelve good men and true of Pewsbury had to view the body. It was remembered afterwards that the expression on the dead man's face showed how completely he had been taken by surprise: it bore an expression of absolute serenity—almost as if he had died in his sleep.

Rather to the disapproval of some of the Pewsbury people, but with the sympathetic understanding of others, Mrs. Tropenell, by her own desire, was present at the inquest; and, supporting her on the painful occasion, was her nearest neighbour and almost daughter, Mrs. Pavely.

The chief witness was Mr. Robert Buckhurst, the gentleman who had been host to the ill-fated shooting party.

His evidence was quite simple and straightforward—indeed, there was nothing at all strange or mysterious about the sad affair.

"Lord St. Amant shot a bird," he said, "and we hunted for it for some time. We were engaged in beating up the next field, when some one said, 'Where is Tropenell?' Just at that moment I heard a shot." He waited a moment, and then went on: "It sounded as if it were fifty yards away."

Again the witness paused, and then he continued gravely: "I said in jest, 'I hope he has not shot himself!' And Lord St. Amant said, 'Hold my gun, Buckhurst, and I'll walk along behind the hedge, and see if I can find him.' He got through a gap, and he could only have gone a very few yards before we

heard him call out. 'Come at once! He's shot!' With this we got through a gap, and ten paces on we saw Mr. Oliver Tropenell lying on his back, parallel with the hedge. The gun was lying across his body, the muzzle towards the hedge. At first we could not find the wound, but soon we discovered that he had been shot through the heart."

In reply to various questions, the witness explained how he raised Mr. Oliver Tropenell's left hand, fancying he could detect a slight flutter of the pulse. He called out for Dr. Turner, who happened to be a member of the party. That gentleman came up, and after a brief examination, said that Mr. Tropenell was certainly dead. The charge had gone through the heart, and death must have been practically instantaneous. Some one, probably the keeper, opened the breech of Mr. Tropenell's gun, and found that the cartridge in the right-hand chamber had been exploded.

At this point, in answer to a word from a juryman, Mr. Buckhurst said very decidedly that there could be no doubt at all that the shot had been fired by Mr. Tropenell's own gun. If he might venture to give an informal opinion, it was perfectly plain what had happened. The ground was rough just there, and twilight was falling. Without doubt Mr. Tropenell, on getting through the hedge, had stumbled heavily, the gun had fallen forward, and then had occurred one of those accidents which occasionally do happen out shooting, and which no amount of care or experience can prevent.

There was some little doubt as to what had been the exact position of the body, and while this was being discussed every one felt particularly sorry for the dead man's mother.

Following Mr. Buckhurst, Lord St. Amant went into the witness-box, and then some inquisitive juryman asked his lordship a question as to the mental condition of the deceased. In answer to that question, Lord St. Amant explained, with a good deal of emotion, that just before he and Mr. Tropenell had started out on their fatal expedition they had had a pleasant little talk together, during which Mr. Tropenell had seemed particularly well and cheerful. Further, the witness threw in, as an after-thought, the statement that the deceased gentleman had expressed considerable gratification at the fact that his mother, Mrs. Tropenell, and he, Lord St. Amant, had just entered together into an engagement of marriage.

This announcement of a forthcoming alliance which so closely touched the whole neighbourhood naturally overshadowed the rest of the purely formal medical evidence at the inquest. Very soon there remained nothing for the jury to do but to return a verdict of "death by misadventure," and to express the deepest sympathy with Mr. Tropenell's mother.

A great deal of deep, unaffected sympathy, more sincere in this case perhaps than a great deal of the sympathy which is lavished on the bereaved in this world, was felt for Mrs. Tropenell.

Her son had not only been the most devoted and excellent of sons, but he had been such a success, such a man to be proud of! It was also remembered that he had done many a kindly turn to the good folk of Pewsbury in the last eighteen months or so, since he had come home to make the first long stay he had made in their neighbourhood for over ten years. His manner, if reserved, was always kindly and pleasant, without any touch of that patronage which is sometimes irritating in gentlemen of his sort. The townspeople recalled, too, the dead man's intimacy with the late Mr. Godfrey Pavely, and the more sober among them did not fail to remind one another how curious it was that in under a year those two men, still both young as youth is counted nowadays, had been gathered to their fathers.

And then, before Pewsbury had had time to recover from the excitement of poor Oliver Tropenell's tragic end, and from the announcement, given under such painful and dramatic circumstances, of his mother's forthcoming marriage to Lord St. Amant, yet another thrilling sensation was provided for the inhabitants of the little town. This was the surprising news that Mrs. Winslow had married again!

The fortunate man was, it seemed, a certain Mr. Greville Howard, one of the largest subscribers to the Prince of Wales's Hospital Fund, a gentleman, therefore, of evident social standing and wealth.

The ceremony had taken place at St. James's, Piccadilly, in the presence of a few friends of the bridegroom, and the happy pair had gone straight off to Mr. Howard's villa in the South of France. There Harber, Mrs. Winslow's faithful factotum, was to join her mistress as soon as she had made the necessary arrangements for the disposal, by auction, of the furniture at Rosedean. Of that furniture two objects were at the last moment withdrawn from the sale—one was

a china cabinet, and the other a rather curious-looking old chandelier, both associated, so it was understood, with the new Mrs. Greville Howard's youth.

The auctioneer regretted these omissions from the catalogue, for by bad luck they were the only objects in the house which a big London dealer had come specially down to see, and for which he had intimated that he was prepared to give a very good price.

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Obsolete spellings and alternate spellings of words (e.g., dulness) have been retained.

On page 137, "Bayton" was replaced with "Baynton".

On page 148, a period was added after "drew a piece of notepaper towards him".

On page 159, "kindess" was replaced with "kindness".

On page 160, "contributary" was replaced with "contributory".

On page 239, "wainting" was replaced with "waiting".

On page 279, "lov" was replaced with "love".

On page 300, "affectionte" was replaced with "affectionate".

On page 329, "whispred" was replaced with "whispered".

On page 352, "Olive" was replaced with "Oliver".

On page 355, "a great deal as as" was replaced with "a great deal as".

On page 361, "expresson" was replaced with "expression".

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LOVE AND HATRED ***

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