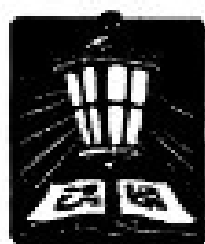


Apples of Gold

By

Warwick Deeping

Author of "Sorrell and Son," etc.



CASELL AND COMPANY, LTD
London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne

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APPLES OF GOLD

Mary Nando's girl had gone to see her mother, who was sick, and Tom Nando was sitting on a stool in front of the kitchen fire, roasting an apple on the point of an old sword. His wife had lit a candle, and was settling herself to a comfortable hour with a couple of sheets and her darning needle, when she thought that she heard the sound of a knock.

She glanced at her husband, who was absorbed in watching the apple sizzling on the point of the sword.

"Did you hear aught, Tom?"

"Nothing," said he, "but what you might count on hearing with the wind as it is."

"I thought I heard a knock."

"A shutter banging, or a tile blown off into the yard."

"Maybe you are right."

She began to spread one of the sheets over her knees, but she was not to get very far with her mending, for the sound came to her again through the bluster of a March night. Her pretty brown head cocked itself questioningly. She had the eyes and the air of a thrush, a brown thrush on a bough, and in their courting days Nando had told her so.

"There it is again! I'll go and see."

She laid the sheet on the table, rose, and taking the candle, went out into the passage between the parlour and the kitchen, leaving her husband by the fire. The door opening into Spaniards Court was barred, and before raising the bar she challenged the possible visitor.

"Is anyone there?"

A voice answered her, a voice that was like a little moan in the crying of the wind:

"Mary—Mary Nando."

There was something else, and Nando's wife undid the door. Her movements were quick and agitated, as though the voice had put her in a flutter. The light of the candle showed her the figure of another woman, and the flicker of the wind-blown light gave to both figures a suggestion of tremulous emotion.

"Mary!"

"Miss Rachel—you!"

"Don't speak; let me come in. O, Mary!"

The door was closed, but a sudden gust had blown out the candle, and in the half-darkness of the passage the two figures seemed to merge as though one of them had put her arms about the other.

"Are you alone, Mary?"

"My man is by the kitchen fire. Come into the parlour. There's no fire lit."

"O, what does that matter!"

"My dear, how you tremble! Hold on to me."

Thomas Nando heard no more than the murmuring voices of the two women. They went into the parlour, and the door was closed; and since his wife was not there to eat the apple he had been roasting for her, he ate it himself. He assumed that a gossip of Mary's had dropped in to borrow something.

The world is always borrowing, and Mary Nando was a giver; nor did Thomas conceive that he had any grievance against his wife because she happened to be generous. She was made that way, and hadn't he married her because she had a soft voice and a warm heart? But there was one thing that she had not given him, and he regretted it, and so did she. Poor Mary! It was the one great bitterness in her life, the feeling that she had failed him; and in thinking of it Nando got up and took his tobacco-box from the dresser, his pipe from the mantelshelf. He sat down again on the stool, lit his pipe with a coal from the fire, and pondered the old problem. He was a smallish man, very well built, with a grave and rather massive face, a man who was given to long silences and sudden sharp humorous sayings. He was a fencing-master, and he kept a fencing school, and he kept it with a dignity which was part of his character. Nando's was the best place of its kind in the kingdom, a school to which gentlemen came to practise sword-play; it was no resort for dissolute

youngsters and fashionable bullies—they could go elsewhere, for Thomas Nando would have none of them.

But he wanted a son, a boy who would grow up and join him in teaching gentlemen a craft that every gentleman should know, a son who should be as good a man with the foil or the back-sword as was his father. No, better! Nando had pride.

"What, still talking!"

He was momentarily attentive to the two voices in the parlour, but the unabated murmur of them persuaded him to return to his reflections. He leant forward and stirred the fire with the old sword which he used as a toasting-fork. He did not hear the door softly opened. His wife was in the room before he realized her presence. She watched him with those thrush-like eyes of hers as she crossed to the fire.

"Tom, see what I've got!"

He turned; he stared, the sword held poised in one hand, the clay pipe in the other, for Mary had a baby in her arms.

"Bless us," said he, "some one has been lucky!"

She gave him a look, a look of pain and of veiled reproach, and Nando wished that he had bitten his own tongue.

"A boy?" he asked, just for something to say.

"Yes."

"Who does it belong to?"

She bent her head over the child.

"To us, Tom, if you choose."

He was astonished, caught off his guard. He stood up, took a sort of peeking look at the thing in his wife's arms, and sat down again. She, too, sat down with a curious soft glance at him. Then, she bent her head over the child.

"What is the meaning of it, lass?" he asked her.

She told him, the old, familiar, tragic story of the woman who was waiting in Tom Nando's dark parlour. Her husband's grave face grew graver; he leant his elbows on his knees, and, staring at the fire, puffed hard at his long pipe. Nando came of Puritan stock, but he was kinder and more human than his forbears.

"So, you see, Tom, the poor lady thought of me. I wasn't her maid for five years for nothing. I saw the inside of that great house, and the hardness of the old man—her father. The Glyns are hard, and she was the only soft one among them."

Nando looked grim.

"Who is the father?"

"She will not tell. Do you blame her? But she says that if we will take the child, and keep her secret, she will see that we are not losers by it."

Her husband made a sweeping gesture with his right hand.

"Mary, I do no such thing as this for money. We carry our own heads on our own shoulders. But—I don't know——"

He stole a glance at her. She was bending over the child, and he saw the firelight on her hair, and the tender, caressing look upon her face. It touched him. It brought him a sudden feeling of understanding and compassion, a sense of deeper comradeship with the childless, lovable creature who was his wife.

"Let's look," he said, stretching out a hand.

She made a quick yet gliding movement and showed him the child. It was a very quiet and happy child; one small, red bud of a hand tried to explore Nando's nose.

"Poor little thing!"

He glanced up at her.

"Mary—would you?"

"O, Tom," she said. "I—I have failed you so badly. I'm hungry, man, hungry."

He kissed her, and it was a strong man's kiss.

"Go and tell her we will do it for her. But the boy must be ours, mind you."

His wife's eyes were wet.

"You are a good man, Tom. I'll tell her. She understands that it means giving up. Perhaps you will come and speak to her, Tom."

He went. There was no light in the parlour save from the dimly dispersed glow of the kitchen fire, but there was sufficient light for Nando to see the figure of a woman seated in a chair. She rose with a little shuddering movement as he entered, and then stood still, tensely expectant.

Nando bowed to her.

"Madam," he said, "I ask no questions. But if we keep the child it must be for good."

He felt her eyes on his face. She was nothing but eyes; she hardly seemed to breathe, and her stillness was extraordinary.

"Yes," she said, "yes."

"One cannot chop and change with a child. If I bring him up as I should have brought up my own son I shall give him up to nobody."

She held out a sudden hand to him.

"It is fair. I promise. But—O—Mr. Nando—you will be kind to him?"

He took her hand.

"The boy will be as my own son."

Her hand was very cold. She withdrew it, steadied herself, smothered a spasm of emotion, and became desperately calm.

"I thank you. I cannot say more. Please send your wife to me, Mr. Nando. I wish to——"

He bowed quickly and left her, feeling that she wanted him to go, and that her courage was shaking at the knees. His wife was by the fire, nursing the child.

He gave her one look.

"Quick! Go to her, poor soul."

They christened the boy Jordan March, Jordan after Nando's Cromwellian father, March because he had come to them on a March night. Their tale was that he was a foundling, that they had heard a knock, and on going to the door had found the child lying on the step. Meg, the maid, spread the gossip among the neighbours, for she had returned to find Nando nursing the child wrapped up in a blanket, while his wife sat stitching at an extemporized frock. They had burned the clothes in which the boy had been brought to them.

Meg was a huge, square creature with black eyebrows meeting over the root of her snub nose, the ugliest and the most sentimental thing in petticoats within a mile of the Bagnio in Long Acre.

"Poor lamb—poor innocent!"

She fell at once to the child, and became his slave and champion; and so devoted were these two women that as the years went by Tom Nando took it upon himself to see that they did not spoil the boy. He thrashed him when necessary, but always with an air of solemn kindness; he taught him that it was infamous for a stout fellow to lie or to shed tears, so much so that when Jordan fell down and blooded his knees he came laughingly to show them to his father. He looked on Nando as his father and on Mary as his mother. They had decided to leave him in that simple faith until he should grow older.

At the age of seven Jordan was a big boy for his years, a frank but rather silent child with a pair of steady grey eyes and a sudden and happy smile. He loved Mary Nando, and he treated Meg with the didactic serenity of a young emperor. His love for Thomas Nando was steeled through with a young male thing's admiration and respect. His father was a wonderful man, and he—Jordan March Nando—was going to try and be just such another man as his father. Already he had his little wooden sword and cudgel, and in the evenings—between lessons in reading and writing—he and Tom Nando would play together the great game of the sword. The boy was happy and frank and courageous. He ran free, and could look to himself, and he was known to all the chairmen who waited with their sedan-chairs in the Piazza of Covent Garden. There was hardly a street he did not explore. He was hail-fellow-well-met with all the hawkers, the sausage and small-coal sellers, the basket-makers, the vendors of old hats and clothes. He had two or three carter friends who gave him rides on their wagons. Tom Birch—the fighting waterman—was his devoted crony. No one ever thought of hurting the boy or of teaching him vicious things; his grey eyes looked straight at you without any fear; he was a stout child, but no prig.

His memories of those days were many and vivid. He had a child's delight in colour and pageantry, in the great gilded coaches, in the fine gentlemen in their huge periwigs, in the pretty ladies of Pall Mall and St. James's. He loved the river, especially when it rained and the watermen put up the blue tilts on their boats. On Sundays the Nandos went to church at St. Paul's, Covent Garden, and Jordan sat between Thomas and Mary Nando and watched everybody and everything. There were the days when his father took him fishing, for Nando was a great fisherman. He had his fights, infant affairs, and at the end of one of them, in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane, a big, dark, saucy orange-girl picked him up in her arms and kissed him.

"Hey, my little buck, you'll be a boy for the women."

Jordan's dignity was so little offended that he hugged her hard round the neck.

"I'll marry you," said he.

"Will you, indeed!" said she, laughing and kissing him full on the mouth.

But his most vivid memories were of the fencing-school and of Thomas Nando, its master. The high, open-roofed room lay beyond the kitchen, and was entered from Spaniards Court by a broad doorway. It had a gallery at one end of it, reached by a winding stair, and here pretty ladies would sometimes sit and watch the work below. Mary Nando and her girl would carry up cups of chocolate to them, for "Nando's" had ways of its own and a fashionable reputation. There were benches round the room, and in one corner pegs on which the gentlemen could hang their hats and coats, also a shelf upon which they could lay their wigs if they so chose. The walls were decorated with weapons, huge old-fashioned rapiers, daggers, falchions, back-swords, and targets. Everything was very clean. The walls were freshly whitewashed each year.

Jordan had a stool of his own in the gallery. He liked to watch Bertrand, the assistant, and Thomas Nando giving their lessons. Particularly he admired his father, the poise and dignity of him, his grave skillfulness, his sudden smile when something amused him. Jordan never quite lost the thrill of seeing Nando putting himself on guard with a quiet "Now, sir." It always seemed to Jordan that his father was the greatest gentleman of them all.

Sometimes one of the pretty ladies would make eyes at the boy and let him share her chocolate.

"What is your name, my dear?"

Jordan always gave it with great solemnity.

"Jordan March Nando, your ladyship."

He would have his shoulder patted with a fan.

"That's right. You will do well for yourself," one of them deigned to tell him, and she was a famous and experienced judge of men, especially of men as lovers.

There was one day in the year that always puzzled Jordan. He had his hair brushed by Mary Nando, was dressed in his best suit, and made to sit by himself on a stool at the back of the fencing-room. He was not allowed to go into the gallery on that day. But what he did learn to notice was that a pretty, pale lady in black sat in one corner of the gallery with her face half hidden by a fan. Jordan found that her eyes remained fixed on him. She did not watch the fencing. And somehow, her eyes so troubled him that he would fidget on his stool.

One day, after his eighth birthday, he asked Mary Nando who the lady was.

"Mother, who is the lady with the eyes?"

"What lady, poppet?"

"The one who comes and stares at me on the day I wear my Sunday suit and sit in the room."

Mary Nando laughed it off.

"O, nobody in particular, my dear. Perhaps you make her think of a boy of her own."

"She looks as though she had lost her boy," said, Jordan.

It was during the June after his eighth birthday that Jordan made his first visit to the St. Croix's house, not far from the church of St. Pancras. It lay among fields where men and women were tossing hay, and at the end of a lane where tall elms made a coolness. Thomas Nando and his wife were in their best clothes, and Jordan was wearing his suit of black fustian.

"Are we going to church, father?"

Nando told him that they were going to the christening of Mr. Sylvester St. Croix's baby daughter. Jordan had heard of Sylvester St. Croix. He was a Frenchman and a Protestant who had come to live in England many years ago, and had married an English wife. Nando and the Frenchman had made their friendship over a fishing-rod. So far as Jordan could understand it, Mr. St. Croix was a kind of clergyman in charge of a small meeting-house to which French people came. Nando spoke of him as being a very learned man, a divine.

"You must be very respectful, my lad."

"Of course he will be," said Mrs. Mary; "did you ever see him show bad manners?"

The house was very old, built of timber and plaster, with queer little blinking windows, and two tall octagonal chimneys rising out of its roof. A shaggy thorn hedge surrounded the garden, which was badly kept, being a waste of grass and fruit trees and unpruned roses, a green and tangled place with the grass standing as high as a man's knees. A brick path, full of weeds, led up to the oak door, and on either side of the door a yew tree stood stiff and solemn.

The house, too, was solemn, and severely sad. In the badly lit oak-panelled parlour a number of people were assembled, people who wore black, and whose faces made Jordan think that he was in church. A thin man with a long and compressed face was seated in a chair. He had a very high forehead, a hooked nose, and pale eyes that never changed their expression.

The Nandos spoke very kindly to him.

"Mr. Sylvester, I could not sleep for thinking of your loss."

"It is very hard, my friend, very hard."

Mr. St. Croix's face seemed to grow more cold and severe.

"Shall I question the ways of the Almighty?" he asked.

Jordan was staring at him, and Mr. St. Croix's eyes suddenly met the boy's.

"Who is this?"

"This is Jordan," said Mrs. Mary.

The man in the chair frowned. There was something disapproving in his eyes, a look of displeased pity. Jordan felt that Mr. St. Croix did not like him, though what he had done to deserve that dislike he did not know.

"Poor child!" said the Frenchman.

Jordan saw Mrs. Mary colour up, and a swift light came into her brown eyes. She put her arm over Jordan's shoulders, and, drawing him to the window, sat down in the window-seat. Jordan leaned against her knees and looked up into her face.

"Why did the man call me a poor child, mother? We are not poor, are we?"

She bent down and whispered:

"No, my dear, but Mr. St. Croix is unhappy."

"Why is he unhappy?"

"Because Mrs. St. Croix died just a week ago."

Presently a woman came into the room with a baby in her arms. The people gathered round and began to make a fuss of the child, though Sylvester St. Croix continued to sit in his chair with an air of cold and severe detachment. Mrs. Mary took the baby in her arms, and talked mother nonsense to it.

Jordan, standing by, asked to be allowed to hold the child.

"Why, to be sure; be very careful, Dan."

Jordan was very solemn and very careful.

"Why, it's got red hair," he said.

"Yes, my dear."

"Isn't it ugly!"

"Tsh, tsh!" said several voices.

"But I like it," quoth he; "what's its name?"

"She is going to be called Douce Jeanne."

"What does Douce mean?"

"Gentle,' my dear."

Jordan kissed Miss St. Croix, and the baby began to cry. She was taken quickly out of his arms, and Jordan, feeling a little hurt, turned about and found Mr. St. Croix's eyes fixed on him with an expression of angry disapproval.

"Why does he look at me like that?" the boy wondered.

On the way home he asked Mrs. Mary the same question, but Mrs. Mary put him off.

When he was ten, Jordan was sent to a school kept by Mr. Peregrine in an old house on the way to St. Giles'-in-the-Fields. Nando's fencing-school had increased its reputation, and Mary and her man were determined that the boy should know his Latin and Greek as well as any gentleman. Jordan trudged off each morning with his strap of books, after a breakfast of small beer, bread and bacon, and a kiss from Mrs. Mary. He had ceased to be kissed by sentimental Meg; his dignity had grown beyond it.

He was not a bookish boy, and it may be that he learnt more from his fights and his friendships than from Mr. Peregrine and his two ushers, but at the age of twelve he had a piece of knowledge forced upon him which he was never to forget. One May day, in the dinner-hour, he had a battle with a boy a year older than himself, an evil lout, the son of a brewer in the city. Jordan beat the brewer's son, but his victory left him cold.

About five o'clock he walked into the fencing-school, where the last gentlemen were putting on their coats. Nando was polishing a foil, and Jordan walked straight up to him. He had a split lip and a lump on his forehead.

"Father."

Nando looked at him, and something in his man's love for the lad was challenged by the boy's serious face.

"Hallo, Dan! What, another fight?"

"I beat Bob Dunnage—I beat him till he howled. He called me a bastard."

Straightway, Nando put down the foil, and taking Jordan by the shoulder led him out of the fencing-school and into the

parlour. It was empty, and Thomas Nando closed the door, saying within himself, "I ought to have told him before."

"Lad," he said, "I want to talk to you."

He sat down in his leather chair and took Jordan on his knee. The boy's frank eyes looked at him with steady seriousness.

"Why did Dunnage call me a bastard?"

"Dan," said Nando, with his hands on the boy's shoulders, "God forgive me, but I ought to have told you of this before."

Very gently he told Jordan the truth, and never in his life had Jordan seen this man so moved. He sat solemnly on Thomas Nando's knee, a little pucker of a frown on his forehead, his young eyes strangely grim. There was no quivering of his mouth. He stared steadily out of the window.

"So you are not my father?"

"No, Dan, save that——"

"And mother is not my mother?"

"By God, boy, but she is—in everything that matters. She loves you better than she loves herself."

And suddenly the boy clasped him about the neck, and Nando's arms went round him and held him very firmly.

"There, there, old lad, you are a real son to us, and we're proud of you, mighty proud."

In a little while Jordan sat up very straight and grave.

"I'll call you father—still."

"Of course."

"And mother."

"And mother."

Jordan smiled faintly.

"It seems, father, that I owe you more than if I'd been a real son."

"God forgive me," said Nando, "but mother herself could not have given me a son more after my own heart."

Jordan March was fifteen when Thomas Nando—a little plumper in the chin and richer in the pocket—took to planting his philosophy of life in a garden not very far from the house of Sylvester St. Croix. It was a pretty parcel of ground shut in by a high thorn-hedge, with a gardener's cottage in the centre of it. There were nut alleys and grass walks, a summer-house in a circle of pollarded limes, a small pool stocked with fish, a little orchard, and flower and herb beds edged with box. On Sunday afternoons Tom Nando and Mrs. Mary would walk out to their garden, Jordan going with them and carrying a basket which might contain a chicken and a bottle of wine. They would spend the rest of the Sunday in this pleasant place, Mary Nando happy as a brown thrush, while her man took his coat off and hung his wig in an apple tree. They supped in the gardener's cottage, the man's wife waiting on them, and towards dusk they would start back for Spaniards Court, the supper basket packed with lettuces, strawberries, green peas or whatever was in season. Mrs. Mary always had her posy of flowers, which she put into water immediately on reaching home.

Thomas Nando's pleasures were of the simplest, for, loving his art as he did, he respected his body and kept it as clean as his sword. Twice a week he spent an hour at Mills's coffee-house, but his garden drew him more and more, and he would stroll across the fields on summer evenings, taking Jordan with him. Once a month the Nandos visited Sylvester St. Croix, but Jordan was not of the party, for though Mrs. Mary was Douce's godmother, she had made up her mind that Jordan should not enter Sylvester's house. She had never forgiven him for the way he had looked at the boy on the day of Douce's christening.

One summer evening, however, when Nando and Jordan were raking up the grass which the gardener had scythed, they heard the gate-bell ring. The oak gate was kept locked, and though Nando had unlocked it he had left the padlock clipped on the chain.

"Go and see who is there, Dan."

Jordan went. He had thrown off his coat and vest, and had his sleeves rolled up, and even at the age of fifteen he was as big as most men. Women thought him a very handsome lad, with his grey eyes, white teeth, and his air of smiling aloofness. He had a dignity of his own, the inwardness of which had begun to develop on the day young Dunnage had taunted him with harsh truth.

Outside the gate he found a tall man in black holding a little girl by the hand—Mr. Sylvester St. Croix and his daughter.

Jordan smiled.

"Mr. Nando is in the garden."

He stood aside, holding the gate open, and Mr. St. Croix passed through without giving Jordan a glance. His walk was a sort of shuffling glide, like a ghost walking on ice. It seemed to Jordan that Mr. St. Croix held the child a little more firmly by the hand, and when she looked back, as look back she did, he admonished her with a tweak of the arm.

Jordan closed the gate. He watched the pair pass up the grass walk towards the cottage, but his eyes were held by the figure of the child. She was in black, and from under a little black bonnet her hair streamed a metallic and glistening red. Her very littleness, an exquisite and airy littleness, appealed to the big boy. But beside her, dominating her, was the rather forbidding figure of Mr. St. Croix, with its angular shoulders, thin legs and long and precise face.

Jordan did not follow them. He went round by the nut walk to the place where the raspberry canes grew, and began to pick fruit. His face was clouded; his thoughts were turned inward; Sylvester St. Croix had given him something to ponder. He could hear voices over by the cottage, and for the first time in his life he realized loneliness and a sense of not being wanted.

He was pushing along between two rows of high canes when he became suddenly aware of a little figure at the end of this green alley, framed by the foliage. The branch of an apple tree let dappled light through upon her. She stood there very solemnly, watching him with her dark eyes like sloes in the soft pallor of her little face. Her hair had a wonderful red lustre, and Jordan was fascinated by it.

The smile they gave each other was a mutual flash of liking, instant and equal, but the boy was the first to speak.

"Come and pick raspberries."

She joined him at once, and Jordan, having half a dozen berries in his palm, offered them to her.

"Just ripe."

She put out a fragile hand with little taper fingers, and took a berry, giving him an upward smile as she popped the fruit between her lips. It made Jordan think of a bird feeding.

"Sweet, aren't they?"

"Yes," said she, with her shy dark eyes on his.

"Have you raspberries in your garden?"

"No."

"Do you like them?"

"Yes."

Jordan had an idea.

"I'll bring you some—one day. May I?"

"Please do, boy," she said.

He liked her calling him "boy." He smiled at her and began to pick more fruit, and she took the berries out of his palm with that little birdlike gesture. She stood close to him with an air of perfect confidence, and Jordan felt that he would like to touch her hair, but somehow he dared not do it.

"What's your name?" she asked with abrupt seriousness.

"Jordan, Jordan March."

"Mine's Douce."

"Douce Jeanne," he corrected her; "I was there the day you were christened."

Her eyes widened.

"How old was I then? I'm seven now."

Jordan laughed.

"You weren't very old, Douce. I'm fifteen."

"How big you are!"

"Am I?"

"My brother Maurice is fifteen, but he is not so big as you are."

"You are not very big yet. Douce, are you?"

"I don't want to be big, never," she said; "but I like you, you big Jordan."

"Do you?" said he. "I wonder why?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"No, I don't," he answered, yet feeling big enough to thrash anybody who should dare to hurt a hair of her head.

They remained perfectly happy together among the raspberry canes until they heard a thin, high-pitched voice calling:

"Douce, Douce! Where has the child got to? Douce, we are going home."

The child's face changed, so much so that Jordan was struck by its white solemnity. She seemed to turn suddenly into a little, demure, serious old woman.

"There's father calling. I—must—go."

She thrust out a little hand.

"Good-bye, Jordan. You have been kind to me."

"Have I?" said he. "Well, I've liked it. And may I bring you those raspberries?"

"O, please do."

She fled away to her father, leaving Jordan to reflect that he did not like Mr. Sylvester St. Croix, and that for some reason Mr. St. Croix did not appear to like him.

Mr. Peregrine let his boys out of school an hour earlier on Wednesdays, and on the following Wednesday Jordan cut across from St. Giles to Thomas Nando's garden, rang for the gardener, and picked his raspberries. He borrowed a straw basket to carry them in, and set out for the house of Sylvester St. Croix. Jordan had considered the possibility of his running into the arms of Mr. St. Croix, but he thought that it might be avoided, and if it could not be avoided he could

present the fruit to Douce's father. The day had been showery, and heavy rain came on just as Jordan reached Mr. Sylvester's garden hedge. He poked his head over the gate, but he could see no one in the rambling garden, and there was no sound save the patter of the rain on the leaves.

He opened the gate, and as he did so one of the lattices opened, and he saw Douce's red head and the flutter of her hand.

"Boy—boy—I'm coming."

She came out between the two solemn yews, and ran down the path through the rain. Jordan opened the basket and showed her what he had brought.

"You see I keep my word."

She gave him an upward glance.

"How lovely! But you will get all wet. Come into the house."

"No, I must be getting home," said Jordan, suddenly shy; "I'll bring you some more another day, and call for the basket."

Her dark eyes questioned his shyness.

"Why, you're afraid."

"Oh, no, I'm not, Douce," he said, "but Mr. St. Croix——"

"Father is visiting some sick."

"But I would not come into the house unless he asked me to."

"How funny you are," she said; "and you have gone all red!"

He made a laugh of it, and taking off his hat gave her a solemn bow.

"I'm glad your ladyship is pleased. Now run into the house, dear; you are getting wet."

She curtsied to him.

"You will come again, Mr. Jordan?"

"Of course," he said; "I shall have to fetch that basket."

On his way home and in a narrow path of the lane Jordan met a tall boy jogging along with a strap full of books over his shoulder. The boy boasted a quite ridiculous resemblance to Sylvester St. Croix, save that he had a cocky, head-in-air look in place of his father's austere severity. Jordan likened him to a prancing goat.

The boy was whistling. He gave Jordan a patronizing glance as they passed each other.

"Hallo, bumpkin! How's the country?"

Jordan smiled at him. At Mr. Peregrine's there was a young gentleman who might have been Maurice St. Croix's spiritual brother, and since big Jordan knew enough of the type to feel himself its master, he was not troubled by young St. Croix's insolence. Besides, if appearances went for anything, the fellow was Douce's brother.

Jordan paid another visit to Miss St. Croix, and spent an hour playing games with her in the garden. Her favourite game was hide-and-seek, with an old creeper-covered arbour serving as "home." Douce did most of the hiding, and when Jordan had to chase the little flying figure that seemed to skim like a bird, he took care never to catch her. She would turn and face him in the arbour, breathless, exultant, faintly flushed, shaking her red hair, her dark eyes full of glimmers of light.

"You didn't catch me!"

But when it was Jordan's turn to hide he so contrived it that he was always caught by her.

There were two more such happy adventures, with Mr. Sylvester not there to frown, before Jordan most chivalrously disgraced himself. On that last visit he came rather late to the rendezvous, and as he reached the gate he heard Douce's voice raised appealingly:

"Oh, don't, Maurice; please don't!"

Jordan looked over the gate and saw Mr. Maurice St. Croix holding Douce's rag doll by the leg, while Douce stood by with her little hands clasped together.

"Oh, don't, Maurice!"

"Let's see how high she can fly. One, two——Up to the tree, hey——nonny no!"

He whirled the doll upwards, but it fell back out of the branches, and as he was stooping to recover it Jordan fell upon him. He pulled young St. Croix back by the collar, threw him to one side, and, picking up the doll, placed it in Douce's arms.

Maurice had gone as white as his shirt. He was counted some boxer at his school, and he came at Jordan with prancing fierceness. There was a fight, quite a brisk fight while it lasted; but Jordan had been taught to box by one of the best men with his fists in London. Tom Nando had made it part of the boy's education. Maurice got up twice and rushed in again, though Jordan had dropped his hands, for he wanted to stop the fight. Douce was standing there, clasping her doll, white and horror-stricken.

"All right, shake hands."

"Shake hands be damned!"

Jordan closed with Maurice and threw him. He felt that he could not go on hitting Douce's brother.

But his magnanimity was wasted, for Mr. Sylvester himself came shuffling up from the gate, where he had stood watching the last episodes of his son's thrashing. For a cold man he showed a most bitter and merciless anger. His eyes looked the colour of slate in his thin and bloodless face.

Douce had begun to cry. Her brother lay half-crouching on the grass, with a very evil look on his rather handsome but disfigured face. Old St. Croix stood over Jordan; he seemed to grow taller and taller, like a menacing ghost, or some angry prophet preparing curses.

"How dared you strike my son?"

"He struck me first," said Jordan sturdily.

Mr. Sylvester's short beard twitched. He was made more angry by the boy's boldness.

"How dared you enter my garden, you child of sin?"

He had given the blow that his son had failed to give, and Jordan winced. His frank eyes clouded over. And it was here that Douce ran up to her father and clasped him, looking up tearfully into his face.

"He's not a child of sin."

With a sweep of the arm St. Croix put the child behind him.

"He was born in sin. He is no fit playmate for my children."

Jordan waited for no more; he understood. He got himself to the gate, and out of it, with the sound of Douce's weeping in his ears. A great bitterness possessed him. He was shocked by the injustice of the thing and by the strange, merciless loathing with which Douce's father seemed to regard him. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, but the boy realized that it was a fact.

"I'll never go there again, never."

But he was a proud lad, and he never breathed a word of what had happened either to Thomas Nando or Mrs. Mary. The memory of it steeled itself inside him with the memory of that day when young Dunnage had hurled at him the bitter taunt.

Thomas Nando walked up and down the fencing-room, rubbing his hands. He loved every corner of this big, bare room, the smell of it, even the cobwebs which collected about the tall windows, but to-day there were no cobwebs and the place smelt like a garden. The floor had been scoured as white as a ship's deck or a hollywood platter.

"Great," said Tom Nando, "great!"

He climbed up into the gallery, where the balustrade was hung with swags of flowers, and the benches covered with red cloth. He looked down into the great room; he smiled, he took snuff, he sneezed triumphantly, and brushed a little powder from the front of his new red coat. He was a sea captain on the quarter-deck of his ship, and she was a stout ship with sails set and bunting flying.

"God forgive me," said he, "but this is a great day."

He sat down in the gallery. Below him were the white boards of the floor, and between him and them he saw loops of roses, roses from Mrs. Mary's garden.

"Bless me—she—has been busy."

His wife and Meg had been up at dawn, with three other women to help them, and as he sat there Nando could hear a chirruping, a murmuring of women busy in the house. "Here's another basket of lemons, mum." "Be careful of the syllabub, Jenny." "Shall I warm the wine, mum?" "Meg, where is Mr. Nando?"

"Bless her," said Nando, getting up and descending the stairs just as his wife came into the room. She stood off, looking at him with critical kindness, quite forgetting her own new green-and-blue-flowered gown, her cap, and black lace mittens, in the splendour of her man.

"Mercy, Tom, you do look fine! That new wig——"

"Well, come and kiss me, you pretty thing," said he.

She ran to him and was kissed.

"Tom, I'm five-and-forty!"

"I'm ten years better than that. You look thirty-five, my dear."

She laughed, and holding on to his arm trailed him round the room.

"I hope there are enough benches, Tom."

"We can seat two hundred."

"Do you think they will come?"

"Sure of it."

She pulled up and swung him round to look at a piece of paper pinned upon the wall, the copy of a leaflet which had been distributed to half the fashionable houses within a mile of Charing Cross. It made announcement to the effect that Thomas Nando begged to inform his patrons that he had arranged an assault-at-arms at his fencing academy on Wednesday, the 7th of June, at three in the afternoon, to introduce to all the aforesaid noble patrons his adopted son, Mr. Jordan March, as a new master of the art of self-defence. Mr. Nando respectfully besought the polite world to honour him with its presence. He had arranged with Mr. Galworthy—the famous sword-master—and Monsieur Legrand, of Paris, to fight bouts with the court-sword and back-sword with Mr. Jordan March and Monsieur Bertrand, his assistant. Also, he proposed to give an exhibition bout in the old rapier-and-dagger style between himself and Mr. Jordan. All gentlemen of quality would be very welcome; also any ladies who deigned to honour Nando's on the afternoon of the 7th of June.

At this moment Jordan came into the fencing-room, aged twenty-one years and standing six feet two. He wore a white wig, a white vest, breeches and stockings, and plain silver buckles on his black shoes.

"Bless us!" said Mrs. Mary, hovering like a bird round a dish of fruit.

Nando looked him over with grave and careful eyes.

"Yes, you'll do. You have filled out a lot the last year."

Jordan smiled at them both. He knew them to be happy, and he wished them to be happier before the day was out.

"What's your weight, my dear?"

"Fourteen stone ten, mother."

Nando nodded and took snuff.

"Feeling stage-shy, Dan? You don't look it."

"I don't feel it."

He picked up Mrs. Mary and kissed her.

"You great big thing," she laughed, "you'll be breaking the hearts of the ladies."

"Let him," said Nando, "so long as they don't break his."

It was two o'clock, and in a little while the great world—or part of it—began to arrive. The high room filled with colour, red, blue, green and black, with silks and satins and velvets, the stateliness of bewigged heads, with pretty ladies in panniers who smelt of lilac, lavender and musk. Nando was bowing everywhere, a dignified yet happy Nando. "Your grace, this is a great honour." "My lord, your servant takes this most kindly." "Madam, a chair." "Your ladyship, I most respectfully thank you." When that very great gentleman the Marquis of Queensmarry walked in with his lady on his arm old Nando went pink, for this was the greatest honour of them all.

"Sir, to see you here, and her ladyship with you, gives your humble servant more pleasure——"

"Mr. Nando," said the marquis, "I count you an old friend. You have taught many men to use the sword, and you have taught them to use it like gentlemen."

He touched Nando on the shoulder.

"Good luck to your boy."

"Sir," said Nando, "that is the noblest luck that ever was wished him."

Following the Queensmarrys came a tall, pale man with swift, ironical eyes. He had a very notable lady with him, dressed all in gold and with a head of the same colour.

"Your servant, my lord," said Nando, bowing rather stiffly.

The lady glanced at him with her green eyes.

"You have found us a prodigy, I hear, Mr. Nando."

"I will leave your ladyship to judge," said he, with sudden inscrutable politeness.

Most of the ladies went into the gallery, the gentlemen taking the benches round the walls. In one corner near the door there was a little group of the Nandos' friends, and among them a tallish, handsome, rather sneering young man with dissipated eyes, and a pale girl with red hair. Nobody paid any attention to these people, for Mrs. Nando and her women were busy with trays of wine and syllabub and cakes, and Nando had gone to speak with Mr. Galworthy and Monsieur Legrand, who had arrived a moment ago in a hackney coach. Jordan and Bertrand were by the table where the foils, swords and gloves had been laid out. Jordan was testing the foils. The eyes of most of the women watched him with interest.

The room was full, and Tom Nando stood in the middle of it and made a little speech. He thanked his patrons, and introduced to them each of the gentlemen of the sword.

"Mr. Galworthy, Monsieur Legrand, Monsieur Bertrand, Mr. Jordan March."

They bowed to the gallery and paired off against each other, as had been arranged. Galworthy and Legrand wore black, Bertrand and Jordan white. They began with the foils, the buttons of which were blackened and whitened so that the hits might show on the opposing colour. Jordan and the Frenchman opened the game.

They were great contrasts. Legrand, a little, sallow man, immensely serious, with compressed lips and glittering eyes, fenced with a kind of cold ferocity. He was very quick, with an iron wrist and a lunge that was like a flash of light. He attacked, and for the moment he made Jordan look big and slow. Nando, a little anxious, took snuff, and watched Jordan's white vest for the feared black mark which did not come. Jordan smiled. He smiled all the time, and that smile made the women wish him to win. He was very cool and as quick as Legrand, though his bigness made him seem slower.

"Gad, a handsome lad!" said someone in the gallery.

"And graceful, for a big fellow—damned graceful. Hallo, he has hit the Frenchman!"

He had. Monsieur Legrand uttered a little exclamation, smiled grimly, and prepared to resume the game. Nando's face

was one big smile. Mrs. Mary and sentimental Meg were holding hands.

The second hit was also Jordan's. Then Legrand touched him twice in quick succession, and Nando took more snuff. They played for quite a long while without further honours, but Jordan destroyed the balance of the play by hitting the Frenchman full and hard upon the chest, a blow that would have killed had the game been real.

Legrand was a little gentleman. He saluted Jordan, and stepping up to him kissed him on the cheek. The ladies fluttered their fans; the gentlemen thumped the boards with their canes. Old Nando, radiant, with a hand on the shoulder of each man, addressed the gallery.

"Ladies, gentlemen—your servant. This great little man has touched my heart. Very gallant! Who says nay to it?"

Someone threw a rose from the gallery, and Jordan picked it up and tucked it into the Frenchman's vest. The room applauded the act, all save the sneering young man with the dissipated eyes, who whispered something to his red-haired sister.

"He thinks himself a fine fellow, Mr. Jordan. That's all stage play."

"But he won," said the girl.

"Of course. He was meant to win. They arrange these things beforehand. That little fellow could have spitted him like a lark."

A bout followed between Mr. Galworthy and Bertrand, in which Galworthy had rather the better of the play. Then when Mr. Galworthy had rested for five minutes and drunk a glass of wine, which Mrs. Nando brought him, he and Jordan faced each other. Galworthy was an old master, very cool and cunning, but the younger man was a little too good for him, and the honours were with Jordan.

They shook hands at the finish, Galworthy looking quizzically into Tom Nando's face.

"The lad is too strong in the arm. He must be as good a man as you, Tom."

"He's better," said Nando; "God bless him!"

The afternoon was a triumph for Tom Nando, and when he and Jordan had given their display of old-time rapier-and-dagger work, more glasses were brought in by Mrs. Mary and her women. Nando, with a full glass in his hand, bowed to the gallery.

"Ladies, gentlemen, with your good consent I will drink the health of two good swordsmen, and also to the luck of Nando's and my lad here."

The Marquis of Queensmarry was standing in the gallery, and he raised a hand.

"Mr. Nando, if your good lady will bring me a glass I will join you in that toast."

"You will drink it for all of us, sir," said a woman's voice.

"Madam, with pleasure."

The business was over, and the gallery began to empty itself into the space below, and here, before the great folk went to their chairs and coaches, Jordan was presented to many of the gentlemen and to some of the ladies. Queensmarry came and spoke to him, looking straight into Jordan's eyes, while Jordan looked at him with his smiling, quiet candour.

"Mr. March, you are a fortunate fellow. Thomas Nando has a hand that is as clean as his sword. No doubt you know it as well as I do."

"I do know it, sir. He has taught me more than the handling of a sword."

Queensmarry's eyes smiled at him.

"Lad," they said, "I like you, you and your big brave smile."

Jordan was talking to a young gentleman who had newly honoured him with the post of his fencing-master, when Nando bustled up.

"Pardon me, sir."

"Certainly, Tom, certainly," said the young buck.

Nando took Jordan by the elbow and led him across the room to where the golden lady with the green eyes was sitting in a chair. "Lady Marigold Bacchus, Dan, has asked me to present you to her." Jordan smiled. He was aware of the tall man with the pale face and ironical eyes standing beside the lady's chair and watching him with enigmatic amusement. He bowed rather stiffly to Lady Bacchus, but not so stiffly as old Nando.

"Your ladyship, Mr. March is greatly honoured——"

She looked Jordan full in the face. She had a queer, lissom, curling mouth that was almost as red as Nando's coat, and when she smiled her smile seemed to show more on one side of her face than on the other. Her arched nostrils held little curved shadows. She had a beautiful neck, but thin arms and shoulders. Her hands were restless, and her flickering fan was never still.

"Thank you, Mr. Nando; so this is the prodigy! If his tongue is as quick as his sword——"

"Your ladyship, he has had less practice with it."

"The women will remedy that," said the tall gentleman.

"That's as it may be, sir," quoth Nando.

He left Jordan to the lady and walked aside with the tall man, Lord George Sflex, Baron Sflex of Sflex, in Gloucestershire, but he contrived to keep his eyes on March and Lady Bacchus. Jordan was looking down at her with that watchful and alert look, as though she were a swordsman and he were meeting a strange weapon. The lady flirted with her fan, but for all her vivacity she was as composed as a cat.

"I see that Mr. Nando is very proud of you, young man."

"I hope he is, your ladyship."

"He has a right to be."

"I owe it to him, your ladyship."

She smiled with gracious impatience.

"Your sentiments are excellent, Mr. Jordan. Cherish them. It is possible that you are going to be a very successful young man."

"I hope so, madam."

She made a gesture with her fan, as though thrusting at him.

"Hope is a poor word. Dare—is a better. But to be really successful, sir, I think that you will have to learn one lesson."

"Perhaps your ladyship will deign to teach it me," he said with all innocence.

She laughed; her green eyes glimmered; she snapped the sticks of her fan. She realized his innocence, and it amused her.

"Do you hope, or do you dare? La—my dear—I see that Mr. Nando has brought you up very properly. That—would require some cogitation! We shall see."

She rose. He was looking at her with puzzled deference, and a seriousness which stood contemplating the fence which she had dared him to jump. He was not quite aware of the fence or of her challenge, for he had not yet realized his attractiveness to women.

"I hope your ladyship did not misconstrue my meaning."

"Misconstrue! What a big word!"

Her eyes were mischievous. She tapped his arm with her fan.

"Attend to all Mr. Nando's good advice, and he will make you an excellent young man—but a——"

She smiled, and her broken sentence and her smile left him groping, while she took the arm of Baron Sflex, and with a little backward glance and a sweeping of her golden petticoats she went towards the door.

In Spaniards Court, on their way to their coach, these two stately creatures gave each other a look full of meaning.

"Would the pup be of any use to us?" asked the man.

"He might be," she answered; "the calf may be made to grow into a bull."

Sflex laughed softly.

"But remember, my dear, I—have a personal prejudice against being presented with a pair of horns!"

"You present them to others," said she; "but a wise lover does not boast."

When Jordan went into the parlour he found a number of the Nandos' friends there, with Mrs. Mary very much the great lady now that all the quality had gone. Every chair was occupied, and half a dozen men were standing with their backs against the wall. The women looked at Jordan very kindly; the men's eyes were less kind.

Mrs. Mary jumped up from the blue settee which stood under the long window.

"Come in, my dear; you and I must have a glass of wine together."

Her brown eyes were very happy, and her thrush's voice full and exultant. As she came to the narrow walnut table Jordan leaned across it and, taking her by the shoulders, kissed her forehead.

"Here's to my best friend," he said.

And Mrs. Mary blushed.

She began to pour out the wine, and while she was doing it Jordan's eyes fell upon the girl who had been sitting beside Mrs. Mary on the blue settee. The sunlight poured in and made a red sheen of her hair as she sat there serious and pale in her simple black dress. She wore white mittens and a white apron, and the dark oval of a little black and white cap framed her pale face in a wreath of shadow.

Jordan stared. He stared until he saw her drop her lashes over her sloe-black eyes. Mrs. Mary was holding out a glass to him; he took it, touched her glass with his, and drank, with his eyes still on the girl by the window. He set his glass down, and, moving round the table, stood smiling downwards and gravely at Douce St. Croix.

"It is a very long time," he said, "since the raspberry days."

She smiled very faintly.

"A very long time, Mr. March."

He remembered that she must be thirteen, but he thought that she looked very much older. She was still a little thing, exquisite in her littleness and in the contrasts of her colouring, that milk-white skin and flowing hair. Yet she had an air of maturity; she sat there like a little matron, serious, wise and faintly remote. She seemed to come from a house in which there was no laughter.

"I did not know you were watching me to-day."

Her eyes remained very dark. They looked past him at someone else who was in the room.

"Maurice brought me. He wished——"

"Your brother?"

Jordan turned quickly and saw Maurice St. Croix lounging by the door. He was never likely to forget young St. Croix or St. Croix's father, but he walked across the room and held out a hand. His eyes smiled. The impulse in him was generous.

"I'm glad to see you here."

St. Croix retained his posture of gentlemanly boredom. At Durand's, the silk merchant, where he held the position of clerk, with the ultimate prospect of becoming the partner of old Durand, who was a distant relation of Mr. Sylvester's, he was known as "Superfine St. Croix." He dressed in the latest fashion, was more of a fine gentleman than the real gentlemen who frequented Tom's coffee-house, and boasted—but not before his father—that he knew every actress and orange-girl within a mile of Drury Lane.

"Hope you are well, sir; hope you are well?"

With an air of superior languor he gave Jordan two fingers.

"Quite pretty—the play—this afternoon. That Frenchman handles a nice sword."

Jordan's grey eyes, holding him in their steady gaze, saw the whole of him, the boy in the man, the strangely impertinent travesty of the father. It crossed his mind that Mr. Maurice was no brother for such a sister. He disliked the man, and instinctively he despised him. The ghost of that rag doll still stood between them.

"You know something of the art, then?"

"O, a little—a little. I have a small scrimmage with Gavidge once or twice a week. Ha! there's an expert for you, sir."

Jordan smiled, a blunt smile.

"If you ever want a lesson I'll give you one."

"Thanks, my dear fellow; Jack Cavidge is good enough for me."

Jordan left him there being supported by the wall, and after doing his duty by a number of Thomas Nando's friends regained the position he coveted by the blue settee in the window. Mrs. Mary had left the place by Douce vacant, and Jordan, with a friendly glance at her, took it; but hardly had he sat down before the girl got up.

"We must be going," she said.

There was nothing for Jordan to do but to stand up, yet this sudden act of hers had hurt him where all her brother's superciliousness had failed to find a mark. He did not know whether she had any reason for behaving as she did, or whether she had begun to share her father's prejudice against a man who had been begotten on the wrong side. She looked, to him, to be the most innocent and gentle thing in the world, and perhaps that was why her seeming avoidance of him hurt him.

"Our friends are staying for supper," he said.

"Father expects me."

She knew that she had hurt him, and she gave him one quick but half-veiled look, which he misread. He might have divined from it that she was the daughter of her father, dominated by her father, and that her reason for going was her fear of him. Sylvester did not know that Maurice had taken Douce to the Nandos', for, friend that he was, Nando's trade always stuck in Mr. Sylvester's righteous throat. But Jordan was not looking for subtleties; he saw only the obvious, and it hurt him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Douce went quickly to Mary Nando, and Mrs. Mary put her hands on the girl's shoulders.

"What, going, my poppet?"

Douce was very firm and very solemn.

"I have father's supper to prepare. Maurice promised him that I should be home by six o'clock."

"What a thing it is to have a father!" said Mrs. Mary, "but I mustn't spoil Mr. Sylvester's supper, my dear."

Douce put up her face to be kissed.

"I think Mr. Jordan was splendid," she said, but Jordan did not hear her say it.

Thomas Nando gave a very merry supper to his friends, and some thirty people sat down at the trestle table which had been put up in the fencing-school. They had music in the gallery, toasts, speeches, and much kindness was shown to Jordan, who looked more serious than some of the younger ladies thought necessary. Two or three of them were quite ready to play at forfeits or at blind man's bluff with him, but he remained serious and quite unprovoked. They kept it up till ten o'clock, when the kitchen was full of prentices or servants who had come to see the company home, and who were being comforted by Meg and the women. A last toast was drunk; there was some kissing and laughter, but Jordan—still serious—kissed no one but Mrs. Mary.

Nando was walking up and down when his wife came in after all the folk had gone.

"You must be tired, Tom."

"Not so tired as you are, my dear."

He gave her a meaning look, and glanced at Jordan who was eating strawberries out of a dish.

"Dan and I are going to have a gossip. The wenches had better get to bed; they can tidy up in the morning."

Mrs. Mary looked anxious. She had a very shrewd notion of what was in her man's mind, and her mother love contended with his wisdom.

"To-night, Tom?"

"To-night," he said, gravely kind.

She kissed Jordan, and the warmth of her kiss surprised him. She half clung to him for a moment.

"Boy—I'm so proud...."

"Mother, that's the best news of all."

"My dear," she said, and went quickly out of the room.

Nando began to snuff the candles, and when they had put out the lights, all save the one that Nando held in his hand, they locked and barred the door leading into Spaniards Court and went through into the kitchen. The fire was still burning, and Nando set the candle on the mantleself and pulled up a chair. He had the air of a man who had something on his mind.

"You and I must have a talk, Dan. Can you keep your eyes open for an hour?"

"As long as you please, sir."

"Good lad."

He let his hand rest for a moment on Jordan's shoulder, and then turning suddenly to the dresser where a leash of new pipes lay on the shelf, he chose two and handed one of them to Jordan. It was a symbolical act. They sat down together before the fire.

Tom Nando took some time over the lighting of his pipe. He had passed the tobacco-box to Jordan, and was watching the young man filling the bowl.

"Not too tight, lad, nor yet too loose. Moderation, moderation!"

He puffed five or six times at his pipe, and blew clouds of smoke.

"It has been a good day."

"A very good day, sir."

They were just a little shy of each other, and with an affectionate shyness which begins by being formal. They looked at the fire and not at each other.

"Well, you are my partner, lad, from to-day."

"I am very proud, sir."

"And I'm proud to have you. But, look you, Dan, we are not here to make pretty speeches to each other. You are a man, and so am I. From to-day you will take a third share in the school. I'm getting old; I'm counting on you, Dan, to take my place bit by bit, and some day I can see Nando's being yours."

Jordan had let his pipe go out.

"You can count on me, father. I owe more to you and mother——"

"Tut, tut—that cuts both ways. You have given us a lot of happiness; I'm not a believer in putting handcuffs on grown men. And that is what I want to speak to you about, Dan, your manhood, not as a parson, but as a man who has seen a little of the world. You'll not make shipwreck, but, damn it—I do feel—that a father should point out the rocks."

Jordan was relighting his pipe, and looking very serious.

"Please speak of them, sir."

Nando turned to him, and, holding his pipe by the bowl, used the stem to prod home and emphasize his points.

"Dan, you are a man. You have had your fevers, the mumps and a touch of smallpox which left you with a pockmark on your chin, but it seems to me that you haven't yet caught the greatest sickness of them all."

"What is that, sir?"

"Lad—I'll ask you a question. Which is the most dangerous rock in the sea, the rock on which many a good lad has split?"

"Strong drink, sir?"

"No, damn it—woman, lad, woman."

He made a circular movement with the stem of his pipe as though he were parrying a thrust.

"Woman! She is and she has got to be, and a lad with any grit in him must have his game with her."

"I grant that," said Jordan, "but if you mean, sir, it's a serious game——"

"Serious! Come to it, lad! It is the nature of man to run after women, and as like as not he will have a dozen affairs in his lifetime, perhaps more, perhaps less, but what I say is—get it over early. It's like the measles, the sooner you get through with it the less dangerous it is."

Jordan looked greatly solemn.

"I have had an affair or two, father, but they did not come to much. I begun to cool off, somehow, but it is in my blood."

"It's in every man's blood. I'll tell you what I believe to be the truth, lad—have your fling now. If you don't you may want it the more badly when you are forty and when you have got a wife and children on your hands. And that's damned uncomfortable physic, I can tell you."

Jordan bit so hard on the stem of his pipe that it broke between his teeth.

"But is it fair—to the women?"

Nando made a quick movement.

"Ah, there you are! It depends on the woman. Women are not angels. In some cases the game's fair, in others it's sheer villainy. A man of sense and of heart has to choose. But one thing, Dan, keep out of Drury Lane, avoid it like the plague. Do you take me?"

Jordan rested his elbows on his knees.

"Father," he said, "I never thought to hear you talk like this."

"Lad, you'll talk like this—at my age—if you are an honest man."

And then, suddenly, he got up and stood with a hand on Jordan's shoulder.

"I'm telling you what's true. Why? Because good medicine never hurt any man. Have your adventures; get 'em over; see just what they are worth, my son, just what they are worth."

Nando's pipe had gone out, and he picked up a coal with the tongs and relit it. He puffed hard and then turned sharply and with a smile of shrewdness towards the younger man.

"But there is something more. If you have your adventures let 'em be clean and not too serious; and in the end I'll lay a wager that you will learn what I learnt."

Jordan glanced up at him.

"What's that, sir?"

"Why, that a good wife and hard work give you the stuff that wears best—but, Dan, I doubt whether I should have learnt it so well if I hadn't had my fling with the wenches."

They sat there till midnight, and when they went to their rooms Tom Nando found his wife walking up and down in her bedgown with a cloak over the shoulders. Her brown eyes looked at him reproachfully.

"Tom, what have you been telling him?"

"What I told you I should tell him, mother."

She began to weep, and she repulsed Nando when he tried to comfort her.

"O, my little Dan, my little boy. Why did you tell him to burn his fingers, Tom?"

"Mother," said he, "the lad's a man. Answer me this: if you were to lock up one of your rooms and kept the key in your pocket, wouldn't your wenches be dying to find out what you had inside?"

"They might be, Tom."

"Of course! I don't believe in locked doors. Let a clean lad see what life is worth. How should I have known what you were worth, sweetheart, if I hadn't seen something of the world?"

Douce St. Croix was washing lettuces to make a salad. She had had to carry the big, earthenware pan from the pump to the table in the kitchen window, and the thing had looked too heavy for her fragile little body; but in the bearing of burdens little women have always excelled. She had had other burdens placed upon her shoulders, and she had accepted them. Mr. Sylvester's old servant had died a year ago, and St. Croix had ordered his daughter to step into the dead woman's shoes—for what is a daughter but a handmaid? Douce had a rough girl to help her in the mornings, a girl who was a clumsy pair of hands and nothing else. She cooked, she mended, she kept the accounts, sewed at her own clothes, and was a silent seamstress in the service of two men, both of whom were selfish and exacting. In the evenings there was yet more work for her to do, for when she was not sewing she was reading to her father. Mr. Sylvester's sight was none too good, and since reading by candlelight tried his eyes, he assumed that he had every right to use his daughter's.

Douce's life had become serious at a time when other girls were romping with their brothers. She had to work hard, to shoulder responsibilities, to keep in tune with the tyrannies of a very religious and narrow-minded man. Duty, the duty to one's parents, was writ large over every doorway, and Douce did not rebel. She had an obstinate and sweet gentleness; she accepted duty, recognized it, fitted it into her life, and yet found time to take trouble with her shining hair and to keep her small hands from being coarsened by her work. That big Jordan should have been struck by her air of maturity, by the seriousness of the little matron, was hardly to be wondered at. Life in the house of Mr. Sylvester St. Croix was a very serious affair.

Looking through the kitchen window. Douce saw her father come in at the gate, leaning on her brother's arm. The likeness between them was extraordinary, and yet it was a likeness with ironical contrasts. Douce watched them come up the path. She had begun to be a little puzzled by this brother of hers.

Not only did Maurice puzzle her, rouse in her a feeling of vague and instinctive uneasiness, but her father's attitude to the son was equally baffling. In looking at Maurice Mr. St. Croix looked at him with eyes which had lost their natural suspiciousness. He accepted Maurice and all his incongruities, perhaps because the under-man in him applauded these incongruities without the moral man quite realizing what he was applauding. He was fanatically proud of his son. Even Maurice's fine clothes and late hours were accepted with the son's explanations of them.

"You know, sir, in our business a man must dress like a gentleman."

Sylvester's weakness was the "gentleman" in his son.

"I have to be sociable, sir. I make friends, and to be well thought of helps a man in his career. It is my wish to be a credit to you."

Maurice had a way of impressing his father, and the hard man's one weakness was ready to be cajoled.

Douce, having prepared her salad, went in to lay the table. Her men folk were at the door, and each gave her their hats and sticks as a matter of course, and she put them away in the oak cupboard. Her father went upstairs to wash his hands before supper, but Maurice sat down on a chair by the window. He brought out a lace-edged handkerchief and flicked the dust from his coat as he had seen the fine gentlemen do it.

"What's for supper, sis?"

"A salad and cold chicken."

He watched her laying the table. He patronized his sister and made use of her, and sometimes he teased her maliciously, for he was the sort of man who pulled the wings off flies.

"How do you like my new coat?"

"It looks very well on you," said she, glancing at him momentarily with her dark eyes.

He was feeling pleased with himself, and in his self-assertive moods he was apt to be cruel.

"It's my colour. Thank heaven, wench, mother gave her red hair to you and not to me."

"I am glad you are satisfied," she said, cutting slices from the loaf.

"That fellow Jordan rather liked it, though. By the way, the great pup is going to be bitten."

She distributed the slices of bread from the trencher.

"O! How do you mean?"

"Some jest, my dear. I told Jack Gavidge that the young gentleman had hinted pretty plainly that he could teach me

more than Gavidge could."

"And who is Gavidge?"

"My fencing-master, my dear, and the best man with the back-sword or the cudgels in London. They don't love the Nandos. Old Nando has always been a bit too big for his boots."

"And what will Mr. Gavidge do?"

Maurice went through the act of taking snuff.

"He is putting out a pamphlet that will make old Nando sneeze. Result, a broken head for our Mr. Jordan, unless he swallows all that Jack Gavidge says about him and the old man."

Douce stood with her two hands resting on the table.

"How mean!" she said with a calm, white solemnity.

"Mean! Fudge, it's a man's joke."

"Because Mr. Jordan beat you six years ago you want to do him an injury."

"Sis, you are a sentimental little fool. I believe you are in love with that big Jordan."

"I'm not," she said hotly; "I'm angry with you."

"Thanks, my dear. Any man likes to see a pup get a licking."

"But you went to their house!"

"I did. And I did not like the swagger of it. March was showing off before the women."

Douce heard her father coming down the stairs, and she turned to the door to fetch her salad.

"You can't do it yourself, Maurice, so that's why——"

"Lord! I knew you were sweet on the fellow."

She fled, knowing that he would have her at his mercy in the presence of her father.

Maurice St. Croix had spoken of a pamphlet or handbill which Mr. John Gavidge was putting abroad as a challenge to Tom Nando, but it so happened that Jordan read it before it came into the hands of his father. One, Toby Buck by name, a notorious bully, strolled one afternoon into Nando's fencing-school and asked for Thomas Nando.

Jordan met him. Bertrand was giving a lesson to a young gentleman from the country, and Nando had gone down to the city on business. Jordan knew Mr. Buck by sight and reputation. He was a big man with black teeth and an inflamed face, and a hat like a small cart-wheel.

Jordan was polite. Like a true Englishman, the less he liked the look of a man the more polite he was to him.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

Mr. Buck swept his huge hat, produced a folded paper, and handed it to Jordan.

"Mr. Gavidge's compliments, sir. Mr. Nando and Mr. March may find something there which concerns them."

The bully bowed, and walked rather briskly out of the fencing-school, leaving Jordan reading the paper. Mr. Buck was half-way across the court and making good progress when he heard himself hailed from the doorway. He turned, and saw Jordan standing there with a smile on his face.

"Hallo! sir, can you tell me where Mr. Gavidge may be found?"

"You might find him at the Roebuck, sir."

"I am much obliged to you," said Jordan, still smiling.

Thomas Nando came back an hour later, looking a little graver than usual, for he had called on his way home at his favourite coffee-house and had surprised a couple of his acquaintances reading Mr. Gavidge's leaflet. A boy had run in and placed it on one of the tables. The men who were reading the leaflet had conceived it to be their duty to show it to Tom Nando. It was a scurrilous bit of insolence; John Gavidge had paid half a guinea for the writing of it to Teg Toplady, an unsavoury pamphleteer.

Nando found Bertrand polishing his foils after giving his last lesson.

"Where is Jordan?"

"He went out about an hour ago, sir."

"Do you know what took him abroad?"

"I don't, sir. A fellow came in and handed him a paper, and Mr. Jordan went out shortly afterwards."

Nando took two or three turns up and down the room and then walked towards the door, but before he reached it Jordan himself came in. He looked happy, grimly yet smilingly happy.

"Where have you been, lad?"

"O, nowhere in particular."

Nando had the eyes of a hawk.

"Nowhere seems to have taken the skin off your knuckles."

Jordan coloured up slightly, glanced casually at his right hand, and laughed.

"Perhaps I hit something."

"Jack Gavidge?"

They looked each other in the eyes.

"Then—you know, sir?"

"I do," and he pulled a piece of paper out of his fob.

"I did not want you to know," said Jordan; "I have made this my affair."

Nando's mouth gave an expressive twitch.

"What have you done, lad?"

"I found Gavidge at the Roebuck, and I stuffed that piece of paper down his throat."

He laughed; there was no swagger about him; he was happily and boyishly grim.

"What happened after that?"

"O, there was a bit of a scrimmage. He had Bummer the boxer with him, and I broke my knuckles on Bummer's teeth. He—broke a table. But we have arranged it all quite pleasantly."

"Where?"

"Cockburn's Cockpit, this day week."

"Swords?"

"No, cudgels, till one of us is knocked out."

Nando grimaced. Then he put his hands on Jordan's shoulders.

"Lad, this should have been my affair."

"What—let that fellow try to crack you over the head, and he twenty years younger! Why, this is my first chance of giving you something back——"

"Lad," said Nando, "I love you."

The news of the coming fight between John Gavidge and young March was soon spread abroad. It was gossiped about at "Tom's," and notices were posted in many of the coffee-houses. "At Cockburn's Cockpit, at three o'clock on Thursday, the 16th day of June, a bout with the cudgels between John Gavidge and Jordan March. The fight to go on till one or the other is on the floor." It became known that there was hot blood in the affair, and that play with the heavy single-sticks gave men more scope than with the sword. The polite world began to bet on the fight, and most of the wagers were in favour of John Gavidge. He was a tough fellow, big, broad, and slightly bowed in the legs, and was held to be the best man in London with the cudgels.

Cockburn's was crowded, and the petticoats were not absent from the benches. The Drury Lane gangs were with Gavidge and were ready to make trouble if things went ill for him, but Nando had foreseen this, and he had a following of his own. Captain Willoughby was in charge of the affair, a brisk and determined little man who would stand no nonsense.

"If there is any mob stuff here," he said to Nando, "we gentlemen will deal with it."

Jordan was the first to climb over the barrier into the pit. He wore his smile, and when some of the gentry saw the size of him they began to feel less sure of their money. A lady threw a bunch of blue ribbons into the pit.

"My colours for Mr. March."

Jordan glanced at her, and she smiled down from her seat on a raised bench. It was my Lady Marigold Bacchus, with white powder in her golden hair, and a green fan tapping her red lips. She had another and older woman beside her.

Jordan picked up the bunch of ribbons, bowed to her, and fastened the blue bunch under the basket guard of his cudgel.

Gavidge came climbing in with an ugly, menacing grin.

"Red's my colour," said he; "let some slut tear a piece off her petticoat."

A lady from Drury Lane obliged him, making an insolent face at my Lady Bacchus.

"I'll wager it's as clean as hers."

The lady with the fan smiled at her sweetly.

Men were offering and taking wagers, and their loud voices filled the building. Already two roughs were quarrelling and had to be pushed apart by their neighbours. Jordan stood and smiled, while Gavidge shuffled his feet in a heap of sawdust.

"Two guineas to one against Nando's brat," shouted a voice.

Jordan heard it, and the smile went out of his eyes. They hardened to cold grey. He seemed to have heard the voice before, but he could not place its owner.

Nando had posted himself beside Captain Willoughby, looking paler than usual and a little anxious, for he knew how much depended on the issue of this fight. At the last moment he beckoned to Jordan and whispered in his ear.

"Look at the old serpent," sneered Gavidge, "telling the pup how to bite."

Willoughby, very spruce in his red coat and white periwig, held up his hand.

"Gentlemen, silence, please. Mr. Gavidge—Mr. March. The fight is till one man cannot fight any longer."

"Yes, that's it," growled Gavidge with a fierce grin at Jordan.

There was much shouting and cursing while the fight lasted, and it lasted some twenty minutes, and there was much argument after it had ended. Men waxed hot and were ready to fight each other. The Drury Lane roughs were for making an Irish festival of it, but when a few determined gentlemen drew their swords the mob men thought better of it.

"'Twas his height that did it. Gavidge was the better man."

"Rot, sir! Gavidge was red pulp. I wonder he stood it after the first ten minutes."

"He was the better man when they began. That lucky clout half-way through——"

"Fudge! March kept his temper better. That was as pretty a blow as ever I saw. The big lad's a fine fighter."

Jordan, after kissing a certain lady's hand, and being made much of by a new world of admirers, walked home arm in arm with Tom Nando, to be embraced by Mrs. Mary.

"O, my dear, I haven't been able to keep still a single minute. Mercy—you have got a great cut on your head! Tom, send Meg for Surgeon Barter."

"It can't be a very big cut, mother."

"It is. Your hair's all clotted."

Nando looked amused.

"She never made such a fuss over me, my son."

"O, Tom, how can you! Don't you remember how I sat up half one night——?"

"I think I do remember it, my dear, though I have an idea that I was asleep all the time after the strong drink you gave me!"

"O, Tom, that's gratitude!"

"Bless your dear soul, a man can't help teasing you."

One young gentleman who had been present at the fight went home in a very bad temper. Douce saw him come in at the gate, and knowing where he had been, she watched his face with quiet shrewdness. He had lost money and the price of his malice, and he was annoyed by the look in his sister's eyes.

"What are you staring at?"

"Was Mr. Jordan very much hurt, Maurice?"

Maurice presented her with his hat and cane. He became the very superior person, the man of the world.

"Such things aren't for little girls' ears."

She knew at once that Jordan had beaten his man, and the knowledge showed in her eyes. Her brother did not miss the shine of a secret exultation in them, and he remembered something which might damp her pleasure.

"Oh, our friend Jordan has good luck. His lady-love was there to throw him a bunch of ribbons. A very great lady, too, my dear."

"Indeed!" said Douce quietly, "but if she brought him good luck.... Besides, if she is such a very great lady, surely ____"

Her brother broke in with a laugh.

"Tut, tut," he said, "I can't talk scandal to a girl of your age. Little girls are not supposed to know about such things."

VII

A girl in a green hood left a letter at Nando's in Spaniards Court. It was a very pretty letter, perfumed, sealed with pink wax, and addressed to Mr. Jordan March. Meg received it, scrutinized it, smelt it, and took it to Mrs. Mary, who went through much the same performance as Meg had done. Mrs. Mary produced the letter to her husband, and her kind brown eyes were uneasy.

"It smells wicked, Tom," she said.

"Hum," quoth Nando, sniffing it, "I don't know about that! It looks a pretty thing."

"Ought—ought he to have it, Tom?"

"Bless my soul, he is out of baby clothes, surely!"

"Tom, you don't understand."

"Dear heart, didn't I have pretty things like this in my young days? If you want to keep a boy from the strawberry bed, give him the run of it; if he is a healthy boy he will be sick of strawberries in a fortnight."

"But, Tom, supposing——"

"Supposing what, sweetheart?"

"Some bad woman, some nasty woman, should get hold of him?"

"I don't think she will, my dear, or not for long. The lad has seen a picture of what a woman should be?"

"Whose picture?"

Nando tweaked her chin.

"Don't pretend you don't know!"

Jordan had his letter. It told him that a certain lady would be at the masquerade at the Opera House in the Haymarket, and that if Mr. March danced as well as he fought she would be glad to have him as a partner. The lady did not give her name, but warned him that she would be wearing a black vizard and a green domino with a black death's-head embroidered on the back of the hood.

Jordan showed the letter to Nando.

"What would you do about it?"

Nando raised his eyebrows.

"When I was your age, Dan, I was always ready for an adventure. Who is the lady?"

"I haven't the faintest notion."

"Well, that adds to the spice of it. A man should learn to use his wits as well as to use a sword. But one word of warning, my son; never take up with a strange woman in the dark. Make her show her face to you in the daylight."

Jordan laughed.

"If a woman has a face worth showing, surely——"

"But, maybe, my lad, she hasn't. I was caught once that way when I was very green, and when madam got me home and I found what I had been kissing! Fough! Dan, always keep to the daylight, and see your woman's eyes and mouth."

"I suppose it is like fencing," said Jordan.

"Much the same—with that sort of woman; her wits against yours."

"I think I'll try it," said Jordan thoughtfully, and his seriousness made Nando smile.

"It's a game, like all other games, Dan; keep it at that; never forget that it's a game, especially when the woman wants to make you play it too seriously. That's a trick of theirs. Bless you, this isn't the last letter of the kind you'll get."

Jordan's grey eyes were a little incredulous.

"Why?"

"Why! Damn it, because...! O, well, you wait and see, my son."

Dawn in the country, night in the city, these are the times for the setting out upon adventure, and Jordan went out when dusk and darkness met. Mary Nando, standing at the window, saw him go across the court with a black domino

over his arm, and his wig freshly powdered. He was wearing the new suit which Mr. Holland, the tailor, had sent home three days before. He had money in his pocket, money of his own making, and he had hurried out of the house without wishing Mrs. Mary good-bye.

She was unhappy, rebelling against the old inevitable breaking of the woman's tyranny of tenderness. She wanted to follow him, to watch over him as though he were still a toddler, and when Tom Nando came in he found her in tears.

"Why—mother!"

"He's gone," she said, "and he never said good-bye. I know what that means, Tom. He has gone to meet a woman."

But youth stoops to the lure of the thing which has never happened. It glimpses a face half-seen behind a curtain, the curve of a neck and head at a window, the hills on the other side of the sunset or of the dawn. Adventure! Mystery! So a young man goes to his first adventure as in the secret stillness of a summer daybreak, with the dew upon the grass and a little whimper of exultation in his heart. Woman! The mystery of her, the perfume, the strangeness, the laughter, the half mischievous tenderness, the hesitations, the sudden surrenders! Jordan smelt night in the darkening streets; and the lights in the windows were stars in the sky of romance. Lanterns were swaying. In the Piazza chairmen waiting dimly by their dim chairs hailed him as he passed. "Chair, sir; chair, your honour?" He smiled. He was conscious of his fine, rich, stalwart self, of the good blood in him, yet the pride of his youth did not swagger. It showed a generous colour. Always, his bigness had a streak of gentleness, the mark of Mrs. Mary with the thrush-like eyes. If he made other men take the posts, he left the wall to old men and the women.

Going down into the crowded Strand, and liking the confused, dim hubbub of it, he passed up Cockspur Street and came to that conflux of coaches, chairs, footmen and runners, link boys, gentlemen, and thieves. Mr. Heidegger's world was in the full glare. Maskers, like moths or mice, fluttered and twittered into it out of the darkness.

The stairs were like life, everybody trying to climb, and at the top of them Jordan found a little room where gentlemen were putting on their masks and dominoes. The thing amused him. What a game and what players! He stood three inches taller than a duke. He assisted a peevish old rake who was in trouble with his silk gown.

"Thank you, sir."

He leered up humorously into Jordan's April face.

"Why do I do it—hee—hee? In your case it is understandable. Good luck to you, sir"

Jordan sailed in on the adventure. The place was one vast eye; it was all eyes, eyes that twinkled and questioned and stared, or threw a challenge or were blind to one, hundreds of little windows, wicked or mischievous or greedy, shining in black velvet or crape. A coloured confusion, a storm of chatter! Mr. Heidegger had thought of everything, and if he had not thought of it, other people thought of it for him. The world here could dance, gamble, make love, quarrel, pick pockets, and flirt with a lady who might be a mere nobody or a learned judge's wife.

Jordan was nudged in the first half-minute. He found himself looking into the eyes of a lady in red.

"Good evening, big boy."

"Good evening, madam," said he.

"What a crush! Sure, someone pushed me against you. If one could find a seat...."

He found her a seat, bowed, and excused himself.

"I have a friend here."

"La," said she, "what a pity! But she might be able to see you even if you don't see her."

Jordan moved slowly about like a big dog, till someone tapped him on the shoulder with a fan.

"You are like a lighthouse looking for a fish," said a voice.

He turned and saw a green domino. He smiled. She pivoted slowly, gracefully, her hoop like the overturned cup of a flower, and he saw the mark on her hood.

"I owe you a forfeit, madam. How did you pick me out?"

"Why, you big thing. I measured heads. I looked about for something like a giant."

He could see nothing of her save her eyes and chin, and her eyes had a greenish tinge and her chin was soft and white. A moment later he noticed her hands and the rings on them. He thought them the hands of a lady. As for her voice, he believed that he had heard it before, and it aroused strange conjectures.

His curiosity was obvious, and it amused her.

"Puzzled?" she laughed, and her eyes made a little glittering in the holes of the mask.

"I am, madam," he said.

"Isn't that the spice of the game? But a man might guess!"

"I have heard your voice before."

"Well—who does it suggest?"

"I cannot remember."

She tapped his arm with her fan.

"A man should—always—remember. Now, sir, what are we going to do with ourselves in this crush? Are you a gambler?"

He shook his head.

"Not with money, perhaps! But we can dance, and we can amuse each other, and we can laugh at all these other foolish people."

She was gay, audacious, and it was her audacity which most impressed him, because it had a note in it which he had not heard before and did not understand. Cynicism is a strange sort of music to the young, discordant and rather frightening, and my lady was quick to feel that he would not respond to it. Like her face her irony was masked.

"Come. Let us go to the music."

He gave her his arm, and as she slipped her hand under it she was pressed against him by the crowd. The soft pressure of her body and the scent of the perfume which she used made the man in him realize the thrill of adventure. Whoever she was, he felt gentle towards her, protective.

"I hope the crowd is not too great for you?"

Her quick ear caught the new note in his voice. There was little in a man's voice that she did not know and all that its varying cadences suggested, and she put herself in tune with it. A man must be allowed to play his part, to take the bait in his own way. She was amazingly quick in her reactions. In five minutes she had sensed more of Jordan and knew more about his inwardness than he did himself.

"I wish you could carry me," she said; "someone has just taken the skin off my heel."

She liked him, she whose life had been a series of adventures, and there was one moment during the evening when she liked him so well that some elemental part of her was touched beneath her glowing cynicism, and she was very near to sending him home. Some fool, rather overmerry, blundered against her, and grabbed familiarly at her dress.

"Hallo, you sweet slut!"

Jordan dealt with the fool in a way that surprised her. It was the sheer rightness of his instinct which took her unawares, and paid her a homage which all women claim and few deserve. He was very quiet about it, grimly good-tempered, and where nine men out of ten would have involved her in a quarrel, he suppressed the drunken gentleman in a way that caught her admiration.

"Where did you learn that?" she wondered; "you, a big boy, the half-son of a fencing-master?"

She heard him apologizing to her for what had happened.

"I ought to have foreseen that insult, somehow."

"My dear," she answered, "it is said that the women who come here cannot be insulted."

"Then I had better take you home," was his retort.

She laughed, and her laughter was against herself. He did not guess what was happening inside her, that she was railing at herself, that she had straightway fallen in love with him. She—the woman of the world, the wit, the laughing, glowing cynic, the manipulator of men, the brilliant wife of a sottish husband.

"Then—you shall," she said.

She pressed his arm. She was full of strange emotion, but she kept her head.

"Now, at once. You may take off your mask."

He took it off, and she watched him. They were together, close to a curtained doorway, and with a little provocative laugh she enveloped herself in the curtain. She was conscious of mystery and of him, of his frank, full-jawed face, his

freckles, his grey eyes, his big and quietly smiling mouth. Yet, young as he was, there was something inscrutable about him, an inward store of reserve which made for dignity.

"You," she thought, "who and what are you? Yes, somehow—you will always be what most men are not—a gentleman, even in the thick of an intrigue. I ought to send you home. I ought to, but I won't."

He looked down at her smiling, wrapped up in the red curtain as she was, her head like a provoking green bud.

"And you?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"But you know me, and I don't know you."

"Presently, perhaps!" she said, and then, stretching out a hand to him—"No, I am not an old woman. I am not afraid of my mask. Mr. Jordan, you can take me home."

With a quick sweep of the hand she threw the curtain from her and stood close to him.

"I have a chair waiting—but, better still, go and get me a chair. You may walk beside it. Come."

He left her in the vestibule while he went and chartered a chair for her, and then, taking her out upon his arm through the midnight crowd, he placed her in that little secret shell.

"Where to?"

"That will be telling."

"Of course."

She touched him with her fan.

"Good night, sir. I will give the men their orders. But if—I should see you again...."

He bowed to her and drew away into the half-darkness, but when he saw the chairmen rise to their poles, he followed the precious casket which held the perilous heart of his first adventure. He walked lightly, with a clear head, and a sense of excitement under his ribs. The stars were shining in the sky of a summer night, eyes in the mask of mystery and romance.

The chairmen passed up the slope and, turning into Piccadilly, went westwards, with Jordan about thirty yards behind them. He remembered Thomas Nando's words: "See her by daylight," but the voice seemed very unreal and distant. The night was the reality, the stars, and the woman in that little mysterious shell. He judged that he had walked nearly half a mile before the men swung into a street on the north of the road. It was a dark street with a number of new, tall houses, with gardens or spaces between each group of houses. Here and there Jordan caught a gleam of light between closed shutters or drawn curtains.

The chairmen stopped. They were in doubt as to their destination, and Jordan heard my lady's voice directing them. They went a little farther up the street and set the chair down. Jordan stepped back into a doorway.

He waited there until the chairmen trudged back past him. They were laughing; they had been well paid, and, whatever the jest was, they were all in favour of pretty ladies.

"Good luck to the petticoats, says I!"

"Where should we be without 'em?"

Jordan walked on. He passed three doorways, and then came to one where a soft shadowiness was waiting. He heard a little thrilling laugh.

"Mr. Jordan, can you see me?"

She had put back her hood and taken off her mask.

"No," said he, bending over her, "only——"

She made a quick movement. She slipped a key into the lock and opened the door, and Jordan saw a narrow passageway or hall with a candle burning in a silver stick. Not a sound came from the house. She drew him in after her, keeping her face averted.

"The door, gently."

He pushed it to, and when he turned she was holding the candle and looking up at him.

"Well?"

He was astonished, and his astonishment delighted her.

"Now—you remember?"

"Yes—I remember."

She smiled. She gave him her hand, and not knowing what else to do, he kissed it. And then, she thrust him gently but meaningly towards the door.

"That—is enough—for to-night."

Out in the street, with the door closed upon him, he stood for a moment looking at the house with a sense of incredulity. Surely she had been playing with him, fooling him, and yet it was she who had made the first move. The white window-frames stared back at him, and he was still standing there when he saw a light moving in the upper part of the house. It grew steady. The candlestick had been set down on a table, and someone came to the window and threw up the lower sash.

It was she. She leaned out for an instant, vaguely silhouetted against the candlelight. She saw him below and waved her hand. He fancied that she had thrown him a kiss and he raised his black domino and shook it. Next moment she disappeared behind the quickly-drawn curtains.

Jordan walked slowly away, but this slow walk soon became a long, swinging stride.

"It is not a dream," he thought; "she said 'the day after to-morrow!'"

The youth in him was intoxicated, and perhaps not a little flattered. The brilliancy of her, the glamour of her reputation, the sensuous mystery of her fine gentlewoman's beauty had gone to his head.

VIII

Tom and Mary Nando were at breakfast when Jordan came down from his room. Nando looked up as he entered the parlour, but Mrs. Mary kept her eyes on the table, and when Jordan bent down to kiss her as he had kissed her for the last fifteen years she took his kiss with mute coldness and made no response. Jordan sat down. He was cutting himself a slice of bread from the loaf when Mrs. Mary pushed her chair back and went out of the room, leaving her breakfast unfinished.

The men's eyes met across the table.

"She's not well?"

Nando examined the contents of his mug.

"Women fash themselves about things. The fact is, Dan, a mother can't give up being a mother."

Jordan stopped eating, and his eyes remained steadily fixed on Nando.

"About me?"

"You have a lot to learn about women, Dan. You are the puppy who has grown into the big dog and taken to hunting, and she's afraid of bad things happening to you. Late—every night, you know. Women have a passion for being told what colour your coat is, and when they are not told they fret and worry."

"But I can't tell her, sir," said Jordan, frankly serious, and not in the least ashamed.

Nando gave one shrewd, quick glance at him.

"So! It's like that."

"I could tell you, father."

"I don't want to know anything about it. A man's affairs belong to himself—and the lady. A man's honour is his own."

Jordan resumed the eating of his breakfast, but he kept his eyes on the table, and his forehead showed a slight frown.

"I wish I could tell her. But I have a sense of honour to someone else. Of course, my not telling her makes her think _____"

"Oh, more than that, my lad," said Nando; "women are devilish quick. You see?"

Jordan did see. In fact, he had begun to see many things which but a little while ago had been below the level of his consciousness. Life was less straightforward than it seemed, full of surprises, of unexpected passions, deceits, tendernesses, doubts and deep misgivings. It was possible to hurt people—and the most unlikely people—without in the least meaning to hurt them.

Old Nando looked grave.

"Serious, is it, Dan? You can tell me that much. I warned you, you know."

"She's unhappy, horribly unhappy."

"Ha! That means that she is married!"

Jordan flushed. These elders had a rapid way of reading what was happening in another man's life.

"She is," he said.

Tom Nando had finished his breakfast, and he pushed back his chair, rose, and after a seemingly aimless excursion up and down the room, he came and stood for a moment by Jordan's chair and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Man—be careful. When a woman talks about unhappiness she is tying her strongest knots. But it is your game."

"It is more than a game, sir. It has not made me slack at my work."

"True, lad, true. You are a better swordsman than you were a month ago, and that is saying a good deal. But—man—be careful."

"I am, for her sake, sir."

Jordan had learnt how much can happen in a month, but he was as a child as to all that had happened in the heart of Lady Bacchus. If he had grown ten years older, she was ten years less old, and strangely reckless in her renewed youth. A month ago she had reached the edge of life and looked down cynically into the emptiness below. What did anything matter? Was there a man who mattered? She knew them so well, so mercilessly well, and her one thought had

been to free herself from the one bloated, howling creature whom she despised and hated. She had conceived the most cruel of plots, and then made it ridiculous by falling in love with the boy whom she had thought to use.

"O, incalculable fools that we are!"

Angry, she had accused herself of being piqued by raw, unsophisticated youth, only to tell herself that the man was not raw, but that there was a fineness about him, a gaillard yet boyish dignity. He had discretion, wisdom, a big gentleness. She had enveloped him with the exquisite soft thinness of her fine-bred body. She was ravished by his fresh, strong tendernesses. He gave her just that thrill which she had never known.

And now she wanted to keep him. She had begun to be quite fierce and serious about it, setting her cleverness to work, knowing that a man is never held by the mere flesh, that kisses grow stale, that passion loses its perfume. She had known almost from the first that this big boy would respond to deeper appeals. He was not one of those to whom an affair is just an affair, and no more. The utmost of him would be involved in it. He would be held only by the passion of a more spiritual tenderness.

She brought out her tragedy, and showed herself wounded in his arms. He embraced a woman whose lips were both sweet and bitter. Even in the soft warm darkness she would cry to him, "O—I am unhappy!" She provoked him with pathos, with mysterious and gloomy outbursts. She would turn away, be dark and incalculable, and then catch his head in the hollow of her arms and kiss him upon the mouth. "I wish I were dead!"

He came at night to the house in the street off Piccadilly. They met elsewhere; she was full of expedients. She even disguised herself as a girl of the people and went jaunting with him by river to Richmond, or let him take her to Vauxhall Gardens. She knew that her passion was likely to make an enemy of the man who had been her friend, and she was on the watch to try and blind him. She was very clever in this and full of resources, but she was trying to fool a man who was as clever as herself.

To avoid a possible enemy is to make him suspect, and each day she drove out in her coach to take the air and to see the world. In Hyde Park she would make her coach draw up, and, stepping out, would walk on the grass under the trees. She met friends and acquaintances, and gossiped and laughed with them, arranged her card parties, let herself be wearied by young and old men who wanted to make love to her. They called her Madam Marigold.

The Bacchus coach was a huge black affair picked out with red, and swinging on its great springs behind a team of black horses. The men's liveries were white and gold. It was easily marked and easily followed, and she knew that Sfax was never very far away, but that he would bide his time, as he always did. He stalked life, and did not rush at it in the open, for certain men like to appear paradoxical and inexplicable, and indirect in approaching a woman.

In a little while she would see his white and ironical face among the other faces. He did not hurry. He talked and smiled at people who bored him, gradually approaching her with a casualness that was methodical. She would catch at last his smile thrown directly at her, yet with a suggestion of whimsical surprise.

"What, you here!"

His mouth had a curious twist when he smiled; and when he bowed, his tall figure seemed worked by a spring.

"How is our friend the calf?"

She never let herself appear serious.

"He grows very slowly. It is beginning to bore me."

Later, she became aware of a change in Sfax. He was more polite, more cynical, more openly amused at life, and she felt that he suspected. He had become an incubus, an ironical epigram pinned on the door of her secret love. He told her that she looked five years younger.

"What do you want from me, George, which I have not given you?"

"The secret of the elixir, my dear!"

"O, don't be foolish!"

He smiled, but she detected malice in the smile.

"Supposing I were to fall in love with a milkmaid aged seventeen, should I revert to two-and-twenty?"

"You would be very dull if you did," she retorted.

One day he walked back with her to her coach, and after handing her into it, stood with his head uncovered, and an enigmatic shrewdness in his eyes.

"Can I count on observing the eclipse?"

She knew what he meant, and she pretended to be direct with him.

"Our calculations were wrong. I am getting rid of my astronomer."

"What, even the sign of Taurus has not brought you good luck?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It was a very bete idea. I see now that it is only a question of patience. The Crab will drink himself out of the sky if only we wait long enough."

Sfexbent and kissed her hand.

"Then—there is hope?"

"I know one person who has never bored me."

She drove off, and he put on his hat and watched the gold and white liveries and the black coach disappear behind the trees.

"Liar!" he reflected; "you have found something more amusing than my tongue."

Jordan had discovered a secret way to the gardens where my Lady Marigold grew, and he followed it whenever he went to her. He took a path from the Oxford Road, skirted round a fruit garden, crossed a field and gained a lane that still remained a part of the country. It brought him within two hundred yards of the street of romance, and by following a path at the backs of the houses he was able to gain the garden door. He had a key which fitted the door. He always looked at one of the upper windows; if a light showed there he entered the garden; if the window was dark he knew that it meant danger, and that he was shut out for the night.

He made his way along the path one moonlight night, and had stepped back under the shelter of some bushes behind the garden wall, for the window above was darkly discouraging, and he hoped to see it change its message. The affair had now lasted two months, and he was more involved in it than ever.

"If I could only set her free!" he thought.

Suddenly, a figure loomed along the path, the figure of a very tall man, walking slowly and noiselessly, with his hat pulled over his face. The man passed the place where Jordan was standing hidden by the bushes, but he paused a little beyond him and looked up at the house. Almost at the same moment a light appeared in the particular window, and the man was so placed—the path being a little higher than the old ditch-bottom where Jordan was standing—that he saw the lower part of the stranger's profile against the lighted window. The man had a peculiar mouth and chin, the former very small and compressed, the latter jutting out rather like the lower horn of a new moon.

The man looked at the wall, as though estimating the height of it and the ease with which it could be climbed. He tried the garden door, and, finding it locked, stepped back under the cover of the bushes within three yards of where Jordan was standing. Half a minute passed, and then it seemed to Jordan that the stranger became suddenly suspicious. He may have heard the sound of breathing, or sensed the presence of someone near him, for he stepped quickly back upon the path with his face towards the bushes. Jordan saw him feel for the hilt of his sword.

"Hallo! there; come out and let us have a look at you."

Jordan did not move.

"What the devil am I to do with the fellow?" he wondered, "if he——"

The man took a step towards the shadowy bushes, hesitated, and appeared to think better of it. He retreated, with his hand still on his sword, and his face towards the place where he seemed to think some danger lurked. He went backwards till he reached the wall, and, moving along it sideways, put a dozen yards between him and the bushes. Then he walked off at a very rapid pace, turning now and again to look behind him.

Jordan waited for a quarter of an hour. Then he went down the path for a hundred yards—it ran between brick walls here—and met nobody. He hurried back, saw that the window was still lit, and, unlocking the garden door, passed in and locked it after him.

A woman was waiting, yawning behind a half-closed door.

"Who's that?"

"Nunquam."

It was the password, and smiling conspiringly she let him in.

"Go up."

She closed the door.

My lady met him half-way up the stairs, and, taking his face between her two hands, kissed him on the mouth.

"O, my dear, what a world it is! I thought that I should not be able to show you the light, for—he—has had one of his rages."

She let herself lean against him, and she felt the trembling of him, for he still trembled when she touched him. She exulted in it. Perfumed and soft, she made a little sighing.

"O, my love, hold me fast; I have none but you."

Jordan bent over her, looking down into her upturned face.

"Why do you sigh? He has been cruel to you again?"

"Yes," she said, "yes. He struck me. It hurts yet. What sort of creature is it that strikes a woman?"

"The beast—the drunken beast!"

He took her in his arms and comforted her.

For a while he forgot all about the man whom he had seen loitering outside the garden.

But presently he remembered. He raised his head to look at her. He asked her a question, and he saw the quick dilating of the eyes.

"Where? What was he like?"

"He was hanging about the path. He tried the door. He did not see me, but he guessed there was someone in the bushes."

"But what was he like? Could you see him?"

Jordan sat up.

"I could draw his chin. I saw little more than his chin and mouth. He was tall."

She slipped round him, and, going to her dressing-table, picked up a little stick of rouge which she used for her lips. The room was panelled in white. The candle was shaded, and she removed the shade.

"Come. Draw."

She gave him the rouge stick, smiling a whimsical smile at him.

"Secrets! I only need it when he has been cruel to me. Draw."

Jordan took the stick and traced on the white panelling the outline of the man's chin.

"Like that," he said. "I seem to have seen it before."

Her face was mirthless and very grave.

"Ah! Like the toe of a slipper!"

Jordan looked at her brooding face.

"Was it——?"

"No," she said, "no. Give me the rouge stick."

She took it in her fingers and traced below the outline he had drawn a fat, round curve that sloped away to the right.

"Like the bottom of a jug! That—is my tyrant."

Jordan stood regarding the two pink scrawls.

"Then—who was the man?" he asked.

She lied to him.

"I do not know. Some creature—perhaps—of his. You are sure that he did not see you?"

"Even if he saw me—he can have seen no more than a shadow."

"O, my dear," she said, "we must be careful. What bitter sweetness is ours!"

She did not realize how utterly he was hers until he took leave of her that night. He went down on one knee and bowed his head over her hands.

"If I could make you happy—set you free!"

He did not see the look in her eyes as she bent over him.

"Alas! my dear, I shall only be free by dying. Or—if he——? No, put that aside."

"I may see you to-morrow?"

"Yes—to-morrow. But be careful, be very careful."

"Sometimes I think a man can be too careful," he said. "Good night—my most dear lady."

When he had gone she sat for a long while pondering those words of his. Her face looked blanched and old, and her eyes fell into long, brooding stares. Once or twice she shivered, and seemed to rouse herself, and her face betrayed passionate and painful scorn.

"No, it cannot be done," she said to herself, "dear God, no!"

Jordan walked into Spaniards Court some time after midnight. The place was in darkness save for the light of the moon, and the shutters were over the windows. Jordan, deep in his own thoughts, went straight to Nando's door, unlocked it and entered. When a man is in a tragic mood he is apt to lose touch with the world about him, and to forget that a lover can never be too much on the alert. Also, the love in him had risen above caution, and touched that sacrificial recklessness which makes for tragedy. A woman was desperately unhappy; she talked of dying, and he loved her.

When the door had closed on him two men came out of a porch on the other side of the court and went quickly out into the street. They walked arm in arm, with their heads down and close together, so that their hats and periwigs seemed joined.

"That was young March. One can put two and two together."

"We'll make sure of it, George, damn them! To-morrow? Look here—will you set the watch?"

"You can rely on me. But I warn you—the man may be dangerous."

"Dangerous! I'll danger him! I'll take half a dozen good fellows with me, and if he shows fight—by gad! we'll spit him."

"Much better pitch him into the street."

"From a top-floor window, what?"

"Fudge, Bob, keep your head. Why get yourself into trouble for a bastard like that? Let him have his thrashing and be done with it."

Sfex walked into "Payne's" about ten o'clock next night, and met one of the drawers carrying a tray of glasses and two bottles of wine to some of the place's patrons.

"Is Sir Roger Bacchus here?"

"Upstairs, your honour, in the front room."

Sfex went up, and while he was still on the stairs he could hear Bacchus's voice screaming its usual oaths. A twinge of contempt showed on Sfex's face, and he paused in the doorway, pale as Death come to summon a man to the great reckoning. Lady Marigold's husband was at cards. He had taken off his wig, and hung it on the back of his chair, and the bald crown of his head shone white above his inflamed face. It was a big, loose, violent face, the nose and cheekbones tight under the mottled red skin, the cheeks hanging in flaps, the lower lids bagged under the eyes. The eyes had an angry expression. The man's mouth was never still, for even when he was not speaking he was biting at his lower lip, or sucking in the upper one. All his movements were jerky and spasmodic, as though the violent nature of the man had never been controlled.

"You silly, screaming brute," thought the cold gentleman in the doorway.

Bacchus raised his eyes from his cards and saw Sfex standing there. He stared, his loose mouth gaped; he threw down the cards and stood up.

"George! I'm wanted?"

Sfex nodded.

Bacchus clutched at his wig and put it on awry. He was never too steady on his feet. The others stared at him.

"Come on," he said, "come on, damn you, the whole roomful of you. Jack, you are one of the crowd. What—I've got two bruisers below! Damn the cards. Come on."

He pushed the table over and walked towards the door. Two or three of his friends got up and followed him. They knew what the adventure was and which way the wind blew.

"Better take his sword away," said one of them.

Bacchus heard him and turned a furious and distorted face.

"Go to hell! I'm not so drunk as not to know how to use it."

The first warning the lovers had was the sound of a woman's voice below, shrill and protesting. There was the noise of feet upon the stairs.

"Heavens!"

She sprang up from the chair and, in pushing it back, overturned the table on which the candle was standing. The room sank into darkness. Jordan, rigid by the door, stood listening.

He heard her moving about the room.

"Where are you?"

She did not answer, and then he saw her figure against the dim window. She had something in her hands, and she made a movement as of throwing something from her. It was his sword; she had thrown it into the garden.

"God," he said, "you have——"

She ran to him; she had her arms about him.

"No, no. O, my dear, I have thrown my heart out with it. Don't fight. Leave me to bear it."

She clung to him as they began to beat at the locked door. She kissed him; he felt her trembling.

"My man—I have loved you better than I knew. Stand over here."

He held her for a moment.

"I could have——"

"No, no," she said, "not that."

She heard her husband's voice screaming oaths, and suddenly she grew very calm. She could see light, a streak of it where the straining door gaped from the frame. She sat down in a chair, and holding Jordan by the left hand she kept him beside her.

They broke in. There were lights, silver candlesticks held in men's hands, angry faces, the glitter of a sword.

"You dog!"

Bacchus had a candlestick in one hand, and his sword in the other. He lurched forward into the room and made a clumsy lunge at Jordan, but Jordan put the thrust aside with his hand.

"Roger, the lad is unarmed."

She stood up. Her eyes were on her husband's face.

"If you must be so brave, strike me."

"By God, I will—you slut!" he said.

Someone clutched at him from behind, but he made a half-thrust at my lady, nor did she move, but stood scomfully still. The point of the blade tore her dress, and before Bacchus could recover himself Jordan, using a familiar fencing trick, caught the colichemarde by the blunt part of the blade and disarmed him.

There was a moment's pause. A couple of gentlemen had Bacchus by the arms and shoulders, and he stood there struggling with them and swearing.

Jordan looked at my lady.

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

She was white as milk and very calm.

"Please. Give me the sword."

He gave it to her, and she put it behind her.

"For my sake a good man shall neither kill a sot, nor be killed by him."

She looked at her husband.

"Yes, he is my lover. He has been to me what you have never been and never will be. Let him go, gentlemen; I am not afraid."

Her scorn was passionate and unashamed. She kept her eyes on her husband, who was breathing hard through his nostrils and biting at his lips.

"How many women have you played with? Pah! If you call me foul names need I play echo? This is my room; I shall be glad if you will leave it."

Bacchus looked from her to Jordan.

"This is a tame sort of rat," he said.

And Jordan bowed to him.

"If Sir Roger Bacchus desires satisfaction——"

"Jordan!" said the lady sharply, but her voice was drowned by her husband's scream.

"What! Treat you as a man of honour and a gentleman?"

"You may use your fists," said a voice; "don't let them thrash you, Jordan."

Jordan had six men against him, but his leap took them unawares. He was over the sprawling body of Bacchus and on the stairs, with another man on the floor, and three clinging to him as best they could. He shook and smote them off, but they were on him again before he reached the first landing, and the knot of struggling figures went down the stairs together. The balustrade broke half-way down the last flight, but Jordan fought free from the tangle on the floor. The others had had enough of it, and as he stood by the open doorway with his coat ripped down the back and his shirt torn open he called up the dark stairs:

"Your ladyship, they have not thrashed me."

"Well done," a faint voice cried from above; "go; I shall not be harmed."

Jordan walked out into the street and no one interfered with him. He was loth to leave her alone in the house, for his blood was up, and his honour was involved with hers, and yet he knew that there was nothing that he could do. Had she not thrown his sword away? She had been more afraid for him than for herself, and his own heart told him how right her fear had been.

"I should have run that man through the body! And then——"

He realized from what she had saved him, and his love saluted her.

He turned away. His mouth was bleeding and he did not know it; he was swordless, wigless, hatless, and one stocking was lumped about his ankle. What did it matter? He was as much involved with her as ever, and as he moved away down the street he was thinking how next he could meet her, how serve her.

Someone stepped out of a doorway and accosted him.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you for the cart and Tyburn?"

Jordan knew the man instantly by his height and by the prominent chin. Also, he suddenly remembered where he had first seen him, as though the hot blood in his brain had washed the memory back into his consciousness.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?"

Sfex stood beside him, looking into his face.

"Well, has nothing happened to the lady's husband?"

"Nothing."

"Dear me," said Sfex with irony, "she must be very disappointed."

Jordan looked him full in the eyes.

"What do you mean, my lord?"

"Why, dear child, she was counting on your helping her to the blessed state of widowhood!"

There was no more said. Jordan's right arm flashed up, and swinging like the bar of a gate, caught Sfe across the chest and laid him flat on his back in the roadway. And Jordan walked on.

He reached Spaniards Court in the small hours, let himself in, and after washing his face in the kitchen, he went noiselessly to his room. "I can't sleep," he thought, for he believed that he was more in love with her than ever, but sleep he did, and in the morning he felt strangely cool. He looked at himself in the glass; he had a cut lip and a half-closed eye.

At breakfast Mrs. Mary gave one timid glance at him, and then seemed to lose all interest in her plate. Tom Nando said nothing. He did not disapprove of a young man boasting a black eye provided he had left the other fellow with two.

Jordan was in the school all the morning, carrying on as if swords were mere toys and not made for killing, even though he had been so near to killing a man, and was thinking of how next he would see his lady. That very night? Somehow! He could not go on living without her. And the happiest of his memories was that of Lord George Sfe lying on his back in the roadway.

They were about to sit down to dinner when Meg came in.

"A wench wishes to speak to Mr. Jordan."

Mrs. Mary gave a kind of soundless moan. Nando looked down his nose. Jordan went out into the passage and found a girl waiting just inside the door. He knew her at once, for he had good cause to know her.

"My lady sends you these."

She had a letter in her hands and something wrapped up in a red cloak. It was his sword which Marigold had thrown into the garden.

Jordan took the letter and read it, and as he read it he was conscious of an empty feeling within him.

"My dear," she wrote, "I send you back your sword; may it always be as lucky as its master.

"I am going away, and of my own free will. I have made up my mind that you must not see me again. Some day, my dear, you will be grateful to me for this. Forgive me, for I know so much more of life than you do, and I think that I have loved you better than I knew.

"It is my wish—my own free wish—that you shall not see me again.

"Good-bye. I have made things safe for you."

Jordan stood leaning against the wall, his sword tucked under one arm, and his eyes looking out through the doorway at the sunlit court.

"When does she go?" he asked.

"She has gone."

He straightened.

"Gone? Already? Where?"

"She left in the coach soon after ten o'clock. For the country, her big house in Somersetshire—I guess. Anyhow, it is a very long way."

"Did she go alone?"

"Yes, quite alone. Sir Robert is abed, and sad in the stomach."

Jordan looked at the girl and she at him. He wanted to ask her a question, and she—on her part—wished to tell him something. She liked him better than he knew.

"Then—you have had your quittance, Sally, like me."

"I have," she said, "but don't you quarrel with what my lady has done. It was the kindest deed she ever did for a man. I'm a woman and I know it."

"How do you mean? Why did she leave you?"

Her eyes said: "You dear, big, simple thing!" She stroked her cheek with her fingers and seemed to reflect.

"Well, it was like this. They sat up half the night, talking. Sir Robert was like a mad dog, yapping and snarling, but

always she had a little the better of him. Yes—I listened at the door. And in the end they made a bargain; it was her bargain and she made it for your sake."

"What was it?" he asked.

"She promised to go away—if he promised not to do what he threatened to do."

"And that?"

"I won't tell you," she said; "it is not the sort of thing a girl can tell a man."

And then she left him, and Jordan went back into the parlour with my lady's letter in his pocket and his sword under his arm. He laid the sword on a chair, sat down, and soberly ate his dinner. He felt that life was at an end, that he would never love another woman, and that this one had behaved to him with a mysterious fineness which he did not quite understand.

After the meal he disappeared, and they did not see him again till dusk fell. He had been out in the country, lying under trees and hanging over gates, fighting through his first great sadness, a sadness which was to last just three weeks. But the ultimate sadness that it was to cause him lasted much longer than that.

Before going to bed he told Thomas Nando the whole story, a Nando who looked solemn and grave, but whose unchastened maleness chuckled exultantly.

"Do you think she was right?"

Nando managed to make him see how right she was. The fierce renunciation of the thing had touched the older more than it had touched the younger one.

"After all—she's a great lady. A man might be proud of having been loved by her. It has not hurt you, Dan?"

Jordan smiled at him wryly.

"Well—a little."

"You'll get over that, lad."

"I suppose I shall. I don't want it talked about. It's too sacred."

"Dan," said his foster-father, "a love affair between a man and a married woman is anybody's property, to talk about as they please. That's part of the price you pay. Still—I hope the gossip won't come to your mother's ears; she's rather a soft-hearted and religious sort of woman, as you know."

Jordan looked unhappy.

"I suppose you don't think badly of me?"

"Badly!" and Nando suppressed a laugh; "well, no, I can't say that I do. Half the gentlemen in London, Dan, would have sold their souls to have been in your shoes. And to cheat man Bacchus out of seeing you thrashed, when he had six fellows ready on the stairs! That's good enough, my lad. You have got the laugh on your side."

In a week the tale was being told in all the drawing-rooms and coffee-houses, and if it was embellished it gained colour and swagger in the telling. Young March was a stout lad, a fellow of enterprise, a good romantic lover. Half the world envied him and sympathized with the lady. Bacchus—it was said—was laid up with the jaundice, and there the world left him amid chuckles and laughter.

The tale came in due course to Mrs. Mary's ears; a thoughtful neighbour saw to that. She took it greatly to heart, and all Nando's worldly wisdom failed to reassure her.

"Tut, tut, mother, the adventure has not done him any harm. To tell you the truth I'm just a bit proud of it."

"O, you men!"

"What about the women, my dear? Do you think they like a fellow the less for being a bit of a dog, and a gallant dog? Why, half of them will be dying to throw themselves at his head."

"Then you are wrong, Tom. Not all women. It might lose him a good woman."

"I don't believe it," said Nando; "she would persuade herself that it was her business to save him from the others."

For some little time there was a feeling of estrangement between Jordan and Mrs. Mary. Outwardly they were the same, but inwardly they felt lost and out of touch with each other. The familiar attitudes of twenty years had changed, and Mrs. Mary could not reconcile herself to the fact of Jordan's vigorous independence. Nando understood it so much better. His wife was a dear sentimentalist who wanted the same flowers to grow each year in the same old garden.

But there was another household in which Jordan's adventure was spoken of and condemned. Maurice St. Croix brought the tale home and confided it to his father. Envy makes a man prudish.

"The boy was born in sin," said the Calvinist, "and he will continue in sin. He is a child of infamy."

Rumours of Jordan's way of living came to Douce's ears. Her brother blurted it to her that young March had had a love affair with a lady who was married.

Douce understood that her father and brother considered Jordan March a bad man, and a part of her had to agree with them.

She was sorry.

Even in youth a man is not always out upon adventure, and for a time Jordan's life ran away very quietly, partly because he willed it so, and partly because his interests returned to other channels. Friendship between a man in the fifties and one in the twenties is somewhat rare, but between Nando and Jordan this friendship was very real. Neither of them asked too much of it, and each was ready to give.

Moreover, more and more of the serious work of the school fell upon Jordan's shoulders, and since he loved his craft of the sword, his work satisfied him and gave him balance. He was proud of his skill, and he was proud of Tom Nando's reputation. He had a big heart, and a frank and happy way of looking into the hearts of others, and much of the ineffectual restlessness of youth was curbed in him. He was learning to react to life without being too self-conscious over the reaction. There were times when he was aware of the increasing greyness of Tom Nando's head, and of the wrinkles round Mrs. Mary's eyes, and the generous part of him took up the challenge.

"They have given me everything," he reflected, which was a fact; "Nando's shall be what it has always been if I can keep it there."

Monsieur Bertrand was no longer a young man, and most of the teaching fell gradually to Jordan. His reputation as a sword-master was very high; it is probable that he was the best man with the small sword in London, and the world found that he could teach as well as he could fence. He was patient, good-tempered, ready to take trouble, and he had a dignity of his own which stood him in good stead. The greater the gentleman the better he and Jordan liked each other. No one ever took liberties with him, any more than they had taken liberties with Tom Nando. Smiling, steady-eyed, there was yet a touch of the inscrutable in him. Men said that he knew his place, although he had got outside it in the affair of Madame Marigold. But that had been the woman's business. He was known as Big March, Big Nando, Gentleman Jordan, and sometimes among his enemies and enviers as The Bastard, but no one ever called him that to his face.

As for Mrs. Mary, she found this breathing space full of tender satisfaction. Her boy was settling down. She was immensely proud of him. Tom Nando had deserted the church, preferring to spend the whole day in his beloved garden; but every Sunday morning Jordan solemnly walked with her to church, carrying her prayer-book. He towered over her. He looked very dignified and natural and handsome. If the world was amused by the parade, he was as untroubled by their amusement as a big dog is by the yappings of smaller dogs. The event never ceased to thrill Mrs. Mary. Her attitude of devotion all through the service was not directed solely towards the Deity.

She began to make plans for him, for though she did not want him married, the Bacchus affair had frightened her, and she decided that she would rather have him married to a girl of her own choosing than running away from her to strange ladies. Mrs. Mary was quite a considerable person in these days, and the women of her circle were very polite to her. Mr. March's pedigree might be a little obscure, but Thomas Nando had become a man of property, and property has an unfailing glamour. Their daughters may have thought less of the property and more of the man.

At all events, Mrs. Mary prepared a succession of dainty dishes, and served them up to Jordan. She began with Miss Jane Lambert, black-eyed, ruddy and buxom, the best-tempered wench in the world, and the daughter of Mr. Lambert, haberdasher, in the Strand. Miss Lambert made eyes of devotion at him, and said, "La, Mr. March, what beautiful weather we are having, aren't we!" But Jordan was not interested in Miss Jane Lambert. Mrs. Mary, experimenting in contrasts, introduced a dear, die-away little thing in place of Miss Lambert's rosy robustness; but Miss Lucy Linacre with her primrose appeal was no more successful than Miss Lambert. She was followed by Miss Prudence Thomson, the daughter of an apothecary, a serious-eyed young woman with a fine pallor and a pretty mouth. Mrs. Mary had hopes of Miss Thomson; she handled Jordan rather cleverly, but she lost him when he happened to catch sight of her ankles.

"Dear, dear," said Mrs. Mary to her man, "I do wish Jordan would marry. They could have the little house, Tom, on the other side of the court; I am sure Mr. Blenkinsop would sell it. I really thought he was taken with Prue."

"You did your best, my dear."

"I know she has thick ankles, Tom, but she is a girl of sense."

"Mother," said Nando, "if you had not had a neat pair of ankles I should never have come to the point of wondering what was inside your head!"

"Do be serious, Tom"

"I assure you that ankles are a very serious matter! Between you and me, my dear, Jordan is much too young to marry."

"But marriage does so steady a man."

"Does it! Marriage with any sort of wench who comes along?"

"Do you think I would let him marry any sort of wench?"

"I don't think you will have much say in the matter, mother, when he goes after a lass in earnest. At present things are topsy-turvy. These wenches are all after Jordan. Why not wait till Jordan goes after his own wench?"

Mrs. Mary looked grieved.

"Women are so sly. I want him to marry a good girl."

"You think he won't know her when he sees her?"

"Looks count for so little. I mean—a lad is caught by a pretty face."

"And God bless him," said Nando, "wasn't I caught that way? I wouldn't give twopence for a lad who asked to see an inventory of all the girl's virtues before he thought of kissing her."

Nando and his adopted son were much together during this period, and Jordan began to take his place as a responsible citizen and a young man of substance. He became something of a politician at a time when tempers were out of hand. He went with Nando to the Whig coffee and mug houses, and became a member of the Mug-house in Covent Garden. He was no great talker, and he sat and listened to the older men, who hated Papists more than they hated the devil, and who sat solidly in their chairs and made an end of all Tories. Nando's had always been a "Whig" school, but mildly so in a season when even a cabbage was challenged to declare itself on one side or the other. "Moderation" was Tom's great word. When a man has a comfortable chair in a comfortable corner he has no use for the wild heads who want to turn all chairs upside down.

Nando's favourite haunt, however, was his garden. He dug and pruned and potted about, and was more proud of his plums and his strawberries than he was of his reputation as a swordsman. He sent baskets of fruit to his neighbours, and was quite convinced of their sincerity when they told him that his garden grew the best fruit in the county of Middlesex. He loved nothing better than to go into the kitchen and say with a wink, "Put up a basket for two, mother," which meant that he and Mrs. Mary were to spend a night at the cottage, where the gardener's wife kept a room ready. The Nandos' autumn was proving a very pleasant one. In spirit they went about hand in hand. Mrs. Mary had never had so many handsome gowns as she had when she was nearing fifty, and she looked very well in them. Nando told her so.

"You pretty creature," he said, "you don't seem to grow any older—somehow."

Which words pleased Mrs. Mary more than did all her gowns and petticoats.

Nando and Jordan had many a talk, and when Thomas was seated under one of his apple trees with a mug of ale on his knee he had every right to pose as a philosopher.

"The next world is a bit of a lottery, Dan. Make the most of this one."

Jordan was quite prepared to agree with him. He found this world a very good world, although he had come to recognize some of its limitations with respect to himself. Certain facts had emerged for him from the Bacchus affair. He might be stronger and wiser than most young men; he was—perhaps—the best swordsman of the day, and yet no gentleman would deign to cross swords with him in earnest. His ambitions were limited. He was shut out from all that other world, save so far as he was allowed to teach it to fence.

His common sense and his satisfaction with life as it was at that period saved him from any feeling of restlessness or rebellion. He had plenty of good, human food to keep him in condition. He had a reputation; he was something of a public character. Urchins would point at him in the street: That's Big Nando, Gentleman Jordan. He can lick any man in London. Women smiled at him; pretty ladies were more than ready to be distinguished by his favours should he choose to distribute them. He was popular; men treated him with a certain measure of respect, especially the rogues who had seen him crack John Gavidge's crown. He had money in his pocket, two well-furnished rooms of his own in Nando's house, and as much freedom as he pleased. The balance was all in favour of his being satisfied with life.

And so he was. He discussed the matter with Tom Nando.

"It seems to me that a man ought to set a limit to things. There are young sparks I know who are always trying to get hold of the coat-tails of some little gentleman. Hangers-on to a world that they will never belong to."

"You don't want to be a gentleman, Dan?"

"It depends on what you call a gentleman. I can't be one of the Pall Mall kind. That's obvious."

"Sound sense, too. I have had a good bite out of life as plain Tom Nando. But some lads are caught by the glitter."

Jordan was eating strawberries out of a rhubarb leaf.

"There is one thing, father; I should like to have known who my mother was."

Nando gave him a quick but guarded look. The Veiled Lady had died five years ago, and it seemed to Nando that there was no good in telling. Why put dreams and possible discontents into a young man's head? He might find plenty of his own.

"I don't suppose you will ever know that, Dan. What good would it do you?"

"None, so far as I can see," said Jordan.

His ambitions fitted his shoes so nicely at this period that he walked comfortably and without much self-questioning along the broad highway. He was not very self-critical, and he did not trouble himself greatly over what other people said or thought of him. There was no sand in these shoes of his, no worm of discontent in the fruit. He was treading one of those smooth and level places which lie between what has been and what is yet to be.

Early in one month of November Thomas Nando went to bed with a heavy cold on the chest, and being a little peevish over it—as is the nature of man—he was devoutly humoured and pandered to by Mrs. Mary. Among other things he professed to a craving for baked apples—no ordinary apple, mind you, but the particular golden pippins which grew in his garden. There were none of these in the house, but plenty in the apple-room at the gardener's cottage, and Mrs. Mary did not like to confess herself caught sleeping at the post of duty.

She appealed to Jordan.

"Meg has the rheumatics, and I wouldn't trust Polly out alone, but I must have some of those pippins before supper time."

Jordan offered to go.

"Bertrand can take the gentlemen this afternoon. I'll give my Lord Mulcaster his lesson, and then walk over."

"I wish you would, Dan, dear. I would not have poor Tom feel sour over a pippin. Men are so fractious—poor dears—when they are abed."

"I'll be back before dark."

It was a still and clear November afternoon, with no wind moving, and frost waiting to rime the hedges and the grass when the sun had set. The sky was a clear pale blue, but as Jordan left the houses behind he saw an opalescent haze hanging over the fields and gardens. The sun, descending, grew huge and red behind this film of mist. The brown, freshly turned soil had a tinge of purple, and the grass was grey with dew. The landscape, very still, seemed to be falling asleep, while the London which lay behind him was preparing to light its candles and make of the night what it pleased.

Jordan had come to the point where the lane branched into three lesser lanes when he heard footsteps behind him, and in turning to the left he glanced back—yet without any very conscious curiosity—to discover who was behind him. He saw a girl in a black cloak and hood and a silver-grey petticoat over her half-hoop. She had a quick, gliding walk, and seemed to float on her little feet with young and serious dignity.

"Why, what a long time since the last time!" thought Jordan, facing about with a smile.

The red sun was behind him and shining upon her hair, and there seemed to him to be a shimmer of some purple colour in its redness. She was quite close to him, but she was not looking at him, which he thought rather odd. The soft pallor of her face seemed set towards some very definite purpose. Her eyes had seen, and yet would not see, dark eyes veiled with young austerity.

"Douce," said he, with his hat in his hand, "I'm big enough to be noticed."

He spoke as he would have spoken to a child, expecting her to smile suddenly up at him, but when she went past him without so much as a quivering of the lids, and turned to the right and away from him into one of the other lanes, he had one of those strange shocks which make a man look inwards at some unrealized image of himself. He stood staring after her, his hat still in his hand. He was very much astonished.

And then he went after her, deliberately, with something in him that was very like anger and yet unable to be angry. He had a very poignant feeling that there was nothing whimsical or easy in what she had done.

"Douce," he said, "I want to speak to you."

She walked on, perhaps a little faster, and her irresponsive back made him more determined. He meant to know the reason of her blindness. It is possible that he realized that this incident was full of intense significance.

He caught her up and walked beside her, looking down at her tense, unwelcoming face. Her eyes never lifted to his.

"You have got to tell me why you did that," he said.

She made no reply, but drew a little away from him.

"You won't? Is it because I am what your father once called a child of sin?"

Her eyelids flickered. Her lips looked pale and compressed.

"No," she said, "it is not."

He was more determined and more puzzled.

"Well, you must tell me."

"I can't—and I won't," she answered him. "Please leave me alone."

He walked for another step or two beside her, and then fell behind. She went on. There was the sense of some irrevocable decision in the passing of her little figure, and he stood quite still in the middle of the lane, feeling the sudden hurt of it. He was not in the least angry. He did not accuse her of her wilful injustice. He was conscious of a new and critical attitude towards himself.

"She would not confess it," he thought, "but that—was—her reason. She lied so as not to hurt me. She is growing up. But why? I should have thought that she, of all people——"

He turned about, remembering Tom Nando's pippins. His eyes were immensely serious.

"Is it—that she is growing up like her father? The child liked me, but I suppose that old St. Croix's grown-up daughter might have no use for a man like I'm supposed to be."

He felt rather bitter. The end of his peaceful period was in sight.

Jordan was apt to be direct in his methods, and when some few days later he happened on Mr. Maurice St. Croix walking up past The Mews into St. Martin's Lane, Jordan stopped him. St. Croix was in the company of two flashy young gentlemen who had been dining at one of the "ordinaries" in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross. Maurice introduced Jordan to the two men, a Captain Hill and a Mr. Lionel Vane, and though Jordan had never heard of them before, the two gentlemen had heard of Jordan. St. Croix may have pretended to despise the fencing-master, but he was quite pleased to pose as the patron of such people, and as a young "know-all" and shrewd man about town.

The gentlemen were red in the face, and hearty after a good dinner, and when they had exchanged a little polite gossip Jordan let it be understood that he wished to have a few words alone with St. Croix. He knew enough of the life of the town to be able to estimate the nature of the relationship between St. Croix and his silk business and these two sleek birds. Maurice had grown very finicking and debonair. He had all the latest poses and the nice gestures of the beau.

"Of course, my dear sir. I'll follow you on to Tom's, Harry."

Captain Hill and Mr. Vane walked on, leaving Jordan and St. Croix together on the sidewalk, and since the place was too crowded for the rather delicate question which Jordan had to ask, he took Maurice aside to the steps of St. Martin's Church. In crossing the road a brewer's dray splashed Mr. St. Croix's shoes and stockings. His shoes had red heels, and his stockings were of white silk. Jordan had noted these details. They were further impressed upon him when Maurice pulled out a cambric handkerchief, and, putting a foot on the step above him, began to dab delicately at the spots of mud on his stockings. He was annoyed.

"A gentleman can't walk the streets these days without some clumsy fool splashing him."

Jordan was not interested in St. Croix's stockings, though it did occur to him to wonder who paid for them.

"I met your sister the other day."

"Oh?" said Maurice, still delicately dabbing.

"She walked straight past me and refused to speak. You may be able to tell me the reason."

St. Croix transferred his solicitude to the other leg. He had no wish to reveal to Jordan the truth concerning Douce's aloofness.

"Did she? The little fool! She is at the gawky age, my dear sir."

"I don't think your sister is a fool," said Jordan firmly, "and she knew what she was doing. Can you explain it?"

He was so plainly determined to get some sort of answer that Maurice withdrew some of his attention from his legs.

"Dash it, man, am I accountable for a girl's likes and dislikes? Besides, after all, we are not very intimate, are we?"

"No, we are not; but Douce and I used to be very good friends."

Maurice raised a laugh.

"I—ought to remember that! But if you really want me to give you a likely reason——"

"I do."

"You might ask my father. I'll admit he is a man of very narrow views."

"So that is it," said Jordan; "I rather thought so. And your sister——"

"Don't imagine I am being personal, March, but she is quite devoted to my reverend parent. He is all the Law of Moses and the Prophets. I'm sorry, but you must remember the stock we come from."

Jordan, looking very serious, had his eyes on the red heels of St. Croix's shoes.

"Not quite—all—the family."

"I take you," said St. Croix, with a smile; "I'm a little more catholic in my colour."

So they parted, St. Croix going on to Tom's, where he was learning to lose money at cards and to pay for being allowed to be a hanger-on to various doubtful gentlemen who belonged to the gay world. Jordan was a pretty shrewd judge of a man and his ways, but his thoughts were more fixed upon St. Croix's little Puritan of a sister. He did not call Douce a prude, not being of an age to draw certain distinctions. For Jordan, the sex was divided into women who liked him and into women who did not, and since the great majority of women liked him, and very much so to his face, he was the more challenged by the principal exception. It was a new fact in Jordan's life, that a little girl of sixteen or so disliked him. Yet, was it dislike or mere disapproval? Was she the mirror of old Sylvester's superfine morality, his godly

fastidiousness? After all, did it matter?

He decided that it did not matter. What was Douce to him or he to her? He had a whole bunch of young women to choose from, and since there is safety in numbers, Jordan had chosen no one. He liked his freedom. He was not urgently inspired to imitate the placid happiness of Thomas Nando and Mrs. Mary. And what, after all, was Douce Jeanne St. Croix? A little, red-headed girl whose head came as high as his heart, an austere little person with serious black eyes and a rather too determined mouth! There was nothing of her! She looked like a doll that would break in a man's arms.

"If she is that way she can stay that way," he reflected. "I don't think I could trouble myself with a cold woman."

Yet the sand was in his shoe, and he was trying to assure himself that his shoe was as comfortable as it had been for the last year. But it wasn't. He felt vaguely sore about it. His healthy and vigorous zest in life began to betray the suggestion of a limp. A little girl with red hair and eyes very black in a pale face kept walking across his path, her head averted, her lips mute. She was an ever-present figure in the day-dream of his consciousness. She made him restless, and this feeling of restlessness instigated action. He felt moved to do something, to impose himself vigorously on life, and not to sit and think out the problem of how and why life might balk a man until he learned to understand it.

"Anyhow," he thought, "her brother may be a fop, but he is a better-natured fellow than her father."

For once in his life Jordan almost liked Maurice St. Croix.

That young man went home late and somewhat merry. He found Douce sitting by the table with a book on her knees, and the candle close to her elbow. Mr. Sylvester was by the fire, his thin shanks spread, his hands folded over his supper. Douce had been reading to him. They were in the middle of Mr. Milton's "Paradise Lost."

Maurice had taken to wearing a sword, and though Mr. Sylvester disapproved of swords, he had nothing to say against Maurice carrying one. He turned in his chair and looked at his son with a cold gleam of affection, while Douce put her book aside and rose to take her brother's hat and surtout.

"Thanks, Sis. I am afraid I am rather late, sir. Mr. Vane asked me to a little dinner to meet Lord Mulholland."

He was breezy, affectionate, handsome.

"That's right. I am glad you let Douce save your eyes. I wish I had as much in my head, sir, as you have, but I was able to cap a Latin quotation of Lord Mulholland's to-night. Quite turned the laugh against him."

He took Douce's chair and turned it to face the fire, and when Douce returned from the cupboard she had to find herself another chair. Sylvester's goat's face showed a smile that was almost a simper.

"What was the quotation, Maurice?"

His son held up an excusatory hand.

"Sir, quite impossible—before her. Rather broad, too broad, but I flatter myself that I gave his lordship a gentlemanly little snub. He said to me, 'St. Croix, if there had not been so much wit in that couplet of yours I should have called you a pig.' One may have to meet the Devil, sir, but one can hold one's own."

Sylvester chuckled, and his chuckle was like the creaking of a door.

"Moral courage, my son, moral courage."

"Oh, I am not afraid of snubbing the Devil, sir. That reminds me. Douce, too, has been engaged in the snubbing of devils. Haven't you, Douce?"

He gave her an ironical look, but her eyes met his without flinching.

"Whom do you mean?"

"No pretences, my dear! Someone stopped me to-day, and would not let me go until I had given him an explanation of a certain young lady's behaviour."

He smiled that arch and malicious smile of his.

"You seem to have annoyed Mr. Jordan, Sis. The fact is that he has been so spoilt by women that he couldn't understand being snubbed by one."

Douce's lips moved, but before any words came from them Maurice had turned to his father, whose face had grown harshly attentive.

"I ask you, sir, did I do right? I refuse to be bullied by any man, though he be twice my size and a bully by training. Mr. March wanted an explanation from me, and he asked for it with some roughness. Well, I told him the truth. I am not

responsible for my sister's likes or dislikes,' I said, 'but I would have you understand that we St. Croix are religious people. We have our own views of men and life. To be frank with you, sir, our world—my father's and sister's world—is not your world, and thank God for it.'"

Douce winced, yet remained very still, with her eyes watching her father. He had raised himself in his chair, and was sitting very straight and stiff in it, with a look on his face which she had known and feared from her earliest years.

"I hope you approve, sir, of what I said?"

"Maurice, every word of it. That a man should be born in sin is his misfortune, but when he wilfully and grossly continues in sin, let him be cast out. He is a child of the Devil."

His pale grey-blue eyes observed his daughter.

"When did this man speak to you?"

"A few days ago, father. It was quite by chance. I think he was going to Mr. Nando's garden."

"And what did you say to him?"

"I did not speak. He followed me. I told him that I did not wish to speak to him, and he went away."

Sylvester's eyes had a hard gleam in them.

"You were right. A good woman should never speak to a bad man. This young man is living a life of shame and of sin."

Douce rose and made a grave curtsy to her father.

"I trust that I shall always be a good daughter to you, sir."

She kissed him, lingered a moment with her hand on the back of his chair, and then went slowly out of the room without looking at her brother.

Maurice drew his chair nearer to the fire.

"One must protect an innocent girl, sir. Women are so easily fooled."

He smiled at Sylvester with an air of easy and frank respect.

"I think that Douce is quite a wise young person. If ever she marries——"

His father stared steadily at the fire.

"I am very fortunate in my children. I think it is my wish that Douce should not marry. She has duties here which fill her life."

Maurice had very good reasons for wishing to please his father, and if he made use of Douce in the pleasing of him, what did that matter? Women were to be used.

"Her duty is to you, sir. I am sure that her affections will never go elsewhere. A daughter in Douce's position should not wish to marry."

Sylvester looked pleased.

"That is my view; I am glad that you share it. Good men are rare. I am sorry for Thomas Nando. Is this fellow March so shamefully ungrateful?"

Maurice made a great show of being fair.

"Wild, sir, wild. I believe that the women have got hold of him. They tell me that—already—he has ruined more than one home."

"Infamous!" said his father. "I thank my God, Maurice, that you are not like that."

"Well, sir, I have had advantages. I have had a good and religious home, and now that I am out in the world I know the value of clean living. By the way, sir, I ought to tell you that I am thinking of going into lodgings nearer to my work."

His father made a quick movement of the head.

"Lodgings! But, my dear Maurice——"

"I knew that you would not like the idea, sir, any more than I do, but our business is growing, and I do feel that I ought to be nearer to it. Mr. Durand has hinted that he would like to have me nearer. And there is another reason."

His father waited to hear it.

"I find myself popular, sir; I go out a good deal into sober society, and I assure you it helps Mr. Durand's business. Why, only last week I obtained two very excellent customers by dining at Mr. Renshaw's, in the City. A man's personality does count, sir, even in the selling of silk."

Sylvester could not deny it. His unwillingness to deny Maurice anything was the elder man's one weakness.

"But—lodgings! I should prefer you to be in some religious family."

"Why, sir, that is just what I wish. I have discovered the very place, rooms over a bookshop in the Strand, kept by a widow who still carries on her husband's business. She was not very eager to let to a young man, but when I told her that my father was a minister she changed her tune."

"An elderly widow?"

"O, she must be quite sixty, sir, and she has no children. She lets her rooms mostly to clergymen and old bachelors. Besides, rooms over a bookshop! You know how I love books, sir."

Sylvester had to agree.

Douce had gone to her room, the most simple and austere of rooms, with its box-bed on four square legs, its oak hutch, its table and brown basin under the window, and its carpetless floor. The whitewashed walls were full of old beams. There was no chair in the room, only a three-legged stool standing beside the bed. The mirror was a poor thing, for the mercury backing was wearing away, and when she looked at her face in it she saw herself through a blackish, spotted haze. Douce's dresses hung under a shelf, covered by a curtain of coarse cloth.

She had drawn the linen curtains across the window and was brushing her hair, sitting on the three-legged stool by the bed. Her long hair hung within three inches of the floor, and from the glowing mass of it her little pale face looked out with a white seriousness.

She was thinking of Jordan. She rather wished that he had not spoken to her brother, for Maurice had an ingenious way of utilizing anything that other people found unpleasant and of converting it into something useful to himself. There were times when her honesty made her distrust her brother. Her intuition divined a meanness in him which she did not understand.

"I wonder if it is true?"

She knew in her heart that she wished that it was not true, and yet she could not convince herself that it was false. Her father believed that Jordan was a bad man. He was convinced of it. She supposed that men knew more about these things than women did. A girl may feel very helpless, with nothing to guide her save a sentimental prejudice in favour of the sinner.

Tom Nando was still abed, and on the Saturday Jordan walked over to the garden to pay the gardener his wages and to see that the winter work was going on. There was the same red sun, the same grey-blue mist, and when he came to the place where the lanes branched he was touched and turned aside by the impulse of the moment.

So far as Jordan could remember he had not seen the house of the St. Croix since the day when he had rescued Douce's doll, and been cast out of Eden as a base child of Adam. That was many years ago, and when he came to the gate at the end of the lane the house seemed smaller and the bare elms less momentous and tall. He, too, was taller, and the boy was lost in the man. Yet the memory remained, both bitter and gallant, with Douce's cry challenging her father: "He is not a child of sin." As Jordan looked over the gate he was caught by that memory and moved by it, in that he was constrained to believe that Douce the girl was none other than Douce the child. He had not changed—at least, he thought that he had not changed—and why should she? She was older, she was a woman, but did being a woman make so much difference? Did a girl look at a man with more critical eyes when the woman in her had matured?

He stood at the gate, deliberating. He was aware that the garden looked more cared for than he remembered it as a boy, and the thought occurred to him that it had ceased to be a playground. Douce had outgrown her dolls; her dolls had become real people. He vaguely divined the fact that her new seriousness had shut him out of her playground.

Jordan asked himself why should he not walk up to that door and have the thing out with Mr. Sylvester? Was he afraid to meet any man with fists or sword? But this moral fencing was different, and he hesitated, and while he was hesitating he saw a girl's head behind the lattice of one of the lower windows. It was as though the red sun had painted a blur of colour there. She was bending over something and not looking towards the gate, and for a moment Jordan stood watching her. The pale flower of her face had a sudden, compelling perfume for him.

He opened the gate and walked up the path, and as he turned across the grass towards the window his bigness came between it and the red disc of the sun. He threw a shadow upon her. She looked up.

He was aware of her eyes for a moment, dark, questioning, and startled. She gave him an impression of hesitancy, of pale trembling. Her lips seemed on the edge of a smile. Then her face changed, as a landscape changes when a sudden cloud shuts out the sunlight. It seemed to grow firm and white and austere, even bathed as it was by the glowing softness of her hair. She put up a hand and quickly drew the curtains across the window.

Jordan felt a fool, and an angry fool, and in no mood to linger in Mr. St. Croix's garden. He got himself out of it, so sternly and with such dispatch that he did not see a corner of one of the curtains lifted. He had reached the gate, and he did not look back.

"That was about as broad a hint as a man could ask for!" he reflected.

He went out of the gate and drew it to behind him, feeling that the act was final so far as he was concerned, nor did he hear the door open and Douce come down the path. He was walking hard and fast, and when she reached the gate he was fifty yards away, his broad back squared to her. She looked pained and unhappy. She wanted to call after him, "Jordan, come back!" but she hesitated, and the longer she hesitated the further she was from the will to recall him.

"I can't and I won't," she said to herself; "a girl should have pride."

Jordan was angry, and his anger went deep, but his anger was against himself and not against Douce. If she chose to shut him out of her life, that was her business. She was the child of her father, and as the gentlemanly Maurice had put it: "Your world is not our world." Jordan realized the truth of it, but he realized it with a new bitterness after Douce had drawn that curtain. "It was my own fault. She was perfectly honest with me the other day. What the devil made me go blundering into their garden?" He remembered his talks with Tom Nando on the subject of the many worlds which a man might not enter, but he realized the difference between the barriers a man recognizes resignedly and the sudden shock of an unexpectedly closed door. "Yes, she closed it on me well and hard!" He gave a toss of the head. "Pride, my boy. Pride. Keep to your own world if you don't want doors slammed in your face." He hardened himself. He went into Tom Nando's garden, and discovering Potts, the gardener, diligently drinking ale with two or three cronies when he should have been busy with a spade, he told him certain things which made that round-backed little man stare at him like an astonished fish. There was no smile on Jordan's face. He called a spade a spade, and with such frankness that Potts had it held close to his snub nose.

When Jordan had gone Potts rubbed his chin, and spat several times into the herb bed. There was no malice in his spitting; it was meditative.

"What's come to him? Cursed me like a real gentleman! Something must have put him out."

It was growing dark when Jordan reached the houses and the world that he knew. He went homewards by way of Drury

Lane, and at the corner of an alley, where a bracket lamp had been lit, he was spoken to by a very tall wench, who came gliding along the wall. She was all lace and velvet, and her hooped petticoat was the colour of blood. Her eyes looked at him with brittle tenderness from under the brim of her big hat.

"Good evening, Mr. March."

Jordan knew her by name and by sight. At "Topladys" she was known as "Spider Doll."

He gave one glance at her and walked on.

"Tut, my dear, you are in a great hurry!"

She went after him and laid hold of his sleeve.

"The devil take you!" he said, shaking her off.

She flared. She had been drinking, which was usual, but there were certain broad and gross courtesies which she demanded as a rebel that any man should give to her. She had a tongue like a live coal. It could scorch. And so she followed Jordan down Drury Lane, screaming the profane truth as she saw it, and inviting the world to share it with her.

She followed Jordan all the way to Spaniards Court, and he was not rid of her till he had closed Thomas Nando's door.

He went straight to his own room. He was angry now with an anger that had a touch of ugliness. There was no light, and he shouted down the stairs.

"Meg!"

"Bless us," said a voice, "who's that calling?"

"Hallo!—bring me a candle."

Meg stood open-mouthed at the foot of the stairs. She had not recognized Jordan's voice.

"Is that you, Mr. Jordan?"

"Who else? I want a light."

She ran for it. She climbed the stairs with devoted trepidation, and collided with Jordan, who came round the door as she was entering. The candle fell out of the stick and extinguished itself upon the boards.

"O, damn all women!" he said.

"O, Mr. Jordan!"

She fled, but she returned very soon with another candle, flustered and propitiatory.

"You did startle me so, my dear. I hope I haven't spilt the grease on your coat."

She would have searched for grease marks, but Jordan took the candle from her hand, and made it very plain to Meg that he wanted to shut the door.

"Dear, dear," she said to herself on the stairs, "what has come to the lad? I have never seen him so rough before. I'm all of a dither."

A fire was laid in the fireplace, and Jordan lit it and, pulling up a chair, watched the flames working through the wood. He wanted to be alone with his own anger and with his own angry thoughts, but before five minutes had passed he became aware of an agitated whispering on the stairs. The women again! He sat and listened, exasperated and impatient.

"You go up, Polly. He bit my poor head off. I don't know what's come to him."

Polly appeared reluctant to face this new and astonishing anger.

"I'm all of a tremble."

"Why, you silly slut, just knock gently and say as how the mistress——"

Jordan got up and flung open the door.

"What do you two fools want?"

They clutched each other.

"O, Mr. Jordan!"

"Oo-er!"

"Mrs. Mary asked me to say, sir, as how Mrs. Linacre is in the parlour, and she has need of you."

"What for?"

"How should I know, sir?"

"All right; tell her I'm coming."

They fled.

When Jordan entered the parlour he found Mrs. Mary looking very solemn, and Mrs. Linacre in tears. Mrs. Linacre was a sentimental creature, with prominent blue eyes and a receding chin, and when she talked—and she always talked very fast—she resembled a rabbit nibbling a cabbage leaf. Jordan disliked her. He stood by the door with his eyes on Mrs. Mary, quite untouched by Mrs. Linacre's tears.

"You sent for me, mother."

Mary Nando's brown eyes opened wide at him. When anyone surprised her she was apt to look reproachfully at the culprit, and Jordan felt reproached, especially when she nodded her head in the direction of Mrs. Linacre and made him understand that a soft voice should be used when a woman was in tears.

"I sent for you—because I thought you might be able to help us, my dear."

Jordan observed Mrs. Linacre, and Mrs. Linacre began to peep at him over the top of her handkerchief.

"O, my dear Mr. March, I'm a miserable woman, a most unhappy woman, sir."

She fell back into tears and was lost in her handkerchief and her sobbings, while Jordan looked at Mrs. Mary for some explanation of the storm. "What the devil is it all about?" said his eyes, "and what have I to do with it?" And Mrs. Mary, still puzzled and reproachful, beckoned him with her finger.

"Mrs. Linacre is in trouble."

Jordan's silence suggested that Mrs. Linacre's troubles were more than obvious.

"Robert has broken out. He has taken to wild living."

Mrs. Linacre dropped her handkerchief, drew a deep breath, and began to declaim.

"I'm a widow woman, and maybe I may have cosseted the boy too much, but he always was delicate and not quite like other boys. He was a little angel, Mr. March, till he got among some of the young men. Drink and women, that's all they think about! And we can sit at home and cry our eyes out. But I did try to be gentle with Robert. It had to stop, Mr. March; I had to try and stop him going to hell. I went on my knees to him to-night, I did. I said, 'Bob, will you break your mother's heart?' and then he said something saucy to me, and I lost my temper. Yes, I did, God forgive me. And I boxed his ears, and he went out in a rage. He called me an old fool, and swore he would go to 'Hackbut's Hole,' and nothing should prevent him."

She resumed her handkerchief, and hiding her face in it rocked to and fro.

Jordan looked at Mrs. Mary. He smiled, and Mrs. Mary thought it wicked of him to appear amused.

"The poor boy will be ruined by bad company. Any man with a heart inside him would go to Hackbut's Hole and bring him home."

"You want me to go, mother?"

Mrs. Linacre emerged again.

"O, Mr. Jordan, my boy clean dotes on you. He's made you into a hero. There's nothing he wouldn't do if you spoke to him like a big brother. Oh, I'm a most unhappy woman! He has learned to play cards!"

Jordan, seeing that her grief was in full flood again, thought that action was the best way of ending it.

"I'll go round to Hackbut's Hole. If Bob is there I'll bring him away."

Mrs. Linacre jumped up and embraced Jordan, while he stood very stiff and reluctant and looked at Mrs. Mary over the top of Mrs. Linacre's head.

"God bless you, Mr. Jordan. You're such a big fine fellow, and so strong. Do give him a word of warning. He'll take it from you. He's only a slip of a boy, you know."

And Jordan was touched at last beneath his anger by the thought of poor, eager, blushing Bobbie Linacre being plucked by some such fine vulture as Spider Doll.

"All right, m'am," he said; "I'll go round to Hackbut's and have a word with Robert. I won't come away without him."

Jordan put on his sword, for Hackbut's Hole was the sort of place where arguments were frequent between the gentlemen of quality who chose to amuse themselves in a world of bullies, cut-throats and thieves. Hackbut's lay at the end of Drury Lane. It was part ale-house, part gambling den. There was music to be had, and wild singing of bawdy songs. In the summer a garden with arbours and shaded lights gave a false glamour to the faces of the pretty ladies who might be found there. Pigeons were plucked, and even hardy old hawks lost an occasional feather in the game of guile and of laughter.

Hackbut's boasted a doorkeeper, a big Irishman with a purple face and sinister blue eyes, but he knew March by sight, and Jordan had no trouble at the doorway. The house had once been a place of some substance, and its great hall was now in the public room and much as it had been in the old days. The musicians sat in the gallery. There was a great fire on the hearth under the hooded chimney, and a long oak table stood across one end of the hall. Double doors from the paved passage opened into the hall, which was two steps below the level of the street.

Jordan went in. The place was none too well lit, for the candles on the tables where drinking or playing were going on left parts of the big room in shadow. A few women were scattered among the men. There were shabby coats and new coats, tarnished red and brilliant blue. A group by the fire were playing, and torn cards lay about the floor. The intent faces of the card players were like so many masks.

No one took much notice of Jordan. A drawer came up and asked him what he would drink, and he ordered a glass of strong waters. Someone hailed him, a roguish fellow, who looked like a fat parson who had lost his frock.

"Hallo, March! Blow in here, my boy."

Jordan smiled at him.

"Sorry. I'm not staying long. I'm looking for a friend."

He had sighted young Linacre at one of the card-tables in a corner, and when the drawer brought him his glass, he strolled over to the table with the glass in his hand. There were three other men at the table—two gentlemen and a nasty-looking fellow with a hook nose, who might have come from Change Alley. Jordan had grown pretty quick at judging the quality of men. One of the gentlemen was obviously a man of good family; he had the poise, the large carelessness, the composure of a man of his kind. His name was Sir Hereward Lorimer. His companion was younger, noisier, and he had been drinking. Also, he had been losing money.

So had young Linacre, and Jordan knew how little he had to lose. The youngster was flushed, talkative, a little furtive. He had gone out of his depth and was floundering.

"Hallo, Bob!"

Jordan put his hand on Linacre's shoulder.

"Hallo!"

"What luck?"

"Nothing to boast about."

The other men looked up at Jordan. Sir Hereward Lorimer knew him, but the others did not. And Jordan sipped his strong waters and stood for a while watching the play. He was sorry for Linacre. What had to be done must be done gently.

There was a pause. The hook-nosed man spat and gathered up money. Lorimer looked at him with observant and calm contempt. The noisy young man in the red coat shouted for the drawer. Linacre was plumbing an empty pocket.

Jordan bent down.

"Bob, your mother is ill. Come along home."

Linacre stiffened.

"Look here—did she——"

"I'll tell you—outside."

Linacre pushed back his chair, but in an instant there were the makings of a row. The hook-nosed man cocked his head like a fierce and greedy bird, but it was the young man in the red coat whose hot temper chose to get out of hand.

"Curses on you, sir, breaking up a gentleman's party!"

"Well, as you will," said Jordan, smiling; "my friend is wanted at home."

The young man jumped up.

"I know that sort of trick."

"Believe me, sir, it is no trick."

"That's a lie."

"Then you are the liar," said Jordan, "if you will forgive me for saying so."

There was every promise of a nice disorder. Mr. Redcoat pulled out his sword, and the Jew gentleman, less fierce than he looked, fell backwards over his chair in his hurry to get out of the way. The whole room stood up; the drawers and the Irish pitcher-out of the contumacious came hurrying in. Jordan had his hand on his sword, but he did not draw it.

"You'll fight, damn you," said Redcoat.

"If you wish it."

The Irishman and the drawers closed in, but the quarrel was snuffed out by Lorimer, who had been sitting calmly in his chair. He rose; he laid a hand on his companion's shoulder; he looked at Jordan with his cool, world-wide eyes.

"Sit down, Dick. This isn't a gentleman's quarrel. You can't fight this young man. Sit down."

He forced Mr. Richard back into his chair.

"It was no fault of Mr. March's. I'm sorry, sir, and so will my friend be to-morrow. Be quiet, you big baby. Drawers, some more wine."

He looked steadily and not unkindly at Jordan, but he was the great gentleman, calmly self-assured, standing upon privilege.

"I am sorry, Mr. March, but there can be no quarrel between my friend and you. If you are a man of sense—as I judge you are—you will understand me."

Jordan had lost his smile.

"I understand you very well, sir. A gentleman may call me a liar, but it is no business of his to prove it on a fencing-master."

Lorimer nodded gravely.

"Exactly. I suggest, Mr. March, that you take your friend home and leave me to deal with mine."

And that was the end of it. Jordan took Bob Linacre home to his mother, but he did not feel himself among the blessed. His temper had a rough edge to it.

"Three doses of sour physic in one day," he thought; "a man must have a good stomach to cope with it!"

It may be that big and generous natures are less self-critical than smaller and more cautious ones, and Jordan did not question the change that came over him about this time. To put it pithily, he lost his smile, or rather—his smile lost its easy good-humour. He had sand in his shoes. The growing part of him had been balked, and being suppressed, it broke out in other directions. He was rougher and more fierce; he began to see enemies where he had been aware of nothing more than anonymous shadows; he was more combative, more dangerous to anyone who trod upon his toes.

Life has a knack of showing in her shop the very goods a man's mood may covet, and since Jordan's impulses were toward adventure and large physical excitements, Life gave him what he desired. There was nothing of the bully in him, and more of the aristocrat than he knew, and at this period he was very fierce in resenting the insolence of the baser man. He never sought a quarrel, but if it came to him he took it by the throat. His most notable fight at that time was with a coal porter who was the terror of all other coal porters and carters. This fellow was a hairy, saucy beast, who made a joke of butting his dirty person into any man who was a little cleaner than himself and pushing him off the footway into the gutter. Not knowing his man he tried the trick on Jordan in the most crowded part of Seven Dials, and Jordan knocked him down. There was a fierce fight, and the Knight of the Coal Dust had to be put into a cart and trundled home.

But this was a mere incident in the larger mob battles that developed during the winter. Political passions were very strong about this time, and if there were shouts of "God bless the High Church, Bolingbroke and Sacheverell," the Whigs replied with "God bless our Protestant King." Effigies were burned. The butchers brought out their marrow-bones and cleavers, and the Tory mob waxed insolent. Partizanship spread itself through the taverns and public-houses, and a man could discover the political complexion of such places in a most quaint guide-book—the "Vade-mecum of Malt-worms." The gentlemen of the Loyal Society who frequented the Whig mug-houses, such as the Roebuck, the Magpie, and many others, began to combine to fight the Jacobite mob. There were battles in the streets, broken windows, effigies captured and recaptured, bonfires lit and scattered. The rabble attacked the Whig mug-houses; the Whigs sallied forth and thrashed them.

Tom Nando being a member of the Loyal Society, Jordan was of the same persuasion, and soon in the thick of these street fights. On many nights he headed a party that went down to reinforce the Whigs at the Roebuck or the Magpie without Newgate, and mob-breaking became the sport of the winter. Jordan left his sword at home and carried a heavy cudgel. He found that a few determined and sober men were more than a match for a riff-raff crowd made up of sweeps, and knackers, and the scourgings of the City. Given hard knocks they broke and ran. They were braver at stone-throwing and shouting than at standing up to men who came of the stock that had tempered the Cromwellian Armies.

Thomas Nando's own particular mug-house lay close to Covent Garden. It was a smallish house, kept by one Roger Bedstraw, and being small it was not very strong in its membership. The mob had left it alone, being more bitter against the larger houses, but Bedstraw happened to put himself in bad odour with one or two undesirable gentlemen who had discovered that his daughter was a pretty wench. Bedstraw was a stout little man, but he began to wear a worried look.

"We shall have them here one night, gentlemen. I trust you will stand by me."

Jordan turned in there one frosty night in January. He found the house nearly empty, there being no more than six members in the common-room, and three of these were men past sixty. Four of them were enjoying a quiet game of cards, and Jordan sat in front of the fire, warming his hands and talking to a new friend he had made—Roland Bliss, the actor.

Now, Bedstraw, who was nervous, kept one of his drawers in the street after dark as a scout, and about nine o'clock that night this fellow came running in shouting at the top of his voice:

"The Jacks, gentlemen; the Jacks!"

The card-party put down its cards and looked serious.

"Many of them, Will?"

"Two or three hundred, I reckon."

Bedstraw came into the room. He had a blunderbuss in his hand, and he looked white and excited; he had lost his head.

"The rabble's here, gentlemen. What are we to do? By gad, I'll fire on them if they attack my house."

Bliss and Jordan had gone to the window and opened it. They could hear the mob in the street beyond. Bedstraw's house stood in a yard off one of the streets leading out of Covent Garden, and the yard had gates, which should have been closed. A full moon was shining, and Jordan could see that the gates were open. He jumped out of the window, ran across the yard, and shut them in the very faces of the mob.

The drawers were closing the shutters over the lower windows, and Jordan found Bedstraw standing in the doorway, still clutching his blunderbuss. Bliss was trying to persuade him to lay it aside. The older men, rather scared, stood bunched in the passage, not knowing whether to run for it or to stay.

Jordan took control.

"We can hold on here. Someone ought to go and beat up reinforcements."

Bliss offered to go, but already the mob was hammering at the gates.

"Have you a back way, Roger?"

"No, sir. But if you get over the wall and into Pindar's garden, you could get through into Mug Alley."

"Good," said Bliss; "I'm not ratting, March; I'll try it."

"Good man. We'll give them something to shout about."

Bliss vanished, and Jordan pushed Bedstraw back into the passage.

"Has anyone got a thick hat? Give me that blunderbuss of yours, Roger."

Redstraw demurred, and Jordan took it from him and handed it over to one of the others.

"You'll only make trouble for yourself. Thanks, Mr. Peters, that's the very sort of headpiece I want. It will keep bottles and stones off. Now, I'm going to hold the door."

"What, against the whole crowd?"

"They are climbing the gates, sir!" shouted one of the drawers.

Jordan took his cudgel, smiled, and went out.

"You can bar the door behind me, Mr. Bedstraw," he said, "if you feel nervous. I shall have my back to it."

"Good God, sir. I've more grit than that."

"All right. Be ready to bar it. If I find them too much for me, I'll bolt in."

Several men had climbed the gates and unfastened them and the mob poured into the yard, and seeing but one man standing by the door in the moonlight they came on pretty boldly, making a great noise.

"High Church and Ormond!"

"To hell with all Whigs!"

Jordan stood quite still, and when the leaders came within three yards of him they appeared to be a little discouraged by his stillness. They held back. Previous thrashings had made them cautious. The yard and the house with the closed shutters suggested a trap.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Jordan; "is there any thing I can do for you?"

Those behind were pushing and shouting.

"Get on!"

"What's the damned Whig say?"

"Pitch him aside and smash in the door."

"Gentlemen," said Jordan quietly, "if you come any nearer to me I shall feel it my duty to hit you."

The foremost of them could not help themselves, for they were pushed on from behind, and Jordan began the game of cracking heads. He had half a dozen rogues sorry for themselves in almost as many seconds, and the vanguard showed a very strong inclination to get to the rear. Jordan made the most of the disorder. He knew that this fool crowd could rush him off his feet if it had had the pluck and the determination to put its head down and charge. He smote hard and fast, and as the crowd shrank and flinched and huddled away from him he followed it with fierce boldness, but he did not go too far.

He returned to the doorway. Two men lay on the stones, and another was crawling away along the wall. Across the yard Jordan saw a huddle of white faces and dim hands clutching sticks.

"Come on, rush the swine."

"It's big March!" shouted someone, "the fencing-master. Old Nando's brat."

Jordan laughed. The door was opened a crack behind him.

"All right—Mr. March?"

"I'm quite happy, sir. I'll call you when I have had a good enough game with these heroes."

The mob had begun to argue. Two or three of the bolder fellows advanced a second time, but when Jordan leapt out at them they scurried back like scared boys.

"It's a trap. There's a whole crowd of 'em waiting for us inside."

"Ain't anyone got any stones?"

"Look out! They is coming round to take us behind."

It was not a very big crowd, numbering perhaps about fifty men, and its mood tended towards a postponement of this particular piece of Whig-baiting. The less valorous began to filter back into the street, and when Jordan saw the significant bobbing of their heads in that direction, he called to those who were within the house.

"Come on, gentlemen, quick—or you'll lose them."

He pushed open the door, and when the rabble saw the passage full of figures it did not stop to consider how many more Whigs were inside the house or what their ages were. It saw Jordan leading a charge, and it turned and fled, but in the street it found itself suddenly attacked by Bliss and some twenty young men, who had rushed over from one of the other mug-houses. The rout was complete. The young Whigs chased the fugitives as far as the piazza, and returned laughing and cheering to Mr. Bedstraw's with Jordan in their midst.

A man holding his hand to a bleeding ear went sulkily past a knot of jeering chairmen.

"Got it badly, old son?"

"O, you be hanged," said the man; "we'll come back another night."

He of the blooded ear was as good as his word, for he was one of those shabby gentlemen employed by far less shabby gentlemen to agitate against their political enemies. Three nights later he called together a larger assortment of butchers. Bridewell boys and children of gin and grime; but, what was of more significance, the rabble was led by certain gay gentlemen, younger sons of Tory magnates, disguised as men of the people. They assembled about Leicester Gardens and marched to the attack.

The Whigs at Mr. Bedstraw's were not unready for them. The house was packed with members of the Loyal Society, who had come up from other mug-houses nearer the City. Moreover, a second body had assembled in a mug-house in Long Acre, and had scouts out to warn them of any attack. Jordan March was their Achilles. His feat of arms in beating the crowd single-handed was the talk of the town.

Jordan allowed the Jacks to break into Mr. Bedstraw's yard, and when it was half full of them the Whig men attacked. They poured out of the door and through the windows, and fell on the Jacks with their cudgels. And this was no mean battle, for the handful of young Tory gentlemen were men of honour and of courage and ready to give as good as they were given. None the less, Jordan and his Whigs drove the crowd out of the yard and down the street into Covent Garden, and here the Whigs from Long Acre joined in when the Tory gentlemen were trying to rally their followers. The Jacks had numbers on their side, and in the open square numbers should have counted.

But the Whigs had the best of it, and after some brisk stickplay the mob began to run for the arcades and the side streets and alleys. Jordan was following a little knot of them along the front of the church when they turned on him and made him take to the steps. It was a clear moonlight night, and Jordan was wearing his close-fitting white fencing coat so that he was easily seen and recognized and could be rallied to by his comrades. He was alone here, facing these half-dozen roughs who seemed ready to show more courage than Jordan had given them credit for.

The church had a pillared front, and this portico was in the shadow. A few casual spectators had taken refuge here, among them a tall young man with a couple of women who had hoods over their heads. The man was Maurice St. Croix. He had recognized Jordan, and was hoping to see him thrashed by those six Jacks.

One of the women felt otherwise. She was leaning forward into the moonlight; her hood fell back and showed her dark curls and pretty, audacious profile.

"O, Mr. Whitecoat, Mr. Whitecoat!"

"He'll get a thrashing," said St. Croix.

"Who is he? Do you know?"

"March—the fencing-master."

"What, Big Jordan! O—look!"

The men made a rush at Jordan. There was a whirling of sticks, but the white figure held its own. He was too quick for these heroes, too swift on his feet. He gave back to their first rush, springing up the steps, and using his long cudgel. One fellow dropped his stick and tottered off with his hands holding his head. Another fell and rolled down the steps, and he did not trouble to reascend them.

She of the curls and the fallen hood could not conceal her excitement.

"O, big fellow; O, fine work! Go and help him, you cold slug!"

Maurice laughed.

"Don't be a fool, Nan."

"Fool, indeed! You haven't the spirit. O, look—that other man! Big Jordan, there is someone behind you."

A man had slipped out from behind one of the pillars and was creeping down the steps with a clubbed stick raised to strike. But he was balked by the most unexpected of enemies. The girl ran down the steps, and, throwing herself with impetuous fierceness against him, knocked him over at the moment when he was about to strike.

Jordan turned swiftly. He saw the sprawling man, the girl with her fierce yet laughing face, her head thrown back, the moonlight in her eyes.

"He was going to strike you from behind."

"Thanks," said Jordan—"thanks. Hallo—you!"

He used his left fist on a fellow who had tried to close with him, and then he fell upon the rest of them and drove them down the steps. The girl was beside him. She had picked up a dropped stick and was laying it over the head of the man whom she had upset in her rush to help Jordan. He was on his knees and trying to protect his head with his bent arms.

"La," she said, "you rat—you cur. Take that home with you—and that!"

The remnant had scattered and fled, and Jordan faced about to find the girl laying her stick over the man's head and shoulders.

"Rot you—you slut!" he squealed, trying to get up.

Jordan gave him a push with his foot, and the fellow went rolling to the bottom. Then he looked at the girl. They smiled at each other.

"You are as good as a man, madam," he said.

"No better than that?" she asked, with a charming lift of the chin.

"Much better," he said—"much better."

Jordan could see her quite clearly in the moonlight. She had the head of a gazelle, yet the dark eyes were mischievous and set somewhat slantingly under the well-marked eyebrows. Her face ended in that charmingly audacious and uplifted chin, and her hair fell in wicked curls about her forehead. She smiled. Her big and expressive mouth showed her white teeth. She gave him the impression of a strong and fierce young creature, graceful, impetuous, well able to look after herself.

"Well," she said, "here is our introduction! How do you do, Mr. Jordan March?"

Jordan made her a bow.

"All the better for seeing you. Miss Stranger."

"O, we will put that right," she said, "and yet I suppose you sometimes go to the theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields?"

"Sometimes—yes."

A voice interrupted them from the portico above:

"Nan, we are waiting."

"More fool you," she said. "Take Molly home."

St. Croix remained in the shadow of the portico. He did not wish to be seen by Jordan, even though March looked like stealing his lady.

"I promised to see you home."

"I hope Mr. Jordan will do that," said she; "I would rather have a man with me when the mob is out."

There were no more appeals from the portico, and two shadowy figures passed away behind the pillars and descended the steps at the end farthest from Jordan and the girl. These two stood and looked at each other with a smile of mutual and amused pleasure.

"I am afraid I have angered the gentleman!"

"That! O, he is only a mock gentleman!"

"I am not even that."

"You are something better," said she; "but what are you staring at?"

"Miss Nancy Sweethaws, the actress who has turned half the heads in London."

"So! You know me—after all?"

"There is only one Nan at Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"Good for you. And there is only one Big Jordan."

Next moment he had her arm in his, and was looking down at her as they descended the steps.

"May I have the honour of seeing you home?"

"That's as you please, sir."

"I do please."

She shook her curls.

"I like a man who knows his own mind. But it cannot be ten o'clock yet, Mr. March."

"Yes, it is quite early," said he, holding her arm a little more firmly.

She laughed.

"I did think of going to Teg Toplady's."

"You go there?"

"I go everywhere. When you are playing life on the stage, my dear, you need to see it played everywhere."

"But you are not playing to-night."

"So? And what do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say."

She gave him a roguish look.

"You are very bright for such a big fellow. No, I am taking a month's rest. I'll go back when they begin to shout for me. But what of Toplady's? There will be a merry crowd there, and I'm Nan the actress and you are a hero."

"Then the hero had better take care of Nan."

"You have sense," she said, "and quite a lot of it."

They walked off together in the direction of Teg Toplady's, which was a house of music and wine in the purlieu of Drury Lane. Jordan felt the woman's soft arm lying in his, and from her hair rose a sweet perfume which made him think of a pot of mignonette. In the moonlight she was a mere figure in black and white, but when they passed close to some dimly burning lamp she took on a faint colour in eyes and face and clothes. Under her open cloak her petticoat was of amber brocade, her gown of a soft green, and her slim throat rose out of a smother of white lace. Her lips showed their redness, and then grew pale again. Jordan thought that her eyes were brown, but they were not too big, and he hated women with cow's eyes. They were very bright, especially when she looked at him.

"Left—right, left—right," she laughed, her swinging hoop brushing against him.

Jordan had his cudgel over his right shoulder, and her conceit that they were soldiers made him swagger like a sergeant of the "Guards."

"On the road to Ramillies!"

"Or how we defeated the French! My dear, how you whacked those poor rogues with your stick! And you loved it."

"I did," said Jordan.

"And so did I."

Teg Toplady's "Chamber of Commerce," as some wit had christened it, was reached by an outside staircase flanked by railings and panels of ironwork. It was approached by passing through a little garden where, in summer, tables were set out under the trees, and musicians made music while men and pretty ladies drank wine and made love. The staircase led to an ante-room where ladies might leave their cloaks and gentlemen their hats and swords, and it was here by the light of the candles that Jordan saw Nan Sweethaws as she was.

She put off her cloak and made him a curtsy.

"How do you do, Mr. March?"

"Better and better for seeing you," said he.

For indeed she was very desirable with her black curls and little mischievous pale face. She had a devil in her, a laughing, sly, sleek devil which made men mad and women wildly jealous. Her provoking chin and eyes said, "Kiss me—if you dare!" Her red mouth and white teeth laughed—"Be careful. I can bite."

She held out a hand to Jordan.

"Come, big one. Listen to the noise they are making. Oh, isn't life good—when——"

She shook her curls.

"When—what?" he asked.

"Ah—that's for you to guess!"

Toplady's was what such places will always be, full of old people trying to be young and young people making themselves old. It had a wicked air and was—perhaps—less wicked than it seemed. Gaiety was its note, and yet more gaiety. It called for wild fooling, but Toplady—shrewdest of scoundrels—insisted upon his patrons keeping their tempers. Brawls did such a place no good. He kept four strong fellows to deal with violent patrons.

Now—Miss Sweethaws was sure of a roaring welcome in any such house. The women might not be so glad to see her, but the men fell over their cups with delight, and it was said that Toplady had offered to pay her ten guineas a night to dazzle and amuse the old fools and the young fools whose money he took. Whenever she came he saw to it that she had a dramatic entry, and to-night old Toplady could boast of another luminary, Gentleman Jordan—the Terror of the Mob.

He sat in his leather chair at the head of the long table, a little, shrewd, snuff-coloured man who might have been a country attorney or a preacher of precise sermons. He was the colour of snuff, and he took it sedulously, holding the pinch below his long, sagacious nose. He had a demure look. He never laughed. Always before speaking he moistened a thin, dry lip with the tip of his tongue.

One of his "confidentials" came and bent over his chair.

"Sweethaws is here, sir."

Mr. Toplady nodded.

"She's brought big Nando with her."

"What—big March?" and the little man's eyes twinkled.

"Sure. They're in the ante-room together."

"Bob," said his master, "make a noise, make a great noise. Beat the drum, fling open the castle gate. That's the game."

"That it is sir."

So when Miss Nancy introduced herself and her hero into Toplady's big room she was given a dramatic entry. A man with a voice that set the glasses jingling bawled—"Nan Sweethaws, God bless her! Gentleman Jordan—the Head-breaker, and good luck to him, say the surgeons." Mr. Toplady rose from his chair and bowed. The gentlemen got up with varying degrees of steadiness and shouted against each other—"Nan, Nan, sweet Nan of the Fields." The women all looked at Jordan standing there big and smiling, with his deep-set eyes and long, straight mouth. Here was a morsel for the ladies! The men were not to have it all their own way that night.

These flowers of Old Drury bunched themselves about Jordan—Nell Frail, Lucky Lavender, Mrs. Minnis, Betty Broster, Poll Purple, Long Jane, Chloe Chatterpole. They enveloped him; they took him by the coat, the arms, the collar; they laughed and squeaked and twittered; they pushed and pulled and persuaded him in triumph till they had old Toplady out of his chair and Jordan seated in it.

Toplady enjoyed the joke. He kept darting out his tongue like a serpent.

"Never mind me, sir. You are welcome to my chair, and to all the pretty ladies."

Jordan was laughing. He had a way of looking shy, and this air of boyish coyness was irresistible to these irresponsible wenches.

"Ladies—ladies—you are more dangerous than the mob!"

"I bet we are, my lad!"

"O—dear child!"

"Isn't he a fine infant!"

They overflowed him; they felt his muscles; they pinched his ears and patted his cheeks. Two of them tried to sit on his knees, and were pulled away joyously by the others.

"Ladies—I'm thirsty!"

They took up the cry.

"He's thirsty."

"Poor lad."

"The hero would drink."

"Drawers—drawers, wine for Big Jordan."

"Run, you rabbits."

"Bring a black-jack full."

"No, a hogshead!"

He was rescued at last from the merry mobbing of him by the lady who had brought him there.

"My dears, give room. Mr. Jordan and I have gone into partnership. He and I beat the mob to-night. I knocked a man down the steps of Paul's church. Did I not, Jordan?"

"You did," said he; "and, ladies and gentlemen—let me tell you that she saved me a broken head."

Mr. Toplady had another chair brought him, and he and Mr. March sat side by side at the head of the table, the very big and the very little, the "new god" and the "old devil," as some witty gentlemen put it. Jordan stood drinks to the ladies, who, in their turn, tried to force too much liquor upon him, but with no success. He just smiled a happy, obstinate smile, and they thought the better of him for being so little of a fool. Every woman, however frail she may be, has some picture

hidden away of man as she would have him and better than he is. Lady Marigold's prophecy still held—"The lad will always be a gentleman—put him where you will."

And Miss Nancy of Lincoln's Inn Fields sat on his knee or on the end of the table and loved him with sudden and fierce impetuosity. She was in great heart. She swung her little red shoes, and made a mystery of herself, and gave him looks of fierce kindness, and that equivocal and provoking smile. She was a pretty creature, but she was more than that, for mere prettiness never made any man seriously unhappy.

The gentlemen began to call on her to sing.

"Sing, Nan, sing."

"Give us the 'Parson's Daughter.'"

But she would not sing. She was a young empress, and her mood was autocratic, though, in fact, she was waiting for Jordan to ask her to sing. But he, thinking that she was in earnest, did not meddle. She was a little piqued, and when the room still importuned her she flashed out at them:

"I have said it. But if Mr. Jordan will make me a pulpit, I'll preach you a sermon."

They cheered her.

"A sermon!"

"O—great. Get up on your sweet feet, O—Parson Nan."

"Give it us hot and strong."

But she insisted on Jordan making her a pulpit, so he set her in his chair, she standing, and he holding it in front of him, so that the back of the chair was her pulpit rail. She faced about and, bending down, gave Jordan a kiss, and she was in the act of kissing him when a man poked his head into the room, and realizing how deucedly superfluous he had become, withdrew a sulky face and sneaked away. It was Mr. Maurice St. Croix.

So Jordan entered upon his second affair, and he made a romance of it, as is the way of some men whose hearts are bigger than the hearts of their fellows. Miss Nancy had a little house somewhere between Piccadilly and Marybone. She called it Lavender Cottage and Jordan carried a sprig of lavender over his heart.

For, indeed, she was a very charming creature, and much desired, and she had fallen in love with Jordan in her own fierce, adventurous way. She liked his straight eyes and clean mouth, his strength, his power over lesser men. That she was sophisticated was not her fault, and though a woman may live three different lives, she puts her love into the best of them, and Nan's best was a very exquisite piece of self-expression, and no one else had been to her what Jordan was. And Jordan understood the real Nan as little as he understood Mr. Isaac Newton's explorations in mathematics. He did not know that there were three Nans—the girl who loved him, the actress, and the woman who looked shrewdly ahead and put the guineas by for the day when her beauty should wane.

"I suppose I shall have a house at Richmond, and go to church, and keep a carriage, a blackamore, and singing birds!"

But she did not tell Jordan this.

Meanwhile, in these days of her early summer, she took life in both hands and made merry. She was ready for any mad adventure; her restlessness had found moments of wild happiness, and she pressed this happiness to her lips. It would not last, but like Lady Bacchus she wanted it to last just as long as she could keep it. Jordan's big tenderness thrilled her. Her problem was to keep his eyes shut and to prevent him from being too serious.

These were great months, though poor Mrs. Mary wept over them, for Jordan no longer went to church with her, and he was talked of as a wild fellow. He was still the stalwart of the Whig mug-houses. He broke heads through all that winter, but he broke them in strange company. For Miss Nancy Sweethaws, dressed up as a young "spark"—and a very pretty little gentleman she made—would not be prevented from sharing in the adventure. She was bolder than most men. She called herself Dick Derrydown, and she insisted on carrying a cudgel. Indeed, she gave Jordan many anxious moments, for they played a rough game with rough playfellows, and she took her risks like a man. He had a special hat made for her, with a light iron plate in the crown, and the brim well stiffened with leather. He made her pad her figure and the shoulders of her coat and when there was stickplay he fought for two. Yet her nearness, the adventurous and daring love on her piquant little face, the dangers he warded from her, thrilled him as nothing else had thrilled him. He admired her gaillard courage, her irrepressible tongue, her roguish quickness. She had immense faith in his strength and his skill, and Jordan was touched by that faith.

One night in one of these scrimmages down Newgate way she was hit on the head by a Jack's club, and her slim legs gave way under her.

"O—Jordan!"

Jordan had felled the fellow who had hit her, and he had her hanging in the hollow of his left arm.

"I'm sorry—Nan."

"My dear, it is part of the game"—and then she fainted.

Jordan was frightened. He picked her up and carried her into a quiet alley, and seeing a light in a window he knocked at the door. He could see a little, dark mark on Nancy's cheek, and he knew that it was blood.

Someone came to the door.

"Who's there?"

"A woman's hurt. Let her rest here till I get a surgeon."

"A woman? How did she get hurt?"—the voice was suspicious.

"The mob," said Jordan; "we got caught in the scuffle."

"I don't open my door at this hour of night."

"O very well," said Jordan, "if you don't open it I'll open it for you. I'm Big Jordan of Nando's."

The door was opened and the old fellow behind it became polite. His eyes protruded when he saw the breeches and stockings which covered the lower part of the figure Jordan held in his arms.

"I thought you said it was a woman?"

"So it is. Look at her hair."

"It isn't a wig?"

"Well? What of it my friend!" said Jordan; "show me where I can lay her down, and fetch me a light."

The old fellow led him into the parlour, whence two prim-looking, middle-aged spinsters fled with every sign of delighted horror. Jordan laid Nan on a settle, and kneeling down put his arm under her head. The old fellow brought a light.

"How did it happen, sir?"

Jordan was parting Nancy's hair.

"Someone hit her. I guess that man has a sore head."

He found the wound high up over one ear. It had been made by the edge of the iron cap in her hat, and was a mere slit. To Jordan it did not look serious, and while he was examining it he felt a hand catch his wrist.

"Not much damage, my dear?"

She turned her head and her bright eyes were under his.

"I shall have a little headache to-morrow."

"Nan—you frightened the life out of me."

"Did I, poor lad?"

"You did."

"Well—kiss me."

She put her arms round his neck, and the two ladies who were looking through the crack of the door gave a little shriek of shocked envy.

"Heavens!" said Nan, a little out of breath, "did you hear the rats in the wainscoting? Were those rats, sir?"

"No," said the old gentleman rather testily, "they were not."

But this incident inspired in Jordan another sort of tenderness towards her. He grew more protective. He ceased to live for the adventure of the moment, and began to think ahead.

"Look here. Nan, you must marry me."

"Dear lad, don't be foolish."

"I'm not being foolish. I say that you have got to marry me."

She refused to take it seriously; she tried to put him off by pretending that a man lost interest in a woman directly he married her.

"Don't spoil it, my dear," she said; "a man should leave his prayer book behind when he falls in love with a woman like me."

He grew rather grim.

"What do you mean by that, Nan?"

"Why—you dear big silly, I'm much too fond of you to marry you."

"Isn't that the one reason why you should marry me?"

She pinched his ear.

"It might be. We are always taught to believe it, but it isn't always true. O—come along; don't be so serious."

She was troubled by his seriousness, by his romantic sincerity, by the possessive note in his tenderness. In her knowledge of life as it is she was centuries older than he was. She understood all the compromises, the social arrangements, the reservations with which Society solaces itself, and she regarded marriage as the greatest and most dangerous of compromises. She did not want to marry Jordan because she wanted to keep him as her lover. As a husband he might be an uncommonly awkward problem. She recognized him as one of those big-hearted creatures who manage to settle down quite contentedly when the youth in them has had its adventures, and a wife and children and the sober affairs of living arrive. She knew that "settling down" was impossible for her—"Until I get into my coffin," as she put it. She was not made for marriage. She knew that Jordan was blind to those other sides of her character; he forgot the actress in her; he was unaware of her passion for money. Perhaps her love for him was the most generous feeling she had ever experienced. But she began to feel that they were nearing the crossroads, where he would insist on

her choosing the road which meant comradeship for life.

She began to be very careful. If he was to remain her lover there were certain worldly facts that had to be hidden from him. He was possessive, protective, the potential husband in his attitude towards her, and if anything were to open his eyes to the truth she knew that the shock would be passionate and fierce.

She dreaded it. So much did she dread it that there were times when she thought of throwing her real self to the winds and marrying him, but always there was something in her, a generous yet cynical tenderness, which would not let her do it.

"No," she said, "I am not going to inflict that sort of tragedy upon him. Even the other thing would be kinder. And they say a bad woman has no morals!"

About that time, too, he began to insist that she should give up her masquerading with him against the mob. It was all part of his larger tenderness, his serious attitude towards her.

She humoured him.

"Just once more. Gossip has it, my dear, that there is to be a wild affair next week. We'll share that, and it shall be the last."

"You promise, Nan?"

"I promise."

Nan's "wild affair" proved a wild affair indeed, for the Tory mob assembled in great strength by the Old Bailey, and in Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street. They marched down into the City to attack the Whigs at the Roebuck, but getting a hot reception, marched back to their own quarters. Meanwhile, the City Whigs had followed them up, and the Jacks found themselves caught between the City gentlemen and a body of Whigs from the western mug-houses, led by Jordan and Mr. Dick Derydown. The battle was fought out in Fleet Street and on Ludgate Hill, and was a very brisk affair while it lasted.

Nan had the skin over her knuckles broken, but Big Jordan was so well known to the Jacks and so wholesomely feared by them that they did not press their attentions upon him and the slim young fellow who fought at his side.

The Whigs had budgeted for a victory, and when the Tory mob had betaken itself to its alleys, they collected the captured hats and sticks, lit torches and paraded the town. Heads were poked out of the windows to see them go by, and in a narrow part of the Strand three people were gathered at an upper window over a bookseller's shop. Mr. Maurice St. Croix had received a visit from Mr. Sylvester and his daughter, and on the landlady running up to say that the mob was out, they had thought it wiser to stay to supper.

"I will see you home, sir, later, when all is quiet," said Maurice the dutiful.

They were seated at the supper table when the Whig procession came up the Strand, singing Lilliburlero, and carrying the captured hats on their sticks. The street was narrow here, and the torches made a yellow glare between the rows of high houses. Maurice went to the window and opened it.

"The Whigs!" said he; "they have thrashed the Papists. Come and wave a hand to good Protestants, Sis."

Douce joined her brother, and Mr. Sylvester, having no quarrel with men who used such muscular vigour in defending all those principles of which he approved, followed Douce to the window. His high, polished forehead shone in the torchlight. Maurice was sitting sideways on the window-sill, with Douce close to him, her red hair coiled in plaits about her head. The smoke and the flames of the torches blurred the faces below; she saw the hats carried on sticks, the open mouths shouting the song. And suddenly her brother touched her arm, and glancing at him she was aware of the sneer on his face.

"See the fellow in the white coat."

Douce saw him. He was leading the march, with a slim young man walking arm in arm with him. She thought it was Jordan, but she was not sure.

Maurice turned to his father.

"There's Nando's adopted child. There, in the white coat, with Nan Sweethaws, the actress, hanging on his arm."

Sylvester's eyes followed his son's pointing hand. He looked puzzled.

"I cannot say that I see the actress, Maurice."

Maurice laughed.

"Quite right, sir—you think she's a man because she is not in petticoats. But she amuses herself by dressing up like a young fop and going about with Mr. Jordan."

Sylvester looked shocked.

"The depravity of the woman!" said he; "and that is the sort of woman March consorts with?"

"She is his mistress, sir, if that is what you mean."

"S'sh!" said his father with a glance at Douce.

But Douce stood there paying no heed to either of them. She saw the crowd below as a mass of meaningless faces, bobbing hats and marching feet. The torches flared; the Whigs roared their song, but Douce was conscious of a tragic stillness within her.

Her eyes were dark and very sad. Her left hand had twisted itself into the curtain. The woman in her suffered envy and pity, anger and regret.

"He was not bad in the beginning," she thought; "why does not some good woman save him?"

And at the back of her consciousness was the suppressed desire that she might be that woman.

Nan was troubled.

"What is to be done with the man?" she asked herself. "He will marry me in spite of myself if I am not careful."

Every night he came to the theatre and, waiting till the play was over, took grave possession of her and snatched her away from the many gentlemen who professed to be in love with her. He made her put on her cloak, and, if the night were fine, he gave her his arm as far as Lavender Cottage. If it was raining or the streets were foul, he called a chair, packed her into it, and walked beside it to her home. Moreover, his devotion was perfectly sincere and natural; he was not an exacting lover, and it was this steadfast tenderness of his which began to make her afraid.

"What have I done?" she asked herself. "Here is a pretty problem for a little devil of a woman! As things are, I might just as well be married to him. If only he were not what he is!"

There were times when she seemed moody and impatient, because Jordan's love had begun to hurt her, and she did not wish to be hurt. All her experience of life—the life of a woman who stands for herself against the world—had inculcated hardness, the necessity for a humorous cynicism. Neither did she want to hurt Jordan, and she began to foresee the inevitableness of the wound. In the beginning she had believed that the affair could be arranged, that she could teach him to laugh with her at the things that did not matter to her, and to accept the game as a game. But he was not like that. He was different from all the other men who had loved her. His seriousness, his romantic freshness made impossible the working of her plan. There was nothing of the careless, casual rake in him. That was the trouble.

And yet she did not want to let him go.

"Nan—when are you going to give me an answer?"

"To what, my dear?"

He looked at her with grave intentness.

"You know very well. When are you going to marry me?"

To gain time she pretended to be roguish and provoking.

"When you see two moons in the sky."

But it hurt her.

"Fool," she thought, "dear fool, why must I seem to you so much better than I am? Oh, it would be so much easier if you saw the real woman in me. But I was the fool. It is more my fault than yours."

She decided to temporize, and she worked out a plan by which it might be possible for her to be herself and to keep her lover.

"I am not the kind of woman, my dear, that you ought to marry. Must you think of marriage?"

"I'm not going to be content with anything else, Nan. You will still be Nancy of Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"Shall I!" she said, "shall I! But if you mean to be serious—I shall be serious too."

"I am asking you to be serious."

"But not in the way you mean! I'm very fond of you, you great big thing—but am I fond enough of you to marry you? That's what I want to find out."

"Don't you know?" he asked her.

She took his grave face between her hands and kissed him.

"No—I don't. Look at it with my eyes, my dear. Don't you see that it might mean my having to give up everything? Do you think this wild and wicked bird would be happy in a cage?"

"Where is the cage?"

"Is not marriage a cage? Yes—it is all very well for some gentle, tame, quiet woman, but for me? Now listen: if you are still of the same mind, I am going to play the little tyrant."

"Well, Nan, you will have to play the tyrant."

"I take you at your word, my lad. You will give up coming to fetch me from the theatre. You will be allowed to see me twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays. D'you see?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Listen. I am going to give myself and you six months' schooling. I want to see if you can learn your lesson while I try to learn mine. At the end of the six months I will give you my answer."

"It means that I must see you only twice a week, Nan?"

"It does. Now, most of the day you are teaching these gentlemen to fence. Supposing I give you Tuesday and Friday evening, when the play is over, if I am playing?"

"I may come and fetch you from the playhouse?"

"No," she said, "no."

He was puzzled, troubled, but he was not suspicious. She could see that he was trying to grasp her supposed reasons and to understand them. He made no attempt to bully or to storm.

"You mean that I am serving a sort of apprenticeship, Nan?"

"We both are. Sweetmeats only twice a week, my lad, while I make up my mind."

"And I am to promise——?"

She shook a finger at him with a playfulness that was fierce and insistent.

"You are not to come near me—save on those two evenings. You are not to come to the theatre or to my house. It is the biggest promise you have ever made to anyone, man or woman, and if you break it—I shall break with you."

Jordan went and stood at the window and looked out into her little garden where daffodils were swinging their yellow heads in the wind. She watched his big, square back, and her eyes were both hard and soft.

"It won't be easy for me, Nan."

"Of course not," said she; "I'm not making it easy for you. I am the tyrant. But if you make me this promise and keep it, I may think of marrying you, my dear."

"Very well," he said; "I promise."

For two months Jordan kept his promise, and then something happened. He was seeing a good deal of Roland Bliss, the actor, for Bliss had come to Jordan for fencing lessons, and the two men had taken a liking to each other. Bliss was ten years older than Jordan, and his opposite in almost every way. His smile had an edge to it. He was black of eye and black of chin, restless, full of scoffings and silent laughter, lean of body, and quick of tongue. His cynicism had a certain lovable frankness, for he laughed at himself as much as he laughed at others. He had a high colour, a hot temper, and ironical eyebrows. He affirmed that he had never loved a woman longer than a week, never borrowed money, or sold his last shirt. He was something of a poet, while professing to distrust all sentiment. He was very much a man's man; women found him too mercilessly clever.

He was a sword in a scabbard, rarely drawn, but when unsheathed a weapon of fine temper.

Maybe it was natural that the man in him should love the man in Jordan. This big, clean, wholesome thing was like the open sea after the painted jealousies of the playhouse. One half of the world cringed to the other half, and Jordan never cringed and never flattered. He stood so well on his own feet, without any obvious vanity, and with such frank naturalness. He had no little tricks and no hypocrisies.

It was a chance remark of Bliss, half ironical, half playful, that served as the spark to the tinder.

"So you and sweet Nan have fallen out!"

Now, Jordan was not quite happy. Like a man in the dark he had begun to feel conscious of something that he could not see. Even Nan's kisses had begun to trouble him; there was a fierceness in them that left a vague, queer pain behind them. Did a woman who was happy kiss like that? And if she was unhappy—why?

He turned bluntly at Bliss.

"Who told you that?"

They were sitting at the window of Jordan's room which overlooked Spaniards Court, Bliss with his chair tilted on its back legs, and rocking himself to and fro. He saw at once by the way Jordan turned on him and by the look in his eyes that the thing was more serious than he had thought.

"O, just gossip," he said.

"It isn't true."

"I take your word for it," said Bliss, instantly on guard for Jordan's sake and for his own; "a man ought to mind his own business."

He was ready to leave it at that, being quick to see that he had meddled with something which was better left alone, but Jordan was not so easily satisfied.

"Who told you?"

There was a frown on his forehead, and Bliss looked at him queerly. Was it possible that Jordan did not know what half the world knew?

"Just silly gossip. We had not seen you at the Fields playhouse. That is all."

"I don't go to the playhouse now," said Jordan, as though his thoughts were ahead of his words; "we arranged that between us."

Bliss nodded and said nothing. He knew that there are certain adventures in which it is madness and folly for a third person to meddle. A man must skim the broth with his own spoon.

"But what made you say that?"

He had to meet Jordan's eyes. They were steady and obstinate, ready to hold truth in a corner and question her. Bliss shrugged and laughed.

"Natural silliness. There is nothing in it. You know my tongue!"

Jordan watched him. He asked Bliss one or two more questions, and then dropped the matter as though he were satisfied, but he was very far from being satisfied, and Bliss suspected it. Something was gnawing at Jordan's heart. He felt that his friend was hiding some fact from him, and so sure of it was he that he did not press Bliss further.

The spring had come, and in Nando's garden the fruit blossom had fallen. May was a cold month, blue of sky, with the wind in the north-east, and though the world was growing green the full joy of the year seemed lacking. Blackbirds sang in the orchards, but their singing was of what might be and what was not. And Jordan was restless. A woman's kisses might be like the blackbirds singing or the north wind out of the blue sky, tantalising, bitter sweet, unsatisfying, leaving regret and a feeling of doubt behind them. The joy of the spring was an illusion. Youth had its first vague dread of life as it is.

At the end of May Jordan broke his promise. He went forth with the full moon behind him, out of the town and along the dusky strangeness of familiar lanes. The earth was a fretwork of silver and jet. He smelt the smell of the gardens, and felt the freshness of the dew upon the grass. The trees were plumed with the moonlight and hung about with dim stars. It was a forbidden night, and he knew it, and he felt something twisted under his heart.

He was cautious, though there should have been no need for caution, and when he came to the garden wall of her little house he paused and leaned against it, listening. It was not that he was disloyal. He had felt himself driven to the place by the whip of an unanswered question. He wanted to be convinced.

He heard voices. There were lights in the house, and he moved nearer along the wall. Presently he heard footsteps, and two men came along the lane and brought up under the shadows of the bushes and of a big tree across the way. They gossiped. He judged that they had some business here, and that they had been to an ale-house and had come back to wait. He could distinguish the outlines of a dark object, and suddenly he realized what it was and what the men were. He was looking at a sedan chair set down under the tree, and the two fellows were chairmen.

He waited, and presently a man came out of the house and got into the chair. The men stood to the poles, lifted the chair and walked off. Jordan could hear the creaking of the straps and the beating of his own heart.

He came the next night and saw the same shadow show, and went away cold and grim. The next night was his—but he let it pass, spending it alone in his room with his naked sword laid across a chair. He knew what he meant to do. He was going to tear the moon out of the black illusion of the sky.

The adventure was of the simplest. He climbed the garden wall, found the window of the parlour open, and the room lit by a couple of candles, but no one was in it for the moment. Jordan entered by the open window. He had been in the room less than ten seconds when he heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Now!" thought he, with all his muscles tense.

But all that he saw was a ridiculous, pug-faced old gentleman, in a snuff-coloured suit and a vast wig, standing in the doorway and blinking his eyes at him. The old gentleman had a cane in one hand and a cambric handkerchief in the other. It was obvious to Jordan that he was very astonished and very angry.

And suddenly he began to prance on his spindle-shanks and to wave his cane and to scream like an angry parrot.

"What—what! Nan, you slut—you lying hussy—come downstairs."

He pranced in towards Jordan, squealing and threatening him with his cane.

"I am the Marquis of Morpeth. What are you doing in my house—fellow? Damn you, what are you doing in my house?"

Jordan stood very still.

"I understood it to be the lady's house, sir."

"Damn it, it's my house, I tell you. Nan—you hussy. You thought you had fooled me, did you?"

She stood in the doorway; she did not look at the little old monkey brandishing his stick and making senile grimaces; she looked at Jordan, and her eyes flashed.

"What are you doing here, Mr. March?"

His eyes met hers, and gave anger for anger.

"Nothing, madam; I had come to pay a call."

"He came in at the window!" screamed the Marquis, shaking his wig; "you told me you had broken with him—you lying slut. You can go to the devil——!"

He flung out of the room, but turned and came back into the doorway.

"Either he goes out—or you—you——"

Jordan answered that question, and he answered it by turning his back on both of them and making for the window. He got out of it in the cool, moonlit garden. He was aware of angry voices behind him, but he did not look back.

"I'm an old fool, am I! Damn it, hadn't I promised to marry you?"

"O, shut up!" said she.

She ran to the window.

"Jordan," she called—"Jordan."

There was no answer, and she climbed out into the garden, her face all white and fierce. She made a dash for the wall. Jordan was straddling the top of it, and she caught his leg.

"One moment," said she; "I have something to say."

He tried to raise his leg, but she held fast to it.

"No—you shall listen. You have not played fair with me."

"Good God!" said the man.

He reached down to put away her hands, but she struggled with him fiercely.

"Fool! O—my dear, don't you understand? You are the only man that matters. These fools——! Come back! You are the only man I want. No—you don't understand that or me or the life I have had to live! I would have fooled them all for your sake; I was fooling them."

He was stark as ice.

"Let go—Nan. All that is finished."

"No—no! O—you men are hard! You may have your adventures, but when a woman has to hold her own against the whole world! If you had not broken your promise to me——"

"Thank God I broke it," he said, in bitter anguish and anger. "Let go. I'm not like those other men——"

She felt his sudden loathing of her, and she cried out and loosed her hold.

"Well—go! I can hold my own. You were always as blind as a bat. You would not see. Go—be quick, go."

He dropped from the wall as into an abyss, and went running heavily along the lane, while she—wounded—fierce—torn between tears and defiance—turned back to the little house. She knew that the end had come, and that she would never see him again.

She felt that she did not want to see him again.

"I'm not made for this," she thought; "women like us should never be serious. It's like bearing a child and then seeing him die! O, damn all men!"

And Jordan was thinking the same of all women.

About this time Thomas Nando showed sudden signs of growing old. His wig covered a grizzled head, and though he was no more than sixty years of age he began to look the old man, a little bent, a little shrunken, less brisk in his movements. The Nandos were not long-lived people, and this sudden ageing of his father threw upon Jordan a fuller burden of responsibility at a time when he was ripe and eager for it. He had had enough of petticoat adventures; the game had been too easy and too unsatisfying in its conclusions, and he began to think of settling down to working out those figures which need not be washed out at the end of each year. To write in one's ledger: "God be thanked, but I am worth five hundred pounds more than I was this day last year," is a satisfying and human entry. Man is acquisitive. A time comes when he begins to realize that to acquire things, tangible things, is to accumulate power and to make progress. He expresses himself in his possessions, especially in the beauty and the pleasant solidity of them. They are his, a part of his strivings, a house built for his own stout soul. With them he flouts the envy of his enemies. Success is exquisite when it angers those who wish to see us fail.

All the practical work of the fencing-school fell to Jordan, and with it a half-share of all the fees, for as Tom Nando put it: "Your mother and I have all we want. When your stocking is full, why be miserly?" He would bring his presence into the school for an hour each morning, but he was a figurehead, a looker on, and Jordan had a feeling that to watch the young men doing what he could no longer do made Tom Nando sad. He was more and more in his garden. He was quite happy in it, and even talked of building himself a house on a parcel of ground next to it.

Jordan had the ideas of a young man, but before putting them into practice he asked for Nando's advice and consent.

"We could do with another room, sir. We are losing custom by not being able to give gentlemen all the time they ask for. There is that big room of Morgan's on the other side of the court."

"Use your own discretion, Dan. Besides, my lad, it is yours now, and I'm proud of it."

"I always like to have your advice, sir. It still is, and will always be, Nando's Fencing School."

Jordan rented Mr. Morgan's big room. He engaged two new assistant fencing-masters, and converted Monsieur Bertrand, who was growing stiff and elderly, into a gentleman clerk who interviewed patrons, arranged the time-table, kept the books, and looked after the foils. In half a year Jordan doubled the takings of the school. He raised his own fees, for the world accepts the price a man puts upon his own skill. He was the fashion. It became the proper thing for all Whig gentlemen to learn or perfect their sword-play at Nando's, and not a few Tories deigned to patronize the "Terror of the Jacks." Jordan was honest, and nothing of a charlatan. He pretended to no trick strokes, and parries, and to no secret cunning.

"It is all wrist and eye, sirs, and hard practice. Some men will go farther than others, because they are born to it. I can teach a man to handle a sword, but only his own heart can teach him to fight."

So Nando's prospered, and Jordan began to be a young man of substance. He had money to spend, and he was gaillard in the spending of it, for big natures do not worry over half-pennies. He bought a horse, a fine black fellow, which he rode daily before breakfast. He spent good money on his wigs and dress, on his shoes and shirts and stockings. Nearly always he wore a black coat and breeches, with a white waistcoat and stockings, and plain silver buckles on his shoes. He looked what he was, the fine gentleman. He refurnished his rooms with walnut furniture; the chairs were seated with Italian velvet, and the carpets were of Flemish make. He bought glass, for beautiful table glass had a great attraction for him, and he liked to look at and handle a fine goblet. Mr. Marsden, the gunsmith, made him a fowling-piece with the stock measured to fit his arm and shoulder. He liked everything solid and rich and good to look at, not because he wanted to swagger, but because fine craftsmanship appeals to a man who is a master in his own craft.

And Mrs. Mary approved. Thirty years ago she had been counting the pennies and keeping a bright and careful eye on the butcher and the baker, but now she could take her pleasure in seeing Jordan spending his money like a gentleman. She was much troubled about her husband, and Jordan's prosperity and his way of showing it gave her relaxation. He was settling down. All these solid possessions suggested permanence and no more chasing of elusive petticoats. He had resumed his Sunday morning church parade with her, and she was more proud of him than she had ever been.

Mrs. Mary could never keep away from the window when Jordan rode into Spaniards Court after his early morning canter.

"La, Tom, he does look well on a horse."

Tom Nando would never be too old to quiz her.

"Sure it isn't the Duke, my dear?"

"Well, I'm sure he is as handsome as any duke, Tom."

"Handsome than most dukes—as I have seen 'em, my dear."

She still carried her head on one side like a listening thrush, and she had the same bright eyes.

"But he has got such solid sense, Tom. It isn't all powder and shoe polish. Sometimes I think it is the Glyn blood coming out."

"So it may be," said her man; "but if someone planted the seed you helped the plant to grow, my Mary."

"And you, Tom, too."

"I have tried to make a man of him, and by gad!—he is one."

There were faces at other windows. Meg, her swarthinness grown grey, would thrust her pug nose against the kitchen panes and dote on the creature whom she had dandled and tried to spoil.

"Here he is, the darling!"

Poll had to have her share of the window.

"I wonder who he'll be marrying?"

"Get along with you! Your silly head's full of men and babies."

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Mary had quite given up the idea of getting Jordan married, for she had ceased to see any young woman who was good enough for him. The Prudence Thomsons, the Jane Lamberts, the Lucy Linacres, were out of date. Miss Lambert had married a drysalter, with a flat nose and legs like lobsters. A drysalter indeed! That was her level! And Jordan mixed with great gentlemen, kept his horse, went shooting, and hired a coach once a week to take Mrs. Mary for a drive in the park. She was quite sure that he was the best looking man in London, and not only the best looking, but the best natured. There is no doubt that she was a little bit tiresome in her admiration of Jordan, tiresome that is—to other women. She hinted more or less openly that Jordan would make a notable match some day. Other women were apt to grow restive. "After all, he's only a duckling, and no chick of hers," or "My dear, you'd think he was a love-child of hers instead of a poor foundling."

Yet the women continued to shake their petticoats at him, but Jordan had grown wise. He had been taught to love by two women who were exquisite artists in the great craft, and he was not to be caught by curls under a mob-cap. His life had become very much a man's life and full of other interests, and his friends were men. A man who has had a meal is less likely to hunger after strange food, and during this middle period Jordan thought more of his horse and his fowling-piece and of his day's work than he did of women. As Tom Nando had prophesied, he had come to realize what such affairs were worth, even the most romantic of them.

Bliss, that privileged mocker, used to laugh at him.

"Well, Big One, who is to be the next lady?"

"My wife," said Jordan promptly.

"Is she still an unrisen star?"

"Well, I have not seen her yet."

"Did not someone once whisper to me about a little girl with red hair?"

"O, that was when I was a boy," said Jordan.

He had seen Douce twice in three years, and he thought about her hardly at all. She had ceased to matter to him; she had lost her lure, though he may have carried in some odd corner of his heart a pleasant memory of Douce the child. He had grown so much bigger, so much broader, and a man in his strong years has no use for a little prude. He saw more of her brother, for the life of the town threw them against each other from time to time, and "Superfine St. Croix" still contrived to be superfine in his little way and to keep out of a debtor's prison. Mr. Durand's had become Durand and St. Croix, and Maurice—the fine gentleman—was an expert in selling silks to the ladies. He displayed the rare stuffs to them with the gallantry of a man who was offering his heart, and as a salesman he had great successes.

As blunt old Durand put it to one of his cronies: "The fellow is a fop and a prig, but he knows how to blandish the women. Why—my dear sir—dozens of them come in just for the pleasure of being wheedled. A pretty leg in the showroom and a hard head in the counting-house. That's how I work it."

Sylvester St. Croix was growing very old, though he continued to preach his dismal and damning sermons, and to totter about among the folk of French extraction and those English who liked plenty of brimstone in their prayers. His shanks were thinner than ever, and they were a problem to Douce in that she had to knit him special stockings which did not

wrinkle on his legs. His goat's beard was a white tuft; there were blue smudges under his eyes, and he had the look of a man who never in his life had been comfortably warm. The thinner he grew the more narrow became his outlook. His mind was like a knife-edge dipped in vinegar, and each day it left its mark on Douce's youth. He was exacting, and she had set herself to humour him, not realizing that as she herself grew set in the frame of her new womanhood she developed a little defensive hardness, a shell, a premature austerity. She was cumbered with much serving. She was for ever repressing herself without being conscious of the repression or of what it signified. She was quick, efficient, and apt to be a little sharp of tongue and tart in her wisdom. She put people right; she was more Jeanne than Douce.

Yet she had her moments of rebellion, though it was the natural woman in her which rebelled, only to be scolded and shut up in the dark cupboard of repression. She dressed in dove grey or black; she darned, cooked and cleaned; she grew the salads and made the preserves; she read horrible dry books to her dry stick of a father. Her blotched old mirror still misused her little, creamy face, and her red hair, curbed and repressed, was drawn back tightly from her forehead.

Maurice came over from his lodging twice a week, a man of the world patronizing this dusty corner of life. He was the only human thing which brought a gleam into Sylvester's cold eyes, but he usually managed to quarrel with his sister. Her austerity, her air of staid self-importance—for, like many little women, Douce had a considerable sense of self-importance, were as tempting to him as her rag doll had been to the boy. He teased her, and he was quite the wrong person to tease her, and he teased her in the wrong way.

"You will have to marry an old gentleman, sis. You have got just the hand for a poultice."

"Thank you, I do not wish to marry."

"Don't be so sure."

He patronized her, and treated her like a child, and it annoyed her. She was always at her worst with Maurice.

"Look here," said he. "I know two or three sober, steady codgers. I'll bring them over to see you, and you can try your tongue on them."

"Men are such fools," she retorted; "they seem to think that a woman has only one idea in her head."

"Nor has she," said her brother; "you go and ask King Solomon."

But Maurice had a certain volatile shrewdness. He foresaw the day when Sylvester would be no more, and when a penniless sister would have to be considered. It was a woman's business to get married, and though Maurice had humoured his father by airing his views on the duties of spinsterhood, his attitude became more human when it ceased to be impersonal.

Mary Nando patronized Durand's, partly because there silks and velvets were excellent, and partly because she felt it was her duty to help the son of her husband's friends. She made Jordan's purchases for him, and when Jordan wished to make her a birthday present of a length of silk, it was Maurice who sold it to him.

"This looks like marriage, sir."

"It is for Mrs. Nando," said Jordan.

Maurice was very charming to him, almost as charming as he was to a pretty woman. He ordered the two assistants about, and had nearly every bale in the shop brought out for Jordan to see. He showed off the stuffs with his own white hands, laying the blues, golds, greens, and crushed roses over his sleeve.

"I rather fancy Mrs. Nando is old rose, if I may be permitted to make a suggestion."

Jordan was inclined to agree with him, and since Maurice was making himself so pleasant, Jordan returned favour for favour.

"How is Mr. Sylvester?"

"Not so bad, sir, for a man of seventy."

"And Douce? I have not seen your sister for more than a year, and then it was on the other side of the street."

Maurice appeared to be troubled about Douce.

"She is so unselfish, my dear sir. A girl of twenty ought to go out more; it is not good for her to give up everything to her father. Don't you agree with me?"

Jordan took the same view.

"I am sure Mrs. Mary would be glad to see more of her," he said, meaning far less than Maurice wished him to mean.

The conversation ended there, and Jordan, having chosen his silk and paid for it, Maurice bowed him out of the shop.

"You will have it sent to Spaniards Court, Mr. March? Yes. Good morning."

Nor was young St. Croix's new attitude a pose of the moment. He heard a good deal of gossip, and he happened to know that Jordan had given up hunting petticoats and had settled down to hard work. Nando's was flourishing, and old Tom Nando was a sleeping partner, which more than suggested that Jordan was a man of substance as well as the best swordsman in London. St. Croix respected success, and he respected money, perhaps because he always was so short of it.

But he was a young Agag; he walked delicately, knowing that he had trodden so often on his sister's toes that she was apt to be critical and suspicious. Strolling over to St. Pancras in the cool of the evening, he sat with Mr. Sylvester under the walnut tree in the garden, while Douce prepared the supper. Their chairs were at no great distance from the parlour window, and since Mr. Sylvester was growing a little deaf, Maurice had every excuse for letting someone else hear all that he said.

"Who do you think I saw to-day, sir? And quite a reformed character. Mr. Jordan March."

His father failed to catch the name, and Maurice had to repeat it, and he did so with half an eye on the parlour window. Douce was passing across the room, and he was aware of her pausing and drawing towards the window. She was there behind the curtain, and Maurice tilted his chair and kept an innocent back towards her.

"Quite a reformed character, sir. He has sown his wild oats and he has settled down."

Mr. Sylvester replied that sin was sin, and that you could not get away from it.

"I grant that, sir," said his son. "But I will say this for March, that he seems to have repented handsomely. He goes to church each Sunday with Mrs. Nando. After all, sir, he had a good deal to contend with. I think people mocked him a little, and it made him reckless. I must say I find him steady and quiet and much more modest than he was."

Sylvester wagged his white beard.

"He may yet prove a brand snatched from the burning. A child of shame——"

"O, come, sir," said the more modern son; "after all, the poor beggar had not much say in the matter. But I do know that Mrs. Nando is mighty proud of him, and half the gentlemen in London go to him for practice with the sword."

"A violent profession, my son."

"Well, no, sir, not wholly that. It teaches a man to defend himself against villains. The better swordsman you are the less likely you are to have quarrels unloaded on you. March is no bully. By the way, Mrs. Nando was speaking to me a few days ago—she had come in to buy some of our Italian velvet—and she said that Douce is quite a stranger and that you have not been near them for six months."

"My legs are not what they were, Maurice."

"But that does not apply to Douce, sir. After all, Mrs. Mary is her godmother and the best-hearted creature in all the world."

Sylvester agreed that Douce ought to see more of her godmother, and Douce herself—gliding along the far wall towards the kitchen door—was of the same mind as her father.

Mrs. Mary peeped round the bowl of red roses on the window ledge and saw Jordan walking across the court with a gentleman to whom he had been giving a fencing lesson. Jordan was wearing his white fencing coat, and he had a foil in his hand. The gentleman was laughing, and Mrs. Mary saw him clap Jordan on the shoulder.

"You are an honest man, March."

Mrs. Mary nodded her head and turned to her visitor, who was seated beside her on the settee.

"That's Lord St. Maur, my dear. He thinks the world of Jordan."

Jordan walked as far as the entry with Lord St. Maur, and leaving that gentleman to enter his coach, he came back playing with the foil and smiling to himself over some incident that had amused him. He was turning towards the doorway of the fencing school when Mrs. Mary put her head out of the parlour window and called to him.

"I have somebody who is quite a stranger here."

Jordan did not ask who it was.

"I have one more lesson to give, mother."

"Very well, my dear. Meg shall bring us in some chocolate at half-past four."

At half-past four Jordan walked into the parlour and saw Douce sitting on the blue settee with the afternoon sunlight shining on her hair. She was dressed in a green and white flowered gown, and she wore black mittens and a black cap with white ribbons. He was surprised and his eyes showed it.

"How do you do. Miss St. Croix?" said he, bowing.

She rose and curtsied to him.

"Very well, thank you, Mr. March."

Jordan sat down on one of the Dutch chairs facing the window. He looked at Douce as though he did not know what to say to her, or whether she expected him to say anything to her. In fact he had the air of a man watching a bird which might rise with a sudden flutter of wings and disappear out of the window. His impression of her littleness was even stronger than it had been of old, but if it made any appeal to him the appeal was different.

"And how is Mr. St. Croix?" he asked.

She replied that her father was very well, and sitting there very solemnly with her hands clasped in her lap, her dark eyes made him feel that he was being watched and questioned by the girl behind the eyes. It was as though she expected something of him, or had asked him a riddle of which he had to find the answer, while his awareness of her was tinged with the memory of a little hand drawing a curtain.

Mrs. Mary, meanwhile, had bustled off to discover why Meg was late with the chocolate, and Jordan, having nothing serious to say to Douce, took refuge in grave playfulness.

"Are you still fond of raspberries, Miss St. Croix?"

Her eyes gave a little flicker. It seemed to her that Jordan was willing to forget certain incidents which she now wished him to forget, and that his recalling of the boy and girl days was a holding-out of the hand.

"I grow my own—now, Mr. March."

"O, do you?" said he, wondering whether she had grown less pretty, or whether his own taste had changed. Also, he was a little curious as to what had brought her to Spaniards Court, and why she seemed ready to forgive him what he could not help. Her eyes were friendly, more like the eyes of the Douce whom he had known of old.

"I suppose you are kept very busy these days," she said, "now that Mr. Nando has given up the work to you?"

"It is my business to be busy. I get a ride on my horse before breakfast."

"O, you ride a horse?"

"Yes, a big black fellow; I bought him some months ago. And I suppose you are busy—too? Maurice told me that you were a regular little stay-at-home."

She smiled her solemn smile at him.

"What you do for Mr. Nando, Mr. March, I do for my father."

"Cook and sew and read?"

"And grow the salads and mend the linen."

"And make jam of the raspberries?"

"Yes, and sew my own clothes."

"You must be a complete housewife, just like Mrs. Mary!"

Mrs. Mary, fluttering in again at this moment, after a little breeze with Meg, wanted to know what Jordan was saying about her.

"Bless us, these wenches! I think that Meg must sleep half the day as well as all night. And what were you saying about me, my dear?"

Jordan told her that Douce appeared to be following in her godmother's footsteps, and that her holy of holies was either the linen cupboard or the larder.

"And why not, my dear?" said Mrs. Mary; "isn't that a woman's business—that and her children? A nice pother you men would make if we were all like the pretty die-away ladies who are too fine to sew a button on a man's shirt. I like a girl's hands to be useful as well as pretty."

"I think Miss St. Croix's hands are both," said Jordan, smiling at her as he would have smiled at a child.

And Douce blushed, for she did not feel like a child.

No sooner had Meg brought in the chocolate than two other ladies came to call on Mrs. Mary, and they were followed by Thomas Nando, who had pottered back from his St. Pancras garden with a basket full of fruit. Both the ladies were young and marriageable, and showed themselves very animated in Jordan's presence and very agreeable to Mrs. Mary and Thomas Nando. Douce sat solemnly on the blue settee, drinking her chocolate, a little figure apart, her austerity emphasized in the presence of these two eager and flattering rivals.

"La, Mr. Nando, what lovely fruit!"

"Out of—your—garden, of course."

Jordan got hold of the basket, and finding a smaller basket of raspberries inside it, he extracted the smaller basket and presented it with an air of great gravity to Douce.

"I know that you cannot resist these, Miss St. Croix."

Douce's dark eyes showed little burrs of light. The other women were looking at her and Jordan, and she was woman enough to realize the significance of the fact that he had not offered them fruit.

"Thank you, Mr. March; you may put them in my lap!"

"I'm still rather fond of them myself," he said, sitting down beside her.

"Please—I'm not greedy, and I can't eat them all."

"Then I'll help you."

Douce may not have been aware of it, but a most suggestive change had blossomed in her in the course of five minutes. She had come by quite a pretty colour; her face and her figure even looked fuller and more mature; her little red mouth had softened, and so had her eyes. She was lit up by an inward glow, and Mrs. Mary, watching her, was surprised by what she saw and by what it signified.

"Bless us!" she said to herself; and then, "Why not? Even if she hasn't a penny!"

The two other ladies, seeing that Jordan was otherwise occupied and disinclined to look seriously in any other direction, turned all their attention to Thomas Nando. Mrs. Mary's attentions were divided, though she was absorbed in considering the possibilities which had dawned on her in Douce's eyes. After all, Miss St. Croix was a dear little thing and an excellent daughter, and would make a man of sense an admirable wife. A little on the small side—perhaps, but was it not notorious that big men always fell in love with little women?

When the party broke up, it was Mrs. Mary who suggested to Jordan that he should see Douce back to her father's house.

"Why—of course, if I may?" said Jordan, looking at Douce.

"I am sure I must not trouble Mr. March."

But she wished to trouble him, and when he made it plain that he intended to see her home, she gave a little inward sigh of complacency and stood demurely beside him with an air of serene self-content. Jordan gave her his arm, and Mrs. Mary watched them cross the court.

The two other ladies had departed, and Mrs. Mary, after burying her nose in the bowl of roses, confronted her husband with an enigmatic question.

"Well, how would you like it, Tom?"

"Like what, my dear?"

Really, there were times when men were extraordinarily dense!

"Jordan and little Douce."

"What about them, sweetheart?"

Mrs. Mary stood over him as though he were a child making a great mess of the saying of his prayers.

"How would you like Jordan to marry Douce?"

Nando felt for his snuffbox.

"I have never thought about it. Why, he hasn't seen the girl for months."

"My dear, does that signify?"

"O, not a brass farthing! It's a good little thing, and gentle."

"Not quite so gentle, Tom, as a man might think. Some of these little things are mighty obstinate. She has a will of her own, has my god-daughter."

Tom Nando was going through the solemn business of taking snuff.

"Do you think he is bitten, my dear?"

"No—I don't. But the girl wants him. Anyone could see that."

Douce, meanwhile, was enjoying that experience which comes to a woman but once in her life, and more especially so if her life has been a very dull one and lived for someone else. Her hand rested on a man's sleeve, and the man was big and strong and comely and very pleasant in her eyes. That other woman had found him good to love was the exquisite thorn in the flesh of her desire. He towered over her protectingly; he kept the best part of the footwalk for her, and sent the rest of the world outside the posts. He looked down at her kindly with his blue-grey eyes; he talked as though he found it pleasant to talk to her; he smiled. And other women and other men looked at them both, and Douce had become aware of what was in these other people's eyes.

"I hope Mrs. Mary has not thought me neglectful," she said, with a shy, upward glance at Jordan.

"Your father takes so much of your time."

"Yes."

"Don't let him take too much. We all have to live our lives, you know."

"I do know," she answered; "but is it not rather hard to deny things to certain people?"

"Of course it is," said Jordan, looking down at her with a big brother kindness, "and it would be to you."

She coloured up.

"Oh, I am not making myself out a martyr. After all, we do owe a great deal to our parents, Mr. Jordan, don't we?"

And then she could have bitten her tongue, remembering as she did how little Jordan's natural parents had done for him; but Jordan did not appear to notice the innocent irony of her little sententious question.

She changed the subject swiftly.

"So you see Maurice sometimes?"

"Yes, now and again."

"I think he has quite forgiven you for the affair of my rag doll."

Their eyes met, and they laughed.

"How we change," said Douce. "Don't you see all sorts of different persons in yourself, quite a procession of persons?"

First one plays for a year or two, and then one becomes serious and perhaps quite priggish. And then you grow wiser again."

"And kinder," said Jordan.

"Yes, and kinder," she agreed.

When they reached Mr. Sylvester's gate Douce hesitated and then looked up at him with veiled eyes.

"You'll come in," she said, as though she was determined that he should come in.

Jordan's glance was questioning.

"May I? If you think——"

"Of course you must come in," she said, and led the way up the path.

They found Mr. Sylvester with his spectacles on his nose, reading a book of sermons, and whether he was too surprised to show a studied disapproval, or whether Maurice's words had had real weight with him, he behaved to Jordan with cold but unquestionable politeness. For the first time in her life Douce dominated the St. Croix household. She sat herself down by her father, and with a little air of pale determination she saw to it that these two men talked to each other. She broke the ice of years, even if she could not drain away the deep water of her father's prejudices.

When Jordan rose to go she walked with him to the gate.

"Good-bye, Douce," said he; "you must come and see us again."

She looked at him steadily.

"I like to hear you call me that," she said; "it is quite like the raspberry days."

He smiled at her.

"Why, that is as it should be."

He had meant far less than he had said, for his attitude to her was one of frank, big-natured liking. She was such a little thing, and he felt protective to little things; but for the moment he was not passionately interested in any woman, and the type that he admired had changed. It might have been thought that his various affairs, especially those with Lady Bacchus and Nancy Sweethearts, would have made him more open to the attack of Douce's glowing freshness. No man had ever kissed her. Her mouth was virgin, but sometimes the mouth of a young girl which delights a boy or an old roué fails to utter those significant words which catch the heart of the strong man in the days of his ambition.

Jordan went home with no stirring of his pulses, but Douce, who knew so little of men, had trembled at the touch of his kindness. It had seemed to her so much more impulsive than it was, so like the picture that she had wished to see that she turned back from the gate with new life glowing in her. She trembled. She was aware of fateful exultation. Her heart felt like glass, ready to be broken in his big hands. She knew that he was the man whom she wanted, and that in her secret thought she had always wanted him.

She pulled a rose from a bush, and held it with both hands against, her mouth.

"I'm not a prude; no—no. I wonder if he thought me one? O, big Jordan!"

She went in and read to her father, and the dull words danced in her heart, for when the heart is happy even the dry dust lives.

Jordan's morning ride took him along the Oxford road as far as Tyburn, and here he would turn off towards Edgware, for he had discovered a very pleasant lane branching from the main road, with broad grass verges on either side of it which gave good ground for a canter. He was up at five on these summer mornings, and this lane of his took him into a new world and towards broader and more open prospects. He loved the hayfields in the early morning, and he loved them in their pale coats after the scythes had shorn them. He watched the birds. He was alone, with the wind on his face and that sense of mystery which dawn and twilight give. There was always for him the feeling of things about to happen, the thrill of some unknown adventure, the call of the open sky and the distant drift of the fields. These were spacious mornings, and perhaps they both heralded and synchronized with a broadening in him of certain half-realized desires and ambitions. He was a city child, but when Black Prince, his horse, carried him out beyond the bricks and mortar he carried him into another world, the world of those parents whom he had never known. The land spoke to him, the fields, the park lands, the woods. Unlike old Nando, he felt that he would not be content with a garden, the city man's playground. The dim urge in him was towards something wider, greater, broad-spreading pastures and rolling woods, a country that was his; rivers whose water swirled round his horse's legs and called him master. He had the love of the land, land over which he could ride from daybreak to sunset, and still call it his.

"Queer," he thought to himself. "What do I want with land? To spend my time like a great gentleman managing an estate! What have I to do with land?"

But the passion was there. It had been there since birth, wanting to express itself, to seize the grown man when the boy in him had ceased to wander. Youth is constructive only in its dreams, destructive in its undisciplined restlessness. No man is a builder until he is mature and has come to realize his own strength and the easy infirmities of most other men. The few build; the crowd stands with hands in pockets, sucking straws, foolishly critical or envious.

But Jordan could not fathom the inevitable tendencies that were in him. He did not know the people who lay behind him. This new, vague urge was not mere discontent, for he was happy in his work, proud of it, and successful in it, and he had come by a good deal of wisdom and self-restraint; but he had the feeling that there was some other self deep down in him which was slowly and surely pushing to the surface. It was rather vague and baffling, and what it portended he did not know.

"A year ago," he laughed, "I should have said that I was ripe for another love affair!"

During the month of June another rider discovered Jordan's lane, and they passed each other on several mornings, cantering in opposite directions. The man was young, sallow, rather fragile in build, with well-cut features, good teeth and pleasant sleepy eyes. To Jordan he looked rather foreign, like a southern Frenchman or a Spaniard.

After two or three days of such passings they smiled and wished each other good morning, and the young man's English was as English as Jordan's.

"Good morning to you, sir."

"The same to you, sir."

Two or three days later Jordan came upon the stranger trying to extract a stone from his horse's shoe. Jordan pulled up and dismounted, and this friendly incident put them upon a different footing. They rode homewards together, and Jordan gathered that the young man was a colonial, a Virginian, and that he was in England for some six months to see the country and certain aunts, uncles and cousins who were English. In fact, Jordan learnt more about the young man than he learnt about Jordan, for Jordan's ears were quicker than his tongue. The Virginian had taken my Lord Askew's house in Carter Street, and here they parted company.

It was a little, narrow red house, with a white door and white sashes. It had a fanlight over the door between two classic pilasters, and green iron railings enclosing a minute front garden. Jordan passed it every morning, for he and the Virginian had agreed to take their canter together along the lane off the road to Edgware. Jordan liked the man, and the man liked him.

It was not until the fourth morning that Jordan, turning in the saddle to smile a good-bye to his new acquaintance, happened to glance at one of the first-floor windows. A woman was sitting there. She caught the end of Jordan's smile, and he fancied that she answered it with an air of whimsical amusement. He rode away with the impression of a pair of humorous dark eyes, a pale and elusive face, a long mouth with red and beautifully cut lips, and a mass of midnight hair. She suggested mystery, though why she should suggest mystery Jordan could not tell.

"Stamford's wife, I suppose," he thought, and rode home to his day's work.

The lady of the laughing eyes came down to give Stamford his breakfast. She was his sister and not his wife, a widow,

and her name was Mariana Merris. She had estates in Virginia, and she had come to England with her brother; moreover, she was half-tempted to remain in England.

"Who is your friend, Will?"

"He might be Adam for all I know."

She smiled at this indolent, happy brother of hers.

"Do you mean to say that you have ridden with him these four mornings and you do not know his name?"

"Yes. Why should I?"

She gave a pretty and humorous shrug of the shoulders.

"Why should you! Mere curiosity! Does he know yours?"

"I believe he does."

"What does he do?"

"I have not the faintest idea."

"Well—find out. I like the look of him."

"Oh, if you like the look of him, my dear, I had better ask him in to breakfast."

He smiled at her with his lazy eyes, and she shook her head at him.

"You are always thinking that I want a second husband."

"Don't you?"

"I do not believe that there is any man who could persuade me to give up my freedom."

Like life, her laughter was the sparkle of sunlight upon water, and beneath the surface in the cool green deeps there was a diffused sadness. She had some of her brother's indolence, moods of pleasant languor, but she was more vital and far cleverer than he was. To some she appeared as a comely creature who had matured in the sunny south, but she was far more than that. Her beauty had a touch of bitterness, a sweet tang that saved it from cloying, and when she laughed her laughter sometimes had a note of elusive mockery, a note that could be plaintive. She hid herself. She talked exquisite nonsense to prevent herself from seeming serious. Her lissom indolence was a cushion upon which she reclined. Once in her life she had given way to a great impulse and had suffered for it. "Never again," was her motto; "it is more amusing to be a spectator."

She was a woman who looked out of windows. For a moment, in a flash, her dark beauty was visible, the inherent, rich glow of her, and then the curtain fell. Her voice, lazy and whimsical, trailed lightly over life. She had moods of long silence.

Her brother came in from his ride next morning with a curve of mischief on his mouth.

"I have found out what my friend is."

She saw that he was amused.

"How did you do it?"

"I asked him his name, and he told me the rest. Guess."

She handed him his cup of hot chocolate.

"Obviously," she said, "he is a man of good family. I should set him down as the younger son of some great person."

Stamford's eyes were lazily ironical.

"Wrong, Marie; stone cold."

She glanced at him as though she had more faith in her own impressions than in what her brother knew.

"Well, we will try again. A country gentleman up for the season?"

"Wrong again."

"A soldier?"

"No."

"A rich merchant's son?"

"No."

"An attorney?"

"No."

"I give it up," she said, laughing.

"His name is March—Jordan March. He is a fencing-master, and he keeps a fencing school. Nando's. Of course—I had heard of it."

His sister said nothing for the moment, and his impression was that she was as surprised as he had been.

"But I like the fellow. He was perfectly frank and open about it. In fact, he is rather proud of his school."

"Why shouldn't he be?" she said. "It is better to teach the use of the sword than to teach men to cheat."

"Quite so," said her brother; "the man is more of a gentleman than most men who pin that mark on their hats. I am just as ready to ask him in to breakfast."

"Well, ask him," she answered.

The invitation was given and accepted; Jordan's horse was fastened to the green railings, with a small boy on guard to see that Prince did not put his head over the railings and browse upon the flowers. Mrs. Merris was waiting for them behind her tray of chocolate cups. She was dressed in some rich red stuff which set off her complexion and her hair.

"Mr. Jordan March—my sister."

Jordan bowed to her, and she made a little graceful movement in her chair.

"Please sit down, Mr. March. These English mornings make one hungry."

"They do, madam," said he, thinking what a remarkable thing it was that she should be Stamford's sister and not his wife.

"Sugar, Mr. March?"

"If you please, madam."

Jordan was rather grave and not particularly talkative, and she had no quarrel with his silence, for she disliked garrulous men, men who were funny and facetious. And Jordan was strangely shy of her, nor was she sorry for his shyness. She noticed that he did not eat much breakfast. It was she and her brother who did most of the talking, while Jordan put in a few quiet words when they seemed required of him. She had absorbed him—so to speak—into her presence, and he was so conscious of something new and strange and unexpected that his consciousness was all ears and eyes. He was aware of the little arcs of bright light that would appear suddenly in the soft darkness of her eyes, of the warm and almost brown golden tinge of her skin like the tints on the skin of some beautiful fruit, of her soft, trailing voice. He was faintly afraid of her, and she was the first woman who had filled him with this vague fear. He thought that she was more like his ideal picture of the great lady than any woman he had ever seen.

Their talk drifted to the sensation of the moment, the South Sea Company and the amazing madness that had turned every Jack and Jill into a speculator. Mrs. Merris described to Jordan a visit she had paid to Change Alley and the sights she had seen there, and she described them very well. She gave him the impression of being a woman apart, above the rush and the chatter and the excitement, while remaining human and humorous and slightly pitying.

"Are you a gambler, March?" asked the brother.

No; Jordan did not think he was a gambler, but he had bought some South Sea shares.

"Then—why did you buy them?"

Jordan looked quietly smiling into Mrs. Merris's eyes.

"O, well—I don't know. There is a spice of adventure in it."

"Surely—that is gambling," she laughed.

"No, but I am not a gambler," he persisted; "someone—a friend—to whom I had done a good turn—advised me to buy the shares."

"Oh—I see. You believe in certainties, solid things?"

"Yes—I think so," said Jordan. "The shares have doubled their value. If they go much higher I shall sell them."

"To make sure of a certainty?"

"Well—I know what I want, madam, not money for money's sake, but what you can do with it."

"So that is where the adventure begins?"

"Yes."

When the meal was over he rose, thanked her gravely, and asked her permission to go.

"I have my first lesson to give at nine, madam."

"We must not keep you, Mr. March."

"Good morning, madam."

He bowed to her, and smiling and nodding to her brother went to mount his horse, and Mrs. Merris saw him give the small boy a *douceur* and ride away. She liked him; she liked the frank way he had spoken of his work; she liked the way his eyes had looked at her, gravely, shyly, as though she were a long way off. But she was puzzled. She stood by the window, absorbed in thought, and tracing invisible patterns on the glass with the tip of a slim finger.

"Marie," said her brother, "what do you think of my fencing master?"

She remained looking out of the window.

"Somehow, he seems in the wrong shoes."

"What do you mean, my dear?"

"I don't quite know what I do mean," she answered.

So Jordan continued his morning rides, and he had his daily glimpse of Mrs. Merris. He would sit his horse for a few moments under her window, looking up, his hat in his hand while he laughed and chatted with her and her brother. Once a week he was asked in to breakfast, but though he had become a friend of the brother, he drew no nearer to Mrs. Merris. He made no attempt to approach her, and she made no efforts to attract him. They talked to each pleasantly from a distance, and though Jordan learnt many facts about the life in Virginia, he learnt little more about the lady, save that she had a fine estate, a crowd of black servants, and easy, spacious days. It was quite a long while before he made the discovery that she was a widow, and when he did discover it, it unexpectedly added to his sense of distance. She was three years older than he was. His attitude was rather that of a boy to a handsome and stately woman who is gracious to him, and he was grateful to her for her graciousness. He admitted quite frankly that she was immensely his superior, a mysterious and brilliant creature whom it was delightful to look at, and the most quaint part of his admiration was that he was content to look at her. He rather liked the feeling of her being up there above him, and it seemed most natural that she should look down with her elusive smile at him from her window. She was different from Lady Marigold, and she affected him quite differently. He never faced the fact that he might fall in love with her; it is doubtful if he realized that he was on the edge of it. He stood gazing up, and was so frankly convinced of her aboveness, that there was something in him which prevented him tumbling into the deep water beyond.

"She is a very great lady," was his thought; "it is an honour to be allowed to bow to her."

For Jordan knew how strong was the intangible barrier which divided the man of family from the man who is nothing but what he is. He had learnt it day by day, in the school, in the streets, in the very atmosphere of the Nandos' home. He was a fencing-master, and a foundling. Life sets a man his limit.

Meanwhile, a little girl with red hair and serious black eyes was waiting to take his fate into her lap. Douce was a regular visitor now, and old Tom Nando, who was a good judge of a woman and had a fondness for Douce, began to think that he would like to see Jordan marry her. Mrs. Mary was not so sure.

"She's not big enough, Tom, and I think she has a temper."

"I have never seen it, my dear! Besides, does any man want to marry a white slug?"

"You don't quite take me, Tom. I have a feeling about things. After all, she's her father's daughter."

"Well, what of that?"

"She might try and tie Jordan up too much, put him on the chain."

Nando looked amused, for if anybody had wished to tie Jordan up in white silk ribbons it had been Mrs. Mary.

"What! That little bit of red hair and clotted cream play the shrew?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Mary, "I have feelings about things. That child could be a little tyrant to the man who loved her."

"O, come now!" said her man.

But there was a distinct warming of the St. Croix family towards the Nandos. Maurice took Mrs. Mary to a play at Drury Lane theatre, and Mr. Sylvester and his son were asked to supper. Douce came to Spaniards Court quite once a week, and she always paid her call about the time that Jordan finished his fencing lessons and came into the parlour for a cup of chocolate. Sometimes he saw her home; sometimes plain Meg acted as escort.

Mrs. Mary saw it all, and having grown wise she held her tongue and smiled. Douce wanted Jordan, and Jordan was kind to her. She was such a little thing, and he felt protective and brotherly, and he thought of her more as Douce the child than as Douce the woman.

He smiled at her a great deal. He liked to sit on the blue-covered settee and talk to her, and when he smiled at her Douce was quite happy.

Jordan was giving a lesson when Monsieur Bertrand came to tell him that a clerk had called from Mr. Bowyer of Bucklersbury and that he carried a letter which was of great importance. Old Bowyer was an attorney who happened to be in Jordan's debt, Jordan having extricated old Bowyer's son from some shabby squabble with certain gentlemen of the baser sort. Jordan read Mr. Bowyer's letter. It contained nothing but an urgent message to him, bidding him to come down to the city without delay.

Jordan went. He found old Bowyer sitting all twisted in his chair, his wig laid on a pile of papers, and scratching hard and furiously with a quill pen. A strong-box stood open behind his chair. The afternoon sunlight painted a patch of gold upon a case of law-books and showed up the dancing dust motes in the air.

"Ha!" said Mr. Bowyer, looking up; "you've come. Sit down."

He was a peremptory little man who did everything in jerks, and who shot out his words like peas out of a pea-shooter. He had the brightest brown eyes, and his favourite colour for a coat was claret. He used a great deal of snuff, and he had a habit of biting the feather end of his quill pen, or of tickling one ear with it. For the rest he was one of the most respected attorneys in the City of London.

Jordan sat down on the other side of Mr. Bowyer's table and waited to hear what the old man had to say, and Mr. Bowyer liked men who allowed him to fire off his shots without unnecessary interference.

"You asked me to watch the Bubble for you, Mr. March. Blown suddenly to ten times its size. Sell."

"You advise me to sell those shares?"

Mr. Bowyer nodded and bit fiercely at his pen.

"Certainties."

"What are they worth?"

"They are worth to-day in Change Alley some fifteen thousand pounds."

Jordan stared at him. He was astonished. He had not troubled to follow the market for the last two weeks, and this sudden mad leap seemed amazing. It seemed equally amazing that he should be worth fifteen thousand pounds without having lifted a finger to earn it.

"It sounds absurd, sir," he said.

"It is—absurd," said Mr. Bowyer. "Take my advice and sell."

Jordan looked very serious for a moment, and then he smiled.

"Something solid," he said, "exactly. Will you sell them for me, sir?"

Bowyer nodded, and little shrewd creases showed round his eyes. He was pleased with Jordan.

"And bank the money for me?"

"I can lay it out for you, Mr. March; sound mortgages."

"Yes, say twelve thousand in mortgages, sir; I think I may be able to find a use for the other three thousand. I shall build a house."

"A sound investment, sir, for a man to build his own house."

"Oh, it won't be for myself," said Jordan, and he told Mr. Bowyer something which made that old gentleman smile one of his occasional smiles.

"Excellent. I congratulate you, young man."

"And I—sir—owe you my thanks for all this."

"Fudge," said Mr. Bowyer; "I've squared a debt, that's all."

Jordan walked all the way back from Bucklersbury to Spaniards Court, for he wanted to think things out and to get a grip upon this new and extraordinary change in his fortune. What did it mean? That he was a man of property, that he could give up being a fencing-master, that he need never do any more work unless he chose to; but directly he faced these possibilities he knew that he loved Nando's, and that his sword-play was dearer to him than any gentlemanly idleness could be. In fact, he refused to be excited, to let himself be overbalanced by the sudden acquisition of a sack of gold.

"What sort of man would one be," he thought, "if one let oneself be mastered by a bag of money? Does a ship abandon its voyage and take to strange seas because she happens to have more cargo aboard? I'll go on to-morrow just as I went on yesterday."

Yet two very definite pictures had framed themselves in his head. If he so chose he could give way to that strange and growing lust of his for land, and he could allow himself to do a certain thing which had long been in his mind. The will and the wish to do it were so strong in him that he turned aside and walked over to Thomas Nando's garden and spent an hour looking at the land which lay about it.

At supper that night he was serious and rather silent, and when Mrs. Mary sallied him upon his silence he glanced at her with a half-mischievous smile.

"Yes—I have been thinking hard, mother. You'll be bringing your work in here while father and I smoke our pipes?"

"To be sure, my dear," said she; "don't I always sit here with you?"

"It is we who sit with you, I think," said Jordan. "Are you going to smoke, father?"

"Since when have I ceased to be a chimney!" quoth old Nando.

Jordan glanced at the dishes, and Mrs. Mary understood that he wanted the table cleared and the girls out of the way, and that he had something to tell them. She suspected at once that he had made up his mind to get married, and she supposed it would be to Douce, whose solemn dark eyes had looked at him so long that they had set him alight in answer to their message. Mrs. Mary sighed. She got her work and sat down on the blue settee, while Jordan fetched two pipes and the tobacco box and told Meg to bring a candle.

He filled and lit Tom Nando's pipe for him.

"Have you been to the garden to-day, father?"

No, Thomas had not been there. He was growing rather stiff in the legs, and he laughed and talked of buying a donkey.

"I can think of something better than that," said Jordan; "you and your garden ought to be nearer. Don't you think so, mother?"

Mrs. Mary looked at him. She had lived for more than thirty years in the house in Spaniards Court; she had grown into it; she was fond of it, and yet there were times when she thought; that she would like something quieter and more spacious. City merchants built themselves fine, comfortable houses. There was Mr. Bulkly who had made himself quite grand out at Islington, and Sarah Bulkly was always talking about her six bedrooms, and her fruit garden, and her linen room and the grand parlour, till Mrs. Mary had grown rather tired of it. Other people were just as good as the Bulklys.

"How do you mean—nearer, my dear?"

"If the mountain won't come to Mahomet," said Tom Nando, "well, Mahomet must buy an ass."

"No," said Jordan quietly; "I have been over there this afternoon, looking at the land. I am going to buy some land and build a house."

"A house!" they both exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Then you are thinking of getting married, my dear," said Mrs. Mary.

Jordan smiled.

"That is the first I have heard of it. No, I am going to build a house, a handsome, solid house for two people named Mary and Thomas Nando."

They stared at him.

"You—my dear?"

"What do you mean, my lad?"

And then Jordan told them. He was a man of property; he had sold his South Sea shares and was worth some fifteen thousand pounds; he meant to build that house and they could live in it or not, just as they pleased. He confessed that he had had the idea in his head for quite a long while. Mrs. Mary should have the house built to her liking, and Thomas Nando's garden should be the envy of all gardeners.

"You picked me off the doorstep. You won't grudge me this for all the happiness you have given me."

Mrs. Mary burst into tears.

"O, my Jordan."

She went and put her arms round him and hid her face on his shoulder.

"I'm so proud, my dear. Isn't it wonderful, Tom, Jordan building us a house?"

"It is," said Thomas Nando rather thickly, stretching out a hand to Jordan; "you good lad—Big Jordan."

Jordan's mouth twitched.

"Of course you need not live in the house unless you want to. I mean—you may have a fancy to stay here."

Mrs. Mary put up her face and kissed him.

"Of course we shall live in the house, and mighty proud I shall be of it, my dear."

They sat up late talking over the new home that Jordan was to build for Tom and Mary, and Jordan fetched ink and paper and drew rough plans of the house and ground. He sketched a longish, generous-fronted house of good red brick, with stone quoins and a stone cornice, white sashes, and a white pillared porch, and Mrs. Mary nodded her head over it.

"But won't it cost a great deal of money, my dear?"

"I have got the money," said Jordan. "What do you think about it, father?"

"Don't make it too grand, Dan."

"No, comfortable, solid. You know the meadow next to the garden? I can buy that, and I think I can get the spinney behind it. It would be pleasant to have a little piece of wood. There is a pond there too, quite a good piece of water. We could stock it with fish."

"Could I have ducks on it?" asked Mrs. Mary. "I do love white ducks."

"As many as you please, mother."

"They won't interfere with Tom's fish?"

"Why not a couple of swans?" said her man.

"And some peacocks. The Bulklys haven't such a thing as a peacock."

So, they talked it over by candlelight, and as Jordan schemed out the dignity of his dream-house he found himself thinking of it as a house which Mrs. Mariana Merris might deign to enter and sit in Mrs. Mary's parlour like the great lady that she was. That—indeed—would be a signal honour! And then he was made to remember that before the house was completed Mrs. Merris would be back in Virginia, and he would never see her again.

"I wonder what she is doing?" he thought, biting the end of his quill like Mr. John Bowyer.

Mrs. Mary brought his dreams back to the kitchen quarters and the virtues of a cellar, while some two or three miles away two people were being rowed across the Thames on a visit to the gardens of Vauxhall.

"I have only two months left," said the brother; "a man should see as much as he can of the life of the old country."

They saw life—chequered life—under the lights of Vauxhall. It was a beautiful night, and beyond the lamps shone the stars. There was music, and the musicians were playing some piece of Scarlatti's, a quaint, gracefully moving measure set for the rhythm of swinging hoops, and bowing heads, and the click of high-heeled shoes.

Stamford and his sister were walking arm in arm towards one of the arbours, when a man who had been shadowing them appeared from nowhere and swept his hat to the lady.

"Madam, you will not grudge me the honour of addressing you."

Two other men, vaguely attentive, hung in the background, watch-dogs over the adventure. Mrs. Mariana looked straight into the gentleman's face. He had completed his bow, and he stood smiling and bending slightly towards her, his hat over his heart, his rogue's eyes issuing a challenge.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I do not know you."

"That, madam, is my misfortune which—with the gentleman's permission—can be remedied."

She pressed her brother's arm, and would have moved on, but the man edged full in their way.

"It is not quite true, madam, to say that you do not know me."

She looked at him haughtily.

"True. I know you as a person who has stared most impertinently at me in the park. I do not desire to be stared at."

"Madam," said he, "you scold me for doing what I cannot help. My name is Phipps, Captain Phipps, and I ask you to introduce me to this gentleman, who, I believe, is your brother."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, sir," she said.

Stamford had tried to withdraw his arm, but she held fast to it, knowing that there was a hot temper behind his indolence. Captain Phipps was still in their way, and showing no intention of removing himself out of it. He was a big man, with a large, high-coloured face, and blue eyes that were muddy and insolent. He had detected Mrs. Merris's restraining movement, her drawing of her brother closer to herself.

"Madam, you are vastly ungracious."

Her eyes were very scornful.

"Sir, if I am accosted by a stranger against my will have I no right to show my displeasure?"

The man in the red coat bowed.

"Madam, the displeasure would sit better in the breeches of the gentleman beside you. He seems in no way inclined to show it."

"I give you the lie to that," said her brother, freeing himself from her restraining arm.

She spoke swiftly.

"Will, is it worth while to quarrel with any impudent fool——? Come away. I am not hurt, so why need you be?"

"The fellow needs——"

"Ssh—be quiet!"

But he had said enough for Captain Phipps.

"Fellow—indeed! Look you, sir, I am 'fellow' to no one. The lady can say what she pleases, but if a man uses rude words to me he eats them, unless—of course—he is not a coward."

"I'll eat no words for your benefit, my friend."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir, very glad to hear it. And now, perhaps, you will apologize——"

"You can go to the devil," said Stamford.

He turned to take Mrs. Merris's arm, but Phipps tapped him on the shoulder, and at the touch of the big beast's hand Stamford lost his temper. He swung round and struck the other man across the mouth with the back of his hand.

Instantly there was a scene. The two expectant gentlemen came crowding up, very big and blustering. Captain Phipps had put his hat on his head and was standing with folded arms. People stopped to stare and to chatter.

"This gentleman has struck me, Harry."

"Are you aware, sir, that my friend is an officer in His Majesty's Army?"

Stamford had mastered his anger.

"Gentlemen, you know what to do. My name is Stamford, and I live in Carter Street. That's enough. I am not going to brawl here in public."

"Brawl, sir! Who's brawling?"

"Damn it, be more careful of your words, sir."

"You shall have the proper answer in the proper place. I wish you good evening, gentlemen. Carter Street. Please remember it."

He gave his arm to his sister, and they made their way out of the gardens.

"Why did you lose your temper with the wretch, Will?" she said reproachfully.

"Because I had to," he retorted; "do you think I was going to see you insulted?"

Jordan was trying to drive the rudiments of sword-play into a very rich, a very stupid and very clumsy pupil, when Bertrand brought him a gentleman's card.

"He is in the ante-room, Mr. March."

Jordan glanced at the card, and seeing "Mr. William Stamford" written upon it, he made his excuses to his pupil, and leaving Mr. Stupidity to one of his assistants, he went straight into the ante-room. William Stamford was standing looking out of the window. He turned about when Jordan entered, and noticed that his indolent eyes were brighter than usual.

"Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?"

Stamford smiled, but his smile was serious.

"I have come here on business, March. The fact is, I want a little practice, and I wondered whether you could take me in hand to-day."

Jordan stood looking at him with grave intentness.

"Just for to-day, Mr. Stamford?"

"Yes, for to-day," and he gave him a whimsical shrug of the shoulders.

Jordan said nothing for a moment; he appeared to be wondering whether he had the right to say anything.

"I can give you the whole day, Mr. Stamford."

"But what about all your other pupils?"

"My assistants can take them to-day. But I rather wish, Mr. Stamford——"

The Virginian looked hard at him.

"What do you wish, March?"

"Well, that you would tell me about it."

Stamford smiled. He walked to the window, and then came back to where Jordan was standing.

"I am afraid I have made a fool of myself, March, but it was one of those occasions when a man has to make a fool of himself. You agree?"

"How did it happen?"

"A man insulted my sister, and I smacked his cheek."

Stamford's eyes were fixed on the buckles of Jordan's shoes, and he did not see what happened to Jordan's face.

"Where did it occur, sir?"

"In Vauxhall Gardens."

"O, Vauxhall Gardens. Won't you sit down and tell me about it? Wait; let's go up to my room."

Jordan took William Stamford up to his room and sat him down by the window in his Dutch armchair. He felt that Stamford was worried, not so much on his own account, but on account of his sister.

"Will you take a glass of wine, sir?"

"No, March, thanks all the same. You have a pleasant room here."

"I am very fond of this room," said Jordan.

He was waiting for Stamford to begin, and Stamford seemed in no hurry to unburden himself. He pulled out a case of little black cigars and offered one to Jordan. Jordan accepted it, and called down the stairs to Meg to bring a light.

"Rather strong, sir, these?"

"They look stronger than they are, March."

"As a rule," said Jordan, "I never smoke till my work is over. Thanks, Meg; will you see that we are not disturbed."

He sat down opposite Stamford, after holding the light for him.

"Vauxhall can be a queer place, sir."

"So it seems," said Stamford. "I'll tell you about it."

He described the affair at The Gardens, and then went on to tell Jordan how two gentlemen had called on him at his house in Garter Street early that morning.

"We fixed up all the formalities, March. I called in a colonial friend of mine. It is to be in Hyde Park to-morrow at six o'clock. But I must say I was rather puzzled this morning."

"O! How?!"

"These two fellows struck me as being rather seedy gentlemen, and they seemed to be driving at something that I did not catch. There was rather a lot of bluster. They actually hinted that their friend was one of the best swordsmen in London. I almost got the feeling that they were trying to frighten me, and at the same time to help me out of it."

"By the way," said Jordan, "you have not yet told me the name of the man whose face you smacked."

"Haven't I? A Captain Phipps."

"Phipps!"

"Yes."

"A big, red-faced man with sore eyes?"

"Yes, that about describes him."

Jordan looked grim.

"My dear Mr. Stamford, you can't fight this fellow."

"Why not? He has been making himself offensive to my sister, ogling her and following her about."

"The fellow is a notorious bully, a flash blackguard. It is all part of the game."

"Do you mean to say that he insulted Mrs. Merris deliberately in order to get me to quarrel?"

Jordan nodded.

"I am sure of it. His game is to frighten people who are up from the country. If you had been a timid squire and had offered him ten guineas, you would have heard no more of Captain Phipps."

"But, my dear March, he caught the wrong man. I'll give the scoundrel a lesson."

Jordan knocked the ash from his cigar, and looked straight into the Virginian's eyes.

"No, sir, you cannot. Nor can Mrs. Merris be made the cause of a quarrel with a common bully. That's impossible."

Stamford sat and frowned.

"But I can't play the coward, March, with a swaggering rogue like this. It has got to be settled."

"I'll settle it," said Jordan.

For the moment Stamford looked at him half-angrily.

"I beg your pardon? I'm quite capable——"

"Mr. Stamford," said Jordan very quietly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, "for your sister's sake you cannot do it. There is no honour involved here. There is only one way to deal with a common bully, and I have had to deal with one or two of them in my time. Have you this fellow's address?"

Stamford hesitated.

"But, look here, March, why should you——?"

"Because I rather like spoiling a bully's game, sir," said Jordan; "leave me to deal with Captain Phipps."

Stamford pulled a piece of paper out of his fob, and, unfolding it, handed it to Jordan.

"I don't know the place. Do you?"

Jordan smiled.

"Some rookery," he said. "Fermor Street—off the Strand. It has the smell of old White Friars. I'll go and call on Captain Phipps—at once."

"I'm coming with you, March."

"No; that's impossible, sir."

"But, man, this bully and his friends might set on you."

"No, I think not," said Jordan. "I can look after myself too well, and most of these rogues know it."

Stamford jumped up and held out his hand.

"Look here, why should you do it? I'm quite ready to go on with the game."

Jordan took his outstretched hand.

"My dear Mr. Stamford, I am going to enjoy myself. Go home, order your horse, and have a good gallop. I'll bring you the fellow's apology this afternoon."

So Jordan sent William Stamford home, telling him to reassure his sister, while he set out to deal with the man who had dared to insult Mariana Merris. He fastened on his sword, and put a pistol in his pocket, knowing that if he found Captain Phipps and some of his blackguards together he might have trouble with them, for three blackguards may fight where one would snivel.

Fermor Street was a shabby street of high old houses long since destroyed. A slut of an Irishwoman opened the door to Jordan, and had she known who he was she might have tried to shut the door in his face. Jordan was polite to her, for the gentlemanly small-sword is superior to the bludgeon.

"Is Captain Phipps within, ma'am?"

The Irishwoman thought that he was, and if the gentleman chose he could go up and see. The fact was that the noble captain was awaiting an embassy of peace from Garter Street, and a solatium in the form of guineas, and he had warned the woman that he was expecting a visitor.

"Third floor back, yer honour."

"Is anybody with him?"

"Mr. Bunce, yer honour, but he won't inconvenience ye at all, at all."

Jordan climbed the stairs; they were rickety and creaked complainingly under his weight, so much so that when he reached the landing outside Captain Phipps's room two voices that had been carrying on an argument suddenly became mute. Jordan set his hand on the latch, and, flinging the door open, walked into the room.

Captain Phipps and his friend were playing cards at a table by the window. They had turned their faces simultaneously towards him like two dolls jerked by a string, and Jordan saw the bending of their knees as they made as though to rise from the table. The captain's hat and sword hung from a peg in a corner, and he had discarded his wig, a stubble of red hair standing up all over his big and brutal head. Bunce was a little man with evil, furtive eyes. They looked like a rat and a bulldog.

"Please don't rise, gentlemen; keep your seats," said Jordan, closing the door and setting his back against it.

Phipps turned in his chair.

"Who the devil are you, sir?"

"My name is March," said Jordan. "Jordan March. I think I have met you before, Captain Phipps."

Phipps tried an easy grin.

"It is possible, sir, it is possible. Glad to see you, Mr. March. Bunce, get Mr. March a chair."

Mr. Bunce got up, urged to some piece of subtlety by a wink from the captain.

"Mr. Bunce will keep his chair," said Jordan.

Mr. Bunce sat down again.

The three men looked at each other. The captain's face had a mottled tint; he moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Sit down," said Jordan.

Captain Phipps sat down with an evil glance at the man by the door.

"Did you speak to me, sir?"

"I did."

Captain Phipps glowered at him.

Jordan drew his sword and looked steadily at the captain.

"Yours is hanging there, sir, I think."

"What the devil are you playing at?" blustered the captain.

"Mr. Bunce, fetch Captain Phipps's sword for him."

"Stay where you are, Bunce."

"Get it," said Jordan with sudden fierceness, and Mr. Bunce obeyed him.

But he could not persuade his friend to own the sword, for Phipps began to swear and to tremble.

"What the hell is your game, sir? I have no quarrel with you. Do you think I am going to stand up in my own room to be spitted by a fencing-master? You are nothing but a bully, sir. What the devil d'you want?"

Jordan smiled at him.

"I thought so," he said; "Captain Phipps can insult a lady and try to bully the lady's brother."

"Ha! that's it—is it; they have hired a fencing-master to try and frighten me out of my rights."

"Phipps," said Jordan, "stand up; come here."

"I'm damned if I——"

"Come here."

The man rose and came heavily across the room. He was nearly as big as Jordan, but his eyes were the eyes of a cur.

"I would hit you," said Jordan, "if you were worth it, or if it would make you fight like a decent man. Now, go and sit down again. Have you a pen and paper in this rat-hole?"

But Captain Phipps was not a man of the pen. When he wanted a letter written, he either got someone to write it for him or scrawled it himself in some coffee-house. There was neither pen nor paper in the room, and when Mr. Bunce suggested that he should go below and borrow writing materials from the landlady, Jordan smiled at him, the smile of a sceptic.

"No, I think not. Captain Phipps will have to accompany me to the nearest coffee-house and write his apology there. Put on your wig and your hat, captain; no, you can leave your sword behind!"

Phipps, sullen and cowed, set about obeying him.

"Take notice, sir, I do this under protest."

"Does it matter?" said Jordan. "A man will hardly write himself down coward and blackguard of his own free will."

Mr. Bunce was ordered to stay in the room, and Jordan turned the key on him and conducted Captain Phipps downstairs at the point of his sword.

"If you try to play any tricks with me, my friend, it will be the last trick you will try to play in this world."

He got Captain Phipps safely put out of the house and marched him to the Half-Moon coffee-house in the Strand. The public room was nearly empty, and Jordan sat the bully down at a table, ordered a cup of coffee for himself and writing materials for the captain. He stood behind Phipps's chair, sipping his coffee, and looking down over the other man's shoulder.

"Take up your pen, captain. I will dictate your letter for you."

"I'll be damned, sir——"

"You will. Pick up that pen."

Jordan dictated the letter, watching to see that Captain Phipps took it down correctly.

"Madam, I am unworthy to address you, but I hereby beg to tender my most humble and abject apologies to you and to Mr. William Stamford, for my gross and insolent behaviour of the previous night. I am a scoundrel, a coward and a bully——"

"No, damn it," said Phipps, "I'll not write that!"

"Set it down," quoth Jordan; "it's the truth. Be quick."

"I tell you, sir——"

"Write," said Jordan, "or—by God—I'll make you fight."

Captain Phipps resumed the writing of his letter.

"I am a scoundrel, a coward and a bully. My trade is frightening people into giving me money. If ever I should dare to raise my eyes to your face, madam, may I be lodged in Newgate, where I have been before now. Madam, I remain your most humble and contemptible servant,

"PETER PHIPPS."

He had jibbed over the signing of it, protesting that the letter might be used against him, until Jordan asked him whether he thought that men of honour would trouble to persecute such a sodden, cowardly wretch as he was.

"Now go," he said, taking the letter, "but if ever I catch you at this game again, I will take you by the ear to the nearest Justice. Remember!"

He stood sipping the last of his coffee while Captain Phipps took up his hat and vanished.

Jordan walked to Garter Street in a very happy mood, for though Captain Phipps was a poor grindstone upon which to sharpen one's reputation, Jordan had enjoyed the chastening of him. He had rather hoped that the fellow would show fight, for he had had a great desire to thrash the man who had dared to use his evil eyes upon Mrs. Mariana Merris.

Will Stamford's black servant opened the door to Jordan.

"No, sah—Mr. Stamford is out riding, sah, but my lady expects you."

Jordan was aware of a little spasm of exultation. She expected him! Her brother had told her the news, and he was to have the supreme happiness of presenting this letter to her.

"Will you tell your lady, Sam, that I wait her pleasure?"

The black conducted him up the stairs to Mrs. Mariana's drawing-room, that long and pleasant room which ran from the front to the back of the house, with its two windows, the one filled with the red of the brickwork of the houses opposite, the other with the greenness of old trees. The room was panelled and painted white. The furniture was of the period of the late Queen, very handsome and solid and homely. The curtains were of rose-coloured damask, and a French carpet covered the floor.

Sambo announced him.

"Mr. March, my lady."

She was seated in her favourite chair by the window overlooking the garden, but when Jordan entered she rose and, coming a few steps to meet him, extended her hand. He bent and kissed it. He may have lingered a little over the kissing of it, for its perfume and its softness would leave him an exquisite memory. He was a little flushed, and his eyes were bright, but he did not know it.

"My brother is out riding—but he should be back very soon. I believe that we are in your debt, Mr. Jordan."

She smiled at him. She seemed to him so very stately and gracious that it was his natural impulse to make light of anything that he had done.

"I have a letter for you, madam."

He handed her Phipps's letter, and after a questioning glance at him she sat down to read it—while Jordan remained standing. He had no thought of sitting down in her presence unless she told him to do so. He watched her shapely head, with the dark hair wreathed about it, her fine hands, the sweep of her lowered lashes.

Suddenly she looked up at him. Her lips quivered; her eyes filled with flickers of light. She was on the edge of laughter, and presently it came, soft and delicious and mischievous, and Jordan had to laugh with her.

"A most quaint letter, Mr. March. Was it written of the man's own free will?"

"No, not exactly," said Jordan.

"I think you must have had a hand in it."

"I was there when he wrote it, madam."

"How near?"

"O, standing behind his chair."

Her laughter changed to something that was more serious. Jordan was naturalness itself. He stood there, smiling down at her like a big boy, quite unaffected, with no suggestion of swagger. It was obvious to her that he had enjoyed the adventure, but beneath the quiet surface she felt that a deeper inspiration moved him.

"Won't you tell me about it?" she said.

He answered that there was not much to tell, but she questioned the truth of this, and made him sit down opposite her by the window.

"You called on the bold captain?"

"If the fellow was ever a King's officer, madam, he has long left the service. He is just a common bully, with three or four rogues to back his bluster. I called on him in his lodgings."

"Was he alone?"

"He only had one little fellow with him. I had no trouble."

"And he sat down at your orders and wrote that letter?"

"Many of these fellows are cowards, madam. Besides, they know me, and I am not worth quarrelling with. The man had no fight in him. I took him across to a coffee-house and made him write that letter. He will never be insolent to you again."

She saw the faint gleam in his eyes, the glitter of an inexorable sword, the quiet anger of the man, anger that had flashed for her. She knew its inspiration, though Jordan would have sworn that he had never betrayed himself.

"Mr. March, I am very grateful to you."

He smiled at her.

"I assure you, madam, I enjoyed myself. I would not have let such an insult to you pass. Besides, I look on Mr. Stamford as a friend."

"And you," she said, "you are a friend."

He coloured up and sat looking out of the window, and if she appeared to him as a creature of mystery and stateliness, she on her part felt that he was not what he seemed. Everything about him spoke of the aristocrat, his skin, his big, well-shaped hands, his easy simplicity, the cut of his mouth and nostrils, the way he carried his head, his very movements. True, there were clumsy, oafish lords, and well-knit watermen, but Jordan had that something which no common man ever has, an atmosphere, a polish, a tightness, a repose. He was not restless, or newly self-conscious; he was not like the raw man or the raw small boy, always wondering what other people thought of him, and how best he could flummox their criticism. Your raw new man is apt to be aggressive, because in his heart of hearts he may suspect himself to be the poor, cheap thing he is.

"I hear that you are a great swordsman, Mr. March."

"It is my business, madam. I was bred to it."

"But being bred to things does not always make us clever at them!"

He smiled shyly at her.

"No. I had a small-sword in my hand when I was five. You see, Mr. Nando taught me as though I had been his own son, and he was a very fine swordsman in his day."

She had a question on the tip of her tongue, but she did not ask it, but substituted another question for it.

"You are fond of your work, Mr. Jordan?"

"I love it, madam; after all, it is my work. Is not that sound sense?"

"Admirable sense."

She asked him to bring her her fan, which lay on a far table. The fan was made of peacock feathers, and Jordan watched her spread the beautiful, rich colours of it and fan herself. She began to apologize to him that he should be kept waiting for her brother, and he was moved to wonder whether he was wearying her, for he fancied that her expressive mouth drooped a little, and her eyes had a veiled look. He felt that it was an exquisite thing for him to be in the same room with her, this pleasant, mellow room with its soft lights and delicate colours. It occurred to him that the house of Thomas and Mary Nando ought to have a room such as this.

She was looking up at him, obscurely yet intently from under her very dark lashes.

"Well, Mr. March, how is the South Sea market?"

Her glance took him unawares. He felt that she had been watching him and he had not known it.

"I have sold my shares, madam."

He smiled.

"A few days ago I had to put the same question to myself about my work."

"O, why?" she asked.

"Because my shares sold at such an absurd figure that I have more money than I should have saved honestly if I had worked for thirty years."

"I'm glad," she said. "You mean—that it is not necessary for you to work?"

"Yes. Mr. Bowyer—the attorney—sold them for me for fifteen thousand pounds."

She was surprised and delighted, and secretly intrigued by his quaint good fortune.

"And you will go on in the same way just as though nothing had happened?"

"I think so."

"How very wise of you," she said. "And you are not tempted to make a show?"

"I am going to build a house, madam."

"For yourself, of course?"

"No, for Mr. Thomas Nando and Mrs. Mary, a solid, handsome little house with a fine garden."

"That is very generous."

"I owe everything to those two dear people. I am rather happy, madam, at being able to do it."

Her eyes looked at him very kindly.

"I understand that," she said; "but how few of us realize where our true happiness lies. Tell me about the house."

Her soft voice held him. He sat down again in the chair, feeling how delightful it was to be able to talk to her. She put a man at his ease. He was sure that he could tell her things that he would tell to nobody else, for he felt that he was talking to a wonderful creature who was cleverer and wiser than he was. And yet—in her graciousness—she understood and sympathized.

"You know—I was a foundling, madam."

"Yes, I think I had heard that," she said gently.

Her eyes were deep and tranquil, and Jordan's heart blessed her for their tranquillity.

"Thomas Nando and his wife adopted me. They treated me as though I were their own son; in fact, I am their son in all that matters. That's why I am so happy to be able to build this house."

He described the plans to her, confessing that he hoped to copy the room in which they were sitting for the beauty and rightness of its proportions. He went on to speak of Tom Nando's garden, and of the land he was buying, and here—with a kind of inward smile—he broke into another confession.

"That is my passion, madam—land. Rather strange, is it not? Why should I hunger after land?"

"Perhaps it is in your blood?" she said.

He looked at her with a startled and questioning brightness in his steady eyes. She had put an idea into his head, an idea of such suggestiveness that it was like a seed dropped into the soil. The passion for land might be in his blood!

"I had never thought of that," he said with immense seriousness.

She observed him, and there were strange stirrings within her.

"How did you find it out?" she asked.

"I think it came to me, madam, when I began to ride out into the country in the early morning."

"And the hunger is for much land?"

"I confess that it is. Miles of it—woodlands and fields, or wild country, land over which a man can ride free from daybreak to dusk."

"Perhaps—it will come to you, Mr. Jordan."

He smiled full at her.

"Hardly. How could it?"

She was silent, and into the silence came the sound of a horse being pulled up in the road below.

"My brother," she said.

She rose, she crossed to the other window, and smiled down at him.

"Mr. March is here. He has been waiting."

When her brother came into the room she took Captain Phipps's letter from her bosom and held it out to him, while her eyes glanced smilingly aside at Jordan.

"Mr. March brought this."

Stamford read it, and then breaking into a laugh, he turned impulsively on Jordan.

"March, I'm more than obliged to you. What did you do to the fellow?"

"O, I just frightened him," said Jordan; "he will not trouble you any further."

"You must have a terrible eye, man."

"I think," said Mrs. Merris, "that Mr. March has a rather terrible reputation."

"Madam!" said Jordan, laughing.

"I mean with the sword."

And so the incident ended, though Will Stamford insisted on celebrating Captain Phipps's apology and his own escape from a shabby adventure, by giving a dinner in Jordan's honour.

"No time like the moment, March. To-night is the night. Marie you can arrange something, and send out notes and beat up a few friends?"

"I do not know how Mr. Jordan feels about it," she said, "but I think it would be much more charming if we made it a dinner for three, our three selves."

"What do you say, March? The honour is with you. I want the whole story of how you put the thumbscrews on that big rogue."

"I agree with Mrs. Merris," said Jordan.

"Good. We'll drink each other's health in the best bottle of Madeira in London."

Jordan took leave of them till the evening, and walked back to Spaniards Court to tell the Nandos where he was going and to put on his best black suit and a laced shirt and ruffles. He was in a gay mood. He had served his great lady, and she had been very kind and gracious to him, and had made him sit and talk of his own affairs as though they were matters of interest to her. He could have forgiven that big rogue, Captain Phipps, for providing so rare an opportunity for spending himself in Mrs. Mariana's service. Blessed be all bullies!

Jordan found Douce sitting on the blue settee in Mrs. Mary's parlour, and Mrs. Mary had been telling her all about Jordan's fortune and his plans for the new house. Jordan was to be congratulated, and Douce jumped up with what was for her a glowing impulsiveness, and held out her hands.

"O, Mr. Jordan, I'm so glad."

Jordan's gaiety made him behave like a big boy, or like a brother to his little sister. Douce was just a child, and to Jordan her childishness was emphasized by Mrs. Mariana's slender height and beautiful maturity. His head was full of this other woman, her tranquil graciousness, the exquisite texture of her, her clever, laughing eyes, his sense of her standing above him and looking kindly down. But towards Douce there was an unconscious and half-playful bending of his manhood. She was such a little thing, and he was blind to the passionate strength of the little thing's sense of her own dignity.

Instead of taking her hands, he picked her up in his own big hands and held her high in the air, as a romping man holds a child.

"And so am I, Douce; and so am I."

He smiled up at her, but his smile died away.

"Set me down, please," she said, flushing to the brilliance of her hair.

He set her down. She was angry, and her anger puzzled him, so swift and vivid was it. Her eyes were all clouded, her mouth a thin red line. She would not look at him, but, returning to the settee, picked up her mittens and began to pull them on.

Jordan stood helpless. He felt that he had hurt her, without understanding how he had hurt her. There was something in her flushed distress which suggested humiliation, a sudden and bitter realization of what she meant to him and what she did not mean.

"I'm sorry. Douce," said Jordan.

"Don't mention it," she answered.

She stood up; she passed by him with downcast eyes, and going to Mrs. Mary kissed her and turned quickly towards the door. Jordan went to open it for her, but she neither thanked him nor looked at him as she passed out.

Jordan came back to Mary Nando.

"I've offended her," he said. "I never meant anything. I wouldn't hurt her for worlds."

Mrs. Mary looked up from the work which lay in her lap.

"You treated her like a child, Jordan."

"Well, mother, she is not much more than a child, is she?"

Mrs. Mary's eyes returned to her work. She was sorry for Douce, sorry as only a warm-hearted woman can be; but if Jordan was blind, was it not better for both of them that he should remain so?

It had been a hot summer's day, and in the cool of the evening Douce walked in her garden. The sun lay behind the great elms and the high hedges, and through the network of dark foliage shot a thousand arrows of light which struck the grass and the flowers and the trunks of the old apple trees. The shadows looked like painted shapes, black and sharp and very still. Under the parlour window a cat was playing with her two kittens, but Douce took no notice of them, having no playfulness in her thoughts. She wandered aimlessly up and down the path along her favourite border, which was all grey, and blue and gold with herbs, larkspur and marigold, and sometimes she would pause and look at some flower which glowed with liquid colour—a sapphire or a jasper hung in a ray of light. She herself looked pale under her glowing hair; it was the paleness of expectancy, a lingering at the gate of life for some sound to break the silence.

Old Sylvester was asleep in his chair. Douce glanced in on him once or twice, and saw him with his chin resting on his chest, his high forehead fallen into the shadow. The book that he had been reading had slipped to the floor and lay with some of its pages all crumpled. A little pang of pity stirred in her. How old he was, how helpless! His spectacles—too—were on the floor, and she felt that she ought to go in and rescue them, but as she moved towards the garden door at the back of the house she heard a sound which made her pause as though a hand had touched her heart.

She stood very still. She did not go to see who had come in at the gate. She heard footsteps and they sounded to her like the footsteps of a man. "A month—a whole month," she thought; "perhaps he has come at last." As in a dream she re-lived the days of that month of waiting, those days of aloofness which were to prove to her whether he cared or not, whether he thought of her only as a child. "I will not go there again," she had said; "he shall come to me if he wishes to come."

In those moments of suspense she knew how much she cared and how frail a thing her pride was. Her heart felt smothered, and she pressed her hands to her breasts.

"It must be, it must be," she assured herself, yet doubting it all the while.

Then her dark eyes seemed to grow more dark. She gave a little shiver and shrank against the wall; her eyelids flickered; her whole pose betrayed a bitter sense of unfulfilment, a consciousness of humiliation.

"Sis," a voice called; "Sis! Where are you?"

And yet when she came from behind the house and met him on the stretch of grass between the parlour window and the flower border, her brother saw nothing but the Douce of the workaday world, a slightly austere and grave-eyed little housewife in black mittens and a white frilled cap. She was perfectly calm; she betrayed nothing; she observed more than she was observed. Her impression was that her brother looked worried and ill and thin, and this impression had been with her for several weeks.

"O, there you are!" he said, almost irritably; "I wondered where the devil you had got to."

"It was so hot in the house; the garden is cooler."

"Hot! I have felt like a wet rag all day. Where is father?"

"Asleep in his chair. We did not expect you."

"Well, I suppose not. The streets are filthy, and I thought I would get out of them for an hour or two. I think a chair out here—or, better still, the grass."

He sprawled; he took off his hat and wig, and she noticed his restless movements and the wavering expression of his eyes. He seemed unable to look at anything steadily or for any length of time. He lay prone; he rolled over on his back and stared at the sky; he tried lying on his side propped on his elbow; but in none of these positions could he remain at rest.

She asked him if he would care for some supper.

"No; but I have a thirst."

She suggested raspberry wine.

"Good lord, Sis, that treacly stuff! Now, if you had something bitter, the juice of a lemon."

"You shall have it," she said.

She glanced in at old Sylvester and saw that he was still asleep, and in going to prepare the bitter drink which should quench her brother's thirst she was aware of the qualms of her own bitterness and of a thirst that was not to be quenched. She hardened herself. She suppressed all that nature asked of her and all that life seemed unable to give.

Twilight came. She had taken out a chair for herself, and some of her endless needlework as an excuse and an occupation for her hands. She went on stitching even when she could not see, while Maurice lay on his back, with his hands under his head and one knee crooked over the other. He kept jerking his foot, and the little restless movement irritated her, for she was fighting the bitter restlessness within herself, and trying to drown it in a mood of severe calmness. She was angry with herself and she wanted the anger to pass. From the love which consumed her she wished to escape into a world of insensitive coldness.

"Seen the Nandos lately?" asked her brother from the grass.

The question was like a blow on a painful bruise. She ran her needle into her finger, gave a little spasmodic catching of the breath, and strove for calmness.

"Tsst—it is too dark to see. I've pricked my finger."

She put her finger to her lips and observed him, but the dusk made his face obscure.

"No, not for three or four weeks. Poor Mr. Thomas is growing very old."

Maurice moved restlessly.

"March is quite a rich fellow. I walked round by way of old Nando's garden. They have bought land and are building a house. The foundations are in already."

"I suppose Jordan is building it for his mother and father?"

"So they say. Is that all you know about it, Douce?"

"Quite all," she answered.

Maurice sat up.

"I should have thought there was something else. When a man begins building a house he is thinking of settling down."

"Well, why should not Jordan settle down?"

He looked at her with furtive and momentary intentness.

"Yes, but that means someone to settle down with. Who's the lady?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she said. "Is there a lady?"

Her complete calmness baffled him.

"I thought you might have heard something," he said, for he had his own reasons for hoping that Jordan March might marry his sister.

He did not press her any farther, and to escape from the pain of appearing calm in the face of her own distress. Douce pretended that she heard her father stirring and, rising, entered the house. Sylvester was still asleep, but he woke when she pushed purposely against a chair.

"Who's that?"

"Douce," she said in her most matter-of-fact voice. "Be careful; your spectacles are on the floor. And Maurice is here in the garden. Would you like to go out into the garden, or shall I bring a light here?"

"I'll go out into the garden. Has Maurice been here long?"

"No, not very long. I think he is very tired with the heat."

She lay awake for a long while that night making herself face the too evident truth that her month of waiting had brought her nothing but disillusionment. She had put her hope to the test, lit it like a candle and set it in her window while she sat down to wait and to watch. She had decided that she would not go again to Spaniards Court until Jordan came to her, and the inference was obvious since he did not come. Her intuition had warned her well. She was just a child to him, something a little less than a woman, a little thing who looked too small to hold so big a passion. He did not love her, and indeed she had so weak a lure for him that he could come to Nando's garden, which was less than half a mile away, and yet come no farther. He was more interested in bricks and mortar than he was in her. She made herself realize this, forcing herself to recognize it with a fierce white austerity.

"It is better to be cold," she thought; "better, far better."

For Jordan was busy with other things, interested in other things, and Douce knew very little about men. Even if a woman grants the ephemeral character of most love affairs, she insists on assuming that her own affair shall be the one

great incident in the man's life. Even the veriest philanderer must love her with permanence and as he has never loved any of her predecessors. Douce knew that Jordan had had adventures, and she had been ready to see herself as the tender and final figure closing the door of the last of his adventures.

"Is it that he just does not care, or is it the house, or someone else?"

As a matter of fact, his aloofness was a complex of all three of these conjectures. Jordan had bought his land and chosen his builder, one Mr. Mactavish, a Scotsman, who had a reputation for sense and solidity, and who was rather like the house that Jordan wished to build. "Handsome and solid and not too big." "Good red breck, Mr. March, and the best pine for the panelling." They were a pair of enthusiasts; they stumped the ground together, and measured and planned and argued. Jordan had very definite ideas, and they met with very little harshness, for it appeared that the house which Jordan wished to build was the very sort of house which Mr. Mactavish approved of.

"Umphs!" said he, which was his peculiar grunt of sympathetic assent, "you and I will be wanting no long spoons, Mr. March."

The house was to be a red house with stone quoins and cornice, white sashed windows, and white classic porch. Its length was to be twice its height.

"I like a house to sit down comfortably, Mr. Mactavish."

"I agree with ye, Mr. March. I have no manner of use for your lanky, pigeon-chested façades. Give me breadth, sir, in a house and a woman. You will not be getting nearer to heaven by marrying a six-foot shrew."

Jordan and Tom Nando walked over each evening when Jordan's work was done, and sometimes they met Mr. Mactavish there, and would adjourn to the garden cottage for fruit, a mug of ale or a pipe of tobacco. Mactavish was as great a lover of gardens as he was of houses, and the linking up of old Tom's garden with the new house and the new ground gave Mr. Mactavish room for enterprise.

"Na, na, I'll not be spoiling your garden, Mr. Nando he declared."

He was always ready to draw plans and to sketch effects with the stick of charcoal he carried in a little silver snuffbox, and when the inspiration was upon him he would draw his plans on any surface that offered itself. The whitewashed wall of the cottage was used for the plan of a formal garden in the Dutch style, with a water cistern, brick paths, and clipped yew and box trees. He sketched out a rose walk and a belvedere on the white top of the cottage table, much to the disgust of the good woman who had to scrub it. "Drat the fellow! He might have used the tail of his own shirt." In fact, there was another sort of tale about Mr. Mactavish. It was said that the madness of inspiration had once seized upon him in church, and having no surface upon which to record it, he made use of the bald head of an old gentleman sitting in front of him, who had removed his wig because of the heat.

His lean, Norse intensity was much to Jordan's liking, and in Garter Street there was intensity of a more delicate temper hidden beneath a gracious languor. Jordan still took his morning rides, and once a week he breakfasted with Mr. Stamford and Mrs. Mariana Merris. He was quite at his ease here by reason of the attitude he had assumed in his relation to Mrs. Merris. It was simple, strong and unstudied. She was his great lady, and his admiration was so open and yet so restrained that it was like the broad sunlight on a still day. It was very evident that Jordan thought her a wonderful and a mysterious creature, an Olympian, quite out of his workaday world, and that he was content to look at her in this way. He was happy and proud so sit at the same table with her and to listen to her voice.

When William Stamford sailed for Virginia Mrs. Merris remained in the Garter Street house. An ancient aunt, a Miss Julia Stamford, came up out of the wilds of the Welsh borders to keep house for her niece. She was a very mild little old lady, whose admiration for Mrs. Mariana was almost as great as Jordan's, and since Jordan was allowed to call at the house in Garter Street once a week, he came to know Miss Julia Stamford quite intimately. He brought the little old lady flowers, but he never brought flowers to Mrs. Merris, and Mariana teased her aunt about Mr. Jordan March.

"I never get flowers, Aunt Julia!"

"No, my dear; but I think the young man shows a very nice feeling."

Mrs. Merris laughed, but she understood and appreciated the subtlety of Jordan's reticence and the pretty restraint that he showed in his homage.

"And he is only a fencing-master, my dear! You would think that he was a gentleman."

"Well, perhaps he is, Aunt Julia."

"I admit that he is a young man of great sense," said Miss Stamford, "and I think that it is very gracious of you to let him call on us, my dear. But——"

Mrs. Mariana put the subject aside.

"Mr. March saved my brother from a duel, Aunt Julia; he can behave like a very great gentleman; otherwise I should not allow him to bring you those flowers."

It was Tom Nando who remarked one night at supper that Douce St. Croix had not been to see them for more than a month. Mrs. Mary looked at Jordan, who had a piece of paper by his plate on which Mr. Mactavish had drawn one of his innumerable plans. Tom Nando understood her look and the little shake of the head she gave him, but though Jordan appeared to be absorbed in Mr. Mactavish's charcoal drawing he had heard what Thomas Nando had said to Mrs. Mary.

After supper, Tom Nando being out of the room for a moment, Jordan came and stood behind Mrs. Mary's chair.

"Is it true that Douce has not been here, mother?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Is the old man ill?"

"He may be; I haven't heard."

"Someone ought to inquire," said Jordan.

Mrs. Mary said nothing which might lead him to believe that there was anything mysterious about Douce's aloofness, for she had learnt that it is better to leave young people to settle their own affairs. If Jordan wanted Douce he had only to go after her; he was within half a mile of the St. Croix's house nearly every day.

The same thought occurred to Jordan, and on the following evening he walked on from Tom Nando's garden and knocked at Mr. Sylvester's door. Douce opened it to him, a Douce whose eyes betrayed nothing.

"Mother was wondering what had happened to you, so I thought I would come and see. I hope Mr. St. Croix is not ill?"

"No, he is very well, thank you," she said with obstinate composure; "but won't you come in?"

Jordan smiled at her as he entered, but she did not return his smile. She took him into the parlour, where Mr. Sylvester was reading, and she left the two men together there and disappeared into the garden. She hid herself and waited, pulling a flower to pieces with her small white fingers.

"If he cares——" she thought.

But twilight fell and no man came in search of her, though presently she heard his voice.

"Douce, I must be getting back. Where are you?"

She remained concealed, and her little face looked pinched and stricken. She refused to surrender to the pleading of her own heart.

"He does not care enough," she said to herself. "Would he have stayed there——"

She remained hidden until she heard the closing of the gate and Jordan's footsteps in the lane.

Jordan had fastened his horse's bridle to the spoke of a heavy cart. A gap had been cut in the hedge, which could be closed by a couple of hurdles, and within this hedge and about twenty yards from the road stood the beginnings of Thomas Nando's house of rest. The ground between the house and the hedge was all scarred with wheel marks, and since it had been raining in the night, these wheel marks were full of water.

Jordan looked about him. He saw the stacks of red bricks and the piles of freestone fresh from the mason's yard, a splodge of mortar, a pile of scaffold poles and put-logs, brick hods, barrows, odd pieces of mortar-whitened timber, the wooden hut in which tools and lime were stored. There was order in all this seeming disorder, a sense of growth and of purpose. The green surface that had been grass had been trampled in places to a stodge of mud, but Jordan knew that in six months there would be a garden here, paved walks, borders, clipped trees, a sedate beauty as Mactavish understood it. He picked up two of the red bricks, weighed them in his hands, and striking them together like cymbals, was pleased with the crisp, strong note they gave. Already the walls stood some twelve feet high, and showed the spaces for the doorway and lower windows.

Overhead hung a thin blue sky, a rain-washed sky, clear and cloudless and fresh. It was six o'clock in the morning, and Jordan had the place to himself. He stepped in through one of the window spaces and found himself in what was to be Mrs. Mary's parlour, the room inspired by that room of Mrs. Merris's in Garter Street, with its long window at either end and its double glimpse of the world without. Jordan stood and smiled. His eyes looked out through the northern window space, and he saw what he wished to see, a long stretch of turf with the early sunlight on it, and rising slightly to the edge of a little wood of well-grown oak trees. The trunks of the trees were in the shadow thrown by the fringe of the foliage. They looked very dark, a greenish black in colour, but here and there fingers of sunlight touched them and left stigmata of gold. Nothing could be seen from this northern window save the long sweep of sunlit grass, the oak wood, and the soft blurred greyness of a distant hill beyond.

"Just right—just as it should be," thought Jordan. "But why?"

There was that in him which recognized the rightness of the thing that he had planned, though he could not explain its rightness or how he had come to foresee it; but by some innate intuition he had. He had stood on this very spot with Mr. Mactavish when the turf was green and untouched, and he had explained the shape of the room and the setting of the windows.

"That view there over the grass to the trees, and on this side the garden."

He remembered that Mactavish had looked at him queerly.

"For a city man, Mr. March, you have a good understanding, sir, of how a country house should be placed. There is all the deference between the eye of one man and another."

Jordan smiled. If Mactavish had cause for surprise over the fact that a fencing-master should have ideas on the setting out of a house and garden, Jordan had come to that stage when a man is surprised by the unexpectedness of the things which happen within himself. He was a fencing-master, a big fellow who had taken the broad and none too gentle life of London into his hands, but somehow he was more than what he had been, and he knew it. There was another man inside him, a man who showed himself more strong and purposeful as each day passed, a man whose eyes saw farther, beyond the tops of the houses, over the heads of the crowd in the street. This second self had first made itself felt on those morning rides into the country. Life had suddenly enlarged itself and taken on the mystery of a new spaciousness. The boy had become merged in the man, a man whose destiny was to accomplish things.

Jordan stepped out through the northern window space and stood looking towards the fruit trees of Tom Nando's garden. That garden was the beginning. Its gate opened on a path of reverie, and during those few months when he stood there under the shadow of the rising house he was aware of a swift flowing of many memories, memories which provoked and challenged him. His mood was a complex of questions asked and remaining unanswered. Some of them seemed strangely irrelevant. For instance, in looking at this ground which was his, these fourteen acres or so of grass and woodland, he was somehow moved to dream in square leagues instead of in acres. His mind was expansive. It reached out beyond its reasonable limits, and its desire overstepped ditches and hedgerows. And why? Hitherto his life had gone to and fro over the flagstones of Spaniards Court. And, stranger still, why should the building of this house be linked perpetually with thoughts of Mrs. Mariana Merris? It was pleasant to accomplish things, to possess a landscape to set off the solidity of your endeavour. But why the figure of a woman, and of this particular woman?

He strolled across the grass towards the wood, and turning to look back at the square shell of the half-built house, he found himself wondering whether Mrs. Merris would ever see it completed. And what would she think of it? He answered his own questions by telling himself that the house could be of no particular interest to Mrs. Merris. It

concerned Thomas and Mary Nando, and had no meaning for a very great lady who chose to be gracious to him because he had done her brother a service.

Jordan wandered into the wood, letting his eyes dwell on the tree trunks and the spread of the great branches into the mass of foliage above.

"I should like leagues of this," was his thought.

Leagues of rolling woodlands, wild and unknown! He was growing fastidious, ambitious, just because a little old lawyer in the city had put him in the way of making a sum of money! Mere luck! But was it luck? He made himself follow out the sequence of events, the cause and effect of that affair. He had done Mr. Bowyer a service. Obviously he would not have been able to render the old man that service had he not trained himself from boyhood to be the man he was with the sword. His reputation as a man of arms had been sufficient to scare other men from plundering a victim. In fact, was there such a thing as luck? Did not the fact of what a man was make certain other things happen to him?

Jordan went back to his horse. He was slow in mounting, and he let the beast walk as he pleased along the deserted lane. He was still thinking, considering the newness in himself, those changes which had come to him almost imperceptibly, but which were none the less real and surprising. His view of life was different. Almost it seemed to him that the old life was ceasing to satisfy him. There was not the same zest in it. Teaching other men to do indifferently what he could do so well, and still remaining what he was, a favoured servant in a gentleman's world. He could see himself following old Tom Nando's career, going regularly each day into the fencing-school, putting other men through their paces, pocketing the guineas, growing a little older, a little more cunning, a little slower and stiffer as the years went by. The day would come when he would need another Jordan March, just as Nando had needed him, and that meant marriage—marriage with whom?

He felt something stir in him.

"No; there must be more in it than that!"

And again he felt the overmastering spell, the lure of a broad horizon, the vague mystery of some other life in which greater things happened.

Jordan found Tom and Mary at breakfast. He sat down gravely at the familiar table, with those two familiar faces on his left and right, and he ate his breakfast in silence. He was preoccupied. He did not realize that he had grown more silent and apart during the last few months, and that these others realized it. They looked at each other across the table when Jordan left them to join Bertrand in the fencing-school.

Tom Nando seemed to understand the question in his wife's eyes.

"It may be that, mother; but I'm thinking it is not that."

"He was like that before," said she.

Nando went for his pipe, yet he did not fill it, but stood behind his wife's chair, tapping his knuckles with the pipe-stem. He had the air of not wishing to see some fact which might prove itself self-evident.

"He is taken up with the new house."

"At his age, Tom!"

"He is older than his age, my dear. Some men are."

Mrs. Mary half turned in her chair, and Tom Nando saw the troubled look in her expressive, thrush-like eyes.

"Tom, supposing he is growing out of us?"

"Growing out of us, mother!" And he winced. "What do you mean?"

"I have never forgotten it."

"What, my dear?"

"That he is not our child. It might be in the blood, Tom. Why, look at the new house he is building. It's for us, but it's a gentleman's house."

"Tut, tut!" said her man. "Why shouldn't a big fellow have big ideas? I think it's time that Jordan got married."

His wife rose up, and going to the window, sat down on the blue settee.

"I used to say that, Tom."

"So you did—so you did. Well, weren't you hinting that old Sylvester's girl?"

Mrs. Mary did not turn her head.

"She wants him, but he does not want her, Tom."

"Sure?"

"I think that I am quite sure," said Mrs. Mary; "and now I come to think of it, I wish I wasn't so sure. One comes to learn, Tom, that a bird in the hand——"

"Even if it is a small bird, my dear!"

"Why, just so. Isn't being happy just knowing how big your larder is and how much you can keep in it? Strange meats, Tom, beyond a man's stomach, don't make him so happy."

"Ha, victuals, old girl! Get the lad a good little housewife and a family! Well, why not Douce? She's a pretty thing."

"Tom," said Mrs. Mary, "what's the use of that if Jordan isn't taken with that sort of dish?"

Jordan went mechanically through the morning's work. He gave lessons to two gentlemen up from the country, who had been told that it was the proper thing to go to Nando's. They were very rough and clumsy, they had loud voices, and they spoke to Jordan as though he were a superior sort of groom.

"Now, my lad, let us see some of your trick play."

Jordan smiled in the man's stupid red face.

"You are not ripe for that, sir, yet."

"What! And me the best shot at a bird in the whole county of Norfolk! Why, man, I used to be some boy with the skewers!"

"What do you want me to do, sir?"

"Why, see if you can keep me from hitting you. Let's have some life in the game. Damn it, don't I pay for it?"

"Just as you please, sir," said Jordan.

He fenced with the gentleman as he would have played with a child. His thoughts were elsewhere. He was amused by the young Norfolk squire's fierce red face, the way his blue eyes gave a sort of blink every time he tried a thrust at him. It was a stupid, hectoring, coarse-skinned face, with a Roman nose, high cheek bones and cruel lips. The man was both arrogant and clumsy. Jordan could imagine him cursing his servants and being rough with women, "And you," he thought, "are a gentleman of property; you may number your acres by the thousand; you have your great house; you go out with your gun and your horse. What a life I could make of that!"

Next moment he felt the foil's button under his ribs. It hit him hard and true, and he was startled. He saw the insolent smile on the squire's face, his red mouth opening like the beak of a crowing cock.

"Ha, ha, Mr. Fencing Master! I got you fair and square."

Jordan smiled, but he had come back out of his dreams. Never in his life had he been so pinked by a country bumpkin.

"So you did, sir."

"Dick," said the man from Norfolk, turning with a wink and a swagger to his friend, "these London cocks don't fight much better than the cocks on our dunghills."

"Fudge!" said his friend; "he let you hit him just to please you."

"Not so, gentlemen," said Jordan. "It was a fair hit, and I own to it."

"Well, my lad, you are a sportsman, anyway. See if you can hit me."

"I'll do it before your friend counts ten, sir."

"Right, by God! There's a guinea on it. Start the clock, Dick."

But Jordan made his hit before the other gentleman had counted five. He had ceased dreaming about acres, and had remembered that it was his business to handle a sword.

Jordan went in to his dinner with a thoughtful face. He sat down at the table without smiling at Mrs. Mary, and his silence and his preoccupation made the two other elders look meaningfully at each other. "It—is—a woman," said Mrs. Mary's eyes; "it must be a woman." Tom cut himself a slice of bread, and rallied Jordan on his solemn face.

"Who has been preaching you a sermon, my lad?"

Jordan's eyes lit up, and he was able to take the laugh against himself.

"Something happened to me this morning."

"What?"

"A raw squire hit me clean and fair on the ribs. It woke me up."

"Hit you! What the devil were you doing, Dan?"

"Thinking of something else—the new house and all that."

Nando frowned, but Mrs. Mary breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's not like our reputation, Dan."

"No, sir; but I made it right with the gentleman. Did it ever happen to you?"

Nando stared at him, his fork half-way between his plate and his lips. A little crinkle of a smile crossed his face, and he glanced momentarily at Mrs. Mary.

"Well, now I come to think of it, it did."

"And when was that, sir?"

"To tell you the truth, Dan, it was on the morning of the day after I had first seen your mother."

For some reason or other all three of them appeared interested in their platters, but it was Jordan who extracted the moral from the story.

"It does not do to dream when you have a sword in your hand. A man ought to keep his eyes on his work."

"Sure," said Nando, "but a man is not a machine, my son."

Mrs. Mary was still unconvinced, for her husband's recalling of that incident of their early life had quickened her own suspicions. She could not see a man of Jordan's age absorbed in the building of a house, and her thoughts still searched for the woman. She had heard of Mrs. Merris, but she had never seen her; and yet she was right in wondering whether Jordan had some picture of this lady hidden at the back of his mind. He had, but he did not realize the significance of the picture. It was more like an altar-piece than a miniature that a man carries over his heart.

Jordan's thoughts went often to the house in Garter Street. He saw Mrs. Merris so occasionally, and knew so little of her real life, that he often wondered what she did, how she passed the hours, what friends she had. He had been thinking about her that morning, and had he been able to see her in her house he might have thought more of his fencing and less of his dreams.

Two coaches stood outside Mrs. Mariana's house, the one a red coach with black wheels, the other black and yellow. Half a dozen servants lounged on her doorstep, and two coachmen had left their boxes and were examining each other's horses. The panels of each coach carried a coat-of-arms. The sun shone full along the street with its chequer of red houses and green gardens, and there were no shadows, but only one long stretch of sunlit road.

Up above in the drawing-room a little group of men and women made it plain to themselves and Mrs. Merris that the polite world had discovered her. It had become the fashion to speak of her as "the beautiful Virginian," to describe her as elegant and charming, and to spread the report that she was rich. Already more than one gentleman had discovered that she was chaste. Aunt Julian, sitting at the garden window with her embroidery frame and her parrot, twittered and smirked and watched the interplay. It was evident that the widow could marry again whenever she pleased, for quite a number of gentlemen were ready to persuade her that a second marriage may be more blessed than the first.

They came at first with their aunts or their sisters or their mothers, and then, having sacrificed to the social duty, they came alone and met each other. They sat or stood around her chair, trying to be as witty and as exquisite and as compelling as their persons, brains and tailors would permit. They pretended to laugh at each other's jokes. They paid court to Aunt Julian, stroked the head of her green parrot, and spoilt the bird's modesty by persistently calling her "Pretty Poll."

Their coats were as gay as the bird's green back, and there were times when some of them talked no more wisely than poor Poll. The bird's alert eye missed nothing, and often, when her drawing-room had emptied itself, Mrs. Mariana would go and stroke the parrot's head and ask the bird what she thought of them.

"And how did they please you to-day, Poll?"

Poll would produce her second remark.

"What a queer world—what a queer world!"

"It is, my dear. Aunt Julia, your bird is wiser than many of the men."

She remained herself in spite of all this homage. Always there was a little humorous gleam at the back of her dark eyes, as though she knew exactly what all this enthusiasm was worth. She kept these men at a little distance from her chair, showing no particular favour to any one of them, and remaining serene and smiling when they tried to outstay each other—and they often did.

There was one gentleman who was very successful in this game of outstaying all rivals. He was very tall, very pale, with ironical eyes and a chin that jutted out like the lower horn of the new moon. His presence seemed to exert a sense of pressure in the room. Slowly but surely, with satirical quietness and restrained arrogance, he forced the lesser men to disappear. He touched them with his cold eyes, and they became babbling fools or self-conscious puppets.

Sfex outstayed them all on this particular day. He stood by Mrs. Mariana's chair, looking down at the warm glowing beauty of her, her smooth completeness, her exquisite maturity, and coveting it and her as an arrogant and clever man covets the richest fruit on the wall. His wit contended with her subtle, smiling languor. She was deep, and he felt her deepness. She was one of those rare women who are never obvious and dull.

"Well, dear lady, if you have not heard an Italian sing you must grant me the honour of taking you to hear her. I have a box for to-night."

"I will come with pleasure," she said, "but on conditions."

"Name them."

She gave him a half-veiled, upward look.

"Aunt Julia has never been to the opera."

"That is soon remedied."

"And Aunt Julia is never parted from her parrot. Where Aunt Julia goes Poll goes, too."

Sfex gave one of his icy smiles.

"Well, Poll shall go to the opera. I dare say she can behave more prettily than most of the scatter-brains who go there and chatter. She can call the whole world queer."

"Which it is."

"Certainly. We will teach her to shout, 'Bravo—bravo,' and to criticize the ladies' heads and dresses."

"And that is why the opera exists."

"Of course."

When George—Baron Sfex—had bowed over her hand and gone she remained at the window in a half-smiling, half-scornful reverie, fanning herself gently, while Miss Stamford went on with the sorting of her silks.

"A most witty gentleman, my dear."

"O, witty—yes! But how dull to spend one's life watching the glitter of an iceberg."

"He has very fine manners."

"Yes, beautifully cut. The ring is always on the hand, you know."

She gave a little impatient flick of the fan, and, rising, went to stroke the parrot.

"We are very wise people, Poll, aren't we?"

For concerning men—the mass of men—Mrs. Mariana had no illusions. She knew just how much and how little they wanted—a glass of wine, a dinner, a pair of lips. Each day was the same.

She returned to the open window, as though the air and the sunlight called her.

"Yes, how futile," she thought, "how evanescent! Give me a man who does not class me with his dinner, a man whose passion is to accomplish something, and who would let me share in the accomplishing of it."

When a young woman comes to pay a call, but hesitates and turns back and then changes her mind once more, her vacillations are not without significance to another woman who happens to be on the watch. Mary Nando, seated in her parlour and busy with her needle, saw a girl enter Spaniards Court, walk half-way across it, and then falter and turn back. The girl was wearing a black cloak and hood, and the edge of a basket showed under her cloak.

"Why, my dear, what are we afraid of?"

It would seem that Douce asked herself that same question, and answered it by turning about again and crossing the court to the Nandos' door. Mrs. Mary remained where she was, diligently sewing, for when a bird is shy the less stir one makes the better. She heard Douce's knock, a very undetermined little knock, but Meg happened to be coming down the stairs and heard it.

"Miss St. Croix, ma'am."

Douce came into the room as though she were half-afraid to find Jordan there. Her eyes looked like two little dark, fixed points. Mrs. Mary put her work on the table and smiled at her, but made no attempt to rise.

"Why, what a stranger you are! I'm glad to see you, my dear."

She held her head in a certain way that should have suggested to Douce that she expected Douce to kiss her. Mrs. Mary was very kissable, even to other women, but Douce did not kiss her. She sat down on the blue settee, kept her basket beside her and put back her hood.

"I am on my way to my brother," she said.

She sat there very stiffly with her hands in her lap, rigid with disapproval, disapproval of herself and of the motive that had made her enter Spaniards Court and knock at Thomas Nando's door. She was one of those passionate and sensitive little women to whom love does not come easily and who may show no mercy to their own emotions. She was rigid, but with a rigidity that trembled.

Now, it was quite natural that Douce should visit her brother, nor did her pausing by the way to look in on Mrs. Mary call for any explanation; but a difficult pride will always try to explain everything. Mrs. Mary had her own understanding of the thing that was troubling Douce.

"La, you are going to call on Mr. Maurice?"

"Yes," said Douce.

"And is he still in the same lodging, my dear?"

"The same."

"And how is he?"

"Very well, thank you."

"And Mr. Sylvester?"

"I think he is much as usual."

"He keeps you very much tied, my dear."

"I don't regret it."

"Of course not. I quite understand that, my dear."

They kept it up between them like two children playing solemnly at catch-ball, throwing their remarks at each other and returning them with perfect gravity. Mrs. Mary resumed her sewing. When you are painfully conscious of another person's discomfort it is comforting to appear at ease and using your hands.

There was a short silence, a pause in the game of the exchanging of trivialities, and Mrs. Mary felt that it would have to be re-started. She was too much aware of the rigid little figure seated on the blue settee.

"Mr. Maurice must be doing very well with Mr. Durand."

"I hope so," said Douce. "I have been mending some of his linen."

"What, you still do that?"

"Yes."

"Really," said Mrs. Mary, "it is time that the young gentleman found a wife to do it for him! All the same, I am mending one of Jordan's shirts."

She gave Douce a very kind look, a look that said:

"Come down off your perch, you little bird. I'm your very good friend." But the look had no effect on Douce. If anything she grew more rigid, more severe in her inward scolding of herself. Mrs. Mary fancied that the girl was listening, and ready to take flight at the first sound.

"My dear, you are difficult!" she thought.

She bent her head over her work, and after a moment's reflection put out another lure.

"I have been thinking the same about Jordan, my dear."

Douce questioned her with her eyes.

"You see, he is building this fine house for us, and when we move into it I've been thinking he will want someone here."

She raised her head and gave Douce a sudden encouraging smile. She was going as near to the girl as she could without touching that tense, sensitive surface, for Mrs. Mary had been coming to the decision that if Jordan must marry she would like him to marry Douce St. Croix.

"Yes, men need so much looking after," said Douce, with an air of staid severity.

"I think Jordan would be quite easy. You must marry a man with a good temper, my dear."

There was a moment's silence, and then Douce cut the conversation in two with the abruptness of a young woman snipping a piece of ribbon with a pair of scissors.

"I shall never marry. I have my father."

She laid a sudden hand on her basket, and put her other hand to her hood.

"O, come, my dear," said Mrs. Mary, "there is no hurry. Mr. Nando will be in at any moment for a cup of chocolate, and you are a favourite of his, you know."

She said nothing about Jordan, knowing that it was Jordan whom Douce both longed and feared to meet; but Douce would not be persuaded, and the more Mrs. Mary tried persuasion the more determined Douce was to go. Her haste had a touch of severity. She came near to snubbing poor Mrs. Mary, who was trying to pour the oil of her sympathy upon a difficult situation.

Douce pulled her hood forward over her white cap and red hair, and, giving Mrs. Mary a curtsy, made towards the door.

"I must leave this with my brother and hurry home. Father is so uneasy if I am away for long."

"Very well, my dear, you know best. But one can humour men too much."

Douce had her hand on the latch, and as she lifted it she heard footsteps in the passage. Panic seized her. She opened the door and found herself face to face with Jordan. They looked at each other, the man gravely kind, the girl like a piece of ivory carved so finely that her features seemed too thin. Her little red mouth was vaguely sullen, and after the first glance her eyes avoided his.

"What, going already?" said Jordan.

He was in her way, and he remained in her way for a moment, though she gave him to understand as clearly as she could that she wished him out of it. She clutched her basket a little more firmly and looked beyond towards the door.

"I'm afraid I am in a hurry."

"I have tried to persuade her to stay," said the voice of Mrs. Mary, "but she is going to her brother's, and Mr. Sylvester is all alone."

Jordan glanced at Mrs. Mary. It seemed to him that her eyes were telling him to do something, to make up his mind on a certain matter; but he could not read the inward meaning of her message. He hesitated. He looked down at Douce and then turned to open the courtyard door for her. He had a feeling that Douce wanted to go, but he did not realize that had the man in him forced her to stay she would have stayed, a secret traitress to her pride.

"I have not seen Maurice for a long while," said he, opening the door for her.

She gave him the faintest of curtsies, and passed through without looking at him.

"Thank you, Mr. March."

Jordan watched her cross the courtyard, walking very quickly with her little head bent down. When she had disappeared he closed the door and went in to Mrs. Mary.

"I have ordered a coach to be here at four o'clock, mother."

"O," said she, looking at him queerly.

"I am taking you over to see how the house is getting on."

"Thank you, my dear; how very kind of you. We might have given Douce a lift back home."

"Of course. I never thought of it. Shall I go after her?"

Mrs. Mary folded up her work and laid it on the table.

"I think it is too late now, Jordan. Go and see if your father is awake. He was taking a nap upstairs on his day-bed."

Douce made her way into the Strand, her face set like a piece of ivory, the eyes very black in it and very still. Her lips looked pale, as though she had bitten the blood from them with her small white teeth. She was angry with herself, and humiliated by this very anger. It was monstrous that a daughter of Sylvester St. Croix should be so fiercely human.

She walked into the bookshop and found a snuff-coloured old man sitting behind a table and polishing his spectacles. This old man, whose name was Truscott, managed the bookshop for Maurice's pious widow. He was a funny old thing with a square bald head, and projecting eyes that threatened to fall out on to the table in front of him. His nose was shapeless, like a lump of dough.

"Good day, my dear," he said to Douce; "what can I do for you?"

Douce was feeling dear to nobody, and she was abrupt with this grotesque old man.

"Is Mrs. Lovibond within? I have something for Mr. St. Croix."

The old man blinked at her, put on his spectacles, got up and opened the door leading into the parlour at the back of the shop.

"A young woman to see you, ma'am. Will you walk in."

Almost he had again called her "my dear," but his voice fell away into an inarticulate mumbling. Douce walked in, to find Mrs. Lovibond trimming a white muslin cap with cerise-coloured ribbon, a very worldly cap for a religious widow. Douce and Mrs. Lovibond had met twice before, and on each occasion they had chilled each other, though the widow had used her succulent voice and a rich smile on Douce. Mrs. Lovibond was a large white woman with very black hair, dark eyes of a curious roundness, a nose that spread out broadly at the tip, and a big mouth that was never still. She was capacious, and there was something about her capaciousness that both repelled and interested Douce. The widow suggested a bed, clean and nicely made, and her face was the white-laced pillow. But there was a slyness somewhere, an invitation, a provoking smoothness that did not refuse to be tumbled.

"Bless me," said the lady, "it is Miss St. Croix."

Douce stood austere and still.

"I have brought something for my brother, Mrs. Lovibond."

The widow rose with the pink-ribboned cap perched on her left hand. She looked roguish.

"And that one thing is a pretty face, my dear! He's upstairs, too, to see it. There's a gentleman with him, but that's of no consequence."

Her manner caressed Douce, and Douce had a feeling that this caressing mood was studied. It was not even like the purring of a cat.

"If Mr. Maurice is engaged——"

"Bless us," said Mrs. Lovibond, "do you think the gentleman who is with him will quarrel with such an interruption."

She took Douce upstairs, moving slowly and making the stairs creak under her largeness; and yet this slow largeness of hers had an attraction which was felt by Douce, but which she did not understand. She found herself wondering whether Maurice liked Mrs. Lovibond. Certainly, she was very kind, and yet "kind" was not quite the word. That cap with the pink ribbons, and that large, alluring softness which was like the white surface of a bed!

Mrs. Lovibond pushed open the door.

"Mr. Maurice," said she, in her deep, silky voice, "here is a pleasant surprise for you," and she undulated back against the doorpost, leaving Douce just room to pass through.

Douce, indeed, had surprised her brother, and she had had one vivid glance of the room and its occupants when Mrs. Lovibond had opened the door. Maurice was sitting by the window, bending forward with his elbows resting on his knees, and his two fists pressed together under his chin. His profile had a sharpness of pain, and his eyes stared. Opposite him but more in the shadow Douce was aware of a neat little man in a bob wig, dressed all in black, with his knees and feet placed precisely, and holding a small book or ledger in one hand. Douce's impression was that her brother and the neat little man were not very happy together.

Maurice rose from his chair, so did the little man in black. Mrs. Lovibond smiled at them all with a smile of infinite capacity, and, closing the door, left them together. Douce noticed that her brother's face looked white and stiff, like a piece of wet linen hanging frozen on a line on a winter morning.

"Mr. Marwick, this is my sister."

The little man had queer, glossy black eyes. He bowed to Douce, and Douce curtsied to him. She had a feeling that her brother wished her to be polite to Mr. Marwick.

"How do you do, sir?"

He smiled, and when he smiled his hard face seemed to crack, as though it were made of porcelain and not of flesh and blood. The corners of his mouth turned upwards into his cheeks; his lips seemed to disappear; his eyes grew brighter. Indeed, they suddenly grew very bright when they looked at Douce, and the red light of her hair kindled a flame in them.

"I am very well. Miss St. Croix, thank you."

She thought him old, but he was not more than five-and-forty, and in his hard, brittle, shrewd way he was not bad-looking. She neither liked him nor disliked him. She knew at once that she was pleasing to Mr. Marwick's eyes, and such knowledge is apt to prejudice a woman.

Maurice stood there with his eyelids half-closed and his hands gripping the back of the chair.

"Mr. Marwick is a very old friend of mine. Well, Sis, what have you got there?"

"Your linen," she said; "I have mended it."

"Excellent," said her brother with dry lips.

Mr. Marwick smiled and brought his chair forward.

"Please," he said.

His voice was sharp but ingratiating. He had the air of reproving the brother by showing courtesy to his sister. Surely she was an admirable young woman to walk all the way with her brother's shirts, and the fellow had not asked her to sit down!

"Miss St. Croix must be tired."

He patted the back of the chair and Douce sat down. She was surprised to find herself obeying the little man as though he were a person in authority. Maurice glanced at them both with a sudden lifting of the eyebrows and the air of a man intrigued and surprised by some idea that had occurred to him.

"And how is our father, Sis?"

Maurice showed a sudden animation. Mr. Marwick had put his little book away in his pocket and taken Maurice's chair, and was looking at Douce attentively as though he had forgotten all about the brother in the presence of his sister. St. Croix perched himself on the oak table behind them. His frozen face had thawed.

"Douce is a most devoted daughter, my dear Marwick."

"I am sure she is," said the lawyer, like a bright-eyed and assenting dog.

Douce looked at her knees.

"Since I was three my brother has always teased me, Mr. Marwick."

"Nonsense, Sis; I mean what I say."

"I'm sure he does, Miss St. Croix."

"Douce works like a little Frenchwoman, sir. She cooks and mends, and makes preserves, and reads to her father, and yet—look at her."

Douce became aware of the fact that Mr. Marwick's eyes were fixed upon her hands. She took great care of her hands,

and they were not red and rough in spite of all her work. She could not help smiling at the lawyer.

"Mr. Marwick does not quite believe you, Maurice."

"But I assure you that he does, madam. I may have a quick eye."

"The quickest in the City," said Maurice, with flattering emphasis.

There was more talk of a like complexion, Maurice showing a pleasant animation in applauding Mr. Marwick's surprising attitude towards his sister. Men are caught in strange ways. They may swim the same pond for years, growing old and crusty, to be caught at last by some unexpected bait. Mr. Marwick was a bachelor, but this singleness of his had been part of a singleness of purpose, and for a boy who had begun life by sweeping out Mr. Jardine's rooms he had done very well for himself. It had taken him twenty years to become the dominant partner in the firm of Jardine and Marwick, and through all these years he had not swerved from his path by a hair's breadth to snap up the world's delicacies or to gather its encumbrances. He was a hard and indomitable little man, and many people had good reason to be afraid of him. "What I want I get" had been his motto. And he had not wanted the things that the ordinary, fleshy man desires, and this had been to him a source of strength.

Mr. Sylvester would be waiting for his supper. Douce remembered this, reminded the two gentlemen of it, and rose to take leave of them.

"I'm sorry. Sis," said her brother; "I would have seen you home, but I am expecting a French merchant at Durand's."

Stephen Marwick rose immediately. It was impossible that Miss St. Croix should walk home alone; he could not permit it; he hoped that she would allow him to take her brother's place.

His brisk and quiet self-assurance and his air of shrewd kindness dominated her. She still had a pain at her heart, and the memory of an anger that hurt.

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you, sir; but it is a long way."

Mr. Marwick picked up his hat and cane.

"The greater my privilege," said he.

Maurice showed them out, looking anxiously yet attentively at the little man, who hardly looked at him at all. They went down the stairs, and Maurice crossed to the window and, leaning out, watched them appear on the footwall below. Marwick offered his arm to Douce. She accepted it, and a sudden smile came into her brother's eyes. And then, just as suddenly, the smile changed to a look of anger. His nostrils grew pinched and thin, and, turning, he picked up the chair on which the little man had been sitting and threw it across the room.

Mrs. Lovibond came labouring upstairs to discover what the noise was. She had cause to be troubled about Mr. St. Croix, who had been refusing his food and walking about his room at night.

"My dear, what a fright you gave me!"

"I knocked a chair over, that's all."

Her white face and her breathlessness showed him that her fear had not been assumed. St. Croix looked at her with a mixture of tenderness and loathing. She had been very good to him, and he owed her money.

"Why, it's a great world. Poll! Here is old Marwick making cat's eyes at my sister. Come and kiss me, you great, big buxom thing."

Meanwhile, that problematical couple, flame linked to black steel, progressed through the noisy crowded streets, past gardens and under the shade of trees until the sky was free of tiles and chimney-pots. They did not exchange twenty words. Both of them were people who had learnt to be silent with ease, the girl in that glum house, the man in the grim loneliness of his getting and gaining. Douce did not appear to be troubled by his silence. When they reached the lanes and the cool quiet of the hedgerows she withdrew her arm from his and walked a little apart; but her aloofness pleased the man and did not offend him. He watched her with a kind of keen approval. She was red where he was black, soft where he was hard, and yet she, too, had her hardness. The dark velvet of her eyes hid much, or, at least, he thought so. He liked her little crisp red mouth and fine white chin.

"I have waited ten years to see the wench I want to marry, and here she is!"

That was his reflection, and in the midst of it she surprised him.

"You are a friend of my brother's, sir?"

"I hope so," said he.

"Then—if he is in trouble you will help him to escape from it?"

Mr. Marwick gave a little jerk of the head. There was exultation in the movement, a shrewd and surprised delight in her quick seizing of an opportunity. He wondered how much she knew.

"Mr. Maurice is a little ambitious," he said. "Perhaps he has——"

"No, nothing. But I have felt."

"Ah, you are quick!"

"People who have to watch are quick, Mr. Marwick."

"And wise," he added. "Well, we shall see."

She said no more, and the cleverness of her silence pleased him. He put it down to cleverness, and having assumed it such, set off on a circuit of false impressions. "O, we shall understand each other," he thought; "we shall understand each other very quickly. This pretty thing is no fool. This is the wench for me." He began to talk to her quite like a debonaire little man of the world, and his preciseness fell from him. He became ten years younger.

When they reached the gate he asked to be taken in to be presented to Mr. Sylvester.

"I shall count it an honour, madam."

Douce humoured him. She had begun to realize that it would be wise to humour him, and inwardly she was tired and sick and pitifully resentful. She had been hurt, and she was in a mood that prompted her to play upon the pain of it. She acted wilfully against her instincts.

But the result surprised her. Her father had always been difficult with strangers, and especially with men, but the little man in the black suit and bob wig did not appear to find St. Croix difficult. Both of them were hard men, but with a little hardness which hid much which the world did not wot of.

Douce went to get the supper ready. She was standing by the kitchen window, brooding for a moment, with the evening sunlight on her hands and hair and a little cloud of bitter darkness in her eyes, when she heard her father's voice calling her.

"Child."

She went in to them, and saw Mr. Stephen Marwick with one of her father's books on his knee.

"Child, Mr. Marwick will take supper with us."

She made a movement of the head. She could not explain the feeling that she had; there was something threatening in this sudden friendliness. She went back to the kitchen. The sun was passing behind the elms, and massive shadows fell upon the window.

At times there comes to a man a sudden sense of the mystery of things. Perhaps he has seen the face of the woman whom he is to love, or has sat at a window while the grey dawn steals in and death stands waiting beside a bed. Life flashes out poignant and strange. There may be a rush of exultation and of anguish, a sense of light streaming upon things visible and invisible, as it streams from under the edge of a cloud at sunset, lighting up some vivid face, burning deep into the eyes of memory.

It was dusk, and Jordan walked in the streets. Overhead were the lingerings of a flushed sky, and somewhere a bell was throbbing. He did not look at the people whom he passed, but went straight forward with his eyes on the distance like a man walking in the fields. He had been thinking of her all day, and in a few minutes he would see her as he had seen her many times before, and yet he had a most strange feeling that this time it would be different. There was something in him that strove and suffered. He wanted to be nearer to her, not with his body, but in some other more mystical yet intimate way.

The evening was cool and very still. He was not conscious of men, but he was deeply aware of other things, the soft dark outlines of a tree with its swelling cloud of dusk dimmed foliage, the sudden blinking of a star, the smell of flowers in a garden. When he came to the street in which she lived he paused and stood still. It was empty, a street of shadows, with the flicker of candlelight crossing from some of its windows, and somehow he wished that it was quite dark, or that the moon was shining down it. She was not made to live by candlelight. He could picture her on some high hill, with the full moon like a shield behind her, or being carried in a silken litter by slaves under the burning sun of a new world. To Jordan she seemed a woman apart, and unlike any other woman he had ever seen or dreamt of. He could always see her standing a little apart, faintly smiling, richly mysterious, urging a man to accomplish something by that watching look in her eyes. Yes, he felt that he could be happy, that he could accomplish great things if he were watched by her. He would like to fight under her eyes, vanquish some man and then forgive him.

He walked up the street, and it was mysterious as no other street had ever been. He passed her house and repassed it, holding the breath of his soul. There were lights in the lower window, but the window which he knew so well was dark. He paused. He played with his expectancy, lingering over it, half loath to change it for the reality, because in the reality there was something to be feared. His homage had ceased to be impersonal. The "I" had wakened in it, and with it a voice which warned him. "Fencing-master, fool, what can you be to her or she to you?"

And to-night the voice warned him, and at the sound of its inward challenge he turned with a lift of the head and crossed the road towards her door.

"What of it?" was his answer. "If I know—I know."

Even Sambo's shining black face was the face from another world, and a Sambo who said "Good evening, sah," and took Jordan's hat and sword. He was shown into the dining-room on the right of the hall, with its Flemish tapestries all soft blues and golds, its walnut furniture, and its polished floor. Candles were burning on the table, and here Sambo left him alone with his own thoughts.

Happening to glance at the table, Jordan saw that places were laid for two, and he was troubled. Mrs. Merris and Aunt Julia! Was it possible that she had not expected him, and that he had presumed too much upon her kindness? Yet it was the day she had chosen for him, and as he stood there feeling challenged by the thought of finding himself an awkward intruder, he heard footsteps on the stairs. They were her footsteps. He would have known them anywhere, and his heart beat faster.

She came in; she was smiling. She was wearing a dress of some golden colour which caught the light of the candles like an amber sheath.

"Forgive me, I am late," she said, "and Sambo had forgotten to light the candles upstairs."

She saw Jordan's eyes rest for a moment upon the table.

"We have been out driving, and Aunt Julia is tired and has a headache. I sent her to bed."

His eyes lifted to hers, and she was aware of the deep shine in them, something of awe and of wonder. "I am to dine with her alone!" he was saying to himself. "I am to spend two—perhaps three—whole hours with her! I can hardly believe it to be true." She smiled. She pointed to a chair with her fan, but he waited for her to seat herself before taking the chair she had chosen for him.

"And how is the house?"

Very gravely he began to tell her about the house, going into all its details with a simplicity that assumed her interest to be unfeigned. She felt that he was not looking at himself while he talked, or choosing what to tell her and what not to

tell, or hesitating with the sudden reflection, "All this must seem very dull to her." He had the knack of making things interesting, because he was so intensely interested in them himself, not egotistically, but out of sheer strong singleness of purpose. They were still talking about the house when Sambo served them at dinner, and the black's solemn yet half-smiling face seemed to reflect more than was visible. For to Mrs. Mariana the house was Jordan; she saw him in it and in the building of it, in its simple solidity, its growth, its purposeful suggestiveness.

But there was more in it than this, and she understood it if he did not. His feeling was of being near to her in some strange and wonderful way, as a child draws near to a creature greatly wondered at and loved. She had him by the hand; she shone upon him; she listened. He was still more conscious of the mystery of her kindness when Sambo lighted them to the room above, and they sat there at the window with the shaded candles behind them and soft moonlight falling into the street below. Jordan felt himself open to her. He was a world, a house, a human book into which she looked with eyes of curious sympathy.

She made him talk of himself. He half realized it, but the depth of his pleasure in talking to her swallowed up his lesser consciousness.

"That's the strange thing, madam, about this house," he said; "it seems to be part of myself, a new part, something I had not foreseen."

"Perhaps it is," she answered. "Don't you think that we find ourselves in the things we do?"

He pondered these words of hers, and suddenly the whole of him seemed to unfold to her.

"I think it began about a year ago. Till then I saw myself doing nothing but teaching gentlemen to be passable swordsmen. I was quite contented. You see, madam, I ought to be contented."

"And why?" she asked.

His face was in the shadow, with its deep-set eyes and long, firm mouth. She watched him.

"Well, had I not more than a man in my position had any right to expect? I was picked up off a doorstep."

For a moment she seemed to cease to breathe.

"And could you help that?"

He made a slight movement, and then resumed his intent stillness.

"No; but it sets a man his limit. Our lives seem like houses; you cannot live in one that was not built to suit your size. Society is bricks and mortar."

"And you want to break down the walls of your house with a shake of the shoulders and get into a bigger one?"

"That is how I feel sometimes," he said.

"Well, is it wrong?"

He half turned his head.

"It might be. Our own house is never quite our own house, is it? There are pieces of other people's houses in it, other people's lives."

"When did you discover that?" she asked.

"O, quite a long while ago, I think. When two people have been very good to you, and you love them, you cannot build quite as you please. Besides, a man must learn to know his limits."

They were silent for a while, and he felt that her silence was half consenting. And then she asked him a question.

"But supposing there were no such people and no houses, but just leagues and leagues of wild, free country, Mr. March. What would you do with it?"

She saw his head lift; he was startled.

"I think I would try and make a new world of it, madam. I would put my arms round it and wrestle with it until I had made it what I wanted."

She could see him doing it, clearing a great space about him, conquering his wild land, building a house which became a white mansion among trees. There would be people about him, servants, slaves, colonists who owned him as the master man and the leader, but none of them would come too near. She fancied that he would love solidity and silence, large rooms, large vistas, a certain aloofness from the smaller, chattering people. He would never be a man to shout and sing and drink his neighbours under the table, or to slap the backs of easy fools.

"That is your dream, Mr. March?" she asked, coming out of a long silence.

"Why, just a dream, madam. I suppose we all have our dreams."

"And sometimes they come true."

"Sometimes," he said, with the air of refusing to be tricked by dreams.

He told her more about himself before he left her, sketching a happy picture of Thomas and Mary Nando, of Spaniards Court, and of the great white-walled room, with its gallery, where he had learnt and taught the craft of the sword. She countered his confessions by telling him that she would like to see him fence, and he looked at her with happy surprise in his eyes.

"That can be easily arranged, madam. If you will honour us by coming to Nandos one day you shall have the whole of the gallery to yourself."

"I might bring Miss Stamford? She has a passion for seeing everything after all these years in the country."

"Bring whom you please, madam."

"And some day perhaps I may see the new house?"

"Why, yes," he said, with a little thoughtful smile. "I should like you to see the house."

When Jordan left her that night she sat a long while by the open window, realizing the man in him as she had never realized him before, and also the distance that he had set between her and himself. He had told her many things, but he had spoken like a man standing a little apart. It was as though he stood in the body of a church while she had her place somewhere above the altar. And she was touched by this devotional attitude of his. He was able to awaken in her passions and deep generous impulses such as no other man had been able to arouse. He was of such a bigness both within and without, so simple, so wise, so cleanly human.

She felt, too, that he had gone from her strangely happy, which was true. He had stood for a moment under her window, and then gone slowly down the street, his hat in his hand and the moonlight in his face. He walked with a large leisureliness, looking upwards, a faint smile in his eyes and on his mouth.

"I have told her everything," he thought, "and she was kind to me. It is very wonderful. I have nothing to regret."

He did not travel beyond her kindness; he was content with it that night, happy with it, proud of it. It was a perfume, a sense of warmth at the heart, a deep delight, a happy reverence. If it did not occur to him to wish to go beyond it, it was because she seemed so different from other women and affected him so differently, and because, in spirit, he looked up at her and felt the rightness of his looking up. She had not even whispered that word, "Climb—climb!" and no inward voice had spoken it in his heart. He remained looking up at her. It was enough.

So Jordan wandered home, while two other men sat at a window overlooking the Strand and bargained with each other. St. Croix, astride a chair, with his arms crossed on the back of it, stared at the windows of the house across the way, not as though he saw them, but as if he were looking at some picture of shame and beastliness and dirt. His sensitive nostrils expressed loathing and scorn. The stench of a debtor's prison, the dirt, the ugliness, the mark of the beast everywhere! He was afraid, and his attitude showed it, for he seemed to crouch as he sat, like a fugitive astride a broken horse. Beside him Mr. Stephen Marwick kept drawing a sheaf of papers between his fingers, as a card player makes the cards crackle before he deals. The act was meditative, and yet it was calculated to fray the nerves of the man who sat and stared.

Sometimes Mr. Marwick spoke in that quick voice of his, as though he were talking to himself and at the same time reminding St. Croix of what would happen or might happen.

"No, it is not a nice place. I would keep out of it. Easier to keep out than to get out. Besides, all that means an end of women and fine clothes and supper parties. I'd keep out of it, St. Croix."

"Damn you!" said the man astride the chair, with sudden fierceness.

Mr. Marwick moistened his lips.

"That does not help us, sir. Here are all these bills against you. What are we going to do about it? Now, as I hinted to you a little while ago——"

St. Croix made a rocking movement on his chair.

"I'll see you in hell first."

"My dear sir, this isn't a stage play. I shall see you in Newgate before you see me in Hades, if it pleases you to talk in

that fashion. I informed you that I was a little bald on the crown, and that I have a perfectly honourable passion for red hair. What is there to prevent me from becoming your brother-in-law?"

The other man faced him. His mouth showed as a black circle in the dusk, as though it could have spouted a dozen reasons to Mr. Marwick's face. "You! You little black crab! You bit of inky leather! Give her to you!" But he said nothing.

St. Croix bent his head over the back of the chair and then began:

"So that's your bargain. I'm to help you to marry—her."

"My dear sir, and why not? Do you think I shall make a worse husband than you would do? The position is perfectly plain. The day I become joined to the family——"

"And should she refuse?"

Mr. Marwick crackled his papers.

"That is what I expect her to do—at first," he said.

As a flower blossoms suddenly in the desert, so Mr. Stephen Marwick came to his flowering after all these years of dustiness and labour and calculation. Nothing is surprising if you follow back any event to its source, and trace all the changes through which it has come to its climax. Many men grow very amorous after forty, and Mr. Marwick had spent twenty years in ignoring all that human part of himself, or in keeping it locked up in his strong-box and neatly fastened with red tape. He was not a moral man, only an ambitious one; he had discovered very early in life that it is much easier to get a wife than to provide oneself with a career and a fortune. Of the two he had seen that the money was of far more importance than the woman, because there are many women who will make a man very comfortable provided that he has the money to do the same for them. Mr. Marwick had the money. He had waited twenty years for his romance, and when he entered upon it he did so with the same shrewdness and careful ferocity with which he had made his reputation in the City.

Hence a bottle-green coat, a white satin waistcoat flowered with red, silk hose, buckles to his shoes, a dandy wig and a scented stick. Hence, too, a solid and pleasant house ready prepared at Tottenham, and it was a fact that he had bought this house before he had set eyes on Maurice St. Croix's sister. He added a chaise and a couple of horses to his establishment, and put up a glasshouse to grow flowers. The shine of Douce's hair suddenly ripened his intentions, and brought a warmth into the ordering of the great affair.

He was quite determined to get Douce for himself, and he went about the getting of her with characteristic thoroughness. She piqued him in a dozen different ways. For about that time she had put on that bewitching and provoking bloom which comes to a young woman in the flush of her early summer. Her skin was like milk under her brilliant hair, and in this whiteness her eyes floated darkly. She flushed quickly and was easily confused. There were moments when she looked moody, sullen almost, inscrutably brooding over something. Her red mouth took on a sharpness of outline. It needed kisses to soften it. Through it all, too, ran a fine structure of hardness, of obstinacy and of pride, and Mr. Marwick loved hardness and respected it. He was not averse from discovering a little hardness in his wife, for a woman with an edge to her beauty cuts life more cleanly than a flocculent, feather-bed fool. Such a woman understands the value of money and of all that money implies. She is not imposed on by servants; she realizes that there are more solid ways of impressing other people than by serving your carrots in a golden dish.

Mr. Marwick arrived. Douce was aware of him in the early stages as a neat little man who paid court to her father. He drove over twice a week in his chaise, and persuaded Mr. Sylvester to drive out with him and take the air. They got on very well together. Mr. Marwick always carried a Bible with him in his chaise, and he explained its presence to Mr. Sylvester by saying, "When I drive out into God's country, sir, and look upon His handiwork, it pleases me to open His Book—even as He opens the book of life to us." St. Croix thought Mr. Marwick an admirable person. Moreover, he talked flatteringly of Mr. Sylvester's son.

So it began. Mr. Marwick had given Douce no more than quick glances from his small bright eyes and a great deal of politeness; but about the time that the leaves of the elms turned yellow and fell fluttering into the lane Mr. Marwick became more personal. He bowed over her hand, and held it a little longer than was necessary. He began to insinuate little wedges of sympathy beneath the marble of her reserve.

"Believe me, Miss Douce, you do too much here. Pots and pans, needle and thread! At your age, too! I don't approve."

He presumed to make such remarks in Mr. Sylvester's presence, aiming them aslant at him, and doing it with impunity.

"Your daughter is too much the Martha, my dear sir. I say it with all circumspection."

Old St. Croix looked surprised, but Douce was still more surprised that he did not actively resent what Mr. Marwick said to him. Sylvester had spent his life in giving other people advice, and he had a habit of showing his long teeth at anyone who returned him the same coin.

Mr. Marwick, walking delicately, took to praising the daughter to the father, and sometimes he allowed her to hear him doing it. St. Croix took it very calmly. He had other uses for women than praising them, but if Mr. Marwick chose to be complaisant, well and good.

"I have tried to bring her up, sir, to fear God."

That was as far as his affection carried him, and translated into honest language the phrase meant that St. Croix had tried to bring Douce up to fear himself. With such cold fish "God" and "I" are synonymous.

Douce became aware of Mr. Marwick's gradual approach to her, and where another girl might have laughed or shown fear, she stood and watched with veiled composure. She shrank and yet refused to show her shrinking. She had locked a secret hope away; she was tempted to be bitter against herself and against men. She was in a convent mood,

revolting from thoughts that burned to self-torture and merciless self-abasement. She turned upon her own emotions, stripped them, scourged them, shut them up in the dark on bread and water.

She had moments of black anger when she told herself that she would marry Stephen Marwick when he asked her.

She had other moments when she felt that she could kill him.

When Maurice came, and with a kind of spasmodic gaiety fell to putting Mr. Marwick on a triumphal horse, she listened and disbelieved him. But why, she asked herself, was this praise necessary? She was aware of something in her brother that set the same strings of bitterness vibrating in them both. He was playing a tune, and sometimes while he played it his nostrils were black with scorn. She noticed the brittle restlessness of his eyes, and once or twice she caught him looking at her with a most strange look, the look of a man who held a knife and loathed himself at the thought of using it. Maurice was not like his father. He had warm flesh on his bones.

Sometimes she had moments of weakness, of overmastering, childish emotion. She had these three men against her; she felt it, and was sure of it. She was such a little thing and so much alone. And one night she woke from some terrifying dream, crying aloud, "O, Jordan, Jordan, help!" But mostly she was able to subdue and to suppress her emotions, seeing that old Sylvester had made her life an affair of continuous suppression.

Winter came, and at Christmas Mr. Marwick gave a party at his house at Tottenham. He sent a coach for the St. Croix, and for Douce the drive on that December evening was full of vague and prophetic terrors. The day was misty and very still, a dead day. She was aware of her father beside her as something that was both alive and dead. He wore a woollen nightcap and had wrapped a white scarf round his mouth and throat, and sitting there very stiff and still he made her think of a dead body wrapped up in a sheet. He said nothing, did not speak a word to her the whole way, and she sat and watched the lights of the coach playing feebly on the fog. Once she had a fit of shivering, but her father did not appear to notice it, and if he did, he did not ask her if she felt cold.

But at Marwick's fires blazed. He came down to help them out, giving Douce his arm and pressing it gently.

"My dear little lady, you are cold."

Instantly she felt a thickness in her throat. She was so very lonely, so unhappy, and that he of all men should be the one to offer her sympathy came near overwhelming her with ironical emotion. She steadied herself but her composure was a thin crust of ice over fire.

"It is very raw to-night, Mr. Marwick."

"Come in, come in to the fire."

She found Maurice there and an ancient relative of Mr. Marwick's, a huge, flat-faced woman with dead eyes and a lipless mouth. She looked at Douce with hostility, but it was obvious that she had received orders to be kind. Marwick, indefatigable, put Douce in front of the fire and brought her a glass of wine.

"Thank you, I never take wine, sir."

His bright eyes glistened.

"But—in my house—on Christmas, please. It will comfort you, dear little lady."

She felt that something was to happen; she felt it all through the dinner. She saw it in Mr. Marwick's bright eyes, on Maurice's flushed and sullenly vivacious face, in the fat woman's bland hostility. There was a surface of merriment, but it covered depths of sinister darkness. She shrank into herself and looked only at her plate.

How it all came about Douce never quite knew. Mr. Marwick was laughing and insisting on showing them over the house. He took a candlestick and Maurice another. They went out, all of them, like people moving purposefully off a stage. Maurice courtiered the fat lady; Sylvester shuffled along behind his son; Marwick had given his arm to Douce. And then she found herself alone with him in a little parlour where a fire crackled and leapt in a black grate. He was smiling; the door was shut. She could not hear the voices of the others; she was convinced that the whole play had been arranged.

Mr. Marwick put the candle on the table. She was aware of his smile, of his little glistening eyes. She sank down in a chair, and found him on one knee at her feet.

"Miss Douce," he said, "I want you to marry me."

She burst into tears. She could give no answer for the moment. She was aware of him as something menacing and kind and sly and horrible.

"I can't," she cried; "I'm so——"

Next moment he had her hand between his and was patting it. He made love like an old man.

"There, there, my dear; no one has ever been kind to you. But I shall be kind—O, very."

"I can't," she said. "I can't."

She was wet-eyed, sullen, miserable. She struggled with her own inarticulate emotions, and could blurt out nothing but five words.

"I don't love you—anybody."

And then, most surprisingly, Mr. Marwick came to her rescue. He patted her hand reassuringly.

"There, there; no hurry, no hurry. Supposing we leave it for a little while, a month or so. It has upset you, my dear. I know. I'm not a bad sort of man, and I tell you I will make you happy."

She was grateful to him, quite absurdly grateful for what appeared to be generous restraint.

"Thank you. But I am sure——"

"We will say no more about it to-night," he said, caressing her hand. "I can't bear to see tears. I want my little lady to be happy."

When the coach rolled them away into the fog, Douce lay huddled in her corner and tried to get a grip upon realities. Mr. Marwick wanted to marry her, and it seemed to her very obvious that both her father and her brother wished her to marry Mr. Marwick. The fact was like a hand in the darkness, clutching her bosom, and suddenly she cried out.

"Sir, do you wish it, do you wish it?"

Sylvester was dozing. He woke up, and in the dim light his long white face seemed to approach her like the face of a ghost.

"What's that? What's that?"

She pressed her hands together.

"Sir, do you wish me to marry Mr. Marwick?"

She caught a gleam of light in her father's eyes.

"Mr. Marwick will make an admirable husband."

She shrank away, realizing that he had been forewarned as to what would happen, and that he approved of it.

"I said 'no,'" she blurted. "He was very kind; but, sir, I cannot."

St. Croix answered her much as Marwick had done, save that he introduced and made use of the Deity.

"Ask God to guide you, my daughter. Pray that you may be taught to value what is excellent in a husband."

Maurice had stayed behind in front of Mr. Marwick's fire. The big lady was still with them, but Mr. Marwick got rid of her with male peremptoriness.

"Anna, go to bed."

Anna, being partly a pensioner of his, went to bed with assumed docility, and Mr. Marwick, after mixing himself a glass of strong waters, came and warmed himself at the fire. He looked sleek and pleased, and not in the least discouraged.

Maurice waited, with one upward glance of the eyes.

"Refused, my dear sir, refused," said the attorney.

St. Croix's lips seemed to grow thin.

"So it is finished?"

"Not at all. It has only just begun. She showed emotion; she wept, my dear sir. Now, I am not supposed to know anything about women, but I believe that to be a very good beginning."

Maurice said nothing, but he watched Marwick drink as though he wished the stuff would choke him.

"I told her not to be hurried," said the little man, lowering the glass; "meanwhile I am her devoted servant. In a week or two we will play our trump card. I shall give her a proof of my devoted generosity. Her brother—a fine fellow—involved in speculations and losses! Someone comes to the rescue. Observe—a debtor's prison avoided, tears, gratitude, parental blessings! Tableau! What do you think of it, my dear sir?"

"I think, Marwick, that I am a damned coward."

"Why, no, my dear boy. If your sister says she will marry me, why worry? I shall make her a better husband than you think. You are much too sentimental, St. Croix, much too sentimental. Sentimentality is the devil."

All through these weeks Douce knew that Jordan was so near. He rode over every afternoon to watch the growth of the new house, and yet he came no farther, leaving her to draw the only conclusion that could be drawn. She had now a quite different picture of Jordan from the one she had had of him two or three years ago. The positions had been reversed. He had become a far more impressive figure, not to be thought of as a wild and adventurous fellow who broke heads and made love to actresses, but as Mr. Jordan March of Nandos, a man with a reputation and a man of property. Being very unhappy herself, she imagined Jordan to be happy, and in her heart she knew that she wished that he could find happiness only through her.

But Jordan was not happy.

Even the new house left something to be desired, not because it was failing to prove a solid and handsome house, and all that Mr. Mactavish had planned it to be, but because the finality of it rounded off something which resented such finality. Jordan had put his restlessness, his new-born ambition, into bricks and mortar, and this shell could not contain it. Instantly now the man in him was calling for something more spacious, something that neither money nor even a deified Mactavish could give him. He knew what it was. He wanted life, life of another kind, of a wider and wilder horizon, and beyond and above it stood the figure of Mrs. Merris. She was a symbol, and much more than that. He was unhappy because he had begun to realize that she could be nothing but a symbol.

For he had discovered that she had lovers, and very eminent and formidable lovers, men who would have spoken of him casually as "March," and thought him honoured with a nod and a patronizing smile. He had discovered that she was a great beauty, the "toast" in many of the fashionable coffee-houses, a star in the firmament, an heiress, a little queen. "The beautiful Virginian!" There were gentlemen who were in great haste to persuade her to marry them. She could pick and choose.

At first he had felt fierce about it. He had wished that she had been no more than an orange girl, so that he could go in and fight for her in the alleys of Drury Lane; and then he had known that he wished nothing of the kind. He wanted her to be just what she was, and he knew that in his eyes she could never be anything else. She had been kind to him—just that. Was he a puppy to sulk and squeal because there were more favoured dogs in her world?

He felt that to be peevish was to be little. Surely he could create a dignity of his own, and stand gravely aloof with a look that said, "Madam, your servant." She would respect a man, but not a sullen, whimpering, ridiculous boy. But he was not happy, and as he mounted his horse on that December afternoon he was caused to wonder whether it was a man's business to be happy. There was work to do in the world. A man set his teeth and did it, where a woman would have a fit of the "vapours."

It was a dead day, with dripping trees and wet hedges, mud in the lanes, and the sky one great greyness. She had promised to take her coach and to drive to see the new house, and he viewed this act of hers as a little piece of graciousness spared to him from the fullness of her glory, because she was kind and because he had once served her brother. What more could it be but that? It could be no more, and he compelled himself to accept it at its true value. Indeed, it was she who had suggested the visit after he had grown wise and had let the promise disappear into silence. She had a sense of what was just and gracious; she was the great lady; she stepped down for a moment from her height and was kind to him.

"I'll stand to that," he thought; "I'll show her that I am a man with a sense of what things are."

When Mrs. Mariana's coach drew up outside the new red brick gate pillars she saw him standing in front of the porch and looking towards her across a stretch of mud. It was as though he had not realized the mud until she came with her coach and her comeliness and all the atmosphere of the great lady. It offended him. She saw him glance half-fiercely at it, and then come walking towards her as though it was not there.

He took off his hat, and his eyes looked grey in the December gloom.

"Madam, will you please stay there for a moment."

She was leaning forward and in the act of stepping out, while Sambo stood to gather up and protect the silks and laces under her cloak of black fur. She smiled at him.

"I am not afraid of mud, Mr. March."

"There is no need for you to soil your shoes," he answered.

There were workmen about the house, for she could hear the sound of hammering, and a glazier was fitting glass into

one of the upper window frames. Jordan's house stood there, solid and red beyond the mud-splash, but her eyes were on Jordan and not upon the house. She saw him go to a pile of planks, take one in his big hands, and lay the first span of the bridge between them, laying the last plank between the swung back leaf of the iron gate.

"Now."

He smiled, but his eyes were grey, and his voice seemed to come from a great distance. She stepped down, very conscious of this distance and of the way his eyes looked at her, as though he had put up a steel grill between himself and her.

"The English do things thoroughly," she laughed. "Your mud even is thorough."

He did not smile.

"Shall I go first?"

"Please."

She followed him across the bridge of planks, but the crossing of it did not exercise her so much as her need to explain to herself his new formalism.

He turned to her, quietly composed, his hat still in his hand. His lips looked as though they had shut and would not open again. And then she heard him thanking her for coming, as though he were making a speech. He became the guide, the cicerone, politely escorting some great personage, and yet his formalism had a touch of reverence that was fiercely sincere. They entered the house together, and she smelled the smell of the new plaster, and saw a blank white staircase littered with shavings. It was all very raw and new, and she could not help feeling its rawness.

But he gave her no time to loiter or to register impressions. He, too, might have been conscious of the newness of the place, for though he did not hurry, he had the air of a man who had no wish to linger. She knew at once that he was disappointed with the house, and that it was she who had broken the illusion. Again she could see his half-angry face across that pool of mud. She could hear him saying to himself, "Yes, this place is what I am, solid and new and raw, without a tradition, the work of a new man. Just so much money turned into bricks and mortar." It hurt her. She wanted to touch him and say, "No, this is not you. It will never be you. Men grow."

But he would not let her say this. She felt that he was afraid of her and of life, and that he had put on armour. He took her into the long room and showed her the view across the grass to the winter blackness of the oak wood. She admired it, and told him so, but Jordan said nothing. He stood looking at it for a moment with an intense and thoughtful stare, as he had once seen something of beauty there and had lost it, and was wondering why and how.

"A house mellows," she said suddenly.

"This one needs living in," he answered; "I hope the old people will like it."

"Of course."

His eyes searched hers.

"Why—of course, madam?"

"Because you have built it," she said.

She saw him stiffen himself. He made a sudden move into some of the other rooms, explaining them with perfunctory grimness, and when they had covered the ground floor he glanced disapprovingly at the litter on the stairs, and excused her from mounting them.

"I will not take you up there. There is nothing much to see but bare walls and shavings."

She felt that he wanted her to leave the house, and wanted it with a passion that was fierce and painful. Was she not too beautifully mature for this raw place and for the man who had built it? One great truth shatters all lesser illusions.

She humoured him. She was wise enough to know what ailed Jordan, and that one word from her might have changed it all, but she did not speak that word. "Climb, climb, climb up to my level—my window." She had many reasons for leaving things as they were, for she loved liberty, and being a woman she loved homage. It was not as though she had not experienced things, or had failed to bite deep into the rich fruits of life, and, so, hungered for it as Douce did. She knew, or thought she did, that the perfume of the flower may be pleasanter than the taste of the fruit. The haste of youth had ceased in her. She liked to watch, to sit at her window, and deep down in her she knew how great the surrender would be to a man of Jordan's make. She was not ripe for a second surrender. There were times when she felt sure that she would never involve herself in a second marriage. The human appeal would have to be very great to persuade her to step down from her pleasant freedom.

And yet she liked this man. He was strong and vital, and he was unhappy. It was pleasant to feel him near her and to know that her power was so great, for most of us love power.

As she walked back across the causeway of planks she paused and spoke to him over her shoulder.

"You know you promised me something else. Have you forgotten?"

Jordan had not forgotten.

"I am at the school every day, madam."

"Then the responsibility is mine. Let us say one day next week. The afternoon of Monday?"

"I shall not forget," he said.

He saw her into her coach, bowed over her hand, and then stood back, watching Sambo climbing up beside the coachman. His eyes avoided hers. He did not look at her again, though she knew that every fibre of him was yearning to look.

"Yes, you have strength," she thought; "weak men spoil things by too much taste."

She drove home as the dusk came down. The lights were lit in Carter Street, and later, other coaches stopped outside her house, and chairmen set their chairs against the railings. The door opened and closed, showing Sambo's black face and flashing teeth, and the figures of gentlemen and gentlewomen going in to dine with Mrs. Merris. She did not know that Jordan was out there, standing in the shadow of a garden wall, watching the coaches and the chairs, her guests, her lighted windows.

He was sad, but with a resolute sadness.

"A man such as I am may get the crumbs," he thought, "and what more can he expect? My world lies on the wrong side of her window."

Mr. Stephen Marwick had staged a pretty domestic play in which he was to be the good angel, but if necessary—the devil. The play opened on the Sabbath, and quite early in the morning before Mr. Sylvester went to his duty, Maurice appeared in the house with his shoes all muddy and his eyes red as to the lids and rather fiercely bright. Douce was busy in the kitchen before going to hear her father's sermon.

She had not seen Maurice come in, but she heard his voice, and she went to the door to listen. Maurice was telling her father something; his voice was emotional, and as she listened, much that had seemed baffling and strange to her became suddenly clear and plain.

"I was a ruined man, but Marwick has saved me."

She drew back a little. She put one hand to her cheek, and her eyes had a look of fear in them. Her father was speaking now, and his voice sounded thin and strange. It was not the voice she knew, but vague and tremulous, the voice of a very old man. So weak was it that she could not catch all the words he uttered, but she caught the sense of them and it amazed her.

He was excusing his son, sympathizing with him, her father—the hard man who preached Hell and the Devil.

She crept away. The suddenness of the thing had shocked her, and yet she had an instant knowledge that somehow the blow that had been turned aside from her brother would fall upon herself. Mr. Marwick had saved him? She had heard a kind of babbling praise of Marwick, Marwick the generous, the wise.

Her heart felt weak within her. She went to her room and sat down upon her bed.

She knew very little of how money was lost and made, but it was plain to her that Maurice had lost money. She had caught something about a debtor's prison. So that was why he had seemed so restless and distraught! And Mr. Marwick had saved him.

As she sat there staring at the wall she realized what would be expected of her and she rebelled against it.

"I'm not grateful—I'm not grateful! Why has it happened?"

She felt that she must try to answer that question, and the answer that came to her left her fiercely resisting. Marwick had done this for her sake. He wanted her, and with this one gesture he had made them all his debtors. But it was not fair. His generosity was false and studied. She did not want him to be generous, because she did not love him, and the debt would fall on her. Yes, she saw this clearly, with the terrible clearness of a woman driven into a corner to be preached at by men. She foresaw it all. They would preach at her, put a halo about the man's head, and make her the sentimental sacrifice. It was so easy, so easy for the men.

Half an hour passed. Douce heard the thud of a closing door, and the sound stirred her to action. She had a will of her own and far more determination than these men of hers imagined, and she rose and dressed herself to go with her father to the meeting-house. She showed no signs of flurry as she put on her black cloak and hood and fastened her shoes, nor was she so wholly involved in her own affairs that she was unable to wonder whether her father was capable of taking the morning's service after the confession that her brother had made to him. She had her hand on the latch of her bedroom door when she heard the sound of a door opening below.

"Douce, it is time to go."

It was her father's voice, and the strength and the resonance of it surprised her. She went down the stairs and found him standing alone in the parlour, wrapped in his old black cloak, his hat on, and with his Bible under his arm.

"I am ready," she said.

She had half expected to find an old man whimpering in a chair, but instead of it she saw the man of her child's memories, cold, reticent, complacent, and the realization of him as the autocrat made her heart beat more strongly. She was afraid and yet not afraid. She rose to the challenge of his rejuvenation, and waited to hear what he would say to her.

But he said nothing. He opened the front door and went out, and following, she locked the door after them and hid the key among the branches of one of the old yews. Her father waited at the gate. Everything was happening just as it had happened for the last ten years; all the details were the same, even his attitude as he paused at the gate. A winter fog hung over the fields, and through the greyness of it the bare elms dripped moisture into the hedges and the puddles in the lane. She was struck by the quietness of everything, a sluggish quietness, dully familiar, in which nothing unusual ever happened.

They walked down the lane together, and Douce was aware of her father's erectness. The shuffle had gone out of his walk, and he moved as though ten years had slipped off his shoulders. He always carried a black stick with a crooked handle, and she saw his hand clenched on it. The bony knuckles were the same, with the skin drawn tightly over them. The blue veins looked like cords. He stared straight down the lane as he walked, and the fog made a dew upon his white beard.

He was silent; he said nothing, and his silence angered her. It was so familiar, so prophetic, so ominous. All these years he had given her either silence or sounds that were to be obeyed, and now when she had come to the crossroads of a woman's life she knew that he would stand like a pious finger-post, silently pointing. She hated him. He did not understand anything, and he had never tried to understand.

They reached the meeting-house, a little red brick building standing behind a wet, black hedge. They went in. She sat in the same place, saw the same whitewashed walls and the same faces, and heard the same words, yet never before had she felt the terrible atmosphere of the place as she felt it now. The place was unheated, cold, unhuman. The breath steamed in it. There was no life here, no love as she understood it now that it had become a yearning and an anguish. She felt the grinniness of everything, the hard complacency of the place and its people. She found herself wondering whether they had been children, or had ever been carried away by some hot-blooded, generous impulse. The place was an ice-house in which these people came to keep their souls from melting into the human thing called sin.

Her father preached, and he preached with a strange vigour. There were moments when he looked ferocious, snapping his jaws like an angry dog. Sometimes he seemed to snarl. He preached on Duty—and the Duty of Sacrifice, and all the while Douce felt that his eyes were upon her. She knew from that sermon what she was to expect. She, a warm, live thing, was to be put into the ice-house of Sylvester St. Croix's god.

Then, they were walking back, after some solemn patter in the graveyard. A red-faced man had kept on blowing his nose into a red handkerchief. Heavy shoes had squelched in the mud. Sylvester walked as he had come, silently, with long loose, gliding strides. He clutched his stick. His Bible made a sharp projection under his cloak. They had reached their own lane before he uttered a word.

"Mr. Marwick is coming this afternoon."

She had expected it.

"You will promise to marry Mr. Marwick. It is your duty."

She had expected that also.

Douce felt that she had nothing to say to him. All her life had been spent in an inarticulate humouring of this man's whims and prejudices. What could she say to him? "I do not love Mr. Marwick." She knew what his answer would be: "I—your father—order you to marry this good man." He would not understand, because he had always refused to understand anything that did not please him. And she felt herself smothering beneath his utter lack of understanding and of sympathy, just as though she had been pushed beneath the surface of some slimy, ice-cold pond. But what was even more hateful to her was the suspicion that while she could not utter one word to him he was horribly satisfied with her silence.

They entered the gate, and she felt that if she did not speak something would break in her.

"At what hour do you expect Mr. Marwick?"

"This afternoon. Maurice has gone to bring him here."

She picked the key out of the yew tree and unlocked the door.

"Father," she said, "I should like to ask you one question. Did you marry my mother as Mr. Marwick is marrying me?"

Sylvester looked over her head.

"God brought us together. Your mother was a very good woman."

"Poor mother!" said the daughter to herself.

She went to her room and took off her things, for she wanted to be alone for a little while, to feel, and to think. Sylvester paralysed her. And as she sat on the edge of her bed she looked round her as though some miraculous writing on the whitewashed walls would speak of comfort and hope, a luminous finger tracing the words, "You shall not marry without love." Of course it was obvious that she could refuse to marry Mr. Marwick. She could oppose obstinacy to her father's tyranny. She could go out of his house and try and earn a living for herself, and it might be she, and not her father, who would profit by the quarrel. But that was not all. At the back of her mind something was forming like a picture in a crystal, the conviction that Maurice was at Mr. Marwick's mercy, and that the whole business was a bargain, her body

against Marwick's money. Women are quick at getting behind the nicely painted scenery of men's ethics, especially when men are trying to fool a woman in whom the strongest of all the instincts has been aroused. St. Croix may have thought his daughter little more than a dummy, or a child whom you ordered to the altar as you ordered her to school. The child would have gone to school. It might have whimpered a little and loitered on the way, but it would not have had that in it with which to rebel. But a woman who knows what love is does not behave like a child.

At three o'clock that afternoon Mr. Marwick came, and Douce heard the wheels of his chaise in the lane. He was alone. She had a glimpse of him from her window, and expecting to see her brother with him she was puzzled to find the little man alone. The thing displeased her. Surely, Maurice, the man, the son, the saved one, should have been ready to show his face? Was he ashamed of it all? Was that sinister suspicion of hers to be reflected in the mirror of reality? Were these three men all against her, three men against a girl?

Douce heard the murmur of men's voices below, but she made no movement to go down to them. Her father should come for her, and presently she heard the opening of a door and his voice calling to her.

"Mr. Marwick is here."

She did not answer, but remained seated on her bed, for she had decided that something was due to her, some reasonable explanation, and that she should be allowed to share in the family secret as a woman who could think and feel. She was determined that her father should come up to her and speak, and in due course she heard him climbing the stairs.

"Douce."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Marwick is here."

He tried her door, but it was bolted on the inside, and she resented his attempt to open it.

"I think you have something to tell me, sir," she said.

He stood there, frowning and looking down.

"It is my wish that you come down and give your promise to Mr. Marwick."

"But before I do that I must know what our debt is to him."

She remained there until he told her something of the tale that she had heard that morning, and then she emerged and went down with him without offering any opinion of her own. She found Marwick standing by the fire, sleekly and modestly expectant, half lover, half family friend. He bowed to her. She sat down.

And then she realized that her father had followed her into the room and had closed the door. He moved to his armchair and seated himself with the air of a man who considered that he had every right to be present at a family affair. He was to preside over it like the deity. But this paternal presence outraged all her instincts. It was not fair; it was abominable.

She looked at Marwick, and the little man was quick to discover his opportunity. He cleared his throat and turned to her father.

"You will excuse me, sir, but what I have to say to your daughter I wish to say in private."

Sylvester stared at him.

"Surely, my dear Mr. Marwick——"

"Sir, I take it that Miss St. Croix is a responsible person. She has a right to hear and judge in a matter that concerns her so shrewdly. I must insist on seeing her alone."

St. Croix got up. He looked a little surprised, a little offended, but he shuffled out of the room, leaving Marwick and Douce together.

"Thank you, sir," said she; "there are some things that my father does not understand."

He gave her a bow.

"My dear, I hope that you and I will understand each other better. It is my wish that you should be happy."

And so, for the second time, he made his proposal for marriage. He said not a word of her brother and his affairs, and for this she was grateful, and ready to like him the better for it. He offered her just what he had to give, the devotion of a dry little man in the forties, a very comfortable home, her freedom—so far as any woman can be free—a solid settlement in case of his death. His proposal was as exact as legal document, but all the while he looked at her with bright and hungry eyes.

At the end of it she went and stood at the window, and remained there very still, looking out into the garden.

"Mr. Marwick," she said, "this is a very serious matter for me and for you. I wish to consider it. Will you give me three days?"

"My dear, most certainly. I applaud your seriousness."

"Then will you call my father and tell him what we have decided?"

Sylvester was called in and made to understand for the first time in his life that another man stood firmly between him and his daughter. Mr. Marwick had made an advance. Never had he seemed so likeable to Douce as on that Sunday afternoon when he put himself between her and the fires of the family Jehovah.

Douce had asked for three days' grace, but her decision came to her in the night. She held it to her bosom like a mother clasping a newly born child, for it was feeble and weak, and such a little thing to cling to, and yet it gave her hope, the courage to go on fighting. All that evening her father had sat before the fire in damning silence, and his silence had been like a hand pushing her into Marwick's arms.

The weather changed in the night, and a frost set in, and about two o'clock on the following afternoon a man who was melting some tar in a bucket over a fire beside the watchman's box inside the gateway of Mr. March's new house, heard the crackle of broken ice in the puddles. He turned about and saw a young woman wrapped up in a black cloak, and a young woman whose face looked white below the redness of her hair.

"Has Mr. March been here to-day, workman?"

Her voice was the voice of a lady, and she spoke like one in authority.

"No, miss."

"Do you expect him here?"

"I don't know, miss. But I did hear him say to the foreman on Saturday that he might not be here till Tuesday."

Douce thanked him and walked away. The disappointment made no difference to her decision; indeed, she was conscious of a sense of relief, for she wished to see Mrs. Mary before anything was said to Jordan. She was very sure that Mrs. Mary would be kind to her, and that a woman who had married for love would be ready to help a girl—and that girl her god-daughter—who refused to marry without it.

The sun hung all big and yellow in the west, and when Douce reached the first houses that were scattered beside the road she kept passing from shadow into sunlight, and from sunlight into shadow. She walked quickly. She was afraid of a certain vacillation in her self, and of something which kept getting between her and her purpose just as these houses came between her and the sun. She began to feel agitated, and her agitation increased as she drew nearer to Spaniards Court. She felt that people were looking at her, into her, and that they must see things in her eyes. She felt ashamed of her own emotion, though why she should feel ashamed of it she did not know. All these years she had made herself wear a veil of reticence, and now it was being torn aside. She shivered and felt naked.

Outside the gateway leading into Spaniards Court Douce found a coach waiting, but a coach was no unfamiliar sight here, for many of the gentry drove to Thomas Nando's. But she did not notice a black man in livery beside the coachman on the box, and when she raised the ring of Thomas Nando's knocker, the knocker-plate reminded her of the black man's face.

She stood tense and still, waiting.

Meg came to the door, a Meg who smiled on her, for being a big and swarthy old woman, Meg was always taken with Douce's pretty littleness.

"Why, miss, come right in."

"Is Mrs. Mary at home, Meg?"

"No, but she should be back in no time, and Mr. Jordan is in the fencing-school."

Douce stepped in, and suddenly old Meg looked sly.

"Why, now, let's go and take a peep at Mr. Jordan at his work. I do love watching of him, my dear, and we can see it all through a crack in the door."

Douce would have hung back, but she was overpersuaded and carried away by the larger vitality of the other woman, and in this moment of stress and of suspense she let herself float on the current of big Meg's kindness. Meg took her along the passage to the door which connected the fencing-school with the house. It hung slightly open, and through

the gap between the doorpost and the door Douce had a view of the big, white room, the smooth boards of the floor running like the planks in the deck of a ship, the chairs and benches round the walls, the oak posts of the gallery at the further end. Douce could not see the gallery itself, nor did it concern her. Her eyes were on Jordan in his white, close-fitting coat. He had his back to her and was fencing with a young man with very black hair and a sallow face. The great room was empty save for these two, and quite silent but for the tingling of the foils and the movement of the two men's feet.

Douce stood there watching the movements of the man she loved, and as Meg had said, he was good to watch. There was no swagger about him, no jerkiness. His movements flowed; they had a large grace, a satisfying completeness, as though every part of him moved just as it should. Even his feet were good to watch, for they were like the feet of a dancer.

And then Douce began to notice something else. She gathered that Jordan and the other man were practising, but it struck her that they were unnaturally solemn and silent over it. She gathered, too, that Jordan was far too strong for the other man, and that he touched him often. They would stand for a moment with lowered foils, as though resting. Jordan's back was turned towards Douce, but she noticed that during these pauses he would throw his head back as though he were glancing quickly at people in the gallery.

The explanation seemed to her very simple. The room might be empty but no doubt there were silent and interested watchers up above. She remembered the coach, and, turning with the idea of asking Meg to tell her who the coach belonged to, she found that Meg was no longer beside her. The woman's disappearance did not disturb Douce, for it was probable that Meg had work to do.

But it did occur to Douce to wonder who was up there in the gallery. By stooping she could bring it into her line of vision, but what she saw was not what she had thought to see. The gallery was empty save for a single figure, the figure of a woman.

Douce saw her very vividly, for the woman was sitting just where a great ray of sunlight from the sinking sun poured in at one of the high windows. She wore a cloak of furs, and under it some rich red stuff that had the colour of blood. She sat there quite motionless, absorbed, strangely brilliant and vivid in the yellow light, looking down at the two men below. Her face, her eyes were unforgettable. There was something mysterious and inscrutable about her. She seemed to burn before Douce's eyes, to inflict a slow and scorching pain.

Douce sank on one knee. She could not take her eyes off the figure of the woman in the gallery. She felt that she hated her, feared her, recognized in her a disastrous beauty that left her kneeling helplessly in the shadow. Once she saw the woman smile, and that smile hurt Douce. Then, she was aware of the woman rising slowly and drawing her dark furs about her. The fencing was over. The sallow, black-haired man was walking away with the two foils, and Jordan was going towards the foot of the staircase leading to the gallery.

Douce saw the woman descend. She seemed to linger on the last step, while Jordan bowed to her and then stood very straight and still. The woman smiled and spoke.

"I understand now why people come here to see you fence."

Her voice seemed to bring a darkness over Douce's eyes. She felt cold, piteously angry, strangely ashamed. A deep, wild feeling of self-abasement choked her. She got up. She slipped almost furtively along the passage, opened the door, and without troubling to close it, fled away across Spaniards Court. No one saw her go, and when Mrs. Mary came in a few minutes after Douce had left, she was met by Meg, who told her that Miss St. Croix was in the house.

But though there was no Douce to be found in the parlour, Meg said that she might be found in the fencing-school, for they had been watching Mr. Jordan fence.

"We just took a peep of him through the crack of the door. I left Miss Douce there playing Peeping Beauty."

Mrs. Mary went to the fencing-room, and at first she thought that it was empty, but on casting her eyes upwards she saw Jordan sitting in the gallery at a spot where the last rays of the sun came in at the window. Mrs. Mary thought it rather strange that he should be sitting there alone. She called to him.

"Have you seen Douce, Jordan?"

He rose like a man who has been disturbed in the midst of deep thought.

"Douce? No. Is she here?"

"She was here."

Neither Meg nor Mrs. Mary knew that Mrs. Mariana Merris had been sitting in the gallery, for she had entered and left

by the school doorway, and Jordan did not tell his mother that Mrs. Merris had come to watch him handle a sword.

That evening two shadows met in Sylvester St. Croix's garden, unhappy shadows who came together by chance in the winter dusk. They met by the tree into which Maurice had once thrown Douce's doll.

"Douce!"

She stood looking at her brother, and he could see her face only as a patch of pallor, and the two eyes like the eyeholes in a mask.

"I want to ask you a question," she said.

The words came to her lips suddenly, and yet to Maurice her voice sounded calm and toneless. He had been walking with his own cowardice in the greyness of the garden, afraid to go in, afraid of what he might hear. His cowardice was with him still.

"Yes."

"I want you to tell me something. I want to be sure."

"What is it, Douce?"

"This. If I refuse to marry Mr. Marwick he will let you go to prison?"

They stood face to face in the dusk, but the only answer he could give her was a miserable lowering of his head.

"Then I will marry Mr. Marwick."

She saw his white face raised to her.

"Douce, God bless you."

He caught at her arm, but she flung him off with a sudden fierce movement.

"Don't touch me, don't touch me."

Those weekly visits of Jordan's to the house in Garter Street had been interrupted, and it was he who had broken the chain of them, but about this time Mrs. Merris made an effort to bring the snapped links together. She might be one of the women of the moment, the "Goddess of Garter Street," as Sfax called her, but she was not resigned to losing the one man who interested her, while she was playing with the many. She was not in love with Jordan—at least—she felt quite sure that she was not in love with him, but her interest in him was not without colour. Most men are so obvious, and most of the men who paid court to her had ceased to grow, and were stuffed complacently into clothes that were nicely final. They would grow a little fatter in the head and body; that was all. But Jordan had not ceased to grow. He was like a new country, big and undiscovered, lying beyond the prettily ordered streets of a conventional town. Most women clung to the conventions, to a comfortable security, cushions, coaches, the polite paraphernalia of a protected life, but Mrs. Mariana had in her some of the blood of the first Stamford who had fought his way into the wilderness. Her southern indolence was coloured with the flush of adventure. She was not, and never would be, the Lady with the Lap-dog. Had not her grandmother handled a gun and shot down Indians from behind a rough stockade?

Jordan appealed to her, but in her maturity she wished to be very sure of the appeal. The eternal woman in her waited to hear the inevitable and unrefusable cry. She was not a girl tremulous behind her window curtains; she was in no haste; she would rather have the man climbing to her with difficulty and pain. For then she would be sure, and not selfishly sure, for when love comes to its maturity its thoughts are doubled.

Mrs. Mariana did not know that Jordan had watched her windows. She should have inferred it—perhaps, and looked at her windows with his eyes and from his place against some sheltering wall. He was out there in the darkness. He saw the coaches and chairs come to her door, saw the great world enter, the lights in the window, and sometimes the bowing assiduous figures of the gentlemen who made love to her. Some men would have been provoked by it. "I'll have her in spite of them!" Three years before Jordan might have been fired to such an adventure, but Jordan was different from the Jordan of three years ago. Mrs. Mariana was not Lady Bacchus, nor was she Miss Nancy Sweethaws. Rather, she seemed to him like the full moon in a clear summer sky. If he could not cut her out of the sky, what was the use of crying? If there was no miraculous ladder by which he could climb up to her, what did it avail him to stamp his feet in the mud? Surely a strong man would be wiser to light a lamp in his own window, and leave moonladies to the stars!

Such a decision may be very well, but when a great lady reminds a fencing-master that he has ceased to pay her the courtesy of eating a dinner with her once a week, the strongest and most silent of men is apt to be what he is, human. She had turned back when he was bowing her into Spaniards Court, and had said with the kindness of a friend: "Why do you never come and see me now?" Jordan had looked surprised, and being unable to find any excuse which she would be likely to believe, he had come very near to telling her the truth.

"Madam, a man has to remember what he is."

"Thank you. Had I known you less well, Mr. March, I should have considered myself corrected. But as it is I have a right to ask whom I choose to my house. You will come."

He had accepted it as a command.

"I am honoured."

"Then so am I. Aunt Julia will be overjoyed, and so will Poll. Let us fix the Monday of next week. Will that suit you?"

"It will," he said.

He had given his promise, and he kept it, and perhaps he was tempted to let himself dream a little during the days that intervened. It was plain to Jordan that she liked him, but it was equally plain to him that she might like other men. And of what use to him was mere liking? It was no more than a dish of tea offered with a smile to a man who had a great thirst and a desire to quench it with life's strong drink. Her very kindness might be dangerous and cruelly elusive. It was probable that she meant nothing by it, and that she trusted to his common sense to make him realize that it was kindness and no more. He told himself that he would go once more to the house in Garter Street, but that he would go to it with no illusions, and with a cool head.

But all that Monday Jordan was a little mad. He wanted to idle about and think, and his mind ceased to trouble about his body. He went into the fencing-school to give a lesson, and was so distraught and inattentive that he came near being made a fool of by a cocky youngster who fancied himself with the sword. "What the devil is the matter with March? He looks asleep." Jordan woke up for half an hour, and dealt with the young man of the smiling eyes. But he did no more work that day. He left the school to Bertrand and the assistants, got on his horse, and went for a gallop. He was out for three hours, and when he came home in the dark his horse looked very tired.

He dressed and walked to Carter Street, but he did not at once stop at the door of Mrs. Mariana's house, but walked to and fro several times with his head bowed down. His mood had changed. He felt like a soldier before an attack, half cold, half impatient, realizing something desperate in the adventure, and therefore tempting himself to make it seem yet more desperate. Either a man was killed or gained what he set out to get. Why should he not make it final, rush boldly in on her unknown defences and play the great gentleman, sword in hand?

"Madam, shoot first. I will stand and take the shot. But if you will not shoot—then—by God—you shall surrender."

Yes—why not? He would stand on the parapet of her pride and challenge her. She could pistol his audacity if she so chose, and there would be an end of it. He squared his shoulders as he raised the knocker of her door, and when Sambo opened it to him the negro saw a man who smiled.

But what he might dare to do appeared to Jordan far more hazardous when he came face to face with her, and was seated at her table. She looked at him so calmly, was so much the moon in a tranquil sky that his courage held back and reconsidered its heroics. She seemed to him unassailable by such a soldier of fortune as he was. Everything joined to stand in her defence: the glass and the silver on the table, the diamonds that she wore, her rich clothes, the very furniture, the quietness and discretion of her servants. Life spun a mysterious and enchanted web about her, a web to catch rough men and hold them at a distance.

"I cannot do it," he kept repeating to himself. "It would be like making love to the moon."

It was possible that she felt the discords within him, for she talked very calmly all through the meal, encouraging Aunt Julia to chatter like her parrot, and Miss Stamford, who was not at all shy of Mr. March, was very ready to pour out all her gossip.

"We have been so gay since you were last here, Mr. March, so very gay. Coaches and coaches and all the fashion! La, I am afraid Poll will have her head turned."

"The gentlemen have been paying court to Poll?"

"Why—think of it, Mr. March. Supposing you were a parrot brought up to London out of the country, and had your head tickled by a real live marquis, to say nothing of the lords!"

Jordan smiled a rather grim smile.

"I think I should be very shy, madam."

"Oh, at first, sir, no doubt, but lapping cream comes easy to a cat. And I assure you poor Poll is getting quite spoilt, coquetting with all these gentlemen. Why, do you know, the bird went to the opera and sat on her perch in a box."

"Indeed!" said Jordan.

"In Lord Sfax's box."

"Lord Sfax," Jordan repeated, feeling a sudden coldness within him.

"To be sure. And Poll behaved like a lady; Marie, did she not?"

"Quite like a lady, aunt. She even bowed on her perch when a certain royal personage appeared in the house."

"Was not that clever of her, Mr. March?"

"Indeed it was, madam," said Jordan, feeling more and more the fencing-master and the boy who had been found on Tom Nando's doorstep.

He was glad when the meal came to an end, and the two ladies went upstairs, leaving him to drink the glass of Madeira that Sambo had poured out for him. His face looked grave and clouded. He kept glancing slowly about the room, at the pictures, the furniture, the glass and silver on the polished table. It was all so rich, so mature, so gracious. It made him so aware of his own newness, till his whole body seemed to smart with a flush of conscious shame.

"You fool!" he thought, "you fool! How ridiculously bold you were out there in the street! Think of the men who may have sat at this table! Sfax—too, God damn him! What would you have found to say to Sfax? What might he not find to say to her? O, fool! Why, do you not see that you alone were asked, because she could not ask you to meet that other world, her world? Kindness, the considerate courtesy that saves a man's face. But why am I here? Because I twisted the nose of a common bully, and because—perhaps—in her kindness—she is a little sorry for me. Put on your mask again, Mr. Jordan March, and go up and tickle the parrot's head."

He went. He appeared before the two ladies as a young man gravely cheerful, standing well within the circle of his own dignity, and knowing that the inevitable limit could not be overstepped. He talked to Poll and stroked her head, examined the embroidery on Aunt Julia's frame, and stood by Mrs. Mariana's chair and solemnly described to her how

he proposed to furnish Mrs. Mary's new parlour. He seemed the big dog, nicely and consciously tamed. "Have no fear," said his eyes, "I have no rough tricks. I know that I am here on sufferance. I shall not upset the china or put my paws on the chair covers."

He talked steadily, like a man out for exercise on a cold morning, and then he discovered that he was talking to her bowed head. He could see the beautiful black wreath of her hair, lustrous as Miss Stamford's silks, for Mrs. Mariana had not fallen to the new and grotesque fashion of turning her head into a flower garden or a ribbon shop. He could see her two hands lying in her lap, and that she was twisting an old ring round and round over one of her fingers. She seemed to be suffering this flow of empty words, this sound that was not the man. And then she looked up at him. Her eyes were very still and deep, but what it was in them that brought his tongue to a standstill Jordan could not say. He felt himself on the edge of a cliff, looking down silently into deep water.

She drew off the ring and showed it to him.

"Now—that—belonged to my grandmother. I can remember her telling me how she furnished her first house. She had a wooden bed made out of timber split with an axe, and with rope for a mattress."

She smiled and slipped the ring back on to her finger.

"She had to weave some of her own linen. She could handle a gun like a man. She worked at building the house. And look at her granddaughter's hands."

She held them out, and turned to Aunt Julia.

"My hands do not look much use, aunt, do they?"

"They are very beautiful hands, my dear?"

And beautiful hands they were, with their long, slim fingers, their whiteness, and their pink seashells for nails. She let them lie indolently in her lap and considered them, while Jordan wondered why she had begun to tell him about her grandmother, and what Mrs. Mariana's hands had to do with all save that she had a woman's right to be proud of them.

"Quite useless, Mr. March? You would say so?"

She raised her eyes to his, and again he had that feeling of standing upon the edge of a cliff and looking down into deep water.

"They are a gentlewoman's hands, madam."

"Weak, lazy things, too indolent even to be bothered with a needle."

"They are as God made them, my dear," said Aunt Julia.

Jordan saw a movement of light in Mrs. Mariana's eyes, and for a moment he thought that she was laughing gently at him.

"Then God made my grandmother's just the same, aunt. Do you know, Mr. March, that my grandmother had hands like mine before she went with my grandfather out upon that great adventure. She kept a diary. O, no, I am not going to tell you all its dear secrets. My grandmother must have been a very lovable woman; I should like to have known her when she was a girl. But I remember one little record in her diary, and always it has touched me. 'Dear James saw my hands today. I had made one of them bleed. He seemed greatly concerned, and so was I over their poor roughness. He had always said that I had the most beautiful hands in the world. And suddenly he bent his head down and kissed them. They are so ugly, James, now,' I said. 'No, dear God,' said he, 'they are more beautiful, for they mean more to me than they ever did, and they hold the whole of my heart.'"

She spread her hands on the rich, red fabric of her dress.

"Now, I have often wondered if I had been in my grandmother's place, whether I should have made them bleed as she did."

Jordan stood looking down at her hands, while Miss Stamford—who was a fountain of sentiment ever ready to play in Mrs. Mariana's garden—was beginning to pour out an answer to that hypothetical question, when Mrs. Merris heard the street door open.

"Why, of course—my dear niece—you would do just what your dear, brave grandmother did. And I am sure that Mr. March will agree with me...."

Mrs. Merris was listening, for she could hear footsteps on the stairs.

"Wait," she said, "Sambo has——"

Her eyes glanced towards the door. The expression of her face changed from a soft wandering among old memories to a half-angry alertness. There were faint lines on her forehead, and her eyes became black and without lustre. And Jordan, who was watching her face and noting its sudden change of expression, as though it were calm water ruffled by a gust of wind, was able to ask himself what it meant. He, too, heard the footsteps on the stairs, and the sound of them was connected with Mrs. Mariana's changed expression. That door would open and explain the cause of this overclouding of her eyes, but before it opened he saw her face grow light and unconcerned. She began to speak, picking up the conversation with the air of recovering something that she had dropped. It was done calmly and well, but Jordan was still wondering why she had looked startled.

"I think my grandmother was a very wonderful woman. She had the courage to choose courage. I remember reading in her diary how she and her husband——"

The door opened before she finished that sentence, and Jordan had been waiting for the opening of that door. Something had warned him that its opening and what it would disclose would have a far more deep significance for him than anything that Mrs. Mariana's lips could utter at that moment.

He heard Sambo's thick voice.

"M'am, Lord Sfex."

Jordan stood quite still. His back was to the door, and he was watching Mrs. Mariana's face. It changed only to smile; he saw her eyes light up, yet how was he to tell that these lamps were lit wilfully and not for pleasure. He remembered her startled look, the calm surface suddenly ruffled. He knew at once that she had not expected Sfex, and that Sambo must have had orders to say that she was not visible that night. Instantly the man in him supplied the motive, and supplied the wrong one, not because he was ungenerous to her, but because he was swiftly merciless to himself. She was not pleased that Sfex should find him here, a fencing-master, a sort of superior servant.

The room filled with sudden, forced vivacity. Sambo, looking somewhat frightened, with much whiteness of eye showing in his black face, made haste to close the door. Miss Stamford got up and curtsied. Jordan moved aside towards the window with an air of rigid self-exclusion. He caught one quick, sidelong stab of the eyes from Sfex, a look which said "Hallo—and what the devil—fellow—are you doing here?" Mrs. Merris had risen from her chair. She seemed to make a very long and considered curtsy in reply to Sfex's bow. The parrot screamed. In fact Miss Stamford's Poll was the only honest and outspoken creature in the room; the bird hated Sfex and showed it.

"Your servant, madam. Miss Stamford, your bird has caught the opera manner. I hope, madam, you will pardon this late visit, but I have news for you with regard to the next levee."

He ignored Jordan. After that one glance he did not even look at him, but he was smiling. His ironical eyes glistened. His long chin jutted out, and Jordan remembered how he had drawn it in outline with a rouge stick on Lady Bacchus's wall.

Mrs. Merris resumed her chair, while Aunt Julia tried to silence the parrot by flapping a handkerchief at him.

"I'm afraid Poll has country manners."

"Bad, bad bird!"

"My lord, this is Mr. Jordan March, who once did my brother and myself a great service."

Sfex turned with sudden and freezing geniality upon Jordan as though he had not been aware of him until his attention had been directed towards his person.

"Why—March, it is a long time since we last met, but I have a most excellent memory."

Jordan said nothing. He bent at the hips; he was just two grey eyes and a hard, straight mouth.

Sfex turned again to Mrs. Merris. He seemed full of inward, mocking, genial laughter.

"So you have taken to fencing, madam?"

"Do you think so?" said she.

"And why not? If a lady chooses to engage a dancing-master, why not a fencing-master? Why, most certainly."

She smiled as a statue might smile.

"Women fence in other ways. It is true that no man can touch Mr. March with the sword."

"But women use their tongues, madam."

"And do men, sir, never use that weapon?"

Sfex gave a laugh, and a sudden glance at Jordan.

"Sometimes—certainly. It may be a very deadly weapon, madam, though of course Mr. March does not give lessons in the use of it. I have an idea that it would be unnecessary."

Jordan had a very confused recollection of all that was said in that room. He remembered that he had been full of a cold yet passionate desire to run a sword through Lord George Sfex, that the parrot had screamed continually, and that Sambo had been called to remove the bird. The situation was impossible. He had no answer to the ironical, stabbing glances which the other man gave him. Sfex had him helpless and disarmed, driven into a corner. His sword could not parry the swift thrusts of this other man's tongue. Sfex, insolent, polished, contemptuous, wholly master of the moment, forced Jordan out into the street.

Yet he got himself out of the room with more dignity than he gave himself credit for, and betrayed far less awkwardness than he thought he had betrayed. He made his bow to Mrs. Merris and Miss Stamford, made a slighter bow to Sfex, and found himself at the door.

"Madam, I have the honour to wish you good night."

She did not attempt to detain him. In a way there was a lightness in him going, but the manner of it troubled her. Nor was she pleased by the way in which he had appeared a little outfaced by Sfex—but then she did not yet know the thing that Sfex would be sure to tell her.

Jordan was in the street. He heard Sambo close the door behind him, a Sambo who had been unable to say no to a great man's masterfulness and his guineas, and standing for a moment in the roadway Jordan looked up at Mrs. Mariana's window.

"That is the end of it," he thought; "I shall never enter her house again."

His anger broke loose now that he was alone, the anger of a man who had been humiliated. Why had he suffered himself to accept her patronage? She was just like other women of the world who loved their own beautiful selves so dearly that they must extort homage from any man, be he a gentleman or servant. He supposed that it had amused her to play with his passion, and to play with it in private, but Sfex had caught her at the game, and she had been angry. Of course Sfex would tell her of the Bacchus affair, and she would be still more angry.

"O, damn all women!" said Jordan.

But he damned himself also with equal fierceness. He swore that there should be no more playing with moonlight, and yet even as he made the decision he realized how bitterly beautiful the moonlight was. There was nothing else quite like it, so tantalizing, so alluring. But after all, a man's life was not made of moonlight. It was built up of solid beef, muscle and endeavour, the habit of work, the getting of a comfortable woman for a wife and the begetting of children. Quiet grey skies, or the equally quiet glare of the sun at noon.

He had come more or less to himself by the time he chose to turn into Spaniards Court. That square of familiar darkness welcomed him, and he was glad of it. The hour was late, but he saw a light in the parlour window, and he guessed that Mrs. Mary was sitting up.

"God bless her," he thought; "there's a real woman for you."

He was not afraid of Mary Nando. They were better friends now than they had ever been, for each had sacrificed something, and they had come closer to each other as a result thereof. Mrs. Mary had ceased from being the anxious mother of the duckling. Almost always she had the happy, smiling face of the woman who knows that her men will come to her if she quietly waits and smiles.

Jordan found her sitting sewing by candlelight. She was alone, Tom Nando having gone to bed, and when she raised her eyes and smiled at Jordan he felt the world solid once more under his feet.

"Well, mother."

He crossed the room and kissed her.

"It is good to come home. But you are trying your eyes, you know."

"I like it, my dear," she said.

He mixed himself a glass of Strong waters and sat down by the fire, and his face seemed to smooth itself out. His mouth softened, and his eyes changed from grey to blue.

"Father gone to bed?"

"Yes, he was rather tired, my dear. He gets more tired these days than I should like."

"It is hard for a man to give up, mother. I know that I should find it hard. But when you get into the new house, he can potter about in the garden."

"Yes," said Mrs. Mary, "I'll try and make him lie in the sun."

Jordan got up and lit a long pipe and sat by the fire, smoking and sipping his drink. He was telling himself that it was a pleasant thing to sit by the fire, and that Thomas Nando must have found it so, especially with such a woman as Mrs. Mary. Surely a man might call himself fortunate and happy if he won for himself a woman who could sit happily beside life's fire?

"Any news, mother?"

Mrs. Mary raised her head and looked at him.

"No—I think not, my dear. Of course you have heard that Douce is to be married."

Jordan removed the stem of his pipe from between his lips.

"Douce? No, I had not heard it. Who to?"

"A little attorney man named Marwick. He is old enough to be her father."

"Why—is she marrying him?"

"My dear, don't ask me!" said Mrs. Mary; "Douce is old enough to know her own mind."

But Jordan was astonished, and perhaps a little shocked. Manwise he had never thought of Douce St. Croix as anything but Douce St. Croix. He had never visualized her as Douce married, the wife, belonging to some other man, and to an old man. And somehow his naïve, self-centred manhood disapproved of it.

A man's mental picture of a woman may be a very false one, and in Jordan's case his mind-pictures of the two women who were to influence his life during this very critical period were very inaccurate and incomplete.

After that fatal meeting with Sfix he drew a curtain across the portrait of Mrs. Mariana Merris, and attempted to suppress all that restlessness which she had encouraged, and to retrace his steps until he regained the old familiar path. As a self-disciplinarian he proved more successful than the ordinary mortal, largely because a man who has taught and trained himself to be an expert in the handling of mathematical problems or the blade of a sword has had to exercise more self-mastery than the man who has never forced himself to do any one thing well. Character is not flung together by chance, and when Jordan was faced with one of life's seeming disillusionments he met it as he would have met an enemy with the sword.

He put himself on guard. He parried the insinuations and the subtleties that were thrust at him, and he struck back. He fought the image of his own desire. He ran his sword through it, and prepared himself to swear that the thing was dead. He would not let himself think of Mrs. Merris. He was rigid, uncompromising, merciless. He had only to repeat to himself certain set formulæ in order to create a spell more potent than the enchantment she had thrown upon him.

Women amuse themselves with one man or another. They take us up and put us down like books. Each man may have his turn in her hands, but to a vain woman the book's value is in its binding. The plain leather is laid aside very quickly when the vellum appears. She had been angry when Sfix had caught her dipping into a common chap-book.

Jordan thought that he had effaced her picture, and he strangled the pain it had caused him with the strong hands of his pride. But there remained that other picture, the picture which had hung there in a corner of his life without his realizing that it was there. But he was aware of it now, and most strangely aware of it, now that another man was lifting it from the wall and preparing to remove it to his own house. Douce St. Croix to be married! Well, what had that to do with him?

Jordan's portrait of Douce had long been incomplete. He had seen her as a little thing, gravely and gently austere, a figure standing apart from the heat and the vigour of life. He had never realized her as the ardent, human girl, a creature whose little hands could clasp and cling, and the black velvet of whose eyes could burn with the light of desire.

But now he was about to see her married, and married to a man who was twice her age, and he found himself looking at her more attentively and with a vague sense of having been dispossessed. He did not like her marriage, and from such gossip as came to him he did not like the man whom she was to marry. Yet the figure of Marwick should have been very appropriate beside the figure of Jordan's Douce, a slightly severe little figure busied all its life with the orderly affairs of a house. He found himself resenting her marriage.

It was as though she had always stood at the back of his mind, without his being actively conscious of her, a little permanent figure which had not changed. And suddenly she had changed; she had come to life, and had begun to breathe in a way that disturbed him. He could not say that he loved Douce, and yet he had the most strange feeling that she belonged to him. Which piece of egotism seemed absurd, but it was not so absurd as it seemed.

For Douce, by this positive act of hers had begun to play upon the complex of a man's vanity and of a long ignored tenderness, and suddenly Jordan saw her again as Douce of the garden, a little, flitting creature with burning hair and great dark eyes in a pale face. And she was going to be given to another man, an old man, a dry stick of a fellow, and deep down in Jordan the essential maleness of him was offended. It was an impressionable moment in him; his emotions were still on the surge below the surface, though he went about with a straight, firm mouth, and steady eyes. He had drawn a veil over one picture, and in the nature of things he began to look more attentively at the other.

Confound this Marwick, what was he, and what had he done to make Douce want to marry him? But did she want to marry him? Was she happy? For a woman may most innocently challenge the whole opposite sex when she decides to choose one particular man from it. And Jordan represented the opposite sex, and also a desire that had been frustrated and made to feel futile. He did not understand half the things that were happening inside himself; few men ever do understand them, and then only when they have learnt to watch themselves and other men playing the eternal game. For in the main Jordan was a man of action, born to accomplish, perhaps to create; he felt the drive of certain impulses, but not always did he understand them. Too much understanding makes us mere watchers and recorders of other men's lives; we are so busy watching and recording that we sit on the benches while the more human and inevitable mortals take the stage.

Mrs. Mary could have told Jordan many things. It is more than likely that she could have explained to him in part why Douce had promised to marry Stephen Marwick, but Jordan did not mention the subject to her, and Mrs. Mary held her tongue. The days went by, and to his surprise Jordan found his thoughts more and more fixed on Douce. The memory

of Douce as he had known her in the beginning refused to let him alone. She came to him with a new appeal, and an appeal that touched both his jealousy and his pity.

And then, one day, just as dusk was settling over the city, he fell in with Maurice St. Croix in Covent Garden Square. St. Croix was walking fast in the direction of Long Acre. He had seen Jordan, and he did not wish to see him, and Jordan understood the look. St. Croix's eyes were hard. He tried to swerve aside, but Jordan stopped him.

"Hallo, St. Croix!"

"Oh, it's you, March?"

"You looked as though I were going to dun you."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Why—nothing."

Jordan stood in his way with an air of finality. He was smiling.

"So Douce is to be married?"

"Yes, in three months or so."

St. Croix's eyes were insolent and unhappy.

"It is a very good match for her."

"I'm glad."

"Yes, Marwick is a very sound man, old enough to know his own mind."

"That's something," said Jordan; "and I suppose that Douce knows hers?"

St. Croix's eyes said: "And what the devil is that to do with you?"

"Because," said Jordan, answering the question, "we all of us want her to be happy."

Her brother looked as if he wanted to say something sarcastic and bitter, but he changed his mind and found a smile.

"You can include me among them, March. I suppose Stephen Marwick is worth thirty thousand pounds if he is worth a penny, and he is most deucedly fond of my sister."

"I'm glad of that," said Jordan, feeling more and more sure that something was wrong. He had come to know men rather thoroughly, and this man's cheerfulness was both brittle and thin.

They stared at each other. There was nothing more to say, unless one of the two challenged the other's silence.

"How is Mr. Nando?" said Maurice, preparing to move on. "I hear the new house is nearly finished."

"Yes, there is not much more to be done. Mr. Nando is not so young as he was."

"Well, you are big enough for two, March. I must be getting on. Good night. I suppose we may ask you to the wedding?"

"I suppose you may," answered Jordan; "I shall come. Good night to you."

A thin drizzle began to fall through the greyness of the dusk, and though it blotted out St. Croix's retreating figure, it could not make Jordan forget the man's fiercely miserable face. The fellow had seemed all edge, trying to polish himself till he shone with an aggressive cheerfulness, yet standing on his toes to take offence. Jordan knew very well that St. Croix had tried to avoid him, and that there was no reason why he should try to avoid him. He had cried up Douce's coming marriage, just as a shopman cries up a piece of cloth which has to be sold to the first persuadable person who enters the shop.

Jordan was troubled. It was as though he had seen in the brother's hard and unhappy eyes the unhappy eyes of the sister, nor could Jordan escape from the feeling that somehow Douce was in danger. But in danger of what? Of marrying a middle-aged man for his money? It was possible, but Jordan did not believe it, perhaps because he did not wish to believe it.

When he reached Spaniards Court he saw the firelight playing upon Mrs. Mary's window. He had a glimpse of her kneeling in front of the fire, her face and grey hair lit up by it, the tongs in one hand, poker in the other. She did not appear to be very intent upon what she was doing, for a live coal fell through the bars and lay smoking on the hearth, and Mrs. Mary did not seem to notice it. She was watching the flames as though she saw pictures in the fire.

Jordan hung his hat and cloak in the passage and went in to her. She rose from her knees as he entered, almost as

though she did not wish him to see her face. She drew back a little into the shadow and sat down in her chair.

"All alone, mother?"

Her face was dim, and for the moment she did not answer him, and he knew that Mrs. Mary's silences were more significant than other women's words. He glanced at her a little uneasily. His first thought was that she was worrying about Tom Nando.

"Douce has been here."

"Douce!"

He was astonished, and he was silent. He stood looking down at her, and at her obscure and serious face. He could not help being struck by the coincidence of her coming, and also by something in Mrs. Mary's voice. It was the same voice that had softly accused and subdued him when he had played some wild and mischievous trick as a boy.

"She is very unhappy."

Again, Jordan felt himself accused, and it roused in him a vague impatience. He drew a chair close to the fire, and sat down so that Mrs. Mary could not see his face.

"About her marriage, mother?"

"Well, I suppose it must be that."

"Then she did not tell you?"

"O—no."

"Then how do you know that she is unhappy?"

Mrs. Mary gave him a look she would have given to a child.

"Women know something without asking or being told."

"Do they?" said Jordan. "Well, perhaps a man may feel the same about another man. It is queer that Douce should have been here, for I met her brother half an hour ago. He struck me as being ashamed of something, but what it was I don't know."

Mrs. Mary sighed, and stroked her cheek meditatively with one hand.

"This marriage," she began.

"Yes," said Jordan, "this marriage. I don't understand it."

"No."

"A man old enough to be her father. It's wrong. Do you think that old St. Croix has forced her into it? She cannot be in love with the man."

"She might be," said Mrs. Mary, venturing a shot at him.

She saw Jordan draw up his feet and give a quick little lift of the head.

"She might be. But suppose she is not?"

"I suppose she has reasons."

He sat considering something and staring hard at the fire.

"I can think of nothing, mother, that would justify a woman marrying a man if she does not love him."

"My dear!" said Mrs. Mary, "how little you know about it, you men!"

It was a fair hit, and he took it gravely, silently, without any resentment. He picked up the poker and began to play with it, and presently he came out of his silence.

"Yes, I dare say that is true. You mean to say, mother, that a woman might marry a man——"

"Because she was angry with herself."

"With herself? But why——?"

"Because of some other man, some other man who had made her feel a bitter fool."

Jordan frowned.

"You mean that some other fellow has made love to her and then——"

"Perhaps."

"I should like to break his neck."

"I dare say you would," she said with a queer look at him, "but the trouble would be to find the man. Douce would never tell."

"I suppose not. But if there is a man."

"Perhaps you may find that out," said she.

And then, most inexplicably, she got up and left him. She was half-way between laughter and tears, while Jordan, after one questioning glance at the closing door, resumed his staring at the fire.

"There may be something in all that," he thought. "Poor little Douce! That brother of hers knows something about it. By God! I feel inclined to ask him."

Mrs. Mary had run upstairs, and finding Tom Nando looking grieved over a stocking that had a hole in it, and holding it out to her with a look of accusation, she did what was for her a most unusual thing, she scolded him.

"Yes, you men always find holes in things at the wrong moment, or just when it is too late."

Nando looked at her benignantly.

"Why, mother, what has upset you?"

"Nothing," she said, "nothing. Give me the stocking. You helpless creatures, God forgive you!"

Mrs. Mary had felt Douce's unhappiness, but she had not plumbed the depths of it or understood the violence of its moods. It had begun in a mad moment of mingled self-abasement and reckless generosity, but now it had entered upon a period of increasing repulsion and passionate inward protest. She had an elderly lover, who, after dusty years of celibacy, had become like an undisciplined boy. Mr. Marwick, grave, precise, kindly, had not seemed to her so impossible a mate, but Mr. Marwick as a lover, eager as a little dog, insidiously amorous, had shocked the clean ardour of the girl.

She lay awake at night, hating him. She hated her brother; there were moments when she felt desperate, miserable waking moments, when the whole body and soul of her were in revolt.

On leaving Mrs. Mary, Douce knew that he would be waiting for her in a hired coach, for he had promised to have it ready at five o'clock outside the entry into Spaniards Court. It was there, and Marwick came out of it hat in hand. She saw his teeth and the sort of smeary shine in his eyes.

"Here I am, sweetheart."

She shivered. He was fumbling to help her in, but she fluttered in like a bird, and shrank away into the far corner. He climbed in after her and the coach started. She felt herself shut up in the close and oppressive darkness, with something that she loathed and feared, something which wild instinct told her was ready to attack her and would have to be resisted.

They had not gone a hundred yards before she felt his mouth at her lips and throat. He began to pour out words of violent tenderness.

She struggled.

"Don't! I hate it."

"My dear," he said, becoming the Mr. Marwick who had so impressed her father, "forgive me; I am so very much in love with you."

He tried a reassuring pat of the hand, but succeeded only in patting the stuffed seat of the coach.

Mr. Marwick had insisted on Sylvester St. Croix hiring a strong girl to relieve Douce of the heavy housework, and had even offered to pay her wages, and this girl, when she opened the door to him that night, was struck by the dead look on Douce's face. She seemed tired out, languid, exhausted by some struggle. The girl noticed more than this, something that she could laugh over and tell to other vulgar wenches. But Douce was unconscious of being watched. She felt dully that she had come to the limit of her strength, and that it would all end in some desperate surrender or some equally desperate revolt.

Marwick did not stay long. He showed himself particularly mild and ingratiating, and then took himself off to his house at Tottenham. Douce sat down by the fire, a little limp and tired figure, while her father, spectacles on nose, poked his way through some pious book. The wind made a noise in the chimney; the old clock ticked; outside, the bare branches

of the elms were groping at the obscure sky.

Douce stared at the fire.

"I think I would rather die," she was thinking.

And then someone came into the house. It was her brother, and yet not her brother as she knew him. His mouth smiled, but it was a smile of tight lips and vicious teeth, and there was no laughter in his eyes. He was wearing a great black coat with bulging pockets, and when he took his hat off his forehead looked all puckered. Douce noticed that he was flushed, and that his movements were quick and jerky, as though some strong emotion was pulling at the strings. He talked a great deal, and he talked very fast. Moreover, he did not take off his coat and sit down, but kept wandering about the room.

Douce wondered where he had been and what he had been doing. She became aware of him watching her, and wherever he was in the room his eyes seemed to remain upon hers, not steadily, but with a kind of wavering fierceness. She felt that he had brought something sinister and unseen and unhappy into the room, restlessness, suffering, and being weary and heart-sick, she resented it. Surely she had been bearing enough for his sake without his coming in like this and playing the shadow to her misery?

She got up and went towards the door, but at the doorway her brother intercepted her. She read the question in his eyes.

"I am going to bed."

"What an early bird!"

Her eyes looked straight into his. There was something desperate in them, a threat, a warning. They had the distressed look of one who has struggled to the point of exhaustion.

"I cannot bear much more," they said; "be warned; I may fail you, and I think I hate you."

And suddenly her brother smiled. His whole face softened. There was affection in the smile, understanding, a protecting tenderness.

"Poor Sis. Go to bed; you are tired."

"I am more than tired," she said very wearily.

He touched her gently.

"Perhaps I may find a cure for that."

Mr. Pottifer called to one of his lads.

"John, bring out Mr. March's horse."

Mr. Pottifer was a barrel of a man, with two fat arms and legs attached to the barrel, and a round, happy, red-faced head superimposed upon it. He had a white beard which curled at the tip, perhaps because he was always caressing it, and it responded to his caresses.

"No, it is not too late, sir," he said to Jordan; "in this open weather there won't be no trouble with 'em. I'll send a wagon over on Thursday."

Mr. Pottifer called himself an arboriculturist, a topiarist, and a garden artist, and he had a somewhat famous nursery beyond Edgware where he raised and grew his trees. It was a place quite beautiful in its neatness and its order, hedged in by ramparts of hazel and thorn, and Mr. Pottifer's father had loved it before him. There was a little stone tablet on the red garden-house which stated that the great Mr. Evelyn had once visited the nursery, and had presented the Pottifers with a rare American tree. Jordan had spent two hours here, wandering along the neat alleyways with their edges of box, and choosing his trees for Thomas Nando's new garden. He had brought yews, clipped and unclipped, hollies, laurels, cypresses, pines, apples, pears, cherries, medlars and a mulberry. Mr. Pottifer had a pocketful of wooden tallies, and each tree was marked as it was chosen.

A band of yellow sunlight streaked the sky beyond the high black hedges when Jordan got on his horse, shook Mr. Pottifer's huge hand, and took the road to London. He was in no hurry, though the dusk was spreading over the fields, and before he had ridden half a mile he was thinking of other things, and Mr. Pottifer and his trees had disappeared, into the darkness. His thoughts went across the fields and entered a certain house where someone—a girl—was supposed to be unhappy. They lingered there awhile with a vague inclination towards some half-sentimental purpose, and then diversified to another house, a house with white window sashes and a door which when it opened disclosed the black face and the gleaming teeth of a negro.

Ten days ago Jordan had said good-bye to that particular house, and these ten days seemed to have removed the house and its memories to some almost impersonal horizon. They were touched with a soft melancholy, a quiet bitterness. He had been surprised to find that he had not suffered more, that the edge of it had bitten less deeply into him than he had expected. He could not quite explain it to himself, but had been able to explain it he might have realized that the relationship had never been very intimate, that he had never allowed his love to touch her very intimately. His thoughts had hovered about the surface of her. He had never imagined kisses or embraces; his love had been a sort of wondering devotion; it had stood still and gazed; it had never been translated into movement, action, the thrill of contact, a wild troubling of the heart and breath. He had desired her almost as a man desires some beautiful but impersonal thing.

Also he might have realized that he had been disappointed. He had expected some message, some sign from her, and nothing had reached him. We may lock the door, and then be tempted to listen for the sound of footsteps, and Jordan had listened for days, without consenting to admit to himself that he was listening. He had been full of a vague expectancy. When nothing had happened he had begun to turn away slowly from the locked door.

"Sfex told her," was his explanation.

It led him to the inevitable conclusion.

"Naturally she does not wish to see me again. I'm tarnished. It might not matter to some women, but it would to her."

His thoughts came back to Douce and Mr. Marwick. He had to allow that Douce had become a very human little figure to him, a figure of appeal. She was unhappy, and man nurses a secret vanity in desiring to kiss the unhappiness away from the eyes and lips of a woman who has for him the human appeal. He had become more conscious of Douce's lips and eyes. Her gentle austerity even had a peculiar and new attractiveness. He did not realize her ardour, the fire—that almost dangerous fire—beneath the pale surface. He may have dreamed of lighting what was already lit. He could not foresee how exacting such a love might prove, the possessive and passionate love of one little woman whose whole world of emotion had swung for a long while round a centre that was himself. She would cling to him, hold to him, fiercely, blindly, with but little understanding of what a man's life is, and how large a part of it may lie outside the circuit of a woman's arms.

It had grown dark. The hoofs of his horse squelched in the mud of a road that seemed deserted. The hedges were visible as dim lines against the obscure fields, and in the distance one or two lights pierced the blurred blackness. Jordan had felt himself alone, and suddenly he was not alone. A figure approached from nowhere. There was a

clutching hand at his bridle, the slight rearing of Jordan's horse as he was checked.

"Hands up!"

Jordan felt the snout of a long pistol pressed against his body. There was no arguing with such a weapon when held in such a position, and the man who chose to argue with it had nothing to count on but the pistol's missing fire. Jordan put up his hands. The gentleman down below there with the crêpe-blackened face had sprung his surprise and won the first move.

Jordan used his wits.

"All right, sir; all right, sir; don't shoot."

"Keep your hands up, damn you," said the man.

He was feeling Jordan's body, and from his body he turned his attention to the holsters. There were pistols here, and the man extracted them and slipped them somewhere into his pockets.

"Now for the brass. Shell out."

"You'll get some small change and little else," said Jordan, puzzled by the man's voice.

"We'll see about that. Get off your horse. No, on this side, and don't try any tricks."

The footpad stood off at arm's length, holding the bridle, and covering Jordan with his pistol as he dismounted.

"Now then—my buck, there is a field gate just here. We'll turn in there just to be nice and peaceful while I go through your pockets. You will walk straight to the gate—you can just see it, and I shall be behind you with the barker."

"Just as you please, sir," said Jordan.

He walked towards the gate, and heard his horse's hoofs sucking at the wet turf as the footpad followed. And suddenly there was another sound—the sound of a man stumbling. The fellow had put his right foot in an open land drain, and in the half-sprawl that resulted he dug the point of his pistol into the sodden grass. Jordan, who had been waiting for his chance to take an active part in the game, was on him before he had recovered his feet. He got a grip of the fellow's wrist and closed with him, while the scared horse cantered off down the road.

They fought it out in silence. The footpad had dropped his pistol, but he was not done with yet; he was strong and savage and quite desperate, and he fought to escape. He used his knees, clawed and twisted and bit till Jordan felt that he had a wild dog in his hands. A stab of anger went through him, for the footpad's open hand had made a jab at his eyes. There was nothing for it but to stun and crush this vicious, foul-fighting thing, and he did it with two hammer blows, in the face, while his other hand held the collar of the fellow's coat.

The man gave him no more trouble. He just sank down on the grass and lay quite still; his mask had been torn off and his face made a little patch of greyness. Jordan had stepped back towards the road, and was looking instinctively for any sign of his horse, but instead of his horse he saw two yellow eyes approaching, with a dull grinding of wheels. They were the lamps of a coach.

He stood in the road with his hands up, and hailed the driver as the coach came up.

"Hallo! There has been trouble here!"

The man pulled up, but a head was thrust out of one of the windows.

"Whip up, Jeremy, you fool; it's some damned trick."

Jordan answered the voice.

"It is not, sir. There has been trouble here. I want you to lend me one of your lamps for a moment. I'll come up to you with my hands up. I suppose you have pistols."

"One's on you now," said the voice grimly; "the decoy will get a bullet if the other birds get away."

A servant was standing up beside the coachman and covering Jordan with a blunderbuss, and Jordan laughed.

"Your servant has got me, too, sir. My name is March. I am Mr. Jordan March, the fencing-master. I want to have a look at a man who is lying over there."

The gentleman at the window hesitated a moment.

"All right. Stand there where I can see you. Jack, get you down and take one of the lamps, and keep your blunderbuss on your hip. Now, sir, I'll trust you at the point of my man's gun."

"Thank you, sir," said Jordan.

Jordan and the servant with the blunderbuss went across to where the footpad was lying, and Jordan, holding the lamp at arm's length, bent over the man whom he had stunned. The servant was watching them both. He saw blood on the face of the man lying on the grass.

"I thought so," said Jordan, rising and drawing back, so that the man's face was in the shadow; "I heard someone groaning. He has been knocked down and robbed."

"Is he dead, sir?" asked the servant.

"Dead! Not a bit of it. I saw his eyelids flickering."

Jordan walked back to the coach, and, bowing to the gentleman at the window, replaced the lamp in its bracket.

"A traveller has been knocked over and robbed, sir. I thought I heard someone groaning, and I got off my horse to look. If you had been going Londonwards I would have asked you to take the poor devil into your coach. As it is, I will look after him."

The gentleman seemed nervous and in a hurry to be gone. He had ladies in the coach, and Jordan could hear their frightened twitterings.

"We are going beyond Edgeware. I could send back help from Edgeware."

"I do not think you need trouble, sir. I can put the man on my horse and take him to the nearest inn."

"You are a Good Samaritan, Mr. March."

"I hope that someone would do the same for me. But I should drive fast, sir, and keep a good look out. The gentry may be after other plunder."

"I will, sir; I will. I am much obliged to you, Mr. March. Good night. Whip up, Jeremy, and if anyone tries to stop you, drive like the devil."

The coach rolled away, while Jordan went back to the man lying by the field gate. He had moved a little since Jordan had left him and was sitting with his back against the gate and his legs stretched out along the grass. Jordan stood over him and listened. The road was deserted; they were alone.

"St. Croix," said he; "how long is it since you took to taking purses?"

The man's body gave a jerk, and the gate creaked on its hinges.

"Who the devil are you?"

"You ought to have known my voice, man. It is March—Jordan March."

St. Croix sat very still. He had been sick, and the nausea was still upon him, but he had vomited more than the contents of his stomach, for when a man fails and fails most horribly his emptiness comes from a sickness of the soul.

"You were too big for me, damn you."

"What has my bigness to do with it?" said Jordan gravely; "you bit like a mad dog. And it was lucky for you that it was I who saw your face by the light of that lamp."

"Then—you did not say——"

"I told them you had been waylaid and robbed, and that I would take charge of you. That was the best way to get rid of them."

St. Croix drew up his knees, and resting his chin on them, held his aching head.

"What are you going to do?" he asked dully.

"Nothing—not yet."

"Not yet?"

"You have got to tell me what all this means."

"O, confess to you, have I?"

"You have," said Jordan very quietly; "you owe me something for losing me my horse, and digging that pistol of yours into my ribs."

But the battered, beaten thing, leaning against the gate, still clung to a futile pride.

"But for that damned hole in the ground I should have brought it off. And I could have thrashed most men."

"Was this the first time?"

"Not by a long way. I have taken thirty guineas in a week, and rings worth a hundred."

"Don't boast about it," said Jordan grimly. "What I want to know is what drove you to this cut-throat's game?"

"I am to make a humble confession, am I? Thanks."

Jordan stood over him.

"St. Croix," he said quietly, "I'm not a parson; I have known what it is to be called a bastard. But when one catches a man like you playing the night-hawk, one can make a pretty sure guess what is wrong with him. Look here; you have been gambling?"

"I have."

"With somebody else's money?"

"Perhaps."

"And you felt the noose round your neck or smelt the smell of the dirty straw?"

"Well, what of it?"

"And you had to get money somehow?"

"Of course."

"But this fool's game, to call it no worse than that!"

St. Croix got up; he clung to the gate and leant upon it, head down, shoulders hunched up.

"That's all you know, damn you! There is more in it than that!"

"Tell me, man; tell me."

"Why the devil should I?"

Jordan went near to him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Why not? I have had my affairs, my ups and downs. I know what it is to feel that your inside has dropped out of you, or is all twisted into a knot. Supposing I ask you a question?"

St. Croix was silent, his teeth clenched on the sleeve of his coat.

"Is Douce concerned in it?"

He felt a movement of St. Croix's body.

"She is! I wondered. And this Marwick?"

"Yes."

"He paid your debts perhaps?"

"Yes."

"Then—why——"

St. Croix turned on him swiftly and stood very stiff, with tight lips and head thrown back.

"Damn it—I had to do something—anything. A man may be a swine, but when it comes to selling—yes, just that, March, just that! I swallowed the thing at first, and then it turned sour and filthy in me. And I have been seeing things in her eyes."

He twisted like a man on a rope.

"She knew. I don't know what made her do it, but she did it. And I have never been much of a brother to her. And then I saw that she was beginning to hate me. I was a foul and cowardly thing, hiding behind her petticoats, but she cannot have hated me as much as I hated myself. I felt I had to do something. I was mad. I wanted money—but I wanted danger, too. Do you know that sort of feeling, March, when you have played the cur and feel that you must go and hold your hand in the fire? Just for your manhood's sake. To show yourself that you can do it. A fool's game, a rotten game, robbing old men and silly women, but with the chance of getting a pistol let off in one's face."

He turned away again and leaned upon the gate as though he had exhausted his emotion and had come suddenly to

the end of things. But Jordan's eyes had grown kind. He had never liked St. Croix, but his heart went out to this man who in the fierceness of his shame could hold his right hand in the flame of his own scorn. Douce's brother was not acting. Men who have the great nausea upon them do not act.

"I am glad you have told me this," he said almost gently.

He stood beside Maurice, his hands resting on the gate.

"How much do you owe Marwick?"

"He had bills against me for seven hundred pounds."

"I will let you have seven hundred pounds to-morrow. Old Bowyer in the city can arrange it."

St. Croix did not move.

"You—March!"

"I made a lot of money. It is obvious that Douce must be free."

"You mean it, man?"

"Of course, I mean it. Pay the old scoundrel off, and let him whistle for a wife."

St. Croix bent his head low over the gate. He might have been praying or making some promise to himself, and Jordan let him alone.

"March?"

"Yes."

"I'll pay you back, somehow, if you will give me time."

"Take as much time as you please."

"And there is this other money. What am I to do with it? I cannot return it."

"Put it aside for use. You will find some poor devil in need of a few guineas."

"Yes—I can do that."

He raised himself; he stood erect, looking over the dark fields. He seemed to have nothing more to say, or if he had anything to say he was unable to express himself. And yet Jordan felt that this man had changed, that something had been torn and rooted out, and that the vanity which had been plucked bleeding out of him might be replanted to grow as the thing we call self-respect.

"March——"

Jordan saw a hand resting on the top bar of the gate, and he laid one of his own hands over it.

"Well—what are we going to do?"

Jordan felt St. Croix's hand turn and grip his.

"I should like her to know——"

"Of course."

"To-night. May I tell her that you——"

"Tell her that we have met and talked, and that I can lend you the money. You need tell her nothing else."

"But I should like to tell her. She ought to know the kind of man you are."

"O—that's nothing. She did a much finer thing. Now, if we could find that precious horse of mine. Or we can hire at the next inn. But look here, you have been hit on the head and robbed, and I happen to come along——"

"That lie will do for the world, March, but not for everybody. Why, man, you will have nothing to boast about!"

"I don't think I care for boasters. Let us try and find the horse."

They were in luck, for they found the horse cropping the grass about three hundred yards down the road. Jordan made him out in the darkness, and when he called to him the beast whinnied and came to him at once, though he was still scared and timid.

"That's all right, old lad. Have a good feed. Get up, St. Croix; I'll walk."

"I'm quite up to walking."

"No, you are not," said Jordan; "a man who has been hit on the head and robbed has to make some show for Dick and Harry. Up with you!"

St. Croix mounted the horse.

Douce was sitting before her cracked mirror and putting her hair into plaits before getting into bed, when she heard a voice calling to her out of the night.

"Douce—Douce!"

The voice came from the garden, and she went to the lattice and opened it. The night was very dark, and she could distinguish no one below.

"Who is there?"

"Maurice. Come down, Sis; I have something to tell you."

His voice thrilled her, for there was emotion in it, a vibrant eagerness. She put on a cloak and her shoes, took her candle and went down the stairs. Maurice was leaning against one of the yew trees when she opened the door.

"What is it—Maurice? O—your face!"

"Never mind my face," and he put an arm about her and took her into the empty parlour.

The fire was still burning, and Maurice sat down by it, while Douce held the candle. She stood and looked at him with wide, dark eyes.

"What has happened? Something has happened."

"Yes—something has happened. You need not marry Marwick."

She stood very still, but the flame of the candle flickered slightly.

"Is it true?"

"It is true."

He got up suddenly and blew out the candle.

"Now, I will tell you. Sit down by the fire, Sis. It will not take very long."

And so he told her everything that had happened that night, holding her hand, and watching the dwindling redness of the fire. It seemed to him that he had been cold at first, but that it grew warm and alive. She asked no questions, but just sat there and listened. A great happiness may fold its tired winds in silence.

"You will try and forgive me, Douce?"

He felt the pressure of her hand.

"I have forgiven you."

"Dear—I believe you have. March said you had done a fine thing, and that man understands. Do you know, Sis——"

"I know nothing," she said, trembling.

"I will tell you. It was not so much for my sake—but for yours. I believe that Jordan March——"

But she made a little restraining and protesting gesture.

"No, no; let that be, Maurice."

She sighed, but it was a happy sigh, like the first deep breath drawn after hours of pain.

"And now—your poor face. What can I do? And you will sleep here?"

She lit the candle again and mothered this man who had brought her so near to disaster, for it is not difficult to be kind in moments of great happiness.

"Perhaps—perhaps," she said to herself when she curled herself up in bed, "perhaps I shall see him to-morrow."

Mrs. Merris opened her crimson fan and held it between her face and the fire, for Sambo, southern creature that he was, had a heavy and a generous hand with the coal-box.

Mrs. Merris was thinking, unhindered by the agitation of Miss Stamford's knitting needles and by the anxious glances her aunt flicked at her from under her lace cap. Miss Stamford was very much disturbed. She had been trying to do her duty, or what had been suggested to her as her duty, but she was beginning to feel that she had been maladroit in the doing of it.

"What clumsy things men are!"

To be given such an answer after all her careful fluffing up of feathers and her preparation of the nest in which to lay the egg!

"Clumsy, my dear! I am afraid——Well, I hope you do appreciate my motive?"

Her niece had turned and smiled on her, one of those smiles which express everything and nothing.

"I do, dear, and his."

Then, silence had settled between them like a screen of glass. Mrs. Merris had turned her chin more towards the fire, opened her fan, rested her elbow on her left knee, and left her face uncovered for Miss Stamford to study it at her leisure. She sat quite still. She seemed to go off into deep thought, her eyes fixed steadily on one of the brass fire-dogs. Her face was masked. Miss Stamford, thoroughly uncomfortable, and feeling herself shut out behind the glass screen of Mrs. Merris's silent composure, sat and clicked with her needles and fidgeted with her foot. Mariana did not mind being stared at! She did not seem to realize that her aunt had eyes and an agitated soul! Now, what did that mean?

Yes, men were very crude creatures, and sometimes they were cowardly creatures. Yet they had a certain cleverness in explaining their motives to themselves and to each other, and in persuading women that what they did was chivalrous or discreet or subtle. To persuade a foolish and good-natured maiden lady that she had a certain duty to perform! To suggest to her that certain words would fall more nicely from her lips than from the lips of a man! Confessions about another man! Did George Sflex believe that he had done the thing rather prettily, or was he just a malicious grin in a wig and court clothes?

Men! What was there lovable in men? What did one love in them? The animal, the boy, the comrade, the hurt dog? Perhaps! But the mere creature who made of life an epigram? Never. A woman would rather have her man a little foolish, lovably foolish, than coldly clever. Satire, wit, never yet kept a woman awake at night letting the candle of life burn to the socket.

She raised her head. There was something mocking, brilliantly combative in her eyes.

"So, Aunt Julia, Mr. March has been a rather wild fellow."

Miss Stamford had the face of a canary, an agitated canary. Poll, her parrot, had a much deeper and shrewder eye.

"My dear, it would seem so. All sorts of women, actresses!"

"Terrible!"

"I do really think, dear, that it was kind and brave of Lord Sflex——"

"To you, yes. But why not to me?"

"My dear!" said Miss Stamford, looking shocked. "How could he?"

She dared not glance at her niece, but gave all her attention to her clicking needles.

Mrs. Merris smiled.

"The wild heart of youth," she said.

She moved her fan to and fro, so that the firelight came and went in her eyes.

"My dear Aunt Julia, I was going to ask you a question, but I see that it would be a superfluous question. Of course, you do not expect me to ask Mr. March here again?"

Miss Stamford gave her a frightened glance.

"My dear, how could you?"

"Is that your view? But I imagine that Sflex will present himself regularly."

"And why should he not?"

"If you were to try to answer that question! We always stop at half-way houses—if they appear comfortable and convenient. I shall give——"

But suddenly she closed her fan as though she were closing an argument.

"I shall give myself a holiday, for a month."

She was a woman who was able to satisfy her wishes, and since the March winds were drying the roads, she had her coach overhauled and her baggage packed, and leaving Miss Stamford in Garter Street, she set out on her unconventional journey. Protests, even panic protests, had no effect on her. "My dear, you cannot travel alone. It is not done. You may be robbed, or be upset in a ditch."

"Well, I can get out of the ditch. And it is done, because I am going to do it. I want you to stay behind and explain to your dear Lord Sfax."

Miss Stamford was very much upset.

"But what am I to say to him?"

"Why, anything you please. Say that I have gone on tour to see all my relations. What does it matter? I don't like the man."

"You don't like him?"

"I detest him."

"Really, my dear, are you sure that——?"

"O, quite sure. You can tell him so, or ask Poll to tell him so. Poll and I agree."

Mrs. Mariana's coach carried her into Oxford on the very afternoon that Jordan set out on a certain expedition which, when he came to approach its climax, appeared more delicate than it had seemed. "Now, what the deuce am I to say to her? I can't walk into the house as though I had brought her ransom in my pocket." He had seen Maurice that morning, a Maurice who had come away from a dog-and-cat affair with Mr. Marwick. "I handed him the money, March. Bowyer went with me. You should have seen his face. 'Sir,' said he, 'I did not think your sister was a young lady who sold herself.' O—well, that's finished, thanks to you. I shall not forget. My father knows; I told him, and, would you believe me, he was inclined to regret Marwick as a future son-in-law. Faith, it's a fact! My father must have come out of the Dead Sea, March. But you will go and see Douce. I know she wants to see you." Jordan had promised to go that very afternoon. Poor little Douce; she had behaved very finely.

But Jordan could not make up his mind what to say to her. He felt that he had her pride in his hand, and he carried it rather awkwardly and self-consciously, like a boy with a flower. The colour of the sky had changed. Douce no longer belonged to another man; she belonged to herself, and there was a sort of pause in Jordan's tenderness towards her. He felt strangely less sure of himself than he had done three days ago; he wanted to see Douce, to look at her, to find out how she affected him. At the back of his mind was a sense of vague self-disgust, a feeling that he was driving himself towards an emotion that should have been a matter of pure impulse and of instinct. He felt rather ungenerous about it. Douce had done a fine thing, yet he was going to her less impulsively than a man should go to the girl whom he had begun to think of as his mate.

Douce expected him. She had spent much time over her hair; she had washed it, and fluffed it out under a white cap threaded with black ribbons. Her eyes seemed to match the black ribbon, but her skin had a faint colour, like the tinting of a shell. She sat at the parlour window which commanded the gate, and pretended to be busy with her sewing.

Her father had gone out. There had been a little passage of arms between them, in which the girl had imposed very definite orders upon a surprised old man.

"Douce, you are keeping me waiting."

"I am not going out, sir. Mr. March is expected."

"March! Then I had better stay."

"You need not stay, sir. Mr. March is coming to see me, not you. I wish to express my gratitude to him. I do not think that you and Mr. March have anything to say to each other."

"It is not seemly for you to receive a young man—alone—in this room. I cannot permit it."

"Indeed, sir! I am surprised! You allowed me to drive alone with Mr. Marwick. To-day I wish to have the use of this

parlour to receive a man who is a gentleman."

She had stood up against Mr. Sylvester. The senile and self-sufficient length of him had been opposed by this firm little body, by the will of a young woman who had suddenly grown very determined because her desired lover was near. Youth had stood up to age and had dominated it.

"If you must stay I will have a fire lit in the other room."

But Sylvester had wagged his goat's beard and gone forth alone with an air of shuffling perplexity. Youth had something which he had lost, a hardness, and ardent obstinacy; he did not understand it, but he had felt its impact upon the brittle shell of his dry old soul.

Douce sat at the window. She could see the path, the grass verges, the elm suckers in the hedge powdered with the faint greenness of an early spring, the dark slats of the gate, and above the hedge the intense blue and whiteness of a swift March sky. Masses of cloud were being blown across the heavens between splashes of hard sunshine. The wind was strong. She saw the hedge shaken by it, the grass flattened into little silvery tremblings. A clump of Lent lilies shook their golden heads. She heard the roaring of the great elms, a sound of fierce rejoicing in the strength and the steadfastness of life. The clouds hurried. And she sat and sewed and waited, though her heart caught all the hurry and movement of the world outside her window.

Presently she raised her head, for she had heard the familiar click of the wooden gate-latch. She saw Jordan coming up the path, walking slowly, and looking at one of the upper windows. She did not hurry, but laid her work upon the table, and remained in her chair until she heard his knock. Her very leisureliness in going to the door was the leisureliness of an obstinate self-restraint, a woman's instinctive concealment of her own emotion.

Douce opened the door to him. She gave him the faintest of smiles. She looked mysteriously grave.

"Will you come in, Mr. March?"

Jordan's gravity matched hers. He stood bare-headed and bowed to her, but she felt that his eyes saw more than they seemed to see.

"Thank you. What a wind there is!"

"Yes, a real March day."

Her eyes smiled, and then became instantly serious.

"One of my days! What does it mean to be born in March?"

"I am sure I do not know," she said, drawing back and making way for him with no lightening of her gravity; "we had no one to tell us fairy tales when we were young. Shall I take your hat?"

"I will put it here—if I may."

"Yes."

"I had it blown off at the corner of your lane, and it fell into a puddle."

"Then it should need drying."

"I think it does."

"I will put it on a chair in front of the fire."

Jordan followed her into the room, and remained standing until she desired him to be seated. They were very polite to each other, and their formalism might have satisfied the most exacting of fathers. Douce had placed Jordan in Mr. Sylvester's chair with his back to the window, while she took the oak joint-stool with the padded top. She faced him squarely with her air of austere dignity.

"Mr. March, I wish to thank you for your very great kindness to my brother."

He smiled at her, and seemed unable to find anything to say.

"Well, now that you have thanked me, let us forget it."

"It will be impossible for me to forget it. I do not think, Mr. March, that I wish to forget it."

There was a pause. Jordan saw a quick and sensitive colour rise to her face and then melt away again; her eyes had given him a sense of momentary brightness, only to become darker than before. Her hands lay folded in her lap. They made no movement. Indeed, no part of her seemed to move, and her stillness had a very peculiar effect on him. Her seriousness, her breathless dignity were what the man in him had somehow vaguely desired. He recognized the

rightness of her, the instinctive pride of her still pallor crowned by the glow of her brilliant hair. Had she studied her part she could not have chosen a more potent attitude. It appealed to him, it touched him, it provoked him to a sudden large tenderness. How much more had she had to bear and to hide than he had, and how very finely she bore it.

"There is something which I, too, do not wish to forget."

She met his eyes, and was aware of a new depth in them. He was looking at her as she had wished him to look. Her two hands clasped each other more firmly.

"I am glad," she said.

He made a movement of bending towards her.

"I think I know what courage is. I cannot say what I feel about it, about what you did for your brother."

He saw her whole face redden.

"Please—please, don't. I wish to forget it."

"Of course. I know that you must wish to forget—a part of it. But I shall not forget it, Douce. It has made me feel rather humble, a little fellow. I came here wanting to tell you how I had felt about it, and I did not know how to tell you. But you have made me tell you, and I am glad."

He saw her lowered lashes, and the hands lying quietly in her lap.

"I did not mean to make you say anything."

"I know that. And, I think, that is why I was able to say it."

Douce knew that Jordan had come very near to her, and the sense of his nearness made her tremble. But she was extraordinarily and instinctively right in her attitude towards him, and in her little air of austere restraint. It was as though she had divined intuitively how to make herself most felt by this big man, and yet there was no conscious posing in her self-possession. He had come very near to her, and suddenly she drew back, gently, with a sensitive and quiet closing of the petals. She had a feeling that he must not approach her too easily, that she must not let him touch her for quite a long while yet.

Again, she was right. For Jordan was aware of this closing of her petals. He was gently and gravely shut out, and this sense of exclusion made him more hers than he had been before. So many women had opened their arms to him, and looked him hotly in the eyes, that this little thing with her pale face and her dark glances made him feel that the thing which is not won easily is the one thing worth having.

He did not stay long with her, but when Douce watched him go down the path she knew that he would come again, and knew it as surely as a woman can know anything. She pressed her two hands to her cheeks and let herself feel all that she had not dared to feel.

"He is going to want me," she thought, "he is going to want me."

Those who saw Douce during the March days were aware of a change in her. There was more colour in her cheeks and a deeper lustre in her eyes; her mouth had ripened, and her face had that indefinable soft bloom which characterizes an inward and happy ardour. Spaniards Court observed her and was wisely indulgent. She came into it once or twice on Jordan's arm, and sometimes she came alone, and Mrs. Mary, with her head among the hyacinths in the pots upon her window-sill, smiled softly in her heart.

"You pretty thing," she said, meeting Douce and kissing her, "you pretty thing!"

They were very kind to Douce, and their kindness accepted her. She lost her air of austerity, and even began to be playful with Thomas Nando and to coquette with his fatherly teasings, filling his pipe for him, and coming like a bird to perch upon his knee.

"Well, well," said he to Mrs. Mary, "I suppose these young things will be making a nest here when we go to roost in the new house."

Douce was allowing herself to forget Mr. Stephen Marwick, but Mr. Marwick was not forgetting her. He had been nearer to her than she had guessed, and those little bright eyes of his had observed her with a menacing and purposeful intentness. Mr. Marwick had no morals. He had always acted upon the assumption that all the chicanery and the clever ingenuities of life are justified by success. The only people who are damned are the people who fail.

He had not accepted failure. He knew that he had not been very far from setting his seal to the document. There were various other methods which could be carried out by certain shady persons without any immediate danger to himself. He was in a position to lay his hands upon such people and to persuade them to do as he pleased.

After all, it was a very old trick, but the oldest tricks are not the least successful. He was a little gentleman who knew a thing or two. He had the virtue of persistence.

"Possession is half the law," and he would have added, "the whole of marriage."

Mrs. Mary's hyacinths had faded, and had given place to pots of red and white tulips, when a negro in a very red coat and the whitest of wigs walked into Spaniards Court and knocked at Thomas Nando's door.

Meg opened it to him.

"Good day, m'arm. Mister March—he lives here?"

The negro smiled, and with such a flashing of white teeth that Meg's face had to reflect the smile. Yes, Mr. March did live here, and what did the black gentleman want with him?

Sambo produced a letter.

"For Mister March."

"Are you to wait for an answer?"

"No, m'arm."

"And who may the letter be from?"

"Mister March, he will know."

"O, will he!"

She shut the door on Sambo, and holding the letter delicately she carried it up to Jordan's room and laid it on his table. But when Meg had laid it there she was persuaded to take it up again, to turn it over and over, to smell it, and hold it up to the light. The letter provoked her. It was a lady's letter, and Meg could remember other occasions when Jordan had received such letters which—according to Meg's observations—were not missives calculated to make a man either contented or happy. She assumed it to be a love-letter. "I know your kind," she reflected; "you come—smelling of lavender—from some fine lady who can't let a handsome man alone. And just when things are going so prettily! Well, perhaps he won't be fooled by you. He's nothink like so taken with women as he used to be."

Jordan had gone out to the new house where the spring and Mr. Mactavish had made an end of the winter's ugliness. Grey flagstones and turf and trees had taken the place of the mud and the rubbish; a gravelled drive led round from the iron gates to the stable; there were flower beds edged with box and full of gilliflowers and tulips and red and white daisies. The fruit trees in Tom Nando's old garden were in bloom, and the oaks in the wood beyond the little paddock were showing buds of bronze and of gold. The house stood there in red and white completeness, solid, and good, and clean, ready for the paper-hangers and the furnishes, sleeking itself in the sunlight like a pretty woman in a new gown.

Jordan had the place to himself that afternoon, for the gardener's wife, after seeing to the fires that were kept burning to dry the house, had gone across to her own cottage. The house surprised Jordan. It seemed to him that hitherto he had never seen it as it was, complete, cleansed, set in its green setting with the sun shining on it out of a blue sky. He wandered about the garden; he went from room to room, happy and yet not so happy as he wished to be, vaguely aware of some presence, some memory that was not part of the house. He stood in the long parlour with its two windows and its white-painted walls. One window showed him the sunk garden with its stone cistern, paved paths, its clipped yews and box trees; the other opened upon that stretch of vivid grass with the oak wood flashing gold leaf buds at the end of it. He stood looking from one to the other. He was caught by a sudden thought, a memory that conjured up a sense of vague and unfulfilled desire. He remembered the day when he had built a causeway of planks for Mrs. Merris, and had loathed the mud, and the men, and the newness. She had taken all the glamour away and carried it off with her in her coach. How well he remembered it!

He found the same mood stealing upon him now. Yet, why should he think of her? What was he to her, or she to him? The mud had gone, and so had the illusion that her beauty could have any meaning for him. But was it a mere matter of beauty? Was it her beauty, her richness of texture, that had made the new house seem raw and ugly, a boy's toy-house, a thing that was finished with before it had been completed? Had there not been something more than that, a subtle challenging of the future, a mysterious wounding of his ambition, a voice that had said: "This is your first play-box. You shall build better than this." He stood and mused; he went out again, and wandered about the garden, looking at the house critically, with a new sense of its limitations and of his. He rebelled against the mood. He saw that the house was handsome, and solid, and well built. And what a fool mood was this! To let the thought of a woman come in and spoil it, and make him yearn vaguely for something else when life might be as solid and as well set as this thing of stone and of brick. Here was a reality, a fact, a substantial accomplishment. Women and the spring were alike in the mischief they made, filling a man's mind with vague discontents and vapours, wounding him with a sense of something yet to be sought for and desired. What did a man want? If he had health, strength, money, a wife, children, some reputation in the world, what more could he ask for? The rest was all moonlight and madness.

Jordan had issued an order to himself that he should think of it in that way. He locked the door, took the key across to the gardener's cottage, and walked home, changing the smell of the green country for the smell of the city, and assuring himself that both were good. He was alive; he had work to do. Wench smiled at him. He was Jordan March, a man to be treated with respect.

He went up to his room and found that letter.

"We have become like strangers. I have been away into the country, but having returned I still live in Garter Street. You may come and see me."

He stood holding the letter in his hand.

His first thought was of the strangeness of its coming to him at this moment when he had fought a battle with himself concerning her. His second thought was that he would not go.

"Why re-open a path that had begun to be overgrown?"

No, he would not go. And so sure was he of his decision, and so high-handed in dealing with the temptation that he tore up her letter, and scattered the pieces in the grate. That settled it. There was to be no more moonlight. He would get on with his life and his work, marry and settle down, and remain solidly in Spaniards Court until two dear people should pass away, leaving him the new house and an old memory. Surely a man could make up his mind and keep it in that condition?

He went down to Mrs. Mary for his cup of chocolate, remembering that Douce should be there, for she had promised to come this afternoon. Mrs. Mary was sitting on the blue settee with her head close to her tulips, but Mrs. Mary was alone. Tom was at Wood's coffee-house with a party of friends.

"What, all alone, mother?"

She looked at him with a glimmer of wise humour in her eyes.

"It seems so. I expect she will come to-morrow."

Jordan felt vaguely ruffled. He had wanted Douce to be here, because she seemed to be part of the promise he had made to himself, and her absence annoyed him. It was as though he had counted on being helped to forget someone else by looking at her, and he found nothing but a little old lady who had smiled at him as though his air of annoyance pleased her. His restlessness returned, and with a doubled force. He stood by the window and stared.

Meg came in with the chocolate.

"Your pardon, Mr. Jordan, but I put a letter on your table."

"I saw it."

His voice had a rough edge to it, and he had a feeling that these two women exchanged glances behind his back. He suspected that Meg had gossiped about that letter to Mrs. Mary, and that they were both wondering what was inside it. Women could never let anything alone. They wanted to arrange a man's life for him, just as they mended his shirts and kept his house in order, but without appearing to manage anything. They pulled invisible strings.

"Confound me—if I marry," he thought, taking a mouthful of the chocolate and finding it too hot.

He had burnt his tongue, but was silent over it, only to find Meg reappearing fussily with a jug of milk.

"I'm afraid it's scalded you, Mr. Jordan. That fool Polly will never learn to be ought else but a fool."

"Perhaps we are all like that," said Jordan, accepting the milk, and realizing how carefully women watch a man.

He was angry with himself for feeling that his sudden inward outburst against marriage was a confession of fear. Was it possible for a man to be afraid of women? Was he afraid of Mrs. Merris?

No, of course not! Then, why tear up a letter and make such a mystery of it? He was not afraid of any woman.

"I may be late for supper, mother."

"O, well, my dear, Meg can keep some for you."

That was all she said, and yet Jordan felt convinced that she knew where he was going, and that it was to see the writer of the letter.

He went to her, half angry, half proud, and wholly resisting, but directly the door opened and he saw her, he knew that he had forgiven her everything. Yet, what had he to forgive? What harm had she ever done him? It was only that the indolent rich beauty of her had got into his head and blood and made him sanely mad. She was sitting by the open

window just as he first remembered her, as though it amused her to watch the people who passed and to make a story of them to herself. She turned slowly when Sambo showed him in. She smiled. He stood there, bowing stiffly, and realizing something in her smile that was new to him. He had thought that he had known her face so well, and yet it was different, more baffling, more appealing. She looked at him as though she knew all that was passing inside him and understood it, as though she understood everything in life and could still smile. He saw not only a very beautiful woman, but also a very sympathetic and a very wise one.

"Well," she said; "I have been away in the country. Did you know?"

"No, madam, I did not know."

She half-closed her eyes and pointed him to a chair. He had not been near the house since his meeting with Sfix, and she had expected that.

"And how are you?"

"I am very well, madam. And I hope you are well, and that Miss Stamford——"

"We are all in perfect health, including Poor Poll."

He saw her eyes light up. She seemed amused—but very gently amused, and then just when he was realizing that one particular expression it changed to something else. She looked out of the window, and he saw her profile against the dark background of the house across the way.

"You were not coming here again," she said; "is not that so?"

He felt as he might have felt had some inexperienced boy touched him with a sword. Where was the parry? Was there a parry to such a question?

"No," he said, "that is true."

She did not move or turn her head, but continued to gaze out of the window.

"Thank you. I wished to know. Let me tell you that I understood your reason."

He said nothing.

"I think that you and Lord Sfix had met before."

"We had."

"Yes; he contrived that I should know. I have given orders that Lord Sfix shall not be admitted to my house."

And suddenly she rose, smiled at him, and stood waiting, and Jordan knew—without being able to explain to himself how he knew it—that she expected him to go. It was a gentle dismissal, a dismissal that made it plain to him that he might come again, that she gave him the right to enter her house, while refusing it to Sfix. He had a feeling of life rushing to his head, yet he stood very still, looking at her.

"Madam—I am and shall always be—your very devoted servant."

Her eyes met his.

"Mr. March—I judge people for myself. I take them for what they are to me. I wanted you to know."

He bowed to her and found himself on the stairs. He had been in that room for less than five minutes, and he had come out of it with the knowledge that a great and wonderful thing had happened. Beyond doubt Sfix had told her of the Bacchus affair and had added other romances to it, and she had gone away, but on her return she had sent for him and re-admitted him into her life with the gesture of one throwing a poisonous letter into the fire. He was astonished and he was touched. Also, he felt deeply exultant, but with an exultation that owed nothing to an ungenerous vanity. She was above such vanity. Lesser men might have suspected her of a graceful wantonness, but Jordan knew she was not that sort of woman. She had behaved to him like a very great lady, and in the spirit he went down on his knee and touched her hand with his lips.

He lost himself in the street. He felt higher than the houses, and looking over the tops of them at far away and splendid things. His mood of the afternoon appeared to him as something inexpressibly weak and mean. He had been sneering at her and at the thoughts and ambitions she had stirred in him, and in sneering at her he had been sneering at himself.

"I wanted you to know."

What words were those, proud words, generous words! He repeated them to himself with gratitude and a man's deep tenderness. Her window was higher than ever, and she more mysterious and more significant. She had beckoned and spoken.

"I know—but I trust you."

Never had the fine temper of him felt itself so challenged, and so ready to be what she willed it to be. He had a sense of growth, of lightness, and of strength, a strange and mounting confidence in himself and in the future which lay like a landscape half-hidden in the mists of the dawn. Was it possible, was it possible? She had smiled at him with a bewildering and splendid kindness, and had shut the door in the face of George Sfax.

Jordan was still in another world when he entered Spaniards Court. He walked towards the familiar doorway, seeing nothing as a wakeful man sees it. He did not notice the opening of the lattice in Mrs. Mary's parlour window, or see her face above the pots of red and white tulips.

"Jordan—Jordan!"

Her voice brought him back to earth. It had some quality of emotion that dissolved a man's dreams. He half paused, turning to the window.

"Yes—mother?"

"Come in. We have been waiting. Something has happened."

There were three people in the parlour—Mrs. Mary, Tom Nando, and Maurice St. Croix. Mrs. Mary was sitting in the middle of the blue settee, with eyes like the eyes of an anxious bird. Tom Nando was sucking at an empty pipe. St. Croix stood by the fireplace, looking like a man who was both angry and afraid.

"Why—what's the matter?"

Jordan glanced from one to the other, and it was Mrs. Mary who answered his question.

"Something has happened to Douce."

"To Douce!"

He turned instinctively to St. Croix.

"What is it?"

St. Croix's voice was thin and harsh.

"Douce has disappeared. She went out yesterday, and she never returned. I did not hear till this morning."

The door of Mr. Marwick's house at Tottenham opened and closed, showing a momentary streak of yellow light which winked like an eye at the backs of the two men who went slowly down the gravel path to the gate. The moon was up, and the black shadows of Mr. Marwick's shrubs lay across his path.

One of the men paused.

"Do you think he was lying?"

He turned and looked back at the house, the lower half of his face in the moonlight, the upper half shaded by his hat. His teeth showed between his tight lips.

"The old devil!"

Jordan put a hand on his shoulder.

"He let us search the house. He looked quite white and shocked when you told him."

"I would not trust him a yard."

"But, man, what more could we do? To have twisted his neck would have been a fool's game unless we were sure that he had something to hide. Besides, he offered to help us."

"Perhaps he will. It might be useful to him if we found Douce."

They moved on, but when they reached the gate Jordan put his hand again on St. Croix's shoulder.

"What do you really think has happened?"

"Well—what do you?"

They looked at each other in the moonlight.

"She had nothing to make her unhappy?"

"No. To tell you the truth, March—I think she was beginning to be rather happy."

"Oh!"

"You are a little fond of her, aren't you?"

Jordan did not answer for a moment, and he felt St. Croix's eyes on his face.

"Of course. And was that making her happy?"

"I don't want to discuss my sister's emotions—but I think it was."

Jordan opened the gate, but he did it as though he were paying no attention to what he was doing.

"We have got to find her," he said.

"Yes, and where?"

They walked straight on down the moonlit road, conscious of all that the question suggested, and the possible horror that might have to be faced.

"St. Croix," said Jordan suddenly, "let us have it out. Where do you think she is?"

St. Croix gave a jerk of the head like a man struck in the throat.

"Do you want me to tell you? Damn it, you can guess as well as I can! And it is not a pleasant guess."

"It has to be faced."

"All right. When a pretty girl disappears in London! Well, what next? Where do you look? Where did old Marwick's thoughts go—at once?"

Jordan's face was grim.

"Drury Lane, or somewhere like it!"

"Exactly."

"Good God, man, do you really think——"

Again St. Croix gave that jerk of the head.

"Didn't you say we had to face it! I—am—facing it, and be damned to you."

They walked on, while in the dining-room of his house at Tottenham Mr. Marwick took snuff, and snapped his fingers and jiggered up and down on his toes. He had fooled the fellows, and fooled them very prettily, meeting them with such an air of deep concern and of candour that he had left them nothing to do but to go away. "Damaged goods," eh? Let them send the crier round for a lost girl. "O—yes, O yes!" But they would not find her. It would be Mr. Marwick who would find her, the faithful Mr. Marwick, the shrewd Mr. Marwick who knew half the rogues within two miles of Seven Dials. Surely he would be rewarded? What a noble gesture! "My poor child, come to my heart. Your virtue shall be mended." Yes, the proper dramatic setting, with Mr. Sylvester waiting to bless them, and a certain notorious person hired for the occasion being gloriously and safely sick in a Rye fishing-boat, but with money in his pocket. Yes, everything was nicely adjusted. A stale, old trick was sometimes the best.

Mr. Marwick was pleased. He drank a hot posset and went comfortably to bed.

"She'll be mine," he thought, "before a month is out. Why, bless me, I'll rush her into marrying me in that rogue Rudd's house. She'll be in hysterics; she'll clutch to me. I know women. She'll play for safety, the little sleek, red-headed beauty. Lord, I am mad about her, I am that!"

Jordan reached home a little before midnight, to find Mrs. Mary sitting up for him. He had left St. Croix knocking up constables, and worrying justices who had gone to bed. Jordan looked very grave. He knew his London well enough to realize that St. Croix's fears were likely to be justified.

Mrs. Mary waited to hear what Jordan had to say.

"No luck, mother."

"O, my dear, what do you think has happened?"

He did not tell her what he feared, but he guessed that she was as wise as he was.

"You'll be going to bed, Jordan. You can do no more to-night."

"No. This is just the time to begin."

Supper had been left on the table, and he sat down and made a meal. Mrs. Mary sat and watched him with the sleepless eyes of a woman whose emotions were deeply involved, but she did not worry him with questions. He did not hurry his meal. He seemed to be thinking while he used his knife and fork, and when he had finished, he got up and put on his hat and cloak.

"Go to bed, mother. I may be out all night."

He knew where to go and what to do, and while Maurice was worrying at the coat-tails of the law, Jordan went straight to the underworld, for it is in the underworld that one may learn what the law-dogs do not know. He made for Teg Toplady's. He found the place just as he had known it in his Nancy Sweetthaw's days. There was the same big bully of an Irishman at the door, a little redder in the face and more swollen about the body. Old Toplady was in his usual chair, mouse-coloured with little bright eyes. The room was full of noise, and heat, and drink and women.

Jordan sat down and drank. He kept his eyes on old Toplady. And Toplady had eyes for everything and a brain that picked the very bones of life as he saw it in his night-house. He looked once or twice at Jordan, smiled a faint crinkle of a smile, and ended by nodding. He knew that Jordan wished to speak to him.

Presently Mr. Toplady got up and went towards a door at the far end of the room. He did not look at Jordan, and Jordan waited a moment before following him.

He found old Toplady in a little room with two very strong doors, and an iron box under a table in one corner. A candle burned on the table. Mr. Toplady was sitting on a leather-seated chair.

"Well—Mr. March, what can I do for you?"

Jordan told him.

"You will be the richer by a hundred guineas, sir, and so will the person who tips me the wink."

"I know nothing about it, Mr. March."

"I dare say not. But you are the most likely man to put me in the way of finding it."

Mr. Toplady passed a dry tongue across his lips.

"It's a good fee. I'll set one or two of my ladies on the work. And one or two of my young rats. Will you be doing anything yourself, Mr. March?"

"I think so," said Jordan; "you can give me a list of every likely place you know of."

Mr. Toplady looked at him quickly.

"O, come, sir, I can't do that."

"I think you can, Mr. Toplady. I'll pay for it, and I'll not give you away."

For three days Jordan was not seen inside the fencing-school. Sometimes he came in to his meals, sometimes he did not. He looked tired but extraordinarily determined, like a runner who had set himself some goal that might yet lie a long way ahead. He was out at nights, and no one knew where he went, but Meg saw him come in one morning with hard eyes, unshaven, and with a little red mark over one eye. He went to his room, and when Meg took up his shaving water, she heard him making a splashing like some big thing in a passion to get clean. St. Croix came and went. He would sit for a while with Mrs. Mary, a restless figure, thin lipped, fierce of nostril. He wore a sword, and was always fingering the hilt of it, even while he was talking. Then he would start up and fling out of the house, banging the doors after him, and walking as though he had lost something and could not find it.

Mrs. Mary looked pinched and troubled. She did not know where Jordan went to search for Douce, but she could guess at his adventures, and the fact that Tom Nando knew and would not tell her what he knew, added to her feeling of fear and of horror. She was a very clean woman and in her way a very gentle one. She shrank from an ugliness which she divined, but had never experienced. It was horrible, and it haunted her.

When Jordan came in to his rare meals she stole half-frightened glances at him, glances that shrank and yet were deeply tender. He said very little. His eyes had a hard look. Once or twice she noticed marks on his face that made her suspect that he had been fighting. He and Tom Nando seemed to understand each other, and this silent understanding of theirs hurt and exasperated her. She felt that the thing was so bad that they would not let her share it.

Five days passed. Jordan still came and went with the same hard look in his eyes.

And then something happened.

Jordan had sat down to his supper when a half-grown scrag of a boy crossed the court and knocked at the Nandos' door. Meg went to it, and came in with a message.

"A young rascal to see Mr. Jordan. He says he won't see no one else."

Jordan got up from the table and went to the door. He returned a minute later with a little roll of paper in his hand, and bending down to one of the candles read what was scrawled on it.

"Try No. 7, Red Alley, off Drury Lane. A man named Rudd lives there. Be careful."

Jordan said nothing, but went to his room and slipped a brace of small pistols into the flap pockets of his coat. Mrs. Mary was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

"Jordan—lad—must you go?"

Jordan patted her arm.

"Mother—you will have that room ready. It may be needed."

"Pray God it will," said she.

Red Alley was a narrow little street of high, pinched houses, and No. 7 lay at the farther end of it, with its windows looking north. Jordan passed and repassed the house twice, noticing that the windows were lit up and the curtains drawn, and that the house had an air of quiet and respectable sedateness. Red Alley owed nothing to its name, being quite a dull and unadventurous haberdasher of a street, with nothing very red about it, but then, of course—as Jordan knew—a grey petticoat may hide flesh-coloured stockings. He looked up the street and down it, saw a dusting of stars between the houses, and a black cat on a roof with its back arched and its tail in the air.

He walked to the door and knocked. It was a sleek and glistening door, but Jordan felt that he would discover more about the door and the people behind it by the way his knock was answered. For there are various ways of opening a door, a whole language in the doing of it.

But instead of the door being opened a window was thrown up.

"Hallo! What do you want down there?"

It was a man's voice, and it was not a pleasant voice, and it sent a queer thrill through Jordan.

"I have a message for you."

"What is it?"

"Come down and I'll tell you."

He put a suggested caution into his voice, and the man up above, after looking at him suspiciously, closed the window and disappeared. Jordan heard footsteps in the passage, but the door remained shut.

"What's your name?" asked the voice.

"Smith."

"And your business?"

"I don't stand in the street to talk business, after coming all the way from Tottenham."

Jordan heard the bolts pulled back. That one word "Tottenham" had served as an open sesame; it had made him suspect that Mr. Toplady's message had been no shot in the dark. And as he listened to the drawing of those bolts the balked rage of days seemed to rush to a head in him.

"Come inside," said a cautious voice.

Jordan found himself in a lighted passage. The man had closed and rebolted the door, and was standing with his back to the wall, and looking at Jordan. He had a long, narrow face, the colour of tallow, and a crooked nose that had been broken years ago by someone's fist. He stood there as though he were expecting Jordan to say something, to give him some message. His face had begun by being cunning and expectant, but suddenly it took on an expression of menace and of fear. He had seen this big man before; he knew him.

Jordan had been watching the fellow's eyes as he would have watched the eyes of an enemy with a sword. He saw the man's mouth open as though to call for help; a hand made a dive for a coat pocket.

"Jack—Jack!"

Jordan struck with all his strength, and struck him so heavily that the fellow's head was dashed against the wall. He made a sobbing noise and crumpled down on the floor, and Jordan put his foot on his throat while he pulled back the door-bolts.

There was a candlestick on the table, and he was in the act of picking it up when he heard the creaking of the stairs. He looked up and saw two men bending forward and staring at him; they had crept down in their stockings, and their scared, fierce faces seemed to strain forward out of the darkness. Instantly he was at them. One of the men had a knife, but Jordan flung the candlestick in his face, and catching him by the ankle brought him down with a crash. The other fellow sprang on him, only to be tossed over his back into the passage below. For one short minute Jordan let his madness go. He picked up the man with the knife and dashed him upon the floor, and catching the other fellow as warily he came down stairs again, he held him pinned against the wall with one hand at his throat while he battered him into senselessness. Then there was silence, save for a little groaning.

Jordan went on. He meant to begin at the top of the house, and to work downwards. Some instinct seemed to be leading him. He reached a little landing under the roof and saw two doors, one on each side of him.

He tried one. It opened, and an astonished wench with her hair in papers stared at him from the bed.

Jordan pointed his pistol at her.

"There is someone in that other room?"

"O, sir, please, sir, there is."

"A lady with red hair?"

"It be red, sir, I believe, sir."

Jordan closed the door and went to the other. It was locked, and the key had been taken away. He set the candle on the floor, put his shoulder to the door, and burst it in.

The light from the candlestick on the floor showed him someone crouching in a corner of the room.

"Douce," he said gently, "Douce. It is Jordan."

It seemed to him quite a long while before the figure moved. He saw its white face, and the gleam of red in the loose hair. The eyes were two circles of blackness. And then, suddenly, it rose and came to him with quick, breathless steps, like a wounded bird fluttering.

"O—Jordan, dear Jordan...."

He caught her, and she clung to him, her eyes closed, her face all puckered with the anguish of her emotion.

"There, there—I am taking you home, to my home."

"Yes, take me away. O—this horror!"

He took her in his arms and carried her down the stairs, over the prostrate bodies of the bullies, and out into the street, and all the while she was trembling, and he could feel the quick beating of her heart. She was but half-dressed, and his cloak had been torn off in the struggle, but he set her down for a moment and went in and recovered it from the passage, for someone had brought a lighted candle out on to the stairs. One of the bullies sat up and stared at him in a dazed way. The man's face was all blood.

Jordan wrapped his cloak round Douce.

"I'll carry you, dear," he said.

Jordan saw the stars shining over Spaniards Court. The clocks had struck midnight, and he had been walking up and down the courtyard for more than an hour. Old Cust, who inhabited one of the other houses in the court, and who was trying to get to sleep, arose and cursed him.

"Hallo! Who the devil?"

"It is Jordan March, Mr. Cust."

"Oh, it is you, March. You have mighty heavy shoes, my man. Why don't you get to bed?"

"Am I keeping you awake?"

"O, not at all, not at all!"

"I'll take my shoes off," said Jordan.

Old Cust thought he was being ironical, and banged the lattice, shaking out one of the squares, which fell tinkling on the stones; but Jordan took off his shoes, placed them on Tom Nando's doorstep, and continued his perambulations round Spaniards Court. Often his eyes lifted to a particular window which had been lit up for the last two hours. Douce and Mrs. Mary were there in that room, two women together, holding fast to each other. Jordan had heard the murmur of voices, the sound of a girl weeping, a broken, bitter sound. There had been long silences, and he had waited. He had known for two hours now that some invisible hand was pushing him towards a poignant choosing.

And he did not wish to choose. A week ago it might have seemed so easy, the taking of a little woman by the hand, the speaking of those simple words: "Douce, I want you, will you marry me?" He realized now that his love had been the love of resignation, a shutting of the door upon a part of life that had tantalized and balked him, but now that door stood open. He looked through it and saw another world, a larger world, a little mysterious, lit by a more brilliant sun, surrounded by a more stimulating atmosphere. It was her world, Mrs. Merris's world, and she had opened the door of it to him and had beckoned. He knew now that he wanted to pass through that doorway, and to try his fortune in that larger world. He loved her, and with a love that was deep and strange and enduring. Those two hours under the stars had taught him that. Pity even could not cloud the crisis that had come upon him, the vivid memory of a trembling girl clinging to him, her little body warm and quivering in his arms. He did not wish to choose, even while he knew that the choice was being forced upon him. He wanted to stand awhile at that open door, looking through it into that other world where Mrs. Mariana walked up and down like a great lady in some very stately garden, a garden of great trees and masses of sunlight and of shadow, where broad stairways led down to smooth lawns and fountains made a soft noise and a plumed glittering. The unknown lured him, the call of strange seas, the light beyond the hills, the deeps of untrodden forests. And she was the human figure in that more mysterious world, waiting for him, challenging him. "Come, climb, set your sails, mount your horse; I will show you greater adventures. Will you be no more than a fencing-master teaching other men to do indifferently what you do so well? Will you sit down like an old man before the fire when the great red sun is rising over the sea? Come! Gird yourself, climb, dare. I have opened the door to you."

He leaned with his back against the wall and looked at the lighted window.

Douce was there, a little thing who had fluttered to him like a wounded bird, and had hidden her flinching face against his shoulder. Ashamed, and shuddering with the shame of it, helplessly compromised, and yet innocent! He remembered the blows he had given those men, the pulped flesh under his fist, and he was glad. But the grim fury that spilled over in the memory of it was a mere overflow, flood-water escaping. He had to think of Douce and yet remain himself.

It was easy and it was difficult. Jordan was aware of passionate repulsion and of an equally passionate and strange attraction. What unspeakable thing had happened to her? Good God! It provoked him most strangely. He had a sudden desire to give with tenderness all that had been given with violence. He wanted to replace the beast with the lover, to heal, to hold, to envelop her with a beautiful ardour. He felt her acceptance, her kisses, the little clinging ecstasy, her breathless cry of "Jordan, O—Jordan!" He wanted to wipe away an outrage with a sacrament.

As he stood there he seemed drawn by two forces. They balanced; they seemed equal; they held him poised, undecided, hesitating.

There remained—pity.

Yes, pity which stood between him and that open door, and held the torch while those two other forces struggled together in an equal conflict, pity and the fierce emotions and generousities that it inspired. He leaned against the wall, feeling things more than knowing them, conscious of being slowly impelled towards an act of positive goodness. Douce needed him; she needed him most desperately. Mrs. Merris had the whole world at her feet.

Suddenly, he was aware of a beam of light striking across the court. The door had opened. He saw Mary Nando standing there, looking out into the night.

"Jordan—Jordan."

Her voice was soft, suppressed, like the voice of a woman in a sick-room. She was peering about for him, her eyes unused to the darkness.

"What will she say to me?" he thought, as he went towards her; and yet he felt that he knew what she would say. It was fate.

He saw her wide eyes in a face that still seemed tremulous and mobile with emotion.

"Jordan——"

"How is she?" he asked. "Asleep?"

"No, not asleep."

Those expressive eyes of hers were fixed on him. She was waiting, and he seemed to know all that was in her mind, and all that the woman in her asked of him.

"Will she see me?"

Mary Nando drew a quick breath.

"You have something to say to her, Dan?"

"Yes."

She waited, trembling, expectant.

"It may seem a strange time to say it, mother, and yet it is the right time."

And suddenly she caught him by the shoulders.

"Man, son—you are going to ask her to marry you?"

"I am."

"Jordan, God bless you! I felt it—I knew. O, I'm proud of my lad."

She kissed him, she clung to him and held him close, weeping a little.

"Oh, my dear, go to her. She is lying there with her face to the wall. I have tried, but she seems frozen; she cannot speak."

"I'll go, mother. But will you go first?"

"No, no. It is not me she wants, but you."

She drew him in by the arm, eagerly, devotedly. They went up the stairs together, and it was Mrs. Mary who opened the door. He felt the gentle pressure of her hand as he went in, and she closed the door after him.

He saw something move in the bed; a white face was turned for a moment and then turned away again. He heard a little protesting cry, half sob, half moan.

It conquered him; it made him one great, generous impulse. He went to her, bent over her.

"Douce."

She struggled a little, tried to hide her face, but he would not suffer her stark resistance. He sat on the bed and held her in his arms.

"Douce, I'm loving you. You are going to marry me."

And suddenly the soul and body of her relaxed. She clung to him; she hid her face against him, and broke out into weeping.

"O, Jordan, I—I——"

"There—there. Kiss me, child, kiss me."

The time came when Jordan realized that he had to do a thing that required courage. He had to tell Mrs. Merris. At the first thought of it he had put the suggestion aside with a little shrug of self-scorn. What need was there to tell her? What claim had he upon her that he should go to her and blurt out this intimate thing? How could he assume that it would have any interest for her, this coming marriage of his? Nay, surely, such a confession might seem to her superfluous and impertinent, a sort of apology for some piece of behaviour that made the very apology a lout's insult. "Madam, I have to tell you that I am about to be married." "Indeed, sir! I hope the interesting event will prove the beginning of much good fortune." Delicately raised eyebrows and a little stately air of surprise! "Really, Mr. March, and did you think it your duty to tell me?"

No, he would not tell her.

Later, he realized that he had to tell her. It did not matter so much what she might say or think, but he had to be right with himself, be honest with his future. He had to close that open door which had given him such fatal glimpses of a larger world, her world.

He was in a curious state between happiness and sadness. He had to allow that he had a very real tenderness for Douce, and that the course he had chosen had brought him love and gratitude and passionate kisses. He had not forgotten Maurice St. Croix's face on the morning after that tragic night. "March, God bless you! I shall never forget this." He still saw the shine in Mary Nando's eyes when he had refused to have the house in Red Alley meddled with. "No, let it be. Some things are better forgotten." He had the good will and the love of these dear people; he was looked at by a pair of dark eyes which seemed to regard him as something more than a man. Even old Sylvester had shown some emotion when Maurice had brought him to Douce at Spaniards Court.

"Mr. March, there are some words of mine that I would like to be forgotten."

Yes, the thing was well done; it had brought happiness to some people, and a glow to his own heart, but how final it was, how solemn! He saw himself anchored here, in harbour before he had adventured on the high seas, sails furled, guns tampioned and covered up. It troubled him. It filled him with vague doubts, a dread of some fatal disharmony. But Douce was a dear little thing. He would grow very fond of her; she was wise, and gently yet strangely passionate. He was responsible for her, more responsible than most men would be for their wives. Never must he hurt her, or make her remember how life had brought them together.

O well, he would settle down. He would work hard, and perhaps he would build another house, a house for his wife and children. Surely a man should be satisfied with good and simple things, with the quiet joys of a home, with little hands that clung, with games and laughter and clean kisses? What more could he desire? Did he ask for pain, and stress, and struggle, midnight rides, and storms at sea, musket shots, sword-play, the wrestling of man with man, something to conquer, something to win? Why, surely, he had had his adventures, his fights, and his love affairs? Life could not go on being an adventure. A man had to be content with one landscape. He could not always be yearning for the valley over the hill.

But he had to tell Mrs. Merris.

Yet, when Jordan reached the end of the familiar street he wished to turn back. He saw Garter Street lying still and vivid in the spring sunlight, brickwork warm and red, window sashes clean and white, masses of colour showing where a red may tree or a golden laburnum spread outwards over a garden wall. A woman was selling flowers, basket on hip, her eyes looking up at the windows. A coach was drawn up close to Mrs. Mariana's house, and for a moment Jordan found that coach an excuse for turning back.

The excuse vanished when a lady in a red-and white-flowered gown and a gentleman in a sky-blue coat came out of the house next to Mrs. Merris's, entered the coach, and drove off. The lady half smiled at Jordan as the coach passed him. He walked on. He found himself on her doorstep. He raised his hand to the brass knocker.

Sambo was rolling his eyes at him and showing his white teeth.

"Yes, sah. Will yon step in, sah?"

She was alone, and sitting by her favourite window, with a book in her lap. Her first glance at him made her wise. Something had happened to him, though she did not know what that something was. It was not that he was gravely formal, or awkwardly self-conscious, or vaguely austere, or smiling as a man smiled when there is no smile in his heart. He had looked at her steadily for a moment as though he were half afraid to look, and he did not look at her again for quite a long while. He was immensely self-controlled, dressed up in some ceremonial mood of his own making.

"I hope, madam, that you will not accuse me of presumption if I call you my friend?"

"Why—no, Mr. March."

"I am glad," he said; "because one tells all one's news to friends."

"Both good and bad news?"

"The good and the bad."

"Particularly the bad. One should always keep one's good news for one's enemies."

He smiled faintly, and as though he found it difficult to smile.

"I suppose that is true, madam. My news is that I am to be married."

It seemed to him that there was a moment of intense stillness in the room. She did not move, nor was he aware of any change in her expression.

"Why, surely, that is good news?"

She raised her eyes to his; their soft brownness seemed veiled with black; they told him nothing; he saw neither anger nor surprise in them; they seemed to watch and to listen, if eyes could be said to listen.

"I wished my friends to know. These things happen suddenly."

"Yes, such things are sudden."

She made a little gracious gesture.

"Won't you tell me? Sit down and tell me."

He had meant to tell her the bare truth about his coming marriage, that and no more, nor had it seemed to him likely that she would wish to hear more. Of what real interest could it be to her? And had the case been such a one that the woman in her had good cause to be interested it might never have been told. He hesitated. He stood with his hands resting on the back of a chair. Then he sat down, and in the doing of it came sensibly nearer to her. After all, why should he not tell her? To tell any ordinary woman would have been very like an act of disloyalty to Douce, but Mrs. Merris was not an ordinary woman, and he wanted her to understand. Yes, he wanted that more fiercely than he knew; the desire was at the back of all his hesitation—urging, persuading, protesting, using Mrs. Mariana herself as a silent pleader. He wanted to stand right with her, and it was a very human wish. He had no thought of making any boast of what he had done. He wanted her to know; that was all. "It happened thus, and thus. No one can say that I was not right in doing what I have done. Let us leave it at that."

He told her, but in the doing of it he did not deal in emotion. And in some subtle way she seemed to be helping him to tell her, willing him to tell her. She sat there, outwardly calm in the wise gentleness of her dignity, her eyes steady and attentive, the sex in her subdued to a soft light. She concealed everything that might have betrayed anything of herself to him. Her dignity required that, her dignity and his quiet yet striving candour. She guessed that he had not meant to tell her all, however much he may have wished to have told it, but that the telling of it had given him—not happiness—but a sense of deep relief. He had shown himself. The air might be clear and cold, but there were no obscuring clouds.

"You were quite right," she said, "utterly right."

She spoke with a gentle confidence, and she did not let him feel her fears. A marriage based on pity, for that was what her intuition divined it to be! He had not hinted even at such a thing as pity, and she doubted whether he realized that pity was the main inspiration. But how could she tell him that? What right had she to warn him? Would it not be gross treachery to that little woman who loved him, and to whom he must mean so much? Pity! Yes, but pity might grow into something else. Douce had the right over a love that might be in the bud. None but a very selfish or a very sensual woman could take away that child's chance of being happy and of being loved.

"I am glad you have told me," she said, as he stood to take his leave of her; "For it makes me know that we are friends."

"I had hardly dared to claim so much, madam."

She was smiling, and the inwardness of her smile was beyond him. How different he must be with men, and how different he may have been with other women! But he had the gentleness of a big fellow; he could be devoted, shrewd yet simple in his homage. She wondered how much he had guessed, whether he had guessed anything!

"Well, I wish you all the good things in the world, Mr. Jordan."

He bent over her hand, and, pausing by the door, stood looking at her.

"I may call on your sometimes, madam?"

"Why, yes. Bring your little wife to see me."

"I will," he said, and went out thinking that he was the only one who had a secret to hide, and that behind her eyes there was nothing but good will.

She leant forward and watched Jordan go down the street. He walked with the air of a man who had accomplished something, and at the end of the street he turned to look back. She withdrew quickly so that he should not see her, for that act of looking back was full of significance.

"I wonder?" she thought, "I wonder? What a lottery it is! For marriage may be either wings or a chain. This little thing, what will she make of him? Is she big enough for such a man?"

She was sad, troubled, aware of a sudden loneliness and of a sense of loss. There was more in the mood than she would allow; the thing had gone deeper than she had imagined; perhaps she knew it while she refused to let herself acknowledge it.

But she was concerned, too, for Jordan. She knew men very thoroughly, the big and the little, the greedy and the generous, the men who would never be more than a collection of appetites, those rare men who could be so much more.

"It depends on the woman," she thought, "always and always. Women keep a man back, the lure of women, the hunger for them. He may never get beyond petticoats and those eternal adventures. But what a pity! The man who is to accomplish things should have not more than two or three women in his life, three at the most, and if he is fortunate he will end by having only one. One—who matters. But she must matter very much—more, even, than his work, more than anything else in the world."

So Jordan was married.

And with his marriage and the coming of this little red-haired thing into his life, life itself seemed to change, and all the old familiar landmarks suddenly moved themselves elsewhere. Tom and Mary Nando had passed away to the new house, taking with them Meg and Polly, and also many pieces of old furniture which Jordan had known since boyhood. The house in Spaniards Court was the same, but the faces were different. Something had gone out of it, that old familiar feeling, the comfortable homeliness, that large and easy smile, the smell of old Nando's pipe, the gentle alertness of Mrs. Mary's brown eyes. For years Jordan had flung into the house like a boy, spread himself, taken everything gratefully but for granted, called upon Meg or Poll, had things brought him, and been treated as a little man-god, without his realizing how comfortable two or three assiduous women make a place. He had been watched, and his ways studied, and he had not known it. The degree of sweetness of his coffee or his chocolate, the sorts of pudding he liked, these had been matters of importance. His linen had been looked to, his stockings darned, his coats brushed and pressed, his shoes sent to the cobbler when necessary. The domestic machinery had run very smoothly, and like most men he had forgotten to ask who supplied the oil.

But now he saw new faces, new furniture. Douce had two girls to cook and clean for her. She had ideas of her own; she began to alter the details of Jordan's life, as well as its atmosphere.

At first it amused him. He was full of much tenderness for her.

Jordan was happy with her, in spite of the sense of strangeness about the house, and the queer feeling that something was not there, but in a little while he became aware of other impressions. Stillness, watchfulness! He would come in from the fencing-school and find Douce seated in Mary Nando's parlour, diligently sewing, or reading, or setting down her accounts. He had brought her a little writing-table with drawers, and she had had it placed in the window, and he would see her red head and white neck against the criss-cross of the lattice. Douce, the housewife, the mistress. Her eyes had grown more expressive; they looked very dark in her creamy face, and they would brighten suddenly and then again grow dark. He noticed that she looked at him in a particular way whenever he entered the room after being out of the house.

That particular look puzzled Jordan. It was a loving look, but there was more than love in it, or rather—it was a love that watched.

One day on coming in he called into the kitchen and gave an order to one of the wenches:

"Kate, make supper half an hour earlier."

For years he had called to Meg for what he wanted, going in afterwards to tell Mary Nando of it if the order he had given had trespassed on her authority, but now the house was his. And yet not quite his. He found Douce sewing. She looked up at him, was silent a moment, and then spoke:

"Jordan, when you wish something done, dear, will you tell me?"

"Why, of course. I was going to tell you, sweetheart."

"I mean—I wish to give the orders to the servants. As mistress it is my business."

He bent down and touched her hair.

"Sorry, Douce. Of course you shall rule the wenches. I was not thinking."

"Thank you, Jordan."

But there was a touch of austerity about her mouth and eyes, and she did not respond to his caress, and though he granted that she was right he was a little surprised at her standing so strictly for her authority.

Jordan had led a free life, and during those first weeks of happiness he did not realize that when a man marries he surrenders a part of his liberty, unless the wife has an exceptional understanding of the man and is willing to be exceptional. His love for Douce was different from her love for him. His had been born of pity and a generous tenderness, and even when he was loving her he was giving more than he was taking. He had loved other women, and in the back of his mind hung the picture of another woman. Douce's love was like a single flower on the plant of her being. It fed and lived upon him, and upon him alone. It was passionate, absorbing, jealously devoted.

She did not like Jordan out of her sight. She wished him to spend the evenings alone with her, while she snuggled up on his knees with her head upon his shoulder. She showed no sign of wearying of this love-making, or of realizing that a man may tire of it and wish to stretch his limbs and use his tongue on matters other than little endearments. Her love

was exacting, and that is love's tragedy. A man may be exacting, and the woman will exult in it, but an exacting woman may kill the love she yearns to hold.

One night Jordan went out to Tom's coffee-house, nor was it a mere matter of pleasure. He had two or three gentlemen to meet there who wished to make arrangements for polishing up their sword-play. And Jordan stayed late. There was no disguising the fact that he found it good to be among men, to feel himself a master among them, to listen to the big male voices. A man must rub shoulders with men. He must have his arguments, his friendships, his quarrels, his strivings, his hours in the wind, his moments when the muscles harden and the heart beats hard.

Douce was sitting up for him. She was sewing. She raised those solemn dark eyes of hers to his face, and their scrutiny puzzled him. She did not smile.

"I have been to Tom's," he said; "I had to meet Lord Lumley there."

"I hope you have enjoyed yourself, Jordan."

"It was a merry crowd."

She glanced at the clock.

"It is nearly midnight."

"Why, so it is. You ought to have gone to bed, sweetheart."

She gave him another look.

"I preferred to wait for you."

He realized that he was being reproached, and for what? For leaving her for three hours to meet men, men whom it was necessary for him to meet?

"Douce," he said, "you know—I have to go out sometimes. Come along, I'll carry you upstairs."

She would not let him carry her to bed, but walked austere before him, carrying the candle, and for the first time since their marriage the thought flashed on him: "She wants so much. Would Mrs. Merris have been grave with me because I had spent an hour or two with a crowd of men?" The songs he had heard at "Tom's" were in his head. "Red Coats—Red Coats!" How they had shouted the chorus! And then had come: "Larry up, and Larry down. Chasing petticoats around the town."

Gradually, he became aware of the fact that he was being watched, devotedly, jealously, as though he were a boy who might get into mischief. Whenever he had been out, Douce seemed to expect him to tell her what he had been doing and where he had been. If he did not tell her, she sat and looked silently hurt and austere reproachful.

"I do want you to tell me everything, Jordan dear."

"Why, of course, poppet," said he; "you and I can have no secrets."

Then he found himself excusing her to himself and saying: She is a dear little thing, and I suppose she loves me very much. She has such a sense of duty. She has a will of her own, too, judging by the way she has got those two wenches under her thumb. O well, I suppose marriage smoothes itself out.

He did not know that when a woman had been aroused she may become mistrustful of the man she loves, and still more mistrustful of other women. Douce was possessive. Passionate and absorbed, she had not the bigness to realize that the more you give the more you keep. Moreover, she had never forgotten the memory of those days when Jordan had been held to be a wild fellow, and now that he was hers these memories rose up and filled her with fierce combativeness. She meant to keep her man. She was tending to become a little, passionate prude, ready to hate all other women who were below the age of forty, and to condemn in others as loathsome and horrible the very natural tenderness that she found so sweet. Here the St. Croix thinness showed. She had the knack of separating her moods and keeping them apart. She never forgot the night in the house of horrors, but she also remembered Miss Nancy Sweetthaws. At the back of her mind was the thought that it was her sacred duty to "reform" Jordan, and reformation meant keeping him for herself.

One day when she was ailed and suffering, Jordan got on his horse and went for a ride. He arrived at the New House to find old Nando with his coat off in the garden, and Mrs. Mary pretending to pick flowers, but keeping her thrush's eyes on her beloved man.

"Dan, I'm glad you've come."

She got Jordan away into the paddock, the excuse being that she wanted to show him her new cow.

"I wish you would put in a word, my dear. Did you notice how feeble he is?"

"He is not so young as he was, mother."

"Dan, if the dear new place—your place—should kill him! He will go out and work—and try to do the things he did ten years ago."

Jordan looked shocked.

"Mother! I never thought of that. I'd rather the house had never been built. I'll speak to him."

"Do, my dear. He'll take from you what he'll take from no one else. And how is dear Douce?"

Jordan was gazing across the paddock to the oak wood, absorbed in thinking of Tom Nando's feebleness and how too much enthusiasm could be curbed.

"Not very well, mother. I left her resting. I ought to be back soon."

Mrs. Mary observed him without him realizing that he was being observed.

"Young women must learn to do without their men sometimes."

"She misses me, mother."

"Ah," said Mrs. Mary, "she's young. She may have more things to think of later on. Don't you spoil her, my dear. I'll tell you a secret. Men get more from a woman by taking than by giving."

Jordan smiled at her.

"Fancy you telling me that!"

"Well, my dear, I had to learn it. I'm not arguing the rights and wrongs of it, but what counts in life is human nature, more than the Ten Commandments."

Jordan got old Nando by the arm, and persuading him to a sheltered seat in a snug corner, he spoke to him with some of the solemnity that Tom had used on him in the old days.

"I did not build this place for you to kill yourself in it, father. If that lazy rogue Potts cannot do the work as it should be done, you must have another man."

"But I enjoy the work, my lad."

"And mother enjoys the worry!"

"O, women are always fussing."

"Then I am an old woman, sir. You are worth more to us than a row of broad beans."

Nando gave him a wink and a smile.

"I'm a tiresome old man. But I'll think about it, Dan. O, damn it, it's a beastly business, growing old! I sometimes wish I had been killed with a sword in my hand."

"Mother would rather have you alive. I suppose it is hard for the one who is left behind."

Tom Nando winced.

"Right, lad; I'll think of that."

Jordan rode home another way, and his nag took him into familiar and enchanted lanes and brought him into Carter Street and past Mrs. Mariana's house. He looked up half fearfully at the sacred window, but she was not there, and instead of her indolent, sunny face with its wise and subtle eyes he saw Sambo's black countenance. Sambo grinned at him, and touched his forehead, and Jordan could see him saying: "Good day, sah."

He rode on, remembering his promise to take Douce to see this great lady, and then he fell to wondering what these two women would think of each other. He had not entered Mrs. Mariana's house since his marriage, but he saw no reason why he should not enter it, especially if he took Douce with him. In fact, Mrs. Merris might be good for Douce. He had begun to admit that his little wife was an exacting young woman, and that the easy house in Spaniards Court suggested affectionate tyrannies.

"I'm a beast to think of her in that way. But she ought to get out more and see the world. She does not seem to understand that a man wants his work and his play. Old Sylvester has made her—narrow. Pure and sweet, but narrow."

He had travelled so far that he was having to confess to her narrowness.

But women are quick. Mrs. Merris would teach her things. Douce would see how a great lady lives.

He had begun seriously to think of taking Douce to see Mrs. Merris.

At Spaniards Court he found Douce still abed, a little white-faced thing pinched with pain.

"You have been away from me all day."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and gently stroked her hair.

"Sweetheart, a man has things to do. How are you now?"

"O, pretty bad. I shall be better to-morrow."

He stayed with her for an hour, and though his hands were gentle, his thoughts were not so gentle as his hands. He was troubled. The insurgent male in him was beginning to rebel against the soft life that he was living, and against the cloying exactions of her love for him. He felt that some of the male virtue had gone out of him and that he was becoming womanish. Like Delilah—Douce was cutting her Samson's hair.

Presently he went down and brought her up supper and sat by her bedside, after he had propped her up with pillows. Her pain had passed. She began to shine again in the possession of him, and to look more sleek and pretty, for a woman's face is a screen—either dark or bright as the heart of her glows or fails.

"Dear Jordan, how good you are to me."

He kissed her hair, and while his lips were touching it he found himself thinking that their marriage would be a very happy affair if only she would realize him as a man.

He drew her head against his shoulder. A sudden impulse persuaded him to speak.

"I want to talk to you, dear."

"Yes, Jordan."

"Now—you must not misunderstand what I am going to say. We have been married two months, and I think we have been happy?"

"O, very."

He held her close.

"Douce, I have altered my life a great deal for your sake, but a part of it must go on as in the old days. I have to go out and about among men, see my friends. We have had hardly a soul to the house since we were married."

He was aware of her as a little figure that had grown slightly rigid.

"What have I done wrong, Jordan?"

"Why, nothing, sweetheart. Don't take it in that way. I'm rather proud of my little wife. I want my friends to see her, and I want her to see my friends. We must go out and about more. If we bury ourselves too much——"

"Of course, Jordan. My whole wish is to please you."

She clung to him lovingly.

"Now, where shall we begin?"

"You dear soul," he said tenderly.

"Dear Jordan."

"You must have a carriage and be seen abroad. People have been asking me what I have done with my little wife. I am going to take you to see them."

"I shall love it."

"Very well, we will begin in a day or two. And I want you to have one or two women friends. I have one in my mind, and I shall take you to see her."

"A friend of yours?"

"Well, in a sense, yes, though she is in a world above me. I know she will love you, Douce."

Again he was conscious of her rigidity.

"What is her name?"

"Mrs. Merris. She came from Virginia. I was a friend of her brother's. And then, there is Mrs. Mascal, a dear creature, and old Mrs. Barter, and Miss Debenham——"

"What a lot of women you know, Jordan."

"Well, they are all good women, sweetheart; and then there will be the men. Bliss and Cartwright, and a crowd more. They have been teasing me and telling me that I am a jealous tyrant."

He turned her face to his and kissed her, but her little mouth was not so warm and impulsive as he would have wished it to be.

Jordan's letter to Mariana Merris was a very short and simple epistle, and yet the writing of it kept him for an hour at the desk. He sent his groom to Garter Street on the following morning, and the same evening he had Mrs. Merris's reply:

"Bring your little wife to see me on Friday. Let us say four o'clock. I shall be alone, and you must take tea with me."

Her letter said even less to him than Jordan's had said to her, though each had tried to read what was behind and beneath the lines.

"I wonder if he is happy."

She re-read the formal and brief sentences. He asked for the honour of being permitted to present Mrs. Jordan March to her. It was quite obvious that he could have written in no other way, and yet his formalism hurt her more than she liked to allow. She was full of curiosity to see the girl whom Jordan had married, and in whose hands lay this man's destiny, for Mrs. Merris had more than a feeling that Jordan would be made or marred by a woman. Big men asked so much more of life.

Mrs. Jordan March and her man drove in a coach to Garter Street, and Douce was dressed as she was always dressed, very simply and in black. She was nervous and determined not to show her nervousness, and this repression made her look stiff and set and quite unable to smile—the young wife going out to her first battle, for that was how Douce regarded it. She was prepared to hate Mrs. Merris, but she did not know how much she would hate her.

Sambo preceded them up the stairs. He opened the door of a beautiful room, and Douce saw a woman rising from a chair, a woman whom she realized that she had seen before. But where? And then Douce remembered that day of anguish when she had fled for help to Spaniards Court, and Meg had taken her to watch Jordan fencing. Mrs. Merris was the Lady of the Gallery, that mysterious woman sitting alone where the sunlight made a yellow glory about her.

Douce became stone.

"My dear—I am very glad to see you."

Mrs. Merris was repulsed. She saw the stiff white face, the hardness of the dark eyes, the mouth thinned to a red line. She had come forward as though to kiss Douce, drawn to her by some sudden attraction, but the little figure, rigid and hostile, warned her to keep her distance. There was one of those pauses when two people become aware of an inevitable antagonism.

"Mr. March wished me to call on you, madam."

She curtsied.

"It was I who asked him to bring you to see me."

"Madam, I quite understand."

Jordan stood there to one side, watching them both, and realizing that something was very wrong. He felt that his intervention was needed.

"This is the first visit we have paid."

He looked at Douce with a troubled appeal, but she did not appear to be aware of him. Her eyes were on the enemy.

"Please be seated, Mrs. March."

"Thank you, madam."

She took the edge of one of the damask-covered chairs, her hands clasped in her lap, her little figure alert yet stiff.

"You have a very pleasant house, madam."

"Yes—I am very fond of it."

"It is the first time that I have seen such a house. And there you have the advantage of me."

"I?"

"You have seen our house, I think. Perhaps it was Mrs. Nando who told me——"

Jordan saw Mariana Merris smile, but it was one of those smiles that blind and make mystery. Her face seemed to soften. He had a feeling that she saw something that he could not see, that some indefinable flush of emotion had spread through her and had come to the surface. He noticed that she spoke very gently to Douce.

"O yes, I remember. Perhaps—some day—you will let me come and see you."

She seemed to be speaking to a shy and suspicious child. And then Miss Stamford came in and began to twitter, and after receiving Douce's curtsy, took Jordan to the other end of the room to be re-introduced to Poll, who had remained most unaccountably silent through all the scene.

"I congratulate you, Mr. March—I really do congratulate you. Such a sweet little wife."

Mrs. Mariana was holding Douce under the spell of her languid and easy voice.

"I shall always be grateful to your husband, Mrs. March. He saved my brother from one of the most dangerous bullies in London. He is a very wonderful swordsman. Yes, to humour me he allowed me to come one day and see him fence. But—of course—you must have seen that often."

Cleverly, kindly, she tried to put Douce into the ascendant, to grant her all these privileges for which this little thing fought.

"Yes, madam, I have."

"And how do you like Spaniards Court?"

"I like it very well, madam."

Sambo came in with the tea, and during the drinking of it Miss Julia chattered and bobbed to Douce, and Mrs. Merris was able to observe both the wife and the husband. She thought that Jordan looked more kindly at Douce than Douce looked at him; it was the bigger nature bending to the smaller one. That Douce loved her husband was too fiercely plain, but she loved him because he was hers. Her little hands were hands that clutched and held.

But to Mrs. Merris the most significant incident was a glance that passed between herself and Jordan. She felt that he was not happy, that he was asking her to be tolerant, to help him somehow to influence Douce, to teach her without hurting her. "For she is such a little thing. She does not understand the things that you understand."

She was sure of it, and before they left her she contrived to draw Jordan to the other end of the room and to speak to him alone. She pretended to be teasing the parrot, crooking her forefinger at the bird, and making a soft, sibilant whistling.

"May I come and see your little wife?"

"We shall be honoured."

"No, please, not in that way. But do you think she will see me?"

He looked at her with surprise in his steady, deep-set eyes, and then it seemed to her that he understood.

"I wish her to. It might be good for her. I'm not disloyal in wishing that."

"No. And it means that you trust me."

"I think that I trust you more than I trust myself."

Douce had been throwing restless glances over her shoulder, and suddenly she was on her feet, and making it plain to the husband that his wife thought it time to go.

"I am very much obliged to you, madam."

"You will let me come and see you, my dear?"

"I am sure, madam, that that would be too great a condescension."

In the coach she sat very upright, looking severely out of the window, leaving to Jordan the other window and her silence. He was disappointed and hurt, and, perhaps, forewarned that this marriage of his was going to be a difficult business.

He felt that the silence had to be broken.

"I hope you like Mrs. Merris, sweetheart?"

Douce took time to reply.

"No."

He looked very grave.

"Tell me—why not?"

"I think she is a bad woman, a sly woman."

"My dear! Now, what on earth——"

"I do not wish you to see her again. I think she is the kind of woman who would be bad for a man."

And Jordan understood that Douce was jealous, and that she would be as obstinate in her jealousy as she was fierce in loving him.

It was no common event for a coach to enter Spaniards Court, for the entry was narrow and cramped by the outjutting buttress of a house, but Mrs. Merris's coachman managed the trick and brought his horses into the yard. He was a big man and full of smiles. Heads were put out to see what all the noise was, and Douce's two girls ran out in time to see Sambo opening the door of the great black and red carriage, the negro's white wig uncovered, one buckled shoe drawn nicely back behind the heel of the other.

"La, here's a fine lady!"

Douce, too, saw what her girls saw. She had come to the parlour window, and she was standing there with her heart beating hard and fast, watching Mrs. Merris stepping down from her coach. The thing had happened! The attack was to be delivered! She saw this fine and mysterious creature in her white silks and her red velvets moving like a splendid love-chief towards her door. The brown wren looked out of her nest and believed that the hawk was upon her!

She pressed her hands to her bosom. She remembered that Jordan had gone to the New House to see Tom and Mary Nando.

Douce drew back into the room. Her face looked sharp and hard.

To her came one of her wenches, flustered and eager.

"Ma'am, here's a great lady asking for you."

"Why—show her in, Mary. Put your cap straight. What need is there for all this fluster?"

She sat down with her back to the light and waited, angry with herself because her knees had trembled under her.

But she showed no sign of flinching when Mrs. Merris entered the room. She rose, gave her the slightest of curtsies, pointed her to a chair, and seated herself, remained motionless and silent. She was on the defensive, yet her silence challenged and attacked. She made no attempt to begin any conversation. Her little figure was judicial and severe.

"I hope you will forgive me for wishing to come and see you."

Mrs. Merris's voice was gentle. She saw and felt Douce's fierce antagonism, and she forgave it, because in coming to see Douce she had won a victory over herself. To do the mean thing may be both easy and impossible, and to Mariana Merris it was impossible; for a woman who has suffered, and has learnt what much suffering may mean to another woman, cannot be content with herself unless she sees in her own heart compassion and generosity.

"Mr. March is out, madam."

It was an insult, deliberate and childish, but Mariana let it pass.

"I did not come to see your husband—Mrs. March."

"Indeed!"

"I came to see you."

She watched the dark eyes in the austere, cream-coloured face. She understood Douce so well, and all that Douce was feeling, and foresaw the pain and trouble she was laying up for herself by giving way to fierce jealousy. A young girl is not so easily handled. Unless she can be touched and won by gentleness she cannot be helped to help herself.

"I see that you do not believe me!"

She smiled.

"Come, can you not trust me?"

Douce's mouth quivered.

"Madam, I do not see the necessity."

They looked at each other steadily for a moment.

"No; of course, there is no necessity. I have no authority for being here—but then—I came."

"Yes, madam."

"Are we to call it a visit of courtesy or of friendship?"

"It may be neither, madam."

"My dear, you mean to be unapproachable!"

Douce sat stiff in her chair.

"Madam, how can there be friendship between you and me? I am the wife of a fencing-master, and you——"

"Yes; but you are a woman, and so am I."

"Exactly, madam. My husband is a fencing-master. The patronage of gentlemen is necessary to him, but I fail to see why a gentlewoman should wish——"

She smiled a wry, fierce little smile, and Mrs. Merris rose. She turned to the window and stood looking out, hiding the things that might have betrayed themselves in her eyes. For Douce had managed to say to her what no other woman had ever said.

"My dear, you wrong me."

She turned, and her eyes had regained their kindness.

"Well—the visit of courtesy is over. I promise you that it shall not be repeated. Good-bye, Mrs. March. Give my remembrances to your husband."

She smiled, but the light of it broke on Douce's hard, white face.

"Your humble servant, madam."

Her curtsy was subtly ironical. She moved to the door and opened it, and curtsied again as Mrs. Merris passed out. Then she went to the window and watched the lady into her coach.

"Liar!" she said to herself, "you thought to come here and fascinate me as a cat fascinates a mouse. All this splendour! Good day, madam. Your insulting kindness was not so clever as it seemed."

When Jordan came home she did not tell him of Mrs. Merris's visit, but the very sight of her husband in the flesh inflamed her the more against Mrs. Mariana. She did not pause to think. She let herself be carried away by instinct, and all her secret dread of other women gathered about the Lady of the Gallery in a storm of sex jealousy. She whipped her anger. She even suggested to herself wild and hateful things. If Mrs. Merris had had her man she should be cheated of him in the future. And yet she hid all her passionate imaginings, her doubts, distrusts, her self-created anguish. She appeared calm. She smiled at Jordan, and, perhaps, she felt a little afraid of him.

"How is dear Mr. Thomas?"

"None too well, sweetheart."

"O, Jordan—I am sorry."

She was very sweet to him, and she exulted in the privilege of her own kindness, but all the while her heart was crying out, "I'll have from him what she cannot have! Yes, a child." Her emotion became a radiance about the figure of her imagined child, her child and his. Would he not love her the more for being the mother of his child? It would be a new bond between them, a sacred nexus, her child, born of her body. No other woman could give him that. And in imagination she was the eternal wife and mother, exulting, boasting herself before other women because of her babe! She knew that she would like to hold the child up in the face of that other woman, and exult before her with eyes that said, "See what he has given me, and what I have given him! He is mine—here is the proof of it."

And that night she was very tender to him.

He lay very still, with his head on her shoulder. Somehow Douce felt sure of him, sure as she had never been before. Her heart had cried out in triumph. She grew audaciously confident vainglorious, afraid of no other woman.

"Jordan, I forgot to tell you."

"What—child?"

His head remained heavy on her shoulder, and she loved its heaviness.

"Mrs. Merris came to-day. I do not think she will come again."

She was aware of a movement.

"Not come again! But—you——"

"She pretended that it was me she came to see."

"O!"

"But it was you. I made her see that I understood. I am your wife—Jordan, and I'm proud."

He had raised his head slightly.

"Douce, you wronged her. My dear——"

"No, no. A woman has eyes and feelings. Why should she come in her coach and be gracious? I'll have no great lady coming to patronize my man."

She drew his head down upon her shoulder and held it there. She was trembling, fearful, clinging to all that was hers. It —was—hers. He would understand that. He must understand it.

And he did not move. He did not say anything. He was going to sleep now; he was hers; she had not angered him; his head remained on her shoulder.

Yet some time that night Douce woke and became aware of an emptiness beside her. The first greyness of the dawn was showing at the window, and as she rose on one elbow and looked about her she saw Jordan's head and shoulders outlined against the greyness. He was standing at the open lattice, with his crossed arms resting on the high window-sill.

"Jordan."

He turned slowly.

"Hallo! Are you awake, poppet?"

"Jordan, are you not well?"

He stretched himself and came towards the bed.

"I woke up with something running in my head. A breath of fresh air soothes one."

He lay down beside her.

"It has been raining," he said, as though just for something to say; "Tom Nando wanted rain. He will be happy to-morrow. I'm sorry I woke you, child."

"I like to be awake when you are awake, Dan."

Yet had Douce been wise she would have aped sleep, and so kept Jordan from knowing that she had discovered him standing at the window in the grey of the dawn. A woman may see too little or too much. That which concerns her most is the art of seeming wisely blind.

Douce never knew of Jordan's visit to Garter Street. It was the first secret that he kept from her, and the fault was hers, for her own jealousy was the cause of it. Her ungraciousness had ruffled him, and had put him in one of those humiliating corners out of which it is very difficult for a man to escape without being bold to one woman or disloyal to the other. He went to Garter Street, knowing what he wished to say, but quite at a loss how to say it. "My little wife was rude to you. Try to forgive her. I am sorry." How could he expose Douce even to Mrs. Merris? Also, there was a part of him that recognized the fact that Douce might have very good reasons for keeping her house as her castle.

But was that the way to hold a man?

Embarrassed, he found himself in that pleasant, restful room. Mrs. Mariana had a book in her lap, and she had closed it and left it lying there. She understood why Jordan had come, and she saw his difficulty in his eyes. They could not discuss the happenings of yesterday. Dignity and reticence distinguish the gentlewoman from the fishwife.

They talked of other things. In fact, Douce and her prejudices were never mentioned, and Mrs. Merris took his visit as a silent apology, while he was able to feel that the ungraciousness had been forgiven. His face had cleared by the time he left her. He was grateful and full of homage. Her window was higher than it had ever been, and he looked up to her as to a woman whom no other woman could match.

"Madam, believe me, I am your most grateful servant."

She smiled as he bent over her hand.

"And you may call me your friend."

He turned quickly to the door, and as he opened it she said a thing which he never forgot:

"One cannot be happy and hurt other people. Good-bye, Mr. March. Come to me if ever you wish to come."

He went down her stairs, loving her as he had never loved her before. He admitted it to himself, and without shame, for what shame could there be in loving such a woman?

So the days passed quietly, and to Jordan more and more quietly, and had he been ripe for quietude this marriage of his

might have been more happy. That was the tragedy of it, Douce's tragedy, in that she had married a man who was too big for her in his nascent strivings and ambitions, and not understanding him she mishandled him and her own happiness. She was too exacting, too possessive. Being content to sit alone with him, she could not appreciate his restlessness, his yearning for action, for the large rough movement of the world of men. He had his work, and when he was not teaching gentlemen to fence she counted his hours as hers. Nor was Jordan blameless. He began to be given to long silences. He did not talk to her as a man talks to a trusted mate. She did not understand men's talk, and he left it at that. His kindness was the half-playful kindness a man gives to a child.

And Douce did not make friends. Maurice dined with them now and then, and old Sylvester came over once a week; but his attitude to Jordan was one of thin reserve, for Jordan had taken away a devoted handmaid, and a hired wench was a poor substitute. St. Croix's eyes seemed to squint whenever he looked at his son-in-law. Somehow the child of sin had got the better of him. He had proved a stouter man than his own son; and though Mr. Sylvester might preach of coals of fire, like most of the righteous, he had felt outraged when they were poured upon his own head.

Douce's most signal failure was with Jordan's male friends. She did not understand them. She was a little afraid of them, and especially of Roland Bliss, the actor, who said the wildest things without a smile. She discovered—or thought that she had discovered—that Bliss was an atheist, and she was shocked.

Surely such a man was bad for Jordan, and she was very austere with Bliss. She discouraged him.

Mr. James Cartwright shocked her in a different way. He was one of the best-hearted creatures living, and his weakness was strong drink. He made playful love to Douce and teased her, which should have been good for her, but it offended her little dignity. One of her troubles was that she had no sense of humour, and no knowledge of men as human beings.

Mr. Cartwright was doomed when Douce met him in a merry moment and finding the piazza of Covent Garden none too spacious for the spacious temper he was in.

"Why—Mrs. March, proud to meet y-you, my dear lady. And how is that big villain of a Jordan? And when—dear lady, are you going to pr-present us with a little villain?"

Never had he been so snubbed, so effaced, so splashed with cold water. Douce walked home like a little Queen Elizabeth, and that evening Jordan was hauled before the domestic footstool.

"Mr. Cartwright must never enter my house again. I met him in a horrible state. He is no proper friend for you, Jordan."

"He is a friend to every man but himself, dear."

"A horrible man. I cannot have him in my house, Jordan. And Mr. Bliss, too, makes me shudder."

"Why, what has Bliss done?"

"He talks blasphemy."

"He talks nonsense."

"It is very godless nonsense."

Jordan looked at her helplessly.

"Sweetheart, does it ever strike you that men are not angels? And I am a man."

She reproved him.

"You can never be like those other men. Do not pretend to me, dear Jordan, that such a thing could be possible."

She was so superlatively good and so tender and clinging a wife that she had her man swaddled up in goodness. There was much in him that rebelled, but how could a big fellow be rough or impatient with such a little thing who loved him so dearly? If she would love him a little more wisely, with more understanding of him as a man! But, then, marriage was discipline, a gradual growing into each other, and the partner who failed in the first twelve months deserved to be condemned as a poor creature.

But there was a part of Jordan that longed to break out, to fight, to use its muscles, to leap into some uproarious street scuffle, to strike other men and be struck by them. He felt like a shorn Samson tied to a chair with pink and white ribbons. There were times in the fencing-school when he was short of temper, and in a mood to tell men exactly what he thought of them.

"Sir, go home and ask your lady to teach you to darn stockings, for you will never make a swordsman."

A day came when he was tempted. Some of his old mug-house cronies called upon him and appealed to their Achilles to emerge from his tent. A street battle was brewing around the figure of a certain Miss Molly Manners, who had been

singing an anti-Jacobite song in one of the theatres. The Tories had threatened that she should walk in a sheet up Drury Lane. The loyal Whigs were trying to prevent it.

So it came about that Jordan took a leading part in what was called the "Moll Manners Riot." The Tory mob attempted to storm the lady's coach as she was leaving the theatre, and the Whigs fought to defend her. There was a battle royal in Drury Lane, and Jordan, in his famous white fencing-coat and swinging his big stick, relieved himself of months of tame goodness. He was the man of the evening. The Tories were thrashed. Miss Manners was conducted triumphantly to her lodgings with the Whigs surrounding her coach. She made a speech to them from her doorstep. She was happy to bestow two hearty kisses on Mr. Jordan March.

Jordan returned home about midnight, and saw that a light was still burning in the parlour. Had he thought to look into a mirror he might have never gone in to his wife with all the glory of a street fight upon him. Douce did not see all that Jordan had accomplished, the charge he had led, the blows he had given, the rough, laughing heroics of such an adventure. She would have understood nothing of it had he told her. But what she did see was a husband with torn coat, smudges of blood on his forehead, and his cravat lost in the tussle.

"Jordan! What have you been doing?"

He was still full of laughter and outrageous elation.

"O, nothing, sweetheart. There was a bit of a scuffle and I joined in it."

She was shocked and angry; also she was frightened. Here was her man reverting to his old, wild ways.

"Jordan, how could you?"

"Well, a man must fight sometimes."

"Horrible! And to come back here to terrify me with blood all over your face. Surely—you remember?"

She was reproachful and severe, and he looked contrite, ashamed.

"Dear, I'm sorry. But I am not hurt."

"How was I to judge? You frightened me. Remember, dear Jordan, that soon you will be a father, the father of our child. You must be very gentle with me, and when a man is a father everything should be different."

He bent over her and kissed her hair.

"You are right, Douce. It shall not happen again while you are like this. Come to bed, dear."

But as he carried her up the stairs the thought came to him that in a little while there might be two tyrannies in that home, that of the wife and that of the child.

Mrs. Mariana Merris heard an account of the "Moll Manners Riot" and of the part that Jordan had played in it, and she drew her own conclusions.

"He has broken out," she thought, and she was left wondering what his little wife had made of it, though it was possible that Douce did not know.

Jordan's manhood was being repressed by his marriage at that very critical time in a man's life when the greater ambitions come to him, and he realizes that the things that he loved yesterday have become the illusions of a boy. The moment of discontent was upon him. In his maturity he was beginning to reach out towards his inevitable heritage, and he found himself tied to a little woman's chair. Yet the fault was not hers. They were two human creatures whom fate had clasped together in the spasm of a generous impulse.

"She is my wife and she loves me. Her life is tied up with mine."

This was a sacred fact and Jordan acknowledged it, but the acknowledgment did not make him happy. He saw Douce at his table, a little woman who was with child, and to whom a time of suffering had come, and his tenderness went out to her. She wanted his strength and his love, and he gave her more than these. He was patient, and he hid his restlessness. It was like smothering the voice of the other man in him, the man whose eyes were opened to new worlds and new creations. He sailed the seas and cut his way into virgin forests. He rode from dawn to sunset with no man to say him nay. And he had his comrade, his dear lady with the wise and subtle eyes, whose heart was full of understanding, and whose slow, soft voice was like rain upon thirsty forest trees. It was all a dream, but he dreamed it day by day.

"With her beside me I could do great things."

Meanwhile he went into his fencing-school and gave his lessons, and tried to put away the thought that he would do this year by year as Tom Nando had done before him. He was thinking this very thought one morning, leaning against the wall and prodding the toe of his shoe with the point of his foil, when the faithful Meg burst in on him.

"O, Mr. Jordan, come at once."

"Why, Meg, what ails you?"

"The dear master is dying."

Jordan went with her straightway, not tarrying to tell Douce the news, and on the way to the New House Meg told him how it had happened. It appeared that Tom Nando had broken his promise, and something more than his promise, by going out into the garden and letting his enthusiasm loose upon the stump of an old tree that had to be grubbed out of the ground. Mrs. Mary had found him lying doubled up over the tree stump and hardly able to breathe. The gardener and the three women had carried him into the house.

"O, my poor mistress, my poor mistress!" said Meg; "it will break her heart, I know it."

Jordan looked fiercely grieved.

"It was that accursed money, Meg. If I had not built that house this never would have happened."

"There, my dear, don't you grieve. Why, didn't they love you for doing it? I know it made 'em happy."

When Jordan entered the iron gates he felt that the house had betrayed him. Its very solidity was ironical. "Fool, why did you build me?" He saw Mrs. Mary come to the doorway between the two white pillars and remain there, waiting for him. "She will not want to live here," he thought, "if Tom dies. She must come back to us, or we must join her."

He felt guilty as he approached her, and she seemed to understand the look in his eyes.

"Mother, I am sorry. How is it with him?"

"My dear, he wants you."

Jordan guessed that Thomas Nando was dying.

"The surgeon has just been with him. He thinks, Dan, that poor Tom broke a blood vessel in his chest."

She faltered for a moment, and her face went all awry, but when Jordan's arm went round her she regained her self-control.

"You are coming with me, mother."

"Dan, he wants you alone. But do not stay too long, dear. These moments—are—so precious."

Jordan's eyes grew hot.

"They are yours, mother. Yes, and yet it must be good to feel how much they are yours. I'll keep but few of them from you."

"Dear son," she said.

Jordan found old Nando lying on the day-bed in the long room, for they had not dared to carry him upstairs. He looked the colour of linen and his lips were almost the same colour as his skin. He was breathing quickly with little, shallow gasps. He moved one hand, and his eyes were fixed on Jordan.

Jordan knelt down beside the bed.

"Father——"

Old Nando smiled a faint smile.

"Sorry, Dan, I was an old fool, but there was that damned tree stump——"

His voice was a whisper.

"There is something I ought to tell you, lad. It didn't seem worth while putting it into your head before."

"What is it, father?"

"Your mother—Dan. Mrs. Mary and I knew it all along. She brought you to us and besought us to take you. We did—and God blessed us. She, poor thing, died long ago. Her father was a hard man."

Jordan knelt very still, closely watching Thomas Nando's face.

"You knew. And why?"

"I'll tell you, lad. Your mother was a great lady, but love and trouble came to her, and she thought of my Mary, who had been her maid. She never told us your father's name, Dan, but I guess her lover was a gentleman. Bend your head down. I'll tell you her name."

Jordan bent over him, and old Nando whispered in his ear.

"That's it. So you see you have fine blood in you, lad. Do you think I did wrong?"

"No," said Jordan. "God knows that you and mother have been the best friends I have ever had."

He kissed Tom Nando on the forehead, and, going out, sent Mrs. Mary in to him.

"I shall be about the place, mother."

"Thank you, my dear."

Jordan was walking in the garden when Mrs. Mary appeared at the south window of the long room. She had a handkerchief in one hand, and with the other she made a sign to Jordan. The supreme, striking courage of her poor blind face warned Jordan that Thomas Nando had gone.

"Mother."

She twisted one hand into the red curtain.

"No, I'm not going to cry, my dear. He always did hate tears. And he said such wonderful things to me, dear lad. O, my man!"

She choked, and then drawing herself up and keeping a steadying hold upon the curtain, she smiled at Jordan.

"But he was happy with me. He never really wanted anybody else. Two good men, you and my Nando. I have been lucky. Now go away, dear. You will see to everything for me, Dan? I—I want to be alone with him."

"I will see to everything, mother."

He covered his eyes with his sleeve.

"But won't you come back with me?"

"No, no. He was proud of his house, my dear, and so am I. Now—God bless you."

Jordan was more shaken than he knew, for one of the foundations had fallen away from the old world of Spaniards Court, and a part of his conception of life was in ruins. Tom Nando dead! And with his old friend's death had come that sudden revelation of himself to himself, of Jordan March the love-child of a great lady and some unknown lover. He was shaken. His eyes felt hot and his mind full of struggling, half-formed thoughts. Something new was being born in

him—or, rather, something that had been striving for life and self-expression was breaking through.

He was aware of a curious exultation even in the thick of his grief.

"I have the blood in me."

His thoughts went towards his unknown mother, that tragic figure which had come to stand beside Thomas Nando's death bed, and somehow in Jordan's mind the image of her expressed itself in the stricken face of Mary Nando. These two women mingled. One had borne him, the other had bred him, and he felt a great and elemental tenderness towards them both. There was no anger in his mood, no bitterness, but in a vague way he realized that the very foundations of life had changed.

A voice was telling him that life was not going to be more easy, and that what he had heard would be no cure for a man's restlessness. The voice urged him towards unexpected confessions. "Go and tell her, go and tell her." Yes, he wanted her to know. And then he realized that in this moment of upheaval his impulses rushed towards her, and not towards Douce his wife. The truth shocked him, for it was so full of infinite significance. He stood quite still in the middle of the lane, staring at the ground.

Should he tell her? What was it that drew him so fiercely to the house in Garter Street? He knew—now. He felt differently towards her. He was of her blood, born of the same tradition, a love-child, no common whelp begotten in some alley. His pride was a different pride. Yes, he wanted her to know.

He was astonished at the change that had come over him. The figure of his wife was like a little helpless shadow, pale and ineffectual, trying to draw him with substanceless hands. He felt the pity of it, the tragedy of it. His heart cried out in great compassion. "Douce, little thing, what am I? What have I done?" He found that he loved two women, and that he loved them so differently, for one love was a boy's love, the other a man's. And the man's love was the stronger. It possessed him, dominated him. Yet it was so deep and spacious that it seemed to include the lesser love as a house of light encloses all that is in it.

He understood.

"I must tell her."

From that moment there was no turning back. His purpose was as sure as the point of his sword.

Prophetic chance. He saw her at her window as he had seen her on that first day. She looked down and smiled. He stood there, bare-headed, and his question was in his eyes.

"May I speak to you?"

She bent her head and pointed with a long and eloquent forefinger. He opened the door and went up, and found himself standing there, in a world of mystery beside her chair, while she continued to look down into the sunlit street. She had the air of waiting. She had felt what Jordan had brought with him into the room.

"Thomas Nando is dead. And in a way—I killed him."

She pointed him to a chair.

"Your best friend. But why do you say——"

"I built the house and gave him the garden. O, perhaps you know what some men are. They will not sit still; they must fight something, age, a tree stump, even if it kills them, and it has killed Tom Nando."

She made a slow gesture of sympathy and protest.

"Why accuse yourself? You would be like that. All men who are men long to die in harness; it is our Norse tradition. And there is nothing more?"

Her deep eyes held him.

In them he seemed to see all himself, all that he had been feeling, thinking.

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"I came to tell you. My world has been turned upside down. I wonder——"

"Well?"

"I wonder whether you will deign to understand?"

He rose and went walking up the room to the window that overlooked the garden, and there he turned about and saw

her sitting with bent head, gazing at her hands.

"I will try."

"I have found out who my mother was."

"Ah!"

She drew her breath deeply.

"She was a woman of quality. She had her love and her tragedy. She brought me to the Nandos."

"Is she alive?"

"No, she has been dead for many years."

"And your father?"

"She never told."

He seated himself on the window-sill and waited with all the length of the room between them, and as he watched her he was conscious of a sudden feeling of longing and of despair. If only things had been different! He might have been here waiting to speak other and more wonderful words to her.

"I think I understand," she said, "and I think that I suspected it."

"How? Why?"

She looked along the room at him.

"You carry it about you. Why, does it not explain some of the things you have felt, the things you have longed for?"

He spread his arms and dropped them.

"Yes. The things I might have had."

There was a silence, and in the midst of it he was aware of her rising from her chair and coming to the centre of the room. She stood very still; she seemed to be listening to some voice within herself. He felt that something was happening, happening to them both.

"Yes, but should one pity oneself? Is not there always someone else to be pitied?"

He gazed at her, for to him she seemed oracular, and far above the common crowd of women.

"Have you told her yet?"

"No."

She allowed herself one moment of exultation.

"You should do. Now, at once. Mr. March, I am a little happy because you came to me. But I do not forget. Please go to her."

He said nothing. He came forward and knelt on one knee before her.

"O, great lady, I will go."

She gave him her hand.

"No one is so wonderful as you," he said.

He put his lips to her hand, and she laid her other hand gently upon his head.

"Brave Jordan, you have the real blood in you."

He rose. His face was like confused light; he turned and went quickly to the door; but there he turned again, and, standing erect, looked steadily back at her.

"I am happy and I shall be strong. You will let me come here sometimes? Do not fear."

"I have no fear of you."

"Then—it is yes?"

"Yes."

"God bless you," he said, and went rather blindly down her stairs.

Douce met him with a face of disapproval. She was the little judge sitting in her chair, waiting to tell Jordan that his dinner had been kept hot for an hour, and that his unexplained absence made her feel foolish before her wenches.

"It would be so easy to warn me, dear."

He was very gentle with her. Her little severities did not anger Jordan, and in some vague way they amused him, even as a man may be amused in times of emotion by some swift contrast.

"I am sorry, Douce. I was called away suddenly, and I did not wish to worry you."

"But it worries me—wondering——"

"My dear," he said quietly, "I was called to Tom Nando. He died this afternoon."

Instantly she was all contrition, and she had her arms about his neck and her cheek to his.

"O, Jordan. I am so sorry, but I did not know. Why did you not come and tell me?"

"Because of something that may be precious to us."

"Dear Jordan!"

He took her in his arms and nursed her like a child, for he felt all the more tender towards her because of his love for Mrs. Merris.

"I wish old Nando could have lived to see the child."

"Poor Mrs. Mary! Is she all alone there?"

"I would have brought her back, but her heart is with him."

"Poor dear. But how did it happen, Jordan?"

"Nando broke himself in the garden. A blood vessel gave way. We had made him promise not to do much, but he was a man who hated growing old."

"I should like to go and see Mrs. Mary."

"No, sweetheart," said Jordan, kissing her; "you must stay quietly here. I have got to be very careful for you. And now I have much to do."

Thomas Nando's death and all that it entailed brought Douce and Jordan closer to each other, and his memories of the month that followed were happy and sadly tender. Douce seemed to lose some of her exactingness, and her jealousy fell asleep. She understood Jordan better, perhaps because she had felt his grief and been stirred by the strength of it. She showed a gentle unselfishness, and offered to share the house with Mrs. Mary.

"If she wishes to come back, Jordan, I will do all I can to make her happy."

"You dear," he said.

But Mrs. Mary was a woman of surprises. Tom Nando lay buried in St. Pancras's churchyard, and when Jordan carried her Douce's message she smiled a little and looked out of the window at the garden.

"No, my dear. Kiss the child for me. But I shall stay in this house—if I can afford it."

"Of course you can afford it, mother."

"Thank you, my dear."

She leaned against the window-frame, and her face was soft with emotion.

"He loved this place best. He was very proud of it; it was more to him than a house and garden. And it isn't as if we did not bring our memories with us, dear; we brought them and planted them in the garden, and there they grow, dear, there they grow."

Jordan went and stood beside her.

"What a great little woman you are, mother."

"I, my dear? O—no. I'm just a simple soul, but I have loved a man. Nothing matters so much as loving and being loved."

"And there is someone else who loved you, mother."

"Yes, my dear, I think you do, and I am very proud of that love."

"But not more proud than I am."

So, it seemed to Jordan that he and Douce were growing closer together, and that other love—strong and great though it was—gave him gentleness instead of passionate impatience. He had realized the good women in the world, and how could he hurt any one of them when he loved them with a love that was not mere fierce selfishness? He had a feeling that Douce was growing, and that the woman was maturing in the child. She understood things better, and became more of a comrade to her man.

It was some months later when the change came upon her, and at first Jordan did not understand it. He was troubled. This second change in her filled him with forebodings. She became querulous, more exacting than she had ever been, and hardly would she let him out of her sight. Often she would send one of the wenches into the fencing-school to fetch him to her, and if he was out of the house she would be peevish and restless till he returned. She began to suffer from strange fancies, and to develop the most unreasonable aversions. She could not bear the sight of the younger of her girls, and would not let the wench touch her food.

Jordan went to Mrs. Mary.

"I cannot make Douce out. There is nothing that she lacks that I can get or give her."

Mrs. Mary enlightened him.

"Women are queer at these times, my dear, some of them more so than others. Douce is not a great strapping wench."

"It worries me, mother. It makes me feel that it is all my fault."

"My dear, it is not the real Douce you see just now. Try to think of it in that way. You will have to be very patient with the little thing."

"I suppose she is not going mad, mother?"

"O, no, my dear," said Mrs. Mary firmly, hiding her own doubts; "she is not herself, that is all. Make allowances. But—of course—I know you will."

"I don't want her to be hurt, or to suffer. It hurts me, but I suppose that is my part of it. Do you think I ought to call in a physician?"

"Wait and see. It might frighten her. Love is a very good physician, my dear, to a woman in such a case."

"I can give her that. And I have feed the best midwife in London."

"I shall be with you, Jordan, when the time comes."

But this clouding of Douce's mind continued, and for the first time in his life Jordan began to understand that whatever a man may do, Nature will have the laugh of him. Foul weather comes when the wind seems fair. Frost nips your fruit trees, or the fruit itself is sour. The more he laboured in his garden, the less things grew; or rather, they grew awry, misshapen, blighted, with blotched leaves and acid juices, and their flowers were poison-cups. That was the pity of it. Strive as he would, the face of his love was clouded, and just when life had begun to brighten with steady sunshine, and there had been a promise of ripening.

He found himself looking at this travesty, this piteous transformation, and asking himself whether this was Douce, the girl whom he married a year ago? At first he was full of compassion, but as the days went by his compassion grew weary. He could not help it; emotions tire and are exhausted, just as the body is exhausted.

She gave him no peace. Infinitely querulous and exacting though she was, Jordan remained gentle. He could bear her exactions as a strong man bears a burden, or the pressure of the wind upon his body on a rough journey that has to be completed. In fact he was wonderfully gentle for a man who did not know what sickness was, and who might have been expected to show impatience. He was awake at night for hours; he held and caressed her when she was in pain; he bore with her complaints and her peevishness.

He was gentle with Douce because he felt responsible, and because he realized that she had to bear all that the mere man cannot bear. His love might grow very weary in the long watches, but it kept awake. "Surely, I am strong enough for both, strong enough to be gentle with her?" Only once did he show any impatience, and afterwards he was so fiercely angry with himself that never again did his temper fail him.

"O, Jordan, what women have to bear!"

That cry of hers always brought him to his knees.

"Sweetheart—I know. I wish I could bear some of it for you."

Her perversions deepened, and out of them grew a devouring jealousy. It was as though an evil spirit had taken possession of her small suffering body, and looked out of her eyes at Jordan, with infinite suspiciousness. She was jealous of everybody, of her two maids, of Mrs. Mary, but especially of Mrs. Merris. She grew sly, evilly watchful.

She would send for Jordan at all hours, and on all sorts of excuses.

If he went abroad she would question him as to where he had been and whom he had seen.

She had wild moods, when she would throw her arms round his neck and refuse to let him go.

There were times when Jordan was very weary, for this little one's love seemed to take the strength from him, and to leave him bloodless and empty of all emotion. He was not the swordsman that he was, and he left the work more and more to his assistants, though his weariness was more of the mind than of the body. He found that Douce's dreads had taken possession of him. He began to stoop slightly, to carry his head as though he had a weight on his shoulders, and to have the air of a man who was afraid of something.

Then there was that unhappy feeling that he was watched, that his wife's eyes and thoughts followed him everywhere, not tenderly, but with a kind of grudging jealousy.

He fought this feeling.

"Nonsense! I am wronging her. Love can never be like that."

So strongly did he react against this sense of suspicion that he deliberately set himself to counter it by going one evening to Carter Street. It seemed to him to be a wholesome act, a challenge flung at all the morbid thoughts that Douce's sickness had suggested. He was aware, too, of a sense of emptiness and of hunger, as though he had been giving out all these months, and the man in him needed filling. Yet when he came to Mrs. Merris's house, a kind of fear fell upon him. He hesitated. He felt a monstrous weakness in the very pith of his being. He could neither go on nor turn back.

It was she who brought him in. He heard her voice and, looking up, saw her at the window. Her eyes seemed to have some of the quality of the sky, a sky that was both light and dark. She was dressed in black, and Jordan thought that she looked paler than usual.

"I have been thinking of you."

The words seemed for him alone, mysterious words, and yet so simply inevitable. He went up to her, and stood looking at the evening sunlight making a brightness upon the brickwork of the house across the way. And suddenly he felt tired, more tired than ever he had felt before, but the strangest part of all was that somehow he knew that he could give way to it.

He did give way to it. He felt himself resting upon something that she gave to him, not with mere words, but with an intangible sympathy, a quiet understanding. She had been busy with some piece of needlework, and she continued at her work, glancing at him occasionally with eyes of veiled kindness. If the virtue had gone out of him at Spaniards Court, she gave it back to him, and that—silently—with no self-parade and no air of conscious wisdom.

Yes, Douce was suffering. He told her that much, and she could read that and more in his tired eyes. He did not say that Douce was difficult, for the uttering of peevish and disloyal things is balm only to trivial people. He just sat there and watched Mariana Merris at her work, and drank in the beauty and the depth of her, and felt something flowing into him like health into a sick body. Her presence made mysterious music about him. He wondered why he had this feeling, for though he loved her, his love for her seemed different from all his other loves. He knew that most women empty a man, but this woman replenished him with a strength that was deeper than desire.

As he bent over her hand when taking leave of her he let fall the most human of confessions.

"I hope I have not tired you?"

She looked up at him.

"Why should you tire me?"

"Because I have been rested here, and am taking something away with me."

She smiled—as to herself.

"We can give and take, you and I. The virtue of living is in the set of the tide."

He walked home, wondering what the real meaning was behind those words of hers.

His Lady of the Window had put so much live virtue into him that he entered his house in Spaniards Court with a feeling of freshness and hope. His love was ready to take up its burden, and even to make light of it. He was conscious of no sense of guilt. Life was teaching Jordan the unexpectedness of his own emotions, for before meeting Mariana Merris he would not have thought it possible for a man to learn to love one woman better because he loved a second woman so differently, and with such a depth of restrained desire. He went in to Douce and found her propped up on the old blue settee, looking pale and pinched. She had the air of one who had been waiting, listening, suffering.

"Well—sweetheart."

His voice had regained its qualities of strength and cheerfulness, and as he crossed the room to her with the evening sunlight shining upon the window, he became suddenly aware of her eyes fixed upon him in an observant stare. Her eyes were hostile, challenging. In some way that was strange to him she seemed to read his face and to feel where he had been and what he had brought with him from the house in Garter Street.

"You have been there."

He paused, frankly astonished, looking down at her tense face.

"Where—Douce?"

"To her."

He stood very still. He was aware of the cold breath of a storm, of some violent and implacable prejudice behind those hard, dark eyes. Even the glow of her red hair could not soften the menace of his wife's small, white face.

"I have."

He was surprised, troubled, vaguely angered by the thought that she had had him watched. This tyranny seemed to him so monstrous, so ungenerous, when he had come back after breathing a finer air to help her and to spend himself on her.

"Do you grudge me my friends, dear?"

She began to breathe in jerks, and to twist her hands together.

"I knew. Yes, you can leave me and go to her. You hate me. How did I know? A woman knows."

"Douce."

He made a movement towards her, but suddenly she raised her hands and began to storm at him. Her voice was shrill and uncontrolled, her face distorted and terrible.

"Don't touch me. You have been to her. O, how I hate you!"

He was down on his knees, trying to catch her hands and to control and calm her.

"Douce. You are dreaming. I belong to you. For God's sake—dear...."

She was beside herself; one of her hands struck him in the face, but he did not seem to feel the blow. Very gently but firmly he mastered her, pinioning her arms, and drawing her to him till her poor, wild, little face was close to his.

"Douce, my darling—you are killing me. You are dreaming lies. I am yours, all yours."

And suddenly she seemed to melt, her rigid body relaxing, her face softening into a quiver of anguish. She broke into tears; she clung to him.

"Jordan, Jordan, my Jordan."

"There—there! Why, I love you."

He gathered her up and carried her up and down the room like a child.

"There, there! You must not take on like this, sweetheart; it is dangerous. Why, what should I do if anything happened to you?"

She thrust her wet face against his neck.

"Say you hate her, say you hate her."

He felt a disastrous sadness falling upon him.

"I do—if it hurts you, dear."

"Say you will never see her again."

"I will not see her again."

She clung to him fiercely, possessively, and he continued to carry her up and down the room, conscious of bewilderment, pain, disillusionment.

"The pity of it!" he thought; "the pity of it!"

Sylvester St. Croix sat on one of Jordan's high-backed chairs by Jordan's window, looking as though he were lashed to the chair, feet and knees together, his hands resting on his thighs. Dusk was falling, and somewhere in the house a thin voice wailed, but if Sylvester heard the voice he betrayed no emotion. He neither moved nor spoke, but sat and stared, a dead figure, stiff, frozen, strangely forbidding, coldly dreadful.

Jordan watched with him. For an hour they had been sitting there together, for a whole night and day now the thing had gone on, and the second night was approaching. He had suffered till he had felt dulled, and until those whimperings of pain had become strangely and terribly distant, striking on a wound that was now too numb to quiver. He sat there and waited. He saw old St. Croix's head grow grey against the window until it was like a hard, black knot of wood on a lean stick, rigid and forbidding. Why he stayed there he did not know. He could feel that this old man hated him.

"Death is in the house."

The words went through and through his head, and indeed—it seemed to him that old St. Croix was death sitting at the window, inscrutable and silent. What was the old man thinking about? Did he feel anything? Or had he grown too old to feel?

At times Jordan's numbness passed for a moment, and acute pain gripped him. He longed to cry out, to be violent, and when the pain was on him he could not keep still. He had to get up and move about the room. He felt that he could kill that motionless old man by the window.

It grew dark, and in one of those stormy moments Jordan went out into the courtyard and walked up and down under the stars. It was better here away from that dead yet accusing presence, even though a memory stabbed him, the memory of that night when he had waited here while Mary Nando had tried to comfort Douce. He remembered it so well, his going up to her, the little shrinking figure in the bed, his impulsive words to her, the clinging of her arms.

"God!" he said, and struck the wall with his fist; "will it never be over?"

His knuckles smarted, but what of that? He was thinking that if Douce died he would have killed her, and the big heart of him cried out.

"Such a little thing! She's too small for all this. Damnation! Cannot that physician do anything? He seems no better than the women."

Presently Jordan saw a light come into the parlour. It was Mary Nando, and as Jordan went in to her he realized how still the house had become. Not a cry! Almost he wished that he could hear cries. There had been life in them, and his hope had answered their anguish. Well—what would Mrs. Mary have to tell him? He found her, candlestick in hand, standing in the middle of the room, weary beyond weariness, her eyes bright yet infinitely desolate. Old St. Croix was staring at her, as a stone figure might stare.

Jordan stood and waited. He spoke to her with his eyes, but his lips were dumb. He saw her give a little shudder, and then steady herself like someone who has been shaken by a gust of wind.

"It is not good, my dear, not good."

Jordan felt his lips quivering. Old St. Croix's chin gave a jerk.

"Cannot they do anything, mother?"

Mrs. Mary put her hand to her forehead.

"No—no. She's such a little thing, and so weak—now. Dear God, it is hard."

And suddenly, old St. Croix opened his mouth and spoke.

"The child of sin. She married a child of sin."

His grey beard wagged on his chin like the beard of a goat. He glared at Jordan.

"The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children. My child will die, and you will have killed her."

He stood up, raising himself with his hands on the rails of the chair, and the bones of him seemed to crack. Jordan was like one palsied; he remained with his head hanging, and his eyes looking at old St. Croix, without anger, but with a kind of dumb wonder. He was aware of shadows flickering about the room, of the rocking of Mary Nando's candle. He heard her voice.

"How dare you say that to him—and at such a time. You miserable old man!"

Never had Jordan seen her so angry.

"Let it pass, mother," he said; "let it pass."

"No, dear heart, it shall not pass," and she went and stood in front of old St. Croix. "You, the Godly man, with venom under your tongue, get you out of the house—for this house has been a house of love, and love is a thing you never knew."

She pointed to the door.

"What sort of hell is your heaven?"

"Mother," said Jordan, "mother!" and caught her by the shoulder.

Old St. Croix showed his teeth like a dog, for the lash had cut him. He blinked his eyes, fumbled for his cloak, and made for the door, and as he went out of it, Mary Nando clasped Jordan and pressed her head against his shoulder.

"Never grieve, dear. You have been to her all that a man can be."

"Can I see her, mother?"

"Not yet, dear, presently. There may be a little hope."

He rested his cheek against Mrs. Mary's head.

"I wish it were over, mother; I wish it were over."

Mary Nando returned to her vigil, and Jordan went out again into the cool night, and taking off his shoes, walked to and fro over the stones. Somehow he could not believe it to be true—that Douce was dying, slipping out of his big hands. Her hair, her glowing, living hair! O, God! The thought of her hair tormented him. It was in his face, and the smell of it in his nostrils. How could such hair go away into the darkness? And her little hands? And her passion and her peevishness? He seemed to understand it all now. She had loved him very much, fiercely. She had suffered a great deal. O, why had he felt weary in being gentle? He looked at her window, that dim window where even the candlelight seemed hushed; and desolation descended upon him. That she should die, and her child with her!

A man came out of the house, closing the door gently. Jordan almost sprang on him, and held him by the arm.

"Well, Mr. Willis——?"

"Sir, you are too strong——"

"Forgive me. But—why—are you going?"

"Because—I have other patients, my dear March."

"And because——?"

"Yes, because there is no hope."

Jordan's hands dropped.

"A hit," he said, "a palpable hit! What a blind scrimmage this life is—anyway!"

Mrs. Mary found him in the middle of the courtyard, standing quite still, and staring at his wife's window.

"Jordan."

"Mother...."

She took his hand.

"You have heard?"

"Yes."

"She wants you, Jordan. O, my dear, be strong."

"She shall have my courage," he said; "it is the last thing that I can give her."

Yet the tragedy did not seem real to him, in spite of the horror and the anguish of it. Life was slipping away while he stared dumbly and helplessly, whispering empty words to the woman who was dying. He sat with his back against the head of the bed, holding Douce in his arms, her red hair tumbled upon his shoulders.

"Jordan—Jordan, I am afraid."

He felt desolate, helpless, wounded to death, yet he called on himself for a man's effort.

"My darling, do not be afraid. God is taking you from me, but some day I shall come to you."

"You—do—love me, Jordan?"

"My dear, O—my dear," he said, and pressed his lips to her hair.

She sighed, and he felt that he was holding no more than a little shred of vapour in his arms. Her two hands were clasping his wrists, and they were very cold. He raised first one—and then the other—and breathed upon them, and she managed to turn and to look up into his face.

"My Jordan, you have loved no one but me?"

His eyes grew hot and heavy.

"No one but you—Douce."

"Oh—I have loved you so much. Hold me closer. I—I cannot see you; things are growing dim."

He held her close, and his courage trembled.

"Douce—my little wife, think of it as going to sleep—here—in my arms—in the arms of your Jordan who loves you."

She sighed, and her cold lips sought his.

"You will come to me—some day, Jordan?"

"Yes."

"O, promise me one thing. Will you promise me?"

"Ask it."

"Promise me that you will never marry again, but that you will always be mine—mine."

He bent over her.

"I promise."

"That—you—will—never—her—that other woman——"

"Never."

"O—my Jordan—my——"

And that last spasm of her love was like the last flicker of a candle, and when Mrs. Mary crept into the room she found Jordan sitting like death, holding his dead wife in his arms.

Douce lay near to Tom Nando in the graveyard of St. Pancras; Nando's fencing-school had been closed for a week, and Jordan sat in the house and dreamed.

The house was a house of ghosts. It had become a place of shadows where nothing was as it had been, a house whose heart was dead and whose life seemed finished. And yet it was poignantly alive, alive with memories, promises, tendernesses, sorrowful compassions. It held Jordan and would not let him go; it touched him with spirit hands; it breathed words into his ears. "Promise—promise!" And he had promised, and the promise lay heavy upon him.

For he was overwhelmed with pity, not for himself, but for the little thing who slept with her unborn child away yonder where old Nando lay. He still felt that he had killed her, and in death she became more real to him that she had ever been when living. He realized that she had been cheated of so much, and that her life in the old days must have been rather dim and empty, and then when life had come to her it had killed her. He brooded. His grief was very sensitive and raw. He could not bring himself to go into that room where they had slept together and where she had died, nor did he dare to touch the things that had been hers. Even in death she was possessive, pathetically tyrannical. She had imposed a memory upon the man whom she had left behind her, a memory that was like a watchful ghost.

Yes, ghosts! Even when he went into the empty fencing-school that had been so full of strong, young life, Jordan felt a deadness, a sense of a season that was ended. Tom Nando haunted him here, and when he stood and remembered Mrs. Merris sitting up yonder in the sunlit gallery he seemed to see a little frail ghost come between him and her.

"You have promised," it said; "I see all. You would not wound me, Jordan, would you? I loved you so much, and of that love I died."

He felt very helpless, very lonely. It seemed to him that all the old life was dead, and that he had no power in him to make it alive again. There was an unbridgeable gap between it and him, and he stood on new ground, on the edge of a new world, bewildered, shaken, unable to see things clearly, still conscious of memories which would not be left behind.

When two weeks had gone by Jordan took his first definite step. He shut up the house in Spaniards Court, sent the wenches away, and joined Mary Nando at St. Pancras. The fencing-school was reopened, but most of the work was left in old Bertrand's hands, Jordan having no heart for it. He began to realize that he did not want to go back to the old life, and the only thing that weighed with him was Mrs. Mary's pride in Thomas Nando's fencing-school.

He spoke to her about it.

"Mother, would it hurt you if I gave up being a fencing-master?"

She was slow in answering, for like Jordan she was finding the new life difficult. To lose things when one is old is far harder than when youth offers new adventures and new chances.

"You must please yourself, my dear. Your life is your own."

"No man's life is quite his own, mother. And as it is I do not know what to do with it."

Mrs. Mary bent her head over her work.

"That will pass, my dear. Why, you are just coming to your full strength. What is in your mind?"

Jordan went and stood by the window and looked at the flowers in the garden.

"I don't quite know."

"Ah," said she, "not yet!"

"So much depends——"

"My dear, don't let an old woman stand in your way."

He was touched! He came and leant upon the back of her chair.

"I don't think you have ever stood in my way, mother. No, you have had the making of me. But I am restless; I feel that some change is coming, as though I were a soldier waiting for an order."

"Well—it will come."

"But—maybe—it will be an order that I cannot obey."

He let his hand rest gently on her shoulder.

"Bear with me, mother. I am not thinking only of myself. And that is what life seems to be whipping into me just now, that no man stands quite alone."

Mary Nando nodded her head.

"That's true, Jordan. But some day——"

"Some day?"

"You will want to marry again, my dear. No—no, don't think me hard and practical."

"Mother, I promised never to marry again."

Mrs. Mary let her hands drop to her lap.

"My dear!"

"Yes, just before she died. And, after all, a promise is a promise."

"Yes, a promise is a promise," she answered.

Before a week was out Jordan had sold the goodwill of Nando's Fencing-School to a Captain Stenning, on the stipulation that old Bertrand should be kept on there until he chose to retire. And when the deed was done, and the agreement had been sealed and signed, Jordan felt that the distance between him and the past had broadened immeasurably, and that with a few scratches of a quill he had signed away the world of his unthinking youth. He was strangely solemn over it, saddened. He took a last look at the big room, shook hands with old Bertrand, who showed many symptoms of emotion, and mounting his horse which a boy was holding in the yard, he rode out from that old world into the new. Nor did he go back at once to Mary Nando's house. He set his horse for the country, for the country called him. He wanted the greenness of it, the solitude, the great spaces, the open sky, the wind.

But even here he had to keep to the roads and the lanes. He was in a land of gates and of hedges where other men had been before him, and had set their seal upon the land. There was no real elbow-room here, save on a few heaths where certain adventurous vagabonds took the purses of the men of property. Not that Jordan had any prejudice against property. He was a northerner, with all the northerner's passion for the land, a possessive passion that was ready to add acre to acre.

Open country! A new land in which neither men nor fields were marked off by hedges and ditches, a land in which that which he could accomplish would be his. Yes, that was what he wanted, and he knew it, as he had known it for the last two or three years.

The new world!

Raw, perhaps, and difficult, but wild and splendid. He would be a man in it, a man with strong arms and a steady eye. In the old world he was just nothing and a fencing-master; in the new world he might be himself.

He pulled up his horse on the top of a hill, and looked back upon London. Yes, it was great and full of strong life, but its greatness was not for him. "Your servant, sir!" He was beginning to swear to himself that he would be a servant to no man.

He smiled, as a man smiles sometimes when he is conscious of bitter yet tender thoughts.

"Douce, little thing, you may have done this for me. You have made me a bondman, and you have set me free. I am alone—now. A man who sets out to fight for his own land should not be cumbered with women."

He rode down the hill, and as the distant greyness that was London sank away behind the trees he knew that his stoicism had a flaw in it. He knew it because he felt it, which is the surest way of knowing. That other love was there, greater than ever, because he felt cut off from it, a splendid dream of passion and comradeship and understanding, of fine devotion and honour, and all that makes life beautifully human.

"I should like to tell her—I ought to tell her," he thought "but not—not yet."

He did not know that their thoughts had crossed, and that while he was out there under the open sky Mrs. Merris was learning of his tragedy.

She had sent someone to inquire for Douce, and her message had found the house in Spaniards Court shut up, but falling in with old Bertrand she had heard some of the news.

"Mrs. March died two weeks ago, madam; she died in childbirth."

Mrs. Merris' eyes had a frightened look.

"Dead! And the child?"

"It was never born, madam."

"Dear God, how heartless things are! And did you hear——?"

"Mr. March has sold the fencing-school. The house is shut up."

"Thank you, Kate. I never thought to hear such news when I sent you out to ask after the little lady."

She was shocked by the very unexpectedness of the tragedy, and challenged by the intimate personal message that it delivered to her. Her inner self stood at gaze. There were certain tendencies that she had thrust into the background of her mind and hidden behind her pride, but now a barrier had been rolled back, and she saw herself facing life as one faces some crisis that is inevitable. She had more than a feeling that Jordan would come to her. It was her right, for she had stood for the right all through, and she had nothing to regret. She foresaw his need of her, or imagined it. And she was full of a smiling compassion and of the impulse towards giving.

But he had not come to her yet, and she had to confess that she was both surprised and not surprised. She found herself wondering whether he would dare to come, whether he would wait for some word from her. But she would send him no word. She would wait. The privilege of coming to her was his.

A week passed, and at the end of it Mary Nando noticed a change in Jordan. He was less restless, more silent, but not less sad, and yet she felt a different texture in his sadness. He had the air of a man who had come through some inward struggle, and had found strength in a settled purpose. She suspected that he had something to tell her, and that he was finding the approach to it difficult and uneasy. He was very gentle with her. His eyes always seemed to be asking a question, a question which it would be hard for her to answer.

But one night he asked it. They had gone out together into the garden, and were wandering slowly round Tom Nando's flower-beds with their edging of clipped box. Jordan had been more silent than usual, and Mrs. Mary knew that he had something in his mind.

"Mother—I want to ask you a question, a hard question."

"Yes, my dear."

"I want to go to a new country, but I do not want to leave you."

She understood. She understood by reason of the love that was in her, and she stood very still looking at the spring of the little fountain that was playing in the sunk stone cistern. She saw the glitter and heard the soft splash of it, and she knew that she was an old woman and that age clings to certain things, provided that it has good memories and is not greedy for the last apple. Yet she was wounded in making this last choice. Little puckers of pain showed on her face. She was so alone now, with no man to run to, no one to care very greatly whether she was happy or sad. And yet, she had the courage to find a smile.

"I am too old, my dear."

He answered her at once, and very calmly.

"That decides it, mother. I shall stay."

She drew a deep breath and nerved herself to fight against her own longings.

"No—my dear, if you feel the call—you must go. I am an old woman."

She laid a hand upon his arm.

"Don't think I do not understand, or that I do not care. It is because I care so much, my dear, that I would not hold you back."

Jordan bent and kissed her white hair.

"I know that. And I am not going. How many years have you given to me?"

"My dear, I had my happiness out of them. Should I grudge you yours?"

"It is I who grudge them, mother. I do not think I should be happy all alone out there with you alone over here. That settles it."

"No, my dear, no."

"But it does."

She could not move him, and though she attempted it time after time as the days passed she failed. So determined was he that he set about trying to rent or buy a farm in the neighbourhood as though he had no other thought than to anchor himself there. He rode all over the country and spent many hours working in Thomas Nando's garden, but with all this appearance of finality he could not satisfy Mary Nando's heart. She was divided against herself. She wanted to

keep him, and she wanted to send him away.

Meanwhile, another woman was waiting in the centre of her little painted world of gallants and simpering ladies, and looking out upon it from her window or from the window of her coach, and thinking how little it all said to her. She was too young, and she was too old. She was being made love to by a precise and witty gentleman with dead eyes and a face the colour of clay, and she suffered him for the sake of the contrast. This bleating, complacent, scurrilous creature, whose one idea of a man's dignity was that he should fit well into his coat! She let herself be pleasantly wearied. She indulged her glimmering scorn, listening to Sir Egremont Sarsnet's flattery, the flattery of a thin-lipped man with a yellow liver. She knew that he loved his petty cruelties, his little pin-points of venom, and she thought of a big hand flattening him as a big hand might flatten a gadfly.

She indulged herself in this contrast. The woman in her spread Sir Egremont out upon a board, and pinned out all his insect anatomy. His littlenesses and his shallowness made her inward love seem so good and fresh. She took draughts of the "wit" as though his acidity cleaned her tongue. He was all that her man was not, and nothing that she wished him to be. The fellow's complacency delighted her. He went about blowing into his conceit as though it were a bladder.

"These yellow, dead-eyed men never did move me."

Sir Egremont was with her, and making polite fun of Aunt Julia and Aunt Julia's parrot, when Mrs. Merris saw Jordan on horseback under her window. She rose and, leaning forward, made a sign to him to dismount. The "wit's" head joined her at the window, inquisitive, facetious.

"Why—March, the fencing fellow!"

She ignored him; she was smiling at Jordan with a significant seriousness.

"I will send a boy to take your horse to the stables. Yes—I am alone. This gentleman is going."

She turned on Sir Egremont. She was gracious, casual.

"I am sorry you must go, sir. I am sure poor Poll will miss you."

He looked astonished. He moistened his thin lips, gave her one glare, and made his bow.

"I was not aware, madam——"

"Oh—Mr. March and I are very old friends, and with me friends come first. Please remember the two steps at the end of the landing. Aunt, dear, would you oblige me by ringing the bell for Sambo?"

Sir Egremont bowed himself out, while the parrot set up a sudden, exultant screaming. The insect game was over; the bladder had been pricked for once, and though the "wit" cocked a yellow-braided hat over a yellow face, he was still an angry fly on spindle legs. Mrs. Merris stood at the window. She held Jordan's eyes. Her seriousness was half light, half shadow.

She knew at once when he entered the room that he had something to tell her, and she had a vague feeling that it was not what she had expected to hear. Miss Stamford, strangely wise for once, crept out and left them alone together.

"I suppose you know, madam, what has happened to me?"

"Yes—I know."

She sat down in her chair, while he leant against the window-casing, and looked lost; for it is so easy to tell a thing to an imagined person, and so hard to tell it to a real one, the most real one of all.

"A tragedy," she said. "Sometimes one does not wish to speak. I understand!"

"Yes, that depends," he said, and stealing a glance at her as she sat there, was smitten with all the longing that he had ever known, that helpless longing. The frame of her dark hair enclosed the rich and mysteriously satisfying beauty of her face. Yes, it was so rich, so mature; yet there was a wildness about it that made him think of rich, wild country. She was no painted jade whose mouth and eyes would lose their mystery after the first kisses.

She felt his glance, and the restrained and helpless ardour of it, and looking up her eyes met his.

"How very weary you must be."

She saw his surprise.

"Yes, that is true. One does not realize how such a loss empties one."

"Poor Mr. Jordan!"

He made a little movement, and then seemed to restrain himself. He turned to the window.

"I have given up the fencing-school. The place was dead to me. Perhaps you know the feeling, when you seem to have crossed a frontier."

"O, yes—I know it. One has shed one's old skin, and you feel raw and strange."

"Yes, raw and strange."

She wondered what was on his mind, for he was labouring towards some point with hesitation and with difficulty, nor could she be sure that he was not still in some pit of desolation, accusing himself, reproaching himself. Death leaves the conscience very raw, and this man was big and human.

"She had you such a little while. But—then—she was happy."

"I wonder?"

"O—surely!"

He remained very still, thinking, and presently she had to glance at him, for his silence began to overshadow her like a cloud. She wanted to see through it, to discover the clearer sky beyond the inevitableness of his regrets and self-reproaching compassions.

"I do not think I realized," he said slowly, "how much a woman could care."

"Not till she was dying?"

"Yes."

"Poor little wife! Like a child, frightened, being carried away from one like the sea when the ship goes down."

Mariana saw him straighten as he stood, and she knew that she had touched the inmost core of him.

"Yes, just like that. Washed away from you almost before you have time to speak. A cry, and it is all over. She had time to cry out to me, to make me promise something."

He paused for a moment, mouth set, eyes steady. The truth was coming, and with a flash of intuition she envisaged it, and all the pity of it.

"She made you promise?"

"That I never would marry again."

"Poor little thing! And you made her that promise? Yes, you would. I know how such words rush from the heart into the mouth."

Mrs. Merris waited. She could not believe that he would hold such a promise to be final, but in looking at Jordan as he stood there she was made to realize that he felt himself bound. The emotion born of his wife's tragedy was still very strong in him. It dominated him for the time being, and she understood that he would try to keep that promise.

But did he wish to keep it? That was what troubled her. She was more wounded by the thought of it than Jordan knew, and yet she held back the cry of protest and refused to question the selfishness of Douce's last words. She did not tell him that no woman had any right to wring such a promise from a man, for if the desire in him to discover its selfishness was strong enough he would discover it for himself.

"So life begins afresh," she said. "What are you going to do with it?"

He gave her one quick look, a glance in which he betrayed half the hope that was in him. She had accepted his promise, and in his heart of hearts he had hoped that she might help him to break it. Something cried out in her, but she held fast to her silence. It was Jordan who must break that promise, if ever it was to be broken.

"You have all your life before you. What will you do with it?"

He sat down in a chair as though he felt tired. His eyes had a resigned look, but at the back of them lurked a spirit of protest.

"I do not know yet. I should like to have gone to a new country, a wild country, and made myself a place there. All doors are shut here. Hedges are up."

"Then why not go?"

"There is someone whom I cannot leave."

"Ah—Mrs. Nando! And she keeps you?"

"No; she has been trying to persuade me to go. But she would be all alone."

"She is too old to go?"

"Yes—and—after all—she gave her best years to me. Ought I not to give her some of mine?"

Mrs. Mariana's eyes were very soft and wonderful, but Jordan did not see them. He was staring out of the window, while she was saying to herself: "You great, big, human, generous thing; I love you." And then she smiled. There was wistfulness in her smile, a twinge of tender humour.

"My friend, it seems to me that you are shut in by women. A man has his life to live, and he has to live it——"

She paused there, and when he turned questioning eyes to her, her face was half averted and elusive.

"You have not finished," he said.

She looked at her hands.

"I—have. Who can choose for someone else? Think, think it over. Most women are born to give. I think most women's last thought would be to give. That is all that I can say to you."

And then he rose to go. He stood a moment, and then bent to kiss her hand.

"Good-bye. You have been so very good to me."

She did not move till he was on his horse, and then she rose and stood at the open window. She wondered whether Jordan would turn and look up at her. He did.

She pressed her hand to her heart.

"Good-bye."

She saw the man in him leap to her from his eyes, and then—he rode away.

To Jordan came a season of stress and of struggle, for there were voices in him that warred against each other.

"Your little wife has been dead no more than two months; and you wish to break your promise to her. Already you are eager to forget."

"I shall never forget," said the other voice. "But was the forcing of such a promise fair? Take heed, too, that I married my first wife out of pity. The second shall be for love."

Outwardly, Jordan made no change. He was a little more quiet and graver than he used to be; he moved more slowly; he reflected and took longer to answer a question; he was much more alone. He had entered into the treaty for the lease of a farm that lay about two miles north of the New House, and his life seemed to be approaching its groove, the ruck of routine and habit that leads on to middle age. It might have appeared the most reasonable and pleasant of futures. Mr. March, ex-fencing-master, a man of property, turned farmer, big and buxom, riding over his fields, going out with his gun, putting on a red coat and galloping with the hounds, swilling draughts of beer, growing still more big and prosperous, eventually marrying some strapping, jolly girl, and begetting a dozen children! Surely, it was a sound and solid frame for any man's picture? And yet the frame did not fit him. He was too big for it; too much the son of the man and the woman who had made him.

Women have given Jordan most of his life's surprises, and Mary Nando was to provide him with one of the most dramatic of them. He came home one afternoon with the lease of "Monk's Farm" in his pocket, meaning to read the document over before he signed it. He sat down in Tom Nando's old leather chair. Mrs. Mary was by the window, glancing out now and again at the garden while she stitched away at clothes for somebody's baby.

"What have you got there, my dear?"

"The lease of the farm. Mr. Bowyer sent me home to read it through before signing it."

"May I see it—Jordan?"

"Of course, mother."

He left his chair and took the document across to her, and then wandered away to the window overlooking the grassland and the oak wood—"My park," as Mrs. Mary called it. The trees made him think of Mrs. Mariana, and a word-picture she had once painted for him of the forest lands and mountains of Virginia. Her country! He found himself wondering whether she would go back to it, and what her going would mean to him. She was in his heart and mind now every moment of the day, and her dark dignity seemed to make that other picture grow more dim and distant. He no longer felt his dead wife in his arms; the vivid sense-memories were fading and losing their acute poignancy.

Suddenly he heard the rending of parchment. He turned about and saw Mary Nando slowly and deliberately tearing up the lease. The material was very tough, and she had to tear sheet from sheet, and then to rend each one separately across the middle. Her calm and purposeful way of doing it was the thing that most astonished him.

"Mother!"

She turned her face to him, and it wore an expression of tender severity.

"You will not take that farm, my dear. I forbid you to take it. I think I know what is best."

He crossed over to her with a look of appeal in his eyes.

"Then—what am I to do? I am not made for an idle life."

"Do—what your heart bids you do, my dear."

In that moment Jordan had a vision of a love that transcended itself, of the mother spirit sacrificing itself for the sake of the child. He thought of poor Douce's clinging, possessive passion, and her wish to hold him with her dead hands.

"Mother, we are making it very hard for each other."

"O, no, my dear. Is it not easier for me to think of you as a man who is happy?"

"But I shall be happy here."

She made a movement with her hands, and understanding her, he knelt down at her knees as though he were a child about to say his prayers.

"No—my dear. Life is yours; you must take it. I think I know that you would not be happy here, not as a man should be. I am an old woman, but I have my memories—good memories."

She took his face between her hands.

"Do what your heart bids you do, my Jordan. Only by doing that can one do things well."

Her unselfishness was a revelation to him, and more than a revelation, for if Mary Nando did not grudge him his liberty, then it was human and right of him to desire it. Two living women were pointing him to the new life; it was the dead woman who held him back. He left Mary Nando weeping a few sacrificial tears over the baby-linen in her lap, and went forth into the glow of a summer evening, feeling solemn and troubled and full of a great tenderness towards all women. The mood took him to that quiet burial ground where Thomas Nando and little Douce lay near each other not far from a very old yew tree. He looked at both graves. Nando's had been turfed, but Douce's was a mound of smooth earth waiting to be grassed over when the autumn came. Both graves had fresh flowers upon them, flowers from old Nando's garden.

Jordan stood by his wife's grave. He felt a great tenderness towards her, but it was a reproachful tenderness.

"Little thing—need your love have asked me for that promise?"

He sat down on an older mound beside her grave and remained there for a long while, bare-headed, and deep in thought. So absorbed was he in trying to fit the past to the future that he forgot Mary Nando's evening visit, for she came daily to the sacred place to put flowers on her man's grave. And so, it happened that she surprised Jordan there, sitting with his head in his hands, with the shadow of the yew tree upon him.

Mary Nando sat down beside him. He had dropped his hands, and she took one of them in hers.

"Is it that you loved her so much, my dear?"

"No," he said; "no. That is the tragedy of it. I loved someone else, and yet I loved Douce, too—but in a different way."

Mrs. Mary's eyes seemed to fill with understanding.

"Then—it was pity, Jordan, that made you marry her?"

"Yes, pity. You remember that night, mother."

"My dear, I remember how I loved you. But I did not know. But—tell me—is she——"

"The woman I love?"

"Yes."

"She is not very far away, mother. But I said good-bye to her—because of the promise I made to Douce, but when I had said good-bye——"

"You wanted her, Jordan, as you have never wanted anything else in your life before?"

"Yes," he said; "yes."

She was silent for a little while, and then she spoke, pressing his big hand between her small ones.

"Let us speak no ill of the dead, my son, but that promise cannot hold. Surely you realize it?"

"I was beginning to realize it, mother."

"You gave what you had to give. Has any mortal creature the right to claim more?"

"That is what my heart tells me."

"My dear, go to her. Your heart is right."

Jordan let a week pass before he set out for Garter Street on a clear September evening. Many times he had gone over in his mind the things he would say to his dear lady, but as he drew near to the familiar street all the grave and considered phrases fell away from him, and he was left with a few simple words, the inevitable words of the lover.

On turning into Garter Street he paused on the footway and stood at gaze, filling his eyes with all the details of the street and its houses, and seeing in it something eternally familiar and eternally strange. It was the beginning of enchantment, the highway leading towards another world. The sunset was warming the red walls, and at the further end of the street three great elms stood out against a huge, piled-up cloud that glowed like a snow-mountain flushing with the dawn. The street was empty. From some window came the thin, tingling notes of a harpsichord and the sound of a woman singing.

Jordan's eyes were very solemn.

"What am I," he thought, "that I should speak of love to her? What will she say to me? What shall I know before the sun has set?"

He walked on up the street, keeping to the side on which her house stood. He did not dare to look up at her window, and when he had put his hand to the knocker, he stood close in to the door, waiting for his knock to be answered. He expected the dusky shine of Sambo's face, but when the door opened he saw instead of it the face of an old woman, mottled, dead-eyed, eyelids and cheeks pendulous and flabby.

She kept the door half closed, and waited for Jordan to state his business.

"Is Mrs. Merris at home?"

"Mrs. Merris! Why—bless you, she sailed for America three days ago."

Jordan stood dumb. He looked over the old woman's head into the dark hall of the house. His eyes seemed to be searching for a light that had been extinguished.

"I did not know. I was here three weeks ago. She did not say——"

He half turned as though to go, but the old figure of fate in the doorway picked up the cut ends of his life's thread.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but may you be Mr. Jordan March?"

"I am," he said.

She opened the door wide and smiled at him.

"It was very sudden like—her going. Most of the furniture was Sir Grandison's and o' course that made it easier. She left me and my old man to look after the place until Sir Grandison comes back, but I must say I would rather have had the lady. She had a way with her, and a voice as——"

Jordan, white and tense, broke in on her monologue.

"Was there a message?"

"Sure, sir, she left you a letter."

"Where is it?"

"Bless you, sir, you shall have it. Come in. She left the letter on a table in the long drawing-room, with orders to me that if you called at the house I was to take you up for you to get the letter for yourself. But if you didn't come before Sir Grandison's return I was to take the letter to your house at St. Pancras. I've got it all writ down."

Jordan was moving towards the stairs. He did not wait for her, but went up swiftly while she closed the street door. The beloved room was much as he remembered it, with the garden window framing the sunset, and fingers of light touching the brilliant colours of the rugs and the polished boards of the floor. The parrot had gone, and so had Miss Stamford's embroidery frame, but on the table where Mariana had kept her books he saw something white—her letter.

The old woman followed him into the room.

"I wish to be alone here," Jordan said to her, and when the piece of gold passed from his hand to hers, she curtsied and closed the door on him.

Jordan stood and looked at the letter, that white oblong upon the mottled black and brown of the walnut table. "Mr. Jordan March. To be delivered to him should he not come to Garter Street. From Mrs. Merris of Cherry Manor—Virginia." She had written that letter before she had left him, three days ago, three little but desolating days! Why had

she left England so suddenly? Why had she not told him? Why had he delayed in his fateful visit to her? What did the letter contain? What had she said to him?

He picked it up reverently, and seemed to hesitate. Then he crossed to the garden window, threw up the lower sash and sitting there in the sunlight, he opened and read her letter.

JORDAN,—I am going away to my old home. I wonder whether you will understand the manner of my going and the reason for it? If you are the man I take you to be I think you will.

Let me recall to you an old legend, the tale of the Islands of the West, and the Gardens of the Hesperides where the Golden Apples grew. Hercules was strong, and the apples of gold fell to him.

My Jordan, it seems to me that the tale is true to-day. Has not adventure turned its wings most often to the West? Why does the West lure us, Drake, Raleigh, the Men of the *Mayflower*, and those who come to this land of mine? Strong men, seeking the apples!

Think of it! Wild country, noble country for a man to take and make his own.

But the man must choose. Has he the courage, the desire, the supreme self-confidence? Does it seem to him worth while?

And I? If you cross the sea, my Jordan, you will find me. Where? Why, in the Garden of the Hesperides where the Apples of Gold grow, and if you are the man of my heart we shall pluck them together.

I have said it.

MARIANA.

Jordan raised his face toward the sunset.

"God bless my most dear lady. Was there ever a woman so wise in the trying of a man?"

He kissed the letter and held it up into the sunlight.

"The Apples of Gold. Mariana—I come!"

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[The end of *Apples of Gold* by Warwick Deeping]