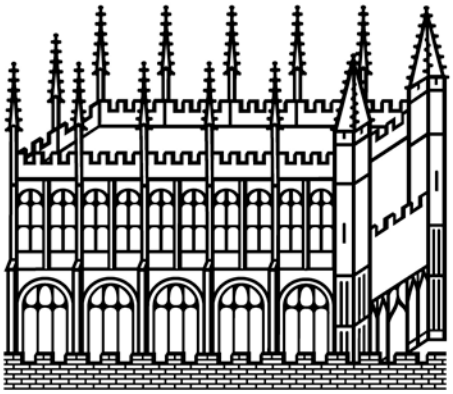

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COMING OF AGE

CHAPTER I

A BIRTHDAY PRESENT

"JACK! Look! That's a birthday present."

The girl, coming hastily into the room, seeing that a gentleman was its only occupant, went rushing towards him, holding out an envelope.

"Old lady," he said, mischief in his eyes; "I address you as 'old lady' because when a girl is twenty-one she is getting old."

"Jack! don't be horrid, and don't be absurd. As if I didn't know how frightfully old I am."

"I am sorry to have to tell you that I shan't be able to give you much in the way of a birthday present—just yet. The fact is that I'm dead stony."

"Are you really? Then I'll give you some of that."

"What's 'that'?"

"Look in that envelope and you'll see."

He opened the envelope, which he had taken from her.

"What's this? A sheet of paper, and in the sheet of paper—my word!—a cheque! This begins to look interesting. On the sheet of paper: 'To Helen Arnold, on her twenty-first birthday, from Stephen Fisher, with best wishes.' What! From the governor? He's got cheek, calling you Helen Arnold. That gentleman strikes me as being too familiar. Has he given his lady clerk a birthday present?—a cheque?"

"I told you to look and then you'd see."

He examined the cheque which he had taken from the envelope. "'Pay Helen Arnold or Order ten pounds.' Ten pounds! I say! that's something like."

"Isn't it nice of him? Isn't it kind? You know how he found out that it was my birthday, my twenty-first? I left a book behind me one night. He was looking at it, and he saw on the fly-leaf: 'To Helen Arnold on her nine-

teenth birthday '—and then the date. He reckoned it out, and he saw that according to that I should be twenty-one to-morrow, and that's the result. It isn't many 'governors,' as you call them, who'd do that."

"I'm not so sure. There's many a 'governor,' as I should call him, who'd give his lady clerk ten pounds on her twenty-first birthday, especially a lady clerk like you."

"Why like me? There's nothing remarkable about me."

"Oh, isn't there? Well, if you like, we'll say there isn't. I only wish I were in a position to give you a tenner. You should put this back in an envelope and return it to Mr. Fisher with compliments."

"Jack!"

"It isn't nice when a man's engaged to a girl to know that he can't afford her even half a crown's worth on her twenty-first birthday, while another man chucks the money at her which only he has a right to give her."

"You mustn't talk like that. Don't be silly."

As Miss Arnold drew closer to Mr. Yarrow the door opened to admit an agitated servant-girl.

"Miss Arnold, you're wanted on the telephone, and Mrs. Thompson says will you be quick, please. I've been looking for you everywhere. I thought you'd be in your bedroom, and Mrs. Thompson, she said if you don't look sharp they'll cut you off."

Miss Arnold addressed Mr. Yarrow. "I shan't be a moment!" she exclaimed, and she darted from the room with the rapidity with which people are apt to do who receive such messages.

The instant she had gone the gentleman looked at the servant, who stood holding the handle of the open door in her hand.

"Hullo, Martha!" he observed, "how goes it? You look as if a kiss might do you good."

Martha was a tall, strapping girl, with black hair and eyes to match. She stood up straighter.

"That's where you're wrong, Mr. Yarrow. A kiss from you would never do any one good, making love to Miss Arnold and then wanting to kiss me directly her back's turned. Thank you, I know your sort; I know more about you, Mr. Yarrow, than you perhaps think."

Martha, her head held, if possible, a little higher, went out of the room. The gentleman stared at the door which she had closed.

"Does she? I wonder how much she does know. How is it that I never can leave anything alone which wears a petticoat?"

He still had the cheque which represented Miss Arnold's birthday present; he held it up so that he might examine it at closer range. As he did so something seemed to strike him. He crushed the slip of paper between his finger and thumb. As he pressed something came away from the back of it.

"What ho! Mr. Stephen Fisher has torn two cheques out of his cheque-book instead of one. I wonder if she noticed it. If she didn't——"

He was holding two cheques, one for ten pounds, the other blank. As he was regarding the blank cheque, with an odd look upon his face, the door opened and shut so noiselessly that Mr. Yarrow remained for some seconds unconscious that some one else had entered the room.

"Hullo, Yarrow!"

Mr. Yarrow started as if frightened. Glancing round, he swore at the new-comer.

"Dash you, Fyfield! I never knew a man who had the trick of entering a room as soundlessly as you do."

"It is sometimes a useful trick—very. I have been looking for you."

"That's good of you. I haven't been looking for you."

"My dear Yarrow, you have been playing the goat again with Miss Reid."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Miss Reid tells me that this afternoon you tried to kiss her."

"She's a liar."

"She's a what?"

Mr. Fyfield moved towards Mr. Yarrow. He spoke quietly, yet there was something in his manner and in the look which was on his face which caused the other to shrink away. Yet Yarrow was the bigger man.

"Great Scot, man, don't look at me like that! I meant

no harm. What business is it of yours, anyhow? Adela Reid is nothing to you; she told me so herself."

"Did she; I suppose you asked her."

"What if I did?"

"You are generally understood to be engaged to Miss Arnold."

"You know what that sort of thing means."

"There's something you don't know—it's this. I won't have you treating Miss Reid as you hold yourself entitled to treat Miss Arnold. I don't wish to use any threats, but you're aware that when I say I won't—I won't."

The words were vague, but they seemed to convey something to Mr. Yarrow which was not on the surface. Mr. Yarrow was a man nearly six foot high—a fine man, broad-shouldered, with a heavy fair moustache and light brown hair plastered close to his head and parted carefully in the centre. Mr. Fyfield was about five foot four or five, seeming even less than his inches; thin, narrow-chested, one shoulder a little higher than the other. He had a trick of stooping, so that his head was always a little in advance of his body. His carelessly brushed dark hair was so scanty in places that the scalp could be seen beneath. The face was long and narrow, the nose large, the cheek-bones high the chin protruding, the mouth thin-lipped, the eyes sunken. He was but a pygmy compared with Mr. Yarrow, yet there was that in their bearing towards each other which made it clear that it was the large man who stood in awe of the smaller.

"All right, Fyfield, I don't want to poach on your preserves. I never saw such a beggar as you are for turning rusty. Helen Arnold is all the girl I want for the present."

"That's fortunate for Miss Arnold."

"I should think it was. She doesn't know her own luck; Fyfield, she is so simple. What do you think this is?"

"It looks like a blank cheque."

"That's what it is. Mr. Stephen Fisher has been giving his lady clerk a cheque for ten pounds as a birthday present; here it is. This blank got stuck to it. I suppose Fisher tore it out without noticing what he was doing. In your hands sometimes a blank cheque doesn't remain blank very long."

"Let me look at it." Mr. Yarrow gave Mr. Fyfield what he wanted. "Now the other." Yarrow handed him the completed cheque. "'Pay Helen Arnold or Order ten pounds. Stephen Fisher.' Stephen Fisher." Mr. Fyfield examined the signature with singular minuteness, turning it round and round, even peering at it through the back of the paper. "Done with a fountain-pen—blue-black ink—dried on a blotter. How long have we got?"

"Fisher may have discovered his mistake by now; he certainly will when he opens his cheque-book in the morning."

Mr. Fyfield seemed to be considering something which was right away at the back of his mind.

"It would have to be presented as soon as the bank opens in the morning. For how much?"

"It wouldn't have to be for very much. Fisher is not a rich man; men who can give their lady clerks ten pounds for a birthday present generally aren't."

"I don't suppose his account is a large one. Would two hundred be too much?"

"I'll try to find out from Helen; she's such a simple soul, she'd give anything away. We could do with two hundred."

"We could; but—will it be worth your while to break with Miss Arnold for that?"

"My dear chap, don't you know that I'd break with any woman in the world for twopence-halfpenny? I never allow sentiment to stand in the way of business."

"You're an agreeable sort of person. That girl will cry her eyes out. She's fond of you, really and truly fond of you."

"I'm fond of her, but I'm broke to the wide. I owe Mrs. Thompson for five weeks' board and lodging; affection won't save me from being turned out into the street. I don't want to be put out into the street with nothing in my pocket, and my luggage detained by Mrs. Thompson."

"Luggage! Your luggage!" There was a sneer in Mr. Fyfield's voice. Yarrow seemed to be about to make an angry retort, then checked himself.

"Look out, she's coming. Put that cheque away; she mustn't know of its existence—not much!"

The sound of a girl's voice humming a popular refrain came through the closed door.

CHAPTER II

ADELA REID

THE two men stood listening. Fyfield whispered:

"Don't you give her back that cheque of hers—at least till I've had a look at it. I want the signature."

He drew away from the other as the door opened. Miss Arnold entered. She still wore the hat and jacket in which she had returned from the office. Her face was flushed, as with pleasurable excitement. She began a sentence as she came in.

"I say, Jack—" Seeing that some one else was present she stopped. "Mr. Fyfield! I didn't know that you were here. I thought Jack was here alone." Fyfield glanced at her as she crossed towards the door.

"He will be presently—I'm just going." He paused with the door-handle in his hand. "I hear, Miss Arnold, that there are to be great doings to-morrow; have you any notion why?"

"It's my birthday! I shall be twenty-one to-morrow. Didn't you know?"

"Is that so? That's very interesting. It must be so good to be only twenty-one. I am such a new-comer, and am so seldom in the house, that everything is news to me. How are you going to celebrate the great day?"

"There's to be a wonderful dinner—Mrs. Thompson has arranged it all; and there's to be a dance. As for me, I'm going to the office just as usual. Mr. Fisher, my principal, offered me a holiday——"

"Oh, he did, did he?" This was Mr. Yarrow.

"He said: 'If you'd like a holiday, Miss Arnold, by all means take one,' but he's been so generous already, and so kind, and the office is pretty full of work, that I told him I'd rather come to business as usual."

"That's the proper spirit—always work when you can."

Mr. Fyfield, who had been the speaker, went out of the room. The girl turned to Yarrow.

"What does he mean? He has a trick of talking so that I scarcely ever know if he is in earnest. He does seem to me such an odd little man. Did you know much of him before he came here?"

"I have met him at intervals a good many times. Who wanted you on the telephone?"

"It was Arthur Dudley—do you remember him? He left soon after you came."

"I do remember him, a red-headed youth. What did Mr. Dudley want with you, which it was necessary to telephone?"

"He 'phoned me all the way from Birmingham. He has a post there in some engineering works. He just wished to say that he hadn't forgotten what to-morrow was, that he had just posted me a present, and that he wished me all good things now because he mightn't be able to do so the first thing in the morning. Wasn't that sweet of him?"

"Very. Strikes me that a good many male persons have been 'sweet' to you since you've been at 'The Priory.'"

"I've been here just over eighteen months, and what you say is a fact. Every man I've met here has been nice to me. And what do you think? You see this letter? It's from Percy Osborne."

"That ugly ass!"

"Jack! You mustn't speak of him like that; he wants to marry me."

"Like his impudence! I thought he proposed to you before and you said 'No.'"

"It was because I said 'No' that he went away. Now he has written to propose again. Of course he doesn't know that I'm engaged to you."

"Then the sooner he does know the better. There'll be trouble if you keep him in ignorance much longer."

"I'll write to him to-morrow, or perhaps to-night. It's such a strange letter he's sent. Jack, he does seem fond of me. He writes the queerest things."

"That doesn't necessarily mean that he's fond of you. Look here, Miss Arnold, it occurs to me that a good many people seem fond of you. I'm beginning to wonder if the atmosphere of a boarding-house is quite suited to you—or,

where you are concerned, to me." A sound was audible. "That's the horrible thing that Mrs. Thompson calls the dinner-gong, and I haven't even washed my hands."

"Nor I—and my hair is in a dreadful state. We must fly."

"Give me a kiss before you go."

He kissed her, quickly. A thought occurred to her as she was about to leave the room.

"Jack! I nearly forgot it! Give me that cheque."

Before he could reply an elderly man came bustling in. He addressed them as if he were a familiar friend.

"Hullo, you two! Do you know the gong has gone. Miss Arnold, are you going to dine in your hat?"

"No, Mr. Whitman, I am not. I'm just going to fly, and you'll see that I shall be down almost as soon as you are.'

She ran from the room with a laugh. When she had gone the new-comer said to Mr. Yarrow:

"That's a nice girl, sir, a very nice girl.'

"I'm glad you think so."

"You're a lucky man, Yarrow, a very lucky man." Mr. Whitman, his hands in his breeches-pockets, eyed the other in a manner which was not altogether cordial. "And I'm not at all sure," he added, "that you deserve your luck. I've heard one or two stories about you which have set me thinking. You'll say it's no business of mine, but let me tell you that it's the business of every decent man to see that a girl like Miss Arnold—she's a girl in a hundred thousand, and I understand that she hasn't a relation in the world to look after her—isn't made a fool of."

Mr. Yarrow assumed the air of indignation which he possibly thought became him.

"What on earth do you mean? My acquaintance with you is not of a kind which entitles you to be insolent—not that I'm aware of." He moved towards the door. "I've always noticed that when a man doesn't get on with women himself he tries to make himself offensive to a man who does."

The door had scarcely closed behind him when a big, portly woman came through it. This was Mrs. Thompson, the proprietress of that home from home, the Priory board-

ing-house. Since she always seemed to be in a state of perspiration, it was strange that her figure was not reduced. She was wiping her face as she came in.

"Mrs. Thompson," asked Mr. Whitman, "did you meet Mr. Yarrow?"

The lady's reply was at least brief. "I did."

"Mrs. Thompson," observed Mr. Whitman sententiously, as if he were delivering himself of a profound truth, "there's something about that young man which I don't like."

"There's a good deal about him which I don't like."

"What a charming young lady like Miss Arnold can see in him I do not understand. I fear she has not chosen wisely."

"A man never does understand what a girl sees in another man. He's got a way with the women, if you know what that means."

"What a way! Mrs. Thompson, I don't wish to slander any man, especially a fellow-boarder. My personal acquaintance with Mr. Yarrow is slight, but one or two facts have been forced upon my knowledge which are not to his credit. Between ourselves, I have reason to believe that he is an all-round bad lot. I don't at all like the idea of his associating with Miss Arnold."

"I know no more to his advantage than you do, Mr. Whitman. And also between ourselves, he owes me for two months' board, lodging and money lent. I want the money and I can't get it. All I can get are excuses, which I believe are lies. I am going to wait till after to-morrow—I don't want to have an upset on Helen Arnold's twenty-first birthday—and then I'm going to have a final understanding; my money, or he goes." She stopped, then presently continued: "He is one of those men who have an influence over women which they themselves don't understand. They seem to have been sent into the world to take advantage of a woman just where she is weakest. Helen Arnold is just a child; I should be sorry to see her marry a man like Yarrow, and if I can help it she never will."

Another man came into the room, this time so young as to be scarcely more than a boy.

"Where is Miss Arnold? I say, Mrs. Thompson, I thought punctuality was the rule at the Priory; do you know dinner has been on the table about three-quarters of an hour?"

"The gong hasn't gone three minutes, Mr. Bucknill. I ought to know, because I sounded it myself. I don't know where the others are; perhaps you'll take me down."

That night, soon after Helen Arnold had retired to the tiny apartment which served her as a bedroom, some one knocked at the door. When she bade the knocker enter the door opened wide enough to admit a female head.

"I wonder, Miss Arnold, if you could lend me a pair of scissors. I can't think what I've done with mine, and I don't want to go hunting for them downstairs."

"I'm afraid mine aren't up to much, but, such as they are, you can have them."

The visitor entered. She was a tall girl, of the florid style of beauty, with a suggestion of something more than powder on her cheeks and about her eyes. Helen Arnold was going through the process of brushing her hair. The visitor commented on the fact.

"What pretty hair you've got, and such a lot of it. I've got nothing but a wisp."

"You make the most of it if that is so. Your hair always looks awfully neat."

"Neat! I know. That's tails and switches and pads, as you know as well as I do. I've bleached it, and tinted it, and dyed it, and messed it about in all sorts of ways. I never could leave my hair alone, and now there's scarcely any left. I'm only twenty-three, but I look twenty years older than you."

Miss Arnold paused in her operations to laugh, a brush in one hand, a strand of hair in the other.

"What an absurd thing to say. You always look so smart; I always feel so dowdy when you're about."

"That's a nice way to put it, but then you always have a nice way of putting things. You don't like me, and I know it."

"What makes you say such a thing?"

"Do you think a girl doesn't know when another girl

doesn't like her? I'm Adela Reid; I'm the landlady's niece; I'm the entertainer at the Priory; I'm the ornamental side. I amuse the guests. I sing to them, and I play to them, sometimes when they'd rather I didn't do either. I try to persuade them to amuse themselves. I'm only twenty-three, though I know plenty of people think I'm at least thirty; and I've been at the game for six years, so I ought to know something about a boarding-house, particularly one which offers special inducements to young ladies and young gentlemen who are engaged in business. A long line of the young gentlemen, oldish young gentlemen some of them have been, have tried to amuse themselves with me. I've had hopes sometimes that it wasn't only amusement they were after, but I've been wrong."

"Miss Reid, why are you saying these things to me? Are you in trouble?"

"I'm saying them because I've got to say them, and I'm in no more trouble than I generally am. I'm always more or less in what you'd call trouble." The girl, who had been speaking with a sort of restrained bitterness, suddenly broke into heat. "You're such a kid, you oughtn't to be allowed in a place like this without a mother to look after you. You'd swallow any old tale that's told you. I've come to do you a good turn, that's what I've come for."

The younger girl, looking at the other with wide-open eyes, seemed to be a little in doubt as to what to say.

"That's very—that's very—kind of you."

"You don't seem to be quite sure about that now; you'll be still less sure when I tell you what it is. I've come to warn you against Jack Yarrow."

Miss Arnold looked at the speaker for some seconds in silence, as if she were seeking for something which was not visible to a superficial glance. Then she said, speaking with what seemed to be a little catch in her breath:

"I don't quite understand what you mean."

"I suppose you think you're engaged to him."

"You know that I'm engaged to him. I've been engaged to him for now nearly three weeks."

"Have you?—so much as that? I hope you noticed the exact hour and minute when the engagement began.

I wonder how many other girls have thought themselves engaged to him, how many do now. You understand one thing by being engaged, he understands quite another. If you suppose that Jack Yarrow means to marry you, you're simpler even than I thought. You may take it from me that it is fortunate for you that it isn't what he means, because if he meant to marry you you'd probably be fool enough to let him. I pity the girl who ever becomes his wife. I advise you to let him know as early as possible to-morrow morning that all relations are over between you. If he doesn't leave the Priory you'd better, and be very careful not to let him have any address at which he can find you. I said that I came to do you a good turn; giving you that advice is the good turn I came to do you. I hope you still think it's very kind of me. Good night."

Miss Reid departed with such suddenness that Miss Arnold found herself staring at the door through which she had vanished before she quite realized that she had gone. Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, she went to the door, opened it, and looked out.

There was the sound of footsteps in the darkened passage; she made as if to follow them, then, with a sudden change of purpose, went back into her room.

She continued to brush her hair as if nothing had happened. Then, just as she was about to plait it for the night, she let her hands fall to her sides, and dropped on to the one chair the room contained. Judging from her attitude and from the expression on her face, she was feeling that it was a very singular sort of "good turn" which Miss Reid had done her. She apparently, after an interval, made an effort to shake off the sense of depression which the visitor had left behind her. She sat up straighter, clenched her fists, stared defiantly at the wall in front of her.

"I don't believe her," she exclaimed. "I don't believe her."

Getting off the chair she continued her preparations for bed, striving to blot out her visitor's words from her mind. But she failed. She had herself been troubled more than once by an uneasy feeling that about Mr. Yarrow all was not quite what she would have liked it to be. Thoughts

swept over her which were too much for her sense of dignity. All at once she threw herself upon the bed, hiding her face in the counterpane. The colour had gone out of it when presently she raised it as if something had startled her.

" He never gave me back the cheque," she told herself.

Even as she spoke certain peculiarities of the writing on the slip of paper which represented her birthday present were being carefully studied by very keen eyes.

CHAPTER III

IN ST. SWITHIN'S LANE

On a brass plate which contained the names of the tenants of an old house in St. Swithin's Lane were engraved the words: "Second Floor, Mr. Stephen Fisher—Produce Agent." Mr. Fisher did not occupy the whole of the second floor, he only had three rooms at the back: a decent-sized chamber, which was called "Mr. Fisher's room"; a smaller one, in which sat Mr. Daniel, whom Mr. Fisher spoke of sometimes as "my senior clerk" and sometimes as "my managing man"; a diminutive sort of lobby, in which was enthroned Miss Helen Arnold and her typewriter, when she was not engaged in doing secretarial work for Mr. Fisher or for Mr. Daniel.

Mr. Fisher sat at the table in his own room. He was a youngish man, somewhere in the late thirties. He had an open cheque-book in front of him; Mr. Daniel was directing his attention to something in it.

"It must," explained Mr. Daniel, "have been adhering to the other. If you look farther on in the book you will see several cheques are sticking together; it's quite easy to tear out two instead of one."

His principal agreed.

"Exactly; you needn't worry. She'll have found out that she has got two cheques instead of one, and she'll bring one back with her."

"Miss Arnold is late."

"My dear Daniel, you don't expect a young woman to get to the office punctually on her twenty-first birthday. I think it's rather hard that she should have to go to an office on such a day at all. I offered her a holiday. There she is."

The two men listened to the opening and closing of an outer door. Some one had entered. Mr. Fisher said to Mr. Daniel:

"Ask her to come here."

"Before she takes off her hat?"

"Perhaps she left the cheque behind. She may have to go back and fetch it. Ask her to come now."

The managing man disappeared, presently reappearing to usher in Miss Arnold.

Mr. Fisher's room was not a very cheerful apartment. It was not over-light. The window was of ground glass, and there was a wire screen as well, an ancient wire screen. The walls, which were colour-washed dark brown, would have been improved by a further application of that not very exhilarating shade. Their charm was not heightened by the fact that all sorts of odds and ends had been tacked up against them in the shape of calendars, posters, notices of sales, mysterious diagrams, and apparently forgotten. The ceiling was black, the bare floor not over-clean. The various articles of which the scanty furniture consisted seemed to have been picked up at junk shops on principles which were not easy to follow. Into this cheerless chamber Helen Arnold came—to descend to bathos—like a little ray of sunshine; indeed, like a very considerable ray. She was smiling when she entered; the flush which accompanied the smile was not lessened by Mr. Fisher's greeting.

"Many happy returns of the day, Miss Arnold."

"Thank you," was all she said, and she flushed still more.

His next remark was not of the kind with which an employer is supposed to greet his clerk.

"You've got on a new hat. Do you see, Daniel, she's got on a new hat."

Mr. Daniel, who was nearly fifty years old, and had been in the City practically all his life, regarded the article in question through his glasses with what was distinctly an air of dubiety.

"I'm afraid I don't pay much attention to such things, but there certainly does seem to be something unfamiliar about that hat."

"There is. It is a new hat. Mrs. Thompson, who runs the boarding-house where I live, gave it me as a birthday present this morning. She would insist upon my wearing it, or, of course, I shouldn't."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"One doesn't wear a new hat at the office."

"I see; that's the standard which obtains. Well, have you brought the cheque?"

"Brought what cheque?" The girl seemed surprised.

"The bank cheque which was stuck, more or less, to the back of the one I gave you."

"Stuck to the back! Mr. Fisher! I don't understand."

"I gave you a cheque for ten pounds as a birthday present, and was very glad to do it; see, here's the counterfoil—number E68415—all filled up, everything in order. The next cheque is missing; when Mr. Daniel discovered it, the first counterfoil was stuck to the second. The adherence of one to the other was probably caused by the pressure of the perforating machine. I was in a hurry when I drew that cheque, and without noticing that they adhered, I must have torn out two instead of one, and slipped them in your envelope. Didn't you notice when you took the cheque out of the envelope that there were two cheques instead of one?"

"I didn't." A startled look seemed to have come on the girl's face.

"You could hardly have helped but notice if you took your cheque out of the envelope. Did you take it out of the envelope?"

"I did, as soon as I got in."

"Didn't you notice there were two cheques instead of one?"

"I didn't; I noticed nothing."

"Where is your cheque?"

The girl seemed confused. "I—I—I lent it to a friend."

"Lent it to a friend! What do you mean by you lent it to a friend?"

"I was so—so delighted with my present that I showed it to him directly I got in."

"It was a he." The girl's flush seemed to keep on growing.

"Yes, it was a he. He took the cheque out of the envelope, and—and he forgot to return it."

"Forgot to return it—your cheque? Rather an odd

sort of forgetfulness, wasn't it ? Let me understand. You say it was he who took the cheque out of the envelope ? " The girl nodded. " How did that come about ? "

" I went into the drawing-room and I found him there. I had the envelope in my hand. He asked what it was, and I said to him : ' Look and see.' "

" And he looked ? " Again she nodded. " And he took the cheque out, and you didn't touch it ? "

" I never touched it at all. As he was looking at it some one came to say that I was wanted on the telephone ; I rushed off and when I came back some one else was with him. Then the dinner-gong sounded and I flew off to change, and after dinner he went out, and it wasn't till I went to bed that I remembered he'd forgotten to give me back the cheque."

" And you haven't seen him this morning ? "

" At the Priory people breakfast at all sorts of hours. I believe some of them breakfast at six. I breakfast at a quarter past eight. He wasn't there this morning when I was. Then, just as I was finishing, Mrs. Thompson came in with the hat, and she detained me, and the consequence was that though I ran as fast as I could I missed the train and was late at the office."

Mr. Fisher leaned back in his chair. He and his managing man exchanged glances, then they both looked at the girl.

" Doesn't this story of yours strike you as being rather an odd one, Miss Arnold ? It's unfortunate that you didn't take the cheque out of the envelope yourself, because then you would at least have noticed that there were two."

" But I can't think how there can have been two. I saw Mr. Yarrow take the cheque out and he would have noticed if there had been two."

" Is Mr. Yarrow the he ? Is he an old friend ? "

" I am engaged to be married to him."

" Oh, I see ! It's like that. I had no idea, Miss Arnold, that you were engaged to be married. Where can Mr. Yarrow be found ? "

" At the Priory, Oakwood Gardens, Westbourne Park."

" Isn't the Priory the name of the boarding-house at

which you reside?" Again she nodded. "What is Mr. Yarrow's business address?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"I suppose he is in business, or is he a gentleman of independent means?"

"I believe he is in business, but I don't know in what business, or where."

"You don't seem to know much about the man to whom you're engaged to be married."

"I know all that I want to know." She spoke with something like a touch of defiance, as if conscious that she was being pushed into a corner. Mr. Fisher eyed her quizzically.

"Do you? Perhaps you are satisfied with knowing very little. If Mr. Yarrow doesn't happen to be in this boarding-house, can you tell me where he is likely to be found?"

"I can't. I haven't the faintest notion. Perhaps Mrs. Thompson can tell you."

"Mrs. Thompson? She is the landlady, the lady who gave you the hat? Exactly. Thank you, Miss Arnold. I have no doubt that everything is perfectly all right, but I can't help thinking it's a bit odd that you should have failed to remember that your friend had forgotten—as you put it—to return you the cheque which I gave you. You don't seem to have thought it necessary to be over-particular about its safe custody. I don't think I need detain you any longer."

The girl dismissed, probably feeling that she had not shown to much advantage in the interview, went off with flaming cheeks to her own quarters.

CHAPTER IV

CASHED

WHEN she had gone Mr. Fisher said to his managing man, in a tone of voice which suggested more than he said:

"Curious little story that of hers. Eh?"

Mr. Daniel pursed his lips and put his fingers up to his chin.

"I have never concealed from you that I have my own views on the subject of feminine ideas of business."

"I'm quite aware of it, Daniel, and don't you trouble to let me hear them again." He was turning over the leaves of his cheque-book. "As I told Miss Arnold, I have no doubt that everything is all right, but as I don't want a blank cheque of mine to be knocking about without the bank being advised of the fact, when you go round to them presently you might ask them to look out for number E68416. Here's a draft which you might pay in." He turned to some letters which were spread out in front of him. "You ought to be back inside ten minutes; you might take this draft round now; it's just on half-past ten. You'll be back before a quarter to eleven, and then I want to have a talk to you about that business of Wootten's."

Mr. Daniel having departed on his errand to the bank, Mr. Fisher, being left alone, sat trifling with the letters in front of him, as if oblivious of the fact that with him as a rule the earlier half of the morning was the busiest part of the day.

"Engaged, is she? That's rather a facer. If I'd known that a little earlier——"

He struck a bell which stood beside him on the table. Almost immediately Miss Arnold appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, Miss Arnold." His manner was genial; he smiled as he addressed her. "It seems that I have not only to wish you many happy returns of the day, which I do very sincerely, but I have to congratulate you also. I had no idea anything of that sort was in the wind."

In spite of the girl's cheeks being still flushed, they seemed to turn a deeper red as she met his smiling eyes.

"Clerks don't as a rule talk about their private affairs to their employers."

"No, I suppose not, not as a general rule, but in this instance there were reasons why you might have guessed that I should have been interested. How long has the engagement been arranged—if you won't think that an impertinent question?"

"Not at all. I was engaged three weeks yesterday."

"And when is the marriage to take place?"

"Not a word has been said about that. I don't suppose it will be for ever so long."

"You'll give us adequate notice, so that we may be prepared?"

"Of course I will."

"The happy man's name, I understood you to say was Yarrow. Is he rich?"

"I can't tell you. I don't know anything about his private affairs."

There was again almost a touch of defiance in the girl's eyes as they encountered his.

"I hope you won't think, Miss Arnold, that my questions are actuated by any sort of impertinent curiosity, but I take a very real interest in your welfare, and I should like to feel that your future happiness was—so far as it can be—assured. Will you give me an opportunity soon of meeting Mr. Yarrow? You might bring him one evening to dine with me, and I'll bring Daniel."

"I—I should like to very much, but I can't answer for Mr. Yarrow."

"Have you reason to think that Mr. Yarrow would not care to meet me?"

"Not the slightest, but—I should have to ask him, shouldn't I?"

"Of course you would." Mr. Fisher paused as the outer door was heard to open and to close. "Hullo! there's Daniel. He seems to be in a hurry—which, in him is a little unusual."

Mr. Daniel, entering the room at what seemed to be

top speed, left no doubt about his haste. He was panting for breath, as if his desire to cover the ground as rapidly as he could had caused him to forget that his ordinary measured pace was the one which suited him best. He was in such a state of agitation that, apparently unconscious that he still was wearing his hat, he broke into speech the instant he was inside the room.

"Mr. Fisher, the cheque has been presented."

Mr. Fisher stared at his managing man as if he did not follow his meaning.

"Presented? What do you mean? How can it have been presented?"

"It has been presented!—and paid!—across the counter."

"I take it you are alluding to the cheque I gave Miss Arnold?"

"I'm not, sir; I'm not! I'm alluding to cheque number E68416, the blank cheque, the one you tore off in error. Nothing has been seen of Miss Arnold's cheque—as yet. It's the blank cheque which has been presented and paid, the one of which Miss Arnold says she knows nothing—saw nothing. It was presented at the counter a quarter of an hour after the bank had opened its doors. It was filled up, apparently in your handwriting. I was shown the cheque. I myself should have taken it for your handwriting."

"But how can it be? You're not suggesting that I drew a cheque when I knew nothing at all about it?"

"No, sir, I'm not; nothing of the kind. Of course the cheque's a forgery."

"A forgery." The interruption came from Miss Arnold. Mr. Daniel turned and snapped at her.

"Of course it's a forgery. What else do you suppose it could be? It was made payable to John Risefield, Esq."

"John Risefield? Who on earth is John Risefield?"

"Haven't the faintest notion, sir, but that was the name on the cheque. I saw it myself. The cheque was made payable to John Risefield, Esq., for two hundred pounds."

"What, Daniel! Two hundred pounds!"

"Yes, Mr. Fisher, for two hundred pounds."

"And it was paid?"

"Yes, sir, it was paid. The cheque was open, payable to order, properly endorsed; the young man behind the counter, who was familiar with your cheques, saw nothing wrong about it—it certainly would have deceived me—had no option but to pay it. He paid it with ten ten-pound notes, ten five, and fifty pounds in gold."

Mr. Fisher had started from his chair. He seemed, as he looked at Mr. Daniel, to be more agitated even than the clerk. He was a changed man since Mr. Daniel had come into the room.

"But," he stammered—his emotion seemed to have affected his speech—"but—two hundred pounds! That must almost have cleared me out."

"Yes, Mr. Fisher, it has very nearly."

Mr. Fisher, turning to the girl, addressed her with a degree of vigour which evidently took her aback.

"What did you do with the blank cheque which was at the back of the one I gave you?"

"I never saw one. I assure you I didn't. I can't believe that there was one there. I should have seen it if there had been."

"Are you suggesting that some one came into this office after it was locked up for the night, took the cheque-book out of my safe, and tore out the cheque next to the one I had given you, and the counterfoil of which this morning was still adhering to the counterfoil of yours? Don't talk nonsense! The thing's more serious than you appear to suppose. I'm not a rich man. I can't afford to lose two hundred pounds, and I don't mean to without a fight. I thought your story was a queer one when you told it first, but it looks queerer now. Now then, let's have this cleared up. How do you know, if, as you say, you never touched the cheque, whether there was or was not another cheque at the back of it?"

"I never saw any signs of it, and I was within two feet of Mr. Yarrow."

"I tell you there was, there was! I don't care how close you were to him. He stuck to your cheque, and he's stuck to the blank cheque too. You say he forgot to return your

cheque, but I'm beginning to wonder—Daniel, did they tell you what sort of man it was who presented the cheque ?"

"They did. What sort of man is he to look at, this Mr. Yarrow ?"

"Yes, out with it ! What sort of man is he to look at ?"

The girl stood confronting the two excited men, like a small dog at bay before two large ones.

"How dare you ask—with such a thought in your minds ! How dare you !"

"Oh, that's how it is, is it ? Mr. Yarrow mustn't even be described. Let's get at it another way. Daniel, what sort of man was it who presented the cheque ? I suppose it was a man."

"Oh, yes, it was a man."

"What did the cashier say he looked like ?"

Mr. Daniel glanced at the girl and then at his employer.

"Shall I tell you in front of this young lady ?"

"Out with it ! She has declined to describe Mr. Yarrow."

The girl raged back at him : "I have not declined."

"She has practically declined, so she can't say that we got any hints of his appearance from her. Now, how did the cashier describe this—gentleman ? Have you a clear recollection of what he said ?"

"Perfectly clear. He said he was a tall man, with a big, fair moustache, florid complexion and brown hair. He wore a grey tweed suit and a brown necktie. There was no one else at the counter at the moment ; the cashier observed him so closely that he even noticed that he wore a signet-ring on the little finger of his left hand."

Mr. Fisher turned to the girl.

"You have heard Mr. Daniel ; now might I ask you to describe Mr. Yarrow ?"

But the girl could not ; she had just heard him described by the managing clerk. Obviously he was the man who had presented that cheque across the counter. As she listened virtue seemed to have gone out of her ; she seemed unable to hold herself upright. She cowered against the wall, as if seeking its protection, to prevent her sapless bones

letting her down on to the floor. Mr. Fisher repeated his question.

"Now, Miss Arnold, would you be so good as to tell us what sort of man it was who took your cheque out of the envelope and forgot to return it?"

"No, Mr. Fisher, I won't. I'll tell you nothing. You've no right to ask me questions."

"You are mistaken—I have a right. As I told you, I am not a rich man. My balance at the bank, small as it was, was required within the next few hours to meet certain claims; if they are not met the consequences may be serious to me. In any case I shall be humiliated. And this I owe to you."

"You don't! You do not! What have I done?"

"I don't quite know yet, but I shall know very soon; then I shall have to have a settlement with you. Are you prepared to assert that the description Mr. Daniel received from that cashier at the bank in no way recalls your friend Mr. Yarrow?"

The girl pressed herself closer to the wall, as if she sought comfort in its near neighbourhood. Something seemed to have happened to her voice; she seemed to find it difficult to speak.

"I have told you that I won't answer questions, and I won't!"

"That is an answer which tells me all that I want to know just now; it tells me something which I would rather not have known. You seem to be of opinion that I have less claim—I won't say upon your gratitude—on your sense of decency than I had hoped. Come, Mr. Daniel, you and I will go round to the bank. They will tell us there all that we want to know. Miss Arnold, I shall be back certainly in less than half an hour. Can I leave you in charge, and rely upon your explaining to callers that both Mr. Daniel and I have been suddenly called away?"

The girl—Mr. Fisher and his managing man having gone—alone in her little room, was like some caged wild thing. She could not keep still, flitting here and there and everywhere, as far as the narrow precincts permitted, as

if the one thing of which she was incapable was inaction And she kept saying to herself:

"It can't be true! It can't be true! It can't!"

Though she repeated it to herself perhaps fifty times, she knew that it could be true, and was. On her twenty-first birthday, on which she was to be so proud, and gay, and fêted, and full of the wine of life, the whole aspect of the world had changed. A blow had descended on her from which she felt that she never could recover. Never again would she be able to look in the faces of her friends as one of themselves; she would be a marked creature—branded with indelible shame. Every one would be able to point at her a finger of scorn. Already, before life had really begun, it was over—there was nothing left for her to live for.

The horror of it all seemed to be driving her mad. What was the point of her staying there, "in charge," awaiting Mr. Fisher's return so that he might heap on her, in his sudden love of cruelty, shame upon shame. She could not remain as an employee in his office. All that was over. She felt that she could not even stay to see again the look which had been upon his face just now, the blaze of scorn which was in his eyes, so that it seemed to wither her. The best thing she could do was to disregard his final orders and take herself off before he could do anything to stop her. Let the office take care of itself!

Suddenly she heard a sound. Footsteps were approaching the office. Was Mr. Fisher already returning? What a fool she had been not to take herself off before!

The footsteps had paused outside the door. She listened with painful acuteness for the handle of the door to turn, or for the sound of some one knocking—some stranger, perhaps, was coming to see Mr. Fisher on business.

Then the handle of the door was turned, the door was thrust forward—as if by some one in a hurry—perhaps a foot or fifteen inches. Something was thrown into the room—the door was shut—there was the sound of retreating footsteps.

Until the sound had entirely died away the girl did not even glance to see what it was which had been thrown in.

It appeared to be a scrap of paper which had been twisted into a shape which permitted of its being tossed through the air. The sight of it filled her with foolish, unreasoning terror. It was several seconds before she seemed to find courage enough to look at it; then, with a sudden grab, she picked it up, unfolding it so that she saw that something was written on it.

"If you've got any sense you'll do a bolt before the governor returns. If you don't he'll lock you up first and ask questions afterwards. How would you like to be locked up on your twenty-first birthday?"

The words were pencilled. The handwriting was strange. There was no signature, no date, no address. Although she must have understood quite clearly that it was nothing but an impudent scrawl, it seemed to affect Helen Arnold as if it were a portent of terrors to come.

CHAPTER V

THE TAXICAB

TAKING her hat and jacket from her own particular peg, she put them on with eager fingers, although it was only a few minutes since she had taken them off. She drew from a drawer in the table on which the typewriter stood a dark green leather handbag, which had been another of her birthday presents. It had been given her, somewhat to her surprise, by Mr. Whitman, who was known at the Priory as Mrs. Thompson's " star " boarder, he having been an inmate of her establishment during the whole period of its existence. He had half jokingly insisted on her bearing it with her throughout the day. It was a beautiful bag, and must have cost a deal of money—she was conscious of the fact even then. She looked round, as if to make sure that she had left nothing behind her ; then, on tiptoe, as if she feared discovery, she moved to the door, opened it and went out on to the landing, then quickly descended the stairs. Half-way down she met a young man, who, she knew, was the son of the man who had an office above Mr. Fisher's. He hailed her, hat in hand.

" Good morning, Miss Arnold. I understand that this is a most frightfully important day—your twenty-first birthday. Allow me, as one who was himself twenty-one only two months ago, to wish you many happy returns of the day."

This young gentleman had been in the habit of greeting her whenever they passed each other on the stairs, or indeed anywhere else, and she had not shown the slightest sign of resentment. Yet now she drew herself back as if she regarded his speaking to her as an outrage.

" Let me pass," she said.

He drew aside and let her pass, glancing at her as she went hurrying down, surprised at her manner.

" What's up ? Has the governor given her the sack ?

I never saw her like that before." Then he added, with the philosophy of youth: "I'm bothered if you ever do know how to take a woman."

Having gained the street, the girl stood still on the pavement, as if uncertain what to do. At the back of her mind she was conscious that she was behaving foolishly. Had the question been put to her she would have been compelled to admit that she was doing the one thing she ought not to have done. Somewhere within her she knew that she ought to have stayed and seen the business through. Had time and opportunity been given her she would have been able to prove that she was not in any way responsible for what had happened to the missing cheque. It was not fear of being condemned herself which was urging her to seek shelter, at least for the present, from the eyes of all who knew her. It was the horror of the thought that she had ever allowed herself to be associated, both in public and in private, with this man Yarrow; it was the consciousness of his guilt which was driving her to flight. The thought that she had just told Mr. Fisher that she was engaged to marry the man, told him only a few minutes before he was discovered to be a felon and a thief—it was that thought which was burning in her brain. She was bragging that she was about to become his wife almost in the same instant when he was found to be this thing. What would people think—Mr. Fisher, old Daniel, the boarders at the Priory—of a girl who had allowed herself to be kissed, caressed and petted by a man who was clearly the poorest kind of thief? What must Yarrow himself have thought each time she permitted him to put his arms about her, and was glad to find herself in his embrace?

It was that sort of reflection which was depriving her of her senses, causing her to behave, as she knew she was behaving, like an idiot. She would not stay there to be regarded with scorn or, worse still, pity. She strode off down the lane, and had reached the bottom when some one touched her on the shoulder, and, looking round, she found that it was Yarrow. The discovery of his presence surprised her into speechlessness. She could only gape at him. It was he who spoke

"Quick! I was just wondering if I should have the luck to come across you. Let's jump into a taxi."

He put up his hand as if to hail one which was crawling along the street.

"How dare you?" she gasped. "Take your hand off me! How dare you touch me?" Her manner seemed to take him aback.

"What's up?" he asked. "What have I been doing? Aren't you well?"

His calmness seemed to bewilder her. There was about him no consciousness of guilt.

"Where's my cheque?" she said.

"Your cheque? Oh, yes. I'll tell you all about it in the taxi; jump in." The vehicle, which he had continued to hail, was standing by the kerb waiting for them to enter. "In you get!"

She seemed, for one moment, as if she were about to do as he bade her, then quickly drew back.

"I shall do nothing of the kind. Where's that other cheque?"

"What on earth do you mean? You don't seem quite well, my dear. Hadn't we better talk in the cab?"

The man's perfectly calm and collected bearing made her almost feel as if it were she who had been doing something wrong. The consciousness drove her to bluster.

"Do you think I don't know that there were two cheques in the envelope; that you filled up the blank one, took it to the bank, and got the money?"

"My dear Nellie, I can't help feeling that you must be seriously unwell, because I haven't the faintest notion what you're talking about, and you're saying some queer things—at the top of your voice. Get into the cab."

"I won't. I believe you stole my cheque, and got the money for that."

He bent down so that his voice was only audible to her.

"Don't be an idiot! Your cheque is perfectly all right. I don't want to explain out here in the street. Do you want to collect a crowd?"

"I don't care! You forged Mr. Fisher's name."

Her voice was rising to a scream. Before she could go

on with her sentence he caught her arm with a grip which hurt.

"Stop that! Don't you imagine, though you may be stark staring mad, that I'll allow you to say such things to me."

He spoke quietly enough, though there was a threat in his tone, for which she apparently cared nothing. She raised her own voice still higher.

"You're a forger and a thief!" she cried.

"I'm hanged—" he began. Before he could get any further a voice exclaimed:

"There, that's the man who presented the cheque."

Mr. Yarrow did not wait to learn who the speaker was or what he meant; taking something from his pocket he thrust it into the girl's hand.

"There—there's your cheque and a bit over."

Saying something to the driver which was inaudible, he got into the vehicle and the taxi started. The voice, which had been audible before, exclaimed:

"Stop him! Stop that cab! Stop it! The man inside is a forger."

The speaker exclaimed in vain. Those who heard looked at him as if wondering what he meant. At the moment the road was nearly blocked with traffic. The taxi, dexterously driven, threading its way through a throng of vehicles, was already undistinguishable. It was not easy among the crowd of cabs to determine which of them contained Mr. Yarrow. All that Helen Arnold knew was that some one's fingers were about her wrist, and that they belonged to Mr. Fisher.

"May I trouble you," she heard him say, "to return with me to the office? I thought I left you in charge."

She made no reply; she just stood dumb before him. The voice which had exclaimed broke into eager speech.

"Mr. Fisher, I tell you that's the man who presented the cheque. An attempt ought to be made to stop him; he's probably got the money on him now. We oughtn't to allow him to slip off under our very noses."

Mr. Fisher replying, seemed to the girl to speak with

curious calmness ; it was almost as if she heard him speaking in a dream.

" Then stop him. Ask the next constable for assistance, or report what has happened to the nearest police-station. Would you be able to describe the taxicab ? "

" Decidedly I should. And the driver—I saw him most distinctly."

The speaker's voice, though it belonged to a man, was shrill like a woman's. Mr. Fisher's deep bass was in striking contrast.

" Then describe both cab and driver ; the police will do their best to help you find him. Mr. Daniel can go with you. I am returning to the office with Miss Arnold. May I trouble you, please ? "

The last words were addressed to the girl. Without attempting resistance or remonstrance, his fingers being still about her wrist, she allowed him to turn her round and lead her back into the lane she had just now quitted. Several people had gathered about them, as people will in a second in a City street ; they drew aside to let them pass. Without a word being spoken on either side the man and the girl moved on together.

CHAPTER VI

SHUTTING THE DOOR

THEY were in Mr. Fisher's own room. Neither sat. He stood on one side of the table, she at some little distance from the table, on the other side, hatted, jacketed, the green leather bag in her hand. The conversation, at least at the beginning, consisted of short, staccato sentences, he speaking curtly, even a little brutally, seeming to drag answering words from her more or less against her will.

"I thought I left you in charge of the office."

"I know you did." Her eyes were looking everywhere except at him.

"I thought I asked you to wait here till I came back."

"I was not forced to wait." As she said it she seemed to shiver.

"Apparently not. You might at least have told me you did not intend to wait."

"When you went out I had not made up my mind what I was going to do."

"What were you going to do? Run away?"

"I don't know what I was going to do."

"I must apologize for coming on you at such an inopportune moment. Is that the man you're going to marry to whom you were talking?"

"It was not."

"It was not Mr. Yarrow?"

"It was not the man I am going to marry." She spoke with a feverish sullenness, as if somewhere within her a fire was smouldering.

"Aren't you going to marry Yarrow?"

The fire within her ceased to smoulder; it broke into flame.

"How dare you ask if I am going to marry a forger and a thief?"

"You assume a very lofty tone, Miss Arnold. How

came you to be talking to him there, knowing—knowing well—that he was both a forger and a thief?"

"He spoke to me, I didn't speak to him. I came upon him by accident, by sheer accident."

"Not by appointment?" He held up his hand as if to check the furious words which were trembling on her lips. "It's no use your pretending to be angry, Miss Arnold. You strain the long arm of coincidence while crediting yourself with a simplicity which is unnatural, when you ask me to believe that when you left this office against my orders you had no notion that Mr. Yarrow was —we will say possibly somewhere in the neighbourhood. You force me to wonder what kind of a fool you take me to be, and what kind of girl you are. Your assurance goes too far. You stand there trying to look a picture of innocence; the effort is overdone. What have you got in your hand?"

Although he did not know it, it was only when she stretched her left hand out that she realized that something was still there, something which Jack Yarrow had given her. She stared at it as if bewildered, on her face what might have been a note of interrogation.

"I don't know what it is. I remember now that he did put something in my hand before I knew what he was going to do, but I never looked to see what it was."

"Then look now. What is it?"

"It seems—it seems to be bank-notes."

"It seems? Are you clear that it only seems? Make sure."

"That's what it is." She placed what she had been holding in her hand upon his writing-table. There were four pieces of paper. He picked them up. His tone was biting; his words might have been oil of vitriol which he was throwing at the girl in front of him.

"These are four bank-notes of five pounds each. It's not a question of seeming; they are. You are apparently so constituted that facts which are obvious and certain to other people only 'seem' to you. Do you seriously wish me to believe you have had these bank-notes all this while and did not know what you were holding, what it was that

he had given you? Do these represent the cheque I gave you? If so, you have made a handsome profit since yesterday, or have you still that cheque in your possession?"

"I'll not answer you! I will not answer you! How dare you say such things? I will not have you say them!"

"Gently, Miss Arnold; please don't assume anger which can be assumption only. My earnest wish is still for your welfare. Because that is so, I beg you to throw off the mask and cease playing a part. My last desire is to have to prosecute you."

"Prosecute me! Me? What do you mean by talking of prosecuting me?"

"What a hypocrite you are. Can you suppose for a single moment that it is not perfectly clear that you were this man's accomplice? You have yourself admitted that you were engaged to marry him. You gave him the cheque I gave you, and you wish me to believe that you forgot to ask for it again. You pretend that you didn't know there was another cheque at the back of it. What actually happened was, I have no doubt, something like this. You let him have your cheque so that he might make a careful study of my signature and forge it on the blank one. You knew what he was going to do; everything points to it. It is absolutely impossible that you did not know that there were two cheques in that envelope. It is equally incredible that you had not an understanding with the fellow to meet him the first opportunity you had. It was my appearance on the scene which was an accident. You were about to go with him in that taxicab; he was actually showing you in. When it seemed safer to bolt off by himself, he was careful to leave you at least some of the spoils in case you needed them. I have no doubt you know where he is at the present moment, and that you propose to use that money to get to him. How far your complicity with him went, at present I cannot say. The police are coming here; they may be at this moment in the street without. If I lay the facts before them I may be compelled to prosecute you, even against my will. They may say: 'If you intend to arrest any one you must start by arresting her.' I cannot afford to lose this money; I must have means to

meet my engagements. Tell me where this fellow is, help me to regain what he has robbed me of, and for your sake I'll compound a felony, I'll not prosecute. If you will not give me the help for which I am pleading, before the police arrive, the matter will have to pass out of my hands. Therefore I beg of you to tell me what I ask, at once, without any more nonsensical attempts to take advantage of my credulity. What is your answer ? "

It was some seconds before her answer came. Her cheeks were white ; she shivered ; her glance was towards the ground ; her voice was faint.

" You will have to prosecute."

" Do you mean that ? "

" I do, if you mean what you just now said."

" I am sorry to hear it. I had thought so much better things of you, Miss Arnold. What harm have I ever done you that you should wish to do me this great wrong ? "

" I have not done you any wrong ; I will do you none ; it is you who are wronging me." This time she raised her glance and looked him straight in the face. He winced, as if because of something which he saw on her face and in her eyes.

" I wish I could believe you."

" I don't care what you believe. After what you have said, what you may or may not believe of me matters nothing. If you were mistaken in me I was much more mistaken in you."

" Are you wishing me to believe, still wishing me to believe, that you know nothing about that blank cheque, and because you know nothing you do not intend to help me to get my own back from your friend Yarrow ? "

" He is not my friend."

" He was your lover. You told me only a few minutes ago that you were going to be his wife."

" Is it possible that you—I am copying your own words—that you wish me to believe that you seriously suppose that when I told you I was going to be his wife I dreamed he was a thief ? But I'm not going to try to defend myself, to do anything to change your ideas of me. Do as you threatened—prosecute."

There was a sound of footsteps somewhere without.

"That, I fancy, is the police."

"Then call them in, and"—something caused the girl to gulp—"give me into custody."

Mr. Fisher was listening intently. "They're coming in."

"Then let them come."

There were two doors to the room; one which opened into the apartment occupied by the managing clerk, another which led immediately on to the landing. Mr. Fisher opened the door of Mr. Daniel's room.

"Who's that?" he asked. "Is that you, Daniel? Is that an officer of police? And the gentleman from the bank? One moment, gentlemen. I'll ask you to come in here in another second."

Re-closing the door, and crossing his room, he opened the door which led on to the landing.

"Go," he said to the girl. She did not budge; she just looked at him.

"Aren't you going to prosecute me?" she asked.

"Go," he said, "for God's sake go. Don't force me to do something which I shall never cease to regret. Go!"

The girl went. Outside the door she turned to him.

"It is you who are wronging me, not I who have wronged you. One day you will regret that."

He shut the door in her face.

CHAPTER VII

THE TEA-SHOP

QUIETLY she descended the stairs, not at all in the helter-skelter fashion in which she had rushed down them only a few minutes before. Again she met the young man who was engaged in his father's office overhead; again he was coming up as she was going down. He was struck by the singularity of their encountering each other twice in so short a space of time. He said as much in his own vernacular.

"What ho! this is rummy. Are we doomed to meet upon this staircase? Last time I met you you seemed to have a little stiffening in the back. If you'll excuse my mentioning it, had I done anything to offend you? I hope not."

He remembered afterwards that there was a look upon her face which was as singular as her words.

"As if you could do anything to offend me—as if any one could! I am one of those whom it is impossible to offend. At the same time, for your own sake I would rather you did not speak to me; speaking to me might do you harm. Please let me pass."

When she had already passed him and was on the stairs below, he leaned over the banister and said, as if struck by a sudden thought:

"I say, what on earth do you mean? What's up?"

She did not answer, she did not even glance up, but moving with the same leisured, indifferent air, passed from the building into the street. No one would have supposed, to look at her, that in a room upstairs an inspector of police was urging the necessity of taking her at once into custody before she had a chance to escape. As a matter of fact, unexpected events had come crowding on her with such amazing rapidity that, in a sense, they had stunned her. Her mind was, for the moment, comatose. She did not realize her own position, what had happened, what it all

meant. In a sort of mental stupor, she walked down St. Swithin's Lane.

When she was in Cannon Street, recalling how, just thereabouts, Mr. Yarrow had touched her on the shoulder, with a startled air she glanced round as if to see if he were still anywhere in sight. It was then that the first flash of realization came to her. She stood still as if oblivious of the crowd which was passing to and fro. As realization became more vivid she started walking as if she were making all haste to keep some appointment for which she was already overdue; the truth being that she did not know where she was going or what would happen to her next. As she moved forward with such feverish, unreasoning haste, one thought kept recurring: she was alone, absolutely alone, with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

She was dismissed from her employment, turned out into the street in a cloud of ignominy and shame. She had not been paid any wage which might be due to her. Since she would have to be careful to avoid the neighbourhood of St. Swithin's Lane for the rest of her life, she would not dare to return and ask for it. In the opinion of her late employer she had cause for thankfulness in that she was not in the hands of the police. As he had plainly hinted, the police would make him prosecute if he did not turn her out into the street before they came upon the scene. So, to save her, he had sent her packing.

The girl was aware that there is an offence known as "compounding a felony." Mr. Fisher might get into trouble for letting her go. They might have put pressure on him, and be hunting for her, even against his will. Her description was perhaps being sent all over the metropolis at that moment. Very soon every policeman in London might be on the look-out for her.

She did not care for that, at least not then. Whether they locked her up or not did not matter to her, so she imagined. All she cared for was that she had ever been such a—she did not know what to call herself—such a purblind fool as ever to have allowed herself to be contaminated by association with that man Yarrow. That was the crime of which she had been guilty; for that she was

vaguely conscious that she deserved the severest punishment. She really had aided and abetted him in robbing the man whose one thought had really been for her welfare. Whether unwittingly or not, she had been his accomplice. She deserved dismissal; she deserved to be "wanted" by the police. Had it not been for her Mr. Yarrow would never have been able to do what he had done.

Wherever the story became known she would be held to be as guilty as he, so she told herself. She had been the accomplice of a thief. She had helped him perhaps to ruin a person to whom she owed nothing but gratitude. Who would wish to have anything to do with her when they knew that? The farther she went, the stronger grew the feeling that she was a sort of moral leper, a pariah, an outcast, a dangerous fugitive, against whom all hands were certain to be raised.

Unconscious of the direction in which she was going she had been walking eastward. When at last, dimly aware that she must have come some distance, she looked about her, she found she was in a part of the world of which she knew nothing. She seemed to be in the country, to be passing through the streets of some rural town. Startled, making an effort to collect her scattered wits, she asked herself what this place could be. There was a wide street with houses and shops on either side, for the most part old-fashioned houses and old-fashioned shops. About everything there was something which was not at all suggestive of London.

Stopping, she sought, on her right and on her left, for something which would give her a notion of what this place was. Just ahead was a post office, which announced that it was Romford Post Office. Romford? Where was Romford? She had a vague notion that it was in Essex, miles from London. How far had she walked?

A little farther on, almost facing the post office, a sign projected over the pavement: "Luncheons. Teas." Those were the two words which were on the sign. She found that the sign belonged to what looked like a confectioner's shop. After a momentary hesitation she went inside. An attendant advanced.

" Can I have something to eat ? " she asked.

She was ushered to a marble-topped table at the back of the shop. When she sat down she knew that she had walked far. The assistant asked what she would like, informing her at the same time what she could have. She ordered herself a basin of mock-turtle soup. As she waited for it to be brought it occurred to her to look at her purse, which was in her new green handbag. The purse contained eight or nine shillings ; she remembered that there had been eight and elevenpence in it when she had left Mrs. Thompson's. Since then she had spent threepence on a bus, so now there must be eight and eightpence.

The discovery did more to bring her back to the world of reality than perhaps anything else could have done. It was borne in on her, with curious clearness, that that was not only all the money she had in the world, but it was everything she had of any sort or kind. Her personal belongings she had seen the last of, they were gone ; she would never go to the Priory to fetch them away, nor would she write requesting that they might be sent. She wished to blot the Priory and all that it stood for out of her mind ; she wanted every one connected with it to forget her. She was certainly not going to give any one in Oakwood Gardens an inkling of where she might be found. From that moment all which was behind her was dead ; she was to be born again, enter a new world which she had not known and which had not known her.

She arrived at that resolution with startling suddenness ; yet she knew that it was irrevocable. Everything and every one connected with the Helen Arnold of the past should have no association with the Helen Arnold of the future. How that was to be managed she had not the vaguest notion. Although conscious that since all her worldly belongings consisted of eight and eightpence, she realized that it would be difficult, she was determined that it should be managed.

They brought her soup, quite a quantity of it, in a thick white basin. Never had soup tasted to her as that did then. Youth can pass from one mood to another with what is sometimes enviable rapidity. When she had

finished that soup she was mentally, physically, and even morally a different girl from the one who had entered the shop. The past was already behind her.

Although she had not an idea of what next she ought to do, she had an abounding faith in the future. With her there would always be good ahead, until her stock of vitality had lessened. She felt " her life in every limb " ; life to her was a joyous thing. Falls were nothing—one could always pick oneself up without being any the worse. She ordered some rice pudding and prunes to follow the soup ; and then, having a large piece of bread left, some cheese to eat with it.

While she was enjoying her bread and cheese—and she did enjoy it—she began to consider, with some sort of seriousness, what was next to be done. She opened her bag to make sure that there really was eight and eightpence in the purse, having a vague idea that in one of the divisions there might be half a sovereign.

She knew that she had half a sovereign, and was not quite certain—at least she tried to make herself believe that she was not quite certain—if she had left it in the trinket-box which she kept in a drawer in her bedroom at the Priory ; or if she might, by accident, have slipped it into her purse.

There had been no accident ; there was no half-sovereign. It would have been welcome. And then there were other things in her bedroom which would have been still more welcome. She relinquished them without a sigh ; any one could have them who liked, and also that half-sovereign. All the same—she was peering into the recesses of her purse—eight and eightpence was not much to begin the world with. And she had no character, no reference, no nothing ; it might be ever so long before any one would give her even the poorest kind of situation. It was rather an awkward position, look at it as bravely as one might ; but, she told herself, as she returned the purse to the bag it was no use being afraid.

Putting back the purse caused her to notice something which was already in the bag. What was the envelope in the pocket at the side ?

CHAPTER VIII

A LETTER

THIS green leather bag of hers was quite the latest thing in handbags. It had three divisions, three separate openings; exactly what each was for she was herself in doubt. In the centre division she had put her purse; on the side of this division was a pocket; in the pocket was the envelope which had caught her eye. Wondering hazily what it was, she took it out. Then she remembered.

It was the letter which, the postman having just brought it, was handed to her as she was leaving the telephone, having received Mr. Arthur Dudley's congratulations all the way from Birmingham. Tearing the envelope hurriedly open, glancing at the letter which it contained sufficiently to get a more or less clear idea of its contents, she had run off with it in her hand to Mr. Yarrow, who was waiting for her in the drawing-room; what became of it afterwards as, envelope in hand, she saw that this was that letter, she was not very sure. She remembered that, that morning, as she was hurrying down to breakfast, she had seen the envelope lying on her chest of drawers and had slipped it in the bosom of her dress, meaning to study it at leisure. Having reached that point in her recollections, the rest was easier. When Mr. Whitman gave her the handbag, insisting on her taking it with her to town, she had taken the letter out of her dress and put it in the pocket in the bag, and here it was.

It certainly was there. She recognized its presence with a curious sensation. The familiar, sprawling handwriting—she had seen it a good many times on envelopes addressed to her—was, whether she liked it or not, a link with that past which she had resolved to put behind her for ever. It seemed to be staring up at her as if it were a voice from the long ago, though it had not yet been in her possession four-and-twenty hours. Somehow it seemed ages since she saw it first.

The attendant was hovering round, as if of opinion that it was time she should pay her bill and go. So she ordered a cup of tea. She was not going to leave that shop till she had made herself mistress of the contents of that letter. Taking it out of the envelope, she started to read it.

It was written on hotel notepaper; it seemed that the writer was staying at a famous hotel at Brighton. Somehow the idea that Percy Osborne should be a patron struck her as funny. He had been the butt of the establishment during his stay at the Priory; he was the sort of person, she told herself more than once, who would be a butt wherever he was. All that most people saw in him was something to laugh at. He was not only ugly—he was more than plain; Helen, the most lenient of critics, admitted to herself that he was really ugly; from the point of view of the ordinary person, he was also funny. Helen owned that he had behaved funnily to her; what other word could one apply to his conduct?

She had never once encouraged the man; she could lay her hand upon her heart and declare that solemnly. She had not been unkind—it was not in her nature to be unkind to any one; she had certainly never joined the others in what they called the "jokes," in more or less bad taste, which they had played upon him. She had never said or done anything which could cause him to imagine that she had a feeling for him of any sort or kind; that for her he existed at all.

Yet in less than a month after he had arrived at the Priory he had proposed to her.

She did think that was a joke, and one not in the best of taste. She told him so. He was not offended; he seemed to be incapable of taking offence. A month afterwards he proposed to her again. He proposed to her on several different occasions before he left the Priory; the night before he went he made her the most remarkable proposal of all.

In an ordinary case she would have said the man was mad; his whole conduct was too silly. But the girl had a peculiar gift of intuition; in a queer sort of way she had begun to understand the man. He was like some

homeless, friendless creature, who craved for companionship, sympathy, some one who, metaphorically, would not be continually on the look-out for a chance to tie a tin can to his tail. The desire to find such a one had become the consuming passion of his life; he was prepared to stick at nothing in his quest. He was quite ready to be snubbed, he had become used to it; snubs were, in a sense, his daily meat and drink. He was content to put up with any number of them if only there was a remote chance of gaining his end.

It seemed that he did not at all mind being snubbed by Helen Arnold. Her method did not hurt him. She had laughed at him at first, she laughed at him all the time, but there was something in her laughter which he liked. It seemed to him that the fashion of her laughter changed —that a new quality came into it, something which was almost tender. He did not mind her laughing at him a bit. To her there was something pathetic in that one fact; she seemed to see the tragedy in this man's life which made him welcome even laughter, so long as it was not too cruel. If he had actually been a homeless, hopeless cur, she could fancy him looking up at her with foolish, yearning eyes, wagging his stumpy tail. He would welcome anything from her.

No, she did not think this man was mad.

It was six weeks since he had left the Priory; during three of them she had been engaged to Mr. Yarrow. Now he had written to her again. She read his letter while her tea grew cold.

"DEAR MISS ARNOLD,—I venture to address you again, on the eve of your twenty-first birthday, because I feel that you will forgive me for wanting to wish you many happy returns of the day. You have forgiven me so much already. I know how trying I have been on several occasions; you have never said an angry or an unkind thing.

"I left Mrs. Thompson's because I had had money left me. I did not say anything about it in the house because I felt that the people there would laugh at me more than ever."

[" What an extraordinary idea," commented the reader to herself.

The letter continued :]

" Especially Mr. Yarrow."

[The girl stopped and bit her lips. Yarrow's treatment of Percy Osborne was one of the things about him which she had disliked.]

" It seems queer " (the writer went on) " that any one should have left money to me ; don't you think it is ? You must think it. Somehow I think it myself. I have always had some money. My mother left me nearly three hundred pounds a year. She told me that I was so incapable of doing anything for myself that if I were not provided for I should starve. She was quite right ; I should have starved long ago ; a more useless creature than I am was never upon God's earth. You know that without my telling you."

[Again the girl commented to herself. " Your fault is self-depreciation. People have told you so often that there is nothing in you, you have never contradicted them—now you have come to believe it. I think it is too late to put anything in you now."

She resumed her reading.]

" Now my aunt has died and left me a great deal of money. She said to me once that she could not bear the sight of me and I was not to go near her house. When she was dying she seems to have remembered this and to have been sorry. It seems to have preyed upon her mind. She wrote to me only a few hours before she died and told me she was sorry, and it seems she sent for her lawyer and made him draw up a short will, which she signed, and said : ' Thank God, that's done ! ' The queer part is that though she did not like me I liked her ; I fancy she found that out before the end. You forgive a great deal to a person who you know likes you. See how you have forgiven me—you have never said you have forgiven me, but I know you have. By her will my aunt left me everything she had. I am told I'm going to have quite a large

income, and there is the house my aunt lived and died in, and all sorts of other property besides. I am a rich man.

" I have not known how to tell you this, but now that you so soon will be twenty-one, I feel that I must. You are old enough to know that money does make a difference. It is because I have such a lot of it that I feel myself entitled to tell you again how much I should like you to be my wife. Please don't stop at this and tear the letter up and say : ' The man's a silly ! ' I don't think that on this occasion I am a silly, and I don't believe, if you read on, that you will think so either.

" Of course I'm not the kind of person any one would like to have for a husband—I know that. But you need not treat me as a husband unless you like, which I don't suppose you ever will do. I will, if you wish, sign any document you like which will make it clear from the commencement that I will never claim any of a husband's rights, and I will settle on you, to be absolutely yours, any sum of money you choose, so that in any case you will be independent of me. I want you to be independent, and not to feel that I am at all in your way or a clog upon your movements.

" I think that if you married me you might, in time, not of course like me, but be able to put up with me now and then. You have no conception what a lonely life I have led. If you would allow me to give you my name and to speak of you as my wife you would make me happy. That will be all that I should ask. You would, of course, go about without me and live where and as you chose ; I should not wish to shame you by thrusting myself upon your society. And you would be rich.

" I don't suppose you'll answer this, and of course I know that you won't accept my offer. Some day something may happen which will make you think that it is not such a bad one after all. I should like to place before you some of its advantages for you as they appear to me. If you will let me do so some time I will not be intrusive, and you may laugh at me as much as you please. If, some day, you like to see me—I don't suppose you ever will, but you

might, one never knows—wherever I am I will come to you at once to wherever you are."

That was the letter. There was no conventional finish, just the signature : " PERCY OSBORNE."

It was characteristic of the man that though he had written to her on the eve of her birthday he said nothing to her about a birthday present. His mind was so filled with what he wished to say that there was no room in it for anything else. Possibly later on it would occur to him that he might have sent her some sort of offering, the consciousness that he had omitted, through sheer stupidity, to do anything of the kind, overwhelming him with remorse. Then, realizing what an opportunity he had lost, he would quite possibly shower on her the contents of half a dozen shops. In the meanwhile there was just the letter. The girl, having read it to an end, sat—her cup of tea still untouched—and thought it over.

" Don't you like your tea, miss ? " It was the attendant, still hovering about, who asked the question.

" Thank you, it's quite all right." Helen just glanced at her. What did the woman mean ? Was she dropping a hint that it was time she went ? How long had she been there ? She must have been there a good long time. Perhaps it was the rule in that establishment that customers, especially strange female customers, should not be encouraged to linger. But if she went, where was she to go ? Obviously she could not stay there for ever, anyhow. If she ordered anything else, having left her tea untasted, they might think there was something about her which was suspicious. She would have to go—but where ?

Such unanswered and unanswerable questions mingled with her attempts to consider Mr. Osborne's letter. All at once, as she sought an answer to the problem—where was she to go ?—she was seized with an access of terror. Her courage oozed through the tips of her fingers. Where indeed was she to go, with the few shillings which would be left to her after she had paid her bill ? She would have to go somewhere, that was certain. Some sort of dreadful echo seemed to answer : Where ?

CHAPTER IX

ON THE PLATFORM

THE bill was one-and-eightpence. Seven shillings was the sum which remained to her when she left that shop. It was nearly five o'clock; before long she would have to think of getting shelter for the night. She was tired; each second she realized that more and more. She must have walked twelve or fourteen miles; as a rule she was not good at walking—she could not remember when she had walked as much as that; it must have been years ago. She was footsore. Her shoes had not been meant for real pedestrian exercise; they seemed to be tight, they hurt her. The soles of her feet were blistered; she would have liked to take her shoes and stockings off and to bathe them. Her limbs ached, her whole body seemed ill at ease. Something was buzzing in her head; she was moved to press her hands against her temples. She had not washed, or, as she would have put it, tidied herself since the morning. Even in the reduced state of her finances she would have given something for an opportunity to perform the small offices of a woman's toilet, to rest, to stretch her limbs.

She would have to do something before long to relieve herself of the sense of physical depression. If she left this place, to what other could she go? She was conscious that she had been regarded askance at that teashop, as if some one in authority had not been certain that she was a desirable patron. Could she go back and ask them if they could let her have a bed? Suppose they refused. And anyhow bed and breakfast would cost her three or four shillings. What could she do when the trifle which would be left to her had gone?

That recurring question, to which she did not even dare to find an answer, settled it. She clenched her teeth, pressed her lips together, and with frightened yet resolute eyes retraced her steps to the post office and walked straight in. She was going to send a telegram.

She did not find the wording of it easy. The two young women behind the counter eyed her oddly as she struggled to find a fitting phrase. It was not easy to send within the compass of a telegram all that she wanted to say. She found, before she got to the end of her message, that one form contained more than forty words. She did not dare to encroach upon her scant resources to that extent. After all, nothing might come of the telegram, and then where would she be if, in order to send it, she had left herself with nothing?

The same thing happened in the post office as at the tea-shop. One of the assistants came from behind the counter, walked about the office, then stopped at the desk at which she was standing. She addressed her.

"You're using a great deal of paper, aren't you? You know each person is only supposed to use one form."

Helen looked round at her, startled, suddenly uncomfortably conscious that that was certainly a rule which she had not observed.

"I want to send a telegram," she stammered, "and I can't think what to say."

"You ought to have thought of that before you came in. I don't know how many forms you have torn up and thrown away; you see, if every one did that we should get into trouble. Only a certain number are allowed us."

The assistant spoke civilly, yet with authority. Helen was afraid lest she should forbid her using another form.

"I'll only use one more, if you'll let me. I think I know now what to say."

"Please do not use more than one."

The assistant returned behind the counter; other customers had entered. Helen proceeded, with shaking hand, to fill up the form in front of her.

"Please come to me directly you get this. I want you. I will meet you at Romford Station. Do not keep me waiting long.—HELEN ARNOLD."

She addressed the telegram to Percy Osborne at the hotel from which he had written at Brighton. The telegram, including the address, contained thirty-one words. She

said to the assistant, to whom she paid one-and-threepence-halfpenny—as she spoke her voice faltered :

" Please see that it goes at once ; it's most—most particular."

Though the assistant smiled her tone was severe.

" All telegrams which are handed in are despatched at once. It is a rule of the office."

Helen went out meekly into the street. Ordinarily she might have replied to that assistant ; she was in no mood to do it then ; her heart was in her shoes. She was limp, and worn, and weary. The gay courage which was her chief characteristic had vanished, and left in its place weariness, and sadness, and fear.

She inquired her way to the station. It seemed to her to be a long way off from the post office ; she felt as if she would never get there. It was not a very cheerful place when she did reach it, but there was something to sit down upon ; and she sat. For how long she did not know. At last a young man in the railway company's uniform came up to her.

" Ticket, please."

She looked at him, startled.

" I haven't got a ticket," she said.

" Haven't got a ticket, miss ? No one's allowed on the platform without a ticket. Where are you going ? "

" I'm going nowhere ; I'm waiting for a friend."

" Where is he coming from ? "

" From London."

" From London ? Then you're on the wrong side ; three trains have come in from London since you sat down here."

She rose, startled. " Three trains ! "

" By which train were you expecting him ? "

" I don't quite know. I don't think he could come yet. Is there anywhere I could see a time-table ? He's coming from Brighton."

" Coming from Brighton ? There's no train comes here from Brighton."

" Yes, I know. He's staying at Brighton, and I sent a telegram to him to come to me at once."

" Oh ! When did you send it ? "

" I sent it from the general post office just before half-past five."

" It's just turned half-past six. He couldn't possibly get here by now. He's only just about got your wire. Did he know you were going to send it ? "

" No, he didn't."

" Then he might have been out, and goodness knows when he'll get it. There's a Brighton time-table here ; I'll go and look at the trains." He walked with her to where a time-table was pasted on a board which hung against the wall. " A train leaves Brighton at 7.30, which gets to London Bridge just before nine."

" Isn't there one before then ? "

" It wouldn't be much good if there were. If he gets your wire directly he couldn't do much more than catch that. If he gets to London Bridge at nine, and takes a taxicab to Liverpool Street, he might get here by ten—that's three hours and a half from now."

Dismay was written large on the girl's countenance.

" But whatever am I to do till then ? "

" Couldn't say. Haven't you got any friends here ? " She shook her head. " Aren't you stopping in the town ? "

" I was never here in my life until to-day." She made a confidant of this unknown young ticket-collector to a degree of which she had never supposed she could be capable. " I—I am in trouble and—I want my friend to come and help me."

" Oh, that's it, is it ? Suppose he doesn't come."

She put her hand up to her throat, as if something had affected her breathing.

" I—I—hope he will. He—he said he would."

" Of course it's no business of mine, but it sounds to me a queer story. The rule is that no one's allowed on the platform without a ticket."

" Please—please do let me stay—till—till the train comes in at ten o'clock."

He saw that she was young and pretty, which fact appealed to his own youth. He saw also that she was in trouble, and that touched him. His tone became a little more human.

" I dare say they'll let you stop. I don't see why they shouldn't. You couldn't do much harm."

"I wouldn't do any harm."

"All right, only you'll have to cross over; that's the down side—I'll see about it. Only it seems to me that you're in for a good bit of waiting."

She was. It seemed interminable, that dreary waiting on the Romford Station platform. In the time to come, at all sorts of odd moments, especially when she was depressed, the memory of it would come back to her with a sense of haunting horror. She never could recall without pain that picture of herself, forlorn, heart-sick, half distraught, waiting, waiting, waiting. Every time an official passed her she feared he might be going to chase her from the station precincts. Evidently that ticket-collector had told her story to his colleagues. They watched her from a distance. She was aware of their espionage, and of how they were saying things about her to each other which it might be better for her health that she should not hear.

The hours and the half-hours went drearily by. There was a clock somewhere in the town which chimed the quarters; she listened for each, wondering affrightedly if the next would never come. Seven—eight—nine; each hour struck as if it never would strike; then the half-hour, a quarter to ten. If he came he should be coming now. Train after train had come and gone. Each time she had risen to her feet, inspecting the passengers who alighted with eyes which grew heavier and heavier when still there were no signs of him.

The ticket-collector came up to her again.

"That's the 9.53 just gone out. There's another at 10.8; if your friend doesn't come by that, then you'll have to leave the station. You've been here going on for five hours. There's another at 10.39; you can come back for that. The station-master has spoken about you, and it's my duty to see that no one hangs about the station without a ticket."

She eyed him with a weary, anxious glance.

"If I had a ticket I could stay."

"You told me you hadn't got a ticket."

"If my friend doesn't arrive by the next train I'll buy a ticket for the next station, and I suppose I can travel by any train I please."

"Of course if you have got a ticket that's different." The

young gentleman went off with something of a worried air as if a problem had presented itself to him in an entirely new aspect. She was conscious that he was eyeing her furtively from the wicket-gate at which he stood to take the passengers' tickets.

The 10.8 came in. She rose to greet it, her nerves all of a flutter. Not many passengers alighted; among them no one in the least resembling Percy Osborne. The disappointment was so acute that she staggered back to the bench like a wounded creature. The passengers had departed; she knew that the collector was observing her. Remembering her promise she moved down the platform, passed him, into the booking-office. He said to her as she went through the gate:

"Going to buy a ticket?"

She did not reply, not because she would not, but because she could not. She purchased a ticket, for which she paid twopence. The collector clipped it at the gate and let her pass.

The 10.39 arrived—no Percy Osborne. Somehow she had not expected him. She had reached a point at which she had a hopeless sort of feeling that he would not come. She had been thinking of what the ticket-collector had said; he might not have been in when the telegram arrived. She had no reason to suppose that he would be in. He might not have been at Brighton at all. He had said nothing in his letter about how long he was going to stop there. He might have been there only for a day or two and have left as soon as his letter to her was written. In that case, God help her. With youth's capacity for quick changes, since she sent that telegram, she seemed to have dropped right deep down into the pit of despair. So far as she could see, Percy Osborne, whose existence she had forgotten till she had his letter, and overlooked again till she found it in her bag, was the only living creature who could save her—Percy Osborne whom, in common with others, she had regarded as half fool, half idiot. So little faith had she in the man that she felt that his very letter to her was one of those pieces of crass stupidity for which he had earned an unenviable reputation. She was aware that he sometimes did things without rhyme or reason, and only grinned when asked what had caused him to make such an ass of himself.

On this occasion he, quite probably, had made an ass of her. What he had said in his letter might be sheer nonsense, meaning nothing, just scribbled to occupy a spare half hour. She had been ninny enough to take it in earnest.

It was no use waiting for any more trains. After dancing attendance on that half-witted creature for five long hours, she had better take herself off, and do what she could; get a bed in some place where they would be willing to run the risk of harbouring such as she. It would have to be somewhere close by; she could not walk far, that was certain. As she began to take painful steps towards the gate the ticket-collector came up to her once more.

"There's another train from Liverpool Street in twenty minutes. Now you've got a ticket hadn't you better wait for that? I've been looking into the trains from Brighton; if your friend missed the 7.30, which he easily might have done, there's another train leaves there at 7.43, which gets to London Bridge at 10.10; it's a slow train, that one. If he came by that he might catch the 10.20 at Liverpool Street —that's the next train in here, 10.59—or the 10.34, which gets here at 11.7. After waiting as you have been doing you wouldn't do much harm to wait a little longer—would you?"

She looked at him with lack-lustre eyes.

"No, I suppose not. When does the last train come from London?"

"Leaves 12.30, due 1.13. He'd hardly come by that. But there is an express leaves Brighton at 10, due at Victoria at 11.11; if he were on that he might catch the 11.35 Liverpool Street, due here 12.33. Where did you say you'd meet him if you weren't at the station?"

"Nowhere; I said I'd meet him at the station."

"Doesn't he know what address will find you?"

"I have no address."

"What are you going to do if he doesn't turn up?"

"I don't know—I was wondering."

"You've got money?"

"Not much."

"Enough for a bed to-night? He may turn up in the morning. If I were you I should wire him again, and give him an address which will find you. That will be all right—if he is a friend."

" Thank you. I think I'll wait for the next train, before I do anything about a bed."

" You look to me as if you were tired."

" I'm tired out." She shut her eyes as if she found it easier to keep them closed than open. " Perhaps he will come by the next train."

" I shouldn't worry if he doesn't. Of course I don't know what the trouble is, but if he's anything like a friend he'll see you through it."

She had not liked to tell that collector, in whom, out of his official mood, there was evidently some leaven of humanity, that she had not the slightest title to regard Percy Osborne as really her friend ; she had done nothing for him, she had allowed him to do nothing for her. She had probably not exchanged fifty sentences with him in her life ; and in not one of them had there been a word which could suggest that to her he was more than a distant stranger. Though she had said nothing of this to that young man she admitted it to herself. Had she not been brought, all in an instant, to despair's last gate, she would not have been so absurd as to suppose that he ever could have been anything else. How people would laugh if they ever came to know of the long hours she had waited for him in that dreary station, just because he had written to her a silly letter. She would just wait for that one more train, and then she would act on the ticket-collector's advice and seek shelter somewhere for the night. She might be able to face the world with a braver face if she could only sleep till the morning.

And while she thought of sleep it came to her, on that hard bench. Her eyelids drooped ; she made no effort to raise them ; slumber was on her. Then she had a dreadful dream. She dreamt that some awful monster, belching forth screams and threats and groans, came crashing, crashing on to her. She felt it knock her down ; she struggled to get up ; her eyes came open ; she found the ticket-collector with his hand upon her shoulder. She heard him say :

" Sorry to wake you, miss, but here's a gentleman inquiring for you."

Standing in front of her was Percy Osborne.

CHAPTER X

HAUNTED

" SEEMS to me that it's the men who've got time to burn who find time to marry. It's your parson who marries, he's a slacker; your writing man, your painting man, your acting man, they're all slackers, work three hours a day and look hard for something to occupy the rest. So they find wives who keep them occupied. Your business man, who's up to the neck in it, he hasn't time to find a wife; he's not the sort to waste a dollar a minute looking after her if he had one. Look at me. Until the last few months how was I going to find time to speak to a woman? It takes time to do that sort of thing. You can't stand talking to her with a stop-watch in your hand, and remark, in the middle of a sentence: 'Time's up—got to get a deal through down street, so long!' She might not like it."

" She might not."

" So here I am, side-tracked, marked for scrapping, old——"

" How old are you? "

" Forty-three on the sixteenth of next month, and as I've put two years into every one of them, you might write me down as eighty-six. Now what woman who's still alive is going to marry a man of eighty-six? "

" You like to talk nonsense, Mr. Van Coster, so I won't attempt to talk sense to you."

" Know of any nice girl who would marry me, Mrs. Osborne? "

" Some quite nice girls do do foolish things."

" Yes, that's what I feel."

He paused; a sudden silence fell upon the pair, as if something which he had inadvertently said had brought something into the atmosphere which held them tongue-tied. Presently Mrs. Osborne, looking round, recognized some one who was approaching.

" Here's your sister, she's looking for you. See you perhaps at lunch."

Without any more formal greeting the lady crossed the stretch of fresh, green grass, towards the hotel which was on the other side. As she went she nodded towards a woman who was coming along the path at the cliff's edge. When this woman reached Mr. Van Coster she put to him a question, settling herself in a hammock-chair as she asked it.

"Peter, what have you been saying to Mrs. Osborne?"

"Nothing—just nothing. That's what I always am saying to Mrs. Osborne—nothing. I'd like to say something, but I don't dare, so it's just nothing, all the while."

"You have your own way of saying nothing, Peter. You don't always do your talking with your tongue."

The speaker, who was very beautifully dressed, had deposited herself on a chair which was immediately in front of Mr. Van Coster, so that he, standing up, leaning against a railing, when he looked down, saw her just beneath him. At that instant he did not seem disposed to look down; his eyes followed the woman who was still strolling leisurely across the grass. Her parasol was between him and her, so that all he could see was a glimpse of her figure. When she reached the steps of the hotel she stopped, and turning, glanced for a second towards where he was standing. Taking off his hat, he held it suspended in the air. She twirled her parasol, then turning again, ascended the steps.

"Peter, who are you bowing to?" asked the lady who was seated below.

"Mrs. Osborne. Cynthia, that's a remarkable woman."

"She is also married."

"Call it married, do you? I don't. The more I see of her the more I don't call her married. There's a story in her life."

"Did you ever know any one in whose life there wasn't a story? The story in her life is that she married for money."

"Do you think that's all there is to it? I wonder. The relations between Mr. and Mrs. Osborne are so—Cynthia, I can't help saying it—they're so darned queer that every time I see them together I start wondering. They seem to me to be the most unmarried married pair. He's no husband to his wife, and she's no wife to her husband. They may be in the eyes of the law Mr. and Mrs. Percy Osborne, but that's as far as they've got."

" That's far enough for you. You look out for some nice woman who hasn't got as far. There's Agatha Rowland."

" Stukeley Harrington told me that his sister is always throwing female things at his head, so I suppose there's nothing unusual about you. You put Agatha Rowland back into the stock-room ; I'm not having her. Strikes me, Cynthia, that all the goods you offer are a little shop-soiled." Turning, he looked over the railing down on to the people walking on the road which led beside the sea. " I'm betting that there is a story in Mrs. Osborne's life, and I've a sort of a kind of a feeling that I'd like to know just what it is. She's a remarkable woman."

" And you, Peter, are a remarkable idiot." The lady, rising from her chair, regarded his broad back. " Why is it that quite sensible men where women are concerned are so often fools ? "

" If I am a fool where Mrs. Osborne is concerned, then I have no wish to be wise. Cynthia, she is the first person who has ever made me ask myself if it might not be worth while for a business man to waste time even at the rate of a dollar a minute. That's a fact. Your husband once felt that way about you."

" I hope he feels that way still."

" Occasionally, maybe, occasionally. Business makes heavy calls on Daniel Sprague."

" And Mr. Osborne ought to make heavy calls on the time of Mrs. Osborne. Seems to me she has more time to spare than is good for her. I'm going home. I want to write some letters before lunch."

Mrs. Sprague did not live in the hotel, she had rooms in one of the houses on the cliff. Her brother said to himself, as he watched her going :

" Now what does she mean by that ? She is hoisting a storm-signal. It certainly is queer that I cannot get Mrs. Osborne out of my head."

Mrs. Osborne, in her bedroom at the hotel, seemed struck by the singularity of the fact that her thoughts would drift towards Mr. Van Coster. Her bedroom, a large, handsome apartment, had a fine view over the cliff and sea. She was

alone. She feared no intrusion; her husband had never entered her sleeping apartment during the whole five years of their married life. No fact could more eloquently suggest the relations which existed between the husband and wife. Five years had made a great difference in Helen Arnold. She was twenty-six; not, so far as outward appearances went, only a woman of the world, but also a woman of fashion. The light-hearted—it might also be said light-headed—impetuous girl of the Priory and Mr. Fisher's office had vanished. In her place was a self-possessed, dignified, expensively attired woman. She was much better worth looking at at twenty-six than she had been at twenty-one. She had passed over a large part of the earth's surface during those five years; everywhere people had spoken of her as "the beautiful Mrs. Osborne." Once a royal personage had seen her in a box at the Paris opera. After scrutinizing her through his glasses, he turned to a member of his staff:

"Who is that in the box with that curiosity of a man? She is one of the handsomest women I ever saw. Find out. I should like to make her acquaintance."

It was not difficult for that member of the royal personage's staff to learn that the lady in the box was Mrs. Percy Osborne; it became quite a different matter when there arose the question of his master making her acquaintance. The lady point-blank declined the honour. Indeed, rather, it seemed, than run the risk of having such an acquaintance forced upon her, the next morning she left Paris.

For her the world had changed since the night on which she had waited on the dreary platform of Romford Station so many hours for the coming of Mr. Percy Osborne. On the morning of the following day he procured a special licence, and in the afternoon they were married, the bride going to her husband without so much as a change of clothes. There probably have been some curious newly married couples, curious from every point of view; there can hardly have been a more curious pair than Mr. and Mrs. Percy Osborne in the first hours, and days, and even weeks of their married life. We have heard that in the days of our grandparents there were "blushing brides" who were overwhelmed with shyness. Brides do not blush nowadays, and

shyness is seldom one of their most marked characteristics. If, on that occasion, the new Mrs. Osborne was shy, it was because, at least in part, of her husband's extraordinary attitude.

When they met at the station they had a singular conversation on the platform, if the word " conversation " can be used when the talking is all on one side.

He had always found it difficult to say much. At the Priory days would pass without his speaking to any one. Helen Arnold's presence on that ill-lighted platform seemed to deprive him of the small capacity for speech which he had ever had. It was only when she realized that he would not talk because he could not, that, conscious of the lateness of the hour, bone-weary, half beside herself with anxiety as to what was to become of her for even that one night, driven to desperation, she began to give him certain explanations for which he had not sense enough to ask.

Her explanations were brief enough, as brief as she could make them. They were confined practically to a statement of the fact that she had had his letter asking her to marry him, and that not only was she willing to accept his proposal, but was ready to become his wife at the earliest possible moment.

He smiled at her—grinned, she called it—when she said this, but uttered not a word. He showed no signs of ecstasy or even of interest ; he just stood still and, avoiding her face, looked at the platform. It was exasperating ! She could have shaken him, even in that moment of her distress, and also of her shame. She had to go on to explain that she believed that for an expenditure of five-and-twenty pounds one could be married without notice, anywhere, at any time.

Some young women, after dropping him such a hint, would have been daunted by his persistent silence. They might have thought, excusably, that his intention was to snub. For some dreadful moments she herself had a horrid suspicion that this might be so. Then, noticing the singularity of his attitude, she was driven to hope that, as before, he was merely silent because he could not speak. She put as plain a question to him as perhaps a girl ever put to a man.

" Will you marry me to-morrow ? "

He scraped his right boot upon the boards, smiled, and murmured, still looking down : " I should like to."

" Have you enough money ? " she demanded next. " I don't know how much it will cost, but you may want more than thirty pounds."

He put his hand to an inside pocket in his coat and took out a roll of paper, which he handed to her. She found herself holding what seemed to be a large number of bank-notes, probably fifty or sixty, of varying denominations, apparently from five pounds to fifty.

" What am I to do with these ? " she asked.

" You can have them," he murmured.

For one moment temptation came to her in a strange form. If he really meant that she might have the bank-notes she was holding, they represented, possibly, five or six hundred pounds—in that case why should she marry him—attach herself for life to such an apology for a man as he was ?

The temptation went as quickly as it came ; she saw the position in a truer light. If she had to accept his money it had better be as his wife, not as an eleemosynary gift. So the next day she accompanied him to Doctors' Commons, played a by no means insignificant part in the purchase of the licence, inquired of an official which was the nearest church at which they could be immediately married, and in less than an hour they were man and wife. Afterwards it was he who was the blushing bridegroom. He seemed to regard her with alarm. Not only would he not go near her, but whenever she approached him he shrank back with grotesque timidity.

That attitude—of grotesque timidity—he had maintained for five whole years. Everything that had been done had been done by her. He was incapable, it seemed, of initiative. She took the whole conduct of business matters in her hands. When, after two or three days of continued speechlessness, she tried to learn what his financial position was, he told her :

" If you want to know about money you must go to Mr Pendleton. He knows all about it, I don't. That's his address. I always carry it about with me in case I should want it."

That was the longest speech he had made to her since they were married. When she looked at the card he had given her, she found that Mr. Pendleton was a solicitor who had offices in Gray's Inn.

"Will you come with me to see Mr. Pendleton?" she inquired.

He shook his head. "No, I don't think I want to. Mr. Pendleton doesn't like me."

As the newly married wife looked at her husband she wondered to herself who would. She went by herself to the offices in Gray's Inn and there found a middle-aged man, who looked at her through glasses, with what she felt was amused curiosity. He had her card in his hand.

"You are Mrs. Percy Osborne? May I ask what Mrs. Percy Osborne?"

"My husband is your client."

"Not Miss Walsingham's nephew?"

"I believe Walsingham was the name of my husband's aunt."

"You believe? I see. Then you don't know much about your husband, Mrs. Osborne?"

She had a feeling that there was a slight emphasis on the "Mrs. Osborne" which was not altogether flattering. She showed then the capacity which grew greater as the years went by: the capacity to defend herself, to hold her own. She stood up straight, she looked straight at the lawyer; her manner was stiff, her tone was cold.

"My husband has sent me to you, Mr. Pendleton, to learn exactly what his financial position is. He doesn't know much about figures, and he doesn't understand them. You never have given him a statement which was plain to him; he wishes you to give one to me."

The lawyer continued to eye her with what clearly was growing interest. He was a dry sort of man, but it was not his dryness which she noticed then. He was ironic.

"I do not think it would be easy to draw up a financial statement which would be plain to Mr. Osborne, though it might be perfectly plain to you. But you must allow me to point out that to me you are a perfect stranger. I was not aware that Mr. Percy Osborne was married, or even thought

of marrying. In any case I should have to have an authority from him before I could do what you require."

"I was married to Mr. Osborne last week. I told him that I thought you would want to see something from him. He gave me this."

She took a letter from her handbag; it was not the green leather bag which had been presented to her by Mr. Whitman. Mr. Pendleton noted the contents of the letter, still standing up. He read it once, twice, then lowered it to subject his visitor to a further examination. Then he observed, as if satisfied with what he had seen:

"This letter, which is undoubtedly in Mr. Percy Osborne's handwriting, the peculiarities of which I have had reason to notice more than once, is as follows:

"'DEAR MR. PENDLETON,—I don't know anything about my money, but I want my wife to know. She wants to know. Will you please tell her all about it? She will bring you this letter. She understands things much better than I do, so as you are my lawyer, I want you to tell her about everything. And don't keep her waiting. Yours, etc.,

"'PERCY OSBORNE.'

"That 'don't keep her waiting' is a characteristic touch, Mrs. Osborne. Am I to understand that you know nothing about your husband's financial position?"

"I know that Miss Walsingham left him money, and that's all he seems to know. I want to know how much she left him, and where it is, and all about it. He will be getting things into a mess if no one understands."

"I appreciate that perfectly. Are you a business woman, Mrs. Osborne?" The question made her wince. Her voice was a little shaky.

"I know something about business. My husband knows nothing."

"He is fortunate in having a wife who knows even something; but if you will forgive my saying so, you seem very young to occupy the position you are proposing to take up."

The girl bit her lip; she blushed. "I shall grow older. Don't you trouble about my extreme youth, Mr. Pendleton.

Will you be so good as to give me the information I have come for ? "

He gave it her, at any rate as much as she required, after a little more pressure had been put upon him. When she returned to her husband she said to him :

" Do you know how rich you are ? " He shook his head, a trick of his which had already more than once exasperated her almost beyond endurance. " And I suppose you don't care ? " Another shake. " Will you give me authority to look after your business matters, sign cheques, pay bills, and that sort of thing ? It seems you have got your banking account into a muddle, as well as everything else. Mr. Pendleton's advice is that you should let me act for you."

" I don't mind," said Mr. Osborne.

So for five years Helen Arnold, now Mrs. Osborne, if only a wife in name, had been very much the head of her husband in fact. Percy Osborne had done exactly as she told him, and was happier than he ever had been in his life because she was there to tell him. He was a rich man ; it was doubtful if he ever did attain to a definite knowledge of just how rich he was. His wife developed a rare capacity for the management of a large income. Although she denied her husband and herself nothing, there was still an annual surplus which, in her hands, grew and grew. From the point of view of a superficial observer her marriage could hardly have been happier. She realized what is the ambition of many modern women : she had as much money as she wanted, she could do with it as she liked, she went where she pleased, was able to gratify every wish as soon as it was formed, she was young and beautiful and healthy, admired by both men and women ; popular, if she chose, wherever she went. Most women regarded her with envy ; she ought to have been happy.

And yet, often, in her own bedroom, she would pace the floor half through the night, with drawn face and staring eyes, a frightened, haunted thing.

CHAPTER XI

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

SHE was haunted: in the first place by her husband. A young wife, to be happy, requires a husband; he is part of the necessary equipment of marriage.

Not only had she no husband in any real sense; she was associated with a man whom she had come to regard with feelings which she tried to hide even from herself. The belief had grown upon her that he was scarcely human; there was certainly something lacking in his mental, moral, and physical development. Although for days together he would scarcely speak to her, it was not because he was displeased with her; with him speech always required an effort, and while he said nothing she felt that he was watching her; that somewhere at the back of his mind he was taking notes, observing, arriving at conclusions of which she was the subject; that he was regarding her as a subject whom it amused him to study. Although he observed her every wish with slavish alacrity, with the dumb willingness of a well-trained dog; seeming, indeed, to have no existence apart from her; yet after five years' association, during which he had never argued or contradicted or questioned her right to do precisely what she pleased, in a fashion which she would have found it difficult to describe, she had grown to be afraid of him. If she could only have learnt, just once, what really was in his mind it would have been something; but, as it were, his mind was always masked. She was convinced that he had opinions, possibly strong ones; certain trifling indications made her sure of that. But no power of which she was possessed would induce him to give them utterance. She could do with him many things, but she could not persuade him to make of her a confidant. Even when she had an uncomfortable feeling that he disapproved, as at certain periods in their married life it was borne in on her that he did, when she begged him, if he did, to say so plainly, he would only smile,

say a few more or less inane words, and, with averted eyes, watch. It came to be with her a sort of obsession—that he was always watching.

Also, as her association with him continued, a suspicion arose within her that he was not mentally sound. He was not in any legal or medical sense insane; but that his brain sometimes lost its balance was the only explanation of the things which he occasionally did.

In an hotel at Vienna he forgathered with one of the table waiters. Motoring with an acquaintance along one of the principal thoroughfares at the fashionable hour in the afternoon, she saw him on the pavement walking with this man arm-in-arm. The waiter was drunk, there was no doubt about that; she had her doubts about Mr. Osborne because she had never known him to touch a drop of intoxicating liquor. But he was singing at the top of his voice, out of tune and in bad German, a song which was the Viennese rage of the moment. Fearing that he might have trouble with the police and that there would be a scandal, she had the car stopped and called to him. When he saw her, without a moment's hesitation, he disengaged himself from his waiter friend and, smiling, entered the car.

When, later, she asked what he meant by his behaviour, he smiled again and said: "I don't know." Then presently added: "He drank four bottles of champagne."

At the thought of the effect which that champagne had had upon the waiter he chuckled. There was something about the chuckle which she did not like at all.

Again, at a popular French watering-place, she came upon him one afternoon dancing with a number of half-intoxicated excursionists. They had formed themselves into a great ring and were amusing a considerable audience with their foolish and frenzied antics. Mr. Osborne had his shoes and socks off, his trousers turned up to the knee, his coat on inside out, and some one else's hat on his head, and so attired, was yelling with the full force of his lungs as he bounded up and down and round and round. A pile of empty bottles close at hand explained the situation. When he saw her he came to her at once. When some of

his new acquaintances tried to stop him he flew at them with a sudden frenzy of rage which might have produced serious consequences. They followed him, threatening reprisals; if a vehicle had not been close at hand the situation might have passed from farce to tragedy. When they returned to the hotel and she asked for some sort of explanation, he just smiled as he always did, and he said:

"They drank twelve dozen bottles of beer and a dozen bottles of brandy."

After that, no matter what he did—and he did some odd things—and she suspected him of doing others which he kept to himself, she never again asked for an explanation.

It was not strange if, after being married five years, she had grown to be afraid of her husband, and that although she had never had a difference of opinion with him of any sort or kind.

Thus, in the first place, she was haunted by her husband; and in the second, by her past. She hoped that it was buried; that no act in it would ever rise to confront her; yet she was haunted by memories of her twenty-first birthday.

One day on a wharf at Havre a number of men were emptying the hold of a vessel which was moored alongside. One man, with a book in his hand, appeared to be checking the various packages as they came ashore. Something about his figure—he had his back to her—seemed to her to be familiar. He turned to speak to some one and she saw it was Stephen Fisher. She was so startled that for some moments she seemed to have lost her wits. When they returned she made all haste she could and walked away. Fortunately he did not glance round, and so remained unconscious of her presence. Had he tried to speak to her she felt as if, for the first time in her life, she might have made an idiot of herself and have fainted. The world seemed to be swimming round her as she walked away; she welcomed an ancient cab which came clattering along the quay.

From that day she was haunted by Stephen Fisher. It was then nearly three years since she had seen him last. What was he doing there, the at-one-time prosperous

merchant? Had the forgery ruined him? If it had not been the sole, it might quite probably have been the chief cause of his passage from St. Swithin's Lane to the Havre wharf. She told herself more than once afterwards that if she had not been a wretched coward she would have attracted his attention, have heard his story, and, so far as she could, have repaired the wrong which had been done. So far as money went she could quite easily have made good to him the sum, and more than the sum, which he had lost. But the suddenness of the encounter had caused her to lose her nerve, and in consequence he haunted her.

Her husband had been with her, they had been doing a tour of inspection of the various docks. Although, as usual, he had not said a word, she had an uneasy feeling that he had noticed her agitation and the cause of it. More, she suspected him of having gone out by himself later in the day, of returning to the wharf and interviewing the man with the book. She was continually assailed by that sort of suspicion: by a dreadful notion that his chief occupation and amusement was to gather facts which told against her, and store them in his mind, with the intention of using them one day for her destruction.

Twelve months afterwards she met some one else who was connected with her nightmare memories of St. Swithin's Lane. She and her husband had been wintering in the Canaries. They were returning home. She was a bad sailor. Half a gale was blowing; she began the voyage by being confined to her cabin. She issued from it when she was informed that they were approaching Madeira. The moment she set foot on the deck she found herself face to face with some one who—perhaps because of the state of her health—startled her even more than Stephen Fisher had done. It was the young gentleman whose father had had an office on the floor above, whom on that eventful morning she had encountered twice upon the stairs. She hurriedly drew back; as she closed the door she was thankful that hers was a deck-cabin. She sank on to an easy-chair—hers was a state-room—and waited, listening. Each second she expected to hear a tapping on the panel. She was sure that he had seen and recognized her. She

had seen his face change as their eyes met ; the movement towards her which was as rapid as hers from him. If he knocked she would not let him in ; she would lock and bolt the door. He had nothing to do with her that she should be compelled to see him.

The knock never came, though she waited in strained expectation till the vessel stopped. She knew that they were landing passengers. She had never seen Madeira ; they had come round by the Morocco coast. She was still young enough to like to see everything there was to be seen, but not for a good deal would she have trusted herself out of her cabin then. Although the sea grew calmer and her sickness ceased, she did not venture outside her cabin till the voyage was over. She was conscious she was foolish. She had no reason to be afraid of that young man, yet she would not run the risk of a meeting which might make it impossible for her to disclaim his acquaintance. Percy Osborne was a husband who never troubled himself about his wife if she dropped a hint that she would rather he did not. They landed after darkness had fallen ; as she went ashore she looked furtively about her. Perhaps it was because he noticed this that, as they were making for the hotel at which they were to pass the night, he put to her one of those disconcerting questions whose very rarity made her wonder what manner of man he was.

" What were you afraid of which made you keep in your cabin when you were quite well ? "

She tried to laugh, even while she was shivering.

" Afraid ? I was afraid of nothing. What funny things you say."

He only smiled.

CHAPTER XII

HER DANCE

WHEREVER the Osbornes went Mr. Osborne was regarded as something to laugh at. In every hotel they stopped at within four-and-twenty hours word was passed round, among the visitors as well as the staff, that Mrs. Osborne's husband really was too funny. The oddity of his appearance had something to do with this. His big mouth, wide-open eyes, perpetual simper, untidy hair, ill-fitting clothes, put on anyhow, lurid taste in neckties, huge boots, laced up anyhow—these inevitable features in his everyday appearance caused nearly every one who saw him for the first time to look at him again and smile. The smile broadened on becoming acquainted with the man. The trick he had of wriggling, like some shy, gawky boy, whenever he was addressed; his unwillingness to speak; his apparent incapacity to carry on a connected conversation, owing to his extraordinary shyness; his awkwardness, his gaucherie, his obvious desire to escape public notice, his sufferings when he was unable to do so; these things made him a personality which seemed to be irresistibly comic to most of those who met him.

But while people laughed at the husband they felt for the wife. The forms this feeling took were often not only inconvenient, but unwelcome as they were boring. She hated sympathy, in the guise in which it was offered to her. For men and women, especially women, to suggest, after the briefest possible acquaintance, sympathy with her because she was possessed of such a husband—it was maddening; whatever the intention might be, it was insolence.

To be conscious, as she crossed a room or walked along a promenade, that people were saying to themselves, even as they nodded: "Poor woman, what a husband she's got, One can't help feeling sorry for her. And she so young; and there are so many nice men who would have been so

glad to have a chance to make her happy "—to know that they were talking to each other in something like that strain was bad enough ; but it was worse to have the fact forced upon her that there were quite nice men who were under the impression that they might make her happy even yet.

In such cases masculine pity is apt to be confined to one channel—which leads to something else. What male creature with a heart in his bosom could avoid a desire to brighten the shadowed life of the pretty young woman who was chained to that ass Osborne ? As a rule, directly a man showed an inclination to cheer her up, Mrs. Osborne beat a hurried retreat, and the acquaintance ceased. There were exceptions. During her five years of married life she had been perpetually travelling. Here and there she was bound to encounter something male who was really nice, whose society and conversation were in agreeable contrast to the sort of thing she had to live with. Friendship, even under such circumstances, she had learnt from painful experience, was apt to be transformed into something else. When a man was young, healthy, strong, full of vitality and vigour, and the woman, still a girl, was his feminine counterpart, various happenings had caused her to believe that between two such persons platonic friendship was a myth.

More than once, especially at the commencement of her career, matters had drifted so fast that before she knew it she found herself standing on what she regarded as the brink of an abyss. Not the least part of the trouble was that even when putting the offender in his proper place, she had been disposed to excuse his sin, and even when departing hurriedly herself, or insisting upon his instant exit from the scene of his offence, she was wont to be conscious of a reprehensible feeling in her heart ; a something which would move her to veil her face with her hands even when alone, and to flush and smile behind their shelter.

Instances there had been, fortunately, in which simple friendship had not, at least outwardly, become anything else. Mr. Peter Van Coster—she had met him for the first time at Colon, where she had gone to make the acquaintance of

some of the wonders of the wonderful canal—Mr. Van Coster was there in his favourite rôle of a business man; he was putting through some "deal" with the authorities which ran into very large figures. He was very civil to the Osbornes, going out of his way to make arrangements which would enable them to see even hidden mysteries under the most agreeable conditions. The second encounter was at Palm Beach, where the Osbornes spent a part of the winter. Mrs. Osborne told herself, as she was leaving the coast of Florida, that she did not think it might be desirable to meet Mr. Van Coster again, even by the merest accident. Then she came upon him, one fine afternoon leaning over the wall of an hotel garden in Algeria. He explained quite frankly how that came about.

"I saw in some paper or other that you and Osborne were here, so I thought you wouldn't mind my sharing some of your sunshine."

He appeared to have come all the way from New York City for the sole purpose of sharing it. She was not sure that his conduct was altogether what it might have been; but for nearly a month he had what he described as "a daisy of a time." Not a word was spoken on either side to which the most exigeant husband could possibly object. Indeed, Mr. Osborne had as good a time as either of the three. He said so himself. Such a pleasant impression did that month of sunshine leave upon his mind that more than once afterwards he remarked to his wife:

"I don't think I ever had a better time than I had in Algeria."

He would say this when memories of that ancient town were forcing themselves upon her against her will. As nothing had been said about Algeria, perhaps for days and weeks, she would wonder by what subtle alchemy he knew it.

They came on Peter Van Coster for a few days in Paris; later in the same year at Aix-les-Bains; in the January following at St. Moritz. There he brought his sister. On each occasion Helen Osborne assured herself that until she actually saw him she had not had the least idea that he was within a thousand miles. At the moment of their

meeting at St. Moritz she was being instructed by a professional in the proper management of a pair of skates.

"That man's all right," Mr. Van Coster told her when the lesson was over; "it's sure he was a skater. I'm a bit of one myself, so I know. If you want to know what skating is, Cynthia will tell you. She will also show you."

"And who," asked Mrs. Osborne, "is Cynthia?"

"Cynthia is my sister. She's Mrs. Sprague, the wife of Daniel Sprague. She and Daniel see each other about once every other year. He's a business man, and as I've told you a business man can't worry about a wife, only just now and then when a week has fourteen days."

"I have heard your theories on that subject before. I am inclined to think, Mr. Van Coster, that pretty often your week has fourteen days."

She looked at him rather narrowly as she was walking towards the hotel by his side. He looked straight in front of him, as if unconscious of her glance.

"Maybe. Even a business man strikes a week now and then which stretches to a month."

She wondered what he meant but did not choose to ask him. During most of the time she was more with Mrs. Sprague than she was with him. She liked Mrs. Sprague; she was an incarnation of worldliness in a sense which was new to her. Cynthia seemed to be under the impression that the world was made for women, and that men were sent into it just to give them a good time. What sort of time the men had did not seem to matter. But though she did her best not to make it evident, Helen was convinced that she cared a good deal about the kind of time that Daniel Sprague was having. It was also plain that Mr. Van Coster had been favouring her with an illustration of American humour when he spoke of his sister and her husband seeing each other once every other year or so. Cynthia took particular care that she saw more of Daniel Sprague than that.

Mr. Van Coster devoted a good part of that fortnight to Percy Osborne. He took him with him on all sorts of excursions, showing unexpected pleasure in his society. What Percy Osborne thought of his new friend there was

nothing to show, but the night before he left Mr. Van Coster said to his sister :

" Cynthia, you'll oblige me by keeping one of your three or four eyes—you've got that many, for sure—on that specimen of British manhood." He made a slight movement with his thumb towards where Mr. Percy Osborne was standing. " He's dangerous."

People were dancing in the hotel ballroom. Cynthia had just got rid of her partner—she was supposed to be dancing the next dance with Peter. Instead of starting directly the music began, as he knew she liked to do, he delivered himself of that remark. She looked at him, as if not unnaturally—surprised.

" Isn't this our dance ? " she said.

" It is," he admitted, " but as I'm going and you're staying, you'll oblige me by doing as I ask you."

" My dear Peter, it's you who are dangerous. Are you going to dance with me ? I refused three men because you said you'd like to have one dance before you went. In my opinion it's more than just as well that you're going."

He looked at her, but he said nothing—at least just then. As is not the case with most American women, Cynthia's fondness for exercise was insatiable. She skated and bobbed and skied ; she would climb for weary hours up the difficult slopes of snow-clad mountains just for the pleasure of coming down ; and one of the forms of exercise —that was how she put it—she enjoyed most was dancing. She might be, and sometimes was, on her feet before the rising of the sun and after its setting ; she was never so tired but that she was ready, willing, and indeed anxious to finish the day by going for several miles round a crowded ballroom. Under cover of that dance brother and sister said things to each other which at its close induced the lady to say to him :

" Peter Van Coster, you can dance, but as a talker you don't shine. I tell you, right out, and you can take this away with you to-morrow morning, that in my judgment, which is a good deal sounder than yours, Percy Osborne is not a fiftieth part as dangerous as you are."

CHAPTER XIII

LOONY

MR. VAN COSTER's next meeting with the Osbornes was at Folkestone in late September of the same year, eight months after their sojourn at St. Moritz. For some reason Mrs. Osborne was always reluctant to visit England. She might stop there for a day or two now and then on her passage from one Continental resort to another, but never longer than she could help. On that occasion business matters of importance rendered it necessary that she should remain in England for possibly two or three weeks. They had been at Folkestone nearly a fortnight when we saw her retire to her bedroom after that conversation with Mr. Van Coster on the cliff. That same night she and her husband dined with him in his sister's rooms overlooking the Leas. They were a party of four. After the meal they went out on to the Leas to take the air and, theoretically, to listen to the band. Mrs. Sprague, who seemed to be in one of her mischievous moods, suggested to Percy Osborne that they should go for a stroll. He smiled, said nothing, and off they went. His wife and Van Coster were left alone together, seated on adjoining chairs. Mr. Van Coster watched the couple strolling off.

" Seems to me," he said, speaking as if it were only by accident that the words were uttered aloud, " that Cynthia finds Osborne amusing."

Ignoring the remark, Helen put to him a question.

" What has brought you to England this time, Mr. Van Coster ? "

" Business—just business. I fancy that it sometimes slips your memory that I'm a business man."

" It's lucky that it should have brought you to Folkestone while the weather is so fine, and that it should not be too urgent to prevent your enjoying a little leisure."

If the lady spoke ironically he did not choose to see it. His gravity was almost ponderous.

" That's so. Things are so ordered in this world, and even in America, that even a business man has moments of leisure. He has them rarely, but he has them." He turned towards the lady. " I've come to England, Mrs. Osborne, incidentally, to find a man."

" I shouldn't think that was difficult; if you look around you'll see plenty."

" That again is so. But I'm looking for a particular man, and he's difficult to find. There have been people with very sharp eyes looking for him for more than three years, and he's not found yet."

" Perhaps he does not intend to be found."

" Maybe; but I don't fancy, somehow, that in this case it is like that. Did I ever tell you that I once had a chum out West, in the days when I'd have been glad of a dollar a day, and to work fourteen hours for it. He was an Englishman—a mad Englishman. We called him Loony—that was the name by which he was generally known; but he wasn't so loony as he seemed, not by yards. He was a good chum to me. I don't know why he liked me, but he did—and I liked him. We went through some queer times together, Loony and I; if I were to tell you about some of them you'd laugh. But we didn't laugh then—not much! Then we parted; he went farther out into the wilds and I went to the city. I had an idea that I might do better where there were people, and I did. I didn't see him after that for more years than I care to tell; I don't want you to think I'm a centenarian."

" I know how old you are. You're forty-three; you told me so."

" Did I? That shows that I'm not a man to hide even my defects under a bushel."

" You told me so only this morning. You have a short memory."

" Maybe, but it has nothing to do with my yarn. No man likes to be interrupted when he's telling a story. One day I had a wire from Loony asking me to go to him at once as he had something he wanted very much to say to me—just a casual sort of wire, as if I had only parted from him the day before, and he was only a couple of blocks away.

That wire came from a place I'd never heard of; I had to look it out upon the map. It took me close upon a fortnight to get there, and I got there an hour before he died. He had just enough breath left in his body to tell me what he wanted to say. If I'm talking you to death, speak and I'm dumb."

"I think I can bear a little more of it."

"That's really kind of you. I've always felt that in real kindness you beat the band."

"You have never told me so. You informed me once, when I last saw you at St. Moritz, that Englishwomen were the hardest kind of women, and that I was the most English Englishwoman you had ever met."

"Maybe. That's some while ago. Let me get on with my yarn. Loony had made his pile—not so very big as piles go, but big enough. He had married, and built himself a home, a nest for his wife—the bird had flown. His wife had gone off with his managing man and his managing man had gone off with some of his money. When he found out how the pair of them had done him in he took it so hard that he had a stroke; it was after he recovered consciousness that he wired me. He had made a will by which everything was left to his wife. But he wasn't going to leave the pile it had taken him so many years to make to a woman who had done her level best to turn the man he had trusted into a blackguard and a thief."

"Had she done that?"

"Kearney, his manager, was a man he knew through and through. He had never known him do a dirty thing, or to be mean to any one. He was clear in his own mind that he never would have done what he had done if he hadn't been drawn into it by the woman. He found out things about her which made it plain that that was not the first time she had played that sort of game."

"How old was your friend?"

"He was old enough to be my father; she might have been my younger sister."

"Now I'm beginning to understand."

"That means?"

"When an old man who, as you put it, has made his

pile, marries a young woman who presumably hasn't, and about whom he knows very little, do you think he's entitled to take it hard if anything happens ? "

" Maybe not. When a man behaves like a fool he may expect to be fooled. Mrs. Osborne, you're a student of the world. Anyhow, Loony had destroyed the will by which he left his money to his wife, and he had made another by which he left it to his relations. And he had sent for me because he wanted me to promise that I'd find them. I promised, and that's the trouble."

" Has it been so difficult to find his relations ? "

" The pile he left has been growing, and it looks as if it will keep on growing, because I don't seem to be any nearer finding them than ever I was. He died before he was able to tell me anything about his own history, or even from what part of England he came. We called him Loony, but his name was Tuffington."

" Tuffington ? " She glanced round at him as if startled.

" It doesn't seem to be a name of which any one need be proud, perhaps that's why he kept it to himself. I have advertised in I don't know how many English papers for any one who answered to the name of Tuffington. Replies have been few, most of them from people who scented a possible dollar and were mightily in want of one. No one came along who had the slightest connexion with Loony. I had only to have ten minutes' interview with them to be sure of that. I got so sick of looking for any one of the name of Tuffington that I just didn't know what to do. I was managing that pile, which kept on growing ; what I was to do with it, I couldn't think. I got to that state that I would have liked to take the lot of it out to sea and dump it right overboard. When I was seriously thinking of applying to the courts for relief, about a month ago I came upon something like a clue at last."

" What was it ? " Had he not been engrossed with his story he might have noticed that there was a slight yet perceptible change in her manner ; that she asked the question almost as if she was afraid of what the answer might be. She listened to it when it came with more

obvious interest than to anything which he had been saying yet.

" I had a letter from some one in a Suffolk village, pretty badly written and pretty badly spelt, on about the commonest paper I ever saw. It was signed Martha Worrall. Martha Worrall wrote to say that she had heard that some one was inquiring for people of the name of Tuffington. She didn't know if it would interest the inquirer—I am using my words, not hers—but she had known people of that name. She believed that all the family was dead, but if the inquirer thought it worth while she would be willing to give him all the information she could."

" What did you say was the name of the writer of the letter ? "

" Martha Worrall. I cabled my agent to look up Martha Worrall and find out all he could. To my surprise, and also to his, he found out quite a lot. He found out more than I had been able to do during those three years. Would you like to know what he found out—or have you had enough of this silly old tale of mine ? "

" What's the use of beginning a story and leaving it unfinished ? Go on. What did your agent find out about Martha Worrall ? "

" She's an old lady of seventy-five ; she lives with her grandson in a cottage for which he pays three shillings a week rent. In the village in which she had been born——"

" What is the name of the village ? "

" New Binsted. I've seen New Binsted, and it's about one of the oldest things in villages I have seen. In New Binsted, Martha Worrall said, there had lived a family named Tuffington. I soon found that was no lie, because there are their lichen-covered tombstones, slanting at all angles, in the village graveyard. At one time the Tuffingtons were some one, but that was before her time ; they were on the down grade when she knew them. Amos Tuffington had lived at the Potash Farm. They had had two children, a son and a daughter. The son had been called after his father, Amos. Now Loony's Christian name was Amos, so it seemed pretty clear that I was on the track. He was eight or nine years younger than Martha Worrall, and, in

the old lady's opinion, always was a rover. He never could stay happy at home; he was always all over the place. While he was still a lad he left New Binsted for good. The old lady had heard nothing about him since, and she didn't believe that any one else had either. It didn't take me long to make certain inquiries which made me sure that that Amos Tuffington was my old chum Loony. But just as I was congratulating myself that that pile was off my hands at last, I found that I was no nearer getting rid of it than I ever had been."

"How did that come about? Couldn't you trace any other members of the family? Where was the daughter? Couldn't you find her?"

Mrs. Osborne put her questions with what one who knew her well would have felt was an elaborate attempt to appear indifferent. Such a one might have suspected that she was even curiously anxious to hear the answer. Before it came something occurred which diverted her attention.

They sat outside the fringe of the crowd which was circling round and round the bandstand. While she was waiting for his response, Mrs. Osborne, chancing to glance at the perambulating people, caught a glimpse of a face, the sight of which affected her in a distinctly surprising fashion. It was the face of a woman who was walking, apparently by herself, almost in the centre of the throng. Just as Mrs. Osborne had her glimpse, some one passed between her and the woman so as to block out the view. When it was again possible to see the woman had gone. Mrs. Osborne rose from her seat as if to make sure.

"What's the matter?" inquired her companion. "Is it any one you know and would rather you didn't?"

"No. I did fancy that I saw some one with whom I once had some slight acquaintance, but this light plays one tricks; I expect I was wrong. One sometimes does mistake a stranger for an acquaintance."

She spoke as if she were trembling. He eyed her anxiously.

"You're cold. I have kept you out in the cool night air, listening to my interminable yarn, and now you've caught a chill. Where is that husband of yours, and that sister of mine?"

A reply came instantly, in the shape of Percy Osborne himself. He came hurrying towards them, picking his way through the crowd in what for him was a state of considerable agitation.

"Helen," he began as soon as he reached them, as if something had moved him to unusual loquacity, "what do you think? Who do you suppose I've seen? I've had such a surprise. Can you guess who it is I've seen?"

She knew in a moment. She got up from her chair, drawing her white wrap about her.

"Come," she said, "I think we'd better go in. Mr. Van Coster and I have been wondering where you were. Where is Mrs. Sprague?"

"She's coming! But who do you think I saw in the crowd?"

"I've not the least idea. What does it matter? Have you managed to lose Mrs. Sprague?"

He answered in his own fashion, sticking to the point which she seemed willing to evade.

"I saw an old friend of yours."

"An old friend of mine! Percy!" She spoke with a sudden touch of contempt, almost as if he had offended her. Her manner seemed to surprise him.

"Wasn't she a friend of yours?"

"My dear Percy, what are you talking about? You are so foolish. Ah, Mrs. Sprague, here you are. I was wondering if my husband had lost you. He is sometimes so erratic."

Mrs. Sprague was smiling; she seemed to be enjoying a joke.

"We were strolling along by the edge of the cliff, and I was trying to enlighten him as to the inwardness of certain American institutions, when, as I was right in the middle of a sentence, he exclaimed: 'There's Adela!' That was the first remark he'd made for half an hour. Directly he had made it he dashed off into the crowd and left me wondering. Mr. Osborne, who is Adela?"

Mr. Osborne seemed oddly excited. "Why, Adela Reid? You remember Adela, Helen, at the Priory, Mrs. Thompson's niece."

" I'm afraid I don't. At least I fancy I have a dim recollection of some person of that name. But we are keeping Mrs. Sprague." She addressed the lady. " As you are going to Le Touquet to-morrow I suppose we shall have to say good-bye to-night. It may be some time before we see you again. I hope you will have good golf and capture all the prizes."

Mrs. Sprague laughed. " At Le Touquet one may count upon good golf though one doesn't capture any prizes. Good night, and good-bye."

As Mr. and Mrs. Osborne moved together towards their hotel, the husband asked the wife, looking at her with a sidelong glance and with his perpetual smile: " Helen, why are you afraid of Adela Reid ? "

The question seemed to move her to something like anger.

" Percy, if I didn't know you as well as I do——"

He interrupted :

" How well do you think you know me ? "

She was so surprised that she stopped short to look at him. It was a question she had often put to herself ; that he should put it to her made her conscious of a sudden most uncomfortable sensation.

" What do you mean ? You are always suggesting that I am afraid of something, of some one. Of what am I afraid ?—of whom ? What reason do you suppose I can have for fear ? "

He smiled. On that occasion it would be more correct to write that he grinned.

" You are afraid of Adela Reid." Then he added, with a volubility which amazed her more and more : " You told lies. You said you didn't remember her, that you had only a dim recollection of her name. You knew her perfectly well ; you saw her as well as I did, that's why you wanted to come away. You're afraid of Adela Reid."

The strangeness of his manner seemed to deprive her of her breath.

" Why should I be afraid of Adela Reid ? "

He sniggered. " I am going for a walk," he said. Wheeling round, he walked rapidly off, leaving her to return to the hotel alone.

CHAPTER XIV

"FASTER!"

THE next morning there was a large postal packet addressed to Mrs. Osborne. As she sat in her bedroom, drinking her before-breakfast cup of tea, she examined its exterior. She knew that it contained papers which, if she gave them the attention they required, would occupy the greater part of the day. It was no use submitting them to her husband. If he were in one of his moods he would quite probably tear them up and tell her to send them back again. They ought to be attended to at once, they had been neglected long enough. She had no doubt that the envelope contained a letter from Mr. Pendleton asking her to let him have them back to-morrow.

She had grown sick of papers, all at once. She had had a broken night, seeming scarcely to have slept at all. Phantoms had sat beside her pillow. She realized that it was absurd of her to suffer them; that if she could only bring herself to the sticking-point they would resolve themselves into the nothings which they really were. But that was exactly what she could not do. Certain events had left an impression upon her inner consciousness which was indelible. It was almost like the record of a gramophone; it had only to be touched with a needle, it would proclaim its existence again and again, for ever and for ever. It seemed to her that in the whole course of her natural life she never could hope to escape it.

Now this woman had come to Folkestone. Adela Reid, the Priory landlady's niece—that vulgar creature whom she had always hated, who had warned her against Mr. Jack Yarrow, and who, she had no doubt, had shared his favours. Her presence meant that the whole horrid episode had come back again. At any moment she might run against her; she might compel her to recall memories which it was her constant prayer might be forgotten. Worse, there was her husband, Percy Osborne. She had an uncomfortable feel-

ing that he was in what she called " one of his moods." The sight of Adela Reid had pleased him the night before. He had dashed from Mrs. Sprague's side to speak to her, apparently in vain. Afterwards, when he left his wife to return alone to the hotel, he might have gone after her again. He might have found her. If he had, what might they not have said to each other, what confidences might they have exchanged?

So far as Helen was aware Osborne knew nothing of her engagement to the man Yarrow; of the forged cheque; of her dismissal by Mr. Fisher; of the various causes which, in her madness, had driven her to become his wife. Then she had been mad indeed. Better anything than to have sent that wire, to have waited for him on the platform of Romford Station.

In his insinuating, roundabout way he had tried to find out, more than once, why she had ever agreed to become his wife. She had not told him. She did not know if she were glad or sorry that she had kept the story hidden from him. She had a feeling which was almost morbid that she would rather endure anything than that he should learn it now, especially from such a source as Adela Reid. She would leave Folkestone that very day; hurry through Mr. Pendleton's papers and be off before the night.

When, a little later, she met her husband in their sitting-room, she told him, in her own way, what it was she proposed to do.

" Percy, I think, if you don't mind, I should like to go. I'm tired of Folkestone."

He had come into the room apparently to look for a paper, and having found it, was about to leave again when she spoke. He stopped and turned and looked at her, and smiled.

" But I do mind."

" What do you mean—you mind? "

" I do mind leaving Folkestone. I don't want to go, and I'm not going."

It was almost the first time that he had ever suggested the slightest active opposition to her wishes. She was so accustomed to his invariable complete acquiescence that even a show of opposition startled her.

" But why don't you want to go? " She started to reason

with him as she might have reasoned with a child. "You told me only yesterday that you didn't find Folkestone very amusing."

"That was before I saw Adela Reid."

She allowed her eyes to rest on him for an instant, then glanced down at the papers which were on the table in front of her.

"Did you see her again last night?"

"I didn't; I looked for her everywhere, but I couldn't find her. That's just it—I'm going to find her before I go, and then she will tell me why you're afraid of her."

She glanced up from the papers, and this time it was she who smiled.

"Is that so? Then, Percy, I fancy you'll find that we shall remain in Folkestone for the rest of our lives."

He nodded. "I shall find out to-day."

Still nodding, as if to himself, he left the room. When he had gone, pillowing her face on her hands, she shivered as if attacked by a sudden chill. Presently, putting pressure on herself, she returned to the study of the papers; but she seemed to find it difficult to concentrate her attention sufficiently to follow their meaning. After a few minutes, recognizing that the thing was hopeless, she crossed to one of the windows which looked on the Leas. The weather continued fine; the sun was shining, the band was playing there were a number of people. One might have thought that it would not be easy to distinguish a particular person in such a throng. But she did it at a glance. Leaning against the railing at the extreme edge of the cliff, right opposite her window, was Peter Van Coster. As if acting on a sudden impulse, she went to her bedroom. Five minutes afterwards, having put on her hat in a remarkably short space of time, she was crossing the grass. He saw her coming and moved to meet her.

"Has Mrs. Sprague gone?" she asked, when a few minutes afterwards they were seated side by side.

"The steamer has just taken her away. You can see the smoke of it out there. She'll be trying to lower her handicap onthat Le Touquet golf course by this time to-morrow morning. You look tired."

"I do feel a little fagged." She added, before he could speak again: "I've been thinking of that story of yours, which last night you left unfinished, about Loony and the pile he left behind. You were just going to tell me something about that sister of his, the Miss Tuffington who stayed behind in New Binsted, when you were interrupted. What was it you were going to say?"

"Queerly enough, I've had a letter about her this morning from my agent. It seems that after all he has managed to make certain that she did marry—a man named Cartwright. They had one child, a daughter, and she married quite young."

"Did she marry some one named Arnold?"

Mrs. Osborne asked the question as if casually. Mr. Van Coster, turning farther round, eyed her steadily.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I fancy that the Miss Tuffington who lived at New Binsted and became Mrs. Cartwright was my grandmother."

"You don't say! Of all the things! But let me understand how that comes to be."

"My name before my marriage was Arnold—Helen Arnold. Didn't you know?"

"A man doesn't go round asking married ladies what their maiden name was. I just knew you were Mrs. Osborne, and that is all I ever have known—not, mind you, that I was over-anxious to know more, because so long as I knew you I was just content."

"My mother, Helen Cartwright—I was called after her—married my father, George Arnold, when she was eighteen. I was born when she was twenty; a year afterwards she died, on her twenty-first birthday. I lived with my grandmother while my father lived in London, trying to earn enough to keep me and to provide me with some sort of education. He died ten years ago. My grandmother died about a fortnight afterwards. Since neither of them left anything behind, except the few pounds I got for my grandmother's furniture, I had to keep myself. Five years after I was married, on my twenty-first birthday. You will remember that my mother died when she was twenty-one;

that seems to have been an eventful age in our family history. That, Mr. Van Coster, is the true story of my association with the Tuffington family."

"You've got your facts right enough. That's how my man states them in his letter. But why didn't you tell me last night?"

"Your story took me so entirely by surprise. As I listened, and began to realize that your Tuffingtons might be mine, I hardly knew where I was. Then before I could speak you know we were interrupted."

"Yes, I remember that. I don't know if you realize, Mrs. Osborne, that it looks as if you were the only representative of the Tuffington family living."

"I believe I am. I've always understood that I've not a relation in the world. I knew that my grandmother had a brother but she always used to speak of him as if he were dead; she certainly hadn't heard anything of him for years and years."

"Maybe. But all the same he outlived her; and you're —do you know you're the lawful owner of his pile?"

"Am I? Are you quite sure?" She spoke so quietly that he regarded her as if with surprise.

"Anyway, you seem to take it calmly enough. You ask me if I'm sure as if you were talking about a handful of cents. I'll have you to know that this is an affair of a shipload of dollars."

"I'm glad to hear it, especially if any of them should prove to be mine. I have never really had any money of my own. I used to earn just enough to keep body and soul together. I went to my husband penniless, with nothing else in the world except the clothes I stood up in; since I was married every shilling I have had has come from him." She drew a deep breath, which was very like a sigh. "If at last I am to have some what you call dollars of my own, enough to keep me——"

"Oh, there will be enough to keep you. If you spend all Loony's pile on your keep you must want a real lot of keeping. Hullo!—What on earth!—Who in thunder!—I'll be sizzled if it isn't!"

These broken exclamations were apparently expressive

of the strength of the emotion which was caused to Mr. Van Coster by what was clearly the unexpected sight of some person or persons in the surrounding crowd. He had raised his body perhaps eighteen inches from the chair to stare at something or some one on his right. The lady followed to the best of her ability the direction of his glance. He continued to give utterance to his feelings in tones which were perhaps just a little loud.

"You see that individual standing over there in a brown suit, and a brown hat a little on one side of his head, a pink rose in his buttonhole and a grin on his face—he's one of the best-known crooks in business. The last time I saw him he wasn't looking so fond of himself. He'd just been thrown out of a second-floor window, and he sort of picked himself up as if he felt a little jolted. He's a peach, that fellow is; he's a daisy! If he'd been in a part of America I know very well, he'd have been decorating a tree a long while ago; instead of which he looks as if he knew that the sun was shining just because he's around. Do you see the man I mean?"

She did—she saw Mr. Jack Yarrow. The moment she had started to follow her companion's glance there he was right in her line of vision. He seemed to be one of a little group of people who were laughing and chatting together like old familiar friends. Directly she realized at whom Mr. Van Coster's glance was directed, and of whom his unflattering words were intended to be descriptive, she sat right back in her hammock-chair, closing her eyes as if to shut out what she had unfortunately been compelled to see.

Mr. Van Coster went on, seeming to grow warmer and warmer:

"To think that a thing like that should be allowed to stay among decent folk, holding himself as if he were as good as the best; I guess I'll just stroll across and give him a little pleasant surprise. If he hasn't forgotten what I look like, and I should fancy he hasn't, when he sees me coming I shouldn't wonder if he lit off for some more congenial climate."

Mr. Van Coster showing a disposition to translate his words into action, Mrs. Osborne put out her hand to restrain him.

"Don't—please don't let us have a scene here. At any rate, couldn't you wait till I'm gone."

"That so; I could and I would, and I beg your pardon for being so very near to forgetting myself; but when I see a man like that something happens to the machinery and I feel I've got to get moving before the boiler bursts. Why, there's your husband. He doesn't seem to see that we're here."

At that moment Mrs. Osborne felt that she would very much rather he shouldn't. Within a dozen yards of where they were sitting, Mr. Percy Osborne strolled past with a lady. As the lady was Miss Adela Reid his wife was content that he should remain blissfully unconscious of her near neighbourhood. When Mr. Van Coster showed an inclination to attract his notice, Mrs. Osborne again put out an interfering hand.

"Please, Mr. Van Coster, let him go. He is walking with a person whose existence I prefer not to recognize." If Mr. Van Coster caught the significance of her words was not clear, he was moved to such extreme agitation by a little scene which was being enacted before them.

"Why, if the lady your husband is with isn't marching him straight up to that all-fired crook. If he gets mixed up in that crowd he'll— Gee whiz!—if he doesn't seem to be recognizing him as an old friend; if this doesn't beat the band! Mrs. Osborne, you'll excuse me, but your husband is shaking hands with one of the most remarkable shags that I've ever encountered—and I've met some—as if he were a dearly loved brother he had found after having lost awhile."

The lady was aware of what her husband was doing without her companion telling her; although to outward seeming she studiously avoided glancing in that direction she saw all that was taking place, as on occasion women can do, without looking. She knew how Adela Reid had, as Van Coster put it, marched her husband straight up to JackYarrow; how, when he was within a few feet of him, he had quickened his pace and made a rush straight at him, and seizing his hand, had begun to shake it as if it were something which he could not bear to lose hold of. She would have got on to her feet and walked right away if she had not been afraid that her action would be noticed and draw to herself just that attention which she was so anxious to avoid.

An exclamation from Mr. Van Coster, however, made her

conscious that though she sat quite still and hid herself as much as she could under the canopy which shaded her chair, she had been observed, and that something which she would have given a great deal to avoid was about to happen. Van Coster's agitation was so marked as to be almost comic.

"Holy smoke! If that husband of yours isn't bringing his dear old friend right here. I don't know, Mrs. Osborne, if you'd like me to do a bolt, but I'm bound to tell you that when his dear old friend sees me there may be a little music unaccompanied by the band. Shall I go?"

The lady got up from her chair.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Van Coster, we will both go. Please walk with me to the hotel, if you can spare the time."

"Oh, I can spare the time. But here is Mr. Osborne, and his friend—indeed his friend. If you'll permit me I'll just stay while you talk with them; only, if you will be advised by me, I don't think I should say more to them than I could help."

"I have no intention of saying anything to them at all. Are you coming, or must I go alone?"

Percy Osborne, with Yarrow on his right hand and Miss Reid on his left, was within three feet of his wife and her companion, when the lady, ignoring them as completely as if nothing were in sight, turning on her heels, began to move leisurely from them towards the hotel at the back, walking with a deliberation which suggested that, so far as she was concerned, there was not the slightest need for haste. Mr. Van Coster, standing still, awaited the approaching trio. Since he had only just risen out of the depths of his hammock-chair, it was apparently only when he was quite close that Mr. Yarrow became aware of his existence. When he saw him Yarrow stopped short, evincing a seeming disinclination to advance any farther. Osborne, interested in his wife's obvious unwillingness to recognize his companions, was unconscious that there was anything singular in Yarrow's bearing when he saw Van Coster. He called out to the lady, moved by what seemed a most unwonted eagerness to attract attention to himself as well as make himself heard:

"Helen! Helen! I say, here's an old friend who wants to speak to you. Come back!"

Yarrow placed a restraining hand upon the speaker's arm.

" Don't trouble Mrs. Osborne, pray. No doubt other opportunities will arise for me to renew our old acquaintance."

Mr. Osborne was not to be diverted from his intention.

" But I want her to stop and talk to you now. What is she going off like that for ? She saw you. She must have seen you. Why does she go walking off as if she hadn't ? Helen ! Helen ! I say ! "

He put his hand up to his mouth and shouted. The crowd turned to stare. Mrs. Osborne seemed to be one of the few persons present who remained unconscious of the fashion in which he was calling after her. She continued her leisurely progress. Mr. Osborne seemed moved to something very like anger.

" Well, I'm dashed ! " he exclaimed. " You stop here, Yarrow. I'll run after her and bring her back."

As he was starting Mr. Van Coster slipped an arm through his.

" I shouldn't." Both his tone and manner were affable, yet they seemed to have a curious effect upon Mr. Osborne. He fell into a trick he had of stammering.

" What do you mean by—you—you shouldn't ? You shouldn't what ? "

" I shouldn't try to prevent Mrs. Osborne from returning to the hotel. I don't fancy you know what sort of person it is who's standing by you. You called him Yarrow just now, but that's not his name."

Osborne actually seemed disposed to bluster.

" His name is Yarrow. I ought to know ; he's an old friend of mine."

" That so ? Then, Osborne, I cannot congratulate you on your choice of friends. This man is a swindler, a rogue, a thief, and a skunk—what we call in my country a crook. Yarrow may be one of his names, though he certainly has two dozen more. To my knowledge the police are looking for him by half a dozen of them, and if he is to be found in Folkestone in half an hour the police will have him. He's the kind of pestilent vermin which it's every man's duty to exterminate whenever seen. Well, you bunco-steering, flat-catching, area sneak, did you happen to hear what I said ? "

Mr. Yarrow looked as if he were scarcely happy; as if conscious that he was in a delicate situation, from which it would not be easy to emerge with dignity. He spoke with faltering tongue.

"I don't wish—I don't wish—to have anything—to have anything to say to you, sir."

"That's right, I shouldn't. Silence best becomes you."

"I don't know—I don't know who you are——"

"I'm the man who threw you out of a window. But maybe you've been thrown out of so many windows that you're not likely to keep a particular one in your mind."

"You've—you've made a great mistake. I can only suppose you're—you're mistaking me for some one else."

"You say another word and you shall prove that to the police—for sure you shall. Slink!"

He accompanied the last word with a gesture which was so pregnant with meaning that the man he addressed "slunk." With an attempt at bravado, which was more than a little painful, Mr. Yarrow, turning, began to stroll back towards the group which he had recently left, as if he found the position most amusing. Van Coster, moving after him, tapped him smartly on the shoulder with a cane which he was carrying.

"Faster!" Yarrow wheeled round, on his face a look which suggested that his resentment was so great as almost to get the better of his prudence. A policeman came threading his way through the people on the asphalt-walk. Mr. Van Coster hailed him. "Constable! Now, you pigeon-plucking dead-beat, I'm going to hand you over to this officer, and you can explain to him when he's got you buckled how it is that I came to take you for some one else. See?"

Whether Mr. Yarrow did or did not see was never made clear. When he saw that officer of police approaching he made another right-about turn and walked off towards the town with a rapidity of motion which was in striking contrast to the careless strolling of a minute before. Van Coster turned to Osborne, who seemed to be a little bewildered.

"There goes your friend. He's just that kind of man."

He pointed after the retreating Mr. Yarrow, who was moving so swiftly that he was already nearly out of sight.

CHAPTER XV

THE DRAWER

MRS. OSBORNE, having returned alone to the hotel, was able to witness from her bedroom-window the departure of Mr. Yarrow. She saw, almost immediately after, Adela Reid follow in the direction he had taken; and then, after apparently a few words with Mr. Van Coster, her husband go hurrying after her. Van Coster, left alone, remained standing where he was with his eyes turned towards the retreating Osborne.

Mrs. Osborne, from her place at the window, could see him smile, then, shrugging his shoulders, subside into the chair from which he had risen at sight of Yarrow. The canopy hid him from her. She wondered what he was thinking; what conclusions he had drawn from that odd episode. He must have long since formed his opinion about the relations which existed between her and her husband. She had often asked herself what they were. She had always had an uncomfortable feeling that the more he knew them the stronger his conviction became that there must have been some abnormal reason for her marriage with Percy Osborne. She had an idea that his sister had a more or less vague suspicion that there was a disgraceful reason. She had heard people say, when they did not know that they had an unwilling listener, that of course she had married the man for his money, and then go on to hint that money was not the only reason, but that she must have had some stronger incentive even than that. She had once heard a man—who professed to be her warm admirer—say to a chance male acquaintance:

"That woman married Osborne because she couldn't help it. There's a story in her life, she's got it written large all over her. I don't pretend to be able to tell you exactly what it is, but I'd like to bet a trifle that once upon a time she was in a pretty bad hole, and I shouldn't wonder if Osborne made it a condition that if he hauled her out of it she should become his wife."

What the speaker meant she did not know; she was afraid to listen any longer. The words suggested such a keen insight into the true state of affairs that for very shame she left the place that day. Often since she had wondered, when people looked at her, if they were reading what was "written all over her."

Now here was Yarrow back upon the scene, that original cause of all her troubles. And here was Mr. Van Coster proclaiming that he was even a worse character than she had supposed. If Mr. Van Coster came to learn about the relations which had existed between them, what would he think of her then? Unwittingly Peter Van Coster had come to stand to her for her ideal of manhood, and rather than fall in his estimation— She veiled her face in her hands and shuddered at the thought of such a catastrophe. To her that would indeed be the end of all things. Yet how was she to prevent it? Only by what looked like a miracle had he been kept from the knowledge now. If she had persisted in refusing Yarrow's recognition he might have blurted out the facts by way of revenge, if Mr. Van Coster had not stepped in and driven him away before he had even a chance to open his lips.

She lunched off a glass of milk and some biscuits in her own room. Before she had finished that simple meal she had arrived at a resolution. Mr. Van Coster's story of the pile of which he was guardian opened to her a vista of possibilities of which she had not hitherto ventured to dream. She was dependent on her husband for every farthing; therefore she was at his mercy. Her experience of earning her own living had not been of a sufficiently encouraging kind to induce her to try again. If she were thrown upon her own resources to-morrow she would not know how to begin to earn a penny. Therefore she was conscious that she owed a certain degree of service to the man whose name she bore and on whose money she lived. And she was able to assure herself that she earned what he gave her. No steward could have managed his affairs better. She had not only guarded his interests, she had guarded him. Over and over again she had protected him from people who would have taken advantage of his incapacity to take care of him-

self, even in the simplest matters of everyday life. So it had come about that, by imperceptible degrees, she had grown to regard herself as his general factotum rather than his wife. She preferred to regard herself from that point of view. She had certainly never been his wife; she had merely been his retainer.

And if in that capacity she had done him faithful service she was the more entitled, if her position became unbearable, to withdraw from it. She would have done that long ago had she had the means. And now—only now—when her strength was indeed becoming unequal to the situation, there was that old man's pile. If she could make clear her title to even a share of that she would speak plainly to her husband, retire from her situation, and make still another effort, in fresh scenes and among other surroundings, to start life again and forget the past.

She sat by the open window thinking, thinking, thinking how that might be done. There was a book in the other room about South America. She had been telling herself only a few days before how much she would like to go there for at any rate a year or two. She had met in Switzerland an Englishman and his wife who had an Argentine ranch. Without breathing an audible word they had extended to her that sympathy which she had so often resented. The wife had said to her that if ever she felt herself in need of a pick-me-up she was to come to their ranch—she would be a welcome guest.

In the book there was a good deal about the part of the country in which the ranch was; she went into the sitting-room to fetch it. The volume was in a revolving bookcase which stood in a corner. As she stooped to take it out the door behind her opened and shut quickly, as if some one had entered in a hurry. She looked round to see who it was, and continued to look.

The person who had entered was Mr. Yarrow.

He did seem to be in a hurry. He stood with his back against the door, leaning against it with his right shoulder, his fingers on the handle, listening, as if he had some unwelcome follower and wished to be advised of his approach. His short, quick breathing showed what haste he had made.

So absorbed was he in his own concerns that he seemed to be unconscious that he was not alone in the room. For some seconds he stayed perfectly still, and then, as if satisfied that the person he wished to avoid was at least not close at hand, he drew himself away from the door and shook himself as if he were shaking off an actual weight. He put his hand up and smoothed his hair—it had been a familiar gesture of his in the old days. The woman behind the bookcase wondered what had become of his hat. Had he rushed into the hotel bare-headed?

He glanced to the right and to the left. That revolving bookcase was nearly five feet high, in a corner; the book she sought was on a lower shelf; she was bending low, so that unless one had a particular reason for looking carefully in her direction, it was quite easy for her to escape notice—which is what happened. Mr. Yarrow's glances were of the most cursory kind. He seemed to take it for granted that the room was empty and walked straight across it to a writing-table which stood in the window. When he reached it he noticed that there was a door leading into another room on his right. It was the door which opened into her own room—she had left it ajar.

The fact that it was ajar seemed to render him uneasy. He moved towards it on tiptoe. Standing close to the wall, he peeped round the corner through the narrow opening. Perceiving nothing and no one, he rapped with his knuckles sharply against the panel. Receiving no reply, opening the door wider, he looked all round it, then crossed the threshold so that he could see still better. The idea that he should intrude himself into her bedroom moved her to such anger that she started up as if to reveal herself. But something held her back; down she bobbed again and waited. Apparently he was in two minds what to do. Had he gone farther into her room she would have risen to call him back. But after hesitating, coming back into the sitting-room he returned to the writing-table.

In the writing-table were seven drawers; a long one at the top, three smaller ones on either side. He tried them all and found them locked; then, stooping, he peered into

the keyhole of the long one at the top. Taking something from a pocket he inserted it, gave it a little twist, and the drawer was open. He returned what might have been a pass-key to his pocket and, pulling the drawer wide open, began to examine its contents.

There was an assurance about his movements which struck the watcher as odd. Three days before Percy Osborne, in one of his moods, had drawn a cheque—a thing he did not do once a year—and without saying a word to her had motored up to London to cash it. Returning late, he had gone to his wife with the air of a penitent. Quite what he had been doing she could not make out; his explanations never were easy to follow. One thing was clear, he had a racking headache and was feeling ill. He produced a roll of bank-notes and placed them in front of her.

What he had meant to do with them was not plain; what he did do was to beg her to keep them for him. In his presence she had gone to the writing-table, opened the top long drawer, placed them in it—where they had since remained.

Only one person knew, except herself, that the notes were in that drawer—that person was Percy Osborne. Yet she had a feeling as she watched that Mr. Yarrow also knew that there were bank-notes in that drawer. How he came by his knowledge she could not guess. There was a method in his movements which impressed her.

Her first impulse was to allow this enterprising gentleman to find what he was seeking; even, if it was that roll of bank-notes which he sought, to walk off with them: to do anything, in short, which would cause him to remove himself from the premises without her having to discover herself. She was all tremulous with the thought of the interview which might ensue.

None the less, when it came to the point she found it impossible to allow this man to play the thief with impunity before her very eyes. As he took from the drawer the bank-notes which, while her husband stood watching, she had placed in it, and was about to transfer them to his pocket,

something rose up within her which refused to permit her to remain inactive. Standing straight up, she moved a little from behind the revolving bookcase. For some seconds he continued motionless; he slipped his hand inside his jacket. When he turned and faced her the man at the writing-table was holding a revolver.

CHAPTER XVI

PLAIN SPEAKING

QUITE what, or whom, Mr. Yarrow expected to see there was, of course, nothing to show. Beyond a doubt to him it was an entire surprise to find himself confronted by the woman whose hand was resting on the revolving bookcase. His face was like a huge note of exclamation. There was a perceptible interval before he recovered sufficiently from his amazement to enable him to speak.

" So it's you ! " he gasped rather than spoke.

She was outwardly calm, calmer than he was, though within she trembled. She had to moisten her lips with the tip of her tongue, as if they were too parched to permit of articulate utterance. When she did speak it was very quietly.

" Take those bank-notes out of your pocket and put them back in the drawer." When he said and did nothing, but only continued to stare, she went on : " When you have replaced them where they were—go ! " When he remained speechless she added, by way of a sort of postscript : " Unless you wish me to ring the bell and tell them to send for the police. You did not seem to be too anxious for the society of a policeman this morning ; now you might relish it even less."

Then he did speak. " I'm not in the least afraid of your sending for the police."

" You think I won't ? "

" I'm sure you won't. If I chose I could stop you with this."

He raised the revolver he was holding. She eyed him disdainfully.

" Do you really suppose I shall be stopped by a thing like that ? "

" I am sure you would be—if I chose. It's a dead-sure stopper, a popgun properly handled. But I have no intention of using mine—it won't be needed. You won't send for the police ; you're too wise."

"Will you put those bank-notes back into the drawer and go?"

With a little laugh he slipped the revolver into his jacket-pocket.

"You're a pretty cool card, my dear. And how you have improved! Who'd have thought that you were the sloppy girl who wanted me to marry her. How fond you were of me! I feel all twittery when I think of it."

"Are you going?" If looks could scorch he would have been shrivelled to a cinder.

"No, my dear Mrs. Osborne, I'm not going. Now that I have been so fortunate as to meet you after all these years, and all alone. I'll have a nice little talk with you before I go."

"You'll do nothing of the kind!"

She moved towards a bell which was at the side of the door. He asked a question just as she reached it.

"What are you going to do?"

"Send for the police."

"Why?"

"You impudent scamp! as if you don't know why!"

"Steady! steady! Don't let's get to calling names, or you may come off worst. Allow me to point out to you, Mrs. Osborne, that this is your husband's apartment, not yours."

"It certainly is not yours, and you have no right here."

"Pardon me, that is where you're wrong. I am here at your husband's invitation."

"It's not true! I don't believe it!"

"I can't help that. I repeat that I'm here at your husband's invitation. Dear Percy, unlike some people, does not forget old friends."

"You never were his friend—never! How dare you say that you were?"

"Your husband, Mrs. Osborne, has been making love to Adela. You remember dear Adela Reid? You can't imagine how delighted he was to see her again. He always was fond of Adela. He's been saying to her some funny things. Only this morning, when that American brute behaved like the bullying blackguard he is——"

"You did not seem to have much to say to him when he was present."

"You wait! I'll show you! Mr. Van Coster and I have not done with each other yet. Your husband told Adela Reid that there were eight hundred pounds in bank-notes in his writing-table drawer and that she was to pass that item of information on to me. And if I chose he would be delighted if I were to pay a call here this afternoon and take the notes away with me. So I've come, at your husband's invitation. And now look at the way in which you're treating me—talking about the police! Is his property his own or is it yours? Can't he do as he likes with his own?"

"Do you imagine that I believe a word you say?"

"As I remarked just now, I can't help your belief. I think I'll sit down and await your husband's return. Perhaps you will be better satisfied if you hear the truth from his own mouth."

"I don't care what my husband said or didn't say. You know perfectly well that half the time he doesn't know what he is saying. I've had to protect him from plenty of thieves like you. I tell you you shall put those bank-notes back into the drawer and go. If you don't I'll send for the police. You're not such a bad judge of character as not to be able to see that I'm serious."

"My dear Helen——"

"How dare you speak to me like that!"

"Like what? Aren't you the girl who used to snuggle into my arms and ask me to kiss her? Have you changed your Christian as well as your surname? You were Helen then. Why, I used to call you Nellikins."

"You—! Are you going?"

"With the bank-notes?—your husband's little gift, which I came at his express invitation to take away."

"Without the bank-notes!"

"No; not without the bank-notes. One moment before you press that bell. For whom do you suppose the police are coming—if sent for?"

"Are you going—without the bank-notes?"

"If the police do come they'll come for you. You've

been bluffing it for years, but if a policeman sets his foot inside this room your time for bluffing is over. You forged a cheque for two hundred pounds."

"I—forged—a cheque!" She put her hand to her side as if in sudden pain.

"None of your rot! I've been shielding you for five years. I've had a rough time. I've known what it is to go hungry, and all the while you've been living on the fat of the land, carrying yourself as if you were an angel of virtue. I'm through with it! You ring that bell and I'll tell the first policeman I see the truth about you."

"You'll tell him the truth—about me, you—you—you miserable thing!" Mrs. Osborne was shaking so that she could scarcely speak.

"You were going to be my wife; you duped me into thinking that you cared for me; you gave me a cheque and asked me to cash it for you, a cheque for two hundred pounds."

"You told me that your master had given it to you—your governor, as you called him—Stephen Fisher—as a present on your twenty-first birthday. I thought the story was a queer one, but you wheedled me and fooled me; in those days I would have done anything you told me to do. So I handed in that cheque across the counter, and they gave me cash for it. Then, when I met you in Cannon Street by appointment to hand you the cash, you saw your governor and the bank clerk coming and you knew the game was up and started screeching. You pushed me into a cab which I had got for you, and then I knew that you had committed forgery and meant to put the blame on me. If I could have got hold of you while I was in the cab I'd have twisted your head off your shoulders. But though I knew by that time what you were, I was still so fond of you, and hoped and expected to see you again and feel your lips against mine, that I kept silent. But not again—not again! I know where Stephen Fisher is—you ruined him as you ruined me—he's had to work for his daily bread as a day labourer. You send for the police and the police shall arrest you. Fisher has been looking for you for years. He'll go into the box and you shall go into the dock, and

you'll get the penal servitude you deserve. What's more, you've been robbing your husband; a girl like you robs every one; she only wants a chance. Your husband told Adela Reid that you've been robbing him ever since he was fool enough to marry you."

"It's a lie! He said nothing of the kind, you—you prince of liars!"

"He told her that you'd robbed him of the bank-notes he has given me. He came back with them from London, where he'd been to get them without telling you, because you wouldn't let him keep a penny of his own money if you knew he'd got one, and directly he came back you went for him—he's as weak as water—and got the whole story from him in less than no time. You made him hand the bank-notes over; you pounced on them as soon as you caught sight of them; you took them from him—his own bank notes!—and you locked them in this drawer; and you forbade him to go near the drawer or to touch them. He goes in such terror of you that he thinks it's as much as his life is worth to disobey you; so you've been keeping his bank-notes in your drawer until you wanted them. If that isn't robbery I don't know what is. That's how you've been handling his property for years. And when I come here, his invited guest, you talk about sending for the police. Go on! go on!—send! If you do, as sure as you and I are living, they shall take you with them as their prisoner."

Scarcely was the last word out of the speaker's lips when the door opened and Mr. Percy Osborne and Miss Adela Reid appeared in the doorway.

CHAPTER XVII

ONE AGAINST THREE

FOR some seconds no one spoke. Each of the four seemed to be disconcerted by the sight of the others, as if the last thing each desired was a meeting at that particular moment. When Mrs. Osborne had recovered from the first shock of her surprise caused by the appearance of her husband's companion, drawing a little farther away from the doors she stared at Miss Reid as if she were some creature whom it was beneath her dignity even to address. Miss Reid, as if to cover the fact that she found the quality of the lady's gaze a little trying, with a sudden show of courage moved towards her with outstretched hand.

"Why, Helen, this is indeed a pleasure. I've been wondering where you were this ever so long. I've been longing to meet you for quite a while. How are you, dear?"

The fashion in which Mrs. Osborne received the lady's enthusiastic greeting was distinctly chilly; she ignored her outstretched hand. She looked straight past her towards her husband.

"Percy, what is this person doing here?"

Mr. Osborne wriggled, evading his wife's unfaltering gaze, looking into vacant space with his oddly foolish smile. He made not the slightest attempt to reply to her question. Miss Reid, whatever her inward feelings might have been, did her best to assume an air of injured surprise. She spoke with what was perhaps meant to be dignity.

"Person? Goodness gracious! Helen, what do you mean?"

Mrs. Osborne ignored both the lady and her question. She again addressed her husband.

"Percy, this man—she made a slight movement of her hand towards Mr. Yarrow—" who ran away from Mr. Van Coster this morning when threatened with the police, has broken open a drawer in the writing-table——'

The gentleman alluded to interrupted:

" That is not correct ; I merely unlocked it."

" —and has taken from it the bank-notes which the other day you asked me to take care of."

" That, also," again interposed Mr. Yarrow, " is not a correct statement of the case, as it reached me. I was told, Osborne, that your wife refused to allow you to keep your own bank-notes and insisted on your handing them over to her ; that, in effect, she practically robbed you of them—of course, there are many ways in which a wife can rob her husband."

If Mr. Yarrow expected some sort of comment from Mr. Osborne his expectation was not realized ; none came. Mr. Osborne continued to wriggle as if he were not comfortable inside his clothes, to smile and to keep his glance fixed on the floor ; but he gave no audible expression to anything he might have been feeling. His wife spoke to him in tones which were both clear and cold.

" Are you going to allow that man's baseless lies to go uncontradicted ? Please remember that I am your wife. Do you propose to let him insult me with complete impunity ? Will you kindly give me an answer, please. I am waiting."

" You do make such a fuss about a thing," was Mr. Osborne's answer ; that apparently was all he had to say. He continued to shuffle with his feet and to simper. It was not easy to determine if he was conscious of the manner in which he was being regarded by the others.

" That, my dear Osborne, is just what I was telling your wife—ladies are disposed to make a fuss. I repeated to her the message which, Adela, you gave me to understand that our friend Osborne sent through you. He said, you told me, that if I chose to come and fetch the bank-notes I could have them for my trouble, since he rather preferred to be robbed by me than by his wife. That part of his message was, I suppose, humorously meant."

Miss Reid, who seemed to have grown taller and was certainly stouter than in the old days, corroborated what he said with emphasis.

" It was not meant humorously ; at least I didn't think so. Percy said that anything was better than being robbed by your wife. Didn't you say that, Percy ? "

Mr. Osborne hung his head a little lower; he rubbed the carpet with the sole of his boot; his smile deepened; but he said nothing. The lady, as if she read approval in his silence, went flowingly on:

"You know, Percy, you told me just where the bank-notes were, and you said that if Jack chose to come and fetch them he could have them with pleasure. You said that sometimes a man was in a position in which eight hundred pounds might be of the greatest service, and when I told you I was sure they would be of service to him you said that he was perfectly welcome to have them. When I asked what he could do for you in exchange you said that if he did take them the obligation would be on your side, because you'd rather be robbed by Jack than by your wife. Isn't that just what you said?"

Apparently Mr. Osborne had been more loquacious when alone with Miss Reid than he seemed disposed to be just then. In face of Miss Reid's appeal all he did was to maintain his former attitude of wriggling silence. His wife put her own interpretation on his demeanour.

"Then am I to understand, Percy, that what this person says is true?"

Once more Miss Adela Reid assumed, or strove to assume, an air of wounded dignity, seeming to puff herself out as she spoke.

"Person indeed! Really, Helen Arnold that was, you might be some one. You were only a typewriting girl yourself, and if it hadn't been for Percy Osborne's money you might have been something worse before now."

"She might have been something a good deal worse." This came from Mr. Yarrow. Miss Reid went on:

"I shouldn't wonder. I've heard some funny tales of you, I can tell you, my dear. So, if you take my advice, you won't be so free and easy with your 'persons.' I may be a person, but, anyhow, I'm as good as you—and perhaps a little better."

"My dear Adela, in every sense of the word you are miles better than she is; you've no idea what a 'person' she is—what a dreadful person!" This, again, was Mr. Yarrow; with further additions from Miss Reid, who was

now beginning to bear herself as if she were the salt of the earth and Mrs. Osborne was nothing.

" I'm very sorry to hear that sort of thing of a person I used to care for, but, of course, directly I heard that Percy had married a young woman who left my aunt's house under such unpleasant circumstances as she did, I can only say I felt for him, because, of course, Percy was a man I always did respect."

Miss Reid paused. She looked across the room as if she were staring very hard at nothing in particular. Mr. Yarrow was staring at Mrs. Osborne. His right hand was in the pocket which held the revolver, his left in that in which were the bank-notes. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, rising and falling on his heels and toes, smiling as if in light-hearted appreciation of an excellent joke. Osborne, who had come a little farther into the room, continued to demean himself as if he were desirous, above all things, to lean neither to the right nor to the left. Mrs. Osborne, with white face and strained eyes, looking little more than a child, stood very straight and stiff, with fists clenched by her sides, as if she were desirous of hiding even from herself the consciousness that she was being baited. She spoke in tones which one felt it needed a very little to make tremulous and broken.

" If you propose, Percy, to allow these persons to remain in this room, then all that there is left for me to do is to leave it."

As she moved with a seeming intention of putting her words into action, Mr. Yarrow, giving a little forward movement, held out his hand with a restraining gesture.

" One moment, if you please. Since you have gone so far we will go a little farther. I do not intend to allow you to go out of this room leaving my old friend Percy Osborne under the impression that Miss Reid and myself are the kind of characters which your words—and still more your manner—would suggest. You will be so good, having waited so long, as to wait a little longer, until I have had my say. I propose that the position, and particularly your position, shall be made perfectly plain. We—Miss Reid and myself—have nothing to hide. I don't think that you can say the same."

Mrs. Osborne stopped and turned and looked at him, with something which had come all at once on her face and in her eyes, which Mr. Yarrow, if he had been a wise man, would have recognized as dangerous. It was perhaps because he was under the impression that he had the whip hand, and that he held this quivering woman, as it were, between his finger and thumb, that he did not hesitate to strike at her with all the cruel insolence of which he was capable.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. YARROW RELIEVES HIS MIND

" As you are aware, my dear Osborne, the surgeon is cruel to be kind ; he uses his knife only because without it the patient would die. That is my attitude. I am the last man in the world to wish to interfere between husband and wife, but when an old friend has a wife—I can't help saying it—like yours, I should be a coward and a traitor if I did not warn him of the risks he is running. Dear old boy, I hope you understand me."

There was nothing about Mr. Osborne's appearance to show that he did. He was fidgeting aimlessly about the room with a vacuous smile and expressionless, half-open eyes, as if nothing that was taking place had interest for him. That everything that was being said and done had the strongest interest for his wife there could be no doubt whatever. Had Yarrow been a judge of character he would still have reconsidered his attitude. But he went ruthlessly on, seemingly taking it for granted that, since he was dealing with a woman whom he had so often and so greatly wronged, he would be perfectly safe in doing her the greatest wrong of all.

" To begin with, Osborne, I don't know if you are aware that your wife was once engaged to me. You hear ? "

For the first time Mr. Osborne showed a glimmer of interest. He ceased for a moment to fidget, looked round, and asked :

" Was she ? "

" Didn't she ever mention it ? "

" Never."

" She wouldn't ; she's that kind of person ; I use the word ' person ' advisedly, as suggesting something unwomanly. None the less she was engaged to me. She threw herself at my head, as young women of a certain sort do fling themselves at men's heads ; and then—I hate to say it, but it's a simple statement of a simple fact—she

wheedled me into agreeing to make her my wife. And then —what do you think she did ? "

Mr. Osborne shook his head, as if he had exhausted the resources of speech. Miss Reid, as if—being aware of a significant something in Mrs. Osborne's attitude which was escaping her companion's notice—she was anxious to keep him from going too far, interposed a few words.

" I don't think, Jack, if I were you I'd be toos evere on her. She was only very young at the time."

" She was twenty-one ; you surely have not forgotten that she was twenty-one."

" Yes, I know ; but some girls at twenty-one——"

" Precisely ; some girls at twenty-one are not like she was. Of that I am quite aware—the Lord be thanked ! On her twenty-first birthday——"

" On her what ? " The question came from Osborne. He seemed suddenly to have been struck by something in the other's words which conveyed a meaning even to him.

" On her twenty-first birthday ; my very dear chap, what do you think she did on her twenty-first birthday ? " Osborne, through his half-closed eyes, glanced at his wife and away again. He shook his head. " On her twenty-first birthday Helen Arnold, as she then was, played on me the most dastardly trick that ever a woman did play on a man."

Quite unsolicited, two words came from Percy Osborne. " Did she ? " he said. Since it was so unusual for him to speak except under pressure, it was difficult not to be struck by the little air of eager surprise with which they came from him.

" Absolutely the most dastardly trick, my dear Osborne. I will tell you just what it was and then you will be able to judge if the language I use is too strong. She was then living at the Priory, a boarding-house kept by Mrs. Thompson, who is Miss Reid's aunt, as you perhaps recollect. You once lived there yourself." Mr. Osborne nodded, and he grinned. " She was a very pretty girl, that no one can deny ; the boarders were disposed to make a fuss of her. They were going to celebrate the day with unusual festivities—in a sort of a way the house was full of her.

When I think of it all I feel as if it were incredible that a girl of twenty-one could be so base; and yet—well, it's no use blinking the facts."

Mr. Yarrow put his hand up to his eyes as if he were desirous to shut out a painful memory. Still he managed to go steadily on.

"On the morning of the great day, just as she was starting for the City—you know she had a situation with a Mr. Stephen Fisher, a produce-broker in St. Swithin's Lane—just as she was about to start for the office she asked me to go with her into the sitting-room. The instant we were in the room she took from a handbag she was carrying a cheque—a cheque, my dear Osborne—and she said—I shall never forget the insinuating tone in which she said it: 'Jack dear, I didn't tell you last night, but look at what Mr. Fisher has given me for a birthday present.' She handed me the cheque, which I was amazed to see was an open cheque, drawn in her favour, for two hundred pounds. I was almost too startled to speak. 'What on earth,' I exclaimed, 'induced him to give you such a sum as this? I didn't know he was a millionaire.' She ignored the last part of my remark. 'I don't know,' she said, and she came close to me and touched her cheek against mine—shall I ever forget it! 'I fancy, Jack,' she whispered, 'that he thinks I am going to be married very soon, and that he means that to go towards furnishing the house. I haven't time to stop and tell you why I think that now; I must rush; it would never do to be late at the office after a gift like that. What I want you to do, Jack, is to go to the bank and change the cheque. I shall be in Cannon Street, at the bottom of St. Swithin's Lane, at eleven. I want you to meet me there and give me the money; if you please, Jack.' Then she put her arms about my neck and she kissed me, and she whispered: 'Mind you're punctual,' and off she tore."

Mr. Yarrow threw out his arms with a gesture which was possibly meant to express the grief he felt at having to lay bare such a painful example of feminine depravity. Mrs. Osborne had remained motionless, almost as if she were suffering from some form of muscular paralysis,

which prevented her even attempting to speak. But apparently Miss Reid, with the intuition which is often keener in a woman than in a man, was not deceived by her attitude of almost unnatural quiescence. Once more she endeavoured to check the eloquent Yarrow.

"Don't you think, Jack, you might let bygones be bygones, and that you'll do no good by throwing in her face what happened all those years ago. No doubt she's been sorry enough for what she did."

Mr. Yarrow's manner as he replied suggested virtuous incredulity.

"Has her conduct this afternoon pointed to anything of the kind? Had she been sorry—really sorry—she would not have treated us, and especially me, as if we were the sinners and she was the saint. As she behaved to-day she behaved then; I have no doubt that is as she has been behaving all through the years. To spare her would do her no good. Obviously she's bad to the marrow in her bones—unfortunately there are such women—while it would be to subject our old and our dear friend Osborne to continued peril from a source of whose existence he does not even dream. No, that I will not do! I will not consent to protect a bad woman at the expense of a good man; and I will cut my story as short as I can. I don't wish to dwell one moment longer than I can help on details which reopen old wounds."

Mr. Yarrow took a silk handkerchief from his outside breast-pocket and unfolded it to draw it across his brow.

"Osborne, that cheque for two hundred pounds was a forgery. I took it to the bank; I handed it across the counter; I was given cash for it, so excellent was the forgery; it was the work of a practised hand. I went with the cash to the rendezvous at the bottom of St. Swithin's Lane. Helen Arnold got out of a taxicab which was standing by the kerb; I thought it odd that she should be in a taxicab at that hour of the morning, but I said nothing. She asked for the money; I held it out to her. Just as she was about to take it she drew back and she said to me, half under her breath: 'Get into the cab and drive away.' She gave me a push—she was very strong—before I knew

it I was in the cab. She shut the door, said something to the driver—off he went. It was only then that I became conscious that three men were hurrying along the pavement towards where I had been standing, and that one of them, whom I recognized as the bank clerk who had given me cash for the cheque, was shouting what sounded like: 'Stop him! Stop that man! He's a forger and a thief!' Shall I ever forget what my feelings were as I heard those words and saw as by a lightning-flash the dreadful truth?"

That time Mr. Yarrow hid the whole of his face in his silk handkerchief. There was silence; it might have been because his listeners respected the depth of his emotion. Presently he removed his handkerchief and went on:

"From that day to this I have seen and heard nothing of Helen Arnold until this afternoon I learn that she is the wife of a dear and honoured friend. I meet her, anxious even after all I have endured on her behalf, to forget and to forgive. You have seen for yourselves what was her attitude towards me. I ask you—I ask myself—I ask eternal justice—what is to be done with such a woman?"

Before an answer could reach him from either of the sources he apostrophized, a question was asked by some one else.

CHAPTER XIX

RETREAT

" RATHER, what is to be done with such a man ? "

The inquiry came from Mrs. Osborne. Had, say, a bombshell been exploded in the room, her audience could hardly have seemed more startled. Perhaps it was because she spoke so quietly, especially as contrasted with the ringing tones in which Mr. Yarrow had been delivering himself, that the effect she produced was heightened. The first attempt to supply her with an answer came from Mr. Yarrow. Striding towards her, throwing out his chest, he assumed an air of splendid truculence.

" You dare to ask that ? To hint that the blame for that shameful story was not entirely yours ? Osborne, this woman whom you have made your wife is past all praying for."

Again his fine voice seemed to peal through the room. Mrs. Osborne's voice when she spoke again seemed lower even than before ; possibly on that account the words she used seemed so surprising.

" I had meant, a few minutes ago, to let you leave the room with the money you have stolen in your pocket, but now I'll take care you don't. Put the money back into the drawer ; then go."

Yarrow gazed at her as if he found it difficult to believe that his ears reported correctly.

" Of all the—of all the—! Osborne, you hear what your wife says ? Is it credible that she can say such a thing while you are standing there ? Does she wish to force me to send for the police ? Now what is she going to do ? "

Paying no attention to his resounding words, Mrs. Osborne had crossed to the telephone, which was on the writing-table. She had the receiver in her hand and was speaking to some one who had apparently asked her what number she wanted.

" Give me 362."

With a little of his truculence gone Mr. Yarrow addressed himself to his " dear old friend."

" Osborne, I appeal to you ; use your authority, your authority as a husband. Restrain your wife from doing that which you as well as she may for ever regret."

The lady's quiet tones interrupted his eloquent period. She was speaking into the receiver of the telephone.

" Is that 362 ? Is Mr. Van Coster in ? Please tell him that Mrs. Osborne wishes to speak to him at once."

The expression on Mr. Yarrow's face, his bearing, the whole man, had changed with a rapidity which was almost grotesque.

" What's that ? To whom is she speaking ? That brute Van Coster ! Damn her insolence ! Put that receiver down ! "

Rushing rather than moving towards her, Mr. Yarrow endeavoured to enforce obedience to his command by grabbing the receiver from the lady's hand. She was more alert than he bargained for. Drawing back as he came forward she caught up a heavy glass inkstand which was on the table and threw it in his face. It struck him with considerable force on the bridge of the nose. The ink with which it was filled streamed over his features. He staggered back with a little cry of pain and amazement, putting his hand up to the point at which the inkstand had come in contact with his nose.

" The vixen ! Osborne, you—you saw that ? She—she very nearly stunned me."

In the same quiet tones the lady continued to speak into the receiver.

" Is that you, Mr. Van Coster ? Yes, it's I. I'm Helen Osborne. I'm at the Climax Hotel. That creature whom you drove off the cliff this morning is in my sitting-room. He's stolen eight hundred pounds in bank-notes. I've just thrown an inkstand at him because he tried to prevent my asking you to come to my help. What do you say ? You'll come at once ? Thank you." She hung up the receiver on its hook, then turned to Yarrow. " Now you will be able to repeat to Mr. Van Coster the farrago of lies which you have been inflicting on my husband ; that is if you propose to stay here till he comes."

The man addressed did not look at all like the gorgeous being who had been spouting libels only a little while ago; now he presented a ludicrous spectacle. His efforts to wipe the ink off his face had only made matters worse. It was difficult to determine what was the real colour of his moustache. All his features were more or less obscured by smeary black stains. He made an effort to retain some vestiges of dignity, without, however, achieving much success.

"Osborne, your wife shall suffer for this. As sure as she stands there she shall suffer. But I—I don't want to have a scene with that American fellow. I won't have one either, especially in your private apartment, so—so I'll just take myself away before he comes."

"Not with those bank-notes in your pocket."

Mrs. Osborne had interposed herself between the man and the door with an agility which did her credit. The man blustered.

"You—you get out of my way before—before I twist your neck for you."

"Return those bank-notes to the drawer."

"So you will have it, will you?"

As if with the intention of putting his threat into force he raised his hands to take her by the throat, but again she was unexpectedly alert. Springing to one side she struck him with all her force on the side of the head with a big ruler, which, unnoticed by him, she had brought with her from the table. So unexpected and so strong was the blow that the big man reeled as if he would have fallen. Clapping both hands to the side of his head, he broke into a torrent of language which somehow seemed more in keeping with the character of the man than anything which had hitherto come from his lips.

"Put those bank-notes back into the drawer," was all she said. While the man glared at the persistent lady Miss Reid caught him by the arm. After her own fashion she joined herself with Mrs. Osborne.

"Do as she tells you; put the bank-notes back. She'll have her own way, Percy Osborne won't stop her. What's the use of waiting till Van Coster comes? You know what

will happen when he does come. Put them back, I tell you, put them back! Where are they? You give them to me—I'll put them back." The man seemed genuinely bewildered, as if the ruler had knocked the senses out of him. The lady put her hand in one of his jacket-pockets. "What's this? A revolver! What do you want with a revolver? You'll get us both into trouble if you're not careful. Where are those notes?" She tried the other pocket. "Oh, here they are. That looks like bank-notes." She held out a roll to Mrs. Osborne. "There you are—take them. Aren't they what you want? You can count them if you like."

Mrs. Osborne showed no inclination to do as the other suggested.

"Return them to the drawer; I do not wish to touch them."

"They won't burn you," exclaimed Miss Reid.

Mr. Yarrow interposed, his temper clearly not improved by suffering:

"What's the use of messing about? Put them back in the drawer, can't you? You'll have that Yankee beast putting his oar in if you don't look sharp; now then, get a move on you."

Without attempting remonstrance Miss Reid stole across the room on tiptoe, as if she feared that ordinary footsteps might be audible to undesired listeners. She returned the bundle of notes to its former resting-place. Then Mrs. Osborne opened the door. "Go!" she said.

And Mr. Yarrow went, Miss Adela Reid close to his heels.

CHAPTER XX

FRITZ

MRS. OSBORNE closed the door, the departing visitors having left it open. She turned and looked at her husband; he seemed to be looking everywhere except at her. She moved towards her bedroom.

"Stop," said Mr. Osborne, when she was more than half-way to it.

The command was not given with the authority which its curtness suggested. Indeed, when Mrs. Osborne glanced round she was disposed to doubt from his appearance if he had spoken at all. His glance was fixed on the floor as if he were studying the pattern of the carpet.

"Did you speak?" she inquired.

After obvious hesitation, "This is my room," he replied.

"Have I suggested that it wasn't?"

"What right had you to ask that American fellow to my room?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't?" This time his eyes were raised, to look at her. "I heard you."

"I had to get that—lying thief out of the room, so I pretended that my call was answered. It wasn't. Anyhow, Mr. Van Coster's number is not 362."

Mr. Osborne opened his eyes quite wide, his usual habit being to keep them nearly closed, and he stared at her.

"Of all the—!" He left his sentence unfinished. "Well, I never!" He emitted a sound which might have been meant for a snigger. "And poor Yarrow ran away because he thought Van Coster was coming." He sniggered again; this was the kind of joke which appealed to him. "And Adela too! You are a beauty!"

"Was what that man said true? Did you tell him he could have that eight hundred pounds?"

"What does it matter to you? It's not your money. I can give my money to whom I please, can't I?"

Mrs. Osborne recognized that not only was her husband in what she would have called "one of his moods"; she had also felt during the last two or three days that something had happened to him which was bringing out a side of his character whose presence she had suspected but not hitherto seen. The strain of her position might have caused her to do him an injustice, but it had seemed that in everything he said and did his desire was, as it were, to scratch her. That being so, she had no wish, if she could help it, to enter into a discussion.

"The money is certainly yours. I care nothing who you wish to give it to; but am I to understand that you propose to invite men like the one who has just gone to make a felonious entry into your rooms—rooms in which I am—and when in them to break open your drawers and strip them of their contents?" She paused for him to reply, but not a word came. "Will you be so good as to answer me?"

"Now I am beginning to understand," after another interval he said, not apparently in answer to her question. To her he seemed rather to snarl than to speak; it was perhaps because her mind was a little off its balance that to her it seemed that there was something about him which was uncomfortably feline.

"What," she asked, "are you beginning to understand?"

"Why you are afraid of Adela, and afraid of Yarrow."

"I'm afraid of neither. You are surely not so foolish as seriously to think that I am."

"You were engaged to Jack Yarrow; you used to kiss him. You never kiss me."

The words were spoken with force and significance which were almost malignant. For the moment his wife was surprised into speechlessness by the accusation they conveyed. He repeated it in a slightly varied form.

"If you'd been his wife you'd have kissed him every day—perhaps twice a day—but you've never once kissed me."

The thing was so true that she was without an answer. She could not have told him then that she had not dreamed that he had ever wanted her to kiss him; still less could

she hint that such an idea had always seemed to her impossible. Her silence seemed to inflame him; stretching out his right arm he wagged at her an accusatory finger.

"Have you ever kissed me?" he demanded.

"No, I have not—never."

She spoke as if she took up what sounded like his challenge.

"When at first you didn't I said to myself, 'Some day she will—some day—some day'; but now I know you never will."

"Never!" She threw the word at him as if it were a missile.

His voice dropped; his glance returned to the carpet; as he shuffled his foot he smiled.

"I have wondered all these years why you married me; at last I know. It was on the evening of your twenty-first birthday that you told me you would be my wife. On the morning of your twenty-first birthday you were engaged to Jack Yarrow. You heard him say so just now and you never denied it. Weren't you engaged to him?"

"I don't deny it now—I was. The memory of it has spoilt my life."

"That same day you forged a cheque."

"I did not. That's a lie."

"You were found out. Your master threw you into the street. The police were after you; you had not even money enough to buy yourself a bed; it was only then that you thought of marrying me. You became my wife to save yourself from gaol."

"That's not quite true, but it's so nearly true that if you choose you can think it is quite."

"For five years I've kept you like a princess; you've had what you pleased, done what you pleased, gone where you pleased—and what have you given me in exchange? Hate! Hate! You hate me."

She could not deny it; if only because, as he moved a little nearer, his hands held out as if he would claw her with his finger-nails, a feeling of repulsion rose up within her which seemed to choke her utterance.

"Do you think I don't know what you've been thinking,

what you're thinking now? You've taken me for an idiot. If you could you would have had me certified and thrown into a lunatic asylum. And you'd have been right—I am a lunatic. If I were to kill you now—and I'd like to!—I would be able to prove without the least difficulty that I was not responsible for what I did. Shall I kill you?"

"If you like. You have brought me to a stage at which I have not the least wish to live."

"Then you shall—you shall! and I'll kill you some other time. But just you remember that if I am a lunatic I have eyes—and ears. I watch and I listen—and I wait. And one day—it will be my day—and then—you'll see. In the meantime you'll understand that things are going to be changed. I'm not always going to do what you tell me; you're sometimes going to do what I tell you. If Jack Yarrow was good enough to be engaged to you once he's good enough to be your friend now. He's going to be my guest; he's going to live with us. He amuses me—you don't. And Adela Reid is going to be your friend too; she's also going to live with us. Don't you try to prevent me having what friends I choose. And remember that my friends are yours, and don't you dare to let them think they aren't."

When he paused she asked: "Is that all you wish to say?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Because if it is I presume you'll excuse me from waiting any longer."

"You stay where you are; don't you move till I tell you. It's my turn to order you." Some one tapped at the door. "There's some one knocking. That is Jack Yarrow come back again."

"If it is—" When she stopped he snapped at her.

"Yes? If it is? What then? What if it is?" He exclaimed: "Come in!" The door opened to admit a waiter carrying a tea-tray. "No, it's not Jack Yarrow; it's my good friend Fritz. Mrs. Osborne would like her tea; she's very fond of tea. Come, Fritz, and have tea with us. My wife would like to have you as her guest. Only two cups? Well, that doesn't matter, I don't want

any tea—I don't care for tea; you and she have tea together. Sit down, Helen, and give Fritz his tea. Make yourself at home, Fritz; here's a chair."

The waiter had placed the tray upon the centre table. Osborne was thrusting towards him a chair. The man, who was black-visaged and blue-chinned, seemed hardly to know what to make of his words and manner.

"Now, Fritz, be a good fellow. Make yourself at home and sit down and have your tea. Helen, will you give Fritz his tea? He's my friend, so he's yours."

Mrs. Osborne had not moved since she had been left alone with her husband. She showed no sign of moving now, nor of speaking. The waiter spoke, with a strong foreign accent.

"I thank you, sir, but it is impossible for me to do what you say. It would be as much as my place is worth."

"Fritz, sit down and have tea!"

"Sir, I cannot; I cannot stay. I have duties to perform. They will look for me. If they find me here, in your room, out I shall go into the road. I shall be without a berth."

"I'll soon find you another if you do as I tell you and stop. Helen, ask Fritz to stop. He is my friend, therefore he is yours."

She said nothing; she just stood still looking her husband full in the face. The sight of her quiescence filled him with sudden anger. He screamed at her:

"Do you hear! Do what I tell you; you shall—I'll make you. If you don't I'll beat you, I'll kill you. Will you do as I tell you."

He raised his hand, seeming half beside himself, to strike her. She did not flinch, even though she knew that the man who had been silent all these years was saying what he meant at last. Even while she looked her husband squarely in the face she saw the door opening, some one come striding into the room and seize his arm just as it was descending, and some one said, as if enjoying a joke:

"Hullo, Osborne, what new game's this? Are you trying to teach your wife the latest thing in physical training?"

"I'm going to beat her," Osborne frankly told the new-comer, who still retained his arm in his grip.

Mr. Van Coster, who was the new-comer, eyed him shrewdly, then exchanged a glance with the woman on the other side.

"Is that the form the last thing takes? What's the trouble, Mrs. Osborne? You don't seem happy."

"Percy wishes me to ask the waiter to have tea with us, and when I said nothing he didn't like it."

"Is that so? He didn't like it? And is this the waiter he wanted you to ask? I think, Mr. Waiter, you'll find the shortest way out of the room is through that door."

The waiter showed no haste to act upon the hint. He was insolent instead, giving Mr. Van Coster look for look.

"You are not my master. You are not a guest in the hotel. You have no right to order me. I take my orders from Mr. Osborne. I have nothing to do with you, nor have you anything to do with me."

"Mr. Osborne, will you be so good as to ask this gentleman to leave the room?"

Mr. Osborne was no more docile than the waiter.

"Fritz is my good friend; you are not my friend at all. He is welcome, I ask him to be my guest; you are not welcome, I ask you to leave my room—to go."

By way of reply Mr. Van Coster pressed the ivory push-piece of a bell which was beside the door.

"What are you doing?" inquired Mr. Osborne.

"I am ringing for the manager. I am going to request him that this waiter fellow leaves, not only the room, but the hotel. Clearly if he listens to the irresponsible foolishness of such a man as you he is not a fit person to have in any respectable hotel."

Thereupon the waiter became more amenable.

"What have I done to you? I have done nothing. I only obey the orders of Mr. Osborne, who is a guest of the hotel. You do not imagine that it is my wish to stop in the room? I prefer to leave it. I go."

The moment the waiter, strutting to the door, had left the room, Osborne turned to Mr. Van Coster, speaking as if he would have bitten him:

"How dare you come into my room and give orders as if it were yours? If you don't go I'll ring for the manager and have you put out."

"Before I do go, may I suggest, Mrs. Osborne, that you should retire to your own apartment and lock the door."

The lady, acting on the hint, did move towards her own apartment.

"Stop!" cried her husband. "Stop! How dare you leave this room until I tell you?"

When Mr. Osborne showed symptoms of a disposition to stop the lady by main force Mr. Van Coster stood in his way and kept him back. When she had gone, and they heard the key being turned in the lock on the other side of her door, Mr. Van Coster said to the angry husband, who, in spite of his rage, still had sense enough not to attempt to force his way past him:

"Osborne, it is never my wish to interfere between a man and his wife, but I've always had a notion that you were a bit of a lunatic, and it is only because I am now sure you are stark, staring mad that I do not start breaking every bone in your miserable little body."

Osborne plainly was in two minds as to what to do and say. His anger waned as the other grew warmer; not because he was afraid, apparently his mood had changed. He walked quietly back to the writing-table. Resting his left arm on the edge, crossing his right leg over his left, he assumed an attitude which was almost oratorical; his speech, however, when it came, was brief enough.

"Mr. Van Coster, you are no friend of mine."

"I am not aware that I ever claimed the honour."

"I do not desire that you should even continue to be an acquaintance."

"I have not the least wish even to be that. But that will make no difference to the fact that I shall still continue to regard myself as your wife's friend."

"You'll do nothing of the kind."

"Pardon me, I shall. And let me tell you that I will make it my particular business to see that you do not force upon her the acquaintance of criminals and similar persons. Even in England, nowadays, a wife is not her

husband's chattel. Should this fact have escaped your knowledge it may be necessary that you should be taught it. Good afternoon, Mr. Osborne, and good-bye."

Percy Osborne continued to stare at the doorway long after his visitor had passed through it. Then, raising his right hand, he waved it, chuckling as if enjoying a joke of his own.

"A long farewell," he said. "I shouldn't care if it was farewell for ever."

CHAPTER XXI

HER RESOLUTION

WHEN some one tapped at the door communicating with the sitting-room, Helen Osborne, in her sleeping-apartment, looked round and listened, but she kept still. Though the tapping was renewed four times she allowed it to go unheeded. Then the handle of the door was turned. Presently she heard her husband's voice uttering her name.

"Helen!" When he received no answer he raised his voice. "Are you in there?" Then again, when the silence remained unbroken: "I know you're in there." She heard him snigger. "Locking the door against your husband!" There was a long interval of silence. As she was wondering if he had left the sitting-room, and if so where he had gone, the tapping came again. "I know you're in there. If you won't let me in I shall tell them at the office that I think something serious must have happened, and I'll have the door broken down to see what it is. Do you hear what I say?"

She did hear, but she allowed no sound to escape her which would convey that fact to him. Again silence; then the unpleasant sniggering sound was again audible; it seemed so near that he might have been standing inside the room. After that not a sound. With unstrung nerves she sat and listened and waited, but nothing happened, nothing was heard. Was he still in the next room, or had he really gone down to the office to execute his threat.

She was unconscious of the flight of time as, sitting a little forward on a big armchair, she wondered what her husband's next moye might be. The darkness deepened; she made no attempt to switch on the light. The flickering fire in the grate was all that relieved the gloom. Fresh shadows were revealed as feeble flames rose and fell. As the minutes passed, and there was nothing to show where her husband was or what he proposed to do, her thoughts wandered. This afternoon he seemed to have been trans-

formed into a different man. She had felt the change coming for a considerable period; now it had come; a new Percy Osborne had been all at once revealed.

She admitted to herself that she suspected his presence all the while. She even owned that, in a sense, he had right on his side; many people would unhesitatingly have held that she was in the wrong. It was true enough, the accusation which he had thrown at her—that she had done nothing in exchange for what he had done for her. She had tried to deceive herself into the belief that there had been fair exchange, that she had done as much for him as he had done for her. But, judged by his standard, she was forced to acknowledge that she had done nothing. She had certainly never been to him a wife.

The curious point was that she had never supposed he wanted her to be. It was equally true that she had never kissed him. In the pall-like gloom, as the fire sank lower, she taxed her memory to recall a moment when there had been anything in his manner which could cause her to suppose, even in the faintest degree, that he wished her to do anything of the kind.

It was emphatically a fact that, so far as she could judge, he had never shown the slightest symptoms of a desire to kiss her. She did not for a moment deny—she would have confessed it to him, to the whole world—that when she became his wife she was at despair's last gate; disasters for which she was in no way responsible had overwhelmed her; she had felt that with her it was a case of the frying-pan or the fire. It had dawned on her too late that it was the fire she had chosen—if she could be held, by an impartial critic, to have ever had a choice.

She had seen enough of the world to have become convinced that a large number of marriages were merely marriages of convenience. Numbers of people did not marry for love. She was certain that there were abundant marriages in which there never had been and never would be any pretence of love on either side. She had only done what millions of women did—she had married for convenience; with much more excuse than the large majority of them could plead.

From what he himself had said that very afternoon, only a very short while ago, it was clear that he had realized the position from the first; much more than she had supposed. He had never asked for her love. She remembered the wording of the letter in which he had made her the proposal which, to her undoing as she felt now, she had accepted. She still had it in her possession. She had preserved it with some odd notion that one day it might serve as a witness on her behalf; indeed, as irrefutable evidence that she had been justified in what she had done. Over and over again had she read it through—since the first time she had read it in that Romford tea-shop—until every word it contained was engraved on the tablets of her memory in characters which never could be erased.

In it he had told her that he was aware that he was not the kind of person any one would like to have for a husband he had the best of reasons for knowing that. He had gone on to say that she need not treat him as a husband; that he was willing to sign any document she liked which would make it clear that he would never claim any of a husband's rights; that he would settle on her any sum of money she chose, so that she might be entirely independent of him.

She had never asked him to do that; she had asked him to do none of the things which he had expressed himself as willing to do. She had never even mentioned them to him, but had been content to keep the letter as testimony of what his attitude at that time had been.

He had said that if she would allow him to give her his name and speak of her as his wife that was all he would ask. She might live, not necessarily with him, but where she pleased; he did not wish to "shame" her—she remembered distinctly that the word he had used was "shame"—by thrusting himself upon her society.

To that effect had he written; she had the proof of it in a secret place; that it was which had actuated her in doing what she did do. What right then had he, after all these years, to throw it in her face that she had not been to him a wife?—having definitely disclaimed—so he had written—even the vaguest notion that she ever would be. She had never told him what the circumstances were

which, while she was still half out of her senses, had forced her—so in her desperate plight she had felt—to wait for him all those long hours on the Romford platform. To this hour she believed herself to have been justified in keeping them locked in her own breast.

The fear that what was hidden would one day be made plain, and that truth would out, had haunted her all these years. What she had suffered on that account she alone knew. Well, her fears had been justified; the hidden things had been made plain, the truth had come out. And on the whole, she felt relieved.

That was what she told herself as, with knitted brows and tightly closed lips, she sat in the darkness of her room looking back through the vistas of the past. Whatever her husband might pretend, the more she thought of it the more certain she grew that he had not been at all surprised. She believed that he had been in possession of the facts almost from the first. Since he had chosen to take up the attitude he had done, so far as she was concerned, the matter was at an end. The relations which had existed between them, such as they were, could exist no longer. She would not remain under the same roof with one, husband only in name, who had behaved to her as he had done that afternoon. She would emphatically no longer continue to subsist on his money, though she gave him twenty-one shillings' value for every pound he spent on her. He had promised to settle on her absolutely a sum of money which would make her entirely independent of him. She was not sure that she could not compel him to make such a settlement now, but she had not asked for one and she never would. She had no private fund by her, as most women in her position would have had. It is true there were large sums standing to her credit, nominally his money, on which she could draw to any amount without even a moment's notice, but she would have none of that. She would have nothing of his from that day forward for ever and evermore. She would go out into the world, possessing nothing but the garments which covered her, and she believed that this time God would help her to earn her daily bread.

Arrived at a sudden resolution she rose from her chair. She would put on her hat and her jacket and go at once. There was an evening train up to town; by it she would travel in search of that new world where she would begin life all over again. Always she was searching for a new world; always she was looking for a mysterious cross-road leading to a point where, if one reached it, one would find that everything began all over again; there would be no past; it would be all future. She knew that she had in her purse some two or three sovereigns. She would use them to take her to where she wished to go: not so very far off; even that modest sum should suffice for her humble wants.

Then, having not yet quite lost her wits, remembering the painfully few shillings which were left to her waiting on that Romford platform, as she was inclined to doubt if those two or three pounds would after all be enough, all at once her thoughts, as it were, flew off at a tangent to old Amos Tuffington's pile. So engrossed had she been with other matters that she had entirely overlooked its very existence.

Yet there was the solution of all her difficulties. It seemed that she was the heiress, that she was the sole living representative of an ancient family—the pile was hers. For the first time in her life she would have money which was really and truly her own; money, that is, which would not be needed for the pitiless necessities of keeping soul and body together.

Why worry herself about trifles? She could reach that jumping-off place into the strange and wonderful new life for which she longed by the most luxurious methods known to modern travel.

She was dressed to start, she had her purse in her hand, never once switching on the light even to see if her hat was straight. Only one thing was wanted to complete her equipment. There were three letters from her friends in the Argentine, who had pressed her to be their guest. At the back of her mind was the intention, if she did inherit the Tuffington pile, to make her home, at least for a while, as near theirs as she conveniently could. She ought to have those letters.

She went to the communicating-door and listened. There was not a sound; some one might be there and yet not be audible. She tapped, first softly, then more loudly. Surely if some one were there her tapping could not have gone unnoticed, especially if that some one had been her husband; he would have answered her tapping though she had paid no heed to his.

The three letters were in a drawer in the writing-table, that writing-table to which Mr. Yarrow had gained felonious access. She felt that she ought to have them, yet she did not wish to encounter Mr. Percy Osborne.

She tapped again, still louder; once more, with all the force of which her knuckles were capable. None answered. She turned the key gently—so gently—in the well-oiled lock. She opened the door just half an inch. No notice was taken on the other side. She could see that there was no light in the sitting-room; obviously because there was no one there. Quickly, quietly, she opened the door almost to its full width and stepped into the sitting-room.

CHAPTER XXII

THEIR SITTING-ROOM

HAVING crossed the threshold she remained motionless. She still had an uneasy feeling that her husband might be playing a trick—be somewhere in the room waiting to discover himself till she had come far enough in to enable him to prevent her escape; but though she paused perhaps half a minute, nothing occurred to hint that he had any project of the sort.

She noticed that the fire in the grate was not lighted. That also suggested that he was not in the room. Percy Osborne was very sensitive to chill; he would have had a flaming fire had he been there. He liked to sit, as his wife put it, right on top of the fire. He never seemed to feel the heat; when others would have been burned he was only comfortably warm. Clearly her doubts were groundless. She would be able to get the letters and be off without attracting the least attention. It was not even necessary to switch on the light; she could find her way to the table, she knew exactly where the letters were.

So in the pitch-dark chamber she moved rapidly over the thick carpet on which her footsteps were soundless. She gained the writing-table; she felt it with her hand. The drawer she wanted was at the other end. She moved towards it, this time less rapidly, since she was feeling her way with her hand. Suddenly she stopped. She screamed —a scream which, with unnatural presence of mind, she strangled almost in its birth. But from her throat there came sounds as if she were sobbing and struggling for breath. Something had driven the courage right out of her, and made of her a very frightened woman.

Presently the noise she was making ceased. She was standing facing the table. She was leaning on it with all her weight, because, although she no longer sobbed, she was shuddering so that all the strength seemed to have gone out of her legs. Without the support of the table

she might not have been able to stand, and above all things she was anxious not to fall because of the something which was on the floor. She had struck against it with the toe of her shoe as she had been moving towards the drawer.

What it was she had struck she was not sure; there was nothing to show, but it frightened her. Fear had deprived her even of the power to retreat. She dared not think what it was which her toe had touched, and until she knew she dared not move away. After a while she began to make certain timid explorations with her shoe, which frightened her worse than ever. There was something horrible about the thing which she was touching which she was conscious caused the blood to stop circulating in her veins, as if it had all at once become congealed. Her breath came in gusts, as if it was only with difficulty that she could breathe at all.

How long she stood by that table she never knew; she never dared to try to guess. It almost seemed to her that she stayed long enough to grow old. She almost felt that she was an old woman before she regained enough feeble courage to enable her to realize what a miserable coward she actually was.

With all the force of which she was capable she fought for the power to return to a semblance of her former self. By degrees it came. She loosed her hold of the table; she stooped; she felt with her hand what was on the floor. She felt a man's face. Although she had felt that it was there, when certain knowledge came she swayed so that, before she could stop herself, she fell right over the man's body.

Then, in a flash, she was on her feet, every fibre of her being trembling. She felt as if she must scream; she knew that if she screamed once she would break into a paroxysm of screams; but she dared not, and she would not, and she did not. Instead she withdrew herself from proximity with what was on the floor, though she knew not how she did it, and with feet which were apparently some one else's, she moved to where she knew, even in the darkness, was the switch of the electric light.

She switched it on. For some seconds she dared not

look round to see what it had revealed. Then she glanced over her shoulder, and saw what she had expected she would see, her husband on the floor. He was lying a little on his right side, with his head twisted on his neck so that he seemed to be looking towards her. Husband and wife seemed to stare at each other. Then she whispered:

"Percy! Percy! Speak to me." When he continued silent her request became more insistent. "What has happened? Percy! Why don't you speak to me?"

She had to learn for herself why he did not; he did not tell her. After a while she moved towards him to learn the cause of his silence. He might not be dead. Some thing might have occurred to cause him to swoon, to lose consciousness, to remain motionless and still. She remembered that he had once had an epileptic fit which had caused him to lie as if dead for more than an hour. Such an attack might have recurred. Somehow, as she leaned over him, she did not think it had. Then his face had been horribly contorted; now it looked better than she had ever seen it look before; he seemed completely and happily at rest. Something which had always made him seem a mere parody of his sex had passed from him; he looked as if he were a man.

She knew that he was dead.

How long had he been dead? How had death come to him? Not so long ago he had seemed to her to be in even unusual health and quite amazing spirits. As she questioned herself she leaned again upon the table. Her fingers came in contact with a revolver. She looked at it; picked it up. It was her own.

Once, travelling in Greece, when she was about to start for an expedition up country, a gentleman whom she had met in Athens, a Major Carmichael, presented her with a revolver. There had been talk recently of brigands in the hills. Carmichael had half jestingly, half seriously assured her that on such an excursion every one ought to go armed, even the women; indeed one might say especially the women. The conversation took place on the night before the party started; they were to leave at an early hour in the morning. When she told the Major that hatpins were

the only weapons she possessed he had gone from the room and presently returned with a revolver and a box of cartridges, which he insisted on her accepting as a gift from him. It had gone with her everywhere since, and had never once been fired. They met nothing in the shape of brigands on their expedition.

When she saw the weapon lying on the table she tried to collect her thoughts. What did its presence there mean? She had seen it last in the corner of the middle drawer in the writing-table against which she was standing, where she had put it on their arrival at the hotel. That was the drawer which Yarrow that afternoon had opened with what he called a pass-key. It was open now. There was nothing surprising about that since, although she had made him return the bank-notes, no one had closed the drawer; her impression was that it was not shut when she had escaped from her husband into the bedroom.

She looked at it more attentively. To actually reach it she would have had to step over the something which was on the floor; she was content to look from where she was. Clearly some one had been making free with its contents. She had left them in perfect order. No doubt Yarrow had disturbed them, but not, she thought, to their present extent. She had noticed the drawer after he had removed the notes; she was sure that they were not in their present condition.

Now everything it contained was in a hopeless muddle; letters had been taken out of their envelopes; bundles of papers unfastened, those sent down by Mr. Pendleton lay scattered on the floor. One thing she observed, the bank-notes seemed gone. She leaned over to make sure; so far as she could see they were not in the drawer. She touched nothing, but so close was her inspection that even in the confusion that obtained in the drawer she could hardly have failed to see some signs of them had there been any to see.

The deduction seemed pretty obvious. Some one had come into the room to take those bank-notes, and coming into contact with Percy Osborne, had killed him. It was strange. If the man had been Yarrow surely he would

not have been accorded such a reception by Osborne as to drive him to extremities. Osborne had, in effect, given him the notes; why should he have risked death rather than allow him to take advantage of his gift? She had a notion that Yarrow was not a man to resort to extreme measures except under very extraordinary pressure. To her, even in that moment of horror, the position seemed amazing.

As, still leaning on the table, she glanced first at the open drawer, then at the something at her feet, questions began to press themselves upon her. How had he been killed? It did not look as if violence had been used. There was nothing to show it. The dead man's clothing was not disarranged, he simply lay as if fast asleep. There were no signs of blood; nothing which pointed to the use of a knife, or some weapon of the kind. Could he have been shot?—by her own revolver, which the thief, interrupted in the act, had snatched from the drawer and, without an instant's reflection, had fired? If he had given himself time to reflect he would have known that he ran no serious risk with Percy Osborne; he would not have fired. Some morbid impulse caused the dead man's wife to take up the revolver which lay at her finger-tips—her own weapon. She was in a state of mental incoherence in which she seemed to have no control over herself or her thoughts. It was quite a little revolver; the donor had pointed out that it was just the thing for a lady. She might slip it into her handbag and not be incommoded by its presence; she might go through the world knowing that a protector was within reach whose existence never would be suspected until its services were needed.

Somehow she never had looked upon that revolver as a protector; she had been afraid of it; now she feared it more than ever. She had half doubted its capacity as a weapon either of attack or defence. Could such a toy have done this thing? It was terrible! What a dangerous thing to trifle with.

As her uncontrolled and uncontrollable thoughts wandered aimlessly here and there something happened which made her lose the few vestiges of self-control which she

still had. The silence which obtained in the room all at once was broken, without the slightest warning. Some one turned the handle of the door which opened on the corridor as if trying to enter. Not unnaturally she was startled: so startled that the revolver fell from her hand and, as it struck the floor, a shot was fired. The trigger must have come in contact with the carpet in such a fashion that, as it were, the weapon went off by itself. The sound of the report filled all the room; though it was in reality but a sharp crack, it seemed to Mrs. Osborne to be the most dreadful sound she had ever heard. She screamed—one scream, which, although she might not know it, was much louder than the noise made by the revolver. She turned, ran back to her bedroom, stood trembling in the grateful darkness, groped her way to the door, opened it, went out into the corridor, looked to the right and left. The corridor seemed empty. Whoever had tried the handle of the sitting-room door, which adjoined, had either entered the room or disappeared.

She forgot for a moment in which direction the staircase lay; had taken a few hasty steps when it occurred to her that she was wrong. She swung round, almost ran towards where she now recollected the staircase was. As she gained the head of the staircase she saw, at the extreme end of the corridor, a figure moving—the figure of a waiter. She did not pause in her hasty flight, but she saw enough to know that it was the figure of the sitting-room waiter, whom her husband had wished her to invite to tea, and whose manner she had more than once resented. He was going from her; she saw only his back. Presumably, therefore, he was unaware of her presence, especially of the fact that she had just come out of her bedroom.

She hurried down the staircase. When she reached the foot two men came out of the lift which was just by her. She knew them both. One was Yarrow; the other was a man whom she had not seen for more than five years. He had been at the Priory, an acquaintance of Yarrow; she was not sure, but she thought his name was Fyfield, a smallish man, misshapen, with a thin, cadaverous face and staring black eyes. She had never liked him; she had

asked Yarrow what he could see in such an unpleasant-looking person, and Yarrow had laughed. At sight of the two men she drew back, nearly tripping over a stair. She expected that they would rush at her. Instead, seeming more startled by the sight of her than she was by the sight of them, they moved at full speed towards the entrance, as if fearful of what she might do or say.

She hesitated. She did not wish to go out into the night close at their heels. They might be waiting for her without; an interview with them was not what she desired. Yet she would have to go. She was conscious that people were regarding her with curious glances: the lift-boy, a waiter with a napkin over his arm, an understrapper from the office, two or three lounging guests. They seemed, to her fevered fancy, to be asking themselves what she was doing there, when the guests of the hotel, dressed for the evening, were dining. She felt that at any moment the understrapper might ask if she had dined; it was his business to look after what were presumed to be the "comforts" of the guests. He might even ask her if Mr. Osborne was going to dine in the hotel. That certainly was not a question which she wished to be asked. Moving as rapidly as Yarrow and his friend had done she crossed the hall to the entrance.

CHAPTER XXIII

COMING

It was a lovely night; such was the chaotic condition of her mind that that was the first thought which occurred to her when she found herself in the open air. Cloudless skies; myriads of stars; a soft breeze which, if a little cool, seemed to her, in her fevered state, to be delightfully refreshing. She stood at the bottom of the flight of steps and looked around. She did not know what the time was. The band was playing on the Leas; she could see that there was a crowd of listeners. On the green immediately in front of the hotel there were scarcely any people. She wondered what had become of Yarrow and his friend. Were they watching and waiting for her? A female figure came quickly towards her from the right—it might be Adela Reid. She did not stop to make sure, even to look; she dashed across the green, anxious above all things to be left alone.

Her idea was to descend the cliff to the Sandgate Road. At that hour there would be few people there. She would have an opportunity to collect her thoughts, to arrange her plans. She had had a carefully considered programme, or so she supposed, but that revolver-shot had blown it all to nothing. That shot was ringing in her ears; it kept echoing up and down the cliff. She wondered that everybody did not hear it. Perhaps if she got down to the Sandgate Road, to the level of the shore, she might escape from its persistent repetition.

The lift was still running, the lift which takes people up from the shore and down again. There it was waiting; some one was in it; it would presently descend. She made a rush to reach it before it started, had got to the three or four steps which led down to the platform which served it as a point of departure, when some one caught her by the arm and held her. She gave a little startled cry. When she looked round she saw it was Mr. Van

Coster ; she felt that she would have given all she possessed which, after all, at that moment was very little—to be able to sink into the solid earth. He maintained his grip of her arm as if he feared that she might run away.

" Mrs. Osborne," he asked, " what's the hurry ? Is it that you're wanting to cut me ? "

She seemed to be in a state of confused agitation.

" Come down in the lift," she stammered ; " I want to speak to you."

" To be sure ; why can't you speak to me here ? There goes the lift. If you can't we'll have to wait till another one comes up."

" I want to speak to you—where we'll be alone."

" Why, certainly ; but if we go a little way along the cliff shan't we be alone all we want to ? Seems to me there'll be no one but ourselves. Come, let's be moving ; is it with cold you're shivering ? "

" No, it's not with cold."

" Do you know "—although she did not look at him she knew that he was smiling—" when I was a kid I used to hear quite a lot about people's teeth ' chattering ' ; seems to me yours are chattering now. Maybe if you're not cold it's because you've got a fever."

" It's because I'm afraid."

The words came from her with a convulsive jerk. She stopped and he stopped and looked at her.

" Why, of what are you afraid ? "

" Can't you hear anything ? "

" Hear ? Why, yes, I can hear a good many things if I start to listen ; I can hear some of them without trying to listen. What's the particular thing I've got to hear ? "

" Can't you hear—a revolver-shot ? "

Leaning a little forward he looked at her more closely As he did so he began to realize that in her mood there was something unusual. With his face still close to hers he asked :

" What's the trouble ? "

" He's dead."

" Dead ? What do you mean ? Who's dead ? "

" My husband."

"Your husband? How does he come to be dead?"

"Murdered." She spoke in a tiny whisper which was only just audible to him at a distance of less than a foot.

"Murdered?" As he echoed her word a look came on his face which made him seem a different man. One felt that his brain had been set in motion, that his mental processes were moving with inconceivable rapidity. For some moments he did not say a word—and she was still. He did not withdraw his face from its close proximity to hers; he was eyeing her as if he desired to penetrate a mask which hid from him things he wanted to know. All at once he said, whispering as she had done:

"Look at me."

And she looked. Her eyes seemed to have been looking in all directions at once as if seeking for things which could not be seen. At his command she raised them to his. Although he was stooping down she still had to look up. Their glances met; something passed from each to the other. She seemed to gain courage from him, as if she had dipped a little pail into a great sea of it; and comfort; and a strange sort of peace of mind. And some of her suffering seemed to pass to him; some of the agony which filled her soul, by some subtle process of transfusion, seemed to enter into his. A new tenderness was in his voice when he spoke again, still whispering.

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know."

"You are sure?"

"Quite." As if suddenly awaking to the fact that something which was in his question had escaped her, she added: "I didn't."

"That's good. Killing is always murder in this old country, although you've done the community a greater service than if you'd killed a rattler. There are some folks who are more in want of killing than any snake I ever came across. Anyway, I'm glad you didn't kill him; killing's not a job for any woman. Who did?"

"I don't know. I've no idea. I can't imagine."

"You have no suspicion?"

"I don't wish to do any one a wrong."

" I saw the smart chap you call Yarrow come out of the hotel just before I saw you. He was with a friend. Have you any suspicions in that quarter ? " Her face was eloquent, or he thought it was. " Do you think it was his revolver-shot you heard ? "

" No—it was mine."

" Yours ? " He spoke as if he were startled.

" I dropped my revolver—it went off."

" I don't understand." His brows were knit as if he were making a painful effort to get at her meaning. " Where were you when you dropped the revolver ? Tell me all you can."

" I was standing close to him."

" Close to him ? Where was he ? "

" He was on the floor—dead ; I found him on the floor, dead ; I found him in the darkness." She seemed all at once to be struck by a new something which she saw on his face. " Do you think they'll think I did it ? "

He seemed to evade giving her a direct answer.

" Tell me all you possibly can," is what he said ; " now, while it is still fresh in your mind."

" It will always be fresh in my mind—always ! "

" Did you see him killed ? Think before you speak. You'll do no harm by telling me just everything. I don't care what happened or what you've done ; it's just the truth that I'd give my life for you."

" How could I see him killed ? I believe you think—" She stopped short in the middle of her sentence. " Something's happening at the hotel."

She was looking towards the great building, dimly revealed by lights in many of its windows. His glance followed hers. From where they stood the main entrance, through which a glow of light came streaming, was distinctly visible. Suddenly figures had come hurrying out ; some had descended the steps and were lost in the gloom below ; others, remaining on the upper step, were thrown into clear outline. Other figures appeared, more and more. Plainly there was some sort of commotion.

" They've found out what has happened," whispered Mr. Van Coster. " Won't you go back to the hotel and tell them all you know, or—what will you do ? "

" I don't want to go back to the hotel ; let's go down on to the Sandgate Road."

" You'll be doing a very risky thing if you do ; it will look as if you were running away."

" I want to run away. I want to get away as far as I can. I want to go to London by the next train."

" You can't do that."

" Why can't I ? "

" They'll have you at the first station at which the train stops."

" Have me ? What do you mean—they'll have me ? "

" I don't understand what's happened, but I do understand—any one with just a little bit of sense would—surely you do—that you'll be making the biggest mistake of your life if you clear out of the hotel as if you were afraid to stop and face an inquiry ; why, if you try to go up to town to-night there's hardly a creature who won't think that you're running away because you've done something to make you want to hide."

" I've done nothing—nothing ! What do you believe I've done ? "

" It isn't a question of what I believe ; I tell you I don't care what you've done. I've seen men killed who deserved it a good deal less than Osborne did, and I haven't shed a hair ; I've just let them be killed. But you can't strike that sort of attitude in England. You've got to go back to the hotel."

" I'm afraid."

" You've a great deal more cause to be afraid of not going back to the hotel than of going. There's some particular thing of which you're afraid ; what is it ? "

" I'm afraid of that revolver-shot."

" What revolver-shot ? "

" When I dropped my revolver."

" Why in thunder ? What's a revolver-shot ? "

Although their faces were already within a foot of each other, she came still closer so that she might whisper in his ear.

" It may have killed him."

" What do you mean—may have killed him ? "

"I don't know."

"You must know! You must know what you mean! For the Lord's sake tell me. Tell me all there is to tell—now, while there's still time."

"The revolver fell—it went off—close to him—the barrel pointing his way. I noticed it. The shot may have gone right into him; I believe it did."

Her broken sentence, the words coming from her in odd little jerks, was not very intelligible. It seemed at once to mystify him and to convey an uncomfortable meaning. He seemed to be turning things quickly over in his mind, with the result that he was puzzled. He admitted it.

"I don't know what to say. You seem to have got things into a tangle."

She reiterated her former request, as if it were a supplication:

"Let's go down on the Sandgate Road."

He glanced round. "We can't, it's too late; they've seen us. I believe they have seen us. Some one's coming."

CHAPTER XXIV

BROUGHT BACK

FIGURES could be seen in the semi-darkness hurrying towards the pair across the green, figures of four or five persons, all men; some with hats, some without. Mrs. Osborne stretched out her hands towards Van Coster. He gently put them from him, whispering:

"Just for a while you'd better stand away from me; we don't want to seem to be in collusion."

A voice was audible, that of one of the men who were hurrying towards them.

"There she is! She's with that American fellow! I told you I saw them standing there."

"Why," whispered Van Coster to his companion, "if that isn't the voice of your friend Yarrow. I saw him come out of the hotel just before you did. He must have seen you; he's come after you; what's he got to do with it anyhow?" His voice sank still lower. "Listen. I've wired to Cynthia to come right back. Directly I saw that skunk this morning I felt somehow that there was trouble and that you might find a woman handy, so I just wired to Cynthia. If the wire found her at Boulogne, as it ought to have done, she'll be on the boat which is just about coming in. I strolled over to see if you'd come with me to meet it. Anyhow you ought to find her at her old lodgings."

She did not ask why he told her this, or what was the nature of the trouble in which he thought that she might be in need of a woman's help. For one thing there was no time to tell anything. The Philistines were upon them before she could speak—probably, also, before she had grasped the significance of his words.

The first to accost them was the understrapper who had been in the hall as she came down the stairs. He was in full evening dress, without an overcoat or a hat: a stoutish man, with dark hair parted mathematically in the centre

and a beautiful moustache. He was a little short of breath, as if he found the speed at which he had been moving trying. He spoke rapidly, if breathlessly, speaking fluent English with a German accent. As he spoke the others fell in line at his side.

"Mrs. Osborne, I must ask you to return to the hotel at once—this moment—directly. Why did you leave it in the way you did when you must have known what had happened?"

"Obviously, since she was seen to come out of the very room."

This was Yarrow, who seemed to be excited.

"Why, you must have known that your husband was dead. You saw me standing in the hall; why did you not tell me so when you came down the stairs, instead of rushing out of the hotel without saying a word of it to any one?"

"She might have had her own reasons for not telling any one."

This was the waiter whom she had also seen standing in the hall, with a napkin over his arm; he had that napkin still. Apparently he was English; he spoke like a Cockney.

"I see the lady coming down the stairs, and directly I see her I says to myself: 'What's up?' I could see something was up from the looks of her."

This was the lift-boy, a young gentleman of perhaps seventeen years of age. He smacked of the country.

Yarrow was glancing about him, as if uneasily.

"We shall have a crowd if we don't look out. Let's go back to the hotel; we don't want to have a scene out here."

The understrapper again: "Yes, Mrs. Osborne, what the gentleman says is right; we do not want to have a scene out here. Come back to the hotel at once—do you hear me? Return at once! now—this second! You know that your husband is dead—you know it."

Mr. Van Coster interposed. Mrs. Osborne had shrunk back a little nearer to the edge of the cliff, confronting the five men, standing all in a row, almost as if she were a hunted animal.

"Gently, gentlemen, gently. And you, Mr. Man, I think you're from the office at the hotel; you go back to it." He turned to Yarrow. "As for you, if you are not very careful, you will fall over the cliff instead of out of a window, and then some one else will be dead."

Mr. Yarrow addressed the understrapper.

"You hear this fellow!—threatening me? I happen to know that he forced his way into Mr. Osborne's sitting-room this afternoon and threatened him. He's that kind of man."

The understrapper spoke to Mr. Van Coster.

"If you are Mr. Osborne's friend——"

"You may take it that I am Mrs. Osborne's friend, Mr. Man."

"I must request you not to take offence because there is no offence intended. Mrs. Osborne's husband is dead; he has been found in his sitting-room dead on the floor. What is more natural than that Mrs. Osborne should be requested to return at once to the hotel? Why, indeed, should it be necessary to have to request her?"

"Why, indeed? That is so; you put it very clearly, Mr. Man, and Mrs. Osborne is obliged. If you gentlemen will just remove yourselves from that piece of ground on which you're standing, and take yourselves to some place where you're wanted, if there is one, Mrs. Osborne will be obliged still more. Mrs. Osborne, you'll be sorry to hear the bad news these gentlemen have brought. When they've cleared off the face of the earth you might like to stroll back to the hotel and learn how much of it is true. I shouldn't recommend you to take anything this card-sharping crook says as worth a cent. Out of the way!"

Mr. Van Coster illustrated his words by suddenly gripping Mr. Yarrow by the throat and nearly flinging him backwards. The outraged gentleman was all sound and fury.

"You let me get at you! I'll teach you to lay your hand upon a gentleman. I owe him a thrashing."

"Yes," said Mr. Van Coster, speaking very quietly, "I think you do. Pay it! I always like to receive what I'm owed."

The understrapper intervened.

"Now, gentlemen, now, now, let's have no fighting here."

"You're not likely to have any, believe yours truly. This is not a fighting man." The gentleman alluded to waxed hot again.

"I'll show you if I'm not a fighting man, you Yankee—!"

"Yes, Yankee what?"

Yarrow had paused; Van Coster seemed anxious for him to conclude his sentence. The understrapper pursued the path of the peacemaker.

"Now, now! if you please. Here are all these people coming. They wonder if anything is the matter. Let us go!"

For the first time Mrs. Osborne spoke, addressing Mr. Van Coster.

"Would you mind walking with me to the hotel?"

"I could conceive of no greater honour."

He removed his hat. The lady moved forward; the five fell back. She passed between them, Mr. Van Coster walking at her side with his hat in his hand. The five remained behind, the understrapper speaking to Yarrow when they had gone a yard or two under cover of his hand.

"Who is he, the gentleman? I have seen him about the hotel and about the Leas. You know him; what is his name?"

"He's a —— American, that's who he is, a —— American sharp. I believe she killed the fool she calls her husband, and I shouldn't wonder if he had had a hand in it. I know a thing or two about him which would be pretty nearly enough to hang him any day. They're a pair."

"She never killed any one, that lady never did; she's not a killing sort. I'll lay a pound on it."

This was the waiter who spoke like a Cockney. There was solid conviction in his tone, which was, in its way, impressive. Mr. Yarrow was scornful.

"A lot you know about it."

"I dare say you know a lot more about killing than I do, that I won't deny, but I do know a lady when I see her, and she is one."

" Gave you a bob for a sixpenny drink and told you to keep the change ; is that it ? "

The understrapper stopped the waiter from replying.

" Now, now ! Let's have no more of this ! Do not argue with the gentleman. You forget yourself. Go back to the hotel. Don't let us go too fast ; let them just keep a little in front."

They regulated their pace so that Mrs. Osborne and her companion did keep a little in front. They were the first to reach the hotel, but only by two or three yards. A considerable proportion of the guests seemed to be waiting on the steps to receive them ; others could be seen in the hall beyond. An individual, also from the office, came forward to greet them. He was not at all like the other understrapper, being long and thin, with that air of curious suavity which marks the best type of hotel employee ; one wonders if such men could lose it even if they tried. He bowed low.

" I regret, madam, to have to inform you that an unfortunate discovery has been made."

Then he turned as if to lead her into the building.

" What's the trouble ? " asked Mr. Van Coster.

" I shall be glad to give Mrs. Osborne all the information we have if she will be so very good as to step inside. It is not a subject of which one can talk out of doors, among all these people."

The lady turned to the gentleman. " Will you come in with me ? "

The lady and the gentleman went up the steps and into the building side by side.

CHAPTER XXV

THE MANAGER'S ROOM

THE suave gentleman led them through the great hall, which was crowded with curious folk, who regarded them as they went by as if they were a spectacle of an unusual kind. Mrs. Osborne noticed that among the crowd were a Mr. and Mrs. Braithwaite, with their daughter, people whom she had met at several other places besides Folkestone, with whom she had formed that semi-intimate sort of acquaintance which does spring up between people who have met each other in various hotels. She was dimly conscious that at sight of her Mrs. Braithwaite took her daughter by the arm and pulled her back, as if she feared recognition, while her husband stood staring her straight in the face as if he had never seen her in her life before. Such, she felt, was the prevailing feeling, that all those who eyed her so oddly as she went wished it to be understood that to them, personally, she was an entire stranger.

Mr. Van Coster seemed to resent this attitude. He said as much in a perfectly audible tone of voice, addressing their guide.

"You seem to have an ill-mannered lot of people staying in your hotel, sir." As he said it he looked round. "Most of the men look as if they were of the kind who would stare at a lady, but surely some of the women should know better. Don't you ever have any well-mannered folk?"

Although Van Coster spoke so clearly the guide, judging from his bearing, appeared not to have heard a word. He had turned into a corridor and now opened a door on the left.

"Will you be so good as to enter?"

Mr. Van Coster seemed dubious. "What's this room?"

"It is the manager's own private room. I think you will find the manager waiting to give Mrs. Osborne all the information we possess."

They entered. The speaker, entering after them, closed

the door. It was a good-sized apartment, comfortably furnished. There were two writing-tables; on the first was the telephone, with a switchboard in front of it; on the other was a typewriter. At the moment of their entry the apartment contained two persons. One Mrs. Osborne recognized as the manager of the hotel, an Italian Swiss whom she had met three years before when he was managing an hotel at Lugano in his native canton. He was named Belgrazza. He was a handsome man, nearly six feet high, with broad shoulders and a figure which showed off his dress-suit to perfection. He spoke English perfectly, without the slightest accent, and if there was something in his almond-shaped black eyes which suggested that he had a temper, about the whole man there was an air of charm, and even distinction. He was sitting as Mrs. Osborne and Van Coster entered, but as they came in he rose and bowed to each in turn.

"Permit me, madam, to offer you a chair."

Mrs. Osborne sat down on the chair he offered without saying a word; she looked as if a chair was an article of which she had been very much in need. Mr. Van Coster remained standing.

The other person present was a big, florid man, across whose white dress-waistcoat ran a thick gold chain. Signor Belgrazza introduced him to Mrs. Osborne.

"Permit, madam, that I present to you Mr. Brookshaw, the chairman of our board of directors. Mr. Brookshaw, this is Mrs. Osborne."

"This is a very unfortunate occurrence, Mrs. Osborne."

The remark was Mr. Brookshaw's. He was standing in front of the fire, his hands in his trousers-pockets, his large head, grey-haired and inclined to baldness, a little on one side. When Mrs. Osborne, sitting bolt upright on her chair, remained perfectly silent, he added something else.

"Unfortunate for all of us, especially, of course, for you; but at the same time it is a very serious thing for the hotel, and it is the hotel of which I have to think."

"Mrs. Osborne is not yet quite clear what it is that has happened."

This was Mr. Van Coster. The chairman of the directors

turned sharply towards him, regarding him intently from under his heavy eyelids.

"Has Mrs. Osborne instructed you to say so?"

"A person from your hotel came to where I was talking with Mrs. Osborne on the cliff, and blurted out that Mr. Osborne had met with a tragic end, but he declined to enter into particulars."

"Are you suggesting that Mrs. Osborne didn't know all about it before that person, as you put it, blurted out the news?"

"I am suggesting nothing, except that Mrs. Osborne is anxiously waiting for an explanation."

The great man turned his attention to the lady; his manner was not rude, but it was blunt. He seemed to be one of those persons who say what they have to say without considering how to say it.

"Come now, this won't do. You don't want an explanation from us—it is we who want one from you. Your husband has been murdered. Don't you know he's been murdered? Mind, it's not a question you need answer, if you think that an answer would entail serious consequences to you."

If the thing were possible, the lady sat up straighter on her chair.

"It can entail no serious consequences to me; nothing can do that."

"I am glad to hear that, for your sake as well as our own; we don't want scandalous tales about any of our guests to get into the public press. Then, if that is the case, perhaps you won't mind telling me if you didn't know your husband was murdered before that man from our office came and told you on the cliff?"

"I did not know—I thought he had."

"You thought he had. Oh! You only thought he had. You knew he was dead."

"I was afraid he was."

"You were afraid he was? You knew he was lying on the sitting-room floor as if he were dead?"

"I did; I saw him."

"Then may I inquire why you didn't inform the hotel of what you'd seen? I presume he was your husband?"

"He was. I have been married to him five years."

"Don't you think your conduct was a little extraordinary, Mrs. Osborne, and I may say unfortunate? Some wives of five years' standing who came upon their husband lying on the sitting-room floor as if he were dead would have thought there was something sufficiently unusual about the matter to cause her at least to ring a bell."

"You're not entitled, Mr. Brookshaw, to ask Mrs. Osborne questions, or to make comments." This again was Van Coster.

"May I ask who you are, sir? You know my name; do you mind my knowing yours?"

"My name is Van Coster—Peter Van Coster."

"Not the Peter Van Coster of Chicago, whom they call the Cattle King?"

"That's me; I'm it."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Van Coster. Certain companies which I represent have a contract with your firm."

"That's good; my firm is a good one to deal with. I'm telling you; I ought to know. The man who trades with us gets more than a hundred cents for his dollar."

"Well, we'll leave that, though I could say a word or two on that; sometimes we're not sure that we get ninety cents. Am I to take it that Mrs. Osborne is a friend of yours?"

"You may, for sure, if Mrs. Osborne will do me the honour to allow me to call myself her friend, and to be her friend."

"I am willing to admit, Mr. Van Coster, that so far as I am myself concerned, I have no right to put any questions to the lady, or to comment on her answers. I have already observed that she need not answer if she should prefer not to. At the same time I am bound to tell you and the lady that the position is much more serious than from her attitude you might suppose. We are here together, and my intention is, and Signor Belgrazza's intention is, to make matters as pleasant as possible. But a murder has been committed. Mrs. Osborne admits that she was afraid a murder had been committed. The victim was

her own husband, yet she doesn't say a word to any one. She doesn't even suggest that a doctor might be sent for, if, as she says, she was not sure that he was dead; but she rushes out of the hotel as if——" Mr. Brookshaw slightly shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you must draw your own conclusions. People will, you know. You talk about an explanation; you must see for yourself that we want an explanation from her, if only for her own sake. The police are upstairs; they're all over the hotel; you must have seen some of them standing outside."

"I fancy we did see something of the kind."

"That's a nice thing for us, to have our hotel, which I don't hesitate to say is the leading hotel in Folkestone, in the hands of the police."

"It certainly isn't nice for you, or for any one. You have my sympathy."

"Unless I'm very much mistaken we'll want a lot of it before we are through; and what will happen to Mrs. Osborne I don't care to think. You know, Mr. Van Coster, no one could behave as she has done without surrounding herself with an atmosphere of suspicion." When Mr. Brookshaw paused, as if to allow his sapient remarks to get well home, there came a knocking at the door. "For all I know there's the police outside this very instant. Uhlmann, see who's there."

This instruction was addressed to the tall, lean person who had been their guide. As he was turning to open Belgrazza said:

"One moment, Uhlmann." He moved towards the lady. "Let me beg of you, madam, to drink this, before he opens. It is good brandy." He offered her a liqueur-glass which he had just filled.

CHAPTER XXVI

CERTAIN QUESTIONS

SHE had not taken the proffered glass between her fingers, she had done nothing to signify whether she wished to avail herself of the manager's suggestion that she should supply herself with what looked very much like Dutch courage, when the door opened and five persons came into the room. Indeed, there was an inclination shown by three or four other persons, who were seen without, to enter also; but the understrapper, the original one who had gone to them on the cliffs, put out his hand and unceremoniously pushed them back.

"Go away," he said; "go right away, all of you! You are not wanted here."

His tall, lean colleague addressed them in a similar strain though in different words.

"Now, you men, be so good as to take yourselves back to your work. You have no business here."

The manager said: "Bruckheim, see that that corridor is kept clear. No one has any business in it."

Bruckheim, who proved to be understrapper number one, went out to do as he was bid, and the door was closed.

Of the four new-comers who remained two were strangers. One was a grey-bearded and grey-haired man in a dark tweed suit. There was no mistaking who the other was; his uniform as well as his manner prevented that; he was an inspector of police, big-boned, square-jawed, stern-faced, yet with something not unkindly in the steady glance of his keen grey eyes.

The manager once more went through the ceremony of introduction.

"Inspector Simmons, this is Mr. Brookshaw, our chairman of directors, of whom you may have heard."

"I know Mr. Brookshaw's name very well indeed." The inspector looked at the lady. "Is this Mrs. Osborne?" Being informed that it was he addressed himself to her.

" It is my duty to advise you that you need answer no questions, that you need say nothing at all if you would rather not, but at the same time you may like to know that I have just been upstairs, looking into matters with the doctor. This is Dr. Holden." He referred to the grey-haired man in the tweed suit, who thereupon bowed to the lady. " I was not able to go so thoroughly into matters as I shall do presently, and Dr. Holden was only able to make a superficial examination of your late husband's body. Isn't that so, doctor?" The doctor nodded. " Up to the present I know nothing of what has happened; I've only been on the premises a few minutes; therefore if there's anything you would like to say, Mrs. Osborne, which would throw light upon the situation, I shall be glad to hear what it is—always remembering that, as I just told you, if you would rather not you needn't."

The lady sat silent, as if reflecting. She was still holding the glass of brandy; she held it out, untouched, to the manager.

" Thank you, I don't think I want this, if you don't mind." The manager took it from her; then she looked at the inspector, and after what seemed to be a further momentary consideration, said: " I have nothing which I wish to conceal, if that's what you mean—nothing; but I don't know what it is you wish me to say. I don't really know much more than I expect you do."

" Dr. Holden here says he was shot in the left side, and that the bullet, penetrating the heart, was possibly followed by instant death. Isn't that what you say?" The reference was again to the grey-haired man, who once more nodded. " You know nothing about that shot, Mrs. Osborne? Remember that you needn't answer, but if you do, let me ask you to think carefully before you speak; always bearing in mind that you need only state that you would rather say nothing, and there will be an end of the matter."

The lady turned to the manager. " Have you a little drinking-water—just plain water?"

The manager motioned to Mr. Uhlmann, who, opening the door a few inches, spoke to some one without. In a

remarkably short space of time a glass jug full of water and a glass on a tray were handed to Mr. Uhlmann by some unseen person without. The lady gulped down half a tumblerful of water, then she spoke.

" I am very sorry to keep you waiting, but my throat feels parched. It is surely natural that I should not wish to say anything about a matter of this sort if I can help it ; but if you are hinting that I have done anything which I ought not to have done and wish to say nothing just to conceal it, you make a mistake. I was sitting in my bedroom. When I went into the sitting-room to get some letters which were in a drawer in the writing-table I found my husband lying on the floor. How he got there I have not the least idea."

" Your bedroom is next to the sitting-room ; I suppose that what happens in the sitting-room can be heard in the bedroom even if the door is closed ? "

" I don't know ; I heard nothing."

" No sound of any one quarrelling, of a struggle, or anything of that kind ? " She shook her head. " No sound of a pistol-shot ? "

" I heard nothing."

" When you saw your husband lying on the floor you must have realized that something unpleasant had happened. Why didn't you call for assistance ? "

" I don't know ; I lost my head."

" But what made you lose your head ? "

" I can't explain. When you look at it in the way you do I suppose it seems strange, but I did."

" You saw a revolver lying on the floor ? "

" I did see a revolver."

" Do you know anything about the revolver ? Did you recognize it as one you had seen before ? Do you know who it belonged to ? Have you any reason to suspect who it belonged to ? "

There was again a perceptible period of hesitation.

" It belonged to me ; it was mine."

Her words created an evident effect. The inspector seemed to look at her more keenly ; his tone was curter.

" Yours ? Bear in mind, please, what I said about saying

nothing if you'd rather not. In face of that warning, do you wish me to understand that the revolver which was found at your husband's side was yours ? "

" It was given to me by a gentleman whom I met in Athens, that was more than two years ago. It has never once been fired."

" It was kept loaded ? "

" I believe it was loaded. I was given to understand that there was no danger in keeping it loaded, because it had a peculiar trigger which would prevent its going off by accident."

" It has been fired now ; you are aware of that ? " She was still. " Two barrels have been fired. If what you say about its never having been fired is correct then it looks as if both must have been fired while you were sitting in your bedroom and heard nothing. Don't you think, if that were the case, it is rather strange that you should have heard nothing ? "

" I did hear nothing."

" You quite understand, Mrs. Osborne, that these proceedings are—we'll say a little irregular. As the matter stands at present I know nothing. Mr. Osborne's death may be the result of an accident ; he may have committed suicide."

" That's impossible ; he was shot from the back."

This was the doctor, who spoke with a little air of finality.

" Anyhow," continued the inspector, " as I have said, we don't know how the matter stands. If we are in the presence of a crime I can't help feeling, Mrs. Osborne, that you will be more anxious than any of us to make the position as plain as you possibly can with a view to the criminal or criminals being brought to justice."

The lady was silent, although all eyes were fixed upon her as if in expectation of her warm endorsement of the inspector's words.

" I believe, Mrs. Osborne, that you know this gentleman."

The allusion was to one of the two other persons who had entered the room. Mr. Van Coster interjected a remark before the lady could reply, his tone conveying even more than his words.

"Gentleman! Crook, you mean. Officer, the fellow's an international blackguard, known to the police all the world over."

"That's a lie! You're a liar!"

Mr. Yarrow, who was the person alluded to, spoke with considerable energy. He eyed Mr. Van Coster with all the honest indignation of which he was capable. Van Coster only smiled at him.

"How the fellow ever came to place himself within reach of a policeman at all is beyond my understanding. He must have had what seemed to him to be good and sufficient reasons; perhaps it would be just as well if we heard what they are."

Mr. Yarrow seemed unhappy. With the best intention in the world to show a brave front he seemed to find Van Coster's presence disconcerting. He addressed the inspector:

"I didn't come here to be insulted by him; if you want me to say anything you'll make him keep a civil tongue between his teeth."

"You've met him before?"

"He says I have, but I believe he's made a mistake. I don't remember ever seeing him before, and I shouldn't mind if I never saw him again."

"I once had occasion to assist some one very like him out of a second-floor window of an hotel in Palm Beach, Florida; but as such an occurrence could hardly entirely escape any one's memory it may have been his twin-brother."

"I haven't got a brother," said Mr. Yarrow.

"Then in that case—— However, Mr. Inspector, I await the gentleman's pleasure."

The inspector's manner was not quite so courteous as it might have been, as if he were beginning to feel that something curious was in the air.

"Be so good as to repeat in Mrs. Osborne's presence what you told me."

Mr. Yarrow's manner suggested sullenness. "I don't know that I want to say anything at all while he's here. I won't put up with his insolence, so don't you think it;

what has it got to do with him, anyhow ? " The speaker glared at Van Coster with what he perhaps meant to be defiance. Mr. Van Coster was merely affable.

" It may have," he observed, " much more to do with me than you suppose."

" What has it got to do with you ? You tell me that—what has it got to do with you, interfering with what's no concern of yours ? "

The inspector interposed. " Come, sir, any difference which you may have with this gentleman you must settle elsewhere afterwards. Are you going to repeat the story you told me ? You told me that you were calling upon your friend here."

The friend in question was the fourth person who had entered—short, spare, dark, one shoulder a little higher than the other. Mrs. Osborne, with feelings to which she was altogether unable to give expression, had recognized him when he came with Yarrow into the room as the Mr. Cyril Fyfield of the Priory boarding-house. He showed none of the discomposure which was so marked a feature of Mr. Yarrow's bearing.

CHAPTER XXVII

THEIR STORY

MR. YARROW, encountering his friend's steadfast glance, seemed to find something in his unruffled and even contemptuous coolness which was contagious. He seemed to shed his trepidation, at least in part. He replied to the inspector with a greater and braver show of self-possession. Unfortunately he was one of those persons whose natural manner is bad; he passed quickly from one extreme to the other—as in such a case as the present, when he went from the appearance of ease to what looked very much like bluster.

"About an hour ago, perhaps a little more or a little less, I came to call upon my friend. He has a room upon the first floor, No. 32. As I was going to his room I heard a noise. I couldn't make out where it came from or what it was. When I stopped to listen I found that it came from a room which was nearly opposite No. 32, and which was closer to the staircase. Some one was quarrelling—two people, a man and a woman. I looked at the number, it was No. 18; I remembered that that was the number of the sitting-room which was occupied by my old friend Percy Osborne. I said to myself: 'He and his wife are having a bit of a barney.' They had had a few words this afternoon."

"You called on them this afternoon?"

"I did; and then there was a little trouble between them."

Mrs. Osborne interrupted. "He did not call on us this afternoon. I was alone in the room when he stole in."

"What do you mean by I stole in? I came in by the door."

"You came in without knocking."

"Why should I knock? I was there at Percy Osborne's invitation. He told you so to your face." It was at this point that Mr. Yarrow began to bluster. "I may tell you,

sir, that Mrs. Osborne's not too fond of me. She's risen in the world a good deal since I knew her years ago. I know too much about her. She didn't want me to have a chance of telling her husband what I do know."

"You would have told him if you had had a chance?" This was the inspector. Mr. Yarrow assumed an air of virtuous indignation.

"She wanted to set my old friend against me; she wanted to choke off all his old friends. He told me that that was one of the things over which they were always having rows."

"That's not true. He told you nothing of the kind."

"You hear her? Perhaps if she won't let me tell my story she'll tell hers. We can't both of us talk at once."

"Mrs. Osborne, will you kindly give this gentleman an opportunity to repeat in your presence what he told me. He will perhaps be able to do so more quickly if you don't interrupt."

"Am I to sit still and allow him to tell lies?"

"That's the way she talks, and that's the way she used to talk to him. If any one says a thing which doesn't suit her it's always lies. It always used to be; she hasn't changed a little bit."

The inspector raised his hand as if to stop an observation which he saw trembling on the lady's lips.

"Let him go on. Be so good as to keep to the point. You say that you heard a quarrel taking place in No. 18."

"I did; I heard Mr. and Mrs. Osborne quarrelling. I heard some of the things they said to each other—you couldn't help it, they were both speaking at the top of their voices—her voice was much louder than his. Compared to her he always did speak quietly. She said something to him which drove him mad. I couldn't hear quite what it was, but he shrieked out: 'I'll kill you if you don't take care!' She laughed and said: 'You'll kill me?—you worm! It's a wonder I haven't killed you long ago.' Any one who knows anything about them will tell you that she always treated him as if he were a worm. Then I heard a sound which suggested that either he had gone for her or she had gone for him. There seemed to

be a sort of rough-and-tumble going on—they seemed to be falling over the furniture."

"Since you knew both the parties why didn't you go into the room and interfere?"

"What?—interfere between husband and wife? Not me, not much! I hadn't interfered in the afternoon but she treated me as if I had. I knew better. Directly I heard them setting about each other I went in to see my friend. He'll tell you what I said to him."

The inspector looked at the friend, and he asked: "What did he say?"

"He said that Mr. and Mrs. Osborne were having what he called a 'scrap,' and that perhaps the lady would find the gentleman better than she expected, and that he'd give her something of what she deserved. Then he wanted to tell me about what happened this afternoon, but I wouldn't listen, because other people's matrimonial differences are no affair of mine, and Mr. and Mrs. Osborne's quarrels did not interest me in the least. Then he went. I was going to dine with a friend in the town. Shortly after Yarrow left I started out to keep my appointment. When I got out into the passage Yarrow came up the staircase; when he saw me he came and said: 'I've forgotten to tell you—' but he got no further; I don't know now what he'd forgotten to tell me, because we were startled by the yelling and shrieking which was taking place in the room by which we were standing. 'They're still at it,' he said. Just as he said that we heard the report of a pistol. He caught me by the arm and said: 'That sounds like business. We don't want to get mixed up in an affair like this; let's get off while there's time.' I said nothing, but I tapped at the door and I turned the handle. The door was locked. He kept pulling at my arm and wanting me to come away. 'It's no affair of ours,' he said. 'If we get mixed up in it we may be kept for weeks, and we don't want that.' I emphatically did not; my arrangements made it necessary that I should leave Folkestone to-morrow. I allowed him to draw me towards the lift. The lift stands a little back, so that any one who is close up to it is not immediately visible to a person who

may be in the corridor. As we stood there hesitating we heard a door open and shut, quietly but very quickly, as if some one was in a hurry. 'I believe that's her bedroom door,' he said. As he spoke Mrs. Osborne came rushing past us so fast that I don't believe she even saw us standing there. Did you?"

The question was addressed to the lady. She stared at him with a sort of fixed stare, but said nothing. Inspector Simmons repeated the question.

"Did you see these two persons standing by the lift?"

"No, I did not; I saw no one. I don't believe there was any one there."

"You did open and shut your bedroom door as he described and go rushing towards the stairs?"

"And down them." The addition was Mr. Fyfield's.

It was only when it seemed that nothing further could be said or done till she had answered that an answer came.

"I dare say I was in rather a hurry; I had my reasons."

"So I thought when I saw the way you were moving." This was Mr. Fyfield. "Just then the lift came down from one of the upper floors. It stopped when it saw us. We got in. When we were leaving it on the ground floor Mrs. Osborne came running down the stairs, tore across the hall and out of the hotel. I suppose that her queer behaviour made my friend think that there must be something very wrong, because he said: 'She's making a bolt for it; she ought to be stopped.' Then he said something to a person who was standing close by us that he ought not to have said."

"What did he say?"

"He said: 'I believe that woman's shot her husband. She's trying to get clear away. She ought to be stopped.' Then he and some other persons went out after her. Presently they brought her back accompanied by this gentleman."

Mr. Fyfield stopped. His quiet, emotionless manner was much more effective than Yarrow's heat. He had an air of aloofness, as if his desire was to keep himself outside the facts which he was stating, as if they really had not the slightest personal interest for him.

Inspector Simmons said to Mrs. Osborne:

"Bearing in mind, as I have already told you, that you need say nothing, is there any comment which you would like to make on what we have just now heard?"

"They are both lying, that is all. They never heard me say a word."

"You did not quarrel with your husband?"

"I did not. I never quarrelled with my husband in my life."

"You did not quarrel with him this afternoon?"

Her hesitation made her reply, when it came, seem halting.

"No. I did not quarrel with him. We did have a difference of opinion, but not in this man's presence."

It was perhaps something in her manner which caused the inspector to try a shot at a venture.

"Who was present?"

An answer came from what was clearly an unexpected quarter.

"I was." Mr. Van Coster, who was the speaker, moved a little forward. "And now, Mr. Inspector, we've come to a point when I feel it is up to me to remark that for lying this pretty pair of gentlemen are away beyond everything I ever before have met. There was no quarrel, but as the lady says there was a difference of opinion, and as I happened to be present at the time I ought to know. As the result of that difference of opinion I gave Mr. Percy Osborne to understand that for the value of a row of pins, or maybe a good deal less, I'd like to take him by the throat and twist the life right out of him. I felt like doing it right then; it would have done me real good; but I trampled on my feelings and I did not. But I went back afterwards, when the lady wasn't there, and I had a difference of opinion with Mr. Percy Osborne. In the course of it he took a gun out of a drawer—a little toy thing which you might use for shooting at rats—and he pointed it at me, and he gave me to understand that if I didn't get out of that room rather quicker than I wanted to he'd empty his popgun into me. So I made a snatch at it; didn't get it so easy as I expected; there was a little bungling; the thing shot itself off, or maybe it was I

who shot it, I don't know, and there was Mr. Percy Osborne on the floor with what looked very like a shot from that popgun well inside him."

"Are you speaking seriously, sir?" The question was the inspector's.

"Well, it depends upon what you call seriously. People from my side of the water sometimes think you Englishmen darned funny when you mean to be real serious. I fancy that you sometimes think the same about us. We've each got our own way of looking at things. I tell you I felt funny when I saw him lying on the floor and I looked at that little toy, and started to wonder if the tiny pellet of lead which was all it could carry had laid him there. I guess it was only because I was standing so close to him that it got so well home as it did."

"I don't know if I'm in order in putting such a question, but may I ask you just where you were standing?" The inquiry came from the doctor, who referred to the inspector. "Ought I to ask him such a question?" The inspector shook his head.

"You ought not; but if it comes to that we none of us ought to say the things we are saying, as matters stand. But if you do ask him such a question I shall strongly recommend him not to answer it."

"Your recommendation, Mr. Inspector, is herewith gratefully acknowledged. When I began that little argument with Mr. Percy Osborne, doctor, we could hardly have been standing closer to each other. When I took the pistol from him I gave his wrist a twist; I daresay it was that twist which started it into action. He swung a little round, and—well, I'm not quite sure—I shouldn't wonder if the shot got into him about here."

Mr. Van Coster put his hand to his left side, a little to the back. The doctor was eyeing him attentively.

"I see. Was the pistol pointed up or down?"

"I couldn't say. It just fired itself, that's all I know."

"You did not take deliberate aim? It was not your intention to fire at him?"

"It was not, not with that popgun. If it had been my intention to fire at Mr. Percy Osborne I should have fired

with something that was worth firing. I happen to have a gun of my own." He produced from a hip-pocket in his trousers a very formidable-looking revolver. "Now, this is a gun. I could plunk lead into every one in this room—that would be lead."

The inspector moved a little forward. "Hand me that revolver."

"Steady, Mr. Inspector, steady. If this gun were to go off it would go off so quickly you'd never know what killed you."

Mr. Van Coster brought his weapon to an angle which clearly disconcerted the inspector. Inspector Simmons looked about him in a fashion which suggested that it was only his sense of dignity which kept him from retreating. His manner seemed strained.

"No nonsense, sir. That's a dangerous plaything you have there, one which in England no man is entitled to carry about with him. I advise you to hand it over to me at once."

"Advice once more gratefully received, but again not acted upon. When you chipped in, Mr. Inspector, I was just about to explain to the doctor-man that though it was not my intention to aim that popgun at Mr. Percy Osborne, I wasn't the least bit sorry when I saw him on that elegant carpet right at my feet. I just felt it funny, and so far as I was concerned that was about all there was to it."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A PRISONER

WHEN Mr. Van Coster paused no one quite seemed to know what to make of him. He looked cheerfully at every one except Mrs. Osborne, whose glance he studiously avoided, and he handled his big revolver with a careless ease which somehow suggested that it was a weapon with the use of which he was almost uncomfortably familiar. As he eyed him the inspector's happiness seemed to decrease.

"I don't know what your name is, sir."

"Don't let that worry you, sir." As he interposed Mr. Van Coster waved his revolver in a fashion which seemed to worry everybody in the room. "My name is Peter Van Coster, and proud and pleased I am to meet so excellent an example of the British constabulary." The inspector's pleasure seemed to be distinctly less than the speaker's.

"If you don't hand me over that revolver at once," he declared, "I shall have to call in my men, Mr. Van Coster, and then there'll be trouble." Mr. Van Coster gave his weapon another swing through the air.

"I shouldn't wonder if there would be—I shouldn't wonder, either then or before. You—libel on a man"—suddenly Mr. Van Coster pointed his "gun" straight at Mr. Yarrow—"don't you so much as move an eyelid." Inspector, this man is a first-rate, number one, top-side liar. With your permission I'll prove it to you, with the aid of this little plaything. I'll make him confess his sins. The tale he has told about Mrs. Osborne is all just lies. He and his friend have lied in company; I'll persuade them both to own it. He never heard what he says he did hear, he or his friend. I doubt if either of them heard anything. If they did, they heard me, though they certainly did not hear what they said they heard if they did. I was in that sitting-room with Mr. Percy Osborne maybe not more

than ten minutes. There was no one in sight when I slipped in and no one when I slipped out."

"Why did you go to him at all?" It was the inspector who asked the question. Even when he replied Mr. Van Coster did not withdraw his glance nor change the direction in which his pistol pointed.

"I wished to call Mr. Percy Osborne's attention to certain details in his behaviour which I felt I would like to have changed, and directly I started, to use your word, Mr. Inspector, trouble began. If he hadn't started monkeying with his gun, four inches in length, the trouble would have been just a little diversion. We didn't make, either of us, any noise to speak of, and as for shouting, we didn't do it; so it looks, Mr. Inspector, as if these two gentlemen owed the company a little explanation."

"When you came out of the room did you lock the door?" This again was the inspector. Mr. Van Coster's reply was instantaneous.

"I did. There was the key in the lock outside; it seemed to have been left there careless-like, so I just gave it a turn."

"And what did you do with the key?"

"Well, I just took it out of the lock."

"Yes, and then?"

"Just dropped it on to the floor." He gave a sideways glance at the inspector. "I see you've found it." The inspector was silent. "That's another funny part of it. Why I locked the door I don't know, or why I took the key out of the lock or dropped it on to the floor. I just did those things. That being so, don't you think, Mr. Inspector, that, as I said before, I ought to try to induce these gentlemen to explain. You can do a lot of persuading with a gun like this. Don't mind me if you feel you'd like me to use my influence that way, because it so happens that so far as I'm concerned it would—this is strictly and entirely between ourselves—give me the greatest possible pleasure to empty my gun into the pair of them. Shall I start persuading them?"

"Don't!" The exclamation came from Mrs. Osborne, in what looked very like the nick of time. Mr. Van Coster was aiming his revolver straight at Yarrow's head, with a

faint smile on his face which suggested grim possibilities. That Yarrow realized that he was in an unpleasant situation was uncomfortably obvious. Possibly recollections of a previous encounter with the same antagonist were crowding on to him. The colour had gone from his face; his cheeks were pasty-hued; all expression seemed to have gone from his eyes; his jaw had dropped a little open. Every one in the room seemed to be under the influence of the same strange sort of coma which was preventing him from offering even a show of resistance. They stood—inspector, doctor, chairman of directors, manager—all, as if in fear of an impending tragedy which they were vaguely conscious that any intervention of theirs might only precipitate.

But when that monosyllabic exclamation came from Mrs. Osborne the tension was relieved. Mr. Van Coster lowered his revolver, turned to her, bowed, and saying: "We won't; I'm always at a lady's command," crossed to Inspector Simmons, holding out to him the butt of his revolver, observing:

"Allow me to entrust to your safe custody the finest gun that you ever saw. We'll leave the—skunk and his too sympathetic friend to a more propitious occasion. It is always a mistake, as well as a gross error of taste, to speak of using persuasion in the presence of a lady. Mrs Osborne, I owe you ten thousand apologies." He bowed very low to the lady, then turned again to the inspector. "Now, sir, I am at your service. Is there anything you want with me?"

The inspector was examining the revolver. "I see that all the barrels are loaded, Mr. Van Coster."

"One can't do much persuasion with an empty gun."

"As much as is wise, Mr. Van Coster."

"One can't always stop to worry about wisdom. It would be a dull world if we did. Wisdom is for fools."

"Apparently that is your point of view. Mr. Van Coster, I hardly know what to make of you. We don't come across many of your sort in Folkestone."

"Unfortunate Folkestone!"

"Well, about that I'm not so sure."

"Does that mean that you think it would be better for

Folkestone's health, and for my own health, if I were to take myself out of this ? "

" You are my prisoner, Mr. Van Coster."

" Is that so ? On what charge, Inspector Simmons ? "

" That, at the moment, I cannot tell you. You have admitted, in the presence of us all, that you were the cause of Mr. Osborne's death. After that there is only one course open to me, to arrest you."

" Did you find that key ? "

" The key of the sitting-room ? I did."

" Where is it ? "

" In my pocket, together with other matters bearing on the case which may be of interest to you later."

" That's very odd."

" What is very odd ? "

" That you should have found that key."

" If, as you say, you took it out of the lock and dropped it on the floor, what more natural than that I should kick against it as I went along the passage ? I did kick against it. I stooped down to see what it was and picked up a key. The sitting-room door was locked ; I tried to see if the key fitted ; it did. Under the circumstances what is there odd about that ? "

" Exactly ; that's the point ; what is there ? Anyway, Inspector Simmons, I'm wondering how you do these things in England. I never have been arrested on this side before. I have some very excellent lodgings just along the cliff, and if it's the same to you I would like to give you my bail—Mr. Brookshaw here will tell you that my money's good—and spend the night in my own quarters. If it will ease your mind, you might send one or two, or even three, of your colleagues to keep an eye on me and to see that I do nothing slippery. Can things be done that way in England ? "

" No, Mr. Van Coster, they cannot, especially in such a case as yours. You will have to come with me to the police-station, where you will be provided with accommodation in a cell for the night ; in the morning you will be taken before the magistrates ; it will be for them to say what is to be done with you."

"Will it? Sounds kind of cheerful. If they're of opinion that I ought to be hung, drawn and quartered, I suppose they'll mention it."

"They might. Are you ready?"

"Ready—what now? Couldn't we have drinks round before we start?"

"No, Mr. Van Coster, we could not. You are a prisoner. Considering the seriousness of your position I'm not sure that it's not my duty to have you handcuffed, but if you'll give me your word to come quietly to the station and to offer no violence to any one I'll stretch a point and omit the handcuffs."

"Now, Inspector Simmons, that's real good of you. I've always been given to understand that handcuffs are neither comfortable nor becoming." There were sounds outside which suggested that the owner of a penetrating feminine voice was not satisfied with things as they were. Mr. Van Coster smiled. "I guess, Inspector Simmons, that's Cynthia, Mrs. Sprague, my sister. If she wants to come into this room they'd better let her come; no one's going to keep her out."

Apparently some one without was trying to prevent the door being opened, and failed. It seemed that the handle must have been wrested right away from him, because all at once the door was thrown wide open and a lady appeared in the opening. She addressed the company within.

"I don't know who you folks are, but there's a man outside here who doesn't know how to treat a lady; perhaps there's some one inside who knows how to treat him."

"Why, Cynthia, if that's you, and if there's any one you'd like wiped off the face of the earth, that's the one thing we all of us in here are wanting to do."

The speaker was, of course, Mr. Van Coster. Waking to a consciousness of his presence, the lady regarded him with indignant eyes.

"Why, Peter Van Coster, before you say another word perhaps you'll tell me why you dragged me back before I'd even got started. I'd just landed at Boulogne, and was toying with a plate of chicken in the restaurant, when some one leaned over my shoulder and wanted to know if

my name was Sprague, which he pronounced in such a way that I didn't know if it was my name. He let me look at an envelope with Mrs. Cynthia Sprague written on it, and then I knew it was my name. There was a telegram inside it, and here it is.

"'Come back by next boat. Very pressing. I want you badly.—PETER.'

"So back I came. When I got to your rooms I found you were out, so I had to hunt around, and when I wanted to get into this room they said I could not. But here I am. So, if the place isn't too public, perhaps you'll tell me what you want me for, because if it isn't anything particular I shall catch the night boat from Dover and still be able to play a round at Le Touquet to-morrow."

"But, Cynthia, I'm afraid it is rather particular. I'm arrested. This is Inspector Simmons and I'm his prisoner."

The lady did not seem at all distressed by the information. Her tone was curt and businesslike; indeed, the whole brief dialogue which followed was a little remarkable.

"Are you? What have you been doing? What's it for?"

"I've been killing Percy Osborne; that's what I've been doing, and that's what it's for."

"That was a careless thing to do. Why did you do it?"

"I wasn't so careless as that on purpose. It was an accident—not that it's one for which I'm sorry. Anyhow, Percy Osborne wasn't what you might call of much account.'

Mrs. Sprague said to the inspector: "Do you make much fuss over here about an accident to some one who was not of much account?"

The inspector's reply was to put a whistle to his lips and blow it. Immediately the door was opened and two uniformed constables entered.

"Have you got a cab outside?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, taxi."

"This is Mr. Van Coster. Put him in the taxi, take him to the station, let him have a cell, and keep him there till I come."

In a remarkably short space of time Mr. Van Coster was out of the manager's room, out of the hotel, and, seated in the taxi with two policemen, was being driven to the station. Inspector Simmons had his own methods when matters reached a certain point of cutting a conversation short.

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO PAIRS OF FRIENDS

WHEN, a little later, those model friends, Messrs. Fyfield and Yarrow, had left the hotel and were moving side by side along the darkened cliff, Mr. Fyfield observed to his companion, in a tone of voice which suggested that he was not over-anxious to be heard by any one else :

" Why did you start to tell the tale in the way you did ? "

" I had to tell it somehow." Mr. Yarrow sounded as if he were aggrieved. If he was, his friend did not seem to be at all sympathetic.

" You made such a hash of things that it was easy enough for that Yankee to bowl you out."

Yarrow as he rejoined was scornful :

" Bowl me out ! You don't believe what he said ! He was all lies—compared to him I was truth itself. I tell you that I did hear what I said I heard."

" Do you mean to tell me that you heard Mrs. O. having a row with her old man ? "

" No, I don't mean to say that ; but I did hear some one, and it was a woman. I couldn't make out who it was at first, then I knew." Touching Fyfield's arm with the tips of his fingers, Mr. Yarrow inclined his lips towards the other's ear : " It was Adela."

Mr. Fyfield seemed to be so startled that he stopped to stare at his associate. His comment was brief : "Straight?"

" Absolutely. Do you think I'd play the goat about a thing like that ? Directly I heard her I understood."

" What do you mean you understood ? What did you understand ? "

" When we got home this afternoon she and I had a few words."

" I know—I know. You two are always having a few words. Get on."

" This afternoon I had ten thousand pounds in bank-notes in my hand, and if it hadn't been for her I'd have

brought them away with me. And, mind you, all my own property."

"That isn't what she says. She says you showed the white feather, and knowing you as I do, I should say she was right."

"Oh, would you? I've noticed that when there's anything to be done you keep in the background and talk like that. When she talked like that we had a regular how-d'ye-do. It ended by her saying that she'd get the bank-notes herself and leave Folkestone with them to-night. So when I h ard her voice inside that sitting-room I understood. She and Osborne were having a little discussion; what it was about I could not make out; to me he always seemed ready enough to give her anything she wanted. Then I heard her fire."

"How do you know it was she who fired?"

"You wait a bit. Some one fired, though I didn't know who. I've always made it a rule, no matter in how tight a place I've been, to keep clear of that sort of thing; a man can get in and out of gaol a dozen times, but he can only be hanged once. When I heard that shot I went all of a fluster. Then I heard some one coming towards the door. I drew back. I didn't want to get mixed up in that kind of trouble, and that was true enough. I bolted into your room and I looked through a crack in the door."

"I wondered what the blazes you were doing."

"Yes; and, like the silly fool you are, you caught me by the shoulder and you swung me round, and you asked if it was I who had been going in for artillery practice. Consequence was that though I heard the door opposite open and shut, before I got a chance of seeing, whoever had come out of that sitting-room was out of sight. Then you and I went out into the passage, and the first thing I did was to pick up this—Adela's glove."

"How do you know it is her glove?"

"Because I bought her a pair exactly like them yesterday. She wore them this afternoon, and she had them on when I saw her last."

"Then who was it who fired the second shot? We both heard that."

"That's where the mystery begins. It seems pretty clear that that must have been Percy's wife, but whether it was Adela who did him in or his own wife—that's the question. I can find out from Adela herself pretty soon. But I tell you this—if it hadn't been for that Yankee thruster we'd have planted it on Helen, and the affair would have been settled pleasantly for all the parties concerned."

The worthies walked on some little distance before another word was said; then Mr. Fyfield observed, as if he spoke out of the fullness of his conviction:

"You're on the wrong tack; there's much more in the whole business than meets the eye, of that I'm persuaded. I'll tell you another thing—that Yankee is no liar, at least not in the way you think. He and Mrs. O. have got mixed up together somehow. I shouldn't wonder if he was in her bedroom and Osborne found him there. That he's covering her somehow I've no doubt; that he's telling the truth when he says he did that little microbe in, perhaps by accident, mind you, I quite believe. That Adela may have been there—about the truth of all that you'll soon find out from her; but I've a feeling in my bones that it was the American who really outed Percy Osborne."

"I wish I had. You may laugh at me, but I've grown to have a feeling for Adela which would make you split your sides with laughing. We've been through a good many queer things together, and a better pal than she's been to me no man can ever have; and to get her out of a fix such as I'm afraid she's got herself into I'd do—I'd do——"

"Yes, I know; you'd do wonders; anyhow you talk of doing them, which is something."

"I'd do a good deal more than talk about doing them, as you may find out yet before we are through."

While these dear friends were discussing the position from a point of view of their own, Cynthia Sprague and Mrs. Osborne were engaged in a discussion on the same subject of quite a different kind. Mrs. Sprague had borne the lady off to the lodgings she had lately occupied and which had been re-engaged that afternoon by her brother.

She had three rooms on the ground floor and her brother three more overhead.

"We might share our rooms," she had once explained to Helen. "We don't both want a sitting-room and a dining-room, but I just don't hold with relations sharing anything. They're the people who ought never to have anything in common. That's how I feel, and that's how Peter feels, so I have my apartments on one floor and he has his on another—and we're not on visiting terms when we don't want to be."

Mrs. Sprague had not carried Mrs. Osborne away with her entirely without opposition. Inspector Simmons had dropped a hint that, for the present at any rate, it would be better that Mrs. Osborne should remain an inmate of the hotel, which Signor Belgrazza had seconded in a fashion of his own. Mrs. Sprague, however, had trampled them both underfoot.

"The poor dear is not going to stay a moment longer in your old hotel than she can help; she is going to stay with me, and don't either of you think she's not."

Mr. Brookshaw, as he looked at her, rubbed his chin with his fingers.

"I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, madam—my name is Brookshaw, and I am the chairman of the board of directors of this hotel—but am I to understand that you are related to Mr. Van Coster?"

"I don't know what you call related. I'm his sister, if that is relationship enough, and, so far as I know, I'm about the only relation he's got in the world. My name is Sprague; my husband's name is Daniel Sprague of Wisconsin, where he spends most of his time working double tides to earn a living for me."

"Is your husband in the timber trade?"

"Lumber we call it. He does deal in what you call timber, but he has a hand in pretty nearly everything that's going. What do you know about Daniel Sprague?"

"I know your husband, madam, very well by reputation. I don't think, Inspector, that you will risk anything by allowing Mrs. Osborne to become Mrs. Sprague's guest; on the understanding, that is, that Mrs. Sprague undertakes

not to remove her from Folkestone, and to produce her whenever required."

Mrs. Sprague dwelt upon that little speech of Mr. Brookshaw's when she had got Mrs. Osborne to her own quarters.

"What kind of a country do you live in, that's what I should like to know? Hear old Brookshaw talk about my 'producing' you whenever required? What are you?—a sample cut off the piece? I never did! That man! Now, my dear, you come and sit by the fire and make yourself cosy. There are times when I think that English fires are away beyond our central heating, and one of those times is when you want something to sit over and feel good."

Mrs. Sprague drew a big armchair to the fireside, and placing Mrs. Osborne in it, padded her up with cushions as if she were some fragile piece of china which might get chipped if not most carefully packed.

"My dear, you do look tired, and no wonder. Now, don't you say a word if for any reason you feel you'd rather not."

Mrs. Osborne interposed: "That's what the policeman said."

"What do you mean by 'That's what the policeman said'?"

"He thought, and I fancy still thinks, that I had a hand in—in what happened to Percy, and what he wanted to do was to warn me against giving myself away."

"Oh, that's what he meant—nice, kind policeman! Now, my dear, just you get into your head that I don't know a single thing about what's happened. When I left this morning things looked like perfect bliss for ever and ever; now I just don't know what things look like, and that's where it is. Now you tell me. We'll start off right at the very beginning. Is it true that your husband is dead?"

Mrs. Osborne, looking the speaker very straight in the face, seemed to be trying to make up her mind as to what sort of woman she was before answering:

"Some one shot him; they think it's me."

"And it wasn't? Who was it?"

"I cannot imagine."

"Was it—Peter?" Mrs. Osborne was still. "My dear, don't tell me it was Peter."

"He himself says that it was."

"He'd say that anyway—if he got into his head that they thought it was you. He'd tell any lie to cover you."

"That's what I feel." Mrs. Osborne seemed to give a little gulp.

"Peter is no woman's man. I'd have had him married ten years ago if he had been, but he's always told the same tale about a business man having no time to get married—as if a man wanted time for a thing like that. Why, my Daniel's got no time, yet he married me. I got that Peter to own up once that there wasn't a woman in the world worth a man's marrying. Fancy any man saying a thing like that! If I'd had my way I'd have had him married once a week for the rest of his natural life. He'd know a little more about women than he does at present by the time he was through. I haven't got the dates quite pat, but since not so very long ago an idea has got into me that to some extent Mr. Peter has changed his mind. I got cheered up a wee bit at the start, because I did like to think that my only brother had found after all there was a woman who was worth his while. I'm afraid I'm a candid person, so I put it to him straight. 'Who is she?' I said. When he told me, away I went right down below zero. My dear, he didn't commit himself to plain speech—that's not his way—but he put things so that I knew it was you. My dear, would any woman with just one brother, and that's all, whom she's been trying to marry to some nice girl for years——"

"Always the same girl?"

"Don't you make fun of my feelings, especially at a moment like this; but wasn't it a blow to find that when, after all, he had come upon some few grains of sense, the woman who came up to his ideas of what a woman should be was one he couldn't marry?"

"Perhaps you misunderstood him." There was a faint flush in Mrs. Osborne's pallid cheeks. "He never showed, so far as I saw, the faintest sign that he had any foolish notions about me."

"No, he wouldn't; and you wouldn't notice if he had; and you wouldn't see anything that wasn't in the shop window; no woman would, they're made that way—especially you. So my brother quarrelled with your husband after all."

"I don't know that; at least—well—he didn't exactly quarrel with him. No one could call it quarrelling."

Mrs. Sprague was watching the speaker very attentively.

"I see; it was like that. Let me tell you, Mrs. Osborne, and it will surprise you to learn it, that my brother quarrelled with your husband—when he wasn't there; I mean when your husband wasn't there—about twenty times a day. He used to say things to him, right to his face—when he wasn't there—which were shocking; he'd have said them when he was there if it hadn't been for you. You know the sort of view a man takes of the woman who fills all his landscape?"

"I don't. I never met such a one."

"Daniel Sprague used to take that view of me; I've an idea that he thinks I'm something in a gilt frame even now—at times; but oh, my dear, that Peter's worse than any one I ever did know. He dragged me all the way across the Atlantic—the chase I had to find him! I've never breathed a word of it till now. I'm not one to lay bare my wounds. If he'd had his way he'd have had me come by wireless, to see the most wonderful thing I ever did see—and then it turned out to be you."

"I don't believe a word of it."

"You're right. It does sound too incredible to be true. And when I said to him, on his forcing me to tell him what I thought, 'She's just a fair to middling specimen of the below-the-average sort of girl,' for a few exciting moments I thought that the last trump had sounded. The things that man said to me, the way he described my appearance, my tastes, my manners, the four-hundred-thousand-word description he hurled at me of the fate towards which I was surely drifting! For a month or more, whenever I was by, he was continually dropping allusions to that 'wretched woman,' and every time I knew it was me. My dear, you have my sympathy."

"Have I? I'm more in want of it than you have the slightest notion."

"That's where you're wrong. When a man thinks a woman is the sort of thing Peter thinks you are, she deserves every other woman's sympathy. When he finds out, as he will the first time he kisses you——"

"Cynthia!"

"Helen! That's the first time you've called me Cynthia, and the first time I've called you Helen. It will do for a beginning. To resume: when he finds out, as he surely will, that she's not within two hundred and twenty-seven thousand miles of the woman he thought she was, she will come down ker-swosh from her perch way up in the skies, and if there's any of her left after she has come down it will be only a few unconsidered trifles which might as well be swept up in a dustpan and dumped just anywhere. Pity you're not a really nice woman, Helen, because then my poor, half-witted brother might let you down a little more lightly. But I don't mind telling you—this is private and confidential—that I'm not sure that I'm not beginning to like you, well, not like Peter does, but my way, and that's why I came back by the next boat, sacrificing, mind you, my entry at Le Touquet, because I'll never get back in time to play my round to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXX

CYNTHIA AND HELEN

THEY remained for some time silent. Helen Osborne, leaning forward in her big armchair, her elbows on her knees, sat looking at the glowing flames. Her hostess, on the rug, looked from the fire to her guest and from her guest to the fire. When at last Mrs. Osborne spoke it was with slow, careful diction, as if she were seeking for the words which would best express her meaning.

" You've no idea of the quandary, the hopeless muddle I am in." When she paused the other waited for her to go on. " I wonder if you've ever guessed what a perfect idiot I've been."

Mrs. Sprague's reply took the form of a question: " How old are you ? "

" I'm twenty-six, and I've been married five years—such years—and such a marriage. I suppose marriage does mean something pleasant to some one."

" Daniel Sprague stands to me for a good deal that's pleasant."

" You're lucky."

" You're unlucky. Helen—I'm going to call you Helen —I believe that the element of chance enters a good deal more into people's lives than some good folk like to admit. Perhaps your childhood wasn't a very happy one."

" You see I never had a mother, or a father to speak of, and I began to earn my own living when other girls were at school. I never had even a friend to advise me. Looking back now, I can see that if there had only been a sensible person who cared for me a snap of the fingers things might have been so different."

" God help the young girl who hasn't a cent, or anything else. I don't wish to speak with the least impiety, but it doesn't seem that He always does. The proverb has it that God helps those who help themselves, but in my own country I do declare that that isn't always the case with girls."

"I don't pretend that I ever cared for my husband—I didn't; I've no reason to suppose that he ever cared for me."

"Your husband, my dear, was a mistake—all round. You'd only got to be in his company five minutes to be sure of that. You must have been in a dreadful pickle when you married him."

"I was; but I should have preferred the pickle if I'd understood what marriage with him meant."

"Lots of women who have sold themselves can say that."

"Once I thought that I was happy—really happy; but it only lasted a very short time, then I realized that I'd been nothing of the kind. I'd only been a fool. It seems to me I've been a fool my whole life long. Look at me now. I've only had one friend, your brother, and see what I've done for him."

"You've made him happy."

"I've made him happy? What do you mean? He's in prison at this moment."

"Yes; and shall I tell you what he's saying to himself? He's saying: 'I've done this for her. I've been able to do this much for her; if I have luck I may be able to do more.' Peter Van Coster is the kind of man who is not so rare as some women seem to think, who is happiest when he's doing something for some one else. You're the only woman he's ever loved—that's sure. If you could only look inside him you'd find that to him the idea of doing things for you is rapture. He's prisoner—for your sake; he'll be brought before the court to-morrow—for your sake. I guess he's thinking at this moment that he'll be lucky if he goes to the chair, as we have it, or to the gallows, as you have it—for your sake. That's the kind of man Peter is."

"And what kind of woman do you think I am?"

"Oh, as I told you, you are a fair to middling below-the-average sort of woman."

"Cynthia, I like you, but you're a pig."

"Yes, I'm a fair to middling below-the-average kind of pig."

"I'm not what you think I am."

"What are you, then?"

"Do you think I want any one to be a prisoner for my sake, or to go before the court, or to the gallows? The thought makes me shudder."

"I know a woman who likes to shudder; she says it's such a quaint sensation."

"I don't believe your brother had anything at all to do with what happened to my husband."

"I don't believe it either."

"I was in my bedroom; if he had been in the sitting-room, which was next to my bedroom, I should have known that he was there."

"When a woman's in a certain state she sometimes does acquire a sort of eighth sense; I've felt it myself. Once when I was passing a certain house I had an overwhelming sort of feeling that my Daniel was in it—and he wasn't."

"You're absurd. I don't lay claim to any sort of eighth sense, but I do feel sure that if your brother had been in that sitting-room while I was in my bedroom I should have known it. I believe that the whole tale he told to that policeman was a pack of lies from start to finish."

"I shouldn't wonder; he loves to lie for your sake."

"Cynthia, don't talk like that. It's not a laughing matter."

"He doesn't think it is. He thinks he's behaving like a hero of romance. To me he seems to be a funny man."

"Why should he have gone into that sitting-room at all?"

"No notion; perhaps he was looking for grazing land."

"There was absolutely no reason why he should have gone. I don't believe he ever went. The more I think of it the more I feel sure he never went."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You'll please remember that I know nothing about anything, but I've no doubt you're right."

"No one saw him go."

"Perhaps he'd taken something which made him invisible."

"No one saw him come out."

"My previous observation again applies."

"He's very quick-witted, your brother is. He got hints from those two dreadful men, and from Inspector Simmons, of which he made use as he went along. That about the key he said he'd dropped on the floor was a masterpiece of invention. It was invented on the spur of the moment. The whole story was invention, sheer, downright invention."

"I shouldn't wonder. Peter would invent anything for your sake."

"The person who went into that sitting-room went to commit robbery. I should very much like to know what became of that eight hundred pounds."

"I can't tell you; but from what I know of my brother Peter, I doubt if he'd take that amount of money, even for your sake."

"Cynthia! The idea!"

"Especially as when it comes to dollars he's got them to burn. My brother Peter, as you kindly say, may be a liar, and probably is, but you need not therefore necessarily conclude that he's a thief."

"I'm doing nothing of the kind; you know I'm doing nothing of the kind. I don't understand. There's a mystery somewhere. I wonder if those bank-notes were taken. Perhaps after all Yarrow took them himself. The trouble is that your brother is a man of very keen perception."

"What's the trouble there? Is it wrong to be a man of keen perception?"

"Don't be so silly. He is a man of very keen perception, and he didn't think Yarrow had taken the bank-notes. I feel certain he didn't; that's the trouble. He thinks it was I who killed Percy; and do you know, Cynthia, I'm not sure it wasn't."

"Goodness sakes alive! What are you talking about? What kind of a game are all you people playing at? Who killed who, and which, and why, and where, and when?"

"Cynthia, do be serious, if you can. I'll try to tell you all about it."

"I can't be serious—I just cannot. Tales of horror simply tickle me to death. So, Helen, you most unfor-

tunate young woman, if you're going to start upon one now you'll have to excuse my smiling."

Mrs. Osborne, in her growing excitement, had risen from that big armchair, and now, a wild-eyed, agitated figure, planted herself immediately in front of Mrs. Sprague, and in quivering, thrilling tones told the tragic story of what happened to her in that darkened sitting-room, and especially of her misadventure with the revolver. Mrs. Sprague remarked on it from her own somewhat peculiar point of view.

"That's a very funny story of yours, Mrs. Osborne."

"Why? I see nothing funny about it. I certainly saw nothing funny about it at the time."

"First of all you keep a revolver, I don't know how many years you said, without ever firing it. Why, when I get a new gun I want to fire it at once. My Daniel has got a regular arsenal. Once I got at it, and emptied every barrel at an apple-tree. There wasn't an apple on that tree when I was done. Then when you do fire it you don't fire it—you let it fall and it fires itself. Don't you think that funny? I do. I suppose the bullet's about the size of a pea. Why, I believe I'd let you fire bullets that size at me."

"You are really too absurd. If one hit you in the proper place you'd never want another."

"Then why you should suppose that peppercorn got into your husband I can't think. Really, if you were in the prisoner's dock, I should consider it my duty to point out to the jury that it was pretty strange that you didn't take the trouble to find out if your husband was dead or alive before the popgun got itself dropped. But, my dear, I do not mean to laugh at you, I do not. I understand that you're in a very horrid position. I understand that quite clearly. I once knew a woman who in the dark came on something at the top of a flight of stairs. She gave it a push with her foot; it went rolling down to the bottom. It turned out to be her husband; he was dead when he reached the bottom. The point was, was he alive when he started from the top? In the township where it happened it was the topic of conversation for quite a while—

every man, woman and child had a bet on it. Those bets have never been settled, because no jury has ever been able to agree about it."

"I don't believe it."

"My dear, you need not, but yours is a case very like it. Who killed Percy Osborne is, it seems to me, going to be a question capable of being answered in a good many different ways."

"Cynthia, I can't help telling you that your ideas of humour are your own—very much your own."

"Thank goodness; everything tickles me."

"Particularly, it seems to me, the sufferings of your relations, friends and acquaintances; the more painful they are the more you seem to laugh."

"Now, that isn't fair—you've never seen me laugh once. I simply don't see the use of crying." Some one knocked at the door. "Hullo, who's this? Perhaps it's some one bringing a jugful of tears. Come in."

CHAPTER XXXI

TURNED OUT

THE person who entered was of such diminutive size as to be almost a dwarf. He was attired in a suit of very light grey flannel, wore a soft shirt and a pearl-grey necktie, light brown boots, and he carried in his hand a wide-brimmed straw hat. What his age was it was not easy even to guess. Not only were there no hairs on his face, there were none on his head; his domed bald head shone as if it had been polished. As he stood in the doorway he introduced himself with a smile which had the odd effect of making his face shine like his head.

"My name is Miles, George Dangerfield Miles, at your service."

He gave his head a little bob, and beamed. Mrs. Sprague observed him with twinkling eyes.

"Your name doesn't seem to be very familiar to me, Mr. Miles. How came you to be where you are? Who let you in? Are there no servants left in this house?"

"Positively I could not tell you. The front door was wide open; I did not see a bell or a knocker; I came into the hall; heard voices; knocked; that's how it is that I'm where I am."

"And being here, what is it you want, Mr. Miles, at this rather unusual hour for paying calls?"

"With your permission I will first of all close the door." He closed it without waiting for the required permission to be given. He inclined his body forward, and he dropped his voice. "Between ourselves, I came to see Mr. Peter Van Coster. Then I learnt the distressing news at the station, right under my very nose one person said to another: 'They've locked up a chap named Van Coster.' When I asked what he meant I was told a most amazing story—I presume mostly lies. I hardly knew what to do. You, I believe, are his sister."

"I am; and now that I begin to think things over, I kind of recall your name. Are you the person he employs to what he calls 'dig things up' for him?"

"I am; I am what he calls his 'digger,' George Dangerfield Miles. I have been employed for some time past digging up details of the Tuffington family. I received a telegram from him this morning directing me to come down to Folkestone at once; this is the earliest moment I could get here. Now I am told, if the subject is not too painful a one to mention——"

"No subject is ever that—never."

"And now I am actually told that he is in gaol on a charge of murder—self-confessed murder."

"But he did not do it; never mind his confession."

"Of course he never did it, and I don't mind his confession. I know him. He would confess to having done things he's never heard of, if he were in the mood."

"You are speaking of your employer, Mr. Miles." This was Mrs. Sprague. If she intended her words to convey to Mr. Miles a consciousness of indiscretion, she signally failed. He beamed more cheerfully than ever, even see-sawing on his toes and heels.

"Of course I'm speaking of my employer, that's how I come to know him so well. You are Mrs. Percy Osborne?" The lady referred to bowed. "I had from him a communication this morning in which he mentioned your name—not for the first time."

Mrs. Osborne looked at the little man with wide-open eyes. She echoed his words.

"You received from him a communication in which he mentioned my name, not for the first time? What do you mean?"

The stranger's smile expanded until he seemed to be all smile.

"I don't think I am committing a breach of confidence when I observe that Mr. Van Coster has mentioned you on very many occasions, Mrs. Osborne. It is a name with which I have become familiar. If you will allow me, I will quote you the telegram which has brought me here. 'Come at once—or sooner. You are an ass. I have dug

up the missing heir. It is a she. I have done in five minutes what you have wasted years over. Go to. Bring your papers.' That is the telegram, ladies, which I received a short time ago. I put the papers and a hairbrush in my bag, and I caught the next train from Charing Cross, to be greeted by the tragic news. Of course, obviously, I am still in the dark, but at the same time I think I am beginning to understand."

"What are you beginning to understand, Mr. Miles?"

Mr. Miles's enjoyment of the situation was so obvious and so great that it was not strange that the ladies should regard him with bewildered surprise. He seemed to be shaking with internal laughter.

"That's the point—what am I beginning to understand? May I ask, Mrs. Osborne, if perchance you have any connexion with the missing heir."

"I am connected with the Tuffington family."

"I thought you might be. Isn't it odd? Wonderful man, Mr. Van Coster. Don't you think he's wonderful?"

Before the lady could reply the door was opened again, this time without any preliminary announcement, and there, standing in the doorway, was Inspector Simmons. He did not apologize for his intrusion; he attempted no explanation of how it came about; he did not even remove his peaked cap; he simply asked a question, not too civilly:

"Are these the rooms occupied by Mr. Peter Van Coster?"

So soon as she had recovered from her not unnatural surprise, Mrs. Sprague gave him question for question:

"To whom do you happen to be speaking?"

The inspector regarded her with an air of not too courteous recognition. "So it's you, is it? It was you who forced your way into the room at the hotel; you therefore won't object to my lack of ceremony. I'm informed that you are his sister."

"Are you indeed? Pray, who may you be?"

"You know very well who I am. I've come here to search Mr. Peter Van Coster's rooms. I don't want to give more trouble than I can help, but if you won't tell

me which they are I shall proceed to search the whole house. Are these his rooms ? "

" They are not. My brother's rooms are on the floor above. What are you going to search them for ? For proofs of his various crimes ? "

" That's a question which I'm unable to answer, as my notions of my duty are not likely to be yours." He spoke to some one in the hall. " Farncombe ! " A constable appeared. " Which of the apartments are occupied by Mr. Van Coster ? "

" From my observation I should say they are on the first floor. I have noticed him sitting at the front-room window, immediately over this."

" Go up and have a look round. If they are his rooms, call to me. One moment. Who have we here ? "

The constable replied : " This is the landlady, Mrs. Wickham—at least I believe it is. Aren't you Mrs. Wickham ? "

" Quite right, I am Mrs. Wickham ; and what are you doing in my house, you two policemen, and two more standing on my front doorstep ? " The speaker had come into the hall accompanied by a tall, thin man in an old-fashioned black frock-coat, crowned by a soft black hat. " You see how it is, Mr. Morrison. It was the truth they told us. Here's the house full of policemen and I don't know what." She introduced her companion to all and sundry. " This is Mr. Morrison, my landlord. I manage this house for him, and I've managed it for thirteen years come next April, and when he told me, as he did just now, that I've got bad characters in the house and that one of them had actually got himself locked up for murder, I nearly had a fit on the spot. And now that I've come in and find the house full of policemen I feel as if it would be the end of me."

Mr. Morrison moved towards the inspector.

" Simmons, what's the meaning of this ? "

" It means that I am here to search the rooms occupied by Peter Van Coster, who is at present locked up at the police-station on a charge of murder."

Mr. Morrison had entered the sitting-room uninvited ;

he also had forgotten to bare his head. "And who are these ladies?"

"One of them is the sister of my prisoner, the other is a Mrs. Osborne, the wife of the man who was murdered, who is at present under inspection."

"Under inspection? Simmons, what do you mean?"

"Well, Mr. Morrison, there are circumstances connected with the case which render it necessary that, for the present at least, we should not lose sight of Mrs. Osborne."

"Do you mean to say that this house is going to be watched by the police?"

"I do—while Mrs. Osborne remains in it."

"Then she won't be in it long. It will be all over Folkestone in less than no time—the reputation of the house will be ruined. Mrs. Wickham, you never told me you had a lodger named Osborne."

"No more I haven't, sir. Mrs. Osborne is not lodging in this house."

"Then, madam, I must ask you to go out of this house—at once, if you please."

Mrs. Sprague interposed: "Mrs. Osborne is here as my guest."

"Then, in that case, madam, without the least intention to be offensive, I should recommend you to take yourself out of the house, with your guest, say inside ten minutes. I can't imagine, Mrs. Wickham, where you got these sort of people from."

Mrs. Wickham was apologetic. "I must say, Mr. Morrison, Mrs. Sprague, that's this lady's name, has always been very regular in her payments. There hasn't seemed to be anything the matter with her so far as money's concerned."

Mr. Morrison was inexorable. "Money isn't everything, Mrs. Wickham. So far as a house of mine is concerned, character is all in all. Look at the state you've brought my house to. A murderer in the best set of rooms——"

"Don't you dare to call my brother a murderer! And remove your hat when you're in the presence of a lady."

She helped Mr. Morrison to do as she requested by

snatching off his hat and letting it fall to the floor. Mr. Morrison turned to the inspector, a long-drawn-out figure of righteous indignation.

" You saw this woman assault me, Simmons, on my own premises, seizing the very hat on my head. She must leave my house. What's the usual mode of procedure ? "

" Has she refused to go ? "

Mr. Morrison addressed Mrs. Sprague. " Do you hear what the inspector says, madam ? Do you refuse to quit these premises—at once ? "

Mrs. Sprague laughed in his face. " Are you suggesting, you funny Englishman, that I should leave this house at this hour of the night, and leave myself without a roof to cover me ? On what grounds do you want me to go ? "

" I'm not going to enter into a discussion with you, madam. I do want you to go. Are you going ? "

Little Mr. Miles had his say, speaking with a smile which, it seemed, would not come off : " Allow me to point out to you, sir, that if you attempt to eject Mrs. Sprague from the rooms which she occupies as a lodger, you will place yourself in a very serious position."

Mr. Morrison treated the little man with contempt.

" I don't know who you are, sir, and I don't want to know. If I do place myself in what you call a very serious position, it's no concern of yours. Who is this man, Mrs. Wickham ? "

" I've no more idea than the dead, Mr. Morrison. He looks as though he might be some one dropped in from the street."

" Then he'd better drop back in the street. Simmons, I ask your advice as a responsible officer of police. What is the course which I had better pursue ? I don't want my house to be irreparably ruined, as it appears to me it very probably will be if these persons are allowed to remain in it. Will your men put them out ? "

" No, Mr. Morrison, that they cannot do. A policeman can only interfere in the event of a breach of the peace. You or your agents must eject these persons, at your own risk. And I will so far associate myself with——"

" My name is Miles, officer—George Dangerfield Miles."

—" with Mr. Miles, as to point out that by so doing you might place yourself in a very serious position. Under the circumstances I should venture to suggest that you should allow them to remain here to-night on the understanding that they leave in the morning."

" I shall do nothing of the kind; as for the risk, I'll take it. Before the morning it will be all over the place that these women are here. The house will be mobbed—it will be ruined. I've known that sort of thing happen elsewhere. No, thank you; they go out now. Mrs. Wickham, get on the telephone to my place. Tell Carter to come up with three other men, and be as quick as he can. I'll have these people out inside ten minutes." The speaker addressed Mrs. Sprague: " If you have any luggage, madam, I should recommend you to pack it."

" My luggage is not unpacked. Do you imagine, you wretched specimen of a gallant Englishman, that I wish to remain in a house which belongs to you an instant longer than I can help? " Mrs. Sprague turned to the inspector: " It's late, especially for Folkestone. Where are we to go for the night? "

" You will find accommodation in an hotel. By the terms of his licence an hotel-keeper is not allowed to refuse accommodation to any one who requires it, so long as there's room on the premises. I should recommend you to return to the hotel from which Mrs. Osborne has come; I will see that everything is made all right for you there."

Mrs. Sprague referred the matter to Mrs. Osborne. " What do you say? "

Mrs. Osborne was white and shivering; she spoke as if her voice were beyond her control. " I—I don't want to go back to the room—I—I had. I—I don't think I could. I'd rather do anything."

" You needn't trouble yourself about that, Mrs. Osborne." This was the inspector. " The rooms you have lately occupied are locked up, the keys are in my possession, for the present no one will be allowed to go near them. I will see that quarters are found for you as far from your old ones as possible."

On that understanding the two women went out into

the night, Mr. Morrison standing on the steps, his hat restored to his head, to watch them as they went. They walked a couple of hundred yards which separated them from the Climax Hotel. A policeman walked behind them.

"Is it necessary that you should follow us?" inquired Mrs. Sprague.

"I'm instructed not to lose sight of you," the man replied.

Mrs. Sprague said to the little man who had constituted himself their companion:

"This is a charming country, Mr. George Dangerfield Miles. Are you so fortunate as to be an Englishman?"

"England has its good points, Mrs. Sprague, just as America has. I am inclined to think that if we were in America, circumstanced as we are, we should not find the police methods any pleasanter than they are here. I always say that wherever you are it is better to bear anything rather than come in contact with the police, especially if you are a woman."

As they neared the Climax Hotel, Helen, walking with Mrs. Sprague, suddenly caught her companion by the arm, and holding her tight, broke into incoherent exclamations.

"I can't!—I can't!—I can't go back to that hotel. He's there—I know he's there!—I can't!"

Mrs. Sprague, eyeing her half-hysterical companion, said to the policeman at the back:

"Is it necessary that we should go straight indoors, or shall we be allowed to take a turn upon the cliff? The fresh air may do Mrs. Osborne good—with your kind permission."

The constable seemed to be rather in a quandary. He was a young man, and was perhaps conscious that both these women were good to look at. He spoke with an uncertain tongue:

"I was told to see you two ladies to the Climax Hotel; the inspector has telephoned to them that you are coming, but I don't suppose there will be any harm done if you like to stop out of doors a bit."

"That's very kind of you to allow us such a liberty.

Come, my dear, the policeman says we can stop out for just a little while, so we can go for a turn on the cliff."

As Mrs. Sprague, slipping her arm through Helen's, was about to lead her away, Mr. Miles said :

" Hadn't I better go to the hotel and see that everything is right about the rooms ? If you like I'll come and tell you if they're ready."

" That's not a bad idea." Mrs. Sprague asked the officer: " Are you instructed to keep this gentleman also in sight, or may he go to the hotel and do as he says ? "

The constable, as if conscious that he was being badgered, was a little gruff :

" I have no instructions except about Mrs. Osborne. This gentleman can go where he pleases ; he's nothing to do with me."

" You hear, Mr. Miles ? How fortunate you are ! By the way, policeman, are you instructed to try and listen to what we say ? "

" I've no instructions to do anything of the kind."

" That's very nice of you. Then, if that's the case, would you mind keeping as far off us as you can ? As long as you keep Mrs. Osborne in sight, won't that be enough ? "

Mr. Miles continued to advance towards the hotel ; the two women moved across the grass ; the constable, taking the hint, remained where he was. As he stood there, his thumbs thrust in his belt, a colleague approached, with whom he exchanged comments on the situation. He spoke with an air of almost judicial wisdom which was a little beyond both his appearance and his years.

" This is a queer game, that's what this is. Mind you, there's more in it than meets the eye. One man locked up because he says he did it ; me keeping an eye on this young woman because the inspector thinks she's done it, and, between you and me, there's another party who thinks that some one else has done it—and, mind you, that some one else means more than one. I believe that that some one else is being looked for at this very minute."

The colleague inclined his head towards the two women,

who could be dimly seen on a seat on the other side of the lawn.

"What are your instructions if she tries to hop?"

"My instructions are to arrest her, quick—that's what my instructions are—if she shows the slightest sign of taking herself off."

"What are you going to arrest her for? You can't arrest her for nothing." The colleague spoke with something which was almost warmth.

"I have no instructions about that. The governor said to me, 'Don't let her out of your sight. Whatever you do, don't you let her out of your sight.'"

"Seems to me," observed the colleague, "that's just what you have done."

"What do you mean?" inquired the officer. Then he himself broke into exclamation" Why, is there only one of them upon that seat! There were two of them a second ago."

"There aren't two of them now." The colleague's tone was dry.

"Which of them's gone?"

"I couldn't certainly say, but I don't somehow fancy that the one on the seat is the one you were told to keep your eyes on."

"Here!—come and lend me a hand; I shall have to look into this."

The two men went hurrying across the grass towards the solitary figure which was on the seat near the edge of the cliff; the seat on which, only a few seconds before, two persons had been seated.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CLIFF PATH

DIRECTLY the two women were seated, Mrs. Osborne said to the other :

" I want to be alone for a little ; I must be. Let me go and you stop here."

" But, my child, how about the policeman who is keeping you in sight ? "

" I don't care. There's the path which leads down to the Sandgate Road just in front of us. I know it quite well. If he comes, that policeman, you can stop him and keep him long enough to let me get a good start. Cynthia, please ! "

Mrs. Osborne laid pleading hands upon the other's arm.

" Helen, what are you going to do ? You're not to do anything foolish."

" I'm not, I'm not. Only, I feel as if I must be alone, if only for half an hour, so that I can think things over—before—they take me back to that awful hotel. Cynthia, I'm going ; I'm going to stoop. Perhaps he won't notice just directly that you're alone."

Which is precisely what did happen. Mrs. Osborne, bending almost double, hurried towards the break in the cliff which indicated the commencement of the descent on to the Sandgate Road. Mrs. Sprague, left by herself, watched her as if uncertain whether to take steps to prevent her flight. In spite of herself words shaped themselves on her lips as the other's figure passed into unseen depths below.

" I wonder—if she did do it. Why is she so afraid to go back to the hotel if she didn't ? "

She was still asking herself the question when the two officers came hurrying up.

" Oh, it's you, is it ? Where is Mrs. Osborne ? "

This, of course, was the constable who had been instructed to keep the lady in sight. His tone and manner showed signs of very obvious resentment. He blustered on :

"Where has she gone to? What game have you been up to now?"

The lady was dignity itself. "If the question, policeman, is addressed to me, I have been up to no game. I never play games of any sort on the cliffs at this hour of the night."

The officer was brusque if not brutal; perhaps because he felt that quite conceivably his position might be an awkward one.

"None of that nonsense! You know very well what I mean. Where's that woman? She was on this seat with you not half a second ago—now where's she gone?"

"Questions addressed to me in that tone by persons of your sort I certainly decline to answer. I may add that in any case I don't see how it is any business of yours. Cannot a lady in Mrs. Osborne's position go for a stroll along the Leas if she wants to?"

"Along the Leas?" The constable turned to look in the direction the words suggested. "Bill, can you see any one on the Leas?"

His colleague rejoined: "Can't say I do, but in this sort of half-light it isn't easy to make sure. She might be there, and yet she mightn't. Now that I look closely, there does seem to be some one on the grass."

In the meanwhile, while those two officers discussed the possibility of there being really some one on the Leas, Mrs. Osborne, descending towards the Sandgate Road, was having adventures of her own. The path she had chosen was not an easy one to negotiate at night. There was a light above and another below, but none on the path itself. As it goes down for a little distance, then turns at a right angle, turns again, and wanders into a series of other paths, which are charming enough in the daytime, but very much in the shadow at night, it is sometimes difficult to make out one's way, and still harder to ascertain if there is any one else about.

As she went lower and lower, moving as rapidly as she could in the darkness, by which she was all at once surrounded, her nerves all on edge, she became uncomfortably conscious of sounds which suggested that some unseen person or persons were descending also, and, so it seemed, keeping step with her. The idea coming on her in that

utter darkness that she was not alone caused her heart to beat so fast that she found it difficult to breathe. Perforce she stopped ; with her hand pressed to her side she listened

The sound might come from the back ; some one might be following her from the top of the cliff—in pursuit. No ; she realized how easy it is in complete darkness to be deceived as to the direction from which a sound is coming ; it did not seem to her that the noise she heard came from behind. She had an uncanny feeling that it came from somewhere close beside her, but whether from her right or from her left she could not tell. It had stopped when she stopped ; in the complete silence she fancied that she could hear persons breathing.

The notion that any one could be so close to her as that and yet remain unseen held her with a new terror which sent her hurrying along the path in such blind haste that she came into contact with the trunk of a tree with such force as almost to knock her off her feet. Brought to a standstill, she leaned against what had almost knocked her over, half stunned, shaken, bruised, gasping, tears in her eyes. The sense seemed to have been driven out of her ; she had lost all consciousness of direction ; she knew not where she was, which the way up, which the way down. She was as completely lost as if she had been a first adventurer in a virgin forest.

The situation was made worse by the fact which was borne in on her, in spite of the disorder of her mental faculties, that she was not alone. Some one had started hurrying when she had started, some one had stopped when she had stopped, some one who was quite close to her at that very moment, some one who perhaps saw her though she saw nothing. What was more, some one who was coming closer still—so close that she actually felt some one's breath upon her face. She would have screamed if she had had the power ; she would have run for her life if she had been able to move. But she could do nothing. It was as if she had been rooted to the ground, deprived of the use of her limbs, of the control of her voice.

Suddenly some one spoke, in a whisper which just reached her ears :

" Helen, is that you ? How you are shaking, I can feel

you tremble. My dear, you needn't be afraid. It's only me. It's Adela."

She knew who the speaker was directly the voice was heard, but it was not by any means sure that the knowledge came as a relief. The feeling that she was alone with Adela Reid, in that place, at that time, was to her like another nightmare. The other seemed to wonder at her silence.

"What's the matter with you, Helen? You're not afraid, not really afraid, of me."

"What do you want?"

"I want to speak to you—about Percy."

Mrs. Osborne gave what sounded like a stifled groan.

"I don't—want to speak to you."

"But you must hear what I've got to say—you must! I've been waiting all night for a chance of saying it. I was on the seat just under the top of the cliff when you came down the path. I could hardly believe it was you. I was just wondering how I could get a chance of speaking to you. I called to you, softly, but you didn't hear. So I came down with you along the path which runs beside the one on which you were. Helen, I've got to speak to you—I may never have another chance. They will tell you that I killed your husband—— Hush."

Some sound which was so slight as to be imperceptible to the other had apparently caught her ear. Mrs. Osborne had felt her breath upon her cheek; now she felt her whole person drawing closer; she felt her trembling with a violence which was almost dreadful, as if she, in her turn, were possessed by a terror which was scarcely human. Words, breathed in an anguished whisper, seemed to penetrate Mrs. Osborne's brain:

"They're after me! Don't let them take me—don't let them!"

At the end of the sentence there was the beginning of a scream, but it got no further than a beginning. Mrs. Osborne was conscious that some unseen person had gripped the woman whose body was pressing against hers by the throat; that fingers were strangling the scream at its inception; that she was being torn from her side by apparently more persons than one.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MORNING CALLERS

THEY found Mrs. Osborne lying on the ground at the foot of the tree. The young officer, coming down the path on his anxious quest, having discovered that there was no one at all like the missing lady on the Leas, struck the toe of his boot against something as he came blundering down. He stopped and felt that it was a woman.

"Bill!" he shouted to his colleague, who was some way above him in the rear, "I believe I've found her. Come down and lend a hand. She's fainted or something."

As close as possible upon "Bill's" heels came Mrs. Sprague, who, standing listening on the top of the cliff, anxious on her own account, hearing something of what the officer said, came hurrying after Bill. Between them they bore her back whence she had come. They could not restore her to consciousness. She seemed to have done something more than fainted. The two officers, practised in the principles of first aid to the wounded, assisted by the lady, were powerless to bring her back to any semblance of life. On the top of the cliff they were greeted by a deputation from the hotel headed by Mr. George Dangerfield Miles, who, in some occult way, seemed to have become aware that something untoward had taken place. She was borne into the building, to a bedroom far removed from the one which she had called hers; and when, with the combined assistance of Mrs. Sprague and a chambermaid, she was placed between the sheets, as if the touch of the fresh, cool linen had a reviving effect, she opened her eyes and looked about her, to find Dr. Holden standing by her bedside looking down at her.

"She'll do now," pronounced that medical authority as he met her wondering glance. "All that she requires is rest and quietude—and sleep; plenty of sleep. I will send something to assure her that."

A few minutes after his departure a small bottle arrived,

the prescribed quantity of whose contents was given to the lady. If its intention was to assure her restful sleep, it failed entirely. All night she lay in agony, a frightened, haunted, nerve-torn woman. She hardly knew whether to shut her eyes or to keep them open. Either way she saw things of horror.

She was back again in her own bedroom—in the one in which she had sat for so many hours in the darkness. Then she had not been conscious of anything which might be happening in the sitting-room which adjoined; now she was conscious of too much. She heard sounds coming from that sitting-room, sounds against which it was vain to shut her ears; cries for help, moans of pain, appeals for mercy. She seemed to see, too, what they meant, what was happening. She saw the diminutive form of her husband assailed by a figure which assumed different shapes. First it was a man who seemed to be twisting his head off his shoulders; she dared not look at that man, she was sure that she knew him too well. Then it was another man—him she did not hesitate to stare and even glare at. It was Jack Yarrow. Somewhere behind him, in an impalpable background, was another figure, short, dark, agile, dangerous. Somehow she could not see his face, but she knew, she could not tell how, that it was Fyfield. These two figures were treating her husband with cruel violence. She longed to spring at their throats, to help him, to save him from their pitiless hands; but she was held in a vice as though she could not move, could not even aid him by opening her lips to cry for assistance, though she knew that they were doing him to death.

Sometimes these two figures, or the one figure—she was not quite sure if there were two—would vanish, and in the same mysterious background would slowly appear the shadowy outline of a woman. It did not appear all at once, but gradually, little by little, so that she was possessed by a sense of horrid wonder as to what it might be that was really coming. Then, all at once, she knew it was a woman—knew not so much by the sense of sight as by some sense which was abnormal.

She had a horrid feeling that this woman, who was so

slowly being revealed in the darkness, was herself; that she was about to do something indescribably awful to something which was lying on the floor at her feet. Then the something on the floor sprang up; she knew it was her husband, that the woman was not herself. It was some other woman, whose very neighbourhood seemed to poison the air. How she was doing it Mrs. Osborne did not know, but she did know that she was doing her husband to death. Then her husband fell lifeless on to the floor; she knew the woman who had killed him was Adela Reid.

Then a phantasmagoric change took place; she was no longer in that sitting-room, she was out of doors in the night air on the path descending to the Sandgate Road. And Adela Reid came to her—a woman chased by avenging furies; and before her eyes—for now Mrs. Osborne could see her plainly—people came and tore her into pieces.

Such-like pleasant imaginings were with her through the night, in spite of the doctor's stuff which was to assure her restful sleep. Whether she was awake or sleeping she did not know. Either way the result was the same; of rest she knew nothing; all night she lay in agony. When the morning came she looked like a woman who is still struggling in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

For her that day was a busy and a troubled one. Morally and physically a wreck after that dreadful night, she was never given a moment's peace; always some one seemed to be wanting her for something.

At a most matutinal hour Mrs. Sprague had an interview with Mr. Miles in the sitting-room which was part of the suite which had been allotted to the two women. Entering in an exiguous costume, with about her no suggestion that she had made her morning toilet, the lady found her visitor warming himself before the blazing fire.

"Sharp frost this morning," he informed her as he rubbed his hands.

"Is that what you've come to tell me?" asked the lady. "When I had just closed my eyes for the first time, so it seemed to me, for weeks, have you dragged me out

of bed merely to tell me that it's freezing cold? If so I'll hurry back again."

The lady scarcely seemed to be in her sweetest temper; she glowered at the visitor as if he had done her some personal injury. Mr. Miles, on his side, seemed to be a little less inclined to beam than on the previous evening, instead there was about him an air of almost whimsical gravity.

"I wish that were all I had come to tell you. I have been making numerous inquiries."

"Making inquiries—when? At what hour do you get up?"

"I made most of my inquiries last night, but I have supplemented them by others which I made this morning. I am an early riser."

"You must be; I'm not. I like a cup of coffee to be brought to me at half-past ten, and, unless I ring, not a moment before. I've dismissed a maid for bringing it at five-and-twenty minutes past. Well, what about your inquiries? Oh, isn't it cold!"

The lady seated herself upon a padded stool, and placed herself so close to the fire that her feet were right in the hearth.

"How is Mrs. Osborne? May I ask that to begin with?"

"I really can't tell you. I believe she's had a very bad night. I don't suppose she's any the better for it this morning; but I haven't seen her."

"I wonder if she has any suspicion that she's in danger of being arrested."

"Is she? How do you know? What are they going to arrest her for? Though she's an innocent lamb, and has my tenderest sympathy, and I love her, I'm beginning to wish that I had gone to Le Touquet and used my brother's telegram to light a cigarette. Did you hear me ask you what they're going to arrest her for?"

"There seem to be a considerable number of people who are of opinion that it was she who killed her husband. I'm bound to say that there are a number of things which point in that direction. One can't shut one's eyes to

facts. It is generally felt that to screen her your brother, Mr. Van Coster, has handed himself over to the police."

"How do you know my brother didn't kill that wretched man? And how do you know that that poor girl did? You seem to be a very cocksure sort of person; my brother once told me you were."

"That was very kind of your brother. But in this instance I am not cocksure; quite candidly, I don't know what to think. That's one reason why I'm here. I doubt if Mr. Van Coster killed this man; I doubt if his wife did either."

"Now you seem to be a very doubting kind of person. What don't you doubt?"

"I think it is very possible that the dead man committed suicide. From what I have gathered, by dint of putting two and two together, that idea seems to be as feasible as any other. You see, Mrs. Sprague, I'm in a peculiar position."

"We all are; my brother is, I am, she is." She jerked her thumb towards the room in which Mrs. Osborne was supposed to be sleeping.

"You see, I'm your brother's representative. I have acted for him in some very peculiar matters; I'm not the fool you perhaps take me for."

"Mr. Miles!" The lady stared at him. "I never took you for a fool."

Mr. Miles beamed at her as if he doubted it.

"Plenty of people do; it suits me that they should. You know your brother well enough to be aware that he would soon cut short his dealings with a fool; I have acted for him for more than twenty years. Now he wants me to do something for him, and I don't quite see how it's going to be done."

"What does he want you to do?"

"I've had a message from him this morning——"

"From gaol?"

"He's not in gaol; at present he's at the local police-station. Here is the message." He took a scrubby piece of paper from a waistcoat-pocket. "You wouldn't understand it if I showed it to you; it's in a cipher to which

only he and I have the key. ' Mrs. Osborne is the heir to Loony's pile.' I'm giving you his own words. ' She's the granddaughter of Amos Tuffington's sister. She's the sole representative of the Tuffington family still living. You must get her away—right, clean away; I don't care where or how, so long as you get her, so long as it's into a storm cellar where the wind won't touch her. Maybe the wind will soon blow by. She mayn't be able to get any of her husband's money just yet awhile. Get mine, or Loony's—which is her own. Get any amount; only, mind you '—this is emphasized—' only mind you get her into that storm-cellar before any one knows she's gone. You have done that sort of thing for me before; do it again, and don't you fail.' "

Mr. Miles looked over the paper which he had been reading at Mrs. Sprague, and again he beamed.

" That's a difficult task your brother has set me."

" It does seem to be a tallish order. But what does he mean with his storm-cellar ? "

" Your brother will be taken before the magistrates this morning; in England a prisoner has to be taken before a magistrate within twenty-four hours of his arrest. It's in his mind that they'll discharge him, that they won't believe his own story of his guilt, and that the moment he is discharged they'll arrest the lady. He wants me to get her somewhere where she'll run no risk of anything of that kind. Of course it can be done, but it will be awkward."

" How can it be done ? Haven't the police got their eyes on the hotel ? "

" Oh, no doubt, no doubt." Mr. Miles screwed up the front of his chin as though it were made of india-rubber. " But there are ways of doing almost anything—if you have got money. The point in this case is the lady—is she willing to be moved ? "

" I've not the least idea. You suggest the most amazing things. How would you propose to—what you call—' move ' her ? "

" That depends to some extent upon whether the lady is willing or unwilling. Of course, if the lady is unwilling other considerations enter on the scene."

"Do you seriously tell me that you are prepared to what you call 'move' the lady whether she wants to be 'moved' or not, at your master's bidding? How would you do it, anyhow?"

"That would be comparatively simple. A steamer could be chartered—one has been chartered before—the lady could be smuggled out of the house without any one having the least suspicion, some other woman would of course be substituted for her, who would of course remain behind and take her place in bed; she would be got on board the steamer without attracting the slightest attention. Oh, it has been done! The rest would be simple. I'm not inexperienced in such matters, Mrs. Sprague."

"So it would appear. Nice possibilities you present to the imagination, you and my precious brother! How would you propose to 'move' her, even from the hotel, if she declined to be 'moved.'"

Mr. Miles coughed behind his hand.

"There are ways and means, Mrs. Sprague, ways and means—various methods. People have been spirited across the world without their ever knowing it; oh yes, I can assure you; it's a question of money. But in this case another, and I may say an extraneous, consideration arises."

"Pray what's that?"

"The point in this instance is—is it worth while?"

"In what sense do you mean it would be worth while?"

"Granting that the lady is sure to be arrested—I say, let her be arrested. I'm inclined to say that positively."

"That's very nice of you."

"I understand Mr. Van Coster's point of view. He feels that for the woman he loves——"

"Mr. Miles! The woman he loves! What do you mean! Mrs. Osborne's husband only died yesterday."

"Well—er—we'll leave that. Mr. Van Coster probably feels that for a lady to be touched by even the tips of a policeman's fingers is an unthinkable thing. Possibly, in a general way, he's right."

"Again that's very nice of you."

"It cannot be pleasant for any lady to be locked up."

"There I'm certainly with you."

"Supposing Mrs. Osborne is innocent of the offence with which she will be charged."

"We will suppose that."

"Mrs. Sprague, in this world no one can be positive of anything. But I'm willing to lay odds on her innocence. Not only am I willing to back her innocence, but even if she's guilty I should recommend her to stay and see it out I'm convinced they'd get no jury to convict her. Even if she shot that little hound—you must pardon my using strong language, but everything points to the fact that he was a little hound——"

"Your principles may be peculiar, Mr. Miles, but I'm not differing."

"I say even if she did—and mind you, I'm laying odds that she didn't—if she's in the hands of a good counsel I'm pretty nearly sure they'd never convict her. So"—the speaker held up his hand as the lady showed symptoms of an inclination to speak. "One moment, Mrs. Sprague, if you'll allow me. What, in the circumstances, would be gained by moving the lady? The law in England has a long memory, and never forgives. Even if we got her into a storm-cellar, which we could do, she might have to stay there all her life. So soon as she put her head outside the police would have her. And what would she gain? It's not pleasant, Mrs. Sprague, for a lady to have to hide from the police."

"Pray don't hit me, Mr. Miles. Why so violent? I'm still not differing."

"I must apologize if I seem heated, but that's because I am—I feel warm. That's why I said your brother had set me a difficult task. I don't know what to do. He's a person who likes his instructions carried out to the letter; but if in this case I do carry them out, afterwards he won't find it easy to forgive me, or himself. So I've come to you, Mrs. Sprague, not for advice; I probably shouldn't follow it if you gave it me; but I've come just to ask you to let me hear what you think, so that I can compare it with what I think."

"And then?"

Mr. Miles beamed at the lady in quite his happiest way.

"And then? Why then, Mrs. Sprague, it is just possible that I may realize that there are occasions on which two heads are better than one; which, after all, will be something gained."

"At what time will be brother be taken before the magistrates?"

"I imagine somewhere about eleven o'clock. You mean that nothing need be done before he has been before them. Yes, possibly, from our point of view, but there are his instructions, which he expects me to carry out literally; he says that she's to be moved at once."

As the lady was about to speak there was a tap at the door and a waiter entered, announcing:

"A gentleman to see Mrs. Osborne on very important business."

The gentleman must have been close at his heels; he came into the room before the waiter had finished his announcement.

"Excuse me if I do not wait for an invitation to enter; I am Mr. Pendleton; I came down by the first morning train from town." He glanced round. "Is Mrs. Osborne not here? I was told she occupied these rooms."

CHAPTER XXXIV

MR. PENDLETON'S STORY

MRS. SPRAGUE, rising from her low seat close to the fire, found herself facing a dapper-looking gentleman, with hair just tinged with grey, who was regarding her through a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, and she in a costume which was certainly little more than rudimentary. It was not remarkable if, self-possessed person though she usually was, she exhibited some signs of confusion.

"These rooms are—well, after a manner—in the occupation of Mrs. Osborne, but I'm not she; I'm Mrs. Sprague." The visitor bowed. "As I think I may call myself Mrs. Osborne's confidential friend, would you mind telling me who you are, and what you want with her? She is not very well."

"Mrs. Osborne knows me very well, Mrs. Sprague; during the last five years she and I have had a good deal to do with each other. I acted as solicitor for—the late Mr. Osborne, but as a matter of fact most of my dealings have been with Mrs. Osborne; she acted—always—for her husband."

"You know what has happened?"

"I know something; I know that Mr. Osborne is dead, and—" The speaker, stopping, adjusted his spectacles on his nose. "I think, if you don't mind, Mrs. Sprague, I must see Mrs. Osborne. Would you mind telling her that Mr. Pendleton wishes to see her on very urgent business?—business which, I may add, must be attended to if she's not actually at death's door."

Mrs. Sprague looked the speaker up and down as if she were anxious to learn what manner of man he actually was.

"Everything, and every one, seems pressing upon this poor girl all at once; and the doctor has ordered her rest and peace. However, I will give her your message—that is, I will tell her that you're very anxious to see her. I don't propose to say anything about her being at death's door."

" I did not intend those words to be regarded as part of my message; perhaps the language I used was strong. I am sorry to hear about her troubled state, which I can perfectly realize; but at the same time it is absolutely essential that I should see her at the earliest possible moment."

On the threshold of Mrs. Osborne's bedroom Mrs. Sprague turned and asked: " Do you wish to see her in private, or will it be enough if she comes in here? Both this gentleman and I are friends of hers."

" I do not doubt it, but, in the first instance, I must see her alone. What I have to say is for her ear only."

Presently Mrs. Sprague reappeared. " Mrs. Osborne will see you. Will you please come in. She is still in bed and very far from well; so will you please avoid as far as possible topics which are likely to disturb her."

Mr. Pendleton, slightly shrugging his shoulders, passing the door which the lady held open, whispered: " It is easy to talk, but—some things must be said."

As the lady, having closed the door on Mr. Pendleton, returned towards the fire, she observed:

" More pain and grief and utter desolation! That man is a bringer of bad tidings, and the very worst kind of bad tidings, or I'm very much mistaken. Poor girl! I wonder what he's come to say."

" Mr. Pendleton is a gentleman of whom I have heard a great deal, and never anything to his discredit. He succeeded his father in a large practice of the very best kind—one which he has considerably increased. I have no idea what it is he's going to say to that unfortunate lady, but I'm sure that he never left London at the hour he must have done unless it was something which had to be said."

Mrs. Osborne was sitting up in bed. Mr. Pendleton's manner as he moved towards her suggested that he stood towards her in the relation of a friend rather than of a professional man. His tone was gentleness itself. When he drew near he softly touched the back of the hand which lay outside the quilt.

" My dear, I am sorry to see you under the weather. I wouldn't have troubled you with my presence had it been possible to avoid it, but—I'm afraid it wasn't."

A faint flush came into the lady's pale cheeks; there was even the hint of a smile about her lips.

"I'm very glad you have come; you're the one person I wish to see."

"That's good hearing. I hope your feeling will be the same when I take myself away. I have heard what has happened. A message came to me last night over the telephone."

"Over the telephone? Who sent it?"

"About that I'm not quite sure. I thought at first it was you."

"It certainly was not me. What was the message and when did you get it?"

"I was at the office late last night. As I was thinking of leaving, the telephone rang. Maclaren, one of my managing men, went to see who had rung. He came back and said: 'Some one wishes to speak to you and you only.' I went to the instrument. A woman's voice came to me through the receiver, and said, when I had assured her that I was Mr. Pendleton: 'Mr. Percy Osborne was murdered an hour ago in his sitting-room in the Climax Hotel. You had better come down in the morning to see his widow.' That was all; the message ceased; I was disconnected."

"How strange. You say it was a woman's voice? Didn't you recognize it?"

"I thought at first that it might have been your voice; afterwards I was perfectly sure it wasn't."

"Have you no idea whose voice it was? It must have been some one who—who knew."

"Evidently. I thought some one might have been guilty of a foolish jest. However, inquiries which I immediately caused Maclaren to make, showed that the speaker had been perfectly correct—that is, that Mr. Percy Osborne had been found dead in his sitting-room. So I got up this morning at an unusually early hour, caught the first train, and here I am."

"It was very good of you to come."

Mr. Pendleton, who had placed himself on a chair at the lady's bedside, gravely shook his head.

"My dear, don't be so sure." He hesitated, then went on. "You know ever since the day when you came to my office and I was told who you were my sympathies have been yours, in a very special sense. I knew what you had to bear, and I knew how well you bore it. No woman could have done her duty better than you did. What would have happened to the man who is now dead without you I do not care to think."

Again he hesitated; taking off his glasses, he wiped them as if, perhaps, to serve as a cover for his hesitation.

"I hardly know how to approach what I have to say to you. I have been in some delicate positions—men who follow my trade have to be—but I cannot recall having been in a more uncomfortable one. However, I don't think it's any good beating about the bush. When a thing has to be said, better say it."

Replacing his spectacles, he observed her through his polished glasses.

"My dear—you will observe how I stick to the noun and avoid the mention of your name—it has lately come to my knowledge that Percy Osborne, to whom you have rendered services which were priceless, and whose—we will put it gently and say peculiarities—you have borne with a patience which is beyond all praise, was not your husband."

The woman in the bed stared at him as if he had said something which was altogether beyond her understanding.

"You may well look at me as if you wondered if my wits were straying; yet the facts are as I have stated them. He never was your husband, and you never were his wife. When he married you he already was a married man."

"How can that possibly have been?"

There was something in her tone which scarcely sounded as if it were sorrow.

"I believe you were acquainted with his wife."

"His wife? Percy's wife? Mr. Pendleton, what do you mean? I was his wife."

"My dear, Percy Osborne committed bigamy; I should not be at all surprised if he committed trigamy;

I'm as nearly as possible convinced that he never was of sound mind."

"I have sometimes wondered myself if he was."

"He wasn't. I'm inclined to think that it was a sort of habit of his to ask females to marry him. Two years ago he nearly got himself into a serious scrape, but with the cunning peculiar to a certain class of lunatic he managed to conceal the fact from you."

"Two years ago? Where were we?"

"You were at Scarborough."

"I remember. We had rooms there for more than a month. I couldn't make out why he wouldn't come away."

"While you were there he appears to have lived a sort of double life. If you will charge your memory, you will find that you did not see a great deal of him."

"I very often didn't; very often I saw nothing of him for days together; I dare say that was the case at Scarborough."

"Possibly on at least some of those occasions he was engaged in pursuits of which he had rather you knew nothing. Anyhow, while he was at Scarborough he made the acquaintance of a young woman who was in a confectioner's shop; gave her to understand that he was a single man; and actually asked her to be his wife. He came to my office and told me all about it. I was more than ever convinced that the man was not sane. A thousand pounds was given to that young woman to keep her still."

"I'd rather not hear about things of that kind, Mr. Pendleton."

"He did not marry that confectionery young woman."

"Who did he marry—before he married me?"

"A young woman named Adela Reid."

"Adela Reid!" The lady sat up in bed with a suddenness which suggested that her activity had returned, at least in part. "You—you—do you mean it?"

"Unfortunately I do. I only learnt the fact myself four days ago. On Friday morning last Mr. Osborne came into my office in a condition which caused me to doubt

that he was sober. I concluded after a while that he was, though it was more than a little difficult to get at the gist of what he wanted to say. It appeared that he had a grievance against you. I don't know what you had been doing."

"I'd done nothing, absolutely nothing. But I'd been conscious that he had what you call a grievance against me for some time."

"I never supposed that you had given him any cause for complaint; I knew him. He meandered on—you know what he was like sometimes when he started to talk—and from what I could gather he not only considered himself ill-used, but he was set upon what he called 'getting even with you.' I thought he was simply—blithering—if I may use such a word in such a connexion—till my ears caught something which caused me to pay closer attention to what he was saying. 'Thinks she's got me,' he said; 'got me on a little piece of string. But she hasn't; I've got her. I've put her nose out of joint, though she doesn't know it. Thinks herself my wife, but she isn't.' Then he leaned towards me across the table, and he whispered—you know that whisper of his?"

"Do I not! Shall I ever forget it! Sometimes—often—it got upon my nerves. I was afraid of it."

"I appreciate how that might have been. My dear, on Friday morning he got on my nerves. 'I tell you that she isn't my wife,' he whispered. 'You can tell her she isn't. My wife's some one else altogether.' I thought he was talking simply for talking's sake. I could not realize that even he could talk like that and mean it. But he did mean it. Although I warned him that it might have very serious consequences to himself, he told me the whole story. He'd come to town in one of his crack-brained moods for the purpose of telling me, and nothing could stop him. He met the young woman at some boarding-house; he had the assurance to tell me that he met you in the same place."

"He did—that's perfectly true. For me that was a house of many meetings." The lady spoke a little crisply; her breath seemed to be coming more quickly; she was

certainly more wide awake than when Mr. Pendleton had first appeared.

"He married the girl at the registrar's. He himself admitted that she married him in a fit of temper. They went back to the boarding-house; she would go back; they never mentioned a syllable of what they'd done to any one; the marriage went no further than the bare legal form. Apparently the moment after the ceremony, such as it was, was concluded, she regretted what she had done; she actually threatened to take his life if he breathed a word about it. According to him, she chased him from the house. If even a part of his story is true, she must be a remarkable young woman."

"She is. I believe she murdered him."

"Mrs. Osborne—I mean, my dear!"

"Don't you call me Mrs. Osborne! Don't you ever dare to do that again!" The lady positively glared at the solicitor.

"It was a slip, a quite natural slip; after being used all these years——"

"Never mind about all these years. I'm not Mrs. Osborne; I never was Mrs. Osborne; don't you dare to hint that I was."

"My dear! you frighten me. I had not the slightest intention of being offensive."

"I know you weren't. But still, don't you call me Mrs. Osborne, even by mistake. Well, what were you going to say?"

"I was merely going to say that, according to him, he left the house because this young woman drove him out of it. Almost immediately afterwards his aunt, Miss Walsingham, died, and some three months later he went through a form of marriage with you."

"He wouldn't even get the marriage licence. He wouldn't do anything. He left it all to me. Now I understand what he meant."

"He never breathed a word to that young woman of what he had done. For a period of years he must have seen and heard nothing of her, till a fortnight ago he saw her down here."

"Was it so long ago as a fortnight that he saw her?"

"Apparently. He saw her in the town, and, according to his own statement, he marched straight up to her and said: 'Hullo, Mrs. Osborne!'"

"Did he? He had his own methods and his own manners."

"For a moment, so he told me, she seemed to be frightened out of her life; then she flew into a fury and told him that if ever he spoke to her like that again she'd have his life. She seems to have been given to threatening that she'd have his life."

"She had it in the end."

"My dear, you should be careful how you say such things!"

"My dear Mr. Pendleton, you need not advise me to be careful. You mean well, but I don't require your advice. What happened after that affecting little scene?"

"She seems at first to have been under the impression that he was still a poor man. When, later, she learnt that not only was he a rich man, but that you were supposed to be his wife, a curious situation seems to have arisen."

"So I should imagine; at least some people might call it curious."

"One reason why he had come up to town was to get money for her—I suppose to keep her still. He had cashed a cheque for eight hundred pounds——"

"Yes, I know. They gave him eight hundred pounds in bank-notes. He brought them back with him and he gave them to me."

"Gave them to you!"

"Gave them to me! I couldn't make out his story; he seemed to me to be sillier even than usual; but he handed me over a packet of bank-notes, which, so far as I understand, he wished me to take care of. I put them in a drawer in a writing-table, and I believe that in trying to get them out of that drawer—he having changed his mind about giving them to her—something happened—and she killed him."

"But, my dear young lady, what scrap of evidence have you to prove what you say?"

" Oh, I've got evidence, and I'll get more. Mr. Pendleton, will you be so good as to leave this room ? I understand that in the next room there is Mr. Miles, and with him Mrs. Sprague. Cynthia Sprague is the sister of the man who got himself arrested by the police because he thought that if they didn't arrest him or some one else they'd arrest me."

" Is it possible ? " The solicitor's amazement seemed to be growing.

" It's a fact. I'm told they're going to take him before the magistrates almost directly. Well, I'll be there also. I'll tell them the plain truth, and I'll dare them to arrest me."

" My very dear young lady, I hope you're proposing to do nothing rash."

" I'm going to do as I please. I've been an automaton all my life, a sort of derelict borne where the tide chose to take me. Now I'm going to be a woman, and the tide's going to take me where I choose. So please, Mr. Pendleton, once more—will you leave the room ? I'm going to get up and dress, and I'm going to look for the real Mrs. Osborne. And when I've found her, or the police have found her for me, I'm going to have matters put on a footing which will clear me for ever from even the shadow of the incubus which has borne me down and oppressed and haunted me all these years. Mr. Pendleton, are you going ? "

" If you will only permit me to say just one——"

" Mr. Pendleton, are you going ? Or do you wish me to get up while you're here ? "

Apparently Mr. Pendleton did not. When the agitated lady showed signs of quitting the shelter of the sheets he made a hasty retreat to the door.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE NEWSBOY

THE lady who shortly emerged from her bedroom clothed and, apparently, in her right mind was quite a different person from the one who had wearied greeted the dawning day. When Mrs. Sprague, soon after Mr. Pendleton's leaving the room, turned the handle and, finding, a little to her surprise, that the door was locked, tapped at the panel, there came from the other side of the door something which was very like a snub.

"Who's there?" inquired a voice, which Mrs. Sprague hardly recognized as Mrs. Osborne's, it was so firm and clear and self-possessed. Mrs. Sprague explained who it was. "What do you want?"

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Sprague, quite meekly, "I want to come in. I want to know how you are."

"Thank you—I'm quite, perfectly well." There was an emphasis about this which, to Mrs. Sprague's mind, suggested something distinctly peculiar. "I'm getting up, and expect to be with you in about five minutes."

It was a little more than five minutes when the lady, gowned, and even hatted, swinging a pair of gloves in her right hand, came stalking into the sitting-room—stalking is really the only word to use, she bore herself so very stiffly, her nose was so very much up in the air, and there was about her a suggestion of contempt for everything and every one. In the sitting-room were Mr. George Dangerfield Miles, sitting on one side of the fire, Mr. Pendleton on the other side, and Mrs. Sprague in the centre. She gave a little nod towards Mr. Miles.

"So you're there," she said.

Mr. Miles stood up and began to rub his hands a little briskly.

"Yes, I am here," he observed. "And, if you won't mind my saying so, I'm very glad to see you looking so well, Mrs. Osborne."

"Don't address me by that name, please. I am not Mrs. Osborne." Mrs. Sprague and Mr. Miles looked at each other and then at the lady, in a way which drew from her another remark. "I'm perfectly sane, thank you. Hasn't Mr. Pendleton told you?"

Mrs. Sprague replied: "He has told us nothing, absolutely nothing."

"It is not for me," explained Mr. Pendleton, "to discuss my clients' business with strangers."

"In a general way I should say you were right, but in an affair of this sort does it matter?" This was the lady, her very tone suggesting that her nose was in the air. "Surely this is a case, Mr. Pendleton, where the widest advertisement is best." She addressed Mrs. Sprague: "Mr. Pendleton has come down all the way from town to tell me that I'm not and never was Mrs. Osborne. There already was a Mrs. Osborne when the late Mr. Osborne was so good as to lead me to the altar. Have you had any breakfast?"

"I've had a mouthful." Mrs. Sprague seemed to be bewildered, which was not strange. "But, my dear child, I don't understand."

"You'll understand presently—every one will. I want more than a mouthful; I want a distinctly square meal. I've had nothing to eat since goodness knows when, and I have a healthy appetite."

Ringing the bell, she gave an order for a breakfast which was a breakfast. And soon the four were sitting down to it. To be quite frank, in spite of the singularity of the conditions, each of them made an excellent meal.

"So you will please understand," observed the lady as the meal was drawing to a close, "that my name in the future will be, just what it always has been, Helen Arnold. I have spent a very unhappy five years before I had reason to suppose that it wasn't. It appears that I was mistaken altogether. Perhaps, one of these days, I will tell you how the mistake arose. The cause of the mistake is dead. The cause of his death is not quite clear, but whatever any one may think, it had nothing whatever to do with me. And that reminds me—are there any policemen about the

house?" The others did not answer—in words. "It doesn't matter if there are. I have a sort of recollection that last night a person named Simmons behaved to me with incredible insolence. He had better not forget himself again. I am going out."

As the lady spoke she was putting on her gloves. Mrs. Sprague seemed startled.

"My dear, I rather fancy that you may find that the person named Simmons will object. Where are you going?"

"I'm going to take the air. Mayn't I take the air? Is there a law against my taking the air?"

The lady moved towards the door, stiffer than ever.

"My dear young lady, there are several subjects which I must discuss with you—now, if you don't mind."

"I do mind; discuss them later."

Mr. Miles had his say. "There are matters about which I should like to talk to you, especially the Tuffington business."

"Yes, I shall be very glad to talk with you about what you call the Tuffington business a little later. I want to talk about nothing now. I wish to take the air."

"And mayn't I come with you—to take the air? Shall I be so much in the way?" This was Mrs. Sprague.

"I don't know that you'd be exactly in the way, but I'd rather you didn't come, if you don't mind. I want"—the lady, stopping, drew a long breath—"I want to take the air by myself."

They allowed her to go. An individual in a dark grey tweed suit, who was sitting on the landing, rose as she appeared.

"May I ask, madam, where you are going?"

His manner was respectful. The lady looked at him with a suggestion in her eyes of something very much like laughter.

"Are you a policeman?"

"I am."

"Are you instructed to stop me?"

"I'm afraid, madam, that I am. I am at least instructed to keep Inspector Simmons informed as to your movements."

" Then inform him, my good man, inform him ; don't be so foolish as to attempt to prevent me going where I choose and doing as I please. Get out of my way ! "

The man was disposed to hesitate. " I'm afraid, madam, I must ask what it is you propose to do."

Her reply was simply : " Arrest me."

" That I am instructed to do only as the very last emergency. I trust you will not compel me to subject you to the inconvenience which such an action would involve. All that Inspector Simmons wishes is to be kept posted in your movements."

" On what charge would you arrest me ? "

Again he hesitated. " I would rather not tell you."

" If you do arrest me you'll have to tell me why, surely. Be so good as to let me pass."

While the man still blocked the way the sitting-room door opened and there appeared first Mrs. Sprague, then Mr. Miles, and then Mr. Pendleton. The lady addressed the solicitor :

" This person, who says he is a policeman, won't let me pass, and talks about arresting me if I do."

Mrs. Sprague said : " I should let him arrest you if I were you. He'll be made to smart for it if he does."

" I want him to arrest me, but he won't. He just stands in the way as he's doing now. If I were to push him or hit him, or use any sort of violence, he might lock me up for assaulting the police, and I should be placed in an awkward position."

Mr. Pendleton interposed : " This person has no right to obstruct your going or your coming. Merely walk past him. If he attempts to prevent you we are here as witnesses."

Before the lady could act on his advice, some one else, ascending the staircase, came towards them—an individual in uniform.

" What's the matter, Rainham ? "

Rainham, which seemed to be the name of the plain-clothes man, explained, and the lady explained ; in fact they all of them explained. The lady's explanation was perhaps as clear as any.

" If I'm a prisoner I wish to be treated as a prisoner and locked up. If I'm not a prisoner I want to do as I choose—and I choose to take the air."

Outwardly the new-comer was on the lady's side. He smiled.

" I know of no reason, Mrs. Osborne, why, as you put it, you should not take the air."

" Please don't call me Mrs. Osborne. I'm not Mrs. Osborne. Mr. Pendleton, who is my solicitor, or rather who was the late Mr. Osborne's solicitor——"

" I am your solicitor; and as your solicitor I do not think that at this moment you should offer to this individual an explanation of any sort. If you take my advice, you'll merely take the air. But—when shall we see you again? Officer, when is Mr. Van Coster likely to come before the magistrates? "

" About eleven o'clock."

The lady exclaimed: " I had forgotten all about it. Where do the magistrates sit? "

" At the town hall, madam—the court-room."

" Will they let me in if—if I ask them to? "

" If you mention my name," said Mr. Pendleton, " I will see that they let you in. If necessary you shall have a seat on the Bench. Would you like to be present at the examination? I presume that it will be only formal, but—it might be painful."

" I don't know if I should like to be present." The lady had turned a little white. " But if I do come I'll ask for you."

" I shall be present; I will give instructions that if you do come you are to be admitted at once."

" I shall be there," said Mr. Miles.

" I also shall be there, if only to see what my brother looks like in a prisoner's dock. I believe that in England you do call those things prisoners' docks." This was Mrs. Sprague.

Then the lady went out to take the air, full of so many thoughts that she was conscious of a sort of mental indigestion. As she moved towards the hotel entrance she was aware that she was an object of interest; but she merely

held herself straighter and her nose higher and walked on. When she was out in the open she drew great breaths, as if she were trying to ventilate her lungs. The weather was fine again; the number of people about at that early hour suggested a desire to make the most of the autumn sunshine. As she was crossing towards the cliff a boy who was selling newspapers came up to her, near enough to slip, under cover of a paper which he offered, something into her hand. Before she had clearly realized what had happened he went off again. Instinctively, as she stood looking after him, she crushed in the palm of her hand the scrap of paper which he had given her. Placing herself on a canopied chair which had its back towards the hotel, she proceeded to see what the thing was.

It proved to be a half-sheet of paper which had been folded over and over so that it was merely a diminutive spill. It seemed to be a dirty half-sheet when she had unfolded it; if it had been carried long in that boy's hand it could hardly fail to be. It was odd what a curious sense of something almost approaching terror she had as she opened it wider and wider. A sort of premonition that, at the moment when she least expected it, she had, so it seemed to her, stumbled upon something which might throw light upon things which were dark. It was some seconds before she even ventured to glance at it; to bring it sufficiently close to her eyes to see what was on it. When she did look it was furtively, as if she feared to be observed by those who were standing by.

On the half-sheet were scribbled in pencil a few words, so badly that they were almost illegible:

"DEAR HELEN,—For God's sake as soon as you get this come to 4 Port Street and ask for Mrs. Villiers. Be quick, I'm almost done.

"ADELA."

She read it three times before she had any real grasp of what it might mean. It was borne in on her more and more each time she re-read it that the mere writing was eloquent. She had more than once seen examples of Adela Reid's

handwriting. Although that was years ago, she still remembered quite clearly what a fine hand she wrote. She kept her aunt's books, drew up the bills, conducted the correspondence; it was because her writing was so good that her services in these matters were so valuable to Mrs. Thompson.

When she studied that half-sheet of paper carefully, Helen could see in those quavering, broken hieroglyphics a ghost of the fine, firm characters she had once known. Did an explanation of the difference lie in the final words, "almost done"? What had happened to her last night in the darkness on the descent to the Sandgate Road? Was it then that she was "almost done"? Recollections of her agonizing fear came back to Helen; in the warm morning sunshine they made her shiver. For yet some moments she remained seated; then she refolded that half-sheet into a tiny roll; then she rose and went in search of Mrs. Villiers at 4 Port Street.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A STRANGE MARRIAGE

PORT STREET proved to be a street of old-fashioned houses close to the harbour. Every house announced "Apartments." At No. 4 there was a card in a bow-window on the ground floor, another over the door, while a small oblong board at the foot of the front steps bore the legend, by way of a variation: "Apartments. Board if required." The door was wide open. Evidently the inmates were expected to come and go as they pleased. If the visitor had known whereabouts on the premises Mrs. Villiers was to be found she would have availed herself of the implied invitation to make her own way in. As it was, she first knocked, then rang and knocked, then rang and knocked again. Just as she was wondering if the house was uninhabited, an untidy-looking servant put her head through the entry which apparently crowned the basement stairs, and inquired:

"Is it about rooms?"

The visitor was for a moment at a loss as to what the question meant. Then she asked one of her own:

"Does Mrs. Villiers live here?"

"Mrs. Villiers? She's got the rooms at the top." The maid, looking round, addressed some person unseen, "Some one to see Mrs. Villiers."

"Is it a man?" inquired a voice.

"No; it's"—the servant, after glancing shrewdly at the visitor, drew her own conclusions—"it's a lady."

"Ask her name."

The servant did as she was bid.

"Mrs. Harrison—that's the landlady; she's engaged just now and can't see no one—wants to know what your name is, please, mum."

"My name doesn't matter. Tell Mrs. Villiers that it is the friend she's expecting. She will know what you mean."

The servant hesitated. A voice spoke to her from behind. She turned; there was a whispered colloquy. The servant drew a little back; another head came through the entry—the big head of an elderly woman with her hair in "curlers."

"Did you say you were a friend of Mrs. Villiers?"

"I did; I am; she is expecting me."

"What's your name?"

"I have already said that my name doesn't matter."

"Oh, doesn't it? There seems to be a good deal of that sort of thing about her." What the speaker meant was not clear, though the apparent intention was not to convey a compliment. "If you're a friend of that good-for-nothing husband of hers, perhaps you'll let me know where he's to be found. He's no man, and you can tell him so from me. He's used her something cruel, that's what he's done. If she was of my way of thinking she'd put the police on to him though he got twelve months. No matter what she's done, no man has the right to handle his wife as he's done her. She's on the top floor, the room at the back, that's where she is. Neither Jane nor I can show you up just now, we're both of us engaged; but if you say she's expecting you, and you don't mind showing yourself up, then you can."

The visitor "showed herself up." She mounted five flights of stairs, knocked at a door on the top landing; then, in response to an invitation, went in. She found herself in a fair-sized room of the ordinary cheap lodging-house type. In a big, untidy bed was some one whose head and face were so covered with bandages that it was not easy to determine by merely looking if it was a man or a woman.

"Who's that?" asked a voice. The speaker was a woman.

There was something about the speaker and her voice, about the whole unclean room, which the visitor found so little attractive that she showed no inclination to move away from the door.

"Some one gave me this paper," she said, holding out the half-sheet which the newsboy had slipped into her hand.

There was a momentary silence, then the voice said—it was a husky voice, as if the speaker were suffering from a curious kind of cold :

" Thank God, it's Helen. I was wondering if—if you'd ever come."

" I got your note less than a quarter of an hour ago. I came straight here."

" They haven't locked you up ? "

" Not yet. I understand that there's a possibility of their doing something of the kind."

There was another pause ; then an odd question from the bed, asked as if with reluctance, as if the speaker were divided between a desire for information and a consciousness of the delicacy of her inquiry :

" Helen, did you—did you do it ? "

" What do you mean ? Did I do what ? "

" You needn't be afraid, I never gave any one away in my life, and I'm not going to start by giving you. But I want to know, did you——"

" Did I what ? Will you explain."

" Did you kill Osborne ? "

The visitor seemed genuinely surprised.

" Are you mad ? What do you mean by asking me such a ridiculous question ? "

Another pause, then a grim remark from the bed :

" They thought I did ; that's why I'm here."

The visitor's eyes opened wider.

" You seem to take it for granted that I understand you, but I don't in the least."

Again the suggestion of grimness from the figure in the bed.

" They thought I killed Osborne. You know those bank-notes—eight hundred pounds' worth ? They thought I did it for them ; they not only thought, they were dead sure ; they swore they heard me doing it. They thought I wanted to keep the notes for myself. When they searched me and found I hadn't got them on me they thought I'd got them hidden and wouldn't tell them where—so I'm here. I feel as if they'd broken every bone in my body."

" Have you seen a doctor ? "

"A doctor?" There was a sound which might have been meant for a laugh. "It's likely I'd send for a doctor; he'd want to know too much. But if you didn't do it, and I know I didn't, who did? They're dead sure it was a woman."

"I don't know who you mean by 'they,' and how could any one be what you call 'dead sure'?"

"They heard her at it, there's no mistake about their doing that. So I thought it might have been you."

"It was not me. I found him lying dead, but about who killed him I know nothing. Is that all you wanted me for—to tell me that you thought I did it?"

"That wasn't it at all. Helen, he's dead now. I suppose you think you're his widow."

"I don't. I've learnt this morning that I was never his wife."

"Who told you?"

"He told his solicitor, Mr. Pendleton, and this morning Mr. Pendleton told me."

"I'm glad of that. I felt you'd got to be told, and I didn't feel like telling you; I'm glad some one else has done it for me."

Still another pause. The figure on the bed lay still; the woman at the door stood motionless, showing no desire to move farther into the room. When the woman in the bed spoke again it was a little less huskily. There was a new intonation in her voice, as if she spoke with difficulty out of the very depths of her being:

"Helen, you think I've never been a friend of yours. Well, I haven't; I was never your sort and you were never mine; but if I had had any idea that you were going to marry Percy Osborne I'd have—I'd have stopped you. I wasn't so little your friend but that I'd have done that. Stark mad I believe he was."

"I don't think he was exactly that."

There was something in the speaker's voice which hinted that she thought he was something worse. The other stuck to her guns.

"I do; stark mad I believe he was. And I was stark mad when I married him. Don't you make any mistake

about that. If I hadn't been worse than a raving lunatic I'd never have done it. He was always worrying me to marry him. He proposed to me the second day he was in the house. In right down dead earnest he proposed to me."

"Did he? In such matters he moved quickly. He proposed to me when I'd been in the house only two or three days."

"I was his wife by then. The beauty!"

"No one knew it. How could any one guess it? Why did you not tell the truth? Why did you keep it secret? It wasn't fair."

"I would sooner have bitten my tongue out than breathed a word to any one. I was that wild—I tell you when I married him I was mad, stark mad."

"Why did you marry him?"

"Why do women like me do anything? If I was to tell you, you wouldn't understand. When I look back and ask why I did this, that or the other, I don't understand myself. Everything was against me. My aunt was that horrid and unkind, and—and some one had treated me badly."

"Was that Mr. Jack Yarrow?"

"Jack Yarrow? I had never even heard his name then. I wish I never had heard it. At that time I didn't know he was alive. You know when he came to the Priory as well as I do. It was some one else. Then Osborne came—he always did come to me every time he had a chance, and when he hadn't got a chance he made one—and started worrying me again. Wouldn't I be his wife? I felt like committing suicide. So I did. I might as well have thrown myself into the river or under a motor-bus. He had a licence in his pocket. I was in Kensington Gardens near the Round Pond when he came to me. It seemed that he saw me coming out of Oakwood Gardens and had followed me. I dare say you know the trick he had of dogging your footsteps without your ever knowing he was anywhere about."

"I do. I have had several experiences of it. Once I went from Edinburgh to London on business—his business. I was there three days. When I returned and got out of

the train at Edinburgh he came out of a compartment quite close to mine, and told me he had been with me in London all the while. He gave me an exact account of everything I'd done. I had not dreamed that he was within a hundred miles of me. It was an uncanny gift he had. I got into such a state of nerves that whenever I was away from him I had a sort of fear that I was being shadowed. I was always wondering where he was hidden, just where he was. I kept starting and looking round to see if he was anywhere in sight. I should have thought that it would have been impossible for any one to keep you in sight as he did without your ever being able to get so much as a glimpse of him."

"Oh, he had some pretty ways! When he came on me in Kensington Gardens he saw the state of depression I was in and started again to worry me to be his wife. He took a marriage licence out of his pocket—he had actually bought it on the off-chance and carried it about with him for weeks. He explained that if I would only say yes we could be married at once—he could make all the arrangements in half an hour. I didn't believe that he knew what he was talking about, or that he was in earnest. You know how difficult it was to know when he was in earnest? I jumped up from my chair, and I said: 'You keep on talking and talking; we'll see if you mean what you say. Let's go and get married.'"

The speaker paused, either for lack of breath or for reflection. She spoke with corrosive bitterness.

"Oh, I was a fool! What a fool I was! He took me to a room in a house in a street which I didn't know, and he left me there. As I was making up my mind that he was just fooling, he came and took me to another room. There were two men seated behind a table and two more men standing. He said to me: 'This is Mr. Baines, the registrar, who is going to marry us.' And he said to Baines: 'Mr. Baines, this is Miss Adela Reid, who is going to be my wife.' Then Mr. Baines said something, and he read something out of a book—I couldn't tell you what—and I said something—what he told me to say; then I signed my name in a book, and I was married. I don't suppose the whole thing took ten minutes. If you only knew the

state of mind I was in—I really wasn't in my proper senses; I wasn't sure the whole time if the thing was being done in earnest. I had a feeling that they were playing a joke on me. All the while I wanted to get out of the room and run away, but I simply couldn't. I did feel such a fool. Directly we got outside I asked Osborne what it meant. He sniggered. You remember that snigger of his?"

"I seem to hear it all the time you're talking. I used to hear it when alone in my bedroom I lay awake at night. I even heard it in my sleep. It haunted me."

"He sniggered and he said: 'You're Mrs. Percy Osborne; here's a copy of your marriage lines.' He handed me a sheet of paper. That gave me a shock. I tore it into pieces and I threw it in the road. He said: 'If you want another copy it will cost you half a crown.' I looked at the ring on my finger."

"He'd given you a ring?"

"Oh, he had that all ready like the licence. When he was putting it on my finger a creepy, crawly feeling went all over me so that I could have screamed. But—you may laugh at me!—his touch so frightened me that I could hardly breathe; to save my life I couldn't have tried to stop him. When I looked at that ring on my finger and saw it was a wedding-ring, and thought of what it meant, of what I'd done, I—I—I just went mad. I didn't say a word. I snatched it off, I threw it across the street, I tore off like a fool, got into a taxi-cab and went straight home. I didn't speak to Osborne for three days. Then one morning he stopped me on the landing outside my room, and he sniggered, and he said: 'Hullo, Mrs. O.!' I hit him. I had to or I should have burst. Though I hit him hard he only sniggered again. I took him with both hands by the throat and I nearly shook the life right out of him—I was a good deal stronger than he was, thank the goodness and the grace. I told him that if he ever spoke to me again I'd kill him; and I believe I would have done. But from that time on he never spoke to me again—never once—till he saw me here the other day. When I saw him I almost had a fit. I was thinking of

Yarrow, who could never bear me to look at another man, though he himself was always looking at any number of women. I told Osborne, right out in the street, that if he breathed a word to Yarrow, or to any one—what I had told him once held good—I'd kill him. And I would have done. But he just sniggered, said I needn't worry, he had another wife. I thought he was lying. Then he told me of his having come into a fortune and all the rest of it. I didn't know what to think. I don't now."

"It was perfectly correct that he went through a form of marriage with me, but it never went further than the form."

"You're lucky; you could have had him up for bigamy if you'd liked. I thought you'd killed him because you'd found out. Do you think he's left you any of his money? He was a rich man, wasn't he?"

"He was; much richer than when he pretended to make me his wife. I saw to that. I acted for him in all his business affairs; in that way I earned my keep. But I'm quite sure that he's not left me a penny. I would not touch it if he had. So far as I'm aware, he left no will. Since it seems that you are his widow, I suppose by law all he had comes to you."

"What!" For the first time the woman in the bed made an effort to move. She partly raised herself, but the effort was too much for her. She sank back with a groan. She continued to groan, yet between her groans she kept on talking. "You don't—mean—that—I'll have —all Osborne's money?"

"He hadn't a relative living. If you are his widow, and he left no will, I should imagine that everything will come to you. I believe that's the law."

"How—much—will—there be?"

"A very large sum. He had a big income; he didn't spend a quarter; it's been accumulating all the while. You're a really rich woman."

"Think of it! I'll be clear of Jack Yarrow if I am. I know a few things about him that would keep him still. After what he's done to me I've done with him. He'll soon learn I'm in earnest if he tries any of his games on

me. How much do you think I'll have ? Five thousand a year ? "

" Percy Osborne has left much more than that."

" Good Lord ! Over and over again I've been without a penny in my pocket. You did ought to have some of it, you know. After all, you've perhaps gone through more than I have."

" I shouldn't wonder. All the same I would rather not touch a penny of his money. You were his wife, I never was. In all my life that was the best news I ever had."

" You must have got used to having money ; what shall you do without any ? A woman can't earn much, no matter what she does."

" I know. I shall manage." There was a look on the speaker's face which, if the woman in the bed could have seen, would have made her wonder.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IN A PUBLIC PLACE

WHEN Helen left No. 4 Port Street she found on the pavement just outside an individual, in tweeds and a bowler hat, who stuiously avoided looking at her, but whom she eyed askance. When she appeared at the top of the steps he turned right round so that his back was towards her and he could not see. When she reached the pavement she stopped for a moment to stare at him, hesitating whether or not to relieve herself of something which was on her mind. Then, with a little upward movement of her head, apparently deciding to treat him with contempt, she strolled off towards the harbour; but she had not gone very far when, glancing backwards, she saw that he had turned right round and was observing her attentively. At the end of the street she stopped, and, standing close to the wall, waited. In half a dozen seconds the man came swinging round the corner with such unthinking haste that he almost cannoned into her.

When he perceived who it was with whom he had nearly come into collision he seemed to be confused. The lady perfectly cool, favoured him with glances which were scarcely flattering.

"Are you a policeman?" she inquired. He was inclined to stutter, but presently admitted that he was. "Are you going to walk after me all day, wherever I go?"

"My instructions, madam, are to keep you in sight."

"And if I get into a motor-car and drive to Hastings, or into a train and go to town?"

"I am afraid my duty would be as far as possible to keep you in sight, but I hope you will do neither."

The man was young and quite good-looking, with a pleasant, almost boyish smile.

"How long have you been a policeman?" the lady asked.

"Nearly two years," he said.

" I didn't know they made boys policeman. I suppose they set you to spy on people because it is easy work, even for one so young—though I should think it is rather disgusting."

He was silent, but his smile was quite as good-humoured.

" I am going up to the Leas ; I'm going to ascend by the lift ; will it be necessary for you to go up in the lift with me ? "

" I am afraid it will."

" I suppose, since it's public, that the lift can be used even by a policeman. When we are on the cliff would you mind keeping as far off me as you conveniently can ? "

The man took off his hat, smiled, bowed. The lady moved on. They went up in the lift together, he ignoring her presence, she persistently eyeing him. When they had gained the Leas she said to him :

" Would you mind just staying where you are until there are at least fifty yards between us ? I have not the slightest intention of running away "

Once more he bowed and smiled, stayed silent and stood motionless while she went on. She had not gone fifty yards when Mrs. Sprague came fluttering towards her across the grass in a state of evident agitation.

" My dear Helen, wherever have you been ? I've been looking for you everywhere. You can't think of the state I've been in."

The manner of the lady addressed was inclined to be icy.

" I am sorry. But you can't have been looking for me everywhere because I've not been very far off. I've been paying a call. What has happened ? "

Mrs. Sprague seemed to be a trifle disconcerted.

" What's the matter with you, Helen ? You speak as if you had a poker down your back."

" I've got a policeman behind me." Turning, the lady pointed. " You see that, that overgrown boy ? That's a policeman. I understand he's going to follow me till I drop. That, my dear Cynthia, is worse than having a poker down your back."

Mrs. Sprague looked at the person pointed to.

"The impudence of the man! He's not the slightest right to do it."

"So I should have imagined; but it appears that a policeman has a right to do exactly as he pleases. Fortunately for him, I'm not a man or I might take him by the scruff of the neck and drop him over the cliff."

"My dear, if Peter comes and he hears you talk like that, he'll do it, and then we'll have the trouble all over again. I feel sure that in England you can't drop policemen over cliffs without something happening. This is an effete old country! In the great white man's land from which I come you might drop a dozen policemen anywhere and no one would say a word."

"You are more fortunate than we are, but I don't see that you need worry. Your brother is in no danger. I suppose when they let him loose they'll lock me up. That's what that policeman is for."

Mrs. Sprague stared at the speaker as if she did not understand.

"My dear! what do you mean? Don't you know? Peter is loose."

It was Helen's turn to seem bewildered.

"But I thought——"

Mrs. Sprague cut her short.

"Of course you thought, I thought, Mr. Miles thought—quite a sensible person that Mr. Miles—Mr. Pendleton thought, everybody thought that the ordinary course would be followed; that Peter would be sent before the magistrates; that what Inspector Simmons calls 'formal evidence' would be given of his arrest; that a remand would be asked for and granted, with the result that Peter would cool his heels in a prison-cell for a week. Instead of which he was never taken before the magistrates at all. Before the time came for them to take him——"

"Just you think of it, as Cynthia says, before the time came for them to take me—to the chair as it might be, they turned the key in the lock, threw the door wide open, and murmured: 'Get a move on you, Mr. American Man, your job's right off'; and I'd have loved to see those old magistrates just once. Why, Mrs Osborne, how are you?"

The speaker was Mr. Van Coster. He had come striding across the Leas without being noticed by either of the ladies, breaking in on their conversation at a point when Mrs. Sprague was doing her best to make the cause of her agitation clear to Helen. He showed no signs of having suffered any inconvenience at the hands of the minions of the law. There was nothing in his demeanour to suggest that he had passed the night in the dreary solitude of a dungeon-cell. On the contrary, he was clearly in perfect health and the highest spirits. Helen was so taken aback by his appearance, which was probably the last thing she expected, that she turned white and pink, and nearly lost her presence of mind and her wits together His last words brought her to some sense of appreciation of the situation.

" I'm not Mrs. Osborne," she managed to murmur.

" What's that ? " Mr. Van Coster addressed his sister. " What does she say ? She's not Mrs. Osborne ! Is visions about ? Is there a twin sister so like her that you can't tell t'other from which ? If you're not Mrs. Osborne, then who are you ? "

Helen stuck to her guns. " I'm not Mrs. Osborne," she said. " I'm nothing and no one. I'm Helen Arnold."

" Helen—what ? " Again Mr. Van Coster appealed to his sister. " What does she mean ? Has the world turned upside down since last night ? "

" Very nearly ; and you are such an idiot, Peter, that you place your great blundering feet——"

" I take number nine in boots ; I don't call that an outside size. Some men take thirteens."

" Never mind what some men take. It's not a question of size, it's a question of sense. Helen has had some very painful news——"

" I don't call it painful ; I should call it the opposite of painful."

The lady held herself very straight ; there was colour on her cheeks and a glitter in her eyes. Mrs. Sprague looked at her as if amused.

" Well, perhaps from your point of view you're right, but there are women who would be pained to learn that they were not married to their husbands."

" Not married to their husbands ? What do you mean ?"

" My dear Peter, if you will take a little stroll with Helen —if Helen will let you—and not choose the most public place to talk to her, as you have chosen now, perhaps she may place you in possession of some information which will cause you to open your eyes."

In an instant Mr. Van Coster stood with his hat in his hand. " Mrs. Osborne——"

The girl stopped him.

" I have already told you that I'm not Mrs. Osborne I'm plain Helen Arnold—Miss Arnold."

" Miss Arnold ? Oh, yes, I forgot ; I don't know what you mean, but I suppose it's all right. Quite so, Miss Arnold. Miss Arnold, would you do me the honour to— I've got a motor-car over there ; I've been dashing about in it looking for you. If you'll be so good, if you wouldn't mind—that is, could you manage to come for a little spin with me and we'd clear things up ? Please say you'll come."

" If the policeman will let me."

" Policeman ? Let you ? If what policeman will let you ? "

Mrs. Sprague interposed. " Helen, don't be so absurd ! What silly things you say. What has any policeman got to say to anything you choose to do. Don't you understand they've found the murderer ? "

A remarkable change took place in Helen's manner and bearing.

" Found the murderer ! " she exclaimed.

" Why," struck in Mr. Van Coster, " how do you suppose I'd be here if they hadn't ? They'd still be thinking it was I—especially after I had confessed. Maybe you'd think they wouldn't dare to call me a liar, but, believe me, that's just what they have done ! They've treated me badly ; they're not gentlemen, the English police ! Quite early this morning Inspector Simmons came to me and he observed : ' You say you killed Percy Osborne.' ' Sure,' I said. ' Then if that's the case,' he remarked—all grin, mind you—' two of you killed him.' ' Never ! ' I declared ; ' I did it single-handed.' ' Then if that's so,' he cackled—

it was a cackle—' you did your job of killing after he was dead.' I saw he was driving at something, and I asked him what it was; and then that policeman-man as good as called me a liar. ' The trouble is,' he explained, ' that there's a man been found who really did kill him, so where did you come in ? ' ' What's his name ? ' I inquired, quite politely—as politely as if he'd never doubted my word. ' Fritz,' he replied, ' Fritz Schulz.' ' And who in thunder,' I asked—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Osborne, I mean Miss Arnold—' who,' I inquired, ' does Fritz Schulz happen to be ? ' ' He's a waiter,' said the inspector. ' He was a waiter at the Climax Hotel. Robbery was his motive. What was yours, Mr. Van Coster ? ' ' Well,' I admitted, ' I'm not quite sure. Mind you,' I added, ' I never said I had a motive.' ' Very few people commit murder without a motive.' To listen to Simmons you'd have thought he was proclaiming a great and original truth. ' Fritz Schulz,' he continued, ' went to Mr. Osborne's sitting-room to steal a packet of bank-notes. Mr. Osborne caught him at it; there were a few words; Schulz shot him.' ' How do you know all this ? ' I demanded. Simmons was all cock-a-whoop. ' Schulz has given himself up,' he said, ' as you did; but there was method in his madness.' Which was as good as hinting that there wasn't in mine. Schulz was in love with a girl to whom he was engaged and wanted to marry. He stole those bank-notes because he wanted to be married to her at once. In a business of that kind it's dangerous to be in too much hurry."

" Don't be ridiculous, Peter ! Get on with your story. Aren't you ever going to finish ? "

" Gently, Cynthia, gently ! Don't imitate Fritz Schulz. Fritz Schulz took the bank-notes to his young woman and wanted her to leave her job—she's a parlour-maid somewhere in the town—and be married right away. She wanted to know where he got his bank-notes. I guess he made a mess of his explanation. Anyhow she wasn't taking it. She kept throwing questions at him; every answer he gave made her throw another. He must be a born blunderer, Fritz Schulz——"

" He's not the only one."

" Maybe, Cynthia, he is not, but that is no reason why you should interrupt my conversation. That young woman must be pretty cute——"

" Women always are cuter than men."

" Maybe some of them are. Cuteness is not a quality which is necessarily to be desired. There is such a thing as being too cute. Before that young woman had got to the end of that game of questions and answers she knew just what Fritz Schulz had done and all about it. I guess he didn't understand that young woman's character very well, because the way she let on at him must have been unexpected. She gave him a bagful of plain speaking. She told him what he was, and what he deserved, and what he'd surely get. So far from marrying him right away, she made it quite clear that she would never marry him at all. And, what was more, that she never wished to see or speak to him again. When he started to get her to forgive him, because all he'd done was for her sake, and tried to kiss her, according to Inspector Simmons, she ran off screeching. I give you the whole story as Inspector Simmons gave it me ; he got it from Schulz. Fritz Schulz spent the worst night of his life. He wandered about the cliffs and about the shore ; he wandered everywhere ; with the result that early this morning he came to the police-station with the bank-notes, which that young woman wouldn't look at, and the truth."

When, being perhaps a little short of breath, Mr. Van Coster stopped for the first time, Helen said :

" I suppose Fritz Schulz was the German waiter Mr. Osborne wished me to ask to stay to tea. You remember, Mr. Van Coster, you came in and found us talking about it."

" I do ; I remember very well. I guess I'll never forget. I wanted Simmons to let me see the man, but he wouldn't. All he did was to make me quit. He kind of hinted that I owed the country something for entertainment, so I let him have one of the five-pound notes he had kept for me through the night, and we parted friends. And now, if you don't mind, Miss Arnold—I've got it pat this time—I say if you don't mind we'll have that motor ride."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BEGINNING AGAIN

THEY had that motor ride, the first of very many. Since then they have motored—two in a car—over nearly all the roads in the world. That first motor spin, from the Folkestone Leas, round about as far as Canterbury, and even Dover, and back again, was the most wonderful thing that ever yet had happened to Helen Arnold, and she had had some strange experiences. It seemed to her that they were driving through a sort of golden haze into the glory of the sun.

Mr. and Mrs. Van Coster are now a married couple of some standing, but Helen has not forgotten, and will hardly forget, that first motor spin—they two alone together.

They had arrived at an understanding by the time they were back at Folkestone—an understanding of sorts, which the impetuous Mr. Van Coster turned to such good account that a fortnight after they were married. That was a marriage—an example of what marriage may sometimes mean. They spent their honeymoon on an Atlantic liner.

The police were averse to the bride leaving England. They wanted her evidence in the case of the King *v.* Fritz Schulz, but, being gone, it was found that her evidence was not essential—a conviction was obtained against the prisoner in her absence.

It was a pitiful story, that of Fritz Schulz. He was a foolish little man, who was so much in love that what little brain he had had become addled. He had been a waiter at the Climax Hotel for some three or four years, and during that time had become attached to a Miss Sarah Budget. Miss Budget was a parlour-maid, a handsome young woman who had more suitors than one. She had led Schulz a pretty dance, as young women of her sort, who have more than one string to their bow, have a knack of doing. She had made it quite clear that, if she did not want to marry money, she intended to marry where money

was—her idea of money. Her ambition was to become the wife of some one who had a shop, of any kind, so long as it was a shop.

Percy Osborne had taken one of those curious fancies for Fritz Schulz which he was apt to take for persons of his class. He had made him several small presents, and even allowed himself to be introduced to Miss Budget. What was more, Osborne had made more or less vague promises on which the waiter built great hopes. He was quite aware that the Englishman was rich and that it would be quite easy for him to provide funds which would enable him to realize Miss Budget's cherished ambition, with the result that she would at once become his wife.

On that afternoon on which we made his acquaintance Fritz Schulz was in a state of mental chaos; even waiters, carrying without a tremor half a dozen plates in each hand, are sometimes that. He had had a bad time with—as he would put it—his young lady. There was a baker who had his eye on Miss Budget, who, according to the lady, talked about opening a baker's shop within the next few months, or even weeks. In which case it would be all up with Fritz Schulz, because she would marry the baker. She had said so plainly. Schulz, who was a sentimental Bavarian, had poured out his heart before her. The lady only laughed. The dream of his life was to open a restaurant, a tiny restaurant which might one day become a big one. But to establish even the smallest restaurant requires some capital, much more than he possessed. Start your restaurant, she had told him, then you can talk about love; only remember that, if you don't move quickly, there's the baker. That was the gist of the ultimatum with which the practical young woman had desolated the sentimental Fritz Schulz.

While in that sitting-room Percy Osborne had endeavoured to induce the girl who supposed herself to be his wife to ask the waiter to have tea with them, Schulz had had an eye on the open writing-table drawer. There, on the top of it, plain for every one to see, was a bundle of what he recognized as English bank-notes. He was in one of those conditions in which a sudden temptation practically

transforms a man. The sight of those bank-notes had a sinister effect upon him. They were what he wanted, all that he wanted. He could not tell the precise sum that they represented; but he saw enough to be pretty nearly certain that it would be a fortune to him. He had come to the conclusion that he could start that cherished restaurant with seventy-five pounds in cash. He knew of one, a beauty, which the owner was willing to part with for a little ready money, leaving the larger part of the purchase price to remain on mortgage.

If he only had that parcel of bank-notes that restaurant would be his to-morrow. He was convinced that there was enough money there to enable him to purchase that restaurant outright. He had a prudent man's horror of debt. To be the owner of such a splendid place, the real owner, not the paper one, owing no man anything, and with even some cash in hand—that would be bliss indeed.

The realization of the dream was within reach of his hand. Osborne had made him promises, he ought to fulfil them. He would hardly be entitled to resent his taking that packet of notes. Osborne had not put his promises into writing, but a court of equity would surely acquit Schulz of impropriety if he himself took steps to ensure their being carried out.

Fritz Schulz went back to that sitting-room a little later. He found things just as they were; the drawer in the writing-table was still wide open, the packet of bank-notes on the top. He already had them in his hand when Mr. Osborne came into the room.

Had Schulz been a natural criminal, or even with any practice in the art of stealing, everything might have been all right. But, naturally, he was an honest man, a bundle of nerves rather than a felon. The sudden appearance of Osborne made him lose his head. When that eccentric gentleman moved towards him smiling, instead of remembering what kind of man this was, and that it was quite possible that he would be willing to let him have those bank-notes as a gift, he did the worst thing he could possibly have done. In that writing-table drawer he had seen, close to the notes, a small revolver. He snatched it up. Osborne,

who was by that time close to him, made a grab at it. His intention was quite possibly humorous, as Schulz might have recognized if he had given himself a chance. As it was, the two men struggled for the possession of the revolver, with the result that Osborne presently lay dead.

The miserable waiter went clean out of his mind. Without a moment's pause for reflection he ran for his life; out of the hotel, into the open, just as he was, hatless, in his professional uniform. No wonder when later he met Miss Budget she was not slow to perceive that there was something wrong. She wanted first of all to know what he meant by coming to her like that. When he produced the bank-notes and began to rave about her coming abroad with him that night her suspicions grew. Before long she had the whole story from his own lips, made blacker even than it need have been; he was in the mood to exaggerate. Realizing that this man was, by his own showing, a thief and a murderer, and even wished to make an accomplice of her, in her turn she fled from him.

After a night of agony, the unhappy man gave himself up to the police, the incriminating bank-notes in his hand. When brought to trial the jury returned a verdict of manslaughter. The judge, admitting that he believed his wretched story, sentenced him to two years' hard labour, only a part of which he served. After he had been in gaol less than six months the waiter escaped by committing suicide.

Where Jack Yarrow is—in gaol or out—possibly Mrs. Percy Osborne—*née* Adela Reid—may know. It is hidden from the world at large. She is a rich woman. Mr. Pendleton took up her case, no opposition was offered to her inheriting all that Percy Osborne had left. There have been whispers that she is about to marry again, really marry this time—in which event it is possible that her life may end more happily than it began.

Helen Arnold renounced very little when she declined to have anything to do with Percy Osborne's money—the money which she had managed so well for so long. Her right to the "pile" which Loony left was made quite clear. When she signed the documents which relieved

Peter Van Coster of his further custody, he declared that now she was richer than he was. Perhaps it was because both husband and wife were well equipped with the gold which perishes that Mr. Van Coster consented to give up being a business man. He has now time, he himself admits it, to look after a wife, and he looks after her very well.

There is another Peter Van Coster who was lately " short-coated "—that is the word his mother used. Both his father and mother seem to find it a business which occupies a good part of their time to look after him.

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