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CHRONICLES OF
SERVICE LIFE
IN MALTA



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"IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE MADE LOVE TO YOU SHOULD NOT
BE SO PRETTY."

Frontispiece.

[See page 105.]

6

CHRONICLES OF SERVICE LIFE IN MALTA

EDITED BY
MRS. ARTHUR T. STUART

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAUL HARDY

59
LONDON
EDWARD ARNOLD
1908

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Time money

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
IN REMEMBRANCE TO
MY HUSBAND
CAPTAIN ARTHUR THOMAS STUART, M.V.O., R.N.
AND TO
ALL NAVAL OFFICERS

EDITOR'S PREFACE

IN offering this collection of stories to the public in book form, I feel that some explanation of how they came to be written is due to those who read them.

Lady Malcolm Fearnought was my dearest friend, and our respective husbands were both stationed in Malta at the same time twice in their careers. Winnie was the sweetest and most sympathetic woman I have ever met ; one to whom the merest acquaintance would confide their joys and sorrows. They called her "The Pleasant Help," and it exactly suited her, for her sympathy was always practical. She always believed the best of everyone, and only when someone made an ill-natured accusation against another was she ever known to utter a snub or severe rebuke ; then, in her most dignified manner, Winnie would crush the offender.

A very beautiful woman, and in a position that gave her every opportunity to "amuse" herself, no hint of scandal was ever breathed on her name ;

indeed, she inspired worship rather than love. She was equally popular with both naval and military people, and was always warmly welcomed back to the island. When Lord Malcolm retired, Winnie, at my suggestion, started writing these chronicles, and at her death some years ago, she left them to me to publish if I desired to do so.

I am indebted to the Editors of *The Throne* and the *Malta Chronicle* for permission to reprint several of these stories, the first three having appeared in the former, and the fourth and fifth in the latter.

NINA STUART.

September, 1908.

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CHRONICLES OF SERVICE LIFE IN MALTA

LADY MALCOLM FEARNAUGHT'S INTRODUCTION

A VERY great friend of mine has often suggested that I should occupy the spare time that now hangs somewhat heavily on my hands by writing stories of Malta from a social standing-point. I always kept an elaborate diary, and have an excellent memory (for an old woman); and by now the heroes and heroines of most of the tales are old enough to laugh at their youthful follies, or are gone where earthly interests no longer count, so I have yielded to my friend's persuasions, but shall take a mild revenge by leaving the manuscript to her in my will.

When I first went to Malta, it was in the early fifties. We were only just married, and I was very young and very simple. My husband was then an ensign in the Highland Carbineers. In

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the course of the next thirty years we were there four times. The first time my husband returned as A.D.C. to my uncle the Governor; then he was made D.A.A.G., and then A.A.G. Then he went out as General in command of the Infantry Brigade; so, you see, I knew it very well. From first to last there was very little change except in the people themselves. The same types of men and women appeared year after year, and are still there, I do not doubt. There were nice pretty women, and pretty women who were not nice; there were fast girls, there were slow girls; there were nice men, and horrid men; there were gossips who talked, and there were those who gave the gossips subjects to talk about. Every season brought its quota of delightful club dances, ship dances, splendid balls at Admiralty House and the Palace. Every year various celebrities and royalties visited us; reviews were held for their benefit, and dinners, balls, and receptions given; and they departed, leaving behind them a trail of pleasant speeches, foreign orders, C.B.'s, M.V.O.'s, or merely signed photographs, as the case might be. I suppose it is something in the climate, but no one can resist the general cheerfulness of that sunny island, with its rocky shores, its blue sea, quaint villages, and its glorious moon, that is responsible for much folly. The very air is gay, the dullest wits are brightened, the

dowdiest woman takes thought for her clothes, the plainest one has a couple of admirers, and a pretty one a hundred; at least, they had in my day. No one there takes their lives seriously, except the real islanders; and as no one else does, it does not really matter. Very, very few of those who have been there but have kindly memories of pleasant times, with the exception, of course, of certain sour, unsociably disposed persons, who hate their kind, and are never happy unless they can go out and kill something every day.

This, then, must be my apology. I have endeavoured, wherever possible, to relate my chronicles in the third person, for fear of boring my readers with too many *I's*; where I could not do so, I trust they will forgive me for thrusting on their notice so humble a person as the chronicler,

WINIFRED FEARNAUGHT.

I

THE PRINCE, THE LADY, AND THE NAVAL CAPTAIN

I

My readers must pardon me if certain data in this story are vague or even misleading, because, dealing as it does with the scandalous behaviour of certain illustrious persons, who are still "illustrating" in various parts of Europe, it will be seen that it would be indiscreet to be more exact. It is a well-known fact that the ears of Royalty are as long as their memories, and, for all that I know to the contrary, they may receive this story in due course; therefore it behoves a poor scribe to be circumspect in her scribblings when daring enough to tell of the past follies of great ones of the earth.

All this happened in the early fifties, when we had only been married a very few years. My husband was acting as temporary or additional aide-de-camp to His Excellency the Governor;

at least, to Sir Cyril Willoughby, who was only Acting-Governor, for Lord — had gone home ill with fever. It was in the days when we wore crinolines, and our hair in sleek festoons draping our ears; when the newest line-of-battle ship was H.M.S. *Agamemnon*, and we had frigates instead of cruisers. It took a month to get to England; we used torches and candles instead of electric light, we went to "routs" instead of "bridge"; there were no telegraphs or telephones in the island, no lady ever thought of going alone in a hired vehicle except (as you will see I did) under great stress of circumstances. In those days men lived and died hard; it was no uncommon thing for one's husband to require assistance upstairs after an official dinner that had commenced at five or six o'clock, and supper-parties were the mode. The political horizon was clouded by the shadow of the Russian Eagle, men and women gambled for ruinous stakes, and royal personages were more exclusive and stay-at-home than they are now. But in spite of all these differences men and women were much the same; young people called their parents "old-fashioned"; old people called their juniors "minxes," "forward chits," or "conceited snippets"; ladies used more stilted language, and gentlemen were more forcible in their expressions of annoyance. The space in the Grand Harbour now occupied by nine iron

6 THE PRINCE, THE LADY, AND

monsters accommodated about thirty of our wooden walls. But steamships were recognised as the coming ships, and it was foreseen that in the future Malta would become more and more important. A great Committee was formed to inquire into and advise the Government as to new forts and defences, and it is round the report of this Committee that this story circles.

It was early in the season, and the absence of His Excellency made things rather dull, so it was with a distinct glow of pleasure we heard the news that we were shortly to be visited by H.S.H. Prince Eugene William Alexander Carlos Albert, Hereditary Prince of Schoenvon Konigseff, an important province of Siluria. It appears the Prince was on a yachting trip in search of health and amusement, and was coming here from Naples. When the beautiful yacht steamed into the bay, she was soon boarded by aides-de-camp and flag-lieutenants, etc., but great was our disappointment when we were told that H.S.H. was travelling strictly *incognito* as Count Auchnek, and wished to be left alone, at least so far as anything public was concerned; he would not even appear at a rout at the Palace that night, which had been arranged especially for him, and it fell rather flat in consequence. But our hopes revived when the next day he appeared out driving with a royally beautiful lady beside him. They drove to

the Marsa, and we were all envious of both the beauty of the lady, her clothes, and the obvious devotion of the Prince, and the story got about that the royal pair were really making this their honeymoon. We knew he had only been married about a year, but Siluria was a long way off, and not of violent interest to any of us ; someone discovered he had married Princess Augusta Olga Sophia Blanche Maria of Torgendin-Swartz, a lady owning a small but very rich neighbouring State. In the course of a few days the Prince made the acquaintance of all the leading lights of our little world—strictly privately, of course. My husband went with Sir Cyril to return the Prince's call on board the yacht. When they were talking, the Countess entered. "Won't you introduce me, Eugene?" she said, but the Prince made no effort to do so until she repeated her request, when he said curtly: "General Sir Cyril Willoughby, Lord Malcolm Fearnought, and Colonel Everett."

"I hope your Serene Highness——" began the General, who was by way of being a lady's man, when the Prince broke in, saying, "Your pardon, General, Madame is *not* her Serene Highness, she is the plain Countess Auchnek." "Forgive me, Your—I mean Count, but the word Highness comes naturally to the lips in addressing so royally beautiful a lady," and the

General bowed gallantly. The Countess clapped her little jewelled hands : "Charming, charming ; I did not know you cold English were such courtiers." After that the visit went on swimmingly. When they rose to go, the General asked his hostess when it would be convenient for her to receive Lady Willoughby. The Count was just going to reply—indeed, he got as far as the words, "It is very good of you, but——" when the Countess broke in with : "Tell your wife to come and see me to-morrow at eleven o'clock ; we do not dine till twelve."

And at eleven precisely Lady Willoughby and I presented ourselves on board, and were received with great warmth by the lady, but with a certain hauteur by the Prince, who conveyed the idea to me that he would rather we had stayed away. The ice being broken, we did our best to make things pleasant for our visitors.

At the wish of the Countess the Prince decided to take a *pied-à-terre*, and finally moved into a house whose back windows looked into mine in the friendly way the houses do in Valetta. But only on the strict understanding that they were treated as simple visitors would the Prince accept an invitation or introduction. Women as well as men fell in love with the fascinating Countess ; she certainly had the most agreeable manners, and in spite of a certain Royal air that we all agreed

would have distinction in any *milieu*, she was the easiest woman to talk to I have ever met.

One day I went in about half-past five to make some arrangement about driving her to a picnic she was giving the next day. It was getting dusk when I was shown into the drawing-room; the man retired, saying he would tell the Countess, and I sat down on the nearest chair. The drawing-room was a fair size, and just where I was sitting hung a portière screening a tiny ante-room, which looked into the back of my house. I heard someone talking in a harsh, foreign language. The Prince and Princess spoke excellent English, and I did not attempt to understand what was being said, thinking it was Hungarian, and the speakers were two of the servants. Then suddenly I caught a few words that took me back to the days when my father was Military Attaché at St. Petersburg, and my Russian nurse taught me her own language; I never forgot it, and afterwards the daughter of the Russian Ambassador in London was one of my most intimate friends.

The first words I recognised as being in Russian brought me up with a "round turn," as they say in the Navy. They were spoken by a man. Translated freely they were: "I tell you, you must get these papers; Bortscheff will give a thousand pounds for any reliable information, and ten thousand for a plan of the new defences. It

is being kept very close, and even the naval people out here do not know what is the subject this Committee is sitting on. The President is the Commissioner of the Dockyard, and the next in rank is Captain Ashwell, of the frigate *Durham*; the meetings are held on board his ship, the papers concerning the new defences are kept in a cupboard in his cabin, and the key is worn on his watch-chain; you must contrive to get hold of that and take a wax impression, and I can get a duplicate key made on the yacht. Surely you can manage to get on board the frigate and get ten minutes alone in his cabin; but not for another fortnight or three weeks, as until then the new plans will not be fully agreed on. Once you see your way let me know, but we must not meet often. It is most awkward Rosalie being in hospital; it leaves us no go-between."

"Oh, Ivan, I can't do it," the voice of the Countess replied; "it is an impossibility you ask. These naval captains are not silly young men to be fooled, and even if I did get into his cabin, is it likely I should be left alone? Besides, my nerve is going; ever since that affair in Buda-Pesth I seem to lose my head. All these good people are unsuspecting enough, and of course the Prince is good cover, but I can't, I can't"—and she broke off suddenly.

"You must," the man said, "unless you want a

certain little affair of some stolen pearls to be laid before the Imperial Person."

"Ah, no!" cried the woman, an agony of fear in her voice.

"Then do as I tell you," said the man shortly.

At that moment the servant came in to light the candles; he seemed surprised to see me alone, and then the portière was quickly drawn aside, and the Countess entered. She was perfectly self-possessed, and apologized for the stupidity of her servant in not informing her of my arrival, adding: "I was just giving our steward some instructions about to-morrow's picnic; he is a good man, but only understands our native patois." Turning to him, she said in Russian: "Go away; she couldn't understand."

I stayed no longer than I could help, and went home trying to think out the best course to take. It was not as simple an affair as it seemed. In the first place I had not a particle of evidence to support my bare word, and it seemed impossible to believe that this Silurian Princess was scheming to procure plans for the benefit of the Russian Government, as Siluria was always snarling at Russia, like a small toy-terrier that yaps at a good-tempered Newfoundland. If I went to my husband I felt sure he would laugh at my story and say I had misunderstood them; or else he would tell it to Sir Cyril, who, though a dear old

gentleman, was devoid of tact or judgment, and was quite capable of telling the whole story back to the Princess as a good joke.

That evening we were going to a small dance on board the *Durham*, and I determined to keep my eyes very wide open. I remember I wore a dress of cherry-coloured silk similar to what we call glacé now ; it was all flounces, and little flat bows of black velvet. I was dancing a good deal with the Commander of the ship, and finally he took me down to supper. His name was Gordon Mackintyre. He was what is now termed "smart"; that is to say, he considered that there were few men in the Navy who were quite as good as he was in handling a ship, and that admirals were nice old gentlemen who did no harm so long as they left naval matters alone ; that senior captains were often foolish and well-meaning persons, who would get into hopeless muddles if it were not for the guiding hand and brain of their smart young commanders, but that so long as they did not interfere all would be well. Commander Mackintyre owed his early promotion to a death vacancy ; he was good-looking, and rather spoilt, but his extraordinary faith in Gordon Mackintyre was infectious, and before I had finished my supper I almost decided to tell him what I had overheard. Just as I had come to this conclusion we went on deck, and he said : " This is my first dissipation

for the last fortnight. I am acting as Secretary to the Secret Commission, and when we are not actually sitting in council I am writing out all the speeches, etc. It is all deadly secret; I am not even allowed a clerk. We are all being worried out of our lives by questions as to what it is all about, so now I tell everyone who asks me that it is to consider the advisability of re-introducing pigtails into the Navy." He laughed heartily at his own wit, and I tried to join; but the weight of the responsibility of the secret on my mind choked down my mirth, and I could only laugh in a weak manner. But before I went home I gave Commander Mackintyre a pressing invitation to call on me. The only thing remarkable I observed in the behaviour of the Countess was the evident admiration she excited in the Captain, and her distinct encouragement of the same.

Captain Ashwell was a quiet man of about forty-eight; in society he was dull, and I never heard him spoken of as brilliant in his profession. During the next week I did not find it necessary to prop open my organs of vision in order to see the Countess was deliberately laying herself out to fascinate Captain Ashwell, and that her task was not a difficult one. Commander Mackintyre had not yet called, and I had to keep my secret to myself, until one evening, when I was the unwilling witness of a singular kind of shadow-show,

which brought me to the conclusion that there was no time to be lost if I wished to frustrate the Countess's designs on our national secret.

I have said our back windows looked into those of the house Prince Eugene had taken. One evening I was sitting at my writing-table in the back drawing-room. It was dusk, and I had finished my letters and was just thinking, when I saw the blinds drawn down and the candles lit in the little boudoir of the Countess. Now, the candles were all in sconces on the wall which faced the window, consequently sharp shadows were thrown on the blind when any person passed between them. As I was absently watching the figure of the Countess moving about, I saw her hand stretch out and meet another, the owner of which was out of the picture ; then he came forward, and I distinctly recognised Captain Ashwell. For a few minutes they flitted backwards and forwards ; then the Countess seated herself so that I could see her beautiful profile. The man was not visible until some minutes later, when he appeared leaning over the back of her chair, and the next incident worth mentioning was the exchange of a most lover-like kiss.

I was a good deal shocked, as I had no suspicion that she would carry a flirtation so far, and with a man of his age, too ; nevertheless, I sat down and wrote a note to Commander Mackintyre,

saying I had something of great importance to tell him, and begged he would come and see me the following day. He replied he would come at three o'clock, which he did, and I told him the whole story up to the affair of the shadows, and pointed out the extremely affectionate terms the Countess appeared to be on with the man whose cabin she was under orders to rifle, and by what gigantic strides the intimacy between spoiler and victim was increasing.

Gordon Mackintyre's face was very serious and stern by the time I had finished; but when he spoke I could not help thinking I detected a note of latent triumph in his voice.

"Lady Malcolm," he said, "I cannot tell you whether what you overheard given as the object of the secret Commission is correct, but I am sure the Countess will never find out anything from the Captain; and by what means can she possibly get at the papers in his cabin? However, I shall take care to give him a strong hint, or even to tell him the whole story; only when a man of his age falls in love it is a bad business. But I am going to the ball at the Palace to-night, and will watch them both carefully."

That night at the second dance Commander Mackintyre found me; he told me he had been dining at the club with his Captain, and very delicately he had hinted that perhaps the Countess

was not exactly what she seemed, and that she spoke French with a distinctly *Russian* accent, which was odd, as she was supposed to be a Silurian. "Unfortunately, he did not take it well, and told me to stick to my sail drill, and not fathom the sayings and doings of royalties; and he said it in his most snubbing manner. The old fool is as much in love as if he were eighteen," he wound up ruefully.

I consoled him as well as I could, and said we could only watch and wait. An hour later, just as I was thinking of leaving, Commander Mackintyre came up to me excitedly.

"When can I see you to-morrow?" he said.

"At twelve," I replied, longing to know what had occurred; but I had to wait till the time I had appointed. He came punctually, and told me this history of his adventures the previous night:

"I was wandering aimlessly up one passage and down another, thinking I was an ass to have come, when at the extreme end of the far passage I saw the Princess and our Captain approaching. I did not want to meet them face to face, after my remarks to the latter at dinner, so I gently pulled a light screen in front of me where I stood, and the next thing I saw was Captain Ashwell's hand round the corner of that screen as he pushed the last fold of it to the right.

"There, sit down, Princess, and no prying

eyes shall watch us,' he said. It was awkward for me; if I moved I should be caught in the ignominious position of an eavesdropper, and I really considered it my duty to listen and hear anything I could that would enlighten us as to the manner the lady intended to get at the papers. First they talked about the beautiful colour of her eyes for five minutes. Oh, if I could have seen his face, I would have given a month's pay! Then they came to business. 'You promised I should come to sup with you one evening; when shall it be?' she asked. 'Do you really think it would be safe? Could you get away without anyone knowing?' 'Yes, next Tuesday my husband dines with the General. I will go to bed at seven, and order them not to disturb me, and then when he is gone I will slip out, and you shall tell a carriage to wait for me, and a boat, and—ah, I will taste freedom, and with thee, my Captain.' Well, just as he had agreed—and I must say he did not do it willingly—I heard a heavy, quick footstep down the passage, and a hand rudely pushed back the screen on to my nose, and the voice of H.S.H. Prince Eugene remarked in a gruff tone, 'I regret, Captain Ashwell, I must ask you to allow me a few words with Madame.' The Captain got up hastily, and said, 'Certainly, your Highness—certainly,' and with unceremonious haste he bolted. Then followed a grand scene. Well, I'm not

married, and if that was a fair example of what happens when a married couple disagree, please God I'll die a bachelor! They talked French, and I could not understand all, but I knew enough to know he was in a most royal rage, and used most unprincely language; finally, she lost her royal temper and boxed his royal ears. After that he announced his intention to leave Malta on Thursday, and forbade her to speak to the 'accursed Englishman' again, saying if the yacht's engines were not in pieces he would have sailed then and there.

"The lady then, with presence of mind and great wit, accused him of not loving her, and soon afterwards they exchanged the most affectionate kisses and went back to the ballroom.

"Now, I do not think there is much doubt that she will make the assault on the papers on Tuesday night."

I quite agreed with him; but as neither of us thought it probable the Captain would ask him to join the supper-party, the question arose, how was he going to guard the papers?

"She has probably managed to get a duplicate key made by now, and will have some plan to get the Captain out of the cabin, and when alone will unlock the cupboard, get the papers—they are all plainly marked 'Secret Commission'—and hide them about her, and, on leaving the ship,

hand them to the yacht's steward, who will be waiting.

"It is no use my speaking to the Captain, he is utterly infatuated; there is only one way I can see to convince him of the truth and to protect the papers at the same time."

"And that is?" I asked eagerly.

"To let her steal them! I will wait and watch, and if I find the Captain absent I will enter the cabin unseen by her if possible, let her get the papers, see what she does with them, and, when he returns, ask him to see if the cupboard has been opened, and to make the lady stand and deliver."

I thought the plan a splendid one, and, indeed, it was the only thing to be done unless we could find out anything more of the Countess's plans.

II

The days dragged slowly on. The Captain and the Countess were less in each other's society, otherwise there was nothing to guide us in any direction. It was not until eight o'clock on that eventful Tuesday evening that anything happened; then event followed event with lightning rapidity. Tonia, my Maltese parlour-maid, came in with my tea, and as she opened the door I heard the sound of low sobs coming from the

kitchen. I inquired what was the matter, and she replied that Nelly was there crying, and declaring she would never go back to the house of the Countess, who had apparently frightened her. Now, Nelly Day was a nice little English girl I had brought out as housemaid, and when the Princess's own maid was taken to the hospital with concussion of the brain two days after her arrival, I had lent her Nelly. I went out and found her weeping loudly in the noisy, snuffling way peculiar to her class. After a few straight questions and many crooked answers, I heard the following story.

It seems that the steward of the yacht was in the habit of sending the Countess little baskets of small iced cakes, which she always had sent to her bedroom. The previous evening the usual box of cakes had arrived just as Nelly was coming round here for an hour's gossip with Tonia, and in a fit of greediness she had taken one and eaten it on her way; but she found it had contained a hard substance in the middle, and on taking it out of her mouth found it to be a small key wrapped in some paper. She slipped it into her bag and forgot all about it when she went back. The next morning the Countess had gone on board the yacht, and came back in a towering rage, swearing that six cakes had been sent and only five been put in her room. Finding that Nelly

had taken them from the messenger and put them upstairs, she had taxed her with stealing one, but Nelly had denied touching them, saying there were only five when she opened the box.

“Of course, my lady, I was wrong to take one, and wrong to lie about it; but there! she frightened me so, and her eyes were all afire, and I won't go back, not if she bribes me ever so!” And the sinner dissolved into noisy tears.

“But the key, girl, and the paper?” I almost screamed in my fever of anxiety. She looked at me stupidly with her swollen eyes, then slowly unclosed her fat red hand, and in it I saw a crumpled piece of paper. I pounced upon it and carried it off to my room. When I unwrapped it I found a small, roughly-made key. The paper itself was very thin, and on it were traced some fine Russian characters. I eagerly sought an old Russian grammar and dictionary that I carried with me wherever I went. In spite of this assistance I could not decipher more than about half the words, because, whilst my nurse had taught me to speak and understand her language, she could not read or write it, and I only learnt the characters in London from Feodora Malensky. However, the information I gathered from the words was such that I did not wait to try and discover the rest, but, hastily putting a long, dark cloak and hood on, I rushed out, and was fortunate

enough to get one of the forerunners of the Carrozzine, which I engaged, and drove to the Marina.

What I read in the note was this (the words in italics I supply to make sense): "*Here is the key. God knows if you will get it safely. I have no other means of sending it. The explosion will take place at 9.14 exactly. You should have a quarter of an hour. Jewels—carriage—return—steamer—waiting outside—no—lights.*"

I could not even guess at the smaller words in the last sentence, but it was plain enough an explosion was to take place at 9.14 in order to give the Countess time to open the cupboard with the key enclosed, and that, not receiving the key, she had gone on board the yacht to inquire about it, and, having heard it had been sent through their usual means of communication (the cakes), had returned in a passion of fright and danger, never dreaming that it was nothing worse than the greediness of a servant that was to blame.

It was then after eight o'clock, and as I got on board the *Durham* (for that was my destination, as you may have guessed), my watch, an old-fashioned repeater, told me it was after a quarter to nine. Regardless of the open amazement of Mr. Weston, the officer of the watch, who received me, I requested that the Commander be immediately sent for. When he came I gave him in a low tone a sketch of the events of the

last hour, and showed him the note, the key, and my translation of the former. He was aghast at the information.

"But she has not got the key, anyhow," he said, "and they can't blow up the ship with her and the papers on board."

"No; but don't you think it possible that, knowing when it will take place—you see, she must have settled things with the steward when she went on board the yacht—she will contrive to borrow or steal the original key from the Captain's chain a moment before it takes place, and trust to his leaving it in her hand on hearing the explosion?"

"Good God! so she might," he said; and, taking hold of my arm, he hurried me to the gangway, saying: "Leave everything to me; you must go instantly. They may have changed the hour, and your life may be—nay, is—in danger. These devils may be going to blow up the very planks we are standing on. Dear, brave lady, I pray no harm will happen to you. I will see that the Countess is not alone when the moment comes."

All this time he was hurrying me into my boat. I felt awfully annoyed at being sent away just as things were coming to a climax, but his tone of authority was not to be withstood, and I was on my way before I realized that I had been sent off.

I got into my carriage, that I had told to wait, and drove up Strada Lervante. Just as we were nearing St. Christofore I heard a loud explosion, and, stopping the vehicle, I got out and rushed to the bastion. The bows of the *Durham* were lit by tongues of flame, but in a few minutes it changed to volumes of black smoke. Dozens of people were soon assembled, watching the scene. I could not tear myself away till all was quiet; then, as I was getting into the carriage again, I saw another coming at a furious pace. I waited a second, and caught a glimpse of the occupant as the little horse slackened his pace at the brow of the hill. It was the Countess, and in her hand was something square and white. With that extraordinary capacity for connecting cause and effect which is often the reason of a woman's success at a crisis, I thrust a piece of silver in my driver's hand, and stopping the other one by a sign, I said to the Countess :

"Oh, Countess, I am so thankful to see you! I have been supping on board the flagship, and got so faint I had to come home. Will you give me a seat? My wretched horse has jibbed at the hill, and I have had to get out."

Without waiting for her to reply, I got in beside her and babbled on with various little lies, not giving her a chance of telling any on her own behalf. She sat in a sort of dazed silence, her



THE BOWS OF THE "DURHAM" WERE LIT BY TONGUES OF FLAME.

two white, jewelled hands nervously grasping the sealed packet in her lap. I had asked her to allow me to tell the driver to stop at my house, as it was on the way to hers, and it was not until we actually stopped at the door that I formed any plan about getting possession of the papers. I signed to the driver to ring the bell; the door was opened by my butler; I got out, and then, leaning towards the Countess as if I was going to shake hands, I made a sudden snatch at the packet, and, tearing it out of her fingers, I rushed inside my own door, which I banged and bolted myself before my flabbergasted butler had time to shut his large mouth, which must have opened in amazement at my astounding conduct.

I almost fell into one of the hall chairs, the papers clasped in my arms. As I expected, the Countess made no attempt to regain her purloined property, and the carriage drove away quietly. I remembered how hungry I was, and told Simmons to hold his tongue as to what he had seen, and to get me something to eat. It was a happy, triumphant woman who sat over her sandwiches and Madeira, I can assure you. I may be pardoned for thinking well of myself. I was only a girl of twenty, and single-handed I had succeeded in outwitting a clever, unscrupulous woman, and defeating her plans, where several clever men had either been hoodwinked or failed.

I sat up until the return of my husband, and then I told him the whole story. It required the evidence of the key and the paper to convince him the whole thing was not a fabrication, but when it came to the relation of my trip to the *Durham*, he was divided between anger at my running such a risk and thankfulness at my escape.

"I always considered Master Mackintyre a conceited ass," he said, "but he showed sense in sending you off like that. You never know where to have these naval men; the ones you think the fools are the smartest at a pinch, and the swaggering youngsters are in reality as full of brains as their heads will hold. But I can't understand this mixing up of Russia in the affair. There can be no doubt the Prince is genuine enough; old Bernstein, the Consul, knows him well. Of course, now I come to think of it, we were never officially informed that the Princess was coming with him. To be sure, she only joined the yacht at Naples!" He paused and smoked thoughtfully, then added as an afterthought: "I suppose she really *is the Princess?*"

"Oh, Peter," I exclaimed—in moments of excitement I always call my husband Peter—"do you mean she is *not* the Prince's wife?"

"Well, my dear, the morals of princes are, of course, beyond the comprehension of mere men; and when one comes to think of it, although we

know *He* is the genuine article, we really have no information about *Her*. They did their best to keep quiet; at our first introduction he told us distinctly 'she was *not* the Princess'—those were his very words, only we took them to refer to the use of his incognito title."

"But Sir Cyril, Lady Blount, and all the people who have fussed and *fêted* them?" I asked. My husband waved his hand airily.

"My dear, Sir Cyril is as simple as a baby where a pretty woman is concerned, and throw in a title, much less a royal one, and you would have both him and Lady Willoughby running after the owner like two pet lambs. But don't you bother any more about it; go to bed, and I will lock up the papers, and you shall give them back to Captain Ashwell yourself to-morrow."

The next morning it was with a gentle glow of righteous pride that I wrote a note to Commander Mackintyre, just saying I hoped no one was hurt by the explosion, and that if he and Captain Ashwell would come and see me I would give them the stolen papers, which were now in my possession. As I fully expected, Captain Mackintyre answered my note in person. He told me only one man was badly hurt, and that, owing to the Captain's blind faith in her, the Countess had got off with the documents, and he could not under-

stand my saying they were in my possession. His jaunty air had gone, and I felt so sorry for him that I just fetched the papers and put them in his hands. His astonishment was delicious. He did not need to open it; all the seals were there intact, and in unbounded relief he kissed my hand, and begged to be told the history of their capture. When I had finished, I requested him to tell me what had happened after I had left the *Durham*.

“Directly you had gone I had a thorough search made for anything in the nature of an explosive, but could find nothing. Just as we got to the fo’c’sle the explosion took place. We can find no trace of what it was or how it got there; it appeared to be some horrible oil, and covered everything with greasy smuts that will take me a month to get rid of. I was only a minute on deck. I ordered the bell to be rung for fire-quarters, put the First-Lieutenant in charge, and rushed down to the Captain’s cabin. I had hoped to avoid meeting the skipper, so as to save explanations with him, but he was so long in tearing himself away from the Countess that we met at the door of the fore-cabin.

“‘Hello, Mackintyre!’ he said, ‘what is the explosion?’

“‘I really don’t know what caused it, sir, but it is a prearranged affair.’

“ ‘Well, don’t you think your place is on deck?’ he said.

“ ‘Excuse me, sir, but I must go into your cabin,’ I said wildly, knowing the importance of not wasting time. I would have gone in if I could, but he is a big man, and he filled up the doorway.

“ ‘What the devil do you want in my cabin?’ he asked.

“ ‘The Countess is after the secret papers. For God’s sake, let me pass, sir!’ He simply glared.

“ ‘You must be mad—raving mad. Captain Mackintyre, your place is on deck, not in my cabin. Go and do your duty, or else consider yourself under arrest.’

“Knowing how we were playing into the Countess’s hands by standing there parleying, I was in the act of pushing him aside, knowing the result of my action would justify my breach of discipline, when he stepped out and shut the door, saying: ‘To your cabin or on deck!’ He meant it, and the pig-headed old man was capable of knocking me down had I tried to force my way, so I had to give it up and go on deck. In a quarter of an hour it was all over, and a steward came up to the Captain and said: ‘The lady asked me to tell you, sir, that she was so frightened she could not stay, and she made me

get her a boat that was hanging about the ladder, and she went ashore.' The Captain grunted, and then, turning to me, said :

" 'Come to my cabin.' When we got there he said : ' Now, Captain Mackintyre, I should like an explanation of your extraordinary conduct in almost forcing your way into my cabin when you should have been seeing to the safety of the ship, and of your unwarrantable accusation against a royal lady, who was my guest.' I replied that during the two years I had served with him I did not think he had ever found me neglecting my duty.

" ' I trust not,' he growled.

" ' I think you may remember, sir,' I said, ' a short time ago I gave you a hint about the lady who was here to-night.' He said ' Umph !' and muttered something about grandmothers and eggs.

" ' Since then,' I went on, ' I have had ample proof that I was more than justified in my suspicions, but did not like to tell you any more, and waited till I could find some tangible proof. Late this evening I received information that an explosion would take place at 9.14, the object being to distract your attention and to give the lady the opportunity, during your absence from the cabin, to open the cupboard and extract the papers referring to the Secret Commission, the object of

which she was fully aware. A key was made and sent to her, but by a mere chance miscarried, and fell into the hands of my ally. I suppose she did not happen to borrow your watch-chain a few moments before the explosion took place ?

“ The skipper’s face was a picture of surprise and dismay.

“ ‘ Good heavens ! she did.’

“ ‘ You see, sir, my object was to get in here and catch her in the act. There is a steamer now waiting for her outside the harbour, and the boat she went off in was waiting most likely for her. Who she really is I don’t know, but that she is a Russian spy is as plain as a pikestaff. She may have taken in the Prince, too. Will you have the cupboard forced, sir ?’

“ This was done, and the place where we had put the sealed packet of papers all ready for sending home was vacant.

“ ‘ I hope, sir, you will think I was justified in what I did,’ I ended up. The Captain said nothing, but, turning to the table, mixed two tumblers of brandy-and-water, and gave me one, saying :

“ ‘ You are a good fellow, Mackintyre ; you mean well ; you are a trifle over-confident of your own cleverness, but you are young—very young. Here’s health to you.’

“ I assure you, Lady Malcolm, I never had

such a facer in my life." And really, as Captain Mackintyre spoke, mortification and humiliation were written all over him. I felt dreadfully sorry for him, and, laying my hand sympathetically on his arm, I said: "I am so grieved that I have been the means of bringing all this on you, but you must make allowance for the awful state of mind Captain Ashwell must have been in when he found the papers gone, and discovered that he had been fooled."

"But," objected Captain Mackintyre, "that is just the thing that hurts. He did not seem to see that he *had* been fooled or to feel it a bit, but behaved as if I was the victim."

I consoled him as well as I could, and finally sent him off with the precious papers and permission to tell the Captain of my share in the business. Of the Countess nothing was heard. The Prince gave out that she was on board the yacht, and that they were leaving the day following, as the Countess was not well.

That evening, about five o'clock, the butler announced Captain Ashwell and Commander Mackintyre. I told him to say I was engaged to any other callers. Captain Ashwell was quiet and self-possessed as usual, but Captain Mackintyre looked like a man who waited a denouement the nature of which he could not surmise.

"I have heard from Captain Mackintyre, Lady

Malcolm," he said, "of your kind efforts to protect me from the machinations of that charming but, I have reason to believe, deceitful member of your sex we have all been presented to as the Countess Auchnek. I am sincerely grateful to you for your intentions, and it is not your fault or that of Captain Mackintyre if your efforts were not crowned with the success you think." He paused and looked at us both, and I began to feel hot and foolish, and Captain Mackintyre moved his eyeglass, as if to ask what the deuce more the Captain wanted us to do. That gentleman then continued :

"Dear Lady Malcolm, please sit down, and I will tell you a story. Your conduct was plucky and discreet, and your errors were those of youth. Why, oh, why did you not take your husband into your confidence? If only you had done so I should have been a made man! However, forgive a disappointed one's ill-humour."

I really could not stand that, so I said stiffly :

"I am sorry for your disappointment, but Captain Mackintyre gave you as straight a hint as he could, and you only snubbed him."

He smiled.

"If only I had snubbed him a little more, perhaps a certain lady would have been in our hands by now. But this is the story :

"When I was a sub-lieutenant I fell desperately

in love with the beautiful Russian wife of an English merchant whom I met at Constantinople, but love's young dream was rudely broken by the arrest of the lady as a Russian spy. Her fate I never heard; she just disappeared, and her husband and only child, a little girl of almost a year old, returned to England. That I may call the Prologue.

“The next chapter occurred twenty years afterwards and three years ago from now. I was on half-pay, and suffering from rheumatism. I was ordered to take some baths at a place called B——, in Germany.

“Now, it happened that my mother, who was with me, made the acquaintance of the Princess Augusta of Torgendin-Swartz, who was there with her suite, undergoing a course of treatment for the improvement of her figure, which was distinctly inclined to embonpoint. She was a kind, good girl, but terribly unattractive, being swarthy and having a heavy, shapeless face and a cast in her eye. But she was very wealthy, and shortly after we left B—— I saw the announcement in the papers of her engagement and subsequent marriage to Prince Eugene of Schoenvon Konigseff. I need not point out to you clever young people the connection between Chapter I. and the Prologue if I add that the Countess Auchnek is the living image of the lovely Fedora

Wallace, known to the Russian Secret Service as Fedora Sotligoff, and that from the moment I saw her here passing as the wife of Prince Eugene, I recognised her from her likeness to her mother, and guessed she was following in my old love's footsteps. In justice to the Prince you must remember that he gave out that he was travelling incognito.

None of the people in the yacht knew the real Princess, as both boat and crew were French. His one gentleman-in-waiting and his secretary were paid to hold their tongues, and the maid and steward were in her service. Had I wanted anything to confirm my suspicions as to the nationality of the lady, I received it one day at a picnic, when—accidentally, of course—I was clumsy enough to spill some very cold water over the Countess's foot, and she cursed me very freely—in Russian. She covered it cleverly by saying it was her Silurian patois, but I had not made youthful love to her mother without learning a little of her language. I then laid my suspicions before the Commander-in-Chief, and we made our plans. The lady's marked partiality for my society, and her innocent questions as to where the Secret Commission's meetings were held, etc., showed what were her quarry. Now, it was most important that Russia should be supplied with full information with regard to decisions of the Secret

Commission, so I sat up night after night to write out everything we wanted them to know, and made sketches and plans that would supply them with the very finest *false* information that they could have no possible reason for doubting. Every single scrap of paper relating to the real decision was passed on to the Admiral as Mackintyre gave it to me.

“A week ago a quiet, inoffensive person arrived, whose unceasing but invisible attention to the ways of the Countess and her steward resulted in the discovery of much useful information. One day the Countess playfully borrowed my watch-chain to put round her Maltese terrier’s neck. I knew then, as she left the room to bring him back, that she would get the impression of the key of the confidential cupboard, and when she suggested I should have a *tête-à-tête* supper-party with her on board, I then knew exactly the date her burglary would take place. She need not have troubled to have arranged an explosion, as I would have given her every chance of securing the prize. However, in spite of Captain Mackintyre’s noble efforts to prevent it, she opened the cupboard with the key on my chain, which she had borrowed for the purpose; she secured her papers, and left the ship in the boat that evidently awaited her. I cannot understand why she went ashore, unless it was to fetch the jewels the Prince had given her, as the ship was waiting for her with the

steward on board. Our frigate, the *Aphrodite*, with Mr. Wilson on board, was ready to follow her, Mr. Wilson having the necessary papers for her arrest ; but before that took place the papers would have been passed to some agent, and Russia would have profited by them all the same. Madame would have got at least ten years' imprisonment, and England would have been secured for that time from the cleverest spy Russia has got.

“ There would have been no scandal, as the Prince would have gone quietly away, having been told how matters stood. As it is, he is mad with jealousy, and half suspects me of hiding the lady. The servants' tongues cannot be stopped, and I can quite imagine his wife giving him a very uncomfortable home-coming. Worst of all, when Wilson catches her he will have no grounds for her arrest ; Russia has no plans with which to deceive herself ; and I—I am a ruined man !”

During Captain Ashwell's long speech his Commander and I had hardly dared look at each other. Seeing our conduct by the light poured upon it by the story of this cool, quiet man, it appeared conceited, impertinent, officious and interfering. We had behaved like children who spoil their elders' game by knocking over the table. Instead of proving our own cleverness, we had been fooled by the very man whom we, in our

innocent blindness, had been trying to save; he had not only completely succeeded in hoodwinking us, but the clever, unscrupulous woman, who believed him so utterly in her toils, while all the time she was playing his game and dancing to the tune he piped.

Tears of humiliation rolled down my cheeks, and Captain Mackintyre looked as though he would have liked to bury his face in his handkerchief too.

“Come, come, Lady Malcolm,” the Captain said at last, “don’t cry; you did what you thought was your duty, and did it cleverly and well—only why did you not tell your husband? He would have seen the value of your information at once.”

“I don’t believe he would,” I said, drying my eyes; “but all I can do now is beg your forgiveness for my officiousness, and Captain Mackintyre’s for having dragged him into it.”

“Mine you have most freely,” said the Captain.

“And mine there is no need to ask for,” said the Commander, and, pulling together the shattered remains of his self-esteem, he said:

“I am more than sorry that my obstinacy in not taking your hint, sir, to attend to my sail drill has led to this miscarriage of your plans, but I hope you will forgive me; I—I——” And he could say no more.

Very kindly, Captain Ashwell put his hand on

the other's shoulder. "Mackintyre, say no more," he said—"say no more. I forgive you as fully as is humanly possible. You have unwittingly ruined me. Had I carried this through successfully, I was a made man; as it is, I shall shortly retire. Luckily for you, it is only results in these matters that are inquired into, so your name will not appear in my report; but another time you will be less ready to put your senior officers down as old fools who can see no further than their own quarter-deck. You are a young man to have obtained your rank—do not let it turn your head, and give your elders credit for knowing their own business." Then, turning to me, he said, in a lighter manner: "Forgive me, Lady Malcolm; it is the last word."

He then shook us both by the hand, and left. Captain Mackintyre did not stay long; there was little to say, and I had to prepare myself for another humiliating interview—with my husband this time.

I think I will draw the veil over *that*. He was, if possible, more crushing than Captain Ashwell at first, and then he comforted my fallen spirits by saying:

"Well, my dear Winnie, I think old Ashwell ought to be very grateful to you for not gossiping about seeing him kiss the Countess, as lots of women would have done, and I think you a

mighty clever little woman to have got those papers; it was not your fault they were wrong ones, and I won't have you worry any more about the matter." He gave me a kiss that made up for a lot—and that made me thank God for such a nice husband, who, instead of the well-deserved salt, poured oil into my wounds.

II

THE TEMPTATION OF THE NAVAL ENGINEER

I

THIS is a story which took place when my husband was A.A.G. in Malta in the early eighties. I was a sort of receiver of confidences. They came to me, some accidentally, some through people asking advice, and some through others wanting sympathy. My first introduction to the existence of the hero was at a club dance, where I heard the following conversation. I was sitting out, and my partner had gone on an errand for me, when two naval officers came and stood quite close to my chair: one was a young lieutenant and the other a doctor. I did not know the latter, but the former was a great favourite of mine. Horace Turner was an only son of an exceedingly wealthy shipowner, but he was as unspoiled as if he had had an allowance of fifty pounds a year, always generous and open-

handed, but hating publicity for his good deeds. He had almost a morbid horror of receiving thanks, and more than once had come to me to help him transfer some of what he called "father's pride" to the pockets of some needy person or charity. Just now he was very much in love with the daughter of a gentleman who was visiting the island on business of a somewhat mysterious nature that no one appeared to know anything about. (They said he was an American of a virulent type.) This was resented, for visitors are expected to produce some plausible excuse for their presence on this island. But Mr. Jabez B. Doolan gave none. His pretty daughter soon made friends with the people in the hotel where they were staying, and at a picnic she and Horace had fallen in love, and for the present were content to remain there. Horace had his back to me, but the doctor's face I could see.

"Just look at old Cotes over there. What a dismal old soul he looks!" said Horace.

"Yes; looks as if he's lost a quid and found a tanner," said the doctor.

"I wonder what is wrong; he's not been the same man since his wife came out."

"Climate," said the doctor.

"Oh, rats! The climate's all right, if you don't drink too many cocktails and take decent care of yourself—and avoid doctors."

"Thanks, old man," said the doctor.

Horace continued: "D'ye think the Captain's been worrying him about coal expenditure? you know what a crank he is about it?"

"No, I don't. Why, we've been in harbour a month."

"Well, I think I shall go and ask him what's wrong," said my honest young friend.

"My dear boy, don't do anything of the sort. Take it from me, our gracious Captain does not worry our noble engineer half so much as do the responsibilities entailed by the possession of a charming wife, a thriving and increasing family, to say nothing about a giddy widow of a sister-in-law. If you really desire to show your sympathy with our friend yonder, you won't ask him what it is that worries him, for he can hardly explain to a wealthy bachelor that, having received his appointment to a ship in Australia, he is unable to find the filthy lucre wherewith to transport his family to that land of frozen mutton and Tarragona port."

So saying, the good-looking doctor strolled off. I called Horace by name; he turned round.

"I hope you did not mean your conversation to be confidential, for I heard every word of it," I said.

"Oh no, Lady Malcolm; we were only talking about one of our officers, Kenneth Cotes, over

there by the window. He is such a good chap, and for weeks he has been quite changed. He's got a nice little wife and two kiddies, and a widow—his wife's sister—who lives with them; and I suppose they are hard up. He only gets eighteen-and-six a day, and now he has been ordered to Australia, poor chap!"

Horace's face got quite long at such a list of troubles, and I looked carefully at the man on whose shoulders this burden rested. He was just an ordinary-looking naval engineer, the sort of man that anyone (knowing anything about naval men) could never mistake for anything else. He had a pale, rather fat face, and a brown beard, cut in that round fashion that seems to belong to the civil branches of the service exclusively, and a pair of honest brown eyes.

"He looks nice," I said, just to encourage him to talk.

"He is," said Horace—"one of the best. No silly want-to-be-an-executive nonsense about him. Says his father rose from a workman at Armstrong's to a manager, and drew five hundred a year before he died. I don't suppose he knows what *noblesse oblige* means, but there's not a straighter man in the service, and it is hard luck to think he is really unhappy for the want of a little cash;" and the boy who had never known that cruel want sighed heavily.

My partner then returned, so I said good-bye to Horace, telling him to come and see me soon. I made several inquiries from different people, but failed to find any of my acquaintance who knew Mrs. Cotes ; but chance threw me across her path, both metaphorically and physically. I was paying calls in Sliema one afternoon. The groom was ringing at the bell of the house when a couple of boys came rushing round an adjacent corner waving a flag and yelling. My pony was a young one, and had only been driven two or three times, and he simply bolted. Fortunately the parade, or front, as it is called, was clear, and we tore along it at a terrific rate. He was just beginning to feel the weight of my hands on the snaffle when a small child of about three broke away from her nurse (who was also wheeling a go-cart) and ran into the road. I saw that I must either run over the child or turn the Czar's head for a heap of débris on the other side. Of course, I did that, and the next thing I remember was opening my eyes and seeing three strange faces peering anxiously at me. Well, to cut a long story short, it seems that we just managed to shave the child. The cart turned over ; I fell out on my head. My groom, who was English, came tearing up. The mother of the child witnessed the whole thing, and she, her husband, and the groom had carried me into their house, which

was close at hand. A naval doctor who was passing volunteered his assistance. My head was aching abominably, and I felt too sick to move ; so it ended in my husband and maid being sent for, and I was put to bed in what turned out to be Mrs. Cotes' sister's room ; for, oddly enough, it was the child of Naval Engineer Mr. Cotes who had caused the accident. I was obliged to lie in that stuffy little airless bedroom for a week before I could be taken home. Once in my own house, I quickly recovered, and beyond being subject to some bad headaches, I was none the worse. Of course, the first thing I did was to send for Mrs. Cotes and thank her for her hospitality.

"I fear I must have put you to horrible inconvenience," I said.

"Oh no, indeed, Lady Fearnaught," she replied ; "if you had not sacrificed yourself my naughty darling would have been killed."

"Oh, I only did what anyone would have done ; besides, there was just a chance of the cart *not* tipping over."

I was wondering how I could possibly bring the conversation round to the financial aspect of my enforced visit.

"It was lucky it was so near our house," she said, "and that Dr. Stopford was passing."

"My husband and I feel so very grateful to you and Mr. Cotes," I ventured, "for all your

kindness, that we want you to let us make little Amy a small present, as a souvenir of her escape."

"Oh, Lady Fearnought, it is too kind of you to think of it," she replied.

"Then that's settled," I said with relief. "I will try and find something the first time I go out, and bring it over myself."

The little woman beamed with pride. She was one of those nondescript pale brown women that go through life wrapped up in the lives of others. I found a pretty silver mug for the child and put a bank-note for twenty pounds inside it, and took it over to the little house in Sliema. I did not want to go in, as I had no desire to be thanked; but Mrs. Cotes insisted, and I heard hurried directions being given to dress Amy and bring her down. When the child appeared I gave the mug to her with a kiss, devoutly hoping she would not discover the note; but no luck favoured me. Mrs. Cotes examined it with a chorus of praise; but when she saw the note, she stared as though a miracle had happened.

"Oh, oh!" she gasped; "this must be a mistake."

For one horrible moment I thought she was going to be offended, so I laid my hand on her arm and said: "Dear Mrs. Cotes, you won't deny me the pleasure of a little thank-offering that I was not the means of killing your child?"

“Oh, Lady Fearnaught—it wasn’t that,” she said; “it—it”—and tears fell quickly down her cheeks—“it seemed like a gift from God—when we wanted it so dreadfully badly!” and she cried unrestrainedly.

“Sit down and tell me all about it,” I said, and she did so.

“Ever since we’ve been married we’ve been struggling to live on Kenneth’s pay, but, you see, two babies cost such a lot; and then poor Julia lost her husband—he was a paymaster—and has to live with us, because forty pounds a year is all she has. We got along somehow until we came here and Willie was born, but ever since then we’ve been getting into debt, and now Ken is ordered to Australia, and we simply haven’t got money to pay our debts here and our passages home too; and yesterday Ken found there was a very cheap steamer going on the third of next month; if he could scrape up twenty pounds, they would take all four of us—and now it has come like this——” And the poor little soul sniffed almost cheerfully.

“But even if you get home, what will you do when you get there?”

“Oh, go into cheap lodgings,” she said; “and I shan’t see Ken for two years.” And the tears broke out again as she added: “And there’s going to be another baby.”

This last misfortune I felt might have been avoided. However, the question was, how were they to be helped? Once fairly started, Mrs. Cotes was eloquent enough.

“You see, Julia could, of course, go out as governess or something; but she is so pretty and clever, we thought she ought to marry again; but she does not seem to. At first she was a great help, but now she is getting over it, and wants to go out and enjoy herself, and that means money. She has to have clothes, and sometimes she wants gentlemen asked to supper, and with only one Maltese servant and two babies, and me not over strong, it is a dreadful struggle. I try not to worry Ken, but I have to tell him things.”

“Of course you have,” I said; “and now that you’ve taken me into your confidence, you must let me try and help you. You know there is a society for helping officers’ wives and families. Of course, it is all done quietly, and no one knows anything about it except the committee in London and the secretary; and I think if I wrote to them about you they would do something to help you.”

She dried her wet eyes, and said doubtfully: “Ken would never let us ask. He’s dreadfully proud. There is a lieutenant” (she called it left-tenant) “on board the *Druid* who has lots and

lots of money, and is very fond of Ken, and I did suggest he might borrow a hundred pounds from him, but he was furious with me even for suggesting it."

I was glad of that sidelight on the husband's character; it was a guide as to how to avoid shoals in going to the rescue.

"Now, Mrs. Cotes, you must not tell your husband anything about me trying to get you some assistance from home, but keep up a brave heart, and you shall hear again from me soon."

I wrote at once on my return home to the secretary of the officers' branch of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families' Association, and, without mentioning their names, laid the case before him. I received a reply in due course, saying that it was not usual to assist the family of an officer on full pay and of the rank of staff engineer, when it was no question of illness; but that perhaps they might advance the passage money of the widowed sister if her brother-in-law would guarantee to refund it. This seemed but a drop in the ocean of their requirements. While I was pondering over the subject, and wishing I was a richer woman, Lieutenant Horace Turner was announced. He chatted for a few minutes on the weather and various other silly subjects, then he came to the point.

"I say, Lady Malcolm, I want you to give me

some advice. How can I make Cotes take a couple of hundred of my superfluous pounds? It's no use offering it to him; he told me, the other day, that there were certain subjects a gentleman only talked to his lawyer or his banker about. That was when I was leading up to it. Poor devil! duns are coming on board for him every day. He goes home on the 10th, to go out in the *Minerva* to Australia, and he simply does not know how to pay his mess bill, and I don't doubt a couple of hundred pounds that I should never miss would pay all his bills and send his missus and kids and that sister-in-law home comfortably. Now, how can he be made to take it?"

"Horace," I said, "are you prepared to part with it as a gift?"

"Why, of course," he replied.

"And will you aid and abet" (what *does* abet mean, and can you abet without aid?) "me in committing a fraud on your friend and his wife?"

"Anything you like from pitch and toss to manslaughter."

"Very well; bring me the money in bank-notes in three days."

"Good," he said, and asked no questions.

My plan was very simple. I merely intended to pretend the money had come from the S.S.F.A., but in order that Mr. Cotes should ask no incon-

venient questions, I had to prepare the way. I sent for Mrs. Cotes the next day.

"I have some capital news for you," I said. "The secretary says nothing will be easier than to help you, as this is the first time you have applied for assistance. But there are certain conditions. First, you must accept the money as a free gift, and ask no questions. You can write a letter of acknowledgment and thanks, but must only sign your initials, and I will forward it. This is to ensure absolute secrecy. And, thirdly, you must ask for no more than will pay what you owe here and your passages home."

I will pass over her thanks and gratitude; they were rather trying. It seemed the debts came to the huge sum of a hundred and twenty pounds, and the passages twenty. My gift was to be banked for little Amy.

"Oh, I do wish Ken was at home!" she said, with a radiant face.

"Why, where is he?" I asked.

"Oh, he's got orders to go round the other side of the island to see some coal that has been wrecked. I don't quite know why, and he won't be back till to-morrow. Even then I may not see him, as the *Druid* is going out firing, and he has to be on board to-night."

"Have you said anything to him about this?"

I asked, touching the secretary's letter, of which I had only allowed her to see the official-looking stamped address.

"Not a word. I did not want to raise his hopes; I never expected they would do anything for us."

Now, as far as I was properly concerned, the matter ought to have ended here; but it didn't, for once again I became the possessor of more knowledge than I required or desired. It happened thus. It was the end of April, and just beginning to get hot. I had been busy and unable to exercise my ponies very much, and my black had behaved so badly the previous day in the cart that I decided to ride him pretty hard down to St. Paul's Bay. I took a Captain Philpotts with me; he was staying in the house. The horse was very tiresome, the sun broiling. I had on my winter habit, and by the time we arrived there I was thoroughly knocked up, and had a splitting headache. We went to the — Hotel, which was close to the beach, and I made them bring me an iced drink and a long chair and put it in the back part of a big room, which had been cut into two by a partition made of paper and a few thin laths. Captain Philpotts went off for a bathe, and I lay down and dropped off to sleep. I was aroused by the sound of a high-pitched American voice saying, "Come in,

Capten, come right in. I guessed you were the officier sent to look at thet thar heap o' black diamonds."

He spoke with a fearful accent, and I discovered, to my annoyance, that he and his companion were sitting down in what was really the other half of my room.

"Yes; I've been sent by the Admiral-Superintendent to see if the coal is in good condition," replied a voice I knew.

"You may bet your bottom dollar that thet coal is as good as the day it was hooked out of the Welsh coal-pit, Capen Cotes."

"Mr. Cotes, please—not Captain. To be a good engineer is quite sufficient work for me, without running after the Commander's job or his tally either."

"Wal, I dessay it is. Now, sit down ther and mix a drink, and I'll tell yer about this business what you and me's got to push thro'."

I was getting very angry at being disturbed; my head was aching, and I still felt dizzy from the sun. I wondered if it was worth while to go out till the men had gone, but decided to wait, as they would be going to look at the coal in a minute. So I shut my eyes, wishing I could shut my ears too; but the raucous voice of the American went on.

"I'm the agent for the company, as you know,

and this yer coal came out fer the British Govern-ment, and the ship got wrecked here. The coal was certainly under water for a few weeks, but it is not harmed by thet. I'll go bail if it was. Mathews and Co. wouldn't be such bally fools as to try and sell it to her British Majesty's Navy. No, my son, you Britishers know too much fer thet. But if your Navy takes it, why, they takes it at the contract price, and the company don't lose; but if they don't take it, it'll have ter be pretty wal given away. So, Capten, just as a sou-vinier of the occasion, and out of pur gra-titude, the company has sent these two little bags down with a hundred sovereigns each in 'em to go to the man as is the means of selling that thar boo-ti-ful heap of coal—just as a bit of pur gratitude, I take it. If you don't do it and I do, why I takes them. If you report well on it—and, 'pon my oath, there's no reason why you shouldn't—your Admiral will take it, and you'll have the company's gratitude"—here he chinked the "gratitude" on the table—"and no one save you and me any the wiser, for it goes down in the accounts as 'Sundries,' and, between you and me, there are an almighty lot of 'Sundries.'"

He was cut short by Mr. Cotes, who said: "I can't waste time talking. I've got to see the coal and wire my report to the dockyard, and go

off in our steamboat to the *Druid*, as we are off to Gib. to fetch some of the Admiralty officials, as the yacht has broken down."

"Vurry well," said the other; and they both went out.

When they had gone, I was perfectly horrified to find I had been listening to a most confidential conversation. In the excitement of the subject I had quite forgotten that I ought to have made my presence known to them; but it was too late now, so I simply lay and thought of the awful temptation that poor man must be undergoing. Two hundred pounds meant such a lot to him—freedom from debt, passages home for his wife, money for her when she got home. He had not yet heard about the money that marvellous society of mine was going to provide. It meant a respite from the daily worries of duns and bills, and even a little nest egg for the future. Was it to be expected of human nature to refuse those little chinking bags of gold, even if the truth had to be stretched a little to do it? And, after all, he was not a man whose father's and forefathers' word had been their bond. I expect his sharp North-country father would merely have thought it a very smart thing to do. Kenneth Cotes had only learnt to be all that is meant by the word "gentleman" through the education he had received in the Navy; so, after all, he would

merely be obeying his inherent instincts if he sacrificed honour to necessity. I waited with the keenest anxiety for their return. For an hour, or even more, there was silence; then the horrid voice came nearer and nearer. The first sentence I heard was: "Wal, Capten, ain't they coals as the devil himself would like to put on his own fires?"

A grunt was the only reply.

"I want pen and ink," Mr. Cotes said next.

"Here you are."

For a few minutes nothing was audible but the scratching of a pen, and then Cotes said: "There, I've reported shortly what I think about it, and now give me a telegraph form; it can be sent from the police-station."

Then more scratching and the chink of coins.

"D—— it, man, can't yer tell me what you've said?" Doolan broke out impatiently.

"There, read for yourself," said Cotes, and his chair scraped across the floor.

"You—you—fool! you (adjective) fool!" spluttered the Yankee.

"I may be, but thank God I'm an honest one," said Cotes; and, going to the door, he called the landlord.

"Take this to the police-station and tell them to send it to the dockyard at once, and post this letter to-night."

"Me no speak Englese, signor."

"I'll tell him," said the Yankee, giving some directions in bad French.

"Good day," said Cotes, in a lighter tone than he had yet spoken; "sorry I couldn't oblige you."

"Your loss, Capten," said the other—"your loss."

Cotes had gone, and the landlord and American had an animated conversation in very bad French, which I did not follow. I cannot tell you how delighted I was that Mr. Cotes had been so true to his cloth. I had had no scruples at listening to the end of the interview, but did not intend to tell anyone what I had heard. However, I did, as you will hear.

II

Two days after my ride to St. Paul's Bay, Horace Turner wrote and asked me if he might come up and see me after dinner on "urgent private affairs." He wrote from the t.b.d. *Syren*. I was surprised, as I thought he had sailed in the *Druid*. However, he explained that just before she left he had been given the command of the destroyer, whose Captain had gone sick.

"Lady Malcolm, I want you to be an angel and ask Blanche to stay with you for a few



"YOU FOOL, YOU — FOOL," SPLUTTERED THE YANKEE.

weeks. Mr. Doolan has been telegraphed for, and she can't stay alone, and I don't want her to go till my mater and pater come out and things are properly fixed."

"My dear boy!" I remonstrated, for although I was good-natured, I thought this was asking a bit too much. That horrible, vulgar, dishonest American, who did his best to bribe Mr. Cotes. No, I really could not chaperone his daughter, even to oblige Horace.

"You see," he went on, "she is not really his daughter; she is his ward, it appears—she only told me all this last night; that last year her father died suddenly, and the only will they could find was dated fifteen years before, when Mr. Doolan and Colonel Stephens were partners. And that will left Doolan Blanche's guardian. She has got about a couple of thousand a year of her own, and this little scoundrel has been trying to spend as much of it as he could before she comes of age, which will be next month. His profession appears to be dodging round the world doing other people's dirty work. He came here as agent to the coal people, Mathews, and now, having sold their collier full of bad coal to the Admiralty——"

"Not sold it you mean," I put in.

He looked surprised. "No; they bought it on our Engineer's (Cotes') report, and I go down

to St. Paul's Bay to fill up with it to-morrow from a lighter, and a beastly job it will be, too."

It was my turn to be surprised, but I realized I had said too much already, so held my tongue.

"And I want you, as a dreadful favour, Lady Malcolm, to have Blanche till my people come out."

What he had said, of course, made a difference.

"I will write her a note now," I said.

"You are good," fervently ejaculated Mr. Turner.

Miss Stephens, or Doolan, whichever she was, arrived for lunch. Her guardian left by the French boat at two-thirty. It so happened we had a small dinner-party that night. The principal guest was the Admiral-Superintendent of the Dockyard, who was no other than my old friend Gordon Mackintyre, who, it will be remembered, helped me to save the Russian Government from being deceived by Captain Ashwell. Our adventure had left us very good friends, and I determined to sound him about the curious affair, and find out why the Admiralty had taken the coal in the face of the unfavourable report on it sent in by their own expert. I made my opportunity after dinner, having arranged two tables of card-players. He and I retired to the veranda overlooking the harbour.

"It's really getting hot now," he began; "I'm

getting the yacht out this week. You must come for a sail."

"I shall be delighted. Yes, it is hot. I rode down to St. Paul's Bay a few days ago, and the heat quite knocked me up. That's a big collier wrecked there."

"Yes," he said, with a frown, "and I fear she's going to be the cause of trouble."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, we've bought the coal, and now it seems it's no use. The destroyers who coaled with it this morning have sent in a shocking report about it, and there'll have to be a court of inquiry as soon as the officer who was sent to report on it returns. I can't understand it; he's one of the cleverest engineers on the station, and yet the coal is absolutely no use. I only hope there's been no chickery-pokery in the matter. That sharp-nosed little Yankee agent of theirs I don't believe could run straight if he wanted to. However, the matter did not rest with him—but you shouldn't let me talk shop like this."

"But do tell me, did the officer advise you to buy the coal?"

"Yes; he telegraphed, 'No reason why coal should not be taken by Admiralty,' and wrote me a short report, saying the coal was not in the least damaged. So, of course, I wrote the cheque for it, as Doolan was in a hurry to go—indeed, he's

gone. I'm going round to-morrow in a tug to have a look at it. My wife wants to come and bring some people. We should be delighted if you will join us. We shall leave the yard about two-thirty. I will send my barge to fetch you from the Custom-house at two-fifteen."

I accepted the invitation, but was sorely puzzled at the discrepancy between what I had overheard and what was now told me. Could I have been mistaken? No; if Mr. Cotes had reported favourably, why would Doolan have called him an adjective "fool," and—but there was no use trying to solve the problem; the next day would surely give me some clue to the mystery. I must not forget to say that the day after my ride I had placed in the grateful hands of Mrs. Cotes Bank of England notes to the value of a hundred and fifty pounds, and received a note of profuse thanks and rather pitiful gratitude to be sent to the "society." I gave it to the "society" the day he had called to ask me about receiving his *fiancée*, and he put it in his pocket without reading it, saying, "Thank you awfully for carrying it through." Little Mrs. Cotes had paid her debts and left the island on the 4th. Her husband was going home from Gibraltar, where his relief was to join the *Druid*. That ship was returning to Malta with two or three of the Lords of the Admiralty, who were stranded there by the breaking

down of their yacht ; and the Fleet being engaged in manœuvres, the *Druid* was the only vessel available to transport them. That fine dockyard tug, the *Sampson*, took a very cheerful party down to St. Paul's Bay the next afternoon. The Admiral and one of the dockyard officials went ashore to inspect the coal. Some of the younger members of the party also landed, but Lady Mackintyre and a few others remained. I changed my intention of staying on board, and, without much object, went off with Horace, Miss Stephens (the truth of her relationship to Doolan was made public by my advice), and a very nice man, a Colonel Gore.

"I want to take a house here for the rest of the summer," said Horace. "The destroyers are to be here a lot, and I think it would be ripping to have a house to go to. I'm going to see old José, the hotel waiter, and ask him about it."

So, to give our assistance, we all proceeded to the primitive hotel. We went into the front-room where Doolan and Mr. Cotes had been. It was bare and not too clean ; the usual huge mirror reared itself up against the wall over a fine old inlaid chest, on which a dusty bottle of ink and a blotting-pad stood. The latter had been leant up against a mirror with the blotting-paper next the glass. While Horace was questioning José about houses, I went to examine the chest, as I had

found one or two lovely old bits of furniture before in most unexpected places. It really was a beauty, but much scratched and ill-used. The inlay on the top was especially fine. I removed the ink-bottle, and was just going to take down the blotter, when the words, "The coal would be quite useless for the Navy," caught my eye, reflected in the mirror from the paper facing it. It suddenly struck me that it was Mr. Cotes' confidential report I was reading. I took the blotter off and drew Colonel Gore's attention to the beauty of the brass handles to the drawers.

"I simply must buy it," I said. "Will you go and get the landlord here for a moment."

"Certainly," he said, and before his return I had removed the tell-tale sheet from the pad and put it in the bag that did duty for a pocket. I bought the chest from the landlord by the assistance of Colonel Gore's Arabic and my own French, and arranged to have it sent in to Valette the next day. The Admiral did not volunteer any information about the coal, and I did not broach the subject. On my return I carefully placed the blotting-paper in an envelope and wrote on the outside the date and where I had found it. This was on the 8th of May. Two days afterwards Horace Turner came in with a very serious face.

"They have telegraphed that a court of inquiry

is to be held about that coal," he said, "and I'm afraid things look precious bad for poor old Cotes."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You see, it was on his word the Admiralty bought it, and now it turns out to be utterly useless, and I fear it is going to be a court-martial job. He's being sent out at once. I'd have bet anything that he was straight."

I groaned inwardly at not being able to say, "He is; I know he's straight." But I felt I had no right to say anything unless I said all I knew. In a very few days all Malta was agog with gossip about it, and the heap of coal was the goal of many a picnic at that time. On the 22nd Mr. Cotes arrived. The court of inquiry was to take place on board the *Hibernia* that day week. On the afternoon of the 23rd I met Admiral Mackintyre riding along the Casel Lia Road. I had been lunching with some friends out there. I stopped, and we talked a little. Then he said: "May I ride back with you?"

"Certainly," I said, only too glad of the chance for a little private conversation with him. But he was *distract* and worried, so, in hunting parlance, "I rushed my fence."

"What explanation does Mr. Cotes give of his share in the affair?" I asked.

"Bless my soul, what a wonderful woman you

are!" he said. "How did you know what I was thinking about?"

"I saw coal or Cotes written in large letters on your face. What does he say?"

"He tells the most extraordinary yarn. He swears he reported by wire to the dockyard that the stuff was quite useless for the Navy, and that he wrote a short report to the same effect, and gave the letter to the landlord at the hotel at St. Paul's Bay to post. He says that the report we got—I showed him the letter—is almost word for word what he wrote, only that the sense is reversed, and the negatives omitted; and where he said, 'The coal is not fit for use in any man-of-war,' the report reads, 'The coal is fit for use in any man-of-war'; and that the telegram he sent said, 'The coal would be quite useless for the Navy; is greatly deteriorated,' and the message we got was, 'Coal all right; not deteriorated at all.' But if he didn't send that wire, who did? We have got the original copy from the police. That is where all telegrams are sent from out there, and even he can't say it is not his writing. It tallies exactly with both that in the report and his usual hand. Now, Lady Malcolm, solve the riddle. I ought not to have told you, perhaps, but, who knows, you may be able to suggest something."

"No," I said, "I can't suggest anything, but I give you my word that Kenneth Cotes is as

honourable a gentleman as the Navy can produce, and I will give a proof of it as soon as we get home."

We lost no time on the road, and when we got in, I sat down and told him the whole story of what I had overheard in the hotel ; but, instead of his face clearing, it got darker and darker. When I had finished, down to the Yankee's remark about an "adjective" fool, the Admiral said : "I am sorry, very, very sorry to hear this, Lady Malcolm, for I fear it makes the case against Cotes even blacker, and gives strength to the report that the day after he left his wife was known to pay a great many of the debts and bills that he owed ; he is known to be a poor man, and one owing more than he had the means of paying. I fear you have unwittingly shown how he did it."

His words gave me a horrid shock. I had not thought of *that* aspect of the affair, and for the moment I could not decide how far I was justified in telling the Admiral about the source of the sudden access of wealth in the Cotes family. So I did as many a General has done in a tight place. I temporized.

"That is not quite all. The day we all went to St. Paul's Bay," I said, "I found this." And going to my bureau, I produced the envelope containing the blotting-paper.

"I do not know what more it may reveal," I said, "as I only saw the one sentence, 'The coal would be quite useless for the Navy.'" And I handed him the envelope. He opened it and withdrew the folded blotting-paper, and held it up to a mirror. There we read what I had seen, together with the words, "is greatly deteriorated, Kenneth Cotes." There was also plainly visible the commencement of the report; the words, "I have inspected . . . ider the coal is not fit for use . . . ar," were perfectly plain, and several more sentences; but the rest of the paper was too much used to be decipherable. The Admiral beamed.

"This, Lady Malcolm, changes the face of the matter very much, for it exactly bears out Cotes' statement. If only he can account for the money, I see no need for even a court of inquiry."

"I don't think he will be able to account for the money," I replied; "but I can."

"You!"

"*Moi qui vous parle*; but I can only do so if you will give me your word that you will not even hint that you know the story."

"I promise I will be absolutely silent, unless I have your permission to speak," he said.

"I gave Mrs. Cotes the money to pay her bills and her passage the day after her husband left the island. She went by a very slow boat, and I

do not think can have either seen or communicated with him since then, as you say he left England the day after he got there. And I have no doubt that he must be very much astonished to find his bills all paid. The money was given to me by Horace Turner, a friend and shipmate of Mr. Cotes'. He knew their circumstances, and having as large a heart as he has a banking account, and knowing nothing would induce his friend to accept the money, either as a gift or a loan, he took me into his confidence, knowing I knew them. I persuaded Mrs. Cotes, unknown to her husband, to let me apply to the officers' branch of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families' Association for assistance. This was practically refused, but I suppressed that, and allowed her to believe the hundred and fifty pounds I gave her came from them. On this understanding she accepted it gratefully. But you see how impossible it is that the truth about it should be told."

"Upon my word, Lady Malcolm, that story makes me think better of all the world. Turner is a generous young fellow, and as to poor Cotes—well, all I can say is, that had such a temptation ever come my way, I hope I should have behaved as well as he did. I shall make it my business to find out who was responsible for the telegram and report. Great Scott! why, the Yankee, of course; ten to one he's bolted with the cheque, and the

two hundred pounds bribe. I shall endeavour to prevent the court of inquiry being held; or, perhaps, now it had better be held, to clear Cotes. Anyhow, I'll see him cleared."

And he did. There was no inquiry, but Mr. Cotes *was* cleared. The landlord of the hotel owned to having given the telegram and letter to the American, who had undoubtedly forged most cleverly both writing and signature. Mr. Doolan was never heard of again, in spite of the reward of fifty pounds offered by his employers for his capture. Horace and Blanche were quietly married in September, in London. She had returned with Sir Alfred and Lady Turner. Kenneth Cotes did not go to Australia, but to a very comfortable billet in Chatham Dockyard. I added the name of a small Kenneth Cotes to my list of godchildren the following autumn, and I only hope he may grow up as impervious to temptation as his father had proved himself to be.

III

THE RED PARASOL

FOREWORD

IN offering this story among "Recollections of Malta," I feel I should explain how I came to hear the prelude, which took place in the little State we will call Hesstardessen—one of Germany's many little stepsons. By an odd coincidence, my only sister was the wife of the English Minister there, Sir Percy Fisher; and when Mrs. Gore told me she was going for a two months' tour to those parts with an old school friend and her brother, I offered her an introduction to Laura. Chester Gore was a distant connection but very great friend of ours. He was at Malta when my husband was A.A.G., as a commander in one of the ships—a quiet, non-society man. Everyone was taken by surprise when his engagement to Gabrielle Clifford was announced. That young lady was a niece of a Mrs. Upton, and had been much admired throughout the season. She was

so pretty that one couldn't help liking her, and forgave her for being somewhat vain and given to do foolish things. However, after her marriage she appeared to be wiser, and I do not think gave Chester any real cause for jealousy until—but that is anticipating. I have been obliged to relate the first half of the story in the third person, as I had to gather it together from the accounts of so many people—the Grand Duke, Fritz-Maltino, Gabrielle, and my sister. The second part is related as it came immediately under my own observation at Malta and elsewhere.

I

On a brilliant September day in 188—, a pretty English lady might have been observed to walk along the parade bordering a wide canal in the ancient town of Hesstardessen. Of her prettiness there was no question; she was lovely enough to be forgiven many things. Neither could her nationality be questioned. Her neat tailor-made dress was of honest naval drill; her small feet were shod in brown shoes. Only her hat was too smart in its simplicity to be entirely English, and she carried in her hand—or, rather, over her shoulder—that which caused the whole of the following events—a Red Parasol. It was a very useful, while extremely dainty, affair, of

post-office red silk, lined with tiny frills of white chiffon, and had a large hook handle and a slender steel stick.

The lady, though outwardly cool and cheerful, was inwardly raging and depressed, and as she stopped for an instant to gaze at the placid though muddy waters before her, she anathematized the fate that had recalled her very pleasant friends to England to soothe the dying hours of a rich aunt (who, as they put it, "never really *did* die"), leaving her stranded in what she now considered "a number one deadly dull hole," to await the arrival of her husband.

"I can't go out to dinner or the opera alone," she said plaintively enough to herself, "and the hotel's awful to spend the hours in from seven o'clock till bedtime. Chester can't possibly get here for a fortnight, and the Fishers won't return from Baden for a week. Oh! it's atrocious luck! and just as Maurice was really getting amusing, too!" And she smiled a little smile of rich reminiscence.

As she continued her lonely walk, the sound of loud cries and a noisy clatter of hoofs caused her to turn and look back up the street behind her, which reached from the canal parade to the upper town by a very steep incline. A high, light phaeton, drawn by a pair of panic-stricken horses, was tearing madly down towards the very spot

where she was standing. Their heads were down, and the animals were evidently wild with fright, paying not the slightest heed to the efforts of a tall, pale boy who was frantically endeavouring to pull them up. It needed no second glance to apprise the lady that His Serene Highness the Grand Duke Carl, ruler of the Duchy of Hesstardessen, the occupant of the conveyance, stood in imminent peril of his life, or, at the least, of his limbs. "Can I turn them?" she thought, and ran a few yards across the road. The eight hoofs clattered down, making straight for the canal. Here there was a drop of some ten feet, and not even a railing between the low parapet and the water.

Overcoming, by a supreme effort, her intense desire to run, the lady stood her ground, and, as the horses approached the bottom of the hill, brought her red parasol sharply over her shoulder and waved it in front of the pair. She had calculated her distance to a nicety; the scarlet, whirling thing both checked and headed the horses, and they instinctively shied away from it and dashed along the parade, which was straight, wide, and empty.

How it happened she never knew, but, somehow or other, the hinder part of the carriage as it turned caught the parasol, and, owing to the tightness of her grip, and to the fact that it was



THE LADY STOOD HER GROUND AND WAVED HER RED PARASOL IN FRONT OF THE PAIR.

steel and not wood, it jerked or twisted her arm sufficiently to snap the bone just between the elbow and wrist. So intent was she in watching the phaeton and its ducal owner that for the moment she scarcely realized what had happened. As she saw the horses slacken their pace and then stop dead, she breathed a sigh of relief as she looked round and saw what appeared to be the whole population of the town swarming towards her. From an excited man she gathered that a tourist on a cycle had frightened the horses. She was now feeling the pain in her arm very keenly, and asked a man in an official uniform if he could call her a carriage, for she was feeling sick and faint. Just as she was driving away in it, the Grand Duke turned his conveyance and pulled up the smoking horses, at the same time taking off his hat in response to the hearty cheers that went up from his loyal subjects. From beside him, his naturally red face pale from his recent fright, scrambled to the ground Count Otto von Bergen, the Grand Duke's cousin and guardian.

"Bring her here!" commanded his nephew. Making a few inquiries, Count Otto arrived just in time to see the lady he was in search of driving rapidly away in the opposite direction. He returned to Duke Carl, who, on hearing his information, bade him get up and drove off, waving a farewell to the cheering crowd.

He soon caught up the "fiaker," and followed it to the Hotel Royal. Giving her time to alight, he then drove up.

"What is the name of the lady who has just arrived?" he asked the waiter who had helped her out.

"She is Madam Gore, an English lady, your Serene Highness."

"Tell her I wish to see her." And flinging the reins to the Count, the Prince descended with the agility of a cat.

The proprietor met him, with many bows, in the hall.

"Would your Serene Highness condescend to allow me to explain? The lady is injured; she bids me send for the Herr doctor."

"A doctor!—injured! Surely we did not touch her!" The landlord looked bewildered. "My horses bolted down Straade Fritz"—the Prince was speaking rapidly—"and she prevented them going into the canal. But I can't understand how she could be hurt. It was a very brave thing to do. We might have killed her. Ah! is that the doctor?"

"Yes, your Highness."

On seeing the Grand Duke, the doctor clicked together his heels and gave a military salute.

"Go at once and see Mrs. Gore and tell her I would speak to her," he said imperiously.

The doctor obeyed, and the Duke meanwhile paced the room with impatient strides. Finally he turned to the fussy proprietor.

“Go, tell Count Otto to come to me.”

The Count and the doctor entered almost together.

“Well?” asked the Duke.

Again the doctor bowed and clicked his heels together :

“I regret to report that the arm of the lady is broken.”

“Arm broken! But how?” exclaimed both Duke and Count in consternation. “Surely, had we touched her we must have killed her!”

“If your Highness will pardon me, she is not killed, but her arm is broken. The lady is in much pain,” he continued, “and I wish to set it as soon as possible.”

“I am responsible for this,” said the Duke, turning to Count Otto. “Go, telephone to the Court physician and Nurse Anna to come here at once,” he said.

Off bustled the fat little Count.

Herr Fushen, the Court doctor, and Nurse Anna, an English hospital nurse, who had attended the Grand Duke during his infantile maladies, soon arrived, and Mrs. Gore’s arm was set and bandaged. Afterwards, the lady, in a

becoming tea-gown, lay on the sofa of her room, feeling that things might have been worse.

For the next few days she kept to her sofa, and then moved to a sitting-room, which she found filled with most beautiful flowers from the Royal conservatories. Here she awaited a visit from the Grand Duke and his mother. She crossed to the long mirror and regarded her reflection with satisfaction. Her soft, graceful gown of pale blue was most becoming ; her delicate oval face was perhaps a trifle pale, and the large deep-blue eyes a little heavy from three wakeful nights. But the bright fair hair, with glints of sunny gold in it, was most becomingly dressed. She took a couple of large Malmaison carnations from a vase and fastened them among the creamy laces, and then, quite pleased with her appearance, she went over to the window. The outlook was rather dismal, being chiefly a view of the backs of other houses. But before she had contemplated them very long the Grand Duke and Duchess were announced.

Sailing majestically into the room, like a stout battleship escorted by a slim cruiser, came the royal pair. Mrs. Gore did her best to curtsy, but the arm in a sling did not help her, and she was glad to take the hand the Duke extended to her.

“I and my son have come to thank you for

your brave action, which probably saved his life," said the Duchess in a pure contralto voice.

"I did little, your Serene Highness."

"That little was fortunately successful," replied the Duchess. "How you were not killed still appears a miracle to me."

Meanwhile, the young Duke had hardly taken his eyes from the now blushing face of his hostess, and the royal heart was beating both faster and harder than was its wont. Never before had he seen so perfectly beautiful a woman as this one, to whose nerve and presence of mind he owed perhaps his life. Moreover, she had sustained a dreadful injury in saving him (it was only a simple fracture of the ulnar bone). Gratitude and admiration welled up in his young breast, and perhaps the first pangs of that which we term "love." He was nearly twenty-one, and was as yet untouched by the arrows of the playful god. He had never travelled. The ladies of Hesstardessen were not renowned for their beauty, and those of the Court were chosen more for their sterling virtues than their personal charms. So perhaps the young Prince's innocence of the primrose paths whereon so many princes' feet oft stray was due more to the lack of temptation than to the power of resisting it. Anyhow, Mrs. Gore was the prettiest woman he had ever seen, and he had

a mind to see as much of her as possible. The gods were kind in having chosen her to be his guardian angel at a moment when the usual ones appeared to be "off duty."

After allowing his august mother to express their gratitude and thanks, he said: "All my mother has said I most fully endorse, and I have a favour to beg—namely, that you will allow me to be your host while you remain here. It is not right you should stay in an hotel while there is a vacant suite in our palace—is it not so, my mother?"

"Indeed, yes. So it is settled. We will send Count Otto to arrange it," said the Duchess magnificently, as she rose to leave.

"I should be most happy," murmured Mrs. Gore, "but—my husband arrives in a few days."

"Your husband will also be our guest," rejoined the Duchess.

An hour later Count Otto called. He, too, was tremendously impressed by the beauty and charm of Mrs. Gore, and made all the arrangements for her to be fetched in the easiest of the royal landaus, even going himself to escort her. So here was Gabrielle Gore, wife of Captain Chester Gore, C.B., R.N., installed as the heroine and guest of the Grand Duke Carl and his royal mother.

* * * * *

About a fortnight after the event above recorded, Count Otto von Burgen sat in the snug smoking-room of his apartments in the royal palace of his ward. He was greatly troubled, and while he drew long puffs at his big pipe, he wondered how he—Otto von Burgen—was going to achieve such miracles as to cool the hot blood of a Prince, curb the vanity of a pretty woman, stop the gossip of the Court, and yet—offend nobody. “The labours of Hercules were nothing to it,” he grunted.

The Count Otto was short, round, and honest. A round bullet head adorned with stiff bristly hair, a round red face with a pair of round black eyes, and a pair of short fat legs completed the outward person of the Grand Duke's guardian. He and the father of the present Duke had been cousins and friends of many years' standing, and, knowing him to be faithful and honest, the dying Duke had appointed him guardian of his son. And he had fulfilled his task well up to the present, yet now he realized how little control he really had over a determined, headstrong young man, who, for the first time in his life, was in love. To anyone the situation would have been trying; Count Otto felt himself utterly unable to cope with it.

“There is nothing for it but to recall Fritz,” he muttered; “and he is such a young devil he would just as soon make it worse as better. But

he's his father's own son for getting out of scrapes himself, so perhaps he can get us out of this one." And with a sigh he turned to the bureau and wrote a note. Then, calling his secretary, he instructed him to have it despatched immediately.

The reed on which the poor fat Count was thinking to lean was his nephew, a certain Fritz—or, more properly, Frederico Maltino. He was the only child of Count Otto's only and most dearly loved sister, who, at seventeen, had left her home with a handsome but utterly unscrupulous young Italian artist belonging to a rich old Genoese family. A certain amount of pressure had to be brought to bear on the Italian before he would agree to marry the girl he had ruined so lightly. However, he did so, but soon after Fritz's birth left his wife, who, after a few years of hoping against hope that her husband would return, went back to Hesstardessen, where she lived on an allowance made her by her brother, Count Otto. Hither, when ill or penniless (for he had quarrelled with his family), Philip Maltino would return, well knowing that, in spite of his unfaithfulness, a welcome always awaited him from his ill-used wife. The last time he came to Hesstardessen was when Fritz was ten years old. He was ill, and the doctors pronounced his malady to be diphtheria in its most severe form. His devoted wife nursed him to the end, and then developed it

herself, dying within a week of her husband, but not before her good brother had promised to provide for the little son. No one else wanted him ; indeed, he had only one other near relative, an elder brother of his father, Umberto Maltino, who, having been desperately in love with another man's wife, had eloped with her, to be severely wounded in a subsequent duel with her husband. When he recovered, it was to find the lady returned to her husband, and himself a cripple for life. He retired into his old castle and gave up his life to writing a mighty book on the subject of the Cultivation of Herbs. Every few years he would write a short note to von Bergen, inquiring after his nephew, and generally enclosing a handsome cheque, and when the boy was about fifteen he sent for him. Each year since then Fritz had spent a month in the lonely old castle. He was looked upon by everyone as his uncle's heir, and the old man loved him. After his mother's death Otto von Bergen had undertaken to bring Fritz up, and tried his best to make a good German of him. Yet, in spite of an education at the finest English and German colleges, the young man grew up Italian to the core.

Outwardly Fritz was pure Italian—of medium height, active and slender, with hair and deep-set eyes of the deepest, softest velvet brown, a pale olive skin, long slender hands, and an expression

that betokened keen intelligence and great power of will. His voice was soft, and his manner towards women tender and caressing. Indeed, women were his stumbling-block, for they appeared, one and all, utterly unable to resist him, and his *affaires de cœur* were as numerous as the pebbles on the shore. He had completed his education by a couple of years at Oxford, and had then returned to Hesstardessen, where he had become the guide and friend of the young Duke, whose senior he was by some five years. His cheerful nature and love of mischief appealed especially to His Highness, and many and many were the escapades they planned and carried out together. This, then, was the reed on which Count Otto leaned.

Fritz Maltino was absent on leave when his uncle's message reached him. He was enjoying shooting and fishing on a well-stocked estate owned by the Grand Duke, some fifty miles distant from the capital. However, on receipt of it, he immediately cancelled his arrangements and returned, reporting himself the same evening to his uncle.

II

"Sorry to bring you back, Fritzchen," said the Count, "but we're in the devil of a mess here, and I thought you might be able to help us out of it.

It was begun by an infernal tourist on one of those inventions of Satan called a bicycle." And then followed a recitation of the circumstances that succeeded the events already recorded. "And now everybody is infatuated with her," he went on dolefully. "The Duchess must be blind not to see what is going on. The Duke himself is madly enamoured with her. He won't attend to any business excepting before the lady gets up or after she retires, and even then he is so absent-minded that he does not listen to a word that is being said, won't give any reply to the hundreds of questions awaiting answer about his coronation, and thinks far more of having the dinner-table decorated to match her dress than he does of any State affair. And as to the gossip!" Here, words failing him, the Count stopped.

His nephew nodded sympathetically.

"And the lady—how does she take it, and what is she like?"

"Oh, that is the worst of it! She is extremely pretty in the blonde English type. She is lovely, charming, delicious! Ach! I am drivelling!"

Fritz laughed gaily.

"Hello, uncle! you appear to have fallen a victim to her charms yourself!"

"Ach! you young scamp! At *my* age we are able to recognise the charms of a woman without wanting to possess them. But at the Duke's—

who knows what folly he might not be capable of?"

"My dear uncle, I really don't see what you are so concerned about. Suppose the Duke to be as severely smitten as you say, there are only two alternatives. One is his recovery; the other has reference to the picturesque but lonely Castle of Cronsberg, where the lady may live in semi-state. This latter will, no doubt, be expensive, for Carl is generous; but, after all, it is nothing very serious. Where, by-the-by, is the lady's husband, and who is he?"

"He is in the English Navy—a Captain—and he is coming here when he gets his leave."

"Ah! so. Well, cheer up, mine uncle; perhaps this brave Captain will object to unfledged Duke-lings making love to his wife, and will remove her. Those English are very particular about their own wives, although other men's are considered fair sport. I shall now leave you."

"And you can suggest nothing?" queried the Count distractedly.

"I can't clearly see that there is anything to be done," said his nephew, laughing, "unless I run way with the lady myself."

"Gott in Himmel! Don't do that! The Duke would shoot you!" declared the Baron.

"Very well, then, I won't. Good-night." And

Maltino withdrew to the club, well knowing that there he would hear all the Court gossip.

The first man he met was the husband of one of the Court ladies. After a few commonplace remarks he asked casually :

“What is this I hear of the Duke and my uncle nearly being killed, and of a lady who waved a red parasol?”

“Yes,” replied the other, “they had a very near shave, and it was a plucky little Englishwoman who saved them.”

“So I heard. And she’s pretty, too, eh?”

“Pretty! Mein Gott! I should think so. And the Duke, he thinks so too. They say he is going to order that none but red parasols be carried all the season; that the Court jewellers are making a fortune; and that plans are under way for re-furnishing Cronsberg Castle. Ha! ha!”

In the smoking-room all told the same story of the infatuation of the Duke, the rage of the Count, and the beauty and pluck of the lady. Bets were being made as to how it would all end, some offering odds on the chances of a morganatic marriage, others on the retirement of the lady to Cronsberg.

When he had heard all there was to hear, Maltino returned to his rooms, already filled with the keenest curiosity to see this Lady of the Red Parasol, as he mentally dubbed her.

The next day, at noon, the Duke, escorted by his guardian and Maltino, presented himself at the apartments of Mrs. Gore to make his inquiries in person.

That lady came forward to receive them with a smile of welcome and a curtsy. Her arm was still in a sling, and she extended her left hand, which the Duke kissed fervently and the Count nervously, whilst Maltino bent his sleek black head over it and pressed it softly with his jetty moustache. Something in the way he did it and the meaning he contrived to throw into the act brought an extra tinge of pink into the fair face of the lady, not yet quite used to Continental gallantries.

"I trust, madame, your poor arm is better?" commenced the Duke. He spoke excellent English.

"Thank you, your Highness, it is going on very well."

"If you feel able to bear the exertion this afternoon, may I drive you out to Cronsberg, where I have a shooting-box? My mother will not be coming, but Countess Kourtz and her daughters will join the party. The place is worth seeing, is it not, Maltino?" he added.

"It is indeed most beautiful, your Highness. The views are unequalled for their loveliness."

"I should love to go," said Mrs. Gore.

"It is, then, arranged. My horses are waiting. May I take you for a short drive now?"

"I thank your Highness; I should enjoy it greatly," was the response.

"I will wait for you here. Maltino, tell them to bring the carriage to the door. Count, you are at liberty, as the phaeton only holds two." And, after saluting, both gentlemen withdrew.

In a few moments Mrs. Gore returned with her hat on. The Grand Duke eagerly seized her hand.

"How lovely you are, my beautiful lady! Be kind to me!"

"Hush! hush! You must not say things like that."

"Why not? I love you!" murmured the infatuated boy.

"Well, then, you ought not to," she laughed. "You forget I am married, and my very big English husband arrives on Thursday. I'm certain he won't approve of your pretty fashions at all."

"Your husband? Ach! I had him forgot." And the Duke dropped the hand he had been fondling. "But come! We will drive, and make the good Count angry," he resumed gaily.

In the passage Maltino waited to escort them downstairs, and the sparkle in the Duke's eyes and the flush on his face did not escape his notice.

“I expect the conversation gained in interest what it lost in formality after our departure,” he said to himself. “And I don’t blame Carl at all, for she’s the prettiest thing I have seen for a long time.”

He helped them into the carriage, and watched them drive off.

The Countess of Kourtz and her two lumps of daughters fell to the share of three gentlemen of the Court, Count Otto, the Duke, and Mrs. Gore occupying the box-seat behind the four superb horses. The scenery was magnificent. The road closely followed the banks of that most picturesque of rivers, the Schrine, with its fringe of fir-trees. On either side towered great forests of pine. Then gradually the coach ascended the mountain called Mount Carl, after the first Grand Duke, and finally the castle itself was viewed nestling amid dense foliage. Cronsberg was a fine specimen of the thirteenth-century style, and positively bristled with towers and fortifications, though the present owner’s father had, in the days of a very wild youth, modernized it for the benefit of a French dancer who had danced herself into his heart. Since her departure the place had been used solely as a shooting-box for the reigning Duke or his friends.

On arrival, at the instigation of the Count, the Countess had preferred a request to the Duke

that they might be shown the armoury, and Maltino offered his escort to Mrs. Gore. The Duke, seeing no way to get out of it, agreed, and they set off, the Countess and the Duke leading, and Mrs. Gore and Maltino bringing up the rear. The latter were soon engaged in an animated conversation about nothing in particular. Mrs. Gore admired the young man's handsome face, and found his somewhat racy conversation rather a relief after the stolid adoration of the young Duke. But it was no part of Duke Carl's programme to allow Maltino to monopolize the Lady of the Red Parasol, so, making some trivial excuse, he waited until the pair came up, and then said :

"Ah, Fritz! come here. The Countess is so deeply interested in the armour that I want you to explain the styles and dates to her in detail. You know them much better than I do, and I will meantime inflict my ignorant self upon Mrs. Gore." And, smiling sweetly and triumphantly on her, the Duke took his place at her side, leaving Maltino, now in a shocking temper, to pair off with the Countess.

"Let me show you the view from the turret window instead of going to the armoury," whispered the Duke as soon as they were alone.

"Very well," replied the lady.

They contrived, without attracting any atten-

tion, to slip away up the turret stair. The view from the top was certainly magnificent.

“Sit down there, and let me tell you why this tower was built.” And, seating himself beside her, His Highness began to relate the story.

“In 1616 the Grand Duke Paul ascended the throne of Hesstardessen, owing to the death of his two elder brothers and father, all of whom were killed in battle within a month of one another, leaving Prince Paul the last in the direct line. But Paul was a student in the first place and a lover in the second, and thrones and crowns had no charms for him. For several years he had loved a beautiful but humbly born maiden, and hoped to wed her; but when he became Grand Duke he knew that this hope would never be fulfilled, for he must wed the bride chosen for his brother. So, heart-broken, he went to the maiden Hildegarde and told her all the facts.

“‘Never, O my Prince,’ said she, ‘shall another love me, for I will go and take the veil.’

“But the poor Prince could not bear to think that he would never see her more, so he persuaded her to come here, and he built this tower; and each night at midnight, by the agency of a powerful light, would she flash to him a message of her constancy and love, for from the King’s wing in the palace this tower is plainly visible.

And once in every year the King rode out here alone and worshipped at the feet of the maid he loved so well. And so until she died did the lovers remain faithful to one another."

The narrator paused.

"Would you be as faithful as that to the man *you* loved?" he said softly, bending over her.

"I don't know—perhaps," she answered, while her eyes travelled across the forest below. "There must have been something great about the man to keep a woman's love when it had so little reward."

The Duke bent nearer still.

"Gabrielle," he said, "could you love me like that?" And before Mrs. Gore realized what he was going to do, his arms were round her and his lips pressing hot kisses on her own. She was utterly helpless in his grip. At length he released her.

"How dare you ! how dare you!" she exclaimed, angrily stamping her foot.

"I dare—because I love you!" was his excuse.

"That's no reason for you to dare to kiss me. I suppose you think because you are a Grand Duke of a pettifogging little State you can do as you like. I consider you have taken a very mean advantage of my helplessness and behaved abominably." And so saying, the lady began to descend the stairs as rapidly as she was able.

At the foot of them she encountered Maltino, who, having found Count Otto, had anchored the Countess to him and made good his escape.

"Where is the Duke?" he asked.

"He's in the turret, and I hope he'll stay there!" returned the lady, with temper.

Maltino gave her a sidelong look out of his eloquent dark eyes, and said:

"We are young, and much in love, therefore claim gentle judgment."

"We are quite old enough to know better," said Mrs. Gore. "Come, tea must be ready."

"Wait a minute here while I fetch the Duke." Fritz led her to a seat, and then ran up the tower steps, where he found the Duke sitting on the stone seat, his face buried in his hands.

"Your Highness! is anything the matter?" he asked.

"I have offended her; she will never speak to me again."

"Nonsense! She is angry now, but believe me, your Highness, no woman ever is really angry because a Prince makes love to her."

"You think not, Fritz?"

"I am sure of it. Leave her to me. I'll bring her round, if you will but come down as though nothing particular had happened."

By mutual consent, Maltino became the escort of the angry lady, and with infinite tact and

humour managed to restore her to her usual mental calm. But the condition of the poor Duke was truly pitiable. He was consumed with jealousy, whilst he knew he ought to harbour none but sentiments of profound gratitude towards Maltino. To the Grand Duke Carl life was, at the moment, an altogether undesired blessing.

Meanwhile, with the Duke temporarily out of the running, Maltino made the most of his opportunities, and he and Mrs. Gore had advanced many strides upon the way to friendship by the time the horses stopped at the palace gates. The hot Italian blood surged swiftly to his heart as he held Mrs. Gore's hand when saying adieu, and at the same time he noted with gladness that the Duke only received the coldest and most respectful of curtseys.

On arriving in her sitting-room, the lady found a long telegram from her husband, which she hastily de-coded, when it read :

“Am unable to join you. Received appointment to *Royal Edward*. Leave for Malta on Monday. Will you join me in Paris on Tuesday?

“CHESTER.”

The appointment was not altogether a surprise, but he had not expected to go so soon.

“What a bore!” she said to herself. “I shall

have to go home and do all the packing up, and wait till it's cool enough to go out; but I may as well meet Chester in Paris and pick up some frocks and send them out with him. I suppose he will stay a few days."

She drew the telegraph-forms towards her and wrote :

"Delighted with news. Will meet you Tuesday. Hope you will stay a few days,"

and proceeded to despatch it. She then sent word to the Duchess, requesting an interview. This was accorded, and Mrs. Gore told her news and asked for permission to depart on Monday. This was granted, with many expressions of regret. Returning to her rooms, she afterwards wrote a little note to the Duke telling him what had occurred.

She had dined in her own rooms, and was resting on the sofa in a tea-gown, reading, when a little knock sounded on the door, and, in answer to her "Enter!" in walked the Duke—alone. It was the first time he had come there without either his guardian or Maltino.

Shutting the door by the simple method of backing up against it, he stood looking at Gabrielle, uncertain how she would receive him. Very boyish and handsome did he appear as he stood

there in evening dress, with the blue-and-gold ribbon of the Order of St. Sebastian across his breast, and his fair face a little flushed and appealing.

“Your Serene Highness!” said the lady, rising hastily.

“I’ve come to ask if I am to be forgiven?” he said, advancing towards her.

Gabrielle’s anger was always short-lived, and had died away entirely by this time. So, holding out her hand, she said :

“Yes—I forgive you,” then added wickedly, “Depart in peace.”

“But I don’t want to depart if I’m forgiven. Mayn’t I stay?” he said.

Mrs. Gore hesitated. She knew little of the ways of Courts, but was quite aware that it was somewhat compromising to receive the young Duke alone, and at nine o’clock. However, she was vain, and had never had a Grand Duke in love with her before, so she smiled and said :

—“Just a minute, then.”

“Will you sit here?” said the Duke, leading her to a chair ; and, dropping on one knee beside her, he put his hand in his pocket and extracted an oval silver case with his monogram in blue enamel and sapphires on it.

“Dear friend,” he said, “I have come alone to you to-night—first, to ask your acceptance of a

gift as a token of my gratitude for having saved my life and that of our good Count, and, secondly, to repeat to you what I said this afternoon—I mean—I love you!”

“Then I regret I cannot listen to your Highness,” said the lady, rising briskly. “You are so very young,” she added, “that I will overlook what in an older man would be an unpardonable insult.”

The Duke had also risen.

“Don’t—oh, don’t treat me like a boy!” he cried. “I love you like a man, and I won’t be put off thus!” And he stamped his foot angrily, and looked more than ever like a naughty child.

Mrs. Gore laughed gently.

“Very well, then; if I take you seriously, I shall say, ‘Go, your Highness; you have insulted me!’” And, with the gesture of a tragedy queen, she pointed to the door.

“Don’t! don’t! I can’t stand it!” said the Duke miserably, with the tears standing in his eyes.

Gabrielle relented.

“Dear Duke, I do like you, but you mustn’t make love to me. Think of the good Count, and of my very big and very severe English husband. Oh, by-the-by, I wrote you this note to tell you I have to leave on Monday—see?” And she

handed him the note, which, in silence, he opened and read.

“You can’t and shan’t go!” he said, in his most imperious manner.

“But I’m afraid I can and must. However, don’t let us talk of it. Show me what you’ve got here.” And she touched the case. “What a pretty cover!”

She was leaning over the case he had placed in her hands, and opened it, expecting to see a pretty pendant or bangle. What she actually did see quite took her breath away. On a bed of green velvet lay a most superb diamond necklace bearing the royal falcon, the arms of the Hesstardessens, in the centre, surrounded by single stones of great size and purity.

“Oh! oh! Carl!” she exclaimed. “I can’t possibly accept that from you!”

Hearing his name come spontaneously from her lips was too much for the enamoured boy.

“Darling! darling!” he exclaimed, “I would give you my crown, my very kingdom, if I could!”

“Hush! hush! You mustn’t!” she said, as she closed down the lid on the tempting, glittering stones. “I cannot take them. It’s no use. Do take them away!”

The Duke looked down.

"Would you take them from my mother?" he asked.

"The Duchess? Oh! that would, of course, be different," she said slowly.

"Good!" returned the Duke, slipping them into his pocket. Then, taking her hand, he asked: "And why do you want to go away?"

"Because my husband has sent for me."

"And do you love your husband?"

"Your Highness, all good wives love their lords."

"Ah! In England?"

"Yes."

"And will you come back for my coronation in November?"

She shook her head.

"I fear not. I go to Malta early in October for the winter. But it is nearly ten. Please go."

"Well, say 'Carl' to me once again."

"Please go—Carl!"

Giving her no time to refuse, he stooped, kissed her swiftly, and with a "Good-night, darling!" hastily left the room.

III.

While the foregoing pleasant interview between the Grand Duke Carl and Gabrielle Gore was in progress, Count Otto and his nephew were holding a consultation anent the pretty pair.

“Well, Fritz, I did not exaggerate much, did I?” asked the Count.

“You rather understated the case, if anything,” replied the younger man gloomily. “The Duke’s ridiculous infatuation is getting worse and worse every day. He is as jealous as—as possible. Why, he won’t allow me a word with her, if he can help it.” And Fritz savagely bit the end off a fresh cigar.

“I did try to give him a hint about his attentions becoming a little *empresé*,” said his uncle dolefully, “but he simply told me to be calm and thankful—calm because getting excited would do no good, and thankful that the lady was not a dancer or an opera-singer—and to-day I find he has just bought a diamond necklace and pendant from Alexander the Jew, the cost of which won’t be a sou under five thousand pounds; and with the exchequer so low, too, and the expenses of the coronation just coming on!” And the poor Count sighed heavily.

Maltino’s dark eyes flashed angrily. “Diamonds for her?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t suppose he wants to decorate either my neck or yours with them, and they are certainly not for the Duchess. So who are they for, if not for Mrs. Gore?”

His nephew had risen angrily.

“Oh, if it’s got to the diamond stage, that’s the

beginning of the end. Your next orders will be for the refurnishing of Cronsberg."

"No, I don't think that. She is too middle-class English, and they are so *very* respectable. Now, if she were one of the nobility!" And the Count shrugged his fat shoulders with a gesture that did not express a particularly high opinion of the morals of the English aristocracy.

"Besides," he went on, "think of the scandal with the English Minister."

"Think of the diamonds with the English lady," jeered Fritz. To him a woman who would refuse diamonds when offered by a Prince was a *rara avis* indeed.

Just then a messenger came to bid both uncle and nephew attend the Duke. On arriving at the Duke's own private apartment they found him writing busily, and in his most official manner he said :

"To-morrow, at noon, my mother desires that the Court will assemble in the Throne Chamber in order to be present when she presents to Madame Gore a necklace as a testimony of her gratitude for having preserved my life."

Then the Duke relaxed a little, and added :

"And I intend to make her a Lady of the Order of the Falcon for having saved yours, my cousin. See that Madame is informed, and that all arrangements are made, and cancel any

audiences made for that hour." The Count, somewhat relieved, bowed. He hoped that if the Duchess was to present the necklace she would pay for it. But Maltino could have laughed with joy. So she wouldn't take it from the Duke. She had no intention of becoming his mistress. He slept more quietly that night than he had done since her fair face had first disturbed his peace.

Mrs. Gore was both flattered and surprised at the news of the honours in store for her. Lady Fisher had returned the previous evening, and was to act as her escort. About half-past eleven she went to her and found her beautifully dressed, but looking rather nervous.

"Do tell me what I must do and say," she asked.

"Oh, do nothing, and say 'Thank you.' You'd better have something to give you confidence; you look pale. Ring and ask for a pint of champagne and some cake." And this prescription both ladies followed.

The ceremony went off without a hitch. The Duke made a charming speech on behalf of the Duchess, and Her Serene Highness subsequently clasped the beautiful necklace on with her own hands. The Duke then pinned on the jewelled Order, the band played, the Court smiled and congratulated, while Mrs. Gore blushed, saying

she had done very little to deserve such gratitude.

The Duchess gave a little dance the next night, which was a Saturday ; and Mrs. Gore's arm now being out of a sling, she was able to dance, and a right merry time she had of it. Towards the end of the evening Maltino, with whom she had been dancing a good deal, came up to claim his dance.

"I am tired," she said ; "take me into the garden."

"One turn—just one," he pleaded, slipping his arm round her as they glided off. Her hair brushed his face as he leant over her, and he held her closer and closer.

"Stop," she said at last ; "I'm tired."

He was intoxicated by the woman and the music, and he heeded her not.

"Stop, stop ! I won't dance any more ;" and she succeeded in stopping him at a door, through which they passed into a little veranda, now unlighted. Maltino stooped and pressed an impassioned kiss on her bare shoulder.

"How dare you do that !" she said. It was too dark to see her face, but he felt she was not very angry.

"Because you are adorable, and I adore you ; and because you like me a little, don't you ?"

Under cover of the darkness Mrs. Gore smiled,

but said: "No, I think you are very—very—" and at a loss for a more expressive word she wound up feebly with "rude." Maltino's arm stole gently round her waist. "If you don't want to be made love to, you shouldn't be so pretty," he said softly in her ear.

She laughed. "I can't help my face. I didn't make it," she said.

"I don't want you to help it; but I love it, and it was meant to be loved and to be kissed," and he kissed it.

"You must not; you must not," she said, in a feeble, ineffectual way.

"Yes, I must and will," he replied in his soft, deep voice. "Now, listen to me, and answer. You don't generally let men kiss you, do you?"

"No, no."

"That's right—quite right; but when it's done, and nicely done, you don't really mind it, do you?"

"No—I mean yes, I do mind."

"No, you don't; you mean you don't mind. Now, don't I do it nicely?" and again his soft little black moustache rested on her cheek.

"Oh! oh! oh! You are awful. I am very angry. How could you?"

"How could I? Why, like this."

But Mrs. Gore had slipped away and into the passage before he could execute his design. He

came out laughing at her pink cheeks and half angry air.

"I have a good mind to tell the Duke," said the lady.

"Tell him what? That I can kiss very nicely?" he asked innocently.

She took no notice, but walked on. Very soon the Duke came to claim his last dance. "Do you realize this is almost your last evening with us?" he said.

"I am very sorry to leave: you have all been so kind."

"If you won't come back to me, I shall come after you and fetch you," said the Duke.

"I fear you will have to go to Malta to do that."

"I have heard there are such things as yachts to be hired," rejoined the Duke.

"We shall be charmed to see your Highness," curtsayed the lady.

"Thank you, darling," whispered that gentleman.

On the following Monday, in a carriage packed full of bouquets, and with the Duke's own courier in attendance, Mrs. Gore left Hesstardessen. And dulness and peace descended on that ancient Court.

For the first week the Duke was the joy of his Minister's heart, for he worked from early morn to dewy eve, and cleared off much of the

work that had accumulated during the previous month. He had fixed December 20 for his coronation, and gave much attention to the arrangement of the details for that ceremony. The next week his appetite for work flagged a little, and he paid more attention to his private correspondence. In the third, he cursed business openly, and went off to Cronsberg with only Maltino in attendance, nominally to fish.

At the end of the first week in November he returned to the palace in a worse temper even than before. Maltino had proved a dull companion, who resolutely refused to talk about the fair lady who had made such havoc with the Prince's peace of mind, and who sulked openly when his ducal master refused him a month's leave. So the pair returned mutually dissatisfied, and for three days afterwards Duke Carl was irritable, unreasonable, and restless, while his usually sunny temper was atrocious. On the fourth day poor Count Otto nearly had a fit of apoplexy at his refusal to give audience to some very distinguished foreigners who had come on an important diplomatic mission.

"I won't be bothered; so it's no use. Tell them I'm indisposed, and show them over the museum," was all he would say.

In his suavest tones von Burgen assured the gentlemen of His Serene Highness's sudden and

severe indisposition, and enlarged on his annoyance at the physician's strict injunction that he should stay in bed. But alas for poor Count Otto's efforts to pervert the truth! even as he spoke, the Grand Duke, escorted by Maltino and his three pet hounds, rode gaily past the palace windows. It was at Maltino's suggestion the ride had taken place, for a bright ray of light had suddenly lit up that young man's somewhat clouded horizon, and he intended its rays to illumine that of the Prince as well. It certainly was unfortunate that the diplomatic mission was standing at the window as they passed.

The two young men rode rapidly out of the town, and then cantered along the soft springy turf that bordered the road. When they reached the little hostelry that was their destination, they ordered a fairly substantial meal.

This finished, they sat and smoked. The conversation languished somewhat at first. After a while Maltino, gazing anxiously at the Duke's face, said :

"If I may be allowed to say so, sir, you do not look at all well."

"Eh?" said the Duke.

"No, sir, you disguise it bravely ; but for days I have felt certain that you have been suffering."

The Duke looked surprised. "Suffering? Where, my good Fritz?"

“Pardon me one moment, sir. Again I say you are not well. Our cold summer has tried you; the ceaseless work entailed by your approaching coronation has weighed upon your nerves. You require rest, total and complete rest; change of scene and climate more complete than you can get on shore. Were I your physician, I should order you a yachting trip.” Maltino paused.

A light began to dawn on his companion. “By Heaven, Fritz, I believe you are right! A yachting trip—to the Mediterranean, for instance.” He smiled.

“The very thing! Go to Italy, land at Gaeta, and I will take you to my old uncle’s castle; and then, when you are tired of that, we might go on to Sicily, or even—Malta.”

The Duke’s face beamed. “Fritz, my faithful friend, your words are full of golden wisdom. I *do* want rest; I *am* ill; and if I don’t get it, I shall be ill when I should be crowned. A yachting trip to Italy—Italy, mind you—is, I am convinced, the only remedy for my complaint. Oh, by-the-by, what did you say you thought my complaint was?”

“Judging from myself, I think it might be diagnosed as a form of cardiacal affection. The symptoms are loss of appetite.”

The Grand Duke looked behind him at the

luncheon-table, where the skeleton of a large fowl, and the remains of a tongue, a tart, and a cheese, testified that their meal had been made off those delicacies.

Maltino grasped the dumb illusion. "The way your Highness has endeavoured to hide from us your loss of appetite is wonderful."

The eyes of the Duke twinkled. "I have done my best," he murmured.

"But there are other symptoms," said his friend—"headaches, giddiness, a disinclination to attend to ordinary official duties. I have seen people under these circumstances put their hands to their heads and suddenly stagger backwards; it is very alarming to see. They are also apt to be rather short in the temper and—ah—irritable."

"I think everyone has noticed that symptom lately," said the Duke grimly. "And you think a good doctor would be sure to order rest for this complaint?"

"Yes, sir, I feel sure Herr Fulcher would, if it were pointed out beforehand to him that the prescription would be an acceptable one."

"Ha! just so. Well, Fritz, you shall go and see our doctor, and tell him how I have suffered in silence, and—well—er—what about a yacht?"

"If I might be allowed to suggest it, perhaps your Highness has also a little rheumatism as well, in which case perhaps it would be judicious

if you were first to go to—well, shall we say, St. G——k for the baths, taking myself and a couple of servants. From there we might go suddenly to Trieste, which is about fifty miles distant, where, possibly, a yacht belonging to a friend of mine might be. I advise this, lest my uncle, in his anxiety to spare your Highness the fatigue of the journey, might try to prevent your taking it.”

“I see, I see. Now you mention it, I have had severe pains in my right arm and leg for some time, and the sulphur baths will, I am sure, cure them. But I think, perhaps, it would be as well for you to take a week’s leave, and go and see your friend about the yacht, returning in time to attend me when I go to the baths. Come, we must go back.”

They rose.

“One more suggestion, sir. If, when your pains and giddiness attack you, instead of bearing them in silence, you were to give some expression to the suffering you feel, I am sure the doctors would be more impressed with the gravity of your case.”

“Fritz, my friend, you are right again. They shall be made aware of my sufferings.”

On their arrival, the gentlemen-in-waiting were horrified to hear low, agonized groans issuing from the lips of their Duke as he dismounted, and still more alarmed to see him stagger and reel

with his hands to his face as he reached the door of his own apartments. The Court physician, Herr Fulcher, was sent for. He was a fussy, nervous little man—clever, but never able to overcome his awe of a prince or royalty of any kind ; and it was a cruelly ironical fate that had made him a Court doctor. He would have cheerfully resigned his position, but for the fact that his wife was a very vain, extravagant woman, who found that her husband's position gave her a certain cachet in society. A second reason was the large income he earned. The lady's ruling passions were an anxiety to reduce the exuberance of her figure and a penchant for following the latest fashionable craze. Of late, like many other ladies in Hesstardessen, she had never been seen without a red parasol.

As his tottering footsteps were guided to the sofa, the Duke groaned feebly, saying, "So sorry ; could suppress it—no longer ;" then closed his eyes and endeavoured to look pale.

On the arrival of the doctor the Duke ordered the others "to remain within call," which really meant to go out of hearing.

The little doctor nervously wiped his glasses. Then, placing them on the extreme end of his nose, he asked : "Would your Royal Highness have the goodness to describe your symptoms ?"

The Duke groaned. "I am so giddy, I

stammer—no, I mean stagger—like this,” and rising languidly, he staggered across the room.

“And then I have such pains in my limbs and knees, and am stiff and even swollen, and it is agony to rise up or sit down.” He stopped and racked his brains in an effort to think of other symptoms.

“This is very serious—very. How long has your Royal Highness felt these things?”

“Oh, for some days, or rather weeks; but I have not said anything about them, as I do not like giving anxiety to my mother. Oh! oh!” The exclamations were caused by the Duke’s efforts to seat himself.

“Your Highness is undoubtedly suffering from acute muscular rheumatism. A course of massage and dietary.”

“Don’t you think some kind of baths—say, sulphur ones—would be better?”

“Well, well, perhaps; Aix, now, or Baden——”

“Or, St. G——k,” suggested the Duke. “But I think the giddiness is from my cardiacal region, is it not?”—looking very solemn—“and total rest is the only cure for that.”

—“Your cardiacal region, I beg your pardon.”

“Yes; the pain is there in the middle of the pericardium.”

The Duke was getting hazy over Maltino’s directions, so, ringing a bell, he told the equerry

who answered it to send Maltino in, and lay back as though exhausted.

"Fritz," he said feebly, "tell the doctor what I confided to you this morning."

Taking the doctor into the ante-room, Fritz told him much, the result of his communications being a peremptory order for the Duke to repair with as little delay as possible to the baths at St. G——k.

"They are wonderful. Last year they reduced my wife's weight two stone."

"They must indeed be strong," said the Duke, smiling; for the lady's embonpoint was a standing jest with the Court.

"Then, doctor," asked Maltino, "it is your opinion that nothing but a course of these baths, accompanied by absolute rest and a complete change of scene, will cure His Highness?"

"Nothing less," said the doctor, firmly convinced that he had really said so.

"Then go and tell that to Count Otto." The doctor turned and departed.

The Duke sprang from the sofa, and danced wildly round.

"Hurrah! hurrah! We'll be off to Malta next week, my Fritzchen." And so it was arranged.

Fritz went on leave, and the Duke, with a small suite, left for the baths, which were really more than half-way to Trieste. A week after-

wards Fritz joined them, and announced that he had hired a beautiful steam yacht.

And then one day he and Fritz went out for a walk, and never returned ; for they were speeding away towards the Adriatic, while Count Otto was tearing his hair over the following note :

“ DEAR COUSIN,

“ I am tired of the baths, and feel I must have the complete rest ordered for me ; so am going with Fritz to his yacht. We shall go for a month's cruise in English waters, probably. Send on all the things by courier that Fritz asks for in his letter, and don't be uneasy.

“ Your affectionate,

“ CARL.”

Thus, finding it impossible to get to Malta alone, the artful Maltino took the Duke with him.

And now I can tell the rest of the story from the Malta end.

IV

When I arrived at Valetta after my summer “leave” I found everyone talking about Mrs. Gore. The story of her adventures at Hess-tardessen had become magnified beyond recognition. Her diamond necklace was the source of every woman's envy, and her beauty appeared to have increased immensely. This was perhaps due to the chic frocks she had “picked up” in

Paris. It could not be said that she "put on side," but she certainly considered a good deal of attention was due to the wife of the Captain of one of Her Majesty's newest battleships; to the acknowledged possessor of the prettiest face on the island; and last, but by no means least, to the owner of that beautiful necklace, the gift of a royal lady under circumstances that threw a small halo of glory round the head of the recipient.

Things were just beginning to be gay, and Mrs. Gore was thoroughly enjoying herself, when the Commander-in-Chief (who was a bachelor, and much preferred the society of his fleet at sea to that of the wives ashore) ordered a detachment of ships to accompany him on a cruise. Among others told off to go was Captain Gore's ship, the *Royal Edward*. Now, Chester Gore was a connection of mine, and he and I had always been the very best of friends; he was a quiet, clever, rather serious-minded man, whose whole life, mind, and heart were wrapped up in the service—at least, until he met Gabrielle, or, as she was generally called, Angel Clifford. After that he only devoted half his life and heart to his profession, and the rest he poured lavishly at the dainty feet of his wife. The marriage had surprised us all; it was a general wonder what they saw in each other. Nevertheless, the result

appeared to be quite successful, and however she did it, the little lady managed to keep on excellent terms with her serious, quiet husband, and yet to have a train of devoted lovers.

I will say Captain Gore looked after her well, and had an effective way of removing out of his wife's path any man whom he considered an undesirable friend for her, and it was amusing to watch the pair.

The fleet was to leave on November 20 for a month, and on the 6th a beautiful small steam yacht was seen entering the harbour; and that afternoon Mrs. Gore appeared on the polo-ground with two strange young men in attendance—one was a boy whose charming face might have been called "pretty," only it was far from effeminate, who looked about twenty, the other was the only living man I have ever seen who in any way conveyed to me what was meant by a "Greek god." Tall, slender, but muscular, his figure and the way his head rose from his neck, and the neck from the shoulders, conveyed the impression of great strength. His features were absolutely perfect in profile, and full face he had a delightful smile, fine and most expressive eyes of the brown that goes black when the owner is angry or excited, a small black moustache and hair, and a chin and jaw that indicated a character strong for good or ill, as the fates decreed.

As soon as I drove up, Mrs. Gore came up with the two men.

“Oh, Winnie,” she said gaily, “this is the Grand Duke Carl. He and Signor Maltino arrived in a yacht this morning.”

I gathered that the boy was Duke Carl and the Greek god his equerry. Both appeared highly pleased with themselves, and said they hoped to stay for a fortnight or three weeks.

That night at the opera every eye was fixed on Mrs. Gore’s box on the grand tier, where she sat with the Grand Duke, the Greek god, and Chester Gore; and the celebrated necklace gleaming on her white skin.

The next few days a procession of boats might have been seen carrying uniformed officers to and fro from the shore to the *Devon Maid*, as the Duke’s yacht was called.

It appeared afterwards that Maltino had engaged the yacht, and the Duke was his guest.

Hospitable Malta fêted the pair in its usual lavish fashion; but much heart-burning was caused by the obvious devotion of both the Grand Duke and his equerry to the “Fair Lady of the Red Parasol,” as they called her. Of course, at official dinners there were several women of higher rank than Mrs. Gore, whose demands on the young Duke’s attention could not be put on one side; but it soon became recognised that if Mrs. Gore

were not bidden to a feast, the Duke was invariably too "indisposed" to attend it; and more than once on these occasions sounds of revelry had been heard from the yacht that accorded ill with the quiet so advisable for the cure of an "indisposition."

One night we had a dinner and small dance "to meet" H.S.H., and my husband overheard our guest rating his equerry soundly.

"Do not let it happen again; she is mine. It is not my wish that you should dance with her. When I cannot be at her side, I put you there to keep off these stupid Englishmen, and to make jealous her husband, so that he shall not suspect me. But do not take advantage of it to come between us—or I will—yes, Maltino, though I love you as a brother, I will shoot you as I would a rat!" As the two came out, I can tell you they looked as though they would like to fly at each other's throat. I was considerably put out at hearing this, and feared there was trouble in store for my good friend Chester.

A few days after this we were dining and dancing on board the *Royal Edward*, and I was sitting in the after-cabin alone with Chester. He dropped for a moment the mask of genial host, and I noticed he looked worried.

"Is anything going wrong?" I asked.

"No, oh no," he replied, in a tone I translated

to mean, "There is, but I don't like to tell you."

"If I can help you, I hope you won't refuse to let me."

He got up and walked to the table, and then said: "Well, Winifred, I don't like leaving Angel—and we go to sea for a month the day after tomorrow. You see, it's not that I don't trust her, and all that, but these foreigners aren't the same. Italians are the very devil where women are concerned, and the brute is handsome enough to turn any woman's head, especially a pretty one married to a man fifteen years her senior. As long as I'm here it's all right; but with me away, and not a soul in the Island who has any right to control or guide her, alone in a little flat with Maltese servants, and that handsome devil madly in love with her—who can say? I can't send her home, there is no one I can send for to come out and stay with her, and I must go to sea."

"You think Maltino more dangerous than the Duke?" I asked, rather surprised at this view of the case, and thinking over what my husband had heard.

"Oh, the Duke! He's a pretty boy—but only a boy. Angel would not take him more seriously than she would one of my midshipmen. No, it's that equerry who might mean mischief."

We said no more, for just then some others

entered the cabin ; but later on I seized the chance to say to Chester : " If you would be easier in your mind, and Angel will accept, I will ask her to come and stay with me for a couple of weeks ; they will have left by then."

" Really, Winnie, you are too good. No wonder they call you ' The Very Pleasant Help.' "

" Do they?" I said. " I didn't know it. I rather like the name. But shall I?"

" Nothing would ease my mind more," he replied, with a sigh of relief.

V

Angel Gore accepted my invitation and came to stay with us, nominally to keep me company while my husband went with the Governor to inspect the troops in Crete.

To say the Duke and his equerry lived on our doorstep would be, perhaps, to exaggerate, but to say they were on it every day would not, and my opinion of Chester Gore's judgment increased greatly as I realized how truly he had summed up the situation. Of Maltino's devotion there was no question, and I began to think that Angel was decidedly *éprise* with the Greek god. So one evening, after we had returned from a dinner at the palace, I taxed her with it.

"Angel, aren't you playing with fire?" I said abruptly, as I sipped my soup.

She laughed a little consciously.

"Oh! he's a dear boy, and great fun!"

"I did not intend my remark to refer to the Grand Duke," I said, without taking my eyes off my cup.

"Oh! I thought you did. Really——" Then a pause.

"Angel, be careful. These Italians are dangerous, unscrupulous men where women are concerned. He is very desperately in love with you, and you may find yourself in an awkward position if you go on encouraging them both as you are doing!"

"Oh! but, Winnie, isn't he divinely good-looking—when he bends over you and his eyes look at you?"

"Just so——"

"He said to-night that the Duke was going to ask us to go to Sicily for a week with them. You will accept, won't you?"

"Certainly not! Fancy being shut up in a yacht with you three firebrands! No, you don't find Winnie Fearnaught in such a *galère* as that!" I said, half laughing.

"Oh! very well," she replied sulkily; "I can take Hetty Amory to make a fourth."

"You'll do nothing of the kind while you are my guest!" I said hotly.

“But I shall not be your guest then! Good-night, dear; don't worry!” And she put down her cup and swept gracefully from the room, and I felt I had acted like an idiot.

The next day the Amorys were giving a picnic to St. Paul's Bay, and it did not please me at all to find that Mrs. Amory had annexed the Duke for her own amusement, and that the Italian was going to drive with Angel. And the Duke looked still less pleased.

That night there was a ball at the Castille, and I was very angry with Angel for the outrageous way she flirted with both the Grand Duke and his equerry.

Finally, I saw her sitting out with the latter in one of the carefully arranged corners, and if I had not been able to hear what they said I would have almost guessed it from their faces. But as there were only a few flags between us I heard the words:

“Mia Angella—I love—I adore!”

Then Angel's silly reply:

“Oh, Fritz, you must not!”

Just then the band began again, and I heard no more, but the next morning I took her to task again.

“You are behaving very badly to everyone—to your husband, because you are making yourself the gossip of the island; to the poor Duke,

who is honestly devoted to you; and to that dreadful Italian, who will stick at nothing to get you; and to me, who promised Chester to look after you."

She looked exasperatingly cool and pretty, and said calmly:

"It's awfully amusing."

"I wish I could box your ears!" I said heartily.

"Dear Winnie, you *are* so good yourself you don't know what it is to be tempted. Of course, I don't mean to elope with either of them, but it's rather fun making them both think I will."

"You are simply childish!" I said.

"You will come to Sicily with us, won't you, dear?" she said, in her softest and most coaxing tones; "because if you do not, he will ask Mrs. Amory, and she is so fascinated with the Duke it will leave Fritz entirely to me." And she slipped out of the room, leaving me to consider my reply.

Of course, I decided to go. It was the only thing I could do under the circumstances, as she absolutely declined to give it up. We were to start on November 26 and come back on December 2, as the Duke had to return for his coronation on the twentieth of that month. Unfortunately, the weather was unpleasant, and a nasty sea greeted us outside the harbour. The Duke soon became ominously silent, and then retired, and I

judged it wiser to go and lay down in my cabin. The other two remained on deck, and with a tarpaulin and rugs ensconced themselves close to my ventilator, and I overheard the whole of their conversation. I did not want to listen, but was not going to run any risks by getting up to warn them. What I heard was something like this :

Maltino : " Is it comfy like that ? "

Angel : " Very. "

Maltino : " Now—say, ' Fritz, I love you ! ' "

Angel : " Fritz, I love you—not ! " (Laughter.)

Maltino : " Angelic Angel ! but you do ! And, what is more, you will love me as well as I love you before long. "

Angel : " Tut, tut ! You have a pretty face and a kind heart, but, oh ! Fritz—not a noble mind ! And I couldn't really love anyone who had not a noble mind. "

Maltino : " Darling—— "

Angel : " Don't. "

Maltino : " I must. Isn't it lucky the dinner, the sea, and the Duke do not agree, and the dear Lady Malcolm, too—she did look green ; and no lady, however handsome, looks her best green ; she was wise to retire. "

Angel : " Poor dear ! You're not to joke about her, Fritz. She's a brick. She hates yachting, she doesn't like you, she's not very fond of me, and yet, just because my husband is

away, and she is an old friend of his, she's here to see that you don't elope with me."

Maltino: "It's awfully good of her, but it will not prevent me doing it."

Angel: "What—eloping with me?"

Maltino: "Yes. Oh, my darling, I can't live without you! You must come! I will teach you to love in ways that cold, elderly Englishmen never dream of. Angel, you shall go to heaven in my arms! Listen. Think of an old, old castle shut in with high walls, hung with a curtain of purple bourganvillea; inside the gates a courtyard; to the left an old, old garden, filled with roses and flowers—flowers everywhere! Think of it! You and I—alone!"

Angel: "Hush! You must be mad to talk like that! I am not going to elope with you. You are only pretending, as I am."

Maltino: "What, you are pretending? Will you tell me you do not love me?"

Angel: "Yes. I don't really love you—except just to amuse myself."

Maltino: "Amuse—amuse—yourself! Devil—not Angel—you surely are! Mein Gott! Is it possible?"

Angel: "Quite. I have no doubt lots of women have succumbed to your fascination, and you have led them on, caring no more for them than I do for you. Now, you see, the tables are

turned. You make love delightfully, and I've enjoyed it very much; but that's all, so don't deceive yourself as to my feelings."

Maltino: "But I love you! I cannot live without you!"

Angel: "That's just what the Duke told me last night, and I told him what I tell you—that it was no use crying for the moon. And, as far as the possibility of what you term 'having me for your own' is concerned, I might just as well *be* the moon, for you are just as likely to get one as the other. So, my dear, good Fritz, don't make yourself ridiculous. I am an intensely respectable married woman, who enjoys talking nonsense up to a certain point, but who sees nothing to be gained by throwing up one good permanent billet for the sake of one that would only be a 'temporary' affair."

Maltino: "Heartless, cruel, wicked—devil! You think you can fool me as you do—that boy; but you will find yourself wrong, and that I, Maltino, will have revenge if you do not give me love!"

Angel: "Rubbish! I won't be called names. Good-bye."

I heard sounds of moving, and in a few minutes Mrs. Gore appeared at the door of my cabin, a pale blue veil tied round her hat and a very slight flush in her cheeks. And, considering the

exciting conversation she had been having she looked remarkably cool.

"How are you feeling, Winnie dear?" she asked.

"So long as I don't move I'm all right, but to sit up would be fatal."

"Well, then, don't sit up. I'll bring you in some tea in a minute. It's quite nice on deck. The Duke is also *hors de combat*."

"Angel, do be careful with that man! I must tell you I could hear all you were saying just now."

"Could you?" she exclaimed, with a frown.

"Yes; you sat just over my head, and the ventilator acted as a sort of funnel."

"Well, it doesn't matter. My replies were strictly proper, and I am not responsible for his questions. Besides, he does not mean half he says."

"I'm not so sure about that. You will drive him to desperation if you are not careful. But I can't talk any more. *Do* be cautious—and send me in some tea."

About eight o'clock the sea went down a little, and the young Duke manfully went in to dinner, and partook plentifully of champagne and sparingly of dry toast. But I remained in my bunk.

The next morning we awoke to find ourselves anchoring in the beautiful bay of Palermo. We all went ashore very early in the most cheerful of

spirits—indeed, the Duke was wildly excited—and spent a very pleasant day exploring and picnicing among the ancient ruins of Taormina, returning to the yacht late in the evening. Signor Maltino had soon lost his spirits, and by noon was moody and even morose. Less and less did I like his expression; there was something sinister and thoughtful about it that made me feel he was planning something, and I determined to watch him closely.

After dinner the Duke suggested to Angel they should go for a row in the skiff, and she foolishly agreed. They were away about an hour, and I had gone to my cabin when they returned. She came down looking thoughtful.

“As you heard what the equerry said last night, it might interest you to know what the Duke said to-night.”

“It certainly would,” I said dryly.

She stood in front of the mirror, took her hat off, and arranged her hair. “Well, it began by him repeating his remark that he could not live without me, so I said that, unfortunately for him, I was not for sale, so what did he propose to do about it. He ramped a little, and then said that of course he knew he could only marry me morganatically, but that our children should be given the titles of Baron and handsomely endowed, and that I should live like a Queen at Cronsberg

(a stuffy old castle in the mountains), and that he would bind me with kisses and cover me with jewels. I thanked him, but said I feared my husband would not allow me to accept his kind offer."

"Oh, Angel!" I could not help remonstrating; "you really are incorrigible! Do you mean to say you were not angry?"

"Angry? No; it's no use being angry with a man—especially in a very small skiff—it only makes him worse. As it was, I thought he would upset us, and I can't swim, so I had to calm him down by telling him he might always go on loving me, and could send me a rose every year, and I would send him a red parasol—like the Prisoner of Zenda man—before he would bring me back. I'm so sleepy, I must go now, so good-night; I thought it would amuse you to know this."

"Oh, Angel, Angel! I really don't think you're responsible for your actions. Chester will have to retire and look after you himself. Good-night."

She went into her cabin. The next day we were to go sight-seeing in Palermo. I felt uneasy as we went ashore, and determined not to lose sight of Angel. We drove out to see the church and cloister at Monreale, and until after lunch (for which we returned to the Hôtel des Palmas) we were not separated. Then the Duke asked her to go with him and select some curios for his

mother—the shop was only a few doors from the hotel—and I heard Maltino say in a low voice :
“ The pier at three.”

“ We will be back in a few minutes, Lady Malcolm,” said the Duke, “ for we must leave the pier at three.”

Maltino went out with them ; he had been looking white and strained all day. I felt there was some reason for it beyond the fact that he was in love. In about a quarter of an hour—it was then two o'clock—he returned hurriedly, saying :

“ Lady Malcolm, for God's sake ask no questions, but do as I say. Drive down instantly to the South Pier and wait beside the yacht's steamboat, and don't leave her for an instant.”

“ I shall do nothing of the sort,” I said, distrusting him utterly, and seeing only a thin plan of getting me out of the way. “ Where is Mrs. Gore ? ”

“ She will be at sea with the Duke if you don't do as I tell you,” he said.

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ I can't stop to explain—only this, that he will tell her that *you* have already gone. I am to go and tell them that now, and she will then insist on going on board immediately. Then I return here to pay the bill, and the yacht will sail instantly they are on board ; the only way to prevent it is

for you to wait for them on the pier. Give any explanation you like, only go—for God's sake go!"

It was a horrible position for me. I utterly distrusted both men; if I left the hotel where Angel would expect to find me it might be some trap, if I did not Maltino's story might be true. I snatched up my purse and boa and rushed down the stairs, took the first prowling cabriolet I saw, and told him to go to the South Pier. True enough, the steamboat was waiting. About ten minutes after I had arrived I saw the Duke and Angel coming hurriedly down.

"How are you?" she said anxiously.

"I'm all right."

"Fritz said you were feeling so seedy you wanted to go off at once, and would I come as soon as I could."

I just looked at the Duke; his face of chagrin and suppressed anger told me Maltino's story was true, but, for some unreasonable reason, I decided to shield the traitor.

"How odd; I did say my head ached, and the room was hot, so I thought I would drive down here and wait for you in the fresh air. I suppose, finding me gone, Signor Maltino got alarmed. Where is he?"

Just then he appeared, and we all went off to the yacht. Both men were very silent.

VI

Later on I told Angel of her narrow escape. She looked shocked, and said: "I shall be glad to get back to Malta to-morrow; won't you?"

"Indeed I shall," I replied from my heart.

After tea the Duke and his equerry had both retired to the former's cabin, where they held a long conversation in low but earnest tones. Once they opened the door, and I heard the Duke say: "I can trust you?"

Maltino replied: "If you fear, why not find someone else to do it?"

"No, no! That you know is impossible. At ten o'clock, then?"

Maltino repeated: "At ten o'clock."

I felt more and more uneasy, and yet, what *could* happen? In a few hours we should be on our way to Malta, for I did not think it likely the Duke intended to elope with all four of us.

There was a volcanic feeling in the air at dinner.

"When do we sail?" I asked the Duke.

"At nine o'clock, I believe," he said, with an absent air.

When we had just finished our third course the captain came in and made some statement. The Duke looked vexed, and appeared to argue, then shrugged his shoulders as though agreeing reluctantly, and the captain withdrew. The conversa-

tion having been in Italian, I did not understand it.

“The captain came to report some slight breakdown in the engines that will delay us starting for some three hours,” he said.

We sat in the deck-house, and played cards until ten, then Angel and I rose to go below.

“I fear you ladies must be cold. One grows quite chilly sitting still; shall we have some hot soup?” said the always attentive Greek god.

“It would be delicious,” said Angel. So orders were sent down for four cups of hot soup.

“I’ll go down and fetch you a rug,” Maltino suggested, running down the companion.

“Don’t bother; we’d rather walk about,” said Angel, seizing my arm, and we three walked quickly up and down the deck till the steward with the soup and Maltino with the rug arrived together. He put us in two chairs, tucked the rug round us, and handed us each a cup of soup; then gave the Duke a chair and his soup, and sat down himself on the rug at our feet and sipped his own, while he watched us. The soup was hot and comforting, but at the second mouthful I fancied there was something medicinal about it. However, I held the cup to my lips and appeared to take a long drink. Then I rose and said: “That was a grand idea of yours, but it’s almost too hot,” and I stirred it thoughtfully and wandered to the side of the

yacht, where, turning my back to the others, I quietly trickled the soup into the water; then, turning round, put the cup to my lips and appeared to drain it, leaving it standing empty on the nearest seat. We then said good-night, and Angel and I went below.

I was feeling a strained, alert sensation, as though some crisis was at hand; and when Angel had gone to her own cabin I did not undress, but merely took off my frock and put on a warm blanket coat, and lay down on the bunk to await events, for I was fully convinced that the soup was drugged, but for what purpose I could not fathom. I suppose I must have dozed, for I remember nothing until I heard the soft pat of feet over my head. "They are getting under way," I thought. In about five minutes the sounds ceased, and the next event was a low tap at my door, which, unfortunately, I had omitted to lock. It was a sliding-door with a curtain before it. I made no reply, and lay with my eyes closed; then I felt a hot breath on my cheek, and I opened them to find the Greek god's face close to mine.

"Good heavens! what's the matter?" I cried, sitting up.

He looked very astonished, and stammered something about:

"Going to get up the anchor—thought the noise might alarm——"

"Nonsense!" I said sharply. "That's not the truth."

"Well, never mind; you've got to come on deck at once."

"What for?"

"Never mind. Will you come, or must I carry you?"

"Neither," I said promptly. "What is the meaning of all this?"

He looked like a man thinking hard, then said:

"Lady Malcolm, will you kindly come on deck at once?"

"No, I will not."

"Then I must carry you." And he endeavoured to lift me from the bunk. I had just time to reach and press the steward's bell before he saw what I was doing. The assistant-steward slept about two inches from where the electric bell went off, and in a moment he was at my door. Maltino's hand on my mouth prevented me calling. Luckily, however, I managed to get a groan out that brought him in; the door was drawn back, and in a second the electric light flooded the cabin. Instantly Maltino, with a curse, pushed past the frightened boy and rushed on deck. I was up in an instant, and in Angel's room, locking the door between that and mine.

"Angel! Angel!" I called, as I turned the light on.

But she slept heavily. I shook her, then dashed water in her face; but all to no purpose—she slept the sleep of the drugged. I sat down and thought, then rang the bell, and when I heard the man reply, I shouted to him to make some coffee :

“Café, café, fortissimo!” I cried. “The signora ist maladie.”

“Si, si, signora,” he replied.

Then I heard, first slow, then faster and faster, the throb of the engines and the rattle of the cable. We were off. “But God knows where!” I thought.

In about twenty minutes the man returned with the coffee. My efforts to arouse Angel being quite useless, I drank a little of it myself and then returned to my cabin and locked the outer door. I saw by my little clock it was two a.m.

The rest of the night was passed in a horrid suspense. The throbbing of the engines failed to reply to the question I asked, and there was no other sound. At five I lit a small lamp and heated up the coffee in a wee travelling-kettle. Angel was still asleep. I did not for a moment think it was likely that Maltino had given her anything to hurt her, but he evidently wanted us both to fall very soundly asleep. And the Duke? Was his soup drugged, too? And if so, why?

At six I redressed, and had only just finished when Maltino's voice at the door asked :

"Lady Malcolm, may I speak to you?"

"Yes, if you have any explanation to give," I said.

"I will explain everything."

"Very well. If I come out, will you give me your word of honour to allow me to return here when I wish?"

"Yes."

I locked the door into Angel's cabin, put the key in my pocket, and came out. He looked very pale and haggard, and led the way to the saloon on deck. A tray of coffee and sandwiches was on the table.

"Will you have some?" he said.

"No, thanks; they may not be so simple as they look, and I want to hear your explanation. But I think you had better fetch the Duke."

He had poured himself out some coffee and drank it thirstily, and then took up a sandwich.

"Let me assure you they are quite harmless," he said; adding: "I fear I can't fetch the Duke, for he is now 'Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep,' as the old English ballad says."

"What! Drowned!" I exclaimed, horrified at such callousness.

"No, no, my dear lady, not drowned, merely lying comfortably asleep on pillows and rugs in

the bottom of our galley, safely tied up to our late buoy in Palermo Harbour; and as we have been doing just fifteen knots an hour since two a.m., I calculate he is just over sixty miles away by now."

I was aghast.

"And where are we going?"

"We are on our way to a small harbour in the North of Italy," he said.

"Will you explain why?"

"Certainly; but do have some coffee. Really, it's all right—look!" And he poured it out, first into his own cup and then into mine, and the milk in the same way.

I took it, and a sandwich, and he began his explanation.

"Lady Malcolm, I need not tell you I love Angel. She says she does not love me; but she does not know what love is. I adore her, and I will have her and teach her how to love. The Duke also loves her, but with a boy's love. Besides, he is a Grand Duke, and could only make her his mistress. She refused him even as she did me. So he had planned to send you and me ashore to-morrow at ten o'clock, and to steam off with her. He would have taken her to Trieste, and thence to Hesstardessen. I could not bear that, so I counterplotted, and drugged you all, meaning to carry you and him into the

galley and leave you both there. I gave all the crew leave to turn in till one, saying the mate and I would keep watch. He is in my hands completely, owing to a little matter of murder in which he was concerned. Between us we carried the Duke down to the boat, and intended to do the same to you, only, unfortunately, your soup appears to have kept you particularly wide awake."

"Simply because I suspected it was drugged, and poured it over the side," I said.

"Oh! astute lady! But I wish you hadn't, for I am much embarrassed to know what to do with you; for, delighted as I should be to have you as a companion in my flight—another time—just now I fancy my hands will be pretty full in managing the Lady of the Red Parasol when she discovers I have every intention of making her my wife—for I have no doubt her good husband will divorce her when she has been a month or two with me."

"You brute! You miserable cur! to get two women into your hands and then think you can force them to do as you like! As soon as my husband hears of this a cruiser will be on our trail, and you will sing a very different tune."

"May be. But the noble Lord Malcolm will not be uneasy, for I sent him a wire yesterday to say 'We are extending our cruise for a week,' and I took the liberty of signing it 'Winnie.'"

"Oh! you did?"

“Yes; and I also sent one to Captain Gore saying the same.”

“And may I inquire if you really think I shall allow you to dispose of me as you see fit, and leave Mrs. Gore alone and at your mercy?”

“That, my dear lady, is just what is troubling me, for, charming as you are, I am sure you will forgive me for feeling that you might possibly be *de trop* while Angel and I are honeymooning. And yet, as you appear so reluctant to leave us, it will undoubtedly require some delicate diplomacy to solve the difficulty.”

Angry as I was with the wretch, I could hardly suppress a smile.

“And if it would not be inquiring too much, may I ask whether you think the Duke will forgive you for all this?”

At the mention of the royal master and friend, Maltino had the grace to look ashamed.

“That is the worst part of it all. I loved the Duke like a very dear younger brother till she came between us—and then I hated him.” He lowered his voice and spoke with concentrated earnestness. “Yes, I hated him; there were times when I could have found it in my heart to kill him. And he—he will kill me—if he can find me.”

His tone conveyed the most absolute conviction

of the truth of his own words, and made me shudder.

“And you did this—this—thing believing you would pay for it with your life?” I asked, as a sort of reluctant admiration for a man who could love so greatly rose in my heart.

“Yes; for life without her is worth nothing to me. And the risk—well, what of it? But the Duke said once to me: ‘Though I love you as a brother, I will shoot you like a rat if you come between us.’ And he will. But what of it, if first I hear her say, ‘I love you’? Then let death come, how and when it will.” He turned abruptly and walked over to the ship’s side. Then, in a minute or two, he returned.

“Pardon me, Lady Malcolm; you are so sympathetic, you make one confide in you.”

Taking from his pocket some small pellets, he gave them to me.

“It is time she was aroused. Will you put one of these in a saucer and burn it under her nostrils? They will counteract the effect of the drug. Both are made by my uncle, who is a wonderful herbalist.”

He stopped suddenly, frowned, looked as though he had made some slip, and then added:

“I will send in some coffee for her; then she will be better on deck.”

I went down to the cabin and did as Maltino

had told me, and in a few minutes she opened those wonderful deep violet-blue eyes of hers, and said :

“What a funny smell! Oh! I am giddy! Are we at sea?”

She soon sat up and drank her coffee and ate some bread-and-butter, and when I thought she was able to hear it, I told her the whole story almost as I have written it down here. All she said was :

“So he’s abducting us both, and left the poor little Duke tied to a buoy! Oh! how furious he will be! But it’s really rather clever of Fritz to diddle us all so completely.” And she lay back and laughed heartily.

I was so angry with her I went out and slammed the door. An hour afterwards she appeared on deck, looking a picture of beauty in a pale blue serge frock and white fur stole. Maltino rushed up to her. She ignored his hand, and said, in a tone I hardly recognised, it was so cold and severe :

“I want to speak to you—come!” and she vanished into the deck-house.

I don’t know what passed beyond what she told me, and that was :

“I asked him how he dared to take such a liberty with us as to abduct us without our consent, and told him, if he did not take us straight

back to Malta, both our husbands would thrash him within an inch of his life. I also mentioned I thought him detestable (which I don't), that I had neither liking nor admiration for him (which was not true), and a few other things, and then I left him."

All through lunch he never spoke except to reply to a direct question. But the yacht did not alter her direction. Angel and I made an agreement not to leave each other on any excuse, and she put Maltino in Coventry, refusing to acknowledge his existence. He got more and more miserable. The second night after we had left Palermo he made his first move. After an almost silent dinner he rose and opened the door. As soon as I passed out he put his arm across the opening, saying :

"Have the goodness, Lady Malcolm, to go on deck or to your cabin. I desire to speak alone with Mrs. Gore."

"Winnie, don't——" Angel began ; but the shutting of the door prevented me hearing more.

I went on deck and opened wide the skylight of the saloon where they were, and said :

"Angel, I am here."

I caught the words, "You shall! You shall!"

"Good!" said Angel. "He's boring me dreadfully."

"Maladette!" said Maltino, with intense meaning.

I looked down and saw Angel seating herself on the edge of the table, just under the skylight.

"Do you smell the dinner?" she said. "It's awful here. I'm sure there was garlic in the salad!"

"You can go!" said Maltino, unbolting the door.

With neither a word nor a look, she walked passed him and on deck. We did not see him again that night.

VII

The yacht had increased her speed greatly the next morning. The weather was perfect, warm and still. The blue sea looked tempting.

"I should love to dive off and have a good swim," I said, as Angel and I leant over the taffrail.

"Oh, Winnie! Would you dare?"

"Dare? Why, it is as easy as sneezing. I can swim like a fish, and love a good dive. I wonder if the water is warm."

After tea Angel and I were sitting drinking our coffee, and, finding it a little cold, I went down to my cabin to fetch a wrap. According to our agreement, Angel came with me. I entered my cabin first, and instantly a man's arm barred her passage and slid my door to and bolted it, and Angel and I were separated. I

hammered at the door, but, after a sort of scuffle outside, all was silence. I fumed and fretted, and tried to think how we could have avoided it, but uselessly.

About eight o'clock we anchored close to the shore in a perfect little gem of a bay. I heard much noise and running about on deck, and saw a boat shove off, but who was in it I could not say. No one came near me till about eleven, when a voice said: "If you will go into the inner cabin and shut the door, you shall have some food."

"Where is Mrs. Gore?" I asked.

"My orders are to reply to no questions. Will you have the food or not?"

Now, I was hungry, and saw nothing to be gained by being uselessly heroic. Besides, if any necessity arose for courage, one can be much braver if one isn't hungry. So I said, "Yes," and retired into Angel's cabin. In a few seconds I heard my door open, a chink of glass and silver, and then it shut. I re-entered and found a tray, with some cold ham, bread, butter, preserved apricots, and a small bottle of champagne with an opener beside it, and a letter. I tore open this last and read:

"DEAR LADY MALCOLM,

"Fate has favoured me and shown me how to return you safely to the arms of the brave

Lord Malcolm. I regret to be obliged to make you a prisoner for twenty-four hours, but to-morrow the yacht must coal, for she is empty, and as soon as this is done and the boats hoisted you shall be released. I have left orders for you to be given everything you want, but you must be patient. Angel and I land here to-night. All will be well with us, do not fear, dear Lady Malcolm. For so wise a lady, you were foolish to try and come between such a man as me and the woman he loves. You cannot blame me for stealing her. You will be landed at Gozo, and from there can no doubt telegraph to Malta of your arrival.

“ Believe me, your most sincere admirer,

“ FREDERICO MALTINO.”

The calm impudence of the letter almost turned my rage into laughter. The deliberate way he consigns me to twenty-four hours' imprisonment, orders me to ask for anything I want, and sends me back like a naughty child while he abducts my friend, surpassed anything I had imagined; but it roused in me a sort of deadly passion for revenge and a determination to thwart his plans, and save Angel from him at any cost. But how was I, a prisoner, to do all this?

At twelve o'clock the same voice said at the

door: "Mrs. Gore desires you to pack up her clothes."

"Bring me a note from Mrs. Gore to say so, then," I replied.

In ten minutes or so the following note was pushed in:

"DEAR LADY MALCOLM,

"It won't make the least difference to my intentions whether you pack up Angel's things or not. It will only mean great inconvenience to her if you don't, for where we are going there will be no means of purchasing any toilet necessities, and as no one else can do this but you, I hope you won't refuse. Please place them in the outer cabin and remain in the other while they are fetched.

"F. M."

I believed what the wretch said about it making no difference to his diabolical plans, and I packed up poor Angel's things. I also inserted a note saying she was to defy him, and that I would find some means to land and trace them.

About half an hour after that I heard a boat pull away, and knew Angel was in it. A feeling of despair came over me, and I sat down and cried. At seven o'clock the next morning coaling began, and continued all that day. My cabin

scuttles were screwed up, and the skylight down; even then coal-dust got in and covered everything with a black film. At four o'clock the mate, who was my jailer, came, and, opening the door, announced I was at liberty to go on deck, and the steward should dust my cabin. I lost no time in ascending the companion. The decks were wet from their recent washing, and dozens of theatrical-looking, swarthy Italian sailors were rubbing, painting, and cleaning. The water was a blue that did not promise any very great depth, and we seemed only about five hundred yards from the shore, where a sloping sandy beach ran into the sea, and a wee pier, hardly more than a landing-stage, ran out on the left. I borrowed some glasses from the chart-house, and noted that the beach ran right up into the town, or appeared to, for I could discover no sea-wall. The town appeared to be a straggling village, and I could well imagine that what the wicked Greek god termed "articles of toilet" would not be purchasable in it.

By direct and indirect questions I endeavoured to ascertain its name, but was always met with "No spek Englese, signora."

I fully determined to get ashore, but the manner of doing so had not yet come to me.

Suddenly I saw a small boat put off from the shore. As she approached us, the mate came up

and said: "Will the signora go to her cabin, please?"

"No, she won't!"

"Then my orders are to have her taken by force." And before I realized what he was doing the brute had a slip-knot over my head and my arms pinned to my side, and had hustled me into the deck cabin and shut and locked the door.

I could have struck the man, I was in such a rage at the indignity of it; so perhaps he was wise in sending the captain to release me. In reply to my remarks he smiled, and showed a row of splendid white teeth, saying, "No spek Englese, signora."

The boat was almost at the pier when I came out, and preparations were being made for putting to sea. The sun had set, and it would soon be dark. Under cover of the darkness and the fuss of getting up the anchor I must escape; and as I had no means of getting off, I must swim. My mind once made up, I commenced my preparations. I went to my cabin and changed my clothes, removing everything that would be heavy when wet. I put on a pair of knickerbockers, a loose silk blouse, and a thin unlined silk skirt, and a hat, in the lining of which I placed all the money and the small amount of jewellery I had with me. Then I called the steward and told him to bring me some biscuits. I took a good

stiff dose of brandy with them, and put a little in a small bottle in my pocket. The distance was nothing to me, but I was a little uneasy about the temperature of the water.

I went out and carefully locked my cabin and removed the key. On deck I saw the mate. "I have a headache, and am going to my cabin. I have had some biscuits put there. Will you please not disturb me till the morning?"

"Si, si, signora. We shall sail in ten minutes." And he went forward.

It was quite dusk by now, and I waited with a beating heart for my chance to go overboard unnoticed. The companion ladder was hoisted, but the port gangway had not been replaced when the captain discovered something wrong on the starboard side. All the sailors rushed across, and I dived over. The water was horribly cold, and I swam for all I knew, and uttered grateful thanks to the teacher at the Bath Club, to whom I owed my skill.

My dark, silk-clad arms could not have been visible after about five minutes, so I slackened my pace and swam steadily, keeping my eyes on a faint glimmer I believed to be a light on the landing-stage. The distance seemed much greater than I thought, and I was out of practice. The cold was chilling me, and a horrid thought came—suppose I got cramp, or fainted! Then I remem-

bered the brandy in my pocket, so I proceeded to tread water while I got it out and drank more than half. The result was splendid, and I swam with double the strength, and when my feet touched a sandy bottom I did not feel a bit exhausted. I waded along to the beach, got out, and endeavoured to wring some of the water from my skirt, but had to slip it off to do so.

I looked at the yacht, and was thankful to see her steaming slowly away, so I had good reason to believe my absence would not be discovered till the morning. My teeth were chattering with cold, so I finished the brandy, and then started running towards the top of the beach.

I found what I had expected. There was only a low parapet of about two feet dividing beach and parade. I scrambled over it, feeling thankful to the darkness for hiding my dripping blouse and sodden skirt. I turned up the ill-lighted street, and asked the first man I saw for "Englese Consul," and holding up a Sicilian ten-franc piece, I said, "Show me." He understood, and led the way to a nice-looking house standing behind some tall iron gates. I rang the bell, and gave my guide the coin. As well as my chattering teeth would let me I asked for the English Consul. He came—a pleasant, clean-shaven Irishman, who, before he would hear a word of my story, beyond the fact that I had swum from the yacht, insisted on

his wife taking me up and giving me a very hot bath and some most welcome coffee. She also provided me with some dry clothes. But, unfortunately, just as I was dressed and going down to Captain Harrison, I collapsed on the floor in a dead faint. They sent for a doctor and put me to bed, and I really don't remember much except being told not to talk.

When I woke in the morning it was with difficulty I remembered all that had occurred the previous day, and I was dreadfully anxious to see my kind host and set to work to trace poor Angel.

I dressed and went down by eight. I must own to being so stiff I could hardly move without crying out.

"I will go to bed again when I have told him all and wired to everybody," I said to myself.

Both Captain and Mrs. Harrison were very much surprised to see me downstairs, and the first moment I could I told them my story.

"Maltino—Maltino. I don't remember the name about here," he said; "but I will send their descriptions all over Italy in a few hours, and will find out how they got away last night from here. If you will write out the telegrams you want sent I will see that they go, and then I must order you instantly back to bed, for you may be required to go after them, you know."

So I wrote out the following wires :

“To General Fearnaught, Malta : We have landed here. Please get leave and come at once.—WINIFRED.”

“To the Grand Duke Carl of Hesstardessen, Palermo : Fritz taken Angel away. Yacht gone. I am here. Please come.—WINNIE FEARNAUGHT.”

“To Captain Gore, *Royal Edward*, Malta : If possible join me here. Worried about A.—WINIFRED.”

I had to make my messages to Malta guarded, because news does leak out in the oddest way, and I did not want any hint of this affair to become known. I gave Captain Harrison the telegrams, and very thankfully went to bed.

Mrs. Harrison kindly wrote to N—— for some clothes for me, because, owing to a difference of about six inches in height and the same in breadth, hers could hardly be called a good fit for me.

I dozed and slept most of the day till five o'clock, when my hostess came in to say Captain Harrison had returned, and had some news.

It was no time for ceremony, so I just got up and went to the sofa and sent for him.

“I have tracked them as far as K——,” he said. “It seems the scoundrel landed himself and engaged a man to bring a carriage down near the

pier at twelve o'clock. I found the man, who returned about four to-day. He and the horse were dead tired; the man refused to speak till I threatened him with the police. Then he owned he had driven them to K——. They went to the Hôtel de Paris, where the lady went to bed, and the gentleman locked her door, saying she was a little mad, and must not be let out. Then he went into the town, and returned in the early morning with a carriage and pair of horses, which he drove himself. The lady he fetched down and put in the carriage, which was a sort of waggonette, and they drove off about eight o'clock. Since that, so far, we have no trace of them."

"Suppose I were to offer a reward of ten pounds for information regarding what road they had taken?"

"My dear lady, you would be told they had been seen on every road in Italy for half that sum. No. But offer it to the police if you have any definite news within twelve hours, and halve it within twenty-four hours, and then quarter it. That is the only way an Italian official can be induced to hurry."

This we did, only the scale started at thirty pounds. Various bits of news came, but nothing we could follow up.

Greatly to my relief, my husband arrived on Wednesday. It was Saturday I had swam ashore.

He was nice, as he always is, and very thankful to find me none the worse for my bathe. His principal news was that Count Otto had arrived, and hearing that the Duke was at Palermo, had gone to him with the intention of taking him home at once.

When I told him my story he set to work to find the *Royal Edward*, and sent an urgent wire to Chester to come at once. Luckily, the squadron was at Naples, and Chester arrived on Thursday morning.

Calm and collected as he was, I never saw so murderous an expression on any man's face as on his while he listened to the story, and I saw his strong square hands clench and unclench as if he felt the throat of his wife's abductor between them.

I had barely finished when Captain Harrison rushed in.

"News!" he cried. "They are found! Look!" And he gave me a telegram, which he translated: "The lady and gentleman you seek are at the castle of Count Maltino, Frederico's uncle. The lady is given out to be his wife. They appear to be going to reside there. They arrived on Monday."

"How soon can we start, Harrison?" said Chester.

I need not go into the particulars of that wretched journey. Let it suffice to say Chester allowed us no time for either rest or food till we

arrived at ——. There we had to wait four hours for a coach, which actually passed the castle.

Worn out with the ceaseless noise and jolting, I thankfully went to sleep, and only woke up in time to get a meal before we started again. Malcolm had also spent his time sleeping and eating, but Chester had not eaten at all, and a shudder went through me at the sight of a heavy riding-whip which he had purchased.

On Saturday, at four o'clock, we descended from the coach and rang the great bell of Castle Como. After a long wait we rang again. It was opened by a weird old man.

"I want to see Mr. Maltino," said Chester in Italian.

"Come in," said the old man, looking strangely at us.

We went across a stone-paved court into a fine old hall, where, raging up and down like a hungry lion, was Maltino.

Chester rushed at him.

"Where is my wife?" he demanded.

Maltino stopped, and all his rage seemed to leave him, and deadly despair took its place.

"Your wife? Where is she? God knows! I don't."

"What do you mean? Where is my wife?" repeated Chester.

"I don't know."

"She's here!"

“Then find her—find her—for I’ve lost her.” And without another word Maltino sat down at a table, and, laying his arms on it, buried his face in them.

“Lost her! What do you mean? I know she’s here. Come, we’ll find her. Come, General, we’ll pull this place about that cur’s ears if we can’t.” And Chester went up the stairs, and Malcolm followed him. I went up to Maltino and touched him.

“Why do you say she is not here? We have traced her, and know she is here.”

But he made no sign of having heard.

The change in him was appalling. His face was haggard, and the eyes heavy with sleeplessness. The mouth worked pitifully, and the black hair was quite white over the temples. I was just going to speak again when the thinnest woman I have ever seen silently appeared.

“Who are you?” she asked in Italian, of which I know a little.

“We have come to fetch Mrs. Gore.”

“Who is she?”

Then I remembered they believed her to be Maltino’s wife.

“His wife is gone—lost—and for two days he has either been mad or like that. He has not eaten or slept.”

I rushed away to call the others to hear what she had to say.

It seemed Angel had simply disappeared ; she had been last seen in the room of the old Count, who was very ill, and had a Sister from a neighbouring convent to nurse him.

We insisted on seeing the Sister, who asked us who we were ; and on hearing that Chester was the lady's husband, she replied :

“ Mrs. Gore is at the Convent of St. Mary Magdalene. She wore my cloak and veil in order to escape, and was met by two of the Sisters outside. In the confusion that followed the discovery of her loss no one noticed that I did not return. In reality, I had never left. Mrs. Gore wrote her story to the Mother Superior, and this was the arrangement the Holy Mother made.”

The Sister clasped her white hands and looked meekly down. Maltino rose and, going to her, said :

“ So it was you, you meek-faced hypocrite, who robbed me of her ! Curse you ! May you all——”

But the words were cut short by Chester, who took him by the throat. Maltino struggled to free himself, and the two men were locked in a deadly embrace. Malcolm then flung himself between them and managed to release Maltino's throat from Chester's fingers, and Maltino's arms from Chester's body.

When apart, they looked with deadly hatred at each other, and Chester said to me : “ Please

go ; this is not for you to see." Malcolm pushed me gently into the nearest room, and the drumstick lady followed. The Sister, like a black, silent shadow, went upstairs. Malcolm is my informant of what happened afterwards.

VIII

Maltino went back to his place at the table. Chester stood opposite him.

"You blackguard! You scoundrel! What have you done with my wife?" he asked, with barely suppressed rage.

Maltino raised his head.

"Nothing. I loved her, and she left me. Nothing else matters."

"Liar! Do you mean she is—is still—my wife?"

"Yes, curse you! As purely your wife as the day you left her."

"On your oath, is that true?"

"Yes."

"Thank God!" said Chester.

"Oh! God deserves no thanks. It was only my faith in her that made me wait, thinking she would care—and she left me. Angel! Angel! how could you?" and again he buried his head in his arms.

Chester picked up the whip and said : "General,

will you please leave us? You might be tempted to interfere with the course of justice, so please go."

"Yes, go," said Maltino. "All of you. You, General, go, and take your wife. She did what she could to prevent this. And you go"—this to Chester. "You have won. I own I am beaten. Your wife has gone back to you as coldly virtuous as when I took her away. You have that to be thankful for. She has only one more little sin—a very little one—on her conscience—that of playing with a man's heart and breaking it before she threw it away. So go, and leave me to bear it as best I can, or to end it."

"Yes," replied Chester Gore, "we will go, but not till I have thrashed you."

Maltino never moved.

"Do you hear?"

"Yes—go on," came in a muffled voice.

Whish! The whip sang out as it descended on the back of the man at the table. Whish! It cut through the air again. But, beyond a convulsive shudder, he made no move.

"Gore! Stop it!" And Malcolm seized the whip.

Chester made no resistance, but walked out of the hall into the court, and from the window where I was standing I saw him wiping the moisture from his forehead. My husband's

sunburnt face looked white as he entered the room and beckoned me out. I cast one glance at Maltino, and saw his coat was ripped open and his white flannel shirt was red with blood ; but his position had not changed.

“Go, Malcolm ; leave me. I must speak to him.”

I held open the door, and Miss Maltino passed out. She turned her head away from the bowed, bleeding figure at the table. She saw no pathos in it—nothing but the insult he had put upon her in introducing another man’s wife as his own.

When she and Malcolm were gone, I went up to him.

“Fritz! Fritz!” I said gently ; and in spite of my anger, two tears rolled down my face and splashed on his hand.

He raised his head.

“Well, why don’t you curse me too?” he asked, in a dull tone.

I did not speak, for tears were coming fast. He looked up.

“What are you crying for?”

“For you.”

“For me?”

“Yes, because you are so unhappy.”

I felt it was a stupid, maudlin remark, and I have since thought of heaps of other things I might have said.

"You dear woman! What does one man's unhappiness matter when weighed in the balance against respectability and virtue?"

"Don't—oh, don't talk like that! I would rather you cursed!"

"I can't curse any more; I'm too tired. Nothing is worth cursing. She's gone, and that sums up everything."

"You will try to forget," I pleaded.

"Forget! No. Love like mine may die, but it never forgets."

"Will you forgive her?" I asked, forgetting he was the offender.

"No—I cannot. If she had not cared I would have forgiven her. But she did care. She gave me back kiss for kiss as I held her in my arms the last time I saw her. And yet she chose him and respectability to love and me! No; I cannot forgive her. You are a better, kinder, truer woman than she is—be her friend."

"I will try."

"Now, dear Lady Malcolm, leave me." He winced as he rose. "You have poured balm into the wounds of this most unworthy, sinful man. He thanks you, and if he ever prays again, he will pray for you." He bowed his beautiful pathetic face over my hand and kissed it.

"God help you!" I said, and passed out into the court.

Malcolm was waiting for me, and the carriage sent after us from — had arrived, so we drove to the convent, where we found Chester and Angel. After duly thanking the kind Mother Superior and leaving a handsome cheque for the funds, we all four drove back to —. We were a silent, serious party, and I believe, had our thoughts been revealed, we should each have been found to be thinking of that broken man who had been the cause of our troubles.

After a good dinner and plenty of "Pommeroy" we cheered up, and I related the history of my escape from the yacht. Angel seemed quite horrified, and magnified the danger out of all proportion to its real size. Indeed, both she and Chester were enormously grateful, and said many nice things that I didn't in the least deserve. Malcolm had to get back the next day, but Angel and I went to Naples for a week for a rest and change of ideas. She had altered strangely—one hour in the highest spirits, and the next in the deepest blues. She seemed to me to have something on her mind. Her husband's devotion to her was pathetic; he could hardly bear her out of his sight, and she was very sweet to him. The night before we left she told me the history of those six days—days of peril and temptation, that left their mark on both the face and the character of the man and woman who had passed through the ordeal.

“Winnie,” she said, “may I tell you all that happened in those six days? You are the only person on earth I dare confide in, and I shall go mad if I don’t tell someone. I only wish I was a Roman Catholic, so that I might confess and believe I was forgiven. It must be such a huge relief,” she sighed wearily.

“Tell me, dear, if you like,” I said; “but don’t you think it would be better to tell your husband? You might be sorry afterwards for having told me. Women often, in moments of emotion, tell other women things, and then bitterly regret having done so; but a husband is the right confidant for a wife to have. I once made a dreadful idiot of myself and someone else, just because I thought my husband would laugh at my story.”

She walked nervously from one chair to another, then to the fireplace, where she sat down on a low stool.

“No! No! I simply couldn’t tell Chester, and even if I could, I know he wouldn’t understand; he is too honest; too honourable, too; too—oh, what shall I call it?—solid is the only word I can think of; he is too unimaginative to see how anyone could be carried away by a handsome face and a persuasive manner, and made to do and say things they didn’t want to—even you won’t *really* understand. No one could unless Fritz had made love

to them." Her tone of remorse and melancholy gave me a cold shudder. Suppose those last words of Maltino's had meant more even than they said. "If you will listen," she continued, "I will tell you about it. You are such a dear, calm, consoling thing, everybody tells you their secrets, and you never give them away or think the worst of them. You just listen to the end before you judge them, and then you are never hard and—and—womanly."

"Dear Angel, I'm sure I'm not all that; I just try to help anybody in trouble who comes my way. Once, when I was a little girl, somebody gave me a little vase of Barnum ware, with a little verse on it; that verse I have tried to take for my motto; it runs:

"Do the work that's nearest,
Tho' 'tis dull at whiles,
Helping when you meet them
Lame dogs over stiles."

My chatter had given her time to recover herself, and she spoke more calmly.

"Well, this lame dog is going to tell you all about her stile! I told you how he threatened to gag, bind, and carry me into the boat if I wouldn't go—and go quietly—and as I saw he would do it, rather than be held down by that disgusting, grinning mate, I went quietly. There was a sort of a carriage waiting; we got in, and drove all night. Ah, it was awful! About five o'clock we

stopped at an inn. I was so dead tired, with want of sleep and the jolting, that I offered no resistance when he helped me upstairs ; he took off my hat and cloak, made me drink something, and lie down on the bed ; he tucked me up, pulled the curtains, kissed me gently, and left me. I slept instantly, and when I woke he was standing at my side with a tray of coffee, eggs, omelette, etc. My pride bade me refuse it scornfully ; but I was so dreadfully hungry, and it smelt so good and hot, that I just said ' Thank you ' very meekly, and ate it all. He hardly spoke. The maid then came in with hot water. He left me, and I had a wash and changed my blouse. I was thankful for that box of clothes, and found your note, and was cheered considerably by it. Then he fetched me from my room and put me in a sort of waggonette, and we drove for the whole of that day, changing horses in the afternoon. In the evening we arrived at that weird old castle. About half an hour before our arrival, he said :

“ ‘ I am taking you to my uncle's castle ; he is old, and a bachelor ; his sister, my Aunt Cecilia, keeps house for him. Their dearest wish is to see me married, for I am the last Maltino, and my uncle's heir. I am going to introduce you to them as—my wife.’

“ He smiled sweetly at me, as if he had said something he knew I would like. I was con-

siderably surprised. To be presented to a respectable family circle as his wife promised complications.

“‘Yes, as my wife,’ he repeated with satisfaction, as though saying it really made me his wife.

“‘I shall tell them very plainly that I am not,’ I said.

“He smiled and said, ‘Beloved, you can’t speak Italian. My ancient aunt speaks nothing else, and my uncle is nearly stone deaf—besides, what other explanation is there? you wouldn’t like them to think you were my—mistress!’ and he gave me such a wickedly laughing look.

“‘How dare you use that word—to me—to me!’ I said.

“Don’t be angry! I only said you wouldn’t like them to think that of you, so I shall present you to them as their future Signora. And so you are. Everyone will welcome you; there are some nice jewels awaiting you, and I, Fritz, am your humble and devoted slave.’

“‘I don’t want your welcome, your jewels, or your devotion. I hate, hate, HATE you!’ I said, as rudely as I could. He only smiled sweetly and said, ‘Carrissima, you look more lovely than ever in a rage; say that again, my angry Angel.’ Naturally I was silent; that was the worst of Fritz—he always made you laugh when you wanted to be angry. When we arrived, he and

the old concierge person had a long yarn about me, and said, 'Bella donna,' and 'Bella Signora' a lot of times; then the old thing tried to kiss my hand. Then in the hall that dreadful old aunt—the Dry Bone I called her—embraced me, and kissed both Fritz and me. I was simply dying to tell them it was all lies, but they did not understand a word I said. Then we had some food and a wash, and I was taken in to the old man, who, it seemed, was very ill, and had a Sister from the convent to nurse him. He mumbled things about 'bambino,' and Fritz looked wicked and laughed and said, 'Yes, some day,' and I could have killed him. The next day the old mummy sent for me, and gave me a magnificent rope of pearls and some beautiful diamonds. I was given a lovely suite of rooms called the Bride's Wing. There was a sitting-room overlooking the lake, and a bedroom where you could have danced a hundred people, and a dining-room and a maid's room. Everything was gilt and brocade, and old and stuffy and dusty. Maltino had the Bridegroom's Wing on the opposite side of the passage. After seeing the mummy, I asked not to be disturbed and to have my dinner sent up. The silver was perfectly superb, but so dirty. After the servant took away my tray, I locked the outer door, and when Maltino rapped on it I did not reply. The next morning he came about eleven to take me out in

the gardens. He was so gay and amusing that I almost forgot what he had done, and we ran about picking lovely roses and all sorts of flowers that grew almost wild. That evening I dined with the Dry Bone and Fritz down in the great dining-room. After it was over he followed me upstairs into the sitting-room. He shut the door, poked up the big log-fire, drew a chair up to it, arranged a cushion at my back, adjusted the paper shade on the lamp, then knelt down beside me and, bending down; kissed my hands as they lay in my lap. Then he looked up at me; and oh, Winnie, if you had been in my place I believe even your heart would have beat a shade quicker. Mine simply thumped. You know how soft and pathetic his great brown eyes are—fancy them with the lashes wet with tears as he whispered, ‘At last, at last.’

“I know I ought to have said, ‘Not at all,’ or something crushing, but I simply couldn’t, so I stroked his hair and said, ‘Poor old Fritz!’

“He smiled, saying, ‘My Angel, mine at last.’

“Then I pulled myself together and said, ‘Not yours now or ever. I only said “Poor Fritz!” because I am sorry to see you wasting such a lot of love on a woman who does not care for you.’

“He laughed softly and said: ‘Darling—you will care; others have when I have not wanted them to—as I want you. Listen, you shall stay here with me for a month; all will believe we are

husband and wife, but I shall demand nothing of you, or force nothing from you, till you offer it out of your own love—after that we shall see. For the present it is heaven to me to be near you, to care for you, to touch you, and if I fail to make you love me I shall have no object in living. If you go, I shall shoot myself; but love me, darling, love me if you can.’ And very gently he took my face in his hands and kissed it.

“Oh, Winnie, it was dreadful; I felt myself yielding—yielding to the charm, the fascination of his voice, his beautiful face, his words, and for the moment I knew how easy, how wickedly easy, it would be to love him. My heart throbbed till I thought he must hear it; little pulses beat in my throat and temples; he seemed to have taken possession of my mind and have driven out everyone and everything but himself. It was terrible. Shall I ever forget it?”

She stopped, and buried her face in her hands. I felt incapable of offering any comment, so put my arms round her and kissed her hair. She raised her head.

“Winnie,” she said solemnly, “you good single-minded women, who have married men with whom you were really in love, and have remained in love with them, cannot imagine the temptations to which a woman like myself is subjected. I am very fond of Chester; he and I are the very best

of friends ; he is an interesting companion, an easy-going, comfortable, dependable husband ; he never looks at another woman, and has a confidence in and an admiration for me that I would rather die than lose. There is no man I have ever met I would change him for, and yet there have been heaps of men the touch of whose hand could bring the colour to my face, and a thrill to my blood, in a way that Chester's kisses never could do. Can you explain it? It was so with Fritz. And shut up there in that silent castle, everyone believing us to be husband and wife, with him making the most perfect love to me—can you blame me? Was I very bad? Oh, Winnie, will you ever like me again if I tell you, I—I—let him do it—because I liked it? I can't help it—it was madness, mental aberration, call it what you like. I only know too well that he taught me how exquisite love between man and woman might be made. Honestly I fought against it and him. I did my best to prevent him kissing me, but when he did it—on the third day—I felt I could not answer for my strength of mind if it went on, and as you were probably on your way to Gozo, I saw no help could come for some time. I discovered that the Sister Lucia went back to the convent every evening ; I could not communicate with her, as she spoke nothing except Italian, but I wrote a letter in French to the Mother Superior, begging

her to send me a Sister's dress by the Sister, and to let me come to the convent the next evening. This I got Sister Lucia to take. The next day a new one came. She was nearly my height, and wore a thick veil. When I went to arrange some flowers in the old man's room, she slipped a note into my hand, which said Sister Francesca would say she had to return at six for a few hours, and would ask me to take her place. I was to say the old man was asleep, and not allow anyone to go into the room; then, slipping on the cloak and veil, I was to get away by impersonating Sister Francesca. Outside the house two Sisters would meet me and take me to the convent."

Angel paused in her narrative, then went on: "After tea Fritz came to my room, and I told him I was going to relieve the Sister at six for two hours.

"'You are very good to my poor uncle; his death will be a merciful release. Tell me, Angel, are you not getting happier with me?'

"'No, I'm not,' I said. 'I'm deadly bored—tired of you, of this place, of this melodrama. Now, once again, and for the last time: Will you let me go?'

"'No, I won't,' he answered savagely. 'You shall never go—at least, till I am tired of you, or you bore me.'

"Then you know the way things flash suddenly

into your mind apropos of nothing. 'You did not consider how bored the Duke would be, tied to a buoy,' I said, 'or Lady Malcolm, whom you sent to roam the seas with only that detestable mate to speak to;' and I began to laugh, and laugh, and laugh, for I thought of you two, and the rage you would both be in at the clever way he had outwitted you, and sent you, the dignified Lady Malcolm, to be ignominiously landed at Gozo, like a returned parcel, and how he had whisked me off to this medieval castle to make love to me. I suppose he thought I was laughing at him, and you know how sensitive these Italians are to ridicule, so he got awfully angry. At last he took hold of my arm.

"'Stop, stop,' he said. 'Why do you laugh? Do you think I am a man to allow a woman to laugh at me? Dio Mio! You shall learn to cry for me, not to laugh at me.' And something in his tone frightened me, and the mirth died out of my laughter. Yes, yes, my pretty one,' he went on, 'you forget you are absolutely in my power. If I choose I can ruin you and leave you, perhaps to crave my charity—then you won't laugh. No, your brave English husband will divorce you, and you shall ask humbly that Fritz Maltino will give you his name, and perhaps—who knows?—to give your child—our child—a name at all. You will cry then—not laugh.'

And oh, Winnie, I was afraid—deadly afraid—when he said that. But I dared not show it, so I stood up and faced him, and said :

“‘I laugh, because the whole affair is a ridiculous melodrama. You are the villain ; I am the virtuous persecuted heroine, and in a few days (I nearly said hours) I shall be out of your power, and instead of a woman you will have a man to answer to, and I tell you my husband will thrash you till you cry for mercy when he hears of all this. Go away ; I detest you.’

“Then his anger suddenly vanished. ‘Angel, my beloved, don’t say that. I cannot bear to hear those words on your lips ; for you I have sinned beyond forgiveness towards those to whom I owe everything. I have betrayed the trust of my Uncle Otto ; I have been false to Carl, the boy whose confidant and friend I have been all his life, and who, till you came between us, loved me like a brother. He trusted me with his plan of getting you on the yacht at Palermo, and leaving Lady Malcolm and I on shore, and I told her and sent her to wait on the pier, because I could not give you up to him ; then I stole you for myself. I have cruelly deceived these good old people here ; I have cut myself off for ever from my beloved adopted country—and all for you ! And now you say you hate me. Oh, sweetest, say you did not mean it—say it was a lie ;’ and

he came up behind me, and you know that picture 'Wedded'—well, he did that, and oh, Winnie, to have a face like Fritz's bending over you like that would require a real archangel to resist. This poor human Angel couldn't; I knew it was the last time I should see him, the last time he would touch me or speak to me. I felt a sob rise in my throat, and I suppose I lost my head, for I threw my scruples away, and I gave him back kiss for kiss, and in that intoxicating embrace I whispered, 'It was a lie, for I love you.'

"No sooner had I said it than shame, fear, remorse, swept over me in a flood. I tore myself from his arms, and out of the room, and down the passage. Seeing he did not follow me, I paused, to let my heart beat less wildly, my cheeks burn less fiercely, and regain my self-control. Then I entered the ante-room of the Count's apartments. The Sister soon dressed me in the cloak, hood, and veil of her Order, and told me how to find the convent should I not see the Sisters outside. I got away without difficulty, but as I passed through the outer court Fritz was standing watching the moon rise, and never, never, shall I forget his expression. The pathetic look was gone, and it simply radiated happiness. It made my heart ache to think how short-lived that happiness would be. You know the rest. Oh, the relief it is to have told someone! But now that you have

heard it, do you think it would have been wise or kind to have told it to my husband?"

I thought for a minute, and I trust I may not be considered to have been disloyal to my old friend when I replied: "No, I think it wiser to leave him in ignorance that it *was* a temptation to you, and that Maltino had gained an influence over you that you found it hard to resist. Angel dear, far from blaming you, I pity you. God knows you were hardly tempted, but you fled from it when many another woman would have yielded, and salved her conscience by saying she could not help herself. Beyond the fact that you were perhaps weak to allow him to say all he did, you bore yourself bravely and truly. Kiss me, dear."

"Thank you, oh, thank you, Winnie." And we kissed and cried in the usual manner of two foolish women.

Chester only once referred to the subject, and then he said:

"Winnie, my instinct was pretty right when I scented danger to Angel coming through that man. I can never be sufficiently thankful that I told you, or sufficiently grateful to you for your offer to look after her, and the way you fulfilled it, even to the risk of your own life."

"My dear Chester, my part in it was little enough. Indeed, Angel extricated herself before any of us got there. I have often blamed myself

for ever having consented to go on that mad cruise, or else I ought in some way to have opened Angel's eyes to the danger she stood in. But nothing is more difficult than the position of one woman to another under such circumstances. You can do nothing but advise, and if your advice is not taken you are quite powerless. Had I refused to go, she would have taken Mrs. Amory."

"You did everything possible to be done, and Angel had no one but herself to blame for the position in which she found herself. The strange thing is, that although far from being devoid of vanity, or in any way underrating her own powers of attraction, she never realizes what a great power she has of winning and holding men's affections, and to what lengths they will go for her sake. Look at the Duke—he wrote and told me that he had quite determined to abdicate if she would marry him morganatically, and I would divorce her. Maltino said he would kill himself rather than live without her, and he will too. And I—well, I could have killed Maltino if he had—had done her any harm."

I believed him, and wondered what it was in her that men set such store by, and that had power to raise to their highest or lowest levels the passions of three such different men as the Grand Duke, Maltino, and Chester Gore. For, as far as I could judge, behind her physical beauty there

was neither the force nor nobility of character that is supposed to call forth great devotion.

* * * * *

After our return to Malta, we had no news of either the Duke or Maltino, save what the papers told us of the coronation of the former. Nothing of our adventures had leaked out, and as we returned together, no one suspected we had ever been separated. In March I saw in an Italian paper a notice of the death of the old Count Maltino, and it said that his brother's son, Frederico Maltino, succeeded to the title and estate. I did not mention it to Angel, for by mutual consent the subject was ignored by us all.

The last act in the play was performed in June, and I was there when the curtain fell.

It so happened that there was a great *festa* (as they call everything in Malta, from a saint's day to the Carnival) going on at Naples in June, and Lady Tottengton invited me to go with her in the Commander-in-Chief's yacht, the *Surprise*, to see it. I accepted with pleasure.

When we got to Naples the ships told off to represent British good-will had arrived, and we started a round of parties of every description. The last two nights of our visit we had slept at the H—— Hotel, and as I was standing in the hall on the last morning, the smoking-room door opened, and the Grand Duke Carl stood before

me—or, rather, a stern-faced, fierce-eyed man, with but a faint resemblance to the sunny, careless boy who had been in Malta the previous autumn.

“Duke Carl!” I exclaimed.

“Lady Malcolm!” He bowed, but ignored my outstretched hand.

“Have you come to the gay doings here?” I asked, for want of something better to say.

“No; I am not here on pleasure. I am here to fulfil a promise.”

Something in his words sounded a note in my memory, and his deadly quiet tone convinced me there was some meaning hidden behind them.

“Will you come on the terrace for a few moments?” I asked.

He looked at his watch. “I leave here in a quarter of an hour,” he said; “till then I am at your service.”

I led the way to the wide stone terrace, at the end of which there was a small shelter. I entered and sat down. He stood, tall, stern, and silent, opposite to me.

“Have you not yet forgiven?” I asked.

He gave a horrid, mirthless laugh. “Madam, you and she fooled me very neatly. I was only a credulous boy, and had faith in the friendship of a man and the honour of two women. Naturally, I was not hard to cheat.”

“Your Highness forgets your own intentions

towards one of us—they could hardly be considered honourable, could they?”

“They were perfectly honourable. I was quite prepared to abdicate in order to marry her.”

“And her husband?”

He shrugged his shoulders. What did mere husbands ever count, when kings and rulers coveted their wives, since the days of David?

“He would have divorced her, had it not been you——”

“I don’t see what I did to you!” I said lamely.

“You played into Maltino’s hands—for what reason, God knows. It was not bribery, for I could have bribed higher. Perhaps the face of the ‘Greek God’ bewitched you also,” he replied fiercely, and with a sneer.

“It is not true! I never played into his hands. I was trying to save her from you both—he behaved as disgracefully to me as he did to you. He made me a prisoner in my cabin, took her ashore by force, or threatened force, and left me to be taken back to Gozo alone in the yacht. And I had to swim ashore.”

“Indeed! I fear it must have been cold,” said the Duke. “Now I regret to have to ask you to excuse me. Adieu!” He took off his hat with a low bow.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

He took out his watch, looked at it, and as he

returned it to his pocket, he said : " I am going to kill Maltino, and I've only just time to catch the train. Adieu!" And before I could recover my presence of mind he was gone.

I went quickly after him, but was only in time to see him drive off. I rushed upstairs to tell Lady Tottengton I was going out on an urgent errand, so that she was not to expect me till night—and to get some money ; and then I, too, drove furiously to the station, where I took a ticket for H——, and got into the train almost as it was moving out of the station. It was what is called in Italy an express. That is to say, it went about forty miles an hour, and did not stop between the big stations. At H—— we both got out, and I followed the Duke to the hotel, where a coach and four small steeds awaited him. He looked very much astonished when he saw me.

"What are you here for?" he asked angrily.

"To prevent murder being done," I replied.

"Curse these Englishwomen! they can't keep ever in their place," he murmured in German.

"I trust you will not refuse me a seat in your coach," I asked, with mock politeness.

A glimmer of a smile lit up his face as he said : "Madam, I am desolate to refuse you ; but every seat is taken. 'Revenge' occupies the box-seat ; behind him are 'Anger, Baffled Passions, Hate,

and Hurry'—passengers who are not fit company for a respectable English lady."

He mounted the box, and the driver started off at a hand-gallop, leaving me feeling a fool. I turned to the landlord and said I must have horses immediately. But it was fully an hour before I started on my fifteen-mile drive; and when I got there I was too late.

It was the next day that I heard from Duke Carl what had happened. I wrote it down at the time, and what follows is almost word for word as he told it to me in the first agony of remorse.

After leaving me so unkindly on the hotel steps, the Duke drove off with his companions, Anger, Baffled Passions, Hate, and Hurry, and arrived at the castle at two o'clock. The old servitor let him in, and showed him into the big bare room where the aunt and I had waited that other time.

In a few minutes Fritz Maltino entered, and the two gazed at one another. So greatly had seven months altered them that they hardly knew each other. The Duke had changed from a boy to a man, and Maltino from a young man to an old one, so worn, lined, and haggard his face, and white his hair. He was the first to speak.

"So you have come."

Carl: "Zo. I've come to kill you."

Fritz: "I expected your Royal Highness."

Carl: "Good; you remembered what I said."

Fritz : " I remembered it perfectly."

Carl : " What was it ?"

Fritz : " You said, ' If you come between us, I will shoot you like a rat.' "

Carl : " Knowing that, you dared to bring her here and make her your mistress."

Fritz : " I brought her here, but I did not make her my mistress."

Carl : " Ach ! You think I believe that."

Fritz : " It is an absolute matter of indifference to me whether you believe it or not. Nevertheless, it is true. Her husband believed it."

Carl : " Only a stupid Englishman would believe such a story. But it does not deceive me, especially knowing you and your past achievements among ladies of our own Court and elsewhere. But I have no time to spare. I have come to do my best to kill you. Here are the pistols ; we will stand ten yards apart."

Fritz : " Unless your Highness has gone off very much in your shooting, you could make a certainty of it much farther off than that, else you would be but small credit to me, who taught you to shoot. But so be it ; across that table, then."

Carl : " I give you a quarter of an hour to make your will and say your prayers."

Fritz : " I am deeply grateful. My will is already made, and you will have the double satisfaction of knowing that in killing me you are

making a lady I will not name a wealthy woman. This is, I fear, another privilege of which I have robbed you."

He turned to an *escritoire*, and wrote steadily for ten minutes. Then he sealed and directed three letters. Meanwhile the Duke took up the pistols, examined them, and loaded them carefully. The hard, angry feeling was rapidly vanishing, and against his will his thoughts would travel back to the days when Fritz was his teacher, friend, and ally. Of how he had helped him escape from restraint, and gallop wildly across the country; how he taught him to handle gun, rifle, pistol, rod, rapier, boxing-gloves, and cricket-bat; and how he could always prove himself the more skilled of the two. He knew now that, if Maltino chose, he could kill him as easily as he himself could shoot a sitting hare. He remembered the love that had bound them as close as brothers; and this was the end—he was going to kill him. And for what?—the sake of a woman's fair face; a woman who had listened to both of them, and laughed at both of them, and preferred a dull, respectable, elderly English husband to either of them.

The pen scratched as Fritz wrote, and the tall old clock ticked loudly. No other sound was audible. God! would that quarter of an hour never pass? Tick! tick! tick! Did ever clock tick so slowly? Beads of moisture broke out on his

forehead, and he could have shouted with relief when Maltino rose and said: "You will see they are delivered, Carl?" The Duke could not speak, but he nodded. Neither noticed the hark back to the days when they were "Carl" and "Fritz" to each other.

Maltino went to the other side of the room, where a small portrait of his mother hung. He bowed his head, crossed himself reverently, and uttered the words, "Dio mio culpa." Then he turned, and, going to the table, picked up a pistol and said, "I am ready."

"Good," said the Duke. "We will fire across the table when the clock strikes the last stroke of three. See, it wants but four minutes to the hour."

"So be it. But it is usual in Italy for duellists to exchange weapons in the last minute. Shall we do so on the first stroke of the hour?"

"Certainly, if it is the custom."

Tick! tick! tick! Slowly went the pendulum of the tall old clock. A cold perspiration broke out on the Duke's forehead again. This, somehow, was different to the revenge he had planned. How he hated the tick of that clock! He dared not look at Maltino's face, so he turned round towards the window. He heard Maltino's pistol click as he opened it, and had he turned round he might have seen him deftly extract the bullet

before he closed it. Then from his pocket Fritz took a small miniature, which he kissed.

The clock struck one.

The Duke swiftly turned round and handed Fritz his pistol. Taking the empty one from him, he cried, "Fritz, shake hands;" and, as they did so,

The clock struck two.

Pistols in hand, carefully aimed, the men faced each other,

And the clock struck three.

Instantly loud and sharp one pistol-shot rang out.

I heard it as I rang furiously at the bell in an agony of fear; the old man was near, and opened it quickly. The bell may have deafened him to the sound of the shot. I rushed past him into the hall, and more by instinct than anything else I opened the door of the room they were in.

Fritz was lying as he had fallen backwards, and the Duke was calling to him, "Fritz, Fritz, Fritzchen," while he held his friend's helpless head on his arm, and the blood was trickling from a small blackened wound in the temple. I bent over him, and held a small chatelaine mirror to his lips. It came away undimmed.

"He is dead," I said.

"Fritz—oh, Fritz, I didn't do it!" murmured the Duke.

I raised the limp left hand of the dead man, and

there in the palm lay a small miniature on china of Angel Gore. It was cracked in a hundred tiny pieces through the pressure of a bullet, that fell out as I lifted it.

"Look," I said, showing the bullet, but hiding the picture with the cold white fingers, as I felt he would have done himself.

"He took out the bullet; that is how I missed fire, and he shot himself, so as to save me remorse;" and the Duke turned away, and for the second time my tears splashed down on Fritz Maltino's hand.

After the funeral was over we were surprised to receive a visit from Signor Bronello, the Maltino family lawyer, who informed us that poor Fritz's first action on coming into the estate had been to make a will which, with the exception of a few legacies, left everything to Angel. It appeared that for years so little had been spent that there were vast accumulations that made the inheritance an exceedingly valuable one. Thus Castello Como, with its wealth of pictures, silver, and jewels, were willed "to my beloved Angel, now the wife of Captain Chester Gore of the English Navy, as a token and remembrance of my great love for her, and at her death it shall descend to her eldest child and his or her heirs for ever, on the sole condition that they add the name of Maltino to their surname. All the jewels I give

her, with the exception of a rope of fifty pearls. This I leave to Lady Malcolm Fearnought in memory of a certain day when her tears fell on the hand of a most unworthy, unhappy, but not ungrateful man."

Thus Angel Gore became a rich woman. The beautiful old castle was restored, and the little son who was born some two years afterwards received the names of "Malcolm Gore Maltino." The magnificent rope of pearls has too sad memories for me to wear it often, but I like to think he knew how sorry I was for him—poor Greek God!

Rumours reach me now and then of the Grand Duke Carl. They say he is a just and generous ruler, but more feared than loved. His Court for years was, if one might so term it, an intensely bachelor one, and on his mother's death became even more so. His distrust and dislike of women became a byword, neither did he give his friendship to men. When, for reasons of State, he married, he was a pattern husband, and his two sons were the greatest joy to him. But never did he regain his bright, light-hearted smile, his trust in women, or the faith in the friendship of men.

Visitors to Hesstardessen all note one peculiarity—no clocks chime or strike the hours in either town or palace. In the Duke's own rooms all clocks are muffled into silence, so that no tick!

tick! is ever heard. It is said that Duke Carl is mad on this point.

L'ENVOI

Now and then I join the fashionable party that the beautiful Mrs. Chester Gore (for since her inheritance of Castello Como and its revenues she is universally acknowledged to be beautiful rather than merely pretty) collects every spring, when the Neapolitan violets perfume the soft air at her Italian home. The old castle has by no means entirely lost its medieval character, only the brocades are clean, the furniture French-polished, and no speck of dust is to be seen. Fresh air, sweet sunshine, pour in through the diamond-paned windows. The magnificent silver and wonderful old cut-glass are as bright and shining as a lordly butler and two hard-working footmen can make it. The old gardens have been reduced to a certain orderly disorder, and I can always find beautiful flowers to lay on the grave of the man who loved so fondly and suffered so intensely for the sake of Angel Gore.

So ends this tale. I fear there is no moral, for it is a true tale of real people, and true stories seldom have good morals, for the wicked undoubtedly *do* flourish, and those who love greatly and risk all on one throw of the dice generally

waste their love and lose their throw. Yet who would dare to say the world is not a better place for a few men and women who can give up all for that which we call Love? and who can judge whether they are happy or miserable in so doing? Not I, the humble chronicler of these stories. I trust my readers are cleverer.

IV

HOW BILLY THE SCAMP NEARLY COMMITTED BIGAMY

I

WHEN my husband was commanding the Infantry Brigade, his old regiment, the Highland Carbineers, was stationed in Malta, and many of the subalterns were sons of those who had been in the regiment with him. They were dear boys—I used to call most of them “my sons”—but the dearest of all, the idol of the regiment from Colonel to drummer-boy, was Billy the Scamp. Whatever the singular charm about him was, everyone felt it. He won hearts as some men win gold and others laurels. It may have been his merry heart, his open hand ever ready to do a good turn to friend or foe, or his laughing, sunny face and his quick, witty tongue. Whatever it was, we all loved him, but he *was* such a scamp I could fill a volume with tales of his jokes and pranks; they were always on such a big scale, too. Once he sent out invitations for a

dance at the — Barracks—he called it “im-promptu”—and dated it that evening, and put “No reply” in the corner. All the dancing *élite* arrived to find no preparations for any dance. However, Billy suggested that, as they had been asked, they had better take up the carpets, and tell the band to play dance-music; and it really was one of the nicest dances that season, only no one ever found out who gave it.

Billy never opened a drill-book, but his company was the smartest in the regiment, simply because the men would rather have died than get Billy into a scrape. Once, at an inspection, Billy was ordered to execute a certain manoeuvre with his men. The exact technicalities thereof I cannot give you, but it was one where he certainly ought to have known the correct words of command necessary for its successful execution. Alas! he had not the faintest idea what to say; however, he saluted in reply to the order, and in a voice something between a foghorn and a corn-crake suffering from bronchitis, said:

“Sergeant, if-you-don't-help-out-of-this—I'll-never-play-cricket-for-the-company-again.”

All this was given in jerks exactly like words of command are delivered. This the sergeant repeated to the men, only instituting correct orders, and the motion was carried out without a hitch, to the joy of all the spectators.

Afterwards the General sent for Billy.

"I am glad, Lord William," he said, "to see you handle your men so well; they behaved splendidly. But," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "you have a terrible bronchial cold; let me advise you to go to your quarters till it is well. To pass the time you might refresh your memory by studying chapters four and five of Colonel Smith's book on 'Infantry Drill.'"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," said the Scamp as he retired, but he judged it wiser not to appear in public again that day, and to remain in his quarters for the evening.

Billy's good luck, cheek, and popularity always got him out of the scrapes that his scampish nature got him into. Just before the regiment came to Malta, the old Dowager Duchess of B—— died. She was Billy's aunt and godmother, and she left him two thousand a year, and tied it up so tightly that poor Billy couldn't "borrow a fiver" on it. Now, if he was popular in the days when he could not pay his bills, was thankful to borrow a ten-pound note, and had periodical sales of his ponies to pay their forage bills, he was none the less so when he had ten-pound notes to lend. Indeed, his income was at the disposal of the whole mess in the same happy-go-lucky way in which he had considered their incomes at his command before Providence and gout removed the Dowager to a better world.

As to Billy's love-affairs, they were too many to admit counting. He loved each lady to madness, while it lasted, but before the receipt of the legacy he was so hopelessly ineligible that even the most designing of mothers passed him over, as a fisherman throws back the baby fish he has hooked. He was the son of an impoverished Irish peer, who lived on his lovely but barren estate, and just scraped together enough to allow his eldest son to do nothing, and Billy to live in the Highland Carbineers with a meagre allowance; but that was all changed now, and Lord William Lindsay, with a clear two thousand a year, was a young gentleman whose attentions were clearly to be encouraged. It had required all the motherly care of his brother officers to steer his irresponsible barque clear of the treacherous shoals and sirens who lay in wait for innocent wealthy young men during the festive season of a Malta winter.

Billy, however, survived the winter, but, alas! the boredom of the summer proved fatal. We had all gone home, and he was taking second leave in October. The heat was torrid, and it was dull to deadliness. Aquatic sports were an event, and dining at the Sliema Club an excitement, so out of sheer idleness Billy started a flirtation with a horrid fast little girl called Totty Murphy. Her father was one of those worthy

Colonels who have never been anything but Colonels; I don't quite understand why—I only know they all blossomed into Colonels from plain Misters one day when the sun shone at the War Office. He was a quiet, inoffensive old person, but his wife and daughters were terrors; they called on everyone, and looked on every man as a possible husband. They were handsome, loud, pushing girls; one was already engaged to a young naval engineer, and the other had a Maltese officer nibbling at the bait in the matrimonial trap. Totty, the youngest, was certainly the best, but not in any way a possible wife for Billy. I think he was a trifle ashamed of his behaviour, as his comings and goings were carefully covered, and he was unwontedly reticent about where he spent his evenings. He organized a few quiet moonlight picnics, to which he did not invite his brother officers or any of his own friends, only those of Miss Totty. They were not nice, nor were they even amusing, but served as "cover" for the flirtation.

The climax came one sultry evening. Billy had dropped into the Murphys' flat after dinner, and gradually all the other members of the family "dropped out," and Billy was left alone with the lady of his (temporary) affections. Suddenly she drew herself away from Billy's encircling arm, and said:

“No, you mustn't; don't you see you mustn't?” and the young lady buried her plump little face in the sofa cushion, and strangled sounds proceeded from it. Of what actually followed Billy always vowed he had no idea, but I think he was too much of a gentleman to give the girl away.

“All I remember,” he said, as he told me the story, “is, she flung herself round my neck, and said: ‘Oh, Wulliam, I do love you, and we'll be married with Ada and Joe at Christmas.’ Just then Colonel and Mrs. Murphy came in. ‘My dear-r-r bhoy,” she said, and—by St. Patrick, I shall never forget it!—the old girl gave me a sounding kiss. I just bolted. I found Grey up when I got back, and told him the whole story, and, like the brick he is, he gave up his leave and let me go instead, so I left by the French boat the next day. The old Colonel came up to my quarters in the morning, but Grey saw him, and told him he thought I had gone off to Gozo for three days, so that kept them quiet till after I had left. I have had a dozen letters from the whole family. Dear Lady Malcolm, do tell me what to do.” For he told me the tale of his folly on the lawn of a little place we had taken for our leave at Goring-on-Thames.

My advice to him was to write a civil letter to Colonel Murphy, and say he regretted that circumstances had led him into a false position with

regard to his daughter, and that he begged to apologize had he been guilty of misleading her as to his intentions, but that he had no desire to marry at present.

“Don't you think, godmother dear, it would be easier to ‘lay low and say nuthing,’ like Brer Rabbit,” Billy replied in his most coaxing tones; and that was just what he did.

Disquieting rumours and questions reached me now and then, but not till I returned to Malta in October did I realize that Billy's engagement to the youngest Miss Murphy was an established fact. At least, so much so as the Murphy family could establish it. I was horrified, but helpless until Billy's return.

II

Billy returned by the P. and O. on November 20. Captain Grey went to meet him, but found that Colonel, Mrs., and Miss Totty Murphy had forestalled him, and were surrounding their victim with help and solicitude. Poor Billy was quite unnerved by the shock of Mrs. Murphy's greeting.

“Me dear Wulliam, it's real glad to have ye back we are!” And Miss Totty looked “books,” and murmured: “Dear Wully!”

Captain Grey managed to release “dear Wully,” and convey him and his baggage safely to St. Elmo Barracks.

After dinner a council was held, and Billy was informed that he was going to be married on December 27, in the company of "Ada and Joe," that Miss Totty might daily be met in Strada Reale seeking articles for that mysterious collection Mrs. Murphy called "the tr-r-r-ouseau."

"Of course, old chap, we've told everyone it's all rubbish, but I fear it is really past a joke; they are determined not to let a two-thousand-a-year lord slip through their fingers. Of course you can't marry her, so what's to be done?"

It really did appear a black look-out, but all that there was to be done was to send an ambassador to the enemy and try to come to terms. Captain Grey, as Billy's own Captain, was selected, and they came to me the next afternoon with an account of the interview.

"I saw the Colonel and Mrs. Murphy, and I told them plainly that it was no use; Lord William Lindsay was not, and never had been, engaged to their daughter, and that nothing they could say or do would make him marry her. Thereupon the couple began to talk at the same time, and Mrs. Murphy said: 'Lord Wulliam has thrifled with the affections of me daughter, and we have seen the letters he wrote her, and her tr-r-r-ouseau is all ready, and marry her he must, and shall, or—thake the consequences.'

"'What would the consequences be?' I asked.

“‘An action for breach of promise and heavy damages.’

“I rather laughed, and said they had no documentary evidence ; but they showed me some of the letters ;” and Captain Grey looked up to the ceiling, implying thereby that the letters were of a nature to compromise a St. Antony, and Billy murmured in a tone of rueful pride :

“I am such an affectionate idiot when I get a pen in my hand.”

“Oh, Billy, Billy, my dear boy, how are you going to get out of it ? Think of the disgrace, the scandal !”

“The damages !” said Billy dolefully. “They would be sure to give heavy ones, and it would mop up all my income for months, just as I was hoping to have a good time, too. Oh, it is bad luck ! However,” he added, “desperate diseases need desperate remedies, though it’s out of the frying-pan into the soup sometimes.” And something in the way he said it gave me a kind of feeling that Billy had some card up his sleeve that was undoubtedly a trump, and to be reserved for the odd trick.

I was very busy just then preparing for a ball I was getting up for the Garrison Baby Fund, and for three days I did not see either the Scamp or his “keeper,” as Captain Grey was called ; but on the Wednesday evening Billy came in to say

he had got a fortnight's leave to go and see his brother, who was ill in Paris. He also told me that Captain Grey had again seen the Murphys, and had offered them five hundred pounds to compromise, but they had refused. "No surrender" was their policy.

"But," said the ever-sanguine Scamp, "perhaps something will turn up while I am away."

This prophecy was amply fulfilled, for by the French boat the following week a little Frenchman turned up with a story that caused us amazement. Captain Grey brought him in early on Thursday afternoon. I never saw a man look so preternaturally solemn as Captain Grey. He was followed by one of the oddest little figures I have ever seen; he looked just like a stage Frenchman; he appeared quite round—round body, round legs, a round pink and white face, with unmistakable touches of powder on it, heavy black eyebrows, and black hair, standing up like a scrubbing-brush. He wore faintly tinted glasses, and had a black moustache and imperial. His clothes were wonderful: a coat of rather bright dark blue, with tails and large mother-of-pearl buttons; trousers of shepherds'-plaid; a piqué waistcoat, with red stripes and gold buttons; a turn-down collar, with pointed ends; and a tie of green-and-white silk, a quarter of a yard wide, and tied in a bow like a sash. He had a huge watch-chain, several rings,

and a brooch in his tie ; his shoes were very shiny and pointed, and had high heels. A more weird figure I have never seen. He spoke a queer kind of broken English—a very literal translation from the French, and gesticulated spasmodically. He hardly waited for Captain Grey to finish his speech before he burst out :

“ Madam, zey 'ere me tell zat you are ze friend of all ze world, ze *belle-maman* of ze Lord Villiam Lindsay, zo to you I come. I come 'ere to fetch 'im chez-nous—vat you call it, 'ome ; yes, 'ome to 'is voman—vat you say, vife—my daulaire, ze——”

“ Your daughter—his wife!” I exclaimed, looking at Duncan Grey for an explanation ; but his back was towards us. The little man went on :

“ But certainly, madam, my daulaire is ze vife of your Lord Villiam ; 'e met 'er in ze capital of ze Scotland, vere she vas gouvernante to ze children of 'is cousins, ze Mr., ze Colonel 'Ector Lindsay, and 'e married 'er at ze church of St. Andrews. My daulaire is beautiful ! Ah ! Mon Dieu, but she is beautiful ! 'E bring 'er back to me, and 'e tell me zat 'e must get permission from ze Colonel of ze regiment to bring 'er 'ere, zo I take 'er back to my 'ouse in Marseilles ; but 'e not come, and 'e not write, and my daulaire she as ze despaire for 'im, and she say to me : ' Fazer, you go to Malta, and tell 'im 'is Josephine avaits 'im,' zo I come. I ask in ze 'otel vere 'e

live, and zay tell me 'e going to be married at ze New Year to a Engleese Mees. Je suis enr-r-r-agé, je suis furieux, je suis désespéré !”

His excitement was so great the little man forgot his English and burst into French ; his shoulders were up to his ears, and the palms of his hands were jerked up to the same level. His story was horrible, but until I had some proof I should not believe it, so I said sternly :

“ Monsieur Collette, Lord William Lindsay is a dear friend of mine, and he is an honourable English gentleman, and until you show me some proof of what you say, I must decline to believe such a story of one I love as a son, and believe incapable of behaving in so dishonourable a manner.”

The Frenchman was in no way perturbed.

“ Madam,” he said, “ I kiss your 'and ” (he did so too). “ You are a friend admirable and loyal, mais vill this convince you ?” and he handed me an envelope. It contained the marriage certificate of William Lindsay and Josephine Collette on September 29 of that year, at St. Andrews Church, Edinburgh. The little man explained :

“ 'E vas most anxious zat nothings should be known of ze marriage, zo 'e not write in 'is true 'andwriting, nor did 'e put 'is title, or 'is vazer's, but mine is zere, Anatole Jean Collette, merchand of vins, Chateau Seine, Marseilles.”

Yes, it was certainly there ; but Billy, our Billy, to behave so abominably, to marry on the sly the daughter of this third-rate little Frenchman, and then desert her—it was so unlike him ! I could have cried, but put it off till they had gone, and said :

“ Monsieur Collette, if all this is true, your daughter has indeed been treated badly, and I sympathize deeply with her.”

“ And also ze ozzer pauvre demoiselle, ze Mees Murffée, I vill go to 'er, and tell 'er she 'as been deceived.”

Then Captain Grey joined in.

“ Yes, we must do that, but I think the kindest thing would be to say nothing to anyone except the Murphys about this marriage, and allow Miss Murphy to break off the engagement herself.”

“ Zat would be ver' good.”

“ Yes, indeed, the best in every way, and when Lord William returns, no doubt he will go and see you when he passes through Marseilles. I hope, Captain Grey, you and Monsieur Collette will come back and let me know the result of the interview,” I said.

III

When Captain Grey and Monsieur Collette had gone, I sat down with a heavy heart to think it over. Something about the excitable little

Frenchman had a haunting familiarity for me, his voice, and now and then a trick of the lips ; and I felt certain that firm brown hand, so out of keeping with the rest of the man, had clasped mine before ; but the news he had brought was of so much greater importance than the man himself that I missed the clue which might have saved me an unhappy afternoon.

At five o'clock they returned triumphant—at least, Captain Grey was.

“It’s all right, Lady Malcolm ; the Colonel has promised to keep it dark, and the female portion will for their own sakes. Monsieur Collette told them what he told you, showed them the certificate, and Miss Totty sat down there and then, and wrote Billy a letter saying she had found she did not love him enough to marry him, and she was going to England by the next boat. I guaranteed Billy would pay her exes to the tune of two hundred pounds.”

“Zat was ver’ cheap, ver’ cheap,” murmured Monsieur Collette from the looking-glass, where he was deeply studying his appearance. Suddenly he did an odd thing : he caught hold of his hair on the top of his head and lifted it right off : it was a wig, and underneath was a close-cut fair head ; but the wig was on again before I could see more, and Monsieur Collette had turned round and joined us at the tea-table.

“ I—I ’ave domage to say it, madam, but I fear your Lord Villiam is a vaut rien, vat you call a good-for-nothings, a bad subject ;” and the horrid little man smiled and took a large slice of my dear Scamp’s pet cake.

“ I cannot agree with you at all,” I said very stiffly. “ Nothing will ever make me believe he is not good and true, and I must decline to discuss him with one who is a stranger to me.”

“ Even ’is fazer-in-law ?”

“ I have not yet had Lord William’s word that you are his father-in-law. Every story has two sides, Monsieur Collette,” I replied shortly, wishing dear Billy’s cake would choke him.

Then he put down his cup, and dropping on his knees, seized my hand and kissed it a dozen times, while Captain Grey got up, and pulled off the wig and spectacles, and there was revealed Billy—Billy the Scamp, our own scampish Billy ; and it lifted a great weight off my heart to think there was no stain on my dear boy’s honour, and I put my arms round his neck and kissed him between tears and laughter.

Then came the explanation of how he and Captain Grey had hatched this plot as the only way out of the Murphy engagement ; how Billy had got a cousin of his, also a William Lindsay, to forward him a copy of his marriage certificate ; of how his brother had been persuaded to send the telegram calling him to Paris ; of how he had

never got further than Marseilles, where he had got an artist belonging to a theatrical company to make him up. Fortunately he talked French perfectly, so that broken English was easy to him.

“But the fat, Billy, how is that done?”

“Look here,” he said, and pulling off his coat, he revealed the artfulness of the padding.

“But when you stuck up for me like that, I simply couldn’t stand it any longer,” he said.

He could not stay long, as he was going over to Sicily, where he would resume his proper character, and spend a few days with his brother.

So ended the story. The Murphys, furious but silent, got what satisfaction and credit they could from the fact that their daughter had jilted a lord.

Miss Totty went to England with Billy’s cheque for a hundred pounds in her pocket, and Colonel Murphy placed the same snug sum to his credit. Mrs. Murphy declared Billy was broken-hearted, and hinted at Miss Totty’s attachment to another.

About six months later, Billy came home with us as my husband’s aide-de-camp, and Captain Grey told Mrs. Murphy in confidence that Monsieur Collette and his daughter were both killed in a railway accident that took place near Marseilles.

But joke about it as he will, it gave Billy a lesson, and steadied him for a little, and the next year he married a charming girl, the sister of the Earl of Woolton, and they are both coming to lunch with me to-day.

V

THE TRAGEDY OF AN ASSISTANT-PAYMASTER

I

THIS tragic little story was enacted when I was in Malta for the third time. Poor Gerald St. John I knew, for his uncle, Sir Godfrey St. John, being the Member for our division of Kent, the boy had frequently been to my dances and picnics. Mrs. Wadden I only knew by sight and reputation. Colonel Charlton I knew slightly, so I have been obliged to piece the story together as best I could. It was not hard to fill in the blanks, and it would only bore you were I to explain how I got my data, so please take it for granted that the main facts of the story are true, and the rest—probable.

In a small drawing-room of a small flat in Strada Forni, a tall, good-looking man in the khaki uniform of a lieutenant-colonel, his breast bearing many ribbons, stood facing an exceedingly pretty woman some five or six years his junior.

“It is a confounded nuisance,” he was saying irritably; “but there is no help for it. Someone has to go, and I suppose I ought to take it as a compliment being sent; but you have demoralized me, little woman, and all I feel is that I don’t want to go anywhere that I can’t see you every day.” He put both his brown hands on her shoulders and gazed at her face. “But I’ll tell you about that part later on. Now, as I told you in my letter, you must by hook or by crook get an invitation to Admiralty House on the fifteenth; it won’t be easy, but you must manage it—it will be our last chance of meeting for six weeks. I shall be there to both dinner and dance. Now I must go. I’ll be back by five for some tea.”

“I’ve told the boy to come at half-past four,” she said. “Of course, he may not be able to help; anyway, I don’t want him to see you here, so go, there’s a dear. If I can persuade him to carry out my idea——” She nodded, and, putting her arms round Colonel Charlton’s neck, kissed him. That gentleman returned the kiss with fervour, picked up his helmet, and took his departure.

The lady turned to the large mirror and looked at her reflection. A tall, finely formed figure, wide shoulders, slender waist and hips. A head of fine hair a shade of golden-brown by Nature, and golden-red-brown by art; it was piled high, and on the forehead and at her neck and ears broke into

natural but carefully trained curly tendrils. Her big eyes were a fine dark blue, and had a roguish or pathetic smile in them, and her full red lips parted over lovely white little teeth.

On first sight Juanita Wadden (certain of her friends said she was christened Jane) invariably brought to women's lips the question, "*Who was she?*" and to men's, "*Please introduce me.*" She was one of those women who, in less refined society than that of Malta, might be termed "Harpies." She had neither self-respect nor pride, save what might be called the pride of face; she revelled in her own physical beauty. She was perfectly devoid of what is termed conscience—knew no laws save social ones. Her only guide was "what would people say?" for she had no wish to be completely ostracized. She loved gambling, dancing, racing; she loved to be in the thick of the social *mêlée*, and would sacrifice anyone to gain an end. She was incapable of love, but swayed by every passing passion. She had always managed to keep just within the social boundaries.

Her husband was a captain in the B—— Regiment, which shortly after its arrival had been sent to Crete. Mrs. Wadden had elected to remain in the flat they had taken, and her husband, who detested her, had been well pleased to leave her there, remarking: "I've no doubt the Colonel will

look after you, my dear." Mrs. Wadden had no doubt either.

Such were the villain and heroine of this story. Now for the hero.

He was a mere boy of twenty. A young assistant-paymaster in the Commander-in-Chief's office. He was wonderfully handsome, with greenish-golden tragic-looking eyes set deeply in a thin, pale, oval face, and shaded with black curly eyelashes and fine straight brows; a sweet, sensitive mouth, and soft girlish chin with a dimple in the centre. He was tall, a fair athlete, rode and danced beautifully.

Thanks to these gifts, he attracted considerably more notice than generally falls to the lot of an assistant-paymaster. But he hated it all; he hated the world that had nothing better to give him than a clerkship in the Navy. He hated his uncle, who was also his guardian, and who, although he was childless and had more money than he could spend, considered he had done handsomely by his orphaned nephew in giving him a profession and thirty pounds a year. He did not like the chaff of his messmates, and would not accept the invitations of nice women who, attracted by the beautiful, sad boyish face, would have really been kind to him, because he hated to be called a "poodlefaker," as the slang of the day put it.

Such was Gerald St. John when first Mrs.

Wadden's lovely face crossed his path. He fell in love with her quite openly and with the whole-souled devotion of a boy who never counts the cost or looks further than the hour. He was deaf to all chaff, and followed his goddess about like a shadow, and was perhaps, for the first time in his life, perfectly happy. She played with him, teased him, encouraged him, allowed him to bring her flowers (which were cheap), and knick-knacks (which were not), and rewarded him with a smile, a pat on the cheek, or allowed him to kiss her hand.

Just at this time all Malta was on the tip-toe of excitement in anticipation of a visit of the King and Queen of Metalia and their two daughters. Reviews, receptions, dinners, and balls were being planned for their Majesties' pleasure. Among the small fry there was weeping and gnashing of teeth over the severe limits that were being put to the invitations—indeed, it was given out that their Majesties were bringing such a very large suite that it was impossible to include as many officers of the garrison and their wives in the entertainments as would otherwise have been done; so that less important people and visitors, no matter how beautiful or popular, or on what intimate terms they might be with the Palace or Admiralty House, could only get invitations to such things as the review or the naval illuminations, for everything was strictly official, and had any outsider

crept in there would have been a hundred indignant voices raised asking, "Why Mrs. Jones was asked and not me, when my husband is senior to Major Jones."

Now, the holy of holies on this occasion was a dinner and dance at Admiralty House. There were to be forty guests at the former, and two hundred at the latter. The young princesses wanted to dance, hence the strictly limited number. Between these two entertainments was to be sandwiched a visit to the opera, to which the royal and dinner guests were to be taken; this enabled the rooms to be arranged for dancing. It was just the sort of evening Malta loved, especially as it was preceded by a review on the Marsa in the morning and a polo tournament in the afternoon.

Now, the ambitious heart of Mrs. Wadden clamoured loudly for the best of everything: to dine, to go to the opera, to dance in the sun of royalty on the night of the fifteenth, seemed to her the thing most desirable, save one, the world could at that moment offer; but how was the wife of an insignificant Captain in the army to wrest the coveted invitation withheld from many officially above her by the haughty wife of Admiral Lord Hilton?

Long and earnestly she thought about it, and came to the conclusion (very rightly) that it would be more possible for the camel of Bible history to

pass through the eye of a needle than for Juanita Wadden to dine and dance at Admiralty House on the aforesaid night—that is to say, in the ordinary course of events. Just as she had arrived at this disappointing conclusion she received a letter from Colonel Charlton saying he was being sent to England by H.E. the Governor on a mission of great importance, leaving by the boat at 2 a.m. on the morning of the sixteenth; and as he had to go to Admiralty House, she must contrive to get an invitation there at all costs, for his duties would keep him at the distant camp until then, save for a brief visit the following afternoon.

Now, the depth of this lady's affection for the fascinating Colonel was impossible to gauge; but he had undoubtedly acquired a considerable influence over her, and for the time being she was very much in love with him in her own fashion. These facts, combined with her own intense desire to go to Admiralty House, made her reconsider her decision to give up the idea of getting an invitation, and she began to wonder if, fair means failing her, others might not be employed. So she sent for Gerald St. John.

A few minutes after the Valetta clocks had clanged the half-hour Gerald entered the drawing-room.

“My dear boy, how sweet of you to be so punctual!” she said. “We’ve only just half an

hour, and then my—dressmaker is coming. Now, I want you to do something for me—a great big something.” She bent her graceful head towards him, and he caught the faint odour of some perfume.

“You know I’d do anything in my power for you—I’d die for you,” he said, with boyish ardour, as his eyes rested adoringly on her face.

She drew back slightly.

“Oh dear, I don’t want you to do anything so uncomfortable as that ; you are much more useful living for me,” she said, laughing.

“I don’t believe you’d care if I *was* dead,” he said gloomily, but without conviction.

“Now, don’t be foolish ; I should care very much indeed, much more than you guess.” She nodded mysteriously, as though to convey the impression she could say a lot more ; then, seeing the light in his eyes, she said :

“You are the very, very best—dancer in the island. Ah, now, don’t be offended ! I was only teasing. Now, joking apart, I have set my little heart”—the adjective was a particularly appropriate one—“on going to Lady Hilton’s dance and dinner ; but as such an insignificant person as I cannot possibly expect to get a card—unless I have a friend at Court ; and you—you, my Chéri, must be that friend.”

“Me?” he queried. “Oh ! it’s impossible ; I have

nothing at all to do with the invitations—the Flag-Lieutenant sends them out.”

“Never mind that now. Tell me exactly the process—who chooses them, who lists the replies, who writes the cards, etc.”

“Oh, it’s very simple. A list is kept of everyone who writes their names in the books; it is alphabetically arranged, and each one is marked with a cross as they are asked to dinner, and a date of when they are asked. For every big dinner or function Lady Hilton marks the names herself; she does them in red ink, and then Young just writes out the cards. She is then shown the refusals, and more cards are sent to the others she has marked, for she always does five or six too many; it’s her own system, and works well.”

“Yes, yes; I see,” said the lady thoughtfully. “Then she does not really know who is coming until they arrive?”

“No. Young pairs them off according to their ratings, and tells them where to sit and all that. A nice job it is, too; I sometimes help him, and we have to look every blessed captain and colonel up to see who’s senior, and send ’em in exactly right, or the old man kicks up an awful fuss.”

The latter part of the sentence fell on unheeding ears. Mrs. Wadden made a little room on the sofa where she sat.

“Come here, Chéri.” She never called him Jerry,

which he hated. She patted the sofa as she spoke. The boy needed no second invitation; she laid her hand palm upwards in his. "Chéri, you are always saying you would do anything in the world for me. Now, I wonder if I took you at your word, and asked you to do something that you wouldn't like doing, whether your love for me would be great enough to make you do it?"

"Try me, only try me, darling."

The last word was whispered, and he raised the soft palm to his lips. The cool finger-tips touched his hot cheeks like a caress—a caress far more maddening than the kiss of another woman's lips. It was a trick all her own. She laid her other hand on the dark head and said:

"Would you dare to put a cross against my name on the list after it came back from Lady Hilton?"

He drew back.

"But how could I?" he stammered.

"Oh, you could, easily enough. Offer to help Mr. Young send them out, get hold of the list, and put a red-ink cross against my name, that's all. Mr. Young sends out my card with the others. I accept, and no one will be the wiser till I arrive, and by then Lady Hilton will have forgotten who was asked."

"But she'll know who wasn't," put in St. John, with a flash of sanity.

“ Among forty people she’ll never see me. Oh, Chéri, I *do* want to go so much ! No one could manage it but you, and you could do it so easily, and do no one any harm. Won’t you try—dear-est ?” It is impossible to describe the amount of persuasion she contrived to throw into the last words ; her voice, her eyes, her hands, all pleaded for her. It was sufficient for the undoing of a St. Joseph, much less of poor, loving, young St. John.

He took the two outstretched hands, and burying his face in them, he said : “ I will do it ; I will do it !”

A look of intense relief and satisfaction flashed into her face. “ You dear !” she said, drawing her hands away and rising. “ And if you manage it, you shall have three dances and a——” She drew her red lips up into a kiss. “ Now, I leave it all to you. You must run away ; that wretched dressmaker will be here ; it’s past five. Let me see—come and dine on Thursday, and take me to the *Jupiter’s* dance.”

“ You won’t ask a lot of others ?”

“ Not a soul.”

“ Darling !” he said, as he left the room with a bright smile.

He ran down the stone steps, and at the door met the “ dressmaker,” who wore a khaki uniform and riding-breeches, and whose pony stood at the

door. Not for an instant did a doubt of his lady's word enter the boy's honest heart. He thought it was merely a chance visit from the Colonel of her husband's regiment, saluted respectfully, and went on.

The affair between the "dressmaker" and Mrs. Wadden was by no means general gossip; she was too clever to get herself talked about with a man she really cared for; the others did not matter. He opened the drawing-room door *sans ceremonie*.

"Well, what luck?" he said, as he flung himself on the sofa. "I want my tea."

Mrs. Wadden, who had been examining her eye-lashes in a hand-glass when he came in, put it down and lighted the burner of the hot-water kettle.

"Oh, the very best! He was most tractable; it seems he often helps the Flag-Lieutenant to send out the invitations, and he is going to——"

"Oh, don't tell me how it's going to be done!" said the man crossly. "Women have no sense of decency! So long as you are there, I don't care a damn how you get there; only, mind you, I won't have you go too far with that boy! I met him going out; he's devilish handsome, and he looked—well, he looked as I don't allow men to look when they leave you." And he scowled at the remembrance.

“Cyril, Cyril, how horrid you are! I had to be a wee bit civil to him,” said the siren innocently. “Here, take your tea! What has upset you?”

“Oh, the General is a dunderheaded old fool; but never mind him! I leave on the sixteenth as arranged, and have every minute occupied till then, so I shan’t see you, sweet one, till the night of the fifteenth; then I will manage to get into your box at the opera, and we can get a good many dances; then six weeks of hell for me. Nita, Nita, you don’t love me, or you’d chuck it all and come with me! I swear you’ll never repent it. Will you?”

But the rest of this interview is another story; let it suffice to say that the lady acceded to his request, and it was settled she should go with him to England on the morning of the sixteenth. Had they only arranged this before, Gerald St. John need never have done what he did; but it suited Mrs. Wadden’s fancy to dine and dance at Admiralty House and elope from there also. Not until he was riding back did Colonel Charlton remember Gerald’s existence; then he felt ashamed of himself for making a cat’s-paw of the boy with the well-bred face and tragic eyes.

“However, it’s Nita’s affair, and one can’t make omelettes without breaking eggs,” he said, as he threw the reins down on the neck of his smoking pony and went into his tent.

II

That hard-working, conscientious officer, Flag-Lieutenant Archibald Young, R.N., sat at his office table. He held in his hand a book with long lists of names marked with crosses and other hieroglyphics. Before him lay a stack of invitation cards and two piles of envelopes. He wore a harassed look, and said to himself: "She said particularly they were to go off early to-morrow by orderly, and those for post to-night I must get down to the ground by four, and it's two-thirty now. Oh, what the devil do you want? I can't attend to anything now! Oh, it's you, Jeremiah! Well, what is it?" These remarks were made to St. John, who had entered the room.

"The Captain came in and asked the Secretary to let one of us help you, as he wanted you at the Marsa by four. I was not very busy."

The Flag-Lieutenant did not wait.

"My dear chap, you are welcome as loaves and fishes were in the desert," he said. "Here, sit down; take thy pen and write fifty—no, a hundred. You begin at A and work down, and I'll start at M. Now, all the people marked with a red X in this column, dated fifteenth, are to be sent *dinner* and dance cards; but those with O don't come to the feed, and get dance cards *only*. That pile left of the ink are dance and the other dinner,

and you must write 'Dance' in the corner; and, for Heaven's sake, don't make a mistake, or we shall have the whole place by the ears. Oh, drat, there's the old man's bell! I must go—you begin." And the young man disappeared.

As soon as he was alone, Gerald turned over the loose typewritten sheets before him till he came to the page containing the names beginning with the letter W. There were almost a dozen with W. "Captain and Mrs. Wynn, General and Lady Eva Watson, Lieutenant Warren, R.N., Captain and Mrs. Weeland, Mrs. Wadden." He read no more. There was neither X nor O against the name he sought. Before him was a bottle of red ink and a clean quill pen; he picked up the latter, dipped it into the ink, and made a bold cross opposite the name of Mrs. Wadden. The handle of the door turned; he hastily blotted the cross, put back the pen, and turned back the pages to the letter B, and went on directing envelopes and cards to Barrels, Barrys, Burtons, etc.

"Getting on all right?" said Young. "Here, I'll begin now." He took up the papers, and taking out the fastener which held the sheets together, said: "I'll go on from M, as it begins a page."

Gerald had a lump in his throat that prevented him speaking, so he just nodded. The Flag-Lieutenant wrote steadily for half an hour; he then

yawned, and began reading out the names marked by Lady Hilton. Suddenly he gave a low whistle as his finger rested on a red cross. St. John raised his pale face for a moment, but as the other did not speak he said nothing and went on writing.

"She's asking your friend Mrs. Wadden," Young said. "Expect I'll have to take her in. Hope so ; she's rare fun."

Gerald did not speak. The deed was done, the card sent, the acceptance returned.

Gerald dined with Mrs. Wadden that night ; she was graciousness itself, and gave him the promised kiss as he said good-night. The boy went back to his rooms half intoxicated, but more by woman than wine. "She loves me, she loves me," he whispered as he fell asleep.

III

The eventful fifteenth dawned in due course—namely, after the fourteenth (this does happen even in real life). The review and polo were over, and, tired but radiant, Mrs. Wadden stood before her long mirror and gazed in undisguised admiration at her own reflection therein—and indeed she had good reason, for the cloudy creation of filmy gold and blue she wore was designed by the greatest artist in dress that Paris possesses, and

he had pronounced it a *chef d'œuvre*; Colonel Charlton's presents glistened on her neck and arms, and a jewelled butterfly poised lightly on the coils of rich silken hair, whose waves and curls were due to Nature, not hot tongs. A bunch of beautiful roses, atrociously arranged, lay on the dressing-table; Mrs. Wadden had no intention of wearing them, but with a wave of compunction broke off a bud and fastened it into her corsage, where it was snugly hidden by a turquoise and diamond beetle.

A little later she gracefully entered the drawing-room of Admiralty House. All the guests, except the royal party, had arrived as she shook hands with her host and his wife. On Lord Hilton's face was depicted nothing but open admiration for his lovely guest, but on that of his wife was a half-surprised, half-puzzled look. Mrs. Wadden shook hands, and passed on chatting to the other guests; with Colonel Charlton she just exchanged a glance of understanding. Many were the comments on her, but above all was the question, "Why is she here?" or "How *did* she manage to get asked?" Then their Majesties arrived, and the presentations took place. Now, King Hulderband was a man who loved a pretty woman, and in a few moments he singled out Mrs. Wadden as the prettiest woman in the room, and after dinner he dropped a hint that she would be a charming

addition to his opera-box. The royal party had split, up and were distributed about with the other guests. There was no difficulty in finding Mrs. Wadden and bringing her to His Majesty's box, where she remained, and Colonel Charlton was left cursing inwardly, and wishing kings and queens would stay at home and not run about the world interfering with the arrangements of more humble folk.

The opera finished, all returned to the beautiful ball-room at Admiralty House. During the first three or four dances Colonel Charlton and Mrs. Wadden might have been seen in a quiet corner in earnest conversation, and an unhappy-looking boy, in the uniform of an assistant-paymaster, wandered about the passages hunting for someone he could not find. At the fifth dance he found her.

"You haven't forgotten my dances?" he asked eagerly.

"No, of course not; you shall have this one."

But just then the Flag-Lieutenant came up and took St. John by the arm.

"Very sorry, Mrs. Wadden, to deprive you of your partner, but Princess Leonie wishes to dance with St. John, and I've come to take him to her."

"Oh, indeed! what an honour for you! Go along, and don't flirt, Gerald."

Gerald said sulkily: "I say, Young, I don't want to go—and tell her I dance like a walrus."

“Nonsense! you’ve got to come whether you like it or not. She said you were ‘*comme un Apollon moderne et triste*,’ and I think she wants to cheer you up: you talk French. Give him another dance, please, Mrs. Wadden, or I’m sure he’ll not be civil to Her Royal Highness.”

“Very well,” she said, laughing, “Number 10.”

With that St. John allowed Young to take him and introduce him to the young Princess. Alas! at Number 10 Mrs. Wadden was at supper; at the fifteenth dance she found him alone. Without any apology or explanation, she dropped Colonel Charlton’s arm, and said:

“Come, Chéri, let’s have our last dance.”

Afterwards she remembered the words. When the music ceased, she said:

“You’ve had no supper, I know, and I could eat something, so let’s go and see what’s to be had.”

Gerald was indeed hungry, and the sparkling Heidseck and the food cheered him up, and Mrs. Wadden had never been sweeter to him. When they had finished, she said:

“Now take me to the cloak-room; I’m going home.”

“Going home? but it’s only about half-past one.”

“Yes, I know; but I’m tired.”

As she came out with her cloak on, oddly

enough, Colonel Charlton was waiting at the door as well as Gerald. She felt she ought to allow the boy (who at great risk had secured her the invitation to come here at all) to take her home; but, on the other hand, Percy Charlton was—and, after all, to-morrow would explain—so she gave Gerald her hand and a sweet smile.

“Good-bye, Gerald; I have had a very happy evening. Good-bye, and I——”

“You are standing in a thorough draught,” broke in the Colonel impatiently. She took his arm and they went out together, leaving the boy with rage, jealousy, and love fighting for the mastery in his aching young heart.

The next morning Lady Hilton sent for the Flag-Lieutenant.

“Archibald,” she said, “kindly explain how Mrs. Wadden came to be here last night; her name was not marked on my list of guests.”

Archie Young’s fair, honest face got very red.

“I assure you, Lady Hilton, you did mark her name; I noticed it particularly as I wrote the card.”

Her ladyship merely replied: “Kindly fetch me the lists; I should never have dreamt of asking that woman here at any time to dinner, much less last night.”

The Flag-Lieutenant said nothing, but went to fetch the lists. He returned with them, and, turning over the pages, handed them to Lady

Hilton at the sheet beginning with W's ; she ran her finger down the names.

“General and Lady Eva Watson. Yes, I am sure those were the only names among the W's ; she stopped as her finger pointed to “Mrs. Curtis Wadden.” With surprise, she scanned the cross closely, then she said : “That is not my cross : see, it is done with different ink ; my red ink I accidentally mixed with a little black, and so it is darker and thicker. That cross was made with the thin, light red office ink ; and another thing, it was blotted immediately it was made, and hastily—see, it has a tiny smudge, and mine were all left to dry.”

Truly the difference was plain when closely examined. Young did not speak for a few seconds—he was thinking the matter over ; then he said :

“I am very, very sorry such a mistake should have happened ; I need not tell you that I knew nothing about it. Will you give me a few hours to find out who did it ?”

“I will give you till six o'clock this evening,” she replied ; “it is a very serious affair. There are a great many officers and their wives of far senior rank to Captain Wadden whom we could not ask, and her presence here last night will give great offence. If she had only been at the dance it would not have mattered quite so much. I

cannot understand it at all. No one except yourself has charge of the invitation cards, and she could not have come without one, as you would not have arranged a place for her. Who took her in?"

"The Captain of the German man-of-war. He can't speak English or French, and she speaks German fluently."

"Oh!" said her ladyship, in a tone of relief; "that is *most* fortunate—it is quite a plausible reason for her being asked. You had better let it be known that you could not find anyone else to talk German to Captain Steinmann—it may save people annoyance in the matter; but, please, Archie, bring me a full explanation this evening. Of course, my dear boy, I do not suppose for an instant you are to blame in any way."

"Thank you, Lady Hilton," he replied, with great relief in his tone; but it was a troubled Flag-Lieutenant that returned to his room.

Lady Hilton was a shy, reserved woman. She made few friends, but hardly any enemies; she was scrupulously particular in carrying out the social duties entailed by her husband's position, but her heart was buried in the grave of her only child, who had been killed in action when he had been two years a midshipman. Archie Young had been his chum, and together they had landed with the naval brigade and fought the fatal battle, and

in Archie's arms Dicky Hilton had breathed his last. For several years after, Lady Hilton could bear no sight of the sea, or ships, or sailors; but finding her husband required her, she bravely took her place at his side, and Archie Young was asked to be the Admiral's Flag-Lieutenant; his love for their dead son made a bond between them, and through him many and many a youngster learned to look on "Lady H." as the best and kindest friend they had. Gerald St. John, in particular, was a great favourite of hers, owing to some slight likeness to poor Dicky; but since his infatuation for Mrs. Wadden he had seen very little of Lady Hilton.

Archie Young took the list out and studied it intently. "It's deuced odd; not a soul saw the second half of that list except myself, and I'll swear that cross was there then, 'cos I said to young St. John—— St. John—by Jupiter! I remember now; the Admiral rang for me, and I left the list here, and he—the young idiot!—he must have known he'd be bowled out. I suppose she made him promise to get her a card. What a devil of a woman! It was sheer luck the Captain asking Peters to find me some help, and St. John volunteered. I see it all; it's as clear as mud. Well, I'll send for him and give him a jolly good fright, and make him confess the whole thing to Lady H.; and if she can make him chuck that

woman over, it'll be one of the kindest things she ever did. She's as bad as she's handsome, and that's saying a good deal." Needless to say, the last sentence referred to Mrs. Wadden, not Lady Hilton. "She'll let him off with a lecture, if only for poor Dicky's sake—because he's so like him. I don't think she'll tell the Admiral; at least, I hope not. Hello, Boots! What d'you want?"

"Come up to see the Secretary," said a young lieutenant who had just entered. "I say, Young, is it true Mrs. Wadden dined here last night? I saw her in the box with H.M., but did she dine?"

"Yes; had to ask her; couldn't find anyone else who could talk to the German Captain in his own bally lingo," returned the Flag-Lieutenant promptly.

"Oh!" said the other rather flatly. "Suppose you've heard she's bolted with that Colonel of the B—— Regiment this morning? Our Pay was seeing his wife off by the *Melita*, and they came on board together. She was muffled up, but he recognised her voice and figure."

"Great Scott!" said Flags.

"Yes, and her maid went up to my sister, who's on the flat above, and asked her to read a note she found on the table this morning, and it said she had left the Island suddenly, and that Captain

Wadden would pay all the bills when he came back—good stroke that. Oh, she's a bad lot—a real wrong un!" said the young man, with cheerful solemnity. "Well, so long; see you 'safternoon." And he departed as unceremoniously as he had arrived, and the Flag-Lieutenant went on with his work.

After lunch he sent for Gerald St. John, with the determination to make things "hot" for him. The boy looked pale and heavy-eyed. Young said abruptly: "Shut the door and turn the key." Gerald obeyed, and when he turned round he saw the other held in his hand the fatal list. The Flag-Lieutenant pointed to Mrs. Wadden's name, and said: "Kindly explain why you took the liberty to add *that lady's name* to Lady Hilton's guests last night."

St. John was silent, and a painful scarlet flush crept slowly from chin to brow; but it was caused more by the tone of contempt his companion used when he said the words "that lady's name" than by the guilt he felt.

"Lady Hilton sent for me," Young went on, "this morning. She was perfectly furious. She said she would not have had that woman here on any account, and practically accused me of having invited her on my own hook. When I showed her the list, and said that I had certainly written out her card, because her name had the cross against

it, she pointed out that the ink was different, and that it was smudged by being blotted, whereas all her crosses were left to dry. Of course, I saw at once you must have done it when I went in to the Admiral. Now, what have you got to say?"

The culprit was silent ; his very lips were deadly pale, and his eyes bent on the fatal cross. The Lieutenant began to get really angry.

"A very smart young ornament to the Service you are! A pretty thing for your uncle, Sir Godfrey! Enough to cost him his seat, if it gets out his nephew's cashiered out of the Service—'to avoid court-martial,' they'll put in the Navy List." Feeling that the last point was a good one, the speaker paused to watch the effect; he felt a pang of compunction as he saw a convulsive shudder shake the slight, silent figure.

"You damned young ass," he went on more kindly, "to get yourself into such a scrape, and for such a woman! You'll have to go and make a clean breast of it to Lady Hilton; it's the sort of thing you can't possibly expect me to take the blame for. I suppose she ordered you to do it, eh?"

Then St. John looked up. "No; she had nothing to do with it—nothing! I knew she would like to come, and so I just put the cross to her name. I did not think Lady Hilton would really mind, or that it would matter so very much."

“Bosh! she told you to do it!” Young said tersely. “She just wanted to meet Colonel Charlton here, and made a cat’s-paw of you. I suppose you know she bolted with him last night?”

“It’s a lie!” flashed the boy, his eyes alight with rage. “Retract it, or——” He seized a heavy glass inkstand.

Young happened to be fiddling with a heavy office ruler at the moment, and with it he hit Gerald’s wrist so hard that he dropped the inkstand.

“You young ink-slinger,” shouted the holder of the ruler, “I’ll teach you to throw things at your senior officer!” and with that he flung himself on St. John, and for the next few minutes a good healthy fight took place. Although Young was both taller and heavier, St. John was the most active; then, while Young endeavoured to throw down his opponent, he felt him suddenly relax his hold and slip to the ground.

“All right, my beauty,” he gasped; “now I’m going to give you a hiding!”

He reached out for the ruler, which was the only weapon at hand; his knee was on Gerald’s chest; he was just about to place him in a more favourable position for the chastisement, when he caught sight of his adversary’s face, and realized he had fainted. He got off his chest, and going to the side-table, drew a tumbler of soda-water

from the siphon and dashed it on the ghastly white face; then he went back and got some whisky, and kneeling down tried to force it between the livid lips.

“Jerry—Jerry, old chap; I’m awfully sorry! Jerry, I say.” To his huge relief the boy’s eyes slowly unclosed. He put the spirit to his lips. “Drink,” he said. A few mouthfuls brought him back to consciousness; and in a few moments he was standing, shaky and dishevelled, holding on to a chair for support. Young went to the table and mixed himself a whisky-and-soda; then he put his tie and collar in the place they are usually worn, and without looking at St. John, said: “You’d better go to your rooms and lie down; I’ll say you’re seedy, and at six o’clock you’ll come with me to Lady Hilton; and if you’ll take my advice, you’ll tell the truth—the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Never mind shielding the lady in this case; she’s a bad one, and she’s gone, and nothing you can say about her can hurt her now.”

Then the other broke down.

“Oh, it’s not true; it’s not true she’s gone with him!” he cried.

“Yes, it’s quite true; Lake, the Paymaster, saw them on board the *Melita* last night, and she left a note for her maid, saying she was not coming back.”

Gerald seized him by the arm.

“Will you swear it?” he said wildly.

“No, Jerry, I can't swear it, but it's true all the same.”

“Oh, my God!” said the boy, and he covered his eyes with his hands. The other, good fellow that he was, turned his back and stared out of a window that looked on a blank wall. He bore it as long as he could, then he turned round, and going to the figure whose head was buried in his hands, he touched his shoulder, saying :

“Don't take it like that, Jerry; there's no desperate damage done. She made a fool of you, that's all. You've had a pretty sharp lesson of what an idiot a pretty woman can make of a chap. You're a good-looking boy, and lots of women will try and fool you if you let 'em, or unless you turn the tables on 'em; but it's a poor game either way—much better play polo and cricket, and wait till you meet a girl whom you'd like to marry, and then have a clean pair of hands and a whole heart to offer her. Married women play the devil with a man's life.” This young Solomon then finished his drink, and added in a brisker tone: “Now pull yourself together, drink this, and I'll do what I can to help you out of this infernal mess. Put yourself a bit straight, and come back at six.”

Gerald rose; he shook off the friendly hand and pushed away the glass.

"Very good," he said stiffly; and, turning round, without a word or sign marched out of the room and house.

The Flag-Lieutenant went upstairs to Lady Hilton's boudoir.

"Can you spare me a minute?" he said.

"Certainly," said her ladyship.

"Lady Hilton," he said, "I wish to take the entire blame of the mistake made about Mrs. Wadden's invitation; will you accept my sincere apologies that it happened?"

Lady Hilton looked at him with a puckered frown.

"Archie, what do you mean?" she asked.

"Simply that the blame rests with me. I sent out the invitations; I alone am responsible for the mistake," said the Flag-Lieutenant.

"Of course, if you choose to take the blame there is no more to be said. I accept your apology."

"Dear Lady Hilton, how good you are! I can't tell you more, I really can't," said Archie Young.

"Very well," said Lady Hilton, smiling; "I know your reasons are good ones, so we will close the subject—the lady has left the Island."

"So I heard," said Archie.

Young's reasons for taking the blame of what had happened on his own shoulders were simple.

"Jerry's hard hit, worse than I thought, and it's

about as much as he can stand just now; and although he wouldn't give her away, I know jolly well *he* never thought of that dodge himself, and he'll only have to tell more bangers if I make him tell Lady H., so when he comes back I'll talk to him like a Dutch uncle, and say that I have explained the matter to her, and that she doesn't want to hear any more about it. I suppose I'm an ass, but—well, it's not a bad thing sometimes to put mercy as leader and justice as wheeler ;” and so saying, the young officer resumed his work.

Gerald mechanically walked out of the big hall-door, not the side entrance generally used by the officers; he had no hat, his tie and collar were awry, he neither saw nor heard any sights or sounds of the outer world; he looked like a sleep-walker—at least, so people said afterwards who had met him between Admiralty House and his rooms on the Parade. On reaching his rooms he sat down at the writing-table and tried to remember what Young had said.

“He said Lady Hilton was furious; that Uncle Godfrey would lose his seat in Parliament because I should be cashiered; that I was a disgrace to my people and to the Service. There was another officer cashiered the other day, but that was for falsifying accounts. I suppose to steal an invitation is just as bad.” He passed his hand wearily across his eyes. “But it doesn't matter; nothing matters since she's gone. Oh, Juanita!

how could you? I never knew you cared anything for him." He took up a photo of Mrs. Wadden in a costly silver frame. "How beautiful you are, my darling! They say you are bad—bad or good, I can't live without you. I've ruined myself for you, and you—you gave me one little kiss and one little dance; but they were worth it, and your name shall not be dragged into any court-martial to defend mine, neither shall Uncle Godfrey lose his seat. After all, it's a very easy way out of it." While he was speaking, he opened a drawer, and taking out a small pistol, loaded it carefully; then, laying it beside him, he took up his pen, saying, "I must clear Young with Lady Hilton," and he wrote:

"DEAR LADY HILTON,

"I did it. I put the X against Mrs. Wadden's name; neither she nor Young had anything to do with it. I am very sorry you are vexed about it. Please forgive

"GERALD ST. JOHN."

He put the letter in an envelope, directed and stamped it, then went into the hall and put it in the post-box.

Lady Hilton received it the next morning; she showed it to no one except Archie Young.

That done, Gerald returned and took up the photo, kissed it wildly, then with an impulse of anger against the beautiful face that had brought

him to so sorry a pass, he fired the pistol at the false heart, and then, turning it towards his own, again pulled the trigger. As the smoke cleared away, he fell forward on the desk, never again to be troubled in this world.

A couple of hours afterwards he was found, the pistol in one hand, and the photo, with its charred face and shattered glass, in the other, telling only too pitifully their own tale.

There was no scandal ; the reason for the deed was too well known, and all blame was laid at the door of the lovely heartless woman who had beguiled the boy and then left him so carelessly, without a word or letter. The other story lay between Lady Hilton and Archie Young, for before she received his letter—indeed, as soon as she heard of the boy's suicide—she guessed the truth.

Poor kind-hearted, blundering Archie Young had tears in his eyes as, word for word, he recounted their interview to her.

“ I made the very worst of it,” he said ; “ but only to give him a fright. I never thought he would take it like that. I thought first, if he confessed it to you, you would give a lecture. I know how good you always are to youngsters, and he—he always reminded me of Dicky.”

Tears were falling down the face of Dicky's mother. They were the only tears shed for Gerald St. John.

VI

THE SCANDAL OF MRS. LACY AND LIEUTENANT OLIPHANT, R.N.

I

DURING the latter part of the time my husband commanded the Infantry Brigade in Malta, there lived in that island a certain Mrs. Neville Lacy. Her husband was a Commander in the Navy; he was a serious, dull, disappointed man; his luck, he said, was bad, but his friends said it was only his temper. He was on the point of retiring, and was twenty years older than his wife. Whether he was really poor, or only mean, I could not say, but I know he gave Mrs. Lacy a very meagre allowance, and would not give her either a pony or an opera-box—two cheap but desirable luxuries, for she loved riding, though she had very little pluck, and no “hands.” I often lent her a mount, but was always careful it was quiet.

She was such a pretty little woman, of the

Dresden China type, fair, small, and fragile. She was very young, and very indiscreet, but one liked her for her actual faults. I often used to scold her for her injudicious, impulsive words or deeds, but she would say: "Dear Lady Malcolm, don't be cross; if I don't have a good time now, I shall die without doing so. Once Neville retires, he won't let a man inside the door or me outside it, and as the dear Admiral has sent him down the Red Sea for six months, I must not waste a minute." And I will say she did not appear to lose any chance of enjoying herself.

I had been rather seedy, and Admiral J—— had asked me to go for a week in his yacht. I accepted gratefully, and wrote a note to Mrs. Lacy, telling her she might use my pony Fiscal Policy while I was away. He was old and as safe as a perambulator. Unfortunately, the day after I left he went lame. The groom went to my husband to ask if he should send her my other pony, Sailor Lad. My husband said "Yes," and thereby hangs this tale.

I must explain. Sailor Lad was my pet pony. He was given to me by a great friend, who was so fond of him that he would not sell him when he left the Island, for fear he should ever come down to a carrozzi—an indignity that would have broken Sailor's proud little heart. He was a pure-bred Arab, and as clever as a dog. He had

a marvellous memory, and would remember for several months afterwards, any house where he had once been given sugar (for which he was a glutton), or a field where corn grew that could be reached. But he had a very decided temper, greatly objected to being ridden by anyone except me, and would sulk and buck if I took the liberty of lending him. I suppose I spoilt and humoured him, but I always have been rather foolish about animals, and a constant loving observer of their ways and wants. I understand several of their languages: "Cattish" I know fairly well, only cats are bad, impatient teachers, and get cross when you don't grasp their meaning at once. "Doggish" I speak fluently, and understand it. But dogs are patient and good-tempered; they never mind how often they tell you the same thing, and they devote their life to you, so that their language is the easiest to learn. "Horseish" is ten times as hard, because a horse is much more selfish and impatient, and has less capacity for affection, and less sympathy with human stupidity. They object to explaining the same thing over and over again, and they have such marvellous memories themselves that they naturally feel contempt for silly creatures who from day to day forget their sugar, or their way home, and are always driving back to fetch their purse or their tobacco, and who cannot be taught to hit a ball at polo when their

pony brings them directly over it. But to return to my *moutons*

When I came back from my trip in the yacht, I found every tongue in the place a-wagging with the names of Mrs. Lacy and Lieutenant Cosmo Oliphant, and a very ugly tale they told. It appeared that on the Thursday after my departure, Mrs. Lacy and Mr. Oliphant were seen riding off together from her flat in Sta Mezzodi (that was just the sort of foolish thing she did instead of meeting her escort outside Porte des Bombes). She was riding Sailor Lad. This was about twelve o'clock.

"And fancy, Lady Malcolm," my informant, Mrs. Ross, went on, "neither of them came back till the next day. Your husband and Captain Montague met them both riding back as they were going to the Marsa at six o'clock the following morning. Just outside Porte Reale they met Mr. Oliphant; Lord Malcolm stopped him, and asked where Mrs. Lacy and your pony were. He *pretended* to be very much surprised, and said Mrs. Lacy had gone home from Civita Vecchia by Verdala at four o'clock the previous afternoon. He did not seem at all put out; but when your husband told him she had not been home all night, he got quite green, and stuttered and stammered. Finally Lord Malcolm said he would ride on to Verdala at once, as some dreadful accident must have happened to her. But just after they had

passed Spencer's monument, they met Mrs. Lacy, looking very dishevelled, but perfectly safe, riding your pony, who was also all right. Her story was that she and Mr. Oliphant had lunch, at the hotel at Civita Vecchia; then they did the Catacombs, and returned to the hotel, had a cup of tea, and she rode off alone, as Mr. Oliphant was dining out there with some mysterious friend, she did not know who. She said she did not go to Verdala, but turned off towards Imtarfa, intending to return by Casal Lia, but lost her way; she then tried to take a short cut, but the pony was very troublesome, and refused to go on, and when she used the whip, he bucked, and she was frightened, and got off and led him. It got dark before she got out of the lane, and she did not know in the least where she was, and got a blister on her heel, and tried to mount the pony, but he would not stand still or go near a wall for her to get on, so she tried to walk, but her heel hurt so much that she could not. The pony dragged the bridle, so that when she came to a sort of bank covered with grass which she could just see, she led him up the bank, and he nibbled the grass while she sat and cried, waiting for someone to come by. She says she sat there all night, and when it got light, a man going to work in the fields came by, and she got him to hold the pony while she mounted, and he showed her the road to Valetta. That's her story, but, my dear Lady

Malcolm, what a nice, simple-minded, credulous set of donkeys she must think us to expect us to believe such a rigmarole, particularly as Mr. Oliphant refuses to give any account of where he was from 5 p.m. on Thursday to 6 a.m. on Friday. Of course, everyone knows he is awfully fast and good-looking. Don't you remember how he flirted all last winter with that horrid Miss West, and then with Mrs. Wadden? He only dropped her directly he met Mrs. Lacy. He used to go to those bridge-parties of Mrs. Wadden's and play for huge stakes, so I'm afraid, very much afraid, their best friends could hardly call it an 'innocent escapade.' Mrs. Lefanu cut her dead on the Marsa yesterday before everyone;" and she ended the recital with a ghoulish smirk.

I hated the woman for her evil mind, her cruel tongue, her stupid, narrow intellect; and said very stiffly:

"Surely Mrs. Lefanu is rather premature; nothing is proved against Mrs. Lacy. I know her rather well, and do not think she would have the moral courage to brave public opinion in such a way. I don't think she cares for Mr. Oliphant, and she is dreadfully afraid of her husband. It seems to me a very probable thing that she lost her way, and I am sure Sailor Lad would not let her mount him alone, and I can't imagine Mrs. Lacy doing anything except sitting down on a bank crying when she found herself alone in the

dark. It is a great pity Captain Lacy is away."

Mrs. Ross laughed.

"We all think it rather a good thing for her that he is; but, if their story is true, where was Mr. Oliphant all the time? He says he is not at liberty to say, only that he had not seen Mrs. Lacy since the previous afternoon."

When we were alone that evening, I asked my husband what he thought of the affair. His judgment is always clear, just, and kind, and he is a splendid judge of men and women.

"Well," he said, "I must own it's an ugly story. You see, they were known to be together up to five o'clock, and how any woman could be silly enough to sit all night on a bank instead of walking a few miles to a village, even if she had a tight boot or a blistered heel, is past the comprehension of a mere man; but, on the other hand, the idea is absurd that they really were together, and then came back within a quarter of a mile of each other, knowing they must meet lots of people going to the Marsa—and the woman on a borrowed pony—no man would be such a fool. Why on earth he can't say where he was I don't know. There is one thing that bears out her story: Williams tells me that Sailor Lad has a bad cold, and showed signs of having had a good deal more damp grass than was good for him; but I should not have anything to do with it if I were you, my dear."

II

I did not take Malcolm's advice about having nothing to do with the affair, and in response to a piteous little note from Mrs. Lacy, told her to come and see me at eleven. She arrived, and in a very few minutes out came the whole story amid many sobs.

"You don't, you can't, believe what they are saying about me, Lady Malcolm! I give you my solemn word of honour that I never saw Cosmo Oliphant after I left him at the hotel, and that I sat on that horrid bank all night. I had no idea where I was; there were no lights near, and Sailor was so aggravating. When I did get him alongside a wall, as soon as I got up on it he sidled away just too far for me to mount."

I could hardly help smiling, as it is exactly what Sailor would do to a strange rider. She went on :

"Soon after it was light a man came along. He could not speak English, of course; but I signed to him to hold the pony, said 'Valetta, Valetta,' and held up a sixpence. He understood that, helped me to mount, and led Sailor till we got into the Musta Road, and I rode back as fast as I could. I had hoped to get back without meeting anyone, and I intended to take Sailor back to your stable, and go and see Lord Malcolm and tell him

the truth, and ask him to tell the groom how it was ; but as soon as I met Captain Montague with your husband, and then Captain and Mrs. Harrison, I knew all hope of keeping my adventure dark was out of the question. Of course, I had no idea they had all met Mr. Oliphant a few moments previously. I knew they would say something nasty, but I had never in my wildest dreams thought of anything so horrible as this. And the worst of it is that if my husband hears about it he will—oh, I don't know, I daren't think what he will do or say." And the poor little troubled soul sobbed in a heart-broken way.

I was perfectly convinced by now of the truth of her story. She was too sincere in her repentance, and alarmed at the result of her escapade, to have any deadlier sin on her conscience, so I determined to try and straighten out her tangled coil, and set her right in the eyes of our unkind little world. Indeed, looking at the affair from her point of view, it seemed absurd that so great a scandal should have arisen from a couple of coincidences—namely, Mr. Oliphant being unable to account for where he spent his time, and the fact that he rode home ten minutes ahead of her. I did not say so to Mrs. Lacy, but merely asked her :

“ How was it you could not find a house, and get someone to help you mount ?”

“ I did pass one, and tried to make them hear ; but there was no one about, and only the usual barking dog on the roof, who drowned my voice ; and I could not climb over the wall to knock at the door, because it was too high,* so I went on until my heel was so bad I could not go any farther. The bank looked clean and green, and I thought perhaps the grass would put Sailor in a better temper. I know I am very silly, but I never was brave, and strong, and independent.”

“ You say nobody passed ?”

“ Not a soul. You see, it was a cross path I had got on, leading from Musta Road to the road by Attard, and I was really quite close to the Musta Road if I had only known it.”

“ Would you know the place again ?”

“ I think so ; at least, there was a shrine at the corner, with three cherubims sitting in a souptureen full of flames. You could see the bank from there, looking up the lane.”

I thought things over for a minute, and then I said :

“ Well, my dear, as far as I am concerned, I believe you sat on that bank in company with Sailor Lad, who has got a bad cold in consequence ; but the question is, How are we going to convince other people ? If only we had some means of

* The peasants' houses are generally built to face their fields, and have no opening on to the road from which they are separated by very high stone walls.—ED.

finding out where Mr. Oliphant was ; but you say he declines to tell."

"He says he cannot say without involving others in a serious trouble. Look, he wrote me this ;" and she gave me a letter.

"DEAR MRS. LACY,

"This is a most horrible end to our ride. I cannot tell you how wild I am at not being able to give an account of my movements ; but I cannot do so without involving others in very serious trouble. I suppose you changed your mind about going home by Verdala. I wish I had gone part of the way with you, then all this would not have happened. But don't worry about it ; the gossips will have forgotten it in a month. I wish I could publish what I think of them in the *Chronicle*, but I fear the editor would not put it in. With a thousand sympathies, yours sincerely

"COSMO H. OLIPHANT."

I returned the letter to her. Had I required anything more to convince me of the innocence of the pair, that would have done it. I sent the little woman home cheered with the assurance that I would stand her friend.

I told my husband the result of our interview.

"My dear Winifred," he replied, "I am very glad you think it's all right ; but it's a thousand pities Oliphant can't say where he was, and that we can't prove she did sit on that grassy bank."

"I suppose it would be impossible to find the man who put her up in the morning?" I queried.

"Not at all; but when you've got him, what are you going to do with him? Take him round to every afternoon tea-party with a label round his neck? Besides, what would that be worth? Any native Maltese ruffian would swear *anything* for half a crown," said my husband.

"Do you think if we got fair proof of her having sat on that bank that it would clear her?" I asked anxiously, for an idea had just flashed through my mind.

"I think it would do so with the majority of people," he replied.

I said no more, but went down to the stables to see how my beloved Sailor was. I found him almost well, and he put his dear soft nose into my hand as much as to say, "Don't scold; I know I was naughty, but I won't be lent to people whom I don't like."

That afternoon I sent for a great ally of mine, Lord William Lindsay, and had a little talk with him. The next day I sent out invitations to a picnic in Musta Valley. I asked Lady Courcy and the Admiral, Mrs. Lefanu, a good many influential naval people, and a fair sprinkling of soldiers and their wives. We were to rendezvous at San Antonio, and from there Lord William would guide the party to a place he had prospected for me.

III

The day of the picnic arrived. I was with the riding party, and Mrs. Lacy was riding Fiscal Policy. Poor little woman! she had not wanted to come, and more than one cold shoulder was turned to her; but I told Billy to look after her, and he and Mr. Dean, a man in the Westshire Regiment, and a girl called Hester Tirrett, rode ahead together. I was riding Sailor. The day was perfect. We had just had a week of blazing sun, which had burnt up every blade of grass and spoilt our complexions. But two nights' of rain had made the air cool and laid the dust. When we had left Casal Lia a couple of miles behind, Billy Lindsay came back to speak to me about the time when we were to lunch. As he had made all arrangements for me, I saw there was more than met the ear in his inquiry, but I replied I hoped it would be ready for us by one o'clock. As he rode off again, he said below his breath: "Give Sailor his head, sit tight, and don't check him."

I had not the least idea why, but I obeyed. We were walking, Admiral Waller on my left, General May on my right, and my husband and Mrs. Lefanu behind. Suddenly I saw Sailor's ears take a cock that meant "Look out," and he broke into a sharp gallop for twenty yards or so,

then, swerving sharply to the right, cantered up a narrow lane and rushed up a bank on the right, putting down his nose to nibble the remains of some long grass, now dried brown. Then I knew what Billy meant. All my escort were now in sight, and hurrying anxiously after me.

"Whatever happened, Lady Malcolm?" exclaimed the Admiral.

"I really don't know," I said, laughing. "I am as much surprised as you. What made Sailor bolt like that I can't think. He evidently knew the place, and I've never brought him here, I am certain. He came after grass, I think."

With a very white, scared face, Mrs. Lacy came up.

"Yes, Sailor knew it, because this is the bank where he and I spent the night; it was covered with grass then. And oh, look! there is the very man who found me!"

She pointed to a tall, swarthy Maltese, who seemed to rise from nowhere, and who greeted Mrs. Lacy with a smile, saying, "Signorina, bonjour!" and pointed to the bank; but on looking at Fiscal Policy, shook his head, and pointed to Sailor, talking and gesticulating. Most of the others had got out of the carriages and come up the lane to see what it was all about, and one of the coachmen was asked to translate the man's words.

"The man, he say he glad to see beautiful lady

again ; he say she stay all night on this bank, but that she then ride General's lady's pony ; he say to her not to do it again alone, as the devil he go out at night ; he say she better bring some holy water to keep him off."

This advice was met with a titter of laughter, that broke the strain we all felt. I was so glad, I told Malcolm to give the man a sovereign. The testimony of Sailor Lad alone would hardly have convinced those who are ignorant of the memory and sagacity of a horse, but the dramatic appearance of the man, and his volunteered confirmation of Mrs. Lacy's story, left no doubt in the most suspicious mind that she had spoken the truth.

We all returned to the road, and went on to the place where lunch was laid. Mrs. Lefanu, who although she had not until then noticed Mrs. Lacy's presence, asked her in her most charming manner to sit next to her at lunch, and Lady Courcy asked her to go to her opera-box the following Monday, and the tongue of scandal was thereby hushed.

I managed before we left to get a few words with Lord William.

"Billy," I said, "how did you do it?"

"Oh, it was very easy! I just rode Sailor quietly along this road that day I borrowed him, and as soon as he came to the lane he did exactly what he did to-day. I felt sure he would, if he

had once spent a night eating grass there—the glutton. Then I went back, and slept at the Melita Hotel in Casal Lia until 3 a.m., and then got up and walked out here. I knew it by those roasted cherubims at the corner on the shrine, and about half-past four my gentleman came along. His fields not having moved since Mrs. Lacy was here, the deduction did not require a Sherlock Holmes to make, and I talk enough Arabic to make these Johnnies understand me. I asked him if he was the man who helped the lady on her pony, and he said : ‘ Yes ; and she was a beautiful English lady.’ I asked him to be here to-day, as the lady was coming and wanted to give him more money—I knew that would fetch him—and there he was—that’s all.”

“ Billy, you are a good boy—a dear, good boy ! I thought you would catch my meaning ; but, of course, I could not arrange anything myself. Poor little woman, it absolutely cleared her.”

“ I’m jolly glad of it. Did you see some of those women’s faces when they heard what the man said ? Cats ! I believe some of them were downright sorry it was turning out square. I suppose it is because she is so pretty. I say, have you noticed how strong Dean is going with Miss Tirrett ? I believe it’s a case, etc.”

And so ended the scandal of Mr. Oliphant and Mrs. Lacy.

To this day she believes the whole denouement to have been entirely due to Sailor Lad's cleverness, and in a way she is right, and his picture in a silver frame always stands on her table.

The explanation of Mr. Oliphant's unaccountable silence, and the revelation of his whereabouts on that eventful night, is another story, called "The Baby Fund Affair," of which you shall hear another day.

* * * * *

The moral of this is : Ladies, don't go out riding with a cavalier unless he promises to bring you home ; and

Young men should not try to lunch with a lady and have mysterious engagements to dinner unless they are prepared to fib about it.

VII

THE BABY FUND AFFAIR

I

THIS was rather a complicated affair, and many of the incidents were never known to the public, but came to my knowledge privately through either Beatrice Upton or Hester Tirrett, so I am going to tell it in the third person.

One day in the dark ages some kind-hearted philanthropist started in Malta a "Baby Fund," its object being to secure for the often unwished-for babies of the sailors and soldiers some sort of welcome into the station, and to provide them with garments and toys. The fund flourished or languished according to the interest taken in it by the wives of the Governor, Admirals, and Generals.

Now in the year 188— it had reached giddy heights that its founder had never dreamed of for it. Every new garrison baby was received by the

lady "commanding" its father's ship or regiment with triumph and toys, and the lady who could report the advent of the latest baby at the monthly Committee meeting was the heroine of the hour. Indeed, every baby that was fortunate enough to make its appearance in this world of sin under the benign auspices of the Malta Garrison Baby Fund in the year of grace 188—, was fathered, mothered, auntied, uncled, and grandmothered by those devoted ladies and gentlemen who formed the Committee. So great was their zeal that once an ungrateful parent was heard to remark: "Well, Maria, I thought as 'ow this yer bloomin' babby belonged to you and me; but it seems I was wrong, and it is the property of the Baby Fund Committee."

↪ However, the shower of clothes, food, and toys were benefits of too substantial a nature to be refused.

The Secretary was a certain Colonel Upton, R.A.; he was an admirable soldier and secretary; he had a very attractive wife, of whom he was extremely jealous. Mrs. Upton, having no children, and not taking any interest in them, was, by the laws of eternal unfitness, on the M.B.F. Committee, and, considering all things, she was a fairly energetic member, and very numerous were the notes, stamped with the three

magic letters, that passed between her and the Treasurer—one Captain Shannon, of the Westshire Regiment. He was a very rich man, and devoted all his time to his racing-ponies, and some “soft” billet was generally found for him where he would not be distracted by mere regimental duties from the more imperative need of looking after those valuable quadrupeds; but in this case he was told that with the billet went the position of Treasurer of the M.B.F. He protested that he knew more about horses than he did of babies; but Colonel Upton promised to show him the ropes, and go through his accounts every week, and as he really wanted the billet, he undertook the care of the Baby Fund.

Now, this chronicle would never have been written had not Captain Shannon heard of a certain sale of ponies at Tunis, and suddenly made up his mind to attend it. He applied for a fortnight’s leave on “urgent private affairs,” and handed over the care of the Baby Fund, together with his other duties, to his subaltern, Percival Dean, a young man more devoted to poker than to babies, but he received full directions about his duties from Captain Shannon:

“All you’ve got to do is to give out the money and get the receipts—be sure about the receipts; I had to pay up five pounds deficit the first month, because the Committee ladies would not send them in. There is one hundred pounds in cash in this

box ; I got it from Lady Malcolm yesterday—the proceeds of her ball. Keep twenty pounds out for cash payments, and bank the rest. Give the Committee everything they ask for, and all will go as smoothly as a pane of glass. Colonel Upton, on the floor below, will tell you anything you want to know. I've asked him to attend to the letters that may come to-day, as you really must count those nose-bags the Mounted Infantry sent in for survey. The Colonel and I spent all Tuesday and Wednesday over them, but you are obliged to have two Captains as well as the Colonel to examine them before you can condemn one. Now I must go ; don't forget to bank that eighty pounds ;” and the genial officer went down the stairs. He looked into Colonel Upton's office, inquired if he was busy, received a very positive affirmative from his clerk, and saying his business was of no importance, ran blithely down the steps.

He directed his feet to the hotel where Colonel and Mrs. Upton lived, and found that graceful lady playing operatic music on a hired piano.

“ I'm so bored by my own company, and the piano is flat,” she said as he entered. “ You got my note ?”

“ Note ? No, I got no note to-day. I've just come from the office ; I'm going to Tunis this afternoon, and came to tell you not to back either Chamberlain or Dieu Donn  at the meeting, and

to ask you to nominate The Kitten for the Ladies' Bracelet. I hope to be back in time, but in case I am not I thought I would tell you this ; and if Dean gives you a tip for the fifth race, take it ; only I won't tell you now, for these things slip out. I don't care myself, as I never bet ; but it is not fair on others."

"Thanks awfully. But what has become of my note ? I sent it a quarter of an hour ago, in a M.B.F. envelope, as usual."

Captain Shannon sat up.

"Good Lord!" he said ; then he burst into a laugh. "Bowled out clean," he gasped.

The lady got angry.

"Oh, stop that laughing, and explain if my husband——"

Her companion broke in :

"That's just it ; your husband's got it ;" and again he laughed. "You see, I asked him to open all the M.B.F. letters this morning, as Dean has to go down to the stables on duty, so your note must have gone to him. I suppose there was nothing in it that mattered ?"

Mrs. Upton wrinkled up her pretty eyes in her efforts to remember the contents of her note.

"I think I said 'Dear Man——'"

"Oh," groaned Shannon, "he will never understand that."

The lady went on :

“‘We will ride to Birzza Bugia at 3.30, so it please you ; we need not hurry, as my old man has to meet the General at 2.30, and has to sit on a blessed Committee at 6. Rendezvous at usual place,’ and I signed it ‘The Trout.’ Oh, why was I ever born, or why did you ever give me that ridiculous nickname? Howell will be furious.”

Captain Shannon smiled.

“Well, you really are like a trout ; you are so fond of spotty frocks, and you are so nice.” Then he broke off his joking manner, and said more seriously : “You had better tell him straight out that if he were not so idiotic about examining all your letters, and inquiring where you spend every minute of your time, you would not be obliged to practise silly deceptions on him in perfectly harmless matters.”

“Yes, that is absolutely true,” replied Mrs. Upton. “He makes such a hideous fuss if I get a letter he does not see the contents of, or if he hears accidentally that I have been speaking to a man, that it is really to save him worry that I do this kind of thing.”

“Yes, of course it is ; all the same, I expect you will have to use all your wits to get him to understand that it was only to save him worry that you wrote this letter.”

“Oh, I’ll manage it ! he is a dear thing, really,

and his bark is worse than his bite ; and after a row he always gives me a nice present to make up for his unwarrantable suspicions."

Soon after Captain Shannon had left her, a very pretty girl, beautifully dressed, but looking unhappy, came in. After she had exchanged the usual greeting with her hostess, the girl—Hester Tirrett by name—said in an anxious tone :

"Oh, Trix, do comfort me about Percy ; the silly boy went and lost a hundred pounds the other night at poker, and he simply does not know how he is going to pay it. He says a tenner is all he has in the world, and I've only got twenty pounds ; you know, papa pays all my bills, and only gives me thirty pounds a month for all my extras, and I can't get another penny of cash out of him ; it's his fad that girls ought not to have any money. But that is not the only trouble ; you know that Percy's Colonel has told all the sub-alterns that if he catches them playing for more than nominal stakes he will turn them out of the regiment. Ever since poor Herbert Maxwell shot himself he has determined to stop gambling in the mess."

"But where was Mr. Dean playing to lose such a large amount as that ?"

"Oh, it seems there is a very fast American woman at Civita Vecchia who gives poker-parties, and last Thursday Percy and some naval man and

another of the Westshire were there, and they played till five o'clock. They all swore secrecy, and my poor donkey lost a hundred, and can't pay it, and if it gets out he and the other man will be ruined, as the Colonel will turn them out of the regiment. If only he could get the money to pay, it might blow over. Oh, Trix, do tell me what I can do; I do love him so!" And the pretty girl's sweet eyes dropped large tears, and the red mouth drooped mournfully.

Mrs. Upton, unmoved by these signs, replied :

" My dear, don't cry ; it's unbecoming, and won't help your Percy. I've not got a hundred shillings to lend him, much less a hundred pounds ; the Colonel gives me out enough for a few carrozzi fares, and that's about all. I might be three instead of thirty for all the control I have of money ! Can't Mr. Dean's people help him ?"

" Oh no," Miss Tirrett replied ; " they are poor parsons with dozens of children. Percy has one hundred and fifty pounds of his own that he manages to scrape along on ; that's one reason papa is so obstinate about our engagement. But of course he will give in ; he is really fond of Percy, but says I ought to do better. As though a girl, even if her father were rich as Croesus, could do better than marry the man she loved ! No, there is only one thing to save us : Percy has got some extraordinary tip about a

horse who *may* win the Malta Cup on Friday; he won't tell me the name, but if he wins we shall get a grand price, and we are both going to put all our money on him."

"Well, you will let me in, I hope?"

"Oh yes; but not till the last minute. You will come with us, won't you, dear?"

After a short talk on indifferent subjects, Miss Tirrett left; then Mrs. Upton prepared for an elaborate lecture from her husband. At half-past twelve Colonel Upton arrived, but with no words of wrath on tongue, or frown on brow; quite the contrary, he was so sweetly amiable that his wife inquired if he did not feel well, but receiving a reply in the affirmative, she concluded that by some lucky chance her letter had not been sent in according to Captain Shannon's directions, so she dismissed the matter from her mind with a thanksgiving to the Fates.

Now, what had really happened was this: Her letter had arrived at the same time as the postman who brought several letters marked "Tenders"; they were tenders for a quantity of bellows to be supplied to the married quarters, and by some carelessness of the clerk Mrs. Upton's letter got mixed up with them, and was, therefore, put away until the time for opening the aforesaid tenders should arrive.

II

Late the next afternoon Percival Dean was alone in Captain Shannon's office ; orderlies and clerks had gone ; he was the only person there, and before him on the desk were ten little piles of sovereigns ; the empty cash-box lay open beside them, and the little stiff bank-bags were in Dean's hand. He gazed at them in a dull, fascinated way, and slowly picked up pile after pile, and dropped them carefully into the bags. At each chink of gold meeting gold the young man's face seemed to grow more strained and white, and his hand to shake. When all the gold was in the bags, he folded the tops carefully down.

"It can't hurt anyone," he said in an undertone, "and I must have the money ; it is more than a week ago now, and the *Repulsive* leaves to-morrow. I must pay Oliphant to-night." And he dropped one of the bags into his pocket, and then another ; then with a short, harsh laugh : "I want it much more than the babies do," he said, "and Free Trade will win it all back for them on Friday!"

He returned the cash-box to the safe, and locking both it and the office door, he descended into the street, and getting into a carrozzi drove to the Custom-house ; there he took a *dasaigh* to H.M.S. *Repulsive*. On board he inquired for

Lieutenant Oliphant, and when he appeared they descended together to his cabin.

“I’ve brought you my debt,” said Dean, handing the bags to the other.

“Oh, thanks! Hello, all gold! You did have infernal luck that night; so did Hutton, but he got square in the end; even our hostess only made a pound or two.” He flung the money into a drawer, and with a certain diffidence said: “I’m awfully glad you’ve come off; I was going to try and see you to-night. I want to ask you if you and Hutton will release me from my promise not to say where I was that night; you see, these gossiping old cats are swearing that poor little Mrs. Lacy was with me, and I thought if you fellows would let me tell where I was—I need not say you were there—it would clear her.”

A greyish shade crept over the pallor of the young soldier’s face. “You swore you would not tell,” he said.

“And I have not told, although there is not a man in the mess who does not think me a skunk for not clearing her name, even at the expense of my word of honour,” said Oliphant stiffly.

“Of course, if the lady is really compromised, you will have to say where you were; but if you do you will ruin both Hutton and myself, as it is certain to leak out, and the Colonel is only waiting to catch some of us; and you know you swore

not to say where you were. After all, gossip breaks no bones ; it will all blow over in a week or so, whereas if we are chucked out of the regiment for gambling——” An impressive silence finished the sentence.

“ Oh, of course, I can see your side,” said Oliphant, “ and there’s no more to be said. Come and have a drink.”

The days that followed slipped by miserably for Percy Dean ; he could neither sleep nor eat, and his young hitherto untried nerves almost gave way under the strain he had to put upon them to carry out his ordinary military and social duties. He had managed to replace ten pounds of the hundred he had borrowed, and was using that for the current expenses of the Baby Fund.

The horse Free Trade was in splendid form—this was his only comfort. His finances were so low that ten pounds was the utmost he could afford to back him with ; but as he would be an utter outsider he hoped to pull through, even if it came to borrowing some of Hester’s winnings. Hester herself was considerably more unhappy than the sole heiress to ten thousand pounds a year has any right to be in a gold-governed world.

When the eventful Friday of the race arrived, the purple dawn found Percy Dean on the Marsa, gazing with anxious eyes on the little horse on whom he had risked everything. At nine he

appeared at the office to attend to any urgent business, but found nothing of importance there ; two letters on M.B.F. affairs he took to Colonel Upton.

“This is the doctor’s certificate about Mrs. Macglouster’s baby ; she says he has ordered it two quarts of beef-tea a day and a spoonful of brandy every two hours, and she wants an order for four pounds of beefsteak and a bottle of brandy. It seems rather a lot for a child of two months old, don’t you think, sir ?” he said seriously, adding : “ I see it is Mrs. Upton’s case, so perhaps you would ask her if it is all right ?”

“ Yes, certainly I will ; as you say, it does seem a lot, but it is really wonderful what an extraordinary quantity of food and even stout these babies will consume. I suppose you want to go off to the races ? All right, I’ll attend to anything that comes ; I’ve only the bellows tenders to go through. Ah, by-the-by, just bring me down the books, cash-box, and bank-book of the Baby Fund ; I always go through them for Shannon every week. . What cash have you in hand ? I suppose you’ve banked the money from Lady Malcolm’s ball ? Ah, General, here you are !” He broke off to receive an upright, elderly man in the uniform of a general, who said :

“ Hope I’m not too early, Upton ? Mornin’, Dean !”

Colonel Upton gave Dean a nod of dismissal, saying : " Leave those books with Sergeant Harris before you go."

Dean, with a cold heart, left the office. He ascended to his own domain, and slowly collected all the books appertaining to the Baby Fund, and then, going to the safe, took out the almost empty cash-box. There was no help for it, he thought ; Colonel Upton would have to make the best he could of it, and to-morrow he would find some explanation for the absence of the money, and would bank Free Trade's winnings before going to the office ; so he took books and cash-box to Colonel Upton's clerk, then, leaving the office and its worries behind, after a hasty lunch he changed into plain clothes and went down to the Marsa.

Colonel Upton and his General, meanwhile, were laboriously going through the tenders ; half-way through the pile they came to an envelope with the letters M. B. F. printed on it, and addressed to Captain Shannon in a writing that the Colonel at once recognised as that of his wife.

" This must have got in by mistake," he said. " Shannon is our treasurer, and his office is up-stairs ;" and he put the letter aside till the General's departure.

He opened it just before he was going home for lunch, and his nice pink face changed to crimson,

and then to magenta, as he read the words that his wife wrote under cover of the innocent Baby Fund envelope.

“DEAR MAN,

We will ride to B.B. at 3.30, so it please you ; we need not hurry, as my old man has got to meet the General at 2.30, and has a blessed Committee Meeting at 6. Rendezvous at usual place.

“Yours

“THE TROUT.”

No freshly landed trout ever gasped more than did the worthy Colonel at this awful revelation of the deceit of the wife of his bosom ; he thrust the letter into his pocket-book, and, swelling with rage, left the office. On the steps of their hotel he met Mrs. Upton, looking very charming in her neat, becoming morning frock, with a bunch of flowers in her hand that she had just been out to buy.

“Aren't they sweet ?” she said, as she held them to his angry face.

He pushed them aside, saying :

“Come up at once ; I've something in my pocket which requires explanation from you.”

“Good gracious, Howell, what mare's-nest have you found now ?” said his wife, with a shrug of her graceful shoulders.

Her husband did not reply, but stalked on

ahead, and violently opened the door of their private sitting-room. The first thing that met his angry eyes was a letter addressed to Mrs. Upton lying on the console by the door. He picked it up, and once more his face changed colour from pink to crimson, deepening into a fine claret.

“Ha!” he said, savagely seizing the offending envelope, “so I’ve caught the Trout nicely;” and he gave a rude laugh.

His wife stiffened at his words, and instantly grasped that by some means or other her lord was in possession of her silly letter to Captain Shannon. Her quick mind saw that if she were to hesitate in making the first hit he would say things that would not easily be unsaid, so she held out her hand for the letter the Colonel was holding, saying pleasantly :

“However did you know that Captain Shannon called me the Trout? It was really rather cheeky of him, but it is because of that brown frock I have with the spots on it; he always said it was like a trout. So I called him the Fisherman, because he is always fishing for cups and billets, or ponies or something. Give me the letter;” and she would have taken it, only her husband withdrew it as he said :

“Not so fast, my lady; first tell me what you mean by this epistle, written under cover of the

Baby Fund stationery;" and with fingers trembling with suppressed rage he brought forth her letter to Captain Shannon.

"Oh, I am glad you've got it; we could not think where it had got to;" and the lady began to unbutton her gloves.

The Colonel was considerably surprised.

"Have you read it?" Her big candid eyes made his own lower their lids.

"Of course I've read it; it got mixed up with some tenders and put away, and I only found it to-day. I—I opened it, as I am doing most of the M.B.F. work now."

"I quite understand." The hint of contempt in her voice made the poor Colonel feel so shrunken that he had to try a little bluster.

"Oh, I'm glad you understand, for I'm damned if I do. How dare you make appointments with men to ride all over the country when you know my duties will keep me out of the way?" He fumed furiously up and down.

"Now, my dear Howell, *do be* reasonable. You have forbidden me to ride by myself or with only another woman, and you like me to be here when you are off duty, so to humour and please you, remember, I worry various men to escort me. When I can, I get Hester Tirrett to come, and we rendezvous at Porte des Bombes; it is only when I know that you won't be at home that I

venture to go any distance. As to any slyness or secrecy about it, I simply omit to tell you these things because excitement is bad for you, and you are so childishly jealous."

There was a suspicion of a choke in her voice, and she applied a morsel of lace to her eyes.

"Indeed, I think your suspicions are ve-r-y in-sulting to us both ;" and she sobbed gently.

The Colonel was visibly affected.

"Oh, I don't suppose you mean any real harm ; it's being deceived that annoys me. And what's the fellow writing to you from Tunis about ?"

"Well, give me the letter, and I shall be able to answer that question," she replied dryly, and wiping eyes in which the beauty was in no wise dimmed by her recent tears. Taking the letter, she sat down at her writing-table, and drawing a long pin from her hat, with great deliberation cut open the envelope with it. She peered inside and carefully took out a letter ; crumpling the envelope into a ball, she threw it into the waste-paper basket, and read the letter out loud.

"VICTORIA HOTEL, TUNIS,

"28th.

"DEAR MRS. UPTON,

"In the hurry of my departure I fear I forgot to refer to your note *re* 'the dumpties,' for Mrs. Shaughanssy's twins. Yes, by all means buy two ; only to give one would certainly lead to ill-

feeling between them ; besides, I think the Committee understood you asked for two and voted them unanimously. Kindly get them yourself and send C. form fully filled in, and enclose the Stores' stamped receipt to Mr. Dean, who will refund you the money. I think the ones with bone rings at fivepence-halfpenny will be good enough ; you see, she is only a bombardier's wife. I hope Mrs. Wells liked the flannel. I thought the quality was very nice, and trust a yard and a half was sufficient. Ask for anything you want : Dean has heaps of money. I gave him over the hundred pounds from Lady Malcolm's ball before I left. With kind regards to Colonel Upton and yourself,

“ Yours very truly,

“ WALTER MILD MAY SHANNON.”

“ There you are,” said the fair reader, as she threw the letter on the table, and hastily entered her bedroom, which led off the sitting-room. When safely there she put her handkerchief to her mouth and rocked herself gently to and fro till she heard the Colonel leave the room to wash for luncheon ; then, still smiling, she returned to the sitting-room, and picking out the crumpled envelope of Captain Shannon's letter from the basket, straightened it out and gently extracted another letter written on thin foreign paper, crushed the envelope up again, threw it back into the basket, and returned to her

bedroom. Considering the trouble both sender and recipient were at to keep its contents secret, they were surprisingly harmless.

“DEAR MRS. UPTON,

“I thought that perhaps, after the last little contretemps of the M.B.F. envelope, it would be wiser not to risk another, so enclose a nice little letter in case of trouble. I am horribly bored here, but have picked up two really good ponies and a very pretty trapper. I shall not get back in time for the races, but hope Kitten will win the bracelet for you. I hope you did not have any fuss with the Colonel over the lost note.”

“Yours sincerely,

“WALTER SHANNON.”

Mrs. Upton tore it up when she had read it, and a peevish expression crossed her pretty face.

“It is really too stupid to have to do this sort of thing,” she thought; “only Howell is so absurdly jealous, and it gives a zest to life, and makes a stupid letter like that assume a racy aspect. It’s a sort of gamble—if I win there is peace, and if I lose there is war, or, at any rate, a skirmish; and in the end I can always smooth Howell down and generally make him apologize for his suspicions, and then the good old thing stumps up a present to prove the genuineness of his repentance.”

It was a very haughty lady that joined Colonel Upton at lunch, unapproachable in her icy robe of injured innocence, and by the end of the meal the Colonel was a grovelling worm.

"My dear Beatrice," he pleaded meekly, "do forgive me. I am an evil-minded, suspicious brute; but I was put out at the office, and that affair coming on top of the other made me angrier than I should have been. I went through the Baby Fund accounts after the General left, and can find no trace of the hundred pounds Lady Malcolm sent from the ball, and you see Shannon says in his letter he gave it over to Dean; however, never mind that now. Look here, dear, would you like to come down to Melli's and show me that little pendant you took such a fancy to—eh?" and rather timidly he took his wife's hand.

"Oh, Howell," she said, her face turned slightly away, "do you mean you are not really angry with me?"

"No, no, my pet—of course not," he said, visibly brightening, as his wife, with one of these sudden changes that bind elderly men with chains of steel, turned, and putting her arms round his neck, kissed him sweetly.

"You are a dear," she cried. "I do love you! I'll get my hat, and will wear the pendant at the races, and it will bring me good luck."

Half an hour afterwards, in possession of a far

more expensive jewel than she had hoped for, Mrs. Upton drove with Miss Tirrett and her father to the races. On the ground they were met by Percy Dean.

"Free Trade is our horse," he whispered, "only breathe not his name. He is looking grand. It is the fifth race. Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Upton? Winnipeg is a hot favourite for the next race"—and so on.

The ladies were not very lucky until the Bracelet race, which the Kitten won, and paid fifteen on, so both were pleased.*

"It is a good omen," whispered Hester to Dean.

The poor man was so nervous he could hardly conceal it; but the numbers for the Malta Cup went up at last. There were eighteen starters. Number 2, a horse called Wee Willie, belonging to Lord William Lindsay, was first favourite, although his owner only backed him for a place; Darky, Number 6, was the next; then came Free Trade, Number 17; then a group of outsiders. But even most of them found a few backers, and when Dean went to the Pari-Mutuel box for his ticket, there were only three horses who were still in single figures: Number 1, Pink Plumes; Number 7, Joe Chamberlain; and Number 16, Sporting Bob. The horses had gone down, but there was still a

* The betting on the Malta racecourse is done on the Pari-Mutuel system.—ED.

crush at the box when, in as low a voice as he could, Dean asked for eighty tickets on Number 17. Hester had given him ten pounds to invest for her. While the man in the office was getting the tickets, Dean tried to signal to Hester that only forty were gone; but she rushed off to get chairs to stand on. He grabbed the tickets and stuffed them in his pocket, and mounted the chair beside Hester and Mrs. Upton. He was just in time to see the start, Free Trade had an inside place, and got off well.

“That gold and blue thing next to him,” said Dean, “is a rank outsider; he will soon drop out and give us more room.”

His heart was thumping furiously against his ribs—honour, future, wife, were all dependent on the speed and endurance of that little pony.

As the cry went up, “They’re off!” Dean moistened his dry lips with his tongue. When they passed the men’s pavilion, Free Trade’s red cap led; Wee Willie’s jockey was trying hard to close up, but could not get ahead of that “blue and gold thing.” A few seconds now thinned out the crowd, and passing the polo pavilion Darky led, Number 7 a good second, and gaining every stride. Free Trade’s jockey was riding wildly, his cruel whip frantically cutting the exhausted animal’s flanks; but each stride he lost ground, and to every onlooker it was certain that whoever won he

would not. The course seemed to rise up and hit Percy Dean in the face. As the two others shot ahead he got down from his chair, shut up his opera-glasses, and tried to stiffen his face and regain his self-command before the two women looked at him. Cries rang out: "Darky, Darky wins! No, Chamberlain, Chamberlain's won!" And true enough it was Chamberlain—the "blue and gold thing," Number 7 on the card, and rank outsider—that had won the big race of the year.

Hester got down from her chair; she hardly dared raise her eyes to her lover's face, and when she did she saw such a terrible expression on it that they filled with tears of sympathy.

"Never mind, little girl," he said. "It's bad luck, but can't be helped;" and he drew the tickets from his pocket, and tidily patted them into a neat heap preparatory to tearing them up, when Hester, with a little cry, snatched them from him.

"Look, look, Percy!" She jerked the words out, pointing to the number on the board where the winners' numbers were hoisted.

"Number 7—that's Chamberlain; and see, your tickets are Number 7. Percy, don't you see, the man must have given you the wrong number. Free Trade is 17, and we've won." She shook his arm, for he hardly seemed to grasp what she was saying; he was looking first at the tickets, then at the board.

"Hester, oh, Hester! thank God!" he said at last; and no Archbishop ever uttered a more sincere thanksgiving.

Just then, on the principle that it "never rains but it pours," two of his brother officers rushed up to him.

"You are a lucky chap, Dean," one of them cried. "You know you drew Chamberlain in the Garrison Sweep last night, and it's worth two hundred pounds?"

"No, did I?" said Dean. "I asked Camdon to draw for me, but he never told me I drew a horse."

"He was such an outsider, I suppose he forgot it; anyhow, I congratulate you."

Hester and Dean went together to collect their winnings. There were only eighty-three sold, and they had eighty of them, so the nice little sum of something over two hundred pounds was paid them for their twenty pounds' worth of mistakes.

"Come, Hester—come away. I can't stay here, or people will think me crazy or drunk. I must kiss you—I shall do it now if you won't come!" and his blazing eyes really looked as if he meant what he said.

"Oh, please don't! I'll come," she replied, laughing. So with just a word of apology to Mrs. Upton, the excited pair drove back to the Tirretts' flat.

Percy emptied his pockets on to the table.

“Hester darling, you don't know all—all that it meant to me to win that money, and until you do know, I must not kiss you.”

Then, in a few words, neither excusing himself nor seeking to palliate his crime, he told her the story of how he had taken the money entrusted to him by Captain Shannon, in order to pay his debt to Mr. Oliphant.

Hester listened in silence. She could hardly grasp what desperate straits a gentleman may be in for even smaller sums than a hundred pounds. The daughter of a very rich man, living among a very wealthy set of people, it seemed almost impossible to her that it could be difficult to a man of her own class to raise a hundred pounds without stealing it; and she instantly made up her mind to remove her lover at once from what must certainly be a most uncomfortable position. Instead of reproaches and ugly words, she put her arms gently round his neck, and rubbing her soft pink cheek against his, she said:

“Poor darling boy! it must have been simply horrid for you to have to do it. But never mind; you shall have lots of money—when we are married.”

Which goes to prove that it is fortunate for many men that a woman's sense of honour is often placed in a different position from that of the other sex.

That night Hester Tirrett and her father had a little conversation—at least, Mr. Tirrett conversed and Hester wept in the beginning, but before they finished Mr. Tirrett was nearly weeping, and Hester was doing the conversing with such good effect that before she went to bed that night she wrote a note to Percy Dean, telling him her father had withdrawn his opposition to their marriage, on the condition that Percy left the army and consented to live with his father-in-law, who will “pay our bills and give us two thousand a year to play with.”

Next day Dean paid one hundred pounds into the Baby Fund account, and added ten pounds to it as a thank-offering. On his arrival at the office he took the receipt to Colonel Upton.

“Here is the receipt for the hundred pounds from the ball, sir,” he said cheerfully.

The Colonel looked keenly at him, and merely grunted: “Oh, that’s all right; I wondered where it was!” But that look sent a cold thrill down the young man’s spine, and he felt glad that his papers were soon to be sent in.

Hester and Percy were married the following July in London, and “lived happy ever afterwards.” But the Baby Fund languished sadly, and a few years afterwards died a natural death for lack of funds. Mrs. Upton is still as charming as ever; and the Colonel, or, as he now is, the

General, is still jealous, but, learning by experience how expensive it was to express outwardly his opinion of his pretty wife's conduct, he is less ready to find fault as in the old days.

And so ended the "Baby Fund Affair," and there was no scandal after all.

VIII

WHERE LOVE IS KING

A ROMANCE OF THE PALACE

I

THAT this story will be read with good-natured jeers, and then dismissed from the minds of the major portion of its readers with the curt but crushing comment of "Rot!" I am quite aware; but, nevertheless, I shall tell it without attempting any explanation of the problems it contains. It is the first time it has ever been told fully, but those who were most nearly concerned have all passed away; its recital can hurt no one, and may, perhaps, act as a feather in the scale against the weight of narrow, ignorant unbelief of the present day, more especially that of the modern young man and woman, who—their language being as limited as their ideas, and their minds wholly devoid of the Divine gift of imagination—will comment on anything that savours of a life deeper, broader, and on a higher intellectual plane than their own, in the

eloquent expression, "I call it rot!" or, as they frequently pronounce it, "Wrot!"

It all took place when my husband was aide-de-camp to His Excellency the Governor, Sir Francis Collett. Lady Collett was my aunt. As she was very delicate, we lived in the Palace; I was thereby able to save her a lot of trouble in many ways. We had a charming suite of rooms, and I was always able to have a guest to stay with me when I wished it. In the winter of 186— I brought out with me Marie de la Hay; she was my husband's cousin; she had been my closest friend for five years. Her father, old Admiral de la Hay, had a place close to our little *pied-à-terre* in Kent. When Marie was only sixteen, she had taken a violent fancy to me. We had not been married very long, and I was only two years her senior. I think it was her dainty loveliness that first fascinated me, but I soon grew wonderfully fond of her; her spiritual beauty and charm seemed to appeal to all that was best in me. After spending a few hours with her, I always felt that, had I patience to persevere, I, too, might train my ears and eyes that they might see sights and hear sounds other than those of mere material things—glimpses of that other world surrounding us, that now and then one of us will see into, though it be "through a glass darkly." It seemed as though Marie had the power of transmitting to

me a something that cleared my sight, and was able to show me lovely thoughts that tinged my intellectual life with gorgeous colours and imaginings. Her father and mother were pathetically devoted to her as the only one of their children who had survived childhood. She accepted their love in a quiet, unresponsive way, but when I became intimate with her I discovered that she really cared very little for the old people, or, indeed, for anyone. She was not selfish, but self-absorbed to a degree extraordinary in one so young; she lived almost in a world of her own fashioning, peopled with spirits purer and fairer than human beings. She was childishly ignorant of the modern young lady's usual accomplishments, but anything of a mystical nature, or that appealed to her imagination, she would study with avidity. She had a queer religion of her own—a belief in the reincarnation of souls, so strong that it was absolutely part of herself. To no one else did she confide these thoughts, but to me she would often describe strange scenes that she said she had witnessed in other ages, or when introduced to strangers would tell me afterwards who they had been in some previous incarnation.

One day we were walking through some woods at B—— that neither of us had ever explored before, for they lay sixteen miles from where we lived, and as we were looking for a nice place to

spread our luncheon, Marie suddenly stopped, and, pointing down a glade, said : " I've been here when I was a priestess, in the days of the Druids ; our temple stood there !" And she went on to describe a scene which she surely must have witnessed. Another day we were reading a chapter in Gibbon's " Rome," where he describes a celebrated Roman banquet, when gradually I saw come into her eyes that mystic far-off look that was always in them as she watched scenes invisible to me, and she said excitedly : " No, no, that was wrong ; the Emperor sat with Flavia on his right hand, and she wore the saffron robe he had given her that morning ; it was to *her* and *not* the Empress he gave the jewels worn by the Senator Antonius when he was taken away in disgrace ; I was Flavia's favourite slave, and stood behind her !"

She made this statement in a tone of such complete conviction that I could not help feeling that the veil of the past was indeed lifted for her, and power given her to remember scenes she had actually taken part in in other ages ; besides, how could she have acquired such strange and intimate knowledge of things that no living man or woman had ever seen ? Once I remember we were having tea on the lawn, when our worthy rector came to call, bringing with him his brother, who was a bishop of a diocese in the North of England. When they had gone Marie remarked dreamily :

“ I suppose the bishop did not recognise me. I knew him at once, though it is many moons since we met. He was then a Red Indian brave, the chief of his tribe. He had a squaw, and many skins and scalps. They called him “ Wabun ”—the East Wind—for he was fleet and strong. I was his horse. He loved me more than his squaw or papoose. My mane was always plaited with the largest shells and the finest fringe.” Then she stopped abruptly, and, absurd as it seems when written, her tone and manner were so convincing that I fully believed what she said, and had great trouble not to inquire for his “ squaw ” the next time I met the bishop. For years afterwards I could never meet him without wondering what he looked like when he wore a row of scalps instead of an apron. But the unsatisfactory part of these revelations was their hard-and-fast limitations ; not one syllable more than she chose to tell could I get out of her. Whether she really only saw one scene and had no further recollection herself, or whether she was not permitted to tell, I do not know. She seemed quite unresponsive to all the love she involuntarily won, and unconscious of the admiration her beauty excited. Every man who had the opportunity fell in love with her. It was a matter of serious trouble to our good rector that he could never keep a curate for more than six months, as they were quite useless once they had

seen Marie. She herself never seemed to consider love or marriage as subjects that could have any possible personal interest for her. "You talk of love when you mean marriage," she said to me one day, in a tone of gentle contempt. "Your good women of this era sell themselves for clothes, for jewels, for horses, for luxuries; your bad women sell themselves for food; but love—ah, you have no time for love! Love takes many lives to perfect." And she smiled a dreamy smile, and left me to try and grasp what she meant.

In the autumn of 186—, Admiral de la Hay was seriously ill with inflammation of the lungs. Marie was sadly depressed and worried, even when her father was out of danger; she looked more fragile and thinner than ever, so that Mrs. de la Hay was only too glad to accept my offer to take her back to Malta with me in October, if she would go. As a rule, only the greatest necessity would make her leave home; she never wanted change or amusements—indeed, she always appeared to consider them superfluous, and to look on life as a tiresome affair, to be got through with as little fuss as possible. However, to our great surprise, she agreed to come without hesitation, and took quite an interest in buying her clothes, although her wardrobe was always well filled with the dainty silks and laces she affected. It was

arranged that as soon as the Admiral was able, he and his wife would follow us, and spend the winter partly in Malta and partly in Italy.

When we were having one of our long talks Marie told me her reason for wishing to go with me.

“I may find my Love again; I know now it was there we parted.”

Her words fairly startled me, and her mention of anything so mundane as a lover made me burn with curiosity; I restrained it womanfully, but to no purpose, for all that she said was:

“No more has been revealed to me as yet.”

Not until we sighted the light on Gozo did she enlighten me further; then, as we leant over the taffrail, looking at the phosphorescent water, in one of those silences that are the speech of kindred souls, and are only broken by one putting into words the thoughts of both, Marie said:

“Yes, I loved him!” It was certainly a direct reply to the question I was mentally asking. “I was in Malta,” she went on, “during the siege by the Turks in 1564; my lover was an Italian nobleman and Catholic; my father was an Englishman and a Protestant. I know not why he was there; I had no mother; I was his only child; I was self-willed, passionate, headstrong, and uncontrolled; I could not bear opposition. I was beautiful and had many lovers, but to only

one did I listen, and to him I gave my heart. He was a Knight of the Order of St. John, a sworn celibate, handsome, brave, and good. He struggled nobly against his love for me, and would have conquered, but I was mad, and would hear of no religious vows that should keep us apart; he was as strong as I, and swore to love me to his dying day, and after to eternity, but also to keep his vow and to fulfil his promise to his king. He came to say good-bye to me, and I stabbed him to the heart, swearing he should not belong to kings or priests; that if living he could not be mine, dead none would take him from me. As he sank to the ground at my feet he whispered: 'When thou hast wiped out this deed I will come and fetch thee!' They were his last words. I fled. They discovered his body later, and hanged a soldier who was found near, but no suspicion ever fell on me. I have lived many lives since then, atoning for my crime, and now I feel the end of my punishment is near. I have worked and suffered greatly, but have always been faithful to him in my heart, and know that soon he will fetch me to a world where Love is King, and no duty bars Love's triumph!"

Accustomed as I was to dear Marie's strange fancies and ideas, I was distinctly alarmed at her speech—indeed, its prophecy made me most unhappy, and I felt that this was far from being

the right spirit in which to approach the Malta season, but I hoped that as her general health improved the tone of her mind would do so too.

II

It really seemed as if my hope—that Marie's mental balance would become more evenly adjusted—was going to be fulfilled ; for more than ten days after our arrival Marie was a different creature. My aunt had not come out. We were staying at San Antonio ; Marie revelled in the lovely gardens and the warmth and sun ; she seemed more girl-like and less dreamy, and appeared suddenly to awake to the fact that admiration was a very pleasant thing. She smiled so sweetly on two of the aides-de-camp that they were soon reduced to the same condition as the rector's curates, being made of the same stuff, only differently dressed.

I was delighted, and wrote a full account of Marie's doings to her parents. It was about a fortnight after our arrival that Malcolm and I brought her in to see the Palace in Valetta. My husband showed her the magnificent armour, tapestries, and pictures, while I was making arrangements for some slight alterations in our own rooms. When I had finished I came down and joined them ; we were all going to lunch at

Admiralty House. We were walking down one of the long passages, when Marie suddenly stopped, and with outstretched arm pointed to a picture just visible through the open door of an ante-room.

"Look, look," she cried—"Leonardo!"

She pushed open the door wider and entered the room, going straight to the picture and gazing at it, her beautiful eyes slowly filling with tears. The picture itself was that of an extremely handsome young man. The high forehead, the thin nose, and cleanly cut mouth and jaw, told of a stern, honourable nature; only the eyes, with their grey-green irises, gave a hint that he might be loved as well as feared. The inscription beneath the portrait was, "Leonardo del Monaco, Knight of the most noble Order of St. John of Jerusalem; this great soldier, loved by his country, trusted by his king, was ruthlessly murdered on the 31st day of December, 1564." Below the picture stood a beautiful suit of armour, the shield bearing the coat of arms of the house of Monaco, and the letters "L. M." Marie's eyes at length left the picture and rested on the armour. Malcolm and I, who were standing in the doorway, saw her put out her hand and touch one of the steel bands over the breast of the corselet; with a slight effort she moved it, and revealed a small object just fitting into a

place evidently cut for it in the steel beneath. She took it out, held it in her palm, gazing at it intently ; then I went up to her. She held it out, saying, "See, that was me." And on the ivory disc there was, indeed, a marvellous likeness to the living girl beside me ; the only difference was the face in the picture was less pathetic than Marie's, and the eyes were more passionate, and had not that wistful, far-away look. One was the face of a woman who would suffer, and the other of one who had suffered ; both were beautiful. She seemed pleased at my recognition of the picture, and added : "Yes, it is like me now, but I was lovelier then. It was painted by old Giovanni, the artist. I remember Leonardo having that secret place made for it by his armourer ; only we three knew of it : see how exquisitely it fits," and, replacing the picture, she slipped back the band, and none could detect where it had been opened.

It was with difficulty we could induce her to leave the room, and all through lunch she was abstracted and dreamy, hardly even pretending to eat, talk or listen, so that I sincerely pitied the poor flag-lieutenant who was sitting next to her. When we returned to San Antonio my husband and I thoroughly discussed the extraordinary affair, but the more we talked, the further we seemed from any reasonable solution of the two

facts—first, Marie's recognition of the portrait as that of Leonardo del Monaco (it was quite impossible to read the inscription, even standing in the doorway); secondly, the extraordinary likeness to herself of the miniature, and the amazing fact of her knowing of its existence in its secret hiding-place. At last we gave it up, my husband advising me to get an explanation from Marie if I could; he was even more puzzled than I, as he, of course, knew nothing of her strange gifts. I have never held it part of a wife's duty to her husband to tell him the confidences of her friends. When I went to say good-night to my guest, I asked her what made her recognise the portrait as that of Leonardo del Monaco. She laughed softly. "Dear Winnie, how foolish you are! Would you not know your husband's picture if you saw it? Of course I knew my Lover's face." And no more would she say.

After this she often begged me to allow her to go and see her picture, and she would spend hours alone with it while I was in Valetta, paying visits. When we came in from San Antonio, at her request I asked Uncle Wilfred to allow me to have the picture moved into my sitting-room, merely saying that Marie had taken a fancy to it; and as my uncle had taken the greatest fancy to Marie herself, it was immediately done, particularly as the picture was of no great value or interest. However, I thought Marie was asking a good

deal when she requested the suit of armour might accompany the picture ; my room was large, but there was a good deal of furniture already in it, and there was really no space for a bulky suit of complete armour. I don't think Marie even cast a thought towards my wishes on the matter ; and her joy was so great at having her knight's picture and armour where she could always see and touch them, that it was worth the inconvenience it caused me. But I was rather annoyed to find that she used to come out of her room and hold midnight interviews with them. I found it out one night when, being restless, I got up to find a book, and heard a voice speaking softly through the door which led from my bedroom to the back drawing-room. On opening it, I saw Marie standing dressed as she had been at dinner, with her head resting against the shoulder of the suit of armour, and for a second I could have sworn that a dark arm encircled her figure.

" Marie," I cried, " what are you doing here at this hour ?"

" He called me," she said simply.

" Nonsense, child ! go to bed. Have you often done this ?"

" Not often—sometimes."

In the morning she was pale, with dark marks under her eyes. During the next fortnight I was seriously worried about her : one day she appeared

in wild spirits, and would laugh and talk in a way I had never known her to do before ; and then she would suddenly become silent, and on the first opportunity would retire to her room. She got perceptibly thinner, and looked more fragile every day. I felt thankful that her parents were coming out by the next P. & O., as I found I had undertaken a charge that was too much for me. I felt it still more when a few days later she petrified me by announcing her intention of going into the Convent of — for a month's "preparation." I quite forget if I have mentioned that, some two years previous to this, Marie had suddenly expressed a wish to become a Roman Catholic, and, greatly against the wish of her parents, had been received into the Roman Catholic Church.

She also added that she had written to her father, telling him not to come out, and saying she was going into retreat for a month. I really felt Marie was taxing the limits of my friendship too far, and placing me in a most awkward position with the Admiral and Mrs. de la Hay. I argued, I remonstrated, I implored her to give up the idea, I even pretended to be offended at the slight to myself ; but all in vain : she hardly seemed to hear what I was saying, and when I was almost reduced to tears, she came over and kissed me, saying :

"Winnie dearest, do not trouble about me.

You are kind and sweet, and I love you, but I have another Love whose commands I must obey ; and I must be where there are no distractions, where I can think and fast, and prepare for the great change."

After that, what could I say? But I telegraphed to the Admiral to the effect that Marie persisted in going to the convent against my wishes. The answer came back : " I absolutely forbid Marie to leave you ; am coming out overland." In subdued triumph I showed her the telegram ; she read it, and laughed gently.

" Dear father!" she said. " He is very good, but he does not understand." After a pause, she said solemnly : " Winnie, it was New Year's Eve I killed him, and on New Year's Eve he will come and fetch me, and I must do one more penance before that. Don't be unhappy about me, dear ; you have never known such joys as will be mine soon—very soon."

I felt helpless against such absolute conviction as this, and went to bed very miserable. Early the next morning my maid brought me a note from Marie.

" DEAR WINNIE,

" I have gone to the convent. Do not fret ; I shall come back on New Year's Eve.

" Yours

" MARIE.'

Needless to say, I was terribly distressed. I drove off at once to the convent, but could get no satisfaction there—nothing but a curt refusal to my request to be allowed to see Marie: “Our Sister has placed herself in our care, and her wish to be shielded from all outside distractions must be respected.” After that I could only take my leave.

I did not see any use in needlessly troubling her parents, who were starting for Malta in a few days; if their daughter chose to regulate her conduct by some higher authority than her father’s, surely it was reasonable to believe that I, who was merely her hostess, was powerless to control her. So I gave out that Marie had gone to the convent for a little quiet before the gaities of Christmas, and endeavoured to assume an air of tranquillity I was far from feeling. But between my social duties and pleasures, my committees and correspondence, I had no time for useless fretting over circumstances I was not in a position to alter. I waited the arrival of Admiral and Mrs. de la Hay; but on the very day they were to have left London poor Mrs. de la Hay slipped down some stairs and broke her arm, and they telegraphed to me it would be quite a month before she could undertake the journey. A later telegram asked me, if possible, to find an escort for their daughter, and to send her home. I wrote at once to Marie, enclos-

ing both telegrams, and telling her that Mrs. Lefone, an officer's wife whom she knew, was returning home the following week, and would chaperone her ; but the Mother Superior of the convent returned my letter, saying that her guest had particularly requested that no letters might be given her, or any news of the outer world be allowed to reach her. After that rebuff I wrote to her father, merely stating that, as Marie was already in the convent, I would advise him to allow her to remain there for a week or two. This was the only advice I could give, as I saw that Marie would do as she intended, no matter what commands the Admiral might issue. To this he acquiesced, and wrote Marie long letters, which I forwarded, and had duly returned from the convent. Matters remained in this state until the 31st of December ; my uncle was giving a big fancy-dress ball the following night.

III

It was the night of the 31st of December, and I had a good many final arrangements for the ball to see to. My husband was at San Antonio with Uncle Wilfred, and Captain Foster (another aide-de-camp) had dined with me, and we had been sorting cotillion favours, etc., afterwards. At half-past ten I felt too tired to do any more, and

went up to bed. I was too sleepy even to read, which was most exceptional for me ; I seemed to sleep a few minutes after my head touched the pillow.

It did not appear to me that I had slept ten minutes, when I awoke to hear the five or six adjacent churches striking twelve, or rather six, which means twelve. I was curiously wide awake, and had an extraordinary feeling of impending disaster. I listened intently for any sounds, but all was silent ; my heart beat in an uncomfortable manner. I lit a candle with the intention of reading till I grew sleepy again, but found that in my hurry to go to bed I had left the book, which I had been reading, in the sitting-room, so I lay wondering if it were worth the trouble of going to fetch it. The tiny flame of the candle in that big, lofty room left in misty gloom all the corners, and made me feel quite nervous, so that I got up, and, slipping on my shoes and dressing-gown, crossed the room towards the door, which opened into the drawing-room. As I did so, I heard a sound that made me drop the candle and stand paralyzed with horror, fright, or whatever the feeling that your blood has turned to icy water, and your heart is beating in your ears, may be called.

The sound was the unmistakable clank of armour—of steel meeting steel. It was clear, and repeated two or three times ; then I heard a low

murmur of voices, those of a man and woman. They seemed to be human, and that enabled me to regain my self-control. Without waiting to light my candle, I drew aside the portière; the door was just open, and a slight push enabled me to see into the room. The young moon shone palely in through the long window, and softly silhouetted against it appeared the figure of a tall man in armour; his well-shaped black head and beautiful aquiline features were sharply outlined, and I recognised at once those of the portrait of Leonardo del Monaco. He bent tenderly over the kneeling figure of a young girl; her rich, dark hair almost covered her face, which was hidden in her hands.

As I watched I felt, rather than heard, her say :

“Forgive, forgive!”

The man seemed to reply :

“My love, my love, kneel not to me. I forgave thee ere they drew the dagger from the wound. Life was of no value to me since duty forbade me to love thee! And thou hast paid in tears of blood, in lives of toil, weariness, and pain, for thy sin against the laws of thy God; but thy atonement is made—thou hast paid thy score in full, and this night thy wanderings shall cease, for I am sent to fetch thee to a world where Love is King—Love in such a perfect form that poor mortals of this world would end their lives to-night to gain one hour of Love’s paradise, did they but know! Rise, beloved.”

As he gently raised her, I saw her face.

It was Marie—Marie, transfigured by a love more Divine than mortal, her face etherealized beyond belief; the great eyes, sunken, but gleaming with a strange lustre, gazed at the face bent down to her. I saw their lips meet, then a heavy cloud passed over the moon, and the room became dark and absolutely still. A feeling of awful terror overcame me; I seemed to be in the presence of some intangible but mighty power. I tried in vain to cry out, and then something in my brain gave way, and I remembered no more.

When I again became conscious, I was lying on the threshold of the door with my arm across my face as if to shut out some sight; my only sensation was one of cold—cold so intense that I could hardly move my limbs. As my senses returned, I gradually remembered the events of the night, and I instinctively looked towards the window where I had imagined I had seen Marie and her lover. Dazed and stupid as I was, I can remember smiling a little as I did so at the idea of seeing anything there. The grey dawn was creeping across the space dividing me from the window; but what was that white huddled thing lying where the light was strongest? I struggled to my feet, and staggered across the room; stooping down to touch it, my hand felt a coil of long, soft, thick hair, then something hard and cold. I turned

back the hair and saw Marie. She was quite dead and cold—her face was, oh, so thin, the bones showing their formation through the skin, and her hands the same ; so little did she weigh, that I lifted her with ease to the sofa.

There was nothing to horrify or alarm in a death that left behind so exquisitely happy an expression of mingled peace and gladness. I gently closed the lovely eyes and kissed the soft cheek, and as I did so merciful tears came to me ; for the strain of what I had seen, and the shock of what I had found, were enough to “chase reason from her seat.” The relief of those tears I shall never forget.

The day was now born, and as I dried my eyes I remembered the touch of the cold substance I had felt as I lifted Marie, and again I approached the window. There, glittering in the pale sunlight, lay Leonardo del Monaco’s suit of armour ; it lay just as if its wearer had been suddenly withdrawn upwards.

It was not the least extraordinary feature of all the strange things I had witnessed lately—the way that armour lay ! I endeavoured to lift it, but its weight and bulk were too great, so I looked round for something to hide it with. Lying on a chair, I found Marie’s cloak, and covered it with that—Marie was dressed in the white serge robe of a novice of the convent. When I had done this it

was past six, so I went down the passage to my maid's room and told her to dress and come to me at once. I met her at the door, and giving her a message to be sent to my husband, telling him to return at once, I locked the doors of the drawing-room, and went to my bedroom to dress.

When Malcolm came, I told him the whole story, and showed him the armour on the floor. Out of consideration for my uncle and the disappointment the postponement of the ball would cause, we decided not to tell him the worst about Marie till the next day, but to give out to him and the servants that Marie had returned that morning from the convent, and was ill. I wrote to the Mother Superior, and told her Marie had come to me in the night, and died in my room, and she sent two nuns to watch beside her, though nominally they were there to nurse her. Malcolm insisted on my taking a sedative and going to bed the whole afternoon, and had I not done so I could never have borne my part at the dinner and ball that night ; but public people have got to suppress their private feelings, whether they be mental, moral, or physical, and I think I carried out my duties well enough to deceive my uncle and guests.

The next day Malcolm told my uncle the same story I had told the Mother Superior. He sent for his own military doctor, and explained what had happened so far as he knew. After a cursory

examination, he gave a certificate of death from heart-failure; but one thing he told me that shocked me horribly—namely, that her body was attenuated to a degree that showed she must have been undergoing semi-starvation for weeks; also that the *flesh was cut and scored as if with blows from a whip*. Much against his own wish, I persuaded him to allow the matter to rest, not even to mention it to my uncle. The Mother Superior explained to us that it was Marie's wish to undergo the most severe form of penance and fasting in atonement for some sin known only to her confessor. She had been allowed to gratify her wish to its fullest extent, and Heaven alone knows what agony that delicate body endured in its subjugation to the martyr-spirit it held.

The armour was replaced on the stand by my husband.

Marie's death broke her mother's heart. The Admiral never recovered from the loss of his wife and daughter, and next year he followed them.

Such is the tragic story of the love of Leonardo del Monaco. I can give you no explanation of the visions of the beautiful girl who died that sorrowful night, and I only relate that which actually passed before my eyes. I was never fanciful or imaginative, and could no more have invented such an unnatural story than I could imagine a fourth dimension. I am only able to

describe the scenes I witnessed, and I shall believe to my dying day that for a brief hour Marie's lover was allowed to resume his material body and release from her earthly tenement the spirit of the woman he had loved so well that Death was powerless to break the cords that bound them to each other; that Marie had indeed made her atonement to the God whose laws she had so sinfully broken, and, having paid the price of her ransom fully and freely, had gone with her lover to some world "where Love is King."

IX

THE LIE OF THE RING

COMMANDER LESLIE CARLYLE was a very clever young officer ; he commanded the cruiser *Part-ridge* out in Malta the last time I was there. He was not a society man ; not that he was by any means unsociable, but he was working very hard at some experiments for the Commander-in-Chief, and had little time for amusing himself. I knew him pretty well, and liked him very much ; and when I heard he was down with what they feared would turn out to be the much-dreaded Malta fever, I sent for him to come up and let me nurse him. The hospital happened to be very full at the moment, and the authorities were very glad to get him off their hands ; so Leslie came, and I nursed him, and finally took him home in June in a P. & O. His father and mother met us, and took him in charge. They were charming people ; indeed, Lady Stapleton has been one of my very best friends ever since. Leslie was their second son. His elder brother, Lord Storr, was a soldier,

and, oddly enough, came out the following winter as military secretary to Sir Philip Wade, the Governor. Leslie recovered slowly, and was not fit to go out again until the end of September. I was then in London buying clothes wherewith to astonish and delight all Valetta during the coming winter, when I got a note from him telling me he was returning to Malta on the fifth, and asking me if I would lunch with him the next day at the Berkeley, adding: "Alone, as I have something very important to tell you." I happened to be disengaged, and so accepted.

He met me at the entrance, looking very well and remarkably handsome. His strong, well-cut, clean-shaven face was good to see, but in his deep-set dark blue eyes a new light burned.

After a few commonplace remarks, he said:

"Lady Malcolm, may I tell you about—her?"

I guessed there was a *her*. I said: "Yes, do."

I will omit the wanderings of a young man deeply in love, and give here the gist of what he said.

It appeared that he was walking down Bond Street about twelve o'clock on September 4, when someone passed in a carriage he thought he knew. Without stopping, he turned his head to look after the receding vehicle, and thereby nearly knocked down a young lady who was stooping to pick up something from the pavement. Mutual apologies

followed, but the face of the girl was so beautiful that my friend lost his head, and incidentally his heart. He crossed the road, and followed her till she turned into the Albemarle Hotel. He entered a moment afterwards, and tried by various bribes to discover her name, but without success. He owns to fairly haunting the street for two days, and then chance favoured him. She came out alone, got into a hansom, and drove to the park. Needless to say, he followed her, and, seeing her sit on a chair, evidently waiting for a friend, he strolled up and sat on the next seat, then suddenly appeared to recognise her, and said :

“I think you are the lady I nearly knocked down in Bond Street on Monday.”

She smiled, and replied she was.

Her friend did not come for half an hour, and such good use did Leslie make of the time that she laughingly promised to be there the next day at the same hour. For three days she granted him an interview, but only on the condition that he neither asked her name nor made any attempt to find it out or to follow her ; nor did she allow him to tell her who or what he was.

Had the young lady been the most experienced coquette she could have adopted no better means of whetting the young man's curiosity and exciting his admiration, and consequently he was head over ears in love. During the past month, every

few days she would meet him for half an hour in some quiet part of the park, but as to who she was or any more about her he was as ignorant as on the first day he saw her, and now she had informed him that her people were taking her abroad for the winter, and that later on she was going to stay with an aunt, also abroad, but she declined laughingly to say more. She had allowed Leslie to tell her his name and profession.

“I am to see her to-morrow for the last time. Oh, Lady Malcolm, how can women be so cruel?”

It seemed she knew he was stationed at Malta. She appeared to be a damsel of wealth, for her clothes and jewellery were of the best, and a well-turned-out carriage and pair sometimes waited for her.

I could advise but little. “Ask her if she will write to you,” I said, “and come and lunch with me at the Bath Club to-morrow, and tell me how you have parted.”

The next day he came, and the only gleam of comfort the mysterious lady would give him was :

“You shall see me when and where you least expect it. Don't shun society ; work hard ; be good, and we shall meet again.”

Which was vague, and far from consoling to a man as much in love as he was. However, there was nothing to be done but wait patiently till the fair one chose to reveal herself again.

Leslie left on October 5, and I followed him in November. It chanced that I travelled out with his brother and sister-in-law, the Storrs. He was a pleasant, good-tempered, but rather weak man—one who would do anything for a quiet life; he loved a mild, harmless flirtation, but never dared indulge in one, for his wife was the personification of jealousy; indeed, she would hardly allow him to join the games played on deck unless she was watching him. She was plain, inclined to be stout, and about five- or six-and-thirty; she had a hard and unkind manner of passing judgments on others, often most unjustly, and she never gave the benefit of the doubt to anyone, so it was not surprising that her husband appeared to be genuinely afraid of her.

One day, as we were nearing Malta, Lady Storr, a Mrs. Fox, and myself, were sitting on deck, and the conversation turned on curious jewellery.

“The oddest ring I ever saw,” said Mrs. Fox, “belonged to an aunt of mine; it was a nigger’s head made of a black pearl, with uncanny eyes of rubies that moved.”

“My husband has a ring I gave him when we were engaged which is stranger than that; he used always to wear it, but when he was climbing Snowdon last summer he was lost all night in a fog, and slipped and strained his hand, and has

never been able to wear it since. Oh, there he is! Victor, go and fetch your skull-ring. I want to show it to Lady Malcolm and Mrs. Fox."

I happened to be watching Lord Storr's face, and was surprised to see a look of almost terror on it—certainly of the very greatest uneasiness, and he stammered over his reply like a nervous schoolboy.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said, "but I—I left it in town to be enlarged; you know, I can't wear it since I strained my hand."

"You never told me," she said sharply. "Who did you give it to?"

"I forget—I mean Benson—yes, I think it was Benson—I have written it down. Now, what about a game of quoits?"

It seemed odd that he should have appeared so uneasy over so simple a matter, but the subject was not referred to again, and I thought no more about it.

Leslie Carlyle came to meet his brother, and the two were unaffectedly glad to see each other. Lady Storr did not seem by any means overjoyed at seeing her brother-in-law, and, indeed, it was very soon apparent that she was extremely jealous of her husband's affection for Leslie. I soon had a visit from the latter, who seemed rather depressed, for he had had neither word nor sign from his Lady.

The season was starting rather late, and many people had not returned before Christmas, but early in January there came a tremendous rush of gaiety. One night at a ball at the Palace I was dancing with Leslie Carlyle, when he said :

“Lady Malcolm, don't you think it's generally best to face a disagreeable thing and get it done, and not keep it hanging about?”

“I do,” I replied.

“That's just what I tell old Victor, but he won't do it. May I tell you the story?”

“Certainly, if I can be of any help to either of you,” I said, smiling.

“Well, it's this. Elinor gave Victor a ring when they were engaged; she picked it up in an old shop in Naples, and the man swore that so long as the owner of it neither sold it nor gave it away, he would never love any woman except his own wife. Well, you know how insanely jealous she is of him, so you won't be surprised to hear that he rather funks telling her he has lost his talisman. It seems that after he came back from a fortnight in Wales last June he had the ring enlarged and was wearing it, and he lost it—how or where he does not know. The last time he remembers noticing it was one day last September. He went to the Naval and Military, where he washed his hands; he might have left it there. Or he took off his gloves somewhere

between Piccadilly and the top of Bond Street ; it might have dropped off then. He only knows when he got back to Prince's Gate (he was staying with the Pater, as Elinor was in Devonshire) his ring was gone. He telephoned to the club and to Scotland Yard ; he got a detective ; he moved heaven and earth to find it ; he offered five hundred pounds reward, and yet he can't get a trace of it. Elinor has been making inquiries about it, and yesterday said she would write to Benson and hurry them up, for Victor had told her it was being enlarged by them. Now, don't you think he had much better tell her the truth ? You see, it is such a curious ring, he can't get it imitated, or he would."

"I certainly think the only possible thing he can do is to tell his wife the whole truth. It was an accident ; there is no more to be said."

"Oh, isn't there ? You don't know the noble Elinor. Victor says she won't believe a word he says about it."

And as matters turned out, Lord Storr was perfectly correct, and when he told her, his wife refused to believe the story of the loss, and vowed he had given the ring to some woman. For a week she stormed and raved, and then she treated him to a stony silence, and did it so openly that it was the gossip of the whole garrison. The story leaked out, and everyone

had their own opinions, most of them being that Lady Storr was a foolish, bad-tempered woman. Poor Lord Storr went about looking miserable.

One night, at a small dinner at the Palace, he sat on my right hand, and the talk drifted to mountaineering, and he was recounting how he had been lost on Snowdon in a fog, and how he had found a girl in the same plight, and they had kept each other company from 4 p.m. till found by some guides at noon the following day.

“She was a wonderful girl—never lost heart nor relinquished hope for a minute. She insisted on sharing some chocolate and buns and milk she had with me, and she even sang. Fancy how weird it sounded hearing songs from the latest comic operas on that fog-hung mountain.”

“Did you find out who she was?” I asked, for I seemed to have heard part of the story before.

“Oh yes; I called her ‘The Maid of the Mist,’ but she was really a Miss Ivy Fisher.”

“I thought so,” I said. “She is my niece, and I heard her account of that story when I was staying with my sister—her mother—last September. And you will have the opportunity of renewing your acquaintance, as Ivy is coming out to me for a couple of months. She is pretty, is she not?”

“Indeed she is—lovely! How odd she should be your niece! She struck me as a young lady with plenty of character and nerve. I shall look forward to seeing her again.”

The next event in this little drama was the arrival of Ivy the following week. She was certainly extremely pretty and extremely smart. She had been at Cannes and Monte Carlo with my sister, and had a fine array of pretty frocks, and all a modern girl's *savoir-faire* of how to make the best of herself.

The day after her arrival she asked me: “Do you know a Commander Leslie Carlyle, Aunt Winnie?”

“Indeed I do.”

“Is he nice?”

“Very nice—a dear! I had him here for a month with fever last spring, and got quite fond of him. Do you know him?”

“Yes and no,” she said, laughing. “Will you ask him here to-morrow?”

“Yes, certainly,” I replied; “but it is no use hurling your arrows at him: he is impervious.”

“Why?” she asked eagerly.

“Never mind; he is.” She looked disappointed, and said nothing.

I wrote and asked Leslie to dine the next night, and at Ivy's suggestion mentioned 7.30 instead of 8 as the hour. I gave particular

orders that when he came he was to be shown into my boudoir, a small room overlooking the harbour ; but my butler stupidly forgot, and ushered him into the drawing-room, where I was writing. He said, "How-d'you do?" and looked surprised to see I was not yet dressed ; but before I could speak, Ivy entered. She did not see me—all her eyes were for the young officer, who stared at her in profound astonishment ; then, with a glad cry of "My Lady!" he seized both her hands and held them. Without a word I slipped out of the room and closed the door, glad to think my friend had found his lost Love.

We had two other guests that night, but I don't believe either Ivy or Leslie was aware of the fact.

That night she told me her side of the story, and of how she had fallen in love with him, but determined to prove his affection before she yielded to it.

"And do you mean you deliberately let him go away for three months without knowing who you were, in order to prove his affection?"

"Yes, it was hard ; but I always do what I make up my mind to do," she replied quietly.

At their request I let them meet as often as he could get away, and for a week they were too absorbed in each other to notice the outer world. Then I thought it time to interfere.

“Leslie,” I said, “are you engaged to Ivy?”
He laughed.

“I really don’t know—I’ve not asked her. I’ll go and do it now ;” and off he bolted to the boudoir where she was. I followed him about half an hour afterwards.

“Well ?” I queried.

“All’s well,” she replied.

I looked at him.

“Oh dear, I forgot! We had so much to say of real importance, I forgot! Ivy, Lady Malcolm wants to know if we’re engaged.”

“Are we? I don’t know. I really never thought about it,” she added, laughing. “You’ve never proposed to me, Leslie.”

“Never mind. Here, you shall have a ring!” he said, taking off his own signet and slipping it on her finger. “It’s rather large, but we’ll get another to-morrow.”

“I’ve got a curious old one I’ll wear to keep it on,” she answered, with a happy laugh.

At dinner she came down wearing one of the most extraordinary rings I have ever seen. It was made in the form of a gold skull, with ruby eyes; in the mouth was a very large diamond. All three stones were of the very finest colour, and the rubies were magnificent. The gold was beautifully chased and modelled.

Leslie was dining at Admiralty House ; but he was to join us late at the opera (for it was Monday night), and the next day he was to present Ivy formally to Lord and Lady Storr as his fiancée. Fortunately for the lovers, the Storrs had been in Sicily during the past week. That night Leslie returned home with his brother and his wife, and broke to them the news of Ivy's existence and their engagement. It was received with a distinct warmth by Lady Storr, who thought that with a wife of his own her brother-in-law would require less of her husband's society. Lord Storr wished his brother good luck, but made no mention of having met his fiancée under circumstances both trying and romantic—an omission that, when he mentioned it to me the following day, struck me as ominous ; so I gave Ivy a hint that unless Lord Storr referred to the matter, it might be diplomatic to meet him as a stranger. About four Leslie called for Ivy, who was looking beautiful in a blue crêpe-de-chine frock, a long grey cloak, and a big black hat, and they went off to interview the family. From all accounts, the meeting passed off quite successfully, and that night Lord Storr made his little explanation.

“ You see, the fact is I have never told my wife anything about meeting Miss Fisher on the mountain. She is—well, you know—she—ah—is rather silly about such things, and I thought

no good could be done by mentioning it, and no harm by suppressing it. Of course," he added ruefully, "I never thought Leslie would go and fall in love with her."

Now, I cannot say I felt any very great sympathy for him ; for a man who will tell a deliberate (if small) falsehood to his wife (*vide* Benson having the lost ring) in order to avoid a "row" seems to me a poor kind of creature ; and when he freely tells a comparative stranger of his adventure on a mountain with a pretty girl, and asks her to omit all mention of his companion in speaking of it to his wife, it seems to me that he requires a lesson in the demands of *noblesse oblige*. However, I never deem it my duty to say a disagreeable thing unless some good end be in view, so I merely remarked :

"I will not betray your confidence ; but if you will allow me to say so, I think Lady Storr will have very good reason to be angry at being kept in ignorance of your previous meeting with Ivy, if chance ever reveals it to her."

The little man did not take the hint, but asked Ivy to suppress any mention of their former meeting, and of course she agreed to do so.

Malta dearly loves a romance ; that of Leslie and Ivy soon leaked out, and they were made into popular heroes in a very short time. Leslie pressed for an immediate marriage ; but Ivy would

not have anything said till her father and mother arrived, which event had been arranged for early in February.

Three days after her introduction to the Storrs, we were to dine with them, to meet His Excellency, Lady Wade, Major Wade, and the rest of the Government House party. Ivy was duly presented and greatly admired. Major Wade had taken her in, and as Leslie was tactfully seated next her, she was looking radiant. When we left the men, and were assembled in the drawing-room, Ivy was standing near the fire, and her right hand, ungloved, rested on the mantelpiece. Now, her hands were extremely pretty ones, and she was very vain of them, and took the greatest care to manicure them. Leslie's engagement-ring of diamonds and pearls glittered on the third finger of her left hand, and on her right was the curious skull ring I had seen her wear once before. I fancied its red eyes gleamed with a particularly fierce, unholy light. Lady Storr was moving from one guest to another, when suddenly she stopped beside Ivy, and, with her eyes fixed on the girl's right hand, said loud enough to be heard by us all :

“Who gave you that ring?”

Ivy drew back her hand as if it had been stung. A crimson flush ran swiftly over her fair skin from brow to chin, and she stammered out :

“Why—do you ask?”

In a tone of barely suppressed fury, Lady Storr said :

“ Because it is the ring I gave my husband, and he said he had lost.”

Her words created an intense excitement in her guests, for all knew something of the story of the Storr quarrel—all, at least, with the exception of Ivy. Without realizing the seriousness of her position, she replied with a little nervous laugh :

“ I think you must be mistaken, because Leslie gave it to me.”

Entirely forgetting the presence of her other guests, Lady Storr gave rein to her rage.

“ That is not true ; Leslie has never had the ring ! You got it from my husband, or else you stole it ! Give it to me !”

I thought it time to interfere.

“ Lady Storr,” I said, “ I think you have made a mistake. However, we can settle the question better to-morrow when we are alone. Ivy, have you noticed those bronzes ?”

Lady Wade very stiffly asked Lady Storr whether she had read Benson’s last book, and everyone else entered into animated discussions. The men came in, and Lady Wade soon said “ Good-bye !” I followed her, but Lady Storr said :

“ Please wait ; I must speak to your niece.”

I deemed it judicious to do as she asked.

In a very few minutes all the guests had

departed (for there was a dance at the Club that night), and Malcolm, Leslie, Ivy, and I were alone with our host and hostess. The latter commenced hostilities.

“Miss Fisher, will you have the kindness to show my husband that ring?” she said.

Ivy, with a set expression on her face, said “Certainly!” and held out her slim white hand, on which blazed the great rubies and the brilliant.

“My ring!” exclaimed his lordship.

“Exactly,” said his wife dryly.

Leslie came forward to look, and Ivy laid her other hand on his arm, saying :

“You are mistaken, as I told you ; Leslie gave it to me. Didn’t you ?” And she looked him in the face with entreaty in her eyes.

It spoke well for the command the young officer had over both his emotions and his features that he showed no surprise, but his sister-in-law gave him no time to reply.

“That is a lie!” she said. “If anyone gave it to you, it was Victor. Victor, did you never meet Miss Fisher before Leslie brought her here the other day ?” She turned suddenly to her husband as she asked the question.

“Never, my dear, never!” he said hastily. That was too much for me, and I said :

“I am sorry, Lord Storr, to have to put you in the wrong ; but although you have forgotten the

fact, you have met my niece. No doubt you fail to recognise her as the lady who was befogged on Snowdon with you last summer. It seems to me wiser to get straight to the bottom of this, and we shall never do that if we begin by—misunderstanding each other.”

During my speech Lord Storr fidgeted first on one foot, then on the other, and looked anywhere except at his wife, Ivy, or me. Malcolm gave me a little nod of approval, and Ivy, with a set, determined mouth, gazed at each in turn. Leslie looked dreadfully distressed.

Lady Storr took up my words.

“So Miss Fisher is no new acquaintance, then?”

“I really am very sorry I did not recognise you,” stammered Lord Storr.

“You never mentioned any lady in the account of your adventures you gave me,” said his wife angrily.

“What happened was this,” said Ivy. “I was staying with the Spencers.”

“The Spencers!” exclaimed her ladyship. “Why, that was where you went afterwards, and stayed for ten days.”

Her husband wriggled under her glance.

“Yes,” continued Ivy calmly. “That morning I insisted on going out alone—I am a very good mountaineer, and know Snowdon well. I got up some distance, when the fog came on, and over-

took me, and I could not find my way down. Suddenly I heard a man's voice close by. I think even Lady Storr could hardly have expected me to wait for an introduction. I called out, and Lord Storr answered; it seemed he too was without a guide. It was far too dangerous to do anything but sit down, and wait for it to clear. This we did, greatly consoled by each other's company. At twelve o'clock the following day the search-party found us, and took us down to the Spencers'. They were old friends of Lord Storr's, and he stayed there for ten days. I have not seen him since."

"I don't believe either of you!" said Lady Storr furiously.

"Elinor, be quiet," put in the firm voice of Leslie. "You have no right to accuse Ivy of telling a lie. She has told you I gave her the ring; the likeness to that which Victor lost has deceived you. I will not allow my future wife to stay here, and have such wild accusations hurled at her; you will be calmer to-morrow, and sorry for what you have said. Lady Malcolm, have I your permission to take Ivy home?"

"Yes, certainly. We will come too. Good-night, Lady Storr, good-night," and, followed by Malcolm, we left before our hostess could think of anything to say.

Ivy and Leslie walked the short distance

between the houses. What they said to each other I don't know, but Ivy was in tears when she came in, and Leslie said good-night very brusquely, and turned back towards the Club. I said no more that night, but next morning I said to Ivy :

"Now, my dear, I expect you to give me a true account of how that ring came into your possession, for one thing I am quite positive of is that Leslie never gave it to you. So, please, no fairy-tales." I saw by the expression on her face that her story, whether true or false, was fully ready for publication.

"You are quite right, Aunt Winnie," she said frankly. "Leslie did ~~not~~ give it to me, but last night, when that woman pounced upon me so suddenly, I could think of nothing else to say."

"Why did you not tell the truth?" I asked.

"Oh, I did not like to, for several reasons. The fact is, I bought it." She twisted the ring in question thoughtfully round her finger.

"You bought it!" I repeated, more than astonished, for the stones were magnificent, and although three hundred pounds a year may be a nice little income for an unmarried girl (it had been left her by a considerate godmother), it does not run to the purchase of rubies and diamonds on such a large scale.

"Yes," she continued. "I bought it in a pawn-

broker's. He said he had had it for years. I had to mortgage the whole of my income for the rest of the year to buy it, and then I don't suppose I paid half its value. Luckily, granny gave me fifty pounds at Christmas, so that helped. I have not dared to tell dad or mother about it, but I simply love it, and don't mind a bit getting no more money from the lawyers for the next nine months, provided I keep my beautiful ring. Of course it was frightfully extravagant, I know. And how could I possibly guess Lord Storr had lost one like it; even if it was his, I bought and paid for it, so now it's mine, and I'll never give it up. Besides, how can they prove it is theirs? There is no inscription on the inside."

I looked up.

"No mention was ever made last night of an inscription," I said.

She flushed suddenly, and looked confused, as she said :

"Oh, I thought something was said about one?"

Her words were cut short by the entrance of Leslie Carlyle. It was almost pathetic to see how the girl's face lighted up at the sight of him. He shook hands with us both, and said :

"Ivy, I have come to hear your explanation."

She gave it, in exactly the same words that she had given it to me. Leslie's face gradually assumed an expression of relief as the recital

continued, and he positively laughed when it was finished.

“My dear but foolish little girl, why, in the name of all that is wonderful, did you not tell that story last night, instead of saying I gave it you? The whole thing’s as clear as day—whoever it was that stole it from Victor sold it to your pawnbroker, probably for a few pounds; he did not dare to ask its full value, knowing well enough that it was stolen. Now, I will take the receipt for it to Elinor; she shall apologize to you for all she said last night, and Victor shall pay you back, either in cash or diamonds, whatever you paid the pawnbroker, you extravagant monkey, and all will be peace once more. Hope you’ve got the receipt here.”

The young man’s reasonable explanation did not seem to bring conviction to my mind; I could not say why, only it did not. Neither did Ivy seem quite happy at the solution of her difficulties. In reply to his query she said:

“I have not got the receipt.”

“Not got the receipt? That’s a bore, but we’ll wire for another. What’s the name of the pawnbroker?”

“I’m afraid—I’ve—forgotten,” she stammered.

“Forgotten? Well, what was the date you bought it?”

“I think it was the first of June. Yes, it was

the first, because I was staying with the Ferrys in Evelyn Gardens from the thirtieth to the second, and it was walking up the Fulham Road that I saw it in the window."

During her speech all the joy and relief had died out of Leslie's face, and he asked :

"Ivy, think ; are you sure, quite sure, of the dates?"

"Yes, positive," she said cheerfully.

"Then there must be some mistake somewhere," he said, "for Victor did not lose his ring till the fourth of September."

Ivy beamed. "That proves it can't be his ring at all, only very like it."

"Yes," said Leslie slowly. "I will write to Scotland Yard, and tell them to go to every pawnbroker's in the Fulham Road till they find which one sold it to you, and get a duplicate receipt. We must have some evidence beyond your word ; that, dear, is of course enough for me, but Elinor and the others must have more."

Ivy's face seemed to have lost some of its youth and some of its delicate colour as she said :

"Yes, we must have some proof."

Just then Lord Storr was announced.

After Leslie and Ivy between them had recounted the facts, Lord Storr appeared even more confused than before.

"If it's my ring, however it got there, it will

have an inscription inside, 'For life and in death,' rather deeply cut."

With subdued triumph, Ivy pulled the ring off her finger.

"There is absolutely nothing in this one," she cried, and showed it to me.

"No, nothing," I said.

Now, it happened that Lord Storr was very short-sighted; but his vanity prevented him wearing or even carrying glasses, instead of which he kept in his pocket a small but powerful magnifying-glass; this he now produced, and closely examined the ring. After a slight pause, he said:

"No; there is no inscription now, because it has been erased. The place where the gold has been scraped away is perfectly visible with this;" and he handed me both glass and ring. It was quite true; the indentation was unmistakable, though invisible to the naked eye.

Ivy was white to the lips; but Leslie said:

"So there is, but that means nothing. Besides, old man, it can't be yours, because you had yours up to the morning of the fourth of September, and Ivy bought this on the first of June; but you wait till we find the pawnbroker, and get his receipt."

And so matters were left, and a state of armed neutrality prevailed.

Only one incident of any importance occurred, and that was one morning when Ivy and I were

opening our mail. We were on the verandah, and there was a fresh breeze blowing; a gust came and caught her letters, and blew them into my lap. I returned them all to her, as I thought; but afterwards, while putting mine in my escritorio, I found a receipt from a bank for seventy-five pounds, "which we have placed to your account." It was addressed to Miss Ivy Fisher, and, without being unduly curious, I could not help feeling surprised, wondering how it was that Ivy, who had forestalled her year's income, was in receipt of the exact amount she generally received quarterly. When I returned it to her she got scarlet, and offered no explanation.

Lady Storr utterly declined to believe the story of Ivy's purchase of the ring, and adhered to her belief that her husband had carried on an intrigue with Ivy, and had given her his ring. She did take one practical step, however, and that was to write home the full facts of the case, as known to us all, to a well-known firm of inquiry agents, instructing them to find out anything they could with regard to the affair. In the meantime, she left the house they had taken on Molino á Vento, and betook herself and her maid to an hotel in Sliema. She refused to see either her husband or his brother, and appeared at none of the functions, giving illness as an excuse; but she did everything that a woman with a violent temper and un-

controlled tongue could do to prejudice people against Ivy and her own husband. Many of the more narrow and righteous of the community were ready to believe the worst of my little niece, and the fact that she had annexed the affections of one of the best *partis* of the year, and was invariably beautifully dressed, in no way helped her cause. Unfortunately, H.M.S. *Partridge* was ordered to sea for a month. Before he left, Leslie did his best to patch up the breach between his brother and his wife, but without any success, so he said to me ;

“It would be awfully good of you, Lady Malcolm, if you'd keep an eye on poor old Victor ; he's awfully down on his luck.”

I said I would do my best, and so it came about that little Lord Storr began to run in and out of our auberge like a tame cat. In an unlucky moment, the idea came to Ivy that she could revenge herself on Lady Storr more surely by flirting with her husband than in any other way. Then began a most trying time for me. Ivy was absolutely reckless, Lord Storr infatuated. When I forbade or prevented her meeting him openly, I found she was doing so in secret. At dances she would go and sit out two or three at a time with him, and, needless to say, there was no lack of kind friends to carry the news of her husband's folly to his wife. Fortunately, my responsibility

ended on the tenth of February, when my sister Laura and Percy Fisher arrived, and took charge of their troublesome daughter ; but as for exercising any control over her movements, I found they were less capable of doing so than I had been, and when I remonstrated with her mother, she said :

“ My dear Winnie, Ivy has always done exactly as she liked with both her father and myself ever since she left her cradle ; it's too late now to try and control her, and Mrs. Groome's legacy has made her more independent than ever.”

When told the story of the ring, they never doubted the account of its purchase for a moment.

“ She is dreadfully extravagant, and it's just the sort of thing she would do to gratify a fancy,” her mother said.

The Governor and Lady Wade were very much annoyed about the whole affair, and I strongly suspect that had Lord Storr not been the future Marquis of Stapleton, he would have been ignominiously sent home. As it was, Malta had the unique and unwonted satisfaction of seeing society divided in twain, and the wife of the Military Secretary cutting on the Marsa the wife of the Assistant Adjutant-General, for her ladyship had the bad taste to vent Ivy's indiscretions on me, an action that lost her many supporters. Some wit devised the names of the “ Ringers ” and “ Clingers,” the former being Lady Storr's adherents, and the

latter Ivy's. It was a state of things the smaller fry enjoyed to the full.

About a month after the eventful dinner at the Storrs', a letter was received by Lady Storr from the firm of detectives she had employed, to say that a jeweller in a small shop in Baker Street had sworn to erasing the words "For life and in death" from a ring exactly answering to the description of the missing one. It had been brought and fetched by a tall lady, wearing a motor-veil, who had given the name of Miss Baker. The date on which she brought it to Mr. King's shop was October the first, and she had taken it away on the third. That was the sum total of their discoveries.

A few days after this Leslie wrote to say the detectives had been unable to find any trace of such a ring having been sold on or about the first of June in any shop in the Fulham Road. They had examined the books of all the pawnbrokers in the road, and could not find either the purchase or sale of any ring remotely answering to the description. He made no comment, merely saying he should be back in a few days.

Needless to say, Lady Storr was as careful to give publicity to her information as we were to secure privacy for ours, the result being that Ivy was given a very cold shoulder by many of those who had previously been ardent "Clingers."

Besides, her flirtation with Lord Storr had rendered her a fair target for their arrows.

This was the state of affairs when Leslie Carlyle returned. As soon as he could leave the ship he came ashore, and to our house. Ivy was out. I was greatly distressed to see how thin and worn he looked. I told him as gently as I could of the state of things, and dwelt as lightly as possible on the *affaire* Storr, but ignore it altogether I could not. When I had finished, he said :

“ Lady Malcolm, I have fully made up my mind what to do, and I shall do it, and shall clear Ivy in the eyes of the world ; but, unless she chooses to clear herself in my eyes, she shall never become my wife.”

I did not quite know what he meant, but just then Ivy and Laura came in. What passed between the lovers I do not know, but the outward and visible results were : Ivy no longer wore the disputed ring, Lord Storr ceased his attentions, Ivy appeared more deeply in love than ever, while Leslie showed his feelings less and less. The *Partridge* was to be docked for a month, and her commander was granted a fortnight's leave, and went with the Fishers to Sicily. I breathed more freely when they had gone, for the tension had been very tight for the last week. When they left Malta, it had been Laura's intention to go straight home ; however, somewhat to my surprise, Leslie told me, on his return from leave, that they

would come back to Valetta in another fortnight. The affair had now been going on for so long that people began to be a bit tired of it, and Lady Storr of her seclusion. Her list of supporters was in no way diminished, but she was no longer in the sun of the Government House smile. I would not receive her, Lady Drummond, the wife of the Naval Commander-in-Chief, had been an ardent "Clinger" all the time, so altogether her ladyship's lot was not quite a bed of roses; her husband was openly moping for Ivy, and was quite indifferent to his wife's desertion.

Then the Fishers returned, and were now staying at Morrell's Hotel. Ivy was arranging some flowers for me one morning, and I noticed the ring was again on her hand, when, to my astonishment, the butler brought in the cards of Lord and Lady Storr. I said I would see them, and in they came. She was beaming, smiling, and gushing as she came up to me. I bowed stiffly, and ignored her outstretched hand. Her little husband looked the epitome of sulky triumph, like a man who is balked and yet successful.

"Oh, Lady Malcolm—Ivy, my dear! You will never, never, never guess what has happened. Look!" She held out for our inspection her right hand, and on it gleamed a ring the exact replica of the one on Ivy's. She gave us no time to speak, but continued: "It came this morning by

the English mail, and this letter." She read from a typewritten sheet :

" 'Your ladyship will recognise the enclosed ring as the one lost by Lord Storr last September. I stole it ; but, being unable to sell it, and having since then come into some money quite unexpected, I return it to you with this letter.'

" That's all, and the post-mark was a London one. Isn't it wonderful ?" She stopped. I was watching Ivy's face—it expressed the most profound astonishment, and a puzzled frown knit her brows.

" I am very glad you have found your ring," I said, "and I trust you will apologize to my niece for your unwarrantable accusations."

"Of course, that's what I came to do," she said, still smiling. "Please forgive me, Ivy ; I am awfully sorry I ever suspected you, but if Victor had not so stupidly made such a mystery of having met you, I should never have dreamt of not believing you," she wound up rather feebly. Then, taking her husband's arm, she said, with a forced laugh : "And Victor and I have kissed and made friends, and are going to live happy ever after." But that gentleman withdrew his arm and said gruffly :

"A nice idiot you've been making me look for the last two months, insulting Ivy, Lady Malcolm, and everybody ; and now that you find you were

all in the wrong, you think you've nothing to do but say, 'Oh, let's be friends,' and we'll all come trotting to feed out of your hand."

His wife was about to issue a sharp retort, when Malcolm and Leslie entered. The explanation was repeated, and then Malcolm said, in his quiet, judicial way :

"Of course, Lady Storr, my niece will undoubtedly accept your apology for your mistake, but I am sure you will realize that something more is necessary. You accused her in public of having either stolen your ring or received it as a gift from Lord Storr. I must ask you to retract it in public. It happens that His Excellency and Lady Wade are dining with us to-morrow ; if you will honour us by doing so too, it will give you the opportunity for undoing a serious wrong to a young girl who is our guest, niece, and your brother-in-law's fiancée."

A chill silence followed Malcolm's speech. Lady Storr bit her lip ; then Lord Storr said :

"Yes, Elinor, that's the least you can do. Now I think there is nothing more to be said. We accept your invitation to dinner to-morrow, Lord Malcolm, and my wife shall make her apologies then. Come, Elinor ;" and without another word they left us standing gazing at each other. Malcolm's eyes twinkled, and his mouth was twitching at the corners.

"I think," he said, "that Lady Storr in regaining her ring has lost her hand—her upper hand." And then we all laughed, but I failed to see the joy and relief that I should have expected on the faces of either Leslie or Ivy. When there seemed no more to be said, I drew Malcolm out of the room, and left the lovers together.

Afterwards, with bitter tears, Ivy told me what had occurred.

When the door closed on us, Leslie came over and took her hands in his.

"Ivy, have you nothing to say, nothing to tell me, nothing to ask me?" he said gently.

"Nothing particular, darling," Ivy replied. "I am very thankful it's all explained, and that that horrid sister-in-law of yours will have to eat a nice large slice of humble pie to-morrow, and poor old Victor won't be sat on any longer. I've often wanted to tell him to buck up and call his soul his own. I suppose women begin that sort of thing gradually. I shall start on the honeymoon."

"Ivy, stop!" he broke in. "Are you going to tell me the truth as to how you got that ring? Do you think that I believe all that rigmarole about your buying a ring that is worth at least five hundred for a hundred, and then having no receipt, and forgetting the pawnbroker's name? Do you think I am quite a fool, and do you think

I am going to marry a woman who can't trust me, and who will lie to me and deceive me as you have done?"

Ivy was too astonished at this unexpected turn of things to reply; she simply stared at him, and her silence seemed to anger him the more.

"Very good, then," he said; "you can stick to your story and the ring, but you won't have me." And he flung open the door and marched out, closing the outer one with a bang. Ivy had even then no idea that he really meant what he had said, and went upstairs and dressed for a ride.

Leslie made no sign till the next morning, when he wrote me a note to say he regretted he could not dine with us that evening. When I told Ivy, she hardened her mouth and said:

"Very well; he can stay away till he recovers his temper, and he won't see my new blue and silver frock."

The dinner went off much as such dinners are wont to do, with a certain stiff cheerfulness, only Lady Storr seemed somewhat silent. When we were assembled in the drawing-room she made her *amende honorable*.

"Ivy," she said, "I am very sorry I made those absurd accusations against you about my ring; will you forgive me?"

Ivy without hesitation put out her hand.

"Yes, certainly I will. I knew it would all come right ; I was silly not to tell the truth at the time, but the fact was, I was ashamed of my extravagance, and knew the ring was worth more than I paid for it. Never let us talk about it again ;" and then everyone beamed and talked, and Lady Wade was her most gracious.

Neither the next day nor the day after did Leslie betray his existence, but on the morning of the third, Ivy came hastily into my room, her eyes wild and her face white, holding a letter in her hand.

"Aunt Winnie," she cried, "what does this mean?"

I took the note and read :

"DEAR IVY,

"You have chosen to keep your secret, so there is nothing for it but to say good-bye. I am going home by the P. & O. that is due this morning. I have cleared your name in the eyes of the world, so none will attribute the breaking off of our engagement to any slur on you. I need hardly tell you that when I asked you to lend me your ring, it was for the purpose of having a duplicate made wherewith to appease Elinor, as I saw you had no intention of giving up the one you had obtained. My plan succeeded

perfectly, and everyone is fully convinced of the truth of your story, but as you could not trust me with your secret, all I can say is good-bye.

“LESLIE CARLYLE.”

By the time I had finished the letter Ivy was sobbing and rocking herself to and fro in her mental agony.

“Ivy,” I said, “you have brought this on yourself. He loved you very dearly, and you have gone near to breaking his heart.”

She stopped crying.

“And do you think I don’t love him?” she said. “It was only for his own peace I deceived him. I was so desperately afraid I should lose him if I told the truth, that when I had told the lie I thought I had better stick to it.”

“What is the truth?” I asked.

“*I picked it up on the pavement in Bond Street the first day I saw him.* I was picking it up when he nearly knocked me down. I saw it glittering on the pavement. I would have sent it to the police, but it fascinated me, and I wanted to keep it. Then I saw the inscription on it, and had it erased, so as to prevent anyone claiming it: then I was ashamed to return it. Oh, why was I such a fool? But he is so honourable and so strict, I knew he would make me give it up, and I couldn’t bear that that little wretch Elinor

should score off me, and now—oh, now I am paid out!" And she started sobbing again.

"But how did you account for the second ring?" I asked, amazed at both her duplicity and simplicity.

"Why, of course I thought that Victor had got it made to get me out of the mess; he must have guessed how I got it, and he is awfully fond of me, and wants me to run away with him. He hates Elinor. Oh, Aunt Winnie, will you go after Leslie, and make him come back? Tell him the truth, and say it was because—because I loved him so. I can't—I won't—live without him; he can't be so cruel as to leave me just for telling a little lie. If he does, tell him I'll run away with Victor; I swear I will!" Her passion and earnestness frightened me.

"Ivy, be quiet; you don't know what you are saying. I will go and see if I can stop him. Go and dress now, and try and be calmer, and remember you have brought it all on yourself."

Still crying, she left the room. Half an hour later I left her on the sofa in my boudoir, her head buried in her arms. I took a carrozzi to the P. & O. harbour, and putting off in a daighsa, I got on board the *Jamaica*, and after some difficulty I discovered Leslie.

"Take me in your cabin," I said.

We went down, and I told him the story of the finding of the ring, as Ivy had told it me, in all its bald simplicity. This time he never questioned it. His face was turned away from me, and his unseeing eyes were looking through the porthole. When I had finished, there was a silence between us for a moment ; then he spoke.

“I’m afraid,” he said, “that Ivy has told the truth too late to heal the breach between us. More than a week ago I received a letter from Admiral H——, asking me to go with him to China in the *Cyclops*. I wired to ask him for three days to consider it ; he granted them. Had Ivy decided to take me into her confidence, I would have refused the Admiral ; as she did not, I accepted. I applied at once for leave and got it, and am now going home, and sail in the *Cyclops* in six weeks.”

I was amazed at the *sang-froid* with which he had made his plans, and the firmness he displayed in carrying them out, and felt rather hopeless of being able to upset them ; but the memory of Ivy’s agonized cry, “Oh, bring him back !” urged me to plead with this obdurate young man.

“But, Leslie, surely now you will forgive her. She was wrong—very wrong, of course, both in keeping the ring, and in telling—what—a—was not true about it ; but she loves you, and is sorry. Won’t you forget and forgive ?”

He did not move, nor was there any softening in his voice as he replied :

“ You can tell her I forgive her, if you think she values my forgiveness.”

“ She will not care a fig for your forgiveness unless your love goes with it,” I burst out rather indignantly. “ After all, it was not you she injured.”

“ She lied to me,” he muttered.

“ And why ? Because she loved you so dearly that in her ignorance of men and their morals she imagined you would find it easier to forgive a lie (if you found it out) than a theft. Had she loved you a little less, and been a little more experienced, she would have told you the truth long ago.”

“ She lied to me,” he repeated miserably.

I was getting angry at the hard virtue of the man.

“ And do men never lie,” I asked, “ and from far lower, meaner motives than to save the man they love from pain ? It seems to me only the other night I gave the lie direct to one of your noble sex.”

I was glad to see the shot go home. I put my hand on his sleeve.

“ Leslie,” I pleaded, “ don't be too virtuous, too just ; some day you may want mercy shown you, and may only get justice. You are a man whose morals and code of honour have been very deeply

planted, well trodden in, and are very flourishing ; she is a woman with a lower standard. Remember, few girls, and not all women, see that petty lies and small thefts are beneath their dignity. When a woman has been married for even a short time to a man with the stiff ideas of right and wrong that men of our class generally have, she instinctively imbibes them ; but girls—especially girls brought up like poor Ivy—who has never been thwarted of a desire or balked of a wish ! Leslie, Leslie, she loves you—you love her—why let your pride cause you both years of misery ?”

“Lady Malcolm, you break my heart. God knows I love her too well not to have forgiven her. If only she had shown some trust in me, and told me the truth when I begged and implored her to do so, I would have backed up her story to outsiders ; but she denied everything, and then defied me, and flirted with Victor.” He said the last words in a tone of utter disgust.

“Yes, she did ; and do you know what she will do now if you throw her over ?” I asked, playing desperately my last card.

He shook his head.

“She will elope with your brother ; he is not very—wise, and is at the present moment furious with his wife ; and, infatuated by Ivy’s foolish encouragement, he has begged her to go : that I know, and if she finds you have left her, she will

revenge herself on fate—and you—by eloping with Lord Storr.”

His face went a grey that was not good to see.

“Leslie, Leslie,” I added. “Think! I believe you hold this girl’s soul in your hand. Are you going to save it or lose it?”

“Lady Malcolm,” he said sternly, his hand clasping my wrists with a grip like a vice, “on your word of honour—do you believe—she will do that?” he asked almost fiercely.

“On my word of honour, I do,” I replied. “I believe she will do it unless you return with me. Leslie, will you come?”

He hesitated for a second, then said very softly :

“Yes, I will come.”

“And you will kiss her first, and talk about forgiveness afterwards?”

He gave a little smile.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he said.

“Then come,” I said, in relieved and cheerful haste.

Hurriedly he called his servant, and gave directions for the disembarkation of his “gear,” and then we went ashore, very few words passing between us. When we got home, I said :

“I think she is in the boudoir ; wait outside the door till I call you.”

Ivy was lying on the sofa, her face buried in the cushions, almost as I had left her.

"Ivy dear," I said, as she lifted her tear-stained, pale face, and implored with her eyes to know.

"He has not gone, not gone?" she repeated.

"No, he could not leave you," I said.

"But he will never, never, never forgive me," she said almost suddenly.

"He is here," I said, and went to the door.

In spite of what he had said, I felt horribly afraid of what he would do. I felt it needed but little to turn the conscience-stricken girl into a desperate woman, and the face of the man I had left outside was stern; the cold steel-grey eyes and shut lips seemed more inclined to administer justice than mercy, and yet by an unerring instinct that has never yet played me false in judging man or woman, I knew that beneath that granite surface was a generous, tender heart, which would never fail those who trusted it, much less the woman it loved; but Ivy had not trusted it—that was all the trouble.

I opened the door; he was in the hall; I beckoned to him.

"Remember," I whispered as he passed in.

Ivy was standing now. As their eyes met, those of the man changed, and a look of exquisite pity filled them. There was no word of forgiveness spoken; he just held out his arms and said:

"My poor little lady!"

I softly closed the door, and said a short thanksgiving of two little words.

L'ENVOI

Ivy, her father and mother, returned to London by the next boat, accompanied by Leslie. They were married very quietly, and had a short honeymoon, as Leslie had to return to join the *Cyclops*. Ivy followed him to China a few weeks later.

I hope, oh, I hope I spoke the truth when I said to Leslie that Ivy would elope with his brother, but I will confess to you, my beloved reader, *that I don't care if I didn't*. Which proves that women have really no principles worth mentioning when they have a certain end to gain.

X

THE GENERAL AND SOME CARNATIONS

THOSE who have been so intelligent as to follow the ins and outs of these chronicles will not need to have pointed out to them that in all the difficulties I got myself into in my efforts to help other people out of theirs, I had a tower of strength behind me, in times of trouble, in my big, strong, quiet, clear-headed husband. He had a way of calming my foolish impetuosity, and smoothing my path of the stumbling-blocks that hindered me; but, at the same time, he generally gave me sound, if somewhat crushing, advice about not mixing myself up in other people's affairs, even with the laudable excuse of assisting them.

Now, I frequently made the most idiotic, silly remarks just when I should have said something wise and witty, and I often did foolish things when I ought to have done sensible ones; whereas Malcolm invariably both did and said the right

ones. This naturally gave him just a little inclination to think himself wiser than me, and so it may be imagined that it was not entirely without a gentle glow of satisfaction that I heard the story of the carnations, and his appeal to help him out of this "devil's own business," as he frankly put it.

Now, although an excellent General and a devoted husband, Malcolm had two little weaknesses. One was, he hated paying calls, and generally, when I had coaxed him into paying two with me, he would suddenly remember an important committee meeting, or a promise to meet "a man about a dog" somewhere in an opposite direction. His other weakness was for a certain type of pretty women. A small woman with round, innocent blue eyes, a pink and white complexion, and a silly way of saying, "Oh, dear-r-r General!" was as fatal to him as a jar of honey to a bee. They could lure him out of the card-room at a dance for quite five minutes, and that is saying a good deal.

It was these weaknesses that got him into this terrible scrape, and shook to their very foundations certain domestic regimental dovecotes. It happened in this wise. I had inveigled him into coming with me in the victoria to pay calls at Sliema. As he came downstairs, I noticed he wore riding-breeches and gaiters. Before I could

“I thought, my dear, you wouldn't mind if I—a—rode home—afterwards, so I told Lorenzo to take the ‘Admiral’ round to the club.”

“Malcolm,” I said reproachfully, “I know what that means—‘a man about a dog.’”

“Not at all, my dear Winifred, not at all.”

Then I felt sure, for when he says “Winifred” he is always very guilty. We paid three visits; then it came.

“By Jove! I never saw Tamworth this morning about those orders for new helmets, and the reply must go to-morrow. I'm afraid I shall have to leave you and ride over to H—— Camp, and try to catch him there.”

I just smiled. “Poor Peter! It's a man about a hat, is it? Well, there, don't make any more excuses; tell him to go to the club,” I said, laughing, for he was so very transparent. He looked rather shamefaced, I'm glad to say. As he bid me *au revoir*, I said: “Now, don't flirt with little Mrs. Perkins if you see her—and oh! do go and see if there is nothing in my cabbage-patch except some very ancient peas, for that is all we are getting.”

“I will—I certainly will,” he replied.

Our “cabbage-patch,” I may here explain, was a garden which my husband's predecessor had thoughtfully secured for himself when laying out

some gardens for the officers attached to the H—— Camp. I don't know that he had the least right to it, but, as no one disputed it, it came on to us with the other perquisites of the billet. Now, a bit of garden is a rare and much-prized thing in Malta, but we had a charming one in Valetta, and this piece was too far off to be of much use, so I chiefly grew vegetables in it. The next patch to ours belonged to a Major Dicker, the married Major of the regiment then stationed there. It was rather difficult to distinguish the different plots, as there was nothing but a little path between them. Ours was a double piece with two paths—one which ran down the centre of the two plots, and the other dividing our left-hand piece from Major Dicker's. All the rest were single pieces simply portioned off by the paths. On the right of ours lay that of Captain Perkins, the senior Captain of the Early-to-Beds, as the B—— Regiment was nicknamed. Mrs. Perkins knew nothing about gardening, and her patch was always untidy and neglected; but Mrs. Dicker took great interest in hers, which was the best kept of them all. Mrs. Perkins—more generally known by the very obvious nickname of Pretty Polly—was a little lady more renowned for the colour of her hair, the smallness of her waist, her fatal attraction for subalterns and generals, and the sharpness of her wits, than for her staidness

or devotion to good works. Malcolm admired her greatly, and thereby hangs this tale.

Divided from the left-hand half of our garden by a narrow path was Major Dicker's plot, or, to describe it more correctly, Mrs. Dicker's plot, for the Major and all that belonged to him were first hers and then his, including the little man himself. A very severe and commanding lady—rumour said she had been handsome when as an infatuated Subaltern at Simla he had led the gay and giddy Miss McBride to the altar. That was the last time he led—he had followed meekly ever since. She was a tall, gaunt woman, with fierce black eyes, and heavy, almost meeting, black eyebrows that varied considerably both in shape and colour. Her sallow skin was generally decorated with a most brazen patch of pink on each cheek. Her one undoubted beauty was her hair of rich, soft black, that was said to reach to her knees, and one could well believe it. She wore it in fine plaits round and round the back of her head, with one coronal round the front, and at night invariably wore three carnations in it. She was dictatorial and quarrelsome, and the officers of the regiment and their wives stood in wholesome awe of her, more especially as the colonel and the other major were bachelors, so that she was the senior lady. She hated with a burning hate the lady known as Pretty Polly Perkins, who alone of all the regiment

showed no fear of her, and often openly defied and derided her ; and oh, worst of all, never lost an opportunity of flirting with Major Dicker, who, in a cowardly manner, was given to run from her attacks. These tiresome details must be told in order that the situation may be exactly appreciated.

What happened to Malcolm after he left me must now be explained. I gathered it from different sources, because all he said to me on his return was : " Oh, there are plenty of peas and beans, and a lot of those pink and red flowers—don't know what they are, rather jolly-smelling ones." I failed to grasp the kind he meant, and concluded the gardener had put in some seeds on his own account.

It seems that on leaving me in Sliema he rode out to the camp, found Colonel Tamworth in, discussed the question of caps, had a cup of tea, and then strolled down to look at our garden. Just as he got to the gate little Mrs. Perkins trotted up.

" Oh, Lord Malcolm !" she said ; " how delightful to see you ! Is dear Lady Malcolm with you ? No—oh, I'm so sorry ! Won't you come back to our quarters and have some tea ? My husband won't be back just yet, I'm afraid, but *do* come."

Malcolm refused, saying he had had tea, and just wanted to see our garden.

" I was just going to look at ours, which is next yours."

"Is it?" he replied. "I never know where ours begins or ends."

"Oh, I'll show you," she said, and chattering cheerfully they walked up the path till they came to the Perkins' plot.

"I fear ours is rather neglected; I know nothing about gardening. Do you, General?"

"Well, I know a rose from a cabbage, and that's about all."

"I suppose dear Lady Malcolm takes a great interest in your lovely garden in Valetta?" she asked.

"Yes, my wife's very fond of flowers—there doesn't seem to be much here except peas," he said.

"Oh, but look at your carnations!" said the lady. "They are lovely—my favourite flower—oh, how delicious they smell!" and she bent her pretty head over the pink blossoms.

"Yes, by Jove! they are rather nice. Clever chap, José—suppose my wife gave him the seeds. Do pick some if you like them. Can't think why he's got this piece so nice and that piece so different," for the right-hand beds were weedy and straggly, and that on the left the acme of careful gardening skill.

"Oh, dear General! I should love to have some; but *you* pick them, in case Lady Malcolm should be—angry;" and she flashed a challenging glance out of her innocent blue eyes that quite subjugated the simple soldier, who said gallantly:

“I will defy Fate, then—for so charming a lady.” And he hastily began to pick the dainty flowers with the careless, lavish hand of one who knows nothing of their tenderness. Buds, delicate grey-green spikes, were ruthlessly broken off, till the two hands of the wicked little lady were quite full, and the beauty of the bed diminished, if not destroyed. The lady’s eyes must have twinkled roguishly as she said :

“Oh, dear-r-r General! you really must not pick any more. These are lovely; I shall wear them to Mrs. Dicker’s dance to-night. I hope you will be there.”

“I fear not,” Malcolm replied, “because I’m going for a trip in the yacht with Admiral White, and we go off to-night in time for dinner, so as to be ready to sail at daybreak.”

“Oh, what a pity!” said the lady. “Mrs. Dicker is such a delightful hostess—when she will leave one alone.”

“Yes, charming. Now I fear I must be going back, so will say good-bye.”

“I will walk with you to the gate,” she said, smelling the carnations to hide a smile.

At the gate Malcolm’s pony awaited him, and just as he rode off up came Major Dicker. As Malcolm turned back for a parting glance at Mrs. Perkins, he saw the pair walking back to the gardens, the lady holding his flowers carefully

behind her back. What he did *not* see was their arrival at the carnation-bed, where the Major, with slight hesitation, stooped down and picked one of the remaining flowers, which he fastened in her frock. His back was to the gate while Mrs. Perkins was facing it, so he missed seeing the entrance of his wife, and in reply to Mrs. Perkins' invitation followed her—she now held the flowers in front and partially covered by a lace handkerchief—round the garden allotted to the non-commissioned officers, and out of the gate—at least, he was just going out, when the voice of his wife stopped him, and he hurriedly left Mrs. Perkins to respond to its call. When he got to her side his heart sank with the premonition of trouble, for with an almost tragic gesture Mrs. Dicker pointed to her wrecked flower-bed, saying :

“Demetrius, how dare you—how DARE YOU pick my carnations !”

“I'm very sorry, my dear,” said the little culprit ; “I only picked one to give to Mrs. Perkins just now.”

“One, indeed!—one! Look at the bed—stripped, not even cut—broken—all my beautiful carnations that I came to gather for the supper-table to-night. How dare you tell me you only picked one, you——”

“I tell you, Selina, I did only pick one. The bed was like that when I arrived with her. I

met her at the gate," he said hastily. "I made sure you had cut them all yourself; you said you were going to at lunch."

"Yes, I'm here to do it. Go at once and find out who's been in the gardens this afternoon."

"Yes, certainly, my dear." And only too gladly the little man rushed off, but no amount of inquiries elicited any information that could lead to the identification of the criminal. One corporal had seen the Major and Mrs. Perkins walk round, but the General's visit passed unnoticed. The private who had held his pony had left for Valetta a few minutes after Malcolm's departure, and heard nothing about the matter. Mrs. Dicker had perforce to be content to vent her rage on the Major, and imply that, in spite of his denial, she believed that he was the culprit. However, the preparations for a little dance they were giving that evening occupied her time, and the tragedy of the carnations had to remain in abeyance for the moment.

Now, I had not intended to go to Mrs. Dicker's dance. Indeed, I had refused the invitation, but was dining with some very old friends at the Palazza Alfano that evening, about two miles from the H—— Camp, where, rather to my disgust, I found the whole party was going on to the Dickers', and was most persuasive that I should go with it. Things were rather complicated by the fact that I had not ordered my carriage to return for me (they

were putting up in the village a mile distant) till ten o'clock, which placed my hostess in the embarrassing position of having to leave me alone for an hour, so there was nothing for it but to go on with them and leave word for my own carriage to follow and fetch me. We were rather early. The "Drum-Major," as Mrs. Dicker was generally called, was looking particularly ferocious, like a tiger who is contemplating his victim, but can't for the moment spring; and I noticed a large paste star took the place of the usual carnations in her magnificent hair. I made my apologies for appearing after my refusal, and was graciously told I was welcome, and then moved off on the arm of little Major Dicker. We were standing sipping some weak coffee, when a light, clear, rather shrill voice, just on the other side of the screen, said: "Does not it all look nice? And how beautifully Mrs. Dicker's painted to-night! Let's go and see it nearer!" And a duet of male and female laughs followed, as Mrs. Perkins and a subaltern emerged from the screen. She was looking extremely pretty in her silly little way, and wore a frock of pale blue chiffon, with touches of pink, and had a spray of splendid scarlet, pink, and white carnations from her shoulder to her waist, and a wreath of the same flowers in her golden hair. She either did not see us, or pretended not to. My partner gulped down his coffee, his eyes staring after

Pretty Polly, and then said : " Shall I take you back now ?" I agreed, and just came up in time to see Mrs. Dicker staring aghast at the flowers on Mrs. Perkins' hair and dress.

" What—ah!—fine flowers!" she was saying, with an evident effort not to say more. " I had no idea anyone but myself grew such carnations in the Island." Mrs. Perkins put her *retroussé* nose into the one on her shoulder.

" Yes, they are nice. They were given to me to-day," she replied coolly.

" Indeed!" icily replied her hostess. " Might I ask if you know where—who——?"

" Who gave them to me?" giggled Mrs. Perkins, shooting a wicked and deliberate glance at my partner. " Of course I know, but I can't tell tales—bad thing to tell tales, isn't it, Major?" And nodding her head gaily, she sailed away.

Of course, having no clue to the scene, I saw no particular point in it; but when his wife turned furiously on the little Major, saying :

" I knew it, I knew it! You did give them to her! The impudent thing to dare to wear them here! Demetrius, go and tell her husband to take her away, or I shall."

" My dear, my dear, do be reasonable!" he said soothingly. " You must not make a scandal. I tell you I've no more idea where she got them than the man in the moon."

Mrs. Dicker then turned to me, saying : " Last spring I got a splendid collection of Sutton's very best carnation cuttings from England and planted them, and they were beautiful, simply too beautiful. When I went to cut them to-night to decorate the table, I found every one had been picked—not even cut, but broken off ; and now Mrs. Perkins is wearing them, for I could swear they were mine. Even the Governor hasn't got any like them, and my husband and that wretched woman were together in the garden this afternoon, for I saw them."

" But surely, Mrs. Dicker, you don't suspect your husband of picking them when he tells you he did not ?"

She looked a little ashamed as she replied : " But if he did not, then who did ?"

" That seems to be an open question," I said. " But would it not be wiser to say no more about it now, and postpone your inquiries until to-morrow ?"

" I would like to turn her out this very minute," she said viciously.

My partner then came up, and I gladly left my hostess's vicinity. Nothing else was talked of that evening, and the general opinion was that either the wicked Mrs. Perkins had induced the foolish Major to pick them for her, or had done so herself. Pretty Polly stuck to her story. Someone had

given them to her, and she could not say who. She had not known they belonged to Mrs. Dicker.

The following day a desperate scene took place, in which rumour said that the more furious Mrs. Dicker became, the calmer and more irritating was Pretty Polly, who had the questionable taste to wear during the interview a large bunch of the flowers in dispute. Major Dicker, at the instigation of his wife, demanded a full explanation from Captain Perkins, who, prompted by Pretty Polly, requested the Major to produce some proof that, first, the carnations were his ; and, secondly, that Mrs. Perkins was guilty of any breach of good manners in accepting them. Neither of which demands was the Major able to satisfy. By the end of the interview, Mrs. Dicker was hesitating between dissolving into tears and making a personal assault upon her enemy. Fortunately, she chose the former. Whereupon Mrs. Perkins departed, remarking : " Tears are things that ruin the complexion."

While affairs were at this awful deadlock, His Excellency the Governor announced that he would present new colours to the regiment, so invitations were hastily sent out to attend the ceremony, and the senior people were invited to lunch afterwards. Here a further complication occurred, for Mrs. Dicker wrote to the Colonel, and said that if Mrs. Perkins was asked to the lunch she would

not go. Now, as senior lady, it was her place to receive us all, and she never for a moment thought it possible that so important an affair could proceed without her august personage. Great was her surprise and wrath to receive a polite reply from the Colonel, which read as follows :

“ DEAR MRS. DICKER,

“ I am very sorry to learn from your note that you will be unable to help me receive our guests on Thursday, but I fear I could not possibly interfere in the private disagreements of my officers’ wives. Therefore I shall reluctantly be obliged to ask the wife of the married officer next in rank to your husband to take your place.

“ Believe me, etc.,

“ _____.”

And, oh, bitter pill! the next senior married officer was Captain Perkins!

Oh, how tongues wagged over the affair, and how triumphantly Mrs. Perkins carried herself! All this time Malcolm was cruising with Admiral White in his yacht. He returned on Wednesday afternoon, and at dinner that night we had only the Military Secretary and the Flag Captain and their wives dining with us. The conversation was general, and then someone started the “Carnation Scandal.”

“What’s that?” asked Malcolm, and in reply

we told it. Great was my astonishment to see Malcolm's face get longer and more and more distressed as the story went on. Mrs. Bell wound up with :

"And nothing will make her say who gave them to her."

In almost hollow tones Malcolm answered her :

"I did!" he said. "I gave them to her."

"You!" we all exclaimed—and then the truth flashed across me.

"You thought they were ours?" I said. "The gardens touch, and those were the pink and white things with the jolly smell you told me about."

"Yes," he said dolefully. "But she ought to have known they weren't mine, and stopped me picking them."

"Oh, that's not the sort of thing you would expect from Mrs. Perkins," said Mrs. Horton.

"She would consider it a great lark to annoy Mrs. Dicker, and get the General into a row," said Mrs. Bell.

When we were alone Malcolm said : "Winnie, what the devil are we to do?"

"Don't say we—say I," was my crushing reply. "Why you should go and present Mrs. Perkins with all Mrs. Dicker's carnations I can't imagine."

"My dear Winnie, I told you I had no more idea they weren't ours than I had of what they were called."

“You ought not to have given them all to Mrs. Perkins, even if you thought they were mine,” I went on. “Now you will have to go up and explain the whole thing to the Drum-Major—I mean Mrs. Dicker—and apologize, and make peace between them both.”

“I—my dear—I am positively terrified of that woman!”

“You shouldn’t have picked her carnations,” I said, with difficulty keeping my countenance, he looked so doleful. But I should have expected a halo to sprout had I not been mean enough to desire to prove that my lord himself could occasionally make a mistake. Hardly had I come downstairs the next day, when Malcolm said:

“Winnie, will you drive out to H—— Camp and settle this affair with me?”

“Really, Malcolm, this is entirely your business,” I said, adding: “You know how often you have advised me not to meddle in other people’s quarrels, even to help to mend matters.”

“Winnie, I’ll never say it again if you’ll help me out decently now.”

How could I hold out against so contrite a spirit?

“Agreed,” I said, “but only on one condition.”

“One or a dozen,” he replied.

“Very well. Sit down and write: ‘To Sutton, seedsmen, Reading, Berks, England. Dear Sirs,—

Please send twelve dozen of your finest carnation plants out by the first steamer to Mrs. Dicker, H—— Camp, Malta. I enclose the address of my agent, to whom you will apply for payment, to include carriage. Yours, etc.’ And a pretty little sum they will cost you, I fear. I know they are very expensive,” I added.

“I don’t care a rush what it costs so long as the scandal stops. A pretty thing for a man in my position to be talked about—suppose the Governor——”

“Oh, I think I can settle it somehow,” I said, as I took the letter from him and rang to order the victoria.

I drove out direct to H—— Camp, and went to Mrs. Perkins’ quarters. The little lady was in, but did not look overjoyed to see me. Indeed, I thought I detected a hint of nervousness in her manner. I came quickly to the object of my visit.

“My husband returned last night,” I said rather coldly, “and is greatly distressed to find that owing to his careless mistake in picking Mrs. Dicker’s carnations, thinking they were mine, a very serious annoyance has been caused her, and I am here now to ask you why you have so strenuously refused to say who picked and gave them to you, when you must have been perfectly aware of the error.”

She giggled. "I was trying to shield Lord Malcolm."

"From what?" I inquired.

"Oh, from Mrs. Dicker's anger."

"Mrs. Perkins, I regret to say I do not in the least understand your attitude. I can hardly believe you allowed my husband to pick you the flowers knowing them to be Mrs. Dicker's, and if you accepted them in all innocence, why did you not say how it occurred?"

"I—I—really—I did not want to get Lord Malcolm into a—bother."

"Oh," I said, "then you will have no objection in coming with me to Mrs. Dicker and telling her the whole truth?"

She looked very uncomfortable. "I would much rather write and say I was sorry for my—error in judgment."

"I do not think that will do at all. If you knew the carnations belonged to Mrs. Dicker, and you allowed my husband in ignorance to pick them for you, you behaved in an extremely unladylike manner; and if you honestly believed them to have been ours, you were extremely foolish not to have stated the facts openly, because you must have known my husband would do so the moment he heard the story. Your only way out of it now is to join with me in apologizing to Mrs. Dicker."

“Oh, if you are going to apologize, I suppose I may as well,” she said somewhat sulkily.

“Will you follow me in about ten minutes?” I said, as I took my departure for Mrs. Dicker’s quarters. I found that good lady at home, and started at once with my apology.

“I am the bearer of my husband’s most sincere apologies,” I began. “He would have come himself, but his duties will detain him in Valetta to-day.”

“Why should Lord Malcolm apologize?” she asked.

“Because, believing them to be ours, it was he who picked your beautiful carnations and presented them to Mrs. Perkins.”

“Good gracious!” she gasped, and I proceeded to explain the affair, and wound up with:

“I have seen Mrs. Perkins, who appears to have had some foolish idea that she was shielding my husband from your just anger by declining to say who gave her the flowers, and she is coming to apologize. Oh, here she is!”

Very gushingly the little lady entered. “Oh, dear Mrs. Dicker, I’m *so* sorry! I really meant it for the best—I was *so* afraid of getting the dear General into a row. I see now I ought to have spoken. Poor little me, I’m always getting into trouble. Do forgive little me, and say you’ll come to the lunch on Wednesday and receive all

the horrid people. I should be frightened out of my wits at having to sit next the Governor. Dear Mrs. Dicker, *do!*" And "Little Me" laid her wicked little fingers on the Drum-Major's arm, who softened visibly.

"And to in some way atone for his mistake, my husband has written home to Sutton's to send you twelve dozen more plants out," I said.

Her face beamed. "Oh, how good of him! Of course, I quite understand. Mrs. Perkins was merely foolish. I should not have taken so much notice of the matter. However, please, Lady Malcolm, tell the General I quite forgive him, and hope the matter will soon be forgotten. I shall certainly take my proper place at the reception and lunch on Wednesday," she added in her most soldierly manner.

I saw Pretty Polly make a *moue*, but she said: "Oh, I'm so glad! And now I shall be able to have dear Major Dicker on my left hand."

"I may reassure my husband, then, of your forgiveness?" I broke in hastily, as I said good-bye.

"Oh yes, of course! What else could he do if Mrs. Perkins asked him to give them to her, and he believed them to be his own? Good-bye."

Her parting shot fell harmless on the fluffy

head of the delinquent, who had met a subaltern on the door-step.

I drove home. Great was Malcolm's relief to hear the peace was signed, and for quite a long time he never advised me to let people get out of their own scrapes.

This, then, is the last of my chronicles of merry Malta. I trust that they will not prevent anyone going there.

THE END

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