The Tale
of
Triona

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Author of
"The Beloved Vaga
bond, etc."

DODD, MEAD
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THE TALE OF TRIONA

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THE TALE OF TRIONA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

IDOLS

JAFFERY

VIVIETTE

SEPTIMUS

DERELICTS

THE USURPER

STELLA MARIS

WHERE LOVE IS

THE ROUGH ROAD

THE MOUNTEBANK

THE RED PLANET

THE WHITE DOVE

FAR-AWAY STORIES

SIMON THE JESTER

A STUDY IN SHADOWS

A CHRISTMAS MYSTERY

THE WONDERFUL YEAR

THE HOUSE OF BALTAZAR

THE FORTUNATE YOUTH

THE BELOVÈD VAGABOND

AT THE GATE OF SAMARIA

THE GLORY OF CLEMENTINA

THE MORALS OF MARCUS ORDEYNE

THE DEMAGOGUE AND LADY PHAYRE

THE JOYOUS ADVENTURES OF ARISTIDE PUJOL

THE TALE OF TRIONA

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CHAPTER I

OLIVIA GALE leaned back in her chair at the end of the dining-room table, and looked first at the elderly gentleman on her right, and then at the elderly gentleman on her left.

"You're both of you as kind as can be, and I'm more than grateful for all you've done; but I do wish you'd see that it's no use arguing. It only hurts and makes us tired. Do help yourself, Mr. Trivett. And—another cup of tea, Mr. Fenmarch?"

Mr. Fenmarch, on her left, passed his cup with a sigh. He was a dusty, greyish man, his face covered with an indeterminate growth of thin short hair. His eyes were of a dull, unspeculative blue.

"As your solicitor, my dear Olivia," said he, "I can only obey instructions. As the friend of your family, I venture to give you advice."

"Why the deuce your father didn't tie you up in a trusteeship till you were twenty-five, at any rate," said Mr. Trivett on her right, helping himself to whisky and soda—the table, covered with a green baize cloth, was littered with papers and afternoon refreshments. "Why the dickens——" he began again after a sizzling gulp.

"Yes, it's most unfortunate," said Mr. Fenmarch, cutting off his friend's period. "And what you are going to do with yourself, all alone in the world, with this enormous amount of liquid money is more than I can imagine."

Olivia smiled and tapped the blue-veined hand that set down his teacup.

"Of course you can't. If imagination ran away with a solicitor, it would land him in the workhouse."

"That's where it will land you, Olivia," said Mr. Trivett. "Common sense is the better mount."

"That's rather neat," she said.

"If it wasn't, I wouldn't have said it," retorted Mr. Trivett, sinking his red jowls into his collar, which made them redder than before.

"You're so quick and clever," said Olivia, "that I can't understand why you

won't see things from my point of view."

"You've got to learn that a man of experience can't take the view of a wrong-headed young woman."

Mr. Trivett emphasized the asperity of his tone by a thump of his palm on the table.

As a matter of fact, he was genuinely angry. He was the senior partner in Trivett and Gale, Auctioneers and Estate Agents, in the comfortable little Shropshire town of Medlow; or rather the only surviving partner, for Gale, Olivia's father, and his two sons had one after the other been wiped out in a recent world accident. Olivia's decision, inspired from no other fount he could think of than lunacy, involved the withdrawal of considerable capital from the business. This, of course, being an honourable man, he could not dispute; but here were peace and reconstruction and inflated prices, and heaven knew how much percentage on the middleman's capital, and here was this inexperienced girl throwing away a safe income and clamouring for a settlement in full. They had argued and argued. It may be stated here that Mr. Trivett was the Executor of her father's estate, which made his position the more delicate and exasperating.

And now Mr. Trivett's exasperation reached the table-thumping point.

Olivia smiled wearily.

"It's such a pity."

"What's a pity?"

"Oh, everything. One thing is that there's no more gold. Of course, I know you can't understand. But that's your fault, not mine. I should have liked to realize all that I've got in sovereigns. Do you think they'd fill a bath? Have you ever thought how lovely it would be to wallow in a bath of sovereigns? Treasury notes are not the same thing. They're either very dirty and smell of plumbers, or very new and smell of rancid oil. Gold is the real basis of Romance."

He put her down for a mere female fool, and replied practically:

"We'll not see a gold coin in England again for the next fifty years."

"Well, well," she said; "anyhow, there's still some romance in mounting the deadly breech of the bank counter with a drawn cheque in one's hand."

"I'm afraid, my dear Olivia," said Mr. Fenmarch mildly, "I don't quite see what we're talking about."

"Why, we've discussed it every day for the last three months," cried Olivia, "and now this is the very last end of everything. A final settlement, as you call it! That's what you two dears have come for, isn't it?"

“Unfortunately, yes,” said Mr. Fenmarch.

“Then it’s all so simple. You’ve shown me this”—she picked up a foolscap document and dropped it—“the full statement of account of my father’s estate, and I approve—I being the only person concerned. You’ve got to give me one last cheque for that amount”—she tapped the document—“and I give you my receipt, signed over a penny stamp—you’ll have to stand me a penny stamp, for I’ve only got three-halfpenny ones in the house—and there’s an end of the matter.”

“My clerk made out the receipt and put the penny stamp on,” said Mr. Fenmarch, untroubled by her smile. “Here it is.”

“Solicitors’ clerks seem to think of everything,” said Olivia. “Fancy his remembering the penny stamp!”

“It’s charged up against you, in Fenmarch’s bill—item ‘sundries,’ ” remarked Mr. Trivett, pointing a fat forefinger.

“Why, naturally. Why should Mr. Fenmarch shower pennies on me? It’s the delicate thoughtfulness that I admire. I hope you’ll raise that young man’s salary.”

Mr. Fenmarch looked pained, like a horse to whom one had offered wooden oats, and swung his head away. Mr. Trivett opened his mouth to speak, but before he spoke finished his whisky and soda.

“My dear Olivia,” said he, “I’m sorry to see you so flippant. You’ve disappointed me and Mrs. Trivett who’ve known you since you were born, more than I can say. Until your poor mother died—God bless her—we thought you the most capable, level-headed young woman in this town. But for the last three months—you’ll forgive my freedom in saying so—you have shown yourself to be quite impossible.”

He paused, angry. Olivia smiled and drummed on the table.

“Have some more whisky.”

“No, I won’t,” he said in a loud voice. “Whisky’s too expensive to ladle out in that offhand fashion. It’s a luxury, as you’ll jolly well soon discover. I’m talking for your good, Olivia. That’s why Fenmarch and I are here. Two minutes will wind up the business. But we have your interests at heart, my girl, and we want to make a last appeal.”

She covered with hers the back of his red-glazed hand and spoke in a softened voice:—

“Yes, I know, I know. I’ve said already that you and Mr. Fenmarch were dears. But what would you have me do? I’m twenty-three. Alone in the world.”

“You have your uncle and aunt at Clapham,” said Mr. Trivett.

“I’ve also some sort of relations in the monkey cage at the Zoo,” said Olivia.

The repartee to the effect that it was the fittest home for her only occurring to Mr. Trivett when he was getting into bed that night, he merely stared at her gaspingly. She continued:

“I’m absolutely alone in the world. Do you think it reasonable for me to stay in this dull old house, in this mouldering old town, where one never sees a man from one year’s end to another, living for the rest of my life on the few hundreds a year which I could get if my capital were properly invested?”

“We don’t grant your premises, Olivia,” said Mr. Fenmarch. “ ‘The Towers’ may be old, but it is not dull. Medlow is not mouldering, but singularly progressive, and the place seems to—to pullulate with young men. So I think our advice to you is eminently reasonable.”

“Oh, dear!” sighed Olivia. “That’s where all the trouble comes in. Our ideas of dullness, mouldering and pullu—what you call it; don’t correspond. Mother was very fond of a story of Sydney Smith. Perhaps she told you. He was walking one day with a friend through the slums and came across two women quarrelling across the street, through opposite windows. And Sydney Smith said: ‘They’ll never come to an agreement, because they are arguing from different premises.’ ”

There was a silence.

“I’ll have a drop more whisky,” said Mr. Trivett.

“I think I see the point of the remark,” said Mr. Fenmarch greyly. “It was a play on the two meanings of the word.”

“That was what my mother gave me to understand,” said Olivia.

Then, after another spell of chill silence, she cried, her nerves on edge:

“Do let us come to the end of it!”

“We will,” said Mr. Trivett impressively. “But not before I’ve made a few remarks in protest, with Fenmarch as witness. I’m sorry there’s not another witness——”

“Oh, I’ll get one!” cried Olivia. “Myra—the faithful Myra.”

“Myra’s a servant, also a fool; and you’ve got her under your thumb,” said Mr. Trivett.

“Well, well,” said Olivia, “we’ll give Myra a miss. But I know what you’re going to say—and the kind heart that makes you say it.”

A touch of real tenderness crept into her fine dark eyes and almost softened

Mr. Trivett. She looked so young, so slender, so immature in her simple mourning. Her soft black hair clustered over her forehead in a manner which he felt was inconsistent with a woman fighting her way alone in the world. She hadn't a bit of colour in her cheeks; wanted feeding up, he thought. She was capable enough in her own sphere, the management of her house, the care of a bed-ridden mother, the appreciation of legal technicalities. Until she had got this bee in her bonnet he had admired her prodigiously; though, with the reserve which every Englishman makes in his admiration, he deplored the shrewdness of her tongue. But this idea of hers, to realize all her money in hard cash at the bank and go off into unknown perils was preposterous. She was not fit for it. You could take her by the neck in one hand and by the waist in another and break her to bits. . . . He was a good, honest man with fatherly instincts developed by the possession of daughters of his own, strapping red-cheeked girls, who had stayed soberly at home until the right young man had come along and carried them off to modest homes of unimpeachable respectability. So when he met the tenderness in Olivia's eyes he mitigated the asperities of his projected discourse and preached her a very human little sermon. While he spoke, Mr. Fenmarch nodded his unhumorous head and stroked the straggling grey hairs on his cheek. When he had ended, Mr. Fenmarch seconded, as it were, the resolution.

Then Olivia thanked them prettily, promised to avoid extravagance, and, in case of difficulty, to come to them for advice. The final cheque was passed over, the final receipt signed across the penny stamp provided with such forethought, and Olivia Gale entered into uncontrolled possession of her fortune.

The men rose to take their leave. Olivia held the hand of the burly red-faced man who had been her father's partner and looked up at him.

"I know, if you could have your way, you would give me a good hiding."

He laughed grimly. "Not the least doubt of it." Then he patted her roughly on the shoulder.

"And you, Mr. Fenmarch?"

He regarded her drearily. "After a long experience in my profession, Olivia, I have come to one conclusion—clients are a mistake. Good-bye."

Left alone, Olivia stood for a moment wondering whether, after all, the dusty lawyer had a jaded sense of humour. Then she turned and caught up the cheque and sketched a few triumphant dancing steps. Suddenly, holding it in her hand, she rushed out into the hall, where the men were putting on their overcoats.

"We've forgotten the most important thing, Mr. Trivett. You wrote me

something about an offer for the house."

"An enquiry—not an offer," replied Mr. Trivett. "Yes. I forgot to mention it. A Major somebody. Wait——" He lugged out a fat pocket-book which he consulted. "That's it. Major Olifant. Coming down here to-morrow to look over it. Appointment at twelve, if that suits you. Unfortunately, I've an engagement and can't show him round. But I'll send Perkins, if you like."

"If the Major wants to eat me, he'll eat up poor little Mr. Perkins, too," said Olivia. "So don't worry."

She waited until Myra, the maid, had helped them into their overcoats and opened the front door. After final leavetakings, they were gone. Olivia put up her hands, one of them still holding the cheque, on Myra's gaunt shoulders and shook her and laughed.

"I've beaten them at last. I knew I should. Now you and I are going to have the devil's own time."

"We'll have, Miss Olivia," said Myra, withdrawing like a wooden automaton from the embrace, "the time we'll be deserving."

Myra was long, lean, and angular, dressed precisely in parlourmaid's black; but the absence of cap on her faultlessly neat iron grey hair and the black apron suggested a cross between the housekeeper and personal maid. She shared, with a cook and a vague, print-attired help, the whole service of the house. The fact of Myra had been one of the earliest implanted in the consciousness of Olivia's awakening childhood. Myra was there, perdurable as father and mother, as Polly, the parrot, whose "Drat the child" of that morning was the same echo of Myra's voice, as it was when, at the age of two, she began to interpret the bird's articulate speech. And, as far as she could remember, Myra had always been the same. Age had not withered her, nor had custom staled her infinite invariability. She had been withered since the beginning of time, and she had been as unchanging in aspect and flavour as Olivia's lifelong breakfast egg. Myra's origins were hidden in mystery. A family legend declared her a foundling. She had come as a girl from Essex, recommended by a friend, long since dead, of Mrs. Gale. She never spoke of father, mother, sisters, and brothers; but every year, when she took her holiday, she was presumed to return to her native county. With that exception she seemed to have far less of a private life than the household cat. It never occurred to Olivia that she could possibly lead an independent existence. Her age was about forty-five.

"They think I'm either mad or immoral," said Olivia. "Thank God, they're not religious, or they'd be holding prayer meetings over me."

"They might do worse," replied Myra.

The girl laughed. “So you disapprove, too, do you? Well, you’ll have to get over it.”

“I’ve got over many things—one more or less don’t matter. And if I were you, Miss, I wouldn’t stand in this draughty hall.”

“All that I’m thinking of,” said Olivia, in high good humour, “is that, with you as duenna, I shall look too respectable. No one will believe it possible for any one except an adventuress.”

“That’s what I gather you’re going to be,” said Myra. If she had put any sting into her words it would have been a retort. But no one knew what emotions guided Myra’s speech. With the same tonelessness she would have proclaimed the house to be on fire, or dinner to be ready, or the day to be fine.

“Well, if you don’t like the prospect, Myra, you needn’t come,” said Olivia. “I’ll easily find something fluffy in short skirts and silk stockings to do for me.”

“We’re wasting gas, Miss,” said Myra, pulling the little chain of the bye-pass and thereby plunging the hall in darkness.

“Oh, bother you!” cried Olivia, stumbling into the passage and knocking against the parrot’s cage outside the dining-room door, and Polly shrieked out:

“Drat the child! Drat the child!”

Before entering the dining-room she aimed a Parthian shot at Myra.

“I suppose you agree with the little beast. Well, the two of you’ll have to look after each other, and I wish you joy.”

She cleared the dining-room table of the tea things and the whisky and glasses and the superfluous papers, and opened the window to let out the smell of Mr. Trivett’s strong cigar, and crossed the passage to the drawing-room opposite, where a small fire was still burning. And there, in spite of the exultation of her triumph over Mr. Trivett and Mr. Fenmarch, she suddenly felt very dreadfully alone; also just a whit frightened. The precious cheque, symbol of independence, which she had taken up, laid down, taken up again, during her little household duties, fell to the ground as she lay in the arm-chair by the fireside.

Was her victory, and all it implied, that of a reasonable being and a decent girl, or that of a little fool and a hussy?

Perhaps the mother whom she worshipped and to whom she had devotedly sacrificed the last four years of her young life was the inspiration of her revolt. For her mother had been a highly bred woman, of a proud old Anglo-Indian family, all Generals and Colonels and Sirs and Ladies, whose names had been involved in the history of British India for generations; and when she threw the

Anglo-Indian family halo over the windmills and married young Stephen Gale, who used to stand in the market-place of Medlow and bawl out the bidding for pigs and sheep, the family turned her down with the Anglo-Indian thoroughness that had compelled her mother to lose her life in a plague-stricken district and her father to lose his on the North-West Frontier. The family argument was simple. When you—or everything mattering that means you—have ruled provinces and commanded armies and been Sahibs from the beginning of Anglo-Indian time, you can't go and marry a man who sells pigs at auction, and remain alive. None of the family deigned to gauge the personal value of the pig-seller. The Anglo-Brahmin lost caste. It is true that, afterwards, patronizing efforts were made by Brahminical uncles and aunts and cousins to bridge over the impassable gulf; but Mrs. Gale, very much in love with her pig-selling husband, snapped her fingers at them and told them, in individually opposite terms, to go hang.

It was a love match right enough. And a love match it remained to the very end of all things; after she had borne him two sons and a daughter; all through the young lives of the children; up to the day when the telegram came announcing the death of their elder son—the younger had been killed in the curious world accident a month or so before—and Stephen Gale stood by her bedside—she had even then succumbed to her incurable malady—and said, shaken with an emotion to which one does not refer nowadays:

"Mary, my dear, what am I to do?"

And she, the blood in her speaking—the blood that had given itself at Agra, Lucknow, Khandahar, Chitral—replied:

"Go, dear."

Olivia, sitting by, gripped her young hands in mingled horror and grief and passionate wonder. And Stephen Gale, just fifty, went out to avenge his sons and do what was right in his wife's eyes—for his wife was his country incarnate, her voice, being England's voice. A love match it was and a love match it remained while he stuck it for two or three years—an elderly man at an inglorious Base, until he died of pneumonia—over there.

Mrs. Gale had lingered for a year, and, close as their relations had been all Olivia's life, they grew infinitely closer during this period of bereavement. It was only then that the mother gave delicate expression to the nostalgia of half a lifetime, the longing for her own kind, and the ways and thoughts and imponderable principles of her own caste. And, imperceptibly, Olivia's eyes were opened to the essential differences between her mother and the social circle into which she had married. Olivia, ever since her shrewd child's mind began to appreciate values, knew perfectly well that the Trivetts and the Gales

were not accounted as gentlefolk in the town. She early became aware of the socially divided line across which she could not pass so as to enter Blair Park, the high-class girls' school on the hill, but narrowed her to Landsdowne House, where the daughters of the tradespeople received their education. And when the two crocodiles happened to pass each other on country walks she hated the smug, stuckup Blair Park girls with their pretty blue and white ribbons round their straw hats, and hated her red ribbon with "LH" embroidered on it, as a badge of servitude. When she grew up she accepted countless other social facts as immutable conditions of existence. Mortals were divided by her unquestioning father into three categories—"the swells," "homely folk like ourselves," and "common people." So long as each member of the three sections knew his place and respected it, the world was as comfortable a planet as sentient being could desire. That was one factor in his worship of his wife: she had stepped from her higher plane to his and had loyally, unmurmuringly identified herself with it. He had never a notion, good man, of the shocks, the inner wounds, the instinctive revolts, the longings that she hid behind her loving eyes. Nor had Olivia; although as a schoolgirl she knew and felt proud that her mother really belonged to Blair Park and not to Landsdowne House. As she grew up, she realized her mother's refining influence, and, as far as young blood would allow, used her as a model of speech and manner. And during the long invalid years, when she read aloud and discussed a wide range of literature, she received unconsciously a sensitive education. But it was only in this last poignant intimacy, when they were left starkly alone together, that she sounded the depths of the loyal, loving, and yet strangely suffering woman.

"I remember once, long ago, when you were a mite of five," Mrs. Gale had said in a memorable confidence, "we were staying at a hotel in Eastbourne, and I got into conversation on the verandah with a Colonel somebody—I forget his name—with whom we had spoken several times before—one of those spare brown, blue-eyed men, all leather and taut string, that wear their clothes like uniform. You see, I was born and bred among them, dear. And we talked and we talked and I didn't know how the time flew, and I missed an appointment with your father in the town. And he came and found us together—and he was very angry. It was the only time in our lives he said an unkind word to me. It was the only time I gave him any sort of cause for jealousy. But he really hadn't. It was only just the joy of talking to a gentleman again. And I couldn't tell him. It would have broken his dear heart."

This was the first flashlight across her mother's soul, and in its illumination vanished many obscure and haunting perplexities of her girlhood. Had Mrs. Gale lived the normal life of women, surrounded by those that loved her, she

would doubtless have gone to her grave without revealing her inner self to living mortal. But infinite sorrow and the weakness engendered by constant physical pain had transformed her into a spirituality just breathing the breath of life and regarding her daughter less as a woman than as a kindred essence from whom no secrets could be hid. At her bedside Olivia thus learned the mystery of birth and life and death. Chiefly the mystery of life, which appealed more to her ardent maidenhood.

So when at last her mother faded out of existence and Olivia's vigil was over, she faced a world of changing values with a new set of values of her own. She could not formulate them; but she was acutely conscious that they were different from those of the good, honest Mr. Trivett and the dull and honourable Mr. Fenmarch, and that to all the social circle which these two represented they would be unintelligible. In a way, she found herself possessed of a new calculus in which she trusted to solve the problems which defied the simple arithmetic of the homely folk of Medlow.

All these memories and vague certainties passed through the girl's mind as she sat before the fire in self-examination after her victory, and conflicted with the prosaic and indicatively common-sense arguments of her late advisers. She knew that father and brothers, all beloved and revered, would have been staunchly on the side of the Trivetts. On the other hand, her mother, as she had said to her husband on the edge of a far, far greater adventure, would have said: "Go, dear." Of that she had no doubt. . . . Yet it meant cutting herself adrift from Medlow and all its ways and all its associations. It meant a definite struggle to raise herself from her father's second social category to the first. It meant, therefore, justifying herself against odious insinuations on the part of her scant acquaintance.

And then the youth in her rose insistent. During all these years of stress and fever which had marked her development from child into woman she had done nothing but remain immured within the walls familiar from her babyhood. Other girls had gone afar, in strange independence, to vivid scenes, to unforgettable adventures, in the service of their country, in the service of mankind—just as her brothers and father had gone—and she had stayed there, ineradicable, in that one little tiny spot. The sick-room, the kitchen, the shops in Old Street, where, in defiance of Food Controller, she had fought for cream and butter and eggs and English meat so that her mother could live; the sick-room again, the simple white and green bedroom which meant to her little more than the sleep of exhaustion; the sick-room once more, with its pathos of spiritual love and physical repulsion—such had been the iron environment of her life. Sorrow after sorrow, and mourning after mourning had come, and the

little gaieties of the “homely folk” of her father’s definition had gone on without her participation. And her girl friends of Landsdowne House had either married rising young tradesmen in distant towns, or had found some further scope for their energies at the end of the Great Adventure and were far away. In the meanwhile other homely folk whom she did not know had poured into the town. All kinds of people seemed to be settling there, anyhow, without rhyme or reason. It was only when there was not a house to be rented in the neighbourhood that she understood why.

“You have a comfortable home of your own. Why, on earth, don’t you stay in it?” Mr. Trivett had asked.

But she had stayed in it, alone, for the three months since her mother’s death, waiting on the law’s delays; and those three months had been foretaste enough of the dreary infinite years that would lie before her, should she remain. She was too young, too full of sap, to face the blight of sunlessness. She longed for the sights and the sounds and the freedom of the great world. What she would do when she got into it, she did not exactly know. Possibly she might meet a fairy prince. If such a speculation was that of a hussy, why then, she argued, all women are hussies from birth. As for being a fool for defying advice on the proper investment of her money—well, perhaps she was not quite such a fool as Mr. Trivett imagined. If she did not spend her capital, it would be just as safe lying on deposit at the bank as invested in stocks and shares; safer, for she had lately had wearisome experience of the depreciation of securities. She would not be senselessly extravagant; in fact, with the sanguineness of youth she hoped to be able to live on the interest on her deposit and the rent of the furnished house. But behind her, definite, tangible, uninfluenced by Stock Exchange fluctuations, would be her fortune. And then —a contingency which she did not put before Mr. Trivett and Mr. Fenmarch, for a woman seldom discloses her main argument to a male adversary—there might come a glorious moment in some now unconjecturable adventure when it might be essential for her to draw cheques for dazzling sums which she could put in her pocket and go over mysterious hills and far away. She stood on the edge of her dull tableland and gazed wide-eyed at the rolling Land of Romance veiled by gold and purple mist. And in that Land, from immemorial time, people carried their money in bags, into which they dipped their hands, as occasion required, and cast the unmeaning counters at the feet of poverty or into the lap of greed.

When she sat down to her solitary supper, she had decided that she was neither hussy nor fool. She held baffling discourse with Myra, who could not be enticed into enthusiasm over the immediate future. Teasing Myra had been her joy from infancy. She sketched their career—that of female Don Quixote

and Sancho Panza—that of knights of old in quest of glorious adventure. She quoted, mock heroically:

"The ride abroad redressing human wrong."

"Better redress the young London women which I see the pictures of in the illustrated papers," said Myra.

Olivia laughed. "You are a dear old blessing, you know."

"I'm sure of it," said Myra, with an expressionless face. "Anyways, you're not going to buy one of them things when you get to London."

"I am," replied Olivia. "And you'll have to help me put it on."

"You can't help folks put on nothing," said Myra.

"What do you think you'll do when you're really shocked?" asked Olivia.

"I never think what I'll do," replied Myra. "It's waste of time."

Olivia enjoyed her supper.

CHAPTER II

IT was only when she waited the next morning for her possible tenant, the Major Olifant of whom Mr. Trivett had spoken, and went through the familiar rooms to see that they were fit for alien inspection, that she realized the sacrilege which she was about to commit. Every room was sacred, inhabited by some beloved ghost. The very furniture bore landmarks of the wear and tear of those that were dead. To say nothing of the beds on which they had slept, the chairs in which they had sat, which still seemed to retain the impress of their forms, there persisted a hundred exquisitely memorable trivialities. The arm of the oak settle in the hall still showed the ravages of the teeth of Barabbas, the mongrel bull-terrier pup introduced, fifteen years ago, into the house, by Charles her elder brother; an animal who, from being cursed by the whole family for a pestilential cur, wriggled his way, thanks to his adoration of Charles, into the hearts of them all, and died from old age and perhaps doggy anxiety a few months after Charles had sailed for France. In her father's study, a small room heterogeneously adorned with hunting crops and car accessories and stuffed trout and a large scale map of Medlow and neighbourhood and suggestive in no way of a studious habit, the surface of the knee-hole writing table and the mahogany mantelpiece were scored with fluted little burns from cigarette-ends, he having been a careless smoker. There was a legend that the family cradle, for many years mouldering in an outhouse, bore the same stigmata. The very bathroom was not free of intimate history. In the midst of the blue and red stained panes on the lower sash stared one of plain ground glass—the record of her brother Bobby aged twelve, who, vowing vengeance against an unsympathetic visiting aunt (soon afterwards deceased), had the brilliant idea of catapulting her through the closed window while she was having her bath. And there was her mother's room. . . .

She could not let all this pass into vulgar hands. The vague plan of letting the house furnished, which had hitherto not been unattractive, now became monstrously definite. She hated the sacrilegious and intrusive Major Olifant. He would bring down a dowdy wife and a cartload of children to the profanation of these her household gods. She went in search of Myra and found her dusting her own prim little bedroom.

"I'm going out. When Major Olifant calls, tell him I've changed my mind and the house is not to let."

Then she put on hat and coat and went downstairs to take the air of the sleepy midday High Street. But as she opened the front door she ran into a man getting out of a two-seater car driven by a chauffeur. He raised his hat.

“I beg your pardon,” said he, “but is this ‘The Towers’?”

“It is,” she replied. “I suppose you’ve—you’ve come with an order to view from Messrs. Trivett and Gale.”

“Quite so,” said he pleasantly. “I have an appointment with Miss Gale.”

“I’m Miss Gale,” said Olivia.

She noticed an involuntary twitch of surprise, at once suppressed, pass over his face.

“And my name’s Olifant. Major Olifant.”

She had pictured quite a different would-be intruder, a red-faced, obese, and pushing fellow. Instead, she saw a well-bred, spare man of medium height wearing a stained service Burberry the empty left sleeve of which was pinned in front; a man in his middle thirties, with crisp light brown hair, long, broad forehead characterized by curious bumps over the brows, a very long, straight nose and attractive dark blue eyes which keenly and smilingly held hers without touch of offence.

“I’ve decided not to let the house,” said Olivia.

The smile vanished from his eyes. “I’m sorry,” said he stiffly. “I was given to understand——”

“Yes, I know,” she said quickly. Her conscience getting hold of the missing arm smote her. “Where have you come from?”

“Oxford.”

She gasped. “Why, that’s a hundred miles!”

“Ninety-four.”

“But you must be perishing with cold,” she cried. “Do come in and get warm, at any rate. Perhaps I can explain. And your man, too.” She pointed. “Round that way you’ll find a garage. I’ll send the maid. Please come in, Major Olifant. Oh—but you must!”

She entered the house, leaving him no option but to follow. To divest himself of his Burberry he made curious writhing movements with his shoulders, and swerved aside politely when she offered assistance.

“Please don’t worry. I’m all right. I’ve all kinds of little stunts of my own invention.”

And, as he said it, he got clear and threw the mackintosh on the oak chest. He rubbed the knuckle of his right hand against the side of his rough tweed jacket.

“Just five minutes to get warm and I won’t trespass further on your hospitality.”

She showed him into the drawing-room, thanked goodness there was a showy wood-fire burning, and went out after Myra.

"I thought the house wasn't to be let," said the latter after receiving many instructions.

"The letting of the house has nothing to do with two cold and hungry men who have motored here on a raw November morning for hundreds of miles on false pretences."

She re-entered the drawing-room with a tray bearing whisky decanter, siphon, and glass, which she set on a side table.

"I'm alone in the world now, Major Olifant," she said, "but I've lived nearly all my life with men—my father and two brothers——" She felt that the explanation was essential. "Please help yourself."

He met her eyes, which, though defiant, held the menace of tears. He made the vaguest, most delicate of gestures with his right hand—his empty sleeve, the air. She moved an assenting head; then swiftly she grasped the decanter.

"Say when."

"Just that."

She squirted the siphon.

"So?"

"Perfect. A thousand thanks."

He took the glass from her and deferentially awaited her next movement. Tricksy memory flashed across her mind the picture of the Anglo-Indian colonel of her mother's pathetic little confidence. For a moment or two she stood confused, flushed, self-conscious, suddenly hating herself for not knowing instinctly what to do. In desperation she cried.

"Oh, please drink it! You must want it awfully."

He laughed, made a little bow, and drank.

"Now do sit down near the fire. I'm dreadfully sorry," she continued when they were settled. "Dreadfully sorry you should have had all this journey for nothing. As a matter of fact, I wanted to let the house and only changed my mind an hour ago."

"You have lived here all your life?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Please say no more about it," said he courteously.

She burst at once into explanations. Father, brothers, mother—all the dear ghosts, at the last moment, had held out their barring hands. He smiled at her pretty dark-eyed earnestness.

“There are few houses nowadays without ghosts. But there might be a stranger now and then who would have the tact and understanding to win their confidence.”

This was at the end of a talk which had lasted she knew not how long. The little silence which ensued was broken by the shrill clang of the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece striking one. She sprang to her feet.

“One o’clock. Why, you must be famished. Seven o’clock breakfast at latest. There’ll be something to eat, whatever it is.”

“But, my dear Miss Gale,” cried Major Olifant, rising in protest, “I couldn’t dream of it—there must be an hotel——”

“There isn’t,” cried Olivia unveraciously, and vanished.

Major Olifant, too late to open the door for her, retraced his steps and stood, back to fire, idly evoking, as a man does, the human purposes that had gone to the making of the room, and he was puzzled. Some delicate spirit had chosen the old gold curtains which harmonized with the cushions on the plain upholstered settee and with the early Chippendale armchairs and with the Chippendale bookcase filled with odds and ends of good china, old Chelsea, Coalport, a bit or two of Sèvres and Dresden. Some green chrysanthemums bowed, in dainty raggedness, over the edge of a fine cut crystal vase. An exquisite water-colour over the piano attracted his attention. He crossed the room to examine it and drew a little breath of surprise to read the signature of Bonington—a thing beyond price. On a table by the French window, which led into a conservatory and thence into the little garden, stood a box of Persian lacquer. But there, throwing into confusion the charm of all this, a great Victorian mirror in a heavy florid gold frame blared like a German band from over the mantelpiece, and on the opposite wall two huge companion pictures representing in violent colours scenes of smug domestic life, also in gold frames, with a slip of wood let in bearing the legend “Exhibited at the Royal Academy, 1888,” screamed like an orchestrion.

He was looking round for further evidence of obvious conflict of individualities, when Myra appeared to take him to get rid of the dust of the journey. When he returned to the drawing-room he found Olivia.

“I can’t help feeling an inconscionable intruder,” said he.

“My only concern is that I’ll be able to give you something fit to eat.”

He laughed. “The man who has come out of France and Mesopotamia finikin in his food is a fraud.”

“Still,” she objected, “I don’t want to send you back to Mrs. Olifant racked with indigestion.”

“Mrs. Olifant?” He wore a look of humorous puzzlement.

“I suppose you have a wife and family?”

“Good heavens, no!” he cried, with an air of horror. “I’m a bachelor.”

She regarded him for a few seconds, as though from an entirely fresh point of view.

“But what on earth does a bachelor want with a great big house—with ten bedrooms?”

“Has it got ten bedrooms?”

“I presume Mr. Trivett sent you the particulars: ‘Desirable Residence, standing in own grounds, three acres. Ten bedrooms, three reception rooms. Bath H. and C.,’ and so forth?”

“The Bath H. and C. was all I worried about.”

They both laughed. Myra announced luncheon. They went into the dining-room. By the side of Major Olifant’s plate was a leather case. He flashed on her a look of enquiry, at which the blood rose into her pale cheeks.

“I’ve been interviewing your man,” she said rather defiantly. “He produced that from the pocket of the car.”

“You overwhelm me with your kindness, Miss Gale,” said he. “I should never have had the courage to ask for it.”

The case contained the one-armed man’s patent combination knife and fork.

“Courage is such a funny thing,” said Olivia. “A man will walk up to a machine-gun in action and knock the gunner out with the butt end of a rifle; but if he’s sitting in a draught in a woman’s drawing-room and catching his death of cold, he daren’t get up and shut the window. These are real eggs, although they’re camouflaged in a Chinese scramble. One faithful hen is still doing her one minute day. The others are on strike.”

She felt curiously exhilarated on this first actual occasion of asserting her independence. Only once before had she entertained guests at her own table, and these were her uncle and aunt from Clapham, the Edward Gales, who came to her mother’s funeral. They were colourless suburban folk who were pained by her polite rejection of their proposal to make her home with them on a paying footing, and reproached her for extravagance in giving them butter (of which, nevertheless, they ate greedily) instead of margarine. Her uncle was a pallid pharmaceutical chemist and lived above the shop, and his wife, a thin-lipped, negative blonde, had few interests in life outside the Nonconformist Communion into which she had dragged him. Olivia had seen them only once before, also at a funeral, that of a younger brother who had died at the age of

three. Her robustious country-loving, horse-loving, dog-loving, pig-loving father had never got on with his bloodless brother. A staunch supporter of the Church of England to the extent of renting a pew in the Parish Church in which, in spite of the best intentions, he had never found time to sit, he confessedly hated dissent and all its works, especially those undertaken by Mrs. Edward. His vice of generosity did not accord with their parsimonious virtues. Once, Olivia remembered, he had dined with them at Clapham and returned complaining of starvation. "One kidney between the three of us," he declared. "And they gave me the middle gristly bit!" So Olivia felt no call of the blood to Clapham. And, for all her inherited hospitable impulses, she had been glad when, having critically picked the funeral baked meats to the last bone, they had gone off in sorrow over her wicked prodigality and lack of true Christian feeling. But for their dreary and passing shadows she had eaten alone—she caught her breath to think of it—ever since her father's last leave—shortly before he died at Etaples—eighteen months ago. Her hostess-ship at the present moment was a bubbling joy. Only her sense of values restrained her from ordering up a bottle of champagne. She contented herself with a bottle of old Corton—her father had been a judge of full red wines, burgundy and port, and had stocked a small but well-selected cellar, and had taught Olivia what is good that a girl should know concerning them.

She watched her guest's first sip, as her father had been wont to watch, and flushed with pleasure when he paused, as though taken aback, sniffed, sipped again, and said:

"Either new conditions are making me take all sorts of geese for swans, or you're giving me a remarkable wine."

She burst out radiantly: "How lovely of you to spot it! It's a Corton, 1887."

"But forgive me for saying so," he remarked. "It's not a wine you should spill on any casual tramp. Oh, of course," he protested in anticipation. "Your politeness will assure me that I'm not a casual tramp. But I am."

"I owed you something for bringing you on a fool's errand. Besides, I wanted to show you what Todger's could do when it liked!"

"Todger's is wonderful," he smiled. "And how you could ever have thought of leaving Todger's is more than I can understand."

"Oh, I'm going to leave it, right enough," she answered. "What on earth do you think a girl all by herself wants with a great big house with ten bedrooms, three reception rooms, bath h. and c., etc., etc.?"

"It's your home, anyhow."

"That's why I don't like to let it."

"Then why go away from it? If it is not an impertinent question, what are

you going to do?”

She met his clear blue eyes and laughed.

“I’m going out into the world to seek adventure. There!”

“And I,” said he, “want to get out of the world and never have another adventure as long as I live. I’ve had more than enough for one lifetime.”

“But still,” she retorted, conscious of his bearing and vigour and other conjectured qualities, “you can’t contemplate fossilizing here till the end of time.”

“That’s what I’m literally thinking of doing,” he replied.

She felt the reaction of bitter disappointment. A man like him had no right to throw up the sponge. The sudden blankness of her face betrayed her thoughts. He smiled.

“I said literally, you know. Fossilizing in the literal and practical sense. Once upon a time I was a geologist. I specialized in certain fossils.”

“Oh,” gasped Olivia. “I beg your pardon.”

“Very fascinating little fossils,” he went on without reference to her apology, for which Olivia was grateful. “They’re called foraminifera. Do you know what they are?” Olivia shook a frankly ignorant head. “They’re little tiny weeny shells, and the things once inside them belonged to the protozoa, or first forms of life. They’re one of the starting-points to the solution of the riddle of existence. I was dragged away from them to fool about with other kinds of shells, millions of times bigger and millions of times less important. I’ve got what I think are some new ideas about them, and other things connected with them—it’s a vast subject—and so I’m looking for a quiet place where I can carry on my work.”

“That’s awfully interesting,” said Olivia. “But—forgive me—who pays you for it?”

“Possibly mankind two hundred years hence,” he laughed. “But, if I stick it long enough, they may make me a Fellow of the Royal Society when I’m—say—seventy-three.”

“I wish you’d tell me some more about these forami—funny little things I’ve never heard of,” said Olivia.

But he answered: “No. If once I began, I would bore you so stiff that you would curse the hour you allowed me to cross your threshold. There are other things just as vital as foraminifera. I’ve made my confession, Miss Gale. Now, won’t you make yours? What are you keen on?”

At the direct question, Olivia passed in review the aims and interests and pleasures of her past young life, and was abashed to find them a row of

anæmic little phantoms. For years her head had been too full of duties. She regarded him for a moment or two in dismay, then she laughed in young defiance.

"I suppose I'm keen on real live human beings. That's my starting-point to the solution of the riddle of existence."

"We'll see who gets there first," said he.

When the meal was over, she stood by the door which he held open for her and hesitated for a moment.

"I wonder whether you would care to look over the house?"

"I should immensely. But—if you're not going to let it——"

"You'll be able, at any rate, to tell Mr. Trivett that he had no business to send you to such an old rabbit warren," she replied, with some demureness.

"I'm at your orders," smiled Olifant.

She played cicerone with her little business-like air of dignity, spoke in a learned fashion of water supply, flues, and boilers. Olifant looked wisely at the kitchen range, while Myra stood at impassive attention and the cook took refuge in the scullery.

"These holes are to put saucepans on, I presume," said he.

"You've hit it exactly," said Olivia.

They went upstairs. On the threshold of the best bedroom he paused and cried, in some astonishment: "What an exquisite room!"

"It was my mother's," said Olivia. "You can come in. It has a pleasant view over the garden."

Then Olifant, who had inspected the study, solved the puzzle of the drawing-room. There the man and woman had compromised. She had suffered him to hang his Victorian mirror and his screaming pictures in the midst of her delicate scheme. But here her taste reigned absolute. It was all so simple, so exquisite: a few bits of Chippendale and Sheraton, a few water-colours on the walls, a general impression for curtains and upholstery of faded rose brocade. On a table by the bed-head stood a little row of books in an inlaid stand. With the instinct of a bookish man, Olifant bent over to look at their backs, but first turned to Olivia.

"May I?"

"Of course." Then she added, with a vague longing to impress on a stranger the wonder and beauty of the spirit that had created these surroundings: "My mother knew them all by heart, I think. Naturally she used to read other things and I used to read aloud to her—she was interested in

everything till the day of her death—but these books were part of her life."

There were: *Marcus Aurelius*, *Lord Herbert of Cherbury*, *The Imitation of Christ*, *Christina Rossetti*, the almost forgotten early seventeenth century *Arthur Warwick* ("*Spare Minutes; or, Resolved Meditation and Premeditated Resolutions*"), *Crabbe* . . . a dozen volumes or so. Olifant picked out one.

"And this, too? The *Pensées de Pascal*?"

"She loved it best," said Olivia.

"It is strange," said he. "My father spent most of his life on a monumental work on Pascal. He was a Professor of Divinity at a Scotch University, but died long before the monument could be completed. I've got his manuscripts. They're in an awful mess, and it would take another lifetime to get them into order. Anyhow, he took good care that I should remember Pascal as long as I lived."

"How?"

"He had me christened Blaise."

"Blaise Olifant," she repeated critically. She laughed. "He might have done worse."

He turned over the pages. "There's one thing here that my father was always drumming into me. Yes, here it is. It's marked in blue pencil."

"Then it must have been drummed into me, too," said Olivia.

" '*On ne consulte que l'oreille, parce qu'on manque de cœur. La règle est l'honnêteté.*´"

"Yes," she said, with a sigh.

He replaced the book. They went in silence out to the landing. After a few seconds of embarrassment they turned and descended to the hall.

"I can more than understand, Miss Gale, why you feel you can't let the house. But I'm sorry."

She weakened, foreseeing the house empty and desolate, given over to dust and mice and ghosts.

"It was the idea of a pack of people, the British Family in all its self-centredness and selfishness, coming in here that I couldn't stand," she confessed.

"Then is there a chance for me?" he asked, his face brightening. "Look. I'm open to a bargain. The house is just what I want. I'm not a recluse. I'm quite human. I should like to have a place where I can put up a man or so for a week-end, and I've a married sister, none too happy, who now and then might like to find a refuge with me. There's also a friend, rather a distinguished

fellow, who wants to join me for a few months' quiet and hard work. So, suppose I give you my promise to hold that room sacred, to keep it just as it is and allow no one to go into it except a servant to dust and so forth—what would you say? Not now. Think it over and write to me at your convenience."

His sympathy and comprehension had won her over. He was big and kind and brotherly. Somehow she felt that her mother would have liked him, accepting him without question as one of her own caste, and would have smiled on him as High Priest in charge of the Household Gods. She reflected for a while, then, meeting his eyes:

"You can have the house, Major Olifant," she said seriously.

He bowed. "I'm sure you will not regret it," said he. "I ought to remind you, however," he added after a pause, "that I may have a stable companion for a few months. The distinguished fellow I mentioned. I wonder whether you've heard of Alexis Triona."

"The man who wrote *Through Blood and Snow*?"

"Have you read it?"

"Of course I have," cried Olivia. "What do you think I do here all day? Twiddle my thumbs or tell my fortune by cards?"

"I hope you think it's a great book," he said, with a smile.

"An amazing book. And you're going to bring him to live here? What's he like?"

"It would take days to tell you."

"Well, compress it into a sort of emergency ration," said Olivia.

So he sat by her side on the oak settle, near the anthracite stove in the hall, and told her what he knew of Alexis Triona.

CHAPTER III

WHAT Blaise Olifant told Olivia about his prospective co-inhabitant of The Towers, and what Rowington, the publisher, and one or two others knew about him, amounted to the following:

One morning a motor-car, having the second-hand air of a hiring garage and unoccupied save for the chauffeur, drew up before the door of a great London publishing house. The chauffeur stepped from his seat, collected a brown-paper package from the interior, and entered.

"Can I see a member of the firm?"

The clerk in the enquiry office looked surprised. Chauffeurs offering manuscripts on behalf of their employers were plentiful as blackberries in September; but chauffeurs demanding an interview with the august heads of the house were rare as blackberries in March.

"I'm afraid you can't do that," he replied civilly. "If you leave it here, it will be all right. I'll give you a receipt which you can take back."

"I want to explain," said the chauffeur.

Scores of people weekly expressed the same desire. It was the business of the clerk to suppress explanations.

"It's a manuscript to be submitted? Well, you must tell the author——"

"I am the author," said the chauffeur.

"Oh!" said the clerk, and his subconscious hand pushed the manuscript a millimetre forward on the polished mahogany counter.

"The circumstances, you see, are exceptional."

There being something exceptional in the voice and manner of the chauffeur, the clerk regarded him for the first time as a human being.

"I quite see," said he; "but the rules of the firm are strict. If you will leave the manuscript, it will be read. Oh, I give you my word of honour," he smiled. "Everything that comes in is read. We have a staff who do nothing else. Is your name and address on it?" He began to untie the string.

"The name, but not the address."

On the slip of paper which the clerk pushed across to him he wrote:

Alexis Triona,
c/o John Briggs.
3 Cherbury Mews,
Surrey Gardens, W.

The clerk scribbled an acknowledgment, the chauffeur thrust it into his pocket, and, driving away, was lost in the traffic of London.

A fortnight afterwards, Alexis Triona, who, together with John Briggs, as one single and indissoluble chauffeur, inhabited a little room over the garage in Cherbury Mews, received a letter to the effect that the publishing house, being interested in the MS. "*Through Blood and Snow*," which he had kindly submitted, would be glad if he would call, with a view to publication. The result was a second visit on the part of the chauffeur to the great firm. The clerk welcomed him with a bland smile, and showed him into a comfortably furnished room whose thick Turkey carpet signified the noiseless mystery of many discreet decades, and where a benevolent middle-aged man in gold spectacles stood with his back to the chimney-piece. He advanced with outstretched hand to meet the author.

"Mr. Triona? I'm glad to meet you. Won't you sit down?"

He motioned to a chair by the tidy writing table, where he sat and pulled forward the manuscript, which had been placed there in readiness for the interview. He said pleasantly:

"Well. Let us get to business at once. We should like to publish your book."

The slight quivering of sensitive nostrils alone betrayed the author's emotion.

"I'm glad," he replied. "I think it's worth publishing."

Mr. Rowington tapped the MS. in front of him with his forefinger. "Are these your own personal experiences?"

"They are," said the chauffeur.

"Excuse my questioning you," said the publisher. "Not that it would greatly matter. But one likes to know. We should be inclined to publish it, either as a work of fiction or a work of fact; but the handling of it—the method of publicity—would be different. Of course, you see," he went on benevolently, "a thing may be absolutely true in essence, like lots of the brilliant little war stories that have been written the past few years, but not true in the actual historical sense. Now, your book would have more value if we could say that it is true in this actual historical sense, if we could say that it's an authentic record of personal experiences."

"You can say that," answered Triona quietly.

The publisher leaned back in his chair.

"How a man could have gone through what you have and remained sane passes understanding."

For the first time the young man's set features relaxed into a smile.

"I shouldn't like to swear that I am sane," said he.

"I've heard ex-prisoners say," Mr. Rowington remarked, "that six months' solitary confinement under such conditions"—he patted the manuscript—"is as much as the human reason can stand."

"As soon as hunting and killing vermin ceases to be a passionate interest in life," said Triona.

They conversed for a while. Stimulated by the publisher's question, Triona supplemented details in the book, described his final adventure, his landing penniless in London, his search for work. At last, said he, he had found a situation as chauffeur in the garage of a motor-hiring company. The publisher glanced at the slip pinned to the cover of the manuscript.

"And John Briggs?"

"A pseudonym. Briggs was my mother's name. I am English on both sides, though my great-grandfather's people were Maltese. My father, however, was a naturalized Russian. I've mentioned it in the book."

"Quite so," said the publisher. "I only wanted to get things clear. And now as to terms. Have you any suggestion?"

Afterwards, Alexis Triona confessed to a wild impulse to ask for a hundred pounds—outright sale—and to a sudden lack of audacity which kept him silent. The terms which the publisher proposed, when the royalty system and the probabilities of such a book's profits were explained to him, made him gasp with wonder. And when, in consideration, said the publisher, of his present impecunious position, he was offered an advance in respect of royalties exceeding the hundred pounds of his crazy promptings, his heart thumped until it became an all but intolerable pain.

"Do you think," he asked, amazed that his work should have such market value, "that I could earn my living by writing?"

"Undoubtedly." The publisher beamed on the new author. "You have the matter, you have the gift, the style, the humour, the touch. I'm sure I could place things for you. Indeed, it would be to our common advantage, pending publication. Only, of course, you mustn't use any of the matter in the book. You quite understand?"

Alexis Triona understood. He went away dancing on air. Write? His brain seethed with ideas. That the written expression of them should open the gates of Fortune was a new conception. He had put together the glowing, vivid book impelled by strange, unknown forces. It was, as he had confidently declared, worth publishing. But the possible reward was beyond his dreams. And he

could see more visions. . . .

So he went back to his garage and drove idle people to dinners and theatres, and in his scanty leisure wrote strange romances of love and war in Circassia and Tartary, and, through the agency of the powerful publishing house, sold them to solid periodicals, until the public mind became gradually familiarized with his name. It was only when the book was published, and, justifying the confidence of the great firm, blazed into popularity, that Triona discarded his livery and all that appertained to the mythical John Briggs and, arraying himself in the garb of ordinary citizenship, entered—to use, with a difference, the famous trope of a departed wit—a lion into the den of London's Daniels. For, in their hundreds, they had come to judgment. But knowing very little of the Imperial Russian Secret Service in Turkestan, or the ways of the inhabitants of the Ural Mountains, or, at that time, of Bolshevik horrors in the remote confines of Asia, they tore each other to pieces, while the lion stepped, with serene modesty, in the midst of them.

It was at Oxford, whither the sudden wave of fame had drifted him, that he met Blaise Olifant, who was living in the house of his sister, the wife of a brilliant, undomesticated and somewhat dissolute professor of political economy. The Head of a College, interested in Russia, had asked him down to dine and sleep. There was a portentous dinner-party whose conglomerate brain paralyzed the salmon and refroze the imported lamb. They overwhelmed the guest of honour with their learning. They all were bent on probing beneath the surface of his thrilling personal adventures, which he narrated from time to time with attractive modesty. The episode of his reprieve when standing naked beside the steaming chaldron in which he was to be boiled alive caused a shuddering silence. Perhaps it was too realistic for a conventional dinner-party, but he had discounted its ghastliness by a smiling nonchalance, telling it as though it had been an amusing misadventure of travel. Very shortly afterwards Mrs. Head of College broke into a disquisition on the continuity of Russian literature from Sumakarov to Chekov. Triona, a profound student of the subject, at last lost interest in the academic socialist and threw up his hands.

"My dear lady," said he, "there is a theory in the United States accounting for the continued sale of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. They say immigrants buy it to familiarize themselves with the negro question. Russian literature has just as much to do with the Russia of to-day. It's as purely archæological as the literature of Ancient Assyria."

Blaise Olifant, sitting opposite, sympathized with the man of actualities set down in this polite academy. Once he himself had regarded it as the ganglion of the Thought of the Universe; but having recently seen something of the said

Universe he had modified his view. Why should these folk not be content with a plain human story of almost fantastic adventure, instead of worrying the unhappy Soldier of Fortune with sociological and metaphysical theories with which he had little time to concern himself? Why embroil him in a discussion on the League of Nations' duty to Lithuania when he was anxious to give them interesting pictures of Kurdish family life? He looked round the table somewhat amusedly at the elderly intellectuals of both sexes, and, forgetting for a moment the intellectual years of quiet biological research to which he was about to devote his life, drew an unflattering contrast between the theorists and their alien guest.

He liked the man. He liked the boyish, clean-shaven face, the broad forehead marked by very thin horizontal lines, the thin brown hair, parted carelessly at the side, and left to do what it liked; the dark grey eyes that sometimes seemed so calm beneath the heavy lids, and yet were capable of sudden illumination; the pleasant, humorous mouth, and the grotesque dimple of a hole in the middle of a long chin. He pitied the man. He pitied him for the hollows in his temples, for the swift flash of furtive glances, for the great sinews that stood out in his lean nervous hands, for the general suggestion of shrunken muscularity in his figure. A stone, or two, thought he, below his normal weight. He liked his voice, its soft foreign intonation; he liked his modesty, his careless air of the slim young man of no account; he liked the courteous patience of his manner. He understood his little nervous trick of plucking at his lips.

In the drawing-room after dinner Mrs. Head of College said to him:

"A most interesting man—but I do wish he would look you in the face when he speaks to you."

Blaise Olifant suppressed a sigh. These good people were hopeless. They knew nothing. They did not even recognize the unmistakable brand of the prisoner who has suffered agony of body and degradation of soul. No man who has been a tortured slave regains, for years, command of his eyes. Hundreds of such men had Olifant seen, and the sight of them still made his heart ache. He explained politely. And with a polite air of unconvinced assent, the lady received his explanation.

He asked Triona to lunch the next day, and under the warmth of his kindly sympathy Triona expanded. He spoke of his boyhood in Moscow, where his father, a naturalized Russian, carried on business as a stockbroker; of his travels in England and France with his English mother; of his English tutor; of his promising start in life in a great Russian motor firm—an experience that guaranteed his livelihood during his late refuge months in London; of his military service; of his early war days as a Russian officer; of the twists of

circumstance that sent him into the Imperial Secret Service; of incredible wanderings to the frontiers of Thibet; of the Revolution; of the murder of father and mother and the disappearance of his fortune like a wisp of cloud evaporated by the sun; of many strange and woeful things related in his book; of his escape through Russia; of his creeping as a stowaway into a Swedish timber boat; of his torpedoing by a German submarine and his rescue by a British destroyer; of his landing naked save for shirt and trousers, sans money, sans papers, sans everything of value save his English speech; of the Russian Society in London's benevolent aid; of the burning desire, an irresistible flame, to set down on paper all that he had gone through; of the intense nights spent over the book in his tiny ramshackle room over the garage; and, lastly, of the astounding luck that had been dealt him by the capricious Wheel of Fortune.

In the presence of a sympathetic audience he threw aside the previous evening's cloak of modest impersonality. He talked with a vivid picturesqueness that held Olifant spellbound. The furtive look in his eyes disappeared. They gleamed like compelling stars. His face lost its ruggedness, transfigured by the born narrator's inspiration. Olifant's sister, Mrs. Woolcombe, a gentle and unassuming woman on whom the learning of Oxford had weighed as heavily as the abominable conduct of her husband, listened with the rapt attention of a modern Desdemona. She gazed at him open eyed, half stupefied as she had gazed lately at a great cinematograph film which had held all London breathless.

When he had gone she turned to her brother, still under the spell.

"The boy's a magician."

Blaise Olifant smiled. "The boy's a man," said he.

Chance threw them together a while later in London. There they met frequently, became friends. The quiet sincerity of the soldier-scholar that was Blaise Olifant seemed to strike some chord of soothing in the heart of the young magician. Fundamentally ignorant of every geological fact, Triona brought to Olifant's banquet of fossil solvents of the mystery of existence an insatiable appetite for knowledge. He listened to reluctant lectures on elementary phenomena such as ammonites, with the same rapt attention as Olifant listened to his tales of the old Empire of Prester John. The Freemasonry of war, with its common experiences of peril and mutilation—once Triona slipped off pump and sock and showed a foot from which three toes had been shot away and an ankle seared with the fester of fetters—formed a primary bond of brotherhood. By the Freemasonry of intellect they found themselves members of a Higher Chapter.

"London is wonderful," said Triona one day. "London's appreciation of the

poor thing I have done is enough to turn anyone's head. But while my head is being turned, in the most delightful way in the world, I can't find time to do any work. And I must write in order to live. Do you know a little quiet spot where I could stay for the winter and write this precious novel of mine?"

Blaise Olifant reflected for a moment.

"I myself am looking for a sort of hermitage. In fact, I've heard of one in Shropshire which I'm going to look at next week. I want a biggish house," he explained, with a smile—"I've had enough of dug-outs and billets in a farmhouse with a hole through the roof to last me my natural life. So there would be room for a guest. If you would care to come and stay with me, wherever I pitch my comfortable tent, and carry on your job while I carry on mine, you would be more than welcome."

"My dear fellow," cried Triona, impulsively thrusting out both hands to be shaken, "this is unheard-of generosity. It means my soul's salvation. Only the horrible dread of loneliness—you know the old solitary prisoner's dread—has kept me from running down to some little out-of-the-way place—say in Cornwall. I've shrunk from it. But London is different. In my chauffeur's days it was different. I had always associates, fares, the multitudinous sights and sounds of the vast city. But solitude in a village! Frankly, I funked it. I've lived so much alone that now I must talk. If I didn't talk I should go mad. Or rather I must feel that I can talk if I want to. I keep hold of myself, however. If I bored you with my loquacity you wouldn't have made me your delightful proposal."

"Well, you'll come, if I can get the right kind of house?"

"With all the gratitude in life," cried Triona, his eyes sparkling. "But not as your guest. Some daily, weekly, monthly arrangement, so that we shall both be free—you to kick me out—I to go——"

"Just as you like," laughed Olifant. "I only should be pleased to have your company."

"And God knows," cried Triona, "what yours would be to me."

CHAPTER IV

JOHN FREKE was one of the most highly respected men in Medlow. A great leader in municipal affairs, he had twice been Mayor of the town and was Chairman of the local hospital, President of clubs and associations innumerable, and held Provincial Masonic rank. But as John Freke persisted in walking about the draper's shop in Old Street, established by his grandfather, his family consorted, not with the gentry of the neighbourhood, but with the "homely folk" such as the Trivetts and the Gales. His daughter, Lydia, and Olivia had been friends in the far-off days, although Lydia was five years older. She was tall and creamy and massive and capable, and had a rich contralto voice; and Olivia, very young and eager, had, for a brief period, sat adoring at her feet. Then Lydia had married a young officer of Territorials who had been billeted on her father, and Olivia had seen her no more. As a young war-wife she pursued all kinds of interesting avocations remote from Medlow, and, as a young war-widow, had set up a hat shop in Maddox Street. Rumour had it that she prospered. The best of relations apparently existed between herself and old John Freke, who put up the capital for her venture, and desultory correspondence had kept her in touch with Olivia. The fine frenzy of girlish worship had been cured long ago by Lydia's cruel lack of confidence during her courtship. The announcement of the engagement had been a shock; the engagement itself a revelation of selfish preoccupation. A plain young sister had been sole bridesmaid at the wedding, and the only sign of Lydia's life during the honeymoon had been a picture postcard on the correspondence space of which was scrawled "This is a heavenly place. Lydia Dawlish." Then had followed the years of sorrow and stress, during which Olivia's hurt at the other's gracelessness had passed, like a childish thing, away.

Lydia's succeeding letters, mainly of condolence, had, however, kept unbroken the fragile thread of friendship. The last, especially, written after Mrs. Gale's death, gave evidence of sincere feeling, and emboldened Olivia, who knew no other mortal soul in London—the real London, which did not embrace the Clapham aunt and uncle—to seek her practical advice. In the voluminous response she recognized the old capable Lydia. Letter followed letter until, with Mr. Trivett's professional assistance, she found herself the lucky tenant of a little suite in a set of service flats in Victoria Street.

She entered into possession a fortnight after her interview with Blaise Olifant, who was to take up residence at "The Towers" the following day. Mr.

Trivett and his wife, Mr. Fenmarch and Mr. Freke, and the elder Miss Freke, who kept house for her father, saw her off at the station, covering her with their protective wings to the last moment. Each elderly gentleman drew her aside, and, with wagging of benevolent head, offered help in time of trouble. They all seemed to think she was making for disaster.

But their solicitude touched her deeply. The lump that had arisen in her throat when she had passed out across the threshold of her old home swelled uncomfortably, and, when the train moved off and she responded to waving hands and hats on the platform, tears stood in her eyes. Presently she recovered.

"Why should things so dear be so dismal?"

Myra, exhibiting no symptoms of exhilaration, did not reply. As they approached London, Olivia's spirits rose. At last the dream of the past weeks was about to be realized. When she stepped out of the train at Paddington, it was with the throb of the conqueror setting foot, for the first time on coveted territory. She devoured with her eyes, through the taxi windows, the shops and sights and the movement of the great thoroughfares through which they passed on their way to Victoria Mansions, where her fifth-floor eyrie was situated. Once there, Myra, accustomed to the spacious family house, sniffed at the exiguous accommodation and sarcastically remarked that it would have been better if air were laid on like gas. But Olivia paid little heed to her immediate surroundings. The cramped flat was but the campaigner's tent. Her sphere of action lay limitless beyond the conventional walls. The walls, however, bounded the sphere of Myra, who had no conception of glorious adventure. The rapidly ascending lift had caused qualms in an unaccustomed stomach, and she felt uneasy at living at such a height above the ground. Why Olivia could not have carried on for indefinite years in the comfort and security of "The Towers" she was at a loss to imagine. Why give up the ease of a big house for poky lodgings halfway up to the sky. A sitting-room, a bedroom, a slip with a bed in it for herself, a bathroom—Myra thanked goodness both of them were slim—and that was the London of Olivia's promise. She sighed. At last put down Olivia's aberration to the war. The war, in those days, explained everything.

Meanwhile Olivia had thrown up the sash of the sitting-room window and was gazing down at the ceaseless traffic in the street far below—gazing down on the roofs of the taxis and automobiles which sped like swift flat beetles, on the dwarfed yet monstrous insects that were the motor-buses, on the foreshortened dots of the hurrying ant-like swarms of pedestrians. It was gathering dusk, and already a few lights gleamed from the masses of buildings across the way. Soon the street lamps sprang into successive points of

illumination. She stood fascinated, watching the rapid change from December day into December night, until at last the distant road seemed but a fantastic medley of ever-dying, ever-recurring sounds and flashes of white and red. Yet it was not fantastic chaos—her heart leapt at the thought—it was pregnant with significance. All that rumble and hooting and darting light proclaimed human purpose and endeavour, mysterious, breath-catching in its unknown and vast corporate intensity. Shivers of ecstasy ran through her. At last she herself was a unit in this eager life of London. She would have her place in the absorbing yet perplexing drama into the midst of which she had stepped with no key to its meaning. But she would pick up the threads, learn what had gone before—of that she felt certain—and then—she laughed—she would play her part with the best of them. To-morrow she would be scurrying about among them, with her definite human aims. Why not to-night? Delirious thought! She was free. She could walk out into the throbbing thoroughfares and who could say her nay? She put her hand to her bosom and felt the crackle of ten five-pound notes. To emotional girlhood the feel of money, money not to hoard and make-do for weeks and weeks with the spectre of want ever in attendance, but money to fling recklessly about, has its barbaric thrill. Suppose she let slip from her fingers one of the notes and it swayed and fluttered down, down, down, until at last it reached the pavement, and suppose a poor starving girl picked it up and carried it home to her invalid mother. . . . But, on the other hand, suppose—and her profound and cynical knowledge of human chances assured her that it would be a thousand to one probability—supposing it fell on the silk hat of a corpulent profiteer! No. She was not going to shower promiscuous five-pound notes over London. But still the crackling wad meant power. She was free to go forth there and then and purchase all the joys, for herself and others, hovering over there in that luminous haze over the Westminster towers of the magical city of dreams.

She withdrew from the window and stood in the dark room, a light in her eyes, and clenched her hands. Yes. She would go out, now, and walk and walk, and fill her soul with the wonder of it all.

And then practical memory administered a prosaic jog to her aspiring spirit. Lydia Dawlish was coming to dine with her in the common dining-room or restaurant downstairs. Shivering with cold, she shut the window, turned on the light and sat by the fire, and ordered tea in the most matter-of-fact way in the world.

Lydia Dawlish appeared a couple of hours afterwards—fair, plump, and prosperous, attired in one of her own dashing creations of hats set at a rakish angle on her blond hair, and a vast coat of dark fur. Olivia, in her simple black semi-evening frock run up by an agitated Medlow dressmaker, felt a poor little

dot of a thing before this regal personage. And when the guest threw off the coat, the flowered silk lining of which was a dazing joy to starved feminine eyes, and revealed the slate-blue dinner gown from which creamy neck and shapely arms emerged insolent, Olivia could do nothing but stare open-mouthed, until power came to gasp her wonder and admiration.

"It's only an old thing," said Lydia. "I had to put on a compromise between downstairs and Percy's."

"Percy's?"

"Yes—don't you know? The night club. I'm going on afterwards."

Olivia's face fell. "I thought you were going to spend the evening with me."

"Of course I am, silly child. Night clubs don't begin till eleven. A man, Sydney Rooke, is calling for me. Well. How are you? And what are your plans now you've got here?"

She radiated health and vigour. Also proclaimed sex defiant, vaguely disquieting to the country bred girl. Olivia felt suddenly shy.

"It will take me a few days to turn round."

"Also to find clothes to turn round in," said Lydia, with a good-humoured yet comprehensive glance at the funny little black frock. "I hope you haven't been laying in a stock of things like that."

Olivia smiled. This was but a makeshift. She had been saving up for London. Perhaps Lydia would advise her. She had heard of a good place—what did they call it?—an enormous shop in Oxford Street. Lydia threw up her white arms.

"My dear child, you're not going to be a fashionable beauty at subscription dances and whist-drives at Upper Tooting! You're going to live in London. Good God! You can't get clothes in Oxford Street."

"Where shall I get them, then?" asked Olivia.

From the illustrated papers she had become aware of the existence of Pacotille and Luquin and other mongers of celestial fripperies; but she had also heard of the Stock Exchange and the Court of St. James's and the Stepney Board of Guardians; and they all seemed equally remote from her sphere of being.

"I'll take you about with me to-morrow," Lydia declared grandly, "and put you in the way of things. I dare say I can find you a hat or two chez Lydia—that's me—at cost price." She laughed and put a patronizing arm around Olivia's shoulders. "We'll make a woman of you yet."

The lift carried them down to the restaurant floor. They dined, not too

badly, at a side table from which they could view the small crowded room. Olivia felt disappointed. Only a few people were in evening dress. It was rather a dowdy assembly, very much like that in the boarding-house at Llandudno, her father's summer holiday resort for years before the war. Her inexperience had expected the glitter and joy of London. Hospitably she offered wine, champagne, as her father, a lover of celebrations, would have done; but Lydia drank nothing with her meals—the only way not to get fat, which she dreaded. Olivia drank water. The feast seemed tame, and the imported mutton tough. She reproached herself for inadequate entertainment of her resplendent friend.

They talked; chiefly Lydia, after she had received Olivia's report on her family's welfare and contemporary Medlow affairs; and Olivia listened contentedly, absorbing every minute strange esoteric knowledge of the great London world of which the pulsating centre appeared to be Lydia, Ltd., in Maddox Street. There Duchesses bought hats which their Dukes did not pay for. There Cabinet Ministers' wives, in the hope of getting on the right financial side of Lydia, whispered confidential Cabinet secrets, while Ministers wondered how the deuce things got into the papers. There romantic engagements were brought from inception to maturity. There also, had she chosen to keep a record, she could have accumulated enough evidence to bring about the divorces of half the aristocracy of England. She rattled off the names like a machine-gun. She impressed Olivia with the fact that Lydia, Ltd., was not a mere hat shop, but a social institution of which Lydia Dawlish was the creating and inspiring personality. Lydia, it appeared, weekended at great houses. "You see, my dear, my husband was the son of an Honourable and the grandson of an Earl. He hadn't much money, poor darling, but still he had the connection, most useful to me nowadays. The family buy their hats from me, and spread the glad tidings." She commanded a legion of men who had vowed that she should live, free of charge, on the fat of the land, and should travel whithersoever she desired in swift and luxurious motor-cars.

"Of course, my dear," she said, "it's rather a strain. Men will cart about a stylish, good-looking woman for a certain time, just out of vanity. But if she's a dull damn fool, they're either bored to tears and chuck her, or they'll want to —well—well—— Anyhow, you've got to keep your wits about you and amuse them. You've got to pay for everything in this life—or work for the means of paying—which comes to the same thing. And I work. I don't say it isn't pleasant work—but it's hard work. You go out with a man to dinner, theatre and a night club, and dismiss him at your front door at two o'clock in the morning with the perfectly contented feeling that he has had a perfectly good time and would be an ass to spoil things by hinting at anything different —and you've jolly well earned your comfortable, innocent night's rest."

This explosion of the whole philosophy of modern conscientious woman came at the end of dinner. Olivia toyed absently with her coffee, watching successive spoonfuls of tepid light-amber coloured liquid fall into her cup.

"But—all these men—" she said in a low voice—the position was so baffling and so disconcerting. "You are a beautiful and clever woman. Don't they sometimes want to—to make love to you?"

"They all do. What do you think? I, an unattached widow and, as you say, not unattractive. But because I'm clever, I head them off. That's the whole point of what I've been telling you."

"But, suppose," replied Olivia, still intent on the yellowish water, "suppose you fell in love with one of these men. Women do fall in love, I believe."

"Why then, I'd marry him the next day," cried Lydia, with a laugh. "But," she added, "that's not the type of man a sensible woman falls in love with."

Olivia's eyes sought the tablecloth. She was conscious of disturbance and, at the same time, virginal resentment.

"As far as my limited experience goes—a woman isn't always sensible."

"She has to learn sense. That's the great advantage of modern life. It gives her every opportunity of acquiring it from the moment she goes out into the world."

"And what kind of man does the sensible woman fall in love with?"

"Somebody comfortable," replied Lydia. "My ideal would be a young, rather lazy and very broad-minded bishop."

Olivia shook her head. The only time she had seen a bishop was at her confirmation. The encounter did not encourage dreams of romance in episcopal circles.

"But these men who take you out," Olivia persisted thoughtfully "and do all these wonderful things for you—it must cost them a dreadful lot of money—what kind of people are they?"

"All sorts. Some are of the very best—the backbone of the nation. They go off and marry nice girls who don't frequent night clubs and settle down for the rest of their lives."

They drank their coffee and went upstairs, where questions of more immediate practical interest occupied their minds. Olivia's wardrobe was passed in review, while Myra stood impassive like a sergeant at kit inspection.

"My poor child," said Lydia, "you've not a single article, inside or outside, that is fit to wear. I'll send you a second-hand clothes man who'll buy up the whole lot as it stands and give you a good price for it. I don't know yet quite what you're thinking of doing—but at any rate you can't do it in these things."

Olivia looked wistfully at the home-made garments which Lydia cast with scorn across the bed. They, at least, had seemed quite dainty and appropriate.

"Well," she said, with a sigh, "you know best, Lydia."

These all-important matters held their attention till a quarter past eleven, when Mr. Sydney Rooke was announced. He was an elderly young man in evening dress, with crisp black hair parted in the middle and thinning at the temples. A little military moustache gave him an air of youth which was belied by deep lines in his sallow face. His dark eyes were rather tired and his mouth hard. But his manners were perfect. He gave them both to understand that though Lydia was, naturally, the lady of his evening's devotion yet his heart was filled with a sense of Olivia's graciousness. Half a dozen words and a bow did it. In a polite phrase, a bow and a gesture he indicated that if Miss Gale would join them, his cup of happiness would overflow. Olivia pleaded fatigue. Then another evening? With Mrs. Dawlish. A pleasant little party, in fact. He would be enchanted.

"We'll fix it up for about a fortnight hence," said Lydia significantly. "To-morrow, then, dear, at eleven."

When they had gone Olivia, who had accompanied them to the flat door, threw herself on the sofa and, putting her hands behind her head stared over the edge of her own world into a new one, strange and bewildering.

Myra entered.

"Are you ever going to bed?"

"I suppose I must," said Olivia.

"Are dressed-up men like that often coming here?"

"God knows," said Olivia, "who are coming here. I don't."

CHAPTER V

THE Odyssey or the Argonautic, or whatever you like to call the epic of the first wild adventure of a young woman into the Infinite of Clothes, has yet to be written. It would need not only a poet, but a master of psychology, to record the myriad vibrations of the soul as it reacts to temptations, yieldings, tremulous thrills of the flesh, exquisite apprehensions, fluttering joys, and each last voluptuous plenitude of content. It is an adventure which absorbs every faculty of the will; which ignores hunger and thirst, weariness of limb and ache of head; which makes the day a dream of reality and the night the reality of a dream. Hardened women of the world with frock-worn minds are caught at times by the lure of the adventure, even when it is a question of a dress or two and a poor half a dozen hats. But how manifold more potent the spell in the case of one who starts with her young body in Nymph-like innocence and is called upon to clothe it again and again in infinite variety, from toe to head, from innermost secret daintiness to outward splendour of bravery!

Such a record would explain Olivia, not only to the world, but to herself during that first fortnight in London. Her hours could be reckoned by gasps of wonder. She lost count of time, of money, of human values. Things that had never before entered into her philosophy, such as the subtle shade of silk stockings which would make or mar a costume, loomed paramount in importance. The after-use scarcely occurred to her. Sufficient for the day was the chiffon thereof; also the gradual transformation of herself from the prim slip of a girl with just the pretension (in her own mind) to good looks, into a radiant and somewhat distinguished dark-haired little personage.

Her shrinkings, her arguments with Lydia Dawlish, her defeats, went all into the melting-pot of her delight. “No bath salts, my dear?” cried Lydia. “Whoever heard of a woman not using bath salts?” So bath salts were ordered. And—horrified: “My dear, you don’t mean to say you wash your face in soap and water. What will become of your skin?” So Olivia was put under the orders of a West End specialist, who stocked her dressing-table with delectable creams and oils. It was all so new, so unheard of, so wonderful to the girl, an experience worth the living through, even though all thousands at deposit at the bank should vanish at the end of it. Merely to sit in a sensuously furnished room and have beautiful women parade before her, clad in dreams of loveliness—any one of which was hers for a scribble on a bit of pink paper—evoked within her strange and almost spiritual emotions. Medlow was countless leagues away; this transcended the London even of her most foolish

visions.

Afterwards Olivia, when, sense of values being restored she looked back on this phantasmagoria of dressmakers, milliners, lingerie makers and furriers, said to Lydia Dawlish:

"It's funny, but the fact that there might be a man or so in the world never entered my head."

And the wise Lydia answered: "You were too busy turning yourself into a woman."

Twice or thrice during this chrysalis period she stole out of nights with Myra to the dress circle of a theatre, where, besides ingenuous joy in the drama, she found unconfessed consolation in the company of homely folk like herself—girls in clean blouses or simple little frocks like her own, and young men either in well-worn khaki or morning dress. On these occasions she wondered very much what she was about to do in the other galley—that of the expensively furred and jewelled haughtinesses and impudences whom she shouldered in the vestibule crush and whom she saw drive away in luxurious limousines. These flashing personalities frightened her with their implied suggestions of worlds beyond her ken. One woman made especial impression on her—a woman tall, serene, with a clear-cut face, vaguely familiar, and a beautiful voice; she overheard a commonplace phrase or two addressed to the escorting man. She brushed Olivia's arm and turned with a smile and a word of gracious apology and passed on. Olivia caught a whisper behind her. "That's the Marchioness of Aintree. Isn't she lovely?" But she did not need to be told that she had been in contact with a great lady. And she went home doubting exceedingly whether, for all her flourish of social trumpets, Lydia Dawlish's galley was that of Lady Aintree.

Criticism of Lydia, however, she put behind her as ingratitude, for Lydia made up royally for past negligence. Time and energy that ought to have been devoted to Lydia, Ltd., was diverted to the creation of Olivia.

"I don't know why you're so good to me," she would say.

And the other, with a little mocking smile round her lips: "It's worth it. I'm giving myself a new experience."

The first occasion on which she went out into the great world was that of Sydney Rooke's party. She knew that her low-cut, sleeveless, short-skirted gown of old gold tissue had material existence, but she felt herself half-ashamedly, half-deliciously clad in nothing but a bodily sensation. A faint blush lingered in her cheeks all the evening. Lydia, calling for her in Rooke's car, which had been placed at her disposal, held her at arm's length in sincere

and noble admiration, moved by the artist's joy in beholding the finished product of his toil, and embraced her fondly. Then she surveyed her again, from the little gold brocade slippers to the diamond butterfly (one of her mother's bits of jewellery) in her dark wavy hair.

"You're the daintiest elf in London," she cried.

To the dinner at the Savoy Sydney Rooke had invited a white-moustached soldier, Major-General Wigram, whose blue undress uniform, to the bedazzlement of Olivia, gleamed with four long rows of multi-coloured ribbon; a vivacious middle-aged woman, Mrs. Fane Sylvester, who wrote novels, plays, books of travel, and fashion articles in a weekly periodical—Olivia learned all this in their first five-minute converse in the lounge; Sir Paul and Lady Barraclough, he a young baronet whose civilian evening dress could not proclaim hard-won distinctions, she a pretty, fair, fragile creature, both of them obviously reacting joyously to relaxation of tension; and, last, the Vicomte de Mauregard, of the French Embassy, young, good looking, who spoke polished English with a faultless accent. It was, socially, as correct a little party as the brooding, innocent spirit of Mrs. Gale could have desired for her about-to-be prodigal daughter. Olivia sat between her host and Mauregard. On her host's right was Lady Barraclough; then the General, then Lydia, then Sir Paul, facing Rooke at the round table, then Mrs. Fane Sylvester, who was Mauregard's left-hand neighbour. They were by the terrace windows, far from what Olivia, with her fresh mind playing on social phenomena, held then and ever afterwards, most rightly, to be the maddening and human intercourse-destroying band.

Not that her first entrance down the imposing broad staircase, into the lounge filled with mirifically vestured fellow-creatures, to the accompaniment of a clashing rag-time imbecility, did not set all her young nerves vibrating to the point of delicious agony. It was like a mad fanfare heralding her advent in a new world. But soon she found that the blare of the idiot music deadened all other senses. Before her eyes swayed black-and-white things whom at the back of her mind she recognized as men, and various forms all stark flesh, flashing jewels and a maze of colours, whom she knew to be women. The gathering group of her own party seemed but figures of a dream. Her unaccustomed ears could not catch a word of the conventional gambits of conversation opened, on introduction, by her fellow guests. It was only when they passed between the tables of the great restaurant and the horrible noise of the negroid, syncopated parody of tune grew fainter and fainter, and they reached the peace of the terrace side, that the maddening clatter faded from her ears and consciousness of her surroundings returned.

Then she surrendered herself to huge enjoyment. Both her neighbours had

been all over the world and seen all sorts and conditions of men. They were vividly aware of current events. Pride would not allow her to betray the fact that often they spoke of matters far beyond her experience of men and things. Under their stimulus she began to regain the self that, for the past fortnight, the cardboard boxes of London had snowed under.

"It's no use asking me," she said to Mauregard, "whether I've been to Monte Carlo or Madagascar or Madame Tussaud's, for I haven't. I haven't been anywhere. I've somehow existed at the back of Nowhere, and to-night I've come to life."

"But where did you come from? The sea foam? Venus Anadyomene?"

"No, I'm of the other kind. I come from far inland. I believe they call it Shropshire. That oughtn't to convey anything to you."

"Indeed it does!" cried Mauregard. "Was I not at school at Shrewsbury?"

"No?"

"But yes. Three years. So I'm Shropshire, too."

"That's delightful," she remarked; "but it does away with my little mystery of Nowhere."

"No, no," he protested, with a laugh. He was a fair, bright-eyed boy with a little curled-up moustache which gave him the air of a cherub playfully disguised. "It is the county of mystery. Doesn't your poet say:

'Once in the wind of morning
I ranged the thymy wold;
The world-wide air was azure
And all the brooks ran gold.' "

"That's from *A Shropshire Lad*," cried Olivia.

"Of course. So why shouldn't you have come from the wind of morning, the azure world-wide air or the golden brook?"

"That's beautiful of you," said Olivia. "Well, why shouldn't I? It's more romantic and imaginative than the commonplace old sea. The sea has been overdone. I used to look at it once a year, and, now I come to think of it, it always seemed to be self-conscious, trying to live up to its reputation. But 'the wind of the morning——' Anyhow, here I am."

"Blown to London by the wind of a Shropshire morning."

Olivia's spirit danced in the talk. With his national touch on the lighter emotions, Mauregard drew from her an exposition of the Dryad's sensations on sudden confrontation with modern life. To talk well is a great gift; to compel others to talk well is a greater; and the latter gift was Mauregard's.

Olivia put food into her mouth, but whether it was fish or flesh or fowl she knew not. When her host broke the spell by an announcement in her ear that he had a couple of boxes for "Jazz-Jazz," she became aware that she was eating partridge.

Mr. Sydney Rooke talked of women's clothes, of which he had an expert knowledge. Lady Barraclough chimed in. Olivia, fresh from the welter, spoke as one in authority. Now and again she caught Lydia's eye across the table and received an approving nod. The elderly General regarded her with amused admiration. She began to taste the first-fruits of social success. She drove in a taxi to the theatre with the Barracloughs and Mrs. Fane Sylvester and sat with them in a box during the first act of the gay revue. For the second act there was a change of company and she found herself next to the General. He had served in India and was familiar with the names of her mother's people. What Anglo-Indian was not? Long ago he had met an uncle of hers; dead, poor chap. This social placing gave her a throb of pleasure, setting her, at least, in a stranger's eyes, in her mother's sphere. The performance over, they parted great friends.

General Wigram and Mrs. Fane Sylvester excusing themselves from going on to Percy's, the others crowded into Sydney Rooke's limousine. The crash of jazz music welcomed them. Already a few couples were dancing; others were flocking in from the theatres. They supped merrily. Sydney Rooke pointed out to Olivia's wondering eyes the stars of the theatrical firmament who condescended to walk the parquet floor of the famous night club. He also indicated here and there a perfectly attired youth as a professional dancer.

"On the stage?"

He explained that they had their professional partners and gave exhibition dances, showing the new steps. They also gave private lessons. It was the way they made their living. Olivia knitted a perplexed brow.

"It doesn't seem a very noble profession for a young man."

Sydney Rooke shrugged his shoulders politely.

"I'm with you a thousand times, my dear Miss Gale. The parasite, *per se*, isn't a noble object. But what would you have? The noble things of the past few years came to an end a short while ago, and, if I can read the times, reaction has already begun. In six months' time the noble fellow will be a hopeless anachronism."

"Do you mean," asked Olivia, "that all the young men will be rotten?"

He smiled. "How direct you are! Disconcerting, if I may say so. So positive; while I was approaching the matter from the negative side. There'll be a universal loss of ideals."

Olivia protested. "The young man has before him the reconstruction of the

world."

"Oh no," said Rooke. "He has done his bit. He expects other people to carry out the reconstructing business for him. All he cares about is to find a couple of sixpences to jingle together in his pocket."

"And have these young men who devote their lives to foxtrotting done their bit?"

He begged the question. "Pray be guided by my prophecy, Miss Gale. Next year you mustn't mention war to ears polite. These young men are alive. They thank God for it. Let you and me do likewise."

This little supper-table talk was the only cloud on a radiant night. The Vicomte de Mauregard took her to dance. At first she felt awkward, knowing only the simple steps of five years ago. But instinct soon guided her, and for two hours she danced and danced in an unthinking ecstasy. The clattering and unmeaning din which had dazed her on her entrance to the Savoy was now pregnant with physical significance. The tearing of the strings, the clashing of the cymbals, the barbaric thumping of the drum, the sudden raucous scream from negro throats, set vibrating within her responsive chords of an atavistic savagery. When each nerve-tearing cacophony came to its abrupt end, she joined breathlessly with the suddenly halting crow in eager clapping for the encore. And then, when the blood-stirring strings and cymbals crashed out, overpowering the staccato of hand beating hand, she surrendered herself with an indrawn sigh of content to her partner's arm—to the rhythm, to the movement, to the mere bodily guidance, half conscious of the proud flexibility of her frame under the man's firm clasp, to something, she knew not what, far remote from previous experience. Strange, too, the personality of the man did not matter. Paul Barraclough, Sydney Rooke, Mauregard, she danced with them all in turn. In her pulsating happiness she mixed them all up together, so that a flashing glance, liable to be misinterpreted, proceeded from a mere impulse of identification. Now and then, in the swimming throng of men and women, and the intoxication of passing raiment impregnated with scent and cigarette smoke, she exchanged an absent smile with Lydia and Lady Barraclough. Otherwise she scarcely realized their existence. She was led panting by Mauregard to a supper table while he went in search of refreshment. He returned with a waiter, apologizing for the abomination of iced ginger ale and curled orange peel, which was all that the laws of the land allowed him to offer. Horse's neck, it was called. She laughed, delighted with the name, and, after drinking, laughed again, delighted with the cool liquid so tingling on her palate.

"It's a drink for the gods," she declared.

“If you offered it, the unfortunate Bacchus would drink it without a murmur.”

“Do you really think it’s so awful?”

“*Mon Dieu!*” replied the young Frenchman.

Then Lydia came up with a dark-eyed, good-looking boy in tow, whom she introduced, as Mr. Bobbie Quinton and Olivia was surprised to recognize as one of the professionals. She accepted, however, his invitation to dance and went off on his arm. She found him a boy of charming manners and agreeable voice, and in the lightness and certainty of his dancing he far outclassed her other partners. He suggested new steps. She tried and blundered. She excused herself.

“This is the first time I’ve danced for four years.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said he. “You’re a born dancer. You only need a few lessons to bring you up to date. What I find in so many of the women I teach is that they not only don’t begin to understand what they’re trying to do, but that they never try to understand. You, on the other hand, have it instinctively. But, of course, you can’t learn steps in a place like this.”

“I wonder if you could give me some lessons?”

“With all the pleasure in life, Miss Gale,” replied Mr. Bobbie Quinton promptly.

About two o’clock in the morning Sydney Rooke and Lydia deposited Olivia at the front door of Victoria Mansions. Rooke stood hat in hand as she entered.

“I hope you’ve not been too bored by our little evening.”

“Bored! It has been just one heaven after another opening out before me.”

“But not the seventh. If only I could have provided that!”

“I’ll find it in the happiest and soundest night’s rest I ever had,” said Olivia.

CHAPTER VI

THIS was life; magical, undreamed of in her wildest Medlow dreams. And thanks to Lydia, she had plunged into it headlong, after a mere fortnight's probation. There had been no disillusion. She had plunged and emerged into her kingdom. London conspired to strew her path with roses. The Barracloughs invited her to a dinner party at their home in Kensington. General Wigram offered her dinner and theatre and convened to meet her an old Indian crony, General Philimore, and his young daughter, Janet. Philimore had known her grandfather, Bagshawe of the Guides, when he was a subaltern, infinite ages ago. The world was a small place, after all. Olivia, caring little for grandfathers beyond their posthumous social guarantee, found youth's real sympathy in Janet, who held open for her their flat in Maida Vale. Young Mauregard, after their first lunch together at the Carlton, seemed prepared to provide her with free meals and amusements for the rest of time. It is true he was madly in love with a Russian dancer, whose eccentric ways and abominable treatment of him formed the staple of the conversation which he poured into her very interested and compassionate ear. And, last, Bobbie Quinton gave her dancing lessons at the flat at the rate of a guinea apiece.

Christmas caused a break in these social activities. Lydia took her off to Brighton, where, meeting various acquaintances of her chaperone and making others of her own, she motored and danced and danced and motored, and in the pursuit of these delights discovered, with a fearful joy, that she could hold her own in the immemorial conflict of sex. Sydney Rooke, having driven down for the day, occasionally flashed through the hotel, the eternal smile of youth on his dark, lined face and his gestures unceasingly polite. As he passed, the heavens opened and rained champagne and boxes of chocolate and hot-house fruits and flowers and embroidered handbags, and once, a Pekinese dog for Lydia. Once again, an automobile seemed about to fall, but at Lydia's protests it melted in the ether.

"A dog and a rose and a glass of wine," said she, "are a woman's due for amusing a man. But a motor-car is profiteering. Besides, it's bound to drive you somewhere in the end—either to the flat of shame or the country house of married respectability: it only depends on who is at the wheel."

"I see," said Olivia. But she didn't. Sydney Rooke was a mystery; and Lydia's attitude towards him was more than her inexperience could understand.

Still, there she was in the pleasant galley and she did not question what she

was doing in it. In a dim way she regarded it as the inevitable rescue vessel after universal shipwreck. Her eyes were blinded by its glitter and her ears deafened by its music to the welter of the unsalved world.

Just before New Year she received a letter from Bobby Quinton. It began: "Dearest of Ladies." Never before having been thus apostrophized, she thought it peculiarly graceful and original. The writing was refined and exquisitely clear. To his dearest of ladies the young man bewailed her absence; life was dreary without her friendship and encouragement; all this Christmastide he was the loneliest thing on earth; he suggested that there was no one to love him—no mother or sisters to whom he could apply for comfort; this terrible night life to which he, poor demobilized soldier of fortune, was condemned in order to earn his bread, weighed upon his spirits and affected his health; he envied his dearest of ladies' sojourn by the invigorating sea; he longed for the taste of it; but such health-restoring rapture he gave her, in the most delicate way, to understand, was for fairy princesses and not for the impecunious demobbed; he counted the days till her return and prayed her to bring back a whiff of ozone on her garments to revive the ever faithful one who had the temerity to try to teach her to dance.

A most piteous epistle. Bobby Quinton, by his ingratiating ways and his deference and his wit, had effaced her original conception of the type of young men who danced at night clubs for their living. She liked him. He seemed so young and she, through her long companionship with sorrow, so old in comparison; he seemed so foolish and impossible, and she so wise; to her, remembering the helpless dependence of her father and brothers, he seemed (motherless and sisterless as he was) lost in a hostile world. Besides, he was not a nameless adventurer. His father (long since deceased) had been a Colonial Governor. He had been to one of the great public schools. In short, he had the birth and breeding of a gentleman. She slipped on a dressing-gown and went with the letter to Lydia, full of maternal purpose.

It was nine o'clock in the morning. Their rooms had a communicating door. She found Lydia daintily attired in boudoir cap and dressing-jacket, having breakfast in bed.

"The poor boy's dying for a breath of sea air. It would do him an enormous amount of good. Do you think we—of course, it really would be me—but it would be better if it appeared to be a joint affair—do you think we could, without offending him, ask him to come down here for a couple of days as our guest?"

Lydia, who had read the letter with a smile round her lips, replied drily:

"As far as Bobby is concerned—I really think we could."

“And as far as we are concerned,” flashed Olivia, “why should the silly fact of being a woman prevent us from helping a lame dog over a stile?”

“A he-dog,” said Lydia.

“What does it matter?” Olivia asked stoutly.

Lydia laughed in her half-cynical, tolerant way.

“Do as you like, dear. I don’t mind. You’re out for experience, not I. I’d only have you remark that our he-dog friend Bobby is sitting up and begging for the invitation——”

“Oh! Ah!” cried Olivia, with a fling of her arm, “you’re horrid!”

“Not a bit,” smiled Lydia. “I face facts, as you’ll have to do, if you want to find comfort in this matter-of-fact world. Have your Bobby down by all means. Only keep your eye on him.”

“He’s not my Bobby,” said Olivia indignantly.

“Our Bobby, then,” said Lydia, with good-natured indulgence.

So Olivia, with the little palpitation of the heart attendant on consciousness of adventurous and (in Medlow eyes, preposterous) well-doing, wrote to Bobby Quinton a letter whose gracious delicacy would not have wounded the susceptibilities of a needy Hidalgo or an impoverished Highland chieftain, and received in reply a telegram of eager acceptance.

Bobby appeared immaculately vestured, his heart overflowing with gratitude at the amazing sweetness of his two dear ladies. Never had man been blessed with such fairy godmothers. By the fresh frankness of his appreciation of their hospitality he disarmed criticism. A younger son hanging on to the court of Louis XIII never received purses of gold from his lady love with less embarrassed grace. He devoted himself to their service. He had the art of tactful effacement, and of appearance at the exact moment of welcome. He enlivened their meals with chatter and a boyish brightness that passed for wit.

To Olivia, the dearest of his dear ladies, he confided the pathetic history of his life. A sunny, sheltered corner of the Pier, both sitting side by side well wrapped in furs, conduced to intimacy. How a young man in such a precarious financial position could afford to wear a fur-lined coat with a new astrachan collar it did not strike Olivia to enquire. That he, like herself, was warm on that sun-filled morning, with the sea dancing and sparkling away beyond them, and human types around them exuding the prosperity of peace, seemed sufficient for the comfortable hour. He spoke of his early years of ease, of his modest patrimony coming to an end soon after the war broke out; of his commission in a yeomanry regiment; of his heart-break as the months went on and the chance of the regiment being sent to the front grew less and less; of his exchange into

a regiment of the line; of the rotten heart that gave out after a month in France; of his grief at being invalided out of the army and his struggles and anxieties when he returned to civil life, branded as physically unfit. He had tried the stage, musical comedy, male youth in the manless chorus being eagerly welcomed; then, after a little training, he found he had the dancer's gift. "So one thing led to another," said he, "and that's my history."

"But surely," said Olivia, "all this dancing and these late hours must be very bad for your heart."

He smiled sadly. "What does it matter? I'm no use to anybody, and nobody cares whether I'm dead or alive."

Olivia protested warmly. "The world is crying out for young men of three-and-twenty. You could be useful in a million ways."

"Not a crock like me."

"You could go into an office."

"Yes. In at one door and out of another. Hopeless."

He drew from a slim gold case a Turkish cigarette—Olivia, minutely hospitable, had put a box of a hundred in his room—and tapped it thoughtfully.

"After all, which is better—to carry on with life like a worm—which anyhow perisheth, as the Bible tells us—or to go out like a butterfly, with a bit of a swagger?"

"But you mustn't talk of going out," cried Olivia. "It's indecent."

Bobby lighted his cigarette. "Who would care?"

"I, for one," she replied.

Her health and sanity revolted against morbid ideas. He stretched out his hand, and, with the tips of his fingers, touched her coat, and he bent his dark brown eyes upon her.

"Would you really?" he murmured.

She flushed, felt angry she scarce knew why, and put herself swiftly on the defensive.

"I would care for the life of any young man. After a million killed it's precious—and every decent girl would care the same as I."

"You're wonderful!" he remarked.

"I'm common sense incarnate," said Olivia.

"You are. You're right. You're right a thousand times," he replied. "I'll always remember what you have said to me this morning."

At his surrender she disarmed. A corpulent, opulent couple passed them by, the lady wearing a cheap feathered hat and a rope of pearls outside a

Kolinsky coat, the gentleman displaying on an ungloved right hand, which maintained in his mouth a gigantic cigar, an enormous ruby set in a garden border of diamonds.

"At any rate," said Bobby, "I'm not as some other men are."

So they laughed and discussed the profiteers and walked back to the hotel for lunch with the sharpened appetites of twenty.

When Bobby Quinton left them, Olivia reproached herself for lack of sympathy. The boy had done his best. A rotten, and crocky heart, who was she to despise? But for circumstance he might have done heroic things. Perhaps in his defiance of physical disability he was doing a heroic thing even now. Still. . . . To Lydia, in an ironically teasing mood, she declared:

"When I do fall in love, it's not going to be with any one like Bobby Quinton. I want a man—there would be a devil of a row, of course, if he tried—but one capable of beating me."

"Bobby would do that, right enough, if you gave him the chance," said Lydia.

Olivia reflected for a while. "Why have you got your knife into him like that?" she asked abruptly.

"I haven't, my dear child. If I had, do you think I would have allowed him to come down? I live and let live. By letting live, I live very comfortably and manage, with moderate means, to have a very good time."

Olivia, already dressed for dinner, looked down on the easy, creamy, handsome, kimono-clad woman, curled up like a vast Angora cat on the hotel bedroom sofa, and once more was dimly conscious of a doubt whether the galley of Lydia Dawlish was the one for her mother's daughter to row in.

Still, *vogue la galère*. When she returned to London there was little else to do. Eating and dancing filled many of her days and nights. She tried to recapture the pleasure of books which had been all her recreation for years; but, although her life was not a continuous whirl of engagements—for it requires a greater vogue as a pretty and unattached young woman than Olivia possessed to be booked for fourteen meals and seven evenings every week of the year—she found little time for solitary intelligent occupation. If she was at a loose end, Lydia's hat shop provided an agreeable pastime. Or, as a thousand little odds and ends of dress demanded attention, there was always a sensuous hour or two to be spent at Pacotille's and Luquin's or Deville's. Tea companions seldom failed. When she had no evening engagements she was glad to get to bed, soon after the dinner in the downstairs restaurant, and to sleep the sleep of untroubled youth. And all the time the spell of London still held her captive. To walk the crowded streets, to join the feminine crush before

the plate-glass windows of great shops, to watch the strange birds in the ornamental water in St. James's Park, to wander about the Abbey and the Temple Gardens, to enter on the moment's impulse a Bond Street picture gallery or a cinema—all was a matter of young joy and thrill. She even spent a reckless and rapturous afternoon at Madame Tussaud's. Sometimes Janet Philimore accompanied her on these excursions round the monuments of London. Janet, who had mild antiquarian tastes and a proletarian knowledge of London traffic, took her by tubes and buses to the old City churches and the Tower, and exhibited to her wondering gaze the Bank of England and the Royal Exchange and Guildhall up the narrow street. For sentimental interest, there was always Bobby Quinton, who continued to maintain himself under her maternal eye. And so the new life went on.

It was one night in April, while she was standing under the porch of a theatre, Mouregard, her escort, having gone in search of his dinner-and-theatre brougham—for those were days when taxis were scarce and drivers haughty—that she found herself addressed by a long-nosed, one-armed man, who raised his hat.

"Miss Gale—I'm sure you don't remember me."

For a second or two she could not place him. Then she laughed.

"Why—Major Olifant!" She shook hands. "What are you doing here? I thought you were buried among your fossils. Do tell me—how are the hot-water pipes? And how is the parrot? Myra has no faith in your bachelor housekeeping and is sure you've eaten him out of desperation."

He returned a light answer. Then, touching the arm of a man standing by his side:

"Miss Gale—can I introduce Mr. Alexis Triona."

Triona bowed, stood uncovered while he took the hand which Olivia held out.

"This is my landlady," said Olifant.

"He is privileged beyond the common run of mortals," said Triona.

"That's very pretty," laughed Olivia, with a swift, enveloping glance at the slight, inconspicuous youth who had done such wonderful things. "I've not thought of myself as a landlady before. I hope I don't look like one."

Visions of myriad Bloomsbury lodging-houses at whose doors he had knocked after he had left the tiny room in Cherbury Mews, and of the strange middle-aged women of faded gentility whom he had interviewed within those doors, rose before Triona's eyes, and he laughed too. For under the strong electric light of the portico, unkind to most of the other waiting women,

showing up lines and hollows and artificialities of complexion, she looked as fresh and young as a child on a May morning. The open theatre wrap revealed her slender girlish figure, sketchily clad in a flame-coloured garment; and, with the light in her eyes and her little dark head proudly poised, she stood before the man's fancy as the flame of youth.

She turned to Olifant.

"Are you in town?"

"For a few days. Getting rid of cobwebs."

"I'd lend you quite a nice broom, if you could find time to come and see me. Besides, I do want to hear about my beloved Polly."

"I shall be delighted," said Olifant.

They arranged that he should come to tea at the flat the following day.

"And if so famous a person as Mr. Triona would honour me, too?"

"Dare I?" he asked.

"It's on the fifth floor, but there's a lift."

She saw Mauregard hurrying up. With a "Four-thirty, then," and a smile of adieu, she turned and joined Mauregard.

"Shall we go on to Percy's?" asked the young Frenchman, standing at the door of the brougham.

Olivia conceived a sudden distaste for Percy's.

"Not unless you particularly want to."

"I? Good Lord!" said he.

"Why do you ever go, if it bores you like that?" she asked as the brougham started Victoria-wards.

"*Ce que femme veut, Mauregard le veut.*"

"I suppose that is why you've never made love to me."

"How?" he asked, surprised out of his perfect English idiom.

"I've wanted you not to make love to me, and you haven't."

"But how could I make love to you, when I have been persecuting you with the confessions of my unhappy love affairs?"

"One can always find a means," said Olivia. "That's why I like you. You are such a good friend."

"I hope so," said he. Then, after a short silence: "Let me be frank. What is going on at the back of your clever English mind is perfectly accurate. I am tempted to make love to you every time I see you. What man, with a man's blood in his veins, wouldn't be tempted, no matter how much he loved another

woman? But I say to myself: 'Lucien, you are French to the marrow of your bones. It is the nature of that marrow not to offend a beautiful woman by not making love to her. But, on the other hand, the Lady Olivia whose finger-tips I am unworthy to kiss'—he touched them with his lips, however, in the most charming manner—'is English to the marrow of *her* bones, and it is the nature of that marrow to be offended if a man makes obviously idle love to her.' So, not wishing to lose my Lady Olivia, whose friendship and sympathy I value so highly, I accept with a grateful heart a position which would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of my fellow-countrymen."

"I'm so glad we've had this out," said Olivia after a pause. "I've been a bit worried. A girl on her own has got to take care of herself, you know. And you've been so beautifully kind to me——"

"It's because I am proud to call myself your humble and devoted servant," replied Mauregard.

Olivia went to bed contented with this frank explanation. Men had already made love to her in a manner which had ruffled her serene consciousness, and she found it, not like Lydia Dawlish, a cynical game of wit, but a disagreeable business, to parry their advances. Bobby Quinton, of course, she could put into a corner like a naughty child, whenever he became foolish. But Mauregard, consistently respectful and entertaining, had been rather a puzzle. Now that way was clear.

For a while she did not associate her meeting Blaise Olifant with her distaste for the night club. In the flush of her new existence she had almost forgotten him. There had been no reason to correspond. His rent was paid through the Trivett and Gale office. His foraminiferous pursuits did not appeal to a girl's imagination. Now and then she gave a passing thought to what was happening in her old home, and vaguely remembered that the romantically named traveller was there as a guest. But that was all. Now, the presence of Olifant had suddenly recalled the little scene in her mother's room, when she had suddenly decided to let him have the house; he had brought with him a breath of that room; a swift memory of the delicate water-colours and the books by the bedside, the *Pensées de Pascal* and *The Imitation of Christ*. . . . Besides, she had felt a curious attraction towards the companion, the boy with the foreign manner and the glistening eyes and the suffering-stricken face. Both men, as she conceived them, belonged to the higher intellectual type that had their being remote from the inanities of dissipation. So, impelled by a muddled set of motives, she suddenly found herself abhorring Percy's. She read herself into a state of chastened self-approbation, and then to sleep, with Rupert Brooke's poems.

CHAPTER VII

OLIVIA sat by her little table, dispensing tea and accepting homage with a flutter of pleasure at her heart. She had been oddly nervous—she who had entertained the stranger Olifant, at Medlow, with the greatest self-confidence, and had grown to regard tea parties at the flat as commonplaces of existence. The two men had drifted in from another sphere. She had reviewed her stock of conversation and found it shop-worn after five months' exposure. The most recent of her views on "Hullo, People!" and on the food at the Carlton had appeared unworthy of the notice of the soldier-scientist and the adventurous man of letters. She had received them with unusual self-consciousness. This, however, a few moments of intercourse dispelled. They had come, they had seen and she had conquered.

"At first I didn't recognize you," said Olifant. "I had to look twice to make sure."

"Have I changed so much?" she asked.

"It was a trick of environment," he said, with a smile in his dark blue eyes.

The feminine in her caught the admiration behind them and delightedly realized his confusion, the night before, at her metamorphosis from the prim little black-frocked quakeress into the radiant creature in furs and jewels and flame-coloured audacity.

"And now you're quite sure it is me—or I—which is it?"

"I'm quite sure it's my charming landlady who for the second time feeds the hungry wanderer. Miss Gale, Triona, makes a specialty of it."

"Then, indeed, I'm peculiarly fortunate," said Triona, taking a tomato sandwich. "Will you feed me again, Miss Gale?"

"As often as you like," she laughed.

"That's rather a rash promise to make to a professional vagabond like myself. When he has begged his way for months and months at a time, he comes to regard other people's food as his by divine right."

"Have you done that?" she asked.

"Much worse. You don't keep chickens?"

"Not here."

"That's a good thing. I think I'm the world's champion chicken-stealer. It's a trick of legerdemain. You dive at a chicken, catch it by its neck, whirl it round and stick it under your jacket all in one action. The unconscious owner

has only to turn his back for a second. Then, of course, you hide in a wood and have an orgy."

"He is not the desperate character he makes himself out to be," said Olifant. "He spent two months with me at 'The Towers' without molesting one of your hens."

"Then you're not still there?" she asked Triona.

"Alas, no," he replied. "I suppose I have the fever of perpetual change. I had a letter from Finland saying that my presence might be of use there. So I have spent this spring in Helsingfors. I am only just back."

"It seems wonderful to go and come among all these strange places," said Olivia.

"One land is much the same as another in essentials," replied Triona. "To carry on life you have to eat and sleep. There's no difference between a hard-boiled egg in Somerset and a hard-boiled egg in Tobolsk. And sleep is sleep, whether you're putting up at Claridge's or the Hotel of the Beautiful Star. And human nature, stripped of the externals of habits, customs, traditions, ceremonials, is unchanging from one generation, and from one latitude or longitude, to another."

"But," objected Olivia, with a flash of logic, "if London's the same as Tobolsk, why yearn for Tobolsk?"

"It's the hope of finding something different—the *ignis fatuus*, the Jack o' Lantern, the Will-o'-the-Wisp——" He was silent for a moment, and then she caught the flash of his eyes. "It's the only thing that counts in human progress. The Will-o'-the-Wisp. It leaves nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of a thousand floundering in a bog—but the thousandth man wins through to the Land of Promise. There is only one thing in life to do," he continued, clenching his nervous hands and looking into the distance away from Olivia, "and that is never to lose faith in your *ignis fatuus*—to compel it to be your guiding star. Once you've missed grip of it, you're lost."

"I wish I had your Russian idealism," said Olifant.

"When will you learn, my dear friend," said Triona quietly, "that I'm not a Russian? I'm as English as you are."

"It's your idealism that is Russian," said Olivia.

"Do you think so?" he asked, deferentially. "Well, perhaps it is. In England you keep your ideals hidden until some great catastrophe happens, then you bring them out to help you along. Otherwise it is immodest to expose them. In Russia, ideals are exposed all the time, so that when the time for their application comes, they're worn so thin they're useless. Poor Russia," he

sighed. “It has idealized itself to extinction. All my boyhood’s companions—the students, the *intelligentsia*, as they called themselves, who used to sit and talk and talk for hours of their wonderful theories—you in England have no idea how Russian visionary can talk—and I learned to talk with them—where are they now? The fortunate were killed in action. The others, either massacred or rotting in prisons, or leading the filthy hunted lives of pariah dogs. The Beast arose like a foul shape from the Witch’s cauldron of their talk . . . and devoured them. Yes, perhaps the stolid English way is the better.”

“What about your Will-o’-the-Wisp theory?” asked Olivia.

He threw out his hands. “Ah! That is the secret. Keep it to yourself. Don’t point it out to a thousand people, and say: ‘Join me in the chase of the Will-o’-the-Wisp.’ For the thousand other people will each see an *ignis fatuus* of their own and point it out, so that there are myriads of them, and your brain reels, and you’re swallowed up in the bog to a dead certainty. In plain words, every human being must have his own individual and particular guiding star which he must follow steadfastly. My guiding star is not yours, Miss Gale, nor Olifant’s. We each have our own.”

Olifant smiled indulgently. “*Moscovus loquitur*,” he murmured.

“What’s that?” asked Olivia.

“He says, my dear Miss Gale, that the Russian will ever be talking.”

“I’m not so sure that I don’t approve,” said she.

Triona laid his hand on his heart and made a little bow. She went on, casting a rebuking glance at Olifant, who had begun to laugh:

“After all, it’s more entertaining and stimulating to talk about ideas than about stupid facts. Most people seem to regard an idea as a disease. They shy at it as if it were smallpox.”

Olifant protested. He was capable of playing football with ideas as any man. Self-satirical, he asked was he not of Balliol? Olivia, remembering opportunely a recent Cambridge dinner neighbour’s criticism of the famous Oxford College—at the time it had bored her indifferent mind—and an anecdote with which he drove home his remarks, that of a sixth-form contemporary who had written to him in the prime flush of his freshman’s term: “Balliol is not a college; it is a School of Thought,” cried out:

“Isn’t that rather a crude metaphor for Balliol?”

They quarrelled, drifted away from the point, swept Triona into a laughing argument on she knew not what. All she knew was that these two men were giving her the best of themselves; these two picked men of thought and action; that they were eager to interest her, to catch her word of approval; that some

dancing thing within her brain played on their personalities and kept them at concert pitch.

She was conscious of a new joy, a new sense of power, when the door opened and Myra showed in Lydia Dawlish. She entered, enveloped in an atmosphere of furs and creamy worldliness. Aware of the effect of implicit scorn of snobbery, she besought Olifant for news of Medlow, dear Sleepy Hollow, which she had not seen for years. Had he come across her beloved eccentric of a father—old John Freke? Olifant gave her the best of news. He had lately joined the committee of the local hospital, of which Mr. Freke was Chairman; professed admiration for John Freke's exceptional gifts.

"If he had gone out into the world, he might have been a great man," said Lydia.

"He *is* a great man," replied Olifant.

"What's the good of being great in an overlooked chunk of the Stone Age like Medlow?"

She spoke with her lazy vivacity, obviously, to Olivia's observant eye, seeking to establish herself with the two men. But the spell of the afternoon was broken. As soon as politeness allowed, Olifant and Triona took their leave. Had it not been for Lydia they would have stayed on indefinitely, forgetful of time, showing unconscious, and thereby all the more flattering, homage to their hostess. In a mild way she anathematized Lydia; but found a compensating tickle of pleasure in the lady's failure to captivate.

To Olifant she said:

"Now that you know where your landlady lives, I hope you won't go on neglecting her."

But she waited for Triona to say:

"Shall I ever have the pleasure of seeing you again?"

"It all depends whether you can be communicated with," she replied. "Alexis Triona, Esq., Planet Earth, Solar System, is an imposing address; but it might puzzle the General Post Office."

"The Vanloo Hotel, South Kensington, is very much more modest."

"It's well for people to know where they can find one another," said Olivia.

"That you should do me the honour of the slightest thought of finding me ——" he began.

"We'll fix up something soon," Lydia interrupted. "I'm Miss Gale's elderly, adopted aunt."

Olivia felt a momentary shock, as though a tiny bolt of ice had passed

through her. She sped a puzzled glance at a Lydia blandly unconscious of wrong-doing.

"I shall be delighted," said Triona politely.

When the door had closed behind the two—

"What nice men," said Lydia.

"Yes, they're rather—nice," replied Olivia, wondering why, in trying to qualify them in her mind, this particular adjective had never occurred to her. They were male, they spoke perfect English, they were well-mannered—and so, of course, they were nice. But it was such an inadequate word, completing no idea. Lydia's atrophied sense of differentiation awoke the laughter in her eyes. Nice! So were Bobby Quinton, Sydney Rooke, Mauregard, a score of other commonplace types in Lydia's set. But that Blaise Olifant and Alexis Triona should be lumped with them in this vaguely designated category, seemed funny.

Lydia went on:

"Major Olifant, of course, I knew from your description of him; but the other—the young man with the battered face—I didn't place him."

"Triona—Alexis Triona."

"I seem to have heard the name," said Lydia. "He writes or paints or lectures on Eugenics or something."

"He has written a book on Russia," replied Olivia drily.

"I'm fed up with Russia," said Lydia dismissively. "Even if I wasn't—I didn't come here to talk about it. I came in about something quite different. What do you think has happened? Sydney Rooke has asked me to marry him."

Olivia's eyes flashed with the interest of genuine youth in a romantic proposal of marriage.

"My dear!" she cried. "How exciting!"

"I wish it were," said Lydia, in her grey-eyed calmness. "Anyhow, it's a bit upsetting. Of course I knew that he was married—separated years and years from his wife. Whether he couldn't catch her out, or she couldn't catch him out, I don't know. But they couldn't get a divorce. She was a Catholic and wouldn't stand for the usual arrangement. Now she's dead. Died a couple of months ago in California. He came in this morning with Lady Northborough—introducing her—the first time I had seen the woman. And he sat by and gave advice while she chose half a dozen hats. His judgment's infallible, you know. He saw her to her car and came back. 'Now I've done you a good turn,' he said, 'perhaps you'll do me one. Give me five minutes with you in your cubby-hole.' We went into my little office, and then he sprang this on me—the death

of his wife and the proposal."

"But it *must* have been exciting," Olivia protested. "Yet——" she knitted her brow, "why the Lady Northborough barrage?"

"It's his way," said Lydia.

"What did you tell him?"

"I said I would give him my answer to-night."

"Well?"

"I don't know. He's charming. He's rolling in money—you remember the motor-car I turned down for obvious reasons—he knows all kinds of nice people—he's fifty——"

"Fifty!" cried Olivia, aghast. To three and twenty fifty is senile.

"The widow's ideal."

"It's exciting, but not romantic," said Olivia.

"Romance perished on the eleventh of November, 1918. Since then it has been 'Every woman for herself and the Devil take the hindmost.' Are you aware that there are not half enough men to go round? So when a man with twenty thousand a year comes along, a woman has to think like—like——"

"Like Aristotle or Herbert Spencer, or the sailor's parrot," said Olivia. "Of course, dear. But is he so dreadfully wealthy as all that? What does he do?"

"He attends Boards of Directors. As far as I can make out he belongs to a Society for the Promotion of Un-christian Companies."

"Don't you care for him?"

Lydia shook her exquisitely picture-hatted head—she was a creamy Gainsborough or nothing.

"In that way, not a bit. Of course, he has been a real good friend to me. But after all—marriage—it's difficult to explain——"

In spite of her cynicism, Lydia had always respected the girlhood of her friend. But Olivia flung the scornful arm of authority.

"There's no need of explanation. I know all about it."

"In that case——" said Lydia. She paused, lit a cigarette, and with her large, feline grace of writhing curves, settled herself more comfortably in the corner of the couch—"I thought you would bring a fresh mind to bear upon things. But no matter. In that case, dear, what would you advise?"

Before the girl's mental vision arose the man in question—the old young man, the man of fifty, with the air and manner and dress of the man of twenty-five; his mark of superficial perfection that hid God knew what strange sins, stoniness of heart and blight of spirit. She saw him in his impeccable devotion

to Lydia. But something in the imagined sight of him sent a shiver through her pure, yet not ignorant, maidenhood: something of which the virginal within her defied definition, yet something abhorrent. The motor-car had failed; now the wedding-ring. She recaptured the fleeting, disquieting sense of Lydia on her first evening in London—the woman's large proclamation of sex. Instinctively she transferred her impression to the man, and threw a swift glance at Lydia lying there, milk and white, receptive.

A word once read and forgotten—a word in some French or English novel—sprang to her mind, scraped clear from the palimpsest of memory. Desirable. A breath-catching, hateful word. She stood aghast and shrinking on the edge of knowledge.

"My darling child, what on earth is the matter with you?"

Olivia started at the voice, as though awakening from a dream.

"I think it's horrible," she cried.

"What?"

"Marrying a man you can no more love than—— Ugh! I wouldn't marry him for thousands of millions."

"Why? I want to know."

But the shiver in the girl's soul could not be expressed in words.

"It's a question of love," she said lamely.

Lydia laughed, called her a romantic child. It was not a question of love, but of compatible temperament. Marriage wasn't a week-end, but a life-end, trip. People had to get accustomed to each other in dressing-gowns and undress manners. She herself was sure that Sydney Rooke would wear the most Jermyn Street of dressing-gowns, at any rate. But the manners?

"They'll always be as polished as his finger-nails," said Olivia.

"I don't see why you should speak like that of Sydney," cried Lydia, with some show of spirit. "It's rather ungrateful seeing how kind he has been to you."

Which was true; Olivia admitted it.

"But the man who is kind to you, in a social way, isn't always the man you would like to marry."

"But it's I, not you," Lydia protested, "who am going to marry him."

"Then you are going to marry him?"

"I don't see anything else to do," replied Lydia, and she went again over the twenty thousand a year argument. Olivia saw that her hesitations were those of a cool brain and not of an ardent spirit, and she knew that the brain

had already come to a decision.

"I quite see," said Lydia half apologetically, "that you think I ought to wait until I fall in love with a man. But I should have to wait till Doomsday. I thought I was in love with poor dear Fred. But I wasn't. I'm not that sort. If Fred had gone on living I should have gone on letting him adore me and have been perfectly happy—so long as he didn't expect me to adore him."

"Doesn't Mr. Rooke expect you to adore him?" asked Olivia.

Lydia laughed, showing her white teeth, and shook a wise and mirthful head.

"I'm convinced that was the secret of his first unhappy marriage."

"What?"

"The poor lady adored him and bored him to frenzy."

The clock on the mantelpiece struck the half-hour after six. Lydia rose. She must go home and dress. She was dining with Rooke at Claridge's at eight.

"I'm so glad we've had this little talk," she said. "I felt I must tell you."

"I thought you wanted my advice," said Olivia.

"Oh, you silly!" answered Lydia, gathering her furs around her.

They exchanged the conventional parting kiss. Olivia accompanied her to the landing. When the summoned lift appeared and its doors clashed open, Lydia said:

"You wouldn't like to take over that hat shop at a valuation, would you?"

"Good heavens, no!" cried the astounded Olivia.

Lydia laughed and waved a grey-gloved hand and disappeared downwards, like the Lady of the Venusberg in an antiquated opera.

Olivia re-entered the flat thoughtfully, and sat down in an arm-chair by the tiny wood fire in the sitting-room grate. Lydia and Lydia's galley, and all that it signified, disturbed her more than ever. They seemed not only to have no ideals even as ballast, but to have flung them overboard like so many curse-ridden Jonahs. To what soulless land was she speeding with them? And not only herself, but the England, of which she, as much as any individual, was a representative unit? Was it for the reaching of such a haven that her brothers had given their lives? Was it that she should reach such a haven that her mother, instinct with heroic passion, had sent Stephen Gale forth to death? Was it to guide the world on this Lydian path that Blaise Olifant had given an arm and young Triona had cheerfully endured Dantesque torturings?

Myra came in and began to remove the tea-things—Myra, gaunt, with her impassive, inexpressible face, correct in black; silk blouse, stuff skirt, silk

apron. Olivia, disturbed in her efforts to solve the riddle of existence, swerved in her chair and half-humorously sought the first human aid to hand.

"Myra, tell me. Why do you go on living?"

Myra made no pause in her methodical activity.

"God put me into the world to live. It's my duty to live," she replied in her toneless way. "And God ordained me to live so that I should do my duty."

"And what do you think is your duty?" Olivia asked.

"You, of all people in the world, ought to know that," said Myra, holding the door open with her foot, so as to clear a passage for the tea-tray.

Olivia rested her elbows on the arms of the chair and put her finger-tips to her temples. She felt at once rebuked and informed with knowledge. Never before had the Sphinx-like Myra so revealed herself. Probably she had not had the opportunity, never having found herself subjected to such direct questioning. Being so subjected, she replied with the unhesitating directness of her nature. The grace of humility descended on Olivia. What fine spirit can feel otherwise than humble when confronted with the selfless devotion of a fellow-being? And further humbled was she by the implicit declaration of an ideal, noble and purposeful, such as her mind for the past few months had not conceived. This elderly, spinsterly foundling, child of naught, had, according to her limited horizon, a philosophy—nay, more—a religion of life which she unswervingly followed. According to the infinite scale whereby human values ultimately are estimated, Olivia judged herself sitting in the galley of Lydia Dawlish as of far less account than Myra, her butt and her slave from earliest infancy.

She rose and looked around the prettiness of taste and colour with which she had transformed the original dully-furnished room, and threw up her arm in a helpless gesture. What did it all mean? What was she doing there? On what was she squandering the golden hours of her youth? To what end was she using such of a mind and such of a soul as God had given her? At last, to sell herself for furs and food and silk cushions, and for the society of other women clamorous of nothing but furs and food and silk cushions, to a man like Sydney Rooke—without giving him anything in return save her outward shape for him to lay jewels on and exhibit to the uninspiring world wherein he dwelt?

Far better return to Medlow and lead the life of a clean woman.

Myra entered. "You're not dining out to-night?"

"No, thank God!" said Olivia. "I'll slip on any old thing and go downstairs."

She dined in her little quiet corner of the restaurant, and after dinner took

up Triona's book, *Through Blood and Snow*, which she had bought that morning, her previous acquaintance with it having been made through a circulating library. In the autumn she had read and been held by its magic; but casually as she had read scores of books. But now it was instinct with a known yet baffling personality. It was two o'clock in the morning before she went to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE tastes of Alexis Triona were not such as to lead him into extravagant living on the fruits of his literary success. To quality of food he was indifferent; wine he neither understood nor cared for; in the use of other forms of alcohol he was abstemious; unlike most men bred in Russia he smoked moderately, preferring the cigarettes he rolled himself from Virginia tobacco to the more expensive Turkish or Egyptian brands. His attire was simple. He would rather walk than be driven; and he regarded his back-bedroom at the top of the Vanloo Hotel as a luxurious habitation.

He had broken away from the easeful life at Medlow because, as he explained to Blaise Olifant, it frightened him.

"I'm up against nothing here," said he.

"You're up against your novel," replied Olifant. "A man's work is always his fiercest enemy."

Triona would not accept the proposition. He and his novel were one and indivisible. Together they must fight against something—he knew not what. Perhaps, fight against time and opportunity. They wanted the tense, stolen half-hours which he and his other book had enjoyed. Would Olifant think him ungrateful if he picked up and went on his mission to Helsingfors?

"My dear fellow," said Olifant, "the man who resents a friend developing his own personality in his own way doesn't deserve to have a friend."

"It's like you to say that," cried Triona. "I shall always remember. When I get back I shall let you know."

So Alexis Triona vanished from a uninspiring Medlow, and two months afterwards gave Olifant his address at the Vanloo Hotel. Olifant, tired by a long spell of close work, went up for an idle week in London.

"Come back and carry on as before," he suggested.

But Triona ran his fingers through his brown hair and held out his hand.

"No. The wise man never tries to repeat a past pleasure. As a wise old Russian friend of mine used to say—never relight a cigar."

So after a few days of pleasant companionship in the soberer delights of town, Blaise Olifant returned to Medlow and Triona remained in his little back room in the Vanloo Hotel.

One night, a week or so after his visit to Olivia Gale, he threw down his pen, read over the last sheet that he had written, and, with a gesture of

impatience, tore it up. Suddenly he discovered that he could not breathe in the stuffy bedroom. He drew back the curtains and opened the window and looked out on myriad chimney-pots and a full moon shining on them from a windless sky. The bright air filled his lungs. Desire for wider spaces beneath the moon shook him like a touch of claustrophobia. He thrust on the coat which he had discarded, seized a hat, and, switching off the light, hurried from the room. He went out into the streets, noiseless save for the rare, swift motors that flashed by like ghosts fleeing terrified from some earthly doom.

He walked and walked until he suddenly realized that he had emerged from Whitehall and faced the moonlight beauty of the Houses of Parliament standing in majestic challenge against the sky, and the Abbey sleeping in its centuries of dreams.

Away across the Square, by Broad Sanctuary, was the opening of a great thoroughfare, and, as his eyes sought it, he confessed to himself the subconscious impulse that had led him thither. Yet was it not a cheat of a subconscious impulse? Had he not gone out from the hotel in Kensington with a definite purpose? As he crossed to Broad Sanctuary and the entrance to Victoria Street, he argued it out with himself. Anyhow, it was the most fool of fool-errands. But yet—he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. To what errand could a fool's errand be comparable? Only to that of one pixy-led. He laughed at the thought of his disquisition to Olivia on the Will-o'-the-Wisp. In the rare instances of the follower of Faith had he not proclaimed its guidance to the Land of Promise?

Three days before he had seen her. He had been impelled by an irresistible desire to see her. To call on her without shadow of excuse was impossible. To telephone or write an invitation to lunch was an act unsuggested by his limited social experience. Taking his chance that she should emerge between eleven and twelve, he strolled up and down the pavement, so that at last when fate favoured him and he advanced to meet her, they greeted each other with a smiling air of surprise. They explained their respective objectives. She was for buying a patent coffee machine at the Army and Navy Stores, he for catching an undesirable train at Victoria Station. A threatening morning suddenly became a rainy noon. He turned back with her and they fled together and just reached the Stores in time to escape from the full fury of the downpour. There he bent his mind on coffee machines. His masculine ignorance of the whole art of coffee-making, a flannel bag in a jug being his primitive conception, moved her to light-hearted mirth. The purchase made, the order given, they wandered idly through the great establishment. They were prisoners, the outside world being weltering deluge. For once in his lifetime, thought Triona, the elements warred on his side. A wringing machine, before which he paused in

wonderment at its possible use, and an eager description on the part of the salesman, put Olivia on the track of a game into which he entered with devoted fervour. Let them suppose they were going to furnish a house. Oh! a great big palace of a house. In imagination they bought innumerable things, furnishing the mansion chiefly with hammocks and marquees and garden chairs and lawn-mowers and grand pianos and egg-whisks. Her heart, that morning, attuned to laughter, brought colour into her cheeks and brightness into her eyes. To the young man's ear she seemed to have an adorable gift of phrase. She invested a rolling-pin with a humorous individuality. She touched a tray of doughnuts with her fancy and turned them into sacramental bread of Momus, exquisite Divinity of Mirth. She was so free, so graceful, so intimate, so irresistible. He followed her, a young man bemused. What he contributed to the game he scarcely knew. He was only conscious of her charm and her whipping of his wit. They stumbled into the department of men's haberdashery. His brain conceived a daring idea.

"I've been trying for weeks," said he, "to make up my mind to buy a tie."

Olivia glanced swiftly round and sped to a counter.

"Ties, please."

"What kind?" asked the salesman.

"Ordinary silk—sailor-knot. Show me all you've got."

Before his entranced eyes she selected half a dozen, with a taste which the artist within him knew was impeccable. He presented the bill bearing her number at the cashier's pigeon hole, and returning took the neat packet from the salesman with the air of one receiving a decoration from royalty. They made their way to the exit. She said:

"I'm afraid we've been criminally frivolous."

"If such happiness is a crime I'd willingly swing for it."

He noted a quick, uncomprehending question in her glance and the colour mounted into his pale cheeks.

"My English idiom is not yet perfect," he said. "I ought not to have used that expression."

Olivia laughed at his discomfiture.

"It's generally used by dreadful people who threaten to do one another in. But the metaphor's thrilling, all the same."

The rain had ceased. After a few moments the mackintoshed commissionaire secured a taxi. Triona accompanied her to the door. She thrust out a frank hand.

"Au revoir. It has been delightful to find you so human."

She drove off. He stood, with a smile on his lips, watching the vehicle disappear in the traffic. Her farewell was characteristic. What could one expect of her but the unexpected?

That was three days ago. The image of her unconsciously alluring yet frank to disconcertment, spiritually feminine yet materially impatient of sex; the image of her in the three separate settings—the dark-eyed princess in fur and flame beneath the electric light of the theatre portico; the slim girl in simple blouse and skirt who, over the pretty teacups, held so nice a balance between Olifant and himself; the gay playmate of a rainy hour, in her fawn costume (he still felt the thrill of the friendly touch of her fawn-coloured gloved hands on his sleeve)—the composite image and vision of her had filled his sleeping and waking thoughts to the destruction of his peace of mind and the dislocation of his work.

Thus, on this warm night of spring, he stood, the most foolishly romantical of mortals, at the entrance to Victoria Street, and with a shrug of his shoulders proceeded on his errand of mute troubadour. Perhaps the day of rapture might come when he would tell her how he stood in the watches of the night and gazed up at what he had to imagine was her window on the fifth floor of the undistinguished barrack that was her home. It was poetic, fantastic, Russian, at any rate. It would also mark the end of his excursion; it was a fair tramp back to South Kensington.

An unheeded taxi-cab whizzed past him as he walked; but a few seconds later, the faint sound of splintering glass and then the scrunch of brakes suddenly applied awoke him from his smiling meditations. The cab stopped, sharply outlined in the clear moonlight. The driver leaped from his seat and flung open the door. A woman sprang out, followed by a man. Both were in evening dress. Voices rose at once in altercation. Triona, suspecting an accident, quickened his pace instinctively into a run and joined the group.

“What’s up?”

But as the instinctive words passed his lips he became amazedly conscious of Olivia standing there, quivering, as white as the white dress and cloak she wore, her eyes ablaze. She flashed on him a half-hysterical recognition and clutched his arm.

“You?”

He drew himself up to his slim height and looked first at the taxi driver and then at the heavy, swarthy man in evening dress, and then at her.

“What’s the matter? Tell me,” he rapped out.

“This man tried to insult me,” she gasped.

Olivia never knew how it happened: it happened like some instantaneous

visitation of God. The lithe young figure suddenly shot forward and the heavy man rolled yards away on the pavement.

“Serve him damn well right,” said the driver; “but where do I come in with my window broken?”

“Oh, you shall be paid, you shall be paid,” cried Olivia. “Pay him, Mr. Triona, and let us go.”

Triona glanced up and down the street. “No, this gentleman’s going to pay,” he said quietly and advanced to the heavy man who had scrambled to unsteady feet.

“Just you settle up with that cabman, quick, do you hear, or I’ll knock you down again. I could knock you down sixty times an hour. And so help me, God, if a copper comes in sight I’ll murder you.”

“All right, all right,” said the man hurriedly. “I don’t want a scandal for the lady’s sake.” He turned to the taxi man. “How much do you want?”

“With the damage it’ll be a matter of ten pound.”

The swarthy man in evening dress fished out his note-case.

“Here you are, you blackmailing thief.”

“None of your back-chat, or I’ll finish off what this gentleman has begun,” said the taxi man, pocketing the money.

Until he saw summary justice accomplished, Triona stood in the lee of the houses, his arm stretched protectingly in front of Olivia. Then he drew her away.

“I’ll see the lady home. It’s only a few steps.”

“Right, sir. Good night, sir,” said the taxi man.

They moved on. Immediately in the silence of the night came the crisp exchange of words.

“I’ll give you a pound to take me to Porchester Terrace.”

“And I’d give a pound to see you walk there,” said the driver, already in his seat.

He threw in the clutch and with a cheery “Good night” passed the extravagantly encountered pair.

“They say miracles don’t happen, but one has happened now,” said Olivia breathlessly. “If you hadn’t come out of space——”

“Do tell me something about it,” he asked.

“But don’t you know?”

“You said that profit-merchant had insulted you and that was enough for

me."

"Oh, my God! I'm so ashamed!" she cried, with a wild, pretty gesture of her hands. "What will you think of me?"

Mad words rushed through his brain, but before they found utterance he gripped himself. He had, once more, his hands on the controls.

"What I think of you, Miss Gale, it would be wiser not to say. I should like to hear what has occurred. But, pardon me," he said abruptly, noticing her curious, uneven step, and glancing down instinctively at her feet, "what has become of your shoe?"

"My slipper—why, of course——" She halted, suddenly aware of the loss. "I must have left it in the cab. I stuck up my foot and reached for it and broke the window with the heel. I also think I hit him in the face."

"It seems as though he was down and out before I came up," said Triona.

"If you hadn't I don't [know] how I should have carried on," she confessed.

They walked down the wide, empty street. The moon shone high above them, the girl in her elegance, the man in his loose grey flannels and soft felt hat, an incongruous couple, save for their common air of alert youth. And while they walked she rapidly told her story. She had been to Percy's with the usual crowd, Lydia Dawlish her nominal chaperone. The man, Edwin Mavenna, a city friend of Sydney Rooke, whom she had met a half a dozen times, had offered to drive her home in his waiting taxi. Tired, dependent for transport on Rooke and Lydia, who desired a further hour of the night club's dismal jocundity, and angry with Bobby Quinton, who seemed to think that her ear had no other function than to listen to tales of sentimenti-financial woe, she had accepted. Half-way home she had begun to regret; three-quarters of the way she had been frightened. As they turned into Victoria Street she had managed to free her arm and wield the victorious slipper.

"I'll never go to that abominable place again as long as I live," she cried.

"I should, if I were you," he said quietly.

"Why?"

"I'd go once or twice, at any rate. To show yourself independent of it. To prove to yourself that you're not frightened of it."

"But I am frightened of it. On the outside it's as respectable as Medlow Parish Church on Sunday. But below the surface there's all sorts of hideousness—and I'm frightened."

"You're not," said he. "Things may startle you, infuriate you, put you off your equilibrium; but they don't frighten you. They didn't this evening. I've

seen too many people frightened in my time not to know. You're not that sort."

They had reached the door of the Mansions. She smiled at him, her gaiety returning.

"You're as comforting and consoling a Knight Errant as one could wish to meet. The damsel in distress is greatly beholden to you. But how the—whatever you like—you managed to time the rescue is beyond my comprehension."

"The stars guided me," he replied, with an upward sweep of the hand. "Mortals have striven to comprehend them for thousands of years—but without success. I started out to wander about this great city—I often do for hours—I'm a born wanderer—with the vagabond's aimlessness and trust in chance, or in the stars—and this time the stars brought me where it was decreed that I should be."

While he was speaking she had opened the door with her latchkey and now stood, shimmering white in the gloom of the entrance. She held out her hand.

"I'm afraid I've been too much occupied in trying not to seem frightened and silly to thank you decently for what you've done. But I am grateful. You don't know how grateful. I'll have to tell you some other time."

"To-morrow?" he asked eagerly.

She hesitated for a moment. "Yes, to-morrow," she replied softly. "I shall be in all day. Goodnight."

After the swift handshake the door closed on the enraptured young man, and the hard, characterless street, down which he seemed to dance, became transformed into a moonlit glade of fairyland.

It was four o'clock in the morning when he entered his back-bedroom at the Vanloo Hotel. But he did not sleep. He had no desire for sleep—youth resenting the veil drawn across a consciousness so exquisitely alive. Sleep, when the stars in their courses were fighting for him? Impossible, preposterous! Let him rather live, again and again, over the night's crowded adventure. Every detail of it set his pulses throbbing. The mere glorious first recognition of her was the thrill of a lifetime. He constructed and reconstructed the immortal picture. The moonlit, silent street, its high, decorous buildings marked by the feeble gas lamps melting into an indeterminate vanishing point. The clear-cut scene. The taxi-cab. The three human figures. The stunted driver. The massive, dark man, in silk hat which reflected the moonlight, in black overcoat thrown open, revealing a patch of white shirt and waistcoat; the slender, quivering, white form draped in white fur, white gossamer, white what-not, crowned with dark glory of eyes and hair. The masculine in him exulted in his physical strength and skill—in the clean, straight, elementary yet

scientific left-hander that got the hulking swine between the eyes and sent him reeling and sprawling and asking for no more punishment. And then—oh, it was a great thing to command, to impose his will. To walk in triumph off with the wonderful lady of his dreams. To feel, as she thanked him, that here was something definite that he had done for her, something with a touch of the romantic, the heroic, which, in its trivial way, justified belief in the incidents of his adventurous career which he had so modestly, yet so vividly described in the book that had brought him fame.

On this point of justification he was peculiarly sensitive. Various Englishmen, soldiers sent out on secret missions to the fringes of the areas of his activities, had questioned many of his statements, both in the book and in descriptive articles which he had written for newspapers and other periodicals, and asked for proofs. And he had replied, most cogently, that the sphere of the Russian Secret Service in which he was employed was, of necessity, beyond the ken of the secret service of any other Power in Europe, and that official proofs were lost in the social and political disintegration of Russia. One man, a great man, speaking with unquestionable authority, silenced the horde of cavillers as far as events prior to 1917 were concerned. But there were still some who barked annoyingly at his heels. Proofs, of course, he had none to give. How can a man give proofs when he is cast up, practically naked, on the coast of England? He must be believed or not. And it was the haunting terror of this sensitive boy of genius, whose face and eyes bore the ineffaceable marks of suffering, that he should lose the credit which he had gained.

At all hazards he must allow no doubts to arise in the mind of Olivia. To fight them down he would do all manner of extravagant things. He regretted the pusillanimous tameness of his late opponent. If the man had only picked himself up and given battle! If only there had been half a dozen abductors or insulters instead of one! His spirits (at seven o'clock) sank at the logical conclusion that the conventional conditions of post-war civilized life afforded a meagre probability of the recurrence of such another opportunity. He had the temperament of those whose hunger is only whetted by triumph, to whom attainment only gives vision of new heights. When, after tossing sleepless in his bed, he rose and dressed at nine, he had decided that, in knocking down a mere mass of unresisting flesh, he had played a part almost inglorious, such as any stay-at-home *embusqué* could have played. By not one jot or tittle did his act advance the credibility of his story. And on his story alone could he found his hopes of finding favour in her marvellous eyes. Of the touch of genius that inspired his literary work he thought little. At this stage of his career he was filled with an incredulous wonder at his possession of a knack which converted a page of scribble into a cheque upon a bank. His writing meant money. Not

money, wealth, on the grand scale; but money to keep him as a modest gentleman on the social grade to which he had attained, and to save him from the detested livery of the chauffeur. The story which he was telling in the new book was but a means to this end. The story which he had told was life itself. Nay, now it was more: it was love itself; it was a girl who was more than life.

He called at the Victoria Street flat at twelve o'clock. The austere Myra looked on him disapprovingly. Tea-time was the visiting time for stray young men, and even then she conveyed to them the impression that she let them in on sufferance.

"What name?" she asked.

"Mr. Triona."

"Miss Gale is in, sir," she admitted grudgingly, having received explicit orders from Olivia, "but she is dressing and I don't know whether she can see you."

"Will you tell Miss Gale that I am entirely at her service, and if it's inconvenient for her to see me now I'll call later."

Myra left him standing in the little vestibule and gave the message to Olivia, who, fully dressed, was polishing her nails in her bedroom.

"You're the most impossible woman on earth," Olivia declared, turning on her. "Is that the way you would treat a man who had delivered you from a dragon?"

"I don't hold with men and I don't hold with dragons," replied Myra unmoved. "The next time you'll be wanting me to fall over a dragon who has delivered you from a man!"

Olivia scarcely listened to the retort. She flew out and carried the waiting Triona into the sitting-room.

"I'm so sorry. My maid's a terror. She bites and doesn't bark. But I guarantee her non-venomous. How good of you to come so early."

"I was anxious," said Triona.

"About what?"

"Last night must have been a shock."

"Of course it was," she laughed; "but not enough to keep me all day long in fainting fits with doctors and smelling-bottles."

"I hope you slept all right."

"No," she replied frankly. "That I didn't do. The adventure was a bit too exciting. Besides——"

"Besides what?"

“It came into my head to make up my moral balance sheet. Figures of arithmetic always send me to sleep; but figures of—well, of that kind of thing, don’t you know—keep me broad awake.”

Olivia’s dark, eager face was of the kind that shows the traces of fatigue in faint shadows under the eyes. He swiftly noted them and cried out:

“You’re dead tired. It’s damnable.” He rose, suddenly angry. “You ought to go to bed at once. Your maid was right. I had no business to come at this hour and disturb you.”

“If you hadn’t come,” said Olivia, inwardly glowing at the tribute paid by the indignant youth, “I should have imagined that you looked on last night’s affair as a trumpery incident in the day’s work and went to bed and forgot all about it.”

“That’s impossible,” said he. “I, too, haven’t slept a wink.”

She met and held his eyes longer than she, or anyone else, had held them. Then, half angrily, she felt her cheeks grow hot and red.

“For you, who have faced death a hundred times, last night, as I’ve just said, must be even dull. What was it to the night when you—you know—the sentry—when you were unarmed and you fought with him and you killed him with his own bayonet?”

He snapped his fingers and smiled. “That was unimportant. Whether I lived or died didn’t matter to anybody. It didn’t matter much to me. It was sheer animal instinct. But last night it was you. And that makes a universe of difference.”

Olivia rose, and, with a “You’re not smoking,” offered him a box of cigarettes.

“Yes,” she said, when he had lighted it, with fingers trembling ever so slightly as they held the match, “I suppose a woman does make a difference. We’re always in the way, somehow. Women and children first. Why they don’t throw us overboard at once and let the really useful people save themselves, I could never make out.”

His air of dismay was that of a devotee listening to a saint blaspheme. Her laughter rippled, music to his ears.

“Do you know what I should like to do? Get out of London for a few hours and fill my lungs with air. Richmond Park, for instance.”

“I, too.” He sighed. “If only I had a car!”

“There are such things as motor-buses.”

He sprang to delighted feet. His divinity on a bus top! It was like the Paphian goddess condescending from her dove-drawn chariot to the joggle of a

four-wheeler cab.

"Would you really go on one?"

She would. She would start forthwith. The time only to put on a hat. She left him to his heart-beats of happiness, presently to re-appear, hatted, gloved, and smiling.

"You're quite sure you would like to come? Your work?"

"My work needs the open air as much as I do," said he.

They went forth, boy and girl on a jaunt, and side by side on the top of the omnibus they gave themselves up to the laughter of the pure sunshine. At Richmond they lunched, for youth must be fed, and afterwards went through the streets of the old town, and stood on the bridge watching the exquisite curve of the river embosomed in the very newest of new greenery, and let its loveliness sink into their hearts. Then they wandered deep into the Park and found a tree from beneath which they could see the deer browsing in the shade; and there they sat, happy in their freedom and isolation. What they said, most of the time, was no great matter. Of the two, perhaps she talked the more; for he had said:

"I am so tired of talking about myself. I have been obliged to, so that it has become a professional habit. And what there is to be known about me, you know. But you—you who have lived such a different life from mine—I know so little of you. In fact, I've known nothing of English women such as you. You're a mystery. Tell me about yourself."

So she had begun:

"Well, I was born—I shan't tell you the year—of poor but honest parents ——"

And then, led on by his eager sympathy and his intimate knowledge of her home, she had abandoned the jesting note and talked simply and frankly of her secluded and eventless life. With feminine guile, and with last night's newborn mistrust of men, she set a little trap.

"Did you ever go into my mother's room?"

"I don't think so. Perhaps that was the one—the best bedroom—which Olifant always kept locked."

She felt ashamed of her unworthy suspicion; glad at the loyal keeping of a promise, to the extent of not allowing a visitor even a peep inside the forbidden chamber.

"I think Blaise Olifant is one of the finest types England breeds," she said warmly.

There was a touch of jealous fear in his swift glance; but he replied with

equal warmth:

"You needn't tell me that. Brave, modest, of sensitive honour—Ah! A man with a mind so cultivated that he seems to know nothing until you talk with him, and then you find that he knows everything. I love him."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Why? Do you admire him so much?"

"It isn't that," she parried. "It's on your account. One man's generous praise of another does one's heart good." She threw out her arms as though to embrace the rolling park of infinite sward and majestic trees. "I love big things," she said.

Whereupon Alexis Triona thanked his stars for having led him along the true path.

Who can say that, in after years, these twain, when they shall have grown old and have gone through whatever furnaces Fate—either personal destiny or the Fate of Social Institutions—may prepare for them, will not retain imperishable memories of the idyll of that sweet spring day? There they sat, youth spiritually communing with youth; the girl urged by feminine instinct to love him for the dangers he had passed; the young man aflame with her beauty, her charm, her dryad elusiveness. Here, for him, was yet another aspect of her, free, unseizable in the woodland setting. And for her, another aspect of him, the simple, clean-cut Englishman, divested of vague and disquieting Russian citizenship, the perfect companion, responsive to every chord struck by the spirit of the magic afternoon. In the years to come, who can say that they will not remember this sweet and delicate adventure of their souls creeping forth in trembling reconnaissance one of the other? Perhaps it will be a more precious memory to the woman than to the man. Men do not lay things up in lavender as women do.

If he had spoken, declared his passion in lover's set terms, perhaps her heart might have been caught by the glamour of it all, and she might have surrendered to his kisses, and they might have journeyed back to London in a state of unreprehensible yet commonplace beatitude. And the memory would possibly have been marked by a white stone rising stark in an airless distance. But he did not speak, held back by a rare reverence of her maidenhood and her perfect trust; and in her heart flowered gratitude for his sensitiveness to environment. So easy for a maladroit touch to mar the perfection of an exquisite hour of blue mist and mystery. So, again, who knows but that in the years to come the memory will be marked by a fragrance, a shimmer of leaves, a haze over green sward, incorporated impalpably with the dear ghost of an immortal day?

They returned on the top of the omnibus, rather late, and on the way they spoke little. Now and then he glanced sideways at her and met her eyes and caught her smile, and felt content. At the terminus of the omnibus route, in the raging, busy precincts of the stations of Victoria, they alighted. He walked with her to her door in Victoria Street.

"Your words have been singing in my ears," said he: " 'I love big things.' To me, to-day has seemed a big thing."

"And I've loved it," she replied.

"True?"

"True."

She sped up to her room somewhat dazed, conscious of need to keep her balance. So much had happened in the last four-and-twenty hours. The shudder of the night had still horrified her flesh when she drew the young man out into the wide daylight and the open air; and now it had passed away, as though it had never been, and a new quivering of youth, taking its place, ran like laughter through her bodily frame and her heart and her mind.

"H'm. Your outing seems to have done you good," said the impassive Myra, letting her in.

"My first day's escape from a fœtid prison," she said.

"I suppose you know what you're talking about," said Myra.

Olivia laughed and threw her arm round Myra's lean shoulders.

"Of course I do."

"He ain't much to look at."

Olivia, flushing, turned on her.

"I never knew a more abominable woman."

"Then you're lucky," retorted Myra, and faded away into her kitchen.

Olivia, mirthful, uplifted, danced, as it were, into the sitting-room and began to pull off her gloves. Suddenly her glance fell on a letter lying on her writing table. She frowned slightly as she opened it, and as she read the frown grew deeper. It was from Bobby Quinton. What his dearest of dear ladies would think of him he left on the joint knees of the gods and of his dearest lady —but—but the wolves were at his heels. He had thrown them all that he possessed—fur coat, watch and chain, diamond studs, and, having gulped them all, they were still in fierce pursuit. In a fortnight would he have ample funds to satisfy them. But now he was at bay. He apologized for the mixture of metaphor. But still, there he was *aux abois*. Fifty pounds, just for a fortnight. Could the dearest of dear ladies see her way——-?

She went to her desk and wrote out a cheque which she enclosed in an envelope. To save her soul alive she could not have written Bobby Quinton an accompanying line.

CHAPTER IX

HERE, all in a rush of twenty-four hours, was a glut of incident for a young woman out for adventure. Triona had only made his effect on the romantically feminine within Olivia by his triumphant rescue. As to that he need have no misgivings. So once did Andromeda see young Perseus, calm and assured, deliver her from the monster. Triona's felling of Mavenna appealed to the lingering savage woman fiercely conscious of wrong avenged; but his immediate and careless mastery of the situation struck civilized chords. She could see him dominating the sheepskin-clad tribe in the Urals (see *Through Blood and Snow*) until he established their independence in their mountain fastness. She could see him, masterful, resourceful, escaping from the Bolshevik prison and making his resistless way across a hostile continent. She could also appreciate, after this wonder-day at Richmond, the suppleness of his simple charm which won him food and shelter where food scarcely existed and shelter to a stranger was a matter of shooting or a bashing in of heads.

As for Mavenna, her flesh still shuddered at the memory of those few moments of insult. What he said she could scarcely remember. The inextricable clutch of his great arms around her body and the detestable kisses eclipsed mere words. Unwittingly his hug had compressed her throat so that she could not scream. There had been nothing for it but the slipper unhooked by the free arm, and the doughty heel. Had she won through alone to her room, she would have collapsed—so she assured herself—from sickening horror. But the Deliverer had been there, as in a legend of Greece or Broceliande, and had saved her from the madness of the nymph terror stricken by Satyrs. The two extravagances had, in a way, counteracted each other, setting her, by the morning, in a normal equilibrium. She had tried to explain the phenomenon by referring to her having spent the night in striking a moral balance-sheet. And then had come the day, the wonderful day, in which the Deliverer had proved himself the perfect, gentle Knight. Can it be wondered that her brain swam with him?

She went the next morning to Lydia's hat shop, and, in the little room which Sydney Brooke had called her cubby hole, a nine-foot-square boudoir office, reeking with Lydia's scent and with Heaven knows what scandals and vulgarities and vanities of post-war London, she poured out her tale of outrage. After listening with indulgent patience, Lydia remarked judicially:

"I told you, my dear child, when you came to London, that the first lesson you had to learn was to take care of yourself."

Olivia flashed. She had taken care of herself well enough. But that brute Mavenna—what about him?

"Everybody knows Mavenna," replied Lydia. "No girl in her senses would have trusted herself alone with him."

"And, with that reputation, he's a friend of yours and Sydney's?"

Lydia shrugged her plump shoulders.

"Really, my dear, if one exacted certificates of lamb-like innocence, signed by a high celestial official, before you admitted anyone into the circle of your acquaintance, you might as well go and live on a desert island."

"But this man's a beast and you've known it all along!" cried Olivia.

"Only in one way."

"But—my God! Isn't that enough?" Olivia stood, racked with disgust and amazement, over her mild-eyed, philosophic friend. "What would you have done if you had been in my place?"

"I could never have been in your place," said Lydia. "I should have been too wise."

"How?"

"The knowledge of men, my dear, is the beginning of wisdom."

"And I ought to have known?"

"Of course. At any rate, you'll know in the future."

"I shall. You may be dead certain I shall," declared Olivia, in her anger and excitement seizing a puckered and pleated cushion from the divan by which she stood. "And if even I—−-"

"Don't, darling; you'll tear it," said Lydia calmly.

Olivia heaved the cushion back impatiently.

"What I want to know is this. Are you and Sydney going to remain friends with Mavenna?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to," replied Lydia. "Mavenna and Sydney are in all sorts of big things together."

"Well, when next you see him, Lydia, look well into his face and ask him what he thinks of the heel of my slipper and Mr. Triona's fist. He's not only a beast. He's a worm. When I think of him picking himself up, after being knocked down by a man half his size——" She laughed a bit hysterically. "Oh—the creature is outside the pale!"

Lydia shook her fair head. "I'm sorry for you, my dear. But he's inside all right."

“Then I’m not going to be inside with him!” cried Olivia.

And, like a little dark dust storm, she swirled out of the office and, through the shop, into the freedom and spaciousness of the streets. And that, for Olivia, was the end of night clubs and dancing as a serious aim in life, and a host of other vanities.

A few mornings afterwards Lydia sailed into the flat and greeted Olivia as though nothing had happened. She seemed to base her philosophy of life on obliteration of the past, yesterday being as dead as a winter’s day of sixty years ago. Would Olivia lunch with Sydney and herself at some riverside club? Sydney, having collected Mauregard, would be calling for them with the car. The day was fine and warm; the prospect of the cool lawn reaching down to the plashing river allured, and she liked Mauregard. Besides, she had begun to take a humorous view of Lydia. She consented. Lydia began to talk of her wedding, fixed for the middle of July, of the clothes that she had and the clothes that she hadn’t—the ratio of the former to the latter being that of a loin-cloth to the stock of Selfridge’s. When she was serious minded, Lydia always expressed herself in terms of raiment.

“And you’ll have to get some things, too, as you’re going to be bridesmaid.”

“Am I?” asked Olivia, this being the first she had heard of it. “And who’s going to be best man—Mavenna?”

Lydia looked aghast. So might a band of primitive Christians have received a suggestion of inviting the ghost of Pontius Pilate to a commemorative supper.

“My dear child, you don’t suppose we’re going to ask that horror to the wedding?”

“The other day,” Olivia remarked drily, “I understood that you and Sydney loved him dearly.”

Lydia sighed. “I’m beginning to believe that you’ll never understand anything.”

So the breach, if breach there were, was healed. Olivia, relating the matter to Triona at their next meeting, qualified Lydia’s attitude as one of callous magnanimity.

Meanwhile her intimacy with the young man began to ripen.

One evening Janet Philimore invited her to dine at the Russian circle of a great womans’ club, which was entertaining Triona at dinner. This was the first time she had seen him in his character of modest lion; the first time, too, she had been in a company of women groping, however clumsily, after ideals in

unsyncopated time. The thin girl next to her, pretty enough, thought Olivia, if only she had used a powder puff to mitigate the over-assertiveness of a greasy skin, and had given less the impression of having let out her hair to a bird for nesting purposes, and had only seized the vital importance of colour—the untrue greeny daffodil of her frock not being the best for a sallow complexion—the girl next to her, Agnes Blenkiron, started a hectic conversation by enquiring what she was going to do in Baby Week. The more ignorant Olivia professed herself to be of babies and their antecedents, especially the latter, the more indignantly explicit became Miss Blenkiron. Olivia listened until she had creepy sensations around the roots of her hair and put up an instinctive hand to assure herself that it was not standing on end. Miss Blenkiron talked feminist physiology, psychology, sociological therapeutics, until Olivia's brain reeled. Over and over again she tried to turn to her hostess, who fortunately had a pleasant male and middle-aged neighbour, but the fair lady, without mercy, had her in thrall. She learned that all the two or three thousand members of the club were instinct with these theories and their aims. She struggled to free herself from the spell.

"I thought we were here to talk about Russia," she ventured.

"But we are talking about Russia." Miss Blenkiron shed on her the lambency of her pale blue eyes. "The future of the human race lies in the hands of the millions of Russian babies lying in the bodies of millions of Russian women just waiting to be born."

A flash of the devil saved Olivia from madness.

"That's a gigantic conception," she said.

"It is," Miss Blenkiron agreed, unhumorously, and continued her work of propaganda, so that by the time the speeches began Olivia found herself committed to the strenuous toil of a lifetime as a member of she knew not what societies. The only clear memory she retained was that of a tea engagement some Sunday in a North London garden city where Miss Blenkiron and her brother frugally entertained the advanced thinkers of the day.

In spite of the sense of release from something vampiric, when the speeches hushed general conversation, she recognized that the strange talk had been revealing and stimulating, and she brought a quickened intelligence to the comprehension of the gathering. To all these women the present state of the upheaved world was of vast significance. In Lydia's galley no one cared a pin about it, save Sydney Rooke, who cursed it for its interference with his income. But here, as was clearly conveyed in the opening remarks of the chairwoman, a novelist of distinction, every one was intellectually concerned with its infinite complexity of aspect. To them, the guest of the evening,

emerging as he had done from the dizzying profundities of the whirlpool, was a figure of uncanny interest.

"It's the first-hand knowledge of men like him that is vital," Miss Blenkiron whispered when the chairwoman sat down. "I should so much like to meet him."

"Would you?" said Olivia. "That's easily managed. He's a great friend of mine."

And she was subridently conscious of having acquired vast and sudden merit in her neighbour's eyes.

Triona pleased her beyond expectation. The function, so ordinary to public-dinner-going London, was new to her. She magnified the strain that commonplace, even though sincere, adulation could put upon a guest of honour. She felt a twinge of apprehension when he stood up, in his loose boyish way, and brushing his brown hair from his temples, began to speak. But in a moment or two all such feelings vanished. He spoke to this assembly of a hundred, mostly women, much as, in moments of enthusiasm, he would speak to her. And, indeed, often catching her eye, he did speak to her, subtly and flatteringly bringing her to his side. Her heart beat a bit faster when, glancing around and seeing every one hanging on his words, she realized that she alone, of all this little multitude, held a golden key to the mystery of the real man. There he talked, with the familiar sway of the shoulders, and, when seeking for a phrase, with the nervous plucking of his lips; talked in his nervous, picturesque fashion, now and then with a touch of the poet, consistently modest, only alluding to personal experience to illustrate a point or to give verisimilitude to a jest. He developed his feminist theme logically, dramatically, proving beyond argument that the future of civilization lay in the hands of the women of the civilized world.

He had a great success. Woman, although she knows it perfectly well, loves to be told what she wants and the way to get it: she will never follow the way, of course, having a tortuous, thorny, and enticing way of her own; but that doesn't matter. The principle, the end, that is the thing: it justifies any amazing means. He sat down amid enthusiastic applause. Flushed, he sought Olivia's distant gaze and smiled. Then she felt, thrillingly, that he had been speaking for her, for her alone, and her eyes brightened and flashed him a proud message.

She met him a while later in the thronged drawing-room of the club, rather a shy and embarrassed young man, heading a distinct course toward her through a swarm of kind yet predatory ladies. She admired the simple craftsmanship of his approach.

“How are you going to get home?” he asked.

The adorable carelessness of twenty shrugged its shoulders.

“I don’t know. The Lord will provide.”

“If you can’t find a taxi, will you walk?”

The question implied a hope, so obvious that she laughed gaily.

“There are buses also and tubes.”

“In which you can’t travel alone at this time of night.”

She scoffed: “Oh, can’t I?” But his manifest fear that she should encounter satyrs in train or omnibus pleased her greatly.

“Father’s dining at his club close by and is calling for me. He will see that you get home safely,” said Janet Philimore.

“It’s miles out of your way, dear,” said Olivia. “I’ll put myself in the hands of Mr. Triona.”

So, taxis being unfindable, they walked together through the warm London night to Victoria Street. It was then that he spoke of his work, the novel just completed. Of all opinions on earth, hers was the one he most valued. If only he could read it to her and have the priceless benefit of her judgment. Secretly flattered, she modestly depreciated, however, her critical powers. He persisted, attributing to her unsuspected qualities of artistic perception. At last, not reluctantly, she yielded. He could begin the next evening.

The reading took some days. Olivia, new to creative work, marvelled exceedingly at the magic of the artist’s invention. The personages of the drama, imaginary he said, lived as real beings. She regarded their creation as uncanny.

“But how do you know she felt like that?”

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “I can’t conceive her feeling otherwise.”

Yet, for all her wonder, she brought her swift intelligence to the task of criticism. Not since her mother’s illness had she taken anything so seriously. She lived in the book, walking meanwhile through an unreal world. Her golden words, on the other hand, the young man captured eagerly and set down in the margin of the manuscript. Half-way through the reading, they were on terms of Christian names. Minds so absorbed in an artistic pursuit grew impatient of absurd formalities of address. They slipped almost imperceptibly into the Olivia and Alexis habit. At the end they pulled themselves up rather sharply, with blank looks at an immediate future bereft of common interest.

“I’ll have to begin another, right away, so that you can be with me from the

very start," he said.

"Have you an idea?"

"Not yet."

"When will you have one?"

He didn't know. What man spent with the creative effort of a novel has the vitality to beget another right away? He feels that the very last drop of all that he has known and suffered and enjoyed has been used to the making of the book. For the making of another nothing is left.

"I suppose I'll have to lie fallow for a week or so," said the young optimist.

"And as soon as things begin to sprout you'll let me know?" asked Olivia, forgetful that before harvest there must be seed time.

He promised; went home and cudgelled tired brains; also cudgelled, for different reasons, an untired and restless soul.

Let him make good, not ephemerally as the picturesque narrator of personal adventure, but definitely, with this novel as the creative artist—the fervent passion of his life—and he would establish himself in her eyes, in her mind, in her heart; so that treading solid ground, he could say to her: "This is what I am, and for what I am, take me. All that has gone before was but a crude foundation. I had to take such rubbish and rubble as I could find to hand." But until then, let him regard her as a divinity beyond his reach, rendering her service and worship, but forbearing to soil her white robe with a touch as yet unhallowed.

Many a time, they could have read no more that day. Just one swift movement, glance or cry on the part of the man, and the pulses of youth would have throbbed wildly together. He knew it. The knowledge was at once his Heaven and his Hell. A less sensitive human being would not have appreciated the quivering and vital equipoise. Many a time he parted from her with the farewell of comradely intimacy on his lips, and when the lift had deposited him on the street level his heart had been like lead and his legs as water, so that he stumbled out into the lamp-lit dark of night like a paralytic or a drunken man.

And that which was good in him warred fiercely against temptations more sordid. As far as he knew, she was a woman of fortune. So did her dress, her habit of life, her old comfort-filled Medlow home, proclaim her. Of her social standing as the daughter of Stephen Gale who bawled out bids for yelts and rams in the Medlow market place, he knew or understood very little. Her fortune was a fact. His own, the few hundreds which he had gained by *Through Blood and Snow*, was rapidly disappearing. The failure of the new book meant starvation or reversion to Cherbury Mews. Married to a woman

with money he could snap his fingers at crust or livery. . . . For the time he conquered.

The end of the reading coincided more or less with Midsummer quarter-day. Bills from every kind of coverer or adorner of the feminine human frame fell upon her like a shower of autumn leaves. She sat at her small writing desk, jotted down the amounts, and added them up with a much sucked pencil point. The total was incredible. With fear at her heart she rushed round to her bank for a note of her balance. It had woefully decreased since January. Payment of all these bills would deplete it still more woefully. The rent of "The Towers" and the diminishing income on the deposit account were trivial items set against her expenditure. She summoned Myra.

"We're heading for bankruptcy."

"Any fool could see that," said Myra.

"What are we going to do?"

"Live like Christians instead of heathens," replied Myra. "If you would come to Chapel with me one Sunday night you could be taught how."

Here Myra failed. She belonged to a Primitive Non-Conformist Communion whose austere creed and drab ceremonial had furnished occasion for Olivia's teasing wit since childhood. Heathendom, ever divorced from Lydian pleasures, presented infinitely more reasons for existence than Myra's Calvinism.

"It seems funny that a dear old thing like you can revel in the idea of Eternal Punishment."

"I haven't got much else to revel in, have I?" said Myra grimly.

"I suppose that's true," said Olivia thoughtfully. "But it isn't my fault, is it? If you had wanted to revel, mother and I would have been the last people to prevent you. Why not begin now? Go and have a debauch at the pictures."

"You began by talking of bankruptcy," said Myra.

"And you prescribed little Bethel. I'd sooner go broke."

"You'll have your own way, as usual," said Myra.

"And if I go broke, what'll you do?" asked Olivia, unregenerately enjoying the conversation.

"I suppose I'll have to put you together again," replied Myra, with no sign of emotion on her angular, withered face.

Olivia leaped from her chair.

"I'm a beast."

"That can't be," said Myra, "seeing that it was I as brought you up."

That was the end of the argument. Olivia recognized in Myra every useful quality save that of the financier. She dismissed Myra from her counsels. But the state of her budget cost her a sleepless night or two. At the present rate of expenditure a couple of years would see her penniless. For the first time since her emancipation from Medlow fetters she had the feeling of signing her own death-warrant on every cheque. Heroic resolves were born of these days of depression.

As a climax to her worries, came Bobby Quinton, one afternoon. What had he done to offend his dearest of ladies? Why had she stopped the dancing lessons? Why did Percy's see her no more?

"I'm fed up with Percy's and the whole gang," said Olivia.

"Not including me, surely?" cried the young man, with a dog's appeal in his melting brown eyes.

She was kind. At first, she had not the heart to pack him off to the froth and scum of social life to which he belonged. He had the charm of unsuccessful youth so pathetic in woman's eyes.

"If you are," said he, "I'm done for. I've no one to look to but you, in the wide world."

Here was responsibility for the safety of a human soul. Olivia gave him sound advice, repeating many an old argument and feeling enjoyably maternal. But when Bobby grew hysterical, and, with mutation of sex, quoted the Indian Love Lyrics and professed himself prepared to die beneath her chariot wheels, and threatened to do so if she disregarded his burning passion, she admonished him after the manner of twentieth-century maidenhood.

"My good Bobby, don't be an ass."

But Bobby persisted in being an ass, with the zeal of the dement. He became the fervent lover of the cinquecento Bandello—and, with his dark eyes and hair, looked the part. Imploring he knelt at the feet of the divinity.

"That's all very well, my dear boy," said Olivia, unmoved by his rhapsody, "all very nice and all very beautiful. But what do you want me to do?"

Of course he wanted her to marry him, there and then: to raise him from the Hell he was in to the Heaven where she had her pure habitation. With her he could do great things. He guaranteed splendid achievements.

"Before a woman marries a man," said Olivia, "she rather wants an achievement or two on account."

"Then you don't love me, you don't trust me?" exclaimed the infatuated young man, ruffling his sleek black hair.

“I can’t say that I do,” replied Olivia, growing weary. “If you tell me what sort of fascination you possess, I’ll give it due consideration.”

“Then I may as well go away and blow my brains out,” he cried tragically.

“You might better go and use such brains as you have in doing a man’s work,” retorted Olivia.

He reproached her mournfully.

“How unkind you are.”

“If you came here as a window-cleaner or a lift porter I might be kinder. You’re quite a nice boy,” she went on after a pause, “otherwise I shouldn’t have anything to do with you. But you haven’t begun to learn the elements of life. You’re utterly devoid of the sense of duty or responsibility. Like the criminal, you know. Oh, don’t get angry. I’m talking to you for your good. Pretending to teach idle women worthless dancing isn’t a career for a man. It’s contemptible. Every man—especially nowadays—ought to pull his weight in the world. The war’s not over. The real war is only just beginning. Instead of pulling your weight you think it’s your right to sit on a cushion, a passenger—or a Pekie dog—and let other people pull you.”

“You don’t understand——”

“Oh, yes I do. One has to live, and at first we take any old means to hand. But you’ve been going on at this for a couple of years and haven’t tried to get out of it. You like it, Bobby——”

“I loathe it.”

“You don’t,” she went on remorselessly, with her newly acquired knowledge of what a man’s life could be. “All you loathe is the work—especially when it doesn’t bring you in as much money as you want. You hate work.”

Resentment gradually growing out of amusement at his presumptuous proposal had wrought her to a pitch of virtuous indignation. Here was this young man, of cultivated manners, intelligent, able-bodied, attractive, rejecting any kind of mission in existence, and——

“Look here, Bobby,” she said, rising from her chair by the tea-table and dominating him with a little gesture, “don’t get up. You sit there. You’ve asked me to marry you, because you think I’m rich. Hold your tongue,” she flashed, as he was about to speak. “I’ll take all the love and that sort of thing for granted. But if I was poor you wouldn’t have thought of it. At the back of your mind you imagine that if I married you, we could lead a life of Percy’s and the Savoy and Monte Carlo and the South Sea Islands, and you needn’t do another stroke of work all your life long.”

He leaned forward in his chair protesting eagerly that it wasn't true. He would marry her to-morrow were she penniless. She had his salvation soul and body in her hands. He hungered for work; but the coils of his present life had a strangle-hold on him. Suddenly he rose and advanced a step towards her.

"Listen, Olivia. If you won't marry me, will you help me in other ways? I'm desperate. You think you know something about the world. But you don't. I'm up against it. It may mean prison. For the love of God lend me a couple of hundred pounds."

The ugly word prison sent a stab through her heart; but immediately afterwards the common-sense of her Gale ancestry told her either that he was lying, or, if it were true, that he deserved it. She asked coldly:

"What have you been doing?"

"I can't tell you," he said. "You must trust me."

"But I don't and that is why I can't lend you two hundred pounds."

"You refuse?"

His soft voice became a snarl and his lip curled unpleasantly back beneath the little silky moustache.

"Of course I do."

"I don't know how you dare, after all the encouragement you've given me."

She stared at him aghast. "Encouragement?"

"Yes. Didn't you make me dance attendance on you at Brighton? Haven't you brought me here over and over again? You've behaved damnably to me. You've made me waste my time. I've turned other women who would have only been too glad——"

In horror, she flew to the door and threw it open.

"Go," she said.

And speeding across the hall she threw open the flat door.

"Go," she said again.

She crossed the landing and rang the lift bell and returned to the hall, where he met her and threw himself on his knees and looked up at her with wild, hunted eyes.

"Forgive me, Olivia. For God's sake forgive me. I was mad. I didn't know what I was saying. Shut that door and I'll tell you everything."

But Olivia passed him by into the sitting-room, and stood with her back against the door until she heard the clash of the lift gates and the retreating footsteps of Bobby Quinton.

A short while ago she had nearly quarrelled with Mauregard because, in a wordy dissertation on the modern young men who lived on women, he instanced Bobby as possibly coming within the category. Now she knew that Mauregard was right. She felt sick. Also deadly ashamed of her superior attitude of well-meant reprimand. She burned with the consciousness of tongue in cheek while he listened. Well, that was the end of the Lydian galley.

She did not recover till the next afternoon, when Triona called to take her to the Blenkirons' Sunday intellectual symposium in Fielder's Park. She welcomed him impulsively with both hands outstretched, as a justification of her faith in mankind.

"You can't tell how glad I am to see you."

"And you," said he, kissing first one hand and then the other, "can't tell how good I think God is to me."

CHAPTER X

HE brought great news. Not only had his publishers thought well of the novel and offered him good terms, including a substantial advance, but they professed themselves able to place it serially in England for a goodly sum. They had also shown him the figures of the half-yearly returns on American sales of *Through Blood and Snow* which transcended his dreams of opulence.

"I had forgotten America," he said naïvely.

"You're nothing, if not original," she laughed. "That's what I like about you."

He insisted on the wild extravagance of a taxi to the garden city. All that money he declared had gone to his head. He felt the glorious intoxication of wealth. When they were about to turn off the safe highway into devious garden-city paths, he said:

"Let us change our minds and go straight on to John o' Groats."

"All right. Let us. We're on the right road."

He swerved towards her. "Would you? Really?"

She opened her bag and took out her purse.

"I've got fifteen and sevenpence. How much have you?"

"About three pounds ten."

She sighed. "This unromantic taxi man would charge us at least five pounds to take us there."

"We can turn back and fill our pockets at the bank."

"It's Sunday."

"I never before realized the blight of the British Sabbath."

"So we're condemned to Fielder's Park."

"But one of these days we'll go, you and I together, to John o' Groats—as far as we can and then——"

"And then?"

"And then we'll take a ship and sail and sail until we come to the Fortunate Isles."

"You'll let Myra come too?" said Olivia, deliciously anxious to keep to the playful side of an inevitable road.

"Of course. We'll find her a husband. The cabin-boy. *Pour mousse un*

chérubin."

"And when we get to the Fortunate Isles, what should we do there?"

"We shall fill our souls with sunlight, so that we could use it when we came back to our work in this dark and threatening modern world."

The girl's heart leapt at the reply.

"I'll go up to John o' Groats with you whenever you like," she said.

But the taxi, at that moment drawing up before the detached toy villa, whose "Everdene" painted on the green garden gate proclaimed the home of the Blenkirons, inhibited Triona's reply.

They found within an unbeautiful assemblage of humans inextricably mingled with crumbling cake and sloppy cups of tea and cigarette smoke. Agnes, shining with heat and hospitality, gave them effusive welcome and, extricating her brother from a distant welter, introduced him to the newcomers. He was a flabby-faced young man with a back-thatch of short rufous hair surmounting a bald forehead. By his ears grew little patches of side whiskers. He wore an old unbuttoned Norfolk jacket and a red tie in a soft collar without an under pin. He greeted them with an enveloping clammy hand.

"So good of you to come, Miss Gale. So glad to meet you, Mr. Triona. We have heard so much about you. You will find us here all very earnest in our endeavour to find a Solution—for never has human problem been so intricate that a Solution has not been discovered."

"What's the problem?" asked Olivia.

"Why, my dear lady, there's only one. The Way Out—or, if you have faith—The Way In." He caught a lean, thin-bearded man by the arm. "Dawkins, let me introduce you to Miss Gale. Mr. Dawkins is our *rapporteur*."

"You haven't any tea," said Dawkins rebukingly, as though bidden to a marriage feast she had no wedding garment. "Come with me."

He frayed her a passage through the chattering swarm that over-filled the little bow-windowed sitting-room and provided her with what seemed to be the tepid symbols of the brotherhood.

"What did you think of Roger's article in this week's *Signal*?"

"Who is Roger, and what is *The Signal*?" Olivia asked simply.

Dawkins stared at her for a second and then, deliberately turning, wormed his path away.

Olivia's gasp of surprise was followed by a gurgle of laughter which shook her lifted cup so that it spilled. The sight of a stained skirt drew from her a sharp exclamation of dismay. Agnes Blenkiron disengaging herself from the

cluster round the tea-table came to the rescue. What was the matter? Olivia explained.

"Oh, my dear," said Agnes, "I ought to have told you. It's my fault. Dawkins is such a touchy old thing. Roger, of course, is my brother—didn't you know? And *The Signal* is our weekly. Dawkins is the editor."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Olivia, "but ought I to read *The Signal*?"

"Why, of course," replied Agnes Blenkiron intensely. "Everybody ought to read it. It's the only periodical that matters in London."

Olivia felt the remorse of those convicted of an unpardonable crime.

"I'll get a copy to-morrow at the bookstall at Victoria Station."

Agnes smiled in her haggard way. "My dear, an organ like *The Signal* doesn't lie on the bookstalls, like *Comic Cuts* or *The Fortnightly Review*. It's posted to private subscribers, or it's given away at meetings."

"Who pays for the printing of it?" asked the practical Olivia, who had learned from Triona something of the wild leap in cost of printed matter.

"Aubrey Dawkins finds the money. He gets it in the City. He has given up his heart and soul to *The Signal*."

"I've made an enemy for life," said Olivia penitently.

Miss Blenkiron reassured her. "Oh, no you haven't. We haven't time for enemy making here. Our business is too important."

Olivia in a maze asked:

"What is your business?"

"Why, my dear child, the Social Revolution. Didn't you know?"

"Not a bit," said Olivia.

She learned many astonishing things that afternoon, as she was swayed about from introduction to introduction among the eagerly disputing groups. Hitherto she had thought, with little comprehension, of the world-spread social unrest. Strikes angered her because they interfered with necessary reconstruction and only set the working classes in a vicious circle chasing high wages and being chased in their turn by high prices. At other demands she shuddered, dimly dreading the advent of Bolshevism. And there she left it. She had imagined that revolutionary doctrines were preached to factory hands either secretly by rat-faced agents, or by brass-throated, bull-necked demagogues. That they should be accepted as a common faith by a crowd of people much resembling a fairly well-to-do suburban church congregation stirred her surprise and even dismay.

"I don't see how intelligent folk can hold such views," she said to Roger

Blenkiron, who had been defending the Russian Soviet system as a philosophic experiment in government.

He smiled indulgently. “Doesn’t the fault lie rather in you, dear lady, than in the intelligent folk?”

“Would that argument stand,” she replied, “if you had been maintaining that the earth was flat and stood still in space?”

“No. The roundness and motion of the earth are ascertained physical facts. But—I speak with the greatest deference—can you assert it to be a scientific fact that a community of human beings are *a priori* incapable of managing their own affairs on a basis of social equality?”

“Of course I can,” Olivia declared, to the gentle amusement of standers-by. “Human nature won’t allow it. With inequalities of brain and character social equality is impossible.”

“Dear Lady”—she hated the apostrophe as he said it and the lift of the eyebrows which caused an upward ripple that was lost in the far reaches of his bald forehead. “Dear Lady,” said he, “in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot you can find every grade of human intellect, from the inbred young aristocrat who is that much removed”—he flicked a finger nail—“from a congenital idiot to the acute-brained statesman; every grade of human character from the lowest of moral defectives to the highest that the present civilization can produce. And yet they are all on a social equality. And why? They started life on a common plane. The same phenomenon exists in a mass-meeting of working-men—in any assemblage of human beings of a particular class who have started life on a common plane. Now, don’t you see, that if we abolished all these series of planes and established only one plane, social equality would be inevitable?”

“I don’t see how you’re going to do it.”

“Ah! That’s another question. Think of what the task is. To make a clean sweep of false principles to which mankind has subscribed for—what do I know—say—eight thousand years. It can’t be done in a day. Not even in a generation. If you wish to render a pestilence-stricken area habitable, you must destroy and burn for miles around before you can rebuild. Extend the area to a country—to the surface of the civilized globe. That’s the philosophic theory of what is vulgarly called Bolshevism. Let us lay waste the whole plague-stricken fabric of our civilization, so that the world may arise, a new Phœnix, under our children’s hands.”

“You have put the matter to Miss Gale with your usual cogency, my dear Roger,” said Dawkins, who had joined the group. “Perhaps now she may take a less flippant view of our activities.”

He smiled, evidently meaning to include the neophyte in the sphere of his

kind indulgence. But Olivia flushed at the rudeness of his words.

Triona who, hidden from Olivia by the standing group, had been stuffed into a sedentary and penitential corner with two assertive women and an earnest young Marxian gasfitter, and had, nevertheless, kept an alert ear on the neighbouring conversation, suddenly appeared once more to her rescue.

"Pardon me, sir," said he, "but to one who has gone through, as I have done, the Bolshevist horrors which you advocate so complacently, it's your view that hardly seems serious."

"Atrocities, my dear friend," said the seer-like Dawkins, "are proverbially exaggerated."

"There's a fellow like you mentioned in the Bible," retorted Triona.

"I have always admired Didymus for his scientific mind," said Dawkins.

Triona pulled up his trouser leg and exposed his ankle. "That's the mark of fetters. There was a chain and a twelve pound shot at the end of it."

"Doubtless you displeased the authorities," said Dawkins blandly. "Oh, I've read your book, Mr. Triona. But before judging I should like to hear the other side."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Blenkiron," said Triona, growing white about the nostrils, to his host who stood by in a detached sort of manner, with his hands on his hips, "I've unconsciously abused your hospitality."

Blenkiron protested cheerfully. "Not a bit, my dear fellow. We pride ourselves on our broad mindedness. If you preached reactionary Anglicanism here you would be listened to with respect and interest. On the other hand, we expect the same consideration to be shown to the apostles—if you will pardon the word—of our advanced thought. Your experiences were, beyond doubt, very terrible. But we admit the necessity of a reign of terror. We shall have it in this country within the next ten years. Possibly—probably—all of us here and all the little gods we cling to will be swept away like the late Russian aristocracy and *intelligentsia*. But suppose we are all—Dawkins, my sister, and myself—prepared to suffer martyrdom for the sake of humanity, what would you have to say against us? Nay—you can be quite frank. Words cannot hurt us."

"I should say you ought to be tied up in Bedlam," said Triona.

"Do you agree with that, Miss Gale?" said Roger Blenkiron, turning on her suddenly.

She reflected for a moment. Then she replied: "If you can prove beyond question that in fifty years' time you will create a more beautiful world, there's something in your theories. If you can't, you all ought to be shot."

He laughed and held out his hand. “That’s straight from the shoulder. That’s what we like to hear. Shake hands on it.” He drew a little book from his pocket and scribbled a memorandum. “You’re on the free-list of *The Signal*. I think Agnes has your address. You’ll find in it overwhelming proof. Perhaps, Mr. Triona, too, would like——”

But Triona shook his head. “As a technical alien perhaps it would be inadvisable for me to be in receipt of revolutionary literature.”

“I quite understand,” smiled Blenkiron, returning the book to his pocket.

Dawkins melted away. Other guests took leave of their host. Triona and Olivia, making a suffocating course towards the door, were checked by Agnes Blenkiron who was eager to introduce them to Tom Pyefinch who, during the war had suffered, at the hands of a capitalist government, the tortures of the hero too brave to fight.

“Oh, no, no,” cried Olivia horrified.

Agnes did not hear. But Pyefinch, a pallid young man with a scrubby black moustache, was too greatly occupied with his immediate circle to catch his hostess’s eye. From his profane lips Olivia learned that patriotism was the most blatant of superstitions: that the attitude of the fly preening itself over its cesspool was that of the depraved and mindless being who could take pride in being an Englishman. He was not peculiarly hard on England. All other countries were the mere sewerages of the nationalities that inhabited them. The high ideals supposed to crystallize a nation’s life were but factitious and illusory, propagated by poets and other decadents in the pay of capitalists: in reality, patriotism only meant the common cause of the peoples floundering each in its separate sewer. . . .

Mere rats, he declared, changing his metaphor. That was why he and every other intelligent man in the country refused to join in the rat fight which was the late war.

Olivia clutched Triona’s arm. “For God’s sake, Alexis, let us get out of this. It makes me sick.”

They drew deep breaths when they escaped into the fresh air. To Olivia, the little overcrowded drawing-room, deafening with loud voices, sour with the smell of milky tea and Virginian tobacco, reeking almost physically with the madness of anarchy, seemed a miniature of the bottomless pit. The irony of the man’s talk—the need to purify by flame a plague-stricken area! God once destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Why did He not blast with fire from heaven this House of Pestilence?

Alexis Triona laughed sympathetically at her outburst.

“I confess they’re rather trying,” he remarked. “Whenever you hear

English people say they belong to the *intelligentsia*, you may be sure they're frightened at common sense as not being intellectual enough. Blenkiron and Dawkins are fools of the first water; but Pyefinch is dangerous. I am afraid I lost my temper," he added after a few steps.

"You were splendid," said Olivia.

More than ever did he seem the one clear-brained, purposeful man of her acquaintance in the confused London world. Rapidly she passed them in review as she walked. Of the others Mauregard was the best; but he was spending his life on fribbles, his highest heaven being a smile on the lips of a depraved dancing-woman. Then, Sydney Rooke, Mavenna, and, even worse now than Mavenna, the unspeakable Bobby Quinton. So much for the Lydian set of professed materialists and pleasure-seekers. In accepting Agnes Blenkiron's invitation she had pleasurable anticipation of entering a sphere of earnest thinkers and social workers who might guide her stumbling footsteps into the path of duty to herself and her kind. And to her dismay she had met Dawkins and Blenkiron and Pyefinch, earnest, indeed, in their sophistry and mad in their theories of destruction. Her brain was in a whirl with the doctrines to which she had listened. She felt terrified at she knew not what. Even Lydia's cynical world was better than this. Yet between these two extremes there must be a world of high endeavour, of science, art, philanthropy, thought; that in which, she vaguely imagined, Blaise Olifant must have his being; even that of the women at the club dinner. But her mind shook off women as alien to its subconscious argument. In this conjectural London world one man alone stood out typical—the man striding loosely by her side. A young careless angel, he had delivered her from Mavenna. A man, he had exorcised her horror of Bobby Quinton. And now, once more, she saw him, in her girlish fancy, a heroic figure, sane, calm, and scornful, facing a horde of madmen.

They walked, occasionally losing their way and being put on it by chance encounters, through the maze of new and distressingly decorous avenues, some finished, others petering out, after a few houses, into placarded building lots or waste land; a wilderness not of the smug villa-dom of old-established suburbs, but of a queer bungalow-dom assertive, in its distinctive architecture, of unreal pursuit of Aspirations in capital letters. Most of the avenues abutted on a main street of shops with pseudo-artistic frontages giving the impression that the inhabitants of the City could only be induced to satisfy the vulgar needs of their bodies by the lure of the æsthetic.

"Don't let us judge our late friends too harshly," said Triona waving an arm. "All this is the Land of Self-Consciousness."

At last they made their way through the solider, stolider fringes of the main road, and emerged on the great thoroughfare itself, wide and unbusied on this

late summer Sunday afternoon. Prosaically they lingered, waiting for an infrequent omnibus.

"Thank goodness, we're out of the Land of Self-Consciousness," said Olivia. "The Great North Road is too big a thing."

Their eyes met in a smile.

"I don't forget your love of big things," said he. "It's inspiring. Yes. It's a big thing. And it doesn't really begin in London. It starts from Land's End—and it goes on and on through the heart of England and through the heart of Scotland carrying two nations' history on its flanks, caring for nothing but its appointed task, until it sighs at John o' Groats and says: 'My duty's done.' There's nothing that stirs one's imagination more than a great road or a great river. Somehow I prefer the road."

"You're nearer to it because it was made by man."

"How our minds work together!" he cried admiringly "I only have to say half a thing and you complete it. More than that—you give my meaningless ideas meaning. Yes. God's works are great. But we can't measure them. We have no scale for God, But we have for Man, and so Man's big works thrill us and compel us."

"What big thing could we do?" asked Olivia.

"Do you mean humanity—or you and I together?"

"Two human beings thinking alike, and free and honest." Instinctively she took his arm and her step danced in time with his. "Oh, you don't know how good it is to feel real. Let us do something big in the world. What can we do?"

"You can help me to the very biggest thing in all the universe—for me," he cried, pressing her arm tight against him.

Her pulses throbbed. She knew that further argument on her part would be but exquisite playing with words. The hour which, in her maidenly uncertainty she had dreaded, had now come, and all fear had passed away. Yes; now she was real; now she was certain that her love was real. Real man, real woman. Her heart leaped to him with almost the shock of physical pain. Again in a flash she swept the Lydian and the Blenkiron firmament and exulted. Yet in her happiness she said with very foolish and with very feminine guile:

"Ah, my dear Alexis, that's what I've longed for. If only I could be of some little help to you!"

"Help?" He laughed shortly and halted and swung her round. "Have you ever tried to think what you are to me? Would you like me to tell you?"

She disengaged herself and walked delicately on.

"It may pass the time till the bus comes," she said.

He began to tell her. And three minutes afterwards the noisy, infrequent motor-bus passed them by, unheeded and even unperceived.

CHAPTER XI

SOMEWHERE on the South Coast, screened from the vulgar by the trap of a huge watering-place, is a long, thin, sandy promontory sticking out to sea, like an innocent rib of wilderness. Here there is no fun of the fair, because there is no fair to provide the fun. There are no taverns, no boarding-houses, no lodgings. One exclusive little hotel rules the extreme tip of the tongue of land in consort with the miniature jetty and quay by which, in late exciting times, strange craft were moored, flying the white ensign and hoar with North Sea brine and deadly secrets. The rest of the spit is peppered with a score of little shy houses, each trying to hide itself from its neighbours, in the privacy of its own sandpit. If your house is on the more desirable side of it, you can look out over the vastness of the sea with the exhilarating certainty (if your temperament may thereby be exhilarated) that there is nothing but blue water between you and the coast of Africa. If your house is, less fortunately, on the other side, your view commands a spacious isle-studded harbour fringed by distant blue and mysterious hills. But it is given to any one to walk out of the back of his little hermitage, and, standing in the dividing road, to enjoy, in half a minute, both aspects at once. It is called esoterically by its frequenters "the Point," so that the profane, map-searching, may not discover its whereabouts.

Just high enough to be under the lee of a sand-hill, with its front windows and veranda staring at the African coast, some thousand miles away, stood the tiniest, most fragile and most absurd of the habitations. Its name was "Quien Sabe," suggestive of an imaginative abandonment of search after nomenclature by the original proprietor.

"A house called 'Quien Sabe'——" said Alexis.

"Is the house for us," cried Olivia, aglow.

They took it at once, without question. It wasn't as if it were an uncertain sort of place, like "Normanhurst," or "Sea View." The name proclaimed frankly the certainty of venturesomeness. And Alexis Triona, sitting on the scrubby grass and sand, his back against the little veranda, the infinite sea and all the universe enveloped in still moonlight, laughed the laugh of deep happiness at their childish inspiration. He rolled, licked and lit the final cigarette. Tobacco was good. Better was this August night of velvet and diamonds. Below, the little stone groin shone like onyx. The lazy surf of ebb-tide far away on the sand of a tiny bay glimmered like the foam in fairyland.

Only half the man's consciousness allowed itself to be drenched with the

beauty of the night. The other half remained alert to a voice, to a summons, to something more rare and exquisite than the silver air and murmuring sea and the shine of all the stars. A few minutes before, languorous by his side, she had been part and parcel of it all. The retreating ripple of wave had melted into the softness of her voice. Her laughing eyes had gleamed importance in the stellar system. The sweet throb of her body, as she had reclined, his arm about her, was rhythmic with the pulsation of the night. And now she had gone; gone just for a few moments; gone just for a few moments until she would divinely break the silence by the little staccato cry of his name; but, nevertheless, her transitory severance had robbed this outer world of half its beauty. He had consciously to incorporate her in order to give meaning to this wonder of amethyst and aquamarine and onyx and diamond and pearl and velvet and the infinite message of the immensities coming through the friendly silence of the moon.

They had been married all of a sudden, both caught up on the wings of adventure. They were young, free as air. Why should they wait? They kept it secret, a pair of romantics. Only Blaise Olifant, summoned from Medlow, and Janet Philimore were admitted into the conspiracy, and attended the wedding. At first Olivia had twinges of conscience. As a well-conducted young woman she ought to ask her old friend, Mr. Trivett, to stand *in loco parentis* and give her away. But then there would be Mrs. Trivett and the girls to reckon with. Mr. Fenmarch, left out, might take offence. The news, too, would run through every Medlow parlour. Old John Freke, in his weekly letter to Lydia, would be sure to allude to the matter; and it was Lydia and the galley that she most desired to keep in ignorance. So they were married, by special licence, at the church in Ashley Place, one quiet, sunny morning, in the presence of Myra and the two witnesses they had convened.

As they emerged into the sunshine after the ceremony, Olifant said to her:

“I’ve never been so reluctant to give anything away in my life.”

She asked a laughing “Why?”

“Dog in the manger, I suppose.” He smiled whimsically. “I shall feel more of a bachelor than ever when I get back.”

“You needn’t, unless you like.” She motioned slightly with her head towards Janet, talking to Alexis, a few feet away. “I’ve not been too busy to think of matchmaking. She’s the dearest of girls.”

“But not my landlady.”

Her happy laughter rippled forth, calling the others near.

“He wants a law forbidding the marriage of landladies. But think of the

advantage. Now you can have your landlady to stay with you—in strict propriety—if you will ask us."

"We settled that with Alexis last night," said he.

Three taxis were waiting. One for the bride and bridegroom. One, already piled with luggage, for Myra who after being fervently kissed in the vestry by Olivia, had said by way of congratulation:

"Well, dearie, it's better than being married in a Registry Office," and had gone forth unemotionally to see that the trunks were still there. And one for Olifant and Janet. They drove to the station, to the train which was to take them on their way to the home which in their romanticism they had never troubled to see.

"I'm sure it's all right," said Janet, who had been responsible for their taking "Quien Sabe." "Father and I'll be at The Point in a fortnight. If you don't want to see us, tie a white satin bow on the gate and we won't mind a bit."

For General Philimore was the happy owner of one of the little hermitages on The Point, and like a foolish old soldier lived there in holiday times, instead of letting it for the few summer weeks at the yearly rental of his London flat; so that Janet assumed the airs of an authority on The Point, and wrote stern uncompromising business letters to agents threatening them with the displeasure of the daughter of a Major-General, if a "Quien Sabe" swept, garnished, and perfectly appointed, with a charwoman, ditto, in attendance, did not receive the bridal pair.

"It's not a palace, Mr. Triona," she said.

"What has it to do with me?" he answered. "A dream nest in a cliff for this bird wife of mine is all I ask for."

Olivia's eyes smiled on him. Why was he so different from the rest of men—even from so fine a type as Blaise Olifant? She appraised them swiftly. The soldier had not yet been sunk into the scholar. He stood erect, clean built, wearing his perfectly fitting grey suit like uniform, his armless sleeve pinned across his chest, his lip still bearing the smart little military moustache, his soft grey hat at ever so slightly a swaggering angle on his neatly cropped head. A distinguished figure, to which his long straight nose added a curious note of distinction and individuality. But all that he was you saw in a glance: the gentleman, the soldier, the man of intellect. On the other hand, there stood the marvellous man that was her husband, hiding behind the drawn boyish face God knew what memories of pain heroically conquered and God knew what visions of genius. Although he had gone to a good tailor for his blue serge suit—she had accompanied him—he had the air of wearing clothes as a

concession of convention. The lithe frame beneath seemed to be impatient of their restraint. They fitted in an easy sort of way, but were dominated by his nervous eager personality. One flash of a smile illuminating eyes and thin face, one flashing gesture of hand or arm, and for ought any one knew or cared, he might be dressed in chain armour or dungaree.

The little speech pleased her. She slipped her hand through the crook of his arm in the pride of possession.

"Did you ever hear such an undomesticated pronouncement?" she laughed. "We're going to change all that."

And the train carried them off to the great wonder and change of their lives.

The train out of sight, Blaise Olifant stuck in his pocket the handkerchief he had been waving, and turned with a sigh.

"I hope she'll be happy."

"Why shouldn't she?" asked Janet Philimore.

She was a bright-cheeked, brown-eyed, brown-haired girl, with a matter-of-fact manner.

"I know of no reason," he replied. "I was expressing a hope."

He saw her to her homeward-bound omnibus and walked, somewhat moodily, on his road. After a day or two, the pleasures of London proving savourless, he returned to Medlow. But "The Towers" no longer seemed quite the same. He could not tell why. The house had lost fragrance.

Meanwhile the pair had gone to the little toy home whose questioning name pointed to mystery. There were just three rooms in it, all opening on to a veranda full in sight (save for the configuration of the globe) of the African coast. On this veranda, sitting back, they lost sight of the whin-grown slope and the miniature sandy cove beneath; and their world was but a welter of sea, and its inhabitants but a few gulls, sweeping and swirling past them with a shy friendliness in their yellow eyes. In a dip of the sand-hill, just behind this elementary dwelling and communicating with it by a short covered way, stretched an old railway carriage divided into kitchen, pantry, bathroom, and bunks.

"It's the craziest place I've ever seen," said Myra. "People will be living in old aeroplanes next."

But the very craziness of the habitation made for their selfish joy. The universe, just for these twain, had gone joyously mad. A cocky little villa made to the model of a million others would have defeated the universe's benign

intention. Nothing could be nearer to Triona's dream nest in a cliff. Their first half-hour's exploring, hand in hand, was that of children let loose in a fairy tale castle.

"There's only one egg-cup," croaked Myra, surveying an exiguous row of crockery.

"How many more do we want?" cried Olivia. "We can only eat one egg at a time."

They passed out and stood on the edge of their small domain, surveying the sandy beach and the seaweed and shell-encrusted groin and the limitless sea, and breathed in the soft salt wind of all the heavens sweeping through their hair and garments, and he put his arm around her and kissed her—and he laughed and said, looking into her eyes:

"Sweetheart, Heaven is empty and all the angels are here."

On sunny days they lived in the sea, drying themselves on their undisturbed half-moon of beach.

"Where did you learn to swim?" she asked.

He hesitated for a second, casting at her one of his swift, half furtive glances. Then he replied:

"In the Volga."

She laughed. "You're always romantic. I learned at commonplace Llandudno."

"Where's your sense of relativity, beloved?" said he. "In Central Russia one regards the coast of Wales as fantastic fairyland."

"Still, you can go to Llandudno to-morrow, if you like—taking me with you, of course; but I shall never swim in the Volga, or the Caspian Sea, or Lake Baikal, or any of those places with names that have haunted me since I was a little girl."

"One of these days we'll go—it may be some years, but eventually Russia must have a settled Government—and we'll still be young."

The sun and the hot sand on which she lay, adorable in deep red bathing kit and cap, warmed her through and through, flooding her with the sense of physical well-being. It was impossible that she should ever grow old.

"It's something to look forward to," she said.

Sometimes they hired a boat and sailed and fished. She admired his handiness and knowledge and prescience of the weather. Once, as the result of their fishing, they brought in a basket of bass and gar-fish, the latter a strange, dainty silver beast with the body of an eel and the tail of a trout and the beak of

a woodcock, and in high spirits they usurped Myra's railway-compartment kitchen, while he fried the catch for lunch. Olivia marvelled at his mastery. In spite of her sage and deliberate putting aside of the rose-coloured glasses of infatuation, in whatever aspect she viewed him, he stood supreme. From the weaving of high romance to the cooking of fish—the whole gamut of human activities—there was nothing in which he did not excel. Her trust in him was infinite. She lost herself in happiness.

It took some days to arouse her to a sense of the outer world. A letter from Lydia reminded her of her friend's pleasant ignorance. With the malice of the unregenerate feminine, she wrote: "I'm so sorry I can't be bridesmaid as you had arranged. How can I, seeing that I am married myself? It happened all in a hurry, as the beautiful things in life do. The fuss of publicity would have spoilt it. That's why we told nobody. This is much better than Dinard"—Sydney Rooke's selection for the honeymoon. "I haven't worn a hat since I've been here, and my way of dressing for dinner is to put on a pair of stockings; sometimes a mackintosh, for we love to dine on the veranda when it rains. It rained so hard last night that we had to fix up an umbrella to the ceiling like a chandelier to catch the water coming through the roof. So you will see that Alexis and I are perfectly happy. By the way, I've not told you what my name is. It is Mrs. Triona. . . ." And so on and so on at the dictate of her dancing gladness, freakishly picturing Lydia's looks of surprise, distaste, and reprobation as she read the letter. Yet she finished graciously, acknowledging Lydia's thousand kindnesses, for according to her lights Lydia had done her best to put her on the only path that could be trod by comely and well-dressed woman.

She sealed up her letter and, coming out on to the veranda where Alexis was correcting the proofs of an article, told him all about it.

"Don't you think we ought to please Lydia and go to Dinard and wear wonderful clothes, and mix with fashionable folk, and have expensive meals and gamble in the Casino, and dance and do our duty as self-respecting people?"

"You have but to change yourself into whatever fairy thing you like, my princess," said he, "and I will follow you. Where you are, the world is. Where you are not, there is the blankness of before creation."

Sitting that night, with his back against the veranda, he thought of this speech of the afternoon. Formulated a bit self-consciously, it was nevertheless true. The landscape, no matter what it was, existed merely as a setting for her. Even in this jewelled wonder of moonlit sea and sky there was the gap of the central gem.

He rolled and lit another cigarette—this time, surely, the very last. Why she took so long to disrobe, he never strove to conjecture. Her exquisite feminine distance from him was a conception too tremulous to be gripped with a rough hand and brutally examined. That was the lure and the delight of her, mystical, paradoxical—he could define it only vaguely as the nearness of her set in a far-off mystery. At once she was concrete and strong as the sea, and as elusive as the Will-o'-the-Wisp of his dreams.

Thus the imaginative lover; the man who, by imagining fantasies to be real, had made them real; who, grasping realities, had woven round them the poet's fantasy.

And meanwhile Olivia, secure in her happiness, kept him waiting and dreaming because she had made a romantic vow to record, before going to sleep, each day's precious happenings in a diary which she kept under lock and key in her dressing-case. She wrote sitting up in bed, and now and then she sniffed and smiled as the soft air came through the open window laden with the perfume of the cigarette.

CHAPTER XII

IN the course of time, Janet Philimore and her attendant father, the General, arrived at their house on The Point, and as Olivia, apprised of their advent, did not tie a white satin bow on her gate, General and Miss Philimore left cards on the newly wedded couple, or, more exactly, a pencilled leaf torn out of a notebook.

Thus arose a little intimacy which Olivia encouraged on Alexis's account. Had not her father and brothers trained her in the ways of men, one of which vital ways was that which led to the social intercourse of man with man? Besides, it was a law of sex. If she had not a woman to talk to, she declared, she would go crazy. It was much more comforting to powder one's nose in the privacy of the gynæceum than beneath man's unsympathetic stare. Conversely it had been a dictum of her father's that, in order to enjoy port, men must be released from the distracting chatter of women.

"If I'm not broad-minded, I'm nothing," said Olivia.

" 'Broad' is inadequate," replied her husband, thrusting back his brown hair. "The very wonder of you is that your mind is as wide as the infinite air."

Which, of course, was as pleasant a piece of information as any bride could receive.

The magic of the halcyon days was intensified by the satisfaction of the sex cravings which, by the symbolism of nose-powdering and port-drinking, Olivia had enunciated. In the deeps of her soul she could find no consuming passion for sitting scorched in a boat with a baited and contemptuously disregarded line between expectant finger and thumb. She could not really understand the men's anxiety to induce a mentally defective fish to make a fool of itself. Yet she would have sat blissfully for hours at his bidding, for the mere joy of doing as she was bidden; but not to be bidden was a great relief. Similarly, Alexis could not vie with Olivia in concentration of being over the selection of material (in the fly-trap of a great watering-place previously mentioned) and over the pattern and the manufacture by knitting of gaudy hued silk jumpers. His infatuated eye marvelled at the delicate swiftness of her fingers, at the magical development of the web that was to encase her adorable body. But his heart wasn't in it. Janet's was. And General Philimore brought to the hooking of bass the earnest singleness of purpose that, vague years ago, had enabled him to ensnare thousands of Huns in barbed-wire netting.

The primitive laws of sex asserted themselves, to the common happiness. The men fished; the women fashioned garments out of raw material. We can't

get away from the essentials of the Stone Age. And why in the world should we?

But—and here comes the delight of the reactions of civilization—invariably the last quarter of an hour of these exclusive sex-communings was filled with boredom and impatience. Alone at last, they would throw themselves into each other's arms with unconscionable gracelessness and say: "Thank Heaven, they've gone!" And then the sun would shine more brightly and the lap of the waves around them would add buoyancy to their bodies, and Myra, ministering to their table wants, would assume the guise of a high priestess consecrating their intimacy, and the moon would invest herself with a special splendour in their honour.

Now and then the four came together; a picnic lunch at some spot across the bay; a wet after-dinner rubber at bridge, or an hour's gossip of old forgotten far-off things and battles of the day before yesterday, or—in the General's house—a little idle music. There it was that Olivia discovered another accomplishment in her wonderful husband. He could play, sensitively, by ear—knowledge of notated music he disclaimed. Having been impressed as a child with the idea that playing from ear was a sin against the holy spirit of musical instruction, and gaining from such instruction (at Landsdowne House—how different if she had been trained in the higher spheres of Blair Park!) merely a distaste for mechanical fingering of printed notes, she had given up music with a sigh of relief, mingled with regret, and had remained unmusical. And here was Alexis, who boasted his ignorance of the difference between a crotchet and an arpeggio, racking the air with the poignant melancholy of Russian folk-songs, and, in a Puckish twinkle, setting their pulses dancing with a mad modern rhythm of African savagery.

"But, dear, what else can you do?" she asked, after the first exhibition of this unsuspected gift. "Tell me; for these shocks aren't good for my health."

"On the mouth-organ," he laughed, "I've not met any one to touch me."

It was not idle boasting. On their next rainy-day visit to the neighbouring town, Olivia slipped into a toy shop and bought the most swollenly splendid of these instruments that she could find, and Alexis played "The Marseillaise" upon it with all the blare of a steam orchestrion.

The happy days sped by in an atmosphere of love and laughter, yet filled not only with the sweet doings of idleness. Olivia discovered that the poet-artist must work, impelled thereto by his poet-artistry. He must write of the passing things which touched his imagination and which his imagination, in turn, transmuted into impressions of beauty. These were like a painter's sketches, said he, for use in after-time.

“It’s for you, my dear, that I am making a hoard of our golden moments, so that one of these days I may lay them all at your feet.”

And he must read, too. During the years that the locust of war had eaten, his educational development had stood still. His English literary equipment fell far short of that required by a successful English man of letters. Vast tracts of the most glorious literature in the world he had as yet left unexplored. The great Elizabethan dramatists, for instance. Thick, serious volumes from the London Library strewed the furniture of the wind-swept sitting-room. Olivia, caught by his enthusiasm and proud to identify herself with him in this feeding of the fires of his genius, read with him; and to them together were revealed the clanging majesty of Marlowe, the subtle beauty of Beaumont and Fletcher, the haunting gloom of Webster. In the evenings they would sit, lover-like, the book between them, and read aloud, taking parts; and it never failed to be an astonishment and a thrill to the girl when, declaiming a fervid passage, he seemed for the moment to forget her and to live in the sense of the burning words. It was her joy to force her emotion to his pitch.

Once, reading Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Philaster*, he clutched her tightly with his left arm, while his right hand upstretched, invoked unheeding Heaven, and declaimed:

> “And then have taken me some mountain girl,
> Beaten with winds, chaste as the hardened rocks
> Whereon she dwells; that might have strewn my bed
> With leaves and reeds, and with the skins o’ Beasts,
> Our neighbours; and have borne at her big breasts
> My large coarse issue! This had been a life
> Free from vexation.”

“But, Alexis, darling, I’m so sorry,” she cried.

“Why? What do you mean?”

“You said it as if you meant it, as if it was the desire of your heart. I’m not a bit like that.”

They laughed and kissed. A dainty interlude.

“You’ve never really felt like that?”

“Never.”

“The idea isn’t even new,” exclaimed Olivia, with grand inversion of chronology. “Tennyson has something like it in *Locksley Hall*. How does it go?”

With a wrinkling of the brow she quoted:

"Then the passions cramped no longer shall have scope and breathing space
I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race.

"Iron-jointed, supple-sinewed, they shall dive and they shall run,
Catch the wild goat by the hair, and hurl their lances in the sun."

"So he did!" cried Triona. "How wonderful of you to remember! Why—the dear beautiful old thief!" He forgot the point at issue in contemplation of the literary coincidence of plagiarism. "Well, I'm damned! Such a crib! With the early Victorian veil of prudery over it! Oh, Lord! Give me the Elizabethan, any day. Yet, isn't it funny? The period-spirit? If Tennyson had been an Elizabethan, he would have walked over Beaumont and Fletcher like a Colossus; but in a world under the awe of Queen Victoria's red flannel petticoat he is reduced to stealing Elizabethan thunder and reproducing it with a bit of sheet iron and a stick."

"Dear," said Olivia, "we have much to be thankful for."

"You and I?" he queried.

"Our generation. We live in the sun. No longer under the shadow of the red flannel petticoat."

Rapturously he called her a marvel among women. Olivia's common sense discounted the hyperbole; but she loved his tribute to her sally of wit.

The book slipped to the floor, while she began an argument on the morality of plagiarism. How far was a man justified in stealing another man's idea, working up another man's material?

His sudden and excited defence of the plagiarist surprised her. He rose, strode about the room and, talking, grew eloquent; quoted Shakespeare as the great exemplar of the artist who took his goods from everywhere he found them. Olivia, knowing his joy in conversational fence, made smiling attack.

"In the last three hundred years we have developed a literary conscience."

"A commercial matter," he declared. "A question of copyright. I granted that. You have no right to exploit another man's ideas to his material loss. But take a case like this"—he paced before her for a few seconds—"on the spur of the moment. It must have happened a thousand times in the War. An unknown dead man just a kilometre away from a bleak expanse of waste covered with thousands of dead men. Some one happens upon him. Searches him for identification. Finds nothing of any use or interest save a little notebook with leaves of the thinnest paper next his skin. And he glances through the book and sees at once that it is no ordinary diary of war—discomfort of billets, so many miles' march, morale of the men and so forth—but something quite different.

He puts it in his pocket. For all that the modern world is concerned, the dead man is as lost as any skeleton dug up in an ancient Egyptian grave-yard. The living man, when he has leisure, reads the closely written manuscript book, finds it contains rough notes of wonderful experiences, thoughts, imaginings. But all in a jumble, ill expressed, chaotic. Suppose, now, the finder, a man with the story-teller's gift, weaves a wonderful thrilling tale out of this material. Who is injured? Nobody. On the contrary, the world is the richer."

"If he were honest, he ought to tell the truth in a preface," said Olivia.

Triona laughed. "Who would believe him? The trick of writing false prefaces in order to give verisimilitude is so overworked that people won't believe the genuine ones."

"I suppose that's so," she acquiesced. Her interest in the argument was only a reflection of his. She was far more eager to resume the interrupted reading of *Philaster*.

"It's lovely that we always see things in the same way," said he, sitting down again by her side.

Besides all this delightful work and play there was the practical future to be considered. They could not live for ever at "Quien Sabe" on The Point, nor could they live at the Lord knows where anywhere else. They must have a home.

"Before you stole over my being and metamorphosed me, I should have asked—why?" he said. "Any old dry hole in a tree would have done for me, until I got tired of it and flew to another. But now——"

"Now you're dying to live in a nice little house and have your meals regular and pay rates and taxes, and make me a respectable woman."

They decided that a house was essential. It would have to be furnished. But what was the object of buying new furniture at the present fantastic prices when she had a great house full of it—from real Chippendale chairs to sound fish-kettles? The answer was obvious.

"Why not Medlow? Olifant won't stay there for ever. He hinted as much."

She shook her head. No. Medlow was excellent for cabbages, but passion-flowers like her Alexis would wilt and die. He besought her with laughing tenderness not to think of him. From her would he drink in far more sunlight and warmth than his passion-flower-like nature could need. Had she not often told him of her love for the quaint old house and its sacred associations? It would be a joy to him to see her link up the old life with the new.

"Besides," he urged, attributing her reluctance to solicitude for his happiness, "it's the common-sense solution. There's our natural headquarters.

We needn't stay there all the year round, from year's end to year's end. When we want to throw a leg we can run away, to London, Paris, "Quien Sabe," John o' Groats—the wide world's before us."

But Olivia kept on shaking her head. Abandoning metaphor, she insisted on the necessity of his taking the position he had gained in the social world of art and letters. Hadn't he declared a day or two ago that good talk was one of the most stimulating pleasures in life? What kind of talk could Medlow provide? It was far more sensible, when Major Olifant's tenancy was over, to move the furniture to their new habitation and let "The Towers" unfurnished.

"As you will, belovedest," he said. "Yet," he added, with a curious note of wistfulness, "I learned to love the house and the sleepy old town and the mouldering castle." The practical decision to which she was brought out of honeymoon lotus-land was the first cloud on her married happiness. It had never occurred to her before that she could have anything to conceal from her husband. Not an incident in the Lydian galley had her ingenuousness not revealed. But now she felt consciously disingenuous, and it was horrible. How could she confess the real reason for her refusal to live in Medlow? Was she not to him the Fairy Princess? He had told her so a thousand times. He had pictured his first vision of her glowing flame colour and dusk beneath the theatre portico, his other vision of her exquisite in moonlight and snowflake in the great silent street. His faith in her based itself on the axiom of her regality. Woman-like, she had laughed within herself at his dear illusions. But that was the key of the staggering position; his illusions were inexpressibly dear to her; they were the priceless jewels of her love. With just a little craft, so sweet, so divinely humorous, to exercise she could maintain these illusions to the end of time. . . .

But not at Medlow.

She had gone forth from it, on her pilgrimage, in order to establish herself in her mother's caste. And she had succeeded. The name of her grandfather, Bagshawe of the Guides, had been a password to the friendships which now she most valued. Marriage had defined her social ambitions. They were modest, fundamentally sane. Her husband, a man of old family and gentle upbringing, ranked with her mother and General and Janet Philimore. He was a man of genius, too, and his place was among the great ones of the social firmament.

She thought solely in terms of caste, gentle and intellectual. She swept aside the meretricious accessories of the Sydney Rooke gang with a reactionary horror.

A few days before, Alexis, lyrically lover like, had said:

“You are so beautiful. If only I could string your neck with pearls, and build you a great palace . . .” etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, in the manner of the adoring, but comparatively impecunious poet.

And she had replied:

“I don’t want pearls, palaces or motor-cars. They’re all symbols, my dear, of the Unreal. Ordinary comfort of food and warmth and decent clothes—yes. But that’s all. So long as you string my heart with love—and my mind with noble thoughts.”

She longed passionately to live with him, above herself. And yet, here at the outset, was she living below herself. She would wake in the morning and, sleepless, grow hot and clammy at the thought of her deception. And the whole of her Medlow life drifted miserably through her consciousness: the schoolgirl’s bitter resentment of the supercilious nose in the air attitude of the passing crocodile of Blair Park; of the vicar’s daughters’ condescending nod—he was a Canon of somewhere and an “Honourable” to boot—at “that pretty Miss Gale”; her recognition, when she came to years of sense, of the social gulf between her family and the neighbouring gentry whose lives, with their tennis parties and dances and social doings, seemed so desirable and so remote. To bring her wonderful husband into that world of “homely folk,” the excellent, but uncultivated Trivetts, the more important tradespeople, the managers of the mills, the masters of the County School, her father’s world, and to see him rigidly excluded from that to which her mother and he himself belonged, was more than she could bear. She tortured herself with the new problem of snobbery—rating herself, in this respect, beneath Lydia, who was frankly cynical as to both her own antecedents and her late husband’s social standing. But for the life of her she could not bring herself to explain to Alexis the real impossibility of Medlow. When she tried, she found that his foreign upbringing failed to seize the fine shade of her suggestion.

His gay carelessness eventually lulled her conscience. As soon as Olifant had done with “The Towers,” they could transfer the furniture to whatever habitation they chose and let the house.

“I feel you couldn’t find it in your heart to sell the old place,” he said. “Besides—who knows—one of these days——”

She thought him the most delicately perceptive of men.

“No, dear,” she said, her cheek against his. “I couldn’t sell it.”

Then all Medlow danger was over. She breathed freely. But still—the little cloud of deceit hung over her serene mind and cast ever so tiny a shadow over her rapturous life.

They had been four weeks in the deliciously sure uncertainty of “Quien

Sabe," when, one noon while they were drying themselves in the hot sand and sunshine of their tiny bay, after a swim, Myra came down gaunt through the whin-covered hill-side with a telegram in her hand. With the perversity of her non-recognition of the household paramountcy of her master, she handed the envelope to Olivia. The name was just "Triona." Olivia was about to open it instinctively when Alexis started to a sitting position, and, with an eager glance, held out his hand.

"I think it's for me. I was expecting it. Do you mind?"

She passed it over with a smile. Alexis rose to his feet, tore the envelope open, and moving a few yards away towards the surf read the message. Then slowly he tore it up into the tiniest fragments and scattered them on the last wavelets of the ebb tide, and stood for a second or two, staring across the sea. At last he turned. Olivia rose to meet him. Myra was impassively making her way back up the rough slope.

"What's the matter?" asked Olivia, puzzled at his scrupulous destruction of the telegram and reading something like fear in his eyes.

"I've had bad news," he said. He picked up his bath-gown, shook it free from sand, and huddled it around him. "Let us get up to the house." He shivered. "It's cold."

She followed him wonderingly.

"What bad news?" she asked.

He turned his head, with a half-laugh. "Nothing so very desperate. The end of the world hasn't come yet. I'll tell you when I've changed."

He rushed up the steps of the veranda and into his little dressing-room. Olivia, dry and warm, sat in a sun-beat chair and anxiously waited for him. The instinct of a loving woman, the delicacy of a sensitive soul, forbade her teasing with insistent questions a man thrown for the moment off his balance. Yet she swept the horizon of her mind for reasons.

A quarter of an hour afterwards—it had seemed a quarter of a century—he appeared, dressed, not in his customary flannels, but in the blue serge suit of their wedding day. The sight of it struck a chill through her heart.

"You are going away?"

He nodded. "Yes, my dear, I have to."

"Why? What has happened?"

"I can't tell you, dear. That's the heart-rending part of it. It's secret—from the Foreign Office."

She reacted in laughter. "Oh, my darling—how you frightened me. I thought it was something serious."

“Of course it’s serious, if I have to leave you for three or four days—perhaps a week.”

“A week!” She stood aghast. It was serious. How could she face a lonely epoch of seven days, each counting twenty-four thousand halting hours? What did it mean?

“There are not many men who know Russian as I do. I’ve been in touch with the Intelligence Department ever since I landed in England. That’s why I went to Finland in the autumn. These things bind me to inviolable secrecy, beloved. You understand, don’t you?”

“Of course I understand,” she replied proudly.

“I could refuse—if you made a point of it. I’m a free man.”

She put her two hands on his shoulders—and ever after he had this one more unforgettable picture of her—the red bathing cap knotted in front, dainty, setting off her dark eyes and her little eager face—the peignoir, carelessly loose, revealing the sweet, frank mould of her figure in the red bathing suit.

“My father and my two brothers gave their lives for England. Do you think I could be so utterly selfish as to grudge my country a week of my husband’s society?”

He took her cheeks in his hands. “More and more do you surpass the Princess of my dreams.”

She laughed. “I’m an Englishwoman.”

“And so, you don’t want to know where I’m going?”

She moved aside. “Of course I do. I shall be in a fever till you come back. But if I’m not to know—well—I’m not to know. It’s enough for me that you’re serving your country. Tell me,” she said suddenly, catching him by the coat lapels. “There’s no danger.”

He smiled. “Not a little tiny bit. Of that you can be assured. The worst is a voyage to Helsingfors and back. So I gathered from the telegram, which was in execrable Foreign Office Russian.”

“And when are you going?”

“By the first train. I must report to-night.”

“Can’t I come with you—as far as London?”

He considered for a moment. “No,” he said. “Where would you sleep? In all probability I shall have to take the midnight boat to Havre.”

An hour later they parted. She returned to the empty house frightened at she knew not what, insecure, terrifyingly alone; she was fretted by an uncanny sense of having mated with the inhabitant of another planet who had suddenly

taken wing through the vast emptiness to the strange sphere of his birth. She wandered up and down the veranda, in and out of the three intimate rooms, where the traces of his late presence, books, papers, clothes, lay strewn carelessly about. She smiled wanly, reflecting that he wore his surroundings loosely as he did his clothes. Suddenly she uttered a little feminine cry, as her glance fell on his wrist watch lying on the drawing-room mantelpiece. He had forgotten it. She took it up with the impulsive intention of posting it to him at once. But the impulse fell into the nervelessness of death, when she remembered that he had given her no address. She must await his telegram—to-morrow, the next day, the day after, he could not say. Meanwhile, he would be chafing at the lack of his watch. She worried herself infinitely over the trifle, unconsciously finding relief in the definite.

The weary hours till night passed by. She tried to read. She tried to eat. She thought of going over the road to the Philimores' for company; but her mood forbade. For all their delicacy they would ask reasons for this sudden abandonment. She magnified its importance. She could have said: "My husband has gone to London on business." But to her brain, overwrought by sudden emotion, the commonplace excuse seemed inadequate. She shrank from the society of her kind friends, who would regard this interplanetary mystery as a matter of course.

If only Alexis had taken his watch! Perhaps he would have time to buy another—a consoling thought. Meanwhile she strapped it on her own wrist, heroically resolved not to part with it night or day until he returned.

She sat by the lamp on the sitting-room table, looking out over the veranda at the pitch blackness of a breathless night in which not even the mild beat of the surf could be heard. She might have been in some far Pacific desert island. Her book lay on her lap—the second volume of Motley's *Dutch Republic*. All the Alvas and Williams, all the heroes and villains, all the soldiers and politicians and burghers were comfortably dead hundreds of years ago. What did these dead men matter, when one living man, the equal of them all, had gone forth from her, into the unknowableness of the night?

Myra came into the room with an amorphous bundle in her hand.

"The camp bed in the dressing-room isn't very comfortable—but I suppose I can sleep on it."

Olivia turned swiftly in her chair, startled into human realities.

"No. It's a beast of a thing. But I should love to have you to be with me. You're a dear. You sleep in my bed and I'll take the dressing-room."

"You once gave signs of being a woman of sense," said Myra tonelessly. "It seems I was mistaken."

She disappeared with her bundle. Olivia put out the light and went to bed, where she lay awake all the night, fantastically widowed, striving with every nerve and every brain-cell to picture the contemporaneous situation of her husband. Three o'clock in the morning. He would be in mid-Channel. Had he secured a berth? Or was he forced to walk up and down the steamer's deck? Thank Heaven, it was a black still night. She stole out of bed and looked at the sea. A sea of oil. It was something to be grateful for. But the poor boy without his watch—the watch which had marked for him the laggard minutes of captivity, the racing hours of approaching death, the quiet, rhythmic companion and recorder of his amazing life.

She forced all her will power to sleep; but the blank of him there on the infinite expanse of mattress she felt like a frost. The dawn found her with wide and sleepless eyes.

And while she was picturing this marvel among men standing by the steamer's side in the night, in communion with the clear and heavy stars, holding in his adventurous grasp the secret of a world's peace, Alexis Triona was speeding northwards, sitting upright in a third-class carriage, to Newcastle-on-Tyne. And at Newcastle he expected no ship to take him to Finland. Lucky if he found a cab in the early morning to take him to his destination three miles away.

For the telegram which he had torn to pieces had not come from the War Office. It was not written in Russian. It was in good, plain, curt English:

"Mother dying. Come at once."

CHAPTER XIII

A TAXICAB took him in dreary rain through the squalor of Tyneside, now following the dismal tram lines, now cutting through mean streets, until they reached a row of low, bow-windows agglutinated little villas with handkerchief of garden separating them from the road. At No. 17 he dismissed the cab and swung wide the flimsy gate. Before he could enter, the house door opened and a woman appeared, worn and elderly, in a cheap, soiled wrapper.

"I suppose that's you, John. I shouldn't have recognized you."

She spoke with a harsh, northern accent, and her face betrayed little emotion.

"You're Ellen," said he.

"Aye. I'm Ellen. You didn't think I was Jane?"

She led the way into a narrow passage and then into the diminutive parlour.

"Of course not," said he. "Jane died three years ago. But you I haven't seen since I was a child."

She looked him up and down: "Quite the gentleman."

"I hope so. How's mother?"

She gave the news dully. The sick woman had passed through the night safely and was now asleep.

"She had made up her mind to see you before she died—she always was strong willed—and that has kept her alive. Until I read your telegram I didn't think you would come."

He flashed one of his quick glances. "Why not? This isn't the first time I've come to see her since my return. If I've made my way in the world, that's no reason for you to call me undutiful."

"I don't want to quarrel, John," she said wearily. "Yes. I know about your visits and the bit of money you send her. And she's grateful, poor soul." She paused. Then: "You'll be wanting breakfast."

"Also a wash."

"Are you too grand for the sink, or must you have hot water in your room?"

"The sink will do. It will be less trouble for you."

Alexis Triona followed her down the passage, and having washed himself with a bit of yellow soap and dried himself on the coarse towel hung on a

stretch of string, went into the tidy kitchen, hung with cheap prints and faded photographs of departed Briggses, his coat over his arm, and conversed with his sister in his shirt sleeves while she fried the eggs and bacon for his meal. His readiness to fall into the household ways somewhat mollified her. Her mother had been full of pride in the great man John had become, and she had expected the airs and graces of the upstart. Living at Sunderland with her husband, a foreman riveter, and her children, and going filially to Newcastle only once a year, she had not met him on his previous visits. Now her mother's illness had summoned her three or four days before, when the neighbour's daughter who "did for" Mrs. Briggs, ordinarily a strong and active woman, found the sudden situation beyond her powers and responsibility. So, until the ailing lady discoursed to her of the paragon, she had scarcely given him a thought for the sixteen years they had been separated. Her memories of him as a child who alternated exasperating mischief with bone-idle fits of reading had not endeared him to her practical mind; and when the impish dreamer disappeared into the vast inane of foreign parts, and when she herself was driven by she knew not what idiot romanticalism into the grey worries of wifehood and motherhood, her consciousness recorded the memory of a brother John, but whether he was alive or dead or happy or miserable was a matter of illimitable unconcern. Now, however, he had come to life, very vivid, impressing her with a certain masterfulness in his manner which had nothing to do with the airs and graces she despised. Yet she still regarded him with suspicion; even when, seating himself at the roughly laid end of the kitchen table and devouring bacon and eggs with healthy appetite, he enthusiastically praised her cookery.

"What I can't understand is," she said, standing at the other end of the table and watching him eat, "why the name of John Briggs isn't good enough for you."

"It's difficult to explain," said he. "You see, I've written a book. Have you read it?"

She regarded him scornfully. "Do you suppose, with a husband and seven children I've time to waste on books? I've seen it," she admitted. "Mother has it bound in brown paper, by the side of her bed."

"You must read it," replied Triona, somewhat relieved. "Then you'll see why I've changed my name." He laughed at her uncomprehending face. "I've done nothing criminal, you know, and I'm not hiding from justice."

"I suppose an outlandish name brings in more money," she suggested practically.

"That's so," said he.

"Fools must be fools."

He acquiesced gladly, gauging the end of an embarrassing examination, and turned the conversation to her domestic affairs.

Breakfast over, he lit a cigarette and watched her clear away, viewing through the smoke the memories of his childhood. Just so, in that very wooden arm-chair, though in another kitchen, used his father to sit, pipe in mouth, while the women did the household work. It was all so familiar, yet so far away. Between then and now stretched a lifetime—so it seemed—of wide and romantic happenings. There, before him, on the wall hung, as it did years ago, the haunting coloured print, cut from some Christmas Number, of young Amyas Leigh listening to Salvation Yeo. As a child, Salvation Yeo's long arm and finger pointing out to sea had been his inspiration. He had followed it, and gone to distant lands and gone through the promised adventures, and had returned to the picture, wondering whether all that had been was real and not the figment of a dream.

A little later, after the doctor's visit, he was admitted to his mother's room. For an hour or so he sat with her and gave a human being deep happiness. In the afternoon she lost consciousness. For a day or two she lingered on, and then she died.

During the dreary interval between his interview and the funeral, Alexis Triona sat for many hours in his father's chair, for the North was smitten with a dismal spell of rain and tempest which discouraged rambling out of doors, reconstructing his life, unweaving fact from fiction, tearing aside the veils of self-deception wherein he had enwrapped his soul. Surely there was some basis of fact in the romantic history of Alexis Triona with which for the past year he had identified himself. Surely a man could not dwell so intensely in an imaginary life if none of it were real. Even while tearing open veils and viewing his soul's nakedness, he sought justification.

Did he not find it in that eagerness of spirit which had sent him, in obedience to Salvation Yeo's pointing finger, away from the dour and narrow father and the first taste of the Tyneside works, penniless, over the wild North Sea to Archangel, town of fairy wonders, and thence, so as not to be caught on the ship again and taken back to Newcastle, to wanderings he scarce knew whither? Did he not find it in the strange lure of Russia which impelled him, when, after a few voyages, he landed in the port of London, to procure a passport which would make him free for the land of his fascination? Did he not find it in the resourcefulness of brain which, the mariner's life forsaken, first secured him employment in the English racing establishment of a Russian Prince, and then interested recognition by the Princess herself, so that, after a strenuous while he found himself no longer as an inconsiderable stable hand,

but as a human being who counted in the world? Did he not find it in his fond ambitions, when the Princess at his request transferred him from stables to garage, from garage to motor-works for higher training; when he set himself to learn Russian as no Englishman should ever have learned it; when afterwards he steeped his mind in Russian poetry and folk-lore, sleeping four or five hours a night, compelled by dreams of greatness in which there figured as his bride of the golden future the little Princess Tania, whose governess-taught English was as pure as the church bells on a frosty night? Did he not find it in those qualities of practical command of circumstance and of poetic vision which had raised him in a few years from the ragged, semi-ignorant, sea-faring English lout alone in Russia to the trusted chief of a Prince's fleet of a dozen cars, to the courier-chauffeur, with all the roads and ways and customs and languages of Russia, from Riga to Tobolsk, and from Tobolsk to Tiflis, and from Tiflis to St. Petersburg, at his finger tips; to the Master of Russian Literature, already something of a published poet, admitted into intellectual companionship by the Prince and thereby given undreamed of leisure for further intellectual development? What were those qualities but the qualities of genius differentiating him from the ordinary run of men and absolving him from such judgments as might be passed upon the errant of them? Without this absolving genius could he have marched in and taken his place in the modern world of English letters?

Meanwhile, being of frugal tastes, he had grown rich beyond the dream of the Tyneside urchin's avarice. He had visions of great motor-works, the manufacture of an all-Russian car, built up by his own resources. The princely family encouraged him. Negotiations had just begun—was his story so devoid of truth?—when the great world cataclysm brought more than his schemes for an all-Russian car toppling to the ground. The Prince's household was disintegrated; horses and cars were swallowed up in the great convulsion.

He found himself driving generals around the shell-scarred front as a volunteer, for being of British nationality he had not been called up for military service. With them he served in advances and retreats and saw battles and burnings like many millions of other men, but from the comparative safety of a headquarters car. It was not until he ran into the British Armoured Car Column that his patriotism took fire, and he became a combatant in British uniform. He remained with the Column for most of the campaign. Badly wounded towards the end, he was left in a Russian hospital, a British naval rating. He remained there many months; a bullet through his chest had missed a vital part and the wound had soon healed, but his foot had gangrened, and only the star in which he trusted had saved it from amputation. There was no fiction about the three lost toes whose gap he had shown to Olifant.

So far did Alexis Triona, sitting in the kitchen arm-chair, salve his conscience. In his story had he done more than remodel the contour of fact? Beneath it did not the living essence of truth persist? Was he not a highly educated man? Had he not consorted—before the cataclysm, and later in the strangely filled hospital—with the young Russian *intelligentsia*, who talked and talked and talked——? Who could know better than he how Russia had floundered in their tempestuous ocean of talk? And, finally, had he not gone, stout-hearted, through the perils and hardships and exquisite sufferings of the cataclysm?

So far, so good. But what of the rest? For the rest, was not Fate responsible?

The Revolution came, and Russian organization crumbled like a castle touched with an enchanter's wand. He went forth healed from the hospital into chaos; Petrograd, where his little fortune lay, his objective. Sometimes he found a foothold on an aimless train. Sometimes he jogged weary miles in a peasant's cart. Sometimes he walked. When he learned that British uniform was no longer held in high esteem he changed to peasant's dress. So far his journey through revolutionary Russia was true. But he had enough money in his pocket to keep him from want.

And then arrived the day which counted most in his life's history, when that which he had recounted to Olivia as a fantastic possibility happened in sober fact.

He had been given to understand that if he walked to a certain junction he might find a train returning to Petrograd. Tired, he sat by the wayside, and undoing his wallet ate the black bread and dried fish which he had procured at the last village. And, while eating, he became aware of something gleaming in the rank grasses of the ditch—something long and pallid and horrible. He slid down and found a dead man, stark naked, lying on his back with the contused mark of a bullet hole in his chest. A man of fifty, with short-cropped, grizzled hair and moustache, and clear, refined features. He must have been dead two days. There he lay, constricted of limb, stripped of everything that could mean warmth or comfort or money to his murderers. The living man's short experience told him that such things were not uncommon in great revolutions. He was about to leave the corpse—for what could he do?—when his eyes caught the glint of metal a few feet away. It was a pocket compass. And further on he found at intervals a toothbrush; a coverless, tattered copy of Tacitus; a little faded snapshot of a woman mounted on cardboard; a vulcanite upper plate of half a dozen false teeth; and a little fat book with curling covers of American cloth. Had he continued his search he might have found many other objects discarded by the robbers as useless. But what was the good of pieces of

conviction for a judicial enquiry that would never take place? The little fat book, which on opening he found to be manuscript in minute handwriting, he thrust in his pocket. And so he went his way.

But on his way, his curiosity being aroused, he read in the little book an absorbing diary of amazing adventures, of hardships and prison and tortures unspeakable; and without a thought of its value, further than its romantic fascination, he grew to regard it during his wanderings as his most precious possession.

So far again, until he reached Riga, there was truth in the story of his Russian traverse. Had he not prowled suspect about revolutionary Petrograd? Had not the Prince and Princess, the idealized parents of the story, been murdered and their wealth, together with his own few thousand roubles, been confiscated? Was he not a fugitive? Indeed, had he not seen the inside of a horrible prison? It is true that after a day or two he managed by bribery to escape. But the essence of things was there—the grain of fact which, under the sunlight of his genius, expanded into the splendid growth of Truth. And his wit had served him, too. His guards were for taking away the precious book. Knowing them to be illiterate, he declared it to be the manuscript of his republican poem. Challenged to read, he recited from memory verses of Shevchenko, until they were convinced, not only of the book's contents, but of his own revolutionary opinions. This establishment of his orthodoxy, together with a few roubles, assured his escape. And thence had he not gone northwards, hungry and footsore?

And had he not been torpedoed? Cast ashore in shirt and trousers, penniless? Was not the real truth of this adventure even more to his credit than the fictitious narrative? For, a naval rating, he had reported to a British man-of-war, and had spent months in a mine sweeper in the North Sea, until the final catastrophe occurred. Then, after a short time in hospital a kindly medical board found something wrong with his heart and sent him out into the English world, a free man.

Yes. His real record was one that no man need be ashamed of. Why, then, the fiction?

Sitting there in the uncompromising reality of his mother's kitchen, he strove for the first time to answer the question. He found an answer in the obsession of the little book. During the scant leisure of his months at sea it had been his breviary. More, it had been a talisman, a secret scroll of enchantment which, wrapped in oilskin, never left his person, save when, beneath the dim lamp of the fo'c'sle, he pored over it, hunched up against a bulkhead. The spirit of the writer whom he had seen dead and naked, seemed to have descended upon him. In the bitter watches of the North Sea he lived through

the dead man's life with bewildering intensity. There were times, so he assured himself, when it became a conscious effort to unravel his own experiences from those of the dead man. That he had not lived in remoter Kurdistan was unthinkable. And, surely too, he had been tortured.

And when, in the attic in Cherbury Mews, impelled by irresistible force, he began to write his fantasia of fact and imagination, the obsession grew mightier. His pen was winged with flame.

"Why," said he, half aloud, one day, staring into the kitchen fire, "why should it not be a case of psychic obsession for which I am not responsible?"

And that was the most comforting solution he could find.

There was none other. He moved uneasily, changing the crossing of his legs, and threw a freshly rolled and lighted cigarette into the grate. It was a case of psychic obsession. Otherwise he was a barefaced liar, a worm to be despised by his fellow-men. How else to account for the original lie direct, unreserved, to the publisher? Up to then he had no thought of sailing through the world under false colours. He had to give the mysterious dead man some identity. His own unconscious creative self clamoured for expression. He had woven the dead man and himself into a personality to which he had given the name of Alexis Triona. Naturally, for verisimilitude, he had assumed "Alexis Triona" as a pen-name. Besides, who would read a new book by one John Briggs? The publisher's first direct question was a blow between the eyes under which he reeled for a few seconds. Then the romantic, the psychic, the whatever you will of the artist's touch of lunacy asserted itself, and John Briggs was consumed in ashes and the Phœnix Alexis Triona arose in his stead. And when the book appeared and the Phœnix leaped into fame, what could the Phœnix do, for the sake of its ordinary credit, but maintain its Phœnixdom?

Until now it had been the simplest matter in the world, seeing that he half believed in it himself, seeing that the identification of the dead man with himself was so complete, that his lies, even to himself, had the generous air of conviction. But now, in the uncompromising John Briggs-dom of his surroundings, things were different. The obsession which still lingered when he bade Olivia adieu had vanished from his spirit. He saw himself naked, a mere impostor. If his past found absolution in the theory of psychic domination, his present was none the less in a parlous state.

He had no more gone to Helsingfors in the last year's autumn than he had gone there now. What should John Briggs, obscure and demobilized able seaman, have to do in Helsingfors? Why the elaborate falsehood? He shrugged his shoulders and made a helpless gesture with his elbows. The obsession

again. The quietude of Medlow had got on his nerves. He had to break away, to seek fresh environment. He had invented Helsingfors; it was dramatic, in his romantic past; it kept up, in the direct mind of Blaise Olifant, the mystery of Alexis Triona; and it gave him freedom. He had spoken truth as to his vagabond humour. He loved the eternal change of the broad highway. The Salvation Yeo inspiration had persisted ever since he had run away from home to the El Dorado beyond the seas. Had he been set down in a torpid household, no matter how princely, sooner or later he would have revolted and have fled, smitten with the wander madness. But the Prince, the nomadic Tartar atavism asserting itself, suffered too much from this unrest; and in their mighty journeyings through Russia, up and down, north and south, east and west, and in the manifold adventures and excitements by the way, the young chief mechanic found the needful satisfaction of his cravings. On leaving Medlow he had started on a tramp, knapsack on back, to the north of Scotland, stopping at his mother's house, *en route*, and had reached the John o' Groats whither, on an eventful day, Olivia had professed herself ready to accompany him. She had little guessed how well he knew that long, long road. . . . Yet, when he met Blaise Olifant again, and was forced to vague allusion to his mythical travels, he almost persuaded himself that he had just arrived from Finland.

But now had come an irreparable shifting of psychological values. He could not return to Olivia, eating her heart out for news of him, and persuade himself that he had been to Helsingfors. The lie had been facile enough. How else to account for his absence? His attendance at his mother's death-bed had been imperative: to disregard the summons had never entered his mind. Yet simple avowal would have been pulling down the keystone of the elaborate structure which, to her, represented Alexis Triona. The parting lie had been easy: but the lie on his return—the inevitable fabrication of imaginary travel—that would be hatefully difficult. For the first time since he had loved her he was smitten with remorse for his deception and with terror of her discovery.

He could not sleep of nights aching for her, shivering with dread at the possibility of loss of her, picturing her alone in the sweet, wind-swept house, utterly trustful and counting the long hours till he should come again. Still, thank God, this was the last time they would be parted. His mother had been the only link to his John Briggs past.

There were no testamentary complications, which he had somewhat feared. His mother had only a life interest in the tiny estate which went, under his father's will, to his sister Ellen. And Ellen did not count. Absorbed in her family cares, she would pass out of his life for ever without thought of regret. It would be the final falsehood.

At breakfast, on the morning of the funeral, Ellen said suddenly, in her

dour way:

“I’ve been reading your book. It’s a pack of lies.”

“It would have been if I had signed it John Briggs,” he answered. “But everything in it is true about Alexis Triona.”

“Your ways don’t seem to be our ways, John,” she remarked coldly.

He felt the words like a slap in the face. He flushed with anger.

“How dare you?”

“I’m sorry,” she answered. “I oughtn’t to have said it with mother lying cold upstairs.”

He shrugged his shoulders, forced to accept the evasive apology. But her challenge rankled. They parted stonily after the funeral, with the perfunctory handshake.

“I don’t suppose I shall ever see you again.”

“It’s rather unlikely,” said he.

“Well, good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

He threw himself back in the taxi-cab with a great sigh of relief. Thank God the nightmare of the past few days was over. Now to awaken to the real and wonderful things of life—the miraculous love of the dark-eyed, quivering princess of his dreams: the work which since he had loved her had grown into the sacred aim of their perfect lives.

And just as he had wired her from Newcastle announcing his sailing, so did he wire her when he reached the railway station.

“Arrived. All well. Speeding straight to you with love and longing.”

Olivia smiled as she kissed the telegram. No one but her Alexis would have used the word “speeding.”

CHAPTER XIV

SHE was waiting for him at the little South Coast station, where decorum had to cloak the rapture of their meeting. But they sat close together, hand in hand, in the hackney motor-car that took them home. This gave him an intermediary breathing space for explanation; and the explanation was easier than he had feared. Really, his journey had been almost for nothing and had afforded little interest. The agent whom he was to interview having been summoned back to Russia the day before he arrived, he had merely delivered his dispatches to the British authorities and taken the next boat to England. It was just a history of two dull sea voyages. Nothing more was to be said about it, save that he would go on no more fool's errands for a haphazard government.

"Besides, it's too dreadful to be away from you."

"It has been awful for me, too," said Olivia. "I never imagined what real loneliness could feel like. All the time I thought of the poor solitary little dab the Bryce children showed us the other day in the biscuit-tin of water. Oh, I was the most forsaken little dab."

He swore that she should never be lonely again; and, by the time they reached their house by the sea, he had half-exultingly dismissed his fictitious mission from his mind. All the apprehensions of the narrow Northern kitchen melted in the joy of her. All danger had vanished like a naughty black cloud sped to nothing by the sun. The mythical past had to remain; but henceforward his life would be as clear to her as her own exquisite life to him.

In their wind-swept home they gave themselves up to deferred raptures, kissing and laughing after the foolish way of lovers. To grace his return she had filled the rooms with flowers—roses and sweet peas—which she bought extravagantly in the neighbouring seaside town. The scent of them mingled delicately with the salt of the sea. To her joy he was quick to praise them. She had wondered whether they would be noticed by one so divinely careless of material things. He even found delight in the meal which Myra served soon after their arrival—he so indifferent to quality of food.

"Everything is you," said he; "scent and taste and sight. You inform the universe and give it meaning."

Her eyes grew moist as she swiftly laid her hand on his.

"Am I really all that to you?" She laughed with a little catch in her throat. "How can I live up to it?"

He raised her hand to his lips. "If only you went on existing like a flower,

your beauty and fragrance would be all in all to me. But you are a flower with a bewildering soul. So you merely have to be as you are."

He was in earnest. Women had played little or no part in his inner life, which, for all his follies, had been lived on a spiritual plane. His young ambitions had been irradiated by dreams of the little Princess Tania, who had represented to him the ever-to-be-striven-for unattainable. On his reaching the age when common sense put its clammy touch on fervid imagination, the little Princess had been given away in marriage to a young Russian nobleman of vast fortune, and he himself had driven her to the wedding with naught but a sentimental pang. But the flower-like, dancing, elusive quality of her had remained in his soul as that which was only desirable and ever to be sought for in woman. And—miracle of miracles!—he had found it in Olivia. And she was warm and real, the glowing incarnation of the cold but perfect ghost of his boyhood's aspirations. She was verily the Princess of his dream come true. And she had an odd air of the little Princess Tania—the same dark, wavy hair and laughing eyes and the same crisp sweetness in her English speech.

Save for all this rapture of meeting, they took up the thread of their lives where it had been broken, as though no parting had taken place, and their idyll continued to run its magic course. Triona began to write again: some articles, a short story. The shadow shape of a new novel arose in his mind, and, in his long talks with Olivia, gradually attained coherence. This process of creation seemed to her uncanny. Where did the people come from who at first existed as formless spirits and then, in some strange way, developed into living things of flesh and blood more real than the actual folk of her acquaintance? Her intimate association with the novelist's gift brought her nearer to him intellectually, but at the same time set him spiritually on unattainable heights. Meanwhile he called her his Inspiration, which filled her with pride and content.

The lease of "Quien Sabe" all but expired before they had settled on their future house. Medlow was ruled out. So was the immediate question of the Medlow furniture, they having given Blaise Olifant another year's tenancy.

While discussing this step, he had said:

"It's for you and you only to decide. Any spot on earth where you are is good enough for me. By instinct I'm a nomad. If I hadn't found you, I should have gone away somewhere to the desert and lived in tents."

Olivia, who had seen so little of the great world, felt a thrill of pulses and put her hands on his shoulders—she was standing behind his chair—

"Why shouldn't we?"

He shook his head and glanced up at her. The way of the gipsy was too

hard for his English flower. She must dwell in her accustomed garden. In practical terms, they must settle down for her sake. She protested. Of herself she had no thought. He and his work were of paramount importance. Had they not planned the ideal study, the central feature of the house? He had laughed and mangled Omar. A pen and a block of paper . . . and Thou beside me, etcetera, etcetera.

"I don't believe you want to settle down a bit," she cried.

He swung his chair and caught her round her slim body.

"Do you?"

"Eventually, of course——"

"But, before 'eventually,' don't you want your wander-year?"

"France, Italy——" She became breathless.

"Honolulu, the Pacific, the wide world. Why should we tie ourselves to a house until we have seen it all?"

"Yes, why? We have all our lives before us." She sank on his knee. "How beautiful! Let us make plans."

So for the next few days they lived in a world of visions, catching enthusiasm one from the other. Again he saw Salvation Yeo's pointing finger; and she, in the subconscious relation of her mind with his, saw it too. House and furniture were Olifant's as long as he wanted them.

"We'll go round the world," Olivia declared.

With a twirl of his finger—"Right round," said he.

"Which way does one go?"

He was somewhat vague. An atlas formed no part of their personal equipment or of the hireling penates of "Quien Sabe."

"I'll write to Cook's."

"Cook's? My beloved, where is your sense of adventure?"

"We must go by trains and steamers, and Cook's will tell us all about them."

She had her way. Cook's replied. At the quotation for the minimum aggregate of fares Alexis gasped.

"There's not so much money in the world."

"There is," she flashed triumphantly. "On deposit at my bank. Much more."

Who was right now, she asked herself, she or the prosaic Mr. Trivett and Mr. Fenmarch? She only had to dip her hands into her fortune and withdraw

them filled with bank-notes enough to take them half a dozen times round the world!

Inspired by this new simplicity of things, they rushed up to London by an incredibly early train to take tickets, then and there for the main routes which circumnavigate the globe. The man at Cook's dashed their ardour. They would have to pencil their passages now and wait for months until their turn on the waiting lists arrived.

It must be remembered that then were the early days of Peace.

"But we want to start next week!" cried Olivia in dismay.

The young man at Cook's professed polite but wearied sorrow at her disappointment. Forty times a day he had to disillusion eager souls who wanted to start next week for the other side of the globe.

"It is most inconvenient and annoying for us to change our plans," Olivia declared resentfully. "But," she added, with a smile, "it's not your fault that the world is a perfect beast. We'll talk it over and come to you again."

So after lunch in town they returned to The Point, richer in their knowledge of the conditions of contemporary world travel.

"We'll put things in hand at once and start about Christmas," said Alexis. "Until then——"

"We'll take a furnished flat in London," Olivia decided.

October found them temporarily settled in a flat in the Buckingham Palace Road, and then began the life which Olivia had schemed for her husband before these disturbing dreams of vagabondage.

Towards the end of their stay in "Quien Sabe" various letters of enquiry and invitations had been forwarded to Triona from people, back now in London, with whom the success of his book had brought him into contact. These, careless youth, he had been for ignoring, but the wiser Olivia had stepped in and dictated tactful and informative replies. The result was their welcome in many houses remote from the Lydian galley, the Blenkiron home of Bolshevism and even the easy conservative dullness of the circle of Janet Philimore. The world that danced and ate and dressed and thought and felt to the unvarying rhythm of jazz music had passed away like a burnt-up planet. The world which she entered with her husband was astonishingly new with curious ramifications. At the houses of those whose cultivated pleasure in life it is to bring together people worthy of note she met artists, novelists, journalists, actors, publishers, politicians, travellers, and their respective wives or husbands. Jealously, at first, she watched the attitude of all these folk towards her husband: in pride and joy she saw him take his easy place among

them as an equal. A minority of silly women flattered him—to his obvious distaste—but the majority accepted him on frank and honourable terms. She loved to watch him, out of the corner of her eye, across the drawing-room, his boyish face flushed and eager, talking in his swift, compelling way. His manners, so simple, so direct, so different from the elaboration of Sidney Rooke, even from the cut-and-dried convention of Mauregard, had a charm entirely individual. There was no one like him in the world.

In their turn, many of the people of note they met at the houses of the primary entertainers invited them to their homes. Thus, in a brief time, Olivia found herself swept into as interesting a social circle as the heart of ambitious young woman could crave. How far her own grace and wit contributed to their success it never entered her head to enquire.

Triona, light-hearted, gave himself up to the pleasure of this new existence. He found in it stimulus to work, being in touch with the thought and the art of the moment. The newness of his Odyssey having worn off, he was no longer compelled to dilate on his extraordinary adventures; people, growing unconsciously impatient of the realistic details of the late cataclysm, conspired to regard him more as a writer than as a heroic personage; wherein he experienced mighty relief. He could talk of other things than the habits of the dwellers round Lake Baikal and the amenities of Bolshevik prisons. When conversation drifted into such channels, he employed a craftiness of escape which he had amused himself to develop. Freed from the obsession of the little black book, he regarded his Russian life as a phase remote, as a tale that was told. His facile temperament put the whole matter behind him. He lived for the future, when he should be the acknowledged English Master of Romance, and when Olivia's burning faith in his genius should be justified. He threw off memories of Ellen and the kitchen chair and went his way, a man radiant with happiness. Each day intensified the wonder of his wife. From the lips and from the writings of fools and philosophers he had heard of the perils of the first year of marriage; of the personal equations that seemed impossible of simultaneous solution; of the misunderstandings, cross-purposes, quarrels inevitable to the attempt; of the hidden snags of feminine unreason that shipwrecked logical procedure; of the love-rasping persistence of tricks of manner or speech which either had to be violently broken or to be endured in suffering sullenness. At both fools and philosophers he mocked. A fiction, this dogma of inescapable sex warfare. Never for a second had a cloud arisen on their horizon. The flawlessness of Olivia he accepted as an axiom. Equally axiomatic was his own faultiness. In their daily lives he was aware of his thousand lapses from her standard of grace, when John Briggs happened to catch Alexis Triona at unguarded moments and threw him from his seat. But,

in a flash, the instinctive, the super-instinctive, the nothing less than Divine hand, was stretched out to restore him to his throne. As a guide to conduct she became his conscience.

Work and love and growing friendship filled his care-free days. His novel was running serially in a weekly and attracting attention. It would be published in book-form early in the New Year, and the publishers had no doubt of its success. All was well with the world.

Meanwhile they concerned themselves busily, like happy children, with their projects of travel. It was a great step to book berths for Bombay by a January boat. They would then cross India, visit Burmah, the Straits Settlements, Australia, Japan, America. All kinds of Companies provided steamers; Providence would procure the accommodation. They planned a detailed six months' itinerary which would take a conscientious globe-trotter a couple of years to execute. Before launching on this eastern voyage they would wander at their ease through France, see Paris and Monte Carlo, and pick up the boat at Marseilles. As the year drew to its close their excitement waxed more unrestrained. They babbled to their envious friends of the wonder-journey before them.

Blaise Olifant, who, on his periodical visits to London, was a welcome visitor at their flat, was entertained with these anticipations of travel. He listened with the air of elderly indulgence that had been his habit since their marriage.

"Don't you wish you were coming with us?" asked Olivia.

He shook his head. "Don't you remember the first time I saw you I said I was done with adventures?"

"And I said I was going in search of them."

"So you're each getting your heart's desire," said Triona.

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Olifant, with a smile.

There was a touch of sadness in it which did not escape Olivia's shrewd glance. He had grown thinner during the year; his nose seemed half-comically to have grown sharper and longer. In his eyes dwelt a shadow of wistful regret.

"The life of a hermit cabbage isn't good for you," she said. "Give it up and come with us."

Again he shook his head. No. They did not want such a drag on the wheels of their joyous chariot. Besides, he was tied to Medlow as long as she graciously allowed him to live there. His sister had definitely left her dissolute husband and was living under his protection.

"You should be living under the protection of a wife," Olivia declared.

“I’ve told you so often, haven’t I?”

“And I’ve always answered that bachelors are born, not made—and I’m one born.”

“Predestination! Rubbish!” cried Triona, rising with a laugh. “Your Calvinistic atavism is running away with you. It’s time for your national antidote. I’ll bring it in.”

He went out of the room, in his boyish way, in search of whisky. Olivia leaned forward in her chair.

“You may not know it, but from that first day a year ago you made yourself a dear friend—so you’ll forgive me if I——” She paused for a second, and went on abruptly: “You’ve changed. Now and then you look so unhappy. I wish I could help you.”

He laughed. “It’s very dear of you to think of me, Lady Olivia—but the change is not in me. I’ve remained the same. It’s your eyes that have grown so accustomed to the radiant gladness of a happy man that they expect the same in any old fossil on the beach.”

“Now you make me feel utterly selfish,” she cried.

“How?”

“We oughtn’t to look so absurdly happy. It’s indecent.”

“But it does one good,” said he.

Triona entered with the tray, and administered whisky and soda to his guest.

“There! When you’ve drunk it you’ll be ready to come to the Magical Isles with us, where the Lady of Ladies awaits you in an enchanted valley, with hybiscus in her hair.”

The talk grew light, drifted inevitably into the details of their projected wanderings. The evening ended pleasantly. Olivia bade Olifant farewell, promising, as he would not go in search of her himself, to bring him back the perfect lady of the hybiscus crown. Triona accompanied him to the landing; and, while they stood awaiting the lift, Olifant said casually:

“I suppose you’ve got your passports?”

“Passports?” The young man knitted his brow in some surprise. “Why, of course. That’s to say, I’ve not bothered about them yet, but they’ll be all right. Why do you ask?”

“You’re Russian subjects. There may be difficulties. If there are, I know a man in the Foreign Office who may be of help.”

The lift rose and the gates clashed open, and the attendant came out.

"Thanks very much," said Triona. "It's awfully good of you."

They shook hands, wished each other God-speed, and the cage went down, leaving Triona alone on the landing, gaping across the well of the lift.

He was aroused from a semi-stupor by Olivia's voice at the flat door.

"What on earth are you doing, darling?"

He realized that he must have been there some appreciable time. He turned with a laugh.

"I was interested in the mechanism of the lift; it has so many possibilities in fiction."

She laughed. "Think of them to-morrow. It's time for good little novelists to go to bed."

But that night, while Olivia, blissfully unconscious of trouble, slept the happy sleep of innocence Alexis Triona did not close an eye.

Passports! He had not given them a thought. Any decent person was entitled to a passport. In the plenitude of his English content he had forgotten his fictitious Russian citizenship. To attest or even to support this claim there was no creature on God's earth. The details of his story of the torpedoed Swedish timber boat in which he had taken refuge would not bear official examination. Application for passport under the name of Alexis Triona, soi-disant Russian subject, would involve an investigation leading to inevitable exposure. His civic status was that of John Briggs, late naval rating. He had all his papers jealously locked up, together with the little black notebook, in his despatch case. As John Briggs, British subject, he was freeman of the civilized world. But John Briggs was dead and done for. It was impossible to wander over the globe as Alexis Triona with a passport bearing the name of John Briggs. He would be held up and turned back at any frontier. And it was beyond his power of deception to induce Olivia to travel with him round the world under the incognito of Mrs. John Briggs.

Rigid, so that he should not wake the beloved woman, he stared for hours and hours into the darkness, vainly seeking a solution. And there was none.

He might blind Olivia into the postponement of their adventure, and in the meanwhile change his name by deed poll. But that would involve the statutory publicity in the Press. The declaration in *The Times* that he, John Briggs, would henceforth take the name of Alexis Triona would stultify him in the social and literary world—and damn him in the eyes of Olivia.

In those early days after the War, the Foreign Office granted passports grudgingly. British subjects had to show very adequate reasons for desiring to go abroad, and foreign visas were not over-readily given. In the process of

obtaining a passport, a man's identity had to be established beyond question.

He remembered now having heard vague talk of spies; but he had paid no attention to it. Now he realized that which he had heard was cruelly definite.

There was no solution. John Briggs was dead, and Alexis Triona had no official existence.

He could not get as far as Boulogne, let alone Japan. And there was Olivia by his side dreaming of the Fortunate Isles.

CHAPTER XV

BUT for Olivia's unquestioning faith in him he would not have pulled through this passport quagmire. At every fresh lie he dreaded lest her credulity should reach the breaking point. For he had to lie once more—and this time with revulsion and despair.

He began the abominable campaign the next evening after dinner. He had been absent all day, on the vague plea of business. In reality he had walked through London and wandered about the docks, Ratcliffe Highway, the Isle of Dogs. He had returned physically and spiritually worn out. Her solicitude smote him. It was nothing. A little worry which the sight of her would dispel. They dined and went into the drawing-room. She sat on the arm of his chair.

"And now the worry, poor boy. Anything I can do?"

He stared into the fire. "It's our trip."

"Why, what has gone wrong?"

"Everything," he groaned.

"But, darling!" She gripped his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid it's a beautiful dream, my dear. We must call it off."

She uttered a breathless "Why?"

"It's far beyond our means."

She broke into her gay laugh and hugged him and called him a silly fellow. Hadn't they settled all that side of it long ago? Her fingers were itching to draw cheques. She had scarcely put pen to pink paper since their marriage. Hadn't he insisted on supporting her?

"And I'll go on insisting," said he. "I'm not the man to live on my wife's money. No, no——" with uplifted hand he checked her generous outburst. "I know what you're going to say, sweetheart, but it can't be done. I was willing for you to advance a certain amount. But I would have paid it back—well, I would have accepted it if it gave you pleasure. Anyhow, things are different now. Suddenly different."

He writhed under the half-truths, the half-sincerities he was speaking. In marrying her his conscience absolved him of fortune seeking. It had been the pride of his Northumbrian blood to maintain his wife as she should be maintained, out of his earnings—this draft on her fortune for the jaunt he had made up a Tyneside mind to repay. Given the passport, the whole thing was as simple as signing a cheque. But no passports to be given, he had to lie. How else, in God's name, to explain?

“My dear,” said he, in answer to her natural question, “there’s one thing about myself I’ve not told you. It has seemed quite unimportant. In fact, I had practically forgotten it. But this is the story. During my last flight through Russia a friend, one of the old Russian nobility, gave me shelter. He was in hiding, dressed as a peasant. His wife and children had escaped the Revolution and were, he was assured, in England. He entrusted me with a thousand pounds in English bank-notes which he had hidden in a scapulary hanging round his neck, and which I was to give to his family on my arrival. I followed his example and hung the few paper roubles I had left, together with his money, round my neck. As you know, I was torpedoed. I was hauled out of the water in shirt and drawers, and landed penniless. The string of the scapulary had broken, and all the money was at the bottom of the North Sea. I went to every conceivable Russian agency in London to get information about the Vronsky family. There was no trace of them. I came to the conclusion that they had never landed in England, and to-day I found I was right. They hadn’t. They had disappeared off the face of the earth.”

“To-day?” queried Olivia.

“This morning. I had a letter from Vronsky forwarded by the publishers.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” cried Olivia. “I had an idea you weren’t quite yourself.”

“I didn’t want to worry you without due reason,” he explained, “and I was upset. It was like a message from the dead. For, not having heard of him all this time, I concluded he had perished, like so many others, at the hands of the Bolsheviks. Anyhow, there he was alive in a little hotel in Bloomsbury. Of course, I had to go and rout him out.”

“Naturally,” said Olivia.

“Well, I found him. He had managed to escape, with the usual difficulties, and was now about to search Europe for his family.”

“What a terrible quest,” said Olivia, with a shudder.

“Yes. It’s awful, isn’t it?” replied Triona in a voice of deep feeling—already half beginning himself to believe in the genuineness of his story—“I spent a heart-rending day with him. He had expected to find his family in England.”

“But you wrote to him——”

“Of course. But how many letters to Russia reach their destination? Their letters, too, have miscarried or been seized. He hadn’t had news of them since they left Petrograd.”

Carried away by the tragedy of this Wandering Jew hunt for a lost family,

Olivia forgot the reason for its recital. She questioned, Triona responded, his picturesque invention in excited working. He etched in details. Vronsky's declension from the ruddy, plethoric gentleman, with good-humoured Tartar face, to the gaunt, hollow-eyed grey-beard, with skinny fingers on which the nails grew long. The gentle charm of the lost Madame Vronsky and the beauty of her two young daughters, Vera and Sonia. The faithful moujik who had accompanied them on their way and reported that they had sailed on the *Olger Danske* from Copenhagen for London. He related their visit to Lloyds, where they had learned that no such ship was known. Certainly at the time of the supposed voyage it had put into no British port. Vronsky was half mad. No wonder.

"Why did you leave him? Why didn't you bring him here?" asked Olivia, her eyes all pity and her lips parted.

"I asked him. He wouldn't come. He must begin his search at once—take ship for Denmark. . . . Meanwhile, dearest," he said after a pause, "being practically without resources, he referred to his thousand pounds. That's where you and I come in. He entrusted me with the money and the accident of losing it could not relieve me of the responsibility—could it?"

He glanced a challenge. Her uprightness waved it aside.

"Good heavens, no!"

"Well, I took him to my bank and gave him the thousand pounds in Bank of England notes. So, my dear, we're all that to the bad on our balance sheet. We're nearly broke—and we'll have to put off our trip round the world to more prosperous times."

Although, womanlike, she tried at first to kick against the pricks, parading the foolish fortune lying idle at the bank, that was the end of the romantic project. Her common sense asserted itself. A thousand pounds, for folks in their position, was a vast sum of money. She resigned herself with laughing grace to the inevitable, and poured on her husband all the consolation for disappointment that her heart could devise. Their pleasant life went on. Deeply interested in Vronsky, she questioned him from time to time. Had he no news of the tragic wanderer? At last, in February, he succumbed to the temptation to finish for ever with these Frankenstein monsters. He came home one afternoon, and after kissing her said with a gay air:

"I found a letter at Decies Street"—the house of his publishers—"from whom do you think? From Vronsky. Just a few lines. He tracked his family to Palermo and they're all as happy as can be. How he did it he doesn't say, which is disconcerting, for one would like to know the ins and outs of his journeyings. But there's the fact, and now we can wipe Vronsky off our slate."

In March the novel appeared. Reviewers lauded it enthusiastically as a new note in fiction.

The freshness of subject, outlook, and treatment appealed to the vastly superior youth, the disappointed old, and the scholarly and conscientious few, who write literary criticism. The great firm of publishers smiled urbanely. Repeat orders on a gratifying scale poured in every day. Triona took Olivia to Decies Street to hear from publishing lips the splendid story. They went home in a taxi-cab, their arms around each other, intoxicated with the pride of success and the certainty of their love. And the next day Olivia said:

"If we can't go round the world, at any rate let us have a holiday. Let us go to Paris. We can afford it."

And Triona, who for months had foreseen such a reasonable proposal, replied:

"I wish we could. I've been dreaming of it for a long time. In fact—I didn't tell you—but I went to the Foreign Office a fortnight ago."

She wrinkled her brow.

"What's the Foreign Office got to do with it?"

"They happen to regard me as an exceptional man, my dearest," said he. "I'm still in the Secret Service. I tried last summer to get out of it—but they overpersuaded me, promising not to worry me unduly. One can't refuse to serve one's country at a pinch, can one?"

"No. But why didn't you tell me?"

She felt hurt at being left out in the cold. She also had a sudden fear of the elusiveness of this husband of hers, hero of so many strange adventures and interests that years would not suffice for their complete revelation. She remembered the dug-up Vronsky romance, in itself one that might supply the ordinary human being with picturesque talk for a lifetime. And now she resented this continued association with the Foreign Office which he thought he had severed on his return from Finland.

"I never imagined they would want me again, after what I told them. But it seems they do. You know the state of things in Russia. Well—they may send me or they may not. At any rate, for the next few months I am not to leave the country."

"I call that idiotic," cried Olivia indignantly. "They could get at you in Paris just as easily as they could in London."

"They've got the whip hand, confound them," replied Triona. "They grant or refuse passports."

"The Foreign Office is a beast!" said Olivia. "I'd like to tell them what I

think of them."

"Do," said he with a laugh, "but don't tell anybody else."

She believed him. He breathed again. The difficulty was over for the present. Meanwhile he called himself a fool for not having given her this simple explanation months ago. Why had he racked his conscience with the outrageous fiction of the Vronskys?

About this time, too, in her innocence, she raised the question of his technical nationality. It was absurd for him to continue to be a Russian subject. A son of English parents, surely he could easily be naturalized. He groaned inwardly at this fresh complication, and cursed the name of Triona. He put her off with vague intentions. One of these days . . . there was no great hurry. She persisted.

"It's so unlike you," she declared, uncomprehending. "You who do things so swiftly and vividly."

"I must have some sort of papers establishing my identity," he explained. "My word won't do. We must wait till there's a settled government in Russia to which I can apply. I know it's an unsatisfactory position for both; but it can't be helped." He smiled wearily. "You mustn't reproach me."

"Reproach you—my dearest——?"

The idea shocked her. She only had grown impatient of the intangible Russian influences that checked his freedom of action. Sometimes she dreaded them, not knowing how deep or how sinister they might be. Secret agents were sometimes mysteriously assassinated. He laughed at her fears. But what else, she asked herself, could he do but laugh? She was not reassured.

The naturalization question settled for an indefinite time, he felt once more in clear water. Easter came and went.

"If I don't move about a little, I shall die," he said.

"Let us move about a lot," said Olivia. "Let us hire a car and race about Great Britain."

He waxed instantly enthusiastic. She was splendid. Always the audacious one. A car—a little high-powered two-seater. Just they two together. Free of the high road! If they could find no lodgings at inns they could sleep beneath the hedges. They would drive anywhere, losing their way, hitting on towns with delicious unexpectancy. The maddest motor tour that was ever unplanned.

In the excitement of the new idea, the disappointment over the prohibited foreign travel vanished from their hearts. Once more they contemplated their vagabondage, with the single-mindedness of children.

"We'll start to-morrow," he declared.

“To-morrow evening is the Rowingtons’ dinner-party,” Olivia reminded him.

He confounded Rowington and his dinner-party. Why not send a telegram saying he was down with smallpox? He hated literary dinner-parties. Why should he make an ass of himself in a lion’s skin—just to gratify the vanity of a publisher? Olivia administered the required corrective.

“Isn’t it rather a case of the lion putting on an ass’s skin, my dear? Of course we must go.”

He laughed. “I suppose we must. Anyway, we’ll start the day after. I’ll see about the car in the morning.”

He went out immediately after breakfast, and in a couple of hours returned radiant. He was in luck, having found the high-powered two-seater of his dreams. He overwhelmed her with enthusiastic technicalities.

“You beloved infant,” said Olivia.

But before they could set out in this chariot of force and speed, something happened. It happened at the dinner-party given by Rowington, the active partner in the great publishing house, in honour of their twice-proved successful author.

The Rowingtons lived in a mansion at the southern end of Portland Place. It had belonged to his father and grandfather before him and the house was filled with inherited and acquired treasures. On entering, Triona had the same sense of luxurious comfort as on that far-off day of the first interview in Decies Street, when his advancing foot stepped so softly on the thick Turkey carpet. A manservant relieved him of his coat and hat, a maid took Olivia for an instant into a side-room whence she reappeared bare-necked, bare-armed, garbed, as her husband whispered, in cobweb swept from Heaven’s rafters. A manservant at the top of the stairs announced them. Mrs. Rowington, thin, angular, pince-nez’d, and Rowington, middle-aged, regarding the world benevolently through gold spectacles, received them and made the necessary introduction to those already present. There was a judge of the High Court, a well-known novelist, a beautiful and gracious woman whom Olivia, with a little catch of the heart, recognized as the Lady Aintree who had addressed a passing word of apology to her in the outgoing theatre crush in the first week of her emancipation. She envied Alexis who stood in talk with her. She herself was trying to correlate the young and modern bishop, in plum-coloured evening dress, with the billow of lawn semi-humanized by a gaunt staring head and a pair of waxen hands which had gone through the dimly comprehended ritual of her confirmation.

He explained his presence in this brilliant assembly on the ground that

once he had written an obscure book of travels in Asia Minor. St. Paul's steps retraced. He had fought with beasts at Ephesus—but not of the kind to which the apostle was presumed to refer; disgusting little beasts! He also swore "By Jove!" which she was sure her confirming bishop would never have done.

A while later, as the room was filling up, she found herself talking to a Colonel Onslow, an authority on Kurdistan, said her hostess, who was anxious to meet her husband. She glanced around, her instinctive habit, to place Alexis. He had been torn from Lady Aintree and was standing just behind her by the chimney-piece in conversation with a couple of men. His eyes caught the message of love in hers and telegraphed back again.

He no longer confounded Rowington. The central figure of this distinguished gathering, he glowed with the divine fire of success. He was talking to two elderly men on Russian folk literature. On that he was an authority. He knew the inner poignancy of every song, the bitter humour of every tale. Speaking sober truth about Russia he forgot that he had ever lied.

Suddenly into the little open space about the hearth emerged from the throng, a brisk, wiry man with a keen, clean-shaven, weather-beaten face, who, on catching sight of Triona, paused for a startled second and then darted up to him with outstretched hand; and Triona, taken off his guard, made an eager step to meet him.

If, for two days, you have faced death alone with a man who has given every proof of indomitable courage and cheerfulness, your heart has an abominable way of leaping when suddenly, years afterwards, you are brought with him face to face.

"You are Briggs! I knew I was right. Fancy running up against you here!"

Triona's cheeks burned hot. The buried name seemed to be shrieked to the listening universe. At any rate, Olivia heard; and instinctively she drifted from the side of Colonel Onslow towards Alexis.

"It's a far cry from Russia," he said.

"Yes, and a far cry from the lower deck of an armoured car," laughed the other. "Well, I am glad to see you. God knows what has happened to the rest of us. I've been one of the lucky ones. Got a ship soon afterwards. Retired now. Farming. Living on three pigs and a bee. And you"—he clapped him on the shoulder—"you look flourishing. I used to have an idea there was something behind you."

It was then that Triona became conscious of Olivia at his elbow. He put on a bold face and laughed in his careless way.

"I have my wife behind me. My dear—this is Captain Wedderburn. We met in Russia."

“We did more than meet, by George!” cried Wedderburn breezily. “We were months together in the Column——”

“What Column?” asked Olivia, puzzled.

“The Armoured Car Column. I forget what the humour of war rated him as. Able Seaman, I think. I was Lieutenant then. It was a picnic, I assure you. And there were the days—he and I alone together—I’ll never forget ’em—we got cut off—but he has told you all about it.”

“No.”

“My dear Mrs. Briggs——”

“Pardon me,” Alexis interrupted hastily. “But that’s not my name. It was literally a *nom de guerre*. My real name is Triona.”

“Eh?” Wedderburn put his hands on his narrow hips and stared at him. “The famous chap I was asked to meet to-night? Mrs. Triona, your husband is a wonderful fellow. The months that were the most exciting time in my life, anyhow, he hasn’t thought it worth while mentioning in his book. And yet”—his keen eyes swept like searchlights over the other’s face—“you were knocked out. I remember the day. And you must have been a long time in hospital. How the deuce did you manage to work everything in?”

“I was only scratched,” said Triona. “A week or two afterwards I was back in the Russian service.”

“I see,” said Wedderburn with unexpected frostiness.

He turned to greet a woman of his acquaintance standing near, and husband and wife were left for a few seconds alone.

“You never told me about serving with the British forces.”

“It was just an interlude,” said he.

The hostess came up and manœuvred them apart. Dinner was announced. The company swept downstairs. Olivia sat between her host and Colonel Onslow, Lady Aintree opposite, and next her, Captain Wedderburn. For the first time in her married life Olivia suffered vague disquiet as to her husband’s antecedents. The rugged-faced, bright-eyed man on the other side of the table seemed to hold the key to a phase of his life which she had never heard. She wished that he were seated elsewhere, out of sight. It was with a conscious effort that she brought herself to listen intelligently to her host who was describing his first meeting with the now famous Alexis Triona, then valiantly driving hireling motor-cars under the sobriquet of John Briggs. She felt a touch of ice at her heart. For the second time that night she had heard the unfamiliar name. Alexis had told her, it is true, of his early struggles in London while writing *Through Blood and Snow*, but of John Briggs he had breathed no word.

The talk drifted into other channels until she turned to her neighbour, Colonel Onslow, who after a while said pleasantly:

"I'm looking for an opportunity of a chat with your husband, Mrs. Triona. From his book, he seems to have covered a great deal of my ground—and it must have been about the same time. It's strange I never came across him."

"I don't think so," she replied. "His Secret Service work rather depended on his avoidance of other European agents."

Colonel Onslow yielded laughingly to the argument. Of course, that was quite understandable. Every man had his own methods. No game in the world had more elastic rules.

"On the other hand, I knew a Russian on exactly the same lay as your husband, a fellow Krilov, a fine chap—I ran into him several times—who was rather keen on taking me into his confidence. And one or two of the things he told me were so identical with your husband's experiences, that it seems they must have hunted in couples."

"Oh, no, he was on his own, I assure you," said Olivia.

"Anyhow, I'm keen to meet him," said Onslow, unaware of the growing fear behind the girl's dark eyes. "I only came home a month ago. Somebody gave me the book. When I read it I went to my friend Rowington and asked about Alexis Triona. That's how I'm here."

Presently, noticing her air of constraint, he said apologetically, "You must be fed up with all this ancient history. A wanderer like myself is apt to forget that the world is supposed to be at peace and is even rather bored with making good the damage of war."

Olivia answered as well as she could, and for the rest of the interminable meal strove to exhibit her usual gay interest in the talk around.

But her heart was heavy with she knew not what forebodings. She could not see Alexis, who was seated on the same side and at the other end of the long table. She felt as though the benevolent gold-spectacled man had deliberately convened an assembly of Alexis's enemies. It was a blessed relief when the ladies rose and left the men; but in the drawing-room, although she was talking to Lady Aintree, most winningly gracious of women, her glance continuously sought the door by which the men would enter. And when they came in his glance, for the first time in their married life, did not seek or meet hers. She scanned his face anxiously. It was pale and drawn, she thought, and into his eyes had crept the furtive look of a year ago which happiness, she thought, had dispelled for ever. He did not come near her; nor did Wedderburn and Onslow; nor did the two latter talk to him; he was swallowed up in a little group at the further end of the room. Meanwhile, the most up-to-date thing in

bishops sank smilingly into a chair by her side, and ridden by some ironical Imp of the Inapposite described to her a visit, in the years past, to the Castle of Schwöbbe in Hanover, where dwelt the Baron von Munchausen, the lineal descendant of the famous liar. A mythical personage? Not a bit. Munchausen was one of Frederick the Great's generals. He had seen his full-length portrait in the Rittersaal of the old Schloss. Thence he began to discourse on the great liars of travel. Herodotus, who was coming more and more into his own as a faithful historian; John Mandeville; Fernando Mendez Pinto, a name now forgotten, but for a couple of centuries a byword of mendacity; Gemelli Carreri, the bed-ridden Neapolitan author of a *Voyage Round the World*; the Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela who claimed to have ridden a hippogriff to the tomb of Ezekiel; George Psalmanazar, who captivated all London (including so level-headed a man as Samuel Johnson) with his history of the Island of Formosa and his grammar of the Formosan language; de Rougemont, the turtle-riding impostor of recent years; and the later unfortunate gentleman whose claim to have discovered the North Pole was so shockingly discredited. The bishop seemed to have made a hobby of these perverters of truth and to look on them (as in theological duty bound), wriggling through the lake of fire and brimstone, in the light of Izaak Walton's counsel concerning the worms threaded on the hook, as if he loved them. Then there were the notorious Blank and Dash and Dot, still living. Types, said he, of the defective criminal mind, by mere chance skirting round the commonly recognized area of crime.

Olivia, with nerves on edge, welcomed the matronly swoop of Mrs. Rowington.

"My dear Bishop, I want to introduce you——"

He rose, made a courtly bow to Olivia.

"I'll read your lordship's next book of travel with great interest," she said.

As the home-bound taxi drove off:

"Thank goodness that's over," said Triona.

She echoed with a sigh: "Yes, thank goodness."

"All the bores of the earth."

"Did you have a talk with Colonel Onslow?" she asked.

"The biggest of the lot. I'm sick to death of the Caucasus," he added with unusual irritation. "I wish I had never been near it. I hate these specially selected dinner parties of people you don't want to meet and will never meet again." He took her hand, which was limp and unresponsive. "Did you have a rotten time, too?"

“I wish we hadn’t gone,” she replied, withdrawing her hand under the pretext of pulling her cloak closer round her shoulders.

He rolled and lit a cigarette and smoked gloomily. At last he said with some impatience:

“Of course, I didn’t mention the little episode with the British Force. It would have been out of the picture. Besides, nothing very much happened. It was a stupid thing to do—I had no right. That’s why I took an assumed name—John Briggs.”

“And you used it when you landed in England. Mr. Rowington told me.”

“Of course, dear. Alexis Triona, chauffeur, would have been absurd, wouldn’t it?” He turned to her with the old eagerness.

This time it was she who thrust out a caressing hand, suddenly feeling a guilty horror of the doubts that had beset her.

“I wish you would tell me everything about yourself—the details you think so unimportant. Then I wouldn’t be so taken aback as I was this evening, when Captain Wedderburn called me Mrs. Briggs.”

“I’ll write you a supplementary volume,” said he, “and it shall be entitled *Through Love and Sunshine*.”

The ring in his voice consoled her. He drew her close to him and they spoke little till they reached their house. There, in the dining-room, he poured out a stiff whisky-and-soda and drank it off at a gulp. She uttered a startled, “My dear!” at the unusual breach of abstemious habit.

“I’m dog-tired,” said he. “And I’ve things to do before I go to bed. Don’t wait for me.”

“What things?”

“To-night has given me an idea for a story. I must get it, dear, and put it down; otherwise—you know—I shan’t sleep.”

She protested. His brain would be fresher in the morning. Such untimely artistic accouchment had, indeed, happened several times before, and, unless given its natural chances had occasioned a night of unrest; but never before had there been this haggardness in his face and eyes. Again the doubts assailed her. Something that evening had occurred to throw him off his balance.

“If anything’s worrying you, dear, do tell me,” she urged, her clasp on the lapels of his dress-coat and her eyes searching his.

He took her wrists, kissed her, and laughed, as she thought, uneasily. Worries? He hadn’t an anxiety in the world. But this idea—it was the germ of something big. He must tackle it then and there. Led, his arm around her body, to the door, she allowed herself to be convinced.

"Don't be too long."

"And you go to sleep. You must be tired."

Left alone, Triona poured himself out another whisky and soda. In one evening he had suffered two shocks, for neither of which his easy nature had prepared him. The Wedderburn incident he could explain away. But from the blind alley into which he was pinned by Colonel Onslow, there had been but a horrible wriggling escape. It was a matter, too, more spiritual even than material. He felt as though he had crawled through a sewer.

He went to his desk by the window, and from a drawer took out his despatch case, which he unlocked with the key that never left his person; and from it he drew the little black book. There, half-erased, in pencil on the reverse of the cover, was the word, in Russian characters, "Krilov." Hitherto he had regarded this as some unimportant memorandum of name or place. It had never occurred to him that it was the name of the owner of the diary. But now, it stared at him accusingly as the signature of the dead man whose soul, as it were, he had robbed.

Krilov. There was no doubt about it. Onslow had known him, that fine-featured grizzled-haired dead man, in his vehement life. He had heard from his lips the wild adventures which he had set down with such official phlegm in the little black book, and which he, Alexis Triona, had credited to himself, and had invested with the wealth of his poet's imagination. Of course, he had lied, on his basis of truth, to Colonel Onslow, disclaimed all knowledge of Krilov. It had been the essence of the old Russian régime that secret agents should have no acquaintance one with another. It was a common thing for two men, unsuspectingly, to be employed on an identical mission. The old Imperial service depended on this system of checks. If the missions were identical, the various incidents were bound to be similar. He had defended his position with every sophistical argument his alert brain could devise. He drew, as red herrings across the track, the names of obscure chieftains known to Colonel Onslow, whom he had not mentioned in his book; described them—one long-nosed, foxy, pitted with smallpox; another obese and oily; to Colonel Onslow's mind irrefutable evidence of his acquaintance with the country. But as to narrated incidents he had seen puzzled incredulity behind the Colonel's eyes and had felt his semi-accusing coldness of manner when their conversation came to an end.

He replenished a dying fire and sat down in an arm-chair, the despatch case by his side, the book in his hands—the little shabby black book that had been his Bible, his mascot, the fount of all his fortunes. His fingers shook with fear as he turned over the familiar pages. The dead man had come to life, and terrifyingly claimed his own. The room was very still. The creak of a piece of

furniture caused him to swing round with a start, as though apprehensive of Krilov's ghostly presence. He must burn the book, the material evidence of his fraud. But the fire was sulky. He must wait for the blaze, so that there should be no doubt of the book's destruction. Meanwhile his nerves were playing him insane tricks. His ordeal had shaken him. He sought the steadying effect of another whisky.

He leaned back in his chair. It had been an accursed evening. Once more he had to lie to Olivia, and this time she appeared to be struggling with uncertainty. There had been an unprecedented aloofness in her attitude. Yes. He spoke the words aloud, "an unprecedented aloofness," at first with strange unsuccess and then with solemn deliberation; and his voice sounded strange to his ears. If she suspected—but, no, she could not suspect. His head grew heavy, his thoughts confused. The fire was taking a devil of a time to burn up. Still, he was beginning to see his way clearer. The whisky was a wonderful help to accurate thinking. What an ass he had been not to recognize the fact before! Besides—the roof of his mouth was parched with thirst.

The diabolical notebook had to be destroyed. But first there must be flame in the grate. That little red glow would do the trick. It was only a question of patience.

"Just a matter of patience, old man," said he.

A couple of hours afterwards, Olivia, in nightdress and wrapper, entered the room. The fire had gone out under its too heavy load of coal. Before it sprawled Alexis, asleep. On the small table beside him stood the whisky decanter, whose depleted contents caused Olivia to start with a gasp of dismay. His drunken sleep became obvious. She made an instinctive vain effort to arouse him. But the first pang of horror was lost in agonized search for the reason of this amazing debauch. He, the most temperate of men, by choice practically a drinker of water, to have done this! Could the reason lie in the events of the evening which had kept her staringly awake? She cowered under the new storm of doubt.

On the floor lay open a little dirty-paged book which must have fallen from his hand. She picked it up, glanced through it, could make nothing of it, for it was all in tiny Russian script. The horrible relation between this derelict book and the almost emptied whisky decanter occurred to her oversensitive brain. Then came suddenly the memory of a stupid argument of months ago at The Point and his justification of the plagiarist. Further, his putting of a hypothetical case—the finding on the body of a dead man a notebook with leaves of the thinnest paper. . . . She held in her hand such a notebook. It dropped from her nerveless fingers. Suddenly she sprang with a low cry to her

husband and shook him by the shoulders.

"Alexis. Alexis. Wake up. For God's sake."

But the unaccustomed drug of the alcohol held him in stupor. She tried again, wildly.

"Alexis, wake up and tell me what I think isn't true."

At last she realized that he would lie there until the effect of the whisky had worn off. Mechanically, she put a cushion behind his head and adjusted his limbs to a position of comfort. Mechanically, too, she put the stopper in the decanter and replaced the siphon on the silver tray, and with her scrap of a handkerchief tried to remove the ring which the wet siphon had made on the table. Then she looked hopelessly round the otherwise undisturbed and beloved room. What could be done until Alexis should awaken?

She would go to bed. Perhaps she might sleep. She felt as though she had been beaten from head to foot.

The despatch box lay open on the hearthrug, the key in the lock. Its secrecy had hitherto been a jest with her. She had sworn it contained locks of hair of Bluebeard victims. He had given out a legend of Secret Service documents of vast importance. Now it was obvious that, at any rate, it was the repository of the little black book.

She hesitated on the threshold. Her instinct of order forbade her to leave the despatch box open and the book trailing about the floor. She would lock the book up in it and put the key in one of Alexis's pockets. But when, having picked up the small leather box and carried it to the desk, she prepared to do this, a name written on a common piece of paper half in print—an official form—stared brutally at her. And there were others underneath. And reading them she learned the complete official history of John Briggs, Able Seaman, from the time of his joining the Armoured Column in Russia to his discharge, after his mine-sweeper had been torpedoed in the North Sea.

Olivia, her dark hair falling about the shoulders of her heliotrope wrap, sat in her husband's writing-chair, staring at him with tragic eyes as he slept, his brown hair carelessly sweeping his pale brow, and kept a ghastly vigil.

CHAPTER XVI

BLAISE OLIFANT sat over his work in the room which once, for want of a better name, the late Mr. Gale called his study; but it was a room transformed to studious use. The stuffed trout and the large scale-map of the neighbourhood and the country auctioneer's carelessly bestowed oddments had been replaced by cases of geological specimens and bookshelves filled with a specialist's library. The knee-hole writing-desk, with its cigarette-burned edge, had joined the rest of the old lares and penates in honourable storage, and a long refectory-table, drawn across the window overlooking the garden, and piled with papers, microscopes, and other apparatus, reigned in its stead. Olifant loved the room's pleasant austerity. It symbolized himself, his aims and his life's limitations. A fire burned in the grate, for it was a cold, raw morning, and, outside, miserable rain defaced the April day.

He smoked a pipe as he corrected proofs, so absorbed in the minute and half-mechanical task that he did not hear the door open and the quiet entrance of a maid.

"Mr. Triona, sir."

The words cut through the silence so that he started and swung round in his chair.

"Mr. Triona? Where?"

"In the dining-room."

"Show him in here."

The maid retired. Olifant rose and stood before the fire with a puzzled expression on his face. Triona in Medlow at ten o'clock in the morning? Something serious must have brought a man, unannounced, from London to Shropshire. His thoughts flew to Olivia.

A moment afterwards the dishevelled spectre of Triona burst into the room and closed the door behind him. His coat was wet with rain, his boots and trouser hems muddy. His eyes stared out of a drawn, unshaven face.

"Thank God I've found you. During the journey I had a sickening dread lest you might be away."

"But how did you manage to get here at this hour?" asked Olifant, for Medlow is far from London and trains are few. "You must have arrived last night. Why the deuce didn't you come to me?"

"I got to Worcester by the last train and put up for the night and came on first thing this morning," replied Triona impatiently.

“And you’ve walked from the station. You’re wet through. Let me get you a jacket.”

Olifant moved to the bell, but Triona arrested him.

“No—no. I’m taking the next train back to London. Don’t talk of jackets and foolery. I’ve left Olivia.”

Olifant made a stride, almost menacing, towards him, the instinctive gesture of his one arm curiously contrasting with the stillness of the pinned sleeve of the other.

“What?”

“What I say,” cried Triona. “I’ve left Olivia. I’ve left her for ever. I’m cutting myself out of her life.”

“You’re mad. Olivia——”

Triona put up a checking hand. “Oh, no, not Olivia.” He laughed bitterly at the indignant advocacy in Olifant’s tone. “Olivia’s there—where she always has been—among the stars. It’s I that have fallen. Good God! like Lucifer. It’s I that crawl.” He caught an accusing question in the other’s hardening eyes. “It isn’t what you might naturally think. There’s not the ghost of another woman. There never has been—never shall be. It’s my only clean record. And I love her—my God! My soul’s in Hell, aching and burning and shrieking for her. I shall live in Hell for the rest of my life.”

Olifant turned, and wheeling round his writing-chair sat down and pointed to an arm-chair by the fire.

“Sit down and tell me quietly what is the matter.”

But Triona waved aside the invitation and remained standing. “The matter is that I’m an impostor and a liar, and Olivia has found it out. Listen. Don’t ask questions until I’ve done. I’m here for Olivia’s sake. You’re the only creature in the world that can understand—the only one that can help her through. And she couldn’t tell you. Her pride wouldn’t let her. And if it did, the ordeal for her! You’ll be able to go to her now and say, ‘I know everything.’ ”

“Up to now, my dear fellow,” said Olifant, “you’ve been talking in riddles. But before you begin, let me remind you that there are two sides to every story. What I mean is—get it into your head that I realize I’m listening to your side.”

“But there aren’t two sides,” cried Triona. “You don’t suppose I’ve come down here to defend myself! If you see when I’ve done that I’ve had some excuse, that there is a grain of saving grace lying somewhere hidden—all well and good. But I’m not here to plead a case. Haven’t I cleared the ground by telling you I’m a liar and an impostor?”

Olifant again looked searchingly at the pale and haggard-eyed young man,

his brown hair unkempt and falling across his broad forehead, his lips twitching nervously; and the elder man's glance turned to one of pitying kindness. He rose, laid his hand on the lapel of the wet coat.

"You'll take this off, at any rate. There—we'll hang it over the fender-seat to dry. Sit beside it and dry your legs. It's no good catching your death of cold."

Triona submitted to the friendly authority and sat down in his shirt sleeves before the blaze. Olifant, aware of the sedative value of anticlimax, smiled and offered refreshments. Tea—coffee—a drop of something to keep out the cold. Triona suddenly glanced at him.

"I'll never touch alcohol again as long as I live."

A cigarette, then? Olifant handed the box, held a match. Triona smoked. Olifant re-lit his pipe and leaned back in his chair.

"Now let me have the plain, unvarnished tale."

They smoked many cigarettes and many pipes during the telling of the amazing story. As his life had unfolded itself in the grimness of the little Newcastle kitchen, so he recounted it to Olifant. In his passionate final grip on Truth, which for the last few months of his awakening had proved so elusive, he tried to lay bare the vain secret of every folly and the root of every lie. The tangled web of the hackneyed aphorism he unwove, tracking every main filament to its centre, every cross-thread from the beginning to end of its vicious circle.

Plain unvarnished tale it was not in the man's nature to give. Even in his agony of avowal he must be dramatic, must seize on the picturesque. Now he sat on the narrow leather-covered fender-seat, hunched up, his eyes ablaze, narrating the common actualities of his life; and now he strode about the room, with great gestures of his pink-shirted arms, picturing vividly the conflicting emotions of his soul. First he sketched—so it seemed to the temperamentally remote Olifant—in broad outlines of flame, his true career. Then in strokes, like red-hot wire, he filled in the startling details. The grizzled head and sharp-cut features of the naked body of the dead man Krilov in the ditch—the cold grey waste around—the finding of the odds and ends, the glint of the pocket-compass behind a few spikes of grass, the false teeth, the little black book, the thing of sortilege, of necromantic influence . . . the spell of the book in the night watches in the North Sea, its obsession; his pixy-led infatuation which made him cast aside the slough of John Briggs and sun himself in the summer of the world as the dragonfly, Alexis Triona. In swift lines, too, of a Will-o'-the-Wisp's dance he revealed the course of his love. Then, unconsciously, before the concentrated gaze of the other man he dropped a baffling gauze

curtain, as on a stage, through which his motives and his actions appeared uncertain and unreal.

Olifant had listened in astounded silence. His first instinct was one of indignation. He had been unforgivably deceived by this exterior of friendship under false pretences. The blow dealt to unregenerate man's innate vanity hurt like a stab. His own clear soul rose in revolt. The fellow's mendacity, bewildering in its amplitude, would have set Hell agape. He shivered at the cold craft of his imposture; besides, he was a ghoul, a stripper of the dead. He lost the man he had loved in a new and incomprehensible monster. But as Triona went on he gradually fell under the spell of his passionate remorse, and found himself setting the human against the monstrous and wondering which way the balance would turn. And then he became suddenly aware of the impostor's real and splendid achievements, and he stood in pitiful amaze at the futility of the unnecessary fraud.

"But why, in God's name? Why?" he cried, staring through the baffling curtain. "A man of genius, you would have held your own without all this."

"I could have done nothing without the help of that damned little black book. Don't you see how the necromancy of the thing gripped me—how it has got its diabolical revenge? I told you not to ask me questions," Triona burst out fiercely. "You're trying to make me defend myself." He swung away, then laughed mirthlessly. "There seems to be a poetic justice in life. This room in which we have spent so many hours—it's filled from floor to ceiling with my lies. Now I come with Truth, a sort of disinfectant. Perhaps I was driven back just to do it."

Olifant knitted a perplexed brow. Such fantastic psychologies were beyond his simple scientific habit of mind. He said:

"You told me you came here on account of Olivia."

"Of course."

"Well—I must ask you again the same everlasting 'Why?' How could you dare to marry her with this lie on your soul?"

"Yes. How dared I?" said Triona dejectedly.

"But wouldn't it have been quite simple to tell her the truth? You could have afforded to make a clean breast of it. You had proved yourself a remarkable man, apart from—from the Triona myth. And she is big enough to have stood it. Why, in God's name, didn't you trust her?"

Triona threw out his hands helplessly. He did not know. Again he pleaded the unseen power that had driven him. When he had tried to resist, it was too late.

“And now you think me a fool and a knave.”

“I think you’re a fool,” said Olifant.

“But not a scoundrel? I should like to know. You were the first man who really held out the hand of friendship to me. Till then people regarded me as an interesting specimen. You took me on my human side. I shall never forget coming to your sister’s house at Oxford. It was a new and wonderful atmosphere.”

“If that is so,” said Olifant, “why didn’t it compel confidence—something of the real truth? I see you now telling my sister and myself your fairy tale; in the same fervid way as you’ve been telling me the truth this morning.”

Triona rose and put on his jacket which now was dry.

“How can I hope to make you understand, when I don’t understand myself? Besides,” he flashed, after shrugging himself impatiently into the garment, “haven’t I said I wasn’t seeking condonation or sympathy?”

“You asked me whether I thought you a scoundrel,” said Olifant quietly.

“Well, do you? Say I am, and have done with it.”

“If I did, I don’t see what good it would do,” replied Olifant, a vague comprehension of this imaginative alien soul dawning on his mind. “You’re out for penance in the same crazy way you’ve been out for everything else. So you hand me the scourge and tell me to lay on. But I won’t. Also—if I committed myself by calling you an unmitigated blackguard, I couldn’t give you the advice that it’s in my heart to give you.”

“And what’s that?”

“To go back to Olivia and do your penance with her by telling and living the truth. *Magna est veritas et prævalebit.* Especially with a woman who loves you.”

Triona turned to the table by the window and stared out into the rain-swept garden, and the vision of a girl horror-stricken, frozen, dead, rose before his eyes. Presently he said, his back to the room:

“You mean kindly and generously. But it’s impossible to go back. The man, Alexis Triona, whom she loved, has melted away. He never had real existence. In his place she sees a stranger, one John Briggs, whom she loathes like Hell—I’ve seen it in her eyes. She feels as if she had been contaminated by contact with some unclean beast.”

Olifant sprang from his chair and, catching him by the shoulder, swung him round.

“You infernal fool, she doesn’t!”

"I know better," said Triona.

"I'm beginning to think I know *her* better," Olifant retorted.

"Well—that is possible," said Triona. "You're of her caste. I'm not. I've pretended to be, and that's how I've come to grief. You're a good fellow, Olifant, straight, just like her; and neither of you can understand the man who runs crooked."

"Crooked be damned!" exclaimed Olifant.

But all his condemnation of self-accusing epithets could not dissuade the fate-driven young man from his purpose. Triona repeated the original intention of his visit: to put Olifant in complete possession of facts which Olivia's pride might not allow her to reveal, and to charge him, thus equipped, with Olivia's immediate welfare. At last he burst out again:

"Man alive! Don't torture me. All the devils in Hell are doing it, and they're enough for any man. Have some imagination! Think what it would mean to her to have me crawling about in her path for ever and ever. When love is dead it's dead. There's no resurrection. She loved Alexis Triona. Won't you ever understand? He's dead. The love's dead. If I stayed with her, I should be a kind of living corpse to which she's tied. So I'm going away—out of her life altogether."

"And where are you going?"

"Just out into the spaciousness of the wide world," replied Triona with a gesture. He looked suddenly at his wrist watch. "Good Lord!" he cried. "I've only just time to catch my train. Good-bye."

"Wait a minute," said Olifant. "Do you think it fair on a woman? While you disappear for ever into spaciousness she'll remain none the less married—tied to you for the rest of her life."

"Oh, don't let her worry about that!" cried Triona. "I'll soon be dead."

He sped to the door. Olifant clutched at him and for a while held fast.

"Never mind trains. You'll stay here to-day. I can't let you go—in this hysterical state."

But Triona wrenched himself free. A one-armed man is at a physical disadvantage in a struggle with a wiry two-armed opponent. Olifant was pushed staggering back, and, before he could recover himself, Triona had flashed from the room, and a moment later the clang of the front door told him he had left the house.

Olifant, after a moment's reflection, went to the telephone and gave a London number. Then he drew his chair nearer the fire and re-lit his pipe and waited for the call to come through. Work was impossible. He was in no mood

to enter into the gaiety of printers in their dance through the dead languages with which his biological pages were strewn. His heart was exceeding heavy. He stared into the fire and thought of what might have been, had he not been a fool. At any rate, she would have been spared misery such as this. He had loved her from the moment she had opened that untouched room upstairs, and the delicate spirit of one that was dead had touched them with invisible hands. And he had been a fool. Just a dry stick of a tongue-tied, heart-hobbled, British fool. It had only been when another, romantic and unreticent, had carried her off that he realized the grotesqueness of his unutterable pain. Well, she was married, and married to the man to whom he had given his rare affection; and, folly of follies, all his intimacy with her had grown since her marriage. She was inexpressibly dear to him. Her hurt was his hurt. Her happiness all that mattered. And she loved her madman of a husband. Deep down in her heart she loved him still, in spite of shock and disillusion. Of that he was certain. He himself forgave him for his wild, boyish lovableness. Olivia abandoned—it was unthinkable!

After an eternity the telephone bell rang. He leaped up. Eventually came the faint, clear notes of a voice which was Olivia's. They established identities.

"Alexis has been here. Has told me everything. He has left here by the midday train. Of course, I don't know whether you want to see him; but if you do his train gets into Paddington at six-fifteen."

And the voice came again:

"Thanks. I'll meet him there."

And there was silence.

Olivia and Myra met the train at Paddington. But they sought in vain for Alexis Triona. He had not arrived in London.

CHAPTER XVII

THE unhappy young man rushed through the train to the railway station, goaded by the new passion of remorse and frantic with the despair which had driven him from the accusing horror in Olivia's eyes. It was only when he waited on the platform at Worcester, where he must change to the main line, that he became suddenly aware of loss of sanity. His suit-case, containing all the belongings which he had taken from the flat, was lying a mile or so away at the inn where he had spent the night. He had not slept, not even gone to bed, not even opened the suit-case. He had dashed out before the inn was awake to catch the earliest morning train to Medlow. And from that moment to this, just as the London train was steaming in, both luggage and unpaid bill had vanished from his mind. There was nothing to do but go to the inn and proceed to London by a later train. Thus, Fate had stage-managed for him another deception of Olivia.

The realization of his crazy lapse of memory was a sobering shock. Never before had he lost grip of himself. Hitherto, the tighter the corner—and he had found himself in many—the clearer had been his brain. The consciousness of the working of a cool intellect had given a pleasurable thrill to danger. Now, for over twenty-four hours, he had been acting like a madman, in contemplation of which the only thrill he experienced was one of profound disgust. To enter whatever sphere of life the effacement of Alexis Triona should render necessary, raving like a maniac would be absurd. It would need all his wit.

His retrieved suit-case in the rack of the third-class carriage, the paid hotel bill in his pocket, and food, up to then forgotten, in his stomach, he fortified himself in this decision, until exhausted nature claimed profound and untroubled sleep.

He awoke at Paddington, homeless for the night. Now his brain worked normally. Alexis Triona had disappeared from the face of the earth. It was therefore essential to avoid hotels where Alexis Triona might possibly be recognized. Besides, he knew that West End hotels were congested, that the late-comers to London had been glad to find a couch at a Turkish Bath. His chauffeur's knowledge of London came to his aid. He drove to a mouldy hotel in the purlieus of the Euston Road, and there found a frowzy room. The contrast between the bed, its dingy counterpane sagging into the worn hollow of the mattress beneath, the threadbare rugs askew on the oilcloth, the blistered deal washstand and dressing-table, the damp, dirty paper, the bleak blinds, and the sweet and dainty appointments of the home he had left smote him till he

could have groaned aloud. Not that he gave a thought to such things in themselves. Physical comfort meant little to him. But the lost daintiness signified Olivia; this abominable room, the negation of her.

He sat on the bed, rolled a cigarette, and began to think clearly. That he had for ever forfeited Olivia's affection it never entered his head to doubt. He saw her face grow more cold and tragic, and her eyes more horror-stricken at every fresh revelation of mendacity. Loathing himself, he had not pleaded for forgiveness; he had done penance, applied the lash, blackening himself unmercifully. He had lost sense of actual things in his cold romance of deception. He stood before her self-proclaimed, a monster of lies. Now he saw himself an unholy stranger profaning the sanctity of her life. He had fought for Heaven with Hell's weapons, and Eternal Justice had hurled him back into the abyss. In the abyss he must remain, leaving her to tread the stars.

The exposure of the Vronsky myth had hurt her as much as anything.

"Vronsky?" She put her hands, fingers apart, to her temples. "But you made me give my heart to Vronsky!"

Yes, surely he had committed towards her the unforgivable sin. He was damned—at any rate, in this world. To rid her irremediably of his pestilent existence was the only hope of salvation. Olifant was a fool, speaking according to the folly of an honourable gentleman. He clenched his teeth and gripped his hands. If only he could have been such a fool! To appear the kind of man that Olifant easily, naturally, was had been his gnawing ambition from his first insight into gentle life, long ago, in the Prince's household. But, all the same, Olifant was a fool—a sort of Galahad out for Grails, and remote from the baseness in which he had wallowed.

"Go to Olivia. She loves you."

Chivalrous imbecile! He had not seen Olivia's great staring dark eyes with rims around them, and the awful little drawn face.

He was right—it was the only way out.

Yet, during all this interview with Olivia, he had been quite sane. He had indulged in no histrionics. He had not declaimed, and flung his arms about, as he had done in Olifant's study. He had felt himself talking like a dead man immersed up to the neck in the flames of Hell, but possessed of a cold clear intellect. In a way, he was proud of this. To have made an emotional appeal would have obscured the issue towards which his new-found honesty was striving.

His last words to Olivia were:

"And the future?"

She said hopelessly: “Is there a future?”

Then she drew a deep breath and passed her fingers across her face.

“Don’t talk to me any more, for heaven’s sake. I must be alone. I must have air. I must walk.”

She shrank wide of him as he opened the door for her, and she passed out, her eyes remote.

It was then that the poet-charlatan became suddenly aware of his sentence. If the Avengers, or what not uncheerful personages of Greek Tragedy had surrounded him with their ghastly shapes and had chanted their dismal Choric Ode of Doom, his inmost soul could not have been more convinced of that which he must forthwith do. He never thought of questioning the message. He faced the absolute.

Waiting until he heard the click of the outer door of the flat announcing Olivia’s departure in quest of unpolluted air, he went into his dressing-room and packed a suit-case with necessaries, including the despatch-case which contained his John Briggs papers and the accursed little black book.

He met Myra in the hall, impassive.

“If you had told me you were going on a journey, I would have packed for you. Does Mrs. Triona know?”

“No,” said he. “She doesn’t. Wait.”

He left her, and returned a few moments afterwards with a note he had scribbled. After all, Olivia must suffer no uncertainty. She must not dread his possible return.

“Give that to Mrs. Triona.”

“Are you coming back?”

He looked at her as at a Fate in a black gown relieved by two solitary patches of white at the wrists.

“Why do you ask me that?”

“You look as if you weren’t,” said Myra. “I know there has been trouble to-day.”

He had always stood in some awe of this efficient automaton of a woman, who had never given him a shadow of offence, but in whom he had divined a jealousy which he had always striven to propitiate. But now she awakened a forlorn sense of dignity.

He picked up his suit-case.

“What has that got to do with you, Myra?”

“If Mrs. Triona’s room was on fire and I rushed in through the flames to

save her, would you ask me what business it was of mine?"

The artist in him wondered for a moment at her even, undramatic presentation of the hypothesis. He could not argue the point, however, knowing her life's devotion to Olivia. So yielding to the unlit, pale blue eyes in the woman's unemotional face, he said:

"Yes. There is trouble. Deadly trouble. It's all my doing. You quite understand that?"

"It couldn't be anything else, sir," said Myra.

"And so I'm going away and never coming back."

He moved to the door. She made the swift pace or two of the trained servant to open it for him. She stood for a few seconds quite rigid, her hand on the door-knob. Their eyes met. He saw in hers a cold hostility. Without a word he passed her, and heard the door slam behind him.

It was when he reached the pavement, derelict on the wastes of the world, that his nerves gave way. Until the click of his brain at Worcester station, he had been demented.

"Never again," said he.

He undressed and went to bed. It was some hours before he could sleep. But sleep came at last, and he woke in the morning refreshed physically, and feeling capable of facing the unknown future. As yet he had no definite plan. All he knew was that he must disappear. Merely leaving Olivia and setting up for himself elsewhere as Alexis Triona was not to be thought of. Alexis Triona and all that his name stood for—good and evil—must be blotted out of human ken. He must seek fortune again in a foreign country. Why not America? Writing under a fresh pseudonym, he could maintain himself with his pen. Bare livelihood was all that mattered. Even in this earthly Lake of Fire and Brimstone to which, as a liar, he had apocalyptically condemned himself, a man must live. During moments of his madness he had dallied with wild thoughts of suicide. His fundamental sanity had rejected them. He was no coward. Whatever punishment was in store for him, good God! he was man enough to face it.

In his swift packing he had seized a clump of his headed note-paper. A sheet of this he took when, after breakfast, he had remounted to his frowzy room, and wrote a letter to his publishers informing them that he was suddenly summoned abroad, and instructing them to pay, till further notice, all sums accruing to him into Olivia's banking account. Consulting his pass-book, he drew a cheque in Olivia's favour, which he enclosed with a covering letter to Olivia's bankers. Then, driving to his own bank, he cashed a cheque for the

balance of some hundreds of pounds. With this, he prepared to start life in some new world. Restless, he drove back to his hotel. Restless still, he obeyed the instinct of his life, and began to wander; not about any such haunts as might be frequented by his acquaintances, but through the dingy purlieus of the vague region north of the line of Euston and King's Cross Stations.

It was in a mean street in Somers Town, a hopeless, littered street of little despairing shops, and costers' barrows, and tousled women and unclean children, that they met. They came up against each other face to face, and recoiled a step or two, each scanning the other in a puzzlement of recognition. Then Triona cried:

"Yes, of course—you're Boronowski."

"And you—the name escapes me—" the other tapped his forehead with a fat, pallid hand "—you're the chauffeur-mechanic of Prince——"

"Briggs," said Triona.

"Briggs—yes. The only man who knew more than I of Ukranian literature—I a Pole and you an Englishman. Ah, my friend, what has happened since those days?"

"A hell of a lot," said Triona.

"You may indeed say so," replied Boronowski. He smiled. "Well?"

"Well?" said Triona.

"What are you, well-dressed and looking prosperous, doing in this—" he waved a hand "—in this sordidity?"

Triona responded with a smile—but at the foreign coinage of a word.

"I'm just wandering about. And you?"

"I'm living here for the moment. Living is costly and funds are scarce. I go back to Warsaw to-morrow—next week—a fortnight——"

"Poland's a bit upset these days," said Triona.

"That is why I am here—and that is why I am going back, my friend," said the Pole.

He was a stout man, nearing forty, with dark eyes and a straggly red moustache and beard already grizzled. His grey suit was stained with wear; on his jacket a spike of thread showing where a button was missing. He wore an old black felt hat stuck far back on his head, revealing signs of baldness above an intellectual forehead.

Triona laughed. "Was there ever a Pole who was not a conspirator?"

"Say rather, was there ever a Pole who did not love his country more than

his life?"

"Yes. I must say, you Poles are patriotic," said Triona.

Boronowski's dark eyes flashed, and seizing his companion's arm, he hurried him along the encumbered pavement.

"Why do you Englishmen who have lately died and bled in millions for your country, always have a little laugh, a little sneer, at patriotism? To listen to you, one would think you cared nothing for your country's welfare."

"We've been so sure of it, you see."

"But we Poles have not. For two centuries we have not had a country. For two centuries we have dreamed of it, and now we have got it at last, and our blood sings in our veins, and we have no other interest on earth. And just as we are beginning to realize the wonder of it, we find ourselves enmeshed in German intrigue, with our promised way to the sea blocked, with the Powers saying: 'No Ukraine, no Galicia,' and with the Russian Red Army attacking us. Ah, no. We are not so assured of our country's welfare that we can afford to depreciate patriotism."

"What are you doing here in England?" asked Triona.

"Breaking my heart," cried Boronowski passionately. "I come for help, and find only fair words. I ask for money for guns and munitions for the enforcement of the Treaty of Versailles, and they reply, 'Oh, we can't do that. Our Labour Party wouldn't allow us to do that. But we'll tell those naughty Bolshevists to leave you alone.' So I return, my mission a failure. Oh, I play a very humble part. I do not wish to magnify myself. Those with me have failed. We are cast on our own resources. We are fighting for our new national life. And as the blood in our hearts and the thought in our brains cry 'Poland, Poland,' so shall the words be ever loud in our mouths. And look. If we did not cry out, who would listen to us? And we are crying our 'Poland, Poland,' in all the Entente and neutral countries—I, Boronowski, the most unimportant of all. Perhaps we are voices crying in the wilderness. But one Voice, once on a time, was heard—and revolutionized the world."

The man's voice, crying in the wilderness of the sordid Somers Town street, awoke at any rate a responsive chord in the sensitive creature by his side.

"Of course, I understand," said he. "Forgive my idle speech. But I am in great personal trouble, and I spoke with the edge of my lips."

Boronowski flashed a glance at him.

"Do you know the remedy? The remedy for silly unhappinesses that affect you here and here—" he swung a hand, touching forehead and heart "—the

little things——”

“I’m damned if they’re little,” said Triona.

“Yes, my friend,” exclaimed the Pole, halting suddenly in front of a wilting greengrocer’s shop, and holding him by the lapel of his coat. “Procure for yourself a sense of proportion. In the myriad of animated beings, what is the individual but an insignificant atom? What are your sufferings in the balance of the world’s sufferings? Yes. Yes. Of course you feel them—the toothache, the heartache, the agony of soul. But I claim that the individual has a remedy.”

“What is that?” asked Triona.

“He must cast off the individual, merge his pain in the common sorrow of humanity. He must strip himself free of self, and identify himself with a great cause.”

A rusty virago, carrying a straw marketing bag, pushed him rudely aside, for he was blocking the entrance to the shop.

“We can’t talk here,” he said, recovering his balance. “Do you want to talk?” he asked abruptly.

“Very much,” replied Triona, suddenly aware that this commonplace looking prophet, vibrating with inspiration, might possibly have some message for him, spiritually derelict.

“Then come up to my rooms.”

To Triona’s surprise, he plunged into the crowded greengrocer’s shop, turned into an evil-smelling, basket-littered passage at the back, mounted a couple of flights of unclean stairs, and unlocked and threw open the door of an untidy sitting-room looking out on to the noisy street. He swung a wooden chair from a little deal table strewn with paper, and pointed to a musty sofa.

“That,” said he courteously, “is the more comfortable. Pray be seated.”

He picked a depopulated packet of cigarettes from the table.

“Will you smoke? For refreshment, I can offer you tea—” he pointed to a spirit-lamp and poor tea equipage in a corner. He did the honours of his mildewed establishment with much grace. Triona accepted the cigarette, but declined the tea. Boronowski seated himself on the wooden chair. Having taken off his hat, he revealed himself entirely bald, save for a longish grizzling red fringe at the back, from ear-tip to ear-tip. The quick rites of hospitality performed, he plunged again into impatient speech, recapitulating what he had said before and ending in the same peroration.

“Salvation lies in a man’s effacement of himself, and his identification with a great cause.”

“But, my dear man,” cried Triona feverishly, “what great cause is there in

the world for an Englishman of the present day to devote himself to? Look at the damned country. You're living in it. Is there a cry anywhere, '*England über alles?*' Have you seen any enthusiasm for any kind of idea? Of course I love my country. I've fought for her on land and sea. I've been wounded. I've been torpedoed. And I'd go through it all over again if my country called. But my country doesn't call."

He rose from the sofa and walked up and down the little room, throwing about his arms, less like an Englishman than his Polish host, who, keeping his eyes on him, nodded his head in amazed approbation as he developed his thesis—that of the fervid creature eager to fight England's battles, but confronted with England's negation of any battles to fight.

"The only positive ideal in England at the present moment is Bolshevism. The only flag waved in this war-wearied country is the red flag. All the rest is negative. Not what we can do—but what we can prevent. And you, Boronowski, a professor of history, know very well that no Gospel of Negation has ever succeeded since the world began. Look at me," he said, standing before the Pole, with wide, outstretched arms, "young, fit, with a brain that has proved itself—I won't tell you how—and eager to throw my personal sufferings into the world's melting-pot—to live, my dear fellow, to work, to devote myself to some ideal. I must do that, or die. It's all very well for you to theorize. You do it beautifully. There's not a word wrong in anything you say. But what is the Great Cause that I can devote myself to?"

"Poland," said Boronowski.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE word was like the lash of a whip. He stared at the patriot open-mouthed.

"Yes, Poland," said Boronowski. "Why not? You want to fight for a Great Cause. Is not a free and independent Poland the keystone of the arch of reconstructed Europe? It is a commonplace axiom. Poland overthrown, overrun with Bolshevism, all Europe crumbles into dust. The world is convulsed. Fighting for Poland is fighting for the salvation of the world. Could there be a greater cause?"

His dark eyes glowed with compelling inspiration. His outflung arm ended in a pointing finger. And Triona saw it as the finger of Salvation Yeo in his boyhood's picture.

"Wonderful, wonderful," he said, below his breath.

"And simple. Come with me to Warsaw. I have friends of some influence. Otherwise I should not be here. The Polish Army would welcome you with open arms."

Triona thrust out a sudden hand, which the other gripped.

"By God!" he cried, "I'll come."

An hour afterwards, his brain dominated by the new idea, he danced his way through the melancholy streets. Here, indeed, was salvation. Here he could live the life of Truth. Here was the glorious chance—although he would never see her on earth again—of justifying himself in Olivia's eyes. And in itself it was a marvellous adventure. There would be endless days when he should live for the hour that he was alive, without thought of an unconjecturable to-morrow. Into the cause of Poland he would fling his soul. Yes, Boronowski was right. The sovereign remedy. His individual life—what did it matter to him? All the beloved things were past and gone. They lay already on the further side of the Valley of the Shadow of Death. His personality was merged into a self-annihilating creature that would henceforth be the embodiment of a spiritual idea.

Thus for the rest of the day, and during the night, his mind worked. Arrived in Poland, he would press for the fiercest section of the front. The bullet that killed him would be welcome. He would die gloriously. Olivia should know.

As John Briggs, with his papers in order, he found his passport a simple matter. Boronowski, with whom he spent most of his time, obtained a speedy visa at the Polish and other Consulates. During the period of waiting he went

carefully through the contents of the suit-case and removed all traces of the name and initials of Alexis Triona. The little black book he burned page by page with matches in the empty grate of his room. When it was consumed, he felt himself rid of an evil thing. In strange East London emporiums, unknown to dwellers in the West End, and discovered by restless wandering, he purchased an elementary kit for the campaign. Much of his time he spent in Boronowski's quarters in Somers Town, reading propaganda pamphlets and other literature dealing with Polish actualities. When the Polish Army welcomed him with open arms, they must find him thoroughly equipped. He bought a Polish grammar, and compiled with Boronowski a phrase-book so as to be prepared with an elementary knowledge of the language. The Pole marvelled at his fervour.

"You spring at things like an intellectual tiger," said he, "and then fasten on to them with the teeth of a bulldog."

"I'm a quick worker when I concentrate," said Triona.

And for many days he concentrated, sleeping and eating little, till his cheeks grew gaunt and his eyes bright and haggard. In his interminable talks with Boronowski, he concentrated all his faculties, until the patriot would laugh and accuse him of a tigerish spring on the secrets of his soul.

"It's true," cried Triona, "it's the soul of Poland I want to make enter my being. To serve you to any purpose I must see through Polish eyes and feel with a Polish heart, and feel my veins thrill with the spirituality of Poland."

"Is that possible?"

"You shall see," answered Triona.

And just as he had fallen under the obsession of the dead Krilov during the night watches in the North Sea, so did he fall under the obsession of this new Great Cause. Something fundamentally histrionic in his temperament flung him into these excesses of impersonation. Already he began to regret his resumption of the plain name of John Briggs. Even in the pre-war Russian days he had seldom been addressed by it. For the first social enquiry in Russia elicited the Christian name of a man's father. And his father's name being Peter, he was called by all and sundry Ivan Petrovitch. So that even then, in his fervent zeal to merge himself into the Russian spirit, he had grown to regard the two downright words of his name as meaningless monosyllables. But he strangled the regret fiercely as soon as it arose.

"No, by heaven!" said he, "No more lies."

And yet, in spite of unalterable resolve, as he lay sleepless with overwrought nerves in the sour room in the Euston Road, he was haunted by lunatic Polish forms, Brigiovski, Brigowski, which he might adopt without

breaking his vow; he could not see himself in the part of a Polish patriot labelled as John Briggs; just as well might a great actor seek to identify himself with Hamlet while wearing cricketing flannels and a bowler hat.

Only once in his talks with Boronowski did he refer to the unhappiness to which he was to apply the sovereign remedy. The days were passing without sign of immediate departure. Boronowski, under the orders of his superiors, must await instructions. Triona chafed at the delay.

Boronowski smiled indulgently.

"The first element in devotion to a cause, or a woman, is patience. Illimitable patience. The demands of a cause are very much like those of a woman, apparently illogical and capricious, but really inexorable and unswerving in their purpose."

"It's all very well to talk of patience," Triona fumed, "but when one is hag-ridden as I am——"

Boronowski smiled again. "*Histoire de femme*——"

Triona flushed scarlet and sprang to his feet.

"How dare you twist my words like that?"

Boronowski looked at him for a puzzled moment, seeking the association of ideas. Then, grasping it:

"Forgive me, my friend," he said courteously. "My English, after all, is that of a foreigner. The word connection was far from my mind. I took your speech to mean that you were driven by unhappiness. And the unhappiness of a young man is so often—— Again, I beg your pardon."

Triona passed his hand through his brown hair.

"All right," he said, "I'm sorry. Yes. If you want to know, it's a woman. She's the day-spring from on high, and I'm damned beyond redemption. The best thing that could happen would be if she knew I were dead."

Boronowski tugged at his little greyish-red beard. A follower of great causes was never the worse for having the Furies at his heels. But he was a man of kindly nature.

"No one while he is alive can be damned beyond redemption," he said. "I don't wish to press my indiscretion further. Yet, as an older man, could I be of service to you in any way?"

"No, you're very kind, but no one can help me." Then an idea flashed across his excited brain. "Not until I'm dead. Then, perhaps, you might do something for me."

"You're not going to die yet, my friend."

"How do we know? I'm going to fight. The first day I may get knocked out. Should anything happen to me, would you kindly communicate with some one?"

He moved to the paper-littered table and began to scribble.

"It's all rather premature, my friend," said Boronowski. "But as you wish." He took the scrap of paper which bore the name and address of Major Olifant. "This I may be liable to lose. I will enter it in my notebook." He made the entry. Then, "May I say a serious word to you?"

"Anything you like."

"There is such a thing as the fire of purification. But—" he put a hand on the younger man's shoulder, "you can't call it down from Heaven. You must await its coming. So we get back to my original remark. Patience, more patience, and always patience."

This was consoling for the moment; but after a few days' further grappling with the Polish language, he burst into Boronowski's lodgings and found the patriot at his table, immersed in work.

"If we don't start soon," he cried, "I'll go mad. I haven't slept for nights and nights. I'll only sleep when we are on our journey, and I know that all this is reality and not a dream."

"I've just had orders," replied Boronowski. "We start to-morrow morning. Here are our tickets."

That night, Triona wrote to Olivia. It was an eternal farewell. On the morrow he was leaving England to offer up his unworthy life as a sacrifice to the Great Cause of Poland. The only reparation he could make for the wrong he had done her was to beseech her to look on him as one already dead. It covered many pages.

When he returned to his musty room after this last hour's heart-breaking communion with her, he sat on his bed overwhelmed by sudden despair. What guarantee had she of this departure for Poland greater than that of his mission to Helsingfors last summer? Would she not throw the letter aside in disgust—another romantic lie? He wished he had not written. He took faint hope again on the reflection that by posting another letter from Warsaw he could establish his veracity. But why should he keep on worrying her with the details of his miserable existence? Better, far better that she should look on him as dead; better, far better that she should believe him dead, so that she could reconstruct her young and broken life. He might die in battle; but then he might not. He had already carried his life safely through battles by land and sea. Again he might come out unscathed. Even if he was killed, how should she hear of his death? And if he survived, was it fair that she should be bound by law eternally

to a living ghost? Somebody had said that before. It was Olifant. Olifant, the fool out for Grails, yet speaking the truth of chivalry. Well, this time—he summoned up the confidence of dismal hope—he would make sure that he was dead and that she heard the news. At any rate, he had prepared the ground; Boronowski would communicate with Olifant.

Then came a knock at his door—it was nearly midnight. The night porter entered. A man downstairs wished to see him—a foreigner. A matter of urgent importance.

"Show him up," said Triona.

He groaned, put both his hands up to his head. He did not want to see Boronowski to-night. His distraught brain could not stand the patriot's tireless lucidity of purpose. Boronowski belonged to the inhuman band of fanatics, the devotees to one idea, who had nothing personal to sacrifice. Just like lonely old maids who gave themselves up to church-going and good works, and thereby plumed themselves on the acquisition of immortal merit. What soul-shattering tragedy had Boronowski behind him, any more than the elderly virgins aforesaid? If Boronowski kept him up talking Poland till three o'clock in the morning—as he had already done—he would go mad. No, not to-night. The mounting steps on the uncarpeted stairs hammered at every nerve in his body. And when the door opened, it was not Boronowski who appeared, but a pallid, swarthy wisp of a man whom Triona recognized as one Klinski, a Jew, and a trusted agent of Boronowski. He was so evilly dressed that the night porter, accustomed to the drab clientele of the sad hostelry, yet thought it his duty to linger by the door.

Triona dismissed him sharply.

"What's the matter?" he asked in Russian, for he was aware of the man's scanty English.

Klinski did not know. He was but the bearer of a letter, a large envelope, which he drew from his breast pocket. Triona tore it open. It contained two envelopes and a covering letter. The letter ran:

"My Dear Friend,

"A sudden change in the political situation has made it necessary for me to go—where I must not tell you. So, to my great regret, I cannot accompany you. You, however, will start by the morning train, as arranged. The route, as you know, is Paris, Zurich, Saltzburg, and Prague. I enclose letters to sound friends in Prague and Warsaw who will relieve you of all worries and responsibilities. If you do not hear from me in Prague, where I should like you to

remain one week—it is a beautiful city, and the Czecho-Slovak Republic is one of the most interesting outcomes of the war—await instructions at Warsaw. But I anticipate picking you up in Prague.

"Yours,
"BORONOWSKI."

A moment ago, he had dreaded the interruption of Boronowski on his nerve-racked vigil. Now the dismayed prospect of a journey across Europe alone awoke within him a sudden yearning for Boronowski's society. A dozen matters could be cleared up in an hour's talk. Suppose Boronowski's return to Warsaw were indefinitely delayed.

"Thanks very much," he said. "I'll take back the answer to Mr. Boronowski myself."

"There can be no answer," said Klinski.

"Why?"

"Mr. Boronowski left his lodgings early this evening, and has gone—who knows where?"

Triona shrugged his shoulders. It was the uncomfortable way of conspirators all the world over. To himself he cursed it with heatedness, but to no avail.

"Why didn't you bring the letter before?" he asked.

"I have had many messages to deliver to-night, sir," said Klinski, "and I have not finished."

The stunted, pallid man looked tired out, half-starved. Triona drew from his pocket a ten-shilling note. Klinski drew back a step.

"I thank you. But in the service of my country I can only accept payment from my Government."

Triona regarded him in admiration.

"It must be a great country!"

"It is," said Klinski, with a light in his eyes.

"And I'm proud to go and fight for her."

"It's a privilege that I envy you," said Klinski. "May God preserve you."

Driven by the impossibility of sleep in the frowsy room, by the incurable wander-fever which took him at periods of unrest, he found himself an hour later standing before the block of flats in the Buckingham Palace Road, staring up at the windows of his home. In the bedroom was a faint streak of light quite

visible from below through a crack in the curtains. He remembered how, a year ago, he had been compelled by a similar impulse, to stand romantically beneath the building which housed her sacredness, and how the gods, smiling on him, had delivered her into his rescuing hands. And now there were no gods —or if there were, they did but mock him. No white wraith would appear on the pavement, turning to warm flesh and blood, demanding his succour. She was up there, wakeful, behind that streak of light.

He stood racked by an agony of temptation. The Yale latch key was still at the end of his watch-chain. He was her husband. He had the right of entrance. His being clamoured for her, and found utterance in a horrible little cry. The light invited him like a beacon. Yes. He would cross the road. Perhaps the fool Olifant was right. She might yet love him. And then, as if in answer to his half-crazed imaginings, the light went out.

He turned, and walked wearily back across sleeping London.

It was four o'clock when the night porter admitted him. He stumbled to his room. As his train left Victoria at eight, it would be an absurdity to undress and go to bed. Utterly weary, he threw himself on it as he was, his brain whirling. There could be no question of sleep.

Yet suddenly he became conscious of daylight. He started up and looked at his watch. It was past seven. He had slept after all. He made a perfunctory toilet and hurriedly completed his neglected packing. The drowsy night porter, on duty till eight, tardily answered his summons, and took his suit-case to the shabby vestibule. Triona followed, with heavy great coat and canvas kit-bag, his purchases for the campaign. The porter suggested breakfast. There was no time. Luckily he had paid his bill the evening before. All he demanded was a taxi.

But at that early hour of the morning there were none, save a luggage-laden few bound for St. Pancras or King's Cross.

"I can't leave the hotel, sir," said the porter, "or I would get you one from Euston."

"I'll find one, then," said Triona, and putting on the heavy khaki coat and gripping suit-case in one hand and kit-bag in the other, he set off along the Euston Road. As he neared the station entrance, he staggered along, aching and sweating. What a fool he had been not to foresee this idiot difficulty! What a fool he had been to give way to sleep. He came in view of the clock. Given a cab, he would still have time to catch the train at Victoria. He had it on his brain that his salvation depended on his catching the train at Victoria. He stumbled into the outer court, past the hotel wings. An outgoing taxi-cab swirled towards him. He dropped his burdens and stood in its path with upheld

arms. There was a sudden pandemonium of hoarse cries, a sounding of brakes. He glanced round just in time to see, for a fraction of a second, the entering motor-lorry which struck him down.

CHAPTER XIX

OLIVIA struggled for a fortnight against Circumstance, when Circumstance got the upper hand.

But it had been a valiant fight from the moment Myra, on her return to the flat, had delivered Triona's scribbled note, and had given her account of the brief parting interview.

"It's just as well," she said. "It's the only way out."

She made a brave show of dining, while Myra waited stoically. At last, impelled to speech, she said:

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"How can I think of what I know nothing about?" said Myra.

"Would you like to know?"

"My liking has nothing to do with it," said Myra brushing the crumbs off the table. "If you tell me, you tell me because it may help you. But—I know it's not a Christian thing to say—I'm not likely to forgive the man that has done you an injury."

"He has done me no injury," said Olivia. "That's what I want you to know. No injury in the ordinary sense of the word."

She looked up at Myra's impassive face, and met the dull blue eyes, and found it very difficult to tell her, in spite of lifelong intimacy. Yet it was right that Myra should have no false notions.

"I've discovered that my husband's name is not Alexis Triona. It is John Briggs."

"John Briggs," echoed Myra.

"His father was a labourer in Newcastle. He was a chauffeur in Russia. All that he had said about himself and written in his book is untrue. When he left us last summer to go to Finland, he really went to Newcastle to his mother's death-bed. Everything he has told me has been a lie from beginning to end. He—oh, God, Myra——"

She broke down and clutched her face, while her throat was choking with dry sobbing. Myra came swiftly round the table and put her arm about her, and drew the beloved head near to her thin body.

"There, there, my dear. You can tell me more another time."

Olivia let herself be soothed for a while. Then she pulled herself together and rose.

"No, I'll tell you everything now. Then we'll never need talk of it again. I'm not going to make a fool of myself."

She stiffened herself against feminine weakness. At the end of the story, Myra asked her:

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to carry on as if nothing had happened. At any rate for the present."

Myra nodded slowly. "You're not the only one who has had to carry on as if nothing had happened."

"What do you mean?" Olivia asked quickly.

"Nothing but what I said," replied Myra. "It takes some doing. But you've got to believe in God and believe in yourself."

"Where did you get your wisdom from, Myra?" asked Olivia wonderingly.

"From life, my dear," replied Myra with unwonted softness. And picking up the last tray of removed dinner things, she left the room.

The next afternoon, she said to Myra, "Major Olifant has telephoned me that Mr. Triona is arriving at Paddington by a six-fifteen train. I should like you to come with me."

"Very well," said Myra.

It was characteristic of their relations that they spoke not a word of Triona during their drive to the station or during their wait on the platform. When the train came in, and they had assured themselves that he had not arrived—for they had taken the precaution to separate and each to scan a half-section—they re-entered their waiting taxi-cab and drove home.

"I hope I shall never see him again," said Olivia, humiliated by this new deception. "He told Major Olifant he was coming straight to town by the train. The truth isn't in him. You mustn't suppose," she turned rather fiercely to Myra, "that I came to meet him with any idea of reconciliation. That's why I brought you with me. But people don't part for ever in this hysterical way. There are decencies of life. There are the commonplace arrangements of a separation."

She burned with a new sense of wrong. Once more he had eluded her. Now, what she told Myra was true. She wished never to see him again.

Blaise Olifant came up to town, anxious to be of service, and found her in this defiant mood.

"It's impossible for it all to end like this," he said. "You are wounded to the quick. He's in a state of crazy remorse. Time will soften things. He'll come

to his senses and return and ask your forgiveness, and you will give it."

She replied, "My dear Blaise, you don't understand. The man I loved and married doesn't exist."

"The man of genius exists. Listen," said he. "After he left me, I've done scarcely anything but think of the two of you. He could have put forward a case—a very strong case—but he didn't."

"And what was his strong case?" she asked bitterly.

Olifant put before her his reasoned apologia for the life of Triona. Given the first deception practised under the obsession of the little black book acting on a peculiarly sensitive temperament, the rest followed remorselessly.

"He was being blackmailed by one lie."

"My intelligence grasps what you say," Olivia answered, "but my heart doesn't. You're standing away and can see things in the round. I'm in the middle of them, and I can't."

If she, although his wife, had stood away; if she had been dissociated from his deceptions; if nothing more had occurred than the exposure of the Triona myth, she might have forgiven him. But the deceptions had been interwoven with the sacred threads of her love; she could not forgive that intimate entanglement. To a woman the little things are as children, as the little ones whose offenders Christ cursed with the millstone and the sea. She had lain awake, his forgotten wrist-watch on her arm, picturing him tossed by the waves of the North Sea in the execution of her country's errand. She had proudly told a hundred people of the Bolshevist gyve-marks around his ankle. She had been moved to her depths by the tragical romance of the fictitious Vronsky. In her heart there had been hot rebellion against a Foreign Office keeping strangle-hold on a heroic servant and restricting his freedom of action. These little sufferings he had caused her she could not forgive. While inflicting them, he knew that she suffered.

In vain did Olifant, unversed in the psychology of woman, plead the cause of the erratic creature that was her husband. In vain did he set out his honourable and uncontested record; that of a man whose response to the call of duty was unquestioned; of whose courage and endurance she had received personal testimony; who had cheerfully suffered wounds, the hardships of flight through Revolutionary Russia, the existence on a mine-sweeper on perilous seas ending in the daily dreaded catastrophe; the record of a man who, apart from his fraud, had justified himself as a queer, imaginative genius, writing of life in a new way, in a new, vibrating style that had compelled the attention of the English-speaking world. In vain did he adduce the boyish charm of the man. Olivia sighed.

“I don’t know him as you see him,” she said.

“Then what can I do?” he asked.

She shook a despairing head. “Nothing, my dear Blaise.” She rubbed the palm of one hand on the back of the other, and turned her great dark eyes on him. “You can’t do anything, but you’ve done something. You’ve shown me how loyal a man can be.”

He protested vaguely. “My dear Olivia . . .”

“It’s true,” she said. “And I’ll always remember it. And now, don’t let us ever talk about this again.”

“As you will,” said he. “But what are you going to do?”

She replied as she had done to Myra. She would carry on.

“Until when?”

She shrugged her shoulders. She would carry on indefinitely. To act otherwise would open the door to gossip. She was not going to be done to death by slanderous tongues. She rose and stood before him in slim, rigid dignity.

“If I can’t out-brave the world, I’m a poor thing.”

“You stay here, then?” he asked.

“Why not? Where else should I go?”

“I came with a little note from my sister,” said Olifant, drawing a letter from his pocket and handing it to her.

Olivia read it through. Then she said, in a softened voice:

“You’re a dear, kind friend.”

“It’s my sister,” he smiled; but he could not keep an appeal out of his eyes. “Why shouldn’t you?” he asked suddenly. “It will be hateful for you here, for all your courage. And you’ll be fighting what? Just shadows, and you’ll expend all your strength in it. What good will it do you or anybody? You want rest, real rest, of body and soul.”

She met his eyes.

“Do I look so woebegone?”

“The sight of you now is enough to break the heart of any one who cares for you, Olivia,” he said soberly.

“It’s merely a question of sleeplessness. That’ll pass off.”

“It will pass off quicker in the country,” he urged. “It will be a break. The house will be yours. Mary and I, the discreetest shadows. You don’t know the self-effacing dear that Mary is. Besides, she is one of those women who is a

living balm for the wounded. To look at her is to draw love and comforting from her." He ventured the tips of his fingers on her slender shoulders. "Do come. Your old room shall be yours, just as you left it. Or the room I have always kept sacred."

She stood by the fireplace, her arm on the mantelshelf, looking away from him.

"Or, if you like," he went on, "we'll clear out—we only want a few days—and give you back your old home all to yourself."

She stretched out a groping hand; he took it.

"I know you would," she said. "It's—it's beautiful of you. I'm not surprised, because—" she swayed head and shoulders a bit, seeking for words, her eyes away from him, "—because, after that first day at Medlow, I have never thought of you as doing otherwise than what was beautiful and noble. It sounds silly. But I mean it."

She withdrew her hand and walked away into the room, her back towards him. He strode after her.

"That's foolishness. I'm only an ordinary, decent sort of man. In the circumstances, good Lord! I couldn't do less."

She faced him in the middle of the room.

"And I as an ordinary, decent woman, couldn't do less than what I've said."

"Well?" said he.

They stood for a few seconds eye to eye. A faint colour came into her cheeks, and she smiled.

"Don't suppose I'm not tempted. I am. But if I came, you'd spoil me. I've got to fight."

This valiant attitude he could not induce her to abandon. At last, with a pathetic air of disappointment, he said:

"If I can help you in any other way, and you won't let me, I shall be hurt."

"Oh, I'll let you," she cried impulsively. "You may be sure. Who else is there?"

He went away comforted. Yet he did not return to Medlow. These early days, he argued, were critical. Anything might happen, and it would be well for him to remain within call.

Of what the future held for her she did not think. Her mind was concentrated on the struggle through the present. She received a woman caller and chattered over tea as though nothing had happened. The effort braced her,

and she felt triumphant over self. She went about on her trivial shopping. She remembered a fitting for a coat and skirt which she had resolved to postpone till after the projected motor jaunt. If she was to live in the world, she must have clothes to cover her. One morning, therefore, she journeyed to the dressmaker's in Hanover Street, and, the fitting over, wandered through the square, down Conduit Street into Bond Street. At the corner, she ran into Lydia, expensively dressed, creamy, serene.

"My dear, you're looking like a ghost. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Jogging on as usual," said Olivia.

Their acquaintance had not been entirely broken. A few calls had been exchanged. Once Lydia had lunched with Olivia alone in the Buckingham Palace Road. But they had not met since the early part of the year. They strolled slowly down Bond Street. Lydia was full of news. Bobby Quinton had married Mrs. Bellingham—a rich woman twice his age.

"The way of the transgressor is soft," said Olivia.

Mauregard was transferred to Rome. His idol, the Russian dancer, had run off with Danimède, the fitter at Luquin's. Hadn't Olivia heard?

"Where have you been living, my dear child? In a tomb? It has been the talk of London for the past six weeks. They're in Paris now, and they say she lies down on the floor and lets the little beast kick her. She likes it. There's no accounting for tastes. Perhaps that's why she left Mauregard."

In her serene, worldly way, she went through the scandalous chronicles of her galley. She came at last to Edwin Mavenna. Olivia remembered Mavenna? She laughed indulgently. Olivia shuddered at the memory and gripped her hands tight. Mavenna—he mattered little. A beast let loose for a few moments from the darkness. He was eclipsed from her vision by the boyish, grey-clad figure in the moonlight. She scarcely heard Lydia's chatter.

"One must live and let live, you know, in this world. He and Sydney are partners now. I hinted something of the sort at the time. You don't mind now, do you?"

"Not a bit. Why should I?" said Olivia.

"That's really why I've not asked you down to our place in Sussex. But if you don't mind meeting him—he's quite a good sport really."

Olivia's eyes wandered up and down the crowded roadway.

"I wish I could see an empty taxi," she said.

She had a sudden horror of Lydia—a horror queerly mingled with fierce jealousy. Why should Lydia, with her gross materialism, be leading this

unruffled existence?

"Are you in a hurry?" Lydia asked placidly.

"I've an appointment with—my dentist."

"We'll get in here and wait till we see a taxi," said Lydia.

They stood in the recess of a private doorway, by the bow-window of a print shop.

"You're not looking well, my dear," said Lydia quite affectionately. "Marriage doesn't seem to agree with you. What's the matter?"

Olivia flashed: "Nothing's the matter."

"How's your husband?"

"Very well."

This was intolerable. She strained her eyes for the little red flag of freedom. Then, as she had told her visitor of a day or two before:

"He's gone abroad—on important business."

"And not taken you with him?"

"His business isn't ordinary business," she said instinctively. Then she recognized she was covering him with his own cloak. Her pale cheeks flushed.

"So that's it," said Lydia smiling. "You're a poor little grass widow. You want bucking up, my dear. A bit of old times. Come and do a dinner and a theatre with us. Sydney would love to see you again. We'll steer clear of naughty old Mavenna——"

She had to stop; for Olivia had rushed across the pavement and was holding up her little embroidered bag at arm's length, and the Heaven-sent taxi was drawing up to the kerb.

Lydia followed her and stood while she entered the cab.

"You'll come, won't you, dear?"

"I'll telephone," said Olivia. She put out a hand. "Good-bye. It has been so pleasant seeing you again."

Lydia shook hands and smiled in her prosperous, contented way. Then she said:

"Where shall he drive to?"

Olivia had not given the matter a thought. She reflected swiftly. If she said "Home," Lydia would suspect her eagerness to escape. After all, she didn't want to hurt Lydia's feelings. She cried at random:

"Marlborough Road, St. John's Wood."

"What a funny place for a dentist to live," said Lydia.

Anyhow, it was over. She was alone in the taxi, which was proceeding northwards up Bond Street. Of all people in the world Lydia was the one she least had desired to meet. Dinner and Revue. Possibly supper and a dance afterwards! Back again to where she had started little over a year ago. She suddenly became aware of herself shrieking with laughter. In horror, she stopped short, and felt a clattering shock all through her frame, like a car going at high speed when, at the instant of danger, all the brakes are suddenly applied. She lay back on the cushions, panting. Her brow was moist. She put up her hand and found a wisp of hair sticking to her temples.

The cab went on. Where was she? Where was she going? She looked out of the window and recognized Regent's Park. Then she remembered her wildly-given destination. She put her head through the window.

"I've changed my mind," she said to the driver. "Go to Buckingham Palace Mansions."

The next morning came a letter from Lydia on expensive primrose note-paper. Would Friday be convenient? Sydney and herself would call for her at seven. There was a postscript:

"I hope the St. John's Wood dentist didn't hurt you too much."

It gave her an idea. She replied:

"So sorry. The St. John's Wood dentist has made it impossible for me to appear in public for at least a month."

She checked an impulse of laughter. She must keep hold on herself.

Olifant came in the afternoon. She told him of a communication she had received from her bank to the effect that Alexis had placed a large sum of money to her account. But she did not tell him of her meeting with Lydia.

"What's to be done with the money? I don't want it. It had better be retransferred."

"I'll see what I can do," said Olifant.

He came back next morning. He had seen the manager of Triona's bank. Nothing could be done. Alexis had drawn out his balance in cash and closed his account.

"Let things be—at any rate for the present," Olifant counselled.

When he took his leave, he said, looking down on her from his lean height:

"I do wish you would come to Medlow."

She knew that she was ill. She knew that she was looking ill. But her little frame shook with an impatient movement.

"I'm going to stick it, Blaise. I'm going to stick it if I die for it."

"It's magnificent, but it isn't war—or anything else," said he.

Then came Rowington. The last straw. The last straw, in the guise of an anxious, kindly, gold-spectacled, clean-shaven, florid-faced philanthropist. First he had asked over the telephone for Triona's address. An urgent matter. Olivia replied that his address was secret. Would she kindly forward a letter? She replied that none of her husband's letters were to be forwarded. Would Mrs. Triona see him, then? He would wait on her at any time convenient to her. She fixed the hour. He came on the stroke.

Olivia, her heart cold, her brain numbed by a hundred apprehensions, was waiting for him in the drawing-room. Myra announced him. Olivia rose.

"My dear Mrs. Triona," said he, emphasizing the conventional handshake by laying his hand over hers and holding it, "where is that wonderful husband of yours?"

"He's gone abroad," said Olivia.

"He must come back," said Rowington.

"He has gone away for a long time on important business," said Olivia, parrot-wise.

She motioned him to a chair. They sat down.

"I gathered something of the sort from his letter. Has he told you of certain dispositions?"

She fenced. "I don't quite follow you."

"This letter——?"

He handed her the letter of instructions with regard to payment of royalties which he had received from Triona. She glanced through it.

"That's all right," she said.

He drew a breath of relief. "I'm glad you know. I had a sort of idea—anyhow, no matter how important his business is, it's essential that he should come back at once."

"Why?" she asked.

But she had a sickening prescience of the answer. The kindly gentleman passed his hand over his forehead.

"It's just a business complication, my dear Mrs. Triona," he said.

She rose. He too, courteously.

"Is it to do with anything that happened on the night of your dinner-party?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Colonel Onslow and Captain Wedderburn?"

He met her eyes.

"Yes," said he.

"They've come to you with all sorts of lies about Alexis."

"I would give ten years of my life not to wound you, Mrs. Triona," he said, in great distress. "I didn't sleep a wink last night. My honour as a publisher is involved. But let that pass. I'm thinking more of you. You only can help me—and your husband. These two gentlemen have come to me with a challenge. Your husband's good faith. They ask 'Is *Through Blood and Snow* a bona-fide personal record?' "

"It is," said Olivia, with her back to the wall.

"He'll have to prove it."

"He will," said Olivia proudly. "What do they propose to do?"

"Have the whole thing cleared up in public—in the Press. My dear Mrs. Triona," he said after a few moments' hesitation, "don't you see the false position I'm in? This letter I've shown you—it looks like running away—forgive me if I wound you. But on the face of it, it does. I daren't tell them. But of course, if Mr. Triona comes back, he'll be able to give all the explanation in the world. I haven't the remotest doubt of it—not the remotest doubt. So, whatever his business is, you must recall him. You see the importance?"

"Yes, I see," said Olivia tonelessly.

"So will you write and tell him this?"

The truth had to come out. She said:

"As a matter of fact, I don't know where he is. I can't communicate with him."

She hated the look of incredulous surmise on Rowington's face. "As soon as I can, I'll let him know."

"Yes, yes," said Rowington. "You must. You see, don't you, that both Onslow and Wedderbum feel it to be their public duty."

"But they're both men of decent feeling," said Olivia. "They wouldn't attack a man when they knew he wasn't here to defend himself."

"I hope not, my dear Mrs. Triona," said Rowington. "I sincerely hope not. I'll see them again. Indeed, I tried to put them off the whole thing. I did my best."

"What's the exact charge they make against my husband?"

To her utmost power she would defend him. Let her know facts.

He explained. There was a mysterious period of ten months. Captain Wedderburn asserted that for four of those months her husband was with the Armoured Column, and for the remaining six he lay wounded in a Russian hospital. Colonel Onslow maintained that those ten months—he had his dates exact—are covered in the book by Alexis Triona's adventures in Farthest Russia—and that these adventures are identical with those of another man who related them to him in person.

"That's definite, at any rate," said Olivia. "But it's a monstrous absurdity all the same. My husband denied the Russian hospital in my presence. You can tell these gentlemen that what they propose to do is infamous—especially when they learn he is not here. Will you give them my message? To hit a man behind his back is not English."

Rowington saw burning eyes in a dead white face, and a slim, dark figure drawn up tragically tense. He went home miserably with this picture in his mind. For all her bravery she had not restored his drooping faith in Triona.

And Olivia sat, when he had left her, staring at public disgrace. Against that she could not fight. The man she had loved was a shadow, a non-existent thing; but she bore his name. She had sworn to keep bright the honour of the name before the world. And now the world would sweep it into the dustbin of ignominy. A maddening sense of helplessness, growing into a great terror, got possession of her.

The next morning, when Myra brought in her letters, she felt ill and feverish after a restless night. One of the envelopes bore Triona's familiar handwriting. She seized it eagerly. It would give some address, so that she could summon him back to make a fight for his honour. But there was no address. She read it through, and then broke into shrill harsh laughter.

"He says he's going out this morning to fight for the sacred cause of Poland."

Myra, who was pottering about the room, turned on her sharply. As soon as Olivia was quieter, she sent for the doctor. Later in the day, there came a nurse, and Myra was banished most of the day from the beloved bedside.

Thus it came about that the next morning no correspondence or morning papers were brought into Olivia's room. And that is why Myra, who preferred the chatty paragraphs to leaders and political news, said nothing to her mistress of a paragraph stuck away in the corner of the paper. It was only a few lines—issued by the police—though Myra did not know that—to the effect that a well-dressed man with papers on him giving the name of John Briggs had been knocked over by a motor-lorry the previous morning and had been taken

unconscious to University College Hospital.

CHAPTER XX

MYRA stood by the screened-off bed in the long ward and looked unemotionally at the unconscious man.

"Yes," she said to the Sister, "that is Mr. John Briggs. I know him intimately."

"Are you a relative?"

"He has no relatives."

"You see, in a case like this, we have to report to the police. It's their business to find somebody responsible."

"I'm responsible," said Myra.

The Sister looked at the tall, lean woman, so dignified in her well-made iron grey coat and skirt and plain black hat, and was puzzled to place her socially. She might be an austere lady of high degree; on the other hand, she spoke with an odd, country accent. It was, at any rate, nine hundred and ninety-nine to one that she was a genuine friend of the patient; but there was the remaining one in a thousand that she belonged to the race of cranks not unfamiliar in London hospitals.

"It's only a matter of formality," said the Sister, "but one must have some proof."

So Myra drew her bow at a venture.

"Mr. Briggs was going abroad—to Poland."

The Sister smiled with relief. In his pocket-book had been found railway tickets and unsealed letters to people in Prague and Warsaw. So long as they found some one responsible, it was all that mattered. She proceeded to explain the case. A broken thigh, broken ribs, and severe concussion. Possibly internal injuries. The surgeons could not tell, yet.

Myra scanned again the peaked bit of face beneath the headbandages, which was all that was visible of Alexis Triona, and asked:

"Can he live?"

"It's doubtful," said the Sister.

They moved away to the centre of the ward aisle. The Sister talked of the accident, of the patient's position.

"He's a rich man," said Myra.

"So we gathered," replied the Sister, who had in her keeping his pocket-book, stuffed with English bank-notes of high value.

"If anything should happen, you of course will let me know."

"Your name and address?"

She gave it. The sister wrote it down on a note-pad.

"Could I see him just once more?" Myra asked.

"Certainly."

They went round the screen. Myra stood looking down on the bit she could see of the man who had brought catastrophe on her beloved. The shock of recognition, although expected, aroused her pity. Then her heart surged with fierce resentment. Serve the lying rascal right. Why hadn't the motor-lorry finished the business right away? For all her cultivated impassivity of demeanour, she stood trembling by the bedside, scarcely knowing whether she wished him to die or live. Had he crossed her path unrelated to Olivia, she would have succumbed to his boyish charm. He had ever been courteous, grasping with his subtle tact the nature of the bond between her mistress and herself. So she half-loved, half-loathed him. And yet, all this considered, it would be better for Olivia and for himself if he were to die. She glanced swiftly around. The Sister had been called away for a second. She was alone behind the screen. She knew that if she could take that bandaged head in her gloved hands and shake it, he would die, and Olivia would be free. She shivered at the extraordinary temptation. Then reaction came and sped her from his side.

She met the Sister.

"Can I come again to see how he is getting on?"

"By all means."

"I shouldn't like him to die," said Myra.

Said the Sister, somewhat mystified at this negative pronouncement:

"You may be sure we'll do all we can."

"I know," said Myra.

Of these proceedings, and of these conflicting emotions, she said nothing to Olivia. Nor did she say anything of subsequent visits to the hospital where Triona still lay unconscious.

In a short time Olivia recovered sufficiently to dispense with the nurse. The doctor prescribed change of air. Olifant once more suggested Medlow, and this time she yielded. But on the afternoon before her departure, while they were packing, she had a strange conversation with Myra.

She held in her hand, uncertain whether to burn it, the last wild letter of Alexis.

“I’m glad he’s gone to Poland,” she said reflectively.

“Why?” asked Myra, not looking up from the trunk by which she was kneeling.

“It’s a man’s work, after all,” said Olivia.

“So’s digging potatoes.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Olivia.

She tore up the letter and threw the fragments into the fire.

“What a hell marriage can be.”

“It can,” said Myra.

“You’re lucky. You’ve escaped.”

“Have I?” asked Myra intent on the packing of underwear.

At her tone Olivia started. “What do you mean?”

Myra looked up, sitting back on her heels.

“Do you suppose, dearie, you’re the only woman in trouble in the world?”

Olivia moved a step towards her.

“Are you too in trouble, Myra?”

“I’ve been in trouble for the last twenty years, ever since I left your mother’s house to be married to him.”

Olivia stared at her open-mouthed, lost in amazement. This prim, puritanical, predestined spinster of a Myra——

“You—married?”

She swerved back into a chair, reeling ever so little under this new shock. If there had been one indubitable, solid fact in her world, one that had stood out absolute during all the disillusions of the past year, it was Myra’s implacable spinsterhood. Why, she had seen Myra every day of her life, ever since she could remember, except for the annual holiday. Yes. Those holidays, always a subject for jest with her father and brothers when they were alive. No one had known whither she had gone, or when she had emerged on her reappearance. She had never given an address—so far as Olivia knew. And yet her plunge into the unknown had received the unquestioned acceptance of the family. Only last November she had gone in her mysterious way, taking, however, only a fortnight instead of her customary month. Olivia, Heaven knew why, had formed the careless impression that she had betaken herself to some tabby-like Home for religious incurables, run by her dissenting organization. And all this time, tabby-like in another sense, she had been stealing back to her husband. Where was Truth in the world? She repeated mechanically:

"You—married?"

Myra rose stiffly, her joints creaking, and stood before her mistress, and perhaps for the first time in her life Olivia saw a gleam of light in the elderly woman's expressionless pale blue eyes.

"Yes, I'm married. Before the end of my honeymoon, I found he wasn't in his right mind. I had to shut him up, and come back to your mother. He's alive still, in the County Asylum. I go to see him every year."

In a revulsion of feeling, Olivia sprang to her feet and held out both her arms.

"Myra—my dear old Myra——"

Myra suffered the young embrace, and then gently disengaged herself.

"There—there——" she said.

"Why have you never told me?"

"Would it have done you any good?"

"It would have made me much more thoughtful and considerate."

"I've never wanted thought or consideration," said Myra. "You have. So I say—would it have done you any good? Not a ha'p'orth. I've been much more use to you as I am. If you want to serve people, don't go and throw your private life down their throats. It chokes them. You may think it won't—but it does."

"But why," asked Olivia with moist eyes. "Why should you want to serve me like that—your devotion all these years?"

"My duty," said Myra. "I told you something of the sort a while ago. What's the good of repeating things? Besides, there was your mother——"

"Did mother know?"

Myra nodded. "She didn't know I was going to be married. I was young then, and afraid. Madam took me out of an orphanage, and I thought I was bound for life. . . . He came to Medlow to do thatching. That's how I met him. His father, one of a large family, had come from Norfolk to settle in the West. The Norfolk thatchers are known all over England. It goes down from father to son. His family had been thatchers in the same village since the Norman Conquest. He was a fine, upstanding man, and in his way an aristocrat—different from the butcher's boys and baker's men that came to the back door. I loved him with all my heart. He asked me to marry him. I said 'Yes.' We arranged it should be for my next holiday. Up to then, I had spent my holiday at a seaside place connected with the orphanage. One paid a trifle. Instead of going there, I went to his home. It was only when the trouble came that I wrote to your mother. She said the fewer people who knew, the better. I came back as

though nothing had happened. Whether she told Mr. Gale or not, I don't know. I don't think she did. There was a baby—but, thank God, it was born dead. Your mother arranged it all, so that no one should be the wiser. You yourself were the tiniest tot. Perhaps now you see why I have a duty towards the daughter of an angel from Heaven."

"And all my life——" Olivia began, but Myra interrupted her unemotionally.

"I didn't tell you any of this, because, as I said, it could do you no good. And it's your good I've lived for. One must have something to live for, anyway. Some folks live for food, other folks live for religion. I'd have lived for religion if it wasn't for you. I've struggled and prayed to find the Way. Often it has been a question of you and Jesus Christ who has called me to forsake the vain affections of this world. And I've chosen you. I may be damned in Hell for it, but I don't care."

She went on her knees again by the trunk, and continued to pack dainty underwear.

"I've told you now, because it may do you good to see that you're not the only married woman in trouble. I'd thank you," she added after a pause, "to leave me alone with this packing."

And as Olivia, not daring to yield the fullness of her heart to this strange, impassive creature, lingered by the door, Myra said:

"You'd best go, dearie, and think it out. At any rate, you haven't got to go through the sorrow of the baby business."

Whether this was consolation or not, Olivia could not decide. If there had been a child, and it had lived, it might have been a comfort and a blessing. Nothing in its heredity would have marked it with a curse. But still—it would have been a lifelong link with the corporeal man whom she had not married, from whom she shrank, and whom she proclaimed her desire never to see again. On the other hand, Myra's revelation gave her strength and restored her courage. She shuddered at the thought of the hopeless lunatic in the County Asylum, dragging out dead years of life. At any rate, she was married to a living man.

Her first days in Medlow passed like a dream. The kindest and gentlest of women, Mary Woolcombe, Olifant's sister, ministered to her wants. Mrs. Woolcombe, too, had made an unhappy marriage, and now lived apart from her husband, the depraved Oxford don. Thus, with her hostess and Myra, Olivia found herself within a little Freemasonry of unsuccessful wives. And one day, when she came to think of it, she laughed out loud.

“We might start a Home,” she said to Myra.

It was only later, when she shook off the strangeness of the dearly familiar, and grew strong enough to venture out into the streets that she found sense of perspective. Not so long ago had she set out on her Great Adventure—only eighteen months. Yet in these she had gathered the experience of eighteen years. . . .

Save for Blaise Olifant’s study, the house was little changed. The oak settle in the hall still showed the marks of the teeth of Barabbas, the bull-terrier pup. The white pane in the blue and red window of the bathroom still accused the youthful Bobby, now asleep for ever beneath the sod of Picardy. Her own old room, used by Mrs. Woolcombe, was practically unaltered. She stared into it as she rambled about the house, and felt that she had done right in not dispossessing its present occupant. All her girlhood was contained within those four walls, and she could not go back to it. The room would be haunted by its inconsiderable ghosts. She preferred her mother’s room, which, though scrupulously kept aired and dusted, had remained under lock and key. There, if ghosts counted for aught, would a spirit pervade of exquisite sympathy.

As Olifant had promised, she found herself in a strange, indefinable way, again mistress of the house, although she could take no part in its practical direction. He had spoken truth of his sister, whom she loved at first sight. Mary Woolcombe was plump, rosy, and brown-haired, with her brother’s dark blue eyes. On their first evening leave-taking, Olivia had been impelled to kiss her, and had felt the responsive warmth of a sisterly bosom.

“I do hope you feel at home,” Olifant asked one day after lunch.

“You seem like guests, not hosts,” replied Olivia.

“It’s dear of you to say so,” said Mary Woolcombe, “but I wish you’d prove it by asking your friends to come and see you.”

“I will,” replied Olivia.

But she flushed scarlet, and, as soon as she was alone, she grappled with realities. And realities nearly always have a nasty element of the ironical. She remembered the first cloud that swept over her serene soul during the honeymoon bliss of The Point. They had discussed their future domicile. Alexis had suggested the common-sense solution—“The Towers” as headquarters. She, with the schoolgirl stigma of Landsdowne House upon her, and possessed by the bitter memory of the nose-in-the-air attitude of the Blair Park crocodile—eternal symbol of social status—had revolted at the suggestion. He, the equal and companion of princes, looked on her—and, if his last crazy letter signified anything—looked still on her, as the high-born lady—the Princess of his dreams. Each, therefore, had deceived the other. She, the

daughter of Gale and Trivett, auctioneers and estate agents, and so, by the unwritten law, cut off from the gentry of Medlow, had undergone agony of remorse for the sake of the son of a Tyneside operative, a boy before the mast, a common chauffeur, a man far her inferior in the social scale. No wonder he could not understand her hesitancies. Her resentment against him blazed anew. For his sake she had needlessly soiled her soul with deceit and snobbery. It was well that he had passed out of her life.

"May I invite Mr. Trivett and Mr. Fenmarch to tea?" she asked.

Mary Woolcombe smiled.

"The house is yours, dear. That's not a Spanish courtesy but an English fact."

So the two old gentlemen came, and Olivia entertained them in the dining-room, as she had done on the afternoon of her emancipation. She sat at the end of the comfortably laid table, and the dusty Fenmarch, with the face of an old moulting badger, drank tea, while, as before, the stout, red-gilled Trivett drank whisky and soda with his hot scones. This time, the latter explained that the whisky was a treat—forbidden by Mrs. Trivett at the domestic tea-table. They welcomed her back in the kindness of their simple hearts. They knew nothing of her separation from Triona. She had been ill and come down for rest and change.

"And you look as if you need it, my dear," said Mr. Trivett. "And some of your good father's old port. There should still be a dozen or two of Cockburn's '70 in the cellar at the present moment—unless Major Olifant has drunk it all."

Olivia laughed, for it was humorously meant. Mr. Fenmarch in the act of raising his teacup to his lips, put it down again with a sigh and shook his dusty head.

"It was a great wine," he said with a look backward into the past.

"We'll have a bottle up," cried Olivia.

In spite of polite protests, she rang for Myra, and to Myra she gave instructions. And presently Myra, trained from girlhood in the nice conduct of wine, appeared with the cob-webbed bottle, white splash uppermost, tenderly tilted in unshaking hands. Trivett took it from her reverently while she sought corkscrew and napkin and glasses, and when she placed the napkin pad on the table, and Trivett took the corkscrew, Fenmarch, with the air of one participating in a holy rite, laid both hands on the sacred bottle and watched the extraction of the cork as one who awaits the manifestation of the god. The brows of both men were bent, and they held their breaths. Then the cork came out clear and true, and the broad red face of Trivett was irradiated by an all-pervading smile. It faded into an instant's seriousness while he smelled the

cork—it reappeared triumphant as he held the corkscrew, with cork impaled, beneath the nostrils of Fenmarch. Fenmarch sniffed and smiled and bowed.

"Olivia, my dear——" said Trivett with a gesture.

Olivia, understanding, held the wine-glasses. The wine flowed clear, gold dissolved in rubies—is there a colour on earth like the colour of old port?

"Stop! Only a sip for me," she laughed.

"Nonsense. It was only for the sake of her health that we let her open it—eh, Fenmarch?"

But Fenmarch, eager on the pouring, cried:

"Don't move your glass, for God's sake, Olivia. You'll waste it."

But Trivett, with a false air of chivalry, let her off with half a glass. Fenmarch refolded the napkin, so as to give the temporarily abandoned bottle a higher tilt. The two men smelled the wine. For the first time since the awful night of disillusion, Olivia felt happy. These old dears! It was like stuffing greedy children with chocolates.

The two elderly gentlemen raised their glasses and bowed to her. Then sipped.

"Ah!" said Fenmarch.

"H'm," said Trivett, with the knitted brow of puzzlement.

Then, suddenly the grey, badgery little man who had never been known to laugh violently, gave Olivia the shock of her life. He thrust his chair from the table and smacked his thigh and exploded in a high-pitched cackle of hilarity.

"He can't taste it! He's been drinking whisky! He has paralysed his palate. I've been waiting for it!" He beat the air with his hands. "Oh Lord! That's good!"

Trivett's fat jowl fell.

"——" he gasped, regardless of Olivia. "So I have."

"Moral——" cried the delighted Fenmarch. "Never try to steal a march on your wife—it doesn't pay, my boy. It doesn't pay."

And he inhaled the aroma of the Heaven-given wine, and drank with the serenity of the man who has never offended the high gods.

Olivia, anxious to console, said to Mr. Trivett:

"I'll send you some round to-morrow."

Trivett spread out his great arms.

"My dear, it'll have to settle. If moved, it won't be fit to drink for a couple of months."

Eventually he reconciled himself to the loss of the subtler shades of flavour, and he shared with Fenmarch the drinkable remainder of the carefully handled bottle.

But it was not for this genial orgy that Olivia had convened the meeting.

“I owe you two dears an apology,” she said.

They protested. An impossibility.

“I do,” she asserted. “The last time you were here, you gave me good advice, which I rejected, like a little fool. I insisted on going up to London with all my money tied up in a bundle, to seek my fortune.”

“Well, my dear,” said Trivett, “haven’t you found it?”

She looked from one to the other, and their wine-cheered faces grew serious as she slowly shook her head.

“I want to tell you something in confidence. It mustn’t get round the town—at any rate, not yet. My husband and I aren’t going to live together any more.”

“God bless my soul!” said Fenmarch.

“So,” she continued, “I’m where I was when I left you. And I don’t want any more adventures. And if you’d take back my bag of gold—there isn’t so much in it now—and advise me what to do with it, I should be very grateful.”

It had cost her some sacrifice of pride to make this little speech. She had rehearsed it; put it off and off during the pleasant wine-drinking. She had flouted them once for two unimaginative ancients, and now dreaded, the possible grudge they might have against her. “If you had only listened to us,” they might say, with ill-concealed triumph. If they had done so, she would have accepted it as punishment for her overbearing conceit and for her snobbery. But they received her news with a consternation so affectionate and so genuine that her eyes filled with tears.

“You won’t ask me why,” she said. “It’s a complicated story—and painful. But it has nothing whatever to do with—with things people are divorced for. I should like you to understand that.”

“Then surely,” said the old lawyer, “as the usual barrier to a reconciliation doesn’t exist, there may still be hopes——”

“None,” said Olivia. “My husband has done the right thing. He has gone away—abroad—for ever, and has made it impossible for me to find out his address.”

“My dear,” said Mr. Trivett, his red face growing redder, “I don’t want to know none of your private affairs—” he lost hold of grammar sometimes when deeply moved “—it’s enough for me that you’re in trouble. I’ve known you

ever since you were born, and I loved your father, who was the honestest man God ever made." He stretched out his great, sunglazed hand. "And so, if old Luke Trivett's any good to you, my dear, you can count on him as long as he's this side of the daisies."

"And I'm your good friend, too," said Mr. Fenmarch in his dustiest manner.

When they had gone, Olivia sat for a long while alone in the dining-room. And she felt as though she had returned to the strong and dear realities of life after a feverish wandering among shadows.

CHAPTER XXI

AFTER this, Olivia took up her life, as she thought, in firm hands. She had made her reparation to her old friends. She joined the family party of the Trivetts at dinner, and mixed with the "homely folk" that assembled around old John Freke's tea table. She lived in a glow of contrition for past snobberies. The vague story of her separation from Triona which she had told to the two old men not sufficing Medlow curiosity, she told what she believed to be the truth.

"My husband has gone to Poland to fight against the Russian Reds."

And thereby she gave the impression that the cause of the break up of her married life was the incurable adventurous spirit of her husband. The suggestion fitted in with the town's idea of the romance of her marriage and the legendary character of Alexis Triona, which had originally been inspired by the local bookseller eager to sell copies of Triona's books. She herself, therefore, became invested in a gossamer garment of mystery, which she wore with becoming grace. Her homecoming was a triumph.

As the days passed and brought no news of Alexis, she grew convinced of the honesty of his last letter. His real achievements in the past confirmed her conviction. He was the born adventurer. It was like him to have sought the only field of mad action open at that hour of frantically guarded peace. He had gone to Poland. In her heart she rejoiced. She saw him striving to burn a past record and rise, Phœnix-like, from its ashes.

"If he came back a Polish General, all over stars and glory," said Myra, during one of their increasingly intimate conversations, "would you take up with him again?"

Olivia reddened. "I should be glad for his sake."

"I don't see that you're answering my question," said Myra.

"I've told you once and for all," flashed Olivia, "that I'll have nothing more to do with him as long as I live."

She meant it with all that she knew of her soul. His fraud was unforgivable; his perfect recognition of it constituted his only merit. In Poland, doing wild things, he was a picturesque and tolerable personage. In her immediate neighbourhood, he became once again a repellent figure. As far as she could, she blotted him out of her thoughts.

The threat of exposure at the hands of Onslow and Wedderburn still hung over her head. The disgrace of it would react on her innocent self. The laughter

of the Lydian galley rang in her ears. She guessed the cynical gossip of the newer London world. That was hateful enough. She need never return to either. But it would follow her to Medlow. She would be pitied by the Trivetts and the Frekes, and the parents of the present generation of Landsdowne House. They would wonder why, in the face of the revelations, she still called herself "Mrs. Triona." To spring her plain Mrs. Briggs-dom on Medlow she had not the courage.

She took counsel with Blaise Olifant. In his soldier-scholar protecting way he seemed a rock of refuge. He said:

"Write to them through Rowington and ask them to hold their hands until you can put them into communication with your husband, which you give your word of honour to do as soon as you learn his address."

She did so. The bargain was accepted. When she received Rowington's letter, she danced into Olifant's study, and, sitting on the corner of his table, flourished it in his face.

"Oh, the relief of it! I feel ten years younger. I was on the verge of becoming an old woman. Now it will never come out."

Olifant leaned back in his chair and looked at her wistfully. A faint flush coloured her cheeks, and her eyes were lit with the gladness of hundreds of days ago. Her lips were parted, showing the white, girlish teeth. Sitting there, vividly alive, in the intimate attitude, smiling on him, she was infinitely desirable.

"No," said he. "It will never come out."

A cloud passed over her face. "Still, one never knows——"

"I have faith in Alexis," said he. "He's a man of his word."

"I think you're the loyalest creature that ever lived."

He raised a deprecating hand. "I would I were," said he.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked pleasantly.

"If I were," said he, his nose seeming to lengthen over the wry smile of his lips, "if I were, I would go out into the world and not rest till I brought him back to you."

She slid to her feet. "With a barber's basin for a helmet, and the rest of the equipment. If you did such an idiot thing, I should hate you. Don't you understand that he has gone out of my life altogether?"

"Life is a long, long time to look forward to, for a woman so young as yourself."

"You mean, I might fall in love with somebody else, and there would be

horrid complications?" She laughed in the cocksureness of youth. "Oh, no, my dear Blaise. Once bitten, twice shy. Three times, four times, all the multiplication table times shy."

Though impelled by primitive instinct, he could not press her further. He found himself in a position of poignant absurdity, compensated by the sweetness of their daily companionship. Sometimes he wondered how it could be that an awakened woman like Olivia could remain in calm ignorance of his love. Yet she gave never a sign of knowledge. She accepted friendship with full hands and gave it with full heart. Beyond that—nothing. From his sensitive point of view, it was all for the best. If, like a lean spider, he sat down beside her and talked of love, he would indubitably frighten Miss Muffet away from Medlow. Further, she would hold him in detestation for intentions which, in the queer circumstances, had no chance of being what the world calls honourable. He therefore put up with what he could get. The proclamation of her eternal man-shyness sounded like her final word on her future existence. So he came back to Rowington.

"I'm glad that's all settled," said he. "Now you can take up the threads of life again."

"What do you think I can make of them?" she asked.

"I can't sit here idle all my life—not here, at 'The Towers,' " she laughed, "for I'm not going to inflict myself on you for a lifetime—but here, in the world."

He had no practical suggestion to make; but he spoke from the sincerity of his tradition.

"A woman like you fulfils her destiny by being her best self."

"But being good is scarcely an occupation."

He smiled. "I give it up, my dear. If you like, I can teach you geology ____"

She laughed. Geology had to do with dead things. She cared not a hang for the past. She wanted to forget it. The epoch of the dynosaurus and the period of the past year were, save for a few hundreds of centuries, contemporaneous. No past, thank you. The present and the future for her. The present was mere lotus-eating; delightful, but demoralising. It was the future that mattered.

"If only you were an astrologer, and could bind me apprentice," she said. "No," she added after a pause. "There's nothing for it. I must do something. I think I'll go in for Infant Welfare and breed bull-dogs."

She watched him as he laboriously stuffed his pipe with his one hand by means of a little winch fixed to the refectory table and lit it by a match struck

on a heavy mat stand; refraining from helping him, although all the woman in her longed to do so, for she knew his foibles. The very first time he had entered the house, he had refused her offer of help with his Burberry. He needed a woman to look after him; not a sister; not a landlady-lodger friend; a wife, in fact, whose arm and hand he would accept unquestionably, in lieu of his own. A great pity sprung in her heart. Why had no woman claimed him—a man stainless in honour, exquisite in thought, loyal of heart, and—not the least qualification for the perfect gentle knight in a woman's eyes—soldier-like in bearing? There was something missing. That was all the answer she could give herself. Something intangible. Something magnetic, possessed by the liar and scamp who had been her husband. She could live with Blaise Olifant for a hundred years in perfect amity, in perfect sympathy . . . but with never a thrill.

She knew well enough the basis of sentiment underlying his friendship. If she were free to marry, he would declare himself in his restrained and dignified way. But with the barrier of the living Alexis between them, she laughed at the possibility of such a declaration. And yet, her inward laughter was tinged with bitterness. What kind of a man was it, who, loving a woman, did not catch her round the waist and swing her on his horse and ride away with her? Of course, she herself would have something to say in the matter. She would fight tooth and nail. She would fling the ravisher to Kingdom Come. But still her sex would have the gratification of being madly desired.

In some such confused way, she thought; the horror of Mavenna, and the romantic mastery of Alexis arising in comparison and contrast. To say nothing of Bobby Quinton. . . .

"I wonder how you can put up with me," she said when he had set his pipe comfortably going.

"Put up with you? What do you mean?"

"You and I are so different."

He had some glimmer of the things working behind her dark eyes.

"Do you still want adventures? Medlow is too dull for you?"

She felt guilty, and cried impulsively: "Oh, no, no. This is peace. This is Heaven. This is all I want."

And for a time she persuaded herself that it was so.

Then there came a day when the lilac and the laburnum were out in the garden behind the house, and the row of beeches screening it from the east wind were all a riot of tender green, and Olivia was sitting with a book in the noon sunshine; and the book lay unread on her lap, for her thoughts went back to a magical day of greenery in Richmond Park; an imperishable memory. Her eyes filled with tears. For a few moments, she had recaptured the lost Alexis in

that remembered hour of blue mist and mystery. And now, he was in Poland. Doing what?

The French window of Olifant's study opened, and he came down the gravelled path towards her, a letter in his hand. His face was serious. She rose to meet him.

"I don't know whether I ought to show you this—but, perhaps later you might blame me if I didn't."

She uttered a little cry which stuck in her throat.

"Alexis?"

"Yes."

The eagerness with which she grasped the letter brought a touch of pain into his eyes. Surely she loved the man still.

"I'm afraid it gives less than news of him," said he.

But, already reading the letter, she gave no heed to his words.

The letter was from Warsaw, and it ran:

> "SIR, "I was commissioned by my friend, Mr. John Briggs, to communicate with you should anything befall him. Now something must have befallen him, because he has failed to keep with me very definite engagements into which he had entered with the utmost good faith and enthusiasm. He was to start on his journey hither, to join the Polish service, on a certain day. He was furnished with railway tickets and passports; also, on the night before his departure, with a letter to friends in Prague where he was to await my coming, and with a letter to friends in Warsaw, in case political exigencies should delay my arrival in Prague. The Prague letter has not been delivered, nor has Mr. Briggs appeared in Warsaw. Nor have I received from him any explanatory communication. That he should have changed his mind at the last moment is incredible, as his more than zealous intentions cannot be questioned.
>
> This letter, therefore, has a double object; first to acquaint you with these facts: and secondly to beg you of your courtesy to give me any information you may possess as to the fate of one whom I learned to hold in affectionate esteem.
>
> Yours faithfully,
> "PAUL BORONOWSKI."

Olivia grew very pale. Her hand shook as she gave the letter back to Olifant.

“Something must have happened to him,” he said.

“What has always happened to him,” she replied bitterly. “He says one thing and does another. One more senseless extravagant lie.”

“He was obviously going to Poland,” said Olifant.

“But he never started!”

Olifant persisted: “How do you know?”

“What can one ever know about him except that truth has no meaning for him? If you suggest that he has perished by the way on a railway journey between here and Prague—” she laughed scornfully. “Really, my dear Blaise, you’re too good for this world. If you caught a man with his hand in your waistcoat pocket, and he told you he only wanted to see the time by your watch, you’d believe him! Haven’t I been through this before? All this elaborate preparation for missions abroad which never came off? Didn’t he leave you here to go off to Helsingfors, and John o’ Groats was the nearest to it he got?”

“Then where do you think he is now?”

“Anywhere, except in Poland. It was the last place he had any intention of going to.”

“He might have written you a false account of his movements,” Olifant argued, “but why should he have deceived this good Polish gentleman?”

“It’s his way,” she replied wearily. “Oh, don’t you see? He’s always acting to himself. He can’t help leading a fictitious life. I can guess the whole thing. He goes to this Mr. Boronowski—one of his stray Russo-Polish acquaintances—with the idea in his head of putting me off his scent. Poland still is romantic and a terribly long way off. He can’t do a thing simply. He must do it fantastically. It’s not enough that I should think he was going to Poland. Mr. Boronowski must think so, too. He throws his arms about, persuading himself and everybody else that he is a Paladin going to fight for the sacred cause of an oppressed nationality. When the thing’s done, and the letter to me written, the curtain comes down on the comedy, and Alexis takes off his war paint and starts off for Pernambuco—or Haverstock Hill.”

“I think you’re unjust, Olivia,” said Olifant.

“And I think you’re too good to be true,” she retorted angrily, and she left him and went down the garden path into the house.

In her room, her mother’s room, with the old rose curtains and Chippendale and water colours, she rang the bell. Myra appeared.

“You know so much already, Myra,” she said in her defiant way, “that I think you ought to know everything. I’ve just heard that Mr. Triona never went

to Poland."

"Indeed?" said Myra impassively. "Do you know where he is?"

"No. And I don't want to."

"I can't quite understand," said Myra.

"I wish you would take some interest in the matter."

"My interest is your interest. If you never want to see him again, what does it matter where he is? Perhaps you're afraid he'll come back to you?"

At the elder woman's suggestion, the fear gripped her with dreadful suddenness. There had not yet been time for thought of such a possibility. If he had lied about fighting for Polish freedom, what truth was there in his perfervid declaration of the severance of his life from hers? She had been right in her analysis of his character. The curtain down on whatever comedy he might be now enacting, he would present himself unexpectedly before her with specious explanations of the past, and another glittering scenario of illusion. And with his reappearance would come exposure. She had pledged her word to Rowington.

She seized Myra by the wrist. "Do you think he will?"

"You are afraid," said Myra.

"Yes. Dreadfully afraid."

"I don't think you need be," said Myra.

Olivia flung away. "You take his part, just like Major Olifant. Neither of you seem to understand." She turned. "Don't you see the horror of it?"

"I've seen lots of horrors in my time," replied Myra placidly. "But I shan't see this one. He's gone for good, dearie. You may be sure of that."

"I wish I could think so," said Olivia.

It was nearly lunch time. Myra went out and returned with a can of hot water.

"You'll not see him so long as I'm about to look after you," she remarked.

And Olivia laughed at the dragon of her childhood.

Some mornings afterwards, Myra came to her mistress.

"If it's convenient to you, I should like a few days' leave. I've had a letter."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" asked Olivia, whose thoughts flew to the madman in the County Asylum.

"I don't know," said Myra. "Can I go?"

"Of course," said Olivia.

So Myra packed her worn valise and left Medlow by the first available

train. But the Asylum was not her destination. The next day saw her seeking admittance to University College Hospital, London.

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN Triona after many dim day-dreams and relapses into nothingness, at last recovered consciousness, he found himself in a narrow sort of cubicle, staring upwards at a mile away ceiling. He was tightly bound, body and legs. He had a vague memory of a super-juggernaut of a thing killing him; therefore he sagely concluded that he was dead and this was the next world. It occurred to him that the next world had been singularly over-rated, being devoid of any interest for an intelligent being. Later, when the familiar figure of a nurse popped round the screen, he recognized, with some relief, the old universe. He was alive; but where he was, he had no notion.

Only gradually did he learn what had befallen him; that he had laid for weeks unconscious; that he had a broken thigh and crushed ribs; that most of the time he had hovered between life and death; that even now he was a very sick man who must lie quiet and do exactly what nurses and doctors told him. This sufficed for a time, while his brain still worked dully. But soon there came a morning when all the memories surged back. He questioned the nurse:

"When do you think I can start for Poland?"

"Perhaps in six months," she replied soothingly.

He groaned. "I want to go there now."

"What for?"

"To join the Polish Army."

She had nursed through the war, and knew that men in his plight were of no further use in armies. Gently she told him so. He stared uncomprehensively on an empty world.

"What can I do when I leave here?"

"You must have a long, long rest, and do nothing at all and think of nothing at all."

He tried to smile at the nurse's pleasant face. "You've done me a bad turn in bringing me back to life," said he.

When they thought him capable of grappling with his personal affairs, they brought him his bulging pocket-book, and bade him count his money. He laughed. It was quite safe. He handed back the roll of notes into the nurse's keeping. But the other contents of the case he looked at dismally: the passport, with the foreign visas; the railway tickets; the letters to Prague and Warsaw. What were the good of them now? He would never go to Poland. When he got

strong, all the fighting would be over. And when he did get strong, in a few months or a year, he would probably be lame, with odds and ends of organs gone wrong inside him. He tried to read the letters; but they were written in Polish—unintelligible now in spite of his strenuous short study of the language. They bore a signature which he could not decipher. But it was certainly not Boronowski. His mind soon tired of the puzzle. What was the good of keeping the letters? Drearily he tore them in pieces and gave them to the nurse to dispose of, when she brought him a meal.

Tired with the effort he slept. He awoke to a sense of something final done, or something important left undone. As his brain cleared, he realized that subconsciously he had been thinking of his duty to Boronowski. Of course, he must be informed at once of the reason for his defection.

And then dismay overwhelmed him. He had no address to Boronowski. The only channels of communication with him, the Prague and Warsaw letters, he had destroyed. A happy idea struck him. He toyed with it for what seemed interminable hours until the nurse came to his bedside. He called for writing materials, which were smilingly denied him. He was too weak. But the nurse would write a short letter from dictation. He dictated two identical letters, one to the Polish Legation, one to the Polish Consulate, asking for the address of Mr. Paul Boronowski, late of 21 Hillditch Street, St. Pancras. By return of post came polite replies from Legation and Consulate. Both disclaimed any knowledge of the identity of Mr. Paul Boronowski. Legation and Consulate were blandly ignorant of the existence of their confidential agents. Then he remembered the baffling signature to the two letters. He laughed somewhat bitterly. His life seemed to be involved in a tangle of false names.

After all, what did it matter? But it did matter, vitally. If ever he had set his soul on a true thing, he had set it on keeping faith with Boronowski. And Boronowski like the rest of the world would set him down as an impostor. In his desperate physical weakness the tears rolled down his cheeks; and so the nurse found him, with one of the letters clutched in his thin hand.

“My only friend in the world,” said he.

“Dead?” asked the nurse.

“No. Lost.”

He gave her the letter.

“Surely you have at least one more,” she said. “In fact I have written to her to tell her of your recovery.”

“*Her?*” He looked at the nurse out of ghastly eyes.

“Miss Myra Stebbings.”

"Oh, my God!" said he, and fainted.

Whereat the nurse, anxious to bring him comforting tidings was exceedingly troubled. The shock put him back for two or three days. He grew light-headed, and raved about a woman called Olivia, and about all sorts of strange and incomprehensible things. When he regained his senses it was an awakening to a life of even more terrifying consternation than before. Myra, he learned, had called daily at the hospital—to be denied access to him till he should be in a fit state to receive her. The nurse told him of her first visit the morning after the accident and of the newspaper paragraph which she had chanced to read. But if Myra knew, surely Olivia knew. And Olivia, knowing him to have been for weeks at death's door, had treated him, as though he had already passed through that door to the other side. Horror gripped him. He questioned the nurse. This Miss Stebbings, had she left no message? No, she was a woman of few words. She had said, in an unemotional way: "I'll come in again to-morrow."

"For God's sake don't let her see me," he cried.

But after a while he countermanded the request. He would learn the worst, and meet steadily the supreme punishment, the tale of Olivia's implacable hatred. There were degrees in a woman's scorn. Much he knew he had justly incurred; but his sick frame shuddered at this maximum of contempt and loathing. Ill-conditioned dog he avowed himself; yet to let him die, for aught she knew, like a dog, without sign or word of interest . . . it transcended thought.

"Are you sure there has been no other lady? Not a letter of enquiry? Nothing?"

"You'll make yourself bad again, if you worry like that," said the nurse.

"I wish to God I could," said he; "and that would be the end of it all."

In a large ward of a London hospital, nurses have not much time to devote to the sick fancies of patients. More than enough for them were their physical needs. The crumb of kindly commonplace was all that the nurse could give to the man's hungering soul. He passed the day, staring up at the mile-high ceiling, incurious as to what vista of misery lay beyond the still remaining American-cloth covered screen.

From the shaft of fierce sunshine on the wall to his right, he gathered that spring had passed into early summer. The outside world was a-riot in the new life of wild flowers and trees and birds and human hopes and loves. Outside that prison of his—a whitewashed wall, a screen, a window behind his head reaching sky-high—spread this world with whose pulsations his heart had ever throbbed in unison. God! How he had loved it! Every leaf, every crested wave,

every patch of sand, every stretch of heat, every rusty horse grazing on a common, every child before a cottage door, every vibrating sound or sight of great cities, every waste in regions of grand desolation, every man with sinews or with purpose in his eyes, every woman parading the mystery of her sex, from the tow-haired, dirt-encrusted goose-girl of a Russian village to the wonder of ever inscrutable wonders that was Olivia.

In all his dreams he inevitably came back to Olivia. Indeed she was the centripetal force of his longings. All that earth held of the rustle of leaves and the murmur of waters, the magic of dawn and the roar of town multitudes and the laughter of green forests and the silence of frozen steppes, were incorporated in the woman of his adoration. Through her spoke the voices of the infinite universe. And all that was visible of it, the patch of sunlight on the whitewashed wall, said:

"She lives and I, a reflected glory of her, live too; but even if you go hence I shall only appear mockingly before you, on prison walls, until you are dead. And you will never find me on the blue seas or the joyous roads or the stone-bounded, clattering haunts of mankind, other than a meaningless mirage, because the inspired meaning of it all which is Olivia, has passed from you for evermore."

"Damn you," said he, and turned away his head, for he could not turn his plaster of Paris encased body, and shut out the white line from his burning eyes.

The next morning Myra came. He had been prepared for her visit. She sat on the cane-bottomed chair by his bedside. As soon as the nurse left them together:

"I'm glad you are better, Sir," she said.

"Have you brought me any message from Mrs. Triona?" he asked.

She looked at him steadily. "You don't suppose Mrs. Triona knows you are here?"

It was some time before he could appreciate the meaning of her words.

"She thinks I'm in Poland?"

"She doesn't know you are here," said Myra truthfully. "She doesn't know where you are."

"Or care?"

"Or care," said Myra, and her tone was flat like that of a Fate.

For a while he was silent, accepting the finality of Myra's words.

"You've left her in ignorance of my accident?"

“Yes,” said Myra. “Haven’t you done the same since you’ve recovered your wits?”

Her dry logic was unanswerable. Yet a man does not expect logic from an elderly waiting-woman. He passed a hand over his eyes and held it there for a long time, while Myra sat patient and unemotional. He understood nothing of her motives. For the moment he did not seek to understand them. One fact alone mattered. Olivia did not know. She had not, with horrible contempt, left him to die like a dog. By the thought of such a possibility he had wronged her. She might, with every reason, desire never to set eyes on him again—but of active cruelty he should have known her incapable.

Presently he withdrew his hand and turned to Myra. “My head’s not altogether right yet,” he said half-apologetically.

“I can quite believe it,” said Myra.

“Why you should bother with me, I don’t understand,” he said.

“Neither do I,” she replied in her disconcerting way. “If you had died I shouldn’t have been sorry. For her sake. Now you’re not going to die, I’m glad. For yours.”

“Thank you,” said he with a note of irony. And then after a pause:

“How is your mistress?”

“She is quite well, sir.”

“And happy?”

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said Myra stiffly, “but I’ve not come here to be asked questions. I’ve no intention of your using me as a go-between.”

“It never entered my head,” he declared.

“It might,” said Myra. “So I give you warning. Whatever go-between-ing I do will be to keep you apart from Mrs. Triona.”

“Then why are you worrying about me?” he asked.

“Because I’ve found you in affliction and I’m a Christian woman.”

Neither of them understood the other. He said suddenly with a flash of the old fire:

“Will you swear you’ll never tell your mistress where I am?”

A faint light flickered in her pale eyes. “I’ll swear if you like. But haven’t you taken in what I’ve been telling you all the time?”

“So long as we can trust each other—that is all that matters.”

“You can trust me all right,” said Myra.

They talked the ground over again for a while longer. Then he grew tired

with the strain, and the nurse put an end to the interview. But Myra came the next day and the day after that, and Triona grew to long for her visit. He became aware of a crabbed kindness in her attitude towards him side by side with her jealous love for Olivia. She was anxious for his welfare within grimly prescribed limitations. His immediate future concerned her. What did he purpose to do with his invalid-dom after his discharge from the hospital? He himself, at this stage, had no notion. He confided to her the despair of his active life. The motor-lorry had wrecked his hopes of salvation. He told her the whole Boronowski story. Myra nodded; but faithful to the part she had chosen, she said nothing of Boronowski's letter to Major Olifant. Only by keeping the lives of the ill-fated pair in tightly sealed and non-communicable compartments, could she be true to an ethical code formulated by many definite sorrows and many vague, but none the less poignant, spiritual conflicts.

"It's funny," said he, "that you're the only human being I should know in the world."

Her intuition skipped the gap of demonstration of so extraordinary a pronouncement, and followed his flight into the Unknown.

"It might be luck for you," she said.

He smiled wistfully on her.

"Why?"

He hung on her answer which she took some time to give. In the lines on the pallid face, in the dull blue eyes of this sphinx-like woman so correct in her negative attire of black coat and skirt and black hat with just a redeeming touch of white, and on the thin, compressed lips, his sick man's brain seemed to read his destiny. She hovered over him, impressive, baffling, ever about-to-be oracular. Combined with her mystery existed the strange fact that she was his sole link with the world, not only the great humming universe of thought and action, but the inner spiritual world in which Olivia reigned. He regarded her with superstitious dread and reverence; conscious all the time of the comedy of so regarding the woman whose duty had been to fold up his trousers and set out his underclothes on the hot rail of the bathroom.

"What are you going to do when you leave?" she asked, and he guessed a purpose behind her question.

"I must hide until I am strong enough to take up active life again."

"Where will you hide?"

He didn't know. He had not thought—so remote did the date of his discharge appear. It must be some secluded, man-forgotten spot.

“If the worst comes to the worst and you need a place where you’ll be looked after, I’ll give you an address of friends of mine,” said Myra. “You’ll, maybe, spend the rest of your life on crutches, and have all sorts of things wrong inside you. I shouldn’t like you to feel I was abandoning you. If you were broken down and needed help, I suppose you wouldn’t write to me, would you?”

“I most certainly shouldn’t,” said Triona.

“I thought so,” said Myra. “In that case I’d better give you the address.” She scribbled it on the writing pad by his bedside. “There. Take it or leave it. It’s the best I can do.”

She left him with an abrupt “Good day, sir,” and took the next train back to Medlow.

“You haven’t had a long holiday, Myra,” Olivia remarked when she arrived.

“I didn’t say I was going on a holiday.”

“I hope things were all right.”

“As right as they ever can be,” replied Myra.

The weary weeks of convalescence dragged themselves out. Myra did not come again; and of course he had no other visitor. He made casual acquaintances in the ward; here and there an ex-soldier with whom he could exchange reminiscences of warfare.

Once a discharged sailor in the next bed—the screen had long since been removed—recovering from an operation, spoke to him of mine-sweeping days, and perils of storm and submarine and he grew to regard him as a brother. Both regretted the deluging waters of the North Sea. The sailor in these times of peace drove a dust cart for the St. Pancras Borough Council. The wages were good—but what a life for a sea-faring man! He would have stuck to his old job were it not that a wave had washed him down on the slithery deck and had brought his knee-cap up against a stanchion and had stiffened it out so that his career on board-ship was over. But those were good times, weren’t they? Oh yes. Of course they groused. But they only groused when they had time. Mostly they hadn’t. Dust-collecting was an open-air life, true enough; but there was a difference between the smell of brine and the stench of house refuse. It was in summer that it made him sick. The odours of the fo’c’sle were not those of a hairdresser’s shop—nothing smelt so fine, he declared, as a hairdresser’s shop—they were a bit thick, but a man could go on deck and fill his lungs with good salt air. And the grub! What an appetite! He conjured up gargantuan meals in perilous tempests. Nothing of the sort now. Everything he ate tasted of sour potato peelings.

“That’s the taste of everything in these post-war days,” said Triona, “everything in life—sour potato peelings.”

The dustman reckoned he was right. In those old days of mine-sweeping, a man had no anxieties. He had no responsibilities. He was happy as the day was long. Now he was married and already had a couple of kids. Life was just one wearisome worry, a continuous accumulation on the debit side of the slate, with few advantages on the credit side to balance. If it wasn’t the wife it was the boy; if it wasn’t the boy, it was the baby; and if it wasn’t them, it was his appendix which had just been removed. Whoever heard of a sailor-man aboard ship getting appendicitis? No, all them things, said he, were blessings of peace. Besides, how was he going to feed his family when they grew older? And clothes, boots, schooling? And he himself—limited to beer—and such beer! He hadn’t tasted a drop of rum——. Was there anything like it? Sometimes he saw it and smelt it in his dreams, but he always woke up before he could put his lips to the pannikin. If only one could get something to hold on to in dreams. He never had need to dream of rum in the navy. So much for peace. Give him the good old war again.

And when his wife, a thin lipped, scraggy blonde, with a moth-eaten fur stole round her neck (although it was sweltering summer), and a pallid baby in her arms came to visit him, and spoke querulously of domestic affairs, Triona gave him his unreserved sympathy.

“And it ain’t,” said the ex-mariner, “as if I couldn’t carry on straight and proper in civil life. I wonder how many of my mates are getting what I’m getting. She ought to be proud of me, she ought. Instead of that—you heard what she said?”

Triona had heard. She had upbraided him for his ungenteel occupation, considering herself, the daughter (so Triona learned) of a small sweet-stuff monger in Dover, where they had met during his sea-going days, socially degraded by her marriage with a municipal collector of dust. She had married him, by the by, before his present appointment, while he was drawing out-of-work pay. Apparently he was possessed of some low-comedy histrionic talent, and she was convinced that he could make his fortune as a cinema star.

“You married?” he asked.

“Not now,” said Triona.

“You’ve been through it,” said the misogynist. “Women! There never was a woman who knew when she was well off! Oh, Gawd! Give me the old days on the *Barracouta*, where there wasn’t any thought of women. That was my last ship. I had nine months in her. There was *Barracouta*, *Annie Sandys*, *Seahorse*. . . .”

He ran through the names of his squadron, forgetful, in the sudden flush of reminiscence, of domestic cares.

"And what did you say you were in?"

"*Vestris.*"

"Of course. I remember. Torpedoed. But even that was better than this?"

Triona agreed, and the eternal talk of the sea went on, until the nostalgia for the wide, free spaces of the world gripped his vitals with the pains of hunger.

"What are you going to do when you come out?" asked the dustman.

"About the same as you," replied Triona. "What's the good of a man with a game leg?"

The dustman sighed. "You've got education," said he.

At first, aware of accent and manner of expression, the dustman had taken him for an ex-officer. Only the discharge-papers of John Briggs, able-seaman, convinced him of John Briggs lowly estate. Still, in the *Barracouta* they had an elderly stoker who had been at Cambridge College. Such a man might be his neighbour.

"I ran away to sea when I was a boy," said Triona.

So had the dustman. He waxed more confidential. His name was Josh Bunnings, and he had sailed in every conceivable kind of craft from Alaska to Singapore. But he had found no time for education. How did his neighbour acquire it? Books? He shook his head. He had been cured of books on his first voyage, when the second mate catching him reading a tattered manual on gardening, when he ought to have been washing up in the galley, had kicked and cuffed him round the deck. Triona's mind went back to his boyhood—to an almost identical incident. There was much in common between himself and Josh Bunnings. They had started on even terms. They had met on even terms in the foul fo'c'sles on the North Sea. They were on even terms, now, lying side by side, lamed, their life of free adventure a thing of the past. Each dreaded the future; Josh Bunnings condemned to cart refuse beneath the affected nose of a shrew of a wife for the remainder of his days; he, Triona, to deal with such refuse as the world would leave him, but away from the wife who abhorred him and all his works. On the other hand, between him and Josh Bunnings lay a great gulf. He had made himself a man of wide culture. Josh Bunnings had remained abysmally ignorant. But Josh Bunnings had lived his life an honourable man. If he told his story to Josh Bunnings he would be condemned by him, even as he had been condemned by his sister on the morning of his mother's funeral. So, when the dustman, with another sigh, harked back to his former idea and said:

"If only I had education."

"You're a damned sight better man than I am, without it," Triona replied bitterly.

When the three weeks' comradeship came to an end, on the discharge of Josh Bunnings, he found himself lost again in a friendless world. The neighbouring familiar bed was occupied by an ancient man in the throes of some ghastly malady, and around him was stretched the horrible, death-suggesting screen. And behind the screen, a week later, the old man died. It was to relieve the nervous tension of this week that he began a correspondence with Josh Bunnings. The writing man's instinct awoke—the mania of self-expression. His letters to the dustman, full of the atmosphere of the ward, vivid with lightning sketches of house-surgeons, sisters, nurses and patients, with here and there excursions into contrasting tempests, storms of battle, and everywhere touched with the magic of his queer genius, would, if sent to his literary agents, have gained him a year's subsistence.

Josh Bunnings visited him occasionally, when freed from municipal, and escaped from domestic, obligations. The visits, he explained, were in return for the letters; for being no scholar, he could not reply. Then one day he appeared and sat on the chair by Triona's bed, with the air of a man about to bring glad tidings. He was rather a heavy, pallid, clean-shaven man, with a curl of black hair sweeping down to his eyebrows. His small dark eyes gleamed. At once he disemburdened his honest soul. He was a Church of England man; always held with church-going—so did his wife; it was the great bond of union between them. So he was on friendly terms with the curate of St. Simon's. And being on friendly terms with the curate, he had shewn him the letters.

"And, would you believe it, mate?" said he. "Would you believe it? He wants to put them in print in the Parish Magazine. In print! Fancy!"

He slapped his thigh. Triona stared at him for a moment and then laughed out loud for the first time for many weeks.

"What are you laughing at?" asked the astonished Bunnings.

"It seems so funny," said Triona.

"That's what I thought."

"And a great honour," said Triona recovering.

"Of course. Only he said he couldn't print 'em without your permission."

Triona gave permission, stipulating, however, that his name should not be used. His modesty forbade it he explained. Josh Bunnings went away delighted. In the course of a few posts came a grateful letter from the curate. In Mr. Briggs's writing he saw signs of considerable literary talent which he

hoped Mr. Briggs would cultivate. If he could be of help in this way, he put his services at Mr. Briggs's disposal. Triona again laughed, with grim amusement, at a funny, ironical world.

Then, suddenly, the underlying tragedy of this comic interlude smote him breathless. Alexis Triona was dead and so were his writings, for evermore. But the impulse to write stirred within him so vehemently that even in these idle letters to Josh Bunnings he had put all his vividness of literary expression. The curate's dim recognition of the unusual was a sign and a token. Whatever he wrote would be stamped with his individuality and if published, even anonymously, would lead to his identification. The arresting quality of his style had been a main factor in his success. This flashing pictorial way of his he could not change. If he strove self-consciously to write sober prose, he would produce dull, uninspired stuff that no man could read; if he lost self-consciousness, automatically he would betray himself. He would re-appear in the Olivia-dominated world. Every book or article would dance before her eyes like an *ignis fatuus*, reminding her maddeningly of his existence in her propinquity.

An *ignis fatuus*. At this point of his reflection he remembered his first talk with her, wherein he had counselled her never to lose faith in her Will-o'-the-Wisp, but to compel it to be her guiding star. More ironical laughter from the high gods! And yet, why not? He wrestled with the temptation. As he lay, convalescent on his back, his brain clear, the sap of youth working in his veins, the uncontrolled fancies of the imaginative writer wove themselves into shreds of fine romance and tapestries of exquisite scenes. Just a little concentration, impossible in the open hospital ward, and all these would blend together into a thing of immortal beauty. He would find a publisher. Nothing easier. No name would appear. Or else, perhaps, as a handle for convenience sake, he would sign the book "Incognito." It would stir the hearts of men, and they would say: "There is but one man living who could do this and that is Alexis Triona." And Olivia, reading it, and beholding him in it, would find her heart stirred with the rest, yet far far more deeply than the rest, and would seek him out, obeying his far-off counsel, and believe that, in his essential self and in his infinite love, he was verily her guiding-star.

But when the hour of exaltation had passed and given way to the dreary commonplace, when the nurse came to wash him like a child, or to chatter pleasantly of the outside world, the revue which she had seen on her free afternoon, or the sentimental novel which had beguiled her scanty leisure, he knew that he had been living in a land of dreams. His real achievement Olivia knew, and by it she was unmoved. Myra had held out to him no chance of hope; only certainty of despair. By no further achievement could Olivia be

persuaded. She realized her Will-o'-the-Wisp as what it really was, a miasmatic gas leading her into quagmires. She would bitterly resent his reappearance. It would be another trick, another way of flaunting before her under false pretences. As well write to her now that he was a mangled wreck in University College Hospital.

In the course of time he was able to leave his bed and be wheeled about the ward and afterwards to hobble about on a crutch. But the injured leg was just a bit shorter than the other, so that he was condemned to a perpetual limp; and though the ribs were mended, yet their breakage had occasioned internal lesions which would have to be watched for the rest of his life. No more adventures in wide spaces. No more tramps to John o' Groats.

"But I'm a born wanderer," he cried to the surgeon who made the final pronouncement. "What shall I do when the wander fever is on me?"

"Fill yourself up with bromide and stick leeches on your head."

He laughed into the smiling kindly face, and was silent for a moment.

"I can drive a car, I suppose?" he said after a while.

"Safer to drive a horse. You haven't to crank it up."

"So I'm going out, a hopeless crock."

"Oh no. There's no reason why you shouldn't live, with reasonable care, to ninety. You're fit for light work. Why not office work? An educated chap like you——By the way, you were off to Poland, if I remember rightly, when you met with your accident. What's your trade or profession?"

"Before the war, I was a cosmopolitan chauffeur," said Triona.

"And since?"

"The damnedest fool God ever made."

The surgeon asked him no more questions.

CHAPTER XXIII

FANSTEAD is a little country town built on the plan of a sparsely equipped herring bone. There is the central High Street, a jumble of old half-timbered houses and staring modern red-brick buildings, and sprouted from it a series of lateral roads, lanes and alleys, dwindling in importance to the High Street tip, and each petering out into the sweet country vagueness of hedges and fields. All save two. One of these ends abruptly at an inconveniently distant railway station. The other, villa bordered, meanders pleasantly for a mile or so to the tiny village of Pendish where it meets at right angles the great high road, and stops modestly, confronted all of a sudden with rolling open country, swelling downs patched with meadow and corn-field and crowned with great clumps of woodland.

Pendish was too small even to have a church. There was a tiny chapel for the convenience of Baptists. But Anglicans tramped into Fanstead or to the larger village of Banton-on-the-Hill, another mile along the great high road. It had a tumbled-down inn, the “Whip and Collar,” and a straggling row of thatched cottages, and a tiny red-brick villa labelled as the home of the County Police. But it also had a post-office, which was also a shop; and this was a small, square two-storied Georgian house imposing among its thatched neighbours and maintaining itself with a curious air of dignity, in spite of the front door open to the public during business hours, and the miscellaneous assortment of sweets, tobacco, tapes and picture postcards exposed in what was once the dining-room window.

It was the freehold of Mrs. Pettiland, a widow of fifty; she had inherited it from her father, a Norfolk thatcher who had brought his mystery to the west and practising it with skill and saving a little fortune brought to him by his wife, had amassed enough to buy the square stone house where he had ended his days. They said in the village that he had never recovered from the shock occasioned by the fate of his son, his apprentice and later his partner, who had gone raving mad a week or two after his marriage and had to be confined in the County Asylum.

Well, the old man had slept with his fathers for many years; his wife had joined him; the son still lingered on in the madhouse; and Mrs. Pettiland, very much alone in the world, save for her husband’s relatives in Fanstead, sold stamps and sweets to the village, and as a very great favour let the best bedroom to an occasional painter with unimpeachable introductions.

She was dark-haired, fresh-coloured, and buxom; she dressed with

neatness, wearing old-fashioned stays that gave her a waist and a high bust; and she was the most considerable personage in Pendish.

When she had received a letter from her sister-in-law, Myra Stebbings, asking her as a favour to put up a foolish young man named Briggs who had got himself run over by a motor-lorry, if ever he should act on her suggestion and come to Pendish, she considered it less as an introduction than as a command. Whether she loved Myra or not, she did not know. But she had an immense respect for the dry, grey-faced woman who had come every year to stay with her, so that she could visit the brother whom she had loved, in the house of awfulness, five or six miles away. She stood somewhat in awe of Myra. Her own good man had died comfortably in his bed and had gone for ever, after a couple of years of placid content. It was sad; but it was the common lot. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. But at the idea of a woman's husband being shut off from the world in the living tomb of the County Asylum, she shuddered. Myra always conveyed to her the vague impression, so impossible to be formulated by an uneducated woman ignorant of traditional reference, of a human soul defying the tragedy of existence.

So when this Mr. Briggs wrote from the hospital in London, she sent him a cordial answer. Any friend of Myra Stebbings was more than welcome. She would not charge him more than out-of-pocket expenses. For she did not know who this foolish young man might be. Myra sphinx-like, as usual, had given no clue. But for Myra to ask a favour was an unprecedented occurrence. She must have far more than ordinary interest in the welfare of the young fellow. Mrs. Pettiland's curiosity was aroused and she awaited the arrival of her new lodger with impatience.

The station car from the Fanstead garage brought him, on a late summer afternoon, with his brown canvas kit-bag and suit-case and khaki overcoat. She stood in the pedimented doorway, over which was fixed the wooden post-office board, and watched him descend. He faced her for a moment, and raised his hat.

"Mrs. Pettiland?"

She looked at his clear cut face, so boyish in spite of whiteness and haggardness, at his careless brown hair sweeping over his temples, at the lips parted in a smile, at the lithe young figure. She caught the significance of his uplifted hat and the pleasant tone of his voice. In her limited category of values he would be only one thing—a gentleman. The manners of an instant charmed her.

"Mr. Briggs?"

"I hope I shan't be a dreadful nuisance to you, but I need rest and quiet and

Miss Stebbings told me to come. And," he smiled, "What she says generally goes."

"I see that you know her, sir," said Mrs. Pettiland pleasantly.

The luggage taken in, the cab dismissed she led him up to his room—a large bed-sitting room, looking over a wild garden and a wide expanse of rolling downs, with the faint white ribbon of high road circling in and out and round about them. His meals, she informed him, he could take in the parlour downstairs, without extra charge.

"But I insist on paying my way," he said. "Unless my staying here is profitable to you, I can't remain. For the present at least, I can well afford it."

So a modest arrangement was made and Triona settled down in his new home.

For some days he enjoyed the peace of Pendish. He had brought with him books, ordered from the hospital; books which would take him long to read; some of the interminable modern French novels; a complete Fielding and Smollett; *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene*, neither of which he had as yet had time to go through. He spent hours in the sunny garden riotous with ingenous roses and delphinium and Canterbury bells and burning red-hot pokers as they call them in the West. Often he limped along the green lanes that wound between the fields up and down the downs. Becoming aware that he knew nothing of bird-life, he procured through the Fanstead bookshop popular works on British Birds, and sitting under a tree in a corner of a meadow would strive to identify them by their song and plumage and queer individual habits. He talked to the villagers. He talked to Mrs. Pettiland, who told him the tragic story of Myra and the man in the County Asylum. Of Myra's doings all the year round, he found she knew little. She was with her lady whom she had served most of her life and had gone back with her to Medlow. Of the lady herself Myra never spoke. Mrs. Pettiland did not know whether the lady was married or not. That was Myra Stebbings's way. She gave no information and no one dared ask her questions.

"She never even told me, in her letter, who you were, sir," she added.

"I am just under her protection," he smiled. "She took me up when I had no one to defend me."

"She's a curious woman," sighed Mrs. Pettiland.

"With strange tastes in protégés." He laughed. "To tell you the truth, Mrs. Pettiland, I don't quite know myself what I am. But doubtless sooner or later I'll do something to astonish you."

The yearning to do this fretted his secret heart. To move about the summer fields when the weather was fine, to lounge in an easy-chair over books in

seasons of rain, was all very well for the period of convalescence after the confinement in the hospital ward. But after a while, when his muscles regained strength and the new blood coursing through his veins brought colour to his cheeks, he began to feel the old imperious need of movement and of action. Sometimes he went back, as in his talks with the dustman, to the idyllic tempests in the North Sea; sometimes to the fierce freedom of the speed across the illimitable steppes of Russia; sometimes to his perilous escape to Petrograd; sometimes to his tramps along the safe roads of England; to his wanderings through the dangerous by-ways of the East End. Bitterly he cursed the motor-lorry that had knocked him out of his Polish adventure. Except on Olivia he had never so set his heart on a thing before. Well, he shrugged angry shoulders. It was no use thinking of that. Poland had gone, like Olivia, out of his life. And when he came to think of it, so had everything that had made up all that he had known or conceived of life.

He closed *Tom Jones*, and stared out of the window on the rain-drenched hills; Tom Jones, with his physical lustiness, his strong animal bravura, was more than he could bear. Tom Jones, no matter in what circumstance he was placed, had all the world before him. His gay confidence offended the lost man. For he was lost. Not a lost soul, he told himself; that was taking an absurd Byronical view of the matter. To pose as a modern Manfred would be contemptible. He went down to bed-rock of commonplace. He was a lost man—a fact which was quite serious enough for any human being to contemplate with dismay. Lost, tied by a lame leg in a deadly little backwater of the world, where he must remain till he died. He could write, pour out all the fever of his soul into words. But what was the good, if no word of his could be transmitted from this backwater into the haunts of men? Work without hope—a verse of Coleridge came vaguely to him—was like draining nectar through a sieve. It could only end in heart-break. He stared through the dripping window-pane at the free hills, dim and hopeless in the mist of deluge. Nothingness confronted him.

He wondered whether Myra, with diabolical insight and deliberate malice, had not lured him hither, so that she could hold him in relentless grip. At any rate she had cast him into this prison.

He lay awake all that night. The next morning the sky had cleared and the sun shone down on the gratefully steaming land of green. He breakfasted in the tiny parlour opposite the shop-post-office on the ground floor. The ornaments in it were those of long ago. Prints of the landing of the Guards after the Crimea, of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort. Curiously carved and polished coconut shells, and a great egg on which a staring mermaid was

nudely painted stood on the mantelpiece. On the chiffonier were calabashes, with gaudy figures of indigenous Indians, such as came from the West Indies seventy years ago, and a model of a full-rigged ship under a glass case, and a moulting stuffed toucan, with its great beak and yellow and red plumage. The late Mr. Pettiland's father, he had learned, had followed the sea. So, beside the objects on the crowded mantelpiece and in front of palm-leaf fans were sprigs of white coral and strings of strange beads, and a dumpy, shapeless, wooden Polynesian god. And at the end lay a great conch shell with its wide, pink, curving lips, mysterious and alluring.

He could scarcely eat. The night had shaken him. He gulped down some food and coffee, lit a pipe and wandered restlessly about the room, looking at these tokens of the lands far away which he had never seen. The coral fascinated him. In the hospital he had read *Typee* and *Oomoo* of Herman Melville in Dent's cheap collection of classics. The sight of the coral quickened dormant longings. He took the great conch-shell in his hand wondering at its beauty of curve and colour. And as he did so his mind went back to early childhood—to an old aunt whom he occasionally was taken to visit in torturing Sunday clothes sacrosanct from the defilement of jam under dreadful penalties, and who possessed such a shell. He remembered that the shell was the glory that compensated the frigid horror of that house. He would hold it to his ear and listen to the boom of far-off surfs and then go home and mingle the message with the pointing finger of Salvation Yeo. And now, grown man, inured to adventure, he put the shell to his ear, and the message was the same, vibrating the call of oceans thundering on distant beaches through the fibres of his being.

He went out into the garden and stood in the sun and looked almost unseeingly at the rolling downs. Suddenly he became aware of the ribbon of road that lost itself not far away, behind a bluff. It was the Great High Road that led eventually to a great western port, where great ships sailed to the South Seas. The Power seemed to impel him, as it had impelled him as a boy to run away from home. By following that road, he would reach the port. At the port he could ship before the mast. On board his limp would not matter. For the rest, he was strong, as strong as a lion, in spite of all pronouncements by the doctors. It was the one adventure life left open to him. Nay more, the one chance of maintaining his reason. He stood with hands clenched staring at the road, the sweat beading on his forehead.

To pack up belongings and arrive with genteel suit-case and kit-bag at the dock-side and expect to be taken on as an ordinary hand would be the act of an embecile. He passed his hand mildly through his hair in his instinctive gesture. Why not go as he was, a cap on his head, and his money, all he had in the

world, in a belt (bought for Poland) round his waist? It was escape from prison. Escape from Myra. The final disappearance from the orbit of Olivia.

Perhaps it was the maddest thing he had done in his life. But what did it matter? If he crocked up, he crocked up. At least he could try. He went indoors and in the parlour found an old railway timetable. There were only two trains a day from Fanstead to the main-line junction, and the morning train had already gone. Why should he not tramp to the Junction, as in the old days, getting a lift here and there on a cart, and know again the freedom of the vagabond road?

He went up to his room, put on his belt of money and good thick boots, and made up a bundle of necessaries. On his dressing-table he left a letter addressed to Mrs. Pettiland, enclosing a month's rent. He looked round the room for the last time, as he had looked round so many in his life, and laughed. No books on this journey. As he had not left the Tyneside with books years ago, so would he start now afresh, with the same equipment. He went downstairs with a light heart, and called out to Mrs. Pettiland busy in her post-office.

"I'm going off on a jaunt—so don't expect me till you see me."

And the answer came: "Don't overdo yourself with your lame leg."

He laughed at the idea. His leg could bear his whole weight to-day without a twinge. Retracing his steps down the passage, he entered the garden and left the place by the wicket-gate and struck up the winding lanes and across fields to the high road, his stick and bundle over his shoulder. By doing so, instead of taking the road at the end of the village, he could cut off a mile. It was a morning of freshness and inspiration. A cool breeze sent the clouds scurrying across the sky and rustled the leaves of the elms and rippled the surface of the half-grown corn. His spirits rose as he walked, somewhat of a jog-trot walk, it is true, but that would last for the rest of his life; so long as the pain had gone for ever, all was well. He reached the high road and settled down to his tramp, gladdened by the sight of cart and car and cottage gardens flaming with roses and hollyhocks or restful with screens of sweet-peas. In the soft-mannered West-country fashion, folks gave him "good day" as he passed. The road undulated pleasantly, now and then sweeping round the full bosom of a hill, with a steeply sloping drop of thirty feet to the valley. Such spots were grimly sign-posted for motorists; for at one of them, so Mrs. Pettiland had told him, a motor-lorry during the war had slipped over at night and all the occupants had been killed. He regarded it with a chauffeur's eye and smiled contemptuously at the inefficiency of the driver. He could race along it at sixty miles an hour. But still, if you did go over—there was an end of you.

By noon he was hungry and ate cold meat and bread at a wayside inn, and

smoked contentedly afterwards on the bench outside and talked of crops and licensing laws with the landlord. When he started again he felt stiff from the unaccustomed exercise. Walking would relax his muscles. Yet he began to tire. A while later he came upon a furniture removing van which had broken down. Two men drew their heads from below the bonnet and looked at each other ruefully, and their speech was profane. He asked what was wrong. They didn't know. He threw off his coat, glad to get to an engine again, and in a quarter of an hour had set it going merrily. For two or three miles he sat on the tailboard between the two canvas-aproned packers, enjoying the respite. When they turned off eventually from the main road, and he had to descend, he felt strangely disinclined to walk. The Junction was still a long way off. It would have been better, after all, to wait for the evening train from Fanstead. He was always starting on crazy ventures without counting the cost. But he limped on.

The road went through a desolate land of abandoned quarry and ragged pine woods. The ascent was steep. Suddenly, as though someone had pierced his leg with hot iron, flamed the unmistakable pain. He stood aghast at the pronouncement of doom. At that moment, while he hung there in agony, a rough figure of a man in old khaki slacks rose from a near hollow in the quarry and, approaching him, asked what time it was. Triona took out his watch, a gold one, the gift of Olivia. It was four o'clock. The man thanked him gruffly and returned to his stony Bethel. Triona hobbled on a few more steps. But the torture was too great. He must rest. The pine-wood's cool quiet invited him. He dragged himself thither wearily, and sat down, his back against the trunk of a tree. He tried to think. Of course the simplest method of extrication was to hail any passing car and beg for a lift, either to the Junction or back to Pendish. Walking was out of the question. But which of those ways should he take? The weight of physical tiredness overwhelmed him and dulled the deciding brain. He had set out at nine in the morning and it was now four o'clock in the afternoon. He had not realized how slow his progress had been. Yes, he was exhausted and sleepy. Nothing mattered. He rolled on his side, stuck his arm under his head and fell into a dead sleep. Thirty yards away, at varying intervals, motor vehicles flashed by.

He was dreaming of a rabbit running across his throat, when suddenly he awoke to find the rabbit a man's arm. He gripped it, instinctively. It was nearly dark.

"What the devil are you doing?"

The man replied: "Why we thought you was dead."

At the significance of the plural, his grasp relaxed and he sat up, staring at two men who had come upon him in his solitude. They were dirty, unshaven,

not nice to look upon. On one of them he noticed a pair of old khaki slacks. As soon as he moved they knelt one on each side of him.

"And if I'd been dead, you'd have run through my pockets wouldn't you?" Suddenly he clapped his hands in front of him. "You swine, you've got my watch and chain."

He thrust them aside and scrambled anyhow to his feet, and struck instinctively with his left full in the face of the nearest man who had sprung up also. But all his weight was then on his left foot and the flame of agony shot up through his thigh and his leg crumpled up before the blow reached the man. Then the one in the khaki slacks came in with an upper cut on the point of his jaw and he fell senseless.

When he recovered consciousness a few minutes afterwards, he found himself alone, dazed, rather sick, in an uncomprehended world of gathering darkness. Black clouds had swept over the brow of the quarry hill. A pattering noise some way off struck his ear. He realized it was rain on the road. He drew himself up to a sitting posture and in a moment or two recovered wits and memory. There had been a fight. There was one man in khaki slacks—why, that was the man who had asked him the time at four o'clock in the afternoon. He had lain in wait for him and robbed him of his watch and chain. What a fool he had been to parade it in this manner. Well, it was gone. It would teach him a lesson in prudence. But the other man? How did he come in? Why did they wait three or four hours before attacking him? Perhaps the man of the khaki slacks had struggled against temptation until a more desperate acquaintance came along. He remembered the landlord of the inn where he had lunched telling him of an ugly quarrying village he would pass through, a nest of out-of-works—owing to quarries, unprofitable at the high rate of wages, being closed down—living discontented Bolshevik lives on high out-of-work pay. He cursed his leg. If it had not failed him, he would have got home on the first man, as easily as shaking hands—the flabby, unguarded face shimmered in front of him; and then he could have turned his attention to the man in khaki slacks, a true loafer type, spiritless when alone—the kind of man, who, if he had worn those slacks in the army, would have been in guard-room every week, and would have cowered as a perpetual cleaner of latrines under the eyes of vitriol-tongued sergeants. Far from a fighting man. His imagination worked, almost pleasurably, in the reconstitution of the robbery. But for his abominable leg he would have downed both the degenerate scoundrels, and have recovered his precious belongings. He damned them and his leg impartially. The watch and chain were all that he had kept materially of Olivia. In the morning he had hesitated as to the advisability of carrying them with him, gold watches and chains not being customarily accoutrements of a common sailor in wind-

jammer or tramp steamer fo'c'sle. But sentiment had prevailed. He could hide them somewhere, when he reached the port, and at convenient slop-shops he could have reorganized attire and equipment.

The rain pattering on the open road came dribbling through the branches of the pines. He cursed the rain. He must go on somewhere. Absurd to stay in the wood and get wet through. He struggled to his feet and then for the first time became aware of a looseness around his middle. He looked down. His trousers were unbuttoned, his shirt sagged out immodestly as if the front had been hurriedly tucked in. His hands sought his waist. The belt with all the money he had in the world had gone.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT was close on midnight when a car grated and stopped in front of the little Georgian house in Pendish, and the truant stumbled through the door, left open, into the presence of Mrs. Pettiland who was anxiously awaiting him. He was wet through, dishevelled, exhausted. He was shivering with cold and his face was like the mask of a ghost. She met him in the passage and dragged him into the little sea-haunted parlour.

"Oh, what have you been doing?"

She had been worried all day, unable to account for the money, a month's rent and board in advance, in the envelope addressed to her.

"Didn't I tell you not to overdo yourself?"

He greeted her upbraidings with a laugh of bravado.

"I set out to-day on my last adventure. This is the end of it. I'm here for the rest of time."

"You'll be in the churchyard for the rest of eternity, if you don't go to bed at once," she declared.

She packed him to his room; fussed motherwise about him; dosed him with ammoniated quinine; stuck hot-water bottles in his bed; stood over him with hot Bovril with an egg in it. She prescribed whisky, also hot; but since the fatal night at Rowington's dinner party, he had abjured alcohol.

"Now perhaps you'll tell me what has happened," she said.

"My game leg gave out when I got to some quarries. I believe the beastly place is called Woorow——"

"Woorow! Why that's the other side of the county!" She looked at him aghast. "Do you mean to say that you walked to Woorow in your state? Really men oughtn't to be allowed to run about loose."

"I've run about loose since I was fourteen," said he.

"And a pretty mess you seem to have made of it. And then what did you do?"

She took away the cup of Bovril and poached egg which he had devoured ravenously, to her womanly satisfaction, and handed him another. He continued his story, recounting it, between spoonfulls, in his imaginative way. When he found he could go no further he curled up to sleep in a wood. When things went wrong, he assured her, there was nothing like going to sleep in a wood. All the pixies and elves and rabbits and stoats and weasels came and sat

round you in a magic circle, shielding you from harm. What would have happened to the Babes in the Wood, he cried, if it hadn't been for the robins?

"I wonder what your temperature is," said Mrs. Pettiland.

"Normal," said he. "This is the first hour I've been normal for months."

"I'll take it before I leave you," she said. "Well, you went to sleep?"

Yes. He slept like an enchanted dog. He woke up four hours afterwards to find it pouring with rain. What could he do? He had to get back. Walking, with his rotten old leg, was out of the question. In the daytime a decent looking pedestrian may have the chance of stopping a motoring Good Samaritan and, with a tale of sudden lameness, get a lift by the side of the chauffeur. But at night it was impossible. To stand with arresting arms outspread in front of the hell-lamps of an advancing car would be an act of suicidal desperation. No; he had returned by all sorts of stages. He had almost forgotten them. A manure cart had brought him some way. Then he had gone dot and carry one for a mile. Then something else. He could only hail slow moving traffic in the wet and darkness. Then he spent an endless time in the cab of a steam traction engine which he had abandoned on seeing a two-seater car with flaring head-lamps, stationed at a cottage gate.

"The old campaigner's instinct, Mrs. Pettiland. What should it be but a doctor's car, outside a poor little cottage? And as the head-lamps were pointing to where I had come from, I concluded he had drawn up and would turn round and go where I wanted to get to."

"And was it a doctor?"

He laughed. Of course it was. He had taken shelter from the rain under the hood of the car for an hour. Then, when the cottage door opened, he had scrambled out and waited for the owner. There had been a few words of explanation. By luck, it was Doctor Stansfield of Fanstead——

"Dr. Stansfield—why——"

"Why of course. He knows you inside and out. A charming fellow. He dropped me here, or rather I dropped him."

"And he never came in to look after you—a man in your condition? I'll give him a piece of my mind when I see him."

He soothed the indignant lady. The good doctor was unaware that anything particular was wrong with him. Poor man, he had been on the go since five o'clock the previous morning—human beings are born inconsiderate of the feelings of others—and he was dog-tired. Too dog-tired even to argue. He would have given a lift to Judas Iscariot, or the Leper of Aosta, so long as he wasn't worried.

"He nearly pitched us over, at a curve called Hell's Corner—you know. The near front wheel was just an inch off the edge. And then he stopped dead and flung his hands over his eyes and said: 'Oh, my God!' He had lost his nerve. Then when I told his I had driven everything from a General's Rolls Royce to an armoured car all over Russia in the war, he let me take the wheel. And that's the whole thing."

He chatted boyishly, in high spirits, and smoked a cigarette. Mrs. Pettiland went for a clinical thermometer. To her secret disappointment, his temperature was only just above normal. She would have loved to keep him in bed a few days and have the proper ordering of him. A woman loves to have an amazing fool of a man at her mercy, especially if she is gifted with a glimmer of humour. When she left him, he laughed out loud. Well, he had had his adventure with a vengeance. A real old Will-o'-the-Wisp chase, which had landed him, as ever, into disaster. Yet it had been worth it, every bit, until his leg gave out on the quarry hill. Even his slumber he did not regret. His miserable journey back, recalling old days, had its points. It was good to get the better of circumstances.

As to his money which was to have started him in life among coral reefs and conch-shells, that had gone irretrievably. Of course, he could have gone to the nearest police-station. But if the miscreants were arrested, he would have to prosecute. Highway robbery was a serious affair; the stolen belt packed with bank notes, a romantic one. The trial would provide a good newspaper story. There would be most undesirable publicity; and publicity is the last thing a man dead to the world would desire. He shrugged philosophic shoulders. Let the money go. The humour of the situation tickled his vagabond fancy. He was penniless. That was the comical end of his pursuit of the *ignis fatuus*. The freak finality and inevitability of it stimulated his sense of the romantic. If he had been possessed of real courage, he would have made over all his money, months ago, to Olivia and disappeared, as he was now, into the unknown. His experience of life ought to have taught him the inexorable fatality of compromise. What would he do? He did not know. Drowsy after the day's fatigue, and very warm and comfortable, he did not care. He curled himself up in the bed and went to sleep.

One afternoon, a week afterwards, he limped into Mrs. Pettiland's post-office with a gay air.

"Mrs. Pettiland," said he, "at last I have found my true vocation."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir," she replied undisturbed in her official duties which consisted in taking the coppers from a small child in payment for two stamps. "You've been rather restless these last few days."

Triona watched the child depart, clasping the stamps in a clammy hand.

"When one hasn't a penny in the world and starvation stares you in the face, one may be excused for busy search for a means of livelihood."

"You've got plenty of money."

"I haven't."

"You paid me a month's board and lodging in advance, the other day—though why you did it, I can't understand."

"I was going to run away," he said cheerfully. "To compensate you in that miserable manner for inconvenience was the least I could do. But the gods rightly stepped in and hauled me back." He swung himself on the counter and smiled at her. "I'm a fraud, you know."

The plump and decorous lady could not realize his earnestness. Behind his words lay some jest which she could not fathom.

"You don't believe me?"

He sighed. If he had told her a fairy tale she, like all the rest of the world in his past life, would have believed him. Now that he told the truth, he met with blank incredulity.

"I'm going to earn my living. I'm taking on a job as chauffeur."

She stared at him. "A chauffeur—you?"

"Yes. Why not?"

Her mind ran over his intellectual face, his clothes, his manners, his talk—free and sometimes disconcertingly allusive, like that of the rare and impeccably introduced artists whom she had lodged—his books . . .

"Why—you're a gentleman," she gasped.

"Oh no. Not really. I've been all kinds of things in my time. Among them I've passed as a gentleman. But by trade I'm a chauffeur. I practically started life as a chauffeur—in Russia. For years I drove a Russian Prince all over Europe. Now there aren't any more Russian Princes I'm going to drive the good people of Fanstead to railway stations and dinner parties."

"Well, I never," said Mrs. Pettiland.

"There's a young man—an ex-officer—Radnor by name, in Fanstead—who has just set up a motor garage." "He'll fail," said Mrs. Pettiland. "They all do. Old Hetherington of 'The Bull' has all the custom."

"With one rickety death-trap for hire and a fool of a mechanic who has wrecked every car sent in for repairs for a radius of thirty miles. I offered Hetherington to teach him his business. You might as well sing 'Il Trovatore' to a mule. So I went to Radnor. He had just sacked a man, and with my

invariable luck, I stepped in at the right moment. No, Mrs. Pettiland—" he swung his sound leg and looked at her, enjoying her mystification "—the reign of Hetherington is over. Radnor's Garage is going to be the wonder of the countryside."

He believed it implicitly. Radnor, a mild and worried young man, with quite a sound knowledge of his business, might struggle along and earn a hand-to-mouth living. But he lacked driving-power. To Triona, during his two or three interviews with him, that was obvious. He had sufficient capital for a start, a good garage equipment, a fairly modern 25 h.p. utility car and was trying to make up his mind to buy another. Triona divined his irresolution. He would be at the mercy of unscrupulous mechanics and chauffeurs. His spirit seemed to have been broken by two years imprisonment in Germany. He had lost the secret of command. And, by nature, a modest, retiring gentleman. Triona pitied him. He had wandered through the West of England seeking a pitch where the competition was not too fierce, and finding unprogressive Fanstead, had invested all his capital in the business. He had been there a couple of months during which very little work had come in. He could stick it out for six months more. After that the deluge.

"Give me four pounds a week as head mechanic and chauffeur," said Triona, "and the deluge will be golden rain."

This was after the exhibition of John Briggs' papers—Armoured Car Column and Minesweeper—and the tale of his Russian chauffeurdom. He had also worked magic, having a diagnostician's second sight into the inside of a car's mechanism, with a mysteriously broken down 40 h.p. foreign car, the only one in the garage for repairs, which, apparently flawless, owner and chauffeur and Radnor himself regarded with hebetude.

"I'll take you on all right," said Radnor. "But, surely a man like you ought to be running a show of his own."

"I haven't a cent in the world," replied Triona. "So I can't!"

All this he told Mrs. Pettiland, swinging his sound leg, as he sat on the counter.

"The only fly in the ointment," said he, "is that I shall have to move."

"From here? Whatever for?"

"Chauffeurs don't have luxurious bed-sitting-rooms with specially designed scenery for views. They can't afford it. Besides, they're not desirable lodgers."

She flushed indignantly. If he thought she would prefer his room to his company, because he drove a car, he was very much mistaken. The implication hurt. Even suppose he was fit to look after a car, he was not yet fit to look after

himself. Witness his folly of a week ago. He would pay her whatever he could afford and she would be more than contented.

"What wonderful people there are in the world," he sighed.

But he withstood her generous blandishments. No, there was an eternal fitness of things. Besides, he must live at the garage, ready to attend telephone calls by day or by night. He couldn't be hobbling backwards and forwards between Fanstead and Pendish. Against this practical side of the question there could be no argument.

"And what shall I do with the money you've paid in advance?"

"Keep it for a while," said he. "Perhaps Randor will give me the sack and I'll come creeping back to you."

Thus did Triona, with bag and baggage take up his quarters in an attic loft in the garage yard at Fanstead.

Not since his flight from Olivia had he felt so free of care. Fate had condemned him to the backwater and in the backwater he would pass his contented life, a life of truth and honesty. And he had before him an essential to his soul's health—an ideal. He would inspire the spiritless with spirit, the ineffectual with efficiency, the sick heart with health. The man Radnor had deserved well of his country through gallant service, wounds and imprisonment. His country had given him the military Cross and a lieutenant's gratuity, and told him not to worry it any more. If Mrs. Pettiland's prophecy came true and he failed, he would be cast upon a country that wouldn't be worried. Triona swore that he should pull through. He would save a fellow-man from shipwreck, without his knowledge. It was something to live for. He became once more the perfect chauffeur, the enthusiastic motor-man, dreaming of a great garage—a sort of Palace of Automobiles for the West of England.

And as he dreamed, so did it begin to come to pass. The efficiency of the Quantock Garage became known for miles around. Owners of valuable cars forsook the professional wreckers in the great junction town and sent them to Fanstead. Radnor soon bought his second car; by the end of the autumn a third car; and increased his staff. Triona was foreman mechanician. Had he not so desired, he need not have driven. Nor need he have driven in the brass-buttoned livery on which he insisted that Radnor's chauffeurs should be attired. Smartness, he argued rightly, caught the eye and imagination. But he loved the wheel. Driving cooled the vagabond fire in his veins. There was an old touring-car of high horse-power, excellent when nursed with loving hand and understanding heart, but a box of dismal caprice to the inexpert, which he would allow no one to drive but himself. Radnor held the thing in horror and wanted to sell it as a bad bargain. He had had it out once and it had broken

down ten miles from home and had suffered the ignominy of a tow back. Triona wrought at it for three weeks, conjuring up spare parts from nowhere, and fitting to it new devices, and turned out a going concern in which he took inordinate pride. He whirled touring parties prodigious distances in this once rickety creature of his adoption. He could get thirty-five or forty out of her easily.

"All right. It's your funeral, not mine," said Radnor during one of their discussions.

It was a healthy life. His lameness did not matter. Whatever internal lesions he suffered from gave no symptoms of existence. His face lost its lines of suffering, his eyes their shifty haggardness. He put on flesh, as far as is possible for a naturally spare-built man. Randor, an honourable soul, when the business in the new year shewed proof of immense development, offered him a substantial increase in salary. But Triona refused.

"What do I want with money, my dear fellow? If I had more I'd only spend it for books. And I've more of them now than I know where to put them. No; keep all you can for capital in the business. Or stick it into an advertisement scheme I've been working out—"

"You're an odd devil, Briggs," said Radnor. He was a small dark man with great mournful eyes and a little clipped moustache over a timorous mouth, and his lips were always twitching. "A queer devil. What I should have done without you, I don't know. If I could do what I want, I should offer you a partnership."

"Don't be a damned fool," said Triona. "A partner puts in money and I haven't a bean. Besides if I were a partner, the whole show would go to hell."

"Why?"

"I should immediately want to go and do something else," replied Triona.

"I give it up," said Radnor.

"Best thing you can do," said Triona.

How could the very grateful young proprietor divine the spiritual crankiness of his foreman? He went through the English equivalent of shoulder shrugging.

Briggs, from the business point of view, was a treasure fallen from Heaven. And Briggs was a mystery. He didn't begin to pretend to understand Briggs. Briggs obviously didn't want to be understood. Radnor was a gentleman. He could press the matter no further.

"Let us get this business up to a net profit of three thousand a year and then we may talk," said Triona.

"Three thou—! Good God, man, I couldn't talk. I'd slobber and gibber!"

"That's where I'll come in," laughed Triona.

He had set his heart on this wash-out from the war making good. Just before Christmas he had an added incentive. A melancholy lady and a wistful pretty girl had flashed for a week end through Fanstead. They had come from London and had put up at The King's Head. Radnor had made the tour of the proprietor through the garage.

"This is Mr. Briggs, my foreman, whom I've so often told you about."

And afterwards, to Triona, with an air of inconsequence:

"A kind of aunt and cousin of mine who wanted to see how I was getting on."

Poor old chap! Of course they wanted to see how he was getting on. The girl's assessing eyes took in everything, himself included.

The unbidden phrase flashed through his brain.

"He shall marry the girl by Michaelmas Day!"

The sudden impishness of it delighted him.

"By God, he shall!" he swore to himself.

So he refused an increase of salary and, by following an *ignis fatuus* of an ideal, he kept his conscience in a state of interested amusement at the mystification of his employer.

April came and found the Quantock Garage in full tide of business. Hetherington of "The Bull" had long since given up his wheezy station car and the motor-destroying works in which he housed it. Triona laboured from morning to night, for a while content to see the wheels of an efficient establishment go round. And then he began to grow restless. He had set Radnor permanently on his feet. If he left, the business would go on by its own momentum. Nothing more was needed than Radnor's own conscientious plodding. Why should he stay? He had achieved his purpose. Radnor would surely be in a financial position warranting him to marry the girl by Michaelmas.

"I'll see him through," he vowed, and stayed on. "And then——"

And then? Life once more became a blank. Of late he had drugged lonely and despairing thoughts by reading. Books grew into great piles in corners of his loft above the garage. But reading awoke him to the poignant craving for expression. He had half a dozen tantalizing plots for novels in his head, a score of great situations, a novelist's gallery of vivid personalities. As to the latter, he had a superstition. If he gave one a name it would arise in flesh and blood, insistent on having its story told. So he shut tempting names resolutely from

his brain; for he had made up his queer mind never to write another line of romance.

The spring stirred the sap within him. It was a year now since he had fled from Olivia. What was she doing, what feeling? Occasionally he called on Mrs. Pettiland.

Myra, he learned, had paid her weekly visit in October, had occupied his old room, had gone to visit her lunatic husband, had maintained her impenetrable silence as to her mistress's doings. When Mrs. Pettiland had reported his chauffeur activities, Myra had said:

"I'm glad he has got honest employment."

"Shall I let him know that you're here?" Mrs. Pettiland had asked.

Myra had answered in her final way:

"I've no desire to see him and he certainly has no desire to see me."

Myra, therefore, had come and gone without his knowledge. Often he wished that he had met her and wrung some information from her unwilling lips. And now, with his purpose accomplished, his heart aching for change, his spirit craving to pour itself out in tumultuous words, and his soul crying for her that was lost, the thought that had haunted the back of his mind for the past year stood out grimly spectre-wise. What right had he to live? Olifant had spoken truly. What right had he to compel her to perpetual widowhood that was no widowhood? She was tied to him, a husband lost, as far as she was concerned, to human ken, never to cross her path again; tied to him as much as Myra was tied to the poor wretch in the madhouse. And as Myra had grown soured and hard, so might Olivia grow. Olivia so young now, with all the joy of life before her. He gone, she could marry again. There was Olifant, that model of men, whom he guessed to have supplanted. With him she could be happy until her life's end. Once more she could be Lady Bountiful of "The Towers." . . . The conception was an agony of the flesh, keeping him awake of nights on the hard little camp-bed in the loft. He grappled with the torture, resolved to triumph over it, as he had gritted his teeth and triumphed over physical pain in hospitals. The knife was essential, he told himself. It was for her sake. It was his duty to put himself out of the world.

And yet the days went on, and he felt the lust of life in his blood. The question tauntingly arose: Is it braver to die than to live? Is it more cowardly to live than to die? He couldn't answer it.

In the meantime he went on mending broken-down motor-engines and driving gay tourists about the countryside, in his car of resurrection.

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT was bound to happen had happened. Olifant the Galahad, out for grails, as Triona, and indeed as Olivia had pictured him, had lost his head, poured out a flow of mad words, and flung his arm about her and kissed her passionately. She had been caught, had half-surrendered; released, she had put hands to a tumultuous bosom and staggered away from him. And there had followed a scene enacted for the twenty-billionth time on the world's stage. She had grown weak and strong by turns. At last she had said: "If you love me, go now and let me think it over and all that it means."

And he had gone, passion yielding to his courteous consideration of her, and she was left alone in the drawing-room, staring through the open French windows at the May garden.

Since her return from the South of France, she had felt the thing coming. In October, as soon as Myra had returned from her holiday, fear had driven her from Medlow. The hunger in the man's eyes proclaimed an impossible situation. The guest and host position she had changed after the first few weeks. Brother and sister and herself kept house together—on the face of it a sensible and economical arrangement. Mr. Trivett and Mr. Fenmarch, once more financial advisers, commended it with enthusiasm. The summer had passed happily enough. The *modus vivendi* with the sections of Medlow society respectively symbolized by Landsdowne House and Blair Park had arranged itself automatically. She found conferred upon her the Freedom of each. The essential snobbery of English life is a myth kept alive by our enemies. It is true that the squire and the linen-draper do not ask each other and their families to dinner. Their social worlds are apart. They don't want to ask each other to dinner. They would never dream of asking each other to dinner, one no more than the other; they respect each other too mightily. But a dweller in both worlds, such as Olivia, Trivett-ed and Gale-d though she was on the one side, yet on the other, the wife of the famous Alexis Triona and the friend of the Olifants, folks whose genealogy was lost somewhere in a Pictish bonfire of archives, can wander up and down the whole social gamut at her good pleasure. Besides she herself does not mix the incompatible. A mere question of the art of life, which Olivia, with her London experiences found easy of resolution. So, in the mild and mellow way on which Medlow prided itself, she had danced and tennis-ed and picnic-ed the summer through. On the Blair Park side—she wondered laughingly at their unsupercilious noses—Blaise Olifant and his sister accompanied her in the gentle festivities. Each day had brought

its petty golden dust—the futile Church bazaar, the tennis tournament, the whist-drive of which old John Freke, the linen-draper father of Lydia, had made her a lady-patroness, the motor-run into quaint Shrewsbury, on shopping adventure in quest of crab or lobster unobtainable in Medlow—a thousand trivial activities—to the innocent choking of her soul, to use Matthew Arnold's figure, and an inevitable forgetfullness. Everything had gone well until October. Then she had taken prudent flight with Myra to the France and Italy which she had never seen—and there she had stayed till the beginning of May.

It was Mrs. Woolcombe who insisted on her return to Medlow. Where else should she return after her wanderings but to her own home? At first everything was just as it used to be. Then, on a trivial cause—an insult offered her by an Italian in Venice which she had laughingly recounted—the passion of Blaise Olifant had suddenly flamed forth.

She was frightened, shaken. He had given her the thrill, which, in her early relations with him she had half contemptuously deemed impossible. She found herself free from sense of outrage. She bore him no resentment. Indeed she had responded to his kiss. She was not quite sure, within herself, whether she would not respond again. The communicated thrill completed her original conception of him as the very perfect gentle knight. For after all, knights without red-blood in their veins might be gentle, but scarcely perfect.

If she were free, she would marry him out of hand, without further question. He had always dwelt in a tender spot of her heart. Now he had slipped into one more warm, smouldering with strange fires. But she was not free. She stood at once at the parting of the roads. She must go back to a wandering or lonely life, or she must defy conventions.

She went out into the ivy-walled garden, and walked up the central path, between the beds of wallflowers and forget-me-nots and the standard roses just bursting into leaf. What could she do? Once she had laughed scornfully at the idea of love playing any part in her life. She had not reckoned with her youth. And now she stared aghast at the vista of lonely and loveless years.

Presently Blaise Olifant came from his study and advanced to meet her.

He said: "Can you speak to me now?"

"Yes—now," she answered.

"I've behaved like any blackguard. You must forgive me, if you can. The Italian cad who made me see red was not very much worse than myself."

There was a smile in her dark eyes as she looked up at him.

"There's all the difference in the world. I disliked the Italian very much." She touched his sleeve. "You are forgiven, my dear friend. It's all my fault. I oughtn't to have come back."

“You’re the most wonderful of women,” said he.

The most wonderful of women made a little wry movement of her lips.

“It’s all a might-be and a can’t-be,” she said in a low voice.

“Do you suppose, my dear, I don’t know that? If it could be, do you think I should regret losing my self-control?”

She said. “If it’s any consolation to you—perhaps I lost mine too. We’re both human. Perhaps a woman is even more so than a man. That’s why I went away in October—things were getting impossible——”

“Good God!” he exclaimed, “I thought you were bored to death!”

A little laugh could not be restrained. The blindness of man to psychological phenomena is ever a subject for woman’s sweet or bitter mirth. But it was not in his heart to respond.

“Then you do care for me a little?”

“I shouldn’t be standing here with you now, if I didn’t. I shouldn’t have made the mistake of coming back, if I hadn’t wanted to see you.”

“Mistake?” He sighed and turned a step away. “Yes. I suppose it was. I should have been frank with Mary and shewn her that it was impossible—for me.”

“It would be best for me to go to-morrow,” said Olivia.

“Where?”

“London. A hotel. Any old branch.” She smiled. “I must settle down somewhere sooner or later. The sooner the better.”

“That’s monstrous,” he declared with a flash in his eyes. “To turn you out of your home—I should feel a scoundrel.”

“I don’t see how we can go on living together, carrying on as usual, as though nothing had happened.”

For a few moments they walked up the gravelled path in silence, both bareheaded in the mild May sunshine.

“Listen,” he said, coming to a pause. “I’m a man who has learned self-control in three hard schools—my Scotch father’s, science, war. If I swear to you, on my honour, that nothing that has passed between us to-day shall ever be revived by me in look or word or act—will you stay with us, and give me your—your friendship—your companionship—your presence in the house? It was an aching desert all the time you were away.”

She walked on a pace or two, after a hopeless sigh. Could she never drive into this unworldly head the fact that women were not sexless angels? How could their eyes forever meet in the glance of a polite couple discussing the

weather across a tea-table? She could not resist a shaft of mockery.

"For all of your philosopher father and science and war—I wonder, my dear Blaise, how much you really know of life?"

He halted and put a hand on her slim shoulder.

"I love you so much my dear," said he, "that I should be content to hang crucified before you, so that my eyes could rest upon you till I died."

He turned and strode fast away. She followed him crying "Blaise! Blaise!" He half turned with an arresting arm—and even at that moment she was touched by the pathos of the other empty sleeve——

"No, don't—please."

She ran hard and facing him blocked his way.

"But what of me? What of my feelings while I saw you hanging crucified?"

That point of view had not occurred to him. He looked at her embarrassed. His Scottish veracity asserted itself.

"When a man's mad in love," said he, "he can't think of everything."

She took his arm and led him up the gravelled path again.

"Don't you see, dear, how impossible it all is?"

"Yes. I suppose so. It must be one thing or the other. And all that is good and true and honourable makes it the other."

Tears came at the hopelessness of it. She seized his hand in both of hers.

"What you said just now is a thing no woman could forget to the day of her death."

She kissed the hand and let it drop, stirred to the inmost. What was she, ineffectual failure, to command the love of such a man? He stood for a while looking into the vacancy of the pale blue sky over the ivy-clad wall. Before her eyes garden and house and wall and sky were blotted out; and only the one tall figure existed in the scene. Her heart beat. It was a moment of peril, and the moment seemed like an hour.

At last he turned and looked at her with his grave smile. She put her hand on her heart not knowing whether to cry or laugh at the relaxation of tension.

"You stay here with Mary," he said gently. "I'll go away for a change—a holiday. I need one. There's an old uncle of mine in Scotland. I've neglected him and his salmon-fishing shamefully for years. How I can fish with one arm, heaven only knows. I've learned to do most things. It'll be a new experience. As a matter of fact, I should have gone last month, if the temptation to wait for you hadn't been so strong. It's up in the wilds of Inverness——"

She made feeble protest. It was she who drove him out of his home. Far better for her to cut herself adrift from Medlow. But he prevailed. He would go. In the meantime things might right themselves.

He departed the following morning, leaving Olivia to a new sense of loneliness and unrest. She lived constantly in the tense moment, catching her breath at the significance of its possibilities. Unbidden and hateful the question recurred: if positions had been reversed; if Blaise had been the lost husband and Alexis the lover, would Alexis have let her go? Certainly not Alexis. And yet deep down in her heart she was grateful that she had come scathless through the moment.

The little round of country gaieties went on and caught her up in its mild gyrations. Mrs. Woolcombe deplored her brother's absence. He had been looking forward to the social life with Olivia, especially the tennis parties. It was wonderful how he had overcome the handicap of his one arm; the effectual service he had perfected, tossing up the ball with his racket and smiting it at the dead point of ascent. It had all been due to Olivia's encouragement the previous summer; for till then he had not played for years. But he had been sadly overworked. When a man cannot sleep and rises up in the morning with a band of iron round his head, it is obvious that he needs a change. It was the best thing for Blaise, undoubtedly; but it must be dull for Olivia. So spake Mary Woolcombe, unaware of kisses and tense moments.

Olivia said to Myra: "This is an idle, meaningless life. We'll go back to London and settle down."

"Will life mean much more when you get there?" asked Myra.

"I can do something."

"What?"

"How do I know? Why are you so irritating, Myra?"

"It isn't me," said Myra.

"What is it, then?"

"A woman wants a man to look after," said Myra in her unimpassioned way. "If she can't get a man she wants a woman. I've got you, so I'm not irritated. You haven't got either, so you are."

Olivia flushed angrily and swerved round in her chair before the mirror on her toilet-table—Myra was drying her hair—as she had dried it from days before Olivia could remember.

"That's a liberty, Myra, which you oughtn't to have taken."

"I dare say, dearie," replied Myra unmoved, "but it's good for you that somebody now and then should tell you the truth."

“I want neither man nor woman,” Olivia declared. Myra gently squared her mistress’s shoulders to the mirror and went on with her task.

“I wonder,” she said.

“I think you’re hateful,” said Olivia.

“Maybe. But I’ve got common-sense. If you think you’re going to London to stand for Parliament or write poetry and get it printed or run a Home for Incurable Camels, you’re mistaken, dear. And you’ll have no truck with women. You’ve never had a woman friend in the world—anyone you’d die for.”

“Of course I haven’t,” snapped Olivia.

“It’s a man’s woman you are,” continued Myra. “You’ve looked after men ever since your dear mother was taken ill. It’s what God meant you to do. It’s all you can do. And you haven’t got a man and that’s what’s making you unhappy.”

Olivia sprang from her chair, looking with her long black hair ruffled and frizzed and spreading out around her warm oval face, like an angry sea-nymph on a rock disputed by satyrs.

“I hate men and everything connected with them.”

“You still hate your husband?” asked Myra looking at her with cold pale eyes.

“I loathe him. How dare you? Haven’t I forbidden you to mention his name?”

“I didn’t mention his name,” said Myra. “But if you like, I won’t refer to him again. Sit down and let me put on the electric dryer. Your hair’s still wringing wet.” She yielded, not with good grace. Myra had her at her mercy. Dignity counselled instant dismissal of Myra from her presence. But the washing and drying of her long thick hair had ever been a problem; so dignity gave way to comfort.

She was furious with Myra. We all are with people who confront us with the naked truth about ourselves. That was all she was fit for; all that life had taught her; to look after a man. She stared at the blatant proposition in the grimness of the night-watches. What else, in God’s name, was she capable of doing for an inch advancement of humanity? She had gone forth long ago—so it seemed—from Medlow, to open the mysterious mysteries of the world. She had opened them—and all the pearls, good, bad and indifferent, were men. All the ideals; all the colour and music and gorgeous edifices of life; all the world vibration of thought and action and joy of which she had dreamed, every manifold thrill that had run through her being from feet to hair on that first

night in London when she had leaned out of her Victoria Street flat and opened her young soul to the informing spirit of the vast city of mystery—the whole spiritual meaning, nay, the whole material reason for her existence, was resolved into one exquisitely pure, bafflingly translucent in its mystery of shooting flames, utterly elemental crystal of sex. Sex, in its supreme purity; but sex all the same.

She was a man's woman. It was at once a glory and a degradation. Myra was right. What woman, in the course of her life, had she cared a scrap for? Her mother. Her mother was a religion. And men? Her chastity revolted. When had she sought to attract men? Her conscience was clear. But men had been the terror, the interest, the delight of her life from the moment she had left the cloistral walls of her home. And even before that, on a different plane, had she not, while keeping house for father and brothers, always thought in terms of man?

And now she was doing the same. The emptiness of her prospective life in London appalled her. The mad liar, her husband, an unseizable, unknown entity, of whom she thought with shivering repulsion, was away somewhere, living a strange, unveracious life. The soldier, scholar and gentleman, who loved her, into whose arms, into whose life, she had all but fallen, had fled, saving her from perils. Before he returned she must, in decency and honour, take up her solitary abode elsewhere. Or else she could terminate his tenancy of "The Towers" and carry on an old-maidish life in Medlow for evermore. Anyway, a useless sexless thing for all eternity.

The second post had brought her some letters, a few bills and receipts, a note from Janet Philimore with whom she kept up a casual correspondence, and a long untidy screed from Lydia. Lydia had conceived the idea of visiting Medlow. Her father, old John Freke, whom she had not seen for years, was ailing. What did Olivia think of the notion? Olivia, sitting in the little ivy-clad summer-house at the end of the garden, thought less of the notion than of the amazing lady. To ask her, an outsider, whether she should come to her father's bed of sickness! She made up her mind to write: "Oh, yes, come at once, but wear the thickest of black veils, so that no one will recognize you." Her mind wandered away from the hypothetical visit—London and Lydia again! Just where she was when she started. Life seemed a hopeless muddle.

"I'm sorry," said Myra's voice breaking suddenly on her meditations. She looked up and beheld Myra more than usually grave and cold. "I'm sorry to disturb you. But I've just had a letter. He's dead."

Olivia, with a shock through all her being, started to her feet.

"Dead. My husband?"

“No,” said Myra. “Mine.”

“Oh!” said Olivia somewhat breathless—and sank on the bench again. She recovered herself quickly.

“I’m sorry, Myra. But after all, it’s a merciful release.”

“God’s mercies are inscrutable,” said Myra.

So, thought Olivia, was Myra’s remark.

“I’ve always loved him, you see,” said Myra. “I suppose you’ll have no objections to my going to bury him?”

“My dear old Myra,” cried Olivia. “Of course, my dear, you can go—go whenever you like.”

“I’ll come back as soon as it’s over,” said Myra.

She turned and walked away, and Olivia saw her lean and unexpressive shoulders rise as though a sob had shaken her.

CHAPTER XXVI

OF the death of Myra Stebbings's husband and of her second appearance in Pendish during his sojourn in the West Country, Triona knew nothing. Again she had forbidden her sister-in-law to give him any information as to her doings. Again she disclaimed interest in the young man. Nor was he aware, a week after the funeral, that Myra, who had stood by the graveside in the pouring rain, and had insisted on jogging back to Pendish wet through, in the undertaker's brougham, lay dangerously ill in the upstairs bedroom of the little Georgian house. The increasing business of the Quantock Garage diverted his energies from polite tramps into Pendish to enquire into Mrs. Pettiland's state of health. Also, he was growing morose, his soul feeding on itself, and beginning to develop an unwholesome misanthropy. Like Hamlet, man didn't delight him; no, nor woman neither. When not working in the garage or driving the old touring-car, he retired to brood in his loft and eschewed the company of his kind.

"You're overdoing it," said Radnor, a kindly person. "Why not go away on a holiday and have a change?"

"Only one change would do me any good," he replied gloomily, "and that would be to get out of this particularly vile universe."

Radnor looked round his well ordered, bustling establishment and smiled.

"It isn't as bad as all that."

Triona shrugged his shoulders and spanner in hand turned to the car he was doctoring, without a reply.

A few days afterwards Radnor said:

"We're going to be married in August, and I don't mind saying it's mostly thanks to you."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Triona. "I'll stick it out till then."

"And then?"

"I'll have the change you've been talking of."

Radnor laughed. "You'll let me have a bit of a honeymoon first, won't you?"

"Oh, yes," replied Triona. "You can have your honeymoon."

The weakening incentive to life would last till September. He would make it last. It was now the beginning of June. Three months or so more wouldn't matter. To carry on a meaningless existence further would be absurd. Indeed, it

would be immoral. Of that, for some time past he had convinced himself.

England ran motor-mad that summer. It awoke to find war restrictions removed, roads free and petrol to be had for the buying. In its eagerness to race through a beloved land closed up for years and view or review historic spots of loveliness, and otherwise to indulge in its national vagabond humour it cared little for the price of petrol. The hiring garages, in anything like tourist centres, found their resources strained. Radnor bought another car, and still had more orders than he could execute. He drove one car himself.

It was a soft June evening. Triona sat at the wheel of the great antiquated touring-car to which he had given its new lease of life, driving homewards from the neighbourhood of the Great Junction Town. He had taken a merry party that day some hundred and fifty miles through the tenderest greenery of early summer, through dark gorges with startling shadows, through cool lanes, over hills in the open sunshine; and, in the sweetness of the evening, he had put them down at the place whence they had started. For all his mood of despair, he had enjoyed the day. The poet in him had responded to the eternal call of the year's life laughing in its gay insolence of youth. Since nine in the morning the sweet wind of the hills had swept through his lungs and scenes of loveliness had shimmered before his eyes.

Alone at the wheel, he thought of the passing day of beauty. Was it not worth living—just to enjoy it? Was it not worth living—just to translate into words, if only for the sake of the doing, the emotion of that enjoyment? He had passed through a beech wood, a world of pale emerald, like fairy seas, above, and a shimmer of blue-bells below as though the sky had been laid down for a carpet. . . .

He drove slowly and carefully. The car had done its good day's work. It was knocking a bit, like an old horse wheezing in protest against over-estimation of its enduring powers. He had tried it perhaps too high to-day. He loved the re-created old car, as though it were a living thing. A valiant old car, which had raced over awful roads in Flanders. It was a crazy irritation that he could not pat it into comfort. Nursing it with the mechanician's queer tenderness, he came to the straight mile, near home, of road on the mountain side, with its sheer drop into the valley, ending at the turn known as Hell's Corner, at which the overwrought doctor, on the night of mad adventure, had lost his nerve. Just past the corner branched the secondary road to Fanstead, for the great road swept on by the expiring end of Pendish village; but by walking from Pendish, as he had done on the day of the aforesaid adventure, through lanes and fields, one cut off a great bend of road and struck it on the fair-mile beyond the turn. And now a few hundred yards from the corner the engine

gave trouble. He descended from his seat and opened the bonnet. He discovered a simple matter, the choking of a plug. The knocking, he knew was in the cardan shaft. He would have to replace the worn pin. While cleaning out the choked plug with a piece of wire and blowing through it to clear it from the last fragment of grit, he wondered how long it would take to have the spare pin made. He was going out again the day after to-morrow. Could he risk the old car? To-morrow he would take her down and see for himself the full extent of the trouble. Meanwhile he screwed the plug on again, shut down the bonnet, cranked up the starting handle and jumped up beside the wheel.

But just as he put in the low gear, his eyes were riveted on a familiar figure some twenty yards away, walking towards him. For a moment or two he remained paralysed, while the old-fashioned gears crunched horribly. There she advanced slim, erect, in Tussore silk coat and skirt, a flash of red bow at the opening of her blouse. The car began to move. At that instant their eyes met. Olivia staggered back, and he read in her bewildered gaze the same horror he had last seen in her eyes.

What she was doing here, on this strip of remote road, he could not understand. Obviously she had not expected to find him, for she looked at him as though he were some awful ghost. He changed gear, went full speed ahead and passed her in a flash. Then suddenly, the command of doom shot through his brain. This was the end. Now was the end that should have come, had he not been a coward, months ago. He deliberately swerved off the road and went hurtling over the hill-side.

Olivia staring, wide-eyed, wondering, at the racing car, saw it happen. It was no accident. It was deliberate. Her brain reeled at the sudden and awful horror. She swayed to the bank and fainted.

A two-seater car, a young man and woman in it, came upon her a few moments later and drew up. The woman ministered to her and presently she revived.

“There has been a horrible accident,” she explained haggardly. “A car went over—you can see the wheel marks—Oh my God!”

She pointed. A column of smoke was rising from the valley into the still evening air. She scrambled to unsteady feet, and started to run. The young man detained her.

“The car will take us quicker. Maggie, you drive. I’ll stand on the footboard.”

They swiftly covered the hundred yards or so to the scene of the catastrophe. And there thirty feet below in the ravine the old car was burning amid the heavy vapour of petrol smoke.

“Quick,” cried Olivia, “let us get down! He may still be alive.”

The young man shook his head. “Not much chance, poor devil.”

“Did you know him?” asked the lady.

“It was my husband,” cried Olivia tragic-eyed.

They all plunged down the slope, the young man going straight in the ruts of the leaping car. Olivia, after a fall or two, ran gropingly to side levels, catching hold of bushes to aid her descent, her brain too scorched with the terror of that which lay below, for coherent thought.

Again her light, high-heeled shoes tripped her on the smooth grass and she slithered down a few yards. And then, as she steadied herself once more on her feet, she heard a voice from behind a clump of gorse:

“Just my damned luck!”

Her knees shook violently. She wanted to shriek, but she controlled herself and, staggering round the gorse bush, came upon Alexis, seated on a hummock, his head between his hands. He looked up at her stupidly; and she, with outspread fingers on panting bosom:

“Thank God, you’re not dead.”

“I don’t know so much about that,” said he, rising to his feet.

The young woman of the car who had been following Olivia more or less in her descent, appeared from behind the bush.

She, too, thanked God. He had been saved by a miracle. How had he escaped?

“A providence which looks after idiots caused me to be hurled out of the car at the first bump. I fell into the gorse. I’m not in the least bit hurt. Please don’t worry about me.”

“You must let us drive you home—I’ll call my husband,” said the young woman.

“Thank you very much,” said he, “but I’m perfectly sound and I’d rather walk; but this lady seems to have had a shock and no doubt——”

The young woman, perplexed, turned to Olivia. “You said this—gentleman—” for Alexis stood trim in brass-buttoned and legginged chauffeur’s livery—“you said he was your husband.”

“A case of mistaken identity,” he replied suavely. Olivia, her brain in a whirl, said nothing. The young woman advanced a few steps and coo-eed to the young man who had just reached the ravine. As he turned on her hail, she halloed the tidings that all was well.

“He’ll be here in a few minutes,” she said.

They stood an embarrassed trio. Alexis explained how the steering-rod, which had given him trouble all day, had suddenly snapped. It had been the affair of a moment. As for the car, it was merely a kind of land ark fitted with a prehistoric internal combustion engine. Insured above its value. The proprietor would be delighted to hear the end of it.

The young man joined them, out of breath. Explanations had to be given *da capo*. Again Good Samaritan offers to put their two-seater at the disposal of the derelicts. With one in the back seat they could crowd three in front. They were going to Cullenby, twenty miles on, but a few miles out of their way, if need be, were neither here nor there. A very charming, solicitous, well-run young couple. Olivia scarcely knew whether to shriek at them to go away, or to beg them to remain and continue to save a grotesque situation.

Presently Triona repeated his thanks and declined the proffered lift. Walking would do him all the good in the world; would steady his nerves after his calamitous bump. The young man eyed him queerly. It was a strange word for a chauffeur.

“But if you would take this lady,” said Triona again.

Olivia recovered her wits.

“I will walk too, if you don’t mind. I’m only a mile from home. And this gentleman is really my husband.”

“If we can really do nothing more?” The young man raised his hat.

“A thousand thanks for all your kindness,” said Olivia.

The very mystified young couple left them and remounted the hill.

The subjects of their mystification stood for a while in silence. Presently Olivia, whose limbs not yet recovered from the shock trembled so that her knees seemed to give her no support, said:

“Don’t you think we might sit down for a little?”

“As you will,” said Alexis, seating himself on his hummock.

She cast herself down on the slope and closed her eyes for a moment.

“You did that on purpose,” she said at last. “You don’t suppose I believe the story of the broken steering-rod?”

He smiled with some bitterness. Fate was for ever against him. The moment they met in this extravagant way, there started up the barrier of a lie.

“I couldn’t very well scare those young folks with a confession of attempted suicide, could I? After all, the naked truth may at times be positively indecent.”

“Then you intended to do it?”

“Oh, yes,” said he. “But it ended, like every other Great Adventure I’ve attempted in my life, in burlesque. I assure you, that when I found myself pitched into this clump of gorse and able to pick myself up with nothing worse than a gasping for breath, I—well—the humiliation of it!—I cursed the day I was born.”

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

She had scarcely regained balance. The situation seemed unreal. But a few minutes ago he had been far from her thoughts, which were concerned with the woman to whose possibly dying bed she had been summoned, with the dreary days at Medlow now that Blaise Olifant had gone, with the still beauty of the hills and their purple sunset shadows. And now, here she was, alone with him, remote from the world, conversing as dispassionately as though he had returned from the dead—as indeed he had almost returned. At her question, he threw his chauffeur’s cap on the grass and passed his hand over his hair. The familiar gesture, the familiar nervous brown hand brought her a step nearer to reality.

“If you can’t guess, it is useless for me to tell you,” he said. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

He took out a cigarette. She noted a trembling of the fingers.

“Do you mind?” She nodded, he lit the cigarette. “I thought here, at any rate, I was hidden from you for the rest of my life. It wouldn’t have been very long anyway. I had made up my mind some day soon to set you free of me—and to-day or to-morrow—what did it matter? I don’t ask you to believe that either. I don’t see how you can believe a word I say. I gave you to understand, that I was in Poland—you find me here. When did Myra tell you I was here?”

Returning sanity had corrected his first mad impression. How could she be a mile from Pendish if she had not heard from Myra? But she regarded him open-mouthed.

“Myra? What has Myra to do with it? Of course I had no conception you were here? I knew you were not in Poland. A man—a Pole—I forget his name—wrote to Major Olifant, last year, wondering what had become of you. You had never joined him——”

“Boronowski,” said Triona.

“That was the name——”

“And you took it for granted I had lied to him too.” Her eyes dropped beneath his half sad, half ironic gaze. She made a little despairing gesture.

“What would you have?”

“And Myra never told you anything about me?”

“You haven’t answered my question,” she said, straightening herself: “Where does Myra come in?”

“That’s rather a long story. I should prefer her to tell it to you. Myra knows everything about me since the day after you received my last letter over a year ago.”

She leaned forward, an angry spot burning on both cheeks. “Myra has been hiding you here all the time and has told me nothing about it!”

“She has her excellent reasons. She will tell you in a very few words——”

“She can’t. At any rate not now. She has been very ill with pneumonia. They thought she was dying and sent for me. Why otherwise should I be here?”

“Are you staying at Mrs. Pettiland’s?”

“Of course.”

“I didn’t even know Myra was in Pendish—I’m grieved to hear she’s ill. I’m afraid I’ve neglected Mrs. Pettiland of late. She was very kind to me.” He paused and added with a smile, “I see Myra’s loyalty. She forbade Mrs. Pettiland to mention the name of the young man called Briggs. You’ve never heard of such a person at Pendish.”

“Not a word,” said Olivia. “But I shall never forgive Myra. Never, never,” she cried indignantly. “To fool me like that!”

He caught sudden hope from the flash in her dark eyes.

“Would you have liked to know where I was?”

“I hate duplicity. I thought that Myra, at least—my God! Is there anybody in the world one can trust?”

Suddenly she turned on him. “What are you doing in that absurd livery?”

“I’ve been earning my living in it, since last August. I’ve done it before. It’s an honester way than many others.”

“Forgive me, if I don’t understand,” she said, still half-bewildered. “You have no need to earn your living by driving a car—a common chauffeur—unless——”

She checked herself with a little gasp—but his quick brain divined her impulsive thought.

“Unless I had taken to drink and gone to the bad, etcetera, etcetera——”

She interrupted him quickly. “No, no. I never thought that. It was a *reductio ad absurdum*. But on what other hypothesis——? You’ve still your brain, your talent, your genius. Your pen——”

“Which is mightier than the wheel,” he remarked.

“I don’t know why you didn’t go to Poland. Perhaps you’ll explain. Anyhow you didn’t. You came here—to the absolute quiet of the country. Why haven’t you gone on writing?”

“For the simple reason,” said he, “that Alexis Triona and all his works are dead. Washed out from the Book of Life. That side of me is all over and done with. You who know everything, can’t you understand?”

She caught the note of truth in his words and gradually there began to dawn on her the immensity of his artist’s sacrifice.

“Do you mean that you’re never going to write again?”

“Never,” said he. “Does this look like it?” and he touched the brass buttons on his livery.

She weakened through impatience at his aloofness, craving to know all that had happened to him, to get to the roots of Myra’s mysterious intrigue. His fatalistic attitude was maddening. The whole crazy combination of tragedy and farce that had set them down in the gorse-enclosed hollow of the hill-side, as though they were the only people on God’s earth, was maddening. The brass buttons were maddening. She flung sudden arms out wide.

“For God’s sake tell me everything that has happened to you.”

“If you’ll believe it,” said he.

She sat silent for a moment, feeling as though she were under his rebuke, and gazed over the valley at the hills black beneath the dying green and faded orange of the sunset. The thin smoke of the burned car mounted into the windless air faint with the smell of petrol fumes and scorched woodwork. And Triona looked down too and saw the end of the creation of his resurrection. He pointed to it.

“That was one of my little dreams,” he said gently. “A sort of rat trap on wheels—the most hopeless box of antiquated imbecility you can imagine. I took it into my head to recreate it. For a time I devoted my soul to it—and I made it a thing of life and speed and obedience. And there it lies dead, a column of smoke, like all dreams and, all my deliberate fault. Every system of philosophy, since the world began, has overlooked the ironical symbolism of life. That’s one; and my dream—smoke.”

She fell under the spell of his voice, although her brain revolted. Yet his note rang sincere in her heart—she knew not what to say. The sunset colours over the ridge of hills died into iron blue of the sky. A faint breeze stirred. She shivered with cold in her thin Tussore silk. He, watching her, saw the shiver.

“You’re cold, you must be getting back.” He rose.

She sprang to her feet before he could help her to rise.

"I'll see you to Mrs. Pettiland's."

They scrambled to the high road above them, and began to walk, in constrained silence. Suddenly she cried:

"You've hurt yourself. You're limping dreadfully. You told me you were unhurt——" She clutched his arm. "You can't go on like this."

"I'll go on like this," said he, thrilling under her touch, "to the day of my death. It has nothing to do with this evening's entertainment. I was smashed up by a motor-lorry over a year ago, as Myra will tell you. That's what knocked me out of Poland."

She echoed his words—"Smashed up by a motor-lorry?—It might have killed you—and I should have never known."

"Myra would have told you. As a matter of fact it very nearly did kill me."

She turned her head away with a shudder.

"And just now——"

"I ought to have waited till I had turned the corner—" he pointed out the bend a few yards in front of them. "Hell's Corner, they call it hereabouts. Then you wouldn't have seen me go over, and I might have had better luck."

He saw her turn deadly white, reel, and he tried to support her; but she slipped away from him and sat by the wayside. She thought she was going to faint again.

"For God's sake, don't talk like that. It's inhuman. It's unlike you. Even if you were a stranger it would be horrible."

"I'm only apologising for my existence," he said. "Fate has been against me—but, believe me, I have done my best."

After a while she rose, declaring herself better, and they struck off the road down the twisting lane that led to Pendish. The air was fragrant in the dusk.

"Tell me about that accident—how Myra came to know of it. I suppose you sent her word?"

"Perhaps when you have talked to Myra, you'll credit me at least with sincere intentions. If I had informed her, it would have been an indirect appeal to you."

"Perhaps it would have been wiser to appeal to me direct," said Olivia tonelessly. "I'm not devoid of common humanity."

"I couldn't have done that," he said gently. "I lay unconscious for weeks. When I came to my senses I found Myra had come the second morning I was in hospital. I had better begin with my meeting with the Pole, Boronowski—it's a simple matter."

To him, walking with this lost wife of his dreams, in the lovers' lane, the hour seemed fantastic. His voice sounded unreal in his ears. His heart lying heavy as lead within him was not the heart that he had thought would beat furiously at the ravishing sight of her. He told his story badly; just the salient facts, uninspired by the dramatic instinct which had made him colour so vividly the narration, a year ago, to Mrs. Pettiland, of his ridiculous adventure. This he barely sketched. For truth's sake he must tell her of the robbery and account for his penniless condition. It was not himself talking. It was not Olivia to whom he talked. One stranger's personality was talking through him to another's. At the end of the tale:

"You have changed greatly," she said.

"That's very possible." There was a pause. He continued. "And you? Forgive me. I haven't even asked whether you are well——"

"Oh, I've been all right. I spent the winter abroad, and now I'm staying with Mrs. Woolcombe at 'The Towers.' Major Olifant is away."

They came up suddenly against the wicket-gate of Mrs. Pettiland's garden. A light shone through the yet undrawn curtains in his old bedroom. He raised an enquiring hand.

"Myra?"

"Yes. I'm in Mrs. Pettiland's room in the front. She would give it up to me. I've been helping to nurse—as well as I can. I've been in all day. That's why I came out for a walk this evening."

"You must be tired."

"I am."

He waited, hoping against hope, for a word revoking his sentence. None came. The steel sinew that ran through him, and was answerable for all his accomplishment, stiffened. He would make no appeal *ad misericordiam*. He had suffered enough in expiation. He had come to the end of his tether. For pity masking the last year's hatred and contempt he had no use. He opened the gate for her. She passed in and he closed it and the click of the latch sounded like the crack of finality; for Olivia, taken almost unawares, as for Triona. They stood for a while, the wooden barrier between them, in the gathering darkness.

Impulsively she exclaimed: "We can't part like this, with a thousand things unexplained."

"I'm at your orders, Olivia," he replied.

She caught her breath and stiffened. "We must talk to-morrow—when we have both recovered."

“I’ll be here any hour you name,” said Alexis. Radnor and his garage could go to the devil.

“Nine o’clock?”

“Nine o’clock,” said he. “Good night, Olivia.”

“Wait.”

The memory of the scandal crashed down on her. . . .

“I may as well tell you now—the night may bring counsel—I’m in a terrible position. Wedderburn and Onslow—you remember?”

“I do,” he said.

She told him rapidly of her pledge.

“It doesn’t matter a scrap to me, but it’s a damnable thing for you,” said he.

“What answer would you make?”

“A clean breast of everything. Could you wish me to do anything else?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Give me time to think.”

“My time is yours, Olivia.”

She paused for a moment irresolute. There was a question she wished to put, but the thought of it made her feel sick and faint again.

“You’ll not do anything foolish, till I see you?”

“Nor anything wise,” said he. “I promise.”

Again there came between them a long embarrassed silence. At last——

“Good night,” she said.

“Good night, Olivia.”

She flung an angry hand in the darkness and slipped away into the house.

CHAPTER XXVII

MRS. PETTILAND met her at the foot of the stairs. She beamed rosily beneath the gas jet.

"Myra is so much better, Madam, after her sleep. The doctor came while you were out. I'm to make her some chicken broth."

Olivia mounted the stairs and entered the sick-room.

"Well dearie?"

She turned to the gaunt waxen face on the pillow.

"I'm so glad to hear the doctor's good report."

She forced herself to linger, speaking the commonplaces of the sick-room. Then she could bear it no longer.

"I'm dead tired," she said. "I'll go to bed. Nurse ought to be here soon. Have you everything you want for the night?"

Myra said in her even tones: "Have *you* everything you want for the night?" And at Olivia's quick glance of enquiry: "You look as if you'd seen a ghost. You have. I was afraid of it. I didn't want them to send for you, but I was too ill to stop them."

Olivia could not wreak her anger yet on the frail woman. But in her heart burned a furious indignation. She controlled her voice, and said as gently as she could:

"Why have you left me in ignorance for the past year?"

"I was biding my time," said Myra. "I was waiting for a sign and a token."

"From me?"

"From you, dearie. I had him here in the hollow of my hand. If you had wanted him, I could have given him to you. But you didn't want him—so you said. I wasn't so sure." She stretched her thin hand on the blanket, but Olivia stood, too much enwrapped in her thoughts to notice the appeal. "When I first saw him in hospital I hoped that he would die and set you free. But when I saw him convalescent, my heart was full of pity for him, and I repented of the sin of committing murder in my heart. And when I heard from my sister in-law that he was facing life like a brave man, I wondered whether I had been wrong and whether you had been wrong. If I say something to you, will you be angry with me?"

Olivia shrugged her shoulders. "Say anything you like."

The weak, even voice went on. "If Major Olifant hadn't left us, I should

have told you."

Olivia leaped at the thrust, her cheeks flaming.

"Myra! How dare you?"

The thin lips parted in a half smile.

"Have you ever known me not to dare anything for your good?"

Myra, with all the privileges of illness, had her at a disadvantage. Olivia was silenced. She unpinned her hat and threw it on a chair and sat by the bedside.

"I see that you acted for the best, Myra."

Not only her cheeks, but her body flamed at what seemed now the humiliating allusion. Myra was fully aware, if not of the actual kiss—oh, no—nothing horrible of servant's espionage in Myra—at any rate of the emotionality in which it had culminated—on her part sex, sense, the unexpected thrill, the elemental between man and woman, the hunger for she knew not what—but superficial, tearing at her nerves, but never, oh, never touching the bed-rock of her spiritual being. A great passionate love for Blaise, she knew, Myra with her direct vision, would have understood. For the assurance of her life's happiness Myra would have sacrificed her hope of eternal salvation.

But the worn woman who had had but one's week's great fulfilment of love in her life, knew what love meant, and she had sounded the shallows of her pitiful love—if love it could be called—for Blaise Olifant; and now, in her sad, fatalistic way she shewed her the poor markings of the lead.

"So you have seen him?" asked Myra quietly.

"Yes I've seen him. God knows how you know."

"Well?"

Her overstrained soul gave way. She broke into uncontrollable crying and sobbing, her little dark head on the blanket by Myra's side. And after a little came incoherent words.

"I've lost him—He doesn't care for me any more—He hates me—He tried to kill himself when he saw me—He was driving a car and put it over a precipice—Thank God—a miracle—he wasn't hurt—But he might have killed himself—He meant to—And it's all your fault—all your fault—If only you had told me. . . ."

Myra put her thin hand on the dear dark hair and caressed it till the paroxysm was over.

"I loved a thing that was scarcely a man till the day of his death, for I had

memories, dearie, of him when he was a man to be loved. You've got a living man for a husband. And you loved yours as much as I loved mine. And he's a living and suffering man. Go to him—" her hand still played feebly caressing the black mass of her hair. "Fate has brought you together again. He's your man, whom you vowed to help in sickness or in health. I kept mine in sickness. Thank God, your man's sickness is nothing like mine. Go to him, dearie. Humble yourself if need be . . . I've been very ill. I've thought and thought and thought—I've an idea that illness clears one's brain—and all my thoughts have been for you. For me there's nothing left. I've thought of him and you. I've thought of what he has done and what you have done—And, with all his faults, he's a bigger human being than you are, dearie. Go to him."

Olivia raised a tragic face.

"How can I? He doesn't want me."

"A man doesn't try to kill himself for a woman he doesn't want. You had better go to him."

And Olivia went. She slipped out of the house at eleven o'clock, after a couple of hours of wrestling with ugly and vain devils. Who was she, after all? What had she done to add a grain to the world's achievement? What had she found in her adventure into the world that had been worth the having save the love of the man that was her husband? Many phases of existence had passed procession-wise through her life. All hollows and shams. The Lydian galley, with its Mavennas and Bobby Quintons. The mad Blenkirons. The gentle uninspiring circle of little Janet Philimore. The literary and artistic society for the few months of Alexis's lionization—pleasant, but superficial, always leaving her with the sense of having fallen far short of a communion that might have been. Nothing satisfying but the needs and the childish wants and the work and the uplifting spirit of the one man. And after the great parting what had there been? Her life in Medlow devoid of all meaning—Her six months travel—a feeding of self to no purpose. An existence of negativity. Blaise Olifant. She flamed, conscious of one thing at last positive, and positive for ill. She had played almost deliberately with fire. Otherwise why had she gone back to Medlow? She had brought unhappiness to a very noble gentleman. It had been in his power, as a man, to sweep her off her feet in a weak hour of clamouring sex. He had spared her—and she now was unutterably grateful. For she had never loved him. She could not love him. His long straight nose. She grew half hysterical. Even when he had kissed her she had been conscious of that long straight nose. She withered at the thought.

She slipped out of the house into the soft night. Pendish, with its double line of low, whitewashed, thatched cottages, one a deep shadow, the other clear in the moonlight, lay as still as a ghostly village of the middle ages. The echo

of her light footsteps frightened her. Surely windows would fly open and heads peer out challenging the disturber of peace.

She was going to him. Why, she scarcely knew. Perhaps through obedience to Myra. Myra's bloodless lips, working in the waxen, immobile face lit, if dull glimmer could be called light, by the cold china blue eyes, had uttered words little less than oracular. Myra had been waiting for a sign or a token from her that had never come. She walked through the splendid silence of the country road, beneath the radiance of a moon above the hills illuminating a mystery of upland and vale shrouded in the vaporous garments of the land asleep. Hurrying along the white ribbon of road she was but a little dark dot on the surface of a serenely scornful universe.

She was going to him. He was her man. All that she knew of the meaning of existence came from him. Moonlight and starlight and the mystery of the night shimmering through its veil of enchantment faded from her eyes. She felt nervous arms around her and kisses on her lips, and she heard him speaking the winged words of imagination, lifting her into his world of genius.

"A man doesn't try to kill himself for a woman he doesn't want."

So spake Myra. Olivia walked, the dull tones in which the words were uttered thudding in her ears. It was her one hope of salvation. Kill himself! This was not a falsehood. She had seen the act with her own horror-stricken eyes. She remembered a phrase of Blaise Olifant's: "He is being blackmailed by one lie."

She realized, with sudden shock, her insignificant loneliness in the midst of this vast moonlit silence of the earth. In presence of the immensities she was of no account. For the first time she became aware of her own failure. She had been weighed in the balance of her love for her husband and had been found wanting. In the hour of his bitter trial, she had failed him. In the hour when a word of love, of understanding, which meant forgiveness, would have saved him, she had put him from her. She had lived on her own little vanities without thought of the man's torture. She had failed him then. She had failed him to-day.

"A man doesn't try to kill himself for a woman he doesn't want."

She strode on, her cheeks burning. All that of extravagance which he had done this past year had been for her sake. For all wrong he had done her, he had sought the final expiation in death. She had failed him again in this supreme crisis. She had whined to Myra that he no longer loved her. And she had not given him—that which even Myra was waiting for—a sign and a token.

She was going to him, nearing him. Already she entered the straggling end

of Fanstead. How would he receive her? If he cast her off, she would perish in self-contempt. She went on. An unsuspecting Mrs. Pettiland had told her, in answer to a question which she strove to keep casual, the whereabouts of the Quantock Garage. The sign above an open gateway broke suddenly on her vision. She entered a silent courtyard. A light was burning in a loft above a closed garage, and a wooden flight of steps ran up to it. The door was open and on the threshold sat a man, his feet on the top stair, his head buried in his hands. She advanced, her heart in her mouth.

The moon shone full on him. She uttered a little whispering cry:

"Alexis!"

He started to his feet, gazed at her for a breathless second and scrambled with grotesque speed down the rickety staircase and caught her in his arms.

She mounted the stairs to his loft, furnished with pallet bed and camp washing apparatus, a wooden chair, a table bearing unsightly remains of crust and cheese, and littered with books in corners and on the uncarpeted floor. All her remorse and pity and love gushed over him—over the misery of the life to which she had condemned him by her littleness of soul and her hardness of heart. She did not spare herself; but of this profanity he would hear nothing. She had come to him. She had forgiven him. The Celestial Hierarchy would be darkened by the presence of one so radiantly angelic.

She clutched him tight to her. "Oh, my God, if you had been killed!"

Exultant, he cried in his old way: "Nothing could kill me, for I was born for your love."

They talked through the night into the sweet-scented June dawn. They would face the world fearlessly together. First the Onslow and Wedderburn challenge to be taken up. She would stand by his side through all the obloquy. That was the newer meaning of her life. If they were outcasts what did it matter? They could not be other than splendidly outcast. He responded in his eager way to her enthusiasm. *Magna est veritas et prævalebit.* With never a shadow between them, what ecstasy would be existence.

They crept downstairs like children into the summer morning.

But as they had planned so did it not turn out. Rowington gave news that Onslow and Wedderburn had dropped the question. Why revive dead controversy? But Triona and Olivia insisted. The letter on the origin of *Through Blood and Snow*, signed "John Briggs" appeared in *The Times*. A few references to it appeared in the next weekly Press. But that was all. No one was interested. *Through Blood and Snow* was forgotten. The events of 1917 in

Russia were ancient history. As well worry over fresh scandals concerning Catherine the Great. What did the reading world care what Alexis Triona's real name was, or how he had obtained the material for his brilliant book?

This summary of the effect of attempted literary and social suicide was put clearly before them in a long letter from Rowington a month or so afterwards.

"But we want another novel from Alexis Triona. When are we going to get it?"

They had stayed on indefinitely at Pendish, ostensibly awaiting Myra's complete convalescence, and incidentally, as they told themselves, having their second honeymoon. At first she took it for granted that he would resign his post at the Quantock Garage.

"I'm not going to begin life again by breaking my word," said he. "I promised to see him over his honeymoon."

"That's a bit mad and Quixotic," said Olivia.

"So's all that's worth having in life, my dear," said he.

So she had settled down for the time with her chauffeur husband, and meanwhile had been feeding him into health.

They read the letter together.

"It's no use," wrote Rowington, "to start again under the Briggs name. You've told the world that Triona is a pseudonym. Alexis Triona means something. John Briggs doesn't."

"He's quite right," said Olivia.

"As you will," he said. "I give in. But you can't say I've not done my very best to kill Alexis Triona."

"And you can't. Fate again. And—Alexis dear—I never knew John Briggs."

They were in the sea-haunted parlour. After a while he took up the pink conch-shell and fingered it lovingly. Then, with a laugh, he put it to her ear.

"What does it say?"

She listened a while, handed him back the shell and looking up at him out of her dark eyes, laughed the laugh of deep happiness.

"I'll go with you, dear—to any South Sea Island you like."

"Will you?" he cried. "We'll go. And I'll write a novel full of the beauty of God's Universe and you."

Myra came in to lay the luncheon table. Olivia leaped up and threw her arms around the thin shoulders.

"Myra dear, you'll have to pack up quick. We're going to Honolulu to-

morrow."

"You must make it the day after," said Myra. "The laundry doesn't come till to-morrow night."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Inserted word marked with square bracket around insertion. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Tale of Triona* by William J. (John) Locke]