

FAMILY JOURNAL

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FAMILY JOURNAL

THE MAN SHE LOVED

By Basil Seldon

THE OUTCAST.

HE had walked miles and miles under the glare of an almost tropical sun, across desolate places, with the grass burn brown by the heat, beside water-courses reduced to a narrow trickle; on rough paths, through thickets of prickly shrubs, through forests of gum trees.

Sometimes, in the distance, the bark of a dog had warned him that he was in the vicinity of a house, but he was careful not to let anyone see him.

Sometimes he sat down to rest, his mind all the time upon the town he was trying to reach, wondering if, when he got there, he would find work.

And always he walked with head sunk between his shoulders, like a man who carries a great burden.

In his case it was the burden of a youth misspent, of a fine career cut short by his own folly, of a home from which he had been banished.

But it did not do to sum up everything that had happened in his life.

When he reached the town, if there was work, he would take care that he had no time for thought.

All the same he was thinking—it would be winter in England. Perhaps the world would be wrapped in a garment of white; or it might be that the woods round Larkdale village—that sweet corner of the old country—were like fairy palaces with hoarfrost.

In the plantation behind the Hall the rooks would be cawing, the starlings chattering.

Perhaps there would be skating on the lake in West Park.

His brothers—there were four younger than himself, and one older. Some were but schoolboys still—would be there, with the girls from the vicarage over the way, and perhaps the doctor's two daughters.

Suddenly he sat down and covered his eyes with his hands.

It was ten years since he had seen them—ten weary years. Ten years since his father had called him into his study—such a stiff, precise man his father—and had handed him two hundred pounds.

He could see his father's face now, hear his voice.

"This is the last, Nichol, that I can afford to do for you. There is a limit to my income, though you don't seem to realise it. There are your brothers to educate and start in life, and I do not see why they should suffer for your reckless extravagance. Besides, you have deliberately set yourself to annoy me and your mother by courting a village girl—one whom we do not feel justified in receiving into our home. Your passage is paid out to Australia; you will start to-morrow."

How well he remembered it all!

His father had seen him on board the next day, to make sure that he had started

on his journey; but he did not know that some of the money that same night had passed into the hands of Clara Abbott, the daughter of the village innkeeper, to pay her passage out as well.

Did his people guess that she had come to him, and that he had married her?

A groan escaped him as he sat there, looking more like a bundle of rags than anything else, for his clothes were threadbare. It seemed a far cry from Larkdale Hall, in England, to that wreck of manhood in the Australian bush.

The heat must have made him drowsy, for when he looked up again he saw that it was night, and a great golden moon was swinging over the horizon.

He must have been asleep, and what had wakened him was the sound of music and singing.

A girl's voice, not very high, but sweet and deep, with a note in it like a thrush.

There must be a house near, for he could hear the words she sang quite distinctly—

*"I saw the old homestead and faces I loved;
I saw England's valleys and dells,
I listened with joy as I did when a boy
To the sound of the old village bells."*

Sweetly, clearly, the words floated out into the still night. He sat motionless, listening.

It must be someone from the old country.

He had a sudden desire to get away from the girl who was singing, who was bringing back memories he did not want to recall.

Getting to his feet, he stumbled blindly forward.

A sharp bend in the path and he stood still again.

Behind a fence to the left was the house—big, square, darker by contrast with the bright light that came through the open door.

Fascinated, he went towards it, and standing on the threshold, he looked in. He saw several men sitting about, and two girls in neat dresses, another girl sat at a piano and played while she sang.

The outcast stared at the girl at the piano—at a face that brought back again the memories that had been troubling him, a face that seemed to belong to a lost youth he had left so very far behind.

EDRIS HUMBERSTONE played and sang to the people who worked on the farm, that had been her father's, and was now hers.

It was the result of years of hard work, that sheep farm.

They had come out from England—her father, mother, brother and herself—with very little money, but a strong determination to get on, and they had succeeded beyond their wildest expectations.

The farm, that was now in the sole possession of the girl, was one of the finest in that part of the country. But it had not

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come to her without much sorrow.

She had lost her mother within three years of coming out, and last year her father and brother had been drowned in one of the sudden floods that filled the creek lying between the farm and the nearest town.

She had been alone ever since, save for the two women servants.

Having helped her men-folk to build up their fortunes among the sheep, while her mother managed the house, Edris knew a good deal about farming, and with the friendly assistance and advice of the men who had served her father, had to carry on.

To-day was the anniversary of the day William Humberstone had first come to Silvercreek, and always, before his death, he had gathered his people around him that day for a little feast and a sing-song. Edris now kept up the custom.

As she sang she was thinking of home—in England. She had more memories in the Norfolk village she had left seven years ago than anyone knew about, memories that she kept to herself and allowed none to know about, memories that had given her a vaguely sad outlook upon life.

They were not sufficiently acute to rob her youth of its gladness, to bring a shadow to her clear eyes, only she had never been able to put another man in the place of the one who had been her ideal lover in those far-off days in England.

"Let's have that one over again, miss," the latest newcomer—a lad who hadn't been in Australia quite a year—made his request in a rather diffident voice.

So Edris started again, and this time the others joined in. She knew it so well that she could play it without the music, and while she sang her thoughts were still busy with the homeland.

Had she been there she would have been putting on hat and coat before going down the long, narrow lane to the old grey church—she and her mother and her brother, perhaps. And she would have passed in through the old doors, taking care to keep her eyes from the pew at the front—the squire's pew, where the boys and their father and mother sat.

But why should she think of that now? The squire's son had never given her a thought.

There was no reason why he should, for he was not of her world. But she had made an ideal of him, perhaps because he was so far above her, perhaps because he was different from other young men, perhaps because he had always treated her with a deference that was so fascinating.

The memories brought tears to her eyes, and because she did not want anyone to see them, she turned her face towards the door.

And there—

The music broke with a crash as she stared into a pair of haggard eyes outside, then she started to her feet with a little cry as the man gazing into the room swayed and fell.

She was at the door—down on her knees beside the fallen man, looking into the face that the great white moon was showing up so plainly.

"Nicol—Nicol Loftus—the squire's son," she whispered.

There was astonishment and consternation in her tones, and above all, a world of tenderness that would have given her carefully guarded secret away had there been anyone near enough to hear.

But there was none, though they were coming out of the house, and presently two of the men carried the wanderer indoors.

When he opened his eyes they went straight to the young mistress of the farm.

The lad who had asked for the song to be sung over again drew back a little into the shadows.

"So they know each other," he thought, a little bitterly, for Phil Harrington loved Edris Humberstone, and had a dream of some time seeking her as his wife.

Now this stranger had come to spoil it all!

Although the newcomer looked at Edris in such a way that convinced Phil that this was no first meeting, he did not claim any acquaintance with her.

After the first look he turned his eyes away.

"I must apologize for interrupting," he said weakly, "but the fact is I have walked too far, and—"

"And you're hungry," put in the elder of the women. "Betty, bring the soup you've hotted up."

It was she who helped him to partake of it, while Edris stood by, a sad look in her beautiful eyes.

Not like this had she expected to meet the hero of her girlhood!

Sometimes her thoughts had turned upon the possibility of an encounter, but she had always imagined him prosperous; she could not think any other. Was not his father squire in the village where her father had been a small farmer?

He finished his soup and rose.

He should have been a fine figure of a man, for he stood quite six feet, and was well-built, too. But privation had robbed him of a great deal of his strength.

"I'd better be going," he said. "I am on my way to the next town in search of work. Thank you for your kindness."

"Oh, you must not go—you are not well enough," Edris moved towards him impulsively. "It is quite late; you will stay to-night? The town is more than six miles away, you will never manage that distance without some rest. You will be able to resume your journey to-morrow."

He looked at her queerly for a moment.

"You are very good to take a stranger in like this," he said slowly, "but—I'd rather go."

The colour came and went in the girl's cheeks. A stranger! Didn't he know her, then?

Yet it was hardly likely that he would remember her after all these years. Her face was not enshrined in his heart as his had been in hers. And he had loved someone else—a village girl, like herself.

Not a nice girl, either. People used to wonder at young "Mr. Nicol's" infatuation for Clara Abbott, who was commonly described as a "brazen-faced young madam."

She was older than Edris and Edris knew little of her personally, though what little she had known had not commended her very greatly.

"You are very kind," he repeated, with, it seemed, some difficulty; "but if you won't think me ungrateful, I—"

Then, quite unexpectedly, the decision was taken out of his hands.

Without warning he collapsed again upon the couch.

IT was some days before he was able to leave his bed.

Perhaps desire was lacking, too; perhaps he found it very pleasant to lie between cool, clean sheets, to be waited upon by a kindly woman who seemed to find nothing too much trouble. To rest by the way for a little time, even if there was that weary tramping after work to follow.

He would have found it difficult to stay, so he told himself, had Edris recognized him.

He knew her, of course, though she had been only a tall, unformed girl of sixteen when he had last seen her, with a cloud of dusky hair that gave a kind of elusive charm to her rose flushed face and sparkling grey eyes.

Oh, he could not fail to recognize her! Even when he was so madly infatuated with Clara he had always said that there was not such another pair of grey eyes as Edris Humberstone's in the world. He would have known them anywhere.

But, he was sure, it was not possible for her to associate the shabby wreck who had tumbled down at her door with "handsome Nic Loftus" as he had been styled in those old, far-away days.

Not that he had any special interest in her, only that she came from Larkdale, that happy village shut in between woods.

But she would have friends there with whom she corresponded, and so it might get about to what depths he had sunk.

How they would laugh—his brothers, who were all, presumably, going the way they should—his father, his mother, if mothers ever did laugh over the downfall of their prodigal sons.

She was singing somewhere about the house, that girl with the voice that reminded him of the thrushes that sang round Larkdale.

Did she guess of what he had been thinking?

But that was absurd—of course, she could not. She didn't know him.

She had touched him afresh, brought such a rush of regret and longing over him, that he threw his arms across the pillow and buried his face in them.

"I must get out of this," he said to himself. "I must not stay any longer. It will not matter to her, but to myself—"

The thought would not bear finishing, with a sudden determination he sat up and looked about him.

His clothes were beside him, neatly folded. Examining them he found that they had been washed and mended. He got up and put them on with an unaccustomed feeling of comfort; then, he went out to find his hostess.

He had hesitated a moment again, contemplating his bearded face, undecided whether he should avail himself of the shaving set that lay on the dressing-table.

It was a temptation, but caution warned him that she might recognise him, and that he could not bear.

He never once thought that it was possible she had recognized him already, that to her he was as unforgettable as she was to him.

So just as he was, he went out.

She was on the veranda, sewing and singing to herself in that deep, sweet voice. As he came out she looked round at him with a smile.

"So you are better?" she said. "I'm very glad."

He came forward a little hesitantly.

"So much better that I must not trespass longer on your kindness," he replied.

The white cotton that she was fashioning into a frock slipped from her hands.

She made a movement as if she were bracing herself for some effort as she slowly rose from her chair.

"Who has told you—or hinted—that you were trespassing?" she asked. "Marion has been pleased to attend to you. She tells me that you have been no trouble."

"That was when I was ill. Now I am quite recovered I must be going. It has been very good of you to take me in. Perhaps, had you known how little I deserve it, you would not have been so kind."

Suddenly he stopped. She was looking at him, her lips smiling. The colour was very deep in her cheeks, and had he not been so obsessed with the idea of getting away, he must have heard the catching of her breath in her throat.

The look in her eyes, the smile on her lips arrested him, he could not move. He could only stand and wait, trembling like a foolish boy.

Then suddenly she moved towards him and laid her hand on his arm.

"Come and sit down, Nicol," she said gently. "Let us talk matters over."

The shock of surprise bowled him over, though when he thought of it afterwards it was not surprise really, for the look on her face had prepared him.

It was the putting it into words that affected him so much.

He sat down unresisting.

She had known all along who he was; it was not as a stranger she had succoured him, it was because he was part of her old life.

Was it possible that he was glad?

"I did not think you would recognize me," he said, after a long pause.

She smiled again; she had seated herself also, in the big basket chair which she had occupied when he came out, but she did not resume her sewing. It lay in a crumpled heap at her feet.

"I did not think you recognized me, either, until you came to me just now without shaving. I knew then—an English gentleman finds it difficult to resist the lather brush unless he is bent on keeping his identity a secret. I'm glad the farce is ended—we can talk business."

"Business?"

She nodded. The colour burnt brightly in her cheeks.

"It is always business first, isn't it? It must be when one has one's living to think of. Now, have you any work to go to?"

She spoke in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone that put him at his ease. He answered with but a light show of hesitation.

"No."

"Then you may perhaps care to stop here? We are a man short and shall be glad of help."

Still she maintained her quiet, business manner, but he still hesitated.

"You don't know what you are doing to ask me," he said slowly. "You don't know anything about me. It is years since I left home, and since then—"

He paused as again those wonderful grey eyes of hers met his.

"I know that Nicol Loftus could never be anything but a gentleman," she said quietly.

"But he was a black sheep. You ought to know something about me before you repeat your generous offer. You ought to—"

"I don't want to know," she interrupted. "What you have done, or not done, is your own business. I will not have any man confess his faults to me. However one may sink, there is usually the time in the life of every man when he reaches the turning point, and—"

"You think I have reached that point?"

She shook her head, smiling still, though her eyes were very grave.

"I hope so. Are you going to be my hired man? Just think of what it will be to me! We can talk of Larkdale together. I haven't seen anyone from Larkdale, or heard from the place, since we left. I've been nearly eight years in the bush, and for one I've been quite alone. Nicol, you're going to stay?"

There were tears in the grey eyes, tears that threatened to brim over.

He crushed down the last indecision. She had no communication with the old home. It was not likely that his people would learn from her how he had sunk. And she was lonely.

People from the same place, meeting in a strange land, have a tie almost as close as that of blood.

How did she come to be alone? he wondered. He had a recollection of a strong, hearty man who was her father, of a fine young fellow who was her brother, was her brother, of a mother. All dead, he supposed.

Well, if he stayed, he would hear, and he might hear something of his own folk.

Her recollections of them were two years later than his own. She would be able to tell him something that he did not know.

He took the outstretched hand, bowing over it with something of the old courtesy that had distinguished him in those long-dead years.

"Yes, I will stay," he said, "if you will promise to treat me exactly as a hired man."

She drew her hand away, laughing softly.

"A hired man does his mistress's bidding," she said. "Go at once and shave, then come and have tea with me. Afterwards it will be cooler, and I'll show you round."

As he went to do as she commanded, she leaned forward in her chair, and clasping her hands round her knees, gazed smilingly into the sunny distance.

The smiling acres of her sheep-farm rolled away in undulations, a little brown from the long heat, but showing signs of prosperity in the flocks of woolly creatures brown from the long heat, but showing signs of prosperity in the flocks of woolly creatures that browsed or basked there in the sunshine.

There were more acres further away, beyond the belt of gum trees that blocked the horizon, more acres and more sheep, and nearer there was a beautiful flower-garden.

The pleasanter side of life had not been forgotten by William Humberstone when he had set out to win his fortune.

He had planned his garden after the English fashion, had introduced as many English plants as he could.

There were roses in abundance, and lilies, mingling a little strangely with the Australian blooms. And to one side of the garden was an orchard, heavy with ripening fruits.

Through the orchard there trickled a stream that rarely dried—a wonderful thing in this land—and that kept the grass underneath the trees green all the year round.

Up to the veranda wattle trees shook their yellow flowers, and made one think of laburnums in England in May-time.

It was here the eyes of the girl rested last, misty with dreams, while her lips smiled.

Why should she not dream? Had she not found him again, the man whom in her youth she had crowned king of all men! Was he not under her roof? Was he not to stay here?

Who knew what the future would bring forth?

She had been very lonely in the home—stead since the tragic end of her father and brother. The servants were all right, fond of her and good in every sense, but they were not companions, they never would be.

Besides, the place needed a man. And why shouldn't Nicol Loftus be that man? He had not strayed across her path for nothing.

She would need to go carefully, for she was a rich woman and he was poor, and pride was synonymous with the name of Loftus of Larkdale Hall.

But she might break down his pride if ever he should come to care for her enough.

She did not know, indeed, no one in Larkdale had ever known, of that disastrous marriage with Clara Abbott. The girl had disappeared shortly after Nicol Loftus had left home, but even her parents professed ignorance of her whereabouts.

Had she even guessed at such a thing, Edris Humberstone would not have sat there dreaming in the drowsy, golden sunshine.

She did not guess, and presently Nicol Loftus came out again, looking very handsome and even distinguished, despite his worn and patched clothing.

A little straighter in figure, a little less bitter about the mouth and eyes too—because, perhaps, a girl with a sweet and gracious smile had stretched out her hand to help him.

In the pleasant room that had been given over to him he had registered many a vow as he endeavoured to make himself presentable.

She had trusted him; he would show her that he was worthy of her trust.

He would work as her hired man, keeping her interests uppermost always, remembering always what she had delivered him from, and he would crush the baser part of his nature that he had allowed to get so complete a mastery.

For her sake. For her sake he would be steady, sober, and industrious—because she had said that a Loftus could not be anything but a gentleman.

As for those ten years of his life, beginning with that sordid marriage, he would blot them out. They should be as if they had never been.

No need to tell her about that since, presumably, she did not know. No need to rake up any more of those bitter memories.

He would be her hired man, and for himself, he would never have any interest in a woman again. Love was over for him.

He had loved Clara Abbott with a lad's first romantic love; he had admired her, worshipped her for her beauty, for the thousand graces that he had imagined she possessed.

And she had thrust his love back upon him.

She had helped him spend the money that his father had given him to start in life with, and when that was gone she had laughed at him, mocked him, and finally left him.

He hadn't seen her for more than five years; he had not spoken with her for nine. She was alive—he knew that. She had managed to get money somehow.

But he had no money, so what was the use? Besides, women were nothing to him—less than nothing. His heart was dead.

It had been killed when he learnt that the girl he had loved so madly had married him for the money he might give her.

So he drank tea with Edris Humberstone on the veranda, and afterwards she showed him over the farm, telling him of her father's early struggles, touching lightly upon his death and that of her brother, because the wound still hurt so.

And from that they began to talk of Larkdale and the people there.

Now the sun was setting, a glory of scarlet and orange behind the orchard trees, touching the boles between which they passed with red fire, and making the fruit above them—peaches, plums and apples—glow like jewels among the deep green of their leaves.

Above their heads a flock of white cockatoos flew screaming to their perches in the encircling forest, and the last beams of the sinking sun caught the amber of their crests and made them shine like gold.

Perhaps it was the time, that mystic time before day is dead and night is born, that made them linger upon those old days; perhaps it was an expression, suddenly seen on the man's face, that made Edris break the conversation as she turned into a narrow winding path between the fruit trees.

"I want to show you your new home," she said, and presently paused where a gate, set in a high hedge, shut in a large, uncultivated square of ground surrounding a log house.

For a moment she hesitated, leaning one hand upon the gate. She was not looking at him just then, but across at the building.

"It has never been occupied," she said. "It was built for my brother."

Her voice shook, there was a sound like a strangled sob as she finished, and suddenly Nicol felt a desire to take her in his arms and comfort her.

She was so lonely, and so was he—alone and disillusioned.

She was speaking again.

"You will be quite near. There is a gate at the other end, giving on to the back of my house. You will come and sit with me, will you not?"

He folded his arms across his chest. Why was he troubled again with that desire to take her in his arms? Why was he telling himself that he had always thought those eyes of hers the most beautiful he had ever seen, even when he had loved Clara?

"I am your hired man, Miss Humberstone," he said quietly.

She did not speak for a moment, though he was not looking at her, he knew she leaned further on the gate, and that her hands suddenly clenched.

"You are very proud," she said at last. "I suppose a Loftus could not—not—"

He laid his hand for a moment on her clenched ones—only for a moment. Then he drew a little away and leaned also against the gate.

"Miss Humberstone," he said, "when we met, after so many years, I made many resolutions. Would you care to hear some of them?"

She nodded, and he went on—

"One was to let drink alone and cards, and to keep from bad company, for the sake of the kindness of one woman; another was not to trespass on the kindness of that woman; even though she would be generous enough to look upon a poor wreck of manhood as a friend, not to allow her to do so. You understand?"

Again she nodded, and again for a minute there was silence; then she roused herself and turned her back on the house.

"Some resolutions are—are better broken, Nicol," she said softly.

LOVE'S MAGIC

NICOL LOFTUS had moved into his house.

With her two helpers, Edris had arranged the rooms, and contrived to make it quite a pleasant place.

Nicol was not the first wreck of a man who had come to Silvercreek Farm and been helped to pull himself together again, but he was the first in whom she had taken a special interest.

She had not met him like this without suffering.

One does not see one's ideal in the mire without a good deal of heartache.

And her feeling towards him had been such that, though it had not spoil her life or made her particularly unhappy, she had never been able to put another in his place.

Had he not crossed her path again she might have done something when the loneliness of her life had become too unbearable, or she might, as she had more than once thought of doing, have sold the farm and returned to England.

There would be enough money to allow her to live comfortably, for with money one can do a great deal. One can make friends, enjoy oneself, though, as she had never been used to much company, she might have found it somewhat difficult to take to such a life.

Still, it had occurred to her, but now she put the thought aside.

Nicol Loftus was here, and she was no longer lonely; life had suddenly become worth while again.

Even though he adhered to his resolve to be just her hired man, she did not feel very disappointed.

He was here, and that was enough.

With the freedom from temptation, and the better conditions, he was losing the dejected stoop; the fine shoulders were straighter, the eyes becoming clearer.

A handsome man still, despite the somewhat worn face—a man who would have stood out in a crowd.

The girl marked the change with secret exultation. No matter that there had been a difference between them at the beginning, time had levelled things. She was able to help him; he had accepted her help, he was hers.

Her favour towards the new man was not unmarked by the other hands, and he was looked upon somewhat askance consequently. There was more than a little grumbling among them.

"I've served her father for seven years, and her for more than one, with my best," Jake Wilkinson, the head man, said one afternoon, when they had gathered together. "She never was nought but pleased with me. And now yon man's come, and she's here and there talking to him, and he must have a house away from the rest of us, as if he was somebody big. And when she speaks of him, it's 'Mr. Loftus this' and 'Mr. Loftus that', as if plain Nic wasn't good enough for the likes of him same as Jake is for me."

"And I've been here a year or more," Phil Harrington put in, "and she never asks me to her house same as I heard her ask him one day. 'Nicol, I shall expect you up for tea to-day,' says she. Up to tea—him! What's her better than any other chap, I'd like to know?"

They did not guess that the little attentions of the girl did not afford any satisfaction to Nicol Loftus.

Not that he did not appreciate them, and thank her in his heart a thousand times, though there were occasions when his lips

refused to utter the words, and his manner seemed almost churlish.

But every day the deception that he was practising towards her weighed more heavily upon him.

He was sure that she had no idea that he was married, and conscience, newly awakened, told him repeatedly that she ought to know.

Not that it could matter to her, so he would tell himself; but for him—it was impossible for a man to be near Edris Humberstone and not feel the charm of her.

He had admired her as a child; as a woman she was everything that man could desire. She was sweet and sympathetic, essentially womanly, and yet she was eminently sensible.

Before he had been there a week he learned that she managed the business part of the farm entirely herself, and could make it pay, too; that she understood all there was to know about sheep-rearing and fruit-growing.

She had poultry, also, that gave a plentiful supply of eggs, besides birds for the table.

And with it all, she was always fresh and dainty, and held the household reins firmly in her capable and pretty hands.

Oh, a woman in a thousand! But he had nothing to do with women. One had made shipwreck of his life, and never another should trouble him as long as he lived.

So the other men need not have envied him; he was not to be envied.

ONE evening, as he was leaning on his gate, smoking, young Phil Harrington, strolling up the orchard path, pulled up in front of him.

"I say, you!" he began, truculently, "we want you to clear out."

Nicol took the pipe from between his lips and laid it on the gate post. From his splendid height he looked down at the square-set, middle-sized young man.

"You want me to clear out?" He repeated the demand as a question.

The other nodded.

"You see, it's like this," he said. "You are too much in favour with Miss Edris—see? We're most of us in love with her, and—"

"I see." Nicol picked up his pipe again. "Well, I'm not trying to cut you out. Though, how any of you have the nerve to imagine you're good enough for her I can't think."

The lad laughed shortly.

"We don't. We only hope to make good so's we can have a chance. It's a race with some of us. One of the men's saved a goodish bit, and he's reckoning to make a bit more soon; and I'm not without prospects."

Nicol struck a match and relit his pipe.

"All this does not matter to me," he said. "As I told you before, I'm not out to become any man's rival."

"That isn't it," the other said quickly. "It's this. Ever since you came, Miss Edris hasn't had eyes for any other fellow, and—well, you've got to clear—see?"

"I see," Nicol replied quietly. "But that doesn't say that I am going."

"It means that you'll have no choice," the young man said, as he turned on his heel.

Nicol leaned on the gate, smoking his pipe and listening to the firm steps fading away down the orchard path.

It was dark now—a soft, warm, brooding darkness that wrapped about him like a living thing, with clinging hands.

Warm, soft hands, like those that had

touched his when she had asked him to stay.

Now someone else had asked him to go—had almost commanded him.

Of course it was nonsense what the fellow said—rank nonsense. She hadn't any particular interest in him, except that he came from her own native village.

She could not have. No girl could be interested in the poor wreck of a fellow who came to Silvercreek that night.

He had almost begun to be happy here. He was forgetting the lost years. He couldn't go while she wished him to stay. The fellow was ridiculous—ridiculous!

Unless—!

Suddenly a question seemed to be hurled at him—a question that demanded an answer.

Why had she made such a point of him staying?

It was ridiculous—absurd! It was impossible! She could not care for him—she could not. It was just conceit to even imagine such a thing!

Yet she had been nearly grown-up when he left Larkdale and he had been known throughout the county as "handsome Nic Loftus."

She had known him at once, in spite of the wreck he was.

The pipe went out unnoticed by him as he leaned there with the shadows about him, while the heart that he had thought killed by a woman's perfidy began to stir with renewed life.

Like a blow upon him came the realisation that he loved Edris, that the feelings he had felt for the girl he had made his wife was nothing compared with this new love that had come to him.

That was but a flame that had burned itself out, leaving a scar behind it. This was a fire that would burn bright for ever.

And as the stars came out, big and white in the dusky-blue sky, the voices of multitudes of frogs came from the bed of the creek which the dry weather had converted into a swamp, mingled with the notes of the cicada and the cry of the curlew.

He remembered a night in Larkdale, just such a warm, oppressive night, when he had been coming down one of the Norfolk lanes.

Half-way along he had met a young girl, and he had thought then that the face looking at him from out of the shadows was the sweetest he had ever seen.

That night might have changed his life if he had not been blind with that mad love for Clara Abbott. It would not have been too late then.

But now—what was he going to do?

He did not know—only that it was impossible to stay here any longer.

Slowly he went into the house. Here were evidences of her thought for him. She had been in while he was at work and had put a jar, filled with flowers from her garden, on his window-ledge.

There were not many left, he knew, the ever-increasing heat had withered most of them up, but while any lingered there would be some to spare for him.

He bent down and laid his lips to a rose whose fragile white beauty reminded him of Edris.

She was white now, the intense heat had drained the lovely colour from her cheeks.

He had mentioned the loss of her colour only this afternoon, and she had laughingly told him that she was waiting for the rainy season to bring the roses back again.

Would she mind very much if he went? Would the fellows think they had driven him away?

He wouldn't have gone for them; he had no coward's fear of their threats. What was driving him, what he was afraid of, was his own heart.

It did not take long to make his preparations—a little food in a haversack, a little money in his pocket, a short note to tell her that the wander-lust was coming over him again, and that he must follow whither it led and he was closing the door on the sweet new life that had begun to make a man of him again.

He took the way through the orchard leaving the house to the left of him.

But as he came out into the bush path, he could hear her singing again, as on that first night, and every note of her voice went like a stab to his heart.

That voice of hers would call him back from the ends of the earth if he could but hear a note of it. It would call him back now if he dared to listen.

He picked up his haversack and strode away almost at a run.

HE had no fixed idea where he was going, only that he must put as much distance between himself and Silvercreek Farm as possible.

He avoided the beaten tracks for fear he should meet any of the men; besides, he wanted to be alone, to battle with himself and the temptation that was urging him to turn back.

He would not turn back—he daren't. Better that she should believe her work of lifting him up and making a man of him again to be a failure than that he should say.

After tramping for hours, it seemed, he flung himself down on a dry hummock under the trees and lay for a long time gazing up at the stars.

Above him hung the stars which form the Southern Cross—a jewel of flashing diamonds on a bed of dusky-blue velvet. His eyes fixed themselves upon it.

He was carrying his cross—he had carried it ever since he set foot on the Australian shore, and he would carry it for ever.

The moon had been peeping over the horizon as he fell asleep. In his dreams it seemed that he saw it slowly advancing up the sky towards him, and gradually the silver disc resolved itself into a face—a woman's face—the face of the one woman in the world.

She was walking on feet that trod those velvet-blue heights like a goddess—walking towards him—bending over him.

And he lifted up his arms to clasp her.

In his dream he held her—no longer a goddess, but a woman—held her close, gazed into her eyes that seemed full of love.

Then, suddenly she was gone. She was floating away from him, white-faced like the moon, and round her neck there hung the Southern Cross.

He started up. His brow was damp. He thought that it was the agony of loss that had brought those drops there, but as he opened his eyes he realized that it was raining.

During his sleep clouds had gathered, and the rain was beginning in earnest.

He sought for a shelter under some bushes, and breakfasted on some of the food he had brought with him. The rest he put back for a future time. Then he continued his journey.

But the way was bad. The rain had increased to a drenching downpour and made the road a quagmire, and the hot earth was sending up a steaming bath of vapour that shut out all but the very near prospect.

With that and the rain he was as one walking through a blind world.

Still he pushed on, and still on, though the heavy drops soaked through his clothing and the splashes from the sodden ground filled his boots.

He had to get away, and he went on with dogged persistence.

But the elements were against him.

The creek that lay between Edris' farm and the town, after many turnings and windings crossed the narrow track that he was pursuing through the Bush.

He did not know that it was the same; he thought that he had left all that many miles in the rear.

But he saw that he was approaching water and the roar of it told him that it was a torrent increasing momentarily as the drainings from the surrounding hills streamed into it.

Impossible to ford this, and equally impossible to skirt its banks. If it went on rising it would spread into a wide river.

He dared not turn back. He was quite hazy as to his direction. Only he knew that if he turned he might get back to Silvercreek.

As he gazed helplessly round, he caught sight of a dilapidated hut made of rough logs and thatched with bark, that had probably been hastily erected by some traveller, or possibly some tramp like himself forced to provide a shelter against the weather.

Such as it was, it would have to serve until some abatement in the rain allowed him to go on.

Making his way towards it, he pushed still further open the door that hung rotting from wooden hinges, and threw himself down on the comparatively dry floor within.

As he did so he heard distinctly the soft swishing sound that comes of a foot passing over water-logged ground.

He felt annoyed at first. He would have to share his shelter with whatever poor wayfarer might chance to be passing.

But pity for a fellow sufferer was stronger than his disinclination for company, and he got to his feet and stood in the entrance, ready to beckon whoever it might be.

The steps were coming nearer, squashing through the pools that lay like splashes of lead in the road. And now they were close enough to distinguish that they were not human steps, but those of some shod animal.

Now he could see, coming between the straight boles of the trees, a brown horse with a woman on its back. It was Edris.

He would have known her anywhere. Even disguised by the closely-shrouding waterproof cloak and hood he knew her.

As he hesitated, not knowing what to do, wondering why she had come and whither she was going, she turned her face and saw him.

With a little cry she slipped from her horse and came running through the trees towards him.

HE met her more than half-way. Catching her outstretched hands, he drew her towards his mean shelter.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She threw open the waterproof cloak and pushed the hood, all shining with wet, from her face. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining.

"I read your note this morning," she said. "I have come to fetch you back. I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to find you, but there were shreds of your clothing on some bushes."

She smiled a little wistfully.

"Nicol"—she laid her hand on his arm—"you must not leave me like this; I can't let you."

There was a note between lightness and tears in her voice; the soft fingers seemed to cling to his.

R solutely putting them aside, he turned his eyes away from her.

"I must go," he said.

She fell back a step. The colour had faded from her face, the light from her eyes.

"You want to go? You have not been happy here?"

He could not bear the pain in her voice it cut him like a knife.

"Not happy! It's been heaven!" he cried.

"But I must not stay."

"Then it was not true that the wanderlust was on you?"

He paced the floor restlessly.

"It was not true. I thought it would serve—that you would be satisfied."

"I wasn't satisfied," she said softly, "so I came after you, and you are going back with me."

"I must not; I tell you I must not."

"Why not?" She came close to him again, arresting his rapid strides across the room, and once more her hand fluttered out. "Nicol, you must tell me why it's impossible, because, you see, if you want to stay, and I want you—"

"That's the reason—the whole reason," he broke in. "Edris, I love you."

The last three words were a cry wrung from him. He could not look at her—he dared not.

Still her soft fingers clung to his.

"But, Nicol," how sweet her voice sounded, "I love you. So there is no need for you to go away. I—I—"

Somehow his arms were around her, and he was kissing her cheek.

Then his arms fell away from her and he stood back.

"I have no right to kiss you. Why didn't you let me go?" he cried bitterly. "Away, I might have fought down my love for you."

She looked at him, a perplexed frown between her eyes.

"Why should you fight it down?" she asked. "Unless it is your pride of family."

"Pride of family? Heavens, you don't think of that, Edris—you who are so far above other women that a man could fall down and worship you? Dear, I should be proud of your love if I were the greatest man in the land. I should be proud to have you for my wife. Only I am not free."

"Not free?" The words dropped from suddenly-whitened lips. "Not free?"

"No!" He leaned against the rough wall and covered his eyes with his hand. "I married Clara Abbot—ten years ago."

For a long time there was silence in the hut. The rain was falling outside, swishing down in a steady, drenching torrent.

To Nicol Loftus's strained fancy it seemed that the world was weeping over the tragedy of his love and hers.

Would she go? he wondered. Would she leave him to his despair?

No. She was again close to him. She was speaking.

"I am glad you have told me," she said quietly, and there was a new note in her voice, a grave, gentle note. "Because, you see, there is no need for you to go away—for that. There will be room for your wife in the bungalow, and if you want it to be made larger—why, then—"

"She would not come," he broke in hastily. "Don't you understand? She—she does not want me. She only wanted my position—she thought my father would call me back, or that he would keep on sending me money. When he didn't, and all that had gone which he gave me to start with, she left me."

He paused a moment, then he went on again—

"She," his face burned dully, "is not a good woman. Her name should never be spoken in the presence of one like you."

He paused again for a moment. "Now you know, you will let me go," he finished.

Edris was silent for a minute, she pulled her hood over her head and moved towards the entrance.

He thought she was going to leave him there, but on the threshold she paused.

"There is no reason why you should not come back," she said. "I am very glad you have told me this—"

"I ought to have told you earlier," he broke in. "For that I can never blame myself sufficiently. It seems that I—undeserving as I am—have won your love."

She shook her head, a smile played about her pale lips and brought out sparkles of light in her grey eyes.

"You have no need to reproach yourself, Nicol," she said. "I loved you, years ago, when we were both in Larkdale. I grew up loving you. There would never have been anyone else, because, you see, no one could ever come up quite to my idea of you. So you are not to blame at all. In fact, the blame is on me, because I thought that—that if you cared—"

Then she broke down, battling with herself, and stepped out into the rain.

"Brownie will carry both of us," she said. "Come, it is not so very far to the farm. You have been walking in circles. You see, you couldn't get away."

He could not find any excuse strong enough to resist her.

It seemed that everything was against him. He had imagined himself to be many miles from Silvercreek, but not knowing the bush in these parts, he had circled in the dark, and had remained comparatively close at hand.

As she said, he couldn't get away from her.

LESS than an hour later a very wet couple dismounted near Edris's farm, and while Nicol went to change into dry clothing, she hurried indoors.

She had brought him back, the man whom she had set out to save from himself. He was safe in the shelter she had given him. He would not make any attempt to go away again.

So she thought, and she was right.

The rainy season continued. Sometimes for days together the downpour completely shut the farmstead and the adjacent cottage into a solitude that was strangely fascinating, strangely thrilling.

The men's huts were further away. During wet weather Edris saw little of them.

None, indeed, except the head man, Wilkinson, when he came splashing through the mud in his high boots and oilskins to talk business with her, to report on the sheep, on the cattle and poultry.

While the rains fell there was little to do except to see that they were housed and fed.

Perhaps it was natural that Nicol should feel anxious about her in her lonely house, with only the two women for companions, and should make it his business to cross the fifty yards or so that separated his door from her backyard to see how she was getting on.

In some way, it seemed that she had given him the right to take care of her because she loved him and he loved her; it did not occur to him that she had lived as she was doing now for considerably over a year, and that her long residence in the bush had rendered her absolutely fearless.

All that was disregarded by him now; he was naturally chivalrous towards women,

but his love for Edris Humberstone made her very precious.

At first he had himself well in hand. He loved her so that he could do anything, make any sacrifice, to render himself worthy of her regard.

But man is not a self-effacing animal at the best of times.

He began to plume himself upon his self-restraint. Twice she asked him to stay to tea, and not a word of love passed between them.

He told himself that it was quite safe to go, that from that hour in the hut a perfect understanding had been established between them, a perfect friendship that would grow and grow.

That Edris should love him showed that there was something worthy of love in him. A girl like this could not care for what was altogether unworthy.

Each time he saw her she seemed more beautiful in his eyes. The way her dusky-brown hair curled about her temples and on her neck, the curve of her lips, the light in her eyes, the colour in her cheeks, all these seemed to increase in charm every time he looked at her.

When he was away from her they were tantalizingly before him, reminding him that other men saw them, too, and that some day one would come along who might find favour in her sight.

As for him, he was but a dream, an ideal, to her. The innocent, first love of her girlhood had been given to him, but some day she might change. Who would win the love of her maturity?

Oh, he knew that she thought she loved him now, but did she? Was that not self-deception—part of the dream woven of her girlhood—fancy and idealism?

Some day she might meet someone—

The thought was torture.

When he realised exactly how it was with him he knew that it was time he went away. He did not need another man to tell him to clear out. He knew that it was his plain duty.

But he could not. The thought of the lover, who might one day come, held him. He must be there to see.

Besides, if he went away he would sink. The desolation of a return to his old life would be too much for him.

So, swayed between what he knew to be right and his desires, he stayed on, and each time he spent an hour in her company his defences were weakened.

It was not possible to help it. He had held her in his arms and kissed her—he had listened to a confession of love from her lips.

Thus, when he began to argue with his conscience his case was lost.

ONE afternoon young Phil Harrington had been to see her on some business or other, and Nicol met him as he was leaving.

The two men glanced at each other in passing, and into Nichol Loftus's heart leapt a sudden pang of jealousy.

For a moment he felt that he hated the lad—hated and envied him too, because he was free, because he could offer the woman he loved what he himself could not—his name.

He knew, too, that young Harrington was more worthy of her.

He was at the beginning of life, with a clean page in front of him and a clean record behind, was he not very much to be envied—and feared?

During tea, which the two women servants shared, Nicol was unusually silent, brooding upon the fate that had made it impossible to make this dearest

of all women his wife.

After the meal the others went into the kitchen to make the place tidy, leaving him and Edris alone.

After a little silence she said suddenly—

"Come and sit next to me, Nicol. In a few minutes we'll try some music over, but just now I'd rather talk—wouldn't you?"

He came forward, but he did not take the seat she indicated. He stood near to her, his eyes on her face, jealousy beginning to gnaw at his heart again.

"Why did young Harrington come here to-day?" he asked suddenly.

She looked up at him, surprise chasing the smiles from her lips.

"He brought a message from Wilkinson," she answered. "Why should you ask that question? One or other of the men come very often—they have to."

"Yes, I know—but—Edris," he broke off suddenly. "Harrington is in love with you!"

Again she looked at him with those clear, grey eyes of hers.

"You must not talk like that," she said. "It is not generous—not—"

"I don't pretend to be generous—no man who loves is!" he broke in swiftly. "Edris, I'm jealous of everyone who comes near you."

"Why should you?" Her voice was a little tremulous. "There is no need—I have told you—"

"Yes, yes—I know! You told me you loved me—that you had loved me for a long time, but that's not sufficient. You may change—love may die! Edris"—he dropped down on his knees beside her—"if I could be sure—"

He knew it was not a manly thing to do—to say, but in that moment all other considerations were swamped in his great love for her.

"I have told you—" she began weakly.

Again he interrupted.

"I know—I know, but—" Suddenly his need of her rushed over him overwhelmingly. What did it matter—what did anything matter, so long as he could be sure of her? But was her love strong enough—did she really care? Or was it merely the dream he had told himself it might be?

"I want to be certain that nothing can take you from me, Edris," he went on breathing hard. "I want you—I need you; no man ever needed a woman's love and sympathy and help as I need yours. Without you I am nothing!"

"You will not have to do without me," Edris said softly. "I shall never marry—if that is any comfort to you."

He was looking into her eyes; now he put his arm round her waist and held her.

"It is—if I could be sure! Edris"—he hesitated a moment, watching her anxiously, almost fearfully—"is that mad marriage of mine to spoil my whole life? Does it matter about it? Here in this wild, free land we can throw aside all convention—can dare to be true to ourselves."

He stopped. She was trembling, her face was white.

There was no use in talking of that old marriage. A man and woman are joined until death parts them.

And yet—yet—

She was already beginning to find excuses for him—he had been hardly used.

Gently but firmly she told him to go from her. But when she began to hesitate, when she followed him to the door and begged him not to be long before he came again, she had already lost the battle.

When the door had closed behind him, she told herself that it was because she had to keep him near her for fear he should sink—but there was another reason in her heart. Her love for him, that had dominated the whole of her life, would not let him go.

NEWS FROM ENGLAND

THERE was much whispering among the men at Silvercreek. A while ago Edris and Nicol Loftus had met, and had gone together into the forest.

It was a wonderful day; the golden heat of summer bathed the land in glory; and she was like the summer in her white frock and shady hat, with summer's rose in her cheeks and summer's sunshine in her grey eyes.

She was happy; so far away from the world that it seemed that the world's conventions could be disregarded.

Months had passed, and conscience, that had at first clamoured to be heard, was stilled. She was happy as she met him this afternoon; her face was radiant.

But the men talked among themselves.

Phil Harrington had been to Melbourne for a holiday, and had met someone who knew Nicol Loftus. He had come back with some strange tales of him; he had heard whisperings of a wife.

"It's not good enough him coming sneaking here and being made so much of," he said, anger in his eyes. "What does he want with Miss Edris?"

Jake Wilkinson grunted.

"We're not going to stand it," he said. "Old man Humberstone left her in my care, and I'm going to see no harm comes to her."

"I told him once before to clear out," Phil grumbled. "And he went. I saw him go. But next day he was back again—she went after him. You see, she knew him back in England."

"Aye, and that makes a lot of difference," agreed Wilkinson. "But now there's this talk of a wife belonging to him it's time we set about doing something."

While they discussed this matter Edris and Nicol were strolling together between the trees, hand in hand, as lovers have done from the beginning of the world.

They had no idea that their meeting had been noticed; their love was known only to themselves, or so they both imagined. Before the eyes of others they were the friends they had always been. Only in these secret meetings were they lovers.

He had ceased to ask the questions that for a long time had been always upon his lips—"Are you happy? Are you content?" He was totally unlike the man who had fallen from fatigue outside her door; totally unlike the man who had asked so humbly for her love.

As they strolled along she kept stealing a side glance at him.

A man for any girl to be proud of he looked, in his white linen suit; the fine shoulders had straightened. The lines had left his face, the skin had a healthy tan, beneath which the natural ruddy hue of the cheeks showed fascinatingly.

Edris was very proud of him—proud that she had brought him back to his old self, proud that he loved her.

In the old days at Larkdale it had not seemed possible that he should ever look even at one so humbly placed as she, and behold! he was her lover.

She thrilled at the thought, and her colour deepened. Out of all the world he had chosen her; out of all the world he had honoured her with his love.

That was how she always thought of him. To her he was never the outcast;

he was Nicol Loftus, squire's son; it was an honour even for him to look at her.

He was hers—hers for evermore, as he so often told her. The wonder of it thrilled her to the very centre of her being.

Their talk to-day was not so much of the present as of the future. Some time, perhaps, he would be free, and they would be married. Then they would go for a holiday to Larkdale, and he would show his people what sort of a man he had become.

"I shall never be content until I can show you to all the world as my wife. Of course, it won't be very much of a world for my life will, most of it, be spent out here in the Bush. I expect my elder brother Ned has married long ago, and there will be little ones growing up."

He was silent for a while, his eyes thoughtful.

They had come to the edge of the creek, the water of which was rapidly diminishing.

Kingfishers in royal blue flew over the surface, low down, as if they were seeking a relief from the great heat, and on one of these miniature lakes a pair of black swans, their scarlet bills making a striking dash of colour against the burnished jet of their bodies, paddled lazily about.

Edris watched them, scarcely seeing them. She was realising that Nicol longed for a sight of home. She herself had often felt that same longing and she had no dear ones there. What must it be when they had all been left behind?

Oh, she could quite understand it, and yet the knowledge that she did not quite make up for them gave her a queer sensation that was not quite jealousy, yet had some of the elements of jealousy in it.

She wondered if it would be possible to hold him always. Might he not some time break away, and risking everything, make an attempt to satisfy the heart-hunger for home?

She tried to dismiss the idea, but it recurred again and yet again, even when they stood together, his arm about her, watching the sun go down, the glory of its setting imparting a peach-like bloom in the distant hills, and he told her once more how dear she was to him, and how he could never be grateful enough for the fate that had sent him to her door.

"If ever I am free, we will go home to England," he said.

She answered, yes, she would like to go, but just now it did not matter to her whether she ever saw the old country again. Her heart was here, her life was here, with him; while she had him she wanted nothing more.

She had loved him so long without even hoping for a return; and now that he cared for her she asked nothing better than to keep him near her for always.

She was to remember the words he spoke that day afterwards.

They walked slowly towards home in the cool of the evening, with the darkness swiftly falling about them, separating just before they came within sight of the house.

He stood watching her white figure slipping in and out among the trees until the shadows swallowed her up.

Still he stood, until the last sound of her footfall in that silent land had died away, then he turned and strode away into the bush.

He could not face the loneliness of his little home just now; he was restless. He wanted to be able to go back to England, to show his people that he had made good. There was nothing to hold him back but that mad marriage of his. Why should he be tied for life by that wretched lad's mistake?

Why had he let the bond hold him until now? He could have divorced his wife over and over, only he had never had the means. Why hadn't he had the means? Why had he let his miseries sink him? If he had striven for a place in the world as other disappointed men had done, he could have made good long before this, and have got his freedom.

He had taken the matter as too final; it had seemed the end of all things then, he had believed that he would never look upon a woman with eyes of love again. But he had not met Edris then. Meeting with her had made all the difference.

But—why shouldn't he try for his freedom now?

Why shouldn't he divorce Clara and marry Edris? He ought to have done it before.

He clenched his hands fiercely. He ought to have secured his freedom before he spoke a word of love to her.

But he would do it now; he would atone. So absorbed was he in plans for his future, that he did not hear stealthy steps coming after him.

Perhaps, if he had, he would have put them down to some nocturnal animals coming out as darkness fell for their nightly prowling.

EDRIS had also carried home a strangely disturbed mind. Never before, since she and Nicol pledged themselves to each other, had she felt so. But to-night she had a strong presentiment of coming trouble.

She was given a good deal to that sort of thing, the loneliness of her life had fostered it. She had always been lonely, there had been no girl companions for her since she had left England, and no amusements—nothing to take her out of herself except the work on the farm, and the coming and going of the seasons.

That was why her father had bought a piano and music for her, but she was entirely self-taught; there had been no money for lessons back in the old country, and here they had been too far away from civilization to admit of any. But what she had been able to find out for herself had been a great comfort to her.

She had books, too, quite a considerable library, partly taken out with them, partly gathered together by her father and brother in their occasional visits to Brisbane or Sydney. These two things had had to serve instead of companionship or outside distraction.

She had not felt the need of others until Albert Humberstone, on a visit to the nearest town, met the girl he had fallen in love with; but after that, she had seen but little of her brother. The bride-to-be had come over once or twice, visiting, but the girl one's brother chooses to marry is seldom the one would care to make a friend of; besides, that had been over a year before Nicol Loftus came.

Little wonder that his coming had made so much impression upon her, that she had allowed her love to outweigh her reason.

He was all that in these lonely years she had missed, all that she had ever desired, all she ever could desire.

She sat down at the piano and tried to play, but could not. Her hands fell idly on the keys, while her thoughts went to Nicol. She tried to sew, but her thoughts were still with him; the slowness of the needle irked her. Reading was no better. She had read all her books over and over, she knew them almost by heart.

And because she could not bear the loneliness, she went early to bed. She would see him to-morrow; in sleep the hours would go more quickly.

SHE saw nothing of him during the next day, and when she went to the usual place of meeting he was not there.

Though she waited an hour, he did not come.

She went home, telling herself that he had no business to treat her so, that the presentiment of the previous night had not been without foundation. He was tiring of her.

As the minutes after dark dragged on, she began to wonder if it was possible that he had been detained, or he might be ill!

No sooner had this thought flashed across her mind than she hurried to his cottage, and on knocking and receiving no answer she opened the door and went in.

It was dark inside; she lit the lamp that stood on the centre table and looked about her.

There was no sign of him anywhere; she crossed the room and knocked on the inner door that opened into his bedroom. He might be there, ill, needing her help.

But no voice answered her, and impulsively she turned the handle. No one was inside; by the light of the lamp she could see into the furthestmost corner.

It was not illness that had kept him—then was was it? She dropped into a chair and sat still, her hands clasped before her. Where was he?

She did not know how long she sat there; it must have been an hour or more, and the oil was burning low in the lamp. She got up and turned it out, passing through the door and out into the soft, warm darkness of the night.

The heavy dew crushed out the scent of the yellow wattles that, in full flower, bounded the path up to her own door.

The wattle trees had been in bloom when he came, a year ago.

DAY followed day, and he did not come; there was no sign of him anywhere. She had an idea that he might have strayed into the bush, and in the darkness lost his bearings, and sent a search-party out to find him.

She did not notice that they went reluctantly, that looks were exchanged between them—significant looks that would have told her all she wanted to know as to the reason of his disappearance.

She sent them out and waited for their return impatiently, herself going into the forest meanwhile, examining every hollow, every thicket, for a considerable radius round the farm.

When they returned they reported no luck, and she thanked them and let them go; she would not let them see either her anxiety or her disappointment.

But they guessed it.
"To-morrow is the anniversary of Silvercreek," she said, before they left her. "You will come as usual?"

Though she spoke quietly, her heart was heavy as lead.

Something must have happened, something dreadful; he might even be dead. If he were not, he would have come back to her before now.

"I'm going to town to-morrow for the mail," the head man told her. "But I'll be back in time for the sing-song."

"Very well," she answered, but she scarcely heard what he said. All her efforts were needed to keep a brave front before them, so that they should not know her heart was breaking.

The next afternoon she dressed herself carefully to meet them, and laughed and talked as usual during the high tea; and after tea she played and sang.

But there was something different this year from any other year that had gone

before, though she did not know what it was.

The men were strangely silent, obviously uncomfortable; they did not applaud her efforts in quite the usual way, and Jake Wilkinson did not put in an appearance until very late—just before the little party was due to break up.

He had brought the mail.

"Nothing but newspapers for you, Miss Edris," he said.

"I am not expecting letters," she replied. "You can put them down—I'll not look at them until after you're all gone."

It did not matter about the papers, she was interested in nothing save what had happened to Nicol.

When they had all gone, she did not attempt to look at the papers for quite a long time. They had come out regularly ever since the family had been in Australia—local papers that her father always said had kept him in touch with the old place.

She did not care about them to-night. She had not taken much notice of them for some time, though the coming of them was a reminder of England, and made her feel as if she still belonged there.

But there was rarely any mention of Larkdale in them; the little village where she had lived was so small that its doings were scarcely ever chronicled—there was, in fact, seldom anything to chronicle.

It would be the same now, she said, when at last she cut the string.

The first she opened, the first page she glanced at, the name stared up at her. With a curiously beating heart she read—

"It is understood that as yet nothing has been heard of Mr. Nicol Loftus, who inherited Larkdale Hall estate some months ago on the death of his father, Edward Loftus, who succumbed to shock following the motor accident in which his eldest son Ned, lost his life. Mr. Edward Loftus was unmarried, so the second son, Nicol, who went out to Australia some eleven or so years ago, is the heir. Every effort is being made to trace him,"

Edris let the paper slip from her hand, her face as white as the dress she wore.

So that explained his absence. He had been found, and he had gone to England to claim his estates. He had left her without a word.

She was not good enough for him—now. He did not want her—now. And she had loved him so—believed in him—trusted him.

"I am paid for my sin," she cried in her heart. "He did not belong to me. I had no business to love him."

Over and over she told herself that, to ease the anguish in her heart. He had but paid her as she deserved.

Life was over for her; she might as well die now. For how was it possible to face the long, long years of loneliness?

Yet she could not let these people see her heart break, to them she must be as usual—must see the head man when necessary, look over the accounts, look after the servants, keep the house in order.

She must go on exactly as if nothing had happened, lest they should find her out.

She did not know that she was already found out—did not guess that it was out of a fierce loyalty that they served her now. She did not know that it was in their hearts that they had avenged the wrong done to her.

Rough men, they loved her for her father's sake and for her own, and would have served her with their lives. They thought they had saved her from herself.

NICOL LOFTUS tried to move, and the effort brought a groan to his lips.

How long he had stood there, bound to the trunk of a tree, he did not know, but his throat burned with thirst, and the bruises that he had got fighting for his liberty were aching badly. He dropped back with another groan.

It had happened very suddenly. The stealthy steps that he had fancied might be those of some animals had drawn nearer, and then they had sprung out upon him—half-a-dozen men demanding that he should leave Silvercreek at once and not come back again.

He had refused flatly, and then they had told him that they were not going to see their Miss Edris ruin her life for a fellow like him, and that if he would not go they would make him.

They had fallen upon him, six to one, and though he had struggled and fought, they had quickly overpowered him and bound him up.

Then they had carried him right into the heart of the bush, tied him to this tree and left him.

Was it days or weeks ago? he wondered.

He shouted again, as he had shouted many, many times before, only now his throat was dry and his voice hoarse and cracked.

This time, wonder of wonders, there was an answer. A man came hurrying between the straight stems of the trees and stood before him.

"Why, Nic—Nicol Loftus!" he exclaimed. "You're the man I've come to Australia to find."

But there was no answer; the recognition was mutual, but in the overpowering relief he had fainted.

It was not until he was in a comfortable bed in an hotel in Sydney that he heard why he was being sought. He had been too weak to think of anything beyond the relief of being found—in fact, during the journey he had been more often in a state of semi-consciousness than otherwise, too worn out with struggling and exposure to think of anything beyond the comfort of being well cared for.

Even Edris seemed but a dream—a far-off memory.

The man who had found him came to his bedside one morning and sat down.

"If you're well enough, we start for England to-morrow."

Nicol started up.

"I am not going to England," he said. "You are, you must. That's what I am here for—to fetch you."

Then he told him—he was the junior partner of the firm of lawyers who conducted his father's business—of the death of his father and brother.

It was a shock, so severe that it was some time before he thought of what it meant to him. He had loved his people; he had never once envied Ned his prospect of inheritance.

When the lawyer reminded him of the benefit it was to himself, still he had no thought save of the brother cut off in his prime, of the father whom he would never see again.

Perhaps of all the bitter moments in his life this was the bitterest. He would never show his father how he had made good.

For the moment all thought of Edris was submerged in this great disaster. When he recovered from the first shock his thoughts went to his mother in her terrible loss, and he was seized with an overmastering desire to get to her and try in some measure to make up to her.

Ned had always been her favourite son

—her eldest born, the pride of her heart. How was she bearing his loss? The thought of Ned dead and buried stumped him; what must it be to her?

ON the boat travelling to England his thoughts turned to Edris.

What was she thinking of him? She would think he had deserted her.

Sudden pricks of discomfort, of consternation, ran over him. She wouldn't know that the men had left him for dead. She would think he had left her.

It was too late to go to her now.

"I'll cable her on the way," he thought. "After all, perhaps it's better for her that I shouldn't go back. And as soon as I can I shall divorce Clara. I'll write to Edris and tell her this, and then we can be married."

It was quite plain to him what he would do. He ought to have got money somehow and divorced his wife before, so that he could have married Edris.

It hadn't been fair to Edris, but it was not too late now. He would write to her during the voyage, and post his letter at the first stopping place.

The sickness that the exposure in the bush had brought on recurred again during the voyage. He was not able to hold a pen, and of course he could not let anyone else write to Edris. It would have to wait until he was at home.

It would be easier to write from there. And when she had his letter, if she felt hardly towards him now, she would forgive him.

He would tell her what had happened that night in the bush. Not who had done it; that would hurt her too much.

He would say that he had been attacked by some outlaws and tied up to a tree, and how he had been rescued. He would tell her how he missed her, how he wanted her, what had taken him to England, and what he meant to do while he was there.

For he did want her. If it had not been that his mother was in such trouble he would have gone back to her, but the shock had put all other considerations out of his mind. She would understand that, and she would also understand, when he explained, that it was best for her that they should not meet again until he was free.

THREE weeks later, on his arrival home in England, an air mail letter came. Wondering a little Nicol opened it.

"Am coming home to share your good fortune. Nick. Am tired of life out here. If you're thinking you'll get rid of me, just ask yourself 'How about Silvercreek'?"

"CLARA."

He crumpled it up in his hand. His face was ghastly. No need to write to Edris now; it was no use—no use.

"Anything wrong, dear?"

His mother had come into the hall—a pathetic figure in mourning. She laid a hand gently on his arm. For, though she had lost her dearest, this handsome second son was a man to be proud of; and he had been so tender with her since he came home that she felt tender towards him, too.

He looked at her, forcing a smile to his lips.

"Nothing you can help, mother," he said. "Only that—my wife is coming."

"Your wife?"

He nodded.

"I married Clara Abbott eleven years ago. It was a bitter mistake; I shall repent it all my life."

He had to tell her so much, but neither

then nor after would he say anything else. No need to write to Edris now. She must think he had forsaken her; she must believe that he had tired of her.

He couldn't tell her that the woman who was his wife had discovered their secret. Best let her think no one knew. So might she hold up her head, as she never would if she thought it was known.

So he turned his back to the love that had been so wonderful and his face to the dreary future. This inheritance of his was not to bring him any pleasure after all.

THE NEW LIFE

ON the day before his wife came home, his mother moved into a smaller house on the estate. She knew that she and Clara would not get on together.

Nicol would have liked her to stay with him, but when she gently insisted upon going, he guessed the reason, and let her go.

The boys who were still at home went with her. The Hall, that had previously been so full of life, was deserted save for himself.

During the time he waited for Clara to join him, Nicol felt inclined to desert it, too, only that it was no use.

Then she came, the woman who had spoiled his life, for whom he had given up home.

Looking splendid in a handsome fur coat, she alighted from the car he had sent to meet her, and passed through the great doors that a footman held open.

So she and Nicol met for the first time after many years.

She saw at once that it was to be hate between them, and her lips smiled as she went through the door he opened for her into the drawing-room.

"You thought you had got rid of me, Nicol," she said. "And so you would have if this hadn't turned up. I should never have troubled you, and you could have stayed with that piece of perfection, Edris Humberstone, as long as you liked. Only, when I heard of the death of your father and Ned, I guessed you might think of trying to get rid of me, and thought I'd better begin to look into your doings—see?"

She laughed, and flinging off her coat and hat, sat down.

"But I shan't do anything," she continued, "unless you force me by prying into my doings."

He looked at her for a moment.

"I shall not pry into your doings at all," he said, "so long as you do not dishonour my name."

"Even then you won't," she flashed. "Or you'll regret it. I have a hold over you, don't you forget it, and I shan't hesitate to use what I've found out if it's necessary. I'm not sure you'll have any cause to be jealous. You're a handsome man. I'm not sure that I shan't fall in love with you again. And now, Nicol, I'll have a cup of tea, if you'll ring for it. It'll be fine, being waited upon."

He crossed the room and stood for a moment, his hand on the bell.

"Understand this, Clara," he said. "You'll never be anything to me again. I'm obliged to have you here to protect the reputation of the sweetest woman in the world, but you are no wife of mine—neither now nor ever."

Then he rang the bell, and ordering refreshments to be served to Clara, he left the room and the house.

For hours he tramped about, trying to school himself to patience, but it was no use. He could never be resigned to the cruel fate that had overtaken him, never

feel anything but loathing for the woman who was his wife, who would make life henceforward one long martyrdom.

But he gritted his teeth and bore it. Months and months he bore it.

The house was filled with people whom he did not like, the neighbourhood rang with the doings, not all of them creditable, of Nicol's wife.

There was gossip about her from the Hall to the meanest cottage in the village and for miles around.

Nicol said nothing. He was bearing it all for the sake of the girl whose name would be dragged in the mud did he utter a word of remonstrance. His wife had threatened, and he knew that she would not scruple to keep that threat.

MEANWHILE in Australia, Edris continued her daily round of duties, managed her house and her farm, with a heart that was well-nigh breaking with pain and disappointment.

She had never thought that Nicol would leave her like this—she had felt sure of him. She could not have believed that he would leave her without a word.

Of course she knew that he would have had to go. He had been called to take up the position the two tragic deaths had left for him, and he could not have taken her. She knew that—but he might have told her.

She would not have minded so much if he had said good-bye. This was the point at which their ways must divide, and she would not have complained.

Nay, she would have been proud to think that she had sent him back to his own land fit to take his place in his own world—a man for his people, to be glad to welcome.

But he had gone without a word, without a sign, and she was left.

The dreariness of life was worse than ever before.

She could not take up any of her old interests. She began to hate the place in which she lived and to long for the old home as a thirsty soul longs for water. The great heat exhausted her, the drenching rains depressed her.

Oh, slowly, slowly went the weeks—never had time dragged so heavily!

"I am being punished for my sin," she would say over and over.

She had taken a man's salvation into her own hands, and therein lay her fault. She should have left it to a Higher Power.

She would sit and think for hours sometimes, when there was nothing to be done; indeed, she felt inclined less for work than ever in her life before. She left more of the management of the farm to the head man, more of the household duties to the women.

She had lost interest in it all, so long as there was sufficient for her need, and to pay the way, what matter?

So the months passed.

Then something happened that shook her out of her lethargy.

Young Phil Harrington fell ill.

With her customary thought for others, Edris herself took on the task of nursing him.

She had him brought to her own house and looked after him as if he belonged to her; no sister could have done more for a beloved brother than she for this young man.

It was an attack of fever that had prostrated him, but with the help of a doctor and the other women, she managed to get it under.

The first day he was able to get up he was brought into the sitting-room and laid on a couch near the window, where he

could see the sunshine on the yellow blossom of the wattle trees, and the stretch of country where the sheep grazed, bounded by the bush.

If he looked a little to one side, there was the orchard and a corner of the house Nicol Loftus had occupied.

He turned away his eyes from it, and they rested upon Edris on the opposite side of the room, putting some roses in a glass bowl. She had just brought them in from the garden.

He remembered when her cheeks were the colour of the roses; now they were white and thin, and the lips were set in a line of patient endurance.

He raised himself on his elbow.

"Miss Edris," he said.

She turned to look at him and met a curious expression in his eyes.

"Aren't you so well? Would you like to go to bed again?" she asked.

"No, but—I'd like to tell you something. You've been good to me, and I've got to tell you, though I don't know how to begin. For you'll hate me—you'll hate us all—when you know."

She stood beside him and laid her hand gently on his shoulder.

"I shan't hate you, Phil," she said gently.

"But you will—you can't help it. Though it's got to be done."

He braced himself for an effort, and before she realised that he was going to begin he was pouring out a confession that at first she scarcely understood, and yet that filled her with growing horror.

He was telling her that Nicol must be dead—that he and some others—he would not tell their names—had decided among themselves that the Englishman, whom she had so graciously taken in, meant harm to her; and because he would not go when they bade him, they had seized him one night, and carrying him far into the bush and binding him to a tree had left him.

Left him to die, a slow and horrible death.

The words drummed in her ears, she felt sick and deaf and blind; she could not take in their meaning—quite.

Could anyone be so cruel as this man said they had been?

"He was a wrong 'un, Miss Edris, and we knew it!" That was how he was excusing himself and his comrades in the ghastly tragedy. "There was a woman said she was his wife. Miss Edris, we did it for your sake—you'll not be too hard on us—you'll not hate us all?"

She shuddered. Was it possible to do otherwise? she wondered. Not hate them—when they had taken her beloved and delivered him to a terrible death?

Yet in spite of her anguish, the sick feeling of revulsion to the deed that had just been confessed to her, she was conscious of a lightening of heart.

He had not deserted her, she could have faith in him still. She could look back upon the time he had been with her and think again of his love for her. Nothing could ever take that away from her.

"It was a cruel, a wicked thing to do," she said.

He lay looking at her, with eyes full of contrition.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked humbly. "I'm ready to take the consequences."

She flushed painfully.

"I don't know—yet. You have all been my friends—you did it out of love for me, but—it was murder."

Then she went out of the room.

What was she going to do? She asked herself the question over and over. There was one duty, that she dared not ignore, facing her.

If Nicol had died in the bush, and there was no reason to doubt it, as she had heard nothing of him for more than a year, his people ought to know that he was dead.

The relationship between herself and him did not matter now, that was their secret. But someone ought to go and tell them that he would never come home again—tell them also that he had made good. And since there was no one else, she must do it herself.

She shrank from the task, but she was not accustomed to shirking what she believed to be her duty because the doing of it hurt.

Besides, she could not stay here. She hated the bush—she hated the silence—its intense, terrible silence, which for her would never be silent any more, but always echoing with a voice that cried and cried for help.

Always she would see a body bound to a tree, drooping forward, the head hanging. No, she would never be able to bear it again!

What must she do to the men who had done that terrible deed?

Finally it came to her that she could do nothing; she must let people do as they pleased about it, but to act herself in the matter would be to bring out the story of their love. His people must do as they thought fit, and if it came out, then she must stand to it.

She wrote a note to the sick man—she would not see him, she could not—and left it for him the day she went away.

"I am going to England. I trust to your honour to stay at Silvercreek until I return."
"EDRIS HUMBERSTONE."

IT was spring in England.

Edris sat in a small cottage in Larkdale, drinking tea, and listening to the gossip of a woman she knew, but who did not remember her.

She had decided that she must learn something of the people at the Hall before venturing there with her news, so she had found this cottage, and the woman who had been middle-aged when she last saw her and was now elderly.

She had encouraged her to talk about the village folk, showing an interest that flattered her hostess and drew out a fund of information.

"Eh, but we had a fine upset here the other night," the woman said. "The Hall was set afire—how nobody knows, or if they do know they won't say. Mrs. Loftus—Mr.

Nicol's wife——"

Edris started, and the movement drew the old lady's attention to her empty teacup; she broke off to fill it. Edris watched her with wild, confused thoughts.

So he had come home, as she had first thought! Either Phil's tale was untrue, or Nicol had been rescued.

If that was so, he had deserted her.

"She was a rare wild one," the woman went on. "Led Mr. Nicol an awful life—she was one of the village lasses, you see, and he married unbeknown to his people—folk here all knowed what she was, but Mr. Nicol didn't. But she's paid for it, poor thing—dead—burnt to death! And Mr. Nicol but just escaped—he tried to save her, you see."

Edris was out again in the narrow, winding street, walking swiftly the way she had come. No need to go with her tale to the Hall. Nicol had been rescued, and he had deserted her.

She must go back again, to the home her father had made for her. The bush would have no terror for her now.

There was only one comfort for her, the men who had served her father and herself so well were guiltless of murder. They could still be her friends.

She turned out of the village into the narrow lane beyond. The beauty of it hurt her—she went on blindly. Her old home was up this lane—she would go and see it, and then—go away.

A car was coming towards her; she did not look back at it, but with the instinct of self-preservation she stepped aside.

But it had stopped, someone was springing from it.

"Edris—what are you doing here? I was coming for you as soon as——"

She heard no more. There was undying love in his eyes, and the relief was so great that she had fainted.

THE tales had all been told, and they were together—Nicol and Edris and his mother. She knew that they loved each other, that they would be married as soon as convention allowed, and Edris was to stay with her until then.

Edris had been told all about the coming of Clara Loftus to her husband's home, and why he had not written to her; and also she had heard all about her tragic death, which was really by her own hand.

For she had been angry at her husband's continued coldness towards her, and had deliberately set fire to the room in which he slept; he had escaped, but she had been trapped.

When he knew that she was in the burning house he had tried to save her, but had failed.

"Now we will let her rest," he said.

Nicol put his arm round her, and drew her to him.

"Our new life has begun, my dearest," he said softly. "My wanderings have ceased."

THE END.

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LOVE HAS NO LIMITS

By Gloria Hayden

HOME FOR GOOD

AS Anne Pirbright sat in a corner seat on the train that was taking her home, she could not be quite sure

whether she was glad or sorry at leaving St. Lucia's. She could have left two years ago when she was sixteen, but her father had insisted on her staying on another two years to take what Miss Quincy, the head-

mistress, called the "finishing course".

Anne had rather enjoyed this since it called for no particular hard work. One learnt deportment, advanced French, elocution and so forth, thus acquiring,

according to Miss Quincy, the *savoir-vivre*, the quiet self-possession, which distinguishes a "young lady from a mere young person".

While the girls regarded Miss Quincy's dictum as being Jane Austenish, it certainly did give them a "finish" not to be acquired in the classroom.

But, as far as Anne was concerned, it was all over now, and she was about to step from an artificial world into the real one, from the refined atmosphere of St. Lucia's into the not so refined atmosphere of her father's hotel "The Greyhound".

With that almost aggressive frankness adopted by so many modern young people, Anne often jestingly referred to it as "daddy's pub", an application which always called forth derisive laughter from her school companions and would have evoked Miss Quincy's severest displeasure had she chanced to overhear it.

Now, glancing out of the carriage window, Anne began to recognise the passing scenery as the train approached the small county town of Linhurst. There, half-hidden by trees, was the picturesque old Manor house which had been the home of the Tendring family for generations, and there was the lodge standing at the entrance to the long drive. Donald Corby, Sir Lucas Tendring's head gamekeeper, lived there now with his mother, so her father had told her in one of his letters.

Anne sighed. She and Donald Corby had attended the same school until her father had decided that the local school was not important enough for his charming daughter, and had sent her to St. Lucia's. Anne sighed again as her thoughts wandered back to the days when she had had a "crush" on Donald, and he had shown a marked liking for her.

"Oh well, that's all over and done with now," she told herself, with an amused smile at her childhood romance.

The two oast-houses, no longer functioning; the tall water tower just outside the town and the sports ground slid past and the train began to slow down as it approached Linhurst. Anne sprang to her feet and took her suitcase from the luggage rack. Then, as the train drew into the station, she lowered the window and peered out.

"Hullo, daddy!" she called, and flung open the carriage door.

A good-looking, middle-aged man hastened towards her and gave her an affectionate hug.

"Well, and how are you, daddy dear?" she asked, smiling up at him when he released her from his embrace.

"All the better for seeing you again my child," he answered, a beaming smile on his face. "Now, just wait a moment, Anne, while I go and see about your trunk. It's in the luggage van, I suppose?"

Her father then hurried off towards the end of the train, and next moment Anne was greeted by a tall, well-built young man wearing corduroy breeches and a Norfolk jacket.

"Donald!" she exclaimed delightedly, holding out her hand to him. "Why, you haven't changed a bit—except that you're much taller than when I last saw you."

"Yes, and you are even lovelier than when I saw you last, my dear Anne," he said, his grey eyes alight with admiration.

Anne wondered why her heart had suddenly changed its beat. Could it be that her old "crush" had revived at sight of her childhood sweetheart—or had it never really died?

"You flatter me, Don," she said. "Anyway, you're not so bad-looking yourself, you know."

Donald gave a gay little laugh. They

seemed to have slipped back quite naturally into the easy friendship of their childhood days, he told himself elatedly.

At that moment, her father returned. "Now, Anne dear, if you're ready," he said, a trifle brusquely.

Donald Corby made as if to pick up Anne's suitcase, but her father forestalled him.

"We can manage all right, thank you, Corby," he muttered, making it quite clear that he wished to be rid of the young man. "Come along, Anne, the car's waiting," he added impatiently.

Anne, flushed with annoyance, followed her father along the platform and through the exit to the car which was awaiting them in the station yard. He put her suitcase in the back, then helped a porter to lift her trunk in.

"Daddy," she said, frowning as he assisted her into the car, "why did you snub Donald in such a way? He was only trying to be helpful, wasn't he?"

"Pushing himself forward, that's what he was doing," returned her father gruffly. "He could see I was with you and that you didn't need any help."

Anne shrugged. She still felt that her father had been unnecessarily brusque with the young man, and after all, Don and she were old friends.

Her father started the car, and as if guessing what was passing in her mind, he went on—

"You're a grown-up young woman now, Anne, and what was all right when you and Donald Corby were kids, isn't all right now."

"But, daddy, I don't see why it was all right for me to be friends with Donald when he and I were children together, and not all right now," she said rebelliously.

Anne knew she was not being quite honest. She was aware that a gulf had opened between her and Donald Corby since her childhood days, for her father had prospered and become a well-to-do man, while Donald had simply stepped into his father's shoes and become Sir Lucas Tendring's gamekeeper.

"Young Corby's a nice enough chap, I allow," continued her father, "but he's not in your class, my girl. So I don't want you to give him any encouragement—and he wouldn't need much by the looks of it."

"But surely you don't expect me to cut him dead, do you, daddy?" Anne retorted. "I'd hate to be taken for a snob, you know."

"I didn't say you need cut him, my dear girl, but you needn't be over-friendly neither," he said. "You can be polite to Corby, of course, but I want you to make him realise that it's no use his paying court to you."

When, a few moments later, the car had pulled up outside The Greyhound Hotel, Old Simon, the porter, hurried out to greet Anne. He had known her in the days before "The Greyhound" had ceased to be a "pub" and had blossomed out into an hotel.

"Hullo, Simon! How are you?" she asked smilingly.

"Still carrying on, Miss Anne, though a bit rheumatically-like," he answered, a broad grin on his face.

"I reckon you'd like to go upstairs and take off your things, my dear?" suggested her father. "You'll be in your old room on the second floor. I thought you'd prefer being there."

"Yes, of course, daddy. It was very thoughtful of you," Anne replied.

She went upstairs and entered the room which had been hers ever since she was old enough to have a room of her own. All the books she had loved were still on

the shelves, and the same pictures hung on the walls. Only one thing was missing—a photograph of Donald Corby, showing him as captain of the school soccer team.

"I'll bet daddy took that photograph down," Anne told herself, with a rueful smile. "Evidently, he wants me to forget Don, and I suppose he's right in a way. Times have changed quite a lot. Daddy has got on in the world, and Don has just stayed put."

She sighed, and crossing to the mirror, Anne gazed thoughtfully at the charming reflection staring back at her—a small, heart-shaped face crowned by a mass of golden hair, hazel eyes with flecks of gold in them, and a slight retousse nose.

Suddenly she smiled as she remembered the glowing compliment Donald had said her at the railway station.

Presently, she went downstairs to lunch, which was laid for two in their private sitting-room.

"Well, and how does it feel to be home again, my dear?" asked her father smilingly, as she took her seat at the table.

"Oh, pretty good, daddy," Anne answered. "I've had just about enough of school—and that fussy old Miss Quincy."

"Aye, but I wanted them to make a lady of you, Anne. That's why I decided to keep you there so long."

"I see," she said laughingly, "well, now that I have left there, daddy, what am I going to do with myself?"

"I can tell you one thing you're *not* to do, my girl, and that is serve in the bars here," her father asserted firmly.

"But why not, daddy. As an innkeeper's daughter I—"

"This isn't an inn, Anne, it's an hotel," he broke in proudly.

"All the same, daddy, in the eyes of the law, it's still an inn, you know—and so, for that matter, is the Ritz in London."

"All right, my dear, have it your *own* way," he said, "but remember that I'm not going to allow you to work in the bar. I've got a barmaid, a girl named Ruth Hobson, and though the red-headed little baggage isn't much good at her job, she attracts customers so I have to put up with her."

"Ruth Hobson? I seem to remember her," murmured Anne. "I think we were in the same class at the local school."

"Maybe, but you're in a very different class now, my girl, and I'd like you to remember that, if the little minx tries to be a bit too friendly with you."

"Well, I never did care for her very much," said Anne, "I remember that she was always a great favourite with the boys."

Stephen Pirbright nodded meaningly. "Aye, I know," he muttered. "She still makes herself very cheap but she does attract business, and that's why I tolerate her."

"Then if I'm not to serve in the bars, what am I to do, daddy?" asked Anne. "I can't just sit about here and twiddle my thumbs, can I?"

"You won't need to, my girl. You can take over the book-keeping and keep a watch on the stock. I'll be glad to be relieved of that job," her father added, "as it takes up more of my time than I can spare."

"Well, as long as it's something really useful, daddy, I don't mind what it is," murmured Anne.

"That's the right spirit, my dear," her father said, his eyes lighting up. "By the way, Anne," he added, "young Tendring has made a habit of dropping in here for a drink most evenings."

"You mean, Sir Lucas Tendring's son, I suppose, daddy? I don't remember ever having seen him."

"No, I don't suppose you have, Anne, for he's only just come down from Oxford. They say he's learning to manage his father's estate. As you know, my dear, Sir Lucas is getting on in years."

"Evidently 'The Greyhound' is becoming quite fashionable, daddy," Anne suggested laughingly.

"Well, yes, you might say it really is," agreed her father, and there was a touch of pride in his voice, "whenever young Mr. Tendring—or Mister Ralph, as he is called—has some of his Oxford pals come to stay at the Manor House, he brings them here of an evening for a few drinks."

"And I suppose they have to be thrown out at closing time, daddy!" Anne remarked jestingly.

"Oh no, Ralph Tendring is a very nice young gentleman," her father protested laughingly. "And don't forget, my dear, that he'll be Sir Ralph when his father dies."

Anne laughed.

"It can't make any difference to me, daddy, whether he is Sir Ralph or just plain 'Mister,'" she said.

"Yes, but when you meet him, Anne, you—"

"But how am I to meet him, daddy, if I'm not allowed to go into the bar?" she broke in.

"Well, you see, when the young man drops in here alone, I invite him into this room and we have a friendly chat—sometimes we have a game of dominoes. He appears to be rather keen on meeting you, you," her father added smilingly.

"But—but why, daddy?"

Her father shrugged.

"Oh, well," he said, "maybe I've talked about you a bit, Anne—as, of course, any proud father might talk about his daughter."

At that moment the door opened and a girl with a head of flaming red hair and green eyes, came hurrying in.

"Excuse me, but you need to tap another barrel of mild, Mr. Pirbright," she blurted out. Then, catching sight of his daughter—"Well, fancy your being back here, Anne! Is it just a visit, or have you come home for keeps?"

"You'd better get back into the bar at once, Ruth, while I go down to the cellar," Stephen Pirbright ordered brusquely.

"Okay, boss! I s'pose I'll have some help in the bar now that Anne's home," the girl suggested, winking at Anne.

"No, you will not, my girl," he landlord replied huffishly. "And now do as I tell you and get back to the bar."

Ruth grinned.

"But don't forget that I'm waiting for that barrel of mild, guv'nor," she said, and then returned to her job.

A few moments later, knowing that Anne would be alone in the room, Ruth came back and put her head round the door.

"You back for good, dear?" she asked with an ingratiating smile.

"Yes, I think so," Anne replied coolly.

"I suppose you're far too much of a lady now to serve behind the bar," Ruth went on, smiling satirically.

Anne frowned, feeling that she disliked the girl more than ever.

"That is a matter for my father to decide," she said curtly.

"Yes, of course," Ruth agreed. "I expect you've lots of boy friends, haven't you?" she added, with a simpering grin.

"No, I haven't," Anne said. "We were not allowed to have boy friends at St. Lucia's."

"No boy friends!" Ruth exclaimed.

"Then it must have been awfully dull for you at that school—almost as bad as being in prison, I should think."

"Oh no, it wasn't as bad as all that," Anne began, then broke off abruptly as her father came bustling into the room.

He glared at Ruth.

"I thought I told you to get back to the bar, my girl," he said angrily. "The ne barrel's on tap."

"Okay, guv," Ruth returned flippantly, and hurried off.

"The insolent little slut!" Stephen muttered irritably. "I'd get rid of her if I could find anyone else to take her place. But you have to go down on your knees these days to get anyone, and, as I've already told you, the impudent hussy does attract customers to the bar."

"Well, and when are you going to start showing me how to keep the books, daddy?" Anne asked.

"Maybe, to-morrow, my dear," he answered. "I'd advise you to rest to-day, after your long train journey."

"Oh, but I'm not feeling a bit tired," Anne said. "So I think I'll go for a walk and see what changes have taken place since I've been away."

Her father nodded his approval, and Anne went upstairs to her room to change her dress.

Presently, wearing a neat little tweed suit and a pull-on hat to match, she set out for a stroll. Anne decided to go for what used to be her favourite walk across some fields leading to what was known locally as Wilton Wood.

It was still winter, though there were signs that spring was on the way. Tiny green buds were appearing on the bare hedges; yellow and mauve crocuses were blossoming in the cottage gardens, and in the fields the winter corn was already inches high. Yes, though winter still held sway, spring was in the air, stirring the earth from its long sleep and awakening the germs of life within its vast bosom.

Something of this awakening vitality communicated itself to Anne as she followed the well-remembered path to the wood, and she began unconsciously to hum a gay little tune. It was good to be back home among the people she knew and amidst the countryside she loved, now no longer a schoolgirl, but a grown-up young woman.

As she entered the wood, Anne suddenly recalled that it was here she had said goodbye to Donald Corby before going away to St. Lucia's. They were kiddies then, of course, she reminded herself, but her heart gave a little leap as she came upon a tree on the trunk of which had been carved two hearts joined by an arrow, with the initials "A.P." and "D.C." underneath.

She remembered as if it were yesterday how she had watched while Donald cut them with his clasp knife. When the design was finished, he had kissed her and made her promise she would never marry anyone but him.

Ah, but that was a long time ago and the hearts with the initials under them were almost invisible now except to the discerning eye. They were just two kiddies who thought they were in love.

Anne sighed, and turned away as she recalled that sad-sweet parting. People laughed at what they contemptuously called "calf love", yet it could hold much of tenderness and pain and could live on in the memory like a half-forgotten song.

Suddenly she heard someone call her name, and next moment Donald Corby appeared from behind a clump of trees, a gun under his arm.

"Hullo, Anne!" he greeted her smilingly. "So you've come to have a look at those old trees, have you? I thought you must

have forgotten all about them."

Anne laughed.

"No, not—not quite, Don," she stammered, a little confusedly. "I was just thinking what a pair of silly, sentimental kids we were in those days."

"Sentimental" perhaps, but why 'silly', Anne?

Anne knew, but it seems like that she replied.

"It doesn't seem so to me," she teased, then added—"You were silly, you then, and I love you for having stopped loving you. I was a little silly to you?" he smiled.

Anne was aware that her heart was beating differently, Don," she

said. "Both of us grown up now, and we've promised to love each other always, we were just a couple of kiddies, weren't we?"

"And now the promise no longer holds good. Is—is that what you mean?" he challenged.

Anne was nonplussed for a moment. Then—

"I—I haven't had time to think about it, Don," she said, with forced lightness.

"But one doesn't have to think about whether one is in love or not, my dear Anne. Love is either in one's heart, or it is not. I—I suppose," Don went on, "it was silly of me to believe that you would go on loving me, as I have gone on loving you."

The sadness in his voice, and the look of pain in his eyes, were too much for Anne. She knew, in her heart, that she was still in love with him and always would be.

"No, of course it was not silly of you, Don," she murmured, smiling at him. "I—I still love you, too."

His heart gave a leap, and he brightened up at once. He laid his gun carefully on the ground, then took Anne in his arms, and she gave him back kiss for kiss. It was no longer "kid's love", half-playful, half-serious and only half-understood. It was the real thing—in fact, perhaps it always had been, but had now emerged like a bud into full bloom, tender and sweet and beautiful.

When they drew apart, they gazed at each other in wonderment. Don was the first to speak.

"I—I'm afraid it's not going to be easy for us, darling," he said, "I mean, your father—"

He broke off, a troubled look in his eyes, but Anne knew what he meant and her heart sank. Had not her father already told her that Donald Corby was not "in her class" and had snubbed him at the railway station? No, it was not going to be easy, she reflected. Yet, fond as she was of her father, she must follow the dictates of her heart.

"I—I think we had better keep our love secret for a little while, Don dear," she murmured.

He nodded.

"Yes, perhaps you're right, darling," he agreed. "If we were to break the news to him suddenly, your father might send you away from here again—maybe to your aunt who lives in London. And we mustn't let ourselves be parted, must we, Anne. If we bide our time and are patient, things may turn out all right of their own accord."

Though it was a highly optimistic thought, Anne shared it. Anything would be better than being sent away again and, as Don had suggested, things might come right for them in the end. After all, she would eventually have to marry someone, no doubt, and who else in Linhurst was there

but Don? Perhaps her father would come to realise this in time and would not oppose their marriage.

"Of course, darling," Don went on, trying to be fair, "I can understand your father's point of view. He's given you an expensive education, and naturally he thinks you can do better for yourself than marry a gamekeeper like me."

"Yes, I know, Don, but happiness counts far more than money or position, and naturally my father wants me to be happy," Anne remarked thoughtfully. Anne glanced at her wrist watch, and added—"I had better be going now, Don, or I shall be late in getting back for tea."

"Very well, then one more kiss, my love," he said, smiling at her, and next moment she found herself enfolded in his arms again, his lips pressed to hers. "When shall we meet again, darling?" Don asked, when he released her.

"I will try and be out here to-morrow at about the same time," she answered. "But you mustn't be disappointed if I can't manage it, Don dear."

"Oh, but I shall be, all the same, Anne. You see, I—"

"Well, if I can't come," she broke in, "I'll do my best to send you a note to let you know when I can meet you. You see, daddy is going to show me how to keep the account books for him, and I don't know when I shall be free."

Don sighed.

"I'll try and be patient, my sweet," he promised.

"Now that we know we are still in love with each other, waiting doesn't seem to matter so much, does it, Don?" she said, a tender look in her eyes.

"No, I suppose not, darling," he agreed, and kissed her again.

When Anne arrived home just in time for tea, she told her father, in answer to his question, that she had been for a walk as far as Wilton Wood, but said nothing about having met Donald Corby.

"Wilton Wood, eh, my dear?" her father remarked, as she handed him a cup of tea. "That's part of Sir Lucas's estate, of course."

"Is it, daddy?" she asked innocently.

Stephen Pirbright nodded. At the back of his mind was the thought that, some day, it might belong to his daughter when she became Lady Tendring. For, he reflected, old Sir Lucas was ailing fast, and it would not be long now before his son and heir would inherit the title and the property. And if ever a girl was fitted to become "Lady of the Manor," surely that girl was Anne whose education had cost him so much.

Anne, too, was dreaming dreams, though of a very different kind. She was seeing visions of herself, dressed in bridal gown, walking up the aisle of the ancient parish church with her arm in Don's, while the organ pealed out the wedding march!

Her dream was suddenly dissipated by her father's voice.

"By the way, Anne," he was saying, "I expect Ralph Tendring will be calling here to-night and I'd like you to meet him."

"But I understood you to say that I was not to go into the bar, daddy," she said.

"Yes, and I still say so, my dear. I shall invite Mr. Tendring, as I often do, into our private sitting-room, and I hope you'll make yourself agreeable to him, Anne."

"Naturally, I shall be polite to Mr. Tendring, daddy, if that's what you mean," she said.

Actually, her father meant something more than that, but he couldn't very well say so. Not, he told himself complacently, that there was any need for her to go out of her way to be nice to the young man. A girl as lovely as Anne didn't have to cajole

or entice—it was the other way about, in fact.

All the same, his thoughts ran on, it might be as well if she were a bit standoffish at first, as some men were apt to become suspicious of girls who fell for them too easily.

"Well, yes, that's all I ask of you, my dear," he told her smilingly. "Just be polite to the young man—not that you could be anything else, of course, if it comes to that."

Anne gave her father a questioning look. Surely he was not suggesting that Sir Lucas Tendring's son might become enamoured of her! she was thinking.

RUTH HOBSON appeared just before opening time to prepare for the evening's business in the bar. She was heavily made-up, as usual, and loaded with artificial jewellery, including a pair of huge barbaric earrings. The landlord frowned, disapprovingly, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it. The girl had to be tolerated, at all costs, as he had no one else to take her place.

Anne remained in the sitting-room trying, but without much success, to read a book. Her thoughts were still with the man she loved, and these were far more interesting than the affairs of a heroine of fiction. Presently her father came into the room.

"Mr. Ralph's just arrived, Anne," he said, "and I'll be asking him in here shortly."

"Mr. Ralph!" she echoed. "I'm certainly not going to address the young man as 'Mr. Ralph,' daddy, as if I were a servant." Anne added, with a toss of her head.

"No, no, of course not, my dear," her father agreed. "I've got into the habit of calling him 'Mr. Ralph,' from hearing other people do it."

He then went back to the bar, but a few minutes later the door of the sitting-room opened again and he came in followed by a young man in horsey attire and with a somewhat arrogant manner.

"Anne dear," her father said, with a proud smile, "this is Mr. Ralph Tendring. Mr. Tendring, this is my daughter, Anne."

"Jolly pleased to meet you, Miss Pirbright," said the young man, holding out his hand.

As Anne shook hands with him, her eyes fell before his raking, insolent stare.

TRAGEDY IN THE WOOD.

"WELL," Stephen Pirbright remarked, in a tone of satisfaction, when the bars had been closed and he and his daughter sat down to supper, "I think you've made a big hit with Ralph Tendring, my dear. He seemed hardly able to take his eyes off you all the time he was here."

"Yes, so I noticed, daddy," Anne muttered, "and I—and I think he's a most detestable young man."

"Detestable?" repeated her father, staring at her in astonishment. "What on earth do you mean, Anne?"

"Exactly what I say, daddy. He's arrogant, conceited and ill-mannered—the type of man who thinks he has only to look at a girl for her to swoon at his feet!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed her father impatiently. "It's just your imagination, my girl. I don't see anything insulting in a man looking at you admiringly—quite the reverse, in fact. But there," he added with a shrug, "having been away at school so long, you know very little about men."

"I know quite enough about them to recognise a cad when I see one, daddy,"

Anne retorted.

"I never heard such utter rubbish in all my life!" her father stormed. "I—I don't understand you, Anne. Everyone in Lin-hurst speaks of young Tendring as a good sport. So why have you taken this unreasonable dislike to him, I should like to know? Surely not because he openly admired you so much?"

It was difficult for Anne to put into words the effect Ralph Tendring had had on her. True, there had been admiration in his eyes, but something else as well—something she could not put a name to, but she had sensed what was behind it, and had regarded him with loathing.

"I—I can't very well explain why I dislike the young man, daddy, but I do, all the same," she said. "Somehow, I feel he can't be trusted."

Her father glanced at her suspiciously. He suddenly remembered the cheerful greetings exchanged between her and Donald Corby at the railway station. He also recalled the fact that, before his daughter had been sent off to boarding-school, she and young Corby had been on very friendly terms.

"You haven't fallen in love with some other man, have you, my girl?" he asked brusquely. "If—if it's Don Corby, let me tell you at once that you've made the mistake of your life. I'm certainly not going to allow you to marry a mere gamekeeper after all the money I've spent on your education."

Anne sighed.

"If you don't mind, daddy, I think I'll now go to bed," she murmured, rising to her feet.

"Yes, and I hope you'll wake up in the morning in a more reasonable frame of mind, my dear girl," he said. "And don't forget that Ralph Tendring is a gentleman—something which Don Corby could never be."

A spirit of defiance suddenly took possession of Anne. Her father had spoken quite plainly, and she decided to speak equally plainly to him, now that she knew what was at the back of his mind, for it was evident that he was hoping Ralph Tendring would ask her to marry him.

"If you think that, someday I may become Lady Tendring, daddy, you're wrong," she said, with a derisive laugh. "Is it likely, I ask you, that the son of the Lord of the Manor will ever think of marrying the daughter of a publican? For that's what I actually am, you know, daddy."

With an effort, Stephen Pirbright managed to retain control of himself.

"Listen to me, Anne," he said, in a confidential tone, "I happen to know that Sir Lucas Tendring is head over heels in debt and that the estate is mortgaged up to the hilt. In other words, my girl, the family is just managing to hang on by its eyebrows. You understand what I mean."

He paused, then went on—

"And I'll let you into another secret, Anne. Your father is now a fairly rich man. I don't want to make a boast about it, but I could buy up the Lord of the Manor any time I wanted. And for your being a publican's daughter, it's what a man's worth that counts nowadays, not his occupation."

"There's another thing, too," Steven continued. "There's no shame in keeping a pub in these days. Gentlemen do it—real gentlemen I mean. I know an Oxford man—I'm told that he's a Greek scholar—who runs a pub. Also, I know of a retired colonel who's landlord of another, and they're not ashamed of it—nor is anyone ashamed of them."

Anne knew this to be true, for she had recently read a book written by a man who kept a public-house and who claimed to be a university graduate.

"So, you see, Anne," her father added elatedly, "there's nothing wrong or degrading in being 'the daughter of a publican', is there?"

"All the same, daddy, it doesn't alter the fact that I have taken a great dislike to Ralph Tendring, and the less I see of him, the better pleased I shall be," Anne countered.

Her father shrugged.

"Oh, well, we'll see about that, my girl," he muttered morosely. "Maybe you'll change your mind later on. Anyway, I think you'd better be off to bed now."

It was a long time before Anne fell asleep that night. She was thinking of Don and how she could arrange to meet him. Somehow or other, contrive to send him a note telling him when and where they could meet. Wilton Wood would probably be the best place, she decided, and their trysting place could be the tree on which Don had carved their initials, long ago.

When at last, she did fall asleep, she was troubled by dreams in which her father, Donald Corby and Ralph Tendring were all mixed up.

After breakfast next morning, Anne accompanied her father to his office and he gave her her first lesson in book-keeping. Then when he had gone upstairs to take his usual nap, she decided to go for a walk.

Almost without realising it, her footsteps took her in the direction of Wilton Wood, and presently she found herself standing under the tree with the twin hearts and initials carved on it.

Suddenly it occurred to her that if she left a note fastened to the tree. Don would be almost sure to catch sight of it as he passed through the wood on one of his "beats". So fumbling in her bag, Anne found a scrap of paper and on it scribbled the following note—

"Will you meet me here under the old tree on Wednesday evening about six. I will be waiting for you—Anne."

She wedged the slip of paper into a loose bit of the bark so that Don could scarcely fail to see it. There was not much likelihood of anyone else but him coming that way. Anne told herself, as she started to walk back to the hotel—little did she know that Ruth Hobson had been watching her from behind a nearby clump of trees.

WHEN Anne set out for Wilton Wood on Wednesday evening, the moon had not yet risen, though it would be at the full when it did. She had said nothing to her father about going out, and as he and Ruth Hobson were both serving in the bar, neither of them saw her leave.

Although it was dark, Anne still knew every inch of the path leading to the wood. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted eerily and was answered by another, and from a long way off came the muffled lowing of a cow.

At last, arriving on the outskirts of the wood, Anne paused and glanced at the illuminated dial of her wrist-watch. It was not quite six o'clock, so she decided to wait a few minutes before entering the wood.

Now, besides the hooting of owls, there were other sounds, the crackling of twigs, and rustling noises from amidst the dry bracken. A scurrying amidst the fallen leaves suggested that some bird—a pheasant or a partridge, perhaps—had suddenly been disturbed.

Then, when the hands of her watch

pointed to six o'clock, Anne entered the wood and walked slowly towards the trysting-place. On reaching the tree, she saw that the note she had left had gone, so Don would be here at any moment now.

Suddenly she heard the sound of approaching footsteps, then caught sight of a dim figure winding its way towards her between the gaunt tree trunks.

"Don!" she breathed, and instinctively stretched out her arms as he drew near to her.

Next moment, Anne found herself clasped in a man's arms, his lips against hers and being held so tightly that she could scarcely breathe. She uttered a stifled scream when she realised that the man was not Don, and struggled violently to free herself, but all to no purpose.

"Oh, let me go, please let me go!" she cried breathlessly. "There are gamekeepers in this wood," she added, thinking that he might be a poacher.

The man gave a mocking laugh, and pressed his lips to hers again.

"The gamekeepers won't interfere with me, my golden-haired beauty," he said. "So there's no need for you to worry on my account."

It was the voice of Ralph Tendring. Anne recognised it at once and was filled with dread and loathing, could it be possible that he did not know who she was—that he thought she might be one of the local girls who had come here to meet her lover?

"I—I'm Anne Pirbright," she stammered, "and you—and you are a friend of my father's aren't you?"

"Yes, and I want to be a friend of yours, too, my darling," he said.

"But how—but how did you get to know that I would be coming here this evening?" she demanded.

"Oh, but surely you know that, my sweet," he said. "It was because of that little *billet doux* you sent me, of course."

"I sent you a—a *billet doux*?" she gasped.

"Come, come, please don't pretend, my dear girl," he said. "I have your note in my pocket at this moment. You asked me to meet you here on Wednesday evening at six o'clock, and here I am!"

Anne was utterly bewildered. What did he mean by saying that she had sent the note to him? Only one explanation seemed possible—that someone must have found the message she had left for Don and had given it to Ralph Tendring.

"Who—who gave you the note, may I ask?" she demanded.

"Oh, but surely you ought to know since it was you who sent it to me?" he countered.

"But I did not send a note to you," Anne protested. "Someone must have found it and—"

"I—I see," he broke in jeeringly. "Then if the note was not meant for me, who was it for?"

"That is my business, Mr. Tendring," she answered curtly.

"Very well, have it your own way, my dear girl," he said. "Whoever the note was meant for, I've come here in answer to it. And if it was not intended for me," he added, "I rather think I can guess who it was for."

Anne winced.

"It—it was for Don Corby, my father's gamekeeper, wasn't it?" he challenged.

"I have already told you that it is no business of yours, Mr. Tendring," she said.

"Oh yes it is," he retorted. "I suppose it does not occur to you that I could get my father to sack this fellow Corby right away? And there are not many gamekeepers' jobs these days, you know."

"I can scarcely believe that you could be such a contemptible cad as to do a thing like that, Mr. Tendring," she flung

at him, with withering scorn.

"No, of course not," he conceded. "Now listen, darling," he hurried on, "as I think your father knows, I've fallen for you in quite a big way. So won't you try and be nice to me? You have nothing against me, have you?"

"Nothing except—well, except that I do not like you," she muttered, not knowing what else to say. "In any case, I must be getting back to the hotel at once, Mr. Tendring. It is getting late and my father will be wondering what has become of me."

"Well, if you tell him you've been out here with me, I don't think your father will be angry with you," the young man said, with a meaning smile. "Now come and make love to me, my darling," he went on, and throwing his arms around her again, he kissed her passionately as she struggled to free herself.

Then it happened. Suddenly a shot rang out, and Ralph Tendring fell to the ground, almost dragging her down with him.

Recovering herself, Anne gazed dazedly about her, and then she was astonished to see her father emerging from behind some trees, carrying a gun.

"Oh, daddy!" she gasped in dismay. "What—what have you done?"

Stephen Pirbright did not answer, but on coming closer, he gazed down at the face of the man lying on the ground.

"My God!" he groaned. "What have I done? It—it's Ralph Tendring, and I—and I thought he was young Corby!"

He knelt down beside the fallen man, and after a moment or two, he looked up, his face ashen.

"He—he's not dead, thank God!" he muttered. "Rush back to the town, Anne, and fetch a doctor and an ambulance. Say there's been a gun accident in the wood."

As she was about to hurry off, Donald Corby suddenly appeared on the scene.

"What—what's happened, Anne?" he exclaimed breathlessly. "I heard a shot and thought the poachers might be at work around here," he added, staring down at the injured man.

"Go and fetch a doctor before Ralph Tendring bleeds to death!" Stephen Pirbright cried excitedly, rising to his feet.

"I'll rush up to the Manor House and telephone for a doctor," Donald volunteered, and then disappeared.

"Oh, daddy, why—why did you do this dreadful thing?" Anne murmured brokenly, her face paper-white.

He hesitated a moment. Then—

"I—I was told that you were out here in the wood with Don Corby," he stammered, "and I reckoned he might be up to some mischief, my girl."

Anne gave a quivering sigh. How could her father think such a thing of Donald?

"I couldn't see clearly in the dim light," he went on, "but I saw that a man was taking liberties with you and took it for granted the man was Corby. So I fired at him."

"And I suppose, daddy, you would not have fired had you known that the man was Ralph Tendring?" she said accusingly.

Before her father had time to reply, two men—Jarvis, an under-gamekeeper and Rendle, Sir Lucas's chauffeur—suddenly appeared in the clearing.

"We've just heard from Donald Corby that the young master's been hurt in a gun accident," Jarvis muttered breathlessly. "The ambulance will be here in a moment or two."

When, at last, the ambulance arrived, a doctor, with the aid of a torch, briefly examined the wound, and as the injured man was placed on a stretcher, Sir Lucas

Tendring came hurrying forward.

"Is—is my son's life in danger?" he asked anxiously.

"From a cursory examination, I am glad to say the wound does not appear to be dangerous, Sir Lucas," the doctor answered, "but I cannot say for certain at the moment."

"How—how did it all happen?" demanded Sir Lucas, gazing from one to the other. "Was it an accident?"

"It—it was I who did it, Sir Lucas," stammered Stephen Pirbright. "You see, I—I thought your son was someone else!"

Sir Lucas gazed at him in amazement for a long moment. Then—

"You—you shot my son because you thought he was someone else, Pirbright?" he gasped. "Do you realise what you are saying, my man?"

"Yes, Sir Lucas. I—I made an unfortunate mistake, but I'm not going to shirk the blame on that account."

"But why did you want to shoot anyone in these woods of mine, my dear fellow?" Sir Lucas cried angrily.

"Well, I—I thought the man was molesting my daughter, Sir Lucas, and I'm going to the police station and openly confess to what I have done."

"Are you coming to the hospital in the ambulance with us, Sir Lucas?" the doctor asked at that moment.

"Yes, of course I am," the baronet replied, and the two men hurried off to where the ambulance was waiting.

HIS DAUGHTER'S HONOUR

THE charge brought against Stephen Pirbright was "shooting with intent to kill," but being a man of substance, he was allowed bail on his own recognisances and that of a prominent local tradesman.

The tragic affair gave rise to all sorts of fantastic rumours. The story went round that Anne Pirbright had been meeting Ralph Tendring in secret, that her father had come upon them in each other's arms in Wilton Wood and had shot the young man to avenge his daughter's honour.

Unfortunately, Anne could not deny the story without revealing that she had arranged to meet Donald Corby in the wood, and she was not prepared to make such a humiliating confession, which would, of course, have involved Donald in the scandal connected with her name.

But the mystery of how her note had fallen into Ralph Tendring's hands remained for the time unsolved. When her father had been released on bail, he took Anne into their private sitting-room and closed the door.

"I've received word from the hospital that there's a good chance of Ralph Tendring making a complete recovery," he said, with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, daddy, I'm so very thankful to hear it!" murmured Anne.

"Yes, and so am I, my girl, but I reckon it won't make any difference to the charge against me," her father muttered grimly. "But whatever happens, Ralph Tendring has got to marry you now, Anne."

"Marry me!" she exclaimed excitedly, "But I—but I don't want to marry him, daddy. I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man on earth!"

"What you want, my girl, has got nothing to do with it," her father snapped angrily. "I'm not going to stand by and see dishonour brought on my name. Oh yes, young Tendring's got to make an honest woman of you, Anne, or I'll know the reason why."

"But, daddy, you—you are completely mistaken," Anne protested. "I admit

that Ralph Tendring did take me in his arms and kiss me against my will. And I hated it, but there was nothing like—I mean, nothing like you are trying to suggest."

"It's not what actually took place, my girl, but what everybody believes took place. You admit that Tendring kissed you, but who's going to believe that nothing else happened? With my own eyes I saw you in his arms—yes, and so did Donald Corby who was following close behind me. And what's more, you didn't appear to be putting up any struggle to free yourself from his embrace."

"But, daddy, I had struggled with the brute till I was utterly exhausted," Anne cried indignantly, "and was in a state of collapse when you appeared on the scene."

"Anyway, how did you come to be in the wood at all after dark, my girl? Tell me that," challenged her father. "And how did it come about that Ralph Tendring happened to be there at the same time? People don't go wandering about in a lonely wood after dark unless they have some special reason for doing so, you know."

Anne knew she was cornered. To explain why she had gone to the wood would have necessitated her telling about the note she had left for Donald asking him to meet her there, and this her pride would not allow her to do. Besides, she had no wish to drag Don into the sordid affair.

"To-morrow," her father was saying, "I'm going to see Sir Lucas, now that his son's out of danger. And if he wants to know—as I reckon he will—why I fired that shot, I shall tell him outright that it was to save my daughter's honour. For if I hadn't come on the scene when I did—well, I've no need to put into words what would have happened, have I?"

"In any case, daddy, I absolutely refuse to marry Ralph Tendring no matter what happens," Anne asserted obstinately.

"And bring lasting shame and dishonour on my name!" he retorted indignantly.

"But, daddy, nothing happened to bring shame and dishonour on your name. you—you are under quite a wrong impression."

"Oh yes, women will refuse to admit anything when it suits them," he growled. "But whether what you say is true or not, nobody's going to believe it, my girl. The name of Pirbright will become a by-word in the neighbourhood, and there's only one way of preventing it—which is for you to make up your mind to marry Ralph Tendring. Then no one will dare to raise so much as a whisper against you."

"People can whisper as much as they like, daddy, but it won't make any difference to me," declared Anne, with a proud toss of her head.

"But just think of the shame of it all, my girl. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"There is no shame, daddy. It is anything but nice for a girl to be kissed by a man against her will, I'll admit, but I am not going to pretend repentance of a sin I've never committed," Anne added defiantly.

"All right, we'll see about that, my girl," her father muttered grimly. "Maybe you'll change your tune when you find people sneering at you, whispering behind your back, and even insulting you to your face. Yes, and they'll call me an old fool for having given you such an expensive education. He wanted to make a lady of his daughter, they'll say, 'and now see what's come of it!'"

He then rose from his chair and left the room, his face livid with frustration and anger. Anne sighed. Though her father's words had sounded melodramatic, she knew there was a good deal of truth in

what he had said. She would be sneered at, and people would point the finger of scorn at her, no doubt.

The easy way out, she told herself, would be to go away from Linhurst and find a job of some kind. But her pride revolted at the thought of running away, of being driven from her home by malicious gossips who would, in all probability, regard her going as a confession of guilt.

"No," Anne decided, after a brief reflection, "I'll stay here and face it out at all costs."

But when her thoughts turned to the man she loved, her heart sank. She must tell Don the truth. Then she reminded herself, with a feeling of dismay, that, according to what her father had told her, Don has seen her in what was undoubtedly a compromising situation. And it would be her word against the seeming evidence of Don's own eyes.

"Oh dear, what am I to do, my darling Don?" she murmured brokenly.

SIR LUCAS TENDRING sat in his study, glaring at Stephen Pirbright, who had briefly told the tragic story of what had happened in the wood.

"It was a most dastardly thing for you to do, Pirbright, and but for the mercy of God, my son would not be alive to-day and you would have been guilty of murder," Sir Lucas muttered accusingly.

Stephen nodded grimly.

"Yes, maybe that is so," he said. "But let me ask you this, Sir Lucas. If you'd been in my shoes—that is, supposing you'd had a daughter and came upon her in a lonely wood at night struggling in the arms of a man, what would you have done in such circumstances?"

Sir Lucas shifted uneasily in his chair. His son had confessed to him that he had met Anne Pirbright in Wilton Wood and that he had taken her forcibly in his arms and kissed her. Although that in itself was no serious crime, what mattered was the construction people would put on it.

But at the moment, from Sir Lucas Tendring's point of view, there was more to it than that. He had just been recommended for an important directorship in a well-known firm which would relieve him of some of his most pressing financial troubles, and if his name should become associated with an unsavoury scandal through his son and heir, the odds were that the proffered directorship would be withdrawn.

"Well, and what do you suggest I should do in the matter, Pirbright?" he asked brusquely.

"There's only one thing you can do, Sir Lucas, and that is to insist on your son marrying my girl," came the reply.

Sir Lucas frowned.

"But that wouldn't prevent the story coming out in court, would it?" he objected.

"No, but the details would come out the way we want it, Sir Lucas. You see if it was understood that my daughter and your son were secretly engaged—unknown then to either of us—and coming upon them like I did. Well, you understand what I mean, don't you, Sir Lucas? After all," Stephen added lamely, "there's nothing uncommon about two young people being secretly engaged is there?"

Sir Lucas nodded thoughtfully. This seemed to provide a way out, and with no hint of scandal, he told himself. Notwithstanding the vast social gulf between the two families, his thoughts ran on, Anne Pirbright was a very likeable girl. She had moreover, received an expensive education, and her father was evidently, a comparatively wealthy man. That being so, Ralph might do a good deal worse than marry an hotel-keeper's daughter.

"Very well, Pirbright, as far as I'm concerned, there will be no objection to a marriage between your daughter and my son," Sir Lucas remarked abruptly.

Stephen Pirbright's face lit up.

"Very well, Sir Lucas, that's all I wanted to know," he said. "Now I shall know what to say in court when the case comes on." He hesitated, then added—"How soon would you like me to announce the engagement?"

"Whenever you like, my dear fellow," Sir Lucas replied, with an air of indifference. "But first of all, you had better have a word with your daughter about it, hadn't you?"

"Yes, of course," Stephen Pirbright agreed, feeling highly pleased with himself.

ANNE was not in when her father returned to the hotel. She had gone for a long walk in order to think things over and—though she scarcely admitted it to herself—in the hope that she might, by chance, meet Donald. If she did so and talked matters over with him, all might be well.

Suddenly she began to wonder how it came about that her father happened to be in Wilton Wood when she was accosted by Ralph Tendring? Evidently somebody must have told him of her intention to go there to keep an appointment, and that same "somebody" must have told Ralph Tendring about it too, or he would never have turned up there just when he did.

But who could have done such a mean and treacherous thing? Anne asked herself.

Then, all at once, she remembered Ruth Hobson, who, she knew, had always been jealous of her. Even when they were school-children together, Ruth had resented her good looks, her smart clothes and the fact that her father was well-off, while her own father was just an ordinary farmworker.

Yes, and the girl was still jealous of her. On her first day home, Anne reminded herself, Ruth had twitted her with being "too grand" to serve in the bar.

In any case, Anne decided she must find out the truth, for her whole future happiness might depend on it. Probably the best course to take would be to spring a surprise on the girl and accuse her straight out of filching the note left in the wood.

Anne waited until closing time that night, then went into the bar-parlour, where Ruth was washing glasses.

"Tell me, Ruth," she said abruptly, "what did you do with that note you found in Wilton Wood?"

Ruth stared at her for a moment, and her face went deathly pale.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered confusedly.

"Oh yes you do," Anne shot back at her. "You found the note and showed it to Ralph Tendring, also to my father. You—you thought that Ralph Tendring might think I was trying to make an assignation with him, and that my father might have the impression that I was meeting Donald Corby, didn't you? And that's why they both appeared on the scene so suddenly."

"It's a lie!" blustered the other girl. "I—I know nothing at all about a note. Besides, even if I—if I did," she stammered on, "why should I show it to anyone?"

"I'll tell you why," Anne said, realising that the girl was now alarmed. "It was because you wanted to make trouble between Donald Corby and me. You—you wanted to make him think that I was carrying on a flirtation with Mr. Tendring. And, what is more, you must have given Donald Corby the impression that he would find me in the wood with Mr. Tendring; otherwise, he would not have turned up just when he did."

"It—it's a lie," Ruth cried again.

"Oh no, it's not," Anne said. "You did this wicked thing, Ruth Hobson, because you wanted to discredit me in Donald Corby's eyes, and you didn't care who suffered as a result of your treachery."

Suddenly the girl's manner changed. Defence gave place to defiance.

"All right, I'll admit that I did do it!" she blurted out. "I did happen to find the note you left in the wood, and though there was no name on it, I guessed it was meant for Donald Corby. And I knew at once it was from you, for I recognised your handwriting. Now are you satisfied?" Ruth added sneeringly.

"But why did you do such a despicably mean thing?" Anne demanded. "What have I ever done to make you hate me so, Ruth Hobson?"

"I—I've always hated you, ever since we were kids together," came the bitter reply. "You have always had everything that I haven't got—nice clothes, a comfortable home and a father who gave you anything you asked for. All the boys fell for you, and I and the other girls got was your cast-offs."

"The other girls didn't mind so much," Ruth went on. "They'd got used to thinking of you as something special—as somebody a cut above themselves. But I didn't. I knew I was as good-looking as you, Anne Pirbright, but I couldn't make the best of my appearance because my parents couldn't afford to buy me fine clothes. Then—then Donald Corby fell for you, and he was the only boy that I really cared anything about."

Anne sighed.

"I—I had no idea of all this—" she began.

"Of course you hadn't," Ruth broke in fiercely. "You always had an idea that you only had to want a thing, to get it. You wanted Donald Corby, and you got him, didn't you? He used to see you home from school and carry your books for you. But when your father sent you away to a boarding-school, I thought my chance had come. I—I thought you'd forget all about Don, and he about you. But now I know I was mistaken."

Ruth paused, then continued, with mounting bitterness—

"Don and I had become great friends. Then you came home and started setting your cap at him again. So I followed you to Wilton Wood that day; I saw you write the note and stick it in the bark of the tree, and when you'd gone, I took it. Well, you know the rest, don't you?"

Anne nodded.

"Yes," she murmured, "and it nearly resulted in murder."

"And if it had, you'd have been shamed in the eyes of the world for ever, Anne Pirbright. Your lady-like airs, your expensive clothes and the rest of it wouldn't have helped you much then, would they? Oh, how I hate you!" Ruth added, now on the verge of hysteria, and then burst into tears.

Anne then left her and hurried upstairs to her bedroom. The mystery of the note that had gone astray, was a mystery no longer. With almost incredible cunning, Ruth had not only purloined it, but had used it with a vindictiveness that was positively appalling.

"WELL, my girl," Stephen Pirbright remarked, smiling at his daughter across the breakfast table next morning, "everything's settled, I've seen Sir Lucas and he's quite willing that Ralph should marry you. It's going to cost me quite a bit, one way and another, but I shan't worry about that."

Anne stared at him in bewilderment. Could her father have forgotten that she had refused absolutely to marry Ralph Tendring? Or did he think he could still persuade her to marry a man she detested?

"But, daddy, I have already told you that I am not going to marry Ralph Tendring," she said trying to keep her voice steady.

"And I tell you that I've got it all fixed up," he retorted. "Don't be a fool, Anne. Someday you'll be Lady Tendring. Just think of that! There's not a girl in the county who wouldn't give her ears for such a chance. Come, my girl, let me have no more of your silly tantrums."

"In any case, daddy, I am not going to marry Ralph Tendring, I loathe and despise the man."

Her father glared at her for a moment. Then—

"Well, if you think you're going to marry Donald Corby, you can think again," he snapped. "And don't forget this—you can't marry him or anyone else yet without my consent."

Anne gave a bitter little laugh.

"You needn't worry," she said, "for I don't think Donald Corby will ever want to marry me now. He, too, saw me in Ralph Tendring's arms, you know, and, no doubt, he drew the same false conclusions as you did."

"Well, then, what's against your marrying Ralph Tendring?" demanded her father irately. "I—I'm at a loss to understand you, my girl. What do you suppose I gave you an expensive education for, if it wasn't to make a real lady of you?"

"I'm very sorry to have to disappoint you, daddy, but have definitely made up my mind about it all," Anne said wearily.

As she was speaking, the door opened and old Simon, the hotel porter, thrust his head in.

"Inspector Radley to see you, sir," he announced agitatedly.

The landlord gave him a startled look.

"What does he want to see me about?" he asked gruffly.

"Couldn't say, sir," Simon replied.

"Very well, bring him in," Stephen muttered.

When the inspector entered the room, he smiled at Stephen, and said brightly—

"Good morning, Mr. Pirbright, I have some good news for you. The charge brought against you has been withdrawn."

"Withdrawn?" repeated Pirbright, gazing at the inspector incredulously.

"Please sit down, Inspector Radley," invited Anne smilingly, no less astonished than her father by the unexpected news.

"It's like this, Mr. Pirbright," said the inspector, when he sat down in the chair Anne had placed for him, "we are now satisfied that it couldn't have been your gun which shot Mr. Tendring. You see, we've had an expert down from London and he found that the shot removed from Mr. Tendring's shoulder came from a cartridge that fitted a different calibre gun from yours."

Stephen Pirbright gave a deep sigh of relief.

"That's what has been puzzling all along, Inspector Radley," he said. "As you know, I told you when you questioned me at the police station that I fired into the air, intending to frighten young Tendring, and not to hurt him in anyway. I've been at a loss to understand how he came to be hit, but there was no denying that he had been."

"In that case, two shots must have been fired," Anne remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, of course, Miss Pirbright," the inspector agreed, "and at exactly the same moment. When we came to search the

spot, we found two different sized cartridge cases, which means, of course, that two guns of different calibre had been used."

The inspector paused, then added—

"On examination, we found that the cartridge which fitted Mr. Pirbright's gun could not possibly have contained the calibre shot found in Mr. Tendring's shoulder.

"And I suppose you do not know who had possession of the other gun?" Anne murmured.

Inspector Radley shook his head thoughtfully.

"Not definitely, Miss Pirbright," he replied. "But as a result of our inquiries, we have suspicions."

"Have you?" Stephen Pirbright put in quickly. "On whom, may I ask?"

"On Sir Lucas Tendring's head gamekeeper—Donald Corby," answered the inspector.

"Donald Corby!" breathed Anne, feeling as if an icy hand had been laid against her heart. "You—you mean it was he who shot Mr. Tendring?"

Inspector Radley shrugged.

"That's not for me to say, Miss Pirbright," he said. "All I can tell you is that we found a gun of the calibre we were looking for in the gamekeeper's possession."

"And does Corby admit having fired it at Mr. Tendring?" asked Stephen Pirbright, an eager look in his eyes.

"No, but Corby admits that he was on the spot, though he asserts that he did not fire his gun. However, we shall have to wait and see what the gun expert has to say about that," the inspector added, rising to his feet. "Well, there's nothing more for me to say, Mr. Pirbright, except to express regret that you should have been wrongly accused."

"I don't hold that against you or your men, inspector," Stephen returned smilingly. "My innocence is now proved, my good name cleared, and that's all I care about."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Pirbright," the inspector agreed, as he shook hands with the beaming landlord and wished him good day.

THE PRICE OF LOYALTY

JOE PEACHEY sat on a five-barred gate whittling a piece of wood with a jack knife, deep in thought. He had the reputation of being the slickest poacher for miles around, and though he had been caught and gaoled many times, he had not given up his nefarious practices.

His face now wore a puzzled expression as he pondered over which, of several courses, he should adopt. He possessed a highly valuable secret, and he had to make up his mind and act at once, or events would be too swift for him.

Joe was handsome in a dark, gipsyish sort of way, and despite his unsavoury reputation, more than one girl had lost her heart to him. But Joe was not susceptible. The question he was now debating with himself was—had his big chance arrived at last? And if he let it slip, would another as good ever come his way?

"A bird in the hand," he muttered, grinning to himself, "is worth two in the bush, so they say!"

The "bird" in this case was a very pretty one indeed, and by all accounts her father was well-off. Anyway, he owned The Greyhound Hotel, and it would be nice, Joe reflected, to be landlord of a prosperous pub, with old Stephen Pirbright's daughter as his wife!

On the other hand, he would have to pay for it. The price might be a year—or even two or three "in the jug"—and that wasn't so good. But afterwards—well, the reward would be well worth while.

Given a decent upbringing and a better education, he would probably have done well for himself. But he had been "dragged up" by a slatternly mother in a tumble-down cottage. His father had died before he was born, so Joe had become a farm-hand, then a notorious poacher and, at intervals, an odd job man.

Strangely enough, he had almost come to a decision as to what course he should take, when the object of his ruminations appeared in sight. Wishing to be alone, Anne Pirbright had gone for a walk, and as she was turning into a lane, she caught sight of Joe sitting on the gate.

Had it been anyone else, she would probably have turned back. But she had always had a soft spot in her heart for Joe Peachey in spite of his erring ways. He too, was another of her old schoolmates, though probably the most disreputable of them all.

"Good morning, Joe," she said, smiling at him.

"Good morning, Miss Pirbright," he returned, with that boyish grin of his. "Bad news about Don Corby, eh?"

Anne nodded gravely.

"It's going to go pretty hard with him, if you ask me," Joe went on, throwing away the piece of wood he had been whittling. "I reckon the police will say that Don shot young Mr. Tendring because of his being jealous of him."

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Anne. "Why should Don Corby be jealous of Mr. Tendring?"

Joe shrugged.

"Well, when a chap sees his girl in another chap's arms, and him kissing her and all, it would be a rum go if he wasn't jealous, wouldn't it?" he replied.

Anne gave him a puzzled look.

"How do you get to know all this?" she asked.

"Oh well, I could see it with me own eyes, come to that, Miss Pirbright," he said.

"But—but you weren't there, Joe!" she stammered.

"Ah, that's what you think, my dear girl," Joe said laughingly. "Oh yes, I was there hidden away in the bracken all right. I'd gone to Wilton Wood to—well, to try and do a bit of business, in a manner of speaking. Then, all of a sudden, you turned up, and so did Mr. Tendring. Spoilt everything for me, that did, and I had to take cover pretty quick or Mr. Tendring would have seen me. So I sank down into the bracken."

"Then—then you saw Mr. Tendring forcibly take me in his arms and the desperate struggle I made to free myself," Anne asked eagerly.

Joe nodded.

"Yes, of course I did," he said, "and you put up a good fight, I will say that much for you, Anne."

"And you—and you could have stepped in and stopped it, couldn't you?" Anne muttered accusingly. "I thought you and I had always been friends, Joe Peachey, but now—"

"Anyway, I did stop it," he broke in, "but I did not intend to tell you or anyone else that."

"You—you stopped it?" she stammered, gazing at him in astonishment. "I know you're not noted for truthfulness, Joe, but I never thought you were capable of telling such a monstrous lie as that!"

"Tisn't no lie, Anne. Young Tendring was shot, wasn't he? And it wasn't your dad who shot him, as everybody thought

at first. All right, then who did?" Joe demanded, in a belligerent tone.

"Well, apparently, the police have discovered that an empty cartridge case found on the spot, which—which fitted Donald Corby's gun," she murmured.

"And couldn't it have fitted somebody else's gun?" Joe asked, with a knowing grin.

"But the police have begun making inquiries, and they say that Donald Corby's gun is the only one of the calibre they were seeking," Anne replied, in a low voice.

"Yes, I know," Joe said. "They called on me and I showed 'em the gun I'd got a license for—but not the gun for which I hadn't," he added, still grinning.

"Then—then are you trying to tell me —" Anne began, staring at him in bewilderment, when Joe cut her short.

"Hidden under that bracken like I was, I didn't either see nor hear your dad nor Corby come into the wood," he said. "I still thought I was the only one there bar you and Mr. Ralph. If I had known, I would never have done what I did."

"But—but what did you do, Joe?" Anne stammered excitedly.

"Well, you see," he said, "when it looked to me like as if you might be in real danger—if you see what I mean, Anne—I poked my gun out of the bracken, took careful aim, and let young Tendring have it. Seems though that your dad must have fired at the same time, as I didn't hear a second shot. Apparently, your dad must have fired over Ralph Tendring's head, but I certainly didn't, and Don Corby didn't fire his gun at all, I'm quite sure of that."

"Then—then it was you who shot Ralph Tendring!" breathed Anne.

"Aye, 'twas me all right, my dear girl," Joe openly admitted. "Like I said, I thought he was taking an unwarrantable liberty with you, and I upped and shot him point-blank."

"And—and I hope, Joe, you're not going to let Don Corby suffer for—for something you did," Anne murmured.

Joe rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Not so long ago," he muttered grimly, "Don had me up before the beaks for poaching and I got twenty-one days for it."

"Yes, Joe, but Don was only doing his duty as gamekeeper, wasn't he?" Anne said.

"Oh, well, I don't hold it against him exactly, Anne. But that doesn't mean Don's my friend, not by a long chalk."

"All the same, Joe, you can't possibly let an innocent man suffer for something you did, can you?" Anne persisted.

"The thought of Don Corby doing a spell in 'the cooler' wouldn't keep me awake o' nights," Joe retorted. "Then he'd learn what it's like inside—'twould give him a taste of his own medicine, I reckon," he added, with a cynical laugh.

"But suppose I went to the police and told them what you have just disclosed to me?" challenged Anne.

"And suppose I deny ever having told you any such thing?" he countered. "Everybody knows that you and Don Corby are sweet on each other, so you'd be what's called 'a prejudiced witness', you know."

Despairingly, Anne realised that he was right. Her story, without corroboration of any sort, would simply not be believed.

"But why did you go out of your way to make such a confession to me, Joe?" she demanded.

"Because I'm ready to make a bargain with you," he answered, grinning at her.

"You—you mean it's money you want?" she asked.

"No, it's not money I'm after—leastwise, not in the way you mean. Now look

Anne," he went on, "a spell in gaol—and it could be anything up to three years, I reckon—would about finish Don Corby. He'd come out a broken man—no job, no friends and with the prison brand on him. He'd never live it down. And even if you were to wait and be ready to marry him when he came out, he'd turn you down, knowing that to marry you would mean your sharing his disgrace in the eyes of the world."

Anne knew that what he had said was true.

"But it would be quite different with a man like me," Joe continued. "I was brought up tough, and I've lived tough all my life. So a spell in 'the clink' doesn't frighten me. Anyway, it wouldn't break my heart like it would Don Corby's. See what I mean, Anne?"

"Yes, I rather think so," she murmured, beginning to suspect what he had in mind. "Am I to understand that you are prepared to tell the truth to the police for a price? If so, what is that price, may I ask?"

"What you promise to marry me when I come out of prison," he answered bluntly.

Anne paled. Now that her suspicion had become a reality, the choice before her was appalling. To save the man she loved from the shame of a prison sentence, she must promise to marry this despicable poacher!

"You—you must give me time to think about it, Joe," she faltered.

"There isn't much time for that," he returned. "As you know, Corby's been before the magistrates and committed to the assizes. That'll be about three weeks from now, and he'll be refused bail."

"Yes, I know, but why?" Anne asked. "My father was allowed bail after he'd been charged."

"Oh, but that was different," Peachey said. "Your dad's a man of property, you see, and there wasn't much likelihood of his trying to make a get-away. Whereas, Corby's only a gamekeeper and who'd stand bail for him?"

Anne sighed, and decided that she must do her best to get permission to see Donald when he was in custody.

"Well, you must give me time, Joe," she murmured again.

"All right, but the sooner you make up your mind, the easier it'll be for Don Corby," he said. "I'll bet he isn't enjoying himself in quod," Peachey added, with a chuckle.

DONALD CORBY had been granted legal aid, and Anne decided to go and see Mr. Sangby, the lawyer who had undertaken to defend him when the case came on at the Midchester Assizes.

Contrary to her expectation, he turned out to be quite a young man.

When Anne was shown into his office, he greeted her with a friendly smile.

"I have seen Corby," he said, "and he declares that he never fired at Mr. Tendring. Yet, according to the police evidence, the cartridge case found on the spot fits Corby's gun. Therefore, if what my client says is true, then someone in the neighbourhood must be in possession of a gun of the same calibre as Corby's, though, so far, the police have not been able to trace the person."

For a moment, Anne was tempted to tell of her talk with Joe Peachey, then decided against it, for if suspicion fell on Peachey, he might think it advisable to disappear and her last hope of saving Donald would be gone.

"As a result of my inquiries, Miss Pirbright," the lawyer went on. "I gather that you and Donald Corby are, or were in love with each other; that you were, in fact, secretly engaged?"

"I would not go so far as to say that we were engaged," Anne murmured, "but we—but we are very fond of each other."

"I—I see," the lawyer remarked thoughtfully, "that provides the prosecution with a motive, of course. They will argue, no doubt, that Corby shot Mr. Tendring because he was jealous of him, and jealousy is no excuse for—"

"But—but supposing Mr. Corby did not shoot him!" Anne broke in impulsively.

"That is what I have to try and prove, Miss Pirbright, and at present I can see very little hope of doing so," the lawyer said gravely. "Unfortunately, all the available evidence is against my client—the gun the cartridge that fitted it, and the motive. In my opinion, only two things can save Donald Corby from a long term of imprisonment—namely, the discovery of the actual gun used—assuming it was not Corby's—or the real culprit coming forward and confessing his guilt."

Anne drew a quick breath. She had almost made up her mind to agree to Peachey's vile demand, as it seemed the only possible way of saving Donald.

"In an interview I had with Corby," the lawyer continued, "he informed me that he had not used his gun for at least two weeks, though, as gamekeeper he always carried it with him when he made his rounds. Incidentally," he added, "do you remember whether or not it had been raining in Linhurst on the day the shooting affair took place?"

"Yes, it had, Mr. Sangby," answered Anne, "though it was mostly sleet and snow."

"I see," he remarked thoughtfully. "Well, if by chance you should happen to hear of anything that you think might help in Mr. Corby's defence, Miss Pirbright, perhaps you will let me know."

"Yes, of course I will, Mr. Sangby," she promised.

They shook hands and Anne, her heart heavy within her, left the office. Then, having obtained the necessary permission, she went to the prison in Midchester to which Donald had been sent pending his trial.

She was shown into a room and allowed to have a short interview with Don.

"Oh, Anne, why did you come here to see me?" he asked, as he shook hands with her. "The sooner you forget me, the better," he added dejectedly.

Anne sighed.

"Please, do not give up hope, Don dear," she pleaded. "I have seen Mr. Sangby, and he told me that you deny having fired the shot that wounded Mr. Tendring."

"Yes, and what I want to know is who did actually fire that shot?" Don muttered grimly, "my impression is that it must have been a poacher. I had heard shots in the wood a little earlier on and guessed there must be poachers about. That's why I happened to be around there that evening. It—it might have been that rascal Joe Peachey, of course."

Anne nodded.

"Yes, of course," she agreed.

"But that doesn't help, does it, Anne?" he went on dolefully. "If it was Peachey who committed the crime, he'll never own up to it. But there's nothing to prove that he did fire the shot. Even if he owned a gun of the calibre in question, he would have hidden it where the police would never find it."

"All the same, Don dear, you must not lose hope," Anne urged. "Something may happen to prove your innocence. In fact," she added, on the spur of the moment "I feel quite sure it will."

Don gave her a puzzled look.

"What do you mean by that, Anne?" he asked.

"Oh, it—it's just a—well, a sort of premonition I have," she stammered confusedly, fearing she might have ventured a little too far.

"Anyway, I advise you not to bank on it," he said gloomily. "I have a premonition, too—that I shall spend the next few years in prison."

"Oh no, Don. You mustn't think that, you know!"

"Well, I do think, my dear Anne," he said sombrely. "And, as I have already suggested, you had better try and forget me. For whether I'm imprisoned for six months or six years, I shall still have been a criminal in the eyes of the law, and, therefore, all question of marriage between us is quite out of the question."

Anne was about to protest, and then decided that, in view of what she intended doing, it might be better to let Don think that she agreed with him.

"When I'm a free man again," he went on, "I shall probably go to New Zealand, where I have an uncle, and start a new life there."

Anne nodded.

"Yes," she murmured, struggling to keep her voice steady, "perhaps that might be best course for you to take, Don."

"Yes, of course it would," he said. "I'm glad you think so, too, Anne," he added, trying not to sound bitter at her ready acquiescence with his plan.

A short silence followed, then Anne rose to her feet.

"I—I think I had better go now, Donald," she stammered, fearing that if she stayed a moment longer she might betray her real feelings, yet longing to tell him that she would gladly wait for him and go on loving him, till the end of Time!

"Yes, perhaps you had, Anne," he agreed dully, his eyes turned away from her.

Anne, her eyes blurred with tears, held out her hand, but Don did not appear to see it.

"Good-bye, Donald," she murmured shakily.

"Good-bye, Anne," he muttered, still not looking at her.

Anne left the prison in the depths of despair. The only course open to her now she told herself, was to promise to marry Joe Peachey on condition that he confessed to having fired the shot at Ralph Tendring. Then Don would be set free with no stain upon his character, and with no shame to live down.

NEXT morning Anne slipped out of the hotel and made for the spot where she had arranged to meet Joe Peachey. She found him leaning against the five-barred gate, smoking a cigarette.

He gave a self-satisfied grin when he caught sight of her.

"Well!" promptly raising his cap to her. "How about it, Anne?"

"I—I have decided to do as you suggest," she said tonelessly.

"You mean, that you'll promise to marry me, is that it?"

Anne nodded.

"Yes, Joe, on condition that you—that you confess it was you who shot Mr. Tendring."

"Oh yes, I'll do that all right, my dear girl," he said lightly, "I shall say it was an accident, and no one can prove that it wasn't. 'Why should I shoot the gentleman?' I shall say. 'Mr. Ralph Tendring never done me no harm'. And I shall probably get away with no more than six months," Peachey added optimistically.

Anne said nothing. Somehow, she had

a feeling that it was all part of a dreadful nightmare from which she would presently awaken.

"Mind you, my dear girl, you've got to give me your solemn promise that you'll marry me when I come out of quod," Peachey was saying. "For once I've given myself up to the police, I'll have no hold on you except your promise. So I'm going to make you put it into writing."

He then produced a slip of paper from his pocket and a stub of pencil.

"Now write down what I say," he ordered, handing Anne paper and pencil.

"I promise on my solemn word that if Joe Peachey confesses he shot Ralph Tendring, I will marry him as soon as he is free to do so," she wrote at his dictation.

"Now sign it," he said.

Anne did so and handed the paper back to him.

"Now you and me are now properly engaged," he said, a smug grin on his face. "But it's got to be secret, mind you, till I come out of quod, for if your dad gets to hear of it, he might send you away out of my reach."

Anne nodded understandingly.

"Very well, Joe," she murmured, as he carefully folded the slip of paper and put it in an inner pocket of his jacket.

"You and me are now in the same boat, Anne," he said, lighting another cigarette.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, you see, a year or so back, I fell pretty badly for a gipsy girl. She and her people camped out at Grindley Green for a fortnight, pea-picking. She fell for me, too, but she was a true Romany, while I've got only a drop of gipsy blood in me. So her people wouldn't let her marry a gorgio, and that put paid to our romance."

"And—and do you still love the girl, Joe?"

"Well, I reckon I feel about her much the same as you feel about Don Corby," he replied. "But I've got to make the best of things as they are, and so have you, my dear girl."

"Yes, of course," Anne murmured resignedly. "I now see what you mean when you said we were both in the same boat."

He had driven a hard bargain, yet curiously enough, Anne did not hate him for it. In a detached sort of way, she rather liked him. For all his lack of education, his native cunning and his nefarious occupation, there seemed to more of the true gentleman in Joe Peachey than there was in Ralph Tendring, in spite of the difference in their stations in life.

Soon after Anne arrived home after her meeting with Peachey, her father came into the sitting-room and told her that she was wanted on the telephone.

"It's a man named Sangby," he said.

Anne hurried to the telephone and picked up the receiver.

"Miss Pirbright speaking," she said, a little breathlessly.

"Could you manage to come over to Midchester this afternoon, Miss Pirbright?" came the lawyer's voice. "I have some rather important information for you."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Sangby," she answered. "I—I will be at your office at about three o'clock this afternoon," she added, with suppressed excitement.

ON WHOM LOVE SMILES

ANNE arrived at the lawyer's office punctually at three o'clock, and John Sangby placed a chair for her to sit down.

"Do you remember, Miss Pirbright," he began, "that after mentioning to you that Corby told me he had not fired his gun for a fortnight or so, I asked you whether it had been raining in Linhurst on the day of the shooting affair?"

"Yes, Mr. Sangby, and I think I told you that we'd had sleet and a little snow during several days, didn't I?" Anne said.

"Exactly, and that goes a long way to prove my client's innocence, Miss Pirbright. I have insisted on the gun which the police had taken from Corby, being thoroughly examined by an expert," the lawyer went on to explain. "The police authority had been satisfied with finding that the gun was the right calibre for the empty cartridge case found in the woods, but I certainly wasn't."

"Had Donald Corby been in the army," Mr. Sangby continued, with a grim smile, "he would have received a severe 'ticking off' for not cleaning his weapon, for a close examination of his gun showed that there were traces of rust inside the barrel."

"You—you mean, Mr. Sangby, this showed that Mr. Corby had not fired the gun for some little time?" Anne asked eagerly.

"Exactly," he said again. "You see, Corby had carried the gun about with him during that wet weather and, naturally, damp had got into the barrel. This may not have occurred to him, of course, but however that may be, there was the rust inside the barrel which proved that the gun could not have been fired for some little time prior to the affair in the wood."

Anne nodded understandingly.

"The police have therefore now decided to withdraw the charge against my client," Mr. Sangby added. "So once more they are faced with the baffling question—who actually did fire the shot at Ralph Tendring? But that is their problem, and not mine."

Suddenly it occurred to Anne that it was up to her to see Joe Peachey at once. Now that Donald's innocence had been proved, there was no need for Peachey to give himself up to the police. Moreover, she told herself gleefully, she would now be released from the horrible bargain she had made with the man.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Sangby," she said gratefully. "I cannot tell you how very much all this means to me—and to Donald too, of course."

John Sangby smiled.

"I am very pleased too, Miss Pirbright," he said, "not only because an injustice has been prevented, but also because I feel—well, that I am not exactly a bad amateur detective. The police themselves might of course, have made the same discovery in due course, but the fact remains that I made it first," the lawyer added jestingly.

Anne caught the bus back to Linhurst, determined to find Joe Peachey at the earliest possible moment. First of all, she went to the dilapidated cottage that he shared with his mother, but only to be told that he was not in.

"Can you tell me where I could find Joe?" Anne asked urgently.

Mrs. Peachey shook her head.

"No, Miss, I'm sorry I can't," she said.

"You see, Joe goes his own way and don't tell me nothing. And I don't ask, for it ain't no concern of mine."

"So you can't tell me when he'll be home, Mrs. Peachey?"

The woman shook her head again.

"He comes and goes when it suits him," she replied.

"I—I see," Anne murmured, and then walked on.

Her one great fear now was that Joe had already gone to the police and con-

fessed that it was he who had shot Ralph Tendring. If he had done that, thus keeping his side of the bargain, she must keep hers too. Anne told herself for the fact that Donald's innocence had been proved to the satisfaction of the police, did not release her from the promise she had made to Joe Peachey.

There seemed nothing she could do except go home, and then later on in the day perhaps go back to the cottage in the hope that Joe had returned.

The first person Anne met on entering the hotel was Ruth Hobson.

"Joe Peachey was here a little while ago asking for you," she announced, eyeing Anne suspiciously.

"Asking for me?" Anne said. "What did he want?"

"Didn't say," Ruth replied. "He came into the public bar and ordered a mug of beer, and as he was drinking it he said he reckoned it was the last pint he was likely to have this side of next Christmas!"

Anne winced.

"And when he left, did he say where he was going?" she asked.

"No, he didn't," Ruth answered, with a cynical little laugh, "Joe isn't the sort of chap to tell anybody where he's going. Oh no, his nobs keeps his comings and goings to himself all right."

At a loss what to do next, Anne went upstairs to her room and sat down on the bed to think. From what Ruth Hobson had said, it rather looked as though Peachey had been on his way to the police station when he called in for that pint of beer. If this were so, he would already have given himself up.

Presently, when she went downstairs, her father came hurrying into the sitting-room.

"Anne," he exclaimed excitedly, "young Corby has just rung up to say that the police have withdrawn the charge against him and that he's a free man again. You—you'll be glad to hear that, won't you, my dear?"

"Yes, of—of course, daddy," Anne stammered confusedly.

"I'm glad to hear about it, too," her father went on. "Although the young man has got ideas a bit above his station, he's a decent sort of lad for all that. Somehow, I never did believe it was he who fired that shot."

"I'm glad you do not dislike Donald as much as I thought you did, daddy," Anne said, with a wavering smile.

"It wasn't so much that I disliked him as a man, but at his aiming to be my son-in-law." Her father paused, then went on—"And that reminds me, Anne, you needn't worry about having to marry Ralph Tendring. That's off. Sir Lucas has planned for his son to marry the daughter of a rich manufacturer, and I reckon the old man will soon be able to pay off some of his creditors—and not too soon, neither."

Anne made no comment. She was still wondering if Joe Peachey had given himself up.

"This tragic shooting affair has shaken me up a bit, my dear," her father continued, "and I've come to see things in a different light, so to speak. I realise now that it was wrong of me to try and fix a marriage between you and Ralph Tendring."

"I'm very glad of that, daddy," Anne murmured.

"I see now that I was a bit too ambitious for you, my dear—and maybe for myself as well," Stephen went on. "Sort of lost my head, as the saying is. 'No fool like an old fool', eh? Well, the last week or two have taught me quite a lot, my girl."

"And me, too, daddy," Anne said, with a deep sigh.

"I guess I know what you're thinking of, my dear. And let me tell you this, Anne—if you've a mind to marry Donald Corby, I shall not stand in your way."

"Oh, daddy, do you really mean that?" cried Anne.

"Yes, of course, I do, my dear," he replied. "I want you to be happy—as I've always wanted you to be—but for a time I wanted it to be my own idea of what should make you happy, not yours. But I was wrong. I realise that now, for one can't lay down rules of happiness for other people."

Oh, if only Joe Peachey had decided to put off going to the police till to-morrow when Donald's innocence would be made known to all the world! Anne thought agonizedly.

She made up her mind to go to the Peachey's cottage again after tea. Joe might have returned by then, and she could tell him that there was no need for him to give himself up in order to save Donald. Then their bargain would no longer hold, and she would be free—free to marry the man she loved.

"No, Miss, he ain't come home yet," Mrs. Peachey told Anne when she called at the cottage early that evening. "Maybe he'll stay out all night, as he sometimes does."

"Well, if—if your son does come home, Mrs. Peachey, will you please tell him to do nothing till he has seen me?" Anne stammered agitatedly.

"Yes, of course, I will Miss Pirbright," the old woman replied.

When Anne arrived back home, it was her father who told her the dreadful news—the news which destroyed her last hope of happiness.

"What do you think Anne?" her father remarked, "Joe Peachey has given himself up to the police. He has confessed that it was he who shot Ralph Tendring! Well, thank goodness the mystery is cleared up at last and no one else will come under suspicion."

Stephen was so excited about the startling development, that he did not notice Anne turn deathly pale and grasp at a chair as if for support.

"I shouldn't be surprised if young Corby turned up here this evening," he went on. "If he does, I shall give him a warm welcome, for Don, like myself, knows what it feels like now to be under so grave a suspicion, and it gives one a sort of fellow-feeling."

Anne nodded her agreement, and then went upstairs to her room, in a paroxysm of despair.

On the following day, Joe Peachey was brought before the local magistrates and was committed for trial.

That evening, when Don called at the hotel to see Anne, she burst into tears.

"What's the matter, Anne dear?" he asked in bewilderment.

"I—I have promised to—to marry Joe Peachey," she murmured brokenly.

Don gazed at her in wide-eyed astonishment.

"I—I don't understand, my dear Anne," he gasped breathlessly. Then the truth came to him in a flash. "I—I suppose you did that in order to get Peachey to confess that it was he who shot Ralph Tendring!" he stammered on. "That is so, isn't it?"

Anne hesitated a moment then nodded. "It—it was Joe Peachey's suggestion," she managed to say in desperation. "Then, when I learnt that the charge against you had been withdrawn, I—I went in search of Joe was unable to tell him about it, but to find him."

"But—but this is utterly ridiculous, Anne! The man can't possibly hold you to such a promise. One might almost call it a form of blackmail!" Donald added fiercely.

"But if—but if I had not agreed to the man's suggestion, Don, he wouldn't have given himself up to the police," Anne said.

"You mean to say, Anne, that Peachey would actually have let me suffer for his crime and never said a word?" Donald asked.

"Well, yes, it would seem so," Anne murmured wearily. "In any case, I have made the promise, Don, and must abide by my word. I—I promised to marry the man on condition that he confessed the truth to the police, and he has done so, hasn't he?"

Don made a despairing gesture. The tremendous sacrifice Anne had made on his account was now becoming clear to him. She had made it to save him from unmerited punishment and lasting shame, and had condemned herself to wedding a man she did not, and never could, love.

The magnitude of the sacrifice a woman is prepared to make for the man she loves, made him feel very humble.

"I—I really don't know what to say to you, Anne," he muttered huskily. "I now realise to the full what you have done for me, the almost unbelievable sacrifice you have made in order that my innocence might be proved. Oh, if only my release had come a little earlier, come in time to prevent Peachey going to the police!"

"Yes, I know," Anne murmured dully. "But it's no use mourning over might-have-beens, is it, Don? It would seem that fate is against us."

Donald made another effort to persuade her that she was not bound by a promise made in such circumstances, and that Peachey had no right, morally or otherwise, to hold her to it.

"That may be so," Anne admitted sadly. "But, Don, a promise is a promise, and since Joe Peachey has kept his side of the bargain, I must keep mine."

"All the same, my dear Anne, it's monstrous—utterly monstrous!" he groaned.

"You told me you thought you could get a job in New Zealand, didn't you?" Anne went on, after a short pause. "I think it would be better for us both that way, Donald. Then we—we might forget in time."

"Oh no, I shall never forget, Anne," he said. "I love you far too deeply for that, and I shall go on loving you to my dying day."

"Even so, Don dear, we must both do our best to forget," she whispered. "It—it is our only hope."

"And is that all you have to say to me, Anne?"

"What else is there for me to say, Don?"

"So this—so this is our good-bye?" he asked unsteadily.

"Yes, this is our good-bye, Donald," she murmured brokenly, then turned and hurried upstairs to her room, blinded by tears.

ANNE sat facing John Sangby in his office. She had called to see him in the hope of finding out what Joe Peachey's chances were in his forthcoming trial.

"The indictment will be 'shooting with intent to kill,'" the lawyer explained. "But since that would be difficult to prove perhaps, the charge will be modified to 'grievous bodily injury', and if Peachey pleads guilty, then it will be simply a matter for the judge to pass sentence on him."

"But how can he do anything else but

plead guilty, since he's given himself up?" asked Anne.

"He has given himself up for shooting Ralph Tendring, but he has not pleaded guilty to shooting him intentionally. You see, Miss Pirbright, it could have been an accident," the lawyer went on. "The man admits that he was out on a poaching expedition at the time. He sees Ralph Tendring in the wood, and fearing that he will be caught red-handed, he takes cover in the bracken. You see what I mean, don't you, Miss Pirbright?"

Anne nodded.

"But what I do not understand is why the man wanted to take a pot-shot at Tendring?" the lawyer added. "Why didn't he decide to remain under cover until the coast was clear?"

"I—I suppose he fired at Mr. Tendring because he thought he was going to—to—"

"Quite so, Miss Pirbright," the lawyer broke in. "But if that line of defence is adopted, I'm afraid it is going to complicate matters very much. For one thing, you would probably be called upon to testify that Ralph Tendring was, technically, 'assaulting' you. Of course, Tendring would strongly deny that he had any such intention."

"In other words, Miss Pirbright, the whole sordid affair would develop into what the French call a *crime passionelle*," Mr. Sangby continued. "From being a mere ordinary case involving a poacher with a gun, it would become one of national interest, with newspaper reporters and photographers giving the affair world-wide publicity. Therefore, I think the best course for us to take is to plead that, Peachey's gun went off by accident while he was crouching in the bracken."

"But—but Peachey told me that he shot Ralph Tendring because—" Anne began agitatedly.

"Yes, that may be so," the lawyer interrupted, "but was he speaking the truth, Miss Pirbright? I very much doubt it. Tell me," he added, "were you and this man, Joe Peachey very friendly with each other?"

"Oh no, I scarcely knew him," Anne replied.

"That being so, is it likely that the man would risk committing murder for the sake of a girl who scarcely knew him?" Mr. Sangby asked. "I certainly do not think so. My opinion is that the gun went off by accident, and that because he wanted to figure as a sort of hero in your eyes, Peachey pretended that he had purposely shot the man who appeared to be taking an undue liberty with you in the wood."

"Yes, that—that may be so," Anne stammered.

"Very well, that's the line I shall decide to take, Miss Pirbright. The defence will be greatly strengthened by the fact that Peachey had no possible motive for shooting Ralph Tendring. His gun gone off by accident, that's what it all amounts to."

"Another point I shall urge in the man's favour is that he gave himself up to the police," Mr. Sangby added. "A man who had knowingly attempted to commit murder, would scarcely have done that, of course. It shows that his conscience was clear, doesn't it?"

"And—and what do you think will happen to him?" murmured Anne.

The lawyer shrugged.

"If the jury are satisfied that the shooting was accidental and return a verdict of 'not guilty', then the man will be acquitted, no doubt," he replied.

AND that is what actually did happen. When a week later, the case came on at the Midchester Assizes, the defence

was able to satisfy the jury that the shooting had been accidental, the result being that Joe Peachey was acquitted.

It was on the day following that Anne chanced to meet him in the street.

"I'm glad you were found not guilty, Joe," she remarked smilingly.

"And so am I," he said, grinning at her.

Anne was wondering what to say next, when he went on—

"Remember me telling you about that gipsy girl I fell in love with? Well, she's left her people and come back to me. Couldn't forget me no more than I could forget her. So I reckon I'll have to jilt you, Anne. But I expect you'll soon get over it," he added, the grin on his face

broadening.

Anne stared at him, scarcely able to believe her ears.

"Do you—do you really mean that, Joe?" she asked eagerly.

"Of course I mean it, my dear girl," he said. "You and me wouldn't never have hit it off together, you know, all things considered. So me and Isopel—that's her name in Romany—are going to buy a caravan and travel the country. After all, that is more in my line, isn't it, Anne?"

"Well, yes, perhaps it is," Anne agreed. "And I—I wish you and your fiancée every happiness, Joe."

"Thanks very much, Anne," he said, still grinning at her, and then walked on.

ANNE and her husband sat side by side on the cliffs overlooking the Cornish sea. It was the first week of their honeymoon, and they were gloriously happy.

"I'm awfully glad that daddy has decided to retire and allow us to manage the hotel, aren't you, my dearest?" Anne asked, giving Donald's hand an affectionate squeeze.

"Yes, of course I am, darling," Donald answered enthusiastically. "It was a wonderfully generous gesture on your father's part, wasn't it, my love?" he added, drawing Anne closer to him and pressing his lips to hers in a kiss of infinite tenderness.

THE END.

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WITH YOU BESIDE ME

By Joan Telscombe

THE SISTERS

MONICA STORM alighted from the single dockers bus at the corner of the wide, tree-lined street and went quickly through the rain towards her home.

There were far more people about nowadays than there used to be, she reflected, as she stepped aside to avoid a young couple so engrossed in each other that they scarcely saw where they were going. Not that it was surprising, for the little Maryland town, in America, where she lived, had been transformed almost overnight into a hive of industry.

It had all begun six months ago, when a rich vein of iron ore had been discovered in the hills to the north of the town. Within hours almost, sleek, modern cars had begun to appear in the streets, most of them towing caravans, and a new housing estate had sprung into existence as if by magic.

The transformation that had taken place was one beset with pitfalls for a great many people, Monica reflected, with a sigh.

Before the discovery of the iron ore, Richardsville had been a sleepy backwoods town, with neat frame houses set amid pleasant little gardens. Everybody knew everybody and life had flowed along with scarcely a ripple to disturb its placid surface.

Now all was changed. There were more shops, more buses, more cars and many more people. The little railway halt had become a junction and there was even an airport.

It was an entirely different place from the one in which she and her sister Alice had been brought up, she decided, as she walked between their own and their neighbour's awn to the front door of the house.

But nowhere was the change more apparent than in their own lives.

For her part, Monica regretted the disruption in their quiet, orderly existence, but Alice, who was two years younger, welcomed it. She worked at the county library, where she met numbers of young men who came in to change books and now scarcely an evening passed when there was not a car or two parked outside their house.

"Hullo, dear! Back again? Have a nice day?"

Her mother, a kindly, middle-aged woman, with lingering traces of the prettiness that had been hers, greeted Monica with a tired smile.

Her husband had died when Monica had been fourteen and Alice twelve. Since then

Mrs. Storm had eked out her slender pension by letting off the two front rooms of the house. But things had become a trifle easier for her when Monica had started work in the office of a local solicitor and was able to contribute something towards running the home.

Monica kissed her mother fondly. Any day that nothing went wrong in was a nice one as far as Mrs. Storm was concerned.

"Quite a nice day, thank you, mummy," she replied, following her mother into the airy kitchen, where the table was laid for supper. "Alice not back yet?"

"No. She didn't say that she was going to be late, either," said Mrs. Storm, crossing to the cooker and switching on the kettle. "Did you see her at lunch?"

Monica shook her head. She had a nicely shaped head, with an aureole of auburn curls, grey eyes and a mouth that was both warm and generous.

"She scarcely ever comes into the milk bar on Second Avenue nowadays," she said. "She usually goes with Hetty Green to that new place opposite Sappho's. A lot of young engineers go there and she meets them."

"I just don't understand her," sighed Mrs. Storm, getting a waffling pan down from a shelf. She drew a basin of freshly mixed batter towards her. "All she seems to think of is boys, boys, boys. It's high time she settled down and took life a good bit more seriously."

"Oh, she's still young, mummy," Monica said, going to the window and gazing out. "You mustn't be too hard on her. She likes a good time, that's all."

Mrs. Storm gave her elder daughter a glance of surprise.

"From the way you talk anyone would think you were middle-aged, Monica," she said, almost rebukingly. "You are only two years older than Alice, when all's said and done."

Monica turned.

"And those two years make a tremendous difference, mummy," she said soberly.

"It didn't in my day," said Mrs. Storm, busy with the cooking.

"Perhaps not," the girl smiled. "But then things have changed since then, haven't they? I don't suppose you were allowed to go out with a young man for moonlight drives in his car or—"

"I should think not, indeed. I don't approve of that kind of thing in any case, as well you know. Why—"

"There's Alice now," Monica interrupted quickly, giving her mother a warning glance. "Don't let her guess we've been discussing her. It will only start another row."

And that, she thought a little wearily, was the whole trouble.

Alice was over-sensitive to criticism, doubtless because she was not at all sure of herself and so looked for slights where none were intended. She was generally sorry afterwards, but the fact remained that, more often than Monica liked to think, she would turn on both of them in reply to some quite innocent remark that she had taken the wrong way.

Alice came in through the doorway, her mac flying and her high-heeled shoes tapping on the floor. She was a slightly-built brunette with an olive complexion against which Monica looked pale. She had a vivid, scarlet mouth and really lovely brown eyes.

"Hullo, Alice," Monica greeted, crossing to the table. She watched as the girl flung mac, hat and bag into an untidy heap in one chair before subsiding into another. "You didn't get wet, then?"

"Not this child," returned Alice rather slangily. "Bill Protheroe ran me home in his jeep. He's calling to take me to the Roxy at seven, by the way."

Mrs. Storm looked over her shoulder, frowning.

"That will be the fourth night you've been out with somebody this week," she remarked shortly.

Alice yawned behind a carefully manicured hand.

"Well, there's nothing else to do, is there? You don't expect me to sit at home and twiddle my thumbs, I hope. We haven't got television and I don't like reading. Besides,"—as if this disposed of the subject—"I like going to the films."

Monica threw her mother a warning glance; no good would come out of saying anything. In any case, there was a great deal of truth in what her sister said. Their home must seem very dull at times, with nothing to do but talk over the events of the day.

It was different for herself. Her own short-lived romance had been rudely shattered, so that she had very little desire to go out much or meet anyone. The few times she did go out at night was like turning a knife in the wound, for the sight of other young couples enjoying themselves, their faces alight with happiness, had the

power to bring back memories she wanted to forget.

"Has the new lodger turned up yet?" enquired Alice, when they were half-way through their meal.

She rested her elbows on the table, the fingers of one hand pressed into her cheek. It was a pose affected by her favourite film star and she practised it assiduously in front of the mirror.

Mrs. Storm shook her head.

"I don't expect him back until eight," she answered. "He had to report somewhere and then was going round to the rail road to collect his things. The room's all ready for him, though."

"What's he like, mom?" asked Alice, in true American style.

"Well," answered Mrs. Storm hesitantly. "He seems a very nice young man. Very polite," she added, by way of an afterthought.

"Oh, sure," Alice shrugged. "What I mean is, what does he look like?"

"Well, I'm not very good at describing people," Mrs. Storm answered, with an apologetic smile. "He struck me as being quite handsome. He's English, by the way," she added, as if that explained a lot.

Both girls laughed. For the past two years the front room downstairs had been let to a bank clerk, who had recently been transferred to another branch.

Mrs. Storm had advertised in the *Richardsville Monitor* and the room had now been taken by an applicant who said he was in search of quiet lodgings in a private house.

"What's he doing in Richardsville if he's English?" Alice wanted to know. "If he was just here on a holiday he wouldn't want a room like ours, surely—he'd stay at one of the hotels."

"I understand that he is going to teach English literature at the college," Mrs. Storm explained. "He wanted a place where he could get on with his studies."

"Gee! A professor!" Alice exclaimed. "Sounds stuffy to me."

"He didn't appear to be anything of the kind," defended her mother stoutly. "I wish all the young men who come to this house had such nice manners," she added meaningly.

Alice giggled.

"You're priceless, mom," she said flippantly. "Just because you are half-English yourself you think all Englishmen are perfect. Personally, I can't stand the way they talk—they are too refined."

"Well, you're not compelled to listen," said Monica quietly. She had seen her mother flush and felt somewhat annoyed with her sister.

After that she helped her mother clear away and wash up. It was a nightly ritual, for Alice was seldom in long enough to do any household chores. It was Monica who fetched the coke and filled the furnace; Monica who filled the hot-water bottles when they were needed; Monica who got up in the morning and prepared breakfast.

Not that she minded, any more than she minded helping with the shopping and cleaning, and getting Sunday dinner. She liked housework and knew that the more she did the less there was for her mother to do.

She might easily have resented the cool way in which Alice seemed to take it for granted that her elder sister should do all the domestic work, but latterly they seemed to have drifted so far apart that it no longer mattered. Alice never confided in her, neither did she expect confidences, so that they had no common ground left on which to meet.

Probably, Monica conceded, she herself was as much to blame as anyone, for ever since Gus Lampard had written to tell her

that he had fallen in love with some other girl he had met while serving with the American Forces in Japan, it seemed to Monica that she had become possessed of a dual personality, one half of which dwelt in a world utterly remote from that in which lived her mother and sister.

It was not until Alice had gone off with her latest boy friend, and she had her mother were listening to the radio, that Monica met the new lodger. He arrived by taxi and she went to the door to let him in.

On opening it she was confronted by a tall, well-set up young man with grey eyes and a friendly smile, whose blue suit was typically English.

"Good evening," he exclaimed, taking off his hat. "You're Miss Storm I presume?"

"I'm Monica," she answered, opening the door wide. "Are you Mr. Bannister?"

"At your service, Miss Storm," he said, with a slight bow. "I hope I haven't arrived at an inconvenient time?"

"Not at all, we were wondering if you had remembered the address," she said. "Your room is all ready for you. In there, please," she added to the taxi-driver, who came up the steps with two heavy suitcases.

A little later, when the taxi had gone, she tapped at the lodger's door.

"I've just made some coffee, Mr. Bannister," she called through the panels. "Would you like a cup?"

"That's very kind of you, Miss Storm." He came to the door, having changed into grey flannels and sports jacket and holding a pipe in one hand. "Shall I join you or—"

"Oh, join us, please. We don't stand on ceremony in Maryland, you know," she said with a merry laugh. "We have all our meals in the kitchen. It's warmer and makes everything much easier, you see."

"You would be surprised how many people in England do the same thing nowadays," he said, following her along the passage.

In the kitchen, Monica invited him to sit down.

"Mother will be here in a moment," she added.

Miles Bannister glanced round appreciatively.

"This is very charming," he said, with obvious sincerity. "There's a grand old world atmosphere about so many of your Maryland houses. That dresser must be very old," he added.

"I believe it is," Monica nodded, pouring coffee into three cups. "It belonged to my great-grandfather, who came here in eighteen-forty. Richardsville was only a tiny settlement then. Sugar, Mr. Bannister?"

"Just a little, please," he said. "You drink a lot of coffee in the States, don't you?"

"Most people do, but we like tea as well. We get that from mother—she's half English, you see."

"And is that why you haven't a real American accent?" he asked.

"Maybe that has something to do with it," Monica laughed. "Actually, you don't hear it much in Maryland—the American drawl, I mean. Most of the families here are descendants of the original English settlers. All the same, you must notice the difference."

"Oh, I rather like it," he said, with a twinkle. "I was particularly struck by the way you said ad-dress instead of address when I arrived."

They were both laughing when Mrs. Storm came in and the conversation became general.

Miles seemed to be well up in his knowledge of American affairs and entertained

them with an account of a recent visit to Korea, that he had made with a Red Cross mission, to see what could be done to get the schools in that devastated area started again.

"It was an experience I shall never forget," he said gravely, "If anything were needed to drive home to me the utter futility of war it was the sight of those thousands of homeless Korean children being cared for by the International Red Cross—children who had lost parents, home—everything!"

"May I ask what made you take up an appointment with an American college, Mr. Bannister?" Monica enquired presently.

"Mainly for the experience," he answered. "In Korea I met a professor from one of your state universities. What he told me about the American system of education interested me, and when he suggested it might be a good thing if I obtained a teaching post in the States, I jumped at the chance. It was very largely through his recommendation that I got this appointment."

"You don't know many folk in Richardsville, then, Mr. Bannister?" enquired Mrs. Storm.

"Other than you—not a soul," he smiled. "I arrived a few days ago and took a room at the Lake View Hotel, leaving my trunks at the station—railroad, as you call it. Then I saw your advertisement and came along."

"Well, you'll find Richardsville a very friendly town," said Mrs. Storm, a note of pride in her voice. "Of course, it is very different now from what it used to be, with all the construction work that is going on."

"I'm looking forward to my three years here, I can assure you, Mrs. Storm," Miles replied, giving Monica a smiling glance. "Whoever my predecessor was at the college I am beginning to think I owe him a debt of gratitude for leaving."

It was a remark uttered lightly and more than half in jest, yet at something underlying in it the colour rose to Monica's cheeks.

She was half asleep when Alice came in, tip-toeing up the stairs so as not to wake her mother.

Alice closed the bedroom door and switched on the bedside light, flopping down on her bed with a tired yawn.

"Gee!" she drawled. "Am I tired or am I tired! That Bill certainly knows his way around. We went everywhere."

Monica propped herself up on one elbow and looked at the clock beside her bed.

"You're rather late, aren't you, Alice?" she said accusingly. "It's past midnight?"

"So what?" Alice returned unrepentantly, beginning to undress. She smiled reminiscently at her reflection in the glass, stretching her arms wide and dropping them to her sides in an unconscious gesture of abandon.

"What's he like?"

"Who?" demanded Monica ungraciously.

"The new lodger, of course. I suppose you've met him, haven't you?"

Monica rolled over and pulled up the covers.

"He's very nice," she said sleepily. "Now hurry up and get the light out or you'll have mother in."

THE next day was Saturday, and after lunch Monica decided to go for a walk.

As she paused at the gate, wondering whether to go round by the lake, or to take the short cut through the woods, the door opened and Miles Bannister came out.

"If you are going for a walk, may I join you, Miss Storm?" he enquired smilingly. "I rather want to find my way around and it is much more pleasant to do so in company, don't you think?"

"Of course," she smiled. "I was just

wondering whether to go through the woods or round by the lake. Have you any preference, Mr. Bannister?"

"The lake sounds inviting," he said. "It's quite a feature of the place, isn't it?"

"It's regarded as one of the prettiest in Maryland," she said as they set off. "It's twenty miles long and five across. There's a yacht club not far from the college, if you like sailing, or you can hire canoes at the boathouse."

"And learn to paddle my own canoe!" he laughed. "I think that might be a very good idea. Will you teach me?"

"I'm afraid it will be a case of the blind leading the blind," she said demurely. "I'm not very good at using a paddle, I'm afraid."

"You play games, though, don't you?" he asked.

"That," she murmured, "sounds very English. Is it true that unless one 'plays games' in England one is looked down on?"

"Gracious, no," he replied, his eyes twinkling. "Though we do seem to attach a great deal of importance to sport, I will admit. But you have some kind of sport, surely?"

"I'm fond of skating in the winter and I play a certain amount of tennis," she conceded. "There, does that satisfy you, Mr. Bannister?"

"Ah, I knew you had something," he smiled.

They walked on, chatting easily and impersonally and paused where the road turned, to admire the magnificent vista of mountain and forest, with the lake at their feet.

Monica was able to identify many of the trees for him, pointing out the lordly sequoias, which almost surpassed the famous Californian red wood trees in size and magnificence.

"This is really a most wonderful part of the world," Miles said, as they went on past a lovely colonial house. "I can see I will never get tired of exploring around here. Have you ever been to the top of that peak there, Miss Storm?" He pointed ahead.

"Old Baldy?" Monica nodded. "Yes, I went with a party from the college and also with a—a friend."

A shadow flitted across her face as she spoke, as if at some poignant recollection.

Miles was quick to notice it and immediately changed the subject, taking advantage of the sudden appearance of a chipmunk on a fallen tree.

"How tame they are," he said, as the graceful little animal made no attempt to run away.

BY the end of a fortnight Monica acknowledged, with a little sense of wonder, that she and Miles had become firm friends. That—and something more!

Without quite knowing how it had happened she was aware of a difference in her outlook which took the form of a strange, quiet happiness whenever she thought of him, which was often.

But for the memory she carried in her heart, everything was in their favour. They had the long, warm evenings in which to walk and talk together, to explore Richardsville's many beauty spots, to discover all the things they had in common.

Miles took up his new duties with enthusiasm. He would discuss his work with her at every opportunity, and frequently asked her opinion about the various problems that cropped up from time to time.

Once, when she smilingly suggested that she was not qualified to voice an opinion he took the remark far more seriously than expected.

"That's where you are quite wrong, my

dear Monica," he declared. "For one thing, you are an ex-collegiate yourself and understand the point of view of the young people I have to deal with. For another, I find that by discussing matters with you I can obtain a second point of view. You have a way of going straight to the heart of a thing that is very helpful."

It was not long, therefore, before he began to realise that he had fallen in love with the grave-eyed, slender girl whose mere presence had the power to transform the most ordinary surroundings into an earthly paradise.

Hitherto Miles had been completely self-contained, wedded to his work and with no greater ambition than to produce the first in what was to be a series of works on advanced English and American literature.

Now, all his hopes and desires became narrowed down to one focal point of existence—Monica!

At first Alice seemed merely amused by the growing friendship between her elder sister and the young professor, as she persisted in calling him.

She treated Miles as she did all her other men friends, with a mixture of condescension and camaraderie that secretly infuriated him, though no one would have guessed it from the polite way he treated her.

Then, some of her remarks became more than ordinarily pointed and once or twice Monica was left wondering if her sister was jealous. But she always dismissed the thought as absurd, though it kept recurring.

As far as Miles was concerned he knew that the first and most important step towards attaining his heart's desire was to win Monica's complete confidence.

He had gone a long way in this direction, but he realised that there was a part of her she revealed to no one. Until she permitted him to share this, it was too soon to reveal the true state of his feelings.

Outside Richardsville was a hill crowned by a monument to the first English settlers, who had braved everything to establish a colony where the town now stood.

It was a place where Monica often went, for there were magnificent views to be obtained from the top and, in the spring and summer, a breathtaking profusion of wild-flowers of every type and description.

Monica had promised to take Miles there and one Saturday they set off to climb the trail through the tall pines.

They stopped for a sandwich lunch on a bluff overlooking the river, with the forest below.

"You know," Miles said musingly, leaning back against a boulder and lighting a pipe, "the more I see of this place the better I like it. It's got everything."

Monica smiled.

"You sound quite American," she said teasingly.

"I feel American," he smiled. "But it has, you know. Mountains, river, forest and lake—what more could anyone want?"

They resumed their way after a rest and reached the monument on the top of the hill shortly after three. Miles read the names carved at the base and pointed to one of them.

"John Storm," he said. "Was he an ancestor of yours?" he asked.

"Yes, my great, great-grandfather," she nodded. "My father's people have always lived here."

"You would hate to leave it, I suppose?" he enquired, giving her a glance.

"Yes, I think I would." Monica looked thoughtful. "It's home, after all. But I would like to travel," she added wistfully.

"Perhaps you will one day," he smiled.

"You never know—your fairy godmother may be lurking somewhere within earshot."

Monica laughed and walked to where a breastwork of stones was built round the edges of the plateau for the benefit of the

unwary, and leaning on it, her hands clasping her elbows, she peered into the depths below.

"My godmother resigned long ago, I'm afraid," she said. "I think she found me such an unsatisfactory godchild that she gave me up as a bad job." She ended with an evasive shrug.

"If I didn't know you better I would say that you were being sorry for yourself," he declared, leaning beside her. "You sound positively disillusioned."

"Perhaps I am." She picked up a fragment of moss from between two stones and started to pull it apart, her head bent. "One starts off by thinking you have reached heights no one else has ever attained and then you wake up—with a bump."

"I see. Is that what happened to you?"

A shadow crossed her face for a moment and he thought she was not going to reply. Then—

"Yes," she said shortly, and then shrugged. "But please don't take any notice of me. As you said, I'm being sorry for myself."

He gave her a thoughtful glance.

"Are you trying to say that you were in love with someone and he let you down?" he asked.

She looked at him in a startled fashion, then shrugged again.

"Naturally you would think that, I suppose," she murmured.

"Well, yes," he nodded. "Don't forget that we've become friends, though, and that you've told me a great deal about yourself. I know your background, the things you like and do and a great deal more besides. There isn't really anything else left is there?"

Monica hesitated.

"As it happens, you are quite right," she said at length. "I fell in love with a boy who had been at college with me. It—it's the kind of thing that happens in a place like Richardsville. You grow up with people and then, suddenly, you find you're in love. More than half the marriages that take place in the town began as boy and girl affairs."

"That's understandable," he nodded again. "I suppose you had a great deal in common?"

"Yes. Gus liked all the things I liked," she said. "We used to plan our future—his father owns the pulp mills down the river and promised to build us a house as a wedding present. Then he was drafted and went into the American air force. We were to be married when he—when his time was up. He was sent to Japan when he got his wings and met—somebody else." She rolled the moss into a ball and threw it away. "At least he was honest enough to write and tell me."

"Were you very much in love with him, Monica?" Miles asked gently. "Or shouldn't I ask that?"

"I don't mind," she hunched. "After all, I needn't have told you," she added. "Still, I'm not sure that I can answer your question, Miles. I mean, I was in love with him at the time, I suppose, but now I'm not quite sure. As I said, we grew up together, and I suppose I took it for granted that I was in love. Now I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't my pride that has been hurt more than—than anything else."

He smiled understandingly.

"You are quite the most honest person with yourself that I know," he said whimsically. "I don't believe there are many girls who would have had the courage to admit a thing like that. But it points to this—you were probably more in love with love than with this man, my dear. That doesn't make your subsequent disillusionment any easier

to bear, I know, but in time you will be able to look at your girlish romance and wonder why you took it so to heart."

"May be." She ran a finger along a crevice in the rock. "But at the moment I still feel sore. Anyway, what's the use of talking about it? It's finished and done with. I think the hardest part of it was knowing that people were being sorry for me."

"I agree that must have been pretty frightful," he said sympathetically. "All the same, you could be sure that their sympathy was genuine. I have never before found such neighbourliness as you have in Richardsville. You people have a happy knack of making a stranger feel as if he belongs!" He smiled down at her, noticing her flushed cheeks, the wistful curve of her lips, her downcast eyes. "Thank you for confiding in me, Monica. It has made me realise that you really do regard me as a friend."

It was a great temptation to take her in his arms and banish the shadow in her eyes with his kisses, but Miles resisted it.

The wound was still too raw, her disillusionment obviously too recent, so that she was not in the mood to hear his avowal.

Shy and sensitive, she had been deeply hurt by the man she had thought she loved, so that any display of over-eagerness on his part would inevitably drive her into retreat from an emotion she had come to distrust.

After all, he argued, Rome wasn't built in a day and he had made good progress up to now. As well, there was the joy of waiting for the right moment, a period during which an intercepted glance, a smile, an experience shared could be fraught with tender meaning.

So tactfully he changed the subject, and had his reward in the laughter that trembled on her lips as they started on the way down.

UNKNOWN to both of them, however, forces were at work that were to have a big effect on their courtship. Events that were taking place on the other side of the world were destined to interrupt the peaceful seclusion of their lives with dramatic suddenness.

For the cable that was to recall Miles to England was already on its way.

At her gate he paused and took her hand. "I can't tell you what to-day has meant to me, Monica," he said a little unsteadily. "Perhaps you can guess—at least, I hope so. Other things apart, I shall always remember how you trusted me with your confidence." "I don't know why I did," she murmured, sighing. "I suppose it was because the last time I went up to the mountain he—Gus was with me. Seeing it again brought everything back."

"Don't worry. I understand," he said gently. He smiled down into her eyes. "I hope, as a result, you won't feel quite so lonely now."

Monica hesitated a moment, turning her head away. She did not seem to notice that he was still holding her hand.

"I don't think I shall ever be lonely again, Miles," she said softly.

He drew in his breath sharply and seemed about to make a move to take her in his arms.

At that moment, however, a jeep turned the corner and roared to a stop opposite the gate. It was driven by Bill Protheroe, a tall, red-headed American in a wind-cheater and a baseball cap, with Alice as his passenger.

With a little gasp, Monica pulled her hand away and turned to reply to the hilarious greeting of the other two.

Alice got out of the car, her expression giving nothing away. But there was an edge

to her voice when she spoke that sent a little chill through Monica.

"Bill's coming back to fetch me at eight—we're going to a hop at the Blue Cap roadhouse. I suppose it would be too much to ask if you two lovebirds would like to come?"

"I'm afraid roadhouse dances are not in my line, my dear Alice," Miles returned smilingly. "Besides, having walked to the Settler's Monument and back I'm feeling rather lazy. Of course, if Monica would like to go——?"

Monica shook her head, grateful for his excuse.

"I'm much too tired, Alice," she said, with a little laugh. "Besides, I want to listen to the concert from Boston to-night. It's the Philharmonic Orchestra."

"Highbrows!" said Bill, joining them. He grinned impartially at both girls and gave Miles a nod, then followed Alice into the house.

If Monica was more than usually silent during supper, no one appeared to notice.

Afterwards she helped clear away, conscious of a new and elusive feeling of happiness throughout her entire being.

In some strange way she did not attempt to analyse, that moment at the gate had told her that she was no longer cut off from happiness.

And facing all that that might mean, she knew that her ability to tell Miles about her jill-starred romance had its roots in the new, shining wonder that encompassed her.

As she went into the living-room and switched on the radio and waited for Miles to join her, she was filled with a quiet contentment that she had not known for a long time.

TRAGIC NEWS.

A TELEGRAPH messenger delivered the cable soon after they arrived back from church the next day. Monica took it in at the door and signed for it. It was addressed to Miles and she tapped on his door.

"This just came, Miles," she said, handing over the buff-coloured envelope.

"Thank you, Monica." His face clouded as he ran a thumb under the flap.

She had almost reached the kitchen when he called her back.

"It's from home—My father is seriously ill," he said gravely.

"Oh, Miles, I am sorry," she murmured sympathetically.

She knew that his father was his only surviving relative and lived in retirement in a small village in Somerset.

She read the cable he handed to her and looked up.

"You—you'll have to go, won't you, Miles?" she asked quietly.

He nodded.

"I daresay I can arrange with the Dean to get someone to take over my classes for the time being. But first of all I must telephone the airport. I don't know how long I shall be away, of course, but I will write to you by air mail as soon as I get home. Your mother will let me keep on the room, I suppose?"

"Oh, of course, Miles. Please don't worry about that," she said, her mind racing on ahead. "You'll have to pack at once if you want to get the afternoon plane. I'll just tell mummy what's happened while you telephone and then I'll come and help you."

"Thank you," he said gratefully.

Monica hurried into the kitchen while he crossed the hall to the telephone. Alice was there as well and from the expression

on her face, and the flush which stained her mother's cheeks, she guessed they had been having an argument.

Both turned towards her as Monica came in but she gave neither a chance to speak.

"Miles has had a cable from England," she said, a note of concern in her voice. "His father is ill and they want him to return as quickly as possible. He is telephoning now to see if he can get a seat on the afternoon plane."

"Oh, dear, that's terrible!" Mrs. Storm exclaimed sympathetically.

"Is he going for good?" Alice wanted to know.

Monica frowned at her, but said nothing.

THE sisters went to the airport to see Miles off. Everybody had been exceptionally kind; the Dean had given him indefinite leave of absence and the airport officials had held a seat on the plane for him.

It would happen that, for once, Alice was not going out with anyone, Monica thought vexedly, as they got out of the taxi and walked over to the departure point. Then she took herself sharply to task, dismayed to find that she was quite as capable of being jealous as anyone else.

Not that she had any reason to be jealous, she reflected comfortably.

She had helped Miles to pack, making sure that he had plenty of clean shirts and handkerchiefs.

There had been something peculiarly thrilling and domestic in sorting out his things that had seemed to draw them very close to one another.

"I'll write as soon as I get back," he promised again, as the loud-speakers began telling passengers to take their places. He held her hand for a moment, his eyes saying all that his lips might not. "Look after yourself while I'm away, my dearest."

"You, too, Miles." For a moment Alice was forgotten. "I shall count the hours until I hear that your father is out of danger."

"God bless you for that," he smiled gently. He turned to Alice and held out his hand. "I won't say good-bye, Alice. It's unlucky. But thank you for all you have done."

"Oh, don't thank me for anything," she returned, a hint of wispishness in her voice. "Monica is the one who has done everything. You'd better go or the plane will take off without you," she added.

For a moment he hesitated, glancing uncertainly from one to the other, then, with a smile he turned and hurried away.

They waited until the aircraft was a mere speck in the sky and then walked slowly towards the exit.

Monica was having a struggle to keep back the tears which threatened to overflow, so that she did not hear what Alice said.

The younger girl had to repeat her remark, her tone sharpening as she did so.

"I—I'm sorry, I didn't catch what you said," Monica stammered, her lips trembling. "I——"

"I said you'd better snap out of it," Alice broke in impatiently. "I know you're mad about the guy, but you don't have to go about looking as if he'd just been led off to his execution."

Monica crimsoned.

"I—oh, please don't say things like that, Alice," she begged falteringly. "I—I——"

Alice laughed.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" she asked, in a brittle voice. "Gus and all that's forgotten now, I suppose. Have you told Miles you were engaged to him?"

"I—of course. I mean—"

"That's all I wanted to know. Well, I hope for your sake that you aren't making another mistake. Miles seems a pretty decent sort, for an Englishman, but you never know where men are concerned. It's a case of 'off with the old—on with the new' with most of them. You've got to have your eyes wide open in this world, unless you want to get stung."

"Miles isn't like that at all," Monica defended warmly. "Besides—"

"Besides what?" prompted Alice. Her eyes widening before she laughed. "Gee! Do you mean to tell me that—"

"I don't mean to tell you anything," Monica interrupted sharply. "For one thing, there isn't anything to tell, and for another you would only laugh if there was."

"You make me tired," said Alice. "I guess that if I'd had half your chances Miles wouldn't have gone off without I knew where I stood. You'll be telling me next that he hasn't even kissed you."

"Of course he hasn't," Monica said indignantly.

"Then all I can say is he must be very slow," Alice retorted. "The way he was holding your hand at the gate last night I thought he had got it badly. Maybe he's just being careful," she added, with a sudden jarring laugh.

"Oh, you're hateful!" exclaimed Monica, on the verge of tears. "There was a time when you would have died rather than talk like this, but now it seems that nothing is sacred to you any more."

"I reckon we've grown up," said Alice shortly. "At least, I know I have. It's about time you did, too, or one of these days you're going to get really hurt."

MONICA lay awake for a long time that night, thinking over the things her sister had said.

What had made her so restless and discontented? For all the younger girl's facade of hard-headed sophistication, she knew very little about men. It seemed to Monica that her sister was not quite so sure of herself as she made out.

Her manner, after they had seen Miles off, seemed to contain the answer to much that had been puzzling Monica of late. It had been like a flash of light in a dark place, but there was no mistaking what it revealed. Alice was in love with Miles herself, or imagined she was, and consequently had allowed her jealousy to run away with her.

Simultaneously Monica made another discovery; she too was in love with Miles.

But it was not the dreamy, adolescent love of a romantic schoolgirl for a boy she had known all her life, but the love which comes but once in a lifetime and endures for all time. No wonder she had given so little thought to Gus lately. No wonder she had been feeling so happy.

She fell asleep at last, to dream that she and Miles were standing on separate sides of a huge gulf and that he was trying vainly to reach her. She awoke with a start to see the light streaming in through the open windows and knew that another day had dawned.

THE tension between Alice and Monica increased.

The elder girl tried desperately to find a way of penetrating past her sister's guard, but without success.

Then she began to feel sorry for Bill Protheroe. He was obviously in love with Alice, who now treated him in a very off-hand manner.

"I wonder you're so patient, Bill," Monica said, when he called to learn that Alice had broken an appointment for the

second time running. "Alice doesn't mean to be heartless, I know, but—"

"Oh, shucks, you don't have to worry, Monica," he replied. "I reckon patience is my long suit where Alice is concerned. She's got to stretch her wings, you see and when she wants me—well, I guess I'll be right there."

A fortnight passed, during which the promised air-mail letter from Miles failed to arrive.

At first, Monica comforted herself with the thought that he was too busy to write—that his father might be worse—anything, in fact, but that he had not bothered.

But when another week passed, and still there was no letter, she became seriously alarmed. She tried, with little success, to hide her anxiety, but on several occasions she caught Alice looking at her with what she could only feel was a gloating expression in her eyes.

Then, when Miles had been gone over a month, the blow fell!

The first hint that he was not coming back again came strangely enough, through Bill Protheroe.

Monica and her mother were listening to the radio when Alice burst in, her face scarlet with suppressed emotion.

"What do you know?" she cried, pulling off her scarf and flinging it on the settee. "Miles Bannister has written to the Dean resigning his job at the college!"

Monica started to her feet, staring at Alice with an odd mixture of wonder and disbelief.

"I don't believe it," she said, her cheeks paling. "It—it can't be true. How do you know?"

"Bill told me. His young sister used to attend Miles's lectures. He's not coming back—ever."

"But surely he would have written to tell us," said their mother, looking mystified. "His books are still in his room, and other things. Besides, he paid me rent for two months."

"Oh, I daresay he'll arrange for someone to pack his things and send them on," Alice returned impatiently. "It's no use, mother. I know you thought he was nice, but he's obviously like the rest of them."

"I don't know what you mean by that," said Monica dully. "Miles—"

"Oh, be your age, Monica," Alice broke in cuttingly. "Because you're keen on Miles it doesn't mean he's perfect." She clenched her small fists, looking stonily at her sister. "Whether you like it or not, I guess you've seen the last of him."

FOR the next few days Monica tried to hold her head high, but as time passed she found it increasingly difficult to maintain a role of indifference.

Matters were not made easier when the representative of a local transport agency called with instructions from Miles authorising the collection and packing of his possessions.

Monica had been out at the time, but on her return Mrs. Storm told her.

"I don't understand it at all," Monica said, sighing. "You would have thought he would have sent some explanation."

When Alice heard she said nothing for a moment, but stood staring into space, her lips compressed.

A little later Monica went up to the bedroom and found her weeping bitterly.

"Alice dear, please don't cry like that," she begged, seating herself on the bed and resting a hand on her sister's shoulder. "If—if you are upset about Miles it won't do any good."

Alice sat up abruptly and ran slim fingers through her tousled hair. Her

eyes were swollen and her young face was tense with grief.

"Oh, leave me alone," she cried petulantly, springing off the bed. Then she laughed mirthlessly. "If you think I'm breaking my heart over a washout like Miles Bannister you can think again."

"Then—then what's the matter? Are you in trouble of some kind, dear?" asked Monica gently.

Alice shrugged and going to the mirror, peered at herself in the glass.

"If I was I wouldn't tell you," she said rudely, screwing up her face. "Ugh! I look a sight!"

AS the summer days lengthened, and the lake became gay with the red-sailed boats from the yacht club, Monica found it difficult to rise above the pain and disillusionment that had come to her for the second time in her young life.

Nowadays she was in the habit of going for long solitary walks after supper, though there were quite a number of young men who would have been glad of the opportunity to escort her.

Sometimes the sympathy she saw in Bill Protheroe's eyes was almost too much, so that she found herself avoiding him, as she avoided others who might be tempted to refer to Miles.

Alice was soon able to forget Miles. Within no time she was her usual self, joining in all the fun and games that were going.

Once she tried to persuade Monica to go to a barbecue that was being got up by the local sports club, but Monica shook her head.

"I'm not in the mood for that kind of thing, my dear," she said, rather wearily.

"Oh, snap out of it, do," Alice urged, something like scorn in her tones. "I'm not blind—I can see that you're breaking your heart over Miles and much good may it do you! There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, you know. By the way," she added meaningly, "did you know that Gus Lampard is back in town? His father told me."

"Gus . . . here?" Monica's eyes went dark. "I thought—I mean—"

"Oh, he's on leave or something," Alice broke in, "Mr. Lampard said he might be going to Europe. I wasn't very interested or I might have found out more. Still, I daresay you'll run into him."

"Oh, I hope I won't," said Monica almost desperately.

Her hopes were short-lived. On her way back from a walk the following Saturday afternoon she came face to face with a thick-set, burly young man in the uniform of a lieutenant of the American Air Force.

"Monica! Gosh, you look like a million dollars! Surprised to see me?"

At the well-remembered voice Monica lost colour but met his eyes bravely. He was grinning sheepishly, his hand going to his cap in a belated salute.

"Hullo, Gus," she said, with a calmness she was far from feeling. "How are you? I heard you were back."

"Yep! I've been posted overseas and wangled a month's leave on the strength of it," he drawled. "Say, are you glad to see me, Monica?"

"Of course, Gus," she said. "After all"—with a forced little smile—"there's no reason why I shouldn't be, is there? You must come to supper one evening and tell us all about your travels."

"Sure, I'll like that, Monica. To tell you the truth, I was wondering if I came round whether you'd show me the door. You'd have a right to, if you felt inclined. I guess I made a fool of myself—you, too."

"We won't talk about it, Gus," she said

gently, her smile unforced this time. "You made a mistake and—and that's all there is to it."

"I made a mistake all right, Monica," he said gloomily. He took off his cap and looked embarrassed as he tried to find words. "The trouble is, when I woke up it was too late."

"I don't understand, Gus," she murmured puzzled. "You—you're happy, aren't you?"

"Happy?" He gave a hollow laugh, staring out past her to where a yacht was slowly beating up against the breeze. "No, I'm not happy, Monica. I guess it serves me right, too."

"But—aren't you engaged?" Somehow she seemed to know what he was going to say.

"No," he said, in sombre tones, "I'm not engaged. The girl I met, and thought I was in love with, turned out to be the same as many others—out for what she could get. When somebody with more dough and a Major's stars came along she dropped me like a hot brick."

"I guess you'll find it hard to understand how a guy can fall for someone like I fell for that girl, Monica," he went on, "but—well—I've seen it happen to other guys. Being stuck out in a place like Japan has something to do with it, I reckon. Or maybe not. I wouldn't know. All I do know is that the girl I really loved lives right here in Richardsville—I guess I don't need to tell you her name! That's one of the reasons I asked for another posting. I wanted to see my folks, that's natural, but mainly I wanted to find out if you would forgive me."

Monica sought in her mind for something to say, something that would be adequate, yet final. There was no mistaking the sincerity in Gus's voice or in the expression of his eyes, but he had lost all power to move her.

She spoke at last in a low voice.

"I—I'm sorry, Gus," she said, with a quick intake of breath. "I—I—there is something I must tell you. Now, before you go any further. You were not the only one to make a mistake, you see. I didn't realise it at the time—in fact, not until long afterwards. At first I was just hurt—terribly hurt—and nothing seemed worth while. Then—then I met someone who showed me the difference between what I thought was love and—the real thing."

"You mean you're engaged to some—some other guy?" he stammered, staring at her in a beseeching fashion.

She shook her head.

"No, I'm not engaged, Gus," she answered slowly. "But—but that's beside the point, isn't it? Now let's forget about the past and just be friends, shall we?"

He drew a deep breath, looking shaken and bewildered.

"I guess that lets me out," he said, after a pause. Then he laughed mirthlessly. "It just shows how a guy can fool himself, doesn't it? Here I've been trying to think up ways of telling you that I'm sorry and all the time—aw, heck, what's the use?"

Monica laid a hand on his arm.

"Please don't look so hurt, Gus," she begged. "Neither of us can help the way things have turned out, can we? When you wrote telling me that you had fallen in love with someone else I did my best to forget you, for I felt quite sure, then, that you could never have really loved me. Then Miles—" She stopped short, realising the slip she had made. She flushed scarlet and tried to cover up her mistake. "I mean—it was later—"

"I get it," he said gloomily, "You fell for that English guy who came to teach

at the college. I—I've heard about him. My father is one of the college governors an' he was talking about this Miles Bannister last night. Came out here to teach us poor, ignorant Yanks how to read Shakespeare or something an' then, when it suited his books, he ran out on everybody. He owes your ma rent, doesn't he?"

"Certainly not," Monica defended sharply, her eyes beginning to sparkle. "He was recalled to England because his father was taken suddenly ill. In any case, I didn't intend to tell you what I did, so please don't mention it to anyone, Gus."

"You needn't worry," he said, with a shrug. "I reckon you can trust me, Monica. But what I want to know is why hasn't he written or let you know something?"

"What do you mean, Gus? I never said—"

"I guess you don't have to," he interrupted shortly. "Your sister told me how this guy had run out on you an' I can put two an' two together the same as most people."

"Alice told you?" said Monica dazedly. "Yep," he admitted, with an apologetic air. "I went to your house, hoping that I'd maybe see you an' Alice answered the door. We had quite a talk an' then she told me where I'd most likely find you." He shrugged again. "What are you going to do about this Bannister guy, Monica?"

"What do you mean, Gus?" she faltered. "Well"—he paused deliberately, his eyes intent on her face—"he seems to have done the vanishing trick, so why can't we—"

"No, Gus—please!" She stopped him with a gesture. "It—it isn't any use trying to turn back the clock. I'm very fond of you and hope we can still be friends, but that's all. I—I'm sorry, but, you see—"

"Okay," he broke in, with rough chivalry, seeing that she was on the verge of tears. "I guess I've rushed things too much, but you can't stop me waiting an' hoping. One day you may think differently."

"If ever I do I will tell you so, Gus!" She smiled, though her eyes were moist. For a moment they stood looking at each other in the evening light, memories crowding in on them.

Then Gus sighed—

"Half a loaf's better than no bread, they say, Monica dear, so please don't worry about me. I've made my bed an' I guess I can lie on it. It's grand to see you again an' if there's anything I can do to help—at any time—you know where to find me. I haven't got long—I'm due to fly to some place in England in ten days time—but I'd be glad to see something of you while I'm here."

"Of course, Gus. You're always welcome to come to the house, you know that."

"Thanks a lot," he said, with a deep sigh. "I guess I'll walk back with you now, if I may."

He was tactful enough to leave her at her gate, but the echoes of that meeting lingered long after he had gone. So much had happened in the past few months that it seemed to Monica impossible she could be the same girl who had walked up to the Settler's Monument with Miles the day she realised, for the first time, that she was in love. Really and truly in love!

Now, over and over again the question kept repeating. Had Miles merely been amusing himself by indulging in a heartless flirtation with her?

It was almost impossible to answer, for had he not been gentleness itself, content to wait until he was certain that she was ready to hear what he had to tell her.

That much his manner and sympathetic understanding had made clear. How,

then, could she think that he was the casual philanderer that others obviously thought he was—Alice amongst them?

Yet, as Miles himself had said once, facts were brutal things, and the chief of them in this instance was that he had not written. Instead, he had resigned from his post at the college and vanished beyond their ken, without even the courtesy of a letter to her mother saying that he was sending for his things.

It was all something quite beyond her! What was the answer?

SEVERED HEARTS

IT was a far cry from Richardsville in America to a remote Somerset village in England, and Miles Bannister was never more conscious of the distance that separated him from the girl he loved than when walking up the hill to the old house where his sick father lived.

Pausing at the gate he looked back over the distant hills, their rugged outlines softened by the pearly dusk. It was all very peaceful, with the smoke rising from the chimneys in the village, though there was no peace in the young man's heart.

Nor had he eyes for anything save the memory of a girl's face, proud and lovely, and candid grey eyes that held a promise he could not, even now, believe to be false!

Yet what else was he to believe? In waiting he had felt sure he had done the right thing, for at the time he had been unable to foresee that he would be recalled to Somerset at a moment's notice.

But all the way across the Atlantic, listening to the unfaltering beat of the aircraft's engines, he had regretted leaving his declaration unspoken. Since then he had done the next best thing, however. He had written and told her of his love.

It had been a difficult letter to write. There are some things better spoken, but in the end he had contented himself with saying what he felt in the simplest of terms. Monica, he knew, would understand.

But as he remembered the cold little note he had received in reply, he felt again the same aching sense of bewilderment that had caused him to read it with incredulous eyes, as if he could not bring himself to believe that Monica had penned it.

He had stared down at it, his hands trembling, one stark passage burning into his brain in letters of fire—

"I am afraid you have made a mistake and cannot imagine why you should think I could possibly care for you in that way. I looked on you as a friend, nothing more, so I can only conclude you have read into that friendship something I never intended. In the circumstances it would be best, perhaps, if we did not meet again."

For long, sleepless nights he had stood at his window, staring into outer darkness, trying to understand it all. Utterly without conceit, he was rendered uncertain of himself, wondering if he had made a mistake. Yet he could have sworn that Monica had begun to care for him. There had been so many signs, so many indications.

Now he gave a bitter little laugh. He knew that he could never love anyone as he loved the girl on the other side of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, for her sake, for his own peace of mind, it was essential to take steps to act as she evidently wished.

He had waited until learning of the specialist's verdict as to Professor Bannister's condition, and had then written to the Dean of Richardsville College asking to be relieved of his duties. He had

also written to a transport agency to tell them to collect his things, and to Mrs. Storm saying he would not need the rooms.

The Dean had replied, but not Mrs. Storm.

Now, to-day, his books had arrived, carefully packed, together with his trunk. And so ended a chapter in his life that had opened with such promise and tender hopes.

Yet he knew that he could never forget. All day and every day Monica seemed to walk beside him. However hard he worked she was still there, and though he tried by every means he knew to forget her, there was no escape from the long, empty hours of the night.

With a sigh he pushed open the gate and walked up to the house.

There was a light in the study and as he approached he saw his father's house-keeper come up to the windows and draw the curtains.

Professor Bannister was sufficiently recovered to take his meals downstairs, and in the pleasant hour that elapsed before it was time for the older man to retire, father and son talked of the many subjects that interested them, their conversation ranging from books to politics.

Professor Bannister prided himself on having kept himself up to date and it did Miles good to see the eagerness with which he discussed problems.

To-night he seemed to sense that Miles was not in a talkative mood, however, for there were long silences in the conversation.

Presently the older man looked up. He was wearing a brocaded dressing gown over his pyjamas, for it was still considered too much of an effort for him to dress.

"What plans have you made for yourself, Miles?" he asked abruptly. "You can't go back to America, you say, so what are you going to do?"

Miles hesitated.

"I haven't made up my mind yet, father," he answered, after a pause. "There's no hurry, in any case. I might apply for a post at one of the secondary schools here—they are always short of teachers."

"Pah!" said his father forcibly. "What are you thinking of? Why can't you go back to America? I was delighted when you were appointed to Richardsville. It was just the thing you were most suited for."

"I can't go back for the simple reason that I have resigned," said Miles flatly. "Because of me, I suppose?"

"Partly," said Miles. "America is a long way off and I prefer to be somewhat closer at hand."

"In case I die!" Professor Bannister gave a cackle of amusement, his eyes derisive. "Haven't you heard the old saying—a creaking door never falls? I'm good for a long time yet, my boy, so you needn't remain at home on my account."

"Nevertheless I prefer to do so," said Miles patiently. He rose to his feet and walked about the room, his hands in his pockets. "If you want to know, there are other and more personal reasons why I have no intention of going back to America. So you needn't have it on your conscience because I resigned, father."

The other regarded him affectionately. "It's high time you married and settled down, Miles," he said, going off at a tangent. "However, you know your own affairs best, I suppose. Anyway, why don't you run up to town for a few days and look up some of your old friends? I shall be quite all right with Mrs. Townsend to look after me."

Miles rubbed his chin speculatively. "Perhaps I will," he said thoughtfully.

"At anyrate, I'll think it over. Thank you for the suggestion, father."

THUS it was that a few days later Miles sat in the lounge of a well-known London hotel, his empty coffee cup on the low table in front of him. He had an appointment to meet a friend at eight-thirty, meantime it was pleasant to sit there scanning the evening paper, and gazing round at the various people who thronged the place.

Not far away a group of four young men in the uniform of the American Air Force sat talking and smoking, evidently planning where to go for the evening.

As Miles watched them, wondering if any of them came from Maryland, a page entered the lounge and came between the tables towards them.

"Calling Mr. Miles Bannister. Calling Mr. Bannister—"

Miles rose instantly and beckoned the boy, only barely aware of the interested party on his right.

One of the Americans, a lieutenant, seemed particularly interested and did not take his eyes off Miles as he followed in the wake of the page to where the telephones were installed.

The caller was the friend Miles had an appointment to meet. He had telephoned to say that he had been detained and would be late.

Having promised to wait, Miles went back to the lounge, where he had left his evening paper, and signing to one of the waiters, ordered another coffee.

He had barely done so than a voice said—

"Pardon me, but I couldn't help hearing that kid paging you. You're Miles Bannister, aren't you?"

Miles looked up, struck by the typical Maryland drawl, his pulses quickening. He saw that three of the young Americans had gone and that the fourth, a thick-set young man with pleasant, good humoured features, was standing beside him.

"Yes, I am Miles Bannister," he replied, wonderingly.

The man was not anyone he had met in Richardsville, and he was too old to have been at the college during the short time Miles had been on the staff.

He indicated a vacant chair opposite.

"I was just going to have another coffee, Join me, will you?"

"Thanks." The young man sat down and waited until the waiter who had brought Miles's coffee had been sent to fetch another. Then he lit a cigarette, looking narrowly at Miles over the flame of his lighter. "My name's Lampard—Gus Lampard," he volunteered. "I'm over here on a new posting and this is my first leave in London. That page sure saved me a lot of trouble."

"Indeed?" Miles raised his eyebrows questioningly. There was something so strange about the other's manner that he wondered what was coming. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You will." Gus sounded neither friendly nor otherwise, just impassive. "Would it interest you to know that I was wondering how to find out where you lived so that I could come and see you?"

"It would, indeed," said Miles, signing to the waiter to place the second cup in front of his guest. "The reason why you wanted to see me would interest me a great deal more," he added.

"I guess it would." Gus stared moodily down at his coffee, stirred it slowly. Then he looked up. "I'm a friend of Monica Storm's," he added softly.

Enlightenment came to Miles. Gus Lampard—Monica had spoken of being

in love with someone called Gus that day at the Settler's Monument! The man seated opposite was the one who had treated her so shabbily!

"Friend, in your case, seems rather an elastic term," he said, with a hint of sarcasm. "As I understand it, you—"

"Okay, brother, you can turn off the heat," Gus broke in. He looked sombrely at Miles. "I guess Monica told you all about me, so we'll take that as read. What you *don't* know is that I've been home to Richardsville and that she an' I have had a few cozy little talks. I fell for another girl—someone I met in Japan—and then left Monica in the lurch. That's what you meant just now, wasn't it? But at least I wrote an' told her what had happened. I didn't just run out on her an' leave her to wonder what had gone wrong. That's where you an' me's different!"

Miles went white.

"What the blazes do you mean?" he demanded, his voice tense. "I never ran out on anyone in my life. Did Monica tell you that?"

"Monica told me a whole lot she didn't think she'd told me," said Gus patiently. "I found out—too late—that it was Monica who really counted in the long run. Now I'd like to make her happy—if I can. For she's not happy." He shrugged and sipped his coffee, eyeing Miles over the rim of his cup. "Maybe you can guess why!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not good at guessing games," said Miles shortly. "If you infer that I have anything to do with Monica's present unhappiness I can only say that you are quite mistaken."

Gus put down his cup sharply.

"Say, what kind of a guy are you?" he asked wonderingly, one hand slowly clenching. "First you play up to a girl and make her think—well, what she did think—an' then you leave her flat without a word—not even a postcard to say you got here in one piece."

"What the dickens are you talking about?" Miles demanded curtly. "I wrote to Monica the day after I reached England!"

"You wrote to her?" said Gus blankly.

"Yes, and received her reply," said Miles icily. "I don't really know what business of yours all this is, but if you want proof, here it is."

Gus took the note he extracted from his inside pocket and scanned it frowningly.

"Say, I guess this must have given you a pretty hefty jolt," he said, looking up. His tone was more friendly, and he seemed to have relaxed from his previous truculent attitude.

"It did!" Miles compressed his lips. "Considering that I had asked her to marry me when I returned to America it rather makes nonsense of your accusation that I 'ran out' on her, doesn't it?"

"It sure does." Gus looked down at the letter again. "All the same, pal, Monica didn't write this."

Miles stared, then laughed derisively.

"Monica didn't write that letter?" he repeated incredulously. "But that's ridiculous, man. It is in answer to mine."

"Maybe, but she didn't write it." Gus shook his head. "I've had too many letters from her in the past to be mistaken, Bannister. That's not her writing to begin with. It's a half-baked imitation and not so hot at that." He paused a moment before adding impressively: "Whoever wrote that was someone who counted on your not being familiar with Monica's hand. Someone pretty close to you both, in fact."

"Do—do you mean to insinuate that someone intercepted my letter and wrote a faked reply in return?" Miles demanded, disbelief all over him.

"I'm not insinuating anything," said Gus. "I'm merely stating a bare fact. If you want it in words of one syllable, I don't reckon you need look further than Alice."

"Alice?"

Gus laughed.

"It's as clear as daylight. Alice wanted to get her hooks into you, so she waited for the post an' grabbed her sister's letter, writin' you that reply. It accounts for the fact that when I returned to Richardsville on leave she did everything but pushed me into Monica's arms. It would have suited her books nicely if she could have pulled it off."

"That takes a lot of believing," said Miles, drawing a deep breath. "In the first place, what could she hope to gain by acting in that malicious way?"

"Search me," said Gus shrugging. "Maybe she hoped for this or that, or maybe she just didn't think about what might happen. The main thing was to put you in bad with Monica—first. I guess she overreached herself, that's all. It would have been a better plan just to keep your letter an' sit tight—that way you'd have thought Monica wasn't interested and Monica would have thought what she has been thinking. Then, if you had come back, Alice reckoned on catching you on the rebound, I suppose."

"But you've no proof that it was Alice," Miles protested, his sense of justice outraged. "Hang it all, man—"

"Don't get het up, pal," said Gus, interrupting. "I happen to know Alice an' you don't. It's just the sort of thing she *would* do an' hang the consequences. Jealousy makes girls go kinda queer, I reckon," he added thoughtfully. "Besides, there's things she said that made me wonder an' now I've seen that letter I'm not wondering any more." He paused, then looked up. "What do you aim to do?"

Miles took the letter back and placed it carefully in his wallet. Then he met the other's eyes and smiled briefly.

"What would you do?" he asked quietly.

Gus grinned suddenly and rose to his feet, holding out his hand.

"Now you're talking," he said heartily. "I reckon you won't find it hard to get a plane reservation, but if you do, let me know. We've always got some United States air force planes going back empty an' I might be able to fix you a ride. The name's Lampard, as I've told you, an' if you ring up Maltstone Aerodrome they'll put you through to me. Give my love to Monica when you see her."

He gave Miles a half salute, and with a wry smile, turned and threaded his way between the tables to the entrance hall, giving Miles no chance to thank him.

But it was not necessary. Completely different in outlook and calling, they had a bond between them, forged by the love that was centred on a slender slip of a girl who, did they but know it, was at that very moment seated in a corner of the settee in her mother's living-room, her eyes dim with tears, while from the radio a voice sang:

"I'll Walk Beside You."

MONICA left her office and turning right, walked towards the bus stop on the corner. She had almost reached it when she heard her name called and saw Bill Protheroe's jeep glide to a stop at the kerb.

"Lo, Monica," he greeted, leaning over. "Jump in—the lights are just going to change."

"This is very nice, Bill," she said, sinking into a seat, and smiling up at him. "I was just wishing I didn't have to wait for a bus."

"I saw you as you came out of your office," he said, edging the jeep into the traffic stream. "As a matter of fact, I've

been waiting to have a chat with you, Monica. You're not in a hurry, are you?"

"Not more than usual, Bill," she answered smilingly. "I mustn't be too late, though, or mother will worry."

"That's okay," he said, shooting between a bus and a truck that came out of a side turning. "We'll go by the lake road—it doesn't take much longer and we'll get there quicker than the bus in any case. Darn this traffic," he added grumblingly, as they were stopped at a road junction. "You can hardly move at this time of the day."

"Our roads weren't built for construction lorries and transporters," said Monica, half teasingly. "You people are to blame. Why couldn't you go and dig up your beastly iron ore somewhere else?"

Bill grinned and started off again.

"Because there isn't any," he said. "Whereas those hills back there are practically made of the stuff. Besides, think of the prosperity we've brought to the old town."

"You've brought other things as well," said Monica drily. "Richardsville used to be a peaceful spot once."

"It was peaceful enough, all right," he said. "I guess it wanted waking up!" He laughed. "All the same, it's a nice place. I like it here."

"So you ought. You've lived here most of your life."

"Since I was ten." He stared thoughtfully ahead. "Babs—my sister—was born here. Now I've got a job with the construction company I look like being able to stay put. That suits me fine."

"Oh?" She looked enquiringly at him. "I thought you wanted to see the world!" He grinned again.

"I saw as much of it as I wanted when I was in the Far East with the Marines," he said. He drove in silence for a moment before adding casually: "Yesterday I bought one of those housing lots up beyond the park."

"You did?" Monica exclaimed, in a tone of surprise. "You mean you're going to build a house, Bill?"

"Well, it'd come in mighty useful, I reckon," he said. "I mean if a guy aims to get married he needs a house, doesn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose so." She was silent for a moment. Then: "Do you aim to get married, Bill?"

"Yes," he said. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Monica."

He drove the jeep onto a grass verge separating the road from the lakeside, and switched off the engine.

"It's this way," he said, taking a cigarette from a crumpled packet. "I reckon you know how I feel about Alice, so I don't have to explain. Not to beat about the bush—what's got into her lately?"

"You mean—"

"I mean that she's heading for an almighty crash if she goes on the way she's been going lately," he said dourly. "If I didn't know different I'd say she had something on her mind. What's biting her?"

Monica stared into space, a little frown between her eyes.

"Don't ask me, Bill," she sighed. "Alice doesn't confide in me any more. All she seems to think about is having a good time and, as you know, she's out nearly every night, either dancing or going to the pictures or—or something."

"Exactly! Or something!" he said meaningfully. "I've done my best but she's stood me up several times lately. Shall I tell you why? For that pie-can she's been running around with lately—Charlie Frobisher."

"Yes, I know, Bill. But what can I do?" asked Monica helplessly.

He drew strongly on his cigarette, his jaw tense.

"I guess there's nothing anyone can do, Monica," he said. "I just wondered if you knew what was wrong, that's all. If she was getting a kick out of hitting the high spots I could understand it, but I'm pretty sure she isn't. It's a form of bravado, if you ask me and again, I'm wondering why."

Monica hesitated.

"Have you asked her to marry you, Bill? Seriously, I mean?"

"About four hundred and ninety-nine times," he said, with a rueful grin.

"And—and she's said no?"

"Not even that." He shrugged whimsically. "She just laughs at me."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Bill. That—that's unpardonable."

"Of course she doesn't mean it that way," he said, flinging away his cigarette. "She's a good kid, really," he went on, after a moment. "It's just that she's got her feet on the wrong road at the moment. I'd stand by until she came a cropper and maybe she'd be glad then for me to pick her up and dust her down, but I don't want her to get hurt. But that's what'll happen if she doesn't watch put."

"Would you like me to speak to her about it, Bill?" Monica asked. "I mightn't do any good, but I will if you like."

His face brightened.

"Well, that's what I was hoping you'd say, Monica," he declared eagerly. "I know she thinks a whole lot of you and she might listen if you warned her. When I try to say anything she just says I'm jealous."

"All right, Bill. I'll see what I can do," she promised.

Privately, however, she was not at all optimistic. Recently, Alice had gone her own way, making it quite clear to her mother and sister that she intended to go on doing so. Any hint of criticism, or the least attempt to restrain her, ended in one of those undignified scenes that were becoming so increasingly frequent.

More than once Monica had come in to find her mother's eyes red with weeping, and often she would lie awake into the small hours of the morning before she heard Alice come tip-toeing up the stairs.

Not so very long ago she had come in long after midnight and when Monica had asked where she had been, her sister had subsided on the bed, giggling, her breath smelling strongly of drink.

No wonder Bill was worried!

As it happened Alice had already come in when Bill dropped Monica at her gate. As she took off her outdoor things the younger girl appeared at the end of the passage.

"Hullo," she said off-handedly. "Miss your bus?"

"No," Monica put her hand to her head, loosening her hair, and turned from the hall mirror towards her sister, an odd little stillness in her face. "Bill brought me home. We stopped by the lake for a few minutes, talking."

"Bill?" Alice exclaimed, an edge creeping into her voice.

"You don't object, do you?"

Alice sneered.

"It wouldn't matter if I did, I suppose, though why you can't find your own boy friends I can't imagine, without running after mine. First it was Miles Bannister—now it's Bill."

Monica flushed darkly.

"Oh, don't talk such rubbish," she exclaimed sharply, going on into the kitchen. "In any case, Bill happened to be driving past the office, just as I left, and he very kindly offered me a lift."

"I suppose that's why you came home by the lake road and stopped for a little quiet love-making on the way!"

"What a vile thing to say. You know it isn't true and—"

The sharp ringing of the door-bell interrupted her. For a split second both girls looked uneasily at each other. Their voices had been raised and they wondered how much someone on the other side of the door might have heard. Mrs. Storm, was still upstairs—they could hear her go along the passage into the bathroom.

"I'll go," said Alice, who was the nearest.

She turned and walked down the passage and flung the door open with an impatient little jerk of her wrist. The next moment she had fallen back, a hand pressed to her side, and Monica distinctly heard her gasp.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"Hello, Alice. May I come in?"

For a moment Monica thought it was Bill who had come back again, but at the well remembered voice she suddenly stiffened. She could not help herself. It was the stiffening of defensiveness but she did not know that. All she was aware of, in a vague sort of way, was Miles Bannister standing under the hall light, his hat in his hand, and her mother coming down the stairs.

After that first startled exclamation Alice neither moved nor spoke.

"Mr. Bannister!" exclaimed Mrs. Storm, coming to a stop as she reached ground level. "But—but what are you doing here?"

"You must forgive me, Mrs. Storm," Miles said quietly, his tones gentle. "But you see, I have flown over from England in order to clear up a misunderstanding." He glanced past her to the end of the passage where Monica, a dim figure in the shadows, stood rigid with apprehension. "It concerns Monica," he added quietly.

"Monica hasn't anything to say to you—the least you can do is to leave her alone," exclaimed Alice rudely, as if she had suddenly come to life. She flung the door wide with a dramatic gesture. "Please go!"

"Do you wish to see me go, Mrs. Storm?" Miles ignored the girl and addressed her mother, who seemed uncertain what to say. "Before you answer that, may I say this? I learned, quite by accident, that the letter I wrote to Monica, a few days after I reached England, was never received by her, yet I had an answer! Neither, apparently, did you get the letter I wrote to you."

"I—I think you had better come into the kitchen," Mrs. Storm answered bewilderedly. "Alice! Please close the door. We don't want the neighbours to hear our business."

"Well, of course, if you others want to listen to a lot of lies I can't stop you," exclaimed Alice, shutting the door with a bang. "But don't expect me to—I'm going upstairs."

Monica turned and walked into the kitchen. So far she had not spoken. She was numb with shock, a prey to a variety of emotions that ranged from a queer, singing gladness to utter bewilderment.

As in a dream she heard Miles say something in answer to Alice and heard her sister's sulky reply. Whatever it was, it was evidently effective, for Alice flounced past her and took up a position near the dresser.

"Well?" she demanded insolently, when they were all in the room.

Miles slowly laid down his coat and put his hat on top of it. Then he took a letter from his pocket and held it out to Monica.

"Tell me, did you write that?" he asked gently.

Reluctantly Monica glanced down at it, refusing to meet his eyes.

"This isn't my writing," she then said

painfully, after a moment, the colour creeping back into her pale cheeks when she read what was on the paper. "In—in any case, I never wrote to you."

"Exactly," he said with quiet emphasis. "But someone did—the someone who intercepted my letter to you and, presumably, the one addressed to your mother as well." He turned to look directly at Alice. "You wouldn't know anything about it, I suppose?"

The younger girl went white but her eyes blazed.

"Why should I?" she exclaimed, with a toss of her head. "It has nothing to do with me what you write or to whom. I'm not sufficiently interested."

"Perhaps not, but maybe the postal authorities will be," Miles returned meaningfully. "Tampering with U.S. mail is a serious offence in this country, I understand. Would you like me to institute enquiries into the delivery of the missing letters? I daresay the postman will remember handing them to somebody at the time—they were in special airmail envelopes and I don't imagine you get many like that here."

Mrs. Storm drew herself up with a pitiful attempt at dignity.

"You had better be careful, Mr. Bannister," she said warningly. "There is a law of slander in this country, too. How dare you accuse Alice—"

"I'm not accusing anyone, Mrs. Storm," he interrupted quietly. "All I am concerned with is finding out the truth! I am sure you are fair-minded enough to realise the importance of doing so."

Monica stepped forward before her mother could speak.

"Does it matter?" she asked slowly. "The—the main thing is that you did write and that all this time we have been doing you an injustice. After all, we—we don't want to punish anyone, do we?"

"I quite agree," he said promptly, a smile lighting his eyes.

In a queer, inconsequential way Monica thought he looked tired and that he had got thinner and more fine-drawn.

He went on:

"As long as you believe me that's everything. As for that"—he indicated the letter Monica had laid on the table—"the sooner it is burnt the better. I only showed it to you as proof that I must have written."

"But I don't understand," cried Mrs. Storm agitatedly. "What does it all mean?"

Miles smiled gently at her.

"It means that I wrote to Monica as soon as I got to England," he said. "In my letter I told her that my father was very ill and that I might have to remain over there for a considerable time and asked her to tell you that I would be writing about my room. As you know, I left more or less at a moment's notice, so that an important question I wanted to ask Monica had to wait. In the circumstances, I asked it in my letter to her, instead." He smiled across at Monica and at something she saw in his eyes her colour flamed. "May I tell them what it was, Monica dear?" he asked softly.

She hesitated and her lip trembled.

Then—

"If—if you like Miles," she whispered, turning her head away, a rising gale of emotion in her heart.

Miles looked at Mrs. Storm.

"I asked Monica if she would do me the honour of becoming my wife," he said quietly. "I love her and dared to hope that she returned my love. That is why, when I got that letter, purporting to have come from her, couched in terms that left me little option, I immediately wrote to the Dean asking permission to resign and

making arrangements to have my things collected."

There was a tense little silence. Mrs. Storm met his gaze steadily for a moment and then, very slowly, turned to where her youngest daughter was leaning against the dresser.

"Alice!" she said in a shaking voice. "Alice! It was you!"

Alice tried to meet her gaze defiantly, teeth gripping her lower lip. Then suddenly, so suddenly that it was almost shocking in its intensity, her composure broke.

"All right!" she cried wildly, the sharp edge of hysteria in her voice. "I did it. I stopped the postman and took the letters off him before he could put them into the mail-box. When I saw what Miles had written I knew I had to do something to stop him from trying to find out why Monica had not answered his letter, so I wrote that."

She pointed a quivering finger to the letter that was still lying on the table. Then, jerking back her head, she laughed hysterically. "A fat lot of good it did me!"

Without warning she sank into a chair, and buried her face in her hands, rocking to and fro like a child in pain.

Monica crossed swiftly to her side and put her arms round the weeping girl.

"Oh, hush, dear!" she begged quivering. "Please don't, Alice. You'll make yourself ill. It—it doesn't matter any more—I understand. We—we'll start again and forget all about it. I know Miles has forgiven you as I do."

But all Alice did was to utter a queer, moaning sound that was even sadder than her tears.

Miles looked on, half in pity, thinking of the bitterness of the past three months.

Then suddenly he walked over to where Alice was crouched in the chair, Monica's arms still around her.

"I understand, too, Alice," he murmured. "At anyrate, it is not for us to judge. I think—in fact, I am sure!—that you have paid over and over again for what you did. That being the case, the last thing we want to do is to punish you—in any way. For, you see"—with a smile—"we couldn't do that without punishing ourselves."

Alice looked up, a dull flush staining her cheeks.

"How you must despise me!" she muttered hoarsely.

"I said I understand and so does Monica," he replied quietly. "How, then can we despise you? Come! Won't you help us to put it all behind us so that we can look forward instead of back?"

She rose to her feet and stood looking at him for a moment.

Then, with a queer, hurt gesture she brushed the back of a hand across her eyes and turning, ran out of the room.

Monica would have followed but Miles put out a restraining hand.

"Let her go," he said sagely. "You've got to give her time to get over it. It won't be easy—it won't be easy for any of us—but in time we shall have other and pleasanter things to remember." He turned to Mrs. Storm. "I'm very sorry to have been the cause of all this," he went on, "but you must see that it was necessary in order to put matters right. I would have chosen any other way if it had been possible, but there wasn't one."

Mrs. Storm nodded sadly.

"I don't blame you, Miles," she sighed. "At anyrate, it's done now and talking about it won't help. I'm going to make some tea—I'm sure we could all do with a cup!"

Monica went to the window, and stood

looking out, her back to the room.

Then—

"You said that you found out by accident that I had never received your letter, Miles. What happened?"

"Gus Lampard told me," he replied. "He asked me to give you his love, by the way, Monica."

She turned swiftly, her eyes widening with surprise.

"You met Gus? But—"

"It was probably chance, but I like to think that it was also something else," he said.

Briefly he explained his meeting in London.

"Gus belied, of course, that I hadn't written and practically accused me of having amused myself with you whilst I was here. I showed him the letter I had received in answer to mine and he said at once that you had never written it. From there it wasn't difficult to put two and two together. As a result I took the first plane back."

Monica opened her mouth to speak, but the sound of the front door slamming checked her. She went pale and glanced at him with sudden fear in her eyes.

Mrs. Storm heard the door as well and looked round.

"That was Alice!" she exclaimed. She put down the teapot. "Monica! You'd best go after her—tell her to come back. I—I'm afraid."

"I'll go," said Miles quickly, and went out, closing the door behind him.

Five minutes later he was back again, smiling.

"Nothing to worry about," he said cheerfully, and to Monica it seemed as if warmth and light had come back into the dark room. "She is with Bill Protheroe. I don't know if he was coming to the house, or whether he was waiting for her at the bottom of the road, but I saw them going off in the direction of the lake."

A LITTLE later Monica put down her cup.

"Why—why did Gus speak to you, Miles?" she asked, breaking a little silence. Mrs. Storm had gone, leaving them together. "It seems such a strange thing to have done."

"It wasn't strange at all, my dearest," he answered quietly. "Apparently he had intended trying to find out where I lived so that he could come and see me. I think he felt that there was an explanation of some kind due to you and he was determined to make me render an account—for your sake. I think it was very splendid of him, considering everything."

She looked down at the tablecloth, tracing a pattern along it with her finger.

"Poor Gus," she sighed.

Miles rose and, taking her hands, drew her to her feet.

"These things are out of our hands, my dearest," he said quietly. "I understand how you feel, for you and he were childhood friends. But, as Shakespeare wrote, there is a divinity that shapes our ends, and I cannot help thinking that it was destiny which sent me to that particular hotel on the night Gus was there." He smiled to himself. "He was a very belligerent young man, I must admit—I'm sure he was prepared to teach me a lesson in the good old-fashioned way if I hadn't cleared myself where you were concerned!"

Monica smiled wistfully.

"Poor Gus," she said again. "I hope he meets someone nice who'll make him happy."

"Perhaps he will—who knows?" Miles said lightly. "But now we've got to look forward, my dearest. You—you do love me, don't you?"

"Yes, Miles," she whispered. "If—I wasn't sure before, I am now. That was why when you didn't write—or rather, when I thought you had not—I was heartbroken. I couldn't understand what had gone wrong."

"And I wondered how I could have been such a self-satisfied ass as to believe that you cared, when I received, what I thought, was your extremely curt answer!" Miles confessed, with a wry smile. "It was the most awful shock and I frankly lost interest in everything. Even my father mentioned it."

"Oh, how is he, Miles? I haven't asked yet."

"Much better, thank goodness," he returned fervently. "When I left he was planning to come out here to spend next summer with us. He will, too!"

Monica blushed at the inference.

"You haven't proposed to me yet," she said demurely. "It's usual before you start planning, you know."

Miles laughed and drew her into his arms.

"Baggage!" he said. "I proposed to you in front of your mother and Alice half an hour ago. And you accepted me!"

"Oh, I didn't!" she murmured teasingly. "I never said a word!"

"Maybe not, but your eyes did." He looked down at her for a moment, and then, with a sharp intake of his breath, laid his lips on hers in a tender kiss.

OUTSIDE, the stars shone down from a cloudless sky, turning the lake into a mirror to reflect their radiance and outlining the forms of a man and a girl who stood close together by a huge sequoia tree.

The glow of a cigarette revealed the countenance of the young man as he inhaled, grave and serious. Then, with a quick movement he took the cigarette from his lips and flicked it into the water.

"I knew there was something wrong, Alice," he said slowly, breaking what had been quite a long silence. "I kidded myself that I knew you pretty well and so I couldn't understand what made you go haywire like you did. Chaps like Charlie Frobisher aren't your sort and—well—I guess I was kinda worried."

"I've been a fool, Bill. A jealous, spiteful little fool," said Alice miserably. "I wonder you don't hate me."

She had gone blindly out of the house, and had almost collided with Bill at the end of the road. For a moment it seemed that she had not recognised him, but he had caught her arm, checking her and asking what was wrong.

Well, now he knew, she thought despondently, and waited in fear and trembling for the condemnation she expected.

Instead—

"I told Monica earlier this evening that you'd got your feet on the wrong road," he said, speaking slowly. "Well, you won't be the first one to make that kinda mistake, nor the last. The great thing is to get back again before you go too far. I reckon that's what you've done."

"Gone too far?" She caught her breath.

"Nope!" He smiled at her in the darkness. "Got back into the straight, honey. It wasn't easy to tell me what you did, I guess."

"No, it wasn't easy." Hands in the pockets of her coat, she stared into the darkness, her lips quivering. "But I had to tell somebody."

"And so you told me." Bill nodded understandingly. "Well, that's how it should be. I mean, when you're in a jam it's natural to turn to the person you really love."

She turned her head slowly and looked at him, her eyes wide and bright.

"When you really love someone—?" She caught her breath. "But, Bill—"

"Listen, honey!" He turned and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Would you have told Charlie Frobisher, or Bert Rivers—any of the crowd you've been running around with? All right, you needn't answer. You see, I know you wouldn't have done. And why? Because they couldn't help. Am I right?"

She nodded.

"Quite right, Bill." She sighed: "All the same, you can't get away from the fact that I nearly ruined Monica's chances of happiness. I know now that I never was in love with Miles—I just liked him—but—"

"Don't worry, I understand," Bill said gently, when she stopped, fumbling for words. "I guess they do, too." He gave her a quizzical look. "Do you know why I was waiting at the end of the road?"

"No?" She looked wonderingly at him. "I—I never thought about it, Bill. Were—were you coming to the house?"

He shook his head, still smiling in that odd fashion.

"I've waited there a good many times lately," he said slowly. "I guessed you didn't know where you were heading and that you might want me badly sometime. An' so I—well—kept an eye on you. I've never been very far away when you went out with the others."

"Oh, Bill, you make me feel so ashamed," Alice faltered, turning her head away.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, honey. You were trying to be something you were never intended to be, that's all. And now—" he paused, as if to lend additional weight to his words—"now you know, don't you?"

"Yes." She nodded again. "I know, Bill. And I'm sorry."

"I guess that's all right, then," he said.

He bent his head and kissed her, drawing her into his arms. With a little sigh she relaxed, her head on his shoulder.

"Bill!" she murmured presently.

"Yes, honey?"

"I love you. That's all."

"Sure, I know you do." He kissed her again. "If I hadn't known that I guess I couldn't have waited till you found out. Now you have, everything's fine."

With a sudden gesture, she put her hands up and drew his head down, kissing him of her own free will.

"How soon can we be married?" she asked breathlessly.

"Do you want to marry me?" He grinned.

"Yes, Bill. I shan't feel really safe until I am your wife," she whispered. "Say it can be soon."

"I reckon it will take about three months to get a house built," he said slowly. "The architect promised to let me have the plans by Saturday and then we can get crackin'." First thing to-morrow—lucky it's a Sunday—we'll go an' have a look at the lot."

"The lot?" She sounded puzzled.

He laughed softly.

"You can say I took a whale of a chance, if you like, but I bought a building lot on the hill beyond Lakeside Drive. It's got a nice view, an' when the house is built you'll be able to see Old Baldy from the front porch."

"Oh, Bill!" she exclaimed.

"Can't you say anything but 'Oh, Bill?'" he laughed teasingly. "It gets kinda monotonous after a while. What about 'Bill darling' for a change?"

Alice laughed, the tears pricking her eyelids. Then she sighed and looked out across the lake, a feeling of release taking possession of her.

Then—

"Bill, darling!" she whispered. She paused a moment. "I don't deserve it, but I'm so happy I want to cry."

MILES was with Mrs. Storm and Monica in the living-room when Alice and Bill entered. One glance at their faces told the others that all was well.

Monica got up and crossed swiftly to where her sister was standing just inside the doorway, a look of shy happiness in her eyes, Bill's hand on her arm. Smiling through her tears she kissed Alice, a rush of pity and tenderness swamping all her other emotions.

Bill smiled wryly at her and then looked towards Mrs. Storm.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, his drawl more pronounced than ever, "but I reckon you're going to lose both your daughters very shortly. Alice and I are going to be married as soon as we can get a house built. I hope you don't mind?"

Mrs. Storm smiled from one to the other.

"No, Bill, I don't mind," she said softly. "In fact, I'm very, very glad. Everything has turned out for the best, and I know that you will take care of my girl for me."

Miles gripped Bill's hand and a look of deep understanding passed between the two men.

Then Miles turned to Alice.

"May I claim the privilege of a future brother-in-law?" he enquired gaily. He met her eyes for a moment, then kissed her lightly on the cheek. "My warmest congratulations, my dear girl," he said softly. "If Monica and I could have asked for more than we have been given, this is it! God bless you both!"

Alice smiled at him, her lips trembling, her eyes suffused with tears. The two she had wronged had forgiven her generously, and she knew that, as far as they were concerned, the past was as if it had never happened.

Yet there was one thing she had to do. Her hand closed on Bill's tightly, as if seeking strength from his nearness.

"Bill knows," she said catchily. "I—I told him everything. He—he—" Her voice broke.

Miles nodded understandingly and took Monica's hand.

"That's the best news I've heard for many a day," he said. "And now I think it's high time we made a solemn pact to look forward and not back." He turned to Alice again and it was as if he had had the last word. "If ever any one of us is tempted to look over our shoulders, it will be to remember that you had the courage to tell Bill the truth, and to tell us that you had done so. That, and nothing else."

The following afternoon Monica and Miles stood in the shadow of the monument on the plateau and looked across the tree-tops to Old Baldy.

"I can hardly believe, even now, that

things have turned out as they have done," he said musingly, his arm round her shoulders. "It is only a matter of days ago that I had lost faith in everything—even in myself—and now—" He broke off and looked down at her with shining eyes—"Oh, Monica, darling, how can I tell you all that is in my heart?"

"There's no need, dearest," she answered softly. "You see, I knew the moment you came in last night that you really loved me. And now that Alice and Bill are going to be happy there is nothing I could possibly want."

"Except a house overlooking the sound, not far from where Bill is going to build," he said teasingly.

She looked up, startled.

"Miles, does that mean—?"

"Yes, my dearest. I saw the Dean this morning and it appears they will be glad to have me back. The man they got in as a substitute has had an offer of a post in Columbia University and is anxious to be relieved of his duties, so I am to take over almost at once. I sent a cable to my father this morning to tell him the news."

"Oh, Miles, how wonderful!"

"Everything is wonderful, my darling and you are the most wonderful of all," he said, drawing her into his arms.

And as she felt the touch of his lips Monica knew that, henceforth, they were armoured by their love against the trials and tribulations that might beset them; that their love would endure for all time in their hearts.

THE END.

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ALL FOR LOVE

By Frances Nicholls

WHO IS HE?

GWEN ARNOLD had for some weeks past been aware of the tall, dark, well-set-up young man who worked in the Press Advertising Agency next door to her own place of business in the shadow of St. Paul's Cathedral—to be exact, at Number 7, Apostles Court.

Gwen had been employed by the Regency Studios for two years now, and liked her job. Previously she had been a retoucher for a firm of photographers in Oxford Street, but the work had been very exacting and she was glad to be out of it.

In those days she had lived with her mother in a small flat in Acton—her father had been killed in a car accident and it had been something of a struggle for them to carry on with only her own small salary, added to her mother's still smaller pension.

But they had managed, somehow, until her mother's death, some fourteen months ago. Then, unable to carry on alone, Gwen had found a room for herself in Acre Lane, Brixton. She had kept enough of the family furniture to make it comfortable, sold the rest, and moved into her new home.

She had been lonely at first, and desperately unhappy. But Time—the great healer—had inevitably dulled the first sharp edge of her grief, and with the acquisition of new friends and new interests, Gwen had gradually settled down to the normal life of a young girl on her own in London.

She did her own housework, her own

shopping and her own cooking—except for lunch which she took at a small restaurant close to her place of work. Known as "The Black Cat", the restaurant was run by a Swiss woman and her two daughters, and Gwen soon learned to know most of the "regulars" by sight, who they were and where they worked.

Ocasasionally, a stranger would walk in—a sight-seeing visitor, perhaps, or a casual passer-by—and Gwen and her friend, Alice Stone, with whom she generally shared a table, would often amuse themselves by trying to guess who and what the stranger was when he or she was at home.

It was on such an occasion that Gwen first became aware of the tall, dark, well-set-up young man in a tweed jacket and flannel trousers. He entered the restaurant rather hesitantly just as Gwen and her friend had reached the sweet stage of their lunch, glanced quickly round the crowded room, and then took the first vacant chair he saw.

"He's a new one!" commented Alice Stone. "I haven't seen him before."

"Who?" asked Gwen, who had not seen the young man come in.

"Fellow in the brown tweed jacket," Alice replied. "He's over by the window where that man from Hanbury and Smith always sits."

Gwen looked in that direction, and nodded. She saw a rather good-looking young man, dark, with broad shoulders—about twenty-four or five she thought, and apparently engrossed in studying the menu.

"No. I haven't seen him before," she said. "He's evidently a 'chance,'" Gwen added, using the professional term for one who drops into a restaurant by chance as opposed to habit.

"A student of some kind, apparently," Alice remarked. "He isn't tidy enough for an office or a shop. Looks a bit uncomfortable, too, as though he's not used to eating out."

Gwen glanced at the young man again. No, he did not look particularly at ease, she thought, Alice was right about his appearance, too. His general set-up had a well-worn look, and his hair was a shade on the long side and carelessly brushed.

"Could be an artist of some kind," Gwen hazarded. "Probably drawing St. Paul's or something. He's certainly not a bank clerk!"

Alice smiled.

"No, definitely not," she agreed. "Nor, come to that, has he the appearance of an artist. Just look at his hands."

Gwen stole another glance at the man. She could not see a great deal of his hands, but the little she could see suggested that they were square-looking and strong rather than slender and artistic.

"Oh, but I don't think you can go by a person's hands, Alice," she said. "I've only met one artist, and he was a world-famous portrait painter. He gave a lecture on Art at our town hall when I was a schoolgirl, and if I hadn't known who he actually was, I'd have taken him for a typical pork butcher. For he had exactly that appearance, with great red hands like

—well, like hams!" Gwen added laughingly, they then went on to talk of other things.

It was a week later, when the young man turned up again. He was just in front of Gwen and her friend as they entered the restaurant. They both recognised him at once. He was wearing the same jacket and flannel trousers, but his general appearance was somewhat smarter.

"He's evidently had his hair trimmed!" Alice giggled, as they sat down at their table.

"Yes, and bought a new collar and tie, by the look of things," Gwen whispered.

The young man was sitting nearer them this time, only a couple of tables away, and they were able to get a better view of him.

"Perhaps he's found a job somewhere," Gwen whispered. "He's certainly smartened himself up since he was here before."

"Commercial artist in Fleet Street," Alice whispered back. "Though I don't know why he should come all the way up here to have lunch," she added, as an afterthought. "Maybe he's a Press photographer?"

"Yes, of course," Gwen agreed. "Though he hasn't the air of one. He doesn't look brash enough for such a job. We've had one or two Press photographers in our place, and though they were as casually dressed as he, I should say they were a good deal more pushing, if you know what I mean?"

"But he may have only just started, and is a bit nervous," Alice suggested.

Gwen found herself watching the young man curiously. Once or twice he looked up suddenly and their eyes met—he had blue eyes, she noticed, with rather a far-away sort of expression as though he were thinking of other things and was not really aware that he was looking at anything in particular—which was not at all flattering to her!

The waitress having brought their order, Alice embarked upon a lengthy description of a film she had been to see the previous night. Halfway through, an idea suddenly occurred to Gwen, and she cut in—

"I say, Alice, you—you don't think he's an actor by any chance, do you? A film actor, I mean?"

"Eh?" Alice returned, staring at Gwen blankly. "Dirk Bogart?"

"Dirk Bogart—nothing!" Gwen retorted laughingly. "I'm talking about the man over there, my dear."

"Oh—him?" Alice shrugged. "You're getting the young man on the brain, Gwen," she went on sarcastically. "I'm talking about Dirk Bogart and the film I saw last night. It's going to be shown in South London next week and you ought to see it. As I was about to tell you, it's set in North Africa somewhere and—"

Alice rambled on and on, but Gwen gave little attention to what she was saying. It was absurd to suggest that she was getting "that young man on the brain," of course, for she knew nothing whatever about him. All the same, she had to confess to herself that he did hold an odd sort of interest for her—certainly more than any other "casual" had ever held.

For one thing, Gwen's thoughts ran on, he was better looking than the average. He had a very interesting face, and she liked his eyes—they seemed to hold some kind of dream in their depths.

She found herself thinking about him several times during the course of that afternoon—wondering who he really was and what he did for a living. Almost she wished she knew someone at "The Black Cat" who could introduce them. Gwen knew one or two of the people there, but it was obvious that no one knew

him, for he was a complete stranger to the place.

He came to the restaurant for lunch three days running—much to Gwen's enlivenment and Alice Stone's scarcely-veiled amusement.

"You'll get him yet, my dear!" Alice remarked laughingly, when it became plain to her one day that Gwen was hurrying through her meal in order to be ready to leave when HE was ready.

Gwen pouted.

"Oh, don't talk nonsense, Alice!" she protested, flushing in spite of herself. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" Alice retorted. "Then you had better have a look in your mirror, my dear. And I advise you not to eat so fast—that is, unless you're trying to be first in the Indigestion Stakes. Ah, me!" she added with a mock sigh. "Love's young dream—it's a wonderful thing, so I'm told."

"Really, Alice, you're gaga!" Gwen cried, with a forced little laugh. "You see too many pictures, that's what it is. Can't one be interested in a person without being stupid about it?"

"Depends on the person," Alice shot back at her. "And, of course, the source of the interest," she added as an afterthought. "For instance, what possible interest can you have in a man you don't know, have never spoken to, and of whose business and character and personality you are utterly and completely ignorant? Tell me that, my pet."

"Well, that's just why I am interested," Gwen replied. "If I knew all those things, maybe I shouldn't be interested any longer."

Alice smiled.

"Which is exactly what I'm telling you," she said. "Not knowing anything whatever about the man, you're imagining things—yes, and all of them what you would like, my dear. In other words—Love's Young Dream!"

"Oh, don't be so utterly ridiculous!" Gwen cried impatiently, knowing that was exactly what she was doing. "It's just that he has a rather interesting face. I mean, he looks as though he would be interesting to talk to—some people are, you know, while others are not. It all depends upon what they have in them."

"And this mysterious stranger has everything, of course," Alice remarked laughingly. "That goes without saying. Already we have invested him with all the virtues and all the graces. He's an earl in disguise, rich and handsome, and his chariot and footmen await without the door!"

"The film mentality again," Gwen suggested sarcastically. "You are back in the old fairy stories, my dear. Things of that sort are of no interest to an adult mind, you know."

"And I suppose in this matter you think you are exercising your adult mind?" asked Alice drily. "Heavens preserve us, Gwen! You have evidently got it badly! But I'll tell you this, my pet—if that man happened to be a dustbin remover you wouldn't—"

"On the contrary," Gwen broke in, "I couldn't care less what he is, or what he does. We all have to make a living somehow, you know."

"Yes, of course," Alice agreed. "Very well, then we'll do our best to find out what he does, shall we, Gwen? Somehow, I have an idea that he must have a job of some kind around here. In any case, I'll detail my scouts to find out who and what he actually is."

"Oh no," Gwen objected. "I really

don't want to know anything about the man."

"So you prefer your dreams, eh?" Alice suggested, with a scornful laugh. "Isn't that exactly what I've been telling you, my dear?"

Gwen glanced at her watch and began to collect her bag and gloves.

"Time I was going," she said shortly. "Coming?"

"Sure," said Alice. "I too have a job to do."

She rose and followed Gwen to the door of the restaurant, but had a quick look back at HIM as she went out.

"No response from the gentleman at all," she muttered, as she joined Gwen on the pavement. "Most unromantic and dispiriting, I call it. Really, my dear, you are wasting your time. Apparently, your young man is far more interested in his sausage and mash than he is in you—he never even looked up as you passed his table."

"Perhaps, my dear Alice, he's a food inspector—on duty," Gwen flung back at her.

She was thinking about the young man quite a lot as she painted her delicate flowers and scrolls and sprays on the piece of period furniture she was restoring in the basement workshop of the Regency Studios that afternoon—Gwen paid no heed to the chatter of the other two girls as they worked on similar pieces alongside her. It was all very well for her friend to make fun of her interest in this unknown young man, Gwen told herself, but why should she not be interested in him?

Why was it that in a railway carriage full of people—in the tube, for example—there was nearly always one face which, for some reason or another, stood out from all the rest? It might be that of a man or a woman. It might be a beautiful face or the reverse, but it made no difference. It invariably happened that out of the people in view, one's eyes kept returning without any conscious volition to that one particular face.

And, in a way, it was like that with this unknown young man. There was no question of her being in love with him, of course. It was simply that something about him interested her to the point when she would like to know who he was and all about him. In short, what she felt was a perfectly normal interest in something that struck her as being a bit out of the usual run of things.

And this unknown young man certainly seemed to her to be something outside the usual run of people who took their lunch at "The Black Cat" every day, and because of that he had intrigued both her interest and curiosity. That was all. And it was just silly of Alice Stone to try to ascribe any other reason for it.

"Are you in love, Gwen?" one of the other girls asked suddenly.

Gwen looked up, startled.

"What—what do you mean?" she stammered.

"Well, you haven't spoken a word to anybody since you came back from lunch, have you?" the girl said. "And I've asked you twice about these worm holes, but you've given me no answer. How many do you want me to put in?"

Gwen laid down her brush and went round the cabinet to where the girl was working on the back panel. It was one that had been "restored" and they were now "ageing" the restored portions to match in with the original work. That was their job and Gwen was in charge of the little team.

Worm had been in the original wood, and eradicated. But to maintain the unity it was essential that worm should appear to have been in the restored parts as well, and those had to be "fixed".

With a stout needle-like implement, Gwen punctured the new wood here and there in a "natural" pattern, and then stood for a while watching the girl as she drilled out the first puncture mark into what was, to all intents and purposes, a perfectly genuine worm-hole. It was tricky work done with a specially designed tool, and the first of six separate operations, after the last of which it would be quite impossible for any but an expert to decide which were the true and which the false.

That, indeed, was the business of Regency Studios. They would take a battered piece of Sheraton, for example, worth nothing at all in the sale-room, and by carefully restoring it, make it worth its full present day value to anyone except the real connoisseur of the period. In the same way, where such a treasure became accidentally damaged or broken, its owner would send it along to the studios to be expertly repaired and restored.

The Regency Studios had a West End salon where they exhibited and sold their own antiques, and it was there that Gwen had first started with them. They had advertised for a young lady assistant, preferably with some knowledge of period furniture, and Gwen had applied for and been given the post.

Actually, she had a pull there for her father, an Army major, had made period furniture his hobby, and it was from him that Gwen had learned much of what she knew before she went to Regency Studios. Her father had had his own little workshop and had, in a small way, gone in himself for repairing and restoring any old piece which he came across and which his means enabled him to buy.

Within ten months of joining the firm, Gwen had been offered her present post in the actual workrooms and had accepted with alacrity, for not only was the work more interesting, it meant doubling her salary.

"We ought to be ready for glazing this job, to-morrow," the girl remarked, as Gwen stood watching her drilling the worm-holes.

Gwen nodded. The "glaze" was put on to give the new wood the appearance of a century and more of careful polishing. Then the "glaze" itself was "aged" by wiping it with a certain chemical which broke it into a myriad tiny cracks and fissures exactly as the original glaze had cracked with the passing years. That had to be done with extreme care.

Gwen crossed over to the cupboard by the window to make sure that the required quantity of glaze was on hand. Having satisfied herself that this was so, she re-locked the cupboard and stood for a moment looking out across Apostles Court at the windows of the advertising agency opposite.

The girl working on the adding machine over there caught sight of her and smiled, Gwen smiled back. The court was only about twelve feet across, and the windows of the two offices were directly opposite each other. Just as Gwen was about to turn away, someone came through the entry into the court and went quickly into the advertising agency doorway.

Gwen gave a stifled little exclamation of surprise, and her heart began to beat wildly, for the man she had seen entering the offices of the advertising agency was none other than the newcomer to The Black Cat restaurant!

Did he work there? she wondered, with suppressed excitement.

FOR the rest of that afternoon, Gwen Arnold's thoughts could be described as one large question mark.

A dozen times she found a reason for going to the cupboard, in order to glance across at the building opposite, but all to no purpose. The result was that by the time she left to go home that evening, she was still uncertain whether the young man actually worked at the advertising agency or whether he had merely called there on business.

But, in some strange way, Gwen did feel that she had advanced a step in her knowledge of him. If he had called there on business once, she told herself, he would almost certainly call again. And if he actually did work there, she was almost bound to meet him, sooner or later.

Much to Gwen's disappointment, he did not put in an appearance at The Black Cat restaurant during the next few days. Then, to her amazement, just when she was beginning to think that he had disappeared for good, he walked past her as she sat on top of the bus that was taking her home, and sat down in a vacant place three seats in front of her.

Gwen stared at his back incredulously. She always travelled home via Blackfriars Bridge and Kennington Park Road, but never before had she seen him on a bus on that route. Was it chance that he happened to have caught the same bus that evening? Or was it possible that he actually lived in Brixton?

That was the question she debated with herself all the way home, watching his back for the first sign of his preparing to leave, and rejoicing inwardly the longer he remained motionless. He was still there when the bus reached Brixton Town Hall, where Gwen herself had to get off, and she knew a desperate urge to remain seated and continue the journey with him, but common sense prevailed.

He might be going anywhere, she told herself—Streatham, Norbury, or Mitcham—and she could scarcely trail him home. Besides, he might be going on a visit to friends. In any case, why make such a fool of herself over a man to whom she had never even spoken? Had she no pride, no sense of dignity?

By the time she reached her lodgings in Acre Lane, Gwen felt highly indignant with herself. What on earth was it to do with her where the man lived? For all she knew to the contrary, he might be a married man with a family!

Not that it mattered to her, of course. Her interest in him was purely academic, and had been aroused mainly because of Alice Stone's silly innuendoes, Gwen told herself.

That settled, Gwen felt better pleased with herself, and set about preparing her evening meal. It was liver and bacon tonight, and as she tied an apron about her waist and switched on the current of her small electric cooker, she forgot for a while the problem that had been uppermost in her mind.

But she remembered it, next morning when she came to board her bus for the City. For no sooner had she seated herself and glanced round, than she saw, sitting immediately alongside her in the seat across the gangway, the young man who had mystified her so much.

Gwen felt a little breathless, and knew a moment of sheer panic in case he should turn and speak to her. Then, keeping her

eyes straight in front of her, she gradually recovered her composure, though she was still vividly aware of the man across the gangway.

Apparently, he actually did live her way, somewhere near, she told herself, and his times were the same as her own, seeing that he had travelled with her on the previous evening and was doing so again in the morning. And if he actually did work at the Press Advertising Agency, he would, no doubt, get off the bus where she got off and walk by the same route to Apostles Court.

All the way to Blackfriars Bridge, Gwen's thoughts went round and round in circles. Once or twice she dared to glance at him out of the corners of her eyes, and noticed that he appeared to be very indifferent about his general get-up. His old brown brogues looked infinitely more suited to the country than Town, although they were well polished.

On the other hand, Gwen was well aware that advertising men, artists, copywriters and so forth sometimes favoured a Bohemian style of dress—in fact, one of the men employed by the Press Advertising Agency in Apostles Court usually turned up in a corduroy jacket, floppy bow tie, flannel trousers and a beard.

As the bus neared the stopping place on the corner of Ludgate Circus, Gwen got up and started towards the stairs—she had noticed that the young man was preparing to get up, too. She descended the stairs, and when the bus stopped, she stepped down on to the pavement, sensing that he was immediately behind her.

Not daring to turn, Gwen crossed the road and started up Ludgate Hill—she could hear him walking behind her.

When, at last, she turned in under the archway leading to Apostles Court, she heard him turn in after her. In spite of herself, Gwen could not resist the temptation to turn and look at him as she opened the door of Regency Studios. He was looking at her, too, and though he gave no sign, she had a feeling that he had noticed her walking in front of him and was wondering who she was.

At any rate, she told herself with an odd little thrill of satisfaction, he was now aware of her, and would, no doubt, recognise her again—perhaps at lunch time in The Black Cat!

That morning, Gwen and her two assistants glazed the piece of Regency furniture they were restoring—a tricky job, and one calling for the utmost care. But even so, she found herself from time to time speculating upon the chance of meeting "the young man across the way", as she now thought of him, during the luncheon interval.

Somehow, since travelling in with him on the bus, she had ceased to question the whys and wherefores of her interest in the man. It was a problem that seemed no longer to matter, or to have any particular significance. She was interested in him—and that was that. What happened now was a matter for the gods to decide.

Promptly on the stroke of twelve o'clock, Gwen put on her hat and coat and set out for The Black Cat—and possibly with the idea of assisting the gods in their task, she glanced up hopefully at the windows of the Press Advertising Agency, as she passed on her way to the street. But no luck. She saw no sign of him.

Nor was he in the restaurant when she entered. One swift glance round showed her that—as it showed her that her friend Alice Stone was already there.

"Hullo, my dear!" Alice greeted her as she sat down at their table. Then, when they had studied the menu and given their order, she added: "I've got some rather interesting news for you."

"Have you?" Gwen murmured warily, remembering what Alice had said a few days ago about finding out who the strange young man was.

Alice nodded.

"His—his name's Cunningham," she announced triumphantly. "Alan Cunningham. And he's recently started work in that Press Advertising Agency—you know, just across the other side of your Court. Rather curious you haven't seen him going in and out there, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose it is," Gwen said, determined to keep her knowledge to herself.

"But it's no use your getting ideas about him, Gwen, for he's broke! Had trouble of some kind, apparently. I don't know what it was. Anyway, he's broke!"

"Bad luck for him, isn't it?" Gwen remarked. "Still, if he's got a job, and—"

"Yes, but it's not much of a job," Alice broke in. "He's doing a bit of copy-writing for the firm—they took him on spec, so I'm told."

Gwen gave her a curious look.

"Who's told you all this?" she asked.

"Oh, a fellow I know who works for Stapletons, the accountants, whose offices are on the floor above," Alice replied. "I was walking back to the office with him yesterday, when your mystery man came striding towards us and my friend said 'How do?' to him as he passed us. I asked who the fellow was, and my friend told me. He comes from the country—Devon, I think my friend said it was."

At that moment, the waitress brought their order, and it was not until they had started on their lunch that Alice spoke again.

"Rather disappointing, isn't it, Gwen?" she said. "I'd much rather he'd been an earl in disguise, or something of the kind. I mean, you can't have much fun with a chap who's broke, no matter how nice he may be. Bit sickening, I call it, especially when you're already half in love with him. Such a dreadful waste of time."

Gwen frowned.

"What on earth are you talking about, Alice?" she demanded.

"Well, you are half in love with him, my dear—or were!" Alice said, with a malicious little laugh. "Think I don't know the symptoms, my pet?" And when Gwen merely shrugged her shoulders: "Even now you're watching the door all the time and hoping that he'll come in, aren't you?"

Although Gwen muttered an angry denial, she knew it was true. That was precisely what she was doing, and had been from the moment of sitting down. In fact, as the door opened again her eyes involuntarily went that way, and Alice laughed triumphantly.

"There, you see," she said, "didn't I tell you? Oh, yes, you're more than half in love with him, Gwen Arnold, and if you take my advice, you'll watch your step, my dear. Men are quick to see that kind of thing and take advantage of it, and I speak as one who knows."

Gwen shrugged.

"Oh, don't be so utterly stupid, Alice," she said impatiently. "I'm not a child. I'm twenty-three years of age, you know."

"Pooh, what's that?" the other retorted. "You can be thirty-three, forty-three—any

old age you like—and still make a fool of yourself, my dear! That's the worst of us women, we never do learn sense—at any rate, most of us don't."

It was at that moment that the door opened and Alan Cunningham himself entered. He stood just inside the door for a moment or two, his eyes sweeping the occupants as though in search of someone. Then, suddenly, he caught sight of Gwen, and his face lit up.

Gwen gave him an uncertain little smile of recognition, and on the instant his well-cut mouth widened in an exactly similar recognition. He then turned and sat down in the nearest vacant seat.

Alice Stone gave a mock sigh.

"Oh, dear, I give up!" she muttered helplessly. "I've given you the gypsy's warning, Gwen, but you don't take a scrap of notice of what I say. Haven't I already told you that the man's broke, and—and in trouble?"

"In trouble?" Gwen echoed. "What do you mean, may I ask?"

"Oh, I don't suppose the police are after him, if that's what you mean," Alice said. "But he evidently is in trouble of some kind, and he's broke. If that isn't as good as a printed warning to you, my dear, then you're already past all human aid!"

Alice hurriedly finished her lunch, and then reached for her bag and gloves.

"Well, I'll have to be off," she said. "Are you coming, Gwen—or are you staying on for a short time, hoping he'll give you the glad eye again?" she added sarcastically.

"I'm coming with you," Gwen murmured. "Oh, Alice," she went on as she rose and picked up her bag. "I do wish you wouldn't talk such nonsense. As you know quite well, I do not even know the man."

"But you soon will, my pet," Alice giped. "The table's all set and the banquet ready to be brought in—that's as plain as the writing on the wall of Nebuchadnezzar's palace—if it was Nebuchadnezzar's? Was it, darling?"

"I really don't know," Gwen answered wearily, her eyes stealing in the direction of Alan Cunningham.

He looked up as Gwen followed her friend past his table on her way to the door, and again they smiled at each other in a shy, uncertain manner.

That afternoon, Gwen went about her work like one in a dream, and just why she felt impelled to hurry past the door of the Press Advertising Agency with averted eyes when she left for home at six o'clock she did not know. As she walked down Ludgate Hill on the way to catch her bus, Gwen was reminded of those lines addressed to Elizabeth I by the ambitious Essex—

"Fain would I climb,

But yet fear I to fall."

And that was how she felt herself. She wanted to know all about Alan Cunningham, yet, somehow, she was afraid. The truth was that, deep down in her subconsciousness, she had already woven a dream around the man, and her fear was that the reality would smash the dream.

So strong was this feeling that she almost turned back when she came in sight of his tall figure waiting at the bus stop, but it was too late. He had already seen her, and short of making an exhibition of herself she had no option but to take the remaining few steps and join the queue herself.

When, a few moments later, the bus pulled up alongside, Gwen had made up her mind to go inside, but fate was against her. There was no room inside and, perforce, she had to go on top.

And he was waiting for her—waiting beside an empty seat. As she reached the top of the stairs, he stood aside so that she

could take the inside seat, then he sat down beside her and the bus moved away.

In her confusion, Gwen began to fumble in her bag for the fare, waiting for him to speak. Then—

"Do you mind if I—if I speak to you?" he asked shyly.

He spoke in a cultured voice that pleased her ear even while it set her heart racing. It was the kind of voice and diction that, somehow, she had rather expected from him, and it gave her confidence in both herself and him. This was no brash young man forcing himself upon her, for he was obviously as nervous as she herself was.

"My name is Cunningham," he went on, "and I'm with the Press Advertising Agency in Apostles Court. I've often seen you at work on old furniture from my office window. You are with the Regency Studios, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right," Gwen murmured.

"I didn't know until this morning that you lived out this way," he continued. "Actually, I came to the City on the same bus as you did, but I don't suppose you noticed me. I only moved out here a couple of days ago. I was living in Chelsea until then, but I had to find somewhere cheaper and so have taken a room on Brixton Hill. Not much of a place, I'm afraid, but a good deal cheaper than Chelsea."

"Yes, I—I suppose it would be," Gwen agreed awkwardly.

"Evidently you live in Brixton yourself, Miss Arnold," he ventured to remark.

That rather startled Gwen, and she supposed he saw the surprised look on her face, for he smiled.

"I got to know your name from one of the girls in the office," he confessed. "I hope you don't mind me taking such a liberty, but, you see—"

He paused. A faint colour had risen in Gwen's cheeks, but whether from annoyance or sheer surprise he could not be sure.

"I—I'm afraid you're thinking that was an impertinent thing for me to do, Miss Arnold," he stammered on, apologetically. "But it's just that I—that I saw you at work from my office window, and—well, wondered what sort of work you were doing. And when I was told that your firm specialised in restoring period furniture, antiques and so on, and that you were in charge of the actual work, I was deeply interested."

"But why?" Gwen asked involuntarily.

He considered for a moment. Then—

"Well," he said, "that's the point, Miss Arnold—only it doesn't seem easy for me to explain, now that I'm faced with the task of having to do so. I—I'm rather afraid you will think I'm cadging, and that's something that hadn't occurred to me until this moment."

Gwen gave him a puzzled look. That he had been sufficiently interested in her to find out her name was flattering to her. But now she was not so sure that his interest had been the personal one she had at first imagined it to be. There seemed to be something else that had aroused his interest in her—something connected with her job.

"You—you mean you have some old furniture yourself?" she ventured to ask.

"Not 'some,'" he answered, with a rueful smile. "I have just one piece, and I'm not at all sure in my mind if even that is much good. That is my problem, Miss Arnold—whether it is of any special value or whether it is not? So I thought, *perhaps*, that you might be able to tell me."

"There, now, it's out!" he exclaimed, gesturing with his hands. "Cadging, you see, Miss Arnold! Why don't I call in a dealer? you may ask. Well, as to that, I can only reply that I can't afford to pay a dealer for his opinion. Moreover, from all that I've heard of the tribe, I don't trust them and I do not want to be swindled."

Gwen had heard him out in silence. She remembered what Alice Stone had told her about his being broke and in trouble of some kind.

"Then are you thinking of selling whatever it is you have?" she asked.

He gave a derisive little laugh.

"I have no option in the matter, Miss Arnold," he replied. "The fact is, I've got to sell the thing or—well, just go under. That's why it's so frightfully important that I get the best price possible for it."

"I see," Gwen murmured. "And what is it, exactly, may I ask?"

"A bureau of sorts," he answered.

"But what period, I mean? And who made it?"

He looked at her blankly.

"Heaven knows—I don't!" he confessed. "That's my trouble—I don't know the very first thing about furniture. All I can tell you is that it was left to me by an old aunt of mine. It had been in the family for ages, apparently, and they thought the world of it. 'Regency', I think the old lady called it, but whether it is or not—"

Suddenly Gwen realised with a start that the bus was approaching Brixton Town Hall.

"Oh, dear, I have to get off at the next stop!" she exclaimed. "I'd no idea we were so near home. We shall have to talk about this—this bureau of yours at another time, I'm afraid, Mr. Cunningham."

"Miss Arnold," he said urgently, "I—I don't want to be a nuisance to you and I'd hate you to think me importunate, but this is really a very serious matter for me. I wonder if you would allow me to meet you sometime and tell you all about it?"

"Yes, of—of course," she answered. "That is, if it would help any."

"Thank you, Miss Arnold," he said gratefully. "Would it be convenient for you to meet me later on this evening?"

Gwen hesitated, glancing through the window as the bus began to pull up at her stop.

"So what about meeting me outside the Town Hall at eight o'clock to-night?" he raced on, before she could speak. "Then we could have a cup of coffee together somewhere and I could explain the whole position to you. I'd be extremely grateful if you would favour me with your advice, Miss Arnold. I know, of course, that it's an awful cheek on my part in asking you—"

At that moment, the bus jerked to a standstill, and Alan rose and stood aside for her to step into the gangway.

"Very well," Gwen said smilingly, on the spur of the moment, and then hurried down the stairs to the street.

THE ACQUAINTANCE DEEPENS

Gwen closed the door of her room, switched on the light, and stood for a moment looking round vaguely at the familiar scene. Nothing had changed. Everything was just as she had left it that morning. She walked over to her small dressing-table and gazed at her reflection in the mirror.

She had not changed either, she told herself. Her eyes were, perhaps, a little brighter than usual, she decided, but that was all. She supposed she ought to have

looked *blase*—for had she not promised to keep an appointment in the street that night with a man she scarcely knew?

Even now she found it difficult to believe it. Never before had she even dreamt of doing such a thing; it was certainly not her line. All the way from the bus to her lodgings she had been thinking of girls who made that kind of "date", as they termed it, with strange young men. Now, it seemed, she was every bit as foolish as the rest of them. She was, in fact, making the very mistake Alice Stone had warned her against!

Yet, even while she told herself that, Gwen did not really believe it. The sole reason Alan Cunningham had spoken to her at all was because he had found out that she had an expert knowledge of antique furniture and would be able to tell him what he wanted to know about the bureau that had belonged to his aunt without having to incur the expense of consulting a dealer. And since, according to Alice Stone, the young man was broke and in trouble, why shouldn't she do what she could to help him?

"In any case, I don't necessarily *have* to go," she informed her reflection. "I can easily make an excuse when I see him in the morning."

But the trouble was, Gwen found, as she set about preparing her evening meal, that she really did want to keep the appointment. She wanted to know more about the young man. And, moreover, she wanted to help him, if she could. Besides, it would be easy for her to advise him about his Regency bureau—she could probably suggest a buyer for it and so save him a dealer's commission.

At last, Gwen's mind was made up. She changed into her best suit, put on her prettiest hat and her new coat, and at five minutes to eight locked the door of her room and walked along the street to the Town Hall.

She found him there waiting for her. He greeted her with a cheerful smile.

"I didn't know from what direction to expect you until I caught sight of you," he said, as they shook hands. "It's most awfully good of you to have come, Miss Arnold, and I apologise for my impulsiveness in asking you to do me such a favour."

Gwen smiled.

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Cunningham," she said. "I had nothing else to do this evening, and if I can help you in any way —"

She left the sentence in the air, and after an awkward moment of silence, Alan suggested that they went to a cafe and had coffee.

"That is, if you care for coffee, Miss Arnold?" he said.

Gwen assured him that she did and was quick to sense his relief at her answer. She had an impression that, had she suggested anything more expensive, he would have been very embarrassed.

They set off to a cafe near Brixton railway station, and as they walked along, side by side, Gwen found that he was taller than she had supposed, for her head only just reached his shoulder.

"I suppose you know Brixton pretty well?" Alan remarked, smiling down at her.

Gwen nodded.

"Yes, fairly well," she replied, "although I've lived here for only about fourteen months. My mother and I used to have a flat at Acton," she added, as an afterthought.

"Acton?" he repeated. "I don't know that part of London. In fact, I know very little indeed about London save what I've picked up in the last month or so. My home is in Devonshire, and to be quite

candid with you, I wish I were back there. Or does that sound like heresy to a Londoner?"

Gwen laughed.

"Not to this one, at any rate," she replied. "I would never live in London except that my work lies here. And beggars cannot be choosers, you know, Mr. Cunningham."

"How right you are!" he said, with a touch of bitterness in his voice. "Still, as a beggar, I suppose one ought to count oneself lucky to be offered any work at all."

Remembering what Alice Stone had told her, Gwen sighed.

"Don't you like your job?" she asked, in a sympathetic tone.

"I loathe it, Miss Arnold," he replied. "But it is better than nothing, of course. And, as you say, beggars can't be choosers. I suppose I was lucky to get anything at all, come to that."

Gwen shot him a curious glance.

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I don't know the first thing about writing advertising copy," he said. "And, moreover, I doubt if I ever shall. It's the most dreadful gibberish, you know, and literally choked with technicalities that don't mean a thing to me."

"But isn't there anything else you can do, Mr. Cunningham?"

"Nothing that I've discovered, at any rate—I mean, except my own job," he answered. "And that's barred to me at the moment, as I've lost all my capital—and my peace of mind as well—and you need both before you can get down to writing anything worth while."

"You—you mean you write books?"

Gwen asked.

"I did, before this trouble of mine put an end to it," he answered grimly.

"Now I doubt if I shall ever write again. In future, my best efforts will be directed to the task of deluding poor old Mrs. Jones into spending her money on a bottle of Catchpenny's Camphorated Corn Cure, or poor Mrs. Smith into buying a packet of Dogberry's Dubious Detergent!" he added, with a forced little laugh.

They had now arrived at the cafe, and he opened the door and stood aside for Gwen to enter.

They found a corner table and sat down. So Gwen was thinking as he ordered the coffee, he was a writer! Right from the first she had felt that there was something unusual about him, something vaguely intriguing and arresting. As she studied his clean-cut features, his sensitive mouth and intelligent brown eyes, she was not altogether surprised to learn that he was an author.

"I'm sorry about that little moan of mine," he went on, with an apologetic grin, when the waiter had taken his departure. "Actually, of course, I'm exceedingly grateful for anything at all that has a salary attached to it—in fact, eight pounds a week looked uncommonly like all the earth to me a month or so ago, when I was on my beam ends. I don't suppose you've ever been down to your last shilling, have you, Miss Arnold?" he added, smiling at her.

Gwen shook her head.

"No, but I've never had many shillings to throw about," she admitted, smiling back at him.

"Haven't you?" he said. "Well, I have, Miss Arnold, and shall again one of these days, I hope. But that time is not yet. In the meantime, I've got to raise money from somewhere, and that bit of ancient furniture of mine appears to be my sole chance of doing it."

He paused, then went on—

"The fact is, I'm short of one hundred

pounds, and although that old bureau doesn't look worth anything like that to me, my great aunt always spoke of it as though it were a sort of nest egg to be sold only as a last resource and when all other means of raising money had failed."

"One hundred pounds?" Gwen mused. "I think you told me it was a bureau of the Regency Period?"

Alan nodded.

"That's what my great aunt called it, at all events," he said. "Personally, as I've already admitted, I don't know a thing about furniture—either ancient or modern. Do you think such a thing would be likely to fetch as much as a hundred pounds?"

"Well, yes, if it's genuine, and in good condition," Gwen replied. "In fact, a really good specimen would fetch several times that amount."

"You—you really mean that, Miss Arnold?" he stammered, staring at her in surprise.

"Yes, of course I do, Mr. Cunningham," she assured him, smiling. "And what's more, it's a genuine piece, I could even suggest a likely purchaser."

"Could you—really?" he murmured incredulously.

"Yes, Mr. Cunningham. I happen to know a man who makes a hobby of collecting Regency furniture—at least, I know of him," Gwen corrected herself. "But everything depends on its condition and genuineness, of course. Tell me—is this bureau of yours in good condition?"

Alan shrugged.

"I really don't know," he answered slowly. "But if I could get anything like two or three hundred pounds for it—"

He paused, and into his eyes swept that far-away expression which was the first thing that had attracted Gwen's attention to him in *The Black Cat*. It was as though he were looking at something she could not see, something that was not actually there.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"Well, it would make all the difference to me," he said. "On a couple of hundred pounds I could go home and start again. But," he hurried on, "that's only a day-dream, of course. Things don't happen like that in real life."

"Anyway, what I have told you could happen," Gwen insisted, "providing that the bureau is genuine Regency."

"Yes, that's the crux of it, isn't it?" he mused. "And that's what I don't know, unfortunately. Would—would you, Miss Arnold?"

"I rather think so if I saw it," she answered. "Where is it, may I ask?"

"In my room, and—and my landlady would show it to you if you could manage to call there." He hesitated, then added—"Of course, Miss Arnold, if I can sell it, I should insist upon paying you the proper—"

"Oh, don't be silly, Mr. Cunningham," she cut in laughingly, and then ventured to ask him the cause of his financial troubles. Alan shrugged again.

"That's rather a long story, Miss Arnold," he said. "But put quite briefly, I backed a cheque for my brother and—well, things went wrong." He stared abstractedly at his empty coffee cup, and went on—"Maurice is older than I. He's an engineer, and was in partnership with another fellow in a small factory at Bristol. Apparently, they overreached themselves in a contract of some kind—anyway, they needed fifteen hundred pounds to save themselves from going smash."

"So my brother came to me and asked if I would guarantee him for that amount at his bank, and like a fool I did it, on the strength of the income I had at that time.

Unfortunately, however," Alan added grimly, "they did not recover themselves as they had hoped. They went smash, and naturally the bank called in my guarantee."

"So that is how you came to lose your money," Gwen murmured.

"Just that," he nodded. "And to raise the full amount I had to sell everything I had—including my cottage—and borrow three hundred pounds from a money-lender. Two hundred of that I have been able to pay back from the royalties on my last book. The final hundred of the debt is due for payment at the end of this month, and so far I've been able to save only fourteen pounds odd towards it—hence my dilemma. But I shall be all right even if the bureau fetches only a hundred."

"And if it could be made to fetch three hundred!" Alan hunched his shoulders, and continued—"That would be too wonderful for words, Miss Arnold. I'd go back to Tregathen right away and start writing like mad. I'd soon earn enough to buy back my cottage and have it furnished again."

Gwen smiled at his boyish exuberance. "You were evidently very fond of your cottage," she remarked.

"Loved it!" he said enthusiastically. "It was the first thing I ever bought with my own money, the first thing I ever really owned. I'll show you."

He took a notecase from an inside pocket, and after a moment of fumbling among its contents, picked out a photograph.

"That's it," he said proudly, handing it to her. "'Dawn Cottage', I called it, because the morning sun used to wake me up in summer shining full into my window."

Gwen looked at the photograph. It had white walls, and the windows came right down to the ground and opened inwards giving access to a wide stone sun terrace and a lawn beyond. It was long and low, and the roof was tiled.

"But this—but this isn't exactly a 'cottage', is it?" she remarked.

"No, but it used to be before it was enlarged and modernised," Alan said. "According to history, it was once a coast-guard cottage, and some pretty desperate battles were fought in the old days in the cove below. Down here is the sea," he explained, leaning over and indicating the position with a forefinger. "There's a path down to the cove from here, and it leads over the hump into the village, about a quarter of a mile away."

"It looks a most interesting place," Gwen murmured.

"It was heaven, Miss Arnold—summer or winter it was heaven—at least, I thought so. In summer, I used to work out on the terrace, and in winter I worked in that end room," he added, pointing to it—"a small room with a large open fireplace for logs and sheltered from the gales."

"And you can still buy it back, you say?"

"Yes, Miss Arnold, if I had the money. Actually, one of my friends in the village bought it—mainly in order to help me, I'm afraid. But the arrangement between us was that, if I wanted to buy it back, I would have the cottage for what he gave me for it—and that would be my immediate target once I settled down to my own work again."

Gwen nodded understandingly.

"But first we have to settle the question of the Regency bureau," she smilingly reminded him.

"Yes, of course," he agreed, with a rueful smile. "That's the kingpin of the whole affair, isn't it? If that fails, then everything fails, and now that you've raised my hopes, Miss Arnold, I'm almost

afraid to—"

"Oh, but the bureau must be of some considerable value if it's genuine," Gwen broke in.

"Well, as I've told you, I know next to nothing about such things," he said. "I have only my aunt's word for it, and she could easily have been mistaken, of course. But she told me that it came down to her from her grandfather."

"Yes, and that is how such valuable things have survived—I mean, by being handed down in families," Gwen said. "Tell me—when would you like me to look at the bureau?"

"Oh, as soon as you can, Miss Arnold," he answered eagerly. "Better to know the worst, and get it over. It's no use living in a fool's paradise, is it? When do you think it would be convenient for you to call at my lodgings?"

"What about to-morrow evening?" she suggested.

"Very well," he said quietly, "to-morrow evening, then. At what time?"

"Shall we say half-past seven?"

"Yes, of course, if that's convenient to you. The address is—but perhaps I had better meet you where I met you this evening?" he broke off to suggest. "The house stands back from the road and it's difficult to see the number from the street."

"Very well," Gwen agreed. "Say at half-past seven, outside the Town Hall. And now I think I had better be going, Mr. Cunningham," she added, with a glance at her watch.

He walked back to her lodgings with her. "I don't know how to thank you sufficiently, Miss Arnold," he said, as he shook hands with her and wished her good night.

"There is no need for you to thank me," she told him smilingly. "All I hope is that everything will turn out as you would like it to, Mr. Cunningham."

"Thank you very much," he said. "Though it seems too much to hope for. It—it would be almost like a reprieve to a condemned man!"

"As much as that?" she asked, with an amused smile.

"Yes, as much as that, Miss Arnold," he answered sombrely. "At any rate, in terms of work and happiness and real living. I—I think I would as soon be dead as go on working in London as a fourth-rate advertisement copy-writer."

From the darkness of the porch, Gwen watched his lonely figure striding away along the street until it was out of sight.

"Oh, I do hope that everything turns out to be all right!" she murmured to herself as she opened the door and went slowly up the stairs to her room. "Even though it *would* mean his going back to his cottage in Devonshire!"

A LABOUR OF LOVE

MUCH to her disappointment, Alan Cunningham was not on the bus that Gwen caught the following morning, but she comforted herself with the thought that she would see him at lunch in *The Black Cat* that day.

Gwen had spent a restless night. She could not dismiss from her thoughts what he had said when he wished her good night—that he would as soon be dead as go on working in London at his present job. He had spoken with such force, that she could not but believe that he meant it—in spirit, at any rate, if not in the strict letter, and it seemed to make the job she had undertaken so much more momentous.

She, and she alone, would have to give the verdict that, as he had said, would be like a reprieve to a condemned man, or, on the other hand, a confirmation of sentence, and it was a reflection that had

greatly troubled her mind during the night.

How Gwen got through that morning's work she was never quite sure. Again and again she found herself hoping fervently that the bureau would turn out to be genuine and in perfect condition, and if, by sheer ill-luck, it turned out to be otherwise, how best she could tell him the truth without plunging him into the direst depression. She even found herself wondering how much money she herself could raise to help him if the worst should come to the worst.

At lunch time, when she entered the restaurant, he was not there, however. Nor did he come in before she had to leave to get back to work. Uneasily, she wondered if anything had happened him, for he was evidently a man of moods. She could easily imagine him picking up his hat and coat and walking out on the Press Advertising Agency at the slightest provocation regardless of everything.

When, at last, it was time for her to leave for home, Gwen was in two minds as to whether or not he would be expecting her to keep her appointment with him that evening. He might have been called away, or be indisposed—a number of things might have happened, of course, and she did not want to have to hang about outside the Brixton Town Hall for him.

But as she neared the bus stop, her fears vanished as though by magic, for she saw him there waiting for her. He caught sight of her at the same moment and stepped forward to meet her.

"I'm so sorry I missed you this morning, Miss Arnold," he said, raising his hat to her. "Unfortunately, I quite forgot to tell you last night that I shouldn't be going in to the office to-day. I had a job to attend to in Croydon, and I came straight here hoping to catch you."

"I see," Gwen murmured. "I've been wondering all day what had happened to you," she added, as they walked back to the bus stop. "I was doubtful what to do about our appointment this evening. Do you still wish me to come to your lodgings?"

"Oh, yes, of course," he answered quickly. "I've been bracing myself all day and preparing for the worst. I had another good look at the bureau last night, and—well, I confess that the thing doesn't look any great shakes to me, Miss Arnold," he added gloomily.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Well, it looks so awfully old and faded and ramshackle to me," he said. "In fact, to be frank with you, I would never have given it house room save that my aunt so obviously treasured the thing."

Gwen smiled.

"Well, you see, it could scarcely be genuine if it didn't look old and faded," she said. "I'll be able to tell you more about it when I see it."

They caught the bus, but to their mutual disappointment, were not able to sit together. Gwen had to sit at the back, and Alan found a seat at the front of the crowded bus. Just before Gwen was due to get off, he rose and came back to her and whispered—

"Half-past seven outside the Town Hall, then?"

Gwen nodded.

"Yes, I'll be there," she answered smilingly, and then hurried down the stairs.

SHARP on the stroke of half-past seven, Gwen was at the appointed place and found him there waiting for her. A four-penny ride on the bus, followed by a short walk, brought them to Alan's lodgings.

"It isn't much of a place, I'm afraid," he apologised, as he opened the front

door. "But, as you remarked last night, Miss Arnold, beggars can't be choosers. My domain is on the top floor," he added, "and if you'll wait just a moment, I'll call Mrs. Bostock."

He then disappeared, and a swift glance round about her showed Gwen that although the furnishings in the hall were old and shabby, everything was scrupulously clean and polished.

A few moments later, Alan returned with a plump, smiling little woman whom he introduced as his landlady.

"And this is Miss Arnold, who has come to look at that bureau of mine, Mrs. Bostock," he explained, with a boyish grin.

The landlady beamed.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Arnold," she said, giving her visitor an appraising look. "Well now," she hurried on, "I don't think there's any need for you to drag me all the way up there, do you, Mr. Cunningham? That is, of course, unless the young lady would prefer me to come," she added smilingly, "but I don't think either of you need a chaperone in my house."

Alan glanced at Gwen. She shook her head and laughed.

"Not as far as I am concerned, at any rate," she said lightly. "It won't take me very long to complete my task."

Alan hesitated a moment. Then—

"Well, just as you like, Miss Arnold," he said smilingly.

As Mrs. Bostock watched them up the first flight of stairs, she smiled to herself. She had not been running a boarding-house for twenty years without being able to sum up a visitor on sight, she reflected, as the young couple started on the second long flight of stairs.

"Well, you're certainly close to the stars up here," Gwen remarked, a little breathlessly, when they reached the top landing.

"But, actually, I'm feeling nearer the pit than the stars," Alan answered, with a rueful laugh. "In fact, at this particular moment, I feel rather like a prisoner being marched into court to hear the verdict, half convinced that it's going to be hopelessly adverse!"

Gwen suppressed a sigh as she reminded herself of all that her decision was going to mean to him. Supposing the bureau was of no special value? How was she going to tell him so? she wondered desperately.

As she watched him fitting the key into the door of his room, she almost wished that she had not undertaken the task, but there was no help for it now. For good or ill, she had to go through with it, whatever the outcome of it all.

Alan switched on the light, and stood aside for her to enter. For a moment Gwen stood looking around the small room with its faded carpet and simple fittings. Then her eyes alighted on the bureau.

"Well, there it is," he remarked, watching her closely.

It was not quite what Gwen had hoped to find. But she was careful not to let her disappointment show on her face.

"Do you mind if I take my coat off?" she asked.

"No, of course not, Miss Arnold," he answered.

He took her coat and laid it across the bed.

"Now please pull the bureau forward under the light," she said.

He did this, then watched her open her bag and bring out the probes and glasses and several tiny bottles of liquid she had brought. These she placed on the floor, then opened the bureau and looked inside.

She stood gazing at it for a moment or two, deep in thought, then started to work steadily and methodically exactly as though

it were a piece that had been sent to the studios for investigation. Gwen's spirits rose with every test she applied, for she realised beyond a doubt that the bureau was genuine Regency.

But just when she was thinking of telling Alan as much, the tiny probe she was using signalled something wrong to her practised fingers, and her heart gave a sudden lurch.

The bureau had been restored! She knew it in an instant. A moment or two later, she discovered that one side of it and a portion of the back was restoration work—and not good workmanship at that. It must have been done years ago before the present-day techniques had been evolved. Gwen decided.

The discovery came like a douche of ice-cold water to her heart. It was as though the bureau had belonged to her and it was her own great hopes and dreams that had been shattered. It was still worth a certain amount of money, of course—possibly a hundred pounds—but definitely not the three hundred he needed to allow him to repurchase Dawn Cottage.

Gwen seemed to see that photograph of the cottage in the polished wood of the bureau—the long, white-walled building with its windows opening on to the terrace and the lawn beyond. And in her ears again was his voice as he had said: "Summer or winter it was heaven—at least, I thought so." And now . . .

Suddenly she moved round to the other side of the bureau and pretended to continue her inspection. He was now sitting on the side of the bed, and Gwen was afraid that if he saw her face he would guess that all was not well.

And she was not ready to tell him that—not yet. Already odd thoughts were beginning to creep into her mind. That restoration work could certainly not stand up to even the simplest test; even the glaze had not been "aged" in the way it could be done to-day. Moreover, the wood had not been properly treated—in fact, it was amateur work compared with the restoring she did every day in the Regency Studios.

So supposing she undertook to restore the bureau herself—worked on it as she did on the pieces that were brought to the studios? Supposing she repainted the scroll work so that it would withstand every possible test that could distinguish it from the scroll work of the original parts?

In her enthusiasm, she was about to turn to suggest as much to Alan, then changed her mind. He might not accept her offer, she reminded herself. He might not be willing to sell what would seem to him a faked article—though in the euphemism of the trade, it was not spoken of as "faking" but "restoring". He might not understand that, knowing nothing of the antique business.

No, Gwen decided, if she were going to do that, she would have to wrap it up in more innocent guise. She would have to speak of "cleaning it up" or something of that kind.

Kneeling there on the floor, and still pretending to be examining the sprays and painted scrolls, she made a rapid calculation of how long it would take her to make a first-class job of it by working in her free time in the evenings and at week-ends.

Somehow, it never occurred to her to wonder why she should be thinking of doing all this for someone who was practically a stranger to her. All Gwen was aware of was an overwhelming desire not to disappoint the young man in his ardent hope—a determination to make it possible for him to resume his own job and, eventually, to buy back Dawn Cottage.

Oh, no, she could not—she would not—disappoint him, when she could easily

make all his dreams come true.

Slowly she rose to her feet.

"Well?" he remarked, a little breathlessly, "what—what have you got to tell me about it all, Miss Arnold?"

"It's all right," she said, smiling. "I think, Mr. Cunningham, you can reckon on getting at least three hundred pounds for it."

He gazed at her incredulously for a moment, and then gave a shaky little laugh.

"This wonderful news means just everything to me, Miss Arnold," he said. "It gives me a chance to live and breathe freely again, and to do the work I love."

"The bureau will need a thorough cleaning and polishing up before you offer it for sale," Gwen remarked thoughtfully.

"Cleaning and polishing up?" he echoed.

"In the technical sense—yes," she said. "The way we do at the studios, I mean. You see, if you offered it for sale, in its present condition, you would probably get only half its value."

"I—I see," he stammered. "But that would cost a lot of money, wouldn't it, Miss Arnold?"

"Well—no, not necessarily," she answered. "As a matter of fact, I could do it myself, if you would like me to. It's the kind of work I'm doing every day at the studios. It would probably take me about three weeks to complete the job, and at the end of that time I think I could tell you where to sell it and get a good price for it."

"Oh, but I—but I couldn't dream of putting you to all that trouble, Miss Arnold," he murmured.

"It's no trouble at all—in fact, I'd enjoy doing it," she told him laughingly. "It's work I love—the same as your writing, Mr. Cunningham. The only thing is you would have to send it to my lodgings, as I should be working on it in the evenings."

"Well, in that case, I certainly wouldn't let you do it without payment, Miss Arnold—," he began.

"Then I withdraw the offer," Gwen broke in, commencing to gather her tools together.

He gazed at her helplessly, for a moment. Then—

"Look here, Miss Arnold," he said, "please put yourself in my place for a moment. I mean—"

"Well, if I were in your place," she interrupted him again, "I should be only too pleased to accept a friendly offer. But, of course, if you're too proud—"

"Oh, no, I've nothing to be proud of," he protested. "It's just that—well, hang it all, Miss Arnold, why should you waste your time on my account?"

"I'm not," she retorted. "It's because I like the work and I shall enjoy doing it. All the same, Mr. Cunningham, if you do not want me to help you in the matter—"

"But I do, Miss Arnold," he broke in, spreading his hands helplessly.

"Then please be sensible and do not argue," she ordered, with mock severity. "Send the bureau to my lodgings to-morrow and let me set to work on it. The sooner I start, the sooner I'll have it finished and ready for sale."

Alan heaved a deep sigh.

"I don't know how to begin to express my thanks and gratitude—and wonderment—for all you are doing for me, Miss Arnold," he said, "seeing that I'm practically a stranger to you."

"Oh, no, we are not exactly strangers, you know," Gwen told him laughingly. "At least, we have drunk coffee together, haven't we?"

"Coffee!" He seized on the word with avidity. "Yes, of course we have, Miss

Arnold," he went on, with boyish delight, "and that's just what we'll do now," he added, as he helped her on with her coat. "And—and if you really mean it, I'll arrange to have the bureau delivered to you to-morrow evening. The terms we can arrange later on."

Gwen frowned; her instinct was to repudiate any suggestion of the kind; but on second thoughts she refrained from doing so. After all, she reminded herself, she had gained her immediate objective, and that was all that mattered for the moment. She had hoodwinked him completely as to the condition of the bureau, together with what she intended to do with it, and that was enough to be going on with. The rest could wait.

But of one thing she was perfectly sure—neither now nor at any other time would she take one penny piece for the work she was going to do. That was to be a labour of love.

So ran her thoughts as she accompanied him down the stairs and out into the street.

It was not until a week later that the real significance of the phrase crashed in upon her, and then it was with the force of an avalanche.

A labour of love!

IT was one evening when Gwen was fitting in a new panel of wood to the back of the bureau. It was a properly prepared piece, already aged to the likeness of the original wood of the bureau, and as Alan sat watching her at work, he thought that she was merely replacing a panel which she had taken out to "clean".

It had become a nightly occurrence for him to call at her lodgings and talk to her while she worked, and each night Gwen found herself waiting restlessly for his ring. She never asked herself why, and even if she thought of it at all it was only to compare her former loneliness with the pleasure of having someone to talk to.

She liked to listen to Alan's conversation. She liked his voice and his way of speaking. He would sit in her easy chair while she worked, and tell her about the people in his village, of the odd things they did and said, and sometimes he would make her laugh by talking in the Devonshire dialect.

He told her of his people and of his childhood days. He went into detail about Maurice, his elder brother, whose troubles had brought about his own downfall, but it was always with affection and kindness. After the smash, Maurice had gone out to Australia.

"But he'll make good there, sooner or later," Alan always wound up, after any mention of his brother's name. "Maurice is a fine chap. He was just unfortunate, that's all, and what happened to him could happen to anybody."

He also spoke about his literary work. He had given Gwen one of his books to read, and she greatly admired it. He had written her name on the flyleaf, "For Gwen, from Alan," and she kept it on the table beside her bed—it was her proudest possession, although he seemed to prize it mainly for the cash it had brought him.

"Money for jam, my dear girl!" he laughingly told her on one occasion, when she chided him for being mercenary. "To me, it's just a job of work, the same as any other job, though much more rewarding."

"Oh, come, I don't believe you, Alan," she said. "Surely you are as proud of that book as—well, as I am!"

He had given her a puzzled look.

"You—you really mean that, Gwen?" he had asked. "I mean, that you are actually proud of my work?"

"Yes, of course I am!" she had answered.

"And you have every reason to be proud of it, too."

They had fallen into using each other's Christian names almost from the first time he had called at her room, and Gwen had never realised that her name sounded so nice until she heard him saying it, and Alan had always been one of her favourite names for a man.

Every night, too, at half-past eight, he insisted upon her finishing and going out with him for coffee. At first, they had walked side by side, but now Alan would take her arm in friendly fashion.

It was time they were starting out now, but Gwen had wanted to finish fitting the new panel into the back of the bureau.

"I shan't be more than a few minutes, Alan," she said. "And it's so very important to get this back with perfect accuracy."

He took it for granted that she was putting back the same panel she had taken out "to clean", as he stood watching her kneeling beside the bureau. Suddenly Gwen felt his hand on her head.

"You have the most lovely hair of any woman I've ever known, Gwen," he said abruptly.

Her fingers had stopped dead on the panel. It was as though all the strength had gone out of them.

"With the light on it, it looks like spun gold," he was saying.

That broke the spell. With a jerk, Gwen came to and went on with fastening the new panel in place.

"The writer speaks!" she managed to say, with a mocking little laugh. "But you are not writing a book now, Alan—or are you just getting your hand in, in readiness, may I ask?"

"Neither," he retorted. "I'm speaking the truth as I see it, Gwen."

"Then let me tell you that the sooner you see an oculist the better it will be for you," she returned, with forced lightness. "Will you push that tin of nails a bit nearer to me, please?"

He eyed the contents curiously as he handed the tin to her.

"Wouldn't it be better to use new nails?" he asked, grinning down at her.

"What?" she exclaimed indignantly. "In a one-hundred-and-fifty-years-old piece of furniture? Where are your wits?"

"Caught in a web of spun gold, my dear Gwen," he told her, with a gay laugh.

THAT night, as Gwen sat brushing her hair before her mirror—with one eye and most of her thoughts on the bureau in the corner—she smiled to herself as she remembered what Alan had said about spun gold.

How perfectly ridiculous, she reflected, leaning forward to take a closer look at herself in the glass. Yes, and how perfectly ridiculous had been her reaction to such a piece of obvious flattery. It was just an idea that had suddenly occurred to him, catching her hair in that particular light, and being a writer accustomed to clothing his thoughts in the prettiest and most effective language, he had instinctively thought of spun gold.

Sitting there looking into the glass, with the hairbrush held loosely in her fingers, Gwen's thoughts strayed on down hitherto unconsidered and uncharted paths. She recalled the first time Alan Cunningham had walked into The Black Cat and how she and Alice Stone had played their usual game with strangers of trying to guess what they were and what they did.

She had plumped for an artist, she remembered, and had not been far wrong. Also, she had felt from the first that he would be interesting to know.

Vaguely Gwen's thoughts covered the

intervening time—their meetings on the bus, and finally to that night when he had taken her for coffee and told her all about himself and the bureau. She could still recall the tense look in his eyes when he had told her about Dawn Cottage and his longing to get back there and to his own work.

She supposed that was what had so greatly attracted her to him. She wanted to be of use to him, to see him back in his rightful place. That was why she had gone to his lodgings to inspect the bureau, and why she was devoting all her spare time to the task of restoring it—simply so that he could sell it for enough money to enable him to go back to Devonshire and his own job of writing books.

Gwen sighed as she thought of the distance between London and Tregathen. She supposed she would not see much of him once he went back there—possibly nothing at all!

The thought startled her, and the more she pondered it, the greater became her feeling of desolation.

"But there are plenty of other young men in the world," her common sense told her.

And it was then that her heart gave up its secret, and revelation came crashing in in upon her with the force of an avalanche. She sat staring wide-eyed at her reflection in the mirror, while in imagination she seemed to see her life stretching away in front of her like an empty desert. And in her ears a voice seemed to be whispering mockingly—

"Maybe, but there's only one of those young men for you, Gwen Arnold! There's only one Alan . . ."

AFTER haunting her dreams all through the night, that clamant voice was still in Gwen's ears when she awoke next morning and set about preparing for the day's work.

"Spun gold, he called it," the voice reminded her, when she sat down to do her hair. And when she glanced at the bureau before leaving to catch her bus: "That's right! You promised yourself it should be a labour of love, and that's just what it is, my dear—a labour of love. Only it won't bring you love, Gwen Arnold. What you've done is to afford him the means of leaving you . . ."

Gwen tried to force herself to think of other things, but it was useless. It was the first time she had ever been in love; the first time she had ever experienced either its power or its pain. At one moment it seemed that she had only to reach out her hands to touch the stars themselves; the next she would be flung into the nethermost depths of despair.

As she approached the bus stop, she saw that Alan was standing there, waiting for her.

"Good morning, Gwen," he said, with a cheerful smile, as he shook hands with her. "Sleep well?"

She nodded, and wondered what he would have thought of her had she told him the truth.

"No, I didn't," she thought of herself saying, "because I suddenly discovered that I love you, my dear Alan."

When they had taken their seats in the bus, Alan started to tell her about an extra bit of money he was going to get that week, and suggested her taking a night off and going to the pictures with him?

"Oh yes, that would be lovely, Alan," she said delightedly. "I'll have a look in the local paper to-night and find out what's on at the cinemas."

"And I'll call for you early in the evening," he suggested.

"Yes, please do, Alan. I'd love that—

the pictures, I mean," she added, confusedly.

"But not me?" he asked quizzically.

Gwen laughed.

"Oh, come, please don't fish, Mr. Cunningham," she teased.

"But if I don't fish, Miss Arnold, I can never expect to catch anything!" he retorted, in the same bantering tone.

"And what do you want to catch?" she ventured to ask.

"Something that's going to be very difficult to catch, I'm afraid," he answered, with that boyish grin of his. "And, unfortunately, I don't know what bait to offer—not that I have much of anything to offer at the moment, worse luck."

"In that case, perhaps you had better wait until you've sold your bureau," she suggested smilingly, not knowing in the least what he was talking about.

"Yes, that'll be the day, Gwen!" he said, his eyes taking on that faraway look she had come to know so well. "*Le jour de gloire!*" he added, as an afterthought.

But it would be no "day of glory" for her, Gwen reflected sadly, when that day dawned. He would be gone like a rocket, back to his beloved Tregathen, leaving her with nothing but a broken heart to mark his passing.

A DREAM COME TRUE.

GWEN roused herself as the faint sound of the church clock at the end of street reached her ears. She counted the strokes. It was nine o'clock. Alan should have been back by now—she had been expecting him since eight o'clock. Surely Mr. Battison would not have kept him as long as this!

A fortnight had passed since her momentous discovery that she was in love with Alan Cunningham—a fortnight of precious memories and exquisite happiness, overshadowed only by the knowledge that it was so soon to end. And what seemed infinitely more cruel, to end through her own efforts.

She had promised to complete the work in three weeks, and in three weeks she had finished it—finished it with the certain knowledge that it was one of the best pieces of restoring she had ever done. It would take a really first-class expert to distinguish between the false and the true, and although Mr. Battison was a first-class expert, she did not believe that he was as good as all that.

In any event, she had to risk it since John Battison was about the only man she knew who would pay Alan the price she had advised him to ask. She had told him where, and in what terms, to advertise the bureau for sale—and exactly as she had anticipated, Mr. Battison had written for an appointment.

Gwen had known him from the days when she had worked in the West End showrooms of Regency Studios. And on one occasion, she had been solely instrumental in enabling him to secure a particular piece of Queen Anne furniture for which, as he had told her afterwards, he was "prepared to give his eye teeth". Mr. Battison had never forgotten that, and since then she had been able to put several other good bargains in his way.

And if she were bamboozling him now, Gwen told herself, it was for Alan's sake—for Alan's sake she was prepared to bamboozle anybody! After all, what was three hundred pounds to John Battison compared with what it meant to Alan? Moreover, Mr. Battison was getting a genuine Regency piece of furniture even if it had been restored.

So Gwen argued with herself, but she was not entirely happy about it all now that it came to the pinch—even though it would

be Mr. Battison's own fault if he failed to discover for himself that the bureau had been restored. After all, he had had it for three days now, thus giving him plenty of time to make quite sure about it.

A ring on the doorbell sent Gwen's heart leaping. Alan! He was back! She rushed to open the street door, and one glance at his face was enough to assure her that everything had gone well. His eyes were shining with excitement, his cheeks flushed.

"Got it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Look, Gwen!" and he held out Battison's cheque for her to see.

It was made out for three hundred guineas—the amount she had told him to ask for.

"Oh, Alan!" she cried, a little breathlessly. "Sit down and tell me all about it. What did Mr. Battison say? I've been on tenterhooks this last hour, thinking that something had gone wrong."

Alan laughed.

"Oh no, everything went smooth as silk, Gwen," he said. He propped the cheque on the mantelpiece. "Three—hundred—guineas!" he read out, with boyish glee. "Even now I can't believe it—and every penny of it due to you, my dear girl."

"Due to your great aunt's bureau, you mean," Gwen suggested smilingly.

"No, due to your work on the thing, Gwen," he insisted. "But for that, it would have gone for a song. If it hadn't been for you I should have sold it for anything anybody offered me."

"Did—did Mr. Battison make any comment on—on its condition?" she ventured to ask.

"Yes, he thought it was in an extraordinarily good condition," Alan replied. "He wanted to know something of its history. So I told him about my great Aunt Mildred and how the bureau had come down to her from her grandfather. Mr. Battison was tremendously interested—that's what kept me so long."

Alan paused, then went on—

"I was rather afraid at first that he wasn't going to give me the money, particularly when he asked me upon what I had based the price I was asking, for he must have been plain to him that I knew nothing about antiques. But I said what you told me to say—I mean, about it being the price Aunt Mildred had always said it was worth, and that seemed to satisfy him. But I was darned glad when at last he opened his cheque book!"

Gwen smiled to herself. She had guessed what questions Mr. Battison would ask, and all along had banked upon Alan's innocence and naturally ingenuous manner to explain things to his satisfaction. Here was no tricky dealer, but a perfectly frank young man who was selling a family heirloom for what he had been told it was worth without having any personal knowledge of it whatever.

"Well, that little job is now over and done with," Gwen remarked smilingly, "though I shall miss the bureau from the corner over there, all the same, I—er—I I suppose you'll be doing as you said, now, Alan?" she went on, trying to make the question sound as casual as she could. "Going back to Tregathen, I mean?"

He nodded.

"But before that happens, my dear Gwen, you and I have a little matter to settle," he said, smiling at her.

She gave him a puzzled look, and then lowered her eyes.

"Don't you remember that I agreed to your working on the bureau only when you in your turn agreed that we should settle the terms later?" he asked softly. "You have put a clear two hundred pounds in my pocket, Gwen—money that could

never have been put there but for you. So now we'll settle the terms of our agreement, shall we?"

"No!" she answered firmly. "I shall do nothing of the kind. I gave you to understand at the time that I undertook to do the work because it would give me pleasure to do it for you. So please put that cheque back in your pocket, Alan. My one great hope is that it will help you to solve your problem."

"But, my dear Gwen—" he began.

"Now please don't spoil everything, Alan," she broke in, "just when the world is looking so bright."

"I don't know where the brightness comes in," he retorted.

"I—I mean your future, of course," Gwen said. "You will now be able to go back to Tregathen and take up your old life again, won't you? You will be able, eventually, to buy back Dawn Cottage. Surely, Alan, there is brightness in a vision such as that—particularly after what you have told me about it all?"

"So you think that do you?" he muttered glumly.

"In any case, that was the main reason for your wanting to sell the bureau—so that you could go back to your own work and start life again in Tregathen, wasn't it?" she countered. "I suppose you will now hand in your notice to the Press Advertising Agency, and say good-bye to London. But I shall expect a presentation copy of the first book you write when you get back, mind you, Alan!" she added jestingly.

He shrugged.

"So—so that is all you want from me, is it, Gwen—just a book?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Yes, and I shall treasure it tremendously, Alan," she forced herself to reply with a gaiety she was far from feeling, but determined not to allow him even a glimpse of her heart. "And whenever I hear people speaking of Alan Cunningham, famous author I shall say 'Oh, yes, I know Alan quite well. He's a very old friend of mine.' And I shall bask in your reflected glory and feel several inches taller!"

"I see," he muttered morosely, then glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "Well, in that case," he added, "I suppose I'd better be taking myself off."

He folded the cheque into his pocket-book, then stood looking at her for a moment, Gwen thought he was going to reopen the argument, but he did not.

"Very well," he said heavily, and held out his hand to her. "Good night, Gwen. I—I'm sorry it—it's only a book I can give you."

"Good night, Alan," she murmured, as she shook hands with him. "I'm so glad everything has turned out so successfully. See you to-morrow on the bus, as usual," she added, with a wavering smile.

He nodded, then walked quickly away. Gwen watched him out of sight, but he did not turn, as he usually did, to wave her a final good night.

When she had closed the door and turned the key in the lock, Gwen stood for a moment looking round her empty room, then suddenly burst into tears.

ALAN was not on the bus next morning, nor did he come into The Black Cat restaurant for lunch. But, Gwen told herself, she would have to get used to that now.

Then, in the late afternoon, she received a shock. She was inspecting a piece of Sheraton furniture when the studio door opened and John Battison walked in.

"Good afternoon, Gwen," he said. "May I have a few words with you?"

She knew a moment of panic. He was an elderly man, with grey hair, and was usually smiling. He was smiling now.

"Why, of—of course, Mr. Battison," she stammered. It would have been "Miss Arnold" had the other girls been there, but they were having tea in the other room, and Gwen was alone. "Nice piece of Sheraton there, Mr. Battison," she remarked nervously, indicating the piece she had been examining. "If you are interested, I—"

"I'm not, my dear girl," he broke in. "I happened to be passing this way and thought I'd have a word with you about a piece of Regency I've just bought—privately. Unfortunately I'm very much afraid that I've been taken for a ride!"

Gwen's heart sank.

"Taken for a—ride, Mr. Battison?" she echoed.

He nodded.

"Yes, and by a young man who led me right up the garden—that is, if my suspicions prove to be correct," he said. "Fellow by the name of Cunningham. Have you ever heard of him?"

"Name of Cunningham?" Gwen repeated, at a loss what else to say.

"So you haven't, eh?" John Battison went on. "I hadn't either until I answered his advertisement. I took him to be the private owner he pretended to be, but I wouldn't be surprised now to learn that he's in with one or other of the big dealers. Nice sort of chap, too, but he took me in completely. But I'll get even with him if you confirm my suspicions, Gwen!"

"You—you mean—"

"Well, I feel pretty sure the bureau he sold me has been restored, Gwen. And what's more to the point, my dear girl, it's so well done that the only people I know who could have done it are you people in this studio. That's why I'd like you to have a look at it for me, Gwen, to see if, by any chance, you've had it through your hands at any time. You'd know your own work if you saw it, wouldn't you?"

Gwen fumbled for the support of the bench behind her. John Battison was evidently cleverer than she had supposed him to be, and knowing Alan Cunningham as she did, nothing was more certain in her mind than that he would return Mr. Battison his cheque the moment the position was made clear to him. Then everything would be lost, and worse still, Alan would know that she herself had deceived him.

"So would you mind coming round to my place and have a look at it?" Battison was saying. "Then we'll bring this 'Smart Alec' to book if we find that he actually has put it across me, Gwen."

"Oh no, I should hardly think so, Mr. Battison," she murmured.

"Eh?" Battison muttered, gaping at her.

Gwen gestured with her hands.

"You—you can take it from me that Mr. Cunningham didn't know a thing about it!" she stammered confusedly. "In any case, Mr. Battison, if—if you tell him that the bureau has been restored, and explain to him what it all means, I feel sure he will return the cheque to you, even though it does mean the end of—of his dreams!"

John Battison stood regarding her in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Tell me—are you talking about, my dear girl?" he asked.

"About that Regency bureau you bought, of course," she answered, with a forced laugh. "In any case, there's no need for me to look at it, Mr. Battison," she added defiantly, "for I happen to know already,

I—well, because I restored it myself!"

"Then I was right, eh?" he said, grinning at her. "I thought it looked like your work, Gwen. Then did this Cunningham fellow buy it from a dealer as a genuine piece?"

Gwen shook her head.

"No, Mr. Battison," she replied. "Everything Mr. Cunningham told you about the bureau was perfectly true, so far as he knew the truth. He knew nothing whatever about the restoration work on it, for the simple reason that I did not tell him about it. All he thought I'd done was to clean it up, because that's what I told him I was going to do. But to get him the money he wanted, it was necessary for me to restore a panel in the back and another at left hand side, and that's what I did."

Battison had heard her out in a puzzled silence; now he frowned his bewilderment.

"But why, Gwen?" he asked. "I—I don't understand you, my dear girl. So won't you tell me the whole story?"

Gwen considered for a moment, then shook her head.

"Don't be afraid, Gwen," Mr. Battison smiled at her encouragingly. "You can't stop now, having whet my curiosity like this."

For a moment longer Gwen hesitated, then it all came tumbling out. She told him of her first meeting with Alan, of his mention of the bureau and his request to her to see if it was any good. She told him of their conversation over a cup of coffee, of the fact that he was a writer and of how he had been ruined by backing a large cheque for his brother. She told him everything, of the money he needed to enable him to return to Tregathen and take up his writing again. Of her desire to help him to his ambition—hence the work she had put in on the bureau which seemed to be his sole chance of ever getting the money he needed.

"But he didn't know a thing about that, Mr. Battison," she wound up passionately. "And I didn't tell him because I knew that if I did he would never have taken the money. I had to deceive him, for his own good. Oh, you must see that! He's not a smart-alec at all, Mr. Battison—quite the reverse. Why, I had a dreadful job to prevent him from paying me half the money for what he thought was my 'cleaning up' of the thing!"

"Yet surely, Gwen, the labourer is worthy of his hire?" Mr. Battison smiled.

"Oh, but I would rather not, Mr. Battison!" she said. "I—I did not restore the bureau for money, but because I wanted Alan Cunningham to find himself in a position to go back to his home in Devonshire and continue with his literary work. I was anxious for him to have the chance of buying back his lovely cottage there and live in it again."

"Yes, Gwen, but why did you want to do all this for the young man?" Battison asked.

"Because—" she began, then broke off in helpless confusion.

John Battison smiled his understanding. He had known Gwen Arnold for some considerable time, and it was plain to him that she was in love with the young man, and equally plain that Alan Cunningham had not as yet tumbled to the fact.

Reaching out, he took her hand and gave it a sympathetic squeeze.

"Never mind, my dear Gwen!" he said softly. "Let's forget it, shall we? I shall be able to dispose of the bureau without a penny of loss to myself, so you needn't worry that little head of yours about that."

"And—and you will not tell Alan any-

thing about it, will you, Mr. Battison?" she murmured falteringly.

"No, of course not, my dear girl," he answered smilingly. "All this shall be a little secret between ourselves, Gwen. You've been a good friend to me in the past, and now I can return the compliment. No, not another word," he added, as she was about to speak. "Anyway, I'm going now."

For some little time after John Battison had taken his departure, Gwen remained standing there, her thoughts in a turmoil. But through it all, one thought remained uppermost in her awareness—Alan would never know; he would go back to Tregathen and his books feeling very happy with himself!

And that was all that mattered.

At five o'clock, Gwen put on her hat and coat to go home. There was no sign of Alan as she passed the door of the Press Advertising Agency, nor was he waiting for her at the bus stop. Possibly, as sometimes happened, he had been working away somewhere, she told herself, and would probably call at her lodgings to see that night.

She had cooked her evening meal and cleared away when the doorbell rang. Gwen stood motionless for a moment or two, her heart fluttering like a bird in a cage.

When she opened the door, she realised once that something had happened. There was a curious air of determination about him—almost of defiance—as he stood there staring at her.

"Alan, what is the matter?" she gasped, her thoughts flying to the interview she had had that afternoon with Mr. Battison. Had he seen Alan and—told him?

"I—I'm not going after all, Gwen," he stammered at last.

"Not—going?" she echoed.

"No, I'm staying here in London, with you, Gwen," he said tautly.

"You—you mean because of the money?" she asked.

"Money—be hanged!" he flung back at her. "Listen, Gwen, I know it will sound crazy to you, but it doesn't to me." He hesitated, then went on—"The fact is, I'm desperately in love with you, my dear

Gwen. I have loved you right from the first moment I saw you, and I always shall love you, darling. I don't care what you say or what you do—I'm not going back to Tregathen or anywhere else. I'm staying right here in London, and that's what I have come here to tell you. There, now you know, and now I will go and leave you to think over what I have told you."

Before Gwen could grasp the full significance of what he had said, he turned to leave.

"Please wait, Alan!" she gasped. "Did you—did you say you are in love with me?"

"Yes, that is what I did say, my darling Gwen," he answered, gazing adoringly into her eyes.

Gwen drew a quick breath, and involuntarily she reached out and took his hand.

Insensibly she reached out towards him, and in a moment he had caught her hands in his own.

"Gwen! Darling!" he cried. "You don't mean—you can't mean—?"

"Oh, Alan dear," she murmured, "this—this is what I've been waiting to hear you say all along."

"Darling!" he cried excitedly, and next moment she was in his arms, his cheek was pressed against hers in an ecstasy of longing. "Oh, Gwen, my love," he whispered, "and all along I've been thinking you wanted nothing from me but a book!"

"And the author as well," she whispered back, smiling into his eyes.

"Oh, him?" laughed Alan. "You've had him for weeks past, my darling, though apparently, without knowing it," he added, and then pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that told Gwen everything she wanted to know...

THUS it was that Alan Cunningham came to write his next book in London, and upon the day it was published, he and Gwen were married and went down to Tregathen for their honeymoon.

By then, Alan's brother Maurice had managed to establish himself in business in Australia, and with the cheque for five hundred pounds which he sent, as a first instalment of the debt he owed him, Alan took a mortgage on Dawn Cottage—that

was his surprise for his bride when they arrived there from London.

When Gwen unlocked the door with the key he handed her, Alan carried her over the threshold and put her down in the large square hall. It was then that they both received a surprise—for there standing against the wall was Great Aunt Mildred's Regency bureau!

"Gwen, darling, am I seeing things?" Alan cried in amazement. He went forward for a closer inspection, opened it and took out the envelope he found lying inside. "Mr. and Mrs. Alan Cunningham," he read out slowly.

Gwen nodded her understanding. She tore open the envelope and extracted the single sheet of notepaper it contained.

"I would like you to have this as a memento of something that seemed to me to be a very fine gesture," she read. "That you may always be happy together is the sincere wish of your friend—J. E. BATTISON."

She turned to meet Alan's puzzled eyes. "What on earth does he mean, darling?" he asked. "A memento of what 'gesture'?"

Gwen stood silent for a moment, gazing at the sun terrace which was just visible through the partly open door. Everything had turned out as she had wanted it. Her dream had come true. Beside her stood the man she had loved from the first moment of seeing him. Now he was her husband, and she knew herself to be beloved by him as he was beloved by her.

She glanced again at the bureau, and the memory of those days rose to engulf her—the days when she had worked upon it while Alan sat watching her in that little room of hers in Brixton, the days when she had been so uncertain of the future—and as uncertain as Alan himself.

But now the clouds had rolled away. Now they were together for always—here in Dawn Cottage!

Suddenly she turned and smiled at her husband.

"One day, my dearest, I'll tell you all about it," she promised, and stood on tiptoe to receive his kiss.

THE END.

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'TWIXT LOVE AND DUTY

By Madge Marlowe

AT THE CROSS ROADS

ON an April evening, when the sky was a pale, translucent blue, washed with primrose, and the rooks were busy preparing their nests in the tops of the old elms, Willows Farm presented a picture of utter serenity and peace.

It was a long, low building of mellowed red brick, three hundred years old. Time seemed to have passed by this quiet valley, leaving no mark upon it.

And yet for the man and woman who stood at the corner where the road from Willows Farm joined the main road looking down on the scene, it was fraught with storms and pain.

John Mansell leaned against his car, his hands gripping the side of it. His grey eyes stared sombrely across the valley. His face—a strong, clean-cut face—was very pale, his mouth a thin, hard line as he listened to the pleading of the woman he loved—

the woman who belonged to another man.

"John, you must see! I can't leave him—I really can't! I married him with my eyes open, and I have to stand by my bargain."

"You didn't know what you were doing," the man said harshly. "He fascinated you, as he fascinates most women—for a time. Now you know what he is, are you going to stay with him, waste your life—and mine, too? Rose"—he caught her hands in his—"he never loved you. He isn't capable of love. You must know that by this time, as well as I do. But I love you and need you. I want to take you away from this horrible existence. I want to surround you with love and beauty and happiness. Won't you come with me, dear? Or will you condemn us both to lifelong misery because of a mistaken sense of duty?"

"It isn't mistaken duty," Rose Colborne answered, in a low voice. "My dear John, if the marriage service means anything at

all, it means that a husband and wife belong to each other for all time. 'For better, for worse,' as you know. It's 'worse' in my case, but that doesn't release me from my vows. I have to stay with Douglas, whatever happens."

"You mean to say if he were unfaithful to you—if he put another woman in your place—you would still forgive him, and stay with him?"

Rose lowered her head.

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know!" she said. "It hasn't come to that—yet. I don't believe he can be entirely bad all through. When we were engaged he seemed to have another side to his character."

John Mansell gave a harsh little laugh.

"Of course! He was trying to win you then. But once he had you, he dropped the mask. This is his real self that you see now, believe me! I'm his cousin; I've known him all his life, and I know what he is! I hate having to say these things, Rose,

but you force me to! You know nothing of the world. How could you, living a sheltered life here? Oh, my dear, that first time I saw you, when I came to your wedding, my heart ached for you! I think I loved you even then. And I had to stand by and watch you giving yourself to a man who wasn't worthy to touch your shoes!"

Rose looked at him, a whole world of sadness and longing in her eyes. In that moment the call of duty was a cold, comfortless thing.

She wanted to forget it—to go to John's arms, and find there the loving tenderness that she had never known from the man who was her husband.

But something within her—something fine and fastidious—would not let her do it. Douglas was her husband.

Although he had never really loved her, and no longer troubled to pretend that he did; although he neglected her, insulted her, treated her more like a servant than a wife, she had to stand by him. Even so, she loved John Mansell with all her heart and soul. It was true that Douglas had merely fascinated her, though she had mistaken infatuation for love when she married.

But it was John who awoke all the infinite tenderness within her, John whose touch had the power to stir her as no other had. She had known it for a long time—how long she could not have said.

Perhaps for her, too, that moment at the wedding, when they had looked into each other's eyes, had been the turning point, though she had blinded herself to the fact.

Certain it was that every visit he had paid to them since had been mingled joy and pain for her—joy at seeing him, being near him—pain because it only served to emphasise the wreck she had made of her life in marrying Douglas.

And now to-night, escaping from the home which had become a prison, she had come up here to be alone with her thoughts, and had found John waiting in his car.

He had driven down from Town, he said, hoping to see her, hoping for an opportunity to tell her of his love, and urge her to come away with him. He had come to the end of his tether. He could no longer stand aside in silence while she lived in a never-ending agony of pain.

It had seemed like a miracle to find him waiting there, just when she needed him most. The shock of surprise had broken down the barriers between them, and before she knew what had happened, Rose was in his arms, and he was pouring out the story of his love.

Afterwards had come realisation. She knew she must send him away.

Not for her the comfort and happiness of his love! She had chosen, and she must stand by her choice.

But it was hard—doubly hard when she had to look on at his agony, to know that for him, too, life stretched empty and desolate and lonely.

She laid her hand on his arm, her eyes dark with pain.

"John, I must go," she said. "What is the use of torturing ourselves like this? We cannot undo the past. We can only try to be brave, and face the future with courage. Some day, perhaps, you will learn to forget. Somewhere in the world there is a woman who could make you happy—there must be!"

He looked at her with anguished eyes.

"You know that isn't true, my dear love. For me there never can be any other woman but you. I'm not a sentimental boy—I'm a man. I've never loved any other woman but you, and I never shall. If you send me away I shall have to carry on

somehow. There is no room in my heart for any woman but you."

He spoke gravely, standing with her hands in his, and looking into her eyes. Above them in the trees the birds sang their mating song. The sky was growing dim.

"Good-bye," Rose whispered, her face very white. "Good-bye, my dear. I shall always think of you and love you. But we must never meet again—never!"

He drew her to him.

"Then you'll let me kiss you just once more? Something to remember, Rose, throughout the lonely years. You won't deny me that, will you?"

Very gently he bent his head and laid his lips on hers in a long kiss that was almost sacramental.

"Good-bye, my dearest," she whispered, a sob in her voice.

"Good-bye, my darling."

He then released her and turned away. But as his hand touched the door of the car he swung round again, and his eyes were burning.

"Rose, I—I can't," he stammered. "To leave you here like this, knowing what you are going back to! Don't you see it's torture to me?"

"I shall be all right," she said. "Don't worry about me, John."

"How can I help it?" He looked at her for a moment, then said slowly—"I shall wait here for an hour. You may change your mind yet. Think it over carefully, Rose. Think what your life will be if you stay with him. Ask yourself if you are justified in torturing us both like this for his sake. And then, if you decide that you cannot condemn us to this misery, I shall be waiting."

"It's no use, John," she murmured brokenly. "It's no use."

"In any case, I shall wait for an hour," he said doggedly.

She gave him one last, agonised look, then turned away and hurried down the lane to the farm.

It was almost dark now. Rose fixed her eyes on the spot of light that glowed in one of the windows of the farmhouse, stumbling onward over the uneven ground, her breath coming in little sobbing gasps.

Behind her, alone in the darkness, the man she loved was waiting. Before her, in that prison-house of her dreams, was the man to whom she was married, the man to whom she must always belong, whatever happened.

She suddenly became aware that tears were streaming down her cheeks. She had not known that she was crying. She was almost at the door of the house now, but she dared not go in. Douglas would be there, and would see her tears.

Rose turned aside into the dairy. It was full of the cool, sweet smell of butter and milk. In the darkness she stood with her head resting on her arm against the white-washed wall, weeping soundlessly, a bitter weeping that seemed to well up from the very depths of her being.

It was the reaction from her interview with John. She had not dared to give way before him, for she knew he would have taken her in his arms, soothed her with loving words, and utterly have broken down her poor defences.

She had managed to seem strong before him when all the time she was just a weak, loving woman—a coward, too, dreading the thought of having to spend the rest of her years with a man she feared and despised—even though he was her husband.

John would never know how near she had been to yielding. It had needed so very little to make her take the fatal step from which there could be no turning back.

But, because she loved him, because she knew that there is no place in society for those who offend its code, she had forced herself to be strong.

But it had been so very hard! Memories of the past came flooding back to her there in the darkness.

Could it be only a year ago that Douglas had wooed her in that ardent, impetuous way of his that had swept her off her feet before she had time to realise the sort of man he was?

Ah, one little year! There had been nothing to warn her. Douglas had put himself out to be so charming, so fascinating, and she had been such an inexperienced girl.

She remembered, as though it were only yesterday, the day when he had first come to the farm as her father's pupil. He had money, and wanted to take up farming. Her father was in difficulties after two consecutive bad years, and had been only too glad to train the young man, and afterwards to take him into partnership in the farm.

Gradually, her father had mortgaged himself to his young partner, and Douglas had acquired the upper hand.

Not that he had emphasised the fact at the time. No, he had been smooth and charming about it, making himself pleasant to the old man and his daughter.

And right from the first he had wanted Rose. Perhaps it was her delicate aloofness, her sweet, unspoilt nature, that made her so different from the women he had known.

He had frightened her a little with the ardour of his courting, and she had avoided him, hardly knowing her own mind, and so inflaming his passion still more until that day when he had come upon her in the wood and caught her in his arms, and poured out hot, burning words of love.

It had been an entirely new experience for her. Most of the young men in the neighbourhood had come courting her at one time or another, but she had held them at arms' length.

But Douglas refused to be held at arms' length. He had swept down her defences, refusing to take "no" for an answer, exerting his charm to the utmost to win her. And in the end he had succeeded.

Ah, fool that she had been to be so dazzled by externals! Why had her eyes been blinded to the true nature of the man until it was too late?

Many things had conspired against her—her inexperience, her inability to escape from Douglas, living under the same roof with him—and then her father's sudden death, which had hurried on their wedding, for Rose had been left practically penniless.

True, the farm and its lands were hers, but the capital necessary to run it belonged to Douglas. He had made her believe that the best way out was to get married at once—for she had nowhere else to go—and so, one spring morning in the village church, with only a few people present, she and Douglas Colborne had been made man and wife.

It was then that she had first met John, Douglas's cousin. He had come reluctantly to act as best man, because Douglas wanted his family to be represented, pitying the girl who was tying herself to the man John knew so well to be a dissipated, undisciplined rogue.

Rose recalled so clearly how she had seen him first, standing tall and straight beside Douglas, at the chancel steps.

He had turned his head and looked at her with those steady grey eyes of his. She had seen a light spring into them—a curious light, of mingled joy and pain and regret, and then Douglas had taken her

hand, and the vicar had begun to read the service.

Afterwards, at the wedding breakfast at the farm, John had talked to her in that low, vibrant voice of his, and she had been impressed by his kindness and understanding; had felt strangely drawn towards him.

Rose remembered how he had stood apart, looking at her with that strange light in his eyes as the car had taken her away on her brief honeymoon with Douglas. And before that honeymoon was over, she had begun to realise the mistake she had made.

For there was no tenderness in her husband's love—only a fierce, devouring passion that left her breathless and frightened.

Not so had Rose pictured love. It had seemed to her that true love should be compounded of so many things—of gentleness, of tenderness, of kindness, of understanding and friendship, as well as of passion—and Douglas had none of these things to offer her save the last.

Feeling bewildered and a little saddened, Rose had returned to her home, telling herself that in time all would be well, that the deeper qualities of her husband's love would shine forth and comfort her as time went on.

But, little by little, the veil had been torn from her eyes, and she had found out that there were no deeper qualities in her husband's love.

There were still times when he caught her in his arms with fierce passion, and bruised her lips with his rough kisses, but for the most part he treated her as a child treats a toy of which he is already beginning to tire.

John had noticed this on his occasional visits to the farm. Rose had seen his face darken when Douglas had spoken to her in that hectoring manner of his.

She had known, long before John had told her so, that he loved her, for her own love, that had come upon her unawares, had given her insight.

But she could not let him lose everything for her.

John was an author, just beginning to make his name, and if she had yielded to his persuasions and had run away with him, his reputation would have been smirched and his chances ruined.

No, she must not even let herself think of him, waiting for her, so lonely and so patient, out there in the darkness.

She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief, and hoped that Douglas would not notice that she had been crying. Nowadays he seldom glanced at her unless he was in the mood to make her feel his mastery, when he would seize her roughly in his arms and kiss her fiercely.

Smoothing her tumbled brown hair with her hand, she stepped out of the open doorway, and came abruptly to a standstill, staring at the scene that met her gaze.

Outlined against the lighted window of the farm kitchen was her husband. But he was not alone. Held tightly in his arms was a girl, and his head was bent to hers in a long kiss.

Rose gasped and drew back, but even as she did so she heard Douglas's voice.

"You're a lovely little girl Nellie. Tantalising, too," he was saying. "But I've got you this time. Now kiss me again, sweetheart, and tell me you love me."

"You know I do, Douglas dear. Haven't I given you proof of it?"

It was the husky voice of Nellie Strang, a girl from the village who came occasionally to do some sewing for Rose when she was extra busy. She recognised it immediately, for there was no other voice like that in the neighbourhood.

Rose stood rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do nor which way to turn. She heard her husband's voice again, low and vibrating with passion.

"Nellie, meet me again to-night down in the copse. Watch for the light in Rose's bedroom to go out, then I'll come to you."

"But supposing your wife found out? She'd tell my father, and then he'd go for me. I'm sure he would."

Her voice trailed off weakly as Douglas caught her in his arms again and smothered her face with kisses.

"You'll come," he said hoarsely. "Rose can't find out. Even if she did, I wouldn't let her tell on you. Don't you love me, Nellie?"

"You know I do. It's no use standing out against you. There's a devil in you that coaxes women's hearts out of them."

He laughed softly.

"To-night, then, in the usual place, darling?"

He was bending his head to kiss her again, and Rose recovered her power to move. Her stunned bewilderment had left her, and anger had taken its place—a furious, blind anger, born of her humiliation and disgust, and the knowledge that her husband was carrying on a sordid intrigue with another girl.

In that moment of disillusionment something had happened to Rose. She knew quite definitely that she could no longer go on living with him, could not bear him ever to come near her or touch her again.

She went forward quickly, and the sound of her footsteps caused the other two to fall apart hastily. In the beam of light from the window she saw Nellie Strang's hand fly to her heart, saw Douglas draw himself up with an air of bravado.

For a long moment the three of them stood there gazing at one another in silence. Then Rose found her voice.

"I—I—" she began, but could not go on—contempt, shame, anger struggled within her, robbing her of words.

She turned away quickly, and almost ran into the house and up the stairs. Once in her bedroom she bolted the door, and sank, gasping, on to the bed.

Her face was deathly pale. She stared before her with anguished eyes. She could not go on. This was the end.

Douglas—and that girl! She could see them still, for the picture was burnt in her brain.

John's question came back to her—

"If he were unfaithful to you—if he put another woman in your place—you would still forgive him?"

And her own reply—

"I don't know—I don't know."

But she knew now. Knew that it was utterly impossible to go on living with Douglas. She shrank from the thought with horror, all her fastidiousness up in arms.

Rose got up and went to the window, staring out into the darkness. Far away across the fields she saw a light. John's car! So he was still there, waiting for her.

She stood very still, filled with a wild temptation to go to him, to let him take her away from all this misery and shame, to let him heal her wounded spirit with his love.

Would she be justified? Supposing it meant ruin for him? Ah, no—she could not. But John had known all that when he had tried to persuade her to run away with him.

She had reminded him of it, but he had merely laughed, and asked her if she thought he cared about such things when he loved her so deeply.

He was, as he had reminded her, not a sentimental boy but a man who knew his own mind. He had weighed the pros and

cons, no doubt, before he decided to come down here this evening, and try to persuade her to run away with him.

Then why should she hesitate? Surely together they would be able to defy the world, to create a world of their own, in which nothing mattered but their love for each other?

The thought warmed her heart to a glow. She dwelt upon it, and then upon the alternative—life with a man she despised and feared, a man who had dealt her this final humiliation.

"Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do!" she gasped, burying her face in her hands.

Then there came a thunderous knocking at the door, and Douglas's voice—

"Rose, let me in!"

"No!" she cried, swinging round to face the door with blazing eyes.

"Am I the master in this house or not? Open the door at once, I insist!"

She did not answer. Quivering, but with her head high and a spot of colour flaming in each cheek, she waited for him to break his way in. She heard him deal the panel a shattering blow, but the stout old oak and the huge bolt withstood the shock.

"Very well," he shouted furiously, "I'll make you pay for this, my girl! You can't stay in there for ever. You're very proud and superior, aren't you? But I'm the master here, and I'll make you understand that I am."

She heard his heavy boots tramping along the passage and down the stairs. No doubt he had gone into the kitchen to wait for her to capitulate.

His violence was the last straw, Rose told herself. She could not stay here to be so humiliated. Old Anna, the servant, would have heard his threats. How could she ever hold up her head again?

And out there in the darkness John was waiting for her—waiting to give her comfort and shelter and love. Why should she deny herself those things for which she longed, for the sake of a man who cared so little for her that he could forget his marriage vows? She had done her best, but this was more than she could bear.

Suddenly Rose knew that she would go. No marriage vows could hold her. She would die if she stayed here—die of a broken heart, of shame, of the bitter humiliation of it all.

Hastily she took her hat and coat from the wardrobe and put them on. She would take nothing else with her. She wanted nothing that Douglas had given her save the barest necessities. She would leave everything behind with the life which she was leaving for ever, and start afresh with John.

She took a last look round the room which had been her mother's—the room in which she herself had been born. Ah, the memories of joy and pain that it contained! None so happy as those of the early days when her dear mother had sat here in the window, sewing; none so bitter as those of her own marriage and she was now leaving it for ever. Never again would she see the old house that was so crammed full of memories for her.

Then, with misty eyes and a lump in her throat, Rose was sliding back the heavy bolt. Softly she opened the door, listened for a moment, and then stole quietly down the stairs.

In the dimly lighted passage she paused. Should she go to Douglas, tell him that she was leaving him, and defy him to stop her?

She would have preferred to do so, but reason warned her that if she did he would not let her go, that he would not stop at using force.

No; better to slip away unseen, and then write to him and tell him why she had left

him, asking him to set her free. She dared not face him now, and so run the risk of losing her last chance of happiness.

The door leading into the big farm kitchen stood open, and a beam of light came from it. She could see Douglas sitting in the armchair, smoking his pipe... His back was towards the door, but there was sullen fury in the hunch of his broad shoulders.

Without a sound, Rose sped past the open doorway and out into the darkness. The sky was ablaze with stars now, but she did not stop to admire the beauty and stillness of the night. Only one thought possessed her—to get away from this dreadful prison, to find shelter in the arms of the man she loved.

She knew every inch of the straggling lane, and ran along it with a sure-footed ease. At the end of it she could see the glimmer of the lights from John's car. Supposing he started up before she could reach him?

The thought scared her, and she ran on. It must be over an hour now that he had been waiting.

"John, John," she panted, "please wait for me!"

She was still a little distance from the car when she heard the door slam. A moment later there came the sound of the engine being started up.

Frantically she rushed forward, crying: "John! John!"

The car had stopped abruptly, and a dark figure came stumbling to meet her.

"Rose! Is it really you? Has a miracle happened?" John cried breathlessly. She was in his arms, held so close against his thumping heart. Here was haven, here was peace. Nothing else mattered.

"Take me away, John, quickly—before he comes," she urged. "I'll tell you about it later on; but now I want to get away—away with you."

A great joy dawned in his eyes. He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the car. Not a word did he utter while he wrapped a fur rug round her. He got in beside her and started up the engine again. Then—

"Thank God that miracles still happen! I hardly dared to hope, and now—"

Rose moved closer to him, loving the roughness of his overcoat, the strength of his hands as they held the wheel.

She was his now—all his. It was symbolic that they should be going forth into the darkness like this, side by side. She had given her life into his care, taken the biggest step that it is possible for a woman to take, setting aside convention, tradition, everything.

But she was not afraid. Now that she had taken the step, she did not look back, only forward—forward to a life of love and happiness.

Nothing could hurt her now. She would go with John to the ends of the earth if needs be. He was her man. They needed each other. Nothing else mattered but that.

The sweet breath of the spring night caressed her cheeks, and blew the soft tendrils of hair about her eyes.

Just for a moment a pang of regret shot through her because she was leaving this dear home of hers, and would never see it again. Then she looked up to the stars, and drew a deep breath. She had chosen. There could be no turning back now.

The car sped onward, carrying her into her new life. Rose sat very still, her shoulder touching John's, her eyes grave and starry as they stared ahead into the future. She did not feel like a guilty wife, running away with another man, but like a bride, radiant in love and faith, sitting beside her bridegroom.

And so Rose went forward into the future.

THE SHADOW.

"JOHN dear, I'm just going down to the village and will be back in time for lunch."

John Mansell looked up from his typewriter with a smile and laid his hand over Rose's, where it rested on his shoulder.

"Very well, my dearest," he said. "Take care of yourself."

She nodded, smiling back at him brightly. The warm sunshine that filled the room made her eyes seem as vividly blue as the Italian sky itself. In her blue linen frock she was a picture of radiant freshness and beauty.

"How are you getting on with your work this morning?" she asked sympathetically.

John shrugged.

"It's not one of my best days," he replied.

"But don't worry about me, my dear. I shall soon get into the swing of it."

"It's such a shame that you should have to stay in on a morning like this," she said. "for it's just too heavenly for words. Oh, John, sometimes it all seems too wonderful to last!"

Her eyes grew shadowed as they stared above his head into the golden distance. The soft breeze, laden with the scent of flowers, drifted in at the open window.

John looked up at her, and his fingers tightened on hers.

"Foolish girl," he said tenderly. "Nothing can possibly happen to spoil it, my darling. We belong to each other now in every way that matters, and nothing can take you from me."

Rose stooped and laid her lips to the top of his head for a moment.

"I—I suppose it's just a woman's fancy," she whispered. "But, John, I love you so—I couldn't possibly live without you!"

"You will never have to, please God!" He smiled at her. "Now run along, darling, and take great care of yourself. I must get this story off to England by to-night's post, or we shall be going bankrupt!"

"Sorry, dearest, then I'll be off," Rose said smilingly, and then she went quickly from the room, down the shallow steps to the narrow path that wound steeply through the rock garden to the dusty white road beyond.

At the garden gate she paused to put up her parasol, and lingered on, gazing at the scene spread before her in all its incredible beauty.

On either hand the garden rose steeply in rocky tiers clothed with azaleas and ilex, and tangled masses of flowering creeper to the white villa that was now her home. She turned to look at it, all its windows standing wide open to the glorious sunshine, and drew a sigh of deep contentment.

Her home! How different from that other that she had left behind in England, with all the other sad memories of the past! This was an earthly paradise—that other had been a prison-house. How far away it seemed now!

Rose leaned against the white gate, and her eyes grew dreamy. Was it only a few months since she had left her husband and come here to share her life with John's? It seemed a lifetime—a lifetime of sheer happiness.

The only flaw had been Douglas's refusal to divorce her. That first night of their elopement, John had written to him from London, asking if he might come and see him and discuss the matter.

Douglas had replied in a letter of abuse, threatening that if he came he would have no hesitation in shooting him.

That had turned John's face pale with

anger, and he had jumped to his feet, vowing that he would go at once and have it out with his cousin, at all costs.

But Rose had pleaded with him not to go. She knew Douglas so well, knew what he was capable of doing in those violent, ungovernable rages of his.

So John had allowed himself to be persuaded not to go, much against his will. Then they had come to Italy to this lovely little village beside the sea, taking a small furnished villa, where they lived with one old peasant woman, who managed their household affairs.

At first, in the new environment, with so much to distract him, John had found it difficult to settle down to work. He was still finding it difficult, but Rose told herself that in a little while all would be well again if only she could persuade him not to worry. For she knew that he did worry—not for himself, but on her account.

He hated to see the woman he loved placed in such an anomalous position. Yet although they had both written to Douglas several times, appealing to him to divorce her, his answer was always the same—"I'm hanged if I will! She doesn't get away with it as easy as that!"

Oh, if only Douglas would relent, and set her free so that they could be married, how happy she would be!

John was anxious to make her his wife so that she could face the world again instead of hiding with him in this remote corner of Italy.

If he could only be made to understand it she cared nothing for what the world thought of her. As is a woman's way when she truly loves, Rose had given him everything she had to give, without a backward glance to the safe havens of respectability.

John hated the thought that it was because of him that she could not hold up her head proudly, and take her place in the world. He had been so sure that Douglas would divorce her, and because he refused to do so his work was suffering.

Darling John! Why wouldn't he understand that she considered the world well lost for his sake?

With a sigh Rose turned away and went through the gateway on to the winding road that led down to the village. Some of the spring had gone from her step, thinking of John. He was so anxious that she should be happy, and yet he himself fretted because Douglas would not set her free.

How could she be completely happy while that shadow remained in John's eyes? She would give anything in the world to make him happy. She felt as though they had always belonged to each other.

Never for one moment had she had any fears that he would ever grow tired of her. The bonds that held them to each other, she told herself, were stronger than any mere legal marriage could have been.

Other men, in such circumstances, might grow tired, but not John. He loved her, as she loved him. She had no fears in entrusting him with the whole of her life's happiness.

But sometimes the thought came to Rose that she had done wrong in coming away with him, even though they were so deeply in love with each other.

She thrust it away from her, and never let John guess, but it was there, all the same. It would steal upon her unawares in the darkness of the night.

Had one the right to snatch happiness, regardless of duty? She would ask herself that question, and a cold shiver of fear would pass through her, and then she would

turn on her side and close her eyes, trying to put it from her.

It was only occasionally that the thought haunted her. Usually she was content to live from hour to hour, like a butterfly basking in this new-found joy; this warm, sheltering love that she had found. But when she looked at John, and saw the troubled lines on his brow, it would sometimes come to her that this was to be her punishment—a happiness that could never really be complete or without flaw.

That morning, for instance, she had been so happy. The joy of the day had entered into her, filling her with a radiant, unquestioning happiness. And then the sight of John's furrowed brow had called up the old doubts again.

She sighed. Oh, if only Douglas would set her free! Then they would be able to get married, and their happiness would be complete!

But would it ever be complete? Would not the consequences of her sin pursue her, even to the end?

The warmth of the sun seemed to have faded, the gold tinged with grey.

Rose hurried on down to the village, did the shopping, and turned homewards.

When she reached the villa, lunch was being served on the shady loggia looking over the sea. John was more silent than usual, and his eyes, as they wandered over the wide expanse of sea, were sombre, but she did her best to cheer him up by talking of little happenings in the village.

"Gina Varese was in Mario's shop this morning," she told him, smiling. "She seemed brimful of happiness, and told me that her husband, Fabio, had done so well with the fishing that he is buying his own boat. They are just like a pair of happy children."

"It must be rather wonderful," John said slowly, "to live as they do. Their lives are almost primitive—nothing to worry them. Gina stays at home in the little white-washed cottage, clothed with vines, and laughs and sings to her babies, and her husband goes out hunting for food. Rather like Adam and Eve in the Garden, except for the serpent," he added, with a forced little laugh.

"I don't know," Rose looked away with shadowed eyes. "I think there's always a serpent, don't you? Who knows how many nights Gina has laid awake listening to the wind howling over the sea, knowing Fabio was somewhere out there in the darkness in his boat?"

John nodded understandingly.

"Yes; there's always a flaw," he said.

Rose felt a cold chill at her heart. She leaned forward and laid her hand over John's.

"My dear, there need not be for us," she murmured. "We have each other. What else matters?"

"But I'm afraid you do not see as far ahead as I do, my dear Rose," he said. "This is all very well while we are young, but what is to happen as the years go by, and we are still outcasts? I don't mind for myself," he added. "It's you I'm thinking of. I hate to think that because of me you have to hide away here like this. I want to be able to acknowledge you in the eyes of the world as my wife."

"But what does that matter, John dear?" she asked helplessly. "It would be better, of course—the final crown to our happiness—but we already belong to each other in every way that matters. Please try to believe that!"

"I know it, my dear. And yet——"

He broke off, and was silent for a moment. Then, with a little shrug, he stood up.

"I must get on with my work, darling,"

he said. "Send some coffee in to my study, will you?"

He touched her head with his lips as he passed on his way to the study. Rose called to Marie to take his coffee in to him, and then sat very still, deep in thought.

She realised, after what John had just said, that he felt their position more keenly than she had guessed. Nothing she could say or do could make his mind easy on the point. Oh, if only Douglas would relent!

But she knew her husband too well to dare to hope that he would do so. He did not want her himself, but he had no intention of making the way easy for John to marry her.

Rose had always believed that everyone had a good side to his character, but she could not help wondering if Douglas had. From the conversation which she had overheard between him and Nellie Strang that night at the farm, she felt almost certain that he had been unfaithful to her.

And yet she knew it was hopeless to try and get definite proof. Naturally they would both strongly deny it, and she had no witnesses.

It was obvious that John was growing more and more worried every day. They were in a cleft stick, and what was to be done at all? She had no relatives who could have interceded on her behalf.

As far as she knew there was no one of her own flesh and blood in the world except her father's brother, Uncle James, who had gone to Australia when he was a boy. And she had long since lost touch with him.

He was rather a stern old man, and when she had last heard of him, at the time of her father's death, he had mentioned that he had quarrelled with his only son, Fred, and turned the boy out because he would not go into the business.

Apart from that, Rose knew nothing of him or his affairs, and it was certainly no use looking to him for help in the present juncture.

She smiled wryly as she imagined what her Uncle James would say if she told him she had left her husband for another man.

No, there was nothing to be done. They could only wait and hope that something would happen to soften her husband's heart. If only Douglas would meet another woman and marry her!

But there was little chance of that. Marriage did not come into his scheme of things. He had only married her because it suited him to do so.

In any case, she could not wish any other woman to become his wife and go through all that she had suffered.

So she resigned herself to the inevitable, and did her best, during the weeks that followed, to make John see her point of view.

He tried to pretend that he did, but there was a Puritan strain in him that would not let him rest while the woman he loved was living under a cloud because of him.

She saw him growing more sombre day by day, and knew that his work was suffering because of the load on his mind.

On one occasion he burst out—

"I must go and see Douglas. It's no use going on like this. I really must do something about it, my dear Rose."

And she answered—

"It wouldn't do any good if you did, John dear. You know as well as I do what sort of man he is. He enjoys keeping us in a cleft stick like this. Oh, if only you would try not to worry about it, my dearest!"

But she knew it was useless trying to make him see it as she saw it.

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; 'tis woman's whole existence." She came to know the truth of the poet's words.

Not that John loved her any less than she loved him; it was just that, being a woman, she gave him her whole heart and soul, and would not let herself worry over the inevitable; and he, being a man, was unable to do that.

He felt that the responsibility of their position rested with him, and that he had dragged her down.

Never for one moment had he believed that Douglas would refuse to set her free. Even knowing the man as he did, he had not believed that he could be so utterly mean and petty.

Rose felt the shadow deepening over their happiness, and fought against it frantically. But as the spring days merged into the dreamy heat of the Italian summer, her spirits began to flag a little.

She could not understand why she felt the heat so much, and was easily tired.

Then, gradually, the truth dawned on her. At first, she refused to accept it, thinking how it would increase John's anxiety. But at last she had to face it.

The question was, how should she tell John?

She sat alone on the loggia one evening after dinner, while the darkness closed down like a soft veil over sea and land. Rose lay back in her chair, her hands loosely folded in her lap, thinking—thinking how different it might have been, and with what joy she and John might have received the all-important news if only she had been his wife.

But what was the use of tormenting herself with such thoughts? The truth had to be faced, and John had to be told.

She heard his step behind her, and raised her face to see him.

"John," she said softly.

He came and stood with his hand on the back of her chair.

"Please sit down, John dear," she said. "I—I want to talk to you. There is something very important I have to tell you."

She saw him glance at her quickly, apprehensively. But without a word he drew a chair forward, and sat down beside her. Rose caught one of his hands between her own, and clung to it, drawing strength from it, while in low tones she told him her story.

He listened, sitting motionless as a statue. When she had finished there was a long silence. Then—

"Are you—are you sure of this, my dear Rose?" he asked, in a voice that was strangely flat and lifeless.

She nodded.

"Quite sure, John. I—I waited before I broke the news to you. I knew you would worry about it."

He buried his face in his hands.

"My God! And this is my doing. I have brought you to this. Oh, Rose—why don't you hate me?"

Rose sighed.

"You—you hurt me when you say a thing like that, John," she said. "I love you with all my heart, and am not afraid even of this. I came to you with my eyes open. You are not to blame. So please, please, John, try to believe that I do not regret, not for a single instant."

He looked up at her, his eyes dark pools in his pale face.

"I know. You are wonderful, my dear. I've never realised until now the power and strength of a woman's love. But don't you see how I feel about it, Rose? I have dragged you down, made you an outcast, and now—this."

"But I don't feel in the least like an

outcast," she told him, with a tender smile. "I feel like a queen, John. Your love crowns me, and lifts me above all petty considerations. Do try to believe that."

"But—but the child? Don't you see what it will mean to the child? What we choose to do is our own affair, but we have no right to let this stigma rest on our child. Think of it, my dear Rose!"

She nodded, her face flushing crimson, and then paling again.

"I have thought of it. But oh, John, what can we do?"

"I know what I'm going to do," he said. "I'm going to England to see Douglas. I'm going to make him set you free somehow, so that we can be married before it is too late. I shall go at once."

"But do you think he will do it, John?"

"He'll have to do it, or—"

John did not finish the sentence, but there was a steely gleam in his eyes that boded ill for the other man.

Rose knew then that it was no use protesting; John would go in spite of everything.

She dreaded the thought of the interview between the two men. Perhaps some miracle would happen, and Douglas would relent while there was yet time. Ah, if only, even yet, it might be possible for her child to be born free of that stigma, the thought of which was like a grim shadow hanging over her!

They sat talking while the stars came out one by one and the scent of the garden drifted up to them on the soft night breeze.

Afterwards Rose looked back upon that hour as the sailor, tossing in a storm, looks back on the haven from which he set sail. It was a haven—a little peaceful backwater of beauty and calm. To-morrow they would be parted. She and John—but to-night was theirs.

Their voices were low, there was sadness in their hearts, but in that moment they were nearer than they had ever been to each other. They were really one in every sense that mattered.

RECONCILIATION.

NEXT day John left for England. Rose went to the railway station with him, and stood watching until the train had disappeared round the bend. Then she went back to the villa, which seemed strangely empty and lonely without the sound of John's typewriter. But he hoped to be back again by the end of the week.

The days stretching ahead seemed an eternity of waiting. Rose tried to read to help pass the time, but found it difficult to concentrate, for thinking of that interview between John and her husband.

What would come of it? She wondered anxiously. She knew that John had gone to England with the fixed intention of forcing Douglas, somehow, to set her free. But if Douglas refused?

She pictured a bitter quarrel between the two men, and shuddered at the thought of what the outcome might be.

Douglas was not a man easy to intimidate. He was hot-tempered, strong-headed, accustomed to having his own way in all things.

John was quieter, but in his way more relentless. He kept a strong hold on himself, but there were powerful forces at work beneath that restrained exterior of his.

What would happen if the two wills clashed?

She waited with nervous dread for John's first letter, picturing all sorts of dreadful possibilities. She tried her best to dismiss them as foolish and imaginative, but they always returned to haunt her. But there was nothing she could do but

wait with what patience and courage she could muster for the outcome of it all.

John sent a brief note from an hotel in London, where he was staying the night before going down to Willows Farm.

He did his best to reassure her, but Rose was anxious. She had calculated that his next letter, telling her the result of his interview with Douglas, would reach her two mornings later. For that she waited in mingled fear and hope, praying that all would be well.

The day went by, and the evening post came without bringing the longed-for letter. She tried to assure herself that all was well, but fear had her in its grip, and that night she could not sleep for the dread that filled her.

She was up early next morning waiting for the post. But there was no letter from John.

She was frantic with anxiety. What could have happened? She knew that John had intended to write to her as soon as he knew anything definite, for he had known how anxiously she would be awaiting his news.

She was sitting on the loggia, trying to think what was best to be done, when the gate was opened and a messenger came up the path with a telegram.

With trembling fingers she took it from him and tore open the envelope. It was a long telegram, and at first Rose read the words without understanding them. Her hands went to her throat, and she looked quickly at the end to see the signature, "John."

Was it true? Oh, no, surely not. She sank into a chair and passed her hands across her eyes, as though they might have deceived her.

But no, the words were there, staring her in the face—incredible words condemning her to heart-break—

"Have seen Douglas. He definitely refuses freedom, but offers take you back for child's sake. Have thought it over and feel this would be best for all concerned. No other course open. Beg you to see this. Good-bye. JOHN."

It was as though the light of the sun had suddenly gone out. She sat there in utter darkness, chilled through, her face chalk-white. It couldn't be—it just couldn't. Whatever she had dreaded, she had never for one instant entertained the thought that John might fail her. Even now, with the words of the telegram engraved on her mind in letters of fire, she could not believe it.

John! Her lover, always so tender, so considerate and kind. It was incredible that he had really abandoned her like this. The whole thing was like a nightmare, utterly unreal. Surely she would awaken in a moment, and find that it was nothing but a horrible dream. But she knew, even while she hoped, that it was real enough.

John, the man to whom she had given everything—everything; the man for whose sake she had been willing to defy the world's conventions; the man who had been to her all-sufficient, even though there was no legal tie to hold them together; he, in whom she had trusted, had deserted her in her hour of need.

Rose did not know how long she sat there. Marie came and told her that lunch was served, but she merely shook her head and waved her away.

The afternoon was heavy with heat. Bees buzzed among the vivid flowers; gay butterflies flitted about the garden; the sea seemed somnolent under a languorous golden haze. But still Rose sat on, motionless as a statue, trying to realise what had happened.

Only a week ago John had been here, smiling at her with those kind, tired eyes of his. Less than a week ago they had sat together on the loggia in the starlight, hand in hand, facing the future together, and he had said—"I love you so."

Other things he had said came to beat upon her brain like hammers.

"What we choose to do is our own affair, but we have no right to let the stigma rest on the child."

Ah, why had she not seen the gloomy foreboding behind the words? Why had she not realised that, for the sake of their unborn child, he might be prepared even to sacrifice their happiness together?

She remembered how he had fretted during the month because he had, as he put it, "dragged her down." But she had not realised that he could ever contemplate the step that he had taken.

Was it because his love was greater or less than hers? Why had he been able to give her up so lightly, when she would have died rather than give him up—had, indeed, proved it by giving up everything else for his sake? Was it because he was ready to make any sacrifice rather than let their unborn child suffer?

And yet it seemed incredible to her that he, who had always raged against the fact that she was tied to a selfish brute like Douglas, should send her back to him in her hour of need. Stranger still that he should be willing to take her. He had never shown any signs of pity or generosity.

If Douglas had suddenly changed, and desired to be generous, why had he not agreed to release her, so that she might marry John?

Rose pressed her hands to her aching temples, and tried to get the thing straight in her mind. But only one thought prevailed—the thought that she would never see John again, that the wonderful time they had spent together was like a closed book that could never be opened.

"John, John!" she moaned, covering her face with her hands to shut out the sight of all the beauty he had shared with her. But it would not be shut out.

Pictures came into her mind one by one—pictures of moonlight nights, when they had wandered together in the garden, listening to the murmuring of the sea; pictures of happy, sunlit hours spent bathing or sailing on the water or lounging among the rocks, watching tiny lizards darting to and fro among the stones; pictures that now mocked her and tore her heart to shreds because they never could be again.

Presently she got up and went with slow, uncertain steps into the house. Marie met her and asked if she would like a cup of coffee. The woman's eyes were soft with sympathy. She guessed that some overwhelming calamity had overtaken the Padrona, and was anxious to help.

But Rose shook her head.

"You may go, Marie. I shall be quite all right. I want to think. Please go."

She passed through to her bedroom and the woman stood staring after her, hands clasped on her ample bosom, and then, with a shrug of her shoulders, turned away to the kitchen.

Rose lay face downward on her bed, not weeping, for her grief was too deep for tears. She felt just as though all the life force had been drained out of her veins. Sorrow pressed down upon her. Ah, if she could only die!

The evening slipped by on soft feet, leaving a trail of shadows in the quiet room. From far away across the valley came the shriek of an engine. That would be the

evening train—the train by which she had expected to welcome John back again. To-night he was to have come.

And now he would never come back to her again. All her days stretched weary and empty before her in grey desolation.

No, he would never come again. She said it over and over to herself, trying to understand. But the thought held such horror and loneliness, such utter grief, that she could not take it in.

Reason told her it was true, but her loving heart still hoped for some miracle that would bring him back to her.

And so, when there came the sound of a footstep on the path outside, her heart leapt, and she jumped to her feet, and ran to the door just as she was, with tumbled hair and creased frock.

A man's tall figure was outlined against the dim violet of the twilight sky. She held out her hands.

"John, John, you have come, then!" she cried. "It was all a mistake. I knew it."

The man moved towards her and took her hands. But it was not John who stood looking down into her eyes.

It was Douglas—her husband!

She stared at him incredulously for a moment, then darkness closed in on her, and she would have slipped to the floor had he not caught her in his arms and carried her to a couch.

When she opened her eyes again he was standing by the table, fumbling with the lamp.

As it burned up she saw his face, paler than usual, and with a curious, enigmatical smile playing about the lips.

It seemed like a fantastic dream to her to be lying there watching Douglas stand where John had so often stood—Douglas, her husband, whom she had thought never to see again.

She uttered a low sound, and he swung round and came to her.

"If you'll tell me where the water is I'll get you some," he said.

"No, no—I'm quite all right."

She struggled to her feet and stood facing him, clutching at the back of a chair for support.

"Why—why have you come here?" she stammered.

"I have come to help you."

"You! But why should you! You treated me cruelly; you humiliated me, and when you had forced me to run away, you—you refused to let me marry the man I loved. How can you help me?"

He hesitated a moment. Then—

"I know I've treated you very badly, Rose. I admit I wouldn't set you free because I wanted to punish you. But all that is past now. I realise that you have been punished enough. I've enough imagination to understand what it must be to be a woman in your position, and to be abandoned by her—lover."

"How dare you?" she cried indignantly. "Have you come here to taunt me?"

"Should I come all the way from England for that? Rose, listen to me. You may find it difficult to believe, but I'm here to help you. John has abandoned you—there's no use blinking the fact. He came to see me, and asked me if I would release you. I said 'No.' Then he told me of the—of the child. I—I suppose I saw red. I called him a cad and a few other things. I said that if he really loved you he would never have dragged you down in the way he has done."

He paused, then went on awkwardly—

"I hate to have to tell you this, Rose, but you must understand. Men are like that. When they've had what they want of a woman, they soon grow tired. Well, John Mansell has grown tired of you."

"That is a lie!" she flung back at him. "If John has done this, it is from a mistaken sense of duty. He always felt that he had dragged me down, and now, for the child's sake, I suppose, he thinks it best to—to let me go."

Douglas laughed.

"No, my dear girl, you're wrong," he said. "I hadn't been talking to him for five minutes before I realised that he was tired of it all. He asked me to release you, so that he could marry you as a matter of form. He has that much decency left. But when I refused he seemed relieved—positively relieved. That brought me to my senses. I suddenly understood what it would mean to you. I said, just to try him at first, 'I won't release her, but I'll take her back, and give the child my name.' I half expected him to flare up, but instead he was so obviously relieved that—well, I wanted to kick him out of the house."

Rose pressed her hands to her throat. It all sounded so convincing, the way Douglas told it. And yet, she could not believe that it was a true account of what had passed between him and John. It seemed absolutely incredible.

But what object could Douglas have in lying to her? Why should he have taken the trouble to come all this way to her unless, as he said, he had at last been stirred to pity by her situation?

True, he had never shown any tenderness towards her. And she had believed what "love" he had felt for her to be utterly dead when she left him.

But strange things happened. There was good and bad in everyone. Could it be that fate had suddenly shown her the good in Douglas, the bad in John, whom she had loved and trusted? She knew it was true that some men did tire of women, but not John! Their love had been something more than passion. It had been a true marriage of spirit as well as body.

Suddenly the thought came to her that John must have chafed against the unconventionality of their position more than she had done. Men felt these things. They were more conventional. Everything John had said had proved that he was not entirely happy in such a situation. Probably that had worked on his mind until, when he knew that the child was coming, he had felt that he could bear the worry no longer.

Then Douglas's offer had opened a way of escape, and John had taken it. It had seemed to him the best thing for them both—and perhaps it was really true that in his heart he was a little tired of the arrangement.

Rose forced herself to face the fact, incredible though it seemed, telling herself that other women in her position must have found it equally incredible that the man they loved, the man to whom they have given everything, should have grown tired of them.

The world's history was full of such tragedies. And each one, no doubt, had seemed as overwhelming, as utterly incredible, as hers was.

Douglas was talking. He had taken her hands in his with a gesture of awkward tenderness.

"Come home with me, Rose," he was saying. "Let me give you the shelter of my roof and of my name—for the child's sake."

"Oh, no. All that is finished, Douglas. I do not love you—I never really have loved you. It was John—John."

"I know. But please give me a chance to show you that I've changed, Rose. That is all I ask. I'll do my best to make you happy, give you shelter and protection—acknowledge your child as my own. And perhaps, some day, you'll feel differently

towards me, and we may be able to—to be happy together again."

"Happy?" she cried. "I shall never be happy again. Oh, Douglas, you don't know what you're asking. I am in love with John—don't you understand?"

"Perhaps I understand better than you think," he said. "At any rate, give me a chance to show you, Rose. You'll need to be taken care of. You have no money of your own, nowhere to go. You can't stay on here alone. For the child's sake, if not for your own, you—you ought to accept my offer."

"I—I don't understand at all," she gasped. "It seems so strange that you should come to me like this. I—I would never have expected it of you."

"It was the callous way in which John was prepared to abandon you that suddenly made me realise that I really loved you, after all," he said. "I've been a fool, Rose. I admit that I've had affairs with other women, but in my heart I've always belonged to you. And so I ask you to come back to the farm, to let me take care of you."

She stared at him, her eyes searching his face. Could it be true that he had changed? He, who had treated her so badly that she had run away from him?

But when so much else that had seemed impossible had come to pass, why not this? Nothing was impossible, apparently—not even that John's love could fail her.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked tremulously. "You are prepared to forgive me—to take me back and give the child your name?"

His florid face was enigmatic in the soft lamplight. She could not read the expression in his eyes, nor the faint smile about his full lips. But he said gently—

"Yes, Rose dear, I am prepared to forget the past"—and took her hands in a firm grasp.

BACK AT WILLOWS FARM.

IT was a summer evening when Rose came home to Willows Farm again.

But there was a faint breath of autumn in the soft breeze, and it seemed only right and fitting that it should be so to match the sadness in her heart.

As Douglas turned the car down the narrow lane, leading to the corner of which she had stood that spring evening, talking to John, she gave an inward sigh.

Oh, how could she bear this place, with all its crowding, poignant memories of the past! But she called her courage to her aid. Somehow she must go through with it. It was all that remained to her of her dreams.

Here, within these old walls that had looked upon so much sorrow and suffering, her child would be born—hers and John's—but it would bear Douglas's name, and be brought up as his.

Rose was pathetically grateful to her husband for coming to her aid in her hour of need. But for him she did not know what would have become of her, for, as he had reminded her, she had no money of her own.

It still bewildered her that Douglas should have done it. Sometimes the suspicion came to her that there was something behind it all, but she dismissed the thought.

After all, what could be behind it? Why should Douglas want her back—offer to take her back on such generous terms—unless he really loved her, and wanted to protect her?

Rose therefore accepted his astonishing kindness at first with reserve, and then with growing gratitude and amazement that he should have changed so.

She learnt from him that the people in the district had never known of her elopement with John. For the sake of his own pride, Douglas had told them that his wife had gone abroad on a visit to a relative.

They might, of course, guess that there had been some trouble between her and Douglas, but they could not know that she had gone away with another man. And it was not likely that anyone would doubt that Douglas was the father of her child.

Rose looked at the mellow brown walls, tinged with orange by the last rays of the setting sun. This was her home, and she supposed that she would settle down here again, and in a little while everyone would forget that she had ever been away.

Old Anna was waiting to receive her, the table temptingly spread for supper, with delicious crisp salad in a gleaming glass gowl, fresh, home-baked bread, home-made butter and cream; bacon cured by Anna's own hands.

Rose wondered how much the old woman knew—or guessed. She must know something about that scene between her and Douglas on the night before she ran away. Had Anna put two and two together? How far did those old keen eyes of hers see?

But, whatever she knew or guessed, it was quite certain that the old woman would keep her own counsel.

She waited on her mistress with pathetic eagerness, and Rose was at pains to talk to her about the household affairs while she had been away.

"You've managed splendidly, Anna. What delicious bread this is!" Rose remarked smilingly.

"Aye, Miss Rose"—Old Anna still called her by her childhood name—"and the store cupboard's full of jam, too. There's marrow, and raspberry, and crab-apple jelly, and blackcurrant—a fine lot of currants there was this year—and the old walnut tree yielded a wonderful lot of nuts, too. There's four big jars of pickles, and plenty more nuts left on the tree yet."

She chattered on, and Rose, listening, realised that she had indeed come back. The reins which she had dropped had been picked up and put back into her hands again. The heavens might fall, and the world turn topsy-turvy, but dear old Anna would go on busily filling the store cupboard against the time of her return.

Oh, well, it was better so, Rose reflected. She must fill her life so full that there would be no time for regret—no time for anything but hard work.

She had sinned, and now was the time of retribution. Little had she thought, that night when she ran along the lane to John, that she would come back again and take up her life where she had left it, as though nothing had happened.

Even so, nothing could ever be quite the same again. There would always be her memories, and, later on, there would be the child—John's child.

Rose knew that she ought to feel shame at the thought, but she did not. Regret, yes, because if things had been different, it would have been the crowning joy of her life. As it was, it would be her comfort—something of John that nothing could ever take from her. The child would be both her cross and her crown.

It was wonderful of Douglas to treat her with such generosity. She would try to repay him, to show how grateful she was, and how much she appreciated the amazing transformation that had taken place in him.

She glanced across the supper table at him. His sleek fair hair, brushed back from his forehead; his vivid blue eyes, that could light up with a glint of devilry

that women found curiously fascinating; his broad shoulders and heavily-built figure that looked so well in riding breeches and leggings.

He was looking at her now with that curious, enigmatic smile of his. He leaned across the table and laid his hand over hers.

"You've come home again, Rose. Are you glad?" he asked.

She coloured, and looked away. It made things very difficult for her when he was kind like this. For try as she would, Rose could not make her heart warm towards him.

"I'm grateful to you, Douglas, and I'll try to prove it," she murmured.

He nodded.

"Well, you'll probably have an opportunity, my dear girl," he said, and then went to the mantelpiece to fill his pipe.

As he reached for his pouch, a little pile of papers fluttered to his feet. With a muttered imprecation, he stooped to pick them up.

Rose went to help him, and with puzzled bewilderment saw that they were all bills. She held two or three of them in her hand, staring at the amounts demanded. Then—

"Do we really owe all this money?" she asked.

He nodded awkwardly, and took the bills from her.

"Yes; I've been getting into low water," he muttered. "Had a bad year, what with the late frosts and the dry summer."

"But one of the bills is for wines and spirits. Have you really ordered all this, Douglas? Or is there some mistake?"

He turned away irritably.

"Oh, I suppose it's all right," he said. "These things soon mount up, you know, if you let them run on. No need to worry, though. We'll soon settle the account when—if we can get some money together. Don't you worry, my girl. You look tired after your journey, and I think you'd better go to bed."

He spoke with suppressed irritation, which he did his best to hide. Rose accepted his explanation of the wine bills. She had not seen the others held in his hand, the total amount of which would have taken her breath away.

They were the outcome of months of dissipation, and there were other large sums owing for expenses incurred on the farm. The truth was that Douglas was up to his ears in debt, but he had no intention of telling her so until the hour was ripe.

So, all unsuspecting, Rose went upstairs to bed. Douglas did not attempt to kiss her, and she was grateful to him for it.

Once more she slept in the room which held so many memories. When she had turned out the light, she lay watching the moonlight weaving patterns on the floor, and thinking of many things.

Her heart ached with longing for John, for despite the bitter blow which he had dealt her, she still loved him—and would never cease to love him.

The dawn was creeping in at her window before she fell asleep.

NEXT day Rose resumed her duties, taking up the threads where she had left them.

She saw little of her husband. He was busy in the rickyard, from which came the sleepy hum of the threshing machine.

He came in to his dinner, and Rose was glad when the meal was over, for there was an embarrassing constraint between them which, try as she would, she could not banish.

Once or twice, during the awkward silences that occurred, she glanced up to find him looking at her in a curious, furtive way.

"Anything happened this morning?"

he remarked abruptly.

She looked at him in surprise.

"What should happen?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"Oh, nothing!" he muttered. "I wondered if you'd had any callers, that's all."

"No. Are you expecting anyone?"

Douglas shook his head.

But as she was helping Anna to clear away the dinner things Rose glanced out of the window and saw that he was talking to Tom Strang.

The sight of the man reminded her of the scene which she had witnessed between Nellie Strang, his daughter, and Douglas that night when she had run away with John.

She stood very still, looking at them. They were deep in conversation, and Douglas appeared to be giving the other man some emphatic instructions. No doubt Strang had come to ask for work, Rose told herself.

At threshing time they always took on extra hands, and Strang was good enough for a job of that kind, though his reputation in the village was anything but a savoury one. He was usually out of work, and was known to be a poacher.

As she watched she saw Douglas put his hand in his pocket and give the man some money. Rose turned away without thinking any more about it. There might be a number of explanations for it, and she did not bother her head about it.

She had quite enough to think about, for she had mapped out a busy day in order to keep herself occupied. But, as she stood stirring the marrow jam she was making, her thoughts wandered off on the line of thought which had been started by the sight of the man Strang.

She wondered what had become of his daughter. Was she still in the village, and, if so, was the affair between her and Douglas finished? He had told her that his affairs with other women had been merely flirtations, and had meant nothing.

Besides, if he cared enough for her to do what he had done, there was no need for her to trouble about his relations with other women. Evidently all that was now at an end.

They both had much to forgive, Rose reminded herself. Their only hope of achieving any sort of happiness together lay in forgetting and forgiving, and in not resurrecting the ghosts from the past.

She sighed, and went on stirring the jam. At that moment Anna came hurrying into the kitchen.

"There's a gentleman to see you, Miss Rose," she said. "It's the same gentleman that came while you were away. The master saw him then."

Rose looked up in surprise.

"To see me? Are you sure, Anna?"

"Aye. Mrs. Rose Colborne, he says. I'll watch the jam while you're away. He's in the parlour," she added.

Rose slipped off her apron and washed her hands, wondering what on earth the visitor could want with her.

The visitor rose to greet her as she entered the parlour. He was a tall, thin man with a queer, dried-up face and a voice to match.

"Mrs. Rose Colborne?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"You—you have been abroad, I believe. Your husband told me that you were away on holiday when I called a week ago. I—er—gathered that you would be here by this time, as he expected you within a few days."

"Won't you sit down?" Rose suggested, a little bewildered by this preamble.

"Thank you," he said smilingly.

He sat down and opened a despatch case, which he had placed on the table.

From it he took several papers.

"No doubt your husband has already informed you of the subject of my previous call?" he remarked.

"Well, no, he has not, Mr.—er—"

"Sibell—of Sibell, Conyers and Sibell, solicitors," he explained. "I must confess I am very much surprised that your husband has not acquainted you with the reason for my calling here to see him. It is not every day, if I may say so, that one comes into a large fortune."

"Fortune?" Rose echoed, in blank amazement.

"Yes, Mrs. Colbourne. You had an uncle, I believe—a Mr. James Waine?"

"Yes, he went to Australia years ago. I don't remember him at all, though he wrote to me when my father died," Rose said.

"Quite. Well, I have to inform you that Mr. James Waine died recently, intestate. You, as his nearest of kin, will therefore inherit his fortune—a quite considerable one, too."

Rose was completely taken aback. "But—but his son?" she stammered. "He had a son, Fred, who left home, rather than enter his father's business."

"Yes, we are aware of that," he said. "The Australian solicitors who handled your uncle's affair have, naturally, made full enquiries. They find that Mr. Fred Waine was killed in a railway accident in New Zealand over a year ago. His body was identified by a friend of the family. So, as far as we can discover, you are the sole legatee, Mrs. Colbourne."

She would share the money with her husband. It would help to put their affairs on a sound footing again, and it would give her a chance to repay him for what he had done for her.

But, after the solicitor had gone, she could not help wondering why Douglas had not mentioned the man's previous visit. Surely he could not have forgotten?

Then why had Douglas not mentioned it? Suddenly a suspicion dawned upon her. Could it be that he was afraid, if she knew, that she would not come back? Had his kindness and generosity been, after all, merely a cloak for other motives?

Despite herself, Rose felt her heart softening towards her husband.

He came in for a late tea, when the threshing was finished for the day. When they sat down, she began to tell him of the solicitor's visit.

"But why didn't you tell me he had called here before, Douglas?" she asked.

He flushed and hesitated. Then—

"I—I was afraid you wouldn't come back," he stammered awkwardly. He got up from his chair and placed his hand on her shoulder. "I—I love you, Rose," he went on. "I feel that what has happened has been largely my fault, and I want a chance to make it up to you. You—you do forgive me, don't you, dear?"

She could not see his face, but she was touched by his new-found humility.

"Yes, of course," she answered. "You have been very good to me, Douglas, and I feel that I have misjudged you in the past."

"Thank you, my dear Rose," he said. He paused, then added—"Tell me—what will you do with the money?"

"I don't know—I haven't thought about it yet," Rose said. "I still feel a little dazed about it all. What do you suggest, Douglas?"

"Better find some sound investments. I'll fix it up for you if you like. I don't suppose you want to be bothered."

"Yes, I'd rather you handled it for me," Rose said. "I don't understand these things a bit. I wonder how much it will be?"

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When the meal had been cleared away, Douglas filled his pipe and settled down beside the fire to read a newspaper.

Presently he said—

"You look very tired, Rose. Why don't you go to bed? Those things can wait, can't they?"

Rose realised that she was tired. She had been on her feet most of the day.

"Good night, Douglas," she murmured.

"Good night, my dear," he said, smiling at her.

A few moments later, he was making his way stealthily across the cobbled yard. He went through the gate into a field, and strode swiftly across it.

As he came to a thicket of trees, a girl slipped out of the shadows towards him.

"I thought you were never coming, Douglas," she said, in a low, husky voice.

"I couldn't get away before," he said. "Kiss me, Nellie."

They wandered into the woods, and it was about an hour later that they parted.

Nellie Strang hurried away across the fields towards the village. She did not know that behind her, in the shadows, a man was following her.

Next morning, when she came downstairs, she found her father in the kitchen, skinning some rabbits.

"I hope you had a good bag last night, father," she said smilingly. "Did you draw the Benton Woods?"

"No. I thought I'd try Colborne's for a change."

"Colborne's? But I thought you never touched his game, father? I thought you and he—"

"Aye, you thought we was too pally for me to poach on his land, eh? Well, I ain't partickler, my lass. It's all the same to me where I gets them from. Colborne's it was last night. An' a fine bag, too. A better bag than I expected," he added deliberately.

Something significant in his tone made her swing round to face him.

"What do you mean, father?" she asked.

"I saw you up there with Colborne, my girl. How long has this been going on?" He took her by the shoulders and shook her violently. "How long, I say?" he shouted, working himself up into a passion.

"You—you—" he stuttered, and hurled a frightful epithet at her. "So it's come to this, has it? A daughter of mine and that—that swine! How long has this been going on?"

"Over a year now," she confessed, with a mixture of fear and defiance. "I love him, and he loves me."

"Oh, he does, does he? An' what about that wife of his, eh? What's going to come of it?" He shook her violently again. "What's going to come of it, I ask you?"

She stood, sullenly silent, and he raised his hand and struck her. With a gasp she fell back against the wall, and slid to the floor, where she lay huddled up, sobbing.

"I'll kill the scoundrel for this!" he shouted. "The—the swine! I'll learn him to come after my daughter, with his low-down tricks. I—I—"

Gasping, he reached for his gun, then stamped out of the room, his face black with anger.

AS YE SOW . . .

WHEN Rose came down to breakfast that morning, she found a long envelope lying on her plate. Her husband was standing eyeing it with interest.

"It's from the solicitors," he said. "Their name's on the flap. It's probably to tell you how much you've inherited."

Rose slit the envelope open with a knife

and unfolded the letter which it contained. There were only a few lines, and she read them several times before she was able to take in the meaning of them.

"Dear Madam," the letter read. "Further to the visit of our Mr. Sibell re the estate of the late Mr. James Waine. We greatly regret to have to inform you that we have received a cable from the Australian solicitors stating that Mr. Fred Waine is still living. The body which was identified as his was evidently a case of mistaken identity."

"Mr. Fred Waine has now appeared in person to claim his late father's estate, and having satisfactorily proved his claim, he will, of course, inherit everything as the next-of-kin."

"We are, dear madam, yours faithfully,

"SIBELL, CONYERS & SIBELL."

Without a word Rose handed the letter to her husband. His hand shook as he read it.

"Curse them!" he muttered furiously. "Curse the lot of them!"

"What is the matter, Douglas?" she asked anxiously.

"Matter!" He swung round on her. "Is it nothing to lose a fortune through those bungling fools?"

"But it wasn't their fault," she said.

"But don't you understand that we're ruined?" he cried. "I was counting on this to get me out of the mess. The farm's mortgaged up to the hilt."

"I had no idea things were so bad. The farm was in a flourishing condition when father died, Douglas," Rose reminded him.

"Yes, because the old man scraped and stinted, and saved money, that's why. But I've never wanted that sort of life. We're only young once, you know. My own money was soon swallowed up. I got into debt, and then when I heard about this legacy of yours it seemed like a godsend. I was counting on that, and now it's vanished, and I'm worse off than I was before."

"Is—is that why you offered to take me back?" Rose asked, an accusing note in her voice.

"Of course it is!" he flung back at her. "D'you think I wanted you back for any other reason?"

"And—and I thought you did it because—because you really loved me," she said. "I thought you were generous and kind."

"You thought I was a fool!" came the bitter retort. "D'you think I want another man's leavings?"

"I only meant to keep you here until I had got the money safely into my hands," he told her callously. "Then I intended to clear out and enjoy myself. I'm sick of this sort of life, anyway. It's just slavery."

How easily she had been deceived!

Fool—fool that she had been! She knew now that men were all alike. Apparently not one of them was to be trusted. They were selfish, callous and brutal. She now stood alone—utterly alone—deserted by the man she loved; and now she knew that Douglas, too, had failed her.

Her sin had, indeed, found her out.

Douglas was speaking again.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" he taunted.

"What can I do?" Rose asked piteously. "I—I don't know where to turn. Oh, I know I've sinned, but I thought there was a little kindness in the world."

"You should have thought of that before you ran away with another man," he retorted relentlessly.

"You made life unbearable for me here," she cried. "How could I stay here and be so utterly humiliated? And I loved John. I know it was wrong, but I'm only human. I—"

Rose broke off as there came a loud

knocking at the door, and a man burst into the room, his face white and working.

Douglas started forward.

"What is it, Strang?" he demanded angrily. "What do you mean by rushing in on us like this?"

"I've come to have a reckoning with you, Colborne!" he shouted defiantly. "I—I was in your woods last night."

There was a moment's silence. The two men stood staring into each other's faces. Then Douglas said sneeringly—

"Poaching my game, eh?"

"Aye, An' there was other poachers about, too," Strang muttered, and his manner lent significance to his words.

Douglas frowned.

"What the devil d'you mean, man?" he blustered. "Have you come here to talk in parables? Better be getting to your work. The men have been at it since dawn in the rickyard."

"I ain't come here to take your pay," Strang flung at him. "A swine like you that carries on with other men's daughters. Aye—he turned to Rose—"that's a nice bit of news for you, Mrs. Colborne. In the wood he was last night with my girl Nellie. Been going on for a year or more, so she says."

"Shut your mouth, you fool!"

Douglas was standing over him with upraised fist, his face purple with rage.

"You keep your hands off me, or it'll be the worse for you," cried Strang. "Didn't want your wife to know, did you? Want to get hold of that nice bit of money that's coming to her, don't you?"

Douglas gave a low, taunting laugh.

"Do your worst, Strang," he said. "I've finished with the damn lot of you, anyway. My wife is not coming into the money."

The man glanced at Rose.

"Is that true, Mrs. Colborne?"

She nodded wearily.

"So he's finished with you, eh?" he muttered. "Well, there's one as'll welcome you, if I ain't mistaken."

"What do you mean?" Rose asked.

"Mr. Mansell, of course," Strang replied.

Rose stared at him in astonishment.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"I mean that he's been shut up in my cottage this last fortnight," Strang said.

"In your cottage? But I—but I don't understand," Rose stammered.

"Maybe not. Maybe you never understood what he's capable of." Strang nodded in Douglas's direction. "He went after him that day Mr. Mansell came to see him, and hit him on the back of the head. That's the sort of swine your husband—

is. Then he come running to my cottage and wanted me to come and help him carry Mr. Mansell there to hide him. I wouldn't have nowt to do with it at first, but he offered me money, and—well, there it is! I helped him, but I wouldn't have done it, not if I'd known about him and my Nellie."

Rose stared at him aghast.

"Is—is this true?" she demanded.

"Yes," he answered. "I wanted to get Mansell out of the way till I'd made sure of your money. Then I intended to clear out and let you go back to your precious lover—that is, if he still wanted you!"

"Then—then it was you who sent that telegram to me?" she said, in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper.

"Yes. Clever of me, wasn't it?" he said leeringly. "I hadn't had time to think out a plan of campaign. The solicitor had only called that morning, and I was wondering what the devil I could do to get hold of the money when Mansell came stalking in, and demanded that I should divorce you."

"Then the idea came to me that if I could make you believe he'd deserted you, and act the nice, forgiving husband, I'd get hold of the money," Douglas added, grinning at her.

Then Rose said sadly—

"Yes, and I believed in you, Douglas. I thought you had some good in you!"

Rose walked to the door.

"I'm going to John at once," she said. "Nothing you can do can ever part us again. He's mine, and even if you never set me free, he and I will belong to each other. But I hope one day you'll learn that there's no happiness to be gained out of making other people suffer. I cannot believe anyone is utterly bad—not even you, Douglas."

Rose then closed the door behind her, leaving the two men together, and hurried across the cobbles and out of the farmyard gate like one in a dream.

When she arrived at the cottage, the door stood open.

Rose went in and rushed up the stairs.

"John, John, where are you?" she called.

"It's Rose!"

From behind a closed door came a feeble answer—

"Rose!"

She tried to open it, but it was locked. Frantically she searched for the key, and succeeded in finding it on the ledge of the panelling over the door.

On entering the room, she found John lying on a narrow bed. She ran to him,

knelt beside the bed, and put her arms round him.

"John—oh, my dear John!" she sobbed.

He moved his bandaged head on the pillow, and she held him close, her cheek pressed to his. In faltering tones she told him all that she had learnt from Douglas and the man Strang.

"My Heavens!" John muttered. "He'll have to pay for this!"

Rose shook her head.

"No, John dear, let us go away and be happy together again. He can't really harm us any more. We belong to each other, you and I. You can't force him to set me free, can you, my dearest?"

His eyes grew sombre, and he turned away his head.

"No; I had overlooked that," he said.

At that moment they heard footsteps below, and a girl's voice screaming—

"He's killed him! He's killed him!"

As they went along the footpath leading to the farm, they met old Anna running towards them.

"Oh, Miss Rose, something dreadful has happened," she cried. "Mr. Douglas—he's dead—Strang shot him. He's sitting in the kitchen holding on to his gun, and seems dazed. Oh, whatever shall we do?"

Amid all the hysteria and excitement, Rose managed to keep calm, though her face was deathly pale.

They found Douglas stretched out on the kitchen floor. One glance told Rose that he was indeed dead. She turned to the man who sat huddled up on a chair, staring before him with dazed eyes.

"It—it was an accident," Strang muttered dully. "I never meant to kill him. We quarrelled, and he tried to throw me out. Then—then the gun went off."

A few minutes later the policeman came hurrying in. Nellie Strang hovered in the background, sobbing.

It was a painful ordeal, but when at last it was all over, Rose knew that she could not feel anything but pity for the man who had so wasted his life.

She went back to John, and kneeling beside his bed, told him what had happened. Tenderly he took her in his arms.

"God moves in a mysterious way . . ." he whispered.

TOM STRANG was acquitted of murder, but sentenced to five years' imprisonment for manslaughter. At the end of his term, he and his daughter emigrated to Australia, where they began life afresh.

THE END.

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A GOOD MAN'S LOVE

By Hester Lane

KINDLING FLAMES!

MORNING service in the parish church of St. Giles had already commenced when the west door opened and a party of four entered.

The congregation was singing the last verse of the opening hymn, so that the entry of the late-comers passed almost unnoticed, except by one or two at the back, who turned curious heads for a moment, and the young vicar, whose heavy brows came together in a frown of disapproval.

Martin Sheldrake recognised two of the party, as they filed quickly into a vacant pew. They were a young couple who had recently come to live at Grove Lodge, a comfortable, roomy old Georgian house

on the outskirts of the village.

"I don't wish to be uncharitable and it is, perhaps, too early to judge," he had said to his sister, who kept house for him in the big old vicarage next to the church, "but Major Campbell and his wife strike me as being typical of a certain section one meets nowadays."

"I have been told that Major Campbell has a very distinguished war record," Prudence Sheldrake had said. "His wife is the only daughter of Sir Septimus Lake, the shipowner. Her name is Mavis, I believe. As you say, it is too early to judge."

Now, as the hymn ended and the congregation became seated, Martin felt a little stir of irritation. Coming late to church was not a very heinous offence, it was true,

but people like the Campbells had no excuse.

He wondered who the other two young people were. The man was quite good looking, while the girl was strikingly attractive.

In the momentary glimpse Martin had had of her he had received an impression of an oval face with regular features, surmounted by Titian hair which escaped from under the brim of a small, close fitting hat.

He wrenched his mind back to the service, chiding himself for allowing his annoyance to disrupt his thoughts.

Later his sermon was brief and to the point. He never allowed himself to obscure the issue with a smoke-screen of words. What he had to say he said plainly, illus-

trating his points in a way that was readily understood by his congregation, the majority of whom were farming folk.

Before coming to Rexton, Martin Sheldrake had been a curate in a densely populated parish of East London. But an attack of influenza, which had turned to pneumonia, had seriously undermined his health, and the bishop had urged him to accept a country living.

The last hymn ended and, preceded by the choir, Martin walked slowly down the aisle, a tall, commanding figure in cassock and surplice, slightly greying hair setting off his keen, aquiline features.

Giving him a darting glance as he passed, Brenda Gaysford thought she had never seen anyone quite so good looking.

She followed Major and Mavis Campbell out into the spring sunshine, and as they passed through the porch her brother came to her side and bent his head to whisper.

"I told you what would happen if you insisted on going back," he said, under his breath. "The parson's annoyed with us for coming in late!"

"Oh, stop it, Reggie!" Brenda said crossly. "I couldn't leave the poor thing could I?"

At the church gate Martin was exchanging greetings with various people.

Mavis Campbell drew Brenda and her brother forward.

"Good morning, Mr. Sheldrake," she said, as the young vicar turned towards them. "May I introduce my cousin, Miss Gaysford? And her brother? Brenda—Reggie—this is Mr. Sheldrake."

"How do you do?" Martin shook hands with them both. "A beautiful spring morning, isn't it? Is this your first visit to Rexton, Miss Gaysford?"

"Yes, it is," Brenda smiled demurely, and added. "I must apologise for coming late, Mr. Sheldrake, and for making the others late, too. It was entirely my fault. I do hope you will forgive me."

"Why, of course, Miss Gaysford," he said instantly, then, without giving her a chance to explain further, he turned to Jock Campbell. "I was wondering if I might call and discuss one or two matters with you, major? We are re-forming the church council and I am hoping that you'll consent to becoming a member. Would Tuesday afternoon be convenient for a talk?"

"Oh, quite," replied the major heartily. "But—"

His wife gave him no time to raise objections. She smiled brightly at Martin; when Mavis Campbell smiled in that particular way she could be very charming indeed.

"I'm sure my husband will be only too delighted to do anything to help," she said earnestly. "Why not come to tea on Tuesday, vicar? That will give us plenty of time to discuss everything, won't it?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Campbell," Martin said, with a slight bow. "And now, if you will excuse me—" He turned away to speak to an elderly woman who had been waiting an opportunity to catch his eye.

"Now look what you've done, Mavis," he grumbled half-jestingly, as they set off. "The next thing he'll have me taking round the plate and reading the lesson."

"And a jolly good thing, too," Mavis smiled. "Self-discipline is good for the soul, Jock my lad." She spoke to Brenda over her shoulder. "What do you think of our vicar, Brenda?"

"He's rather nice," the girl replied in a non-committal tone. "He's not very old, is he?"

"Thirtyish, I believe," said Mavis chatily.

"Did you say his name was Sheldrake?"

mused Reggie Gaysford interestedly.

"There was a young padre of that name in the R.A.F. who got himself quite a reputation. Pulled a jet pilot clear of some flaming wreckage when a plane crashed on the runway, or so I heard. I wonder if he's the same chap?"

"It's the kind of thing Martin Sheldrake would do, I feel sure," said Mavis. "He never mentioned to us about being in the Services, though. Why not ask him, Reggie?"

"Oh, I won't be here on Tuesday." He grinned. "I'll leave it to Brenda. All the men she meets seem to want to tell her the story of their lives five minutes after being introduced!"

"Don't be silly, Reggie," Brenda said good naturedly. She looked round her with sparkling eyes. "Oh, do stop a moment, Jock. I want to look at that view."

Major Campbell drew the car to a standstill on the crest of a slight rise. The view was certainly worth admiring, with the dun-coloured Sussex downs sheltering the valley below, and a distant glimpse of the sea.

"I brought you this way on purpose," he said. "It was seeing all this that made us decide to look for a place round about. Grove Lodge happened to be up for sale and—well—there you are."

Brenda was thoughtful for the rest of the way back.

With her brother, who was the elder by two years, she had been brought up by a spinster aunt who lived in the Midlands.

Miss Capell, the aunt in question, was a stern Puritan who had discharged the letter of her responsibilities rather than the spirit, so that neither of the children had happy recollections of their earlier days.

Later Reggie had gone into the R.A.F. more, Brenda imagined, to escape the frustrations of home life than because he was keen on flying. But he had done very well and had recently been promoted Squadron-Leader.

Such avenues of escape were closed to Brenda, however, and Mavis Campbell suspected that she was anything but happy.

She could only guess at the real situation, however, for Brenda was fiercely proud and no word of complaint ever left her lips. She was spending a brief holiday with her cousin while Miss Capell was visiting friends in Edinburgh. Reggie, who was stationed in Kent, had come over for the week-end.

"I'm so glad you were able to manage a visit at long last, my dear," she remarked the following day, when Reggie had gone. "It's such ages since we have done anything but meet for a quick cup of tea somewhere and you know how I love having you. That goes for Jock, too."

"That's very sweet of you, Mavis," Brenda smiled. "I love being here with you in your new home." She sighed. "It's a pleasant change after Croxford."

"Poor darling! It can't be much fun living with Aunt Helen. She's rather grim at the best of times."

"Oh, I suppose it isn't as bad as that," Brenda said generously. "Aunt Helen has been very kind to me in lots of ways."

"All the same she ought to remember that you are not a child any more and have a right to lead your own life," declared Mavis warmly. "I can't forgive her for the way she behaved when you wanted to become a nurse."

Aunt Helen had soon put a stop to all that!

"It's a great pity you haven't met Mr. Right," Mavis said lightly, linking arms affectionately with the younger girl. "Then you could snap your fingers at Aunt Helen and it would serve her right."

Brenda shrugged.

They were standing on the terrace overlooking the spacious grounds of Grove Lodge, both making a charming picture of young English womanhood at its best.

Mavis was fair, with blue eyes and a retrousse nose; there was both character and good humour in her face. Six years ago she had married Jock Campbell when he had been a junior subaltern, and for five years they had lived in married quarters in different parts of the world. A year ago her husband had inherited a small fortune from an uncle, and so they had been able to realise their dream of having a place of their own.

"You must have met lots of young men in Croxford," Mavis went on, when Brenda did not speak. "Wasn't there one you rather liked?"

"There was no one special," Brenda replied, looking into distances. She laughed. "Probably it's just as well. Aunt Helen would have frightened off anyone who dared to fall in love with me."

"Not if he was really in love," said Mavis. "My family did their best to frighten me off Jock but they never succeeded. I remember daddy laying down the law when I told him that we planned to get married. He said Jock had nothing but his subaltern's pay and wanted to know what we intended living on, mother cried and said she had always hoped I would do so well for myself."

"There's going to be trouble when Aunt Helen finds out that Reggie is keen on a girl in the W.R.A.F.," Brenda said, breaking a little silence. "She's a section officer at his camp and they've been going about quite a lot together. Reggie showed me her photograph when he came down on Saturday and asked me to tactfully pave the way for him with Aunt Helen."

"Good for Reggie," exclaimed Mavis. "In any case, Aunt Helen can't do a thing about it—he's over twenty-one and can please himself, so what's he worrying about?"

"Well, you know what Aunt Helen is," Brenda murmured, pulling a face. "If she makes up her mind that she disapproves of anything like that she will refuse to meet the girl, and Reggie would hate that. I mean, it would be pretty awful, wouldn't it?"

"What's the matter with her?" demanded Mavis crossly. "Surely she must realise that you're both grown up and that she can't go on ordering your lives for you indefinitely. I suppose the truth is she's got her eye on some girl in Croxford she wants Reggie to marry."

"That's just it," nodded Brenda. "She's the Dean's daughter—quite a nice girl in a way—some kind of a protegee of Aunt Helen's. She is always throwing them together and I know nothing would please her more than for Reggie to rise to the bait."

"Aunt Helen's impossible!" flashed Mavis, her indignation rising. "Does she imagine she can arrange everybody's affairs for them? You'll be telling me next that she has a prospective husband lined up for you!"

"Oh, but she has!" Brenda coloured slightly. "He's a widower with two small children and badly in need of someone to mother them, poor man. He's a minor canon at the cathedral and Aunt Helen is convinced that one day he will become bishop. There is nothing she would like better than to be able to refer to me as 'my niece, the bishop's wife, you know!'"

"It seems to me it's high time you shook the dust of Croxford from your dainty feet," she said. "The trouble with people like Aunt Helen is that they can never see any point of view but their own. One thing, however—I can't see you as a bishop's

wife, prospective or otherwise. I wish——"

The arrival of her husband cut her short. "I need fortifying with huge cups of tea," he said, dropping his hand on his wife's shoulder with an air of pretended weariness. "I ran into that woman who lives at the top of the High Street—Miss Jones, isn't it? She's been telling me what is expected of me as the owner of Grove Lodge. She was surrounded by fierce dogs whose chief ambition in life was to take large lumps out of my legs. Was I glad to escape?"

"You poor darling," laughed Mavis, leading the way into the house. "She tried to sell me a Boxer pup the other day and I said I would ask you about it. We ought to have a dog here, I suppose."

"Idiot!" said his wife. "Seriously, though, I should love a Boxer, Jock. They are so adorably ugly and look so fierce, even though they are not."

Jock turned to Brenda.

"Isn't that just like a woman?" he sighed resignedly. "Adorably ugly! I suppose she wants something about that is the opposite to me."

NEXT morning Brenda got up early and went downstairs.

Avoiding the front door, which was bolted at the top and bottom, she let herself out through the door which opened off the dining room.

She stooped over a budding rose-tree, reading the name "Peace" on the metal tag fastened to one of the branches.

Peace! How well it symbolised the quietude of the surrounding park-land.

As she went she thought of the conversation that had taken place on the terrace the previous afternoon.

Mavis might get worked up, she reflected, but she had not been brought up by someone like Aunt Helen, so that it had become almost second nature for her to fall in with her guardian's wishes. It was easy enough to advise rebellion, but not so easy to rebel. For that would mean hurting someone who had, she had to admit, been kind to her.

Subconsciously she found herself thinking of Martin Sheldrake, wondering what made a man like that enter the church.

She smiled reflectively at something Jock Campbell had said. He had described the young vicar as "a muscular Christian".

He had certainly been annoyed by their late arrival in church. Not knowing the true reason he had obviously looked upon it as a deliberate act of discourtesy.

She came at last to the crest of the rise and looked down into a wide valley, with a farm about half a mile away.

Standing there, drinking in the scene and revelling in the intoxicating sense of space, she heard the sound of footsteps and looking round, saw the man she had been thinking about. She had time to notice that he was wearing grey flannels and a sports coat and had an R.A.F. tie in place of his clerical collar.

"Ah, good morning, Miss Gaysford!" Martin greeted her smilingly. "You are up and about very early!"

"It was such a lovely morning I decided to do a little exploring on my own account," she smiled in return.

"It is the best time in the country," he said. "I often put in two or three miles before breakfast. It helps one to keep fit."

"I wouldn't have said you were in need of additional exercise, Mr. Sheldrake," she said amusedly. "Major Campbell tells me you have a large and very scattered parish."

"True enough," he laughed. "Even so I am very fond of my early morning canter. Are you staying long?" he added.

"A fortnight," she answered, a note of

regret creeping into her tone. "I live with my aunt in Croxford and have to be back by the fifteenth. Do you know Croxford at all?"

"Slightly," he said. "I spent a week-end there two years ago—a friend of mine was being ordained. It's a nice old place."

"Yes," she murmured, and drew a deep breath. "But not like this, though. I can't imagine anyone ever feeling cramped for space here."

He regarded her quizzically.

"Does that mean you feel cramped, then, Miss Gaysford? I should have thought that you would find plenty of scope for your energies in a town like Croxford."

"But then you don't know my aunt," she said.

"I see," he remarked drily.

More to change the subject than for anything else she and impulsively.

"By the way I owe you an apology for what happened on Sunday, Mr. Sheldrake," she said. "We were very late for morning service and I'm afraid it was all my fault."

"Oh?" He queried, with a lift of his eyebrows.

"We would have been in time but a baby hedgehog ran across the road in front of us," she explained. "I was afraid it might be hurt so I asked Major Campbell to stop the car. Then I got out and carried the poor little thing into a field and let it go again. May be you think that was quite unnecessary?"

"My dear Miss Gaysford, whether it was necessary or not is beside the point," he said. "It is the motive behind your action that counts." His eyes twinkled merrily. "In the circumstances you may consider yourself completely forgiven."

"Now you are laughing at me," she said reproachfully.

"Really, I am doing nothing of the kind," he said. "As it happens, I am grateful to you for explaining. To tell you the truth, I sometimes get quite annoyed when people arrive late for church as I was yesterday. People are far too casual nowadays and are apt to regard God's house as a convenient venue for baptisms, weddings and funerals—very little else! Rightly or wrongly, I feel that if the church *does* mean anything to them at all, they should give it their complete respect in all matters."

"Oh, I quite agree," Brenda declared fervently. "I was very sorry indeed to have made us all late. I wouldn't like you to think that—that they were casual in that way. They are not."

By the end of the week Brenda acknowledged to herself that she and Martin Sheldrake had become good friends.

Mavis Campbell had not been slow to notice the way things were going and she did all in her power to encourage the association, much to the amusement of her husband, who accused her of becoming a matchmaker.

Mavis smiled.

"Leave it to me, my lad," she said mysteriously. "I think I can manage Aunt Helen."

Thereafter a brief exchange of correspondence followed and Miss Capell graciously consented to her niece extending her visit for another month.

"I told her I was rather lonely and said what a wonderful help you had been," Mavis told Brenda, when they received her aunt's reply. "It's true, whatever you may say."

"You're a dear, Mavis," Brenda said warmly. "I only hope your conscience doesn't prick you, that's all. You—you really do want me to stay?"

Mavis gave her an impulsive hug.

"Of course I do, my dear child. I wouldn't

have braved Aunt Helen's wrath otherwise. Not that she was at all wrathful," she added thoughtfully. "Quite the reverse, in fact. I really must pay her a visit one of these fine days."

"She'd like that," said Brenda. "I know she is only a half-cousin of your mother's, but she looks on you as her niece. She was angry when you defied everybody and married Jock," she added, laughing.

"Well, she wasn't the only one," said Mavis, with a reminiscent smile.

"What do you mean?" Brenda frowned.

"Aunt Helen is like a great many others—selfish without knowing it," remarked Mavis sagely. "Quite different from Martin Sheldrake," she added casually.

Brenda refused to be drawn, however and Mavis hid a smile.

Privately, as she had confided to Jock, she entertained great hopes of the young vicar. Not that she had much to go on.

True, he and Brenda seemed quite friendly and had been seen together a number of times.

Martin had persuaded Jock to take a place on the church council. Mavis and Brenda had been to tea at the vicarage and met Miss Sheldrake, quite seven years her brother's senior.

It was during that last visit that they had cleared up a small mystery.

It was a photograph of Martin in R.A.F. padre's uniform which had supplied the clue.

Remembering what Reggie had told them, Mavis had probed delicately and learned that it had been Martin who had rescued the pilot of the crashed plane. He had been awarded the B.E.M., Miss Sheldrake had told them.

"Don't you find it rather dull here after working in a big London parish, Mr. Sheldrake?" Mavis had enquired artlessly. "One usually associates a quiet country living with someone much older and more sedate."

Martin had smiled.

"You know, I thought the same when the living was first offered me and there isn't much doubt that I would have refused it but for my doctor—and the bishop, Mrs. Campbell," he answered. "Now I am very glad that I did not. There is a lot of work to be done in a place like Rexton—far more than one would imagine, believe me. And it is all the same work, wherever one does it."

"If I can, I will," had said Mavis surprised. "What is it?"

"It's the old, old story of a trusting girl and an unscrupulous man, I'm afraid," he had sighed. "She is the daughter of a very worthy couple living in that cottage at the end of Ivy Lane. I have done my best but the scoundrel has repudiated his responsibilities and the poor girl is desperate. I thought, perhaps, if you could take her under your wing—she has had to leave her job and come home, of course—but she could do light housework until she goes into the maternity hospital. Afterwards——"

"Poor child," had said Mavis, feelingly. "Of course I will do what I can, Mr. Sheldrake. I will go and see her this very evening."

"That is most kind of you, Mrs. Campbell. Her name is Edna Pope and she is only seventeen. Quite a nice girl, as a matter of fact. If she were given cause to feel that someone like you did not condemn her for what has happened it might make all the difference."

"I quite understand," had said Mavis, with genuine sympathy. "When I hear of cases like this I often think of those words—'There, but for the grace of God, go I.'"

He had smiled, and Miss Sheldrake had tactfully changed the subject.

On their way home Mavis had been exceedingly thoughtful, saying little.

"What are you thinking of, Mavis?" Brenda had asked. "Edna Pope?"

"No." Mavis had shaken her head, a far-away expression in her eyes. "I was thinking of Martin Sheldrake. When one talks to him for any length of time one knows what is meant by the expression *a good man*. No wonder he is looked up to and respected."

BROKEN IMAGES

THE next afternoon Brenda emerged from the woods behind Grove Lodge and took the path which led over the downs.

She had left Mavis to go to a meeting of the local branch of the Women's Institute and as Jock had driven over to visit an army acquaintance, who had settled a few miles away, Brenda had decided to go for a walk.

Pausing to admire the view, her hair tossed by the wind, she might have been the very embodiment of the spirit of youth. She seemed to express a challenge to the new Elizabethan age that had been ushered in—the age of scientific discoveries which could make or mar the future of mankind.

So at least thought the young vicar as he wheeled his bicycle up the path on the other side of the hill, his approach unseen.

Then his foot caught a stone and Brenda turned, a flush of recognition coming into her cheeks.

"Good afternoon, Miss Gaysford," Martin smilingly greeted her. "This is a most unexpected pleasure for the second time. I imagined you would have gone with your cousin to the W.I. meeting."

"To be quite honest, I didn't feel like it to-day," she confessed, with a little laugh. "Is that very remiss of me? After all, I am only a bird of passage—it isn't as if I belonged here."

He smiled whimsically.

"I can't say that I altogether blame you," he said. "You would be surprised if I told you how often I am tempted to play truant from some of my duties. I find the days simply aren't long enough to fit them all in."

"I can imagine that," Brenda said shyly. "Mavis was telling me of some of the things you have done since you came here, Mr. Sheldrake. You have quite evidently accomplished wonders."

Modestly he said—

"I have done what I could, Miss Gaysford. The parish had been sadly neglected for some years—I hardly like to think how long it was since there was a confirmation, and there was nothing for the young people at all. Now we have quite a good youth centre and a Dramatic Guild and next week there is going to be a get-together concert in the parish hall."

He went on to tell her of some of his earlier difficulties—the absence of anything like a choir, lack of a good organist.

"It must have been heart-breaking," Brenda said, when he paused. "I don't know how you have managed to get everybody to agree."

"Oh, I haven't, I'm sorry to say," he answered, with a rueful laugh. "There are still some groups at daggers drawn and sometimes I despair of ever reconciling their differences. It was really a case of trying to act as a buffer and prevent head-on collisions between people of widely differing viewpoints. The fact that we now have a good choir, and that the church is reasonably full each Sunday, indicates a measure of success, I suppose, but there is still a long way to go."

"It isn't easy, though," he went on, enlarging. "Even so simple a thing as the order of service can set opposing factions at loggerheads. One dear old lady told me that she didn't hold with one wearing elaborate vestments—the previous vicar apparently hadn't—and because I did so she was not coming to church any more. In vain I pointed out that we go to church to worship God and that wearing vestments or not was immaterial. She still hasn't come to church."

"Well, it just proves that you can't please everybody," smiled Brenda.

"True," he agreed. "Of course, one can compromise but it always seems to me that compromises are an indication of failure. Personally, I prefer to set a course and steer by it. Either one's beliefs are worth fighting for or they mean nothing at all."

"Don't you sometimes wonder if it is the right course?" she enquired. Then, realising how her words could be taken, added—"I don't mean that I think you are wrong. Only, I know for myself I often have to stop and ask if something I am doing is right or if I merely think it is."

He gave her a quick, searching glance, then said simply—"One can always pray."

They walked down the hill to the village.

The church was very old, with a Norman spire and a Saxon doorway. Martin told her that they were trying to raise the funds to have the belfry repaired, as dry rot had appeared in the structure.

"It's going to cost nearly four hundred pounds," he said ruefully. "The Diocesan Fund will help, of course—in fact, they will pay the lot if it is necessary, but they have so many calls on their funds that I would like to raise the whole amount through our own efforts. Up to date we have collected a little over seventy pounds!"

"Major Campbell has been very generous," he went on. "He gave me a cheque for thirty pounds the other day, and we ought to raise about twenty-five with the jumble sale next month. But it is only a drop in the ocean, so to speak."

Brenda smiled introspectively.

"You love the church, don't you, Martin?" she asked. Then she blushed furiously at her use of his first name.

"I do," he said quietly. "To me it is more than just an edifice—it is a symbol of man's everlasting struggle against the forces of evil." He paused a moment, then added slowly: "You called me Martin just now. Does that mean you look on me as a friend, Brenda?"

She met his eyes, blushed, and looked away hurriedly.

"I—I suppose so, Martin. I—it just slipped out. Please don't ask me to explain."

They walked on slowly, the silence that fell after her simple admission holding nothing of embarrassment for either of them, for it seemed as if, quite suddenly, they had come to that stage in their companionship when words, as such, were not necessary.

Brenda turned.

"You have told me a lot about yourself," she said reflectively. "More than you think, perhaps. You look on your work as a matter of dedication, so that you would never allow anything else to stand in the way. That's true, isn't it?"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I suppose it is, in a sense. I haven't consciously thought about it, though. A clergyman isn't like a doctor or, say, a dentist. One has to be single-minded and fully alive to one's responsibilities all the time. Otherwise you'll fail and do more harm than good."

"But . . . you don't have to discard everything, surely?" she asked, after a moment. "What about personal relation-

ships? Have they no place in your scheme of things?"

"You mean marriage?" He looked surprised. "I haven't given the matter serious consideration, but since you ask, I don't think a priest should marry. I have seen too many good men torn to pieces by divided loyalties—by worry and anxiety over money—trying to make ends meet on a meagre stipend—all the things that go with marriage. They're not all like that, I grant you, but the risk is there."

"I see."

The level rays of the setting sun filtering through the trees fell on her face, showing it to be heart-breakingly lovely.

Her presence held Martin in a spell that he wished could be prolonged for ever.

"What happens if you fall in love?" she added.

"That isn't at all likely to happen."

"Oh?" she said disbelievingly, her eyes demure. "But what if you *did*?" she persisted.

He shrugged.

"I can't answer that. I have no doubt that in the unlikely event of such a thing happening I should be given the strength to do what is right. At a pinch"—a smile, half-humorous, half-sad, touched his lips—"I could always remove myself from temptation."

"Run away, you mean?"

"Not at all." He moved his shoulders restively, somewhat embarrassed. "It is purely a question of doing what one believes to be right. You said just now that I looked upon my work as a matter of dedication. Well, so I do and—it isn't much use doing a thing by halves." He propped his bicycle up inside the gate. "I'll walk back with you as far as the Lodge, if I may. There's just time before my vestry meeting at seven."

She shook her head, an enigmatic smile breaking out on her face for a moment.

"Oh, please don't bother," she insisted. "I know how busy you are and it isn't really far. Good night, Martin."

"Er—good night, Brenda."

She nodded and was gone, walking quickly away and round the corner.

A FEW mornings later Martin Sheldrake was reading his letters, while eating a hurried breakfast, and came to the last envelope on the pile his sister had placed next to his plate.

It was a stout manilla packet of the kind that can be purchased at a post office with the registration fee already paid. It was addressed in block capitals to The Rev. Martin Sheldrake and marked "Personal".

"Hullo! A registered letter! Now, I wonder who that's from?" He turned the envelope over but the space for the sender's name and address on the back had not been filled in.

His sister regarded him with amused interest.

"Why not open it and see, dear?" she suggested, re-filling his cup from the coffee pot. "It looks exciting."

Martin smiled and inserted a knife under the flap, cutting it open. Then he shook the contents on to the tablecloth and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

It was a thick bundle of one pound notes together with a single sheet of notepaper. Printed on it, in the same block capitals as had been used on the envelope, were the simple words "For the belfry. From a well-wisher."

"From a well-wisher!" he said in a dazed fashion. "Who on earth could it be?"

He counted the notes rapidly, and then a second time to make sure he was correct and looked up, blank wonder in his eyes.

"A hundred pounds," he said, in awed

tones. "A hundred pounds! What a magnificent gesture on someone's part."

"Evidently someone who wishes to hide his or her light under a bushel," said Miss Sheldrake, reaching out a hand and taking up the envelope. She studied it for a moment. "H'm! The post-mark is Broadfield. That doesn't tell us much."

"It's more than that, my dear," said Martin excitedly. "It means we can start work on the belfry almost at once. With this money, and what we have already raised, we have more than half the amount needed. In the circumstances I am quite sure the Diocesan office will advance the rest, to be paid off as and when we can manage to do so! I must call a church council meeting at once."

He hastily finished his meal and hurried off to telephone, after locking the bank-notes away for safe keeping.

When she got up to clear the table his sister saw that he had left the envelope and the accompanying note beside his place. She picked up the latter and studied it for a moment, a curious expression coming into her eyes.

Then—

"I wonder!" she mused, half aloud. "It's more than possible. Well, well, time will tell, I suppose. At least, I sincerely hope so."

IT was a busy day for the young clergyman, who set off on a round of visits after calling a church council for seven o'clock that evening.

One of his parishioners, a lorry driver, had been taken to hospital for an emergency operation and to Martin had fallen the task of arranging for the care of his wife and children.

This afternoon he was calling to tell Mrs. Rattigan that a car would come to take her to visit her husband at seven, and to make arrangements for someone to look after the children during her absence.

He knocked at the door of the cottage, which was opened by Mrs. Rattigan, a pale-featured, untidy woman, with two small children clinging to her apron.

"Oh, it's Mr. Sheldrake!" she muttered in confusion, stepping back into the narrow hall and opening the door wider. "Please come in, sir. I'm afraid we're all at sixes and sevens, what with one thing and another. Have you seen Jim?" she added anxiously.

"Yes, Mrs. Rattigan, I saw him last night," Martin replied cheerfully, laying down his hat. "You haven't anything to worry about—he has come through the operation splendidly and the doctors are very pleased with his progress. I came to tell you about the arrangements for you to visit him this evening."

"Oh, thank you, sir." Her thin lips quivered. "You've been more than kind. I don't know as how we'll ever repay you."

"Nonsense," he said smilingly. "We are all in this world to help each other. How are the children?"

"Oh, they're all right, sir," Mrs. Rattigan replied, with a wan smile. "They're too young to really understand what it's all about, I'm thankful to say, though if it hadn't been for Miss Gaysford I don't know what I should have done."

"Miss Gaysford?" Martin echoed in surprise. "Has she been here?"

"She's here now, sir. She's been every day since Jim was taken off in the ambulance. Edna Pope is working at Grove Lodge and told Mrs. Campbell about us and she and Miss Gaysford came to see what they could do. Mrs. Campbell has gone now. They've been ever so kind, sir."

She opened the kitchen door and when Martin reached it he paused on the thresh-

hold, looking at the scene in astonishment.

Two elder children were seated at the table having their tea, while Brenda, in a skirt and pullover, was feeding the baby she held in her lap, a feeding bottle clasped in one small hand.

Looking up she met Martin's gaze and the colour rose in a slow tide from her throat to her temples.

Then—

"Oh!" she murmured. "It's you!"

"Well, well," he smiled. "I have just been hearing your praises sung by Mrs. Rattigan. Evidently you prefer to do good by stealth."

"Can I offer you a cup of tea, Mr. Sheldrake? It's just been made," said Mrs. Rattigan.

"Thank you," said Martin gratefully. He sat down and ruffled the hair of the small boy seated next to his fair-haired sister at the table. "Well, young shaver, and how are you? Been getting up to any mischief lately?"

"He's been getting up to mischief, all right, sir," said Mrs. Rattigan, in a resigned tone. "Fair leads me a dance, does Michael. Still, I'd rather have 'em that way, shows they're healthy."

The boy giggled and glanced at his sister, who burst out laughing at some childish secret shared.

"Auntie Brenda's been telling us fairy tales," she said, in a piping treble. "All about a funny man called Rumble—Rumple—"

"Rumplestiltskin?" suggested Martin, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, that's right," the child nodded, her eyes dancing. "He was—"

"You be quiet now, Susan, and get on with your tea," said her mother. "Miss Brenda didn't cut all that bread for you to waste." Mrs. Rattigan placed a cup of tea at Martin's side. "They didn't say as when Jim would be coming back, I suppose, sir?"

"You have no need to worry now," said Martin, hastening to reassure her. "I have already spoken to Mr. Winstanley, and he has promised to put Jim on light work for at least six months. Now, what about to-night?"

"Oh, that will be all right, Mr. Sheldrake," the woman answered quickly.

"That's splendid," Martin said heartily. "Mr. Jordison will be here with his car at seven sharp. Visiting hours are from seven-thirty till eight fifteen so you will have plenty of time. I needn't tell you how eagerly Jim is looking forward to your visit, I suppose," he added genially.

Mrs. Rattigan smiled wanly. Before she could reply there came the pattering of high heels on the flagged pathway and the sound of the front door opening.

"That will be Connie," Mrs. Rattigan said, brightening. "The bus must've been early."

The door opened and a pretty, fair-haired girl of about eighteen entered the room. She was neatly dressed and had an air of quiet competence that impressed Brenda.

"Oh, hullo, everybody," the newcomer said brightly. She glanced from Martin to Brenda, smiling impartially at both.

Martin held out his hand.

"Good evening, Connie," he said. "How are you? And your mother?"

"Oh, mum's quite well, thank you, Mr. Sheldrake," she answered. "She was coming, too, but dad's in bed with a bad cold."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. He turned to Brenda. "You two haven't met," he went on. "Connie Eastlake—Miss Gaysford. Miss Gaysford has been staying at Grove Lodge and has been helping your aunt, Connie."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Gaysford," Connie Eastlake murmured, looking at

Brenda in a puzzled fashion. Then her face cleared. "I've seen you before, haven't I, Miss Gaysford? You came into Broadfield post office yesterday and sent a registered letter. I remember it because of its being addressed to Mr. Sheldrake!"

There was a moment of painfully embarrassed silence.

Martin was the first to recover.

"Well, it's a small world," he remarked, smilingly. "But now I think I must really be going. Don't forget, Mrs. Rattigan—if there is anything you require please let me know. Are you coming, Brenda?"

"Yes," Brenda hesitated, as if she had half a mind to say no, but turned away and picked up her coat.

Mrs. Rattigan accompanied them to the door, stammering her thanks for all that had been done.

Martin wheeled his bicycle out of the gate and caught Brenda up. The sun was setting and the blue shadows were already creeping across the downs.

Once again Martin was the first to break the silence.

"I wondered who my unknown benefactor was when I received that registered packet this morning," he said quietly. "I never dreamt it might be you, of course! My grateful thanks would be rather out of place, I presume?"

"I—there's nothing to thank me for," said Brenda lamely. "It was some money I had put by from—from my allowance. I never spend it all and I thought it might come in useful. That's all."

"Yet you didn't want me to know you had given it," he said, as if stating an unchallengeable fact. "I wonder why?"

Brenda dug her hands deep into the pockets of her coat.

"I was afraid you would refuse to accept it," she said flatly.

"As, of course, I should have done!" He paused and they walked on in silence.

Presently he sighed.

"There isn't anything I can do about it now, though, I'm sorry to say. I have told the committee and, in fact, there has been a church council meeting called for this evening to discuss your most generous gift. It means the work of repairing the belfry can be put in hand almost at once."

"That is what I wanted to happen."

She hesitated a moment.

"Martin, please don't be cross with me," she murmured.

"Cross with you?" He gave her a whimsical glance. "Why should I be? I am puzzled as to why you thought it necessary to send the money in the way you did, that's all."

"I've already told you—I was afraid you wouldn't accept it," she said. "It—it's nothing very much, anyway."

"I disagree. A hundred pounds is a great deal of money. I wonder you can afford it."

"Well, I can." She shrugged impatiently.

"The allowance I get from the trust fund, under my dead father's will, is more than I need so there is always something over at the end of each quarter. I had the money in the bank and it seemed a pity to let it just lie there."

"I see." He stared into space, frowning a little. "That's no reason why you should give it all away, though. You ought to save for a rainy day!"

"I do save. Quite a bit," she said defensively. "In any case, when I am twenty-one—"

She caught herself up but it was too late. "So that's the position, is it?" he said slowly. "You're quite an unpredictable person, aren't you, Brenda? You never told me you were an heiress!"

"I'm not!" she flashed, going scarlet.

"Don't think I am ungracious," Martin

said, speaking with slow deliberation. "It's the last thing I want to be, I assure you. The fact remains, you sent that money as a result of what I told you the other night—well, how do you think I feel?"

At length she spoke, choosing her words with care.

"Once you said that explanations were unnecessary between friends, Martin. Isn't it enough that I wanted to help and took the most practical way of doing so?"

"Not quite," he replied evenly. "Naturally, I am deeply grateful, and you may rest assured the money will be put to very good use. Unfortunately, you have placed me in a somewhat delicate position, for I have already told the members of the committee about the gift. That being so, perhaps it would be best to say no more about it."

Brenda stared in front of her, her eyes dark with sadness.

"You hate being under an obligation to me, don't you, Martin?" she said drearily. "I thought that if—one liked a person enough, other things didn't count, especially stupid things like money. No doubt you feel very noble and self-sufficient, but one of these days you'll wake up and discover the truth about yourself. You haven't meant to, I know, but you've shown me where I stand."

"I apologise," he said stiffly, a dull flush creeping up under his tan. "I had no right to criticise your motive as I appear to have done. At the same time you must realise—"

"I realise just what a self-deluding little fool I've been," Brenda interrupted shortly, her mouth twisting into a little crooked smile. "But don't worry—I'm not likely to make the same mistake twice. Please don't bother to see me home. It isn't dark yet and I know the way quite well. Besides, it wouldn't do to be late for your meeting, would it, Martin?"

She turned and walked off without a backward glance.

For a moment he was tempted to run after her, to beg her forgiveness, to throw himself upon that quality of mercy which comes with true love and understanding, but it was too late.

CONFESSIONS

BACK in Croxford, Brenda tried to pick up the threads of her old life, to go on as if nothing had happened. But it was far from easy.

Her aunt was a very energetic woman who liked to keep things in her own hands, so there was very little for Brenda to do to keep her mind off other things.

Reggie came home for the week-end, and brother and sister went for a long walk together on the Saturday afternoon. When they sat on a stile to rest, Reggie took out his case and lit a cigarette, staring into space for a moment with a thoughtful expression on his good looking face.

"What's up, sis?" he asked at length, breaking a long silence. "Don't tell me there isn't anything because I won't believe you. There's something on your mind, what is it?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand, Reggie," she evaded, looking away. "In any case, I don't think I want to talk about it."

"How truly feminine," he smiled. "In the first place, you can't be sure I wouldn't understand, secondly you'll go sick inside if you don't talk about it to someone. Think I'm blind?" he ended.

"All right," she said, with a choky little laugh. "As you are so keen—I'm in love."

"Gosh! Is that all?" His face cleared. "I thought it was something really serious. Who's the lucky chap?"

"He wouldn't consider himself at all

lucky if he knew," said Brenda, with a wry twist of her lips. "He—he's frightened of marriage. It might interfere with his work, you see."

"What a rum type!" frowned her brother.

"Do I know him?"

Brenda nodded and said—

"Martin Sheldrake."

"You mean that parson fellow?" he ejaculated.

"You needn't say it in that tone of voice," said Brenda crossly.

"Sorry, old girl," He gave her an apologetic grin. "Anyway, what's the matter with him? I mean to say, you're not exactly repulsive, you know."

Brenda cupped her chin in her hands and smiled wanly.

"I've told you. Martin doesn't think clergymen should marry. Apart from that, I did something rather stupid and upset him, so that we practically quarrelled."

She went on to tell of the events leading up to the afternoon when Mrs. Rattigan's niece had revealed that it was she who had sent the registered packet containing the money to Martin.

"H'm that *wasn't* one of your best efforts," Reggie commented. "Whether you intended to or not, you put him under the kind of obligation no man likes being put under, especially to a girl."

Reggie threw away his cigarette and patted her hand. Brother and sister had grown very close to one another since the death of their parents, and those who knew Reggie Gaysford only as a dare-devil pilot would have been surprised at the tenderness in his voice.

"Cheer up, dear," he said sympathetically. "You've got to give the chap time to throw off his blinkers. If he cares for you at all he's bound to miss you when he realises you've left him flat. Chaps of Martin Sheldrake's type don't change their ideas all in a moment, but when they do, it's usually for good."

REGGIE went back to his base two days later, leaving Brenda somewhat comforted. She had not realised, until the talk with him, how much she had been in need of someone in whom to confide.

The dean's garden party was an annual affair, one of the social high-lights of the city, and everybody who was anybody went.

Brenda was one of the helpers and worked hard for two hours until she was relieved by the wife of one of the officiating clergy.

She made her way out of the tent into the sunshine, glad of the break, and went in search of her aunt. Miss Capel was deep in conversation with the dean.

"Ah, good afternoon, Brenda! How are you, my dear child? It seems a very long time since I had the pleasure of seeing you."

"Oh, really? That must have been a nice change from Croxford," said Dr. Worley, his eyes twinkling. "Where were you staying, may I ask?"

"Rexton, in Sussex, Doctor Worley. My cousin and her husband have a house there," Brenda explained.

"Rexton? Rexton? Let me see now! Ah, of course! That's where young Martin Sheldrake is vicar, isn't it? You met him, of course?"

"Yes, I met Mr. Sheldrake." Brenda took a firm hold of herself. "He—he is very popular," she added, somewhat tardily, at a loss for something adequate to say.

"I have no doubt he is," beamed Dr. Worley. "I remember him quite well—he did some very good work when he was a curate in London. I venture to think he is now going to be missed."

Brenda's heart seemed to skip a beat.

She was uneasily conscious of her aunt's eyes on her face, and felt her cheeks go cold.

"Missed?" she echoed, in a strained voice. "You—you mean Mr. Sheldrake is leaving Rexton, Doctor Worley?"

"Yes, didn't you know? He has asked to be released from his duties in order to take up missionary work abroad."

"It was a shock to you to learn that the young man Dr. Worley mentioned was thinking of leaving Rexton, wasn't it, Brenda?" said her aunt later.

"Yes," she said, after a moment. "I—I had no idea that Martin—that Mr. Sheldrake contemplated leaving, Aunt Helen. He never said anything when I was there."

"Evidently a sudden decision," replied her aunt somewhat tartly. "In my experience young men who make up their minds suddenly like that usually do so for some very good reason. From what you told me I gathered that he had only recently accepted the living at Rexton."

"Are you in love with him?" she demanded bluntly, her eyes searching the girl's face.

Brenda went scarlet. It was one thing confiding in Reggie, but quite another submitting to her aunt's forthright questioning.

"I—I—we became friends," she said, stammering a little. "That was all. In any case, it wouldn't matter whether I was or not. Martin doesn't believe in marriage. At least, not where he himself is concerned."

"More fool he, then," said Miss Capell drily. She gave her niece a sympathetic glance. "Don't you think it might be a good idea if you were to tell me all about it?" she went on. "There is a seat over there where we can be fairly certain of not being interrupted. I have seen for some time past that you are unhappy and I have, naturally, wondered why."

IT was a long time before Brenda went to sleep that night; she had plenty to keep her awake. In listening to the girl's confidences about Martin, Aunt Helen had revealed surprising tenderness and understanding.

"I have tried to bring you up to be self-reliant so that you could make your own decisions," Miss Capell had said, in her dry way. "The man I loved was killed in the First World War so that I never married and had children of my own. To a certain extent you and Reggie took their place. I know there have been times when you considered I was being unreasonable, even unjust"—she had smiled thinly—"but I have only tried to safeguard you from the pitfalls that lie in wait for youth and inexperience."

"You mean like when you refused to let me take up nursing, Aunt Helen?"

Miss Capell had nodded.

"That is one instance," she had said. "No doubt you thought I was being unreasonable then, but I knew you better than I think you knew yourself. In my opinion you were temperamentally unsuited for work of that kind—you are far too sensitive, for one thing, and I know how frustrating it can be to want to put the world to rights and not be able to do so. As the wife of a man like Martin Sheldrake you will be able to do far more for the good of humanity than you could ever hope to do as a nurse!"

"Martin doesn't want to marry me. He doesn't want to marry anyone," she had said protestingly, her face scarlet.

"He may change his ideas," Miss Capell had replied, with an enigmatic smile. "That is, if he is truly in love with you, as you seem to think he is. Anyway, we can talk about it later—I see Mr. Whittaker

looking for us, so perhaps we had better go."

Miss Capell had smiled reassuringly.

"I won't beard the lion in his den, if that is what you mean," she had answered amusedly, leaving Brenda to conjecture uselessly what she really did mean.

THIS IS OUR LOVE

IT was a week later when Martin rode along the lane, and getting off his bicycle, propped it up against the wall of Mrs. Rattigan's cottage.

From inside a sudden squeal of childish laughter came to his ears and when he knocked and entered, he stood in the narrow hall for a moment wondering what was going on.

Then the kitchen door opened and Brenda appeared.

"Oh, good evening, Martin," she murmured confusedly, the rich colour staining her cheeks. "I—I didn't expect to see you. I thought it was Connie."

"And I certainly didn't expect to see you, my dear Brenda," he returned. "When did you come?"

"I arrived this morning on a short visit," she said. "As Mavis was going to tea with some friends of Jock's I thought I would walk over to see how Mrs. Rattigan was getting on."

"I see," he remarked, following her into the kitchen, where he was greeted rapturously by the children. The baby, newly-fed and washed, crooned happily in its cot.

"Mrs. Rattigan wanted to do some shopping so I said I would get the children's tea while she was out," Brenda hastened to explain, flushing a little under his questioning gaze. "Isn't it wonderful to think that her husband will be home again next week?"

"Yes, indeed. He has made a remarkable recovery," Martin said absently.

Truth to tell, he was still suffering from the shock of seeing her open the door. Obsessed with the ideal of service, dedicating himself to a cause he regarded as sublime, he had found it difficult to reorient his ideals, to enlarge his conception of life so that it might hold room for the girl who stood smiling at him across the width of Mrs. Rattigan's kitchen.

And then, when it was too late, he had realised what he had thrown away.

Now—

"I imagined you were still in Croxford," he said, breaking the short silence that followed his last remark. "I saw Mrs. Campbell the day before yesterday and she didn't mention that you were coming."

"She didn't know then," Brenda said, with a slightly embarrassed laugh. "I telephoned her yesterday and asked if I could come for a week." She lifted a cup and saucer off the dresser and placed them on the tablecloth. "I've just made some tea, Martin. Would you like a cup?"

"Thank you," he said, somewhat at a loss. He sat down and put an arm around the smallest girl. "Did you say you were expecting Connie?" he added.

"Yes. She comes over three times a week while Mrs. Rattigan goes to the hospital, but I suppose you know all about that," Brenda replied, filling his cup and passing it to him.

"Auntie Brenda has been telling some more fairy stories," the little girl confided, nestling close to Martin. "One was about a prince on a white horse."

"And I suppose he married the princess and they lived happily ever after?" smiled Martin.

"She didn't finish," murmured his hearer sadly. "You came."

"Oh, that's a pity," said Martin. "Never mind, dear. I'm sure Auntie Brenda will finish the story if we ask her nicely. I would like to hear it, too."

"Some other time, darling," said Brenda hastily, her colour deepening. "Besides, here comes mummy. She will be wanting her tea."

A little later Martin wheeled his bicycle out into the road, where Brenda awaited him, her hands in the pockets of her swagger coat as he had seen her last. She was smiling a little uncertainly for the memory of their last walk together was uppermost in both their minds.

"It was a great surprise finding you here," Martin observed, as they set off. "I must say you seemed very much at home," he added, with a smile.

Brenda laughed.

She was about to say something a little pointed then changed her mind.

"You look very tired," she said instead.

"Have you been working hard?"

"There has been a lot to do," he sighed.

"We have had a lot of illness in the parish, as well as other things. I presume you noticed that the work of repairing the belfry has begun?"

"Yes, I saw the scaffolding," she said.

There was a little silence. Then—

"Martin!"

"Yes?" He raised his eyebrows.

"Please don't be angry with me again but there is something important I want to ask you."

"I've never been angry with you, my dear girl," he said quietly. "I was angry with myself that last time, and I can only apologise for the way I behaved. It was boorish, to say the least."

"It doesn't matter." She made a brief gesture, then looked directly at him. "Is it true that you are giving up the living here in order to go abroad?"

He betrayed his surprise.

"Quite true, but how did you know?" he said.

"Dr. Worley mentioned it. I said I had been here on a visit and he asked if I had met you. I don't know how he knew, though."

"Oh, he probably learned about it from one source or another," Martin said with a shrug. "Rexton isn't in the same diocese, but I knew the dean when he was in the Consistory Council in London. I daresay someone from the diocesan office mentioned it to him." He shrugged again. "It doesn't matter. It will be public property in a few days, I daresay."

"You mean"—her lips trembled—"that the bishop has given you permission to go?"

"Not yet. But I have no doubt he will. It is only a matter of finding someone to take my place, you see."

There was another little silence before she spoke again.

"Why are you going, Martin?" she asked, in a low voice. "I thought you were satisfied that there was work to be done here?"

"So there is, but it is work that any competent parish priest can do," he replied. "Missionary work has always appealed to me and—well—there it is."

"I see," she murmured.

Then, giving herself a little mental shake she looked at him.

"If I ask you a question would you answer it truthfully, Martin?" she enquired, her breath coming a little faster.

He studied her for a moment, considering. "I'll try to, of course, Brenda," he said quietly. "What is it you want to know?"

She drew a deep breath.

"Are you really going abroad because you want to do missionary work—or is it because you think it necessary to remove

yourself from—temptation?" she asked slowly.

For a moment he did not move or speak.

"That—that's a question that doesn't require an answer, my dear Brenda," he said at last, speaking with a curious hesitation. "Whatever my personal reasons may be, they are based on considerations I can hardly expect to weigh with you or, for that matter, anyone else."

"Are you sure they aren't, well, selfish considerations, Martin? Or do you *only* think of one point of view—your own?"

Martin stared.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, half impatiently. "I thought I had been at some pains to explain—"

"Oh, you explained everything perfectly—to your own satisfaction," she interrupted breathlessly. "But—haven't you forgotten something?"

"If I have, I don't know what it is," he said almost curtly.

She stared in front of her, her eyes holding an expression he could not analyse.

Then—

"You practically told me—though not in words—that you loved me, Martin," she said hesitantly. "That—that's true, isn't it? I mean, you do, don't you?"

For a moment he looked as if he was not going to answer her. Then—

"It would be foolish to pretend that I don't love you, Brenda. But—" He made a gesture—"there are countless reasons why I must go out of your life. Apart from the fact that I have always believed that a clergyman must be single-minded if he is to do his work properly, there remains another rather important aspect of the situation. Perhaps you have forgotten?"

"You mean—my money?" she asked.

"Yes," he said bluntly. "The kind of life I could offer you is incompatible with that to which you have been accustomed."

"If I didn't know you so well I would think you were the most selfish man alive, Martin," she said slowly. "What you have said amounts to this—that even if you hadn't got the idea firmly fixed in your head that a clergyman mustn't marry, you would be too proud to ask me to be your wife merely because my parents left me a half share in their estate. Really, it is too impossible for words."

"Impossible or not, it happens to be the way I feel," he said doggedly.

"And how do you think I feel?" cried Brenda, stung. "You have practically forced me to beg—yes, beg!—for a crumb of comfort, a word of hope, but you are so steeped in your own insufferable pride that you are blind to everything else. It hasn't occurred to you that my heart might be breaking—or that I might be lonely. Why"—with a hollow laugh—"Mrs. Rattigan is better off than I am. In spite of everything—in spite of being poor and having a struggle to make ends meet—in spite of illness and disaster—she has something that most women are prepared to give their souls to possess! You call yourself a man of God, but God means love—not blind egotistical—pride."

She turned away as she had done on a previous occasion from this very spot, choking back a sob.

But this time Martin did not let her go.

"Brenda!" he said, in a low, awed voice. "Brenda—please don't go. I—"

He looked helplessly at her, and at what she saw in his face Brenda's softened and her lips parted in a poignant little smile.

"Oh, Martin," she whispered brokenly, and the way she uttered his name stabbed him to the heart. "Oh, Martin! I do understand how you feel—I know what a terrible struggle it has all been for you—but surely nothing matters if we love each

other? If—if you are too proud to take me with my money won't you take me—without?"

Then, with a sudden movement, half of resignation, half of wonder, Martin drew her into his arms, unable to hold out any longer against the longing which permeated his entire being.

IT was a long time afterwards that they walked up the path over the downs to where the lights of the village were beginning to spring up one by one in the purple dusk.

"We mustn't linger, dearest," she said, turning to him, a little smile touching her lips. "I promised Mavis that I would be back by seven and it is now a quarter to! But there is something I want to tell you first."

"What is it, my love?" he asked tenderly. "It isn't really important, though you seemed to think so once," she answered thoughtfully. "It—it's about my money."

"I thought we had settled all that," he answered, with a ready smile. "I am quite willing to admit that I was mistaken in the attitude I took up."

She looked at him strangely, as if amused by some secret joke.

"Then—then you don't mind my being an heiress, Martin?" she enquired demurely.

"Just that," he said, a little puzzled by her manner. "I know now that these things are unimportant besides the fact that we love each other. They say pride goes before a fall and—well—I've fallen very hard."

"That's all right, then," she said, with a little sigh. "I shan't have to worry about it any more. Not that it really counts. You see, I'm not an heiress any more."

"I don't understand," he said, more puzzled than ever. "Do you mean you've given your money away?"

Brenda's lips quirked.

"I haven't any to give away," she said dreamily. "Aunt Helen told me the truth when I—when she found out why I had returned to Croxford before my visit was up. I mean, I told her about you. It appears there isn't anything left out of father's estate—even my allowance has been paid by her for the past two years! That hundred pounds I gave for the repairs

to the belfry was really her money."

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "But I thought from what you told me—"

"I know. I did, too. But the solicitor who had charge of the trust funds got into deep water in some way I don't quite understand and had been helping himself to the capital for years. When Reggie came of age he managed to raise enough to pay him out by taking money from other clients and then he tried to stave off discovery by using what was left of the trust fund. He was found out in the end—that was inevitable, I suppose—and received a long term of imprisonment. The point is—there was nothing left."

There was a short silence. Then Martin started to laugh.

At length—

"In a way I'm glad," she said. "It would have been useful, of course—there is so much one can do with money to help others—but it really isn't important any more. There—there is only one thing that worries me now."

"And what is that, my darling?" he asked teasingly.

She blushed and looked away.

"I'm afraid that, perhaps, one day you may regret that you married me."

His grip tightened.

"Look, my darling," he said quietly. "We all start off with a lot of preconceived ideas that time proves to be either wrong or unworkable."

"I hadn't met you, then," he went on whimsically, while she kept her eyes on his face, studying every change of expression. "When I did, I must confess that my ideas underwent a violent change, yet I was still afraid, for how could I guess that my love was returned?"

She flung back her head, her eyes luminous in the growing dark.

"Oh, Martin!" she whispered. "You don't know how happy you have made me."

Very humbly he bent his head and as she felt his lips on her own Brenda felt the strength of his love and knew a thrill which left her spent and breathless.

"Martin!" she whispered.

"Yes, my darling?"

"Do you know that you haven't asked me yet if I will marry you? I wonder you don't think me utterly shameless."

"On the contrary, I think you are the most honest person I know," he said tenderly. He held her very close to his heart. "However, I must make amends at once. Brenda Gaysford, will you marry me, Martin Sheldrake, bachelor of this parish?"

"I will," she said gravely. "Oh, Martin, how am I going to look at you in the light?"

THREE months later Martin stood on the crest of the downs and looked down at the girl at his side. They had returned from their honeymoon a week earlier and had spent two days in London before Martin had to report to his bishop.

Brenda had gone with him and waited at the hotel where they had put up until he came back from his interview.

"The bishop was very understanding and helpful," he had said, seating himself next to her in the deserted lounge. "I explained the whole thing to him—just what had made me send in my application and all the rest of it and he listened most patiently. In the end he suggested that it might be a good idea if I forgot I had written it!"

"I'm glad," she had said softly. "So glad, Martin. Rexton is your proper setting and it needs a man like you. I would have been quite happy to go abroad with you—you know that—but I am not going to pretend that I'm sorry it hasn't come off."

"As long as I have you, I don't care about anything else."

Now he smiled into her upturned face.

"Happy dearest?" he asked shyly.

She laughed and blushed.

"So happy I can hardly bear it, Martin," she whispered.

She put up her hands and drew his head down, kissing him of her own free will.

"God willing," she repeated dreamily.

"Oh, Martin darling, I sometimes wonder if it is all a dream and that I will wake up to find myself back in Croxford, with only a jumble sale to look forward to. Tell me it isn't."

They walked back to the vicarage together. To both of them it was already home, a place that had become hallowed for them by what it stood for and all that it meant.

THE END.

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THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

By Margot Wright

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS

"ARE you sure you'll be all right until I come home, dear?" Gillian Denham enquired, gazing anxiously at her frail-looking mother, who was seated in an armchair in front of the kitchen fire.

Gillian had recently become very concerned about Mrs. Denham's health, though her mother merely smiled and shook her head when the girl tried to make her see the doctor.

This morning, however, she looked very pale and ill, but had insisted on getting up to breakfast as usual. Gillian had persuaded her to sit by the fire with a cup of tea, and having finished her own breakfast, had cleared away and washed up, made the beds, and put a milk pudding in the oven for her mother's midday meal.

The fact that the older woman had allowed Gillian to do all this, without protest, was enough to tell the girl that her mother must be feeling rather poorly, for normally Mrs. Denham was an exceedingly

energetic woman who took a great deal of pride in keeping her home as bright as a new pin.

"Yes, thank you, dear, I'll be quite all right, so please don't worry about me," Mrs. Denham replied, summoning a wan smile. "It's nothing but one of those attacks of indigestion of mine. It will pass off presently. Now you run along, dear, or you'll be late for the office."

"Well, good-bye, dear, and take care of yourself," the girl murmured gently. "I'll be home as soon as I can, so please don't try to do too much."

With that Gillian let herself out of the house, a slim, attractive figure in a neat grey costume with a small hat to match.

"Good morning, Gillian. Can I give you a lift to the station?" a cheery voice enquired a moment later, and she glanced up to see Brian Melcott, the young man from next door, smiling at her from the window of his car.

He was a nice-looking young man, with a pleasant, open face and clear grey eyes.

Most people liked him at first sight. Gillian had known him for several years. She also knew and liked his parents, two kindly folk with no pretensions about them, who were always ready to do a good turn to anyone.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Denham had very little to do with her neighbours. Shy and reserved, she preferred to "keep herself to herself", as she expressed it. This had earned for her the reputation of being rather "stand-offish" in the suburban road where she lived. It never seemed to occur to her that Gillian might miss the society of other young people in the rather secluded life which mother and daughter led.

Nevertheless, her mother's reserve had been unable to erect a barrier between Gillian and the young man next door, who worked at a local garage.

"Thank you very much, Brian. I'd be very glad of a lift—I'm a little late this morning," Gillian answered smilingly.

"Good! Jump in, then. I'll have you at the station before you can say 'knife'."

Brian grinned, throwing open the door for her.

As they sped past rows of small, semi-detached villas, all exactly like those in which they lived, the young man remarked teasingly—

"What made you late this morning, Gillian? Don't tell me you overslept?"

The girl shook her head, and answered rather gravely.

"No, I was up earlier than usual, Brian. Mother does not seem at all well, so I wanted to do as much for her as possible before leaving for the office."

"Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that," he replied sympathetically. "It must be worrying for you to have to leave her alone all day. Would you like my mother to pop in occasionally and see if there's anything she can do for Mrs. Denham?" he added.

"Yes, I know she would, Brian, and I very much appreciate your kind offer. But—but I don't think it is necessary to put her in all that trouble," Gillian added rather lamely, knowing that her mother would certainly dislike a neighbour fussing over her.

"Well, if there's anything I can do, just give me a ring at the garage, Gillian," he suggested helpfully.

"All right, Brian, and thank you for the lift," she smiled gratefully, as the car stopped at the entrance to the Underground station.

In the train a few minutes later, Gillian's heart was still beating rather rapidly; as it always did in Brian's company. There was something so very nice about him that made her feel he was absolutely dependable in every way. There was no doubt that she liked him better than any other young man she had ever met.

Unfortunately, her mother did her best to discourage their friendship although she was quite ready to admit that Brian was a very nice young man.

Gillian sighed a little ruefully to herself. She was devoted to her mother, and was well aware that under that rather reserved manner of hers, Mrs. Denham was equally devoted to her. All the same, she could not help wishing that her mother was not quite so ambitious for her.

GILLIAN'S job as secretary to Mr. Clive Leavis, head of an important export business, was an exacting one. That morning she had to make a determined effort to concentrate when her employer was giving her dictation.

Mr. Leavis was about forty years of age, with dark hair touched with grey at the temples, and a firm, determined chin. Many of his employees went a little in awe of him, because of his rather abrupt manner, and the high standard of work he expected of them.

She spent the rest of the morning typing busily, and after lunch took the letters in for Mr. Leavis's signature.

"Is anything worrying you, Miss Denham?" he enquired suddenly, handing them back to her.

Gillian, who had been gazing vacantly out of the window, thinking anxiously about her mother, started and flushed vividly.

"Well—yes, Mr. Leavis—I'm rather worried about my mother's health," she answered hesitantly. "But I'm sorry you should have noticed it. I—I did my best not to show—"

"Come, come, Miss Denham—I hope I am human enough to realise that my employees have their personal problems, like everyone else," he said kindly. "I do not expect you to be a machine, without any feelings of your own, you know. I am very sorry to hear your mother is unwell. I trust it is nothing serious?"

"I don't quite know what it is, Mr. Leavis," Gillian replied. "You see, up till now I've been unable to persuade her to see the doctor, but—"

She broke off as the telephone started ringing.

"Excuse me, Miss Denham," he muttered, reaching for the instrument. Then—"Yes, this is Mr. Leavis speaking. Oh, just a moment, please. It's a private call for you, Miss Denham," he added, handing her the receiver.

"Oh, thank you." Gillian flushed confusedly.

Next minute she forgot everything else as she recognised Brian Melcott's voice.

"That you, Gillian? I thought I'd better 'phone you at once. Mother went in to see how Mrs. Denham was getting on, after I told her she was not very well, and she found her in a state of collapse. We called in Dr. Wilson, and he's sent her off to hospital. I told him I'd get in touch with you and ask you to go straight to the cottage hospital."

"Thank you, Brian," Gillian said shakily. "I—I'll ask Mr. Leavis if I can go at once."

Her hand trembled as she hung up the receiver. But before she could explain Mr. Leavis said—

"I'm afraid you have had some bad news, Miss Denham. Is it about your mother?"

She nodded, and told him what had happened.

"Then you must go at once," he said crisply. "I'll drive you to the hospital myself. Fetch your hat and coat, and I'll 'phone for my car to be brought round."

"But Mr. Leavis—" Gillian murmured, taken aback. "I—I—"

"Come, my dear girl, we mustn't waste time," he interrupted, taking her arm and leading her to the door.

In order to distract the girl's thoughts during the journey to the hospital, Clive Leavis gently drew her out to tell him about her home life.

As they entered the hospital waiting-room, a plump, motherly-looking woman came hurrying to meet them. It was Brian's mother.

"Oh, here you are, Gillian dear," she said, in a kindly tone. "I hardly expected you so quickly."

"Mr. Leavis very kindly brought me in his car," the girl explained, with a grateful glance at her employer. "Tell me, Mrs. Melcott—how is mother?"

"Now you don't have to worry, my dear," the older woman comforted her. "I'm sure everything is going to be all right. The doctors can't say anything definite till they've had the results of the X-ray. It should be through quite soon, now, then I expect you'll be able to see your mother. Of course, I shall stay with you, my dear."

"Well, as you appear to be in very good hands, Miss Denham, I will leave you now," said Clive Leavis. "But I shall be anxious to hear how your mother is going on. Perhaps you would kindly telephone me this evening, at my home, and give me the latest news about her?"

"Very well, Mr. Leavis, if you wish me to," Gillian answered. "And—thank you for all you have done."

"Well, we must just hope the doctors' verdict will be a reassuring one, Miss Denham," he smiled, dismissing her thanks. "Good-bye for now, and try not to worry. Good night, Mrs. Melcott."

"Well, I must say your employer is a real gentleman, Gillian," Mrs. Melcott murmured, after he had gone. "How very kind of him to take such a friendly interest in your affairs, my dear."

"Yes, it certainly is," Gillian agreed. "And you, too, have been very kind, Mrs.

Melcott. I shudder to think what might have happened if you hadn't gone in and found mother as you did."

"Now don't you worry, my dear," the older woman said again, taking the girl's arm and leading her to a chair. "As soon as Brian told me your mother was not at all well, I felt I just had to go and see if there was anything I could do. Now let's hope it won't be long before we hear the results of the X-ray."

It seemed to Gillian an age that they sat there, with Mrs. Melcott chattering away about everything she could think of.

But at long last the door opened, and a nurse came in, followed by a young doctor.

"Miss Denham?" he enquired, going up to the girl. "We have the results of the X-ray, and I'm afraid there must be an operation if your mother is to stand a chance of recovery."

He explained the nature of the operation that would have to be performed, and then Gillian was allowed to see her mother for a few minutes.

But Mrs. Denham was asleep, under the influence of a sedative which had been given her to relieve the pain, so the girl could only lay a gentle kiss on her cheek, and then come away, her heart heavy with anxiety.

Mrs. Melcott would not hear of Gillian returning to her own empty house, and insisted on the girl spending the evening with them, sleeping in their spare room.

The girl was deeply moved by the unobtrusive kindness she received from Brian and his parents. It seemed as if they could hardly do enough to show their sympathy with her, and for their sakes she tried to hide the gnawing anxiety at her heart.

After tea, she went out to a call box to telephone Mr. Leavis, Brian waiting outside while she got through.

Clive Leavis expressed his sorrow when she told him that her mother was to undergo a serious operation next day, adding—

"Of course, I shall not expect you at the office to-morrow. One of the other girls can manage for the time being. I sincerely hope the operation will be successful. Please try not to worry, Miss Denham. Meanwhile I am pleased to know that you have such a kind person as Mrs. Melcott to stand by you."

Rejoining Brian, Gillian told him what her employer had said.

GILLIAN hardly slept a wink that night for thinking of her mother.

Next morning it seemed as if the hours dragged by on leaden feet, even though she busied herself helping Mrs. Melcott with the housework.

Soon after lunch she and her kindly neighbour were at the hospital, waiting for news of Mrs. Denham's operation.

When at last a nurse came to tell her that the operation had been successful, Gillian felt as if a tremendous load had been lifted from her young shoulders.

For the next few days Mr. Leavis gave Gillian leave from the office, and she was able to spend long periods at the hospital, sitting at her mother's bedside. She was too ill to speak, but it was evident that her daughter's presence was a great comfort to the patient.

Mrs. Melcott had persuaded Gillian to stay on with her for the time being, and she spent her evenings in the cosy little sitting-room of Brian's home, knitting a dainty bed-jacket for her mother to wear as soon as she was able to sit up.

Occasionally, Gillian would glance up from her knitting to find Brian gazing at her with a look in his eyes that set her heart beating rapidly. At once she would bend her head over her knitting again, asking herself if it could really be true that Brian was attracted to her in the same

way as she was to him, or whether it was only her imagination.

One afternoon, Gillian was returning from a visit to the hospital with a lighter heart than she had known since the beginning of her mother's illness. Mrs. Denham had at last been taken off the danger list, though it would be several weeks before she could be discharged.

Stopping at a call-box, she telephoned and told her employer that she would be returning to work next day.

"I'm delighted to hear that, Miss Denham," said Clive Leavis. "Needless to say, I shall be very glad to have you back, though Miss Brown has done very well considering she is not used to the work. It must be a great relief to know that your mother is recovering."

"Yes, indeed it is, Mr. Leavis," Gillian agreed. "Oh, by the way, I wish to thank you for the flowers you sent mother. They were in a vase at her bedside when I called this afternoon. They are lovely."

"Oh, it was just that I thought they might help to cheer her up," he replied, rather awkwardly. "Anyway, good-bye for now, Miss Denham. I shall expect you in the morning, then."

Gillian left the call-box thinking what a kind man he was when one really got to know him!

A short distance farther on she came to the garage where Brian worked, and she could not resist glancing into the repair shed as she passed.

Brian was standing beside a sports car, talking to an extremely pretty girl sitting at the driving wheel; Gillian recognised her as Sylvia Groves, whose father was the proprietor of the garage.

Sylvia had been in the same form as Gillian at the local High School, but the two girls had never been specially friendly having little in common.

Gillian would have walked on quickly, but at that moment Brian caught sight of her, and called out cheerily.

"Hullo, Gillian! Have you just come from the hospital? How is your mother?"

"I'm very pleased to say she is now out of danger, and making good progress, Brian," the girl answered, giving Sylvia a friendly nod.

"That's grand, isn't it, Gillian?" Brian commented enthusiastically.

"I'm glad to hear your mother is better Gillian," the other girl remarked patronisingly. "Brian mentioned that you had been staying at his place while Mrs. Denham has been in hospital. By the way," she added quickly, "I'm just going in that direction, so let me give you a lift."

Gillian was rather taken aback at the offer, for Sylvia had often passed her in the car before, with barely more than a brief nod.

Before she could think of an excuse for declining the offer, Brian had opened the car door, and after a moment's hesitation Gillian got in beside the other girl, with a murmured—

"Thanks, Sylvia."

"Well, bye-bye for now, Brian," Sylvia smiled at the young man. "I'll see you to-night, then."

"Yes, I'll call for you round about eight o'clock, Sylvia."

With that the young man went to the entrance to guide Sylvia as she backed out.

"Poor old Brian," Sylvia remarked, with a careless shrug, as they threaded their way through the traffic of the High Street. "He's asked me so many times to go out with him that I really hadn't the heart to refuse again, so we're going to that dance at the Town Hall to-night. Luckily my father is away on business, so I'm hoping it won't come to his ears that I went to a dance with one of his employees," she

added, with a shrill little laugh.

Gillian stared straight in front of her, a queer frozen feeling of dismay clutching at her heart.

What a little fool she had been to imagine that Brian might be interested in her! she told herself.

Only too evidently it was Sylvia to whom he was attracted. Which was not really surprising, for the girl was extremely pretty, with her luxuriant dark hair and olive-skinned features.

Had it been anyone else other than Sylvia Groves who had won Brian's heart, Gillian could have borne the blow more easily. But from the patronising way in which his employer's daughter had spoken about him, it was plain that the young man's devotion merely amused her.

"If that's how you feel about Brian, surely it would have been better, for both your sakes, not to have accepted his invitation, Sylvia," Gillian returned after a thoughtful pause, a quiver of indignation in her voice.

The other girl laughed mirthlessly.

"Oh, well, it won't do any harm, just this once, I suppose. And it will show—I mean," she corrected herself hastily, "it—it might be quite amusing. However, this is where you alight, isn't it?"

"Yes. Thank you for the lift, Sylvia," Gillian murmured, getting out as soon as the car stopped. "Good-bye," she added a little coolly.

Sylvia nodded and drove on, biting her lip as she recalled the real reason for wanting to go to the dance that night with Brian.

Actually it was she who had asked Brian to escort her to the dance. The idea having come to her on the spur of the moment while he had been attending to some small repair to the car.

Sylvia had originally arranged to go to the dance with Maurice Fielding, a handsome young actor from the local repertory theatre, with whom she had been hopelessly infatuated for some time.

But that morning Maurice had rung up to say that he would not be going to the dance, after all, as he might be needed at the theatre—though he was not appearing in the play which was being shown that week.

Sylvia, who was of an extremely jealous nature, had at once suspected that Maurice was merely making an excuse in order to spend the evening with some other girl, and there had been a furious quarrel between them over the wires.

In the end she had told him that there were plenty of other young men who would be only too glad to take her to the dance, and had banged down the receiver.

However, for her vanity's sake, she simply had to find some young man to take her to the dance. Thus, on a sudden impulse, she had told Brian that her father had promised to take her, but had not been able to get back from his business trip in time.

"I'm so bitterly disappointed," she had murmured, gazing at him with her melting dark eyes. "You see, Brian, it means that I shall have to stay at home to-night, all by myself, thinking of the wonderful time I might have been having at the dance. That is, unless—"

"Brian, I wonder if you would be a dear, and escort me to the dance? I'm sure father would have no objection to that. After all, you and I have known each other for ages, haven't we? Besides, I happen to know that father has a very high opinion of you. He considers you are so steady and reliable."

Brian had stared at her, taken aback.

So the poor young man had reluctantly

consented, and a few minutes later Gillian had come along.

Until then Sylvia had fondly imagined that Brian would naturally feel honoured to have the chance of taking her to the dance. But as she had noticed the eager way in which he had greeted Gillian, she realised that it was the other girl in whom he was really interested.

So she had quickly offered Gillian a lift in her car for the sole purpose of misleading the other girl into believing that the invitation had come from Brian. She knew that Gillian was not the sort of girl to "wear her heart on her sleeve". If she believed that Brian was interested in another girl she would be too proud to show her hurt feelings.

MEANWHILE, Gillian was telling Mrs. Melcott the good news about her mother's progress, explaining that she had arranged to return to work next day.

"So—so I needn't trespass on your kind hospitality any longer, Mrs. Melcott," she went on hesitantly. "I—I can't tell you how very grateful I am for all you have done for me. But I feel there is no reason why I should not return to my own home, now that mother is out of danger."

"Why, my dear, you're welcome to stay here as long as ever you like. In fact, I was hoping you'd remain with us until your mother came home," said Mrs. Melcott in a disappointed tone.

"Oh, I—I'm afraid I couldn't so that, though it's awfully sweet of you to suggest it, Mrs. Melcott," Gillian replied. "As I shall be going back to work to-morrow, I've been thinking that it would be better if I went home this afternoon—it would give me time to tidy up the house, and press my office clothes, and so on—"

"Yes, I suppose that would be the best thing to do, dear, if you're really determined to leave us," Mrs. Melcott agreed. "But I'm sure my husband and Brian will be very disappointed when they come home and find you've gone. I must say I don't like the idea of you coming back to that empty house every night."

"Oh, I really don't mind that a bit, Mrs. Melcott, now that my mind is relieved about mother," Gillian assured her. "While as to Mr. Melcott, and—and Brian," she added, with a forced smile, "I should think they will be glad to have their home to themselves again."

"Nonsense, my dear, we're all going to miss you very much. But there," the other smiled. "You won't be very far away, will you? And I hope you'll drop in and see us whenever you want to, Gillian."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Melcott—I shall certainly never forget your great kindness to me," the girl murmured.

A few minutes later she went upstairs to pack the few belongings she had brought with her.

As she did so her heart was aching almost unbearably. For, as Mrs. Melcott had remarked, although she would not be far away, she almost wished that she was going right away, so that she would not have to go on seeing Brian, knowing all the time that her love for him was hopeless.

THE WRONG GIRL

BRIAN was feeling in anything but a festive mood when he arrived at the dance with Sylvia.

It had been a great disappointment to return from work to learn that Gillian had gone back to her own home. Moreover, when he had told his parents that he was escorting Sylvia Groves to the Town Hall dance, they had stared at him in blank surprise.

"But I didn't know you and Miss Groves were as friendly as all that, Brian," his father had remarked thoughtfully.

While Brian's natural frankness had urged him to explain the real reason why he was going to the dance with Sylvia, nevertheless his sense of chivalry had prevented him from doing so. His parents would be shocked to hear that Sylvia had asked him to escort her.

So Brian had muttered, rather uncomfortably—

"Well, after all, Sylvia, and I have known each other quite a long time now, haven't we, dad?" Then he had hurried out of the room to wash.

Later, as he had driven off to call for Sylvia, he had glanced up at the windows of the house next door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Gillian, but there had been no sign of her.

Sylvia had kept him waiting nearly half-an-hour in the drive of the large house which her father had bought in Hill Rise. He had declined the housekeeper's invitation to go in and wait.

Eventually, the girl had come floating down the steps, a radiant vision in a peach-coloured dance dress, which—as even Brian had to admit—made her look entrancingly pretty.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Brian," she had murmured sweetly, slipping into the seat beside him. "Tell me, do I look all right?"

"Yes, you look very charming, Sylvia," he had assured her, much in the same tone as he might have admired a painting.

She had frowned and bit her lip, throwing a sidelong glance at him.

Actually, there was something very attractive about the young man, she had thought, even though he had none of Maurice Fielding's striking good looks. Usually she had only seen Brian in his working clothes, and had not realised until now that he was an escort of whom any girl might be proud.

The fact that Brian seemed indifferent to her charms intrigued Sylvia. In her shallow little heart she was thinking that it might be rather "amusing" to try and make him fall in love with her.

Now, as they entered the dance hall together, Sylvia gave a little gasp, and the colour rushed into her cheeks. For the first person she saw was Maurice Fielding, dancing with a tall, blonde girl, so exquisitely dressed that Sylvia felt instantly dissatisfied with her own pretty dance frock.

The sight of them increased her rage and jealousy. How dared Maurice casually break his appointment with her, almost at the last minute, in order to bring that other girl to the dance!

"Is anything the matter, Sylvia?" Brian enquired, glancing with some concern at the girl's pale face, in which burned two spots of colour.

"No—no, of course not, Brian," she answered, with a shrill little laugh. "Ah, that's my favourite tune—come along, let's dance."

Next moment the young man found himself holding Sylvia in his arms, and gliding with her on to the dance floor, to the strains of a popular quick-step.

"Why, Brian, you're quite a good dancer," Sylvia complimented him in that vivacious, excited manner she had adopted suddenly, to hide her chagrin at having her jealous suspicions about Maurice confirmed.

"Oh, come, Sylvia, I'm sure you can't really mean that," Brian smiled awkwardly.

"But I do," she murmured, giving him a coquettish glance from under her long lashes, and leaning her head closer to his shoulder. "Anyway, you dance well enough

for me," she went on. "I can't say I care for men who dance too well. I think they're often rather effeminate, don't you?"

This remark was intended to reach the ears of Maurice Fielding, who was gliding past with his partner; the young actor was easily the best dancer in the room.

At the same time Sylvia casually turned her head, pretending to catch sight of the other man for the first time.

"Why, hello, Maurice!" she exclaimed vivaciously. "I wasn't expecting to see you here to-night. I understood you might be detained at the theatre?"

The actor reddened, and threw an uncomfortable glance at his partner, the tall blonde girl, who was staring coldly at Sylvia.

"A friend of yours, Maurice?" she drawled. "Won't you introduce me, darling?"

At that moment the music stopped, and the two couples stood facing each other, Sylvia struggling to control her temper at the other girl's cool, possessive manner towards Maurice.

"Oh, yes," she retorted, with a shrill little laugh, "Maurice and I have been extremely friendly for some time now. Haven't we, Maurice?"

Sylvia turned to the young man with her most alluring smile, but it suddenly vanished as the blonde girl gave an amused laugh, and slipped her arm through her partner's.

"Oh, really?" she murmured. "Well, I do hope you haven't taken the friendship too seriously, my dear. I must warn you that my fiancé is an incorrigible flirt, but he doesn't really mean any harm. He and I understand each other perfectly. Don't we, Maurice darling?"

The young actor smiled mirthlessly, avoiding Sylvia's stunned gaze.

"Sylvia," Brian interposed, taking the girl's arm, "I think you had better let me take you away. People are staring at us. Come along, my dear girl," he urged, as Sylvia stood there numbly, biting her lip, tears of humiliation in her eyes.

AS he drove her homeward Sylvia sat with her hands clasped tightly in her lap, staring white-faced through the wind-screen.

After a long silence, she said in a trembling voice—

"I—I suppose you despise me, Brian, now that—that you know my real reason for asking you to take me to the dance? You—you realise, of course, that I—I told you an untruth when I said that father had arranged to take me. Actually," she hurried on, "I did it to save my pride, after—after Maurice had let me down."

"I realise that now, Sylvia," the young man replied levelly. "But I don't despise you, my dear girl. On the contrary, I feel rather sorry for you. It is most unfortunate that you should have made the acquaintance of somebody like Fielding. I hope you will soon forget him."

She suddenly buried her face in her hands and burst into sobs.

At the same time Brian turned the car into the drive, and stopped at her door.

"Sylvia, please don't upset yourself in this way," he muttered, putting his arm comfortingly round her shoulders. "I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. Before long, all this will be forgotten, and you'll find some man who will make you really happy."

"Oh, Brian, you—you really are a dear!" She snuggled closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder. "You're such a very kind and understanding person, Brian. But— Oh, I can't bear to think of people gossiping about me, and—"

She broke off suddenly as the interior of

the car was suddenly lit up by the glare of headlights. A taxi had turned into the drive and pulled up behind them.

"Gracious, it must be father returned home sooner than he anticipated," Sylvia murmured, hastily sitting up and drying her eyes. "I—I wasn't expecting him until to-morrow. Oh, Brian, whatever will he think? I mean—"

Brian, too, was wondering how on earth he was going to explain away the fact that he had apparently been holding his employer's daughter in his arms. There could be little doubt that Mr. Groves must have seen them in the glare of the taxi's headlights.

"Brian, you—you won't tell father about—about Maurice—will you?" Sylvia pleaded.

As the young man shook his head and started to open the door, Sylvia's father came over to them, a beaming smile on his face.

"Well, well! This is a surprise, Sylvia, my dear," he remarked, giving his daughter an affectionate kiss. "I had no idea there was a romance between you and Brian. But judging from what I saw as I came up the drive, it seems all I have to do is to give you both my blessing. Isn't that so?"

The two young people stared at each other in dismayed silence, which Mr. Groves evidently mistook for embarrassment, for he laughed and laid his hand on Brian's shoulder.

"It's quite all right, my boy, you needn't be afraid that I shall raise any objections to the match," he went on jovially. "As a matter of fact, I'm delighted. There's no one I'd sooner have as a son-in-law than you, Brian. I'm very glad to think that Sylvia has had the good sense to choose a nice, steady young man who will be able to step into my shoes and take over the business, some day."

"But we mustn't stand here talking," he went on. "Come along indoors, Brian. You and I must have a little chat."

He put his arm round his daughter, and led the way into the house, Brian following in a state of dazed dismay.

Then, as they stepped into the hall, the elderly housekeeper came bustling forward to welcome her master, and Mr. Groves said with a genial smile—

"Well, Mrs. Horton, we have some exciting news for you. These two young people are engaged to be married."

"Well, I never!" the woman exclaimed in astonishment. "This certainly is a surprise, Miss Sylvia. Allow me to offer you my best wishes for your happiness—you, too, Mr. Melcott. I suppose this explains why you're back from the dance so early? Why, I wasn't expecting you for hours, yet."

"Yes, we—we got rather bored with it," Sylvia replied, flushing vividly. "Come along, father—you must be tired and hungry after your long journey."

"I'll prepare a meal for you right away, sir," the housekeeper said, hurrying off to the kitchen.

In vain he waited for the girl to explain the misunderstanding. But whenever he happened to catch her eye Sylvia merely shook her head slightly, and gave him a warning glance.

"Well, Brian, I can see you're in no state of mind at present to discuss business," Mr. Groves broke off, at last, with a jovial laugh. "I suppose that's only natural, when you've just become engaged, so we'll put it off to another day."

The young man nodded and hid his relief. "Yes, and I think it's time I went, Mr. Groves," he muttered. "As Sylvia said, I expect you are tired after your journey."

"Well, I am a bit," the older man replied. "Good night, Brian—Sylvia will see you

out," he added, a twinkle in his eye as he glanced at his daughter.

Sylvia nodded smilingly, and slipped her arm through Brian's as they went out of the room together, closing the door behind them.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Brian stopped and looked down at the girl, a grim expression on his face.

"Sylvia," he muttered, "why have you allowed your father to assume that we are engaged? Surely you must realise how awkward it is for me to let the misunderstanding continue? You must promise to tell your father the truth to-night, before you go to bed. We can't go on acting a lie, can we?"

"But Brian, how can I possibly tell father we are not engaged, after—after he has made all those plans about taking you into partnership and told Mrs. Horton, too?"

"Come, Sylvia," he went on in a firm, but kindly tone, "I know it needs some courage to tell your father the truth, but it's got to be done. Let's both go back and tell him everything, right away, shall we? Perhaps it would be easier for you if I were with you?"

Sylvia averted her head, biting her lip as she realised that her attempt to lure the young man into a genuine engagement had failed.

The idea had come to her as soon as she had seen that her father was more than ready to welcome Brian as a son-in-law.

Why shouldn't she marry Brian? she had asked herself. Not only would it show Maurice Fielding that she was not breaking her heart over him, but she had felt a sudden distaste for the lonely, purposeless life she had been leading since leaving school.

Her mother had died some years ago, and her father—though a kindly, well-meaning man—was too busy with the garage business to have much time to spare for her.

"Oh, very well, Brian," she answered resentfully after a long pause. "I—I suppose we had better go and explain to father, and get it over. Obviously you do not care how very unhappy you are making me—"

Sylvia broke off abruptly as the housekeeper came hurrying into the hall, her face pallid.

"Oh, Miss Sylvia, please come at once. Your—your father has been taken ill," she stammered.

Sylvia and Brian hurried to the lounge, where they found Mr. Groves leaning back in an armchair, his hand over his heart.

"Quick, Sylvia—fetch some brandy," Brian muttered.

"Brian"—he stared into the young man's face with cloudy eyes—"if—if anything happens to me, I—I know you'll take good care of Sylvia. Such a relief—to know—she has you. I—I want you to be married—right away. Promise?"

"Yes, I promise, Mr. Groves," he answered steadily.

The sick man drew a quivering breath, and his head fell back against the cushions.

At the same moment the housekeeper hurried into the room.

"I've 'phoned for the doctor. He'll be here right away, Miss Sylvia—" She broke off as she caught sight of her employer's face. It was too late for the doctor to do anything now.

THE OTHER MAN

GILLIAN returned home the following evening, after her first day back at the office, and was preparing her solitary meal when a knock came at the door.

Going to open it, she found Mrs. Melcott standing there.

"Oh, do come in, Mrs. Melcott," the girl smiled delightedly. "I've just made a cup of tea. I hope you can spare time to have one with me?"

"Thank you, my dear, I'd be glad to," the older woman answered listlessly, as she stepped inside. "I left my husband reading the paper, and Brian has gone out—"

She paused rather abruptly, and said no more until she was seated in an armchair by the fire, while Gillian poured out the tea.

"Tell me, my dear," she resumed, "have you heard the tragic news about poor Mr. Groves? He died suddenly last night from a heart attack."

Gillian stared at her incredulously.

"Oh, good gracious! What a terrible shock for poor Sylvia!" she murmured.

The older woman nodded, glancing at Gillian with a queer expression in her eyes.

"Yes, I feel very sorry for the poor girl, though she was not alone at the time," she said. "You see, dear, she and Brian had been to the dance at the Town Hall, and apparently left early. Brian had just driven Sylvia home when Mr. Groves returned from a business trip, though he wasn't expected back until to-day. I think he may have cut it short because he was not feeling so well. Anyway, Brian said the poor man looked very tired, though he was in a jovial mood—"

Mrs. Melcott paused again, then added, as if forcing herself to go on—

"No doubt you'll be as surprised as we were, my dear, to hear that—that Brian and Sylvia are engaged to be married. Apparently it happened just before Mr. Groves returned. Sylvia told me, when I went to see her to-day, that her father was delighted about it, and planned to make Brian a partner in the business. But I must say it was quite unexpected so far as my husband and I were concerned," she continued, sighing. "We had no idea that they were on such friendly terms."

Gillian set down the tea-pot and had the greatest difficulty in hiding her feelings.

Mrs. Melcott's heart ached for her.

Gillian said nothing, and Mrs. Melcott went on to talk about the plans for Mr. Groves's funeral.

At last Gillian spoke.

"I—I presume Sylvia and Brian will be getting married quite soon, as she is all alone in the world, Mrs. Melcott?" she managed to say.

"Yes, dear, Sylvia told me that was her father's last wish. But of course," added the older woman, "there has not been time to settle anything definite yet."

Shortly afterwards she took her departure, and Gillian was left alone with her thoughts.

IT was a great comfort to Gillian, during the days that followed, that her mother continued to make steady progress, and she was deeply grateful to her employer for the kindly interest he showed, and for the flowers and fruit he insisted on sending to the hospital.

"Really, dear, I'm quite overwhelmed by Mr. Leavis's kindness," her mother remarked one visiting day. "I can't imagine why he should take such a generous interest in someone he has never yet seen!"

"I think it's because he has a naturally kind heart, dear," Gillian said smilingly. "In fact, it's surprising how very kind people are, when one is in trouble"—and she went on to tell her mother what a good friend Mrs. Melcott had been.

Until now Mrs. Denham had seemed so weak and tired that Gillian had felt it best not to talk to her too much about outside affairs. To-day, however, her

mother seemed much more like her old self, except that she was still very pale and delicate-looking.

"I'm so grateful to her, dear," said Mrs. Denham. "Please tell her that I am looking forward to thanking her personally before very long. Dear me, I'm afraid I have never been very sociable to my neighbours in the past. It has only recently occurred to me that you must have had rather a dull life of it, Gillian dear. But I've made up my mind that things are going to be different from now on."

"It—it's very sweet of you to say that, mother dear," Gillian murmured at last. "But—but please don't worry about me. I am quite happy as long as I have you. As for Brian Melcott, you'll be surprised to hear that he is now engaged to be married—to Sylvia Groves."

"No!" Mrs. Denham exclaimed, staring at her blankly. "Well, that certainly does surprise me. I would never have said that Sylvia Groves was the sort of girl to attract Brian. In fact, I was under the impression that you—"

She stopped sharply, having been about to say that she had been given the impression that it was Gillian to whom the young man was strongly attracted. Now she realised that her daughter was secretly hurt about Brian's engagement.

As the girl went on to tell her about Mr. Groves's sudden death, and that Sylvia and Brian were to be married quite soon, Mrs. Denham saw that things might not have happened like this had she not done her best to discourage the friendship between the two young people.

GILLIAN had not seen Brian since the afternoon of the dance. But as she was returning from visiting her mother, she saw him and Sylvia as they came out of the house next door.

"Oh, hullo, Gillian!" Sylvia greeted her sweetly, and Brian smiled rather awkwardly.

Gillian's heart thumped violently, but somehow she managed to return the other girl's greeting in a normal voice.

"I—I was very sorry to hear about your tragic loss, Sylvia," she went on.

"Yes, it was a terrible shock to me naturally," the other girl sighed, sadly. "You can't think what a great comfort Brian has been in my trouble. I suppose, by the way, you've heard that we are engaged to be married, Gillian?"

She slipped her arm possessively through Brian's as she spoke.

"Yes—Mrs. Melcott told me," Gillian answered steadily. "May I offer you both my very best wishes for your happiness?"

"Thanks, Gillian," said Brian briefly, then, as if anxious to change the conversation, went on to enquire about her mother.

Gillian replied that Mrs. Denham was making very good progress, and Sylvia—who did not like the conversation being diverted from herself—chimed in—

"You must be awfully lonely, Gillian, living all by yourself. I must say I find it so, though I have my housekeeper for company. Still, it won't be for very much longer—we are getting married in three weeks' time. It will be a very quiet ceremony, of course, as I am in mourning, but as you are an old friend of Brian's, I do hope you will be able to be present, Gillian."

"Thank you, Sylvia," the other girl murmured. "But—but I really can't say if I can come or not. You see, mother will probably be discharged from hospital in about a fortnight's time, and I am hoping to be able to have my holiday then, instead of later, and take her away for a change of air."

"Well, come along, Brian," Sylvia broke in impatiently. "We're supposed to be

going for a walk, aren't we, dear? Good-bye for now, Gillian."

Brian muttered, "Good-bye, Gillian," then the young couple went off down the road.

There was a queer tightness at her throat as she sat down to her solitary tea, picturing the pleasant little family tea-party which would be taking place in Mrs. Melcott's cosy living-room, when the engaged couple returned from their walk.

If only Mr. Leavis would agree to let her take her fortnight's holiday as soon as her mother was discharged from hospital, it would do her the world of good to go away to some inexpensive seaside resort. Moreover, Gillian's thoughts ran on, it would enable her to avoid being present at Brian's wedding.

Her heart grew cold at the thought of having to watch the man she loved being married to another girl.

GILLIAN mentioned the matter of holidays to her employer next morning, when he sent for her to take dictation, and enquired, as usual, how her mother was progressing.

"Why, certainly, Miss Denham," he replied promptly. "It is just what your mother wants—a few weeks' convalescence. As a matter of fact, I intended to suggest it as soon as I knew when Mrs. Denham was likely to be discharged.

"As it happens," he continued, rather awkwardly, "I have been wondering whether you and your mother would care to make use of my holiday cottage on the Sussex coast. I only use it myself for occasional week-ends, and I shall be very glad to place it at your disposal for a month, if the idea appeals to you. I think you would find it quite comfortable—there is a woman living nearby who looks after it for me. She would, of course, do the housework for you, so you would have nothing to do but devote yourself to your mother. What do you say?"

Gillian stared at him in blank astonishment.

"Do—do you really mean it, Mr. Leavis?" she faltered.

"Why, certainly I do, Miss Denham," he answered smilingly.

"But—but why on earth should you do so much for us, Mr. Leavis?" Gillian murmured rather breathlessly. "You—you have been so wonderfully kind, sending mother those lovely gifts of flowers and fruit, and—giving me time off to visit her. Now you are offering me a month's holiday—and the use of your seaside cottage! I—I feel quite overwhelmed by so much kindness," she added, with a shaky little smile.

Clive Leavis leaned back in his chair, gazing at her steadily. With her flushed cheeks and shining eyes Gillian had never looked more attractive than at that moment, and the man felt a sudden, almost overwhelming impulse to tell her how dearly he loved her.

But that would never do, he reminded himself sternly. No, he must be patient in the hope that one day he might be able to win the girl's love, in spite of the wide difference in their ages.

It seemed a forlorn hope to the lonely man who up till now, had been too absorbed in his work to realise all the happiness he was missing. But now that his eyes had been opened, he would have given everything to make this charming girl his wife.

"It is a pleasure to feel that I can help you and your mother, Miss Denham," he muttered, after a lengthy pause. "It seems to me I was in danger of becoming a crusty old bachelor, absorbed in nothing but business, until I realised that my very

capable little secretary was not merely a machine, but a human being with troubles of her own.

"So you see, my dear girl," he added, with a wry smile, "there is no need to thank me. I sincerely hope you will accept my suggestion, in which case I shall be very delighted to drive you both down to my cottage on the day your mother leaves the hospital."

A FORTNIGHT later—a Saturday—Clive Leavis drove Gillian and her mother down to the cottage by the sea.

Mrs. Denham was still very pale and weak, and had to be assisted to the car by Gillian and one of the nurses. But she was smiling happily as she sat warmly wrapped in rugs, gazing out of the window at the countryside which was bathed in soft spring sunshine.

When Gillian had told her mother about her employer's kind offer to lend them his cottage for a month, she had been unable to credit it.

Like Gillian, Mrs. Denham had wondered why a busy man like Mr. Leavis should go to such trouble on their account.

Now that she had met him for the first time, she realised that—apart from his natural kindness—he was very much interested in her daughter.

This was evident from the way he looked at Gillian, though the girl was obviously unaware of the fact. Mrs. Denham was excited to think that her dream of seeing her daughter make a good marriage might come true, after all.

Her own life had been such a hard struggle that Mrs. Denham longed for Gillian to have the advantages she herself had been denied.

Love, of course, was the first essential to a happy marriage, and though she guessed that the girl had suffered a bitter disappointment over Brian's engagement to Sylvia Groves, Mrs. Denham hoped that her girl would get over it in time, and make a happy marriage with some other man who would love and cherish her dearly.

A man like Clive Leavis, for instance, she reflected, as her gaze rested for a moment on his face in the driving mirror.

"I trust you are quite comfortable, Mrs. Denham?" he enquired, over his shoulder. "Please tell me if I drive too fast for you, won't you?"

"Oh, I am perfectly comfortable, thank you, Mr. Leavis," she smiled. "You can't imagine how very much I am enjoying this lovely sunshine."

Gillian glanced fondly at her mother's contented face, feeling a surge of deep gratitude to the man whose generous kindness had given her a glimpse of pleasure she had never known before.

When they reached the cottage, which stood on the slopes of the South Downs, with a wide view over sea and country, they found that Mr. Leavis had thought of everything for their comfort.

A bright fire burnt in Mrs. Denham's bedroom, with an easy chair beside it, while on a bedside table was a pile of magazines which Mrs. Green, the daily help, explained her master had ordered for his invalid guest.

"I'm afraid you are determined to spoil me, Mr. Leavis," Mrs. Denham said, with a tremulous smile, when she and Gillian rejoined him in the oak-beamed living-room.

"Well, I think you could do with a little 'spoiling', as you call it, Mrs. Denham," he answered smilingly. "Please come and sit down in front of the fire—I think you'll find this chair the most comfortable."

A few minutes later Mrs. Green came in with tea, and Clive Leavis smiled and said—

"Would you be kind enough to pour out Miss Denham?"

Watching, as she presided over the silver tea-tray, Clive Leavis found himself conjuring up a picture of Gillian as the mistress of his home; a picture which filled his heart with an almost unbearable longing.

How utterly sweet and charming she was, he reflected tenderly, with the sunshine slanting through the window on to her auburn hair, her graceful movements as she handed round the cups.

He was charmed, too, by the loving attention she lavished on her mother in a gentle, unobtrusive way. To Clive Leavis there was something infinitely touching in their quiet devotion to each other. What a real pleasure it would be to be able to relieve them of all their cares; surround them with all the security and comfort that money could buy!

"What a delightful view, Mr. Leavis," Mrs. Denham was saying as she gazed at the sea in the distance. "And it is even more entrancing from my bedroom window. Really, I'm almost afraid that I may wake up at any moment and find that it is just a dream."

"There's no fear of that, Mrs. Denham," he assured her, with the kindly, understanding smile which softened his rather stern features so attractively. "This cottage has stood here for centuries, so it is much too substantial to be a dream. I bought it a year or two ago, as a quiet week-end retreat, and have spent many delightful hours exploring the Downs, as I sincerely trust you will shortly be strong enough to do. Meanwhile, you must allow me to and take you for drives at week-ends. That is, of course, unless you would both prefer to be alone?"

"Why, no, we shall have plenty of time to ourselves during the week, Mr. Leavis, and should be very sorry to bar you from your own cottage whenever you choose to come," Mrs. Denham answered. "It is very kind of you to offer—we should certainly enjoy that very much."

After tea, Clive Leavis showed Gillian over the garden, which was already gay with spring flowers.

As they paused to watch the sunset glow beyond the hills, he glanced down at the charming face beside him, and vowed to himself that, before the next month was up, he would put his fate to the test and ask this girl, whom he so dearly loved, to become his wife.

LOVE'S REWARD

AFTER three days at the cottage Gillian was delighted to note that her mother was already beginning to look better.

Mrs. Denham took breakfast in bed every morning, and when the weather was fine and warm Gillian placed a deck-chair for her in a sheltered corner of the garden.

In the afternoons the girl would go for walks over the Downs, enjoying the fresh sea breezes which stung her cheeks and tossed her hair into little curling tendrils.

It was a very restful existence, it being evident to Gillian that her mother enjoyed every moment of it. For the first time in her life the invalid was knowing what it was to relax completely, in surroundings of the utmost comfort.

As she noted the tinge of pink in her mother's pale cheeks, Gillian felt that she could never be sufficiently grateful to Clive Leavis for all he had done for them both.

But in spite of the pleasure it gave her to see her mother making such good progress, Gillian could not forget that Brian's wedding had been fixed for the following Saturday.

She had avoided being present, but with

each day that passed her heart grew heavier. Not merely for her own sake, but for Brian's, too. She still could not believe that Sylvia was the right girl for him, or that she would make him happy.

When Saturday morning arrived Mrs. Denham could not help noticing, when Gillian brought her breakfast tray, how very pale the girl looked, with dark shadows under her eyes as if she had hardly slept at all the previous night.

"While you are having your breakfast, dear, I will walk down to the village and send off a telegram of good wishes to Brian and Sylvia," Gillian said, with a forced cheerfulness which made her mother's heart ache for her.

"But what about your own breakfast, my dear?" Mrs. Denham remarked gently.

"Oh, I had mine ages ago. I was up earlier than usual this morning, and went for a walk over the Downs," Gillian answered smilingly. "I'm so glad it's a nice day for Brian's wedding. That's supposed to be a good augury, isn't it?"

"Yes, so they say, my dear, but if two young people really love each other they are sure to be happy, no matter what the weather may be on their wedding day," Mrs. Denham replied thoughtfully.

Gillian nodded, a strange tightness at her throat.

"Well, I must go and send off that telegram, dear," she murmured, trying desperately to make her voice sound normal. "I'll be back by the time you have finished your breakfast."

Mrs. Denham sighed as the door closed behind her daughter. Surely, she thought, one of the hardest things for a mother was to be forced to look on helplessly while her child suffered.

Now she longed to put her arms round the girl and comfort her, but at the same time she realised that it was perhaps kinder to pretend that she was not aware of Gillian's love for Brian. The dear girl was struggling so bravely to hide her feelings. It would only make it harder for her if she knew that someone else guessed her secret.

No, she could only keep silent, and pray that Gillian would get over her unhappy love affair.

But Mrs. Denham was only too well aware of what the girl's thoughts must be as she walked to the village to send off that telegram of good wishes, to the man she loved.

She found it difficult to swallow the dainty breakfast Gillian had prepared for her. But she forced herself to do so, knowing that her daughter would worry if she appeared to be losing her appetite.

At the same time she derived some comfort from the knowledge that Mr. Leavis would be arriving in time for lunch; that his company might help to distract Gillian's unhappy thoughts.

LUNCH had been arranged for one o'clock, but half-an-hour after that time Gillian and her mother were still awaiting Mr. Leavis's arrival.

"It's the first time I've ever known the master to be a minute later than he said," Mrs. Green remarked. "Such a punctual gentleman he is, as a general rule, I can't understand it. I'm afraid the food won't be worth eating, after keeping it hot all this time. Ah, there he is at last," she broke off, as a car stopped at the gate.

"But that isn't Mr. Leavis's car," Gillian pointed out. "It—it looks like a police car, Mrs. Green—"

"Why, yes, so it is. I wonder. Excuse me, Miss—"

The woman hurried out of the room while Gillian and Mrs. Denham waited, a chill presentiment at their hearts, which

they tried to hide from each other.

Then the door opened, and Mrs. Green came in, looking deathly pale.

"Oh, miss—I'm sorry to say there's very bad news," she said tremulously. "It's about the master. A—a lorry crashed into his car—he—he was killed instantly."

LATER that afternoon Gillian, looking pale and stunned, sat alone in the living room, when a knock came at the door.

As Mrs. Green had gone home, the girl went to answer it herself, and she gave a gasp of relief as she recognised the elderly man standing there. It was her dead employer's solicitor, Mr. Cardew.

"Oh, I'm so thankful to see you, Mr. Cardew," she said, in a tremulous voice. "Please come in."

"I came as soon as I heard the tragic news, Miss Denham," the solicitor explained gravely. "Mr. Leavis had told me that you and your mother were staying here, and I know he would have wished me to do what I could to help and advise you. I realise, of course, what a painful shock it must have been to you both."

"Yes, it—it certainly was, Mr. Cardew," Gillian answered, in a low voice. "Mr. Leavis was one of the finest men I have ever known. He has been kindness itself to us, and naturally we feel his tragic death very deeply. My poor mother is so distressed that she has had to retire to bed again. She is only just recovering from a serious illness."

Mr. Cardew nodded sympathetically. "Yes, I am aware of that, Miss Denham, and believe me, I can well understand how you must be feeling," he said. "But on one point, at least, I can set your mind at rest," he went on. "There is no need to feel that you must endanger your mother's recovery by returning home immediately. I feel it is only right to inform you at once, Miss Denham, that this cottage now belongs to you."

"To—to me, Mr. Cardew!" the girl faltered, staring at him incredulously. The solicitor nodded. "Yes, that is so, Miss Denham. Only yesterday, Mr. Leavis sent for me and made a will, leaving everything he possessed to you. He told me he was anxious to ensure that, if anything happened to him in the near future, you and your mother would be taken care of—"

"But—but—why on earth should Mr. Leavis have done that?" Gillian murmured, shaking her head in bewilderment.

The solicitor gave her a penetrating glance. "Mr. Leavis gave me the impression that he had a very warm regard for you, Miss Denham. I do not think I am betraying a confidence when I say that he had very great hopes of persuading you to marry him one day. That is why he wished to provide for you and your mother in the event of his death. It almost seems as if he had some kind of premonition, doesn't it?" he added thoughtfully.

The colour mounted in Gillian's cheeks as she took in the full meaning of his words.

Could it possibly be true that Clive Leavis had loved her? she asked herself, deeply moved by the man's unselfish devotion.

The solicitor glanced at the girl's stunned face, and went on quietly—

"However, I will not trouble you further at present, Miss Denham. Just leave everything to me, and I will come and see you again in a few days' time. There is just one thing more, however. May I ask if you have any special wishes regarding Mr. Leavis's funeral?"

Gillian nodded, tears springing to her eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Cardew—I—I wish him to be laid to rest here, in the village churchyard. I feel sure that is what he would have desired."

The solicitor bowed his head. "I think so, too, Miss Denham, and I will make the necessary arrangements," he said. He opened his brief case. "By the way, in case you should require some money to be going on with, here is a hundred pounds. You have only to let me know if you need any more."

He laid a roll of notes on the table, and Gillian could only murmur unsteadily—

"Thank you, Mr. Cardew." When the solicitor had left, the unhappy girl stood for a long time gazing into the fire with misty eyes, thinking with tender gratitude of the man who, unknown to her, had loved her.

What would her answer have been, had he asked her to marry him? she wondered. Would her warm affection and gratitude have been enough to offer him, in return for all the devotion and kindness he had lavished on her? Could she have made him happy, when all the time her heart belonged to Brian, and always would, to the end of her days?

Suddenly she knew that if Clive had still wanted her for his wife, knowing that she could not love him in the same way, in return, she would have married him and then done her utmost to have made him happy. The thought brought a tiny gleam of comfort to her aching heart.

With a deep sigh she turned away, and went slowly upstairs, to break the news of Clive's generosity to her mother.

THE evening before her wedding had been arranged to take place, Sylvia Groves sat reading a fashion magazine, when her housekeeper came in to announce that there was a gentleman visitor to see her.

"He refuses to give his name, Miss Sylvia," the woman went on disapprovingly, "but I recognised him as one of those actors from the repertory theatre. He says it's very important."

Maurice Fielding! Sylvia sat up abruptly, her heartbeats quickening. Why on earth had he called to see her, when she had not even set eyes on him since the night of the dance?

Her first impulse was to refuse to see him. But she was burning with curiosity to know why he had called. Moreover, she told herself, it would be a pity to miss such an opportunity of "getting her own back" on the young man for the way he had humiliated her.

"Please show him in, Mrs. Horton," she said, and the moment she was alone, Sylvia ran to the mirror and hastily smoothed her hair.

She was just lighting a cigarette when Maurice Fielding was shown into the room.

"Sylvia! It's awfully sweet of you to see me, after the way I've behaved to you," he began, in that low, appealing voice which had made him a popular idol at the local theatre.

Sylvia shrugged her shoulders, trying to appear cool and sophisticated, though her heart beat jerkily as she realised that his fascination over her was as strong as ever.

"Perhaps you will kindly explain why you have had the impudence to call on me the day before my wedding?" she demanded, flushing.

"Please don't be cross with me, Sylvia." The young man moved closer, looking down at her with pleading eyes. "I admit that you have every reason to be angry my dear girl, but—but the truth is, I never

really intended to deceive you about my being engaged to Lois. It just happened that I fell madly in love with you before I could stop myself. You *must* believe me, Sylvia!"

Sylvia stared at him uncertainly, then shook her head.

"No, I—I don't believe you, Maurice," she retorted. "Besides, what's the use of raking it all up again? You—you're engaged to that other girl, and—and—what's more, you allowed her to insult me on the night of the dance."

"Listen, Sylvia!" Maurice put his hands on her shoulders, and the girl felt a sudden electric thrill run through her. "I know I behaved like a cad, that evening. But honestly, I was taken unawares. I wasn't expecting to see you at the dance, and I was feeling terribly miserable, because of that quarrel we'd had over the 'phone that morning. Then, seeing you dancing with that other chap, I felt mad with jealousy. I hardly knew what I was saying or doing."

"Oh, Maurice, were—were you really jealous of Brian then?" Sylvia blurted out, before she could stop herself.

"Yes, I was. You can't imagine what I've suffered since I heard that you were engaged to him, my dear girl," he assured her. "Finally, I—I couldn't stand it any longer. I told Lois it was you I loved, and asked her to free me from my promise to her. Which she did eventually, after a very unpleasant scene. Now I've come to ask you to forgive me, Sylvia darling—before it's too late. Dearest one, I can't let you marry this other fellow. You know that you and I were made for each other, don't you?"

He held his breath and waited for her reply.

The truth was that Lois herself had broken off their engagement after that scene at the dance. Although Lois had pretended, for her pride's sake, that she did not mind his flirtations with other girls, she had lost her temper when they were alone, and had told him she wished to have no more to do with him.

Next day, Maurice had heard of the death of Sylvia's father, also her engagement to Brian Melcott. He had been furious with himself for having missed his chance of marrying a well-to-do heiress, and had decided to make a last desperate bid to win the girl away from the other man.

It was easy for someone like Maurice Fielding to persuade himself that he was also in love with Sylvia, for she was an exceedingly pretty girl.

Doubtless if he could persuade her to marry him they would get along quite well together, being very similar in temperament. But the main advantage in his eyes was Sylvia's money, and as he thought of all that was at stake, he went on—

"You do love me, don't you, Sylvia darling—just as I love you? Surely you can't marry Brian Melcott, and spoil both our lives—"

Swept off her feet, Sylvia looked up at him with flushed cheeks, and gave a reckless little laugh.

"Very well, Maurice. I will marry you," she said.

"My darling!" He drew her into his arms.

At that moment the door opened, and Brian stood there, looking pale and grim.

"May I ask what all this means?" he demanded tensely.

Maurice Fielding looked taken aback, but Sylvia answered calmly—

"Yes, Brian. It means that I'm going to marry Maurice, after all. I'm sorry—I'm afraid I've made rather a mess of your life, but I sincerely hope it is not too late

to put things right."

It was the first time Brian had ever heard the girl speak with such sincerity, and in spite of the surge of relief that swept over him, he felt he must do his best to save her from marrying a man like Fielding.

"Sylvia," he said, walking over to the girl and looking down at her steadily, "I promised your father to take care of you, and I must warn you that if you marry this fellow Fielding, you will certainly have cause to regret it. I think you know as well as I do that he is not to be trusted—"

"Look here, Melcott—" the other man interposed blusteringly.

Sylvia glanced from one to the other, then smiled mirthlessly.

"Don't worry, Brian. I assure you I am quite capable of taking care of myself," she said. "And, you see, I happen to be in love with Maurice, which makes all the difference, doesn't it?"

"By the way," she went on, "I shall be putting the business up for sale immediately, and Maurice and I will be leaving the district as soon as we can be married. So I don't suppose we shall meet again. Good-bye, Brian—and good luck to you."

Brian shrugged, and without another word he left them. But as he walked homewards he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his young shoulders.

That evening Brian informed his parents that his marriage to Sylvia would not take place after all.

He then went on to explain how the engagement had come about, and when he had finished his parents exchanged glances of overwhelming relief.

"Oh, Brian dear, we are so very thankful that you have been saved from making such a terrible mistake," Mrs. Melcott murmured, laying her hand on his. "I never could understand how you and Sylvia— But there," she broke off, "there's nothing to be gained by talking about it, now it is all over, is there?"

"No, my dear—least said, soonest mended," her husband put in quietly. "By the way, son, if Sylvia intends to sell the business, why not try and take over the garage yourself? I know you've been saving hard for a long time in the hope of setting up on your own, and I've enough faith in your ability to make good to put my own savings into the venture. What do you say to that, Brian boy?"

"Why—Dad—" Brian grinned delightedly. "If you really mean it, I can only say that it's jolly decent of you, and you may depend upon it, I'll work doubly hard to repay your money, with interest."

"Well, mother, it looks as if we're going to be set up for life, doesn't it?" Mr. Melcott jested.

But there was a look in his eyes as they rested on Brian that expressed the pride they both felt in their son.

ON Sunday morning Mrs. Denham was sitting in the garden, in the warm spring sunshine, listening to the birds singing joyously.

Gillian had gone to church, her mother having persuaded her that she was quite strong enough to be left alone.

Presently, she started out of her thoughts at the sound of a car stopping at the gate, and glancing up, she saw Brian Melcott.

"Why, Brian, what on earth are you doing here!" she enquired in some astonishment. "Surely you—you are not spending your honeymoon in the district?"

"No, Mrs. Denham—my wedding has been cancelled," the young man answered, as he took off his hat and stood looking down at her. "It was broken off at the last minute. Sylvia is going to marry someone else."

"Oh, really?" Gillian's mother sat up

very straight in her chair, a faint flush of indignation in her pale cheeks. "And may I ask, Brian, why you have come all this way to see Gillian—as I presume you have?"

"Because I love her with all my heart Mrs. Denham," the young man answered, in a simple, straightforward tone which could not fail to impress her. "There has never been any other girl in the world for me. That is why I saved hard for years, so that I might have something to offer her, when—when I asked her to be my wife. I now have a good prospect of owning my own business, thanks to my father's help," he went on, "and—and if I could persuade Gillian to marry me I assure you that I would do everything in my power to make her happy."

"But if this is true, Brian, why did you become engaged to Sylvia Groves?" asked Mrs. Denham, mystified.

The young man explained how the engagement had come about, and though he did his best to shield Sylvia, it was evident to Mrs. Denham that the other girl had traded on his chivalrous instincts by holding him to the promise he had given her dying father.

"Well, Brian," she remarked, "I cannot answer for Gillian—the dear girl herself is the only one who can do that, and she should be home from church at any time now."

"By the way," she added, with a deep sigh, "I suppose you have heard about Mr. Leavis's tragic death? But no, I suppose you can't have done—it only happened yesterday. The poor, dear man was killed in a car crash, on his way down to spend the week-end here with us."

"Good gracious, I am very sorry to hear that, Mrs. Denham," Brian said, in a shocked voice.

"Yes, it is terribly sad. He was such a fine man, and so very kind and generous and thoughtful—"

Mrs. Denham's eyes filled with tears, and after a pause she went on—

"Mr. Leavis's solicitor came to see Gillian as soon as he heard the tragic news, to tell her that, only a day or so before his death, Mr. Leavis had made a will leaving everything he possessed to her."

"What!" Brian exclaimed, in blank astonishment.

"Yes, there can be no doubt that he was devoted to the dear girl, and that he was hoping to persuade her to marry him, eventually," Mrs. Denham said, with a sigh. "But it appears he made this will in case anything happened to him in the meantime."

"But, Mrs. Denham—Gillian must have inherited a fortune," Brian cried, staring at her aghast. "This means that I—I can't possibly ask her to marry me."

"Don't worry, Brian," Mrs. Denham laid her hand on his arm, with a kindly smile of real affection. "You see, the dear girl has already decided to make it all over to charity, except for this cottage, which she wishes me to have, with an annuity which will keep me in comfort for the rest of my life."

"But here is Gillian herself," she broke off, as the girl appeared at the gate, and stood staring at Brian as if she could hardly believe her eyes. "Please excuse me, my dear boy. I know you and Gillian will have a great deal to say to each other."

Mrs. Denham got up from her chair, and went indoors, while in the sunlit garden, with the birds singing in the trees overhead, Gillian and Brian stood hand in hand, their hearts thrilling to the sweetest song of all—love's old sweet song.

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