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THE MARRIAGE OF
WICKLOW

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The MARRIAGE *of*
BARRY WICKLOW



The MARRIAGE *of* BARRY WICKLOW

BY

RUBY M. AYRES

AUTHOR OF

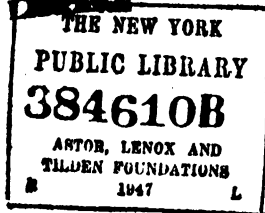
"RICHARD CHATTERTON," "A BACHELOR HUSBAND,"
"THE SCAR," ETC.



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"TALBOT"
WHETHER SHE LIKES IT OR NOT.

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MARRIAGE OF BARRY WICKLOW

CHAPTER I

AND so, dear old thing, I really can't come. I do hope you won't be very wild with me. I really am most awfully disappointed, but what would be the use of my coming when I am nearly blind with headache? Write me a line, or, better still, come and see me one day soon, as a sign that you forgive me for turning you down at the last moment—Yours,

“AGNES DUDLEY.”

Barry Wicklow threw the letter down on the table and swore. He might have expected something of the kind, he told himself savagely, his luck had been dead out for so long.

Of course, she couldn't help having a headache, but all the same it was a confounded nuisance, just when he had got a box, too; he might as well have chucked the money in the gutter, after all.

He was bitterly disappointed; he had so looked forward to having her to himself for one evening; he glanced at his reflection in the glass with rueful eyes.

He had got himself up so carefully; he flattered himself that he looked his best in evening dress. Barry swore again; he lit a cigarette and walked over to the window.

A September evening was drawing to a close, the streets were grey and rather depressing. It seemed to

suit Barry Wicklow's frame of mind. He pushed the window wide and leaned his elbows on the sill.

It was a rotten world, he thought, pessimistically. He wondered if the luck would ever change and come his way for a bit.

He was fed-up with his own company; he had counted so much on this evening with Agnes, and now she had turned him down because of a confounded headache.

It was not much fun going to a theatre alone, and there was nobody else whom he cared to invite. He wished Norman was back in town; he was a bit of an ass in some ways, but they got on all right together in spite of it. He raised himself and yawned.

Should he go, or should he not? The box had cost four guineas—it seemed a shame not to use it.

He went out of the room and took his coat down from a peg. Might as well go, after all; it would pass the evening, anyway; he let himself out of the front door, slamming it after him.

The driver of a taxi hailed him, but Barry shook his head. He could not afford the fare for himself alone; as a matter of fact, he could not afford it for anyone else either, but, of course, they would have had a taxi if Agnes had come. He threw his half-smoked cigarette away angrily. Dash it all! surely she could have managed better than have a headache to-day of all days.

He wondered if she really meant to marry him. Sometimes he thought that it was all right and that she did, and then at other times—to-night, for instance. He shook his shoulders together with a sigh. He was hanged if he could understand women. He wondered if she had really got a headache or if it were only an excuse with which to put him off.

He frowned as he looked down the grey street. If only he had got Norman's money! It was the very deuce of a job to live within one's income when one's income was so very much under four figures.

If only his father had managed to get born before Norman's father, what a difference it would have made in his life. It seemed rather hard that because one twin had been in rather more of a hurry to have a look at the world than the other, the son of the one should be a millionaire, and the son of the other poor devil struggling on something under £600 a year.

Not that he grudged it to Norman actually, but—his thoughts broke as he reached the theatre.

A line of carriages and motor cars were drawn up outside; the usual crowd jostled one another at the pit door; inside the foyer daintily-dressed women with immaculately-dressed escorts stood and chatted.

Barry scowled. If only Agnes had been here! If only—

"I beg your pardon." He had bumped into a girl who was turning disappointedly away from the box-office.

She glanced up at him disinterestedly and smiled.

"Oh, it's all right, thank you." She turned at once to her companion, an elderly woman dressed in a black bonnet and cloak that were obviously of country make. "Not a seat to be had," she said disappointedly. "Oh, isn't it a shame!"

Barry Wicklow was staring at the girl admiringly; she was very young, but her face was so pretty that for a moment at least he did not notice that she, too, had a country cut to her clothes, and that neither she nor her companion looked as if they wanted to pay half-a-guinea for stalls.

There was Irish blood in Barry Wicklow's veins; Irish impulsiveness that often made him butt in headlong where he was not wanted; he took a quick step toward the girl.

"I beg your pardon." He spoke with a rush, the words tumbling over one another in his excitement. "But I heard what you said just now—about there being no seats, I mean, and I've a box—quite a large

box, with room for four people, and there's only me to use it. If you would be so kind—I should be delightedly—awfully delighted, if you and—your mother. . . .”

This last was a random shot, but by the smile that suddenly appeared on the elder woman's face he saw that it was also a lucky one.

“We ought to have booked,” she told Barry confidently. “But we so seldom come to London, and my daughter was so sure we should get in all right; it does seem a pity that we've come all this way for nothing.”

“If you'll share my box I shall be only too delighted,” Barry said again; he looked at the girl all the time he spoke, but she flushed and shook her head.

“We're not in evening dress—it would look so queer.”

Barry pooh-poohed the argument. “It doesn't make any difference—you can take your hats off. If you only knew how I was hating the idea of my own company all the evening. Please say yes!”

The girl and her mother exchanged glances. “It's very kind of you,” the girl said, doubtfully. “But——” Barry struck while the iron was hot. “Then that's settled,” he said, cheerfully. “I shall enjoy the piece ever so much more with someone to talk to.”

It was surprising how much happier he felt; he almost wished that Agnes could see him and know that he had not been left so utterly stranded after all.

As he turned to lead the way across the foyer a lady bowed to him, glancing curiously at his companions.

Barry returned the bow and smiled; he loved being unconventional, and he knew for a certainty that Mrs. Baring would be sure to tell Agnes she had seen him with a girl—and a very pretty girl, too—and that Agnes was inclined to be jealous.

“I've never been in a box before,” the girl told him as they took their seats.

Barry had placed her so that she was facing the stage; his own chair was a little in the background.

The girl had taken off her hat and the country-made

coat; she looked prettier than ever, Barry thought admiringly; he was quite proud to be seen with her; when the curtain went up he drew his chair a little more forward.

This was an adventure if you like, he thought with a little chuckle; he wondered what Norman would say if he ever heard about it; Norman was such a stickler for convention.

He turned to the elder woman.

"You don't live in London?" he asked.

"No . . . we live right down in the country. It's rather quiet for my daughter, I'm afraid. I wish, for her sake, we could move, but I've been there all my life." She fumbled with a not particularly smart handbag on her lap. "You must please let us pay for our seats," she said, with great dignity.

Barry flushed crimson. "Oh, please—I beg of you." He was uncomfortably certain that they had not got the price of a couple of stalls between them. He was horribly distressed. "The chairs would have been empty if you hadn't come," he rushed on. "I shall be only too honoured." But he knew he was making his appeal in vain.

"We couldn't think of allowing you to pay for us," he was told. "It's very kind of you to let us share your box . . . if you will tell me how much . . ."

Barry told an agitated lie.

"The box is 20s.—and there are four seats—so your share is half . . . but I do wish you would allow me . . ."

He broke off. He had to pocket the money without further protest. The girl's mother closed her bag with a snap, and leaned back more comfortably.

"Now I can enjoy myself," she said.

The play bored Barry. Perhaps he was not in the mood for it, or perhaps he found the girl at his side more attractive than the leading lady on the stage, for he certainly looked at her a great deal more, and the

more he looked at her the prettier he thought she was.

Barry had all an Irishman's susceptibility. Before the first act was finished he had forgotten his disappointment about Agnes Dudley. Before the second act was finished he had made up his mind that this chance acquaintance was going further than the door of the theatre.

He wondered if he might ask their name. He wondered if he might venture to present them with his card. He felt in his waistcoat pocket, but he had no cards with him.

The girl was very quiet. She was entirely engrossed in the stage.

"Do you like the play?" Barry asked her once; he was a trifle piqued at the little attention she gave him.

She turned starry eyes to him for an instant. "Oh, I think it's lovely! Do you know that it's my ambition to be an actress?"

Barry frowned. "You'd hate it," he said bluntly. "It's a rotten life."

She smiled disbelievingly.

"It is! 'Pon my word it is!" Barry assured her. "You ought to go round to the back of the stage, you can't judge at all from what you see this side of the foot-lights." But she was not listening; she was looking at the stage again, and Barry relapsed into silence.

He had never seen anyone so pretty in all his life, that was what he was thinking; he had never seen anyone with such beautiful hair, such a dear little chin, such long lashes.

He liked her mother, too; in spite of the home-made severity of the clothes she wore, he recognised that there was a sort of quiet dignity about her; oh, he was certainly not going to lose sight of them when the evening was over.

But Barry's rotten luck still held; he had no chance to ask any of the questions that were burning his tongue; the crowd in the passage outside the box prevented

conversation as they were leaving, and when they reached the street it was pouring with rain.

"I'll get a taxi if you'll wait."

Everyone was calling for cabs. Commissionaires in white mackintoshes, shiny with rain, hurried to and fro.

Barry dashed out into the street; he could at least drive with them wherever they were going, he told himself; he had to go some yards before he could find a disengaged taxi. He drove back with it in style. His hat and coat were wet, but he did not care; the crowd had thinned somewhat now. He looked eagerly towards the spot where he had left the girl and her mother, but they were no longer there.

He went into the theatre again; he searched everywhere; finally, when he was almost the last person left in the theatre, he had to give up and drive away alone in sulky state.

"Wonder if they did it purposely," he thought with sudden suspicion. "They might have waited." He squared his shoulders. "Well, I don't care; I'll find 'em again if I have to search every corner of London. Jove! that girl was a beauty!"

He let himself into his flat with an irritable hand; the old depression had fallen over him again; he considered that he had been treated very badly; first Agnes—and now this girl.

He shut the door behind him with a slam and went on to the sitting room. A man was sitting there in one of the armchairs, his feet stuck up on another.

Barry stood in the doorway, looking at him.

"So you've come back at last," he said, not very affably.

Norman Wicklow drained a tumbler of whisky he held in a white, rather effeminate hand. "Yes," he said, "I've come back."

He spoke with rather a drawl. He yawned and settled his head more comfortably against the cushions of the chair.

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"Sit down," he said, after a moment. "You get on my nerves standing there."

Barry threw his hat down and took off his wet coat.

They were first cousins, these two men, and yet they were as unlike each other as it is possible to be.

Barry was tall and rather heavily built.

"Lumbering," was how Norman Wicklow described him. He had brown, nondescript hair that grew rather shaggily and a rather boyish, not in the least good-looking face until he smiled, but when he smiled even Agnes Dudley thought Barry's smile was beautiful.

For the rest, he was irresponsible, kind-hearted and rather fickle; people who did not like him, and they were few, said that they would be sorry for the girl whom Barry ultimately married; and people who did like him, and their name was legion, said that she would be a lucky woman!

Barry himself had no very exalted ideas on the subject; he meant to get married and he hoped to marry Agnes. She was a widow, and sufficiently young and sufficiently charming to make her desirable; and she had money.

This last fact sometimes made Barry feel uncomfortable; he never had any money himself, and he quite realised that if he were wise he would marry a woman who was not similarly afflicted; but he had a morbid idea of being thought mercenary, and he certainly would never have proposed to Agnes Dudley for her money alone.

He really liked her, was in love with her, so he would have said; if he had been a rich man, and she penniless, he believed he would still have been as anxious to marry her.

He was four years older than his cousin, but he did not look it; the something "lumbering" in his personality gave him a certain air of youthfulness, though as a matter of fact he was twenty-eight. Norman was fair and curly-haired and very good looking, and he had

been thoroughly spoilt all his life; the only person of whom he stood in the least in awe being his father.

"And what have you been doing amongst the turnips all this time?" Barry asked abruptly.

He sat down on the edge of the table and looked at his cousin with a sort of tolerant affection.

They had been brought up together, and though in his heart Barry considered Norman "a bit of an ass," he was really fond of him. He asked his question without much interest, and was surprised at the sudden change in his cousin's face.

"Oh, I've had a great time," he said. "A great time!"

Barry stared; after a moment: "It's rained heaven's hard nearly every day," he said dryly. "And in spite of that you've had a great time. I congratulate you."

Norman sat up with sudden energy. "There was a little girl down there," he said eloquently.

Barry whistled. "What—another!" he said.

Norman laughed. "Oh, go on! chaff as much as you like! It's serious this time, though. I'm going to marry her—if she will have me," he added after a moment.

Barry said "Humph!" he rubbed his chin and his eyes grew anxious. "Told your Guv'nor?" he asked bluntly.

The younger man flushed. "Not yet; he'll disapprove, of course; not that I care." Barry got up from the table and lit a cigarette. "Like that, is it?" he said.

Norman nodded. "Yes—just like that."

There was an embarrassed silence. "Well, I hope it'll be all right," Barry said sentimentally. "Have a drink." He pushed the whisky across.

"Who is she?" he asked, after a moment. Norman laughed. "Well, the Guv'nor will probably say that she isn't a lady," he said, defiantly; he flushed up, unconsciously squaring his rather sloping shoulders. "But I—well, for once I don't care a damn what the Guv'nor says," he added, recklessly.

CHAPTER II

FOR two days Barry Wicklow neither wrote to Agnes Dudley or went near her.

He was paying her out for disappointing him, so he told himself, whereas in reality he merely stayed away because he had no very great inclination to do anything else.

On the third morning she sent him a note. "Have I offended you beyond hope of forgiveness? or will you come and lunch with me to-day?"

Barry went; he put on a new tie in honour of the occasion, and bought a red carnation for his button-hole.

Mrs. Dudley greeted him rather coolly, though there was a little gleam of anxiety in her eyes.

"You didn't believe in that headache?" was her first question.

Barry coloured. "I did—'pon my word, I did. But I was wild—it seemed rotten hard luck."

She looked down. "Were you—*very* lonely?" she asked after a moment.

There was a little silence. "Mrs. Baring has told you she saw me, of course," said Barry bluntly.

She raised her eyebrows; very fine eyebrows they were, dark and delicately pencilled.

"She mentioned that you had two funny people with you in the box."

"They weren't funny people," said Barry indignantly. "They were very charming."

She laughed without much enthusiasm. "You always are so unconventional; but don't let us quarrel, it must be lunch-time."

Barry did not move. "I'm sorry, I can't stay to lunch; I just came to tell you I've got an appointment at one."

She looked genuinely disappointed. "An appointment you can't put off—even for me?" she asked softly.

"I'm sorry," Barry said again stiffly. "It's my Uncle John, Norman's father, you know."

He made his adieux coldly; he left the house fuming; it was just like a woman, he told himself. "Funny people," indeed. He had never seen a prettier girl in all his life, and as for her mother—well, it was a pity there were not more women in the world like her.

He went back to his rooms; he wished he had not gone to see Agnes at all, she had thoroughly got him on the raw. As he opened the door a servant came to meet him.

"Mr. John Wicklow is here, if you please, sir."

"Damn!" said Barry, under his breath.

He had told Mrs. Dudley that he had an appointment with his uncle, but he was not at all pleased to find that his uncle was really waiting for him. He looked rather surly as he walked into the room.

Mr. Wicklow was standing back to the grate, with spread coat-tails, though it was a warm afternoon and there was no fire.

He was a tall, rather pompous-looking man, with something of Barry's lumbering appearance; but whereas Barry had no pretensions to good looks, this father of Norman's was an exceedingly handsome man.

He had iron-grey hair and a grey moustache, a long, straight nose, and eagle eyes that just now searched his nephew's face rather quizzically.

The two men shook hands. "Norman out?" Mr. Wicklow asked.

"Yes; gone away for the week-end."

"Ah! to the country, I suppose?"

Barry glanced up. "I believe so—yes."

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There was a little pause. "And what do you know about this infernal business?" Mr. Wicklow demanded.

Barry stared. "What infernal business?" he asked blankly.

His uncle was very red in the face. "This—this—liaison of Norman's. He's written me a ranting letter—a long-winded piece of tom-foolery—about some girl, a farmer's daughter. I wondered why he'd taken such a fancy to the country—never could stand it at one time! Came up here to live with you, because he said my house was too quiet for him! A nice state of things! Some scheming hussy. Who is she, I want to know? I demand to know!"

Barry shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't the ghost of an idea; he hasn't told me. I know there is a girl, and that's all."

"He's a damned young fool!" the elder man sputtered. "A damned young fool! Taken with the first pretty face he sees. I won't hear of it—I refuse to hear of it. I'll cut him off with a penny! I've my own idea as to the sort of wife he's to marry. A farmer's daughter, indeed! Three acres and a cow sort of business."

Barry checked a smile. "There are lots of gentlemen farmers," he protested mildly.

"Lots of gentlemen fools, you mean, sir!" was the rather complex retort. "I tell you, I won't hear of it. Norman is to marry the woman I choose for him. My only son! I'll cut him off with a penny. Afraid to face me, that's what he is, or he wouldn't have written four pages of twaddle!"

"Is he engaged to the girl, then?"

"Engaged! I should hope not!" was the roaring reply. "And he never will be, if I know it! Says she is too good for him, a confounded farmer's daughter! Says he's afraid she'll refuse him! Why, she'll jump at him, I tell you, *jump* at him!"

Barry began to look bored. "Well, I can't help it," he said, laconically. "It's no use raving at me. I'm sorry

Norman's such a silly ass; if I could do anything I would, but I can't."

"And I say you can," Mr. Wicklow broke in agitatedly. "In fact, that's why I'm here. I've been a father to you, Barry, and I look to you to save my son. You're older than he is; you're a man of the world."

Barry laughed; he thought that in some ways Norman could give him points.

"He won't listen to me," he said positively. "He's not a bit the sort of chap one can preach at."

Mr. Wicklow came a step nearer.

"I have done a great deal for you in the last twenty years," he said with sudden earnestness. "I have treated you as if you had been my own boy, you've had everything your cousin has had, I have not made any difference with regard to the way you have been brought up and educated, and I ask you to do something for me now—in return!"

Barry looked uncomfortable; he had never seen his uncle in such a mood before. He answered awkwardly that he would do what he could—of course he would, but—dash it all. . . .

"Three months ago," Mr. Wicklow broke in, curtly, "you came and asked me to pay your debts, and I refused. You haven't forgotten?"

Barry flushed up to the eyes. "It's not a thing that can be easily forgotten," he said, rather shortly. It was a thing that had rankled with him ever since—both the asking, and the curt manner of his uncle's refusal.

The elder man frowned.

"Very well—I've a proposal to make," he said, after a moment. "You help me put an end to this—this nonsensical infatuation of Norman's, and I'll pay your debts and give you a handsome present as well. What do you say?"

Barry raised his eyes slowly. "You're not serious, of course?" he said blankly, after a moment.

"Not serious? I was never more so in my life. Come, my boy, think it over. You're young and unattached, and a pretty face more or less—what is it?"

There was a moment's silence; then Barry rose to his feet.

"Are you proposing that I cut Norman out?" he asked blankly.

Mr. Wicklow shrugged his shoulders. "If you like to put it that way," he said carelessly.

"Come, Barry, you know you're always a favourite with women; and, after all—just a country girl! You shan't regret it, I give you my word you shan't."

He waited a moment, but Barry did not answer. Mr. Wicklow picked up his hat.

"Don't answer hurriedly, think it over and let me know," he said affably. "But there's no time to lose." He looked at Barry rather anxiously, but the young man did not move or answer, and Mr. Wicklow went quietly away.

Barry walked over to the table then, and helped himself to a generous whisky. He felt rather as if he had been dreaming; it had been such a preposterous interview. How, in the name of all that was holy, could he calmly appropriate the girl on whom Norman had set his heart? A girl whom he had never seen, and never wished to see! It was all rot to say that he was always a favourite with women—all rot! He thought suddenly of Agnes Dudley.

He was practically engaged to her. He really wished to marry her. In the light of this new and monstrous suggestion, he forgot their little tiff; he remembered only that she was a delightful woman, and that he wished to have her for his wife.

His uncle did not know what he was talking about; the whole idea was preposterous. He should refuse, of course he should. There was no need to even think it over. As for his debts . . .

"A note, if you please, sir!"

Barry took the little note off the tray and tore it open eagerly. It was from Agnes. No doubt she was as anxious as he to make up their little tiff; no doubt she wanted to see him again. There was a little silence.

The seconds ticked slowly by; the maid at the door fidgeted uncomfortably. "The messenger is waiting, sir," she ventured at last.

Barry roused himself with an effort. "No answer," he said, mechanically.

When the door had shut he passed a hand across his eyes dazedly; he could not believe that he had read the little note correctly:

"Dear Barry,—I have been thinking things over since you left me this morning, and I have come to the conclusion that it will be better for us both for our friendship to end. Though I have said nothing before, I have noticed a great change in you during the last few weeks, and I must admit that I no longer feel to you as I did. I hope we shall always be friends, and am sure you will wish me every happiness when I tell you that Laurence Hulbert asked me to marry him last night and that I have accepted him.—Ever your sincere friend,

"AGNES DUDLEY."

When the first shock had passed a little, Barry Wicklow flew into as fine a rage as a young man could.

He stamped round the room and kicked things about. He had been made a fool of—the unpardonable sin! Agnes had been leading him on for all these weeks, had allowed him to look upon her as his property, and now she had thrown him over—thrown him over as carelessly as if he had been an old glove, and for Hulbert!

Hulbert, whom he disliked more than any chap in London—Hulbert, to whom he owed money.

This last recollection was gall and wormwood; to owe money to the man who had cut him out, to the man whom Agnes was to marry! He would die of the shame of it! He would never be able to hold up his head again.

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He was naturally a hot-tempered man, and his Irish blood rose now to boiling point. He took his hat, and a taxi round to Mrs. Dudley's flat. He strode past the astonished maid with a face like the Day of Judgment. He was in the drawing-room before she could say a word or stop him, and had slammed the door behind him, standing with his back to it.

Mrs. Dudley looked up startled from her writing-table; then she laid down her pen and waited quietly. There was a little smile in her eyes, only Barry was too blinded with rage to see it.

"I got your letter," he said, hoarsely.

He took it from his pocket, tore it across and across, and dashed the pieces down on the table.

"There's my answer to it," he said, "and my congratulations. If you prefer that little rat to me, marry him, and welcome. I suppose you've been playing up for this all along, when you refused to come to the theatre the other night. Well, I suppose I'm well rid of you, if that's all its been worth."

His voice broke a little for the first time. "I haven't got Hulbert's money, I know, but if that's all you care for——"

"Barry!" She tried to stem the rush of words, but he took no notice. He went on, passionately: "You're all the same, you women; you lead a chap on and pretend to care for him, and then you chuck him over, and leave him to get out of it as best he can. I thought better of you, I thought you really liked me. . . ." His voice broke.

"Barry!" She rose from her chair now, and held her hand to him, but he moved back a step.

"You talk the usual rubbish about friendship. What do I want with your friendship? I've asked you to marry me half a dozen times, and you've put me off and put me off. Not a man in a hundred would have had the patience I have. But I'm through with it now."

He paused a moment; he looked round the room with

burning eyes. Hurt pride much more than a damaged heart drove him on.

"I hope to God I shall never see you again!" he said, violently. And he was gone before she could say a word or try to stop him.

She stood quite still, listening to his furious, departing steps, and the slam of the street door; then she laughed.

So he did care for her, after all. Well, she had discovered that at least, and it had been worth while.

She loved him when he was in a rage. Lately he had been rather a tame lover. She was delighted that she had so easily roused him; the memory of his passionate eyes and stumbling words made her heart glow. He would come back soon—perhaps that very night—and then she would forgive him, and they would be married soon, quite soon.

As for Laurence Hulbert! Barry was quite right. he certainly was a little rat! She picked up a portrait of Barry, framed in silver on the writing table—and kissed it.

He was a man, in spite of everything. She liked his boisterous, blundering rages. She kissed his picture again. He would come back, of course he would.

But out in the street Barry was striding away at a furious rate. He carried his hat in his hand; the blood was hammering in his temples; he could not remember that he had ever been so furiously angry. Fooled, and by a woman!

He tried to remember what he had said to her, but could not. He only hoped that he had not spared her. He was quite sure that, whatever he had said, he had meant it all, and a good deal more besides. He had let off steam, anyway, and was already feeling better.

If he met Hulbert, he quite made up his mind that he would tell him exactly what he thought of the whole business. As for that money he owed the little cad—Cold sweat broke out on Barry's forehead; he hated

the thought of owing that man money; quite a lot of money it was, too, which Hulbert had advanced from time to time. He realised that by now it must have run into several hundreds of pounds.

Agnes would get to know of it, no doubt they would talk him over together. Barry ground his teeth; if he could only pay the little blighter back! But it was hopeless to think of it! There was only his uncle to whom he could turn, and he—— Barry drew a long breath, his interview of that morning with Norman's father came back with a flash of illumination.

"You help me to put an end to this infatuation of Norman's, and I'll pay your debts and give you a handsome present as well."

It was impossible, of course! But if only it hadn't been. He walked on more soberly.

It was out of the question, of course; and even supposing it had been possible, Norman was his cousin; and to do a mean trick like that! He shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the thought. Besides, what guarantee had he that this girl, whoever she might be, would look at him?

He knew that he had particular claims to good looks; Norman was a thousand times handsomer. But deep down in his heart Barry knew also that there was a great deal of truth in what his uncle had said—that he was a favourite with women.

The knowledge gave him back something of his lost self-esteem. After all, Agnes wasn't the only woman in the world. He squared his shoulders.

Anyway, it was a moral impossibility to do as his uncle had suggested; not that it was very likely Norman was any more serious over this girl that he had been over a dozen others about whom he had raved in the past. Norman had all the Wicklow fickleness. But deliberately to try to cut him out was too much.

Barry hailed a taxi and told the man to drive to the hotel where his uncle was staying. He would just tell

the old chap that it couldn't be done at any price, that it wasn't a job in his line at all. The sooner it was finally settled, the better.

He was annoyed to find Norman at the hotel instead of his uncle. He looked at him rather disagreeably.

"Thought you were away," he said, shortly.

"I was—I came back this morning."

"Oh!" There was a little pause.

"What do you want with the Guv'nor?" Norman asked, suspiciously.

Barry did not answer. He picked up a magazine and started flicking over its pages.

Norman laughed cynically. "I suppose it's true, then?" he said, after a moment.

Barry glanced up. "What's true?" he asked, with a growl.

"That the little widow has given you the go-by. I heard them talking at the club this morning, and didn't believe it; but I suppose it's true—by the look of you."

Barry sent the magazine spinning down the polished table. "And what if it is true?" he demanded, violently.

"Poor old chap!" There was something mocking in his cousin's voice. "I never really thought you'd pull it off," he added. "She could see through you right enough, my boy; she knew that you found her money-bags more attractive than you found her."

Barry flushed crimson. "You mind your own infernal business," he said furiously, "and get back to your dairy-maid."

The words were a direct insult, but they were provoked, and Barry regretted them bitterly as soon as they were spoken. He would have apologised if he had been given time, but Norman caught him up at once.

"I suppose there's some excuse to be made for you, as you've been jilted," he said, stinging. "But I must say that Mrs. Dudley has more sense than I gave her credit for. I dare say she heard about the girl you were with in the theatre the other night—everyone else seems

to have heard, and to have been laughing at you. It isn't likely Agnes was going to stand that." He looked at Barry with a sneer on his handsome face. "Where did you pick her up?" he asked with a detestable inflection.

Barry was white to the lips now. All his life he had stood a great deal from Norman, realising their different positions, and how good Norman's father had been to him. But to-day he was at the end of his endurance; to-day he felt that he could not stand his cousin's sneers and jibes. He made a furious lunge at him across the table, and missed. There was a moment's silence, then Norman broke out:

"That's not the way to get your debts paid, my dear chap! And I suppose that's why you're here. If it's money you've come for, it will pay you to keep a civil tongue in your head. There's a limit—even to what my father will stand, you know."

Barry had pulled himself together. He was horribly ashamed of his loss of self-control. He had never had a serious row with his cousin before. It gave him cause for wonder now, as he looked at Norman's sneering face, and for the first time in his life saw the dislike that looked at him from the younger man's handsome eyes.

Had it always really existed? he asked himself, with a sort of shock. Had there always been a sort of veiled hostility between them that had never shown itself until this moment?

He was so easy-going himself; it had never once entered his head that perhaps Norman had always been jealous of him, had always resented his adoption.

Norman had picked up his hat and coat. He sauntered to the door with an assumption of carelessness he was far from feeling.

"You are—waiting, I suppose?" he submitted, insolently.

"Yes," said Barry. "I am."

When his cousin had gone he went over to the window

and flung it wide. He hated the smell of scented cigarettes in the room. Norman always affected scented cigarettes. It struck him for the first time that there were quite a number of other things about this cousin of his that he also hated.

It was a shock to his happy-go-lucky nature; he was a man who wished to be friends with everyone. He could not understand why it had been such an easy thing to quarrel with Norman. This had been an eventful day. First the scene with his uncle, then Agnes, and now Norman. He wondered if it had been his own fault in each case; it seemed improbable.

Norman had said preposterous things; about that night at the theatre, for instance. Barry's blood boiled. What an uncharitable world it was. He took up arms in passionate defence of the girl who had sat beside him with such quiet attention. He supposed he had Mrs. Baring to thank for all the gossip; he had always distrusted that woman.

He glanced at his watch—nearly five. He rang the bell, and asked the maid if she knew what time Mr. Wicklow would be in.

"He said about five, sir. He said if anybody called I was to be sure to ask them to wait."

"Meaning me, I suppose," Barry thought grimly, as she went away. He wished he had not come; he had only walked into further unpleasantness. He had almost decided not to wait when he heard his uncle's step outside, and a moment later he was in the room.

He looked pleased to see Barry. He greeted him heartily. "I hope you haven't been waiting long," he said.

Barry did not answer; he knew what his uncle was assuming. He wondered how he was to disillusion him.

Mr. Wicklow brought out a box of cigars.

"About our little conversation this morning," he said, tentatively. "I've been making a few enquiries, Barry, and I hear that this girl is—most undesirable, shall we

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say? My informant was quite a disinterested party. No, I shall not mention names, but I am more determined than ever to put a stop to this nonsense with Norman."

"It will be a hard job," said Barry flatly. "Norman isn't a child."

"He is an extremely foolish youth," Mr. Wicklow asserted calmly. "This is not the first time I have had this trouble with him, as you know."

Barry knew it well enough. He had a vivid recollection of other occasions when Norman had wanted to rush off and get married to some girl who had taken his fancy; occasions when he had declared himself broken-hearted and his life ruined if opposition prevented him from doing so. But he made no comment.

"I look to you, Barry," said Mr. Wicklow again, "to help me."

Barry moved restlessly. "I can't—I hate the job! Besides, it's pure conceit to think I could do it. I'm sorry, but it's no good."

Mr. Wicklow drew his chair closer to the table, and leaned his arms on it, looking earnestly at his nephew.

"Barry," he said, "I'll pay your debts and give you five thousand pounds besides if you'll do this for me. Norman is my only son; it will break his mother's heart if he marries this girl. Besides, it can't be a serious attachment; I know him so well. It's not him I am afraid of, but the girl. She means to have him, she'll marry him before he knows where he is—before he realises that he is making a complete fool of himself." He held out his hand. "Come, Barry, it's not much I'm asking you, just a harmless flirtation, a transfer of affections—temporarily."

Barry did not look up; he was thinking of his cousin as he had looked not half an hour ago, his sneering words, with their hidden dislike and veiled animosity, and something in his heart longed to be able to hit back—hard!

After all, perhaps it was not a serious attachment! Norman had had so many similar affairs, and they had

all ended in smoke. He raised his eyes and met his uncle's. After a moment he put out his hand, unwillingly enough, and took the elder man's.

"Oh, all right," he said gruffly. "If you're sure it's not serious; and if I fail. . . ."

Mr. Wicklow laughed. "You won't fail, Barry," he said confidently. "I know you."

Agnes Dudley waited a whole day for Barry to come back and eat humble-pie. She was so sure that his passionate anger had not been final; she knew him so well, she told herself. His anger was like champagne, all fizz and fuss at first, but soon dying down.

Of course, he had not been serious when he said he never wished to see her again. She had only to wait and he would turn up to sue humbly for forgiveness.

But the hours dragged by and there was no Barry. Every time a bell rang she was sure it must be he; every time a taxi raced down the street her heart began to throb in eager anticipation. But a whole day passed, and there was no Barry.

She began to torture herself with doubts. Supposing he never came again; supposing for once in his life he really meant what he said; supposing this time she had driven him a little too far?

When evening came she could bear it no longer; she rang up Barry's rooms. The 'phone was answered by the maid. "Mr. Wicklow was out," she said.

"Out!" Agnes Dudley echoed the word eagerly. "Do you—of course you don't know if he is coming to see me this evening? I am Mrs. Dudley."

There was a little pause; she could hear the heavy beating of her heart. Then the maid's voice, answering deprecatingly:

"I couldn't say, I am sure, ma'am, but—but Mr. Wicklow said he was going out of town. He took a portmanteau with him, ma'am, and told me he did not expect to be back for a fortnight."

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Agnes caught her breath. "Out of town! Oh, where has he gone?" There was a ring of very genuine distress in her voice. "Surely he left an address?"

But the answer came back with unmistakable truth.

"No, ma'am, Mr. Wicklow left no address; and he said he should not be wanting any of his letters sent on."

CHAPTER III

ONCE Barry Wicklow made up his mind to do a thing he went on with it right away; he never allowed himself time in which to re-consider it, which was sometimes a good thing, sometimes a bad.

In this case he did not much care how it turned out. He made his few preparations recklessly. His heart was still full of a smouldering anger against Agnes Dudley, and against his cousin. He considered that they had both treated him rottenly. His one gratification, as he listened to his uncle's last words of instruction, was that he hoped he was about to pay them both out; beyond that he did not care in the least what happened.

"You haven't told me the name of the blessed girl," he said presently, with irritation. "How on earth am I to find her?"

Mr. Wicklow produced a letter from his pocket.

"Don't be so impatient, my dear boy," he said mildly, more mildly than Barry had ever heard him speak before. "I can give you all the information you require. The—er—girl's name is Hazel Bentley." He paused and looked at Barry. "A ridiculous name!" he said, with exasperation. "It savours of the theatre."

Barry was scribbling the name on the back of an envelope. "Rather a pretty name," he said absently. "Address, please?"

Mr. Wicklow referred again to his letter. "Cleave Farm, Bedmund," he said. "I understand that she lives with an uncle who is a small farmer." He folded the letter and restored it to his pocket. "And now, Barry, if you can give me some idea as to what you propose to do——"

Barry gave an impatient exclamation. "I haven't any more idea than the dead. I shall put up at an inn, I suppose, if there is one, and have a look round."

He laughed shamefacedly. "It sounds like a romance of the dark ages," he said, with a sort of savagery. "I'm the villain of the piece, plotting to carry off the fair heroine." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well—if I fail——"

"You won't fail," said Mr. Wicklow, positively.

There was a moment's silence. "After all," he went on rather uncomfortably, "there's nothing in the whole proceeding. You simply work up a harmless flirtation."

"It won't be so easy to do. Supposing Norman takes it into his head to come down? A nice sort of fool I shall look with him chipping in and wanting to punch my head."

"Norman won't 'chip in,' as you put it," his uncle assured him. "I am taking Norman home with me to-night and keeping him there—indefinitely."

"He may refuse to stay."

Mr. Wicklow dismissed the idea as unworthy of consideration.

"You get away first thing in the morning," he said. "There's nothing like striking while the iron is hot, Barry; and when you get there"—he smiled rather nervously at Barry's sullen face—"well, I'll back an Irishman all the world over to win a girl's heart quicker than any other man."

Barry's face flamed. "Confound it all, I don't want the wretched girl's heart," he said wrathfully. "If it's going to mean anything like that——"

Mr. Wicklow saw he had made a mistake; he rose to his feet. "I was only chaffing, my boy. It doesn't mean anything like that. Get her to break with Norman—that's all I want; and if anything unforeseen should happen, trust me to stand by you."

"The only thing that will happen will be that I come back in twenty-four hours," Barry declared; but he

cheered up a little; after all there would be a certain amount of fun in it, he thought, and if this Hazel, whatever her name was, chose to give him the cold shoulder he could but pack his traps and catch a train home and leave Norman to his fate.

He went to bed and slept soundly in spite of the fact that he was a recently jilted man; he woke up feeling remarkably fit and ready for anything.

He was just ready to leave his rooms when the telephone bell whirred; Barry hesitated, staring doubtfully at the receiver, then he went over and took it down.

It was Mr. Wicklow—Barry frowned a little as he listened to his complacent voice.

"That you, my boy? Good! I just thought you'd like to know that Norman has sprained his ankle and will have to lie up for a week or two; so you needn't be afraid that he'll turn up at Bedmund. How did he do it? Getting out of a taxi, I believe. I'm taking him down to his mother this morning. We had to stay in town last night, after all."

There was a little pause. "Well, good-bye and good luck," said Mr. Wicklow.

Barry hung up the receiver without answering; on the whole he was rather relieved to hear of Norman's accident. It gave him a free hand; he felt almost cheerful as he threw his bag into a taxi and told the man to drive to King's Cross.

It was a sunny morning, and sunshine always affected Barry's spirits; he leaned forward, whistling softly, and looked at himself in the narrow strip of mirror.

Not such a bad-looking chap, the reflection told him; and in spite of Norman's curls and classical nose, Barry registered a vow to eat his hat if he couldn't effectively cut him out with this little Hazel girl and win that five thousand.

CHAPTER IV

THE tall man in the brown leggings looked Barry Wicklow up and down with humorous eyes.

"How far to Bedmund?" he said thoughtfully. He spoke with a slight country burr in his voice, which was rather pleasing.

"Well, it's a three mile walk from here across the fields; further round by the road."

Barry swore. He dropped the suit-case he carried and mopped his face.

"They told me at the station it was only three miles, and I've walked about a dozen already," he said irritably. He looked up at his companion with a scowl. "Is it utterly impossible to get a conveyance in this corner of the world?" he demanded.

The man in the brown leggings rubbed his chin; he had a firm, strong hand, a little work and weather roughened.

"Well," he said at last slowly, "I've got a trap. What part of Bedmund do you want to get to?"

Barry hadn't the remotest idea, and said so frankly.

The eyes of the two men met, and suddenly Barry laughed.

"The fact is," he said more cheerfully, "I've never been here before, and I don't know my bearings. I heard that the country was fairly decent round Bedmund, so thought I'd make it my headquarters and do a bit of walking." He stopped. The man in the brown leggings was looking down at Barry's boots.

"You won't get far in those boots," he said bluntly.

Barry coloured. "I know. I've got some others in

my bag," he explained in a hurry. "But, I say, if you really *could* give me a lift? . . ."

He glanced eagerly towards the small dogcart drawn to the side of the roadway.

"I suppose you're a farmer?" he submitted.

"I suppose I am." The answer sounded fairly ironical. "And if you care about a lift you'd better come along—I'm in a hurry."

Barry did not particularly care for the blunt way in which he spoke, but he was tired and cross, and anything was better than a further tramp across ploughed fields and down dusty roads; so he picked up his bag and followed the man in the brown leggings to the dogcart.

"I suppose there's a hotel or an inn place where I can put up?" he asked more cheerfully when they were jogging along down the road. The mare between the shafts was evidently not particularly young; her feet clop-clopped languidly at each step, and the lightly-built trap jolted rather uncomfortably; but for once Barry was not disposed to be critical. He was only thankful for the lift.

The man beside him glanced down with a sort of pitying scorn.

"There's the Load of Hay," he said laconically. "It's a beer-house, but I never heard that they had any rooms to let."

Barry said "Oh!" rather blankly. "I dare say I can get fixed up somewhere," he added. "Perhaps you can put me on the right track."

The man seemed to be considering; once or twice he looked at Barry with a sort of suspicion in his eyes.

"My sister lets rooms in the summer-time," he said after a moment. "They're only plain, but if you're not too particular——"

Barry assured him that he should be only too delighted, that he did not care where he put up as long as the place was clean.

"Oh, it's clean enough," his companion assured him

dryly. "I'm not sure that we can take you, mind; it was only an idea of mine. If you care to come up to the farm and see——"

Barry said again that he would be only too delighted, that the suggestion was most kind.

"It's just business," he was informed unemotionally.

He relapsed into silence after that; it was uphill work trying to talk to this farmer; Barry looked at him rather resentfully. He was not a young man, he might have been anything between forty and fifty, and his face was tanned to the colour of mahogany by wind and sun.

His hair was slightly grizzled at the temples, and there was a fine network of lines round eyes which were startlingly blue against his sunburnt face. He wore a rough tweed coat and a woolwork waistcoat, and there was a horseshoe pin stuck in his tie.

He turned his head abruptly, and met Barry's interested eyes.

"Well," he said, "and what do you make of me?"

There was a sort of blunt humour in the words, and Barry coloured. "I beg your pardon," he said awkwardly. "I didn't know I was staring so hard."

He sat up and looked out over the country. The day was drawing to a close; there was a faint haze rising from the land; the sky was streaked purple and yellow with the sunset; away in the distance the sloping roof of a farmhouse was turned to red in the glow, and beyond it were hills—grey hills.

The man beside him followed his gaze. "That's my farm," he said. He turned the horse towards an open gate; the trap rocked and rumbled for a few yards over rough ground before it reached a made road again.

There was a sloping lawn in front of the house and a pond with ducks scratching and cackling round its margin. The farmer got down and hitched the mare's bridle to a post; then he came back and took Barry's suit-case.

"You'd better come and ask about the rooms," he said stoically, "I don't know if anybody's in."

Barry followed silently. It was a rather picturesque spot, he admitted, but dull—deadly dull! Somehow he did not think he would be staying here for long.

The front door of the farmhouse stood open. The floor inside was stained and polished—a bright warming-pan hung directly opposite the door, and somewhere a grandfather clock was ticking solemnly.

The farmer set Barry's bag down in the narrow hall. He went to the foot of the rather steep stairs and called up: "Is anyone at home?"

A girl's voice answered him instantly. "Coming, Uncle Joe."

The farmer turned back and pushed open the door of a sitting-room on the right. "Walk in," he said bluntly.

Barry obeyed. He had to stoop to enter, as the door frame was so low. The room was long and narrow, and a long black beam of oak ran lengthways across the low ceiling.

A black cat lay asleep on the wide window ledge. There was a big bowl of late roses on the table.

Barry stood twisting his hat. He should rather like to stay in this house, he thought; there was something about it that made a fellow feel at home, in spite of the farmer's bluntness. He thought it would be rather ripping to wake up in the morning in such a place. He looked at his companion.

"May I ask your name?" he began, and then stopped. Someone had come into the room behind him. A voice said:—

"Here I am, Uncle Joe," and then broke off sharply as Barry swung round.

A girl stood in the doorway, a girl in a pink cotton frock, with loose sleeves rolled up to the elbow; a girl whose eyes, after the first quick glance, met Barry Wicklow's with an incredulous amazement and delight in their greyness; the girl who a week ago, had shared his box at the theatre.

CHAPTER V

BARRY'S heart gave a big thump, and seemed to stand still for a moment. For once in his life he lost his tongue and could only stare.

To meet her here of all places. Surely this was a piece of real romance. He realised all over again how very pretty she was. It flashed through his mind that he would like to see all his women friends in London wearing cotton frocks like the one this girl wore, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow, showing soft white arms.

But that was only his man's stupidity. He would have thought Agnes Dudley out of her mind if she had walked into her own drawing-room, or anyone else's, in such a get-up. He did not realise that environment is everything.

The girl recovered her composure more quickly than he did. She broke into a little laugh.

"How very funny! Mother and I were only talking about you last night and wondering if we should ever meet you again."

Barry grinned delightedly. "Were you? By Jove! I say, it is ripping to see you again. What happened to you after the show? I looked everywhere."

"I don't know; we lost you in the crowd. We were so sorry not to see you again and thank you for your kindness."

The farmer had been standing by looking on stoically. He broke in now in his rather expressionless voice.

"This gentleman is looking for a room. I told him I would ask your mother if we could put him up."

He asked no questions. He did not seem particularly surprised at the mutual recognition.

The girl turned to him at once. "There is plenty of room. I am sure mother will be pleased if Mr.—" she paused, looking expectantly at Barry.

In the excitement of the moment Barry nearly told her his real name. He only just stopped in time.

"My name is Ashton," he said.

It was quite true, his name was Barry Ashton Wicklow, and he had decided on the journey down from town that, for the present, he would adopt his second name.

"If you could put me up—for a night or two," he said diffidently.

"I dare say it could be managed," the farmer said gruffly. "Where is your mother, my dear?"

"She went into the village; she won't be long, though. Would you like some tea?"

She looked at Barry; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled; there was no doubt that she was very pleased to see him again.

Barry said he should love some tea; he had forgotten all about the farmer. His eyes followed the girl about the room as she laid the cloth; he thought she was just ripping; as she passed and repassed the window the light of the sunset touched her hair and the dainty profile of her face; she chatted away to Barry the whole time. She seemed quite at her ease.

"Mother will be so surprised to see you," she said, pausing at the door for an instant; she had a green painted tray under her arm; she was quite unembarrassed at having to make tea for him. "What has brought you down here?" she asked with sudden interest.

Barry blushed; he knew that the farmer was looking at him.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I really don't know," he said. "I like the country, and my—someone told me it was pretty in this part of the world, so I thought I'd come down and put in a week."

"It's pretty enough," she admitted, rather doubtfully. "But I should have thought you would find it dull."

She went away without waiting for a reply, and Barry heard her singing as she crossed the narrow hall and went into the kitchen.

"I should have thought you would find it dull, too," the farmer said rather abruptly. He was standing back to the fireplace; a big, rather clumsy figure in the low-ceilinged room. He was looking at Barry rather hard. "We've had gentlemen like you down here before, but none of them seem to stay long; they all find it dull."

It was the longest speech he had made as yet and Barry fidgeted rather uncomfortably.

There was a moment's silence. "So you have met my niece before?" the farmer said again.

"Yes—a week ago—in town at a theatre."

The elder man's steady gaze rather embarrassed Barry. He got up; he felt at a better advantage on his feet. He thrust his hands into his pockets and stared out of the window. He began to whistle a snatch of song, but gave it up. He looked again at the farmer rather nervously.

"You've got a nice place here," he said.

"Nice enough," was the uncompromising reply.

The silence fell again and lasted this time till the girl came back with the tea.

"There isn't any cake," she said looking at Barry with friendly eyes. "So I've made some toast. It's all ready, Uncle Joe."

The farmer sat down at the head of the table. There was a sort of unfriendliness about him, Barry thought; he was infinitely relieved when at last he went out of the room.

The girl looked at Barry and smiled. "What do you think of Uncle Joe?" she asked. "And how did you get to know him?"

"I met him on the road. I asked him the way to Bedmund, and he very kindly gave me a lift."

She nodded. "Yes, he would—he's just the dearest man in the world."

Barry said, "Oh, is he?" rather blankly; he did not quite think her description suited the farmer.

"What is his name?" he asked after a moment.

"Daniels—Joseph Daniels—he's one of the biggest farmers round here. He is my mother's brother, you know; we came to live with him when my father died."

"I see; and I suppose you were just having a little jaunt up to town the other night when I met you?"

"Yes, it was quite an event for us; we hardly ever go up." She looked rather wistful. "I should so love to live in London," she said.

"Perhaps you will some day," Barry answered.

He wondered why she blushed and why her eyes fell.

"Yes," she said, "I hope so."

He looked at her admiringly; he was sure now that she had been in his thoughts ever since that night at the theatre. He was equally sure that he had never seen anyone prettier.

She raised her eyes suddenly. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked him.

Barry leaned a little towards her over the table. "I was thinking how pretty you are," he said earnestly.

The words did not sound in the least like an empty compliment, but as if they were absolutely sincere.

For a moment they looked at one another, then her eyes fell before the steadiness of his.

There was a moment of silence. Barry's heart was thumping somewhere up in his throat; he had made love to lots of women in his life, but somehow he had never felt as he did now as he looked at the shy, flower-like face of this girl in her pink cotton frock, with her bare dimpled arms resting on the shiny mahogany table.

All his life afterwards he remembered that moment, remembered the long, low-ceilinged room with its latticed windows open to the sloping garden and fields beyond; the fading sunset tints and the silence all about them.

Then—well, then, just as he was beginning to lose his

head a little, Mr. Daniels came back into the room, and the girl rose rather hurriedly from her chair.

Barry roused himself with a sigh. "Let me help you clear away the tea-things," he said briskly.

She laughed and refused, but he insisted. He packed the cups up clumsily and followed her into the kitchen with them, putting them down gingerly on the table there.

They were standing very close together. Barry could see a little pulse leaping in her soft throat, and again that curious emotion shook his heart.

Suddenly he caught her hand. "Look at me," he said urgently.

She raised startled eyes. "Why?" she began, and then stopped. Barry felt that her fingers were trembling a little in his.

He asked an abrupt question. "Are you glad we have met again? Tell me."

She did not answer; she just looked at him with fascinated eyes.

"Because I am," said Barry steadily, after a moment. "I am more glad than of anything else in all my life. Some day you will be, too."

He let her go then and turned away. "I'm going to get the rest of the tea-things," he said prosaically, and walked out of the room.

He avoided looking at her when he came back with the rest of the tea things; they were both relieved when they heard her mother's voice in the passage—the girl passed him quickly and went out. Barry heard her say:—

"Mother, you will never guess who is here," and then he thought it was time to show himself, and he followed.

The girl's mother gave a little cry of amazement when she saw him.

"Well, I never," she said heartily. "And we have spoken about you so often, and wondered if we should ever meet again." She shook hands with Barry as if he were an old friend. "How did you find us?" she asked him.

Barry laughed. "Well, I must admit that it was only chance," he said; he cast a quick glance at the girl. "As I told your daughter, Mr. Daniels very kindly gave me a lift on the road, and—here I am."

"And very pleased we are to see you," he was assured. "I hope you have had some tea. Where are you staying in Bedmund?"

Barry hesitated. "Well—I—er—don't know; Mr. Daniels very kindly suggested that you might. . . ." He stopped, colouring ingeniously.

Mr. Daniels came to the door of the sitting-room. "I told Mr. Ashton that we sometimes let rooms," he said in his blunt voice. "But I don't know that we have one to spare now, have we?"

His sister looked at him with mild amazement. "Why, of course we have! You know that well enough, Joe. There's a room over the porch—I'll show you at once, Mr. Ashton."

Barry followed her up the steep stairs with a little feeling of triumph; he was sure from the farmer's manner that he had changed his mind for some reason or another and did not want him to stay in the house, and for that very reason he made up his mind that stay he would, by hook or by crook.

He began to think it would be a long time before London saw him again.

When he came downstairs he had booked the room, and paid a week's rent in advance.

"I'm afraid it's very small," the girl said deprecatingly when he told her. "You'll have to be careful not to bump your head when you go in at the door."

"It's just the room I want," he declared. "Just exactly. It's awfully good of your mother to allow me to have it—I'm sure I'm most awfully grateful; I'll just take my traps up."

He seized upon the bulging portmanteau and went up the stairs again two at a time; the farmer and his sister looked at one another silently.

"It's really very fortunate, isn't it, Joe?" she asked in a pleased voice. "I didn't think we should let again this summer."

Daniels frowned. "We shouldn't be letting now, if I had my way," he said bluntly.

She stared at him. "Why, whatever do you mean? Only yesterday you said that——" He cut her short.

"Yesterday isn't to-day, and I've changed my mind; no, never mind why; but I've my reasons."

He took up his hat and went out leaving his sister looking after him blankly.

Barry came back into the room almost at once; he looked very cheerful. "I say, this is top hole," he said, delightedly. "I hope you won't find that I'm an awful lot of trouble."

She laughed at his enthusiasm. "I am sure we shall be very pleased to have you, Mr. Ashton. There is another small sitting room, if you would like to have it for your own use—your meals could be served there."

Barry's face fell. "Oh, I say!" he protested. "Must I?"

She laughed again. "It's just as you like, of course. I only suggested it. We shall be very pleased to have you with us."

Barry looked quickly at the girl. He broke out hesitatingly. "Will you—mayn't I know your name? It seems so absurd, when we're quite like old friends already, that I do not know what to call you."

The elder woman looked surprised.

"Don't you know? I thought my brother would have told you. My name is Bentley—Mrs. Bentley—and this is my daughter, Hazel."

CHAPTER VI

FOR a moment Barry Wicklow stared at the two women as if he could not believe his senses; then he flushed crimson, and a look of such utter dismay crept into his eyes that Hazel took an involuntary step towards him.

"Why," she began, "whatever—" then stopped.

Barry dashed into speech. "Thanks, thanks awfully. I just wanted to know your name. Mine is Ashton. Oh, I told you; I forgot."

He hardly knew what he was saying. After a moment he made the excuse that he would go and unpack his traps. He went up the stairs two at a time and into the quaint little room over the porch, shutting the door.

He stood for a moment with his back to it, staring at his reflection in the small mirror on the dressing-table opposite. He was white enough now; there was a sort of shamed look in his eyes.

It had never for one moment occurred to him that these were the people for whom he was looking. What a hash-up! What a ghastly contretemps! Supposing he had told them his real name; supposing—oh, supposing he had said and done a hundred and one things that would have told them who he really was!

So this was the girl whom Norman meant to marry! This was the girl about whom he was so keen that he was even prepared to defy his father.

Well, Barry was not surprised! He moved away from the door and sat down on the side of the narrow bed. What a hash-up!

For the moment he could not think consecutively, but he was conscious of a very real pang of jealousy.

Hazel had been his discovery; it was insupportable that she and Norman should have been friends all the time. Barry ground his teeth.

He leaned his elbows on his knees and ran his fingers through his thick hair. Was ever a man in such a dickens of a mess? He cursed his uncle under his breath, and himself for ever having listened to his monstrous proposition. He felt that he could never face Hazel or her mother again.

If it had been any other woman! He thought of the moment in the kitchen when he had said that he would make her glad to have met him again; the surprised, startled look in her eyes; the way she had flushed and avoided his gaze. Surely if she had thought anything of Norman—if she had been engaged to him—she would have been angry with another man for so speaking to her.

Of course, now it was impossible to stay here. He would have to own up—to tell her his real name, or she would find it out for herself, and then that would mean good-bye to his chances for ever.

He stopped thinking here and tried to make out what he meant exactly by that. Of course, he had liked her the very first time he ever saw her. He had looked at her a great deal more than he had looked at the stupid play; but he was honest enough to admit that the fact that this was the girl about whom Norman had raved added a hundred-fold to her attraction for him.

Let the best man win. Of course, if she preferred Norman, well, at any rate, he would play the straight game and tell her the truth, and then if she chose to kick him out. . . .

He got up, brushed his ruffled hair and went downstairs again.

The house was very quiet now; but as he hesitated for a moment in the narrow hall, he heard Hazel's voice outside in the garden. He went out down the sloping lawn to join her.

She had been feeding the ducks, she told him. She

carried an empty basket. She looked at him with a faint smile.

"I think you'll soon get tired of living down here," she said, suddenly. "It's a very monotonous life. We do the same things day after day—get up at the same time, have meals at the same time, feed the animals, cook and wash up, and go to bed at the same time. The only really exciting thing in the week is market day, and then we all go into Bedmund." She laughed at his interested face. "And Bedmund is so tiny you would probably be able to walk all round it in a quarter of an hour."

"We will try, shall we?" he suggested, quickly.

She laughed and shook her head. "It's a very busy day for me. I help Uncle Joe."

"And do you like living here?"

She hesitated. "I suppose I do," she said at last. "I've lived here all my life, and nobody has ever been so good to me as Uncle Joe. When my father died, mother and I hadn't anything at all, and he just came and fetched us over here to the farm, and we've been here ever since." She stifled a little sigh. "But, all the same," she said, with sudden change of tone, "I should love—just love to be able to live in London."

"Perhaps you will, when you are married," Barry said, deliberately. He watched her closely as he spoke, and saw the sudden flush that dyed her cheeks.

"That will not be for a long time, then," she said, rather shortly, as if she did not wish the subject pursued. Barry stood beside her in silence for a moment. "You have friends in town, of course," he said then.

Again there was the faintest perceptible pause before she answered him. "I know one or two people there; yes."

Apparently she was not going to satisfy his curiosity. Barry frowned. He tried to recall what it was his uncle had said about this girl, that she was most undesirable! Yes, that had been one of the many preposterous things.

He looked down at her with a little flame in his eyes. The old fool did not know what he was talking about. Who in the wide world could have been responsible for such a statement? He frowned fiercely as he looked out across the fast-greying landscape.

Hazel was watching him. "How cross you look!" she said, with a little hint of laughter in her voice. "Whatever are you thinking about?"

"I was wondering," Barry answered abruptly, "whether I should tell you something, or whether . . ." He turned and looked at her. "I think, perhaps, it will keep," he added, in another tone.

She did not question him, and they turned towards the house.

"I don't know what you are going to do with yourself here all day," she said presently. "I am quite sure that you don't really care for long walks, in spite of what you said to Uncle Joe."

Barry declared that he did; he said that he thought the country was ripping. "And I shall ask your uncle to take me round the farm with him," he added.

She laughed at that. "Uncle Joe would walk you off your feet in a morning," she declared. "He's so strong—he never gets tired."

"And don't you think I am strong?" Barry demanded with pretended effrontery.

She raised her pretty eyes, and dropped them again quickly. "I'm sure I don't know," she said, rather indifferently.

They had reached the house again now, and she went away, leaving him standing in the doorway.

Barry looked after her with a comical sort of dismay in his eyes; then he wandered into the sitting-room.

There was nobody there, and he sat down on the arm of an old-fashioned grandfather chair, and stared moodily at the floor.

He was conscious of a miserable indecision—should he

go or should he stay? He did not want to stay, and yet he most assuredly did not want to go.

Norman was safe for the present, at all events; the sprained ankle would keep him a prisoner for some time.

Barry swung his leg to and fro impatiently, and wished he had not come.

It had been a fool's errand; he could not understand now why he had ever consented to it. He got up from the chair and lounged over to the mantel-shelf; it was covered with an old-fashioned velvet mantel-board, worked in silk in gay colours. A great many photographs stood there in rather ugly frames that looked as if they might have been bought in Bedmund on a market day.

Barry scrutinized them idly. There was one of Joe Daniels, taken ten years ago, on horseback; another of him got up in what was obviously a "best" suit, with a little girl on his knee.

Barry's interest increased. He leaned a little closer to the photograph. The little girl was Hazel, he was sure; the likeness was unmistakable, in spite of short frocks and a pinafore, and a big bow on her pretty hair. He picked the photograph up and looked at it rather eagerly. She had been very pretty then, but not nearly so pretty as she was now. He put it down hastily; he thought he had heard someone in the passage outside.

He turned again to the other photographs. What hideous frocks women wore in those days, he thought. It was quite a relief to find something modern amongst the collection, and then he scowled suddenly, for he had come across a snapshot of his cousin taken somewhere on the farm with Hazel herself.

It was evidently quite a recent snapshot. Norman was in flannels and a straw hat, and he was smiling down at the girl beside him, and looking very pleased.

"Silly ass!" said Barry, under his breath. He felt angry, without knowing why. Norman was always in

and out of love with someone. What business had he got to hang about after this girl?

"Don't you think that is a good snapshot?" asked Hazel, at his elbow.

He had not heard her come into the room. He started to find her so close beside him.

He put the photograph down hurriedly, as if it had been hot. "Not bad," he said, casually. "Who's the man? One of the farmers round here?"

"A farmer! Oh, if he could hear you!" She laughed merrily. "Oh, no, he isn't a farmer," she said. "He's just a friend who comes down sometimes from London to see us."

"Humph!"

"He was to have taken us to the theatre that night we met you," she went on. "But he wasn't able to manage it." Her eyes grew mischievous. "He's got a father whom I believe he's awfully scared of," she said, confidentially.

"Indeed," said Barry. He was delighted at the turn the conversation had taken. He looked again at his cousin's photograph. "He's rather like a chap I used to know," he said, with elaborate indifference.

"Is he?"—she was interested at once. "His name is Wicklow," she said. "Norman Wicklow—do you know him?"

Barry shook his head. Afterwards he blamed himself because he had not seized upon this opportunity to tell her the truth; but the moment came and went almost before he was aware of it. "And does he like rustic life?" he asked, rather dryly.

"Oh, no!" There was a trace of self-consciousness in her voice now. "He'll be a very rich man some day," she said, with a sigh.

"Lucky dog!"

She did not hear the little touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"I don't think he's had a very happy sort of life, poor

boy," she went on. "His people don't seem to understand him, and he's got such a horrid cousin."

Barry stood quite still.

"A—horrid cousin!" he echoed, blankly.

"Yes—they were brought up together, you see, and Barry—that's the cousin—is very jealous of Norman, and is always trying to make trouble. It's too bad, because Norman's been awfully good to him."

Barry tried to speak, but could find no words; he felt as if he were choking.

"I think it's a very ungrateful world," Hazel went on, innocently, "don't you? I am sure if I got into debt for hundreds of pounds, and someone came along and paid them for me, I could never be grateful enough, could you?"

Barry swallowed hard.

"And did your friend pay his cousin's debts?" he asked, rather hoarsely.

She nodded. "He has paid them twice, and he never gets any thanks; it's too bad."

"Hazel! Hazel!" Mrs. Bentley called from the stairs, and the girl turned quickly.

When she had gone Barry swung round slowly on his heel, and, raising his clenched fist, shook it at his cousin's smiling face.

"You paid my debts, did you—you young liar?" he said, under his breath. "All right, my boy! Then I'll make it my business to see that you're repaid—with interest!"

CHAPTER VII

BARRY WICKLOW let the long trail of blackberries he had been holding down swing upwards with a sudden jerk, and looked at Hazel with a pucker between his eyes.

"Do you know," he said, in the voice of one who has made a sudden interesting discovery, "I don't believe your uncle likes me?"

Hazel glanced up from the basket of blackberries on her arm and laughed.

"Whatever makes you think that?" she asked. "Not like you! Why, of course he does."

Barry shook his head. "He doesn't. I don't know why, but I've got a firm sort of conviction in my mind that he looks upon me with suspicion."

His eyes twinkled. "Perhaps he thinks I've got designs on some of his property," he suggested. "And perhaps I have," he added, coolly.

Hazel laughed again.

"The copper warming-pan, for instance!" she said. "I heard you admiring it the other day. It isn't a bit valuable, I assure you."

Barry's eyes grew suddenly grave. "Mr. Daniels has other possessions that are, though," he said.

"Others?" She looked at him, not understanding.

Barry was looking at her steadily. "Perhaps I should have said—one other." He amended his words deliberately.

It was impossible now to mistake his meaning. Hazel made a little grimace.

"If you've quite finished paying me compliments," she

said, trying to speak lightly, "I think we had better go home. The basket is quite full; if we put any more in they'll only be spilt."

Barry took the basket from her arm. They walked a few steps in silence.

"Why will you never be serious with me?" he asked her suddenly. "I am beginning to think that you are like Mr. Daniels, and don't altogether trust me," he added, with a tinge of impatience in his voice.

Barry had been at Cleave Farm four days now, and already London seemed far away, so far that sometimes he wondered if it were not really weeks, instead of days, since that morning when he walked out of his rooms and started unwillingly on his mission.

Down here, in the country, the time flew. It was no sooner morning than it was evening; no sooner had the day begun than it was ended. Barry never once found himself wondering what in the world to do with himself, and yet he never did anything at all except wander about the farm and fields.

Sometimes he went out in the rickety little trap with Mr. Daniels; sometimes he trudged along with him over hills and ploughed fields; sometimes—as now—Hazel would take him out with her.

To-day he had invited himself. It was time the blackberries were picked, he had informed her that morning, looking in for a moment at the kitchen window; it was wicked waste to leave them another moment for the village boys to gather. Was she coming out with him to pick them, or had he got to go alone?

Hazel had looked up from her work. She was making cakes, and her arms were all white with flour, and there was a big pinafore tied round her slim waist.

"I can't come. I'm busy. Can't you see how busy I am?"

Barry leaned his arms on the sill. "I'll come in and help you—I can cook. I used to make ripping toffee when I was at school."

She laughed merrily. "Toffee! I'm not making toffee. These are cakes—cakes for your tea."

"Well, it won't take all the morning, anyway," he insisted. "And it's a topping day."

She looked at his pleading face and shook her head. "I've wasted too much time already since you've been here. You're always trying to get me out. You can't always have your own way."

But he got it all the same, and now the basket was full of the big juicy blackberries, and it was time to go home.

Barry did not want to go home. He liked being out here in the woods. He liked the crackle of last year's dried twigs and bracken under his feet; he liked to feel the cool country air, with its first touch of autumn chill on his face; he liked pulling down the high branches that were out of Hazel's reach, and holding them while she picked the berries from them.

He had thoroughly enjoyed himself this afternoon, but now there was a look of gloom on his face as he silently followed her along the narrow path.

"You haven't answered my question," he said presently.

She looked up at him quickly and away. "I don't know how to answer it, that's why," she said. Her voice sounded rather bewildered. "I think you just imagine these things. I'm sure if Uncle Joe doesn't like you

Barry broke in quickly. "You know he doesn't then?"

She made a gesture of impatience. "I don't know anything of the sort. If he is a little gruff and stand-offish, he was just the same when Norman was here; he——" she stopped, self-consciously.

"Norman!" Barry echoed.

"Yes, Norman Wicklow. I showed you his photograph, the one on the shelf in the sitting-room, taken with me."

"Oh—that ass!" said Barry, crossly.

She coloured. "He isn't an ass, at all, and it's rude of you to speak like that about my friends."

Barry set his jaw sullenly. "So Mr. Daniels didn't care for him, either," he said presently. "Was he here long?"

She raised her chin with a touch of dignity. "He comes very often; mother likes him; he was here a week ago."

"I don't imagine that he comes to see your mother, all the same," said Barry, ill-temperedly.

A faint smile crept into her eyes. Barry was conscious of a little contraction at his heart.

He looked down at her with angry eyes. "I suppose he will be coming again this week-end?" he submitted shortly.

She stopped to disengage her dress from a trailing bramble. "I shouldn't be surprised," she answered evenly. "He knows we are always glad to see him. Oh, look! There is Uncle Joe." She raised her voice, calling to the farmer across the open, stubble-grown space which they had reached and which divided the wood from the fields.

Mr. Daniels turned and waited. He looked at Barry with rather unfriendly eyes.

Hazel slipped a hand through her uncle's arm.

"We've been blackberrying," she said. "Look, aren't they beauties?"

Mr. Daniels glanced at the basket Barry was carrying and grunted. "Good enough. This is something new for you, Mr. Ashton."

"Yes," said Barry. "I haven't done this sort of thing for years."

"And it's the sort of thing you'll soon tire of, eh?" the farmer said. "I say it's the sort of thing you'll soon get tired of," he repeated, as Barry did not answer.

Hazel looked at him quickly. It struck her that there was a note of underlying meaning in her uncle's voice. She turned to Barry.

"Uncle Joe means that he thinks you'll find it dull here," she said.

"It's not in the least dull," Barry assured her quickly.

They walked back to the farm almost silently; Barry followed Hazel into the kitchen and deposited the basket of blackberries on the table.

Mr. Daniels was out of earshot now. Barry looked at Hazel. "I told you he didn't like me," he said, suddenly. Their eyes met; hers looked somehow distressed. "Oh, I don't think so," she said quickly. "Why shouldn't he like you?" Barry took a step towards her; his hand fell to hers as it lay on the table.

"Do you want me to tell you why?" he asked.

She caught her breath. She drew a little from him.

"Oh, no, no!" she said in a whisper.

She tried to move her hand away, but Barry held it fast. "Hazel!" His voice was not quite steady. "Hazel, will you answer me something? This fellow—this Norman Wicklow—is he . . . is he anything to you?"

He was surprised at the earnestness of his own voice—surprised at the anxiety with which he waited for her reply. So much seemed to hang on the next few moments.

Mr. Daniels called irascibly from the sitting-room. "Are we going to have tea to-day or to-morrow?"

Hazel dragged her hand free. "Let me go—oh, let me go."

Barry turned away impatiently; he went back to the sitting room; he looked rather pale.

Joseph Daniels glanced up at him from beneath his dark brows; the lines of his face were rather forbidding at that moment.

Barry stood looking out of the window; his rather lumbering figure looked dejected; when Hazel came in to lay the tea he turned and sat down straddle-wise across a chair, his arms on the wooden back, his eyes following her gloomily as she moved about the room.

She made a pretty picture in her simple cotton frock,

and with her little air of busy preoccupation. She did not once glance at Barry; he thought that she seemed deliberately to avoid him.

He got up presently and went out to the front door; he stood leaning against the framework staring out across the garden.

He had started on this adventure without the least seriousness; he had stumbled across Hazel and Cleave Farm by the merest chance, and yet in four days the whole affair had grown by leaps and bounds to gigantic proportions.

He had stayed on at first with a resentful wish to pay his cousin out for the lies he had told to Hazel; at the time that desire had weighed far more heavily with him than his uncle's promise of reward. But now he was staying on for himself; staying on because he knew that if he went back to London he would not know a minute's peace; that he would be thinking of Hazel all the time, and wishing to be with her.

Norman's father had been so confident that he would be able to cut Norman out; Barry had never been less confident about anything in all his life. He had failed with Agnes Dudley; was it likely, then, that he would be able to succeed with this girl? She avoided him for the rest of the evening; she went off to bed with a casual, "Good-night, Mr. Ashton," spoken across the room.

Barry was pretending to read a newspaper; it was a dull local paper, all about crops and the market, and the squabbles of the vicar and his churchwardens; but it served as a screen from Joe Daniels' eagle eye as Barry watched Hazel cross the narrow passage and go upstairs.

She carried a candle, and the uncertain yellow light made a halo round her pretty head as she went on into the darkness.

There was a sort of uncomfortable silence in the sitting-room when she had gone; Mrs. Bentley went on with her sewing, and her brother shut the heavy covers

of the ledger in which he had been making entries, and rose, taking his favourite stand, back to the mantel-shelf.

Barry put down his paper and tried to make conversation, but it was up-hill work; the farmer only answered in monosyllables; Mrs. Bentley was too intent on the little tucks she was making to pay much attention to either of the men.

When the clock struck nine Barry rose with a sigh of relief. "I think I'll turn in," he said, rather lamely.

He waited a moment. "Well, good-night," he said.

The farmer grunted something inaudible. Hazel's mother looked up and smiled.

"Good-night, Mr. Ashton; sleep well."

Barry escaped. He went out into the kitchen and took off his boots. There was a blue pinafore of Hazel's hanging over a chairback; he stood for a moment looking down at it with rather wistful eyes. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went out of the kitchen and up to his room, each stair creaking a little beneath his weight.

From the open sitting-room door, the farmer watched him silently. When he was quite sure that he had gone, he looked at Hazel's mother as she sat in the lamplight, bending over her work. "Well," he said suddenly, "and what do you think of Mr. Ashton?"

Mrs. Bentley looked up. "Mr. Ashton! I like him," she said decidedly.

The farmer sniffed; an inelegant sniff, but eloquent.

"Oh, you like him, do you?" he said flatly. "Well, I don't, and what's more, I'm not going to have him hanging about here any longer. I don't like him, and I don't trust him. He thinks I'm fool enough to have swallowed that little yarn about his coming here for country walks and country air; but he thinks wrong! I don't know what brought him here, and I don't care, but I know it wasn't love of the country, and I know he's not

going to stay in my house any longer. The point is, Mary, will you tell him to go, or shall I?"

Mrs. Bentley stared at her brother for a moment in blank amazement.

"Send him away! Tell him he must go!" she echoed at last. "Joe! You must be mad!"

The farmer closed the door with an irritable hand.

"Not so mad, perhaps," he said, in a rather surly voice. "I never did care for this idea of yours of letting rooms. It's not as if we want the money. I'm quite well able to keep you and Hazel without having strangers in the house. I gave in to you over Mr. Wicklow, but he was different to this man. I tell you I don't trust him. Who is he, anyway, I should like to know?"

Mrs. Bentley flushed with annoyance. "I really haven't asked him," she said, rather curtly. "It's no business of ours where he comes from or who he is, as long as he pays for what he has."

Joe Daniels glared at his sister across the lamplight.

"Can't you see what his little game is?" he demanded. "Can't you tell by the way he hangs round Hazel?"

Mrs. Bentley's face cleared. She laughed.

"Joe! You silly fellow! You're jealous, that's what it is. I know you can't bear the idea of Hazel marrying. You were just the same when Mr. Wicklow was here. You said all manner of things about him at first, and then ended up by liking him."

"He was a different kind of man. Hazel would be happy with him if he ever asked her to have him, but with this Mr. Ashton, he's got half-a-dozen girls on his books, I'll warrant, if the truth is known. You're the girl's mother; you take my advice and get rid of him; don't have him here, you'll be sorry if you do, mark my words."

Mrs. Bentley re-threaded her needle. There was a little smile in her eyes.

"In some ways, Joe, you're a far-seeing enough man,"

she said, evenly, "but in others you're surprisingly dense. If you ask my opinion, I much prefer Mr. Ashton to Norman Wicklow. One's a man and the other's a dressed-up boy. Look at the coloured shirts he used to wear and the fancy socks."

"And so does Ashton."

"I know, but there's a difference," she insisted gently. The farmer growled.

"That's a woman's way of arguing. However, I'm not going to say any more. I suppose I'm not master in my own home now, that's what it means. I suppose I've got to stand by like a tame cat and see Hazel's heart broken by a jumped-up whipper-snapper."

Mrs. Bentley raised her eyes. "It was you who brought him here, Joe," she said.

"Yes, it was; and you who kept him; and you and Hazel who picked him up at some theatre without knowing who he was, or what his name was. I should have thought, Mary, that you'd been taught better than that by this time. Your own marriage——"

She broke in tremulously. "We don't want to speak about that. I made a mistake, I know, but it's over and done with, and Hazel isn't married, or thinking of getting married."

Daniels scowled. "Ashton reminds me of Jim Bentley, anyway. He's got that same soft way of looking at a girl; that same soft tongue. Bah! It makes me sick. There are plenty of decent lads round Bedmund if she wants a husband, without hankering after gentlemen in positions above her own. That young Norman Wicklow has asked her more than once, I know."

Mrs. Bentley flushed. "Oh, no! She would surely have told me if he had."

The farmer looked superior. "No girl tells her mother any more than she thinks she will," he said unkindly. His sister's eyes filled with tears; Hazel was all that was left to her from the wreck of her pitiful

marriage; and she could not bear to think that perhaps she had not got all the girl's confidence.

Joe Daniels kicked off his boots.

"It's bedtime," he said gruffly. He went off upstairs, but Hazel's mother sat for a long time lost in thought, the tears dropping fast on the dainty work she was doing.

The tragedy of her own marriage was a thing long since ended and forgotten, but it was an endless dread with her that some day her own life's story might find an echo in her daughter's.

Young as Hazel was, she had already had half the boys of Bedmund at her heels, and she had turned up her little nose at them all.

"As if I could marry any of them, mother," she said, with a faintest disdain. "They're so rough. I don't want to live on a farm all my life. If ever I marry it must be a man in a good position—a man who can take me to live in London."

"She's beginning to talk like they do in London," her uncle said once, disgustedly. "I don't know where she gets her fine words and manners from."

Mrs. Bentley knew; knew that the refinement and charm with which Hazel's father had captured her twenty years ago had been inherited by his daughter. He had been a fickle ne'er-do-well; he had made her more miserable during the three years of their married life than she had ever believed it possible for a woman to be; and yet down to the day of his death she had loved him and thought him the most attractive man she had ever met.

Over and over again she could see him in Hazel, some little trick of speech, some expression in the eyes, and back would come the old heart-ache.

Her husband had been thrown from a restive horse he was trying to train, and had broken his back. They had brought him home to her on an improvised stretcher and laid him down at her feet in the little parlour where she had spent so many lonely hours, and there he had

died. It had been impossible to move him; impossible to do anything to prolong his life.

She could see it all as plainly as if it had been but yesterday, though it was seventeen long years ago.

He had looked up at her as he lay there with a little flash of his old smile.

"Send for the gov'nor; he'll come now," he said weakly; and he had been right. The old man who had refused to acknowledge her or his son's marriage, came a few minutes before that son died.

There had been no time for explanations, or even for forgiveness. Jim just looked at his father and pointed to Hazel—a little curly-haired mite of two years then, hiding shyly behind her mother's skirts.

"Don't be hard on the kid," he said with a touch of anxiety in his weak voice. "She's all a Bentley, anyway."

And a moment later he had died; without a word to his wife, without a look for the girl who had loved him so devotedly.

Her husband's people had offered to take Hazel, but the offer had been refused indignantly, and Mary Bentley had never seen any of them since. It was then that Joe Daniels stepped into the breach and brought her back home to Cleave Farm, and she and Hazel had lived there ever since.

And Hazel was more "all Bentley" every day. Lately, too, she had asked a great many questions about her father's people.

"I don't know anything about them," her mother told her. "They never recognised me. I only saw your grandfather once in my life, and then he did not speak half-a-dozen words to me."

But she knew that in a quiet way Hazel had tried to find out something about them. Once she had found her pouring over some old books of her father's—an old Bible, with a list of names written on the blank page in front.

She had looked up at her mother with puzzled eyes. "If my father was James Bentley," she said, "he must have had all these brothers and sisters. Where are they all? They can't all be dead?" Mrs. Bentley turned away from the eager questioning with a little pang at her heart.

"I know nothing about them," she said again quietly. "They did not consider I was good enough for them."

Hazel heard the hurt tone in her mother's voice; she got up and kissed her impulsively.

"Poor little mother! But then they didn't know you."

Mrs. Bentley lived through all these little incidents again as she sat alone in the lamp-lit parlour and thought over her brother's words. Joe loved Hazel, she knew, and perhaps for that reason he was prejudiced against Norman Wicklow and Mr. Ashton, seeing in both of them possible suitors for his niece.

She rose presently, turned out the lamp and went upstairs. She passed Hazel's door, and stood for a moment outside, but there was no sound from within, and she went on to her own room.

After all, age and grey hair cannot make a woman's heart old; and to-night Mary Bentley felt herself to be once again the girl who had crept out of her father's house in the early dawn of a spring morning to be married to Hazel's father; and she took his portrait from the locket she always wore round her neck and kissed it before she got into bed and cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE'S a letter for you, Mr. Ashton," Hazel said the following morning, meeting Barry in the doorway.

It was quite early—only just after seven, but Barry had developed an astonishing taste for early rising since he came to Cleave Farm. From his window he had seen Hazel out in the yard feeding the chickens, and he had raced through his toilet and come down in time to meet her at the door.

"A letter—for me!" he echoed blankly. He could not think who could have written to him; he had given his address to nobody except his uncle. It was something of a relief, therefore, to see that it was his uncle's writing.

"Dear Barry," Mr. Wicklow wrote, "as I have not heard anything of you I thought I had better write and ask how you are progressing. Norman's ankle still keeps him a prisoner, I am glad to say, but he has written several times to a certain lady who shall be nameless, and, needless to say, the letters have not been posted. I had a note from Mrs. Dudley this morning asking very urgently for your address. She rang up yesterday when I was out. What am I to do? Please let me have instructions. Wishing you good luck.—Your affectionate uncle,

"JOHN WICKLOW."

Barry frowned. "You don't look very pleased," Hazel said, smiling at his serious face. "Is it bad news?"

Barry tore the letter across and across.

"I hate letters from people," he said irritably. "I hate answering them. I came away for a holiday! I don't want to be bothered." His brow cleared and he smiled. "I shan't answer it anyway," he said boyishly.

"Is that the way you treat all your correspondents?" she asked.

"I hate writing letters," Barry said again, evasively. He wondered what the dickens Agnes wanted his address for. He had done with her. It seemed ages and ages since he had danced obedient attendance at her heels.

It was strange how a man could change in a short time; his eyes wandered to the girl beside him. For the first time he saw that she, too, had a letter, which she was folding and refolding rather nervously in her hands.

"Who has been writing to you?" he asked, abruptly.

She looked up startled, flushing a little. She put her hands behind her back.

"Nobody very much," she said, quickly. "I get very few letters, but . . . oh!" she had dropped the letter.

Barry grabbed for it. He glanced at the writing on the envelope as he returned it to her. It was Norman's.

For a moment he did not speak. There was a bitter feeling of jealousy in his heart. So, in spite of his father, Norman had managed to get one letter through.

"I suppose it's from that—chap in the photograph?" he said shortly.

She did not answer.

The blood rose to Barry's face. "Is it?" he insisted.

She looked up at him. "Really, Mr. Ashton, I can't see what it's got to do with you." She moved past him into the house.

He stood where she had left him till breakfast was ready. He was in no mood for company. Hazel glanced at his sullen face as he took his seat at the table and a little smile lit her eyes.

Joe Daniels had had his breakfast earlier and gone out. Barry and the two women were alone.

They were all rather silent. Mrs. Bentley looked a little pale, as if she had not slept very well.

"Any letters this morning, Hazel?" she asked presently.

"Yes, mother, Mr. Ashton had one, and there was one for me from Mr. Wicklow." She glanced at Barry as she spoke.

Mrs. Bentley looked up. "From Mr. Wicklow—it is quite a long time since we heard from him. Is there any news?"

Barry's spoon tinkled agitatedly against his cup for a second as he waited for Hazel's reply.

"He says that he has sprained his ankle," she said evenly, "but that if it is better he hopes to be able to come down to-morrow—for the week-end."

Barry raised startled eyes from his eggs and bacon; his face had flushed crimson.

"Coming here, for the week-end," he stammered.

Hazel looked at him calmly. "So he says—if his ankle is better."

There was a poignant silence.

"Does Mr. Ashton know Norman?" Mrs. Bentley asked in faint surprise. Hazel shook her head.

"You know he doesn't, mother."

"I thought it might be possible," the elder woman answered. She looked at Barry. "Once or twice I have thought that Mr. Ashton and Mr. Wicklow were somehow alike, only in expression, of course."

Hazel laughed. "Mother! They're not a bit alike."

But Mrs. Bentley stuck to her point. "It's only an occasional expression, of course," she admitted. "But every now and then something in Mr. Ashton's eyes

She broke off apologetically.

"I am flattered," said Barry dryly. He had noticed that Mrs. Bentley had alluded to his cousin as "Norman"; they must be on very friendly terms for them to call him by his Christian name, he thought jealously.

As soon as breakfast was over he went out for a long

walk by himself. He knew that Hazel came to the door and looked after him as he strode away down the garden, but he did not turn his head. He was smarting with jealousy. He believed that she had deliberately tried to hurt him by her frequent reference to his cousin.

He wandered about the lanes and woods all the morning. He did not go back to lunch. He lay on his back on a mossy bank under some oak trees and tried to sleep.

Presently he dozed off, his cap pulled well over his eyes to shade the flickering sunlight that sifted through the gently moving leaves of the trees overhead.

He woke late in the afternoon to the consciousness that someone was standing near him. He started up, half asleep.

A girl was standing beside him on the narrow path looking at him with a faintly amused smile.

"I'm glad you were only asleep," she said. "I thought, perhaps, you might be dead. I've been standing here ever so long waiting for you to wake up."

Barry scrambled to his feet, shaking the bits of moss and grass from his coat. He stooped for his cap which had fallen off.

"I'm sorry—I was asleep—is anything the matter?"

She shook her head. She had very golden hair and she was very smartly dressed.

"Oh, no—I only want to know the way to a place called the Cleave Farm—I've been wandering about ever so long looking for it, but I can't find it anywhere. If you know it——"

"I know it very well," Barry said. "I am staying there; it's about a mile-and-a-half on. If you will allow me to show you the way. . . ."

She hesitated, and glanced towards the road which was some little distance from the wood, winding its way among the trees like a dusty ribbon.

"Well, I've got the car in the road," she said. "But if I may give you a lift home I shall be delighted."

Barry said he would be delighted, too; the girl was

not at all pretty, he decided, but there was something taking about her, in spite of her undoubted make-up and rather theatrical style.

He followed her down the narrow footpath, hastily trying to tidy his ruffled hair as he went. He wondered who she was, and what she wanted at Cleave Farm.

The car, waiting in the road, was a very handsome one. The attendant chauffeur was in smart livery. Barry gave him a few directions: "Keep straight on, and then turn to the right; then I'll tell you again." He followed the girl into the car.

"It's rather dusty," she said. "But we've come from London, and it's a longer run than I thought it would be."

"You live in London?" Barry asked.

"Yes." She looked at him with a little pucker between her brows. "Have you ever seen me before?" she asked. "Because somehow I am sure I have seen you, but I can't remember where."

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I think I should have remembered you if we had ever met before."

She looked pleased at the inferred compliment. "So you are staying at Cleave Farm?" she said presently. "How strange that I should have asked you the way, isn't it?"

"Very. . . . You know Mrs. Bentley, I suppose?"

She hesitated. "Well, no," she said at last. "I can't say that I do; I've never met her, but—well, as a matter of fact, her daughter Hazel and I are first cousins."

Barry stared.

"Her father and my father were brothers," she explained. "But her father married beneath him, or they chose to think so, and somehow he drifted away from his family. I don't live with my people now, you see, so I do as I like, and I wanted to see them—so I just took the car and came down—on spec'!" She laughed.

"I've heard a lot about Hazel, and so I thought I should like to see her for myself."

"You'll like her," said Barry, promptly. "You'll like her mother, too; they're charming people."

She turned her head. "You know them well, of course?"

"No. At least, as a matter of fact, I'm staying in the house for a little while. Mrs. Bentley very kindly let me have a room. I wanted to be in the neighbourhood, and—and so I was very glad of the chance."

"I see." There was a little silence.

"And so your father and Hazel's father were brothers," Barry said presently.

"Yes—they're both dead now, so far as I am concerned the old feud—whatever it was—is buried with them. I haven't got many relations, so I thought I'd dig Hazel up." She hesitated. "I'm on the stage, you know."

"Oh, indeed," said Barry politely. He had guessed it a long time ago.

"I'm not anybody well known," she went on candidly. "But I hope to be some day, with any luck! I'm not pretty enough to make much of a splash without someone to push me, you see."

For once in his life Barry did not know what to say, but he began to feel distinctly sorry that this girl was coming down to claim acquaintance with Hazel. They were so utterly different. He was sure that Hazel had never used rouge or a powder puff in her life.

"Is it much farther?" the girl beside him asked presently. "I'm so tired of country roads and fields. Do you really like being down here? You look such a thorough town man."

Barry laughed. "Do I? I much prefer the country to town—at any rate, in fine weather."

"And in good company, perhaps," she supplemented.

He coloured. "There is very little company here. We go to bed with the rooks, and get up before them sometimes."

"How uninteresting. Oh, is that the farm?"

"Yes." Barry rose. "Turn to the left here," he called

to the chauffeur. "And go slowly; it's a thundering bad road."

They turned in at the same gate through which Joe Daniels had driven him that first afternoon, and the car jolted and swayed over the uneven ground till they reached the farm.

Barry got out. He had seen Hazel up at her bedroom window, and he hoped she was thinking that no doubt he had spent the morning and afternoon in the company of this girl.

He led the way into the house. Mrs. Bentley was in the kitchen. She called out to him cheerily.

"Where have you been? We were beginning to get quite anxious about you, Mr. Ashton——"

The girl beside Barry looked up at him. "Is your name Ashton?" she asked.

"Yes," said Barry. She looked faintly disappointed. "Then I haven't met you before; I don't know anyone of that name."

Mrs. Bentley came out into the passage.

"Have you had your dinner? I kept it hot for you till three o'clock. Oh——" she broke off, looking at Barry's companion.

Barry began some sort of an awkward explanation, but the girl stopped him.

"I can do all that myself, thanks!" she said, with a little laugh. "Is this Mrs. Bentley?"

Barry nodded, and she went up to Hazel's mother and took her hand. "You don't know me," she said. "But I'm your niece. My name is Delia Bentley. Your husband and my father were brothers."

There was a little pause. Mrs. Bentley had flushed painfully. She tried to draw her hand away, but Delia held it fast.

"Now, it's no use being stand-offish with me," she said, cheerily. "It's not my fault that we haven't met before. I've heard lots about you and Hazel, and I'm very pleased to meet you at last. I've driven all the

way down from London to find you, and I'm just dying for a cup of tea. Can we have one? I've got a car outside, and a man. I dare say he's thirsty, too. And where is Hazel?"

She gave Mrs. Bentley no time to speak. There was something so unaffected about her that it was impossible to stand on one's dignity for long.

Mrs. Bentley recovered herself with an effort. She said they should have tea in a minute. She called tremulously to Hazel, and retired into the kitchen again.

Delia had thrown off the long, loose coat she wore, and untied the motor veil from her hat. "Have you got a cigarette?" she asked.

Barry had. He produced his case. He wondered what on earth Joe Daniels would say if he came in and found this girl smoking.

He struck a match and lit the cigarette for her. She gave two long puffs and leaned back in her chair with a little sigh of relief.

She looked at Barry with a twinkle in her eyes. "It's an unexpected pleasure to find a man like you in this sleepy hollow," she added. "Hullo!" She rose to her feet. "I suppose you're Hazel?" she said, in a change of tone.

Hazel had just come into the room. She was all in white, and there was an excited flush on her pretty face. She had heard from her mother who their visitor was.

The two girls shook hands. Delia's cool eyes scanned her cousin critically.

"Well, you look just the country rose part," she said, in her downright fashion. "I wish they could put complexions like yours in a box for us to buy."

Hazel flushed.

Barry felt very tender as he looked at Hazel. She was so different to every other woman he had ever known. She looked younger and prettier than ever now, beside the carefully made-up smartness of her cousin.

When Hazel went off to help her mother with the tea,

Delia looked at Barry and laughed. "Is she the reason why you like the country?" she asked him, teasingly. "Goodness, don't blush so," she added. "I admire your taste. What a hit she'd make in London!"

She blew another cloud of smoke into the air and chuckled. "Wonder what she thought of me for smoking?" she said. Barry did not answer.

Hazel reappeared with the tea-tray. She looked at Delia a great deal as she moved about the room. She was contrasting her own simple home-made clothes with Delia's, and feeling a little pang of envy.

"Where did you two meet?" she asked presently.

Delia answered at once. "Mr. Ashton was the sleeping beauty in the wood," she said. "And I woke him—though not in the story-book way. I asked him where Cleave Farm was, and he said he was staying there, so we came along together."

She threw the dead end of her cigarette towards the fire. "Will you come and stay with me in London, Hazel?" she asked impulsively. "I'll give you the time of your life."

Hazel coloured excitedly. "Oh, I should love it—I adore London."

Barry scowled. "You'd soon get to hate it," he said, with a sort of savagery.

"You be quiet!" Delia told him sharply. "Leave Hazel alone. She will love London as I shall show it to her. Why, I don't suppose she's hardly been to a theatre, or a night-club."

Barry bit his lip. The thought of Hazel in a night-club made him feel sick. He changed the conversation as quickly as he could. Hazel went off to cut bread and butter.

Delia looked at Barry teasingly. "You don't like the idea of her coming to town," she said, with a little laugh. "You want to keep your rose all to yourself—eh?"

Barry tried to curb his rising temper. "It's no busi-

ness of mine," he said hardly. "Miss Bentley will no doubt be delighted to accept your invitation."

There was a little silence. Then Delia Bentley rose and went over to where he stood. She looked up at him with a curious expression in her eyes.

"Keep quite still," she said suddenly. "No, don't move or turn your head—I—yes, now I know where I've met you before. You came behind at the theatre one night. I remember your name, too. You're Barry Wicklow!"

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CHAPTER IX

BARRY had never been so taken aback in his life. He stared at the girl for a moment with blank eyes, the colour rising guiltily in his face.

"I—I don't remember at all," he stammered at last. "I—I really think you must be making a mistake."

She shook her head, laughing amusedly.

"Oh no, I'm not. I can't think why I did not recognise you at first. It came back to me all in a flash as you were standing there. As a rule I'm awfully good at remembering faces, but it wasn't to see me that you came to the theatre. You were only pointed out to me, and I remembered your name. It struck me as being rather a nice one."

Barry did not know what to answer.

"I don't know why you're calling yourself Ashton down here," she went on. "But you need not look so scared; I'm not going to give you away——"

Barry found his voice then. "No, for Heaven's sake, don't! There's a reason. I can't explain, or I would."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, I'm not curious. And what an awful time they are with that tea."

Hazel came into the room at that moment. She looked from one to the other with faint apprehension. Barry wondered if she had heard anything of their conversation. He felt that he should never know any peace of mind till Delia had rolled away in her smart car. But apparently Delia was quite comfortable where she was. She talked and chatted with Mrs. Bentley with great friendliness.

"I always wanted to know you both," she said, rather gushingly. "I'm simply delighted to have met you at

last. You must let Hazel come to stay with me in London. I've got a ripping flat; she'll just love it."

Mrs. Bentley answered rather hurriedly. "Oh, but I can't spare her."

"I've never had an invitation before," Hazel broke in quickly. "Of course, I should simply love to come and stay with you," she said, with enthusiasm, turning to her cousin.

Barry scowled into his cup. It was very easy to see which way the wind was blowing, he thought. It made his blood boil to have to sit by, unable to interfere.

If Hazel went to London with Delia it would spoil her, he was sure. The two girls were so utterly different. He was remembering that night at the theatre to which Delia had referred.

He and a rackets crowd of his friends had gone behind and taken a party of the girls out to supper. He could not remember having seen Delia amongst them, but he felt uncomfortable when he remembered that night. It was one of the episodes in his life of which he had lately grown to be slightly ashamed.

Delia turned to him. "Do you live in town, Mr. Ashton? Oh, but of course you do; you told me so. Well, you must come and see me, too, will you? I give you all a standing invitation to come when you like, and take pot-luck."

Hazel's eyes sparkled. She was fascinated by this new cousin. She had never seen anyone quite like her before, and she was really sorry when at last Delia rose to go.

"My brother will be sorry not to have seen you," Mrs. Bentley said, rather formally. "This is my brother's farm, you know. We have lived with him ever since my husband died."

Delia said, "Oh, how ripping!" rather vaguely. She was not particularly anxious to meet Joe Daniels. She kissed Hazel and Mrs. Bentley effusively.

She gave Barry's hand rather an unnecessary squeeze when she said "Good-bye."

"Come and see me in London—Barry," she said. She added the last word in a mischievous whisper.

Barry was red and uncomfortable as he stood and watched her drive away. She stood up in the car when it reached the road and waved a last farewell.

He turned then and looked at Hazel. "Well," he said, "what do you think of your new cousin?"

Hazel roused herself from the reverie into which she had fallen. "Oh, I think she's sweet," she said, with enthusiasm. "How I should love to have beautiful clothes like hers!"

"Rot!" said Barry brusquely. He realised that the monosyllable sounded rude, and hastened to apologise. "You've nothing to envy in her," he said. "I hope you won't go to London if she asks you."

Hazel looked at him in surprise. "You hope I shan't! Oh, but of course I shall. It's what I've been longing for all my life."

Barry looked angry. "Your mother won't let you go," he said.

Hazel laughed with a trace of annoyance. "I think I know mother better than you do," she told him. "She will let me go if I wish to—and, of course, I wish to."

She was turning away when he stopped her. "Wait a moment. I want to speak to you."

She hesitated. "I am in a great hurry."

"Not in too much of a hurry to spare me a moment, please."

He was very much in earnest now. Hazel stood still. "Well, what do you want to say?"

Barry asked his question with blunt impulse.

"Is that fellow Norman Wicklow coming down to-morrow?"

She drew herself up a little.

"Oh, I know," he rushed on. "I know you think it's no business of mine, and that it's cheek to ask;

but—well, if you knew how much it does matter to me. It just comes to this—if he is coming, I'm going away."

There was a little silence. "Why?" she asked then quietly.

He blundered on recklessly. "Because I know he's coming here to see you, and because I'm not going to stand by and see him following you about, and—and——" He stopped. "Are you angry?" he asked, hopelessly.

She raised her head a little. "Why should I be angry? I'm not at all angry. And if you want to go—why, of course, you must. No, I really can't stay any longer." And she turned and left him.

CHAPTER X

BARRY knew he had behaved foolishly. As usual, he had allowed his tongue to run away with him. He swore under his breath as he stood there looking towards the gate through which Delia's car had vanished a moment since.

Mr. Daniels and the rickety trap were coming through it now. Barry went forward to meet him. The farmer was staring down at the big tire marks the car had left in the wet ruts of the road. "Who's been here?" he asked gruffly.

Barry answered with a touch of maliciousness: "A Miss Bentley—Mrs. Bentley's niece, I believe. She came in a Rolls-Royce. . . ."

The farmer turned blank eyes to him. "In a—what?" he asked.

"A Rolls-Royce," said Barry again. "A car—a jolly fine car, too. She's only been gone a few minutes. You must have passed them on the road."

A grunt was the only answer. Mr. Daniels left the trap and went into the house.

Mrs. Bentley met him in the passage. She was a little flushed still with the excitement of Delia's visit; she began to tell her brother breathlessly all about it.

"It was so unexpected. I don't know how she found us. It was no wish of mine that she came. I've been slighted so long by the whole family that it would not have mattered if they had never taken any notice of me. But she made herself very agreeable, I must say—and oh, Joe! she wants Hazel to go and stay with her in London."

The farmer thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"Oh, she does, does she?" he said. "Well, and what did you say?"

"I said that Hazel never went away alone. But Hazel is so anxious to go. . . ."

"Why, of course," Hazel chimed in from behind her mother. "And, of course, I shall go, shan't I, Uncle Joe?"

He looked at her from beneath his heavy brows. "Not with my consent, you won't," he said, curtly, turning on his heel.

Barry wondered what was going to happen. He stayed out of the way, expecting a scene; but when he re-joined them all at supper, apparently nothing had been said.

Hazel talked about her cousin the whole time. She was evidently very keen on her visit, and asked Barry a thousand and one questions about London. She had evidently forgotten their little tiff earlier in the evening.

Barry looked constrained. He was still wondering what on earth to do about the week-end, and whether Norman would be coming down. When supper was over Mr. Daniels turned to his niece. "Stop a minute, Hazel; I want to speak to you."

Barry went out of the room. He strolled up and down the garden in front of the house, far enough away to be out of earshot. He could guess what the farmer had to say, and was glad of it, for he was sure now that Hazel would not be allowed to go to London.

The time went by. Presently he saw the half-closed front door open again and Hazel ran out into the dusk. The white frock she wore made her look very slim and childish as she came towards him. Barry's heart began to race. "Well," he said, "is the lecture over?"

She did not answer at once. Then suddenly she turned on him passionately. "I suppose it's your doing. I suppose you told Uncle Joe not to let me go to London. Oh, how dared you interfere!"

Sheer astonishment kept Barry silent. Then he broke

out, indignantly: "I! I never said a word about it. I give you my word of honour I didn't—Hazel!"

She was crying now, like a disappointed child. Her voice was caught with little sobs as she answered him.

"I want to go so much. I've never been anywhere, or had any fun. I've tried to be contented down here, but—oh, if you knew how d-dull it is. Nothing but fields and trees and—and the country. It's worse in the winter than it is now. Oh, I think they might let me go!"

Barry did not answer for a moment. He hated to hear her crying. "I thought perhaps you'd advised Uncle Joe not to let me go," she went on, desolately. "I'm sorry if I was rude."

"That's all right," said Barry, rather huskily.

"I couldn't have come to any harm," she went on. She was wiping her tears away now. "And it would have been just lovely to have perhaps a whole week in London. If you knew how I've longed for someone to ask me up there. And, after all, she's my own cousin, and I like her awfully."

"What reason did Mr. Daniels give for refusing?" Barry asked presently.

She shook her head. "None, except that as my father's people had snubbed mother all her life, he wasn't going to let me know them now. It's absurd to argue like that. It isn't Delia's fault. She's ever so nice and friendly, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Barry. He wanted to say something about it being a wise decision on her uncle's part, but he did not dare.

"Never mind," he said at last, gently. "You're sure to have other chances—lots of chances. When you marry —"

She gave a little pitiful laugh.

"When I marry! They'll never let me marry the man I care for. They'll expect me to choose someone down here—one of the boys who've lived here all their lives,

and who don't know anything of the world and how beautiful it is outside this little village. They'll expect me to settle down on another farm like this one, and stay here till I get old and grey." She laughed drearily. "That's what mother and Uncle Joe will expect me to do when I marry."

Barry's heart was thumping up in his throat. His eyes had never left her face. She looked so pretty standing there with the little pathetic droop to her mouth, and her hands tugging, schoolgirl fashion, at her handkerchief, that he suddenly lost his head. He took her face in his hands, looking down at her with passion-filled eyes.

"Marry me!" he said, in a whisper. "I love you, Hazel! Marry me. . . ."

CHAPTER XI

IT was so silent down there in the dusk. Years afterwards Hazel could close her eyes and live again those few moments when she stood with Barry's eyes looking down into hers, and heard his voice through the still evening.

"Marry me—I love you, Hazel—marry me!"

For a moment she seemed to lose all sense of time and place. There was nothing in all the world any more but this man's face and his voice.

It was as if at his touch a veil had been torn from her eyes, showing life to her as it had been since he came to Cleave Farm, as it would be if he went away again and left her behind.

Barry saw the sudden light that filled her eyes—saw the little tremulous smile that curved her lips, and with sudden impulse he stooped and kissed her.

Neither of them were very clear as to what happened after that. There were many more kisses and incoherent words; but Barry's arms were round her now, and her face hidden against his coat. She felt as if someone had pushed her off the everyday workaday world into a little heaven which held only herself and him.

The dusk wrapped them round like a grey veil. It was so still down there in the garden. Little stars peeped shyly out at them from the sky. Somewhere across the fields a sheep-bell tinkled musically, and a sleepy bird twittered drowsily from its nest.

"Do you love me? Do you love me?" said Barry in a whisper.

His head was bent to hers; her soft hair touched his cheek, and she answered him tremblingly: "Oh, I do—you know I do. . . ."

"And you will marry me? When will you marry me?" She lifted her head then. He could see the shy confusion of her face through the grey evening. "Oh, but you're in such a hurry. . . ." Her eyes fell before his.

"I've loved you ever since that first night—at the theatre," he told her.

He really believed he had. He was sure that he had never cared for any woman in all his life as he cared for this one. He was positive that this was the real thing at last. He felt most tremendously happy.

He had certainly quite forgotten his uncle and Norman. For the moment, at least, it was nothing but his own desire that drove him. He had wanted this girl, and now she was his.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it—kissed the smooth, soft wrist from which the white sleeve fell away.

He did not understand how much that first kiss of his had been answerable for—did not realise that the charm of his impetuous love-making had taken this little girl by storm and won something deeper and more lasting than just a passing fancy.

But Hazel knew, and she wondered if he guessed that the touch of his lips had turned the key in the closed door of her heart. She hid her face again against his coat.

It was a wonderful thing how entirely her feelings had changed towards him. She had liked him before—admired him, too, in an impersonal way, but now . . . there was nobody like him in all the world, nobody so big, so strong—so tender!

Barry kissed her hair. He was naturally sentimental, and he believed that this was Romance with a capital letter.

The silence of the country made an ideal background. There was a faint scent of newly-mown hay on the night air. Barry looked up at the stars and felt himself a lover indeed.

"You are not cross with me any more?" he asked presently.

"I never was cross with you," she told him.

She looked at him adoringly with sweet, shy eyes.

"And you needn't have been jealous—really," she told him. "I mean—of Norman! . . . I never cared for him at all—but he cares for me—poor Norman!" There was a little note of regret in her voice, and Barry felt a pang of remorse.

After all, although he was sincere enough now, he had come to Cleave Farm with the deliberate intention of cutting his cousin out. Now he had kissed Hazel and held her in his arms he began to feel more sympathetic with Norman. He asked a jealous question:

"He never kissed you, Hazel—did he?"

She hesitated. "I never kissed him," she said at last.

He held her at arm's length. "You mean that he did kiss you," he said growlingly.

He liked playing the jealous lover. "Did he, Hazel?" he insisted.

She kept her face downbent. "Well—only once . . . when he went away . . . I knew then—that I didn't really care at all, that I should hate to have him kiss me always."

"Really and truly?"

"Really and truly."

He drew her closer to him gain. "But you like me to kiss you. You don't feel like that with me."

He had to stoop to catch her answer. "I never really knew that I loved you till you—till you kissed me."

Barry promptly kissed her again.

Mrs. Bentley came to the door of the farmhouse. She called through the dusk. "Hazel—are you there, Hazel?"

Barry turned her face to his coat to prevent her answering. "I'm not going to let you go in yet," he said masterfully.

Mrs. Bentley went back to the sitting-room; they could see the silhouette of her head against the yellow lamp-

light, and Joe Daniels, a tall, square figure in the background.

"You won't mind so much now about London, and Delia?" Barry asked presently.

"I shan't mind at all," she told him, happily. It was such a much more wonderful thing to love and be loved by this man than to rush through a week of gaiety and late nights with an almost unknown cousin. To Hazel the last few minutes had endowed the country with a new radiance and mystery.

"And—is Wicklow really coming down to-morrow?" Barry asked presently.

She laughed softly. "No—I only said it to tease you. He said he would liked to have come, but that his ankle kept him a prisoner." She stifled a little sigh. "Poor Norman! I wonder what he will say when I tell him about you?"

Barry, too, wondered what he would say.

"And mother—and Uncle Joe," Hazel went on dreamily. "Won't they be surprised!"

Barry said yes, he supposed they would. "Your uncle will hate the idea of it," he said.

"Poor Uncle Joe."

"Yes, but he can't keep you here for ever."

"I know, but I love him."

"And me? Where do I come in?"

"First—first of all," she whispered.

Barry's heart thumped. She was adorable—he loved the shy little tremble in her voice, loved her whole-hearted admission of how much she cared for him.

"Hazel—Hazel—" Mrs. Bentley called again from the doorway.

Hazel raised her head from Barry's shoulder.

"I must go—yes, let me go. . . ."

"Very well—you must kiss me again first."

Their lips met for a moment, and then he released her. "It will seem an eternity till the morning," he told her.

When she had quite gone he turned and leaned his

arms on the gate, looking out into the darkness with a smile on his lips.

He felt a little dazed—so much had happened in the last hour—but he was thoroughly happy. He could not remember ever having felt so happy in all his life before.

"And now I shall have to tell old Daniels, and do the straight thing," he told himself. "After all, they've been jolly decent. . . ."

He roused himself with a little sigh and strolled back to the house.

The farmer was alone in the sitting-room, smoking. He looked up when Barry entered.

"It's a fine night," said Barry, with an effort to speak naturally; but he felt very self-conscious. He passed a hand over his ruffled hair. "Topping night," he said again.

"Humph!"

The farmer laid down his pipe and paper.

Barry fidgeted round the room. He wished to goodness Mrs. Bentley would come in and relieve the strain. He never felt at his ease with Mr. Daniels; he had an uncomfortable conviction that the farmer's keen blue eyes could see right through him and read his thoughts.

And his thoughts just then were a confused tangle.

The farmer broke the silence. "I've told Hazel she can't go to London with this—this new cousin of hers," he said slowly.

Barry looked up. "Oh—er—indeed!" he said lamely.

"Yes"—the keen blue eyes were looking at Barry now—"I mean to keep my niece in the country," the farmer went on deliberately.

"I don't mean her to get mixed up with London folk and London ways. I don't mean her to have her head turned. . . . I've lived all my life down here at Bedmund, and if it's been good enough for me and her mother it ought to be good enough for her."

Barry fidgeted with his tie. He had an uncomfortable

sort of feeling that all this was leading up to something that concerned himself.

"Hazel's a girl that will have to settle down in her own sphere," Mr. Daniels went on. He had refilled his short clay pipe and was cramming the tobacco home with a brown forefinger.

"I never did hold with girls who looked above their own station. Hazel's mother ruined her life by looking too high, and I don't mean Hazel to do the same. Do you follow me, Mr. Ashton?"

Barry said "yes—oh, yes. Of course!" The farmer grunted.

"There's been more than one gentleman like you hanging round down here," he resumed presently. "And Hazel's a pretty girl, but I've my own plans for her future—my own ideas as to the sort of man she'll choose for a husband. You understand what I mean?"

Barry flushed. "Yes, I understand quite well what you mean," he said clearly.

He knew now what was coming. He rose to his feet.

The farmer rose too. His square-built figure threw an enormous shadow on the low ceiling.

"Well, as long as we understand one another, that's well," he said slowly. "And that being so—perhaps you'll tell me when you're thinking of going back to London, Mr. Ashton."

Barry turned scarlet. For a moment he stood staring at Joe Daniels' relentless face without speaking.

The fact that this sour-faced old man should dislike him so heartily was a severe blow to his pride.

He drew himself up stiffly. "I shall be returning to London as soon as possible—in the morning," he said curtly. "I very much regret ever coming here, and can only remind you that it was at your own suggestion I did so."

Mr. Daniels did not move. "There's a train up to London at 9.40," he said implacably. "I'll have the trap ready to drive you down, Mr. Ashton."

He fumbled in a pocket for his pipe and refilled it carefully. He did not look in the very least disturbed. It was quite evident that, as far as he was concerned at all events, the conversation was finished.

Barry walked to the door. He flung it open, then stopped, turned, and came back.

"Out of mere curiosity," he said, "I should like to know what is your objection to me?"

The farmer finished lighting his pipe before he even raised his eyes. Then he looked Barry over coolly from head to foot.

"Well," he said slowly, "in the first place, I don't altogether trust you, Mr. Ashton, if you must know; and in the second place—I've no wish to see my niece's life ruined as her mother's was twenty years ago. I don't pretend to be anything but what I am. We're plain people, but we're none the worse for that, and I'm not going to have you or any other man filling Hazel's head with a lot of nonsense. That's all, Mr. Ashton. You know better than I do if there's any reason for me to distrust you. Nine-forty that train goes in the morning. Good-night."

It was a dismissal. Barry walked out of the room without answering and went upstairs.

For the moment he was too surprised to think. He shut his door and stood staring round the little room with a dazed sort of feeling. He had got to go! He was clear enough on that point, at all events. His room was preferable to his company at Cleave Farm. It was the first time in his life that such a thing had even been suggested to him.

He dragged his portmanteau from under the bed and took some shirts out of a drawer. He had got to catch the 9.40 in the morning and sneak back ignominiously to town.

He never slept a wink all night and was up with the lark in the morning and downstairs. The farmer had

already breakfasted and gone out, Mrs. Bentley told him. She looked at Barry with anxious eyes.

"My brother tells me you are leaving us this morning," she said. "I am so sorry. If you hadn't been comfortable _____"

Barry cut in roughly: "Thank you—I've been most comfortable—most comfortable; and as to my leaving you—Mr. Daniels asked me to go—told me to go, in fact, I should say." He smiled grimly.

"I'm sure I don't know what I've done to make him dislike me," he said, wryly. "But he does dislike me, very heartily."

She looked distressed. "I had no idea. I am so sorry—but Joe is a strange man. He gets an idea into his head and it's utterly impossible to move him. I can only assure you, Mr. Ashton, that it's no wish of mine—I mean——"

She broke off as Hazel came down the stairs. The girl looked at Barry, and a little additional colour tinged her cheeks.

"Good morning, everybody," she said. She stopped on the last stair and opened a letter she held. "It's from Delia, mother. She's written already to ask me to go and stay with her. I didn't think she would remember, somehow. Isn't it kind of her?"

Barry did not answer; Mrs. Bentley looked unhappy. "My dear child, you know what your uncle said——"

Hazel struck in impatiently; "Uncle is too silly for anything. I'm not a child, and—and . . ." She broke off; her eyes had fallen on Barry's bulging portmanteau standing in the hall. She turned to him quickly. "Where are you going?" she asked sharply.

Barry shrugged his shoulders. "I've been asked to leave," he said hardily. "Your uncle prefers my room to my company."

There was a moment's silence. Hazel was crimson with anger. "Mother—how insufferable! Why wasn't I told? Oh whatever will uncle do next? Oh! I won't stand it!"

Mrs. Bentley began to cry. "It's his house, my dear. He has kept us all these years. It's for him to say who shall be here."

"I think it's disgraceful!" Hazel said stormily. "If he thinks I am going to be ordered about all my life like this . . ."

She broke down into tears and ran back up the stairs.

Barry followed two at a time. He caught her as she reached the little landing. He put an arm round her. She was sobbing bitterly now.

"Don't cry, my dear," he said in distress. "There's nothing to cry for; it will be all right. I'm not going for ever. I shall write to you, and come back and fetch you. It's only for a little while."

She turned to him, hiding her eyes against his coat.

"I don't want you to go. It will be hateful here without you, and I was so happy."

Barry was at his wits' end to know what to do. He hated to see Hazel crying, but for the moment the situation seemed impossible.

He went on talking rapidly. He would make arrangements and come back to fetch her. They could get married, and everything would be all right. She was a silly little girl to cry—there was nothing to cry for. He kissed her and tried to comfort her.

"I don't want you to leave me," she sobbed. "I know you'll never come back——" She had utterly lost her self-possession. She clung to him and cried piteously. "You'll forget me when you get to London; I know you will——"

"I shan't—upon my honour I shan't!" he declared, indignantly. "If you think that, I'll go downstairs this minute and tell them that we're going to be married. Shall I do that?"

He did not wait for her to answer. He started towards the stairs, but she stopped him.

"No—no—it would only make things worse. I'll wait. I won't cry any more. Only——" she raised

swimming eyes to his face. "You won't forget me? Promise you won't forget me?"

Barry answered passionately that he never should, of course he never should. He kissed her again and again.

"I'll write to you—and we'll be married soon, and then they can't say anything. You do love me, Hazel?"

"You know I do!" she answered, quiveringly.

He did know it. It gave him a little thrill of triumph to know it, and yet above her bowed head, his eyes looked somehow worried.

What the dickens was he to do? he was asking himself. He hadn't any money worth talking about, and if he married Hazel off-hand and took her up to town to his rooms it would be the very deuce! The only thing for it was a compromise, for the present at least.

"I'll write," he promised again. "I'll write to you as soon as I get to London. There—kiss me."

He kissed her hurriedly. Such a woe-begone little face she raised to him, and he heard her sobbing as he went off down the stairs two at a time.

Mrs. Bentley met him in the hall.

"Mr. Ashton, you must have some breakfast before you go."

"No, thanks," Barry answered grimly. He picked up his bag and held his hand to her.

"Good-bye—I'm sorry. It's not my fault all this has happened. Thank you very much for your kindness."

The farmer came to the sitting-room door.

"The trap won't be here yet for half-an-hour," he said rather uneasily.

Barry looked at him with furious eyes.

"Damn the trap!" he said. "I'm going to walk."

CHAPTER XII

BARRY fell asleep in the train. He slept till he reached London. That surprised him—he had felt so genuinely worried and wretched he had not expected to get any sleep for a week at least.

London was looking its best. Autumn sunshine filled the streets.

As he drove across Piccadilly he noticed that the women on the island were selling big shaggy chrysanthemums.

Barry had never noticed those sort of details before he went to Cleave Farm. After all, ripping though the country was without doubt, London was also one of the finest places in the world. He let down the window of the taxi and sniffed the air appreciatively.

He was not expected in his rooms. His arrival threw the housekeeper into a panic. There was nothing in the place to eat, she told him. If only he had sent a wire!

"I don't want anything to eat," Barry told her. "I'm dining out. Are there any letters for me?"

There were a whole stack of them. Barry glanced through them casually, and finally selected two. He opened the first frowningly.

It was from Hulbert and asked in polite, but unmistakable terms for a cheque:—

"You promised this some time ago. I must ask you to forward it now without delay."

Barry said "Damn." He tossed the letter down and opened the other, which was addressed in Agnes Dudley's writing. He read the first line and changed colour a little.

"You dear, impulsive firebrand," she had written, "why must you take me so seriously? I didn't mean it, Barry. I was only just seeing if you really cared for me. You don't know what I've suffered since you went away and vanished so mysteriously. I have tried to find you by every means in my power and failed. I am now sending this to your rooms in the hope that someone may really know where you are and forward it. Come and see me, Barry; the answer to a question you asked me long ago has been waiting for you ever since you went away.—Yours as ever, AGNES."

Barry groped backwards for a chair and dropped heavily into it. He could not believe that he had read aright. He stared down at the letter with incredulous eyes.

So she wasn't engaged to Hulbert, after all! It had all been a joke—at least, he supposed it was what she would call a joke; a pretty joke, when one looked at it in the light of the events of the past ten days.

Barry ran his fingers through his hair. A pretty mess he was in now! What the dickens was he to do?

The housekeeper came again to the door.

"Mrs. Dudley has rung up every day since you went away, sir," she said deprecatingly. "I promised to let her know as soon as you came back."

Barry turned sharply. "Oh, all right."

The door shut again. Barry mixed himself a stiff whisky. As yet he could not analyse his feelings, though it was a great relief to know that, after all, he had not really been jilted.

One blow to his pride was soothed at all events. He felt considerably bucked.

He glanced at himself in the glass above the mantel-shelf. He supposed he would have to go round and see her. It was the only possible way to put things straight; and then he thought suddenly of Hazel, and whistled softly! Things had got complicated with a vengeance.

He sat down again and tried to sort himself out, but somehow Hazel and the farm already seemed to have retreated to an unconscionable distance.

Barry was the kind of man who lived always in the present. Down at Bedmund he had been happy and satisfied—he had not missed London one little bit—but now he was back there again neither did he greatly miss Bedmund or Cleave Farm.

He thought of Hazel a great deal as later he changed into evening clothes. He wondered what she was doing now. He glanced at his watch. Six o'clock. Perhaps she would be getting supper ready!

He smiled a little. It seemed impossible that at this time yesterday he had been quite content to sit on the kitchen table and watch her make cakes and pastry—quite satisfied with the plain "high tea" which was generally the evening meal at the farm. It only showed, so he told himself, what an accommodating fellow he was, to be able to shake down in any surroundings.

He wondered if Agnes would be very surprised if he walked in that evening. It was only when he actually found himself at her house that he realised he had acted foolishly in coming; he hated a scene, and he supposed he would have to go through one either way, whether he told her about Hazel or not. It was something of a relief, therefore, to hear that she was out, and not expected in till nine.

He left his card and went off cheerfully to dine at his club. He enjoyed his meal thoroughly. After all, London was hard to beat. When he had finished he dozed in an armchair till nine, then he sent for a taxi and drove again to Mrs. Dudley's.

Yes, she was in now. The maid smiled discreetly as she took his hat and coat. She knew a great deal about her mistress and she had seen the sudden flash of joy in Mrs. Dudley's eyes when she heard that Barry had called.

Barry followed her soberly across the hall. His heart

was beating uncomfortably fast, but not exactly with pleasure. He wished he could forget Hazel for a moment, but, try as he would, she was always in his mind. He felt as if she were walking across the hall beside him and into Agnes' scented drawing-room.

Mrs. Dudley rose from the sofa as he entered. There was strong agitation in her face as she came to meet him. She held out her hand, and Barry saw how it shook.

"Well, wanderer!" she said with a nervous laugh, "I thought you'd walked away for ever."

He took the hand she held to him. He wondered if she expected him to kiss her. Before he went away he had kissed her quite often and naturally, but now things seemed to have changed a great deal.

He kept her hand in his and sat down beside her. "I've been in the country," he said awkwardly. "I only got back this afternoon and found your letter."

She looked at him reproachfully. "Why didn't you write? Barry, I've been so unhappy!"

He had never heard so much emotion in her voice before. It would have made him ineffably happy once, but now it merely embarrassed him.

"I hate writing letters," he said boyishly; "and—and it was miles away from anywhere—where I stayed. . . . There was nothing to write about."

She flushed. "Nothing to write about! Not to me? Oh, Barry!"

He did not answer, and she drew her hand away.

Barry stared down at the carpet. He had seen it hundreds of times before, but to-night for the first time he noticed that there were pink rosebuds in it. He kept his eyes fixed on them. He felt as if he could never look up again.

He knew now how great a mistake it had been to come; he cursed his folly under his breath.

With an effort he raised his eyes.

"Well, what have you been doing all this time?" he asked stiltedly.

She rose to her feet. She walked away from him and stood with her hand resting on the mantelshelf, looking down at the fern-filled grate. Her eyes were mortified.

Barry bit his lip. He knew he was hurting her horribly; and yet, he asked himself desperately, what the dickens else was he to do?

Once he had thought he loved her. It was strange that he thought so no longer. Of course, he should always be fond of her—as a friend, but never as anything else . . . He dragged himself to his feet, went over to where she stood and tried to make her look up, but she resisted him.

"Why have you come?" she asked in a muffled voice. "Oh, Barry, aren't you just a little bit glad to see me?"

Barry clenched his teeth. He did not know what to answer. It seemed impossible that it was really Agnes who was speaking to him with that pain in her voice. He had always thought her such a cold, self-controlled woman.

He broke out agitatedly.

"You make me feel such a cad . . . Agnes—I . . . " He took a few steps away from her and came back. "Why did you write that infernal letter?" he asked, with a sort of rage. "It's your fault all this has happened. Until then I never gave another thought to any woman but you. . . ."

He stopped with a gasp. He had done it now.

She looked up at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"Barry!" There was a cry of very real anguish in her voice; she began to sob.

"I've said I'm sorry—you must believe me. I never knew how much I cared for you till you went away and left me without a word. I know I ought not to have written that letter; but you'd been so cold—and I wanted to be sure—sure. . . ."

She broke off. She tried to see his face.

"Barry, why don't you answer?"

He freed himself with a sort of desperation.

"Because I don't know what to say to you," he said hoarsely. "Because I—oh, dash it all!"

But his agitation had told her what all his eloquence could not put into words, and for a moment there was a dreadful silence in the pretty room, then Mrs. Dudley said faintly,

"You mean—you mean that you no longer care for me?"

He broke out at once. "I do—I do. I shall always care for you. We've been such pals."

"But—but you mean that there is someone else—someone you like better—than me. . . ." He did not answer. "Oh—Barry!" she said with sudden anguish.

He tried to explain, to excuse himself. "You sent me away. I was so wild—so unhappy. I didn't care what became of me. I just rushed off to amuse myself with anyone—anything that came along; and . . . and . . ."

She laughed drearily. "And you found that it wasn't—amusement, after all. Is that it?"

Barry was crimson. When he came into this room a few moments since there had been no definite plan in his mind. He had had no more idea than the dead what he meant to say to this woman. It was surprising how all at once he had decided.

It was not Agnes for whom he cared at all. As soon as they came face to face again he had realised the truth—that it was Hazel who had kept him from kissing her—Hazel who seemed to be there in the dainty room where he had idled away so much of his time, watching him, keeping him back.

"I'm sorry," he stammered again. "I'm—I'm desperately sorry."

He went on again. "I ought not to have come. It would have been much better if I hadn't come . . . I hope you'll try to forgive me—I—I can't tell you how sorry I am. I'd rather cut off my right hand if it would do any good. . . ."

He looked at her now, at her white, painstricken face, and he took an involuntary step towards her.

But she waved him away. "Leave me alone—leave me alone. . . . Go away—oh, go away! I never want to see you again."

She dropped into a chair, hiding her face in her hands, rocking to and fro.

Barry looked at her in an agony of indecision.

He knew that he could do no good now, whatever he said. He turned blindly to the door. He had never felt so mean in all his life. He slunk out of the house and walked away down the road at a tremendous rate.

And yet, in spite of any other emotion, he was glad he had told her; glad that he was free. He drew a deep breath.

All day long he had deliberately tried to forget Hazel. Now he deliberately conjured thoughts of her as he walked through the dark streets.

They would be married soon—he would take her away from the farm and the surly old farmer. He would bring her to London, and even if they hadn't much money, he was sure that they would be very happy. He loved her and she loved him. The thought of the way she had cried and clung to him lay warm against his heart. As if he could ever have forgotten her!

He went straight back home and sat down to write to her. He put a new nib in the pen in honour of the occasion. This was going to be a very different sort of letter to those he had occasionally written to Agnes Dudley. This was to be a real love-letter.

He squared his shoulders and began to write.

"My own darling. . . ."

He sat back and looked at the words with a little glow of pride. She was his own darling—he had never cared for anyone else in all his life. With a touch of unwonted sentimentality Barry stooped and kissed the words before he wrote any further.

Afterwards, reading the finished letter through, he

could not believe that he had really written it, and what was more wonderful still that he really meant everything he had written.

His spirits went up like rockets. He felt absurdly happy. He went to bed early and slept dreamlessly.

When he woke the sun was shining. Barry whistled all the time he was dressing. He ate an enormous breakfast.

It was just as he was finishing that the idea came to him. What was the good of waiting for a reply to his letter? What was the good of waiting to get married? Why not get married at once?

He dashed off in a hansom. Before midday he was back again at Bedmund. It seemed an unconscionable time since he left it. He looked round delightedly as he walked the miles to Cleave Farm.

As he neared the house Mrs. Bentley came to the door. When she saw him she gave a little cry of relief.

"Oh, Mr. Ashton, where is she? Where is she?"

Barry stared. His heart seemed to leap to his throat.

"I don't understand! Whom do you mean—Hazel?"

She burst into hysterical tears.

"She went away late last night. Her room hasn't been slept in. Oh, Mr. Ashton, I thought perhaps you'd know where she was! We've made all the enquiries we can, and Joe's found out that she went up to London on the late train last night. . . ." She looked at him with piteous eyes.

"Oh, I was sure she'd gone to you," she said again. "After what she told me——"

Barry swallowed hard. He was very white.

"No," he said. "No—I give you my word of honour I haven't seen her, and that I don't know where she is. . . ." He looked away from her grief-stricken face, remembering with a pang that Hazel did not even know his London address or his real name.

After a moment he broke out incoherently. "Something must have happened after I left to have driven

her away like this. She promised me——” He stopped, not knowing how much Hazel had told them.

“Something did happen,” Mrs. Bentley sobbed. “We had a most dreadful scene. I have never heard my brother speak to Hazel as he did last night. I know he’s a hasty-tempered man, but there was no excuse for what he said; none at all.

“She answered him back! Poor child. I should have done just the same. She has all her father’s impulsiveness. She said that she would never forgive him for what he had said. . . .”

“What had he said?” Barry asked impatiently.

She wiped her eyes. “I don’t think he meant half of it,” she temporised. “When a man is thoroughly roused he hardly knows what he does say; but—he told Hazel that she was dissatisfied with her life here and ungrateful for all he had done, and. . . .”

“And Mr. Daniels—where is he?” Barry interrupted.

“Poor man! He’s worried to death. He’s been out ever since we missed Hazel . . . oh what shall I do if anything has happened to her?”

“Nothing has happened,” said Barry quickly. He was feeling pretty bad himself; he dragged out his watch—“What time is there a train to London?” He did not wait for an answer, but went on hurriedly. “Look here, Mrs. Bentley, you’re not keeping anything from me, are you? I mean . . . there isn’t anything I ought to be told?”

Mrs. Bentley coloured distressfully; her eyes met his with a pathetic pleading.

“Only that—when her uncle was so angry,” she faltered, “Hazel said she should go to you; that you cared for her, that . . . oh, Mr. Ashton, she’s all I’ve got in the world.”

Barry flushed up to his eyes.

“If it’s any comfort to you to know it,” he said, “I came down to-day to ask her to marry me . . . but—

but you can't be right about her having gone to me; she doesn't know my address. . . ."

"Or my real name," he added to himself with a little feeling of despair.

The thought goaded him; supposing after all she had somehow discovered his address, and had gone to him? What might she not find out before he could get to her, and tell her himself.

He went back to London on the next train and straight to his rooms; the housekeeper nearly fainted when she saw him.

"Oh, sir! if only you wouldn't come so sudden like! and you said you wouldn't be home till to-morrow."

"I know; I changed my mind. Don't look so scared, my good woman; tell me, has anyone been here? a young lady—a pretty young lady?"

"No sir, nobody—and I've never left the place for a moment."

Barry began to cool down; if Hazel had not been here, there could be no serious damage done yet; she had probably gone to her cousin's after all; he started off in hot haste on this new trail, but he had only gone a few yards when a girl turned the corner of the street and came towards him.

She looked very tired and rather countrified—that was Barry's first thought—and she was lugging a dressing-case that looked far too heavy for her. He noticed all these things in an impersonal way before he saw the girl's face, and knew that already his search was at an end and that this was Hazel herself.

She stood quite still when she saw him, letting the bag fall to the pavement with a little thud. Barry had a horrible feeling that she was going to cry. He reached her side in a couple of strides. He caught her hand in a hard grip.

"It's all right—don't cry. You're quite safe with me. Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't cry!"

She winked her tears away.

"I ran away," she said brokenly. "I had an awful row with Uncle Joe—so I've come straight to you." She looked up at him anxiously. "You're not going to send me away?" she asked.

"Good Lord, no!" Barry caught up the bag. He hailed a passing taxi and followed her into it.

"Look here," he said. "We'd better go to your cousin's—to Miss Bentley's—I'll explain as we go along." He directed the driver, and sat down beside Hazel with a long sigh of relief.

"I went down to Bedmund this morning," he said. "I haven't been back half-an-hour. Your mother told me what had happened. She seemed frightfully upset. We shall have to send her a wire to say you're safe." He looked at Hazel, and the colour deepened in his face.

"Well, aren't you going to kiss me and say you're glad to see me?" he asked with a sudden change of tone.

She let him take her into his arms readily enough. She leaned her head against his shoulder with a contented sigh.

"You're not angry with me?" she whispered. "You don't think I ought not to have come to you?"

He kissed her for reply. "But I can't think how you knew where I lived," he added, a trifle anxiously.

She laughed. "There was part of an old label on your suit-case. I tore it off one morning." She blushed in confusion beneath his eyes. "That was a long time ago, though, before—before—" She stopped.

"Before I ever kissed you," Barry supplemented audaciously.

He kissed her again. He felt in his pocket for the special licence. "Do you know what that is?"

She glanced at it and shook her head.

"It's a special licence," Barry explained. "By which you and I may get married at any time of the day or night anywhere in England. I took it down to Bedmund

this morning, and had to bring it back again. Well, what do you say?"

She was looking at him with wide eyes. "Married! You and I!"

"Yes, please," said Barry.

"Oh!" she hid her face suddenly shy.

"We're going to be ever so happy," he urged. "I haven't got much money, but if you really care about me——"

Apparently there was no doubt about that. Barry's susceptible heart beat fast as he drew her hands down and saw the look in her eyes. "But—mother and Uncle Joe——" she faltered.

"I've told your mother," Barry answered. "And she didn't mind at all. As a matter of fact, I think she was quite pleased; and as for your uncle, well, he doesn't count."

"He'll be furious," Hazel declared.

"Let him! Who cares! Miserable old blighter. . . . After all, once we're safely married, he can't say anything——"

"N—no," she agreed, doubtfully. "But—but you will send that wire, won't you? Mother will be so anxious."

"Of course." Barry thrust his head out of the cab window and told the man to drive to the nearest post-office; he got out and flashed off a wire to Mrs. Bentley.

"Hazel safe—bringing her home to-morrow."

"But you're not, are you?" she asked him with anxiety, when he showed her the message. "I don't want to go home!"

"You won't—till we're safely married," he assured her. "Then we'll just run down and let them see you are all right, and then . . ."

"And then?" she echoed softly.

Barry climbed back into the cab and kissed her rapturously.

"And now I suppose we'd better find your cousin," he said more soberly. "If you can stay there to-night, Hazel, I can make all the arrangements, and to-morrow we'll trot along and be married."

She nodded. "Supposing Delia isn't at home, though?"

But Delia was at home. She expressed herself delighted to see them, though she looked rather mystified.

Barry explained. "We're going to be married to-morrow. I thought if you'd put Hazel up for the night

"Married!" said Delia with a shriek.

She stared at Hazel. "You sly thing," she said, with a trace of vexation. "You never told me a word when I was down at the farm."

"We didn't know ourselves," Hazel answered. She looked at Barry, a wonderfully happy Barry who hardly took his eyes off her. For once in his life her clothes did not seem of great importance. After all, one can always buy others.

Delia took Hazel to her room. Barry could hear them talking—hear the little staccato shrieks Delia gave from time to time as he waited in the diminutive sitting-room.

He was glad Hazel had only got to be here one night. The whole place offended him, though it was pretty in a gaudy sort of way. The chairs all had gold legs and the sofa was heaped with golden-coloured satin cushions.

The whole place smelt strongly of scent, too, and he noticed that there was a stand of liqueurs on a side table and a glass that had evidently been recently used.

He was glad when the girls came back. He noticed that Hazel was rather flushed, and that she came over to where he stood at once, as if somehow for protection.

"I think you'd both better come out to dinner with me to-night and go to a theatre afterwards," he said. "Can you manage that, Miss Bentley?"

Delia said she was tired of theatres. "You too turtle

doves had better go alone," she said. "I'll give Hazel the latch key. I shall be late myself to-night."

"Hazel can't very well come back alone," Barry said, with a sort of dissatisfaction.

Delia laughed. "How absurd! Of course, she can. If she's going to live with you for the rest of her life she'll have to get used to late hours and things like that. . . . What about some tea?" She skipped off, and they heard her calling shrilly to a maid.

Hazel looked at Barry. "I should—should like to buy some clothes if—if I'm going to be married to-morrow," she said shyly. "These are so—so very plain. . . ."

She was adorable, he thought. He kissed her before he answered: "I don't mind what you wear—but we'll trot along to the shops now if you like."

"I should love it; and—and. . . ."

"Well?"

"Are you sure that you really, really want me to marry you—sure that you . . . you won't be sorry? I'm so different to women like—well, like Delia. . . ."

"Thank Heaven!" Barry interjected fervently.

"And all the other women you must have known before you met me," she insisted.

Barry took her face between his hands. "You're the only woman I want for my wife," he said. "The only woman I've ever loved."

And the most surprising part of it all was that, at the moment, at least, Barry really believed it himself, but then all men believe their first love to be their last, and their last the first.

CHAPTER XIII

HAZEL bought her frocks and furbelows surprisingly quickly. Barry had trotted round at the heels of more than one woman on shopping expeditions, but he had never known anyone decide so quickly what she really wanted.

She ordered all the parcels to be sent to Delia's flat. "And now I'm going to take you to get a meal," Barry said, as they left the last shop.

He chose a quiet restaurant and selected a table in an alcoved window. He ordered an extravagant dinner and champagne.

"I've never had champagne in my life," Hazel said. "I don't think I want any."

"You'll love it," Barry assured her.

She was the most delightful girl he had ever met, he kept telling himself. He had never believed that he could ever care half so much for any woman. He leaned forward suddenly across the table.

"Hazel—I've got to get a wedding ring."

She flushed rosily. "Oh! supposing you had forgotten."

"There are millions of them in the London shops," he answered.

She laughed. "Do you know," she said presently, "that you have never told me what your Christian name is."

There was a little pause. Barry coloured.

"Haven't I?" he said helplessly. "By Jove! . . ."
He wondered what on earth he had better say. Somehow he could not meet her eyes. Then all of a rush he made up his mind. He would tell her the truth.

She would have to know sooner or later. She would have to know to-morrow when they were married. He would have to sign his full name in the register.

He changed his seat and came to sit beside her. "I want to tell you something," he said quietly.

She looked faintly alarmed. "Is anything the matter? You look so grave——"

"No, of course not. It's only . . . Hazel, will you be very angry with me if I ask you a question?"

She shook her head. "Angry! Why should I be?"

He hesitated. "It's about Norman Wicklow," he said at last.

She sat up with sudden attention. "Yes—what about him?"

"He wanted to marry you, Hazel, didn't he?"

She raised her eyes. "Yes, but why do you ask?" There was a touch of anxiety in her voice. "Did you—did you ever know him?" she asked with sudden quick suspicion.

Barry met her gaze steadily. "I was brought up with him," he said. "I have lived with him all my life. He is my cousin."

There was a little silence. Down at the far end of the room the orchestra started to play with startling suddenness. Hazel sat very still. Her eyes fixed incredulously on Barry's perturbed face.

"Your cousin!" she said blankly. "I don't understand."

Barry swallowed hard. He realized that a great deal hung on the next few minutes, but he went on manfully.

"My name is Barry Ashton Wicklow. . . . I'm the cousin Norman spoke to you about—but it's an infernal lie that he ever paid my debts. He's never given me a penny-piece in his life; he's too darned mean."

Hazel dragged her hand free of his. For the moment she was too dazed to realise what this was he was telling her.

Barry Wicklow! Norman's cousin! . . . She passed a hand across her eyes. After a moment:

"Then why—why—" she stammered. "Oh, I don't understand! How did you come to Bedmund? Why didn't you tell us your proper name?"

Barry's heart seemed to stop beating; in a flash he realised what he had done. How was it possible to give any explanation without relating the whole story of the agreement with Norman's father? What in the world could he say?

There was a little tremble in Hazel's voice now. She went on piteously:

"That night at the theatre—did you know? Did Norman send you then?"

Unconsciously she had offered him a loophole of escape. Barry seized upon it with desperation.

"No, I didn't—not then; only afterwards Norman told me about you—and. . . ." He floundered helplessly, only to rush on recklessly.

"Your mother mentioned—at the theatre that night—that you came from Bedmund . . . I—I wanted to see you again. You must have known that I did. I was frightfully disappointed when I missed you after the show. I thought about you for ages . . . At last I made up my mind to go to Bedmund and chance my luck. . . ."

He told his lie badly, sincere about it as he was, and now only conscious of a great desire to make her believe him.

"Meeting your uncle was pure luck. I had no more idea than the dead that he was your uncle." He forced himself to look at her. "That's all," he said. "It sounds feeble, I know, but—Hazel, you're not going to be angry with me?"

She was very pale.

"You've taken my breath away. I can't understand properly. If it was—was that you wanted to see us

again, why did you say your name was Ashton? You might have told us the truth—then.”

“How could I, when I knew that Norman wanted you?”

“Did you know that?” she asked quickly.

“Of course, I did. He raved about you till it made me sick. Of course, I knew.”

A little smile crept into her eyes. “Poor Norman!”

Barry frowned. “Don’t say that. He doesn’t care for you as I do. I was furious when I saw his photograph in your house—taken with you, too.” His voice was full of disgust. She answered quickly:

“You need not have been. I didn’t care for him; only—he was good to me. Poor Norman!”

Barry growled.

“And it hasn’t made any difference?” he asked, anxiously.

She shook her head. “Of course, it hasn’t. It’s only—rather—bewildering to find that you’re . . . Barry!” She laughed softly. “I had quite begun to hate Barry——”

“That was Norman! He told you a pack of confounded lies about me——”

“I didn’t really believe them. Now I know it’s you, how could I?”

“Darling. . . .” said Barry eagerly.

“Soup, sir,” said the waiter stoically at his elbow.

. . . . Barry swore.

“I’m glad you know the truth, anyway,” he said later. “You’d have been told to-morrow, of course, but I’m glad it’s been to-day instead. . . . Hazel, do you think you’ll like being Mrs. Barry Wicklow?”

She flushed and made a little grimace. “I liked the name Ashton, too.”

“My mother’s name was Ashton,” he explained. “You know I’m not rich like Norman’s people? I wish I was—for your sake. If my father had managed to get born before Norman’s father things would have been very

different. Not that it's any use grumbling, Uncle John has always been jolly good to me."

"So he ought to be," Hazel said warmly. She squeezed his hand under cover of the cloth. "I dare say he often wishes you were his son," she said fondly.

Barry laughed ruefully. "He says I'm the biggest handful he's ever had to tackle in his life," he admitted. "I was always the bad boy at school, and Norman the good one. I never had a decent report in my life, and I should think I had more whackings than any other boy in the school."

She laughed merrily. "I should love to have known you then."

He assumed a paternal air. "My child! You must have been in your cradle when I was learning Euclid."

"Oh, not so bad as that," she protested.

They had a very merry dinner; Barry drank most of the champagne. Hazel declared she didn't like it.

They had a taxi back to Delia's flat. "You haven't lost the key, I hope," Barry said with sudden propriety; he took it from her hand and opened the door; the scented atmosphere of the small flat made him frown.

"I don't like leaving you here. I'm glad it's only for one night. . . ."

"I shall be quite happy," she answered him.

Barry came into the passage and half closed the door. "I'm not going without a kiss, anyway."

He put his arms round her and held her fast for a moment. "Good-night, darling . . . just till to-morrow."

He kissed her many times. "And I shall come to-morrow very early."

"As early as you like."

He tore himself reluctantly away.

He walked down the road with his hat in his hand and his eyes on the stars, as he made a mental resolution to turn over a new leaf and be a model husband from this time forth and for evermore.

CHAPTER XIV

HAZEL and Barry Wicklow were married quite early the following morning; absurdly early, so Delia declared pettishly as she struggled to make her toilet in time to accompany them to church.

The new frock had arrived and the hat with the osprey, and Hazel was twisting and turning before the long glass in Delia's room like a delighted child.

She was looking her freshest and prettiest, though she had not slept a wink all night. Delia had come in about two in the morning, cross and with a headache. She had turned on the light and sat on Hazel's bed, talking and smoking cigarettes till it was nearly morning.

Hazel thought she was a most extraordinary girl.

Barry called for them, and they all drove to the church together in a taxi. Barry was wonderfully smart in a morning coat and a silk hat and a white flower in his coat. He was bubbling over with excitement and talking nineteen to the dozen.

But Hazel had sobered a little. She was realising that this was really her wedding day. She wished her mother had been there. More than once the tears were very near her eyes.

The church was dark and full of echoes. As they walked up the aisle their footsteps sounded like a crowd trooping into the church.

It was a strange sort of wedding, Hazel thought. Just themselves and the verger, a man with a cold face and unsympathetic manner.

The parson seemed in a desperate hurry. He rattled through the service, and took off his surplice as they followed him to the vestry. Here everything was cold

and silent, too. The scratch, scratch of the quill pen with which he filled in the register got on Hazel's nerves.

She looked down at her wedding-ring and tried to realise what it meant. She looked at Barry and tried to believe that he was really her husband. She wished she had been married at Bedmund. There was such a dear little church there, with sheltering trees and flowers where butterflies flew about, and bees droned in the sunshine. Tears smarted to her eyes and she brushed them angrily away.

Barry was speaking to her. "Will you sign your name, dear?"

She obeyed mechanically. She wrote her maiden name for the last time with unsteady fingers—"Hazel Bentley."
. . . . It was no longer her name. She was Mrs. Barry Wicklow.

The parson blotted the signature and shook her by the hand. He said he hoped she would be very happy. He shook hands with Barry and left them for the verger to show out.

Barry had kept the taxicab waiting. "I think we had better have some lunch," he said.

He had seen the signs of strain in Hazel's face. He wished Delia would go away and leave them alone. Perhaps Delia guessed, or perhaps she had found the whole ceremony depressing, too, for she declared she had an appointment and wasn't going to stay to spoil the sport. She kissed Hazel and would have kissed Barry, too, with very little encouragement.

She stood on the path outside the church as they drove away. As soon as they had gone she took another taxicab and went back to the flat and had a brandy cocktail.

She had never felt so depressed in her life. Her idea of a wedding was a crowded church and lots of flowers and music. . . .

Barry put his arm round Hazel as soon as they were alone. He was quite happy himself, and he did not like to see the tears in her eyes. He said that as soon as they

had had some lunch he was going to take her down to see her mother; he lifted the hand with its new wedding-ring.

"We're going to show her this," he said softly.

Hazel smiled. "I wish mother could have been there," she said. "It was so lonely, somehow . . ." She tried to smother the words. She told him she was really very happy to be his wife.

"Are we going to the same restaurant we went to last night?" she asked him. Barry said "No." He said he was going to take her where there would be more people to appreciate her wonderful blue gown and the hat with the osprey. He followed her proudly down the crowded room. He wondered if they looked very newly-married. He quite hoped they did.

An attentive waiter, scenting romance, gave them a table with white flowers in its centre. He danced round Barry the whole time smilingly.

"He knows we've just been married, I believe," Hazel whispered.

Barry pretended to be angry. "Like his cheek. I . . ." He broke off, his face flushing crimson. A startled look filled his eyes.

A man was coming down the room towards them—a man who glanced casually from side to side as if in search of someone. It was Norman Wicklow.

Barry rose to his feet. For a moment he did not know what to do.

The restaurant was crowded. He wondered what on earth would happen if his cousin made a scene. He looked at Hazel with stricken eyes. He had been a fool to bring her here. He knew that it was a place which Norman frequented. He had counted too surely on that sprained ankle and his uncle's authority.

Norman still limped a little, and used a stick. He looked rather pale and fagged.

Barry held his breath. Every moment seemed like a hundred years. Then suddenly Norman spotted an ac-

quaintance at some other table. He turned and went across the room.

Hazel was watching her husband wonderingly. "Whatever is the matter? Have you seen a ghost?" she asked anxiously.

He forced a laugh. He sat down again. He moved his chair beside Hazel's so that his back was to Norman. After all, Norman might not see him.

The waiter brought lunch, but Barry could not eat. His whole being was concentrated on the other side of the room. Once he was sure he heard his cousin's laugh. He dared not turn round for fear of being seen. He sat in silent torment.

Luckily Hazel was too interested in her surroundings to be very critical. She thought everything was wonderful. She had never seen so many beautifully dressed women.

It seemed to Barry that that luncheon was dragged out to years instead of minutes. His forehead was damp with perspiration. He gave a tremendous sigh of relief when at last it was ended.

He had not once looked round yet, but as they left the room together he raised his eyes in desperation to the table to which Norman had gone; then he could have laughed aloud for pure joy, for Norman was there no longer. He felt ten years younger as he followed Hazel out, and waited for a taxi.

It was a busy time of day. People were coming in and out. Hazel watched them all interestedly. Once or twice Barry raised his hat to an acquaintance. "Who was it?" she whispered.

"The last one," he told her, "was Mrs. Baring. She's an old scandalmonger. She saw you at the theatre with me that night, Hazel."

Hazel flushed a little. "Oh, did she?" She was wondering if she had looked very dowdy and countrified.

The taxicab was at the kerb now. Barry touched her arm.

"Come, dear."

The commissionaire held the door open. Hazel had already stepped in, and Barry was just following when someone shouted to him from the porch of the restaurant:

"Barry, hullo! Barry!"

Afterwards Barry never knew what made him turn his head. He was sure that he did not mean to. He was sure that he exerted every nerve in his body to keep himself from looking back; but, all the same, he did look back, and the man calling to him was Norman.

He came up as quickly as his lameness would allow. He looked at Barry injuredly.

"Are you trying to run away from me? I saw you as you were leaving the room and tried to catch you. Where the deuce have you been hiding all this time?"

"I've been down in the country. I only came back to town a couple of days ago." Barry was standing with his back to the taxi, trying to block the window with his broad shoulders.

Norman frowned as he looked at him. "Well, you might give me a lift," he said. "This confounded ankle of mine doesn't seem to get any better. It's rotten having to limp about. Which way are you going?"

Barry bit his lip. "I can't give you a lift. I'm sorry, but well, I'm not alone," he explained jerkily.

Norman grinned. "Oh, I see. Well——" He glanced curiously towards the window of the cab, and at the same moment Hazel leaned forward to see whom Barry was talking to.

There was a second of mutual astonishment. Then Norman thrust Barry unceremoniously out of the way. "Hazel!" he said eagerly.

For the moment the strangeness of the meeting did not occur to him. For the moment Barry was forgotten as he held Hazel's hand and looked into her face with eager eyes. "You! of all people! Whatever are you doing here—and—and with Barry?"

He turned round sharply and stared at his cousin. "What does it mean?" he asked sharply.

Barry spoke quickly. "I'll explain later. I'll meet you where you like—anywhere—but I can't talk here. We're in a hurry. Hazel. . . ." Norman wrenched himself free. His face was ugly with suspicion.

He looked at Barry—at his smart coat and the white flower in his buttonhole, and a dull red slowly suffused his face.

"What is there to explain?" he asked thickly. "What the devil are you driving at. . . ." He turned to the girl again. There was something infinitely pathetic in the expression of his eyes.

"How did you meet Barry? You didn't know him last time I saw you. It's preposterous! What is he to you?"

But he knew even before she spoke. Perhaps the look in her eyes told him before even his own fell on the ungloved hand in her lap with its new wedding-ring. He fell back with a stifled cry, white to the lips.

It was a tragic moment; Barry dared not look at his wife. He had never felt so sick and ashamed in all his life, for he knew now that Norman really had cared for this girl.

The commissioner had moved a few steps away, but was watching them interestedly. Barry spoke hoarsely.

"We must be getting along, Norman. Pull yourself together, man. . . ." He stopped. Norman had made a furious lunge at him, missing him almost by a hair's breadth.

"You cad! You cad!" he gasped between his white lips.

"Barry!" Hazel cried out to him in terror.

Barry spoke sharply to the driver. He gave him the address of his rooms, and in another moment he and Hazel were being driven rapidly away.

CHAPTER XV

THEY had gone some way in silence before Barry dared to look at his wife; his eyes were hot and ashamed as he broke out—

"It was rotten luck! I'd have done anything to avoid him."

"Why?" she asked. "It isn't anything to do with him that we are married. And he guessed, didn't he? I could see by his face that he guessed."

Barry nodded. "I'm afraid he did——" He felt horribly mortified.

"It was rather like running away from him," he said after a moment; "but he'd have made the deuce of a scene if we'd stayed."

She was looking at him with puzzled eyes.

"You mean he's angry because he didn't know that you and I were friends," she said, painfully.

"Friends!" Barry echoed, with scorn. He put an arm round her. "Have you forgotten so soon that you are my wife, madam?"

But she did not yield to him. "I don't like to-day, Barry," she said, tremulously. "It hasn't really been a nice day. That church was so cold and unfriendly, and now—meeting Norman . . ."

"Nonsense; Norman would had to have known sooner or later. It's just as well he does know." He frowned at the distress in her face. "Hazel, are you trying to make me jealous of him?"

She shook her head. "You know I'm not, but—somehow. . . ." Her lips quivered, and for a moment she did not go on. "Where are we going?" she asked.

He answered rather sulkily. "I thought you wanted to go home—to see your mother."

He was surprised at the tone of her voice as she said that she thought she would rather not go to-day—that there would be plenty of time later on.

"I would rather stay in London. Can't we?"

"Of course we can! We shall have to go to an hotel. My rooms won't do for you. They're just a bachelor's rooms."

She smiled faintly. "But I should like to see them," she insisted. "I know so little about you. I should like to see where you live."

He gave fresh directions to the driver. The taxi turned about.

Hazel was very quiet. Though Barry's arm was round her she sat stiffly erect, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed out of the window.

Barry leaned down to look at her. "It has made a difference to you," he said jealously. "You're not a bit the same."

She relented at once. "I am; oh, I am; but—somehow . . . Barry—do you know what it feels like to have a shiver down your spine—someone walking over your grave? That's how I feel, as if something horrid is going to happen . . ."

"Nonsense! What can happen? Mr. Daniels will probably swear a great deal when we see him; but that won't hurt us. He can't take you away from me, can he?"

"No——" She laid her cheek to his shoulder. "Are you glad we're married?" she asked softly.

Barry's careless face sobered. "I've never been so glad about anything," he said, earnestly.

"You said that the first night you came to the farm," she told him. "Do you remember? You said you'd make me glad, too—to have met you again."

"And I have, haven't I?"

"Ever so, ever so glad."

"And they married and lived happily ever after," Barry quoted sentimentally. He drew his arm away as the taxi stopped. "These are my historic rooms," he said lightly.

Hazel followed him up the stairs looking about her with interest. So this was where Barry lived! She thought it all delightful. When Barry had opened the door with his latchkey he drew her in and kissed her.

"I never thought I should have you here all to myself," he said rapturously. "It's not a bit the kind of place I should like to bring you to, but——"

"I shall love it," she told him, "because it's yours."

She had quite forgotten her depression. She looked round her with delighted eyes. She was very much in love with her husband. Since that morning he seemed to have grown so very much more wonderful. She felt herself of small significance beside him.

Barry looked at her self-consciously.

"Well, this is where I live," he said. "Do you like it?"

"I think it's lovely. I . . ." She broke off. Her eyes had fallen on a large photograph that stood in conspicuous isolation on Barry's desk. The photograph was of a woman in evening dress.

There was some writing scrawled across a corner of it. She was quite close enough to read the words, and they stared up at her defiantly:

"Dear Barry Boy,—with love, from Agnes."

Barry turned suddenly struck by her silence and saw what had attracted her attention.

He flushed and took a quick step forward.

"What are you looking at? That old photograph! That's nothing. Dozens of people send me photographs."

Hazel raised her eyes after a moment. "But you haven't got dozens of them framed and standing on your desk," she said quietly.

Barry shrugged his shoulders. "I know; but she was

rather a friend of mine—at least, I mean—dash it all, a man must have something to stand on his desk,” he added lamely.

Hazel did not answer.

“Why, you’re not jealous, are you?” he asked, more lightly than he felt. “You’ve no need to be. I’ll burn the blessed photograph.” He made an impetuous movement to do so, but Hazel stopped him.

“Don’t do that. It’s a pretty photograph. Who is she?”

Barry frowned. “She’s a Mrs. Dudley—Agnes Dudley. She’s a widow,” he added after a moment.

“I see!” Hazel was looking again at the pictured face, and there was a little jealous pain in her heart.

“Why does she call you ‘Barry boy’?” she asked.

Barry walked a step away.

“She doesn’t. At least, she used to,” he began in stumbling explanation. “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a habit some people have of calling one ridiculous names like that. Don’t let’s waste time arguing about it. I dare say Norman called you much more endearing names than that,” he added with a sort of sullenness.

A ghost of a smile lit Hazel’s eyes. “Very well, we won’t talk about it any more. I won’t be jealous if you won’t,” she promised.

Barry’s face cleared. He had been in rather a tight corner then, he knew. It had been foolish not to have moved that photograph; but then he had not known that Hazel would be coming to his rooms. He bent and kissed her.

“We’ll let the past take care of itself, shall we?” he said. “After all, we’ve got all the future. . . .”

He congratulated himself that everything had passed off well.

He lit a fresh cigarette, and asked Hazel if she would like some tea.

“The old girl here can soon get you some. She’s a good sort, but looks rather a griffin.”

He crossed the room and rang the bell. He thought he would like to see Hazel pouring out tea in his rooms. He put her gently into his big armchair and sat down on the arm of it.

"I never thought I should have you here—all to myself," he said. "Hazel, can you realise that we are really married?"

She laughed and blushed. "Yes, I think so." She glanced down at her left hand. Barry seized it and raised it to his lips.

"If all our lives—" he began; then broke off, rising to his feet with a smothered exclamation as a step sounded outside on the landing. "Oh, come in," he said exasperatedly.

He thought it was the housekeeper in reply to his ring; and so for a moment he could only stare blankly as Norman Wicklow opened the door and walked into the room.

There was absolute silence. Hazel did not move, though there was a faint alarm in her face. Norman looked so white and his eyes so fierce, as he shut the door behind him with a slam and came forward.

"So you are here, then," he said. He spoke very quietly. He threw his hat and gloves down on the table. He moved towards Hazel, but Barry stepped between them.

"If you've got anything to say, say it to me," he said. "I suppose you've come here to make a scene. Very well, you may as well know the truth to start with then. Hazel and I were married this morning."

Norman did not answer. He stood with clenched hands, the breath tearing through his nostrils, his eyes fixed on Hazel.

Suddenly he broke out wildly:

"It's not true—Hazel . . . For God's sake . . . tell me it's not true. . . ."

She flushed crimson. She put Barry gently on one side and went over to his cousin.

"But it is true," she said gently. "I am sorry, Norman, but—but well, I—I love him, and if you. . . ."

"Love him! Love him!" he broke in passionately. "You don't know what you're talking about. Perhaps he's told you that he loves you. Perhaps he's even made you believe that he does. But I tell you he hasn't got it in him to love anyone. He was engaged to half-a-dozen different women before he met you."

He looked round the room with wild eyes. He saw the portrait of Agnes Dudley. He caught it up with a sort of frenzy and dashed it down at her feet, shattering the glass to pieces.

"He was engaged to that woman not a month ago!" he said, passionately. "Let him deny it if he can! He cares no more for you than he did for her. It was her money he was after—to pay his debts because my father had refused to pay them for him. And now—with you."

He thrust his head forward, staring down at her terrified face. "Do you know why he's married you, you little fool?" he said, violently. "He's married you because he was paid to—paid to! Do you hear?"

Barry broke in agitatedly. "Norman! for God's sake! It's not her fault. She doesn't know . . . I beg of you . . ."

"Doesn't know! Of course, she doesn't know! You took good care of that," his cousin raved at him. "I give you credit for being smart enough to keep that hidden from her till it was all sealed and settled anyway! . . . Doesn't know! Why, of course she doesn't!"

He was looking at Hazel again, and his fierce voice had unconsciously softened. It was impossible not to be sorry for her.

Barry broke in agitatedly. "Don't listen to him, dear," he said hoarsely. "It's all a pack of lies. He doesn't know what he is saying. Hazel, if you love me . . ."

She ignored him, she spoke to Norman.

"Please, will you tell me what you mean?" she asked dully. He laughed harshly.

"Yes, I'll tell you. Oh, it's no use you trying to shut me up," he added with fresh fury, rounding on Barry. "I'm not going to tell lies to save your face, though you've told a good few to ruin my happiness. I'm not such a fool as you think I am. I know the truth, and Hazel shall know it, too."

Barry shrugged his shoulders. He was very white, but he knew how useless it would be to try and interfere. He dropped into a chair and rested his arms on the back with a nonchalance he was far enough from feeling.

He did not dare to look at Hazel. He did not dare to think what this would mean. And Norman went on recklessly.

"Barry's in debt. He's always in debt—I told you about him before." He spoke to Hazel. He took no notice of Barry's sneering interjection. "He asked my father to settle up for him, and the Guv'nor refused. That's months ago. Then he got engaged to Mrs. Dudley. She's rich. He thought she'd be fool enough to pay up for him. I dare say she found him out. They all do in time. Anyway she threw him over. He went to my father again . . ."

Norman's face was working now passionately, and Barry looked at him with a sort of contempt. He wondered if he had always really despised him, or if his feelings had changed only during the past few weeks.

He rose to his feet and walked over to the window, standing there looking out with hard eyes.

He heard Norman go on. "It was just about the time that I told the Guv'nor about you. He was mad with me . . . He hated the idea of my marrying anyone except a wife he'd chosen. He knew I meant to have you—and he told me he'd move Heaven and earth to prevent it . . ."

He stopped for a moment, choking, then struggled on

again. "He spoke to Barry about it. He asked him to interfere—to use his influence with me so that I should break it off with you . . . Oh, hold your lying tongue!" he flared out as Barry tried to speak. "You've had your say. You've lied yourself black in the face by this time, I've no doubt. It will be a change for Hazel to hear the truth."

He was shaking in every limb. He mopped his face with his handkerchief. Hazel had not moved. She looked as if she had been turned to stone. Her hands were clasped to hide their trembling. "Go on—go on," she said weakly.

Norman moistened his dry lips. "Well—well," he said incoherently, "the Guv'nor told Barry if he would fix it, he'd pay his debts and give him a handsome present as well. Barry was at the end of his tether—driven into a corner. He jumped at it. He went off, down to Bedmund. He called himself by another name. He got to know you, and then—then . . ." He broke off. He turned away. "He's ruined my life, that's all I know," he added hoarsely.

There was a tragic silence. Barry was still staring out of the window. He wondered what had happened to the world all at once.

He could almost hear the agitated beating of his heart as he waited in an agony for Hazel to speak—for someone to speak—for anyone to break the nightmare spell that seemed to be holding him bound hand and foot.

He could not realise that this was an actual scene in which he was playing a part. He could not believe that his uncle had ever been base enough to give him away so utterly.

The seconds ticked away unbearably slowly. At last Barry swung round in desperation.

He looked at Hazel, and for a moment his stoic composure deserted him. She looked so forlorn, so utterly crushed. Something like a sob caught his throat.

"Hazel," he said, huskily. She looked up at him. She

raised her eyes slowly as if it required an actual physical effort. The ghost of a smile touched her lips for a moment and died away again.

"Well," she said, in a whisper. "Well—is it true? I'll believe you, Barry—I'll believe you against him—whatever you say."

Barry tried to deny it. He felt that he was exerting all his strength to say "No"—but somehow as he looked at her he knew he could not. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, it's true enough," he said, recklessly. "What's the good of denying it? It's true."

CHAPTER XVI

THERE was a moment of profound silence, then Hazel said: "Oh, Barry!"

There was a world of unutterable anguish and reproach in her voice. She waved him back when he would have gone to her.

He broke out passionately: "You're not fair. You're condemning me unheard. If you like to believe Norman I can't help it, but you ought to let me explain—I can explain . . . You don't understand."

"But you don't deny it. You say it's all true," she answered wildly. Suddenly she broke down and began to sob broken-heartedly.

Norman rose from his chair. He would have laid his hand on Hazel's shoulder, but the look of fury in his cousin's face checked him. For a moment the two men glared at one another, then Barry said savagely: "Get out of this. You've done what you wanted to. Now clear!"

Norman laughed. He picked up his hat and gloves and walked out of the room.

Barry had gone back to the window, he looked out into the street with eyes that saw nothing. He was only conscious of his wife's pitiful sobbing.

It seemed such a lonely, desolate sound somehow. Presently it stopped. He heard the little movement of a chair being pushed back, and he held his breath.

Was she coming over to him? Was she going to forgive him and tell him it was all right? His heart-beats nearly choked him.

Each second seemed an eternity. Once he was almost sure she was there at his elbow. He swung round, but

she was not there at all. She was over by the table, dragging on her gloves, the tears still wet on her white face.

"Hazel," said Barry beseechingly. He crossed the room and tried to put his arms round her. "Let me explain—let me tell you how it all happened. Give me a chance to explain."

He felt her stiffen within the circle of his arms. She looked up at him with burning eyes.

"There's nothing to explain; nothing at all. You say that what Norman has told me is the truth. Then that is all. Please let me go."

Barry took his arms from about her.

"It's rottenly unfair," he said violently. "Norman lied to you about me before I ever saw you. He always has hated me. If there is some truth in what he says, and I'm not going to deny it, it's not *all* true. I care a thundering sight more for you than *he* ever did. If he'd had one jot of affection for you, do you think he'd have come here this afternoon and made this mischief?"

She answered him steadily. "I am *glad* he came. I am glad that I know the truth. And as for you caring for me—" her lips quivered—"I'm afraid I can't see at all where that comes in." She moved towards the door.

Barry rushed after her. "Where are you going? Hazel—you've got to forgive me . . . You can't have forgotten that you're my wife?"

She answered him stonily. "I should like to forget it. I should like to forget that I have ever seen you."

"Hazel!" Barry had never heard her speak with such bitterness. Somehow the youth seemed to have gone from her voice and face. He tried to take her in his arms, but she resisted fiercely.

"Leave me alone! Don't dare to touch me! . . . and let me go. I don't want to stay here with you any longer. . . . Oh!" she said passionately, "I wonder if anything you have ever said to me has been true, or if it has all been lies—to get your uncle's money."

Barry turned crimson.

"I swear to you . . . Hazel, I've *never* cared for any woman but you. I married you because I loved you, and for no other reason. If I did listen to what Norman's father said, it's all forgotten long ago. I forgot it from the moment when I found you were the girl I met at the theatre. I've never cared for any woman as much as I care for you."

She looked down to the scattered broken glass at her feet, and then up at his agitated face. "You lied to me about her—unless Norman has lied. Were you ever engaged to her?" she asked, quiveringly.

He scowled.

"Yes, I was. At least—I asked her to marry me, and she never would say one way or the other. It's true that she threw me over—or, at least, that she pretended to. I got mad. It was rotten to feel that I'd been chucked by a woman. That decided me to go to Bedmund. I went off in a rage—I was boiling with rage . . ."

"You must have cared for her then."

"I didn't—at least . . . oh, dash it all! I'm not a boy. You can't expect me never to have met any other woman in my life till I met you. I've liked scores of them—so has Norman! He shouts a lot now, and makes out that his life is ruined. I've heard him say the same thing dozens of times . . . It's all rot!"

"You told me that you came to Bedmund to find me—that you'd thought about me ever since that night at the theatre. Is that true?"

Barry's eyes wavered before hers. He ran distracted fingers through his hair.

"It is true, and it isn't," he said, desperately. "I *had* thought about you. But—but it wasn't the reason that took me to Bedmund. I'd no more idea than the dead where you lived, if you must have the truth."

"I told you that because I didn't want you ever to know *why* I went there. I was a fool . . . If

I'd told you the truth at first, Norman couldn't have done what he has. But, at least, I do love you. I'd give my soul to undo this last infernal hour . . . Hazel, aren't you going to answer?"

"Yes," she said, hoarsely. "I am going to answer, as you want me to." She looked him full in the eyes, "I don't believe one word of what you've said," she told him deliberately. "I believe that what Norman said is the truth—every word of it. I believe that you simply married me so that you could keep your word to your uncle and take me away from Norman." Her cheeks were flaming now. "I hope you'll enjoy spending your money—if you ever get it," she added.

Barry felt as if she had struck him. He had expected tears and a scene, but that she would ever turn and rend him like this had been his last thought.

He looked at her with stunned eyes. She seemed almost like a stranger to him.

"Well," he said at last, dully. "Then that finishes it, I suppose."

"Yes," she flared back at him. "It does. I'm sorry I ever saw you. I'm more sorry than I can say that I didn't listen to Uncle Joe. He was wiser than I, after all . . ."

She waited a moment. "Good-bye!" she added.

"Hazel." She was out on the landing when Barry caught her. He almost carried her back to the room. He held her so tightly that he hurt her. His eyes blazed.

"You must be mad . . . You can't go away and leave me like this. What do you think people will say? We were only married this morning."

His voice broke a little. He could see now that things were serious. "Hazel, I'll go on my knees and ask your forgiveness if you like. I'll do anything in the world you want me to—anything in the world!"

"Let me go. That's all I want."

"You don't mean that. You said you loved me, and you can't have changed so quickly. I'll make it all up to you. I swear I will. I'll make you forget it all. I know I've been a rotter, but I can be decent if I like. I'll be anything you want me to be. I don't care a hang about Uncle John's money. He can keep it and welcome. I never meant to take it, even if you had never known about it all."

"It's easy enough to say that now."

He let her go with such violence that she almost fell.

"You're saying all you can to hurt me," he accused her passionately. "You're enough to rouse the devil in any man. I've said I'm sorry. I can't do any more. I've told you the truth, anyway."

"You only told me when you had to," she struck in. "If Norman hadn't come here I should never have known at all."

"You would. I meant to tell. I should have told you to-day."

The cold contempt in her face stung him. He put his arms round her and kissed her again and again.

"You're my wife. All the lawyers in England can't undo that. You're my wife, and you've got to stay with me. You were willing to marry me. If you think I'm going to stand quietly by and let you walk off like this because of what that little cur Norman chooses to say, you're making a mistake. I'll keep you if I have to lock you in this room all night."

He broke off, breathing hard, only to rush on again in stumbling apology. "I don't mean that. I don't know what I'm saying. I'm sorry, but you're driving me mad. You can't be so cruel. For God's sake, Hazel . . ."

She wrenched her hand from his. "I don't believe you ever really cared for me. I've been the fool all along. I ought to have listened to Uncle Joe."

"Damn him!" said Barry furiously.

"At any rate, he'd rather have died than told me the lies you have," she flashed back.

Barry dropped into a chair. He had never felt so sick and ashamed in his life. He was angry, too, furiously angry, because he had been so sure of her forgiveness.

He did not realise that it was because she cared so much that she was so bitterly resentful. He did not understand that if she had loved him less she would have found it more easy to forgive.

"Well, what do you propose to do?" he asked.

"I shall go to my cousin's to-night. She will have me."

Barry cried out sharply: "I won't have you there! She's no fit companion for you. I'm your husband, and I forbid you to go!"

Her eyes flamed. "You're only my husband because you cheated me. I should never have married you if I had known the truth. You know that . . . I shall do as I like. Nothing you can say will stop me. I am going to my cousin's."

He stood irresolute for a moment; then, "Very well," he said quietly, "I suppose you don't object to my taking you there?"

"You can come if you like," she answered coldly.

He flushed crimson. "I don't want to inflict myself upon you. No doubt you would rather go alone."

She twisted her hands nervously. "I—I haven't got any money," she told him then in a whisper.

There was something of the old childishness in her voice again, and it melted Barry's anger instantly. He went over to her, though now he made no attempt to touch her.

"Forgive me, Hazel," he said humbly. "I'm not really such a bad chap . . . I—I'd give my soul to undo what's gone, but I can't. I can only try and make up for it in the future. Try and forgive me, Hazel."

For an instant it seemed that she wavered. Then her face hardened.

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"I can never forgive you for having lied to me. I shall never believe anything you say again."

Barry strode across the room and flung the door open.

"I am ready when you are," he said, darkly.

CHAPTER XVII

THE short drive across London to Delia Bentley's flat was a nightmare to Barry Wicklow.

He sat opposite his wife, his arms folded, his eyes staring straight in front of him.

He never once glanced in her direction, but all the same he was acutely conscious of her every movement. He knew that more than once she wiped away tears that would well to her eyes, and he swore to himself that he would give Norman the most thorough hiding a man ever had. He tried to comfort his sore heart with the conviction that Hazel would have to forgive him sooner or later; that it was impossible for a man's wife to go on indefinitely ignoring him; that in the end she would think it over and be sorry.

As the cab turned into the rather dull square where Delia's flat was, Barry stole a look at his wife, but her face was averted, and he could only see the outline of a pale cheek, and a little lock of hair.

He stifled a sigh, as the taxi drove up to the kerb and stopped.

Barry opened the door and held his hand to Hazel, but she ignored him. She passed him and went up the steps to the house and through the open door into the stone-floored hall.

Barry followed silently. He stood beside her in the lift, so close to her that their arms were touching; but she did not speak, and they went on and to the door of Delia's flat.

Here Hazel turned and faced him. "You need not come any further," she said. "Good-bye."

Her voice was hard and she did not raise her eyes

above the white flower in his button-hole. The flower had died now. It hung its scented head forlornly against Barry's coat as if ashamed of having assisted, even in such a small way, at his disastrous wedding.

The colour flamed to Barry's face. He began to answer angrily, then checked himself.

"Very well," he said, grimly. "Perhaps you will let me know what story you intend to tell your cousin, so that I can repeat it to any of my friends who are curious."

"I shall tell her that I found out I didn't like you after all. That is the truth," she said, defiantly.

Barry laughed. He was not going to believe this, at all events, but for the moment at least he supposed it would be wisdom to humour her.

"Very well," he said, lightly. "If that is a good enough yarn for you, it is for me; and—your mother?"

Hazel's lips quivered. "I will write to her. You need not trouble yourself about my people."

"Very well; and with regard to money," Barry began diffidently, "anything you want, of course . . ."

"I shall never want anything of yours," she told him.

"I only want to forget that I ever knew you." The words sounded convincing, and Barry winced.

"Then it is useless for me to stay any longer, I suppose," he said, stiffly. "If ever you should want me at any time—I know it's not remotely possible, but just in case—a letter, or a 'phone message to my rooms will always find me."

She might not have heard for all the notice she took. She had turned away and had pressed the bell on Delia's front door. Barry waited till he heard steps in the narrow passage inside. Then he went back down the stairs.

It was Delia herself who opened the door. She was wearing a tea-gown of her favourite golden colour, and was smoking a cigarette. She stared at Hazel for a

moment without speaking, then: "Goodness gracious!" she ejaculated. "What in the world? . . . Surely you haven't quarrelled yet?" she asked, helplessly.

Hazel nodded. She pushed past her cousin and went on into the gaudy little sitting-room.

She broke down completely then and sobbed, with her pretty face buried in Delia's golden cushions.

Delia stood by frowning for a moment. Then, not unkindly, she put a hand on Hazel's shoulder.

"You'll ruin those cushions," she said. "Do turn off the water works and tell me what has happened, and where is Barry."

Hazel sat up. Her face was all flushed and tear-stained, her hair dishevelled. "I hate him," she said. "I wish I'd never seen him."

Delia sat down on the arm of a chair and stared at her pretty feet in their high-heeled shoes. "It's a bit soon," she said at last. "What has happened since I left you?"

"I've found him out," Hazel answered sobbing. "He didn't really want to marry me. It was all. . . . Oh, I wish I'd never seen him."

Delia threw her cigarette away and selected a fresh one.

"Humph! Well, I'm not altogether surprised," she said calmly. "He's a bit of a goer from what I've heard about him. But on your wedding-day! It's a bit rapid! What have you heard exactly?"

Hazel told her story disconnectedly. She was longing for sympathy, but Delia's nature was not much inclined that way. She was just a practical woman with a streak of surprising sentimentality in her. She listened stoically enough, and when Hazel had finished she laughed.

"It sounds rather like melodrama," she said. "But, anyway, from what I know of the Wicklows, you've married the best of them, my dear . . . That Norman!" She broke off with a shrug of her shoulders.

Hazel looked up. "Do you know him?" she asked.

"Do I?" the elder girl echoed. "Do I not! He was hanging round one of our girls for weeks. It was through him that I met your Barry."

"You mean that you knew Barry, too? Before that day down home—before that day at Bedmund?"

"Yes. He came behind at the theatre one night. I knew I had met him before somewhere, but for the moment I couldn't recall his name. It came back afterwards, and I asked him why he was travelling incog.; so to speak. I know now, of course."

Hazel felt as if her idol were falling to pieces at her feet. What else had she got to discover about him, she wondered helplessly.

"I should forgive him if I were you," Delia said after a moment. "They're a good family, the Wicklows, and you can make his people take you up if you play your cards properly. They've got tons of money, too. You'll be very silly if you let him off scot free."

Hazel did not understand. She sat with her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes full of unshed tears. She could only think of Barry as he had been that night down at the farm when he told her he loved her. He seemed an altogether different man from the one from whom she had just parted.

"Anyway, if you won't go back to him, what are you going to do?" Delia asked after a moment.

Hazel looked up. "I thought I could stay with you, for a little while at least. I don't want to go back home. Uncle Joe would be so angry, and I don't feel that I can face him."

"Stay here!" Delia echoed sharply. "Heavens! what shall I do with you here? You haven't got any money, have you?"

Hazel's face flamed. "No," she said; "but—I suppose I can work, can't I?"

There was a little silence.

Delia paced up the room and came back.

"Look here, Hazel," she said, "you'd better make it up

with your husband. After all, he may be quite all right in the future. Give him a chance. Gracious! I thought he was keen enough on you by the way he looked at you. Give him a chance, and then if you find it isn't going to work. . . ."

Hazel drew away from her. "I'll never go back to him," she said obstinately.

Delia frowned. "Very well, you can stay here for the present, and I'll see what's to be done. You'd better write to your mother or somebody and say where you are, or else they'll all be having forty fits." She looked at the girl consideringly.

"You're quite pretty, of course," she said dispassionately. "I might get Greaves to give you a walking-on part if you think you could stick it."

Hazel echoed the words, not understanding. "A walking-on part?"

"On the stage, silly! A part in the chorus. You won't have anything to do except smile," she added, impatiently.

Hazel's eyes glowed. "Oh, I should love it! I've always longed to go on the stage."

Delia made a grimace. "That shows your ignorance," she said tartly. "However, we'll see, but I'm not going to promise anything. It all depends."

"Here, you'd better have some tea," she went on with a change of voice. "You look a fright with those red eyes. I should think your head aches, too. I've got to run out for an hour, but I shall be back about half-past six. Make yourself at home and cheer up! Heavens! there are other men in the world beside Barry Wicklow."

Delia rang for tea and went off to change her frock. She called out to the smart maid to fetch her a taxi. Presently she came back dressed for outdoors.

Hazel thought she looked beautiful. She admired the too-smart costume and rakish hat. The clothes she had chosen with such pride for her wedding seemed dowdy beside them. It seemed ages and ages ago since she

had driven off from this very flat with Delia to be married, and yet it had only been that morning!

"I thought you had your own car," she ventured presently when Delia started to fume because a taxi was so long coming. "Wasn't that your car you came to Edmund in?"

Delia laughed. "I wish it had been. It's Laurie Hulbert's. You don't know Laurie? No! Well, you needn't hanker to. He's as mean as they make 'em. Little rat!" she added viciously.

The smart maid came to the door. "The taxi is here, miss."

Delia blew a kiss to Hazel. "Make yourself at home, and for heaven's sake cheer up," she said.

She went off down the stairs and out into the street.

The taxi driver stood waiting at the door of his cab. Delia gave him Barry Wicklow's address. "And look sharp," she added.

Barry had just reached his rooms when Delia drove up. He turned and glanced casually over his shoulder; then he saw Delia and stopped.

She called to him from the window of the taxi.

"Come and help me out, you rude man!"

Barry obeyed sulkily. "Have you come to see me?" he asked ungraciously. "I've just left Hazel at your flat."

"I know. That's why I'm here. Can I come in? I want to talk to you."

Barry hesitated. "I'll drive along with you if I may," he said finally. He got into the taxi beside her.

Delia looked at him with a twinkle. "Well, you've made a nice hash-up of everything," she said cheerily.

He did not answer. "Hazel wants to stay with me," Delia went on. "She's mad to go on the stage. Between you and me, my dear boy, she rather welcomes her freedom for that reason. However——"

Barry flushed furiously. "I won't allow my wife on the stage. I hate everything to do with the stage."

"Well, you won't be able to stop her," Delia told him easily. "The day is past when she was willing to do as you told her. Oh, I'm not preaching! Don't look so angry! As a matter of fact, I'm going to try and befriend you both—for a consideration!"

She looked at Barry from beneath her long lashes. She laid a hand on the sleeve of his coat. "Come, you know I'm as poor as a church mouse," she said coaxingly. "And you're not! What's it worth, Barry, if I look after this little country girl for you?"

Barry sat staring at the floor, and there was a hard line between his eyes.

"What are you proposing—actually?" he asked dryly.

Delia laughed. "Well! I thought perhaps you'd think it worth while to keep in with me," she said lightly. "I know you don't like me. I know you won't like the idea of Hazel living in my flat, so if you care to pay for it, I'll try to send her home, or at least I'll see that she doesn't go on the stage, since you are so against it."

She made an impatient gesture. "Goodness!" she said with a touch of exasperation. "What are you scowling like that for! If you're so mighty keen about the girl you shouldn't have let her quarrel with you in the first place. I'm only offering to help you. She is going to be a nice handful, I can see."

Barry had never cared for this girl, but he felt now that he hated her; he could not trust himself to speak. Delia went on irritably:

"It's all very well, but I've got myself to think about. It's no use putting on that saintly air with me, Barry——"

"I object to being called by my Christian name," Barry said with temper. But she only laughed.

"I shall call you what I like, and if you're not very careful I shall tell that wife of yours a few interesting little details that occurred in your life before she knew you. Ah! I thought that would rouse you!"

She opened her handbag and drew out a powder-puff,

with which she dabbed her nose viciously. "Well," she said presently, "what offers?"

Barry set his teeth. He loathed the position. He did not want Hazel to have anything to do with this girl; but for the present at least he supposed he had better be diplomatic.

"If you look after her," he said with an effort. "*Really* look after her, mind you, I'll see you're not the loser. I'm not going to let her stay with you more than a few days, though," he added darkly.

She looked at him with good-natured scorn.

"It isn't a question of what you're going to let her do, my dear boy," she told him bluntly. "Hazel's made up her mind to wash you out once and for all, take it from me."

Barry let down the window with a slam. "You can drop me here," he said shortly.

She changed her manner at once. She laughed. "I'm only teasing. Don't take any notice. It's my way. I'll look after her for you, and let you know every day how the darling gets on. You don't like me, I know, but I'm not half a bad sort, really."

Barry smiled in spite of himself.

Delia saw her advantage and pressed on.

"You give me a tenner a week, and Hazel shan't go on the stage; but if you don't. . . ."

His temper rose again. He answered almost rudely. "I'm not going to be bullied like this. Anything I may do will be for my wife, and not for you. Besides, it's only for the next few days. Hazel will soon want to go home."

"I hope she will," Delia said energetically. "She's too weepy for me. The first thing she did when she got there was to cry all over my cushions."

Barry looked away. He hated to think of Hazel in distress, with only this girl's doubtful sympathy to help her through.

"Well, you can drop me here, anyway," he said. "And I'll see you again to-morrow. And, look here! If Hazel leaves you, you let me know that minute. You can ring up."

"Very well," she nodded and smiled. "So long!"

Barry left her and walked away. He did not trust her in the least, but he knew Hazel had no money, and he supposed he had done the best thing possible in the circumstances. Delia would look after her all right as long as she was paid to do it. There was some small grain of comfort in the thought.

He walked round to the hotel where his uncle stayed when he was in town, but Mr. Wicklow was out. He had heard from his son of the scene with Barry, and had discreetly betaken himself off. He had seen Barry in a rage before, and had no wish to repeat the experience.

Barry walked aimlessly away wondering what the deuce he should do with himself. He was still wearing his wedding clothes. His eye fell on the dead flower in his button-hole, and he tore it out with an angry hand and flung it away.

He was really very miserable. He went back to his rooms, and stood looking round him wretchedly.

It was all Norman's fault—confound him! Some day he would give Norman the biggest thrashing . . .

What a wedding-day for a man to have! He looked down at the fragments of smashed glass which still lay on the floor. He stooped and picked Agnes Dudley's portrait from the debris. He scowled down at the smiling face.

It was her fault, too! If she hadn't written him that infernally silly letter three weeks ago, none of all this would ever have happened. He would never have seen Hazel. He would never have got himself into this unholy mess.

He tore the photograph in halves and threw it into the coal box. Women were all the same. You couldn't rely on any of them for more than two minutes at a time.

Jilted by one, and deserted by another on his wedding-day!

Life was a rotten concern; he was fully persuaded that he did not care how soon it ended. Of course, Norman would take good care that the news of his marriage and its result should be heard at the clubs; he gritted his teeth; he hated being laughed at, and he knew how people would laugh.

He poured himself out a strong drink and felt better; after all, moping never cured anything; he changed his clothes and brushed his hair; he would go round to the club and see how much Norman had told already; one might as well know the worst at once; he was getting into an overcoat when the doorbell rang; he opened the door without waiting for the housekeeper to come.

Joe Daniels stood there in the dim light.

He looked very tall and overpowering, and for a second Barry felt slightly apprehensive, then he pulled himself together.

"Er—how d'y'e do," he said, "Er—won't you come in."

The farmer obeyed and Barry shut the door. "Er—I suppose you got my wire," he said awkwardly.

"Yes. We got your wire." The elder man's voice sounded heavy. He kept his eyes on Barry's face. "Yes, we got your wire," he said again.

Barry shuffled his feet. "Well—er . . . that's all right, then," he said with an effort to speak cheerfully.

He had an uncomfortable feeling that something was wrong. He indicated a chair. "Won't you sit down?" he asked.

"No, sir, I will not," the farmer answered. "I have come to fetch my niece, and when I have found her I will go away and trouble you no more."

His face flamed suddenly. He clenched his fist. "I knew what you were from the first!" he said, with an outburst of rage. "I saw through you before you'd been in our house twenty-four hours . . . I told her mother . . ." He broke off.

Barry shrugged his shoulders. "It's useless arguing, I know," he said coolly. "And your niece is not here. . . . She's with her cousin, Miss Bentley. I can give you the address. If you care to go there you will see for yourself that I am telling you the truth."

He met the farmer's eyes steadily. He wished the old beggar wouldn't glare at him like that.

"I will take you to her this minute, if you like," he said again impatiently. "Come, Mr. Daniels, it's no use adopting this attitude, it's not my fault that Hazel ran away from home; I knew nothing about it till I went down to the farm and saw Mrs. Bentley; she will have told you I daresay. We'll go along and see Hazel—I'll send for a taxi."

The farmer stood motionless by the table as Barry walked out of the room; he made a stiff, forbidding figure; he never moved till Barry returned.

"There's a taxi waiting," Barry said shortly. "If you'll come along."

They went down the stairs and drove the short distance to Delia's flat without speaking.

On the landing Barry stopped. "You'd better let me go and tell her first. She's rather afraid to meet you." Daniels made no answer, and Barry went on, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Obstinate old brute!" he muttered under his breath.

The smart maid admitted them. Miss Bentley was not yet in, she told them, but the other young lady . . .

Barry brushed past her, and went on to the sitting-room door. Hazel was there, listlessly turning the pages of a magazine. When she saw him she rose to her feet.

Barry broke into incoherent explanations.

"It's your uncle—Mr. Daniels. I had to bring him."

The farmer had followed him into the room. For a moment he looked at Hazel without speaking; then he said: "So he has spoken the truth for once, and you are here with your cousin!" His voice was bitter.

Hazel did not answer. She looked very pale, but her eyes were defiant.

"I'm going to stay here," she broke out excitedly. "I'm not going back to Cleave Farm. Delia is willing for me to stay here, and you can't make me go back. Mother wouldn't wish it if she knew everything."

She stopped, struck by something in the farmer's expression. "Oh what is it?" she asked in a whisper.

The elder man's hard face quivered for an instant; then he said, almost brutally: "Your mother will never wish anything for you again as long as you live, my girl. You've killed her between you—you and this man here. Your mother is dead!"

CHAPTER XVIII

A TERRIBLE silence followed the farmer's words. The wings of tragedy seemed to have swooped down and settled on the gaudy little room.

Hazel stood frozen with horror, her pretty eyes fixed on her uncle's relentless face.

It was Barry who broke the silence, Barry who took a stride forward and gripped the farmer's arm. "Mr. Daniels, for God's sake! It's not true. . . ."

The elder man's hard eyes turned to Barry's face. When he spoke his voice was unemotional.

"It's quite true," he said. "Hazel's mother died in her sleep last night. We found her this morning . . ." His voice rose to a sort of dull anger. "You can thank yourself for this, Mr. Ashford, or whatever you choose to call yourself. Her death lies at your door."

He waited a second, then turned on his heel. When he reached the door he stopped again and looked back at the two white young faces. "You took Hazel away from my house," he said; "you took her away from her home . . . Well! you can keep her now. I've done with her—done with you both." The door shut behind him.

Barry stood like a man turned to stone. Into what depth of tragedy had his recklessness led him!

Hazel was sitting on the couch, Delia's gaudy cushions tumbling about her. Her hands were clasped in her lap; her eyes looked blank.

Barry went over to her. He knelt down beside her. "It's not true," he urged. "Don't believe him, Hazel. I don't believe him. It's just a lie, a cruel lie."

She turned her eyes to his face with an effort. "It is true," she said. "You know it's true."

The words were purely mechanical. "It's quite true," she said again lifelessly. "And what Uncle Joe said is true as well. We killed her—you and I."

There was something in her stony grief that was unbearable to Barry, he put his arms round her.

"It's not fair to say that. It's not fair to yourself, or to me."

Hazel pushed him away. She rose to her feet, her hands hard pressed over her eyes.

"Oh, go away, go away," she said wildly. "Leave me alone. Oh, why can't you leave me alone?" Barry watched her in despair.

It was a nightmare, this unending day! Much as he longed to try and comfort her, he felt the futility of it.

She was his wife, but she cared nothing for him. She would never forgive him for this. Whatever happened in the future, she would blame him for her mother's death. She would lay this last and greatest blow of all at his door.

She turned on him almost angrily.

"Why are you standing there staring at me? Go away! It's your fault. All this is your fault. I was happy enough till I met you. If you had never come to the farm mother would have been alive and well to-day." She broke down at last into a passion of sobbing.

Barry was beside her instantly. He tried to put his arms round her.

"Darling, darling!" he said, brokenly. "I'd give anything in the world to bring her back. Hazel, for God's sake . . ."

She struggled against him. "Let me go! I can't bear you to touch me. I hate you to touch me."

She freed herself from him, and crouched sobbing by the couch, her pretty head amongst Delia's golden cushions.

Barry stood looking down at her helplessly. This was the end of everything, he supposed. She had said that

she hated him. She had struggled against him as if she hated him.

The outside door of the flat slammed. A moment, and Delia walked into the room.

She stood for a second staring blankly; then she came slowly forward.

"I thought you two had agreed to differ," she said with a touch of exasperation. "This flat isn't to let, if you think it is, and I don't want you dodging in and out all day long."

"You needn't worry," he said hoarsely. "It's the last time you'll see me here . . ." He went away without another backward glance.

Delia shrugged her shoulders. She spoke to Hazel roughly.

"For heaven's sake, stop crying, child! What's he done now? Why did you let him come here?"

Hazel raised her face; such a pitiful, tragic face.

"I'm not crying for him," she said fiercely. "I wish I'd never seen him . . . It's my mother . . . Oh, Delia! She's dead, she's dead, and Uncle Joe says that I killed her! Mother . . . Mother . . ."

Delia caught her breath hard, her face changing completely. "Dead! Your mother! . . ." She dropped down suddenly to her knees beside Hazel. She gathered her into her arms with wonderful tenderness.

"Oh, you poor little thing, you poor little thing," she said, compassionately.

CHAPTER XIX

BARRY WICKLOW drained his tumbler and set it down on the table at his elbow with a jerk.

It was a fortnight later. Outside in the London streets a fine drizzling rain was falling, blurring the windows and making everything look thoroughly grey and wretched. Even the club room where Barry had been trying to kill the afternoon was more silent and depressing than usual.

He had tried to sleep, but after half-an-hour shifting and turning about in a chair had given it up.

There was nobody else in the big room but himself. A small fire, which some enterprising soul had lit to try and chase out the gloom, crackled cheerily on the hearth.

Barry got up and poked it with his foot to make a bigger blaze. As he did so his eye fell on a calendar standing on the mantel-shelf. He noted the date with a grim sort of humour.

Just a fortnight since his wedding-day! If anyone had told him it was a year ago he would not have been in the least surprised. He felt as if he had dragged through months and months of remorse and wretchedness since that fatal afternoon.

He had not seen Hazel since. He had written to her dozens of times, but none of his letters had been answered. He had written to Mr. Daniels at Cleave Farm, and the letter had come back unopened.

He had tried to get hold of Norman, but his cousin had left London. He had tried to get hold of his uncle, and had failed.

Mr. Wicklow had sent him a cheque for the sum agreed upon between them, and Barry had promptly re-

turned it. Since, he had wondered if he had been a fool to do that. Goodness knows he had earned it, anyway.

Sometimes he felt he would have given anything to undo that marriage in the silent London church. At other times he was fiercely glad that she was tied to him—at least in name.

He knew that the news of his marriage had got out. He knew that everyone had known about it, and had been talking about it for the past week. He supposed he had Norman to thank for that, too.

The future looked unpromising enough, as he stood glowering before him down the deserted room.

The only person who had befriended him at all during this last rotten fortnight was Delia! Barry was beginning to think that he had rather misjudged her after all. She had certainly been kind to him, and apparently she had been kind to Hazel, too. Once or twice he had hung about outside the flat in the evenings to try and catch a glimpse of Hazel, but he had never succeeded.

He thought of her as he had last seen her, sobbing with her pretty head in Delia's gaudy cushions, and he gave a great sigh.

They might have been so happy together, he and she!

The door of the room swung noiselessly open and a man entered. He was short and smartly dressed, and inclined to be bald. He looked at Barry and nodded affably enough, though there was a little sly smile in his eyes.

Barry returned the nod curtly. He had always disliked Hulbert, even before he had tried to cut him out with Agnes Dudley, and he still disliked him, though there was no longer any cause for jealousy between them.

He came over to where Barry stood taking up all the fire, rubbing his hands chillily. "Nasty day," he said meaningly.

"Yes," Barry moved a couple of inches. "Beastly day," he said.

Hulbert held his hands to the blaze. There was a fine diamond ring on one of his fingers. It sparkled in the firelight.

There was a moment's silence. "Well, and how goes it?" said Hulbert. He looked Barry up and down, and noticed his sullen face.

Barry grunted. "Not very well?" Hulbert went on. "Well, never mind; there's a good time coming for all of us—eh?"

"Not for me there isn't," Barry answered in rather a surly voice. "Nor for you, if you're counting on getting back that money I owe you. I haven't got a bob in the world."

Hulbert's eyes narrowed a little. "Humph! Well, that's bad," he said cheerfully. "However, I've waited so long for it that I suppose I can wait a bit longer. By the way, Wicklow, is it true that you've been getting married? Your cousin was telling me . . ."

"You know damned well it's true," said Barry savagely. He had turned very red. Hulbert hastened to soothe him down.

"Well, there's no need to get rusty about it," he said. "I'm delighted to hear it, I'm sure. I congratulate you."

Barry did not answer. "By the way," the other man went on, "I met a friend of yours last night, a Miss Bentley. She told me she knew you."

Barry looked up sharply.

"Oh—er—yes! I know her slightly," he said.

He wondered how much of his private affairs she had discussed with Hulbert.

"Pretty little thing!" the other man went on complacently. "Greaves is going to give her a show in the autumn. He says that even if she isn't particularly clever it won't matter, because her face will pull her through."

Barry shrugged his shoulders. "I shouldn't have called her even passably good-looking," he said shortly. "However, opinions differ, and Greaves ought to know what he's doing. Thought she *was* on the stage though!"

"Good Lord, no! Country girl to her finger tips. . . ." Hulbert chuckled. "She blushed every time she was spoken to."

Barry turned slowly till he was facing his companion. "Are you talking about *Delia* Bentley?" he asked in faint amazement.

Hulbert chuckled again.

"*Delia*! Lord, no! *She's* no country girl! Gad! I can't imagine her blushing. . . . No, no, I was speaking about that little cousin of hers. Hazel she tells me her name is."

So this was how *Delia* had kept her promise!

That was the first furious thought that passed through Barry's mind. This was how she had pretended to befriend himself and Hazel, by introducing her to men like Hulbert and Greaves!

Barry knew Greaves. He had knocked about with him many a time in the past, and thought him a jolly good fellow, but it turned him cold to think of him in connection with Hazel.

He controlled himself with an effort. He realised that he would discover far more by holding his tongue than by furiously blurting out that Hazel was his wife, and that he would not allow her on the stage, either under Greaves' management or the management of any other man. He went back to his chair, sitting with his back to the light so as to keep his face in shadow.

"Oh, you mean *Delia* Bentley's cousin," he said, evenly. "I see. I didn't understand. So Greaves is going to give her a show, is he?"

"Says he will; but you can never be sure of that chap. I shouldn't mind putting up some of the money. I've a sort of conviction that she'll make a name for herself. Touched up a bit and properly dressed, she'll be the prettiest little thing——"

He offered a cigar to Barry. "Have one?"

Barry shook his head. "No thanks . . ." He kept

his eyes lowered. He was afraid that if he looked up Hulbert would see the rage in them.

"I'm taking her out to supper to-night," Hulbert went on complacently.

He was a vain man. Barry had heard his boast before, scores of times, about his many conquests.

"She's never been anywhere or seen anything, you know," the elder man went on. "It'll be sport to see what she thinks of London as I shall show it to her."

He blew a cloud of smoke into the air and smiled meaningly.

"Where are you taking her?" Barry asked. He was surprised at the steadiness of his own voice.

Hulbert shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. There are so many places. You must come along one night, Wicklow, and see the fun."

"Thanks. I should like to."

There was a moment's silence. "I suppose," Barry asked then, "I suppose she isn't—married—or anything like that, eh?"

"Married? Who? Little Hazel! Lord, no, I should say not! Why, she can't be more than about eighteen. She told me she'd lived in the country all her life, on a farm. I can well believe it. She looks as if she'd been brought up on cream and new-laid eggs."

Barry rose to his feet. His face was flushed. This man's careless words had driven him back to the night at Cleave Farm when he first kissed Hazel.

It all came to him again so easily—the dusky evening, the faint scent of the hay, the touch of her soft hair against his face. He seemed to hear her voice.

"I never knew that I really loved you—till you kissed me . . ."

Well, she didn't love him now, at any rate. She must hate him very heartily to have so deliberately kept the fact of their marriage hidden. Norman and he had both thought her beneath them, but now it was Hazel

who was not proud to have to admit she was Mrs. Barry Wicklow.

Hulbert touched his arm. "Dreaming! I've asked you twice what you'll have to drink."

Barry roused himself with a start.

"Nothing, thanks. I—I've just had a drink. I won't have anything more. I've got an appointment. See you later."

He went away, leaving Hulbert staring after him.

It was raining when he reached the street. He turned up the collar of his coat and shivered. Rotten weather! Enough to give a man the blues if he had everything he wanted in the world; but when a poor devil had nothing.

He strode on savagely. He could only think of Hazel in the company of this man and his friends; Hazel in a night-club, Hazel with her wild-rose face, one of a crowd such as Delia always had round her.

He had stayed away from her purposely all this fortnight. He had been so sure that she would be sorry and want him, but she had made no sign. She had just ignored him.

He hardly knew that his steps had turned towards Delia's flat till he found himself at the door; but he went on and up in the lift and rang the bell.

Hazel was his wife, and it was the place of a man's wife to do as her husband wished. He kept on telling himself this as he waited for an answer to his ring.

It seemed an eternity till the smart maid opened the door. Barry flushed beneath her quizzical eyes as he asked for Miss Hazel.

He had almost asked for Mrs. Wicklow, but just checked himself in time. He was not going to thrust his name upon her if she was unwilling to take it.

Yes, she was in. If he would go to the drawing-room.

Barry obeyed blindly. The blood was singing in his ears, and for a moment he could hardly see when at last he stood in Delia's gaudy room.

There was a fire burning, and the couch with the golden cushions was drawn close to it. There was the same faint scent in the room which Barry loathed. He shook his shoulders distastefully as he went forward.

Hazel was sitting on a low stool on the hearthrug. She looked up startled when she heard his step; then she rose to her feet.

CHAPTER XX

THERE was a moment of silence. Barry was looking at her with eager eyes. In a man's indefinite way he was realising vaguely that she had changed a great deal since he last saw her, though he hardly knew how or in what way.

Her hair was differently dressed. Her clothes were different. There was something—a sort of flippancy about her whole manner that turned him cold.

"Good afternoon," she said composedly. She pushed forward a chair.

"Won't you sit down?" Barry was remembering how Hulbert had said that she blushed whenever she was spoken to. There was no sign of agitation in her face now. Her blue eyes met his dispassionately.

She was dressed all in black, but such smart black, that somehow she did not look as if she were in mourning. Barry, glancing at her hands, saw that she no longer wore his ring, that she wore no rings at all.

He ignored the chair she had offered. He went straight to his point.

"I've just been talking to Hulbert—you know Hulbert. He tells me you are going on the stage under the management of that—that man Greaves."

He spoke a little breathlessly. "Well," said Hazel. "And what if I am?"

"I won't have it, that's all," Barry answered excitedly. "You're my wife, and I won't have it, I tell you! The stage is no place for you. I told you when I first met you that I hated it. I repeat it now, and I forbid you—I absolutely forbid you—to have anything to do with it or that man Greaves."

She shrugged her shoulders. If she were at all disturbed by his visit she hid the fact admirably. She went back to her humpty stool and looked up at him with a provoking smile.

"Well, I'm going to, all the same," she said quietly.

There was a little table standing at her elbow. It held Delia's cigarette case.

Hazel put out her hands and took it up. She opened it with a little click and selected a cigarette. Barry watched her with burning eyes.

If he had only known it, Hazel had never smoked a cigarette in the whole course of her life, but the longing to hurt him, to shock him, put the thought into her head. She held the cigarette daintily towards him.

"Please give me a light . . ." Barry stood quite still for a moment. Then he leaned forward, and snatching it out of her hands threw it into the fire.

"How dare you smoke!" he said furiously. "I hate to see a woman smoke . . . Don't you ever let me see you do it again."

She raised her eyebrows. "How very absurd!" she said amusedly. She put out her hand again towards the silver case; but Barry was before her. He snatched it up and sent it flying across the room.

"I suppose you're trying to copy your estimable cousin," he said bitterly. "If you are, you're behaving like a little fool. I thought better of you, Hazel . . ." His voice softened wonderfully. "Oh, my dear," he said pleadingly.

She rose to her feet, frowning petulantly.

"Why do you come here? I told you I never wanted to see you again, and I meant it. I'm quite happy. Why can't you leave me alone? I thought you understood that it was all over between us."

"All over, when you're my wife!"

She would not look at him. "I never should have married you if I'd known. You know that. We can forget all about it. I haven't interfered with you."

"I wish to God you would!" Barry exclaimed hoarsely. What he had most dreaded had come to pass. Hazel was adopting Delia's life. She was quite happy in her new surroundings, quite happy without him.

Instead of this last fortnight tightening his hold of her, it had relaxed it. There was no longer a place for him in her life.

She was standing twisting her fingers together, and frowning. She seemed somehow like a stranger to him.

He could not believe that she was the little girl who had been so happy with him down at Cleave Farm.

Presently she looked up defiantly.

"As you are here," she said slowly, "perhaps—I was going to write to you—but perhaps I can ask you now instead of writing it."

"Yes," said Barry quickly.

"You know if there is anything I can do for you—anything in the world—I shall be only too pleased—too happy . . ."

She shook her head. "You won't . . . not to do this . . ." And then the silence fell again.

Barry took a step forward. He laid his hands on her shoulders, turning her to him.

"What are you trying to say?" he demanded.

She shook his hands off irritably. She laughed—a little reckless laugh that sounded somehow more like Delia than Hazel.

"I want to know if—if it wouldn't be possible to—to get—get our marriage annulled," she said at last.

She looked at Barry quite steadily as she asked her question, though her colour had risen a little. She did not give him time to answer; she rushed on.

"It can be done. I know it can. Delia says so, too. She knew a girl who got tired of her husband, and ——" She stopped, arrested by something in Barry Wicklow's face.

"Don't quote Delia to me," he broke out passionately. "I might have known what it would be; I'd no right to

have allowed you to come here. I always hate the thought of you living with her."

Hazel shrugged her shoulders.

"We don't need to argue about that," she said, with a touch of impatience. "I like it; I've never been so happy in my life." But her voice wavered a little as if she did not quite mean what she said. "I always wanted to live in London. I can't think how I ever put up with Cleave Farm for so long."

Barry covered the ground between them in a stride; he took her by the shoulders and shook her.

"How dare you say such things? I can hardly recognize you, Hazel. What in heaven's name has changed you so? It's not three weeks since we were so happy together. I won't believe that any woman could change so quickly."

She looked at him with hard eyes. "If I have changed it's your fault," she told him. "I was happy with you. I did love you; I thought you were the most wonderful man in the world." Her voice quivered a little, and she laughed quickly to hide her unwilling emotion. "I was an idiot! I suppose I ought to have guessed that you were not what I thought. Delia says that men never are what you think them. I wish I had listened to Uncle Joe—oh, I wish I had!"

Barry released her violently.

"I wish to heaven you had, too!" he said, with sudden passion. "If you think it's any pleasure to me to be tied to a woman who hates the sight of me, you're mistaken. I should like to be free as much as you—perhaps more. But you must be out of your mind to think such a thing can be done. We're married, and we've got to make the best of it. I could make you live with me if I chose; the law is on my side."

Hazel laughed scornfully. "All the law in the world wouldn't make me live with you, I don't know why you came here—I didn't want to see you—I was quite happy."

"I came here to forbid you to have anything to do with

Hulbert and men like him; they're not fit for you to mix with. Hulbert tells me he is taking you out to supper; well, I forbid you to go."

Hazel did not answer; she went back to the sofa and picked up the magazine she had been reading.

"Did you hear what I said?" Barry demanded after a moment.

She raised her eyes for a second, and dropped them again. "I should think everyone in the flat must have heard," she retorted.

Barry clenched his fists; it was all so unreal; he felt as if he were talking to a strange woman who looked at him with Hazel's eyes; he cursed Delia for having brought about this change.

"I forbid you to speak to Hulbert again," he said after a moment. "And as for that man Greaves. . . ."

She laughed provokingly. "I like Mr. Greaves; he has been very kind to me."

"Kind!" Barry shouted; his eyes were furious. "Do you know what sort of a man he is? Do you know that he—he——" His voice dropped suddenly; he went over and sat down beside her.

"Listen to me, my dear," he said shakily. "You're young, and you don't know anything of the world. You've got nobody to look after you but me. Oh, I know you hate me." He rushed on as she would have interrupted. "But I'm going to tell you, all the same, that it's madness, sheer madness, for a child like you to get in with Greaves and his lot. You mustn't do it, Hazel; your cousin ought to be shot for ever having allowed it in the first place.

"I thought better of her. Let me take you away! you can live in my rooms if you like, and I'll clear out. I don't want to force myself upon you. I'm sorry enough for everything that's happened, but you're my wife, and it's my duty to look after you."

She raised her eyes coldly to his agitated face.

"To look after me and see that I don't tarnish the aristocratic name of 'Wicklow,' is that it?" she asked. She

rose to her feet. "Oh, you needn't be afraid; I'm not likely to disgrace you. I don't want to use your name; I'm not proud of it. Nobody need know that we were ever married."

"But I want them to know," he urged. "I want everyone to know that you are my wife. I'll take you away; we'll go abroad; you've never seen the world, Hazel. You'd have the time of your life." He paused eagerly.

"With—you?" she asked. She looked away from him. "Thank you, but I would rather stay here." She went over to the window and stood looking out into the street. Her breath was coming fast, and her hands were clasped together to hide their trembling; but Barry only saw the defiant carriage of her head and heard the hard finality of her voice.

There was a long moment of silence, then he got up and followed her.

"And this is your last word?" he asked stiffly.

She answered without turning: "Yes, quite."

"You realise what it means? If you send me away I'm not coming back any more. I've done my best; I'm willing to do anything in the world to make up for the past. I'll take you away anywhere you like this minute; but—but after to-day——" He stopped. "Well—it's an end if I go now."

"Very well."

She did not even look round.

Barry picked up his hat and coat from a chair and walked to the door.

He looked round the little room, with its gaudy furniture and air of untidiness, then his eyes travelled to the slim, defiant figure in the window.

If he went now, he knew that he was leaving her to Delia and Delia's life and friends; if he stayed. . . . He took a step forward.

"Hazel." But she might not have heard for all sign she gave, and Barry went out, shutting the door after him.

Hazel went back to the fire and crouched down by it, shivering with excitement.

He had gone, he had done with her—done with her. She moistened her dry lips; they were burning. She looked down at her hands and was surprised to see how they shook.

She leaned over and poked the fire into a blaze; the flames shot upwards cheerily.

She held her hands to them; she was chilled to the bone. Barry had gone. It was the one thought in her brain.

"I don't care," she said aloud. The sound of the words frightened her.

"I don't care at all," she said again.

She rose to her feet and went over to the glass. She looked at herself for a moment curiously.

She knew she had changed; but she wondered a little that Barry had been so angry to see it.

She had thought he would like her clothes, and the new way she did her hair. She had copied Delia as nearly as she could. Delia had said that men liked women to be smart, Delia had said a lot of other things as well; a lot of things about Barry that had added to the wall of ice round his wife's heart.

She knew now that it was not only in appearance that she had changed. She felt like another woman. The girl she had been when she loved and married Barry Wicklow had died and left in her place a hard woman years older, who spent the days looking on—on! and refusing to look back.

In her heart she blamed Barry for her mother's death. She blamed him for everything. Sometimes, lying awake at night, she thought of everything he had ever said to her, and marvelled bitterly that she had ever believed in him.

Delia had told her that men are better actors than women. Delia had told her that Barry was the sort of man who made love to every woman he met.

"Why, there was a girl at the last show I was in," she began, but Hazel had stopped her. "Don't, don't!" she had begged. "I don't want to hear any more."

The world had toppled in pieces about her during the last fortnight.

She smiled faintly, meeting the look of her reflected eyes. She was sorry for the girl who had loved Barry Wicklow.

"Men like go-ahead girls," had been another of Delia's remarks. "Barry's a man about town, my dear; he'd have been rusted out if he'd stayed in your sleepy hollow another week. You'd have to have bucked up if you wanted to keep him," she laughed reminiscently. "You ought to have seen him at that supper party where I first met him," she went on. "When I went home in the small hours of the morning, your Barry Wicklow was dancing an Irish jig with Topsy St. Helier on one of the tables. Goodness! don't look so shocked! He'd like you a jolly sight better if you were the same sort of woman, and don't you forget it."

Delia really believed what she was saying; she was firmly convinced that the fact that Barry had got tired of Hazel was at the bottom of all this trouble, that he had found her too slow and countrified, and that he had never really meant to marry her.

She had made Hazel believe it as well.

She had artfully impressed it upon the younger girl's mind till now all Hazel longed for was to be like Delia—to be as smart as she was, to be able to stay out all night and not have a headache in the morning. To get to like smoking cigarettes and drinking champagne, and, most of all, to go on the stage! She had a vague sort of idea that if Barry could see her across the footlights he would love her again, that he would come hanging round the stage door to see her in the way so eloquently described by Delia.

"A man never cares for a woman he is too sure of," had been another of Delia's little poisoned shafts. Hazel

had kept it firmly before her during her interview with Barry that afternoon. She believed that if she held him at arm's length he would some day want her again. She clung to the belief piteously as she looked at her reflection in the glass. She made up her mind that she would go on—go on—no matter what it cost her. After all, there was no longer a choice left to her; Joe Daniels had cast her off, Cleave Farm was closed to her, and now Barry had done with her, too.

"I'll make him sorry," she told herself fiercely. "Oh, I'll make him sorry."

She did not realise that the easiest road to find is sometimes the one which we have carefully prepared for the feet of another.

CHAPTER XXI

"MY word!" said Delia.

She paused on the threshold of Hazel's little bedroom and looked at her cousin with wide eyes. Hazel was dressed for the supper party with Hulbert; she was standing in front of the small dressing table eyeing herself anxiously.

She turned as Delia spoke. "Shall I do? Do you think I shall do?" she asked doubtfully.

Delia walked round Hazel with slow criticism.

"I'm sorry I ever gave you that dress," she said at last frankly. "I never knew it looked so decent. What in the world have you done to it?"

Hazel flushed. "I only altered it a little; it was too big. Does it really look nice?"

Delia sat down on the bed and nodded.

"Never thought you had it in you," she said frankly. She looked the younger girl up and down. "You ought to fetch them properly," she added.

Hazel flushed. Perhaps she did not know how pretty she was looking in the flimsy black frock that Delia had given to her with the remark that it was an awful rag, but that she might be able to make something out of it.

It suited Hazel's fair hair and delicate skin to perfection. She looked very young and slim in the full skirt cut short above her little feet and ankles, her pretty hair loosely arranged. There was a short silence, then Delia rose.

"Here—I'll lend you my pearls; they're not real, but they're not half a bad imitation, and they'll just finish you off. No; you need not be so grateful, my dear," she added tartly as Hazel began to thank her. "If we pull

this off with Greaves I'm going to get a tidy sum out of the mean old brute. He thinks you're a find, and, if you are, it'll be up to him to give me something handsome—see?"

She went off without waiting for a reply. She came back with the pearl necklace, which she clasped round Hazel's throat.

"There, that puts fifty pounds on to the frock," she said, with a nod of satisfaction. "And with the roses Laurie Hulbert sent—where are they?"

"In the other room."

"Well, hurry and put them on, or he'll be here before we're ready, and he hates being kept waiting."

Hazel obeyed eagerly. She was very excited; her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone. Her hands shook with eagerness as she fastened Hulbert's roses into the filmy folds at her waist.

It was wonderful what a difference dress made to anybody, she thought, and then, with a sharp pang, she wondered what her mother would say if she could see her!

Hazel never thought about her mother if she could help it. She belonged to the sweet memories which she was trying to bury deep away, out of sight, with her love for Barry Wicklow.

Delia's philosophy had helped her here. Delia had pointed out how unutterably foolish it was to think about things that made you unhappy. What was the good of it? One only got old and ugly if one moped and shed tears. Therefore, why do it?

"There isn't anybody in the world I'd shed a tear for," she declared flippantly. "There isn't anybody worth it."

But Hazel wiped some tears away now as she looked down at Hulbert's sweet-scented roses. They had taken her back so acutely to the summer and Cleave Farm. Just such red roses grew on the walls of the old farm and poked their scented heads in at the window of the

little room where she had slept for so many happy years.

"All serene?" Delia demanded at the door. She twisted and turned for Hazel's inspection. She was wearing a wonderful garment of shot green and gold, with a filet of the same colours in her hair.

"Is this skirt too long, do you think?" she queried anxiously.

Hazel thought it was not long enough, but she did not like to say so.

"You look lovely," she said.

Delia beamed. "And you don't look half so bad," she answered condescendingly. "Whoever would have thought my old black frock would turn out like that? Hazel, I'd give a fiver if that Barry Wicklow of yours could walk in to-night and see you and me having supper with Laurie and Greaves! It'd be worth a fiver to see his face; I suppose he's never seen you in evening togs, eh?"

"I've never had any before."

"Well, you ought to get plenty after to-night," Delia said bluntly. "There's the bell, now smile and look pleasant."

But Hazel merely looked terribly nervous when the door opened, and Hulbert was announced; she shook hands with him and tried to thank him for the roses, but he cut her short. "Pooh! That's nothing! Glad you're wearing them; I'll send you some more to-morrow." He held her hand rather unnecessarily long; when presently they went down to his car he rather pointedly addressed his conversation to her.

Delia did not mind; she had a little scheme maturing in her brain as she sat silent in the corner of Hulbert's luxurious car.

Supposing this little cousin of hers "caught on"—as she called it! Delia's hopes soared high; after all, it was entirely due to her that Hulbert and Greaves had ever met Hazel; it would be worth their while to stump up.

Delia knew her own limitations. She knew that noth-

ing very alluring in the way of fame lay in wait for her; therefore, she was determined to make hay while the sun shone in any other direction.

Hazel had told her nothing of Barry's last visit, she imagined that he was still in blissful ignorance of the fact that she had let him down so badly; if he ever found out she meant to tell him that a tanner a week had been no good to her, and that he ought to have known it.

When the car stopped she slipped a friendly hand through Hazel's arm. She said she was dying of hunger; she told Hulbert she hoped he had seen to it that the champagne was iced.

"And where is Jimmy Greaves?" she asked.

"We're meeting him inside," Hulbert answered.

An attentive waiter conducted them to a reserved table. Hazel looked round her with wide eyes. She had never seen such a room in all her life; the many lights and the masses of flowers awed her. She stood quite still till Delia touched her hand.

"Sit down, child! There's no extra charge."

She obeyed rather helplessly; she found herself next to Hulbert, with an empty chair on the other side.

Delia was drawing off her gloves and chattering away about the supper. She repeated that she was dying of hunger; she asked Hulbert if he had ordered oysters.

"Good evening!" said a voice.

Hazel looked up, startled, to find Norman Wicklow beside her.

The colour rushed to her cheeks; she could find no words. He took the empty chair beside her.

Delia hailed him rapturously.

"Where have you been hiding all this time?" she asked. She leaned her elbows on the table and looked at him with bright eyes. "And how's the ankle? We heard all about it."

"It's nearly well," Norman answered. He looked rather agitated. The sight of Hazel had set his pulses racing and brought back his loss to him with a fresh

sense of desolation. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"We're waiting for Jimmy Greaves," Delia told him. "He's going to give Hazel a show in the autumn, you know."

"Hazel!" Norman looked at her and quickly away again. "Hazel going on the stage!"

"There's nothing settled," she told him, quickly. "And I don't suppose I shall be any good at all."

"I should like to back my opinion against yours, Miss Bentley," Hulbert answered. "Here comes Greaves."

A tall man with grey hair was coming down the room towards them. He had a cheery, smiling face, and small, very shrewd eyes. He shook hands with Hazel and Delia, and clapped Hulbert on the back.

"And who asked you to butt in, Wicklow?" he demanded of Norman in pretended anger. "If you're thinking of buzzing round the honey-pot, you're a bit too soon, my boy." He glanced towards Hazel, meaningly.

"Miss Bentley and I have known one another some time," Norman answered, rather stiffly. "And I'm not staying, don't worry! I only came over to say 'How do!'" He rose to his feet again. "I suppose I mustn't ask questions."

"You may," Greaves told him, pleasantly. "But they won't be answered; and I'm hungry. Where's that confounded waiter?"

Norman went away, and Greaves sat down. He talked to Hazel a great deal. He asked her a hundred and one questions. He told Delia to bring her along to his office in the morning.

"You say you can't sing, eh?" he asked. "Well, we'll try!"

He suddenly stopped talking business and set himself to be entertaining.

Hazel thought he was a most delightful man. She liked his boisterous laugh and the twinkle of his eyes.

She forgot her shyness and laughed and chatted to him eagerly. She did not notice that as soon as her glass began to get empty he filled it up again. She felt very happy and excited. When Delia took out her cigarette case and began to smoke, Hazel declared that she would smoke too.

She wished that Barry could walk in and see her; he would realise then that he was not the only man who had ever paid her attention. Greaves had drawn his chair closer to hers; he was leaning over the corner of the table talking to her confidentially.

When, after the first puff or two, she let her cigarette go out, he insisted that she relit it from his.

"I like to see a pretty woman smoke," he told her. "You've no idea how charming you look."

It was all so different to what Barry had said. Hazel remembered what a rage he had been in and how he had torn the cigarette case from her hand.

The excitement fell from her; she sat silent, staring down the long room. She felt cold and miserable all at once; she looked at Greaves and shivered; there was something about him that she did not like, after all, she thought, timidly. She looked at Delia—a very flushed and noisy Delia—and a sudden distaste of the whole evening rose in her heart.

She wished she had not come; the room was hot and noisy; the band made her head ache. Greaves was refilling her glass; she laid her hand on his sleeve to check him.

"Please, no more! I don't want any more."

He covered her hand with his; such a big, hot hand it felt. Hazel drew her own sharply away.

Hardly knowing what she was doing, she pushed back her chair and half rose.

"The room is so hot," she said confusedly, "I wish we could go home, Delia."

But Delia paid no attention; she was telling Hulbert something in a whisper and screaming with laughter.

"You don't want to go home," Greaves answered soothingly. "Why, we've only just begun the night." But Hazel was not listening, she was looking past him down the long room.

The door had just opened to admit some fresh comers. Greaves swung round in his chair to see who it was that was claiming Hazel's attention.

A woman in evening dress was walking up the room between the tables, closely followed by a man. The woman was Agnes Dudley—Greaves knew her by sight; he had often seen her about with Barry Wicklow—and the man; he glanced at the man's big, rather lumbering figure and careless face—it was Barry himself.

CHAPTER XXII

BARRY thought he had planned out his evening to a nicety. After leaving his wife, he sought out Greaves; he guessed that Greaves would know where Hulbert was taking Hazel that night, and he had not been wrong.

A diplomatic invitation to the manager to have dinner with him had drawn the required information.

"Should have been delighted," Greaves told Barry unsuspectingly. "But the fact is, I've promised Hulbert to meet him. He's got some new little girl in tow, and he's very anxious for me to give her a trial run this autumn."

"Ah, yes!" Barry's voice was even and disinterested. "He told me something about it. Where are you dining?"

Greaves told him unsuspectingly; he added that he didn't suppose anything would come of it; but that Hulbert was a great friend of his.

"Anyway, Hulbert thinks she's bound to be a success," Barry told him, calmly. "She's pretty enough."

Greaves raised his brows. "Oh, you know her, then?"

There was the faintest possible pause before Barry answered. "Yes—I've met her." He smiled grimly at his own reply, recalling those days down at Cleave Farm.

He went away from Greaves, savage and smarting with jealousy. He was determined to turn up at the restaurant to meet Hazel. It was only later that he thought he would ask Agnes Dudley to go with him. Probably if he had stopped to consider it for a moment he would not have done anything so foolish. But with his usual bull-at-the-gate impulsiveness it seemed to him a fine way of

showing Hazel he could amuse himself without her, quite as well as she could amuse herself without him.

He went straight back to his rooms, and rang Agnes up; he was quick to detect the little eagerness in her voice.

"You, Barry! Why I thought . . ." She stopped.

"I'm at a loose end," he told her, hurriedly. "Will you let me take you out somewhere to supper?"

He waited impatiently for her reply.

"Well—I should like to come. Will—will your wife be with you?"

Barry scowled into the receiver. "No, my wife will not be with me," he said savagely.

He heard her say "Oh!" with soft amazement, and wondered what she was thinking. Anyhow, it did not matter; he fixed up the time and meeting place before she could change her mind and rang off.

He hoped savagely that Hazel would see him. He hoped Agnes would be well turned out. He had often heard it said that she was one of the best dressed women in London.

But he felt painfully nervous as he waited in Mrs. Dudley's drawing-room. It seemed ages since he had been here. So much had happened since that last "good-bye." He almost wished he had not come. What was the use of re-opening the old friendship?

He felt a helpless, trapped sort of sensation as he looked round the familiar room. His own photograph still stood on her desk, and Barry frowned. It was strange how quickly a man could change; he felt somehow ashamed of himself.

He turned his back on it and stood staring down into the fire. He hoped she would not make things difficult for him. He realised that it *was* going to be difficult to take up the old thread of friendship with the memory of the last meeting between them.

It seemed a long time before Mrs. Dudley came down. She was beautifully dressed; Barry noticed that at once.

She was wearing his favourite colour—blue; he noticed that, too, and wondered if she had chosen it on purpose to please him. He looked faintly embarrassed as he took her hand.

"It's awfully good of you to say you will come—awfully good."

"I wanted to come," she told him. She was clever enough to keep all emotion from her voice. She drew her hand away. "I have missed you," she said lightly. "Where have you been hiding all this time?"

"All this time!" He echoed her words with a little laugh. "Why, it's only a fortnight——"

"So it is! It seems longer." She let him help her into her coat. "And how is your wife?" she asked him.

It was a question that was bound to come, he knew, but he felt quite unprepared for it. He flushed up to his eyes.

"Who told you I was married?" he asked rather shortly.

She hesitated. "I am not sure, I have heard it from so many people, but I believe your cousin—Norman—told me in the first place."

"He would," Barry said grimly.

She looked up at him.

"Barry! Is anything the matter?"

Barry winced. "I'd much rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. I made a hash of it, that's the truth. You're bound to know sooner or later, so I may as well tell you myself. We—she . . . we agreed to differ—on our wedding-day. Don't think I blame her; it's been my fault alone all along. She found out she didn't care for me—and . . . and that's the end of it."

She did not know what to say, but her proud face quivered for a moment.

"So we won't talk about it if you don't mind," Barry said more easily. "We'll just have a good time and forget everything else, shall we?"

"I'm sorry, Barry," she said gently, though she kept her face averted. "I'm—so sorry."

Barry swallowed hard. "Oh, well!" he said with an effort. "It's my own fault, I deserved it." He hunched his shoulders. "There's a taxi waiting," he said with a change of voice; and they went out together.

Agnes Dudley was a clever woman. She had heard all sorts of stories and rumours about Barry Wicklow's marriage, but that it had ended so suddenly and completely she had not the faintest idea. She carefully avoided all references to the past in her conversation, and, as they drove through London, she treated him in the old friendly, affectionate way. She really cared for him, and she was more than happy to be with him, no matter what were the circumstances.

She felt a little thrill of apprehension as they reached their destination. There would be sure to be many people in the restaurant who knew them both. She wondered what would be said of her and of Barry, but apparently Barry was unconcerned, and she took courage.

After all, if he did not care, she need not. It was her fault he had rushed off into his disastrous marriage; the least she could do now was to give him the friendship he wanted.

Her colour rose a little as they walked down the crowded room. She did not look to the right or left; she gave a little sigh of relief when at last they reached their table.

"Quite comfortable?" Barry asked her. "Not too near the band?"

"Oh, no—it's very nice." She began to draw off her long gloves. She and Barry Wicklow had dined here scores of times together. She felt as if the last two weeks had been just a bad dream from which she had now wakened.

She met his eyes and smiled nervously.

"There are a lot of people I know here, Barry," she said.

"Are there?" There was a note of defiance in his voice. There was only one person whom he hoped to see. He glanced round the room, and in that moment he saw her—sitting just a stone's throw from him with Greaves and Hulbert on either side of her. She was looking at him, and there was a sort of appeal in her wild-rose face; she was very flushed, and her eyes were somehow distressed. Barry's heart gave a big thump, but he restrained himself with a mighty effort and merely bowed formally.

Hazel hardly acknowledged him. She had sunk back in her chair, and Greaves was bending close to her, speaking in an undertone.

Barry had chosen his seat so that he could look at that other table without turning his head. He began to talk to Agnes; he hardly knew what he said; he was speaking quite at random; his eyes turned again and again to Hazel.

Once he heard her laugh—a shrill nervous laugh that somehow hurt him. Once he saw her lift her glass in response to a toast from Hulbert. It was champagne they were all drinking, of course, he told himself savagely. He wondered what Hazel's mother would say if she could see her now; what Joe Daniels would say.

They would blame him for this, of course. They would say it was all his fault that Hazel sat there with that scared, reckless look in her eyes. Well, let them—who cared! He had done his best, and she had refused to allow him to help her. Once he met Delia's mocking eyes. She knew how he was feeling beneath all his forced composure, and the knowledge amused her.

He hardly touched his dinner. Mrs. Dudley was puzzled at the sudden change in him. He had seemed pleased and happy enough to be with her at first; but now he was pale and abstracted. Once or twice he seemed not to hear when she spoke to him.

Presently she touched his arm.

"Laurie Hulbert is over there," she said. She had only just seen the four at the other table.

"Who is he with, Barry?"

Barry roused himself with an effort.

"The tall man is Greaves, the theatrical manager. He's worth a pot of money."

"You know him?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And—and the two girls?"

Barry kept his eyes averted.

"The elder one is on the stage," he answered evasively.

Mrs. Dudley looked across the room.

"The one with the fair hair is very pretty," she said at last. "Don't you think she is very pretty, Barry?"

He forced himself to glance over at Hazel.

"Yes," he said. "Oh, yes."

"I think she has a sweet face," Mrs. Dudley went on; she was sufficiently handsome herself to be able to admire good looks in other women. "Do you know her, Barry? She is looking at you now."

Barry forced himself to answer.

"Yes—I know her . . . at least . . . yes, I know her," he said incoherently. He turned in his chair. "Where's that waiter?" he said irritably. "The attention is something shocking here to-night."

His nerves were at snapping point. He wondered if Agnes knew who Hazel was, and was deliberately speaking about her.

Greaves had risen from his chair; he took Hazel's cloak from the waiter. Barry could hear Delia's shrill voice distinctly across the room; she was laughing immoderately.

Were they going? Barry almost held his breath; he felt that nothing in the world could prevent him from getting up and following Hazel if he saw her leave in the company of those men. The blood was hammering in his temples.

A moment dragged by then Hazel came slowly down

the room, followed by Greaves. He was walking very close to her. Barry clenched his hands under cover of the table.

They passed quite close to where he sat. Greaves laid a hand on Barry's shoulder in careless greeting. "Hullo, sonnie!"

Barry said "hullo."

He looked round for Delia; she was not attempting to follow; she and Hulbert still sat at the table talking and laughing together. Hazel was going alone with Greaves!

They were at the door now; someone opened it for them, and just as they passed through it and out of sight Barry saw Greaves take Hazel's hand and draw it through his arm.

The next moment the door had swung to, and they had gone.

CHAPTER XXIII

BARRY never knew how he got through the remainder of the evening. He had a vague recollection of finishing his dinner somehow, of drinking a great deal more than was good for him, of answering Agnes Dudley's attempts at conversation wildly and at random, and of being infinitely relieved when at last she said she thought it was time for her to go home.

She kept looking at Barry in a puzzled way. He had been inexplicable to her all the evening, when they were driving away again his almost noisy excitement fell from him. He leaned back in a corner of the taxi with a deep sigh.

"Tired?" she asked.

"No—I've got a brute of a head." He let down the window for the cool air to fan his hot face.

Agnes spoke suddenly.

"Barry—may I ask you a question?"

He roused himself with a start.

"A thousand if you like!" he said with forced flippancy.

She hesitated; the light from a street lamp they were passing gave her a momentary glimpse of his face; a hard unhappy face it looked.

She laid her hand lightly on his arm.

"Barry—where is your wife?"

She could feel that his whole body stiffened beneath her touch; for a moment he did not answer; then he laughed mirthlessly.

"If you mean where is she at this moment, I'm blessed if I know. If you mean where does she live . . .

well, the last time I saw her she was sharing a flat with her cousin."

"You mean that—that you don't see her—often?"

"I mean that if she had her way we should never meet again."

"And—if you had *your* way?" she asked. There was a touch of suppressed eagerness in her voice.

Barry did not answer. He knew that it was impossible to tell this woman that if he had his way he would not be here now with her, that he would be somewhere—anywhere—with the woman he loved, and whom he had married.

But sometimes silence is more eloquent than words, and Agnes knew by instinct that Barry loved his wife, as he had never loved anyone else.

She leaned back in the darkness and closed her eyes.

He had only come to her to-night because he was unhappy, because he had dreaded his own company, because he had once told her, he and she had always been such good "pals."

Her lips twisted into a little wry smile; men were so odd in their ideas of what a woman could stand. They so calmly took it for granted that because they could offer friendship in place of love, the woman to whom it was offered could accept it calmly and gratefully.

A great desire to see Barry's wife seized her. She had heard so many stories about her, and had been wise enough to discredit them all; she opened her eyes.

"I should like to meet your wife, Barry," she said suddenly.

He turned with pathetic eagerness.

"Would you? I wish you could—I should like her to have a friend like you. She's had an awfully dull life, poor little girl; and nothing of—of all this is her fault, Agnes; I brought it entirely on myself. I hope you'll not think it has been her fault in any way."

She did not answer, and he went on—

"She's so young—not twenty-one yet, and she knows

absolutely nothing of the world; and—and her mother died the day we were married.” He stopped with desolating memory of that fateful afternoon.

If Mrs. Bentley had lived, things might have been all right, he was thinking, but what was the good of looking back—of thinking what might have been? One could only look on—on—surely there must be something pleasant awaiting somewhere in the future.

The taxi stopped at Mrs. Dudley’s house, and Barry got out.

“It’s been awfully good of you to spend the evening with me,” he said; he pressed her hand hard for a moment. “I’m afraid I haven’t been very cheerful company.”

“I’ve enjoyed it,” she answered. “It has been quite like old times.” Afterwards she wondered what made her say that, seeing that all the evening she had felt as if she were out with a stranger; just a man who looked at her with Barry Wicklow’s eyes and spoke to her in Barry Wicklow’s voice, and yet who was not Barry at all.

“I—suppose you won’t come in?” she asked hesitatingly.

“Not to-night—I won’t come in to-night; but we shall meet again soon.”

“I shall always be pleased to see you,” she told him gently, though she knew as he turned away that of all the many things she had hoped for from this evening, none of them would ever come true. Barry was lost to her for ever.

She stood at the open door for some minutes looking into the darkness where Barry had disappeared. What sort of a woman could his wife be, she asked herself, that she did not want him—did not care for him at all?

Barry went straight to the club. It was a sort of obsession with him now that he must find Greaves and hear about Hazel. It was not very late yet—only half-past eleven—but the club was almost deserted. He wan-

dered about aimlessly for some time, then went out again. Nobody had seen Greaves, nobody knew where he was likely to be found.

Barry went round to Delia's flat. There would be nobody there either, he knew, but he walked up and down for some time in the darkness.

Every time a taxicab rounded the corner he was sure Hazel must be in it. A dozen times his heart seemed to stand still with apprehension, but the time dragged away and she did not come.

He stopped under a lamp-post and looked at his watch; nearly one o'clock. He had been waiting over an hour! He walked back again past the house.

A sleepy policeman at the corner bade him good-night. As he stood in the darkness staring up at the windows of Delia's flat a mongrel cat came and rubbed its thin body against his legs, purring rustily.

Barry hated cats as a rule, but to-night he stooped and stroked the poor creature's head; he was sufficiently miserable to appreciate even such humble overtures of friendship.

Half-past one—a quarter to two . . . two o'clock! Barry was dead tired, but he was not conscious of the fact. He meant to stay there all night till he knew that Hazel was home. His head was splitting. He took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair.

Back to the corner again. The policeman had gone and the road was very still; now and then a distant horn from a taxi broke the silence.

Half-past two! Barry clenched his hands. He had been out all night himself scores of times, had gone home cheerfully with the milk and thought nothing of it, but this was different. He thought of the early hours down at Cleave Farm. By ten o'clock at latest everyone was in bed and asleep. He swung round once more and walked back down the street.

He would get even with Delia for this. He would take Hazel away from her by main force. He would . . .

A taxi turned the corner of the street and came towards him. It slowed down a little, and he heard the driver calling to his fare:

"Which number did you say, miss?"

A woman's voice answered with shrill impatience:

"Thirty-one! Why can't you remember?"

Barry was across the road in a flash. That was Delia's voice. She flung open the door almost before the taxi stopped and got out. She was alone.

Barry stood back in the shadows while she paid the driver. He heard her haggling about the fare and heard the impatient tap-tap of her high-heeled shoe on the pavement. Then the taxi drove off and Barry stepped forward.

"Where is my wife?" he asked.

Delia screamed. She swung round, saw who it was, and broke out angrily:

"What are you doing, hanging about here? I'm fed up with you. For heaven's sake take your wife, and leave me in peace—if you can get her," she added nastily. "I don't know where she is any more than you do—she went off with Greaves . . . I'm not her keeper . . ." She tried to evade him, but Barry caught her arm and held it in a grip of steel.

"Where is she? I'm not going till I know—and you're not going either."

She stamped her foot at him.

"You've no right to keep me here; how dare you! You're nothing but a great bully! No wonder Hazel's scared to death of you."

"I don't want any sermons from you," Barry said savagely. "Tell me where she is—and you can go, do you hear?"

"I don't *know* where she is. She's not a child; she can look after herself."

"I've paid you to look after her," he broke out. She laughed shrilly.

"A tenner a week! Lord! If you think I'm going to waste my time hauling Hazel at my apron strings all day for a tenner a week, you're mistaken," she told him flatly. "I don't know where she is, she's got beyond me already." She wrenched her arm free and ran up the steps to the house. She looked back at him mockingly. "I should advise you to apply to Mr. Greaves for the latest information."

Barry's face flamed, all the blood in his body seemed to have rushed to his head, for the moment he was blind and deaf with rage. He sprang up the steps after her and caught her by both arms.

"By God!" he said hoarsely, "if you don't tell me where she is I'll kill you—I'll . . ."

She cowed away from him; she began to whimper.

"You're hurting me . . . let me go . . ."

He relaxed his hold a little; he was breathing hard and fast.

"If anything has happened to her," he began hoarsely.

She looked up at him angrily, but something in the expression of his eyes checked the words she had been going to say—she shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know what you want to make all this fuss about," she said more quietly. "Hazel came home ages ago; she's been in bed and asleep for hours."

A light over the door shone full on her face as she spoke, on the hard, angry eyes and scornfully smiling mouth.

Her arms were aching where he had gripped them; she would never forgive him for this. She quite realised that he was a sufficiently strong man to spoil all her little plans. She made up her mind that, come what might, she would fight him to the end.

She cared nothing for him or what he wished. She hated him because he had always been indifferent to her. She loved admiration and flattery, and Barry had never been more than ordinarily civil. Well, she would pay

him out. Ten pounds a week was nothing when compared with all she hoped to get out of Greaves. The knowledge made her feel almost pleasant again.

"If you don't believe me, you can come up and see for yourself if she is home or not," she said more graciously.

"Well, I don't believe you, so I will," Barry answered flatly.

The lift had stopped running and they had to go up the long flights of stairs. Delia was breathless and panting before they reached the top. She said angrily that she hated living in such a hole and that she didn't mean to stay there all her life.

She unlocked the door with her latchkey and flung it open. She crossed the narrow passage and kicked open the door of the gaudy little drawing-room. Barry had never seen her in such a temper before. He had always considered her an amiable sort of girl. He followed in silent disgust.

She switched on the light and went forward; then she stopped with a short laugh.

"There's the sleeping beauty," she said cynically.

Barry glanced across the room; Hazel was lying on the couch with the yellow cushions fast asleep. She still wore the frock he had seen her in that evening; the red roses were all crushed and dying; her hair was tumbled anyhow about her face.

Delia looked at him mockingly.

"There she is," she said again. "Now are you satisfied?"

She dropped her silken coat to the floor, kicking it out of her way as she passed him and went on to her own room. Barry heard her banging about in there, as he stood gazing down at Hazel.

She looked so young, such a child! And suddenly all the anger and bitterness he had felt against her seemed to die from his heart. After all, it had been his fault; once she had loved him and trusted him, would have

loved him and trusted him still had he played the game.

He glanced toward Delia's room. The door was half closed; he went a little closer to the couch where his wife lay sleeping and, bending, kissed her softly.

She never moved; he felt warm breath against his cheek for an instant, it seemed such a long, long time since he last kissed her. Then he went away and down the dark stone staircase again to the street.

Delia heard him go; she came to the door of her room and listened; she had thrown off her smart frock and had got into a loose gown. She had taken down her hair, and was smoking a cigarette; when she knew Barry had gone she bolted the outer door, came back to where Hazel lay asleep and woke her with no very gentle hand.

Hazel sat up with a little frightened breath; she rubbed her eyes, and stared at Delia sleepily.

"What's the matter? Is anything the matter? What time is it?"

"Nothing's the matter, and it's nearly breakfast-time," Delia answered disagreeably. "What time did you come in? How long have you been here?"

"I came straight home when we left the restaurant. My head ached." She looked away from Delia's hard eyes. "I hate champagne," she said petulantly.

Delia said "Humph!" She sat down in an armchair and looked at Hazel critically.

"What did you do with Jimmy?" she asked.

"Nothing—he just saw me home and went away."

"And you've been here ever since?"

"Yes." Hazel flushed uncomfortably. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Delia flung her cigarette firewards; she had hardly taken half-a-dozen puffs.

"I don't mean anything," she said crossly. "Are you going to his office in the morning?"

"Yes—at half-past ten."

Hazel unfastened the dead roses from her frock and looked at them rather sadly.

"You saw that precious husband of yours there to-night, of course," Delia said presently.

"Yes." There was a little catch in Hazel's voice. After a moment. "Who was that he was with?" she asked.

Delia was only too delighted to be able to tell her; she had heard all about Agnes Dudley from Hulbert.

"It's the woman he was engaged to before he knew you," she said. "Frightfully smart, wasn't she? Pots of money; they say she's paid Barry Wicklow's debts half-a-dozen times."

Hazel did not answer; did not raise her eyes.

"He's jolly soon consoled himself," Delia said again viciously. "You take my advice and do the same thing, my dear."

Hazel forced a smile to her lips.

"Barry is quite welcome to do what he likes," she said. "I suppose you didn't speak to him to-night?"

"Speak to him!" Delia shrilled. "Is it likely? Bless your heart and soul, he was far too much taken up with Mrs. Dudley to look at me." She yawned, stretching her arms languidly over her head. "I should cut him out once and for all, if I were you," she said. "Come on—I'm going to bed."

Hazel sat staring down at the dead roses in her lap. They had lived such a little, little while, but they had been very sweet. It was like her own short happiness with Barry.

And now—she thought of Greaves' admiring eyes and whispered compliments that evening, and a little shiver went through her.

She had got to see him again in the morning; she had got to smile and pretend to like his too familiar ways. Delia had told her that it was a necessary means to an end. Delia was so sure that she was going to make a success.

And yet, sitting there in the silence of the little flat, it seemed to Hazel that the only thing in all the world she wanted was to wake up and find that she had dreamt

these endless weeks—to wake up and find herself back in the little bedroom at Cleave Farm, with her mother alive and well, and grumpy Joe Daniels looking at her with kind eyes; and Barry . . .

“Put out that light and go to bed,” Delia called irritably from the room.

Hazel obeyed hurriedly. She was glad that the interruption had come just in time. She did not want to think of Barry any more.

CHAPTER XXIV

HULBERT was surprised at the friendliness Barry evinced for him during the days that followed. He had never cared particularly for Barry, and on more than one occasion they had had a few words, but now, all at once, he began to change his opinion.

Barry could be quite a decent chap when he liked. Barry was quite good company when he cared to exert himself; the two men were seen about together a great deal; Barry declared himself very interested in what Hulbert was doing.

"You're a chap with so many irons in the fire," he said once. "I can't think how you manage to keep 'em all going."

Hulbert was very open to flattery; he puffed out his chest and smiled amiably.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, complacently. "It takes a bit of doing—but Jack of all trades is my motto—be a bit of everything and you're all right." He took Barry by the lapel of his coat. "Jimmy and I have got a fine thing coming along," he said confidentially. "Little Hazel, you know; she's shaping properly I can tell you. We'll make London sit up in the autumn, my boy."

Barry had hard work to keep himself under control.

"Oh, so she's shaping well, is she?" he said, carelessly. "What are you doing with her?"

"Oh, just a vaudeville turn, you know—a song—and a bit of a dance. But it's her face and her youth that'll get her over the footlights, my boy. Have you seen her lately?"

Barry answered truthfully that he had not.

"Well, you wouldn't know her," he was told em-

phatically. "Greaves handed her over to a first-class woman—clothes and all the turn-out top hole! You wouldn't know her!"

Barry nodded. "Is she—is she still living with her cousin?" He knew that she was, but he had to say something.

"Oh, yes; she's still there—for the present." Hulbert dug Barry in the ribs and laughed immoderately.

"Greaves pays Delia to have her, of course; she's a Shylock, that woman, as cute as you make 'em. She made old Jimmy stump up properly for the introduction, and all the rest of it. I've a great respect for Delia, you know," he added. "She's a business woman."

"She's a woman I hate," said Barry. He spoke without thinking; he coloured angrily at his own impulsiveness.

Hulbert looked surprised.

"She said the same thing about you only last night," he said. "I forgot what made us mention you . . ." He hesitated. "Oh, I know—that cousin of yours was there—Norman! By the way, he's always hanging round little Hazel, and I remarked how different you were, you and he, as you are, old boy—and Delia said you were the one man she had ever met that she couldn't stand. Odd you should say the same thing about her."

Barry did not think it was odd at all.

"Anything else complimentary said about me?" he asked stiffly, after a moment.

Hulbert shrugged his shoulders.

"No—nothing; but—I hope you won't mind my asking you, old man, but is it true that you're going to get your marriage put aside—annulled, don't they call it? I've never liked to ask you before; it was a nine days' wonder to us, you know! I always thought that you and Mrs. Dudley . . ." He hesitated.

Barry raised his eyes slowly.

"Who told you?" he asked. "About my marriage being annulled, I mean?"

Hulbert rubbed his chin.

"I really forget—unless . . . oh, of course, it was little Hazel . . . she told us." He smiled reminiscently. "She seemed to know all about it, too," he added.

Barry got up and walked over to the window. He looked rather white, though there was no emotion in his voice when he answered.

"It's very kind of Miss Bentley to be so interested in my affairs, but she's mistaken. There is no question, and never has been, of my marriage being annulled. Perhaps you'll tell anybody who mentions it to you again."

Hulbert looked uncomfortable.

"Oh, certainly, dear boy, certainly," he said. "No offence meant, but you know how people talk! I'm very sorry about the whole affair. Of course, I don't know the lady."

He hesitated, as if expecting Barry to say something, but he was disappointed, and he wandered away leaving Barry alone.

He stood by the window looking into the street dully. He could not for the life of him understand how it was that nobody seemed to know that Hazel was his wife. He supposed that she must have taken great pains to keep the fact a secret; no doubt, Norman and Delia were both in the conspiracy.

Of course, had he liked he could himself have proclaimed the fact from the housetops, but at the moment there seemed nothing to be gained by doing so.

He knew that Hazel was constantly with Hulbert and Greaves; he had heard a great deal of talk of the new star that was to shine in the vaudeville heavens before long. It turned him cold to think of Hazel living amongst the paint and powder and artificiality of the stage. It made him sick to hear her name for ever on Hulbert's lips, and to know that he himself was powerless to control her actions in any way.

He hardly knew how he got through life. It was just

one long nightmare. Norman and he never 'met, and Norman's father took good care to keep out of the way.

He had seen Agnes Dudley once or twice, but now he, too, had realised the futility of trying to keep up the old friendship. There was a constraint between them which neither could break down.

Another week dragged miserably by; Barry hated London; he wondered that he had ever thought it the finest place on earth. He spent the days wandering from his rooms to the club and back again.

It was strange that he had never caught a glimpse of Hazel, and he could learn very little from Hulbert, though he was always talking about her.

Then one afternoon, when Barry was mouching dispiritedly across the Park, he came face to face with his uncle.

It was too late for the elder man to turn back, or he would certainly have done so; he was red and agitated as he greeted Barry.

"Well, my boy, I was wondering what had become of you."

Barry ignored the proffered hand.

"I am sure you were," he said with sarcasm, "seeing that you've done your best to avoid me."

Mr. Wicklow tried to laugh.

"Come, come, we're not going to quarrel, are we?" he asked. "I stood by my share of the bargain; I sent you a handsome cheque; it's your look-out if you chose to return it."

"You told Norman the whole rotten story," Barry said with violence. "You've let me in the cart properly with everyone. I hope you're satisfied."

"Norman insisted; he raved and swore."

Barry shrugged his shoulders.

"He behaved as I might have expected; he's a thorough outsider; it's the last time that you need ever come to me to get him out of a scrape."

Mr. Wicklow said nothing.

"Of course, you know my wife refuses to live with me," Barry went on savagely. "Or perhaps you don't know. I've been made a laughing stock of all round; that's what comes of doing as you asked me."

Mr. Wicklow frowned.

"Well, you didn't do it very successfully," he said sharply. "From all accounts, Norman is going on just the same way. Only now he's dancing attendance at the heels of your wife instead of at the heels of a single woman. He's always with her. I don't know what the devil you're made of to stand by and allow it. Heavens above! What did you marry the girl for, if you didn't want her? I never asked you to carry things so far as that."

"If Norman says he's always with my wife, he's a liar!" Barry said, shortly. "She's sharing a flat with her cousin—a girl named Delia Bentley; a flat in South Kensington, and I know thundering well Delia wouldn't have Norman hanging round all day long. She's got no time for him."

"You may think so, but I know different. Your wife isn't living with her cousin at all; they quarrelled some time ago. Oh, don't glare at me like that, boy! I know what I'm talking about. Lord above! I've paid enough money to have an eye kept on Norman; he's a weak-minded young fool, and I never thought the day would come when I should have to say that of my own son," he added grimly.

Barry stood like a man turned to stone.

"If this is true," he said, at last, "where is she, my wife?"

Mr. Wicklow tried to temporise.

"I shouldn't have told you. It's no good making bad blood, Barry. Listen to me——," but Barry had already turned on his heel and was striding off over the grass.

He picked up a taxicab outside the Park and drove straight to Delia's rooms. He told the man to wait for him, and went up the stairs two at a time.

Miss Bentley was out, the smart maid told him. She was not expecting her back till the evening.

She looked at Barry interestedly. She knew almost as much about him as he knew about himself. She had no scruples whatever in reading her mistress's letters, or listening at the door when she thought the conversation might be interesting.

"And—Miss Hazel?" Barry asked, hoarsely.

She dropped her eyes. She had been told not to say anything about her mistress's business, she said, but if—Barry gave her a sovereign, and a moment later he was driving away to the address she had given him.

So it was true, after all! He was surprised that he felt so little emotion; he sat forward in the taxi with his head in his hands and tried to think. He dismissed the cab and rang the bell at the outer door of the block of flats.

They were very new flats, he could see, and looked expensive. Hazel's name was over a door on the ground floor, and he stood for a moment staring at it with a dread sinking at his heart.

Two months ago this girl had hardly been to London . . . the door opened, and he gave his name to the maid; a moment later he was crossing the little hall.

He heard himself announced.

"Mr. Wicklow, please, miss . . ."

Hazel turned quickly from a desk where she sat writing, and their eyes met. He saw the blank look of dismay that crossed her face; the little flush that tinged her cheeks as she rose.

"I thought it was Norman," she said.

Barry controlled his voice with difficulty. "I only heard—this afternoon—that you had left your cousin. I went there at once—to find where you were." He looked round the room, it was expensively and tastefully furnished. "Whose flat is this," he demanded. Her eyes wavered.

"It's mine. Whose do you suppose it is? Delia and I quarrelled; she told me that she did not want me any longer; besides—" she paused, and shrugged her shoulders. "Anyway, I should not have stayed there, as you were paying her to have me."

"She told you that?"

"Yes."

His eyes wandered over her dainty little person; it seemed impossible that this was the Hazel whom he had watched making cakes and pastries in the kitchen at Cleave Farm—the little girl in the blue pinafore who had once loved him.

"And—who is paying for you now?" he asked her, hoarsely.

She raised her head with a touch of dignity.

"Mr. Greaves is paying me a salary. I am quite independent. He is going to send me on tour next month."

She spoke quietly, but there was a faint look of anxiety in her eyes.

"He is *not*," said Barry.

She moved back a step.

"I don't know what you mean, but if you have come here to bully me again, it's no use. I am going to live my own life, I don't interfere with you, you are free to go where you like and do what you like."

"And you are *not*," said Barry again. "And I shall not leave this flat till I take you with me."

She cried out in anger.

"You must be mad—you've no right to come here at all. I never meant you to know where I was. How dare you speak to me like this!"

He went and looked down at her angry face with unhappy eyes.

"I know you hate the sight of me," he said thickly. "But that doesn't matter. I love you, whether you believe it or not. I love you in spite of everything, as I did in the past, and I shall always love you. That's why I'm here, to prevent you from ruining your life."

There was a tragic silence when he had finished speaking; Hazel's eyes were fixed on his face; she was twisting her fingers together childishly; presently she tried to laugh.

"It all sounds very fine, but. . . ." There was a tap at the door.

"Mr. Hulbert," the maid announced, and the next moment Hulbert walked into the room.

He came forward with outstretched hands.

"Well, my dear," then he stopped short, saw Barry and frowned. "You, Wicklow!"

Hazel came forward.

"Mr. Wicklow is just going—he only called to see my new flat."

Barry squared his shoulders.

"I am not going," he said obstinately, "unless you come with me."

Hulbert flushed dully; he looked from one to the other in heavy amazement.

"But—good heavens!" he began helplessly; Barry cut him short.

"I am sure you will understand, Hulbert, when I explain things a little," he said, controlling his voice with an effort. "Possibly I owe you an apology for not having told you before—that this lady—Hazel—is my wife."

CHAPTER XXV

AFTER the first moment of utter incredulity, Hulbert burst out laughing. "Oh, I say, Wicklow," he protested. "You must think of one better than that! You and Hazel married, that's good, that's . . ."

He broke off as Barry took a threatening step forward; he was crimson in the face, and the veins stood out like cords on his forehead.

"I tell you it's true," he said savagely. "And I'll thank you not to call my wife by her Christian name."

It was no longer possible to disbelieve him. Hulbert fell back, he looked at Hazel, he half held his hand to her.

"Is it true? Why don't you deny it?" he stammered. "Is it true that you are Wicklow's wife?"

"Yes." The monosyllable seemed forced from her. Suddenly she gave a little cry of rage, she looked up at Barry with passionate eyes. "I never wanted anyone to know, you knew that. I'll never forgive you for this; you seem to do all you can to make me hate you. Why couldn't you have let me alone, I was quite happy." Barry did not answer. He stood with his hands thrust in his pockets, his jaw set in forbidding lines. There was a moment's unbroken silence, then Hulbert turned to the door.

"Well, I'll say good-bye," he said constrainedly. "I can only apologise for having intruded; had I known the truth I should certainly have stayed away." Hazel followed him.

"But it won't make any difference, how can it make any difference? I'm just the same—I can't help being married."

Barry laughed a grim sort of laugh with no real mirth in it.

"You married me of your own free will," he said.

"Yes," she flashed back at him. "And you married me because you were paid to. Why don't you tell Mr. Hulbert the truth, that you did your best to ruin my life. Surely you might leave me alone now, and give me a chance to do something for myself."

Hulbert came back a step. Then he met Barry's eyes and stopped. For a moment the two men looked at one another silently; then Hulbert shrugged his shoulders and, turning, walked out of the room.

Barry crossed to the door, which the other had left open, and shut it with a little slam; then he came back to Hazel. He took both her wrists, drawing her hands down from her face.

"Now we're going to have this out between us," he said. "It's no use going on like this any longer. You're my wife; I've been a fool not to insist upon everybody knowing it before. Hulbert will take care that everyone hears about this, and if you leave this infernal place and come to my rooms or anywhere else you like——" She wrenched herself free.

"I'm not going anywhere with you. I didn't want anyone to know that I married you. I'm not proud of it. I was just beginning to be happy again. I know I should have made a success with Mr. Greaves; he won't want me if he knows about you."

"Greaves is no good to you, and you'd be sick to death of the stage in a month. You're not meant for that sort of life. You may think you are, but I know better. You're not the type of woman to be able to stand the life. You'll be a thousand times happier with me."

Hazel stood quite still; and her silence encouraged him.

He went on with passionate eagerness:

"Let us wipe out the past and start again. These last weeks have just been a bad dream. I'll make you for-

get them; I'll teach you what happiness really means. I love you so much."

She raised her eyes to his face.

"And I don't think I ever really loved you," she said, slowly.

"Hazel!" he cried out, as if she had struck him. "You don't mean that; you're just trying to hurt me. I won't believe it. I know I deserve that you should punish me, but surely I've had enough."

"You were engaged to another woman when you came to Bedmund——"

"I was not."

"You've been out with her since—you've been out with her many times since."

"That's your fault. I've been nearly mad; you wouldn't let me come near you. Take me back, Hazel, give me a chance."

"No." Her voice was hard. "It's no use. I don't want you any more. I want to live my own life; I want to be free. Mr. Greaves thinks I can make a name on the stage—it's what I've wanted all my life."

"You said once that all you wanted was to be my wife." She flushed painfully.

"I said a lot of silly things I didn't mean. I didn't know what sort of a man you were then."

"I'm the same man I was then; I love the very ground you walk on, Hazel—if you're trying to break my heart——"

"I'm not; I only want you to leave me alone."

He let her go violently.

"Leave you alone!" he echoed, passionately. "Leave you alone so that you can have Hulbert and that rotten lot hanging round here. How dare you let them call you by your Christian name? How dare you have them here to visit you? You talk to me as if I were a cad and an outsider. Wait till you get to know them better, and see what they are. If it's their money you like,

they've got plenty of that I know, and I haven't a bob in the world—but you knew that to start with."

"It would have made no difference if—if you'd really cared for me. It wasn't money I wanted when I married you."

He went down on his knees beside her, encircling her with his arms.

"I do care for you. I'd give twenty years of my life if I could undo all that has happened. I want nothing in the world but you, Hazel . . . Hazel . . . For God's sake . . . let me take you away!"

Hazel looked away from him; she was trembling all over. Something in his voice and the touch of his arms took her back forcibly to that night when he first said he loved her, and just for an instant she wavered.

Then she broke out:

"I can't, I can't forgive you—give me a little time—leave me alone for a little——"

Barry lifted his white face.

"I've kept away from you for weeks, and it's done no good. You're learning to do without me."

It was the truth, and she knew it. Her life had been filled to overflowing since she came to London. The flattery and promise of Greaves and his friends had pleased and excited her.

Ambition had crowded love out of her life. A veneer of worldliness seemed to have grown about her heart.

She remembered the story of her own mother's marriage, and she dreaded that her life would echo it. Barry would soon tire of her, so Delia declared; had done so already.

Hazel was easily influenced; though she had quarrelled with Delia, she believed that Delia was right in her worldly knowledge of men. She believed that she herself was only one of the many women whom Barry had loved in his life, and the knowledge terrified her.

She broke out desperately:

"If you'll give me a week, just another week, that isn't asking very much. I want to think it over, I want a little time."

She looked at his white face and quickly away again.

"I promise you, if you'll leave me alone, just for a week, that I'll tell you then—if . . . if I can . . . ever do what you want."

"You don't *mean* to come back to me," he said hoarsely.

She shivered.

"Oh, I don't know what I mean to do. It's your fault. I wanted to marry you and be happy with you, you know I did. I can't help it if you've made me change." Her voice broke. "Give me just this week, Barry—please! please!"

He walked away from her, and stood looking down at the fire, then he turned, and, coming back, took her face in his hands.

"Very well—if you'll tell me something first."

"Yes."

"There isn't, there isn't—any other man?"

She did not understand.

"Any other man?" she echoed.

"Yes, anyone who's cut me out—Norman, or that brute Hulbert," he asked hoarsely. "If I thought you cared a damn for either of them——"

"Barry!"

"I'm sorry, but lately, somehow——" But he could not tell her of the greatest dread in his heart. He rushed on: "At the end of the week, if I'm very patient, what will you tell me then?"

But she only shook her head.

CHAPTER XXVI

BARRY packed a bag and left London that night. He knew that if he stayed in town he would constantly be hearing things about Hazel that would make it very difficult for him to keep his promise.

He had great hopes now of the future, for, for the moment at least his jealousy was lulled. Her amazement had been so thoroughly genuine when he asked her if there was any other man for whom she cared.

Hulbert and Greaves had turned her head, that was all. They had flattered her up with wonderful plans for the future.

The whole world—hers and his—seemed to have turned upside down. There was nothing left for him to do now but to stand by and wait for it to right itself.

But the standing by was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life. He went to a seaside town where the season was just dragging to a close. He wandered about alone all day trying to kill time. He felt that it was something more than a godsend when, on the second night, as he went up to dress for dinner, he met Agnes Dudley on the stairs.

She was as amazed as he. She said she had no idea that he was within a hundred miles. She was pathetically pleased to see him.

Barry was pleased, too. He cheered up considerably, and ate quite a good meal for the first time since his arrival.

After dinner they sat in the lounge and talked.

"I was moped to death," Barry told her. "It seemed too good to be true when I saw you."

Neither of them mentioned his wife.

On the sixth day he wrote to Hazel. He told her that he should be back in town the following evening. When might he come to see her?

His hand shook as he signed his name. He felt that every nerve in his body was on edge. At dinner that night he had a bottle of champagne to himself. His hopes had gone up with a rush.

He travelled up to town with Mrs. Dudley; he was so excited that he could hardly keep still; he left her alone in the carriage most of the journey and went out into the corridor to smoke.

The train was an express, but it seemed to drag; it was getting dark before they reached London. He grudged every moment that Mrs. Dudley kept him with her. As soon as he had seen her safely to her car he took a taxicab and went off to his rooms.

He felt like a schoolboy home for the holidays; he was too eager to wait for the lift; he went up the stairs two at a time. The thought came to him that perhaps he would find Hazel there; that perhaps she would have come to him like this, to put an end to explanations and doubts for all time.

But the rooms were empty. Barry stood for a moment with a little chill disappointment in his heart; he had been too sure.

A bundle of letters were waiting for him; he sorted them through eagerly, but there was none from Hazel.

For almost the first time he wondered seriously what he should do if she never came back to him. The enormity of the question almost stunned him.

A bell pinged sharply through the silence, and he turned quickly; he had judged her too harshly. This must be she; of course, it must! His heart began to race. He could hardly breathe as he waited.

Then the door opened. "Mr. Hulbert, if you please, sir."

Barry caught his breath hard; his lumbering figure stiffened threateningly.

Hulbert came into the room smiling rather nervously. He and Barry had not met since that day in Hazel's flat. He half held out his hand and drew it back again; he began to speak quickly.

"I called yesterday; they told me you would be home to-day."

"I've just come in," said Barry uncompromisingly.

"Er—yes . . . well, I've called to see you on a little matter of business. Er—I suppose I can sit down?"

Barry did not answer, and Hulbert dragged forward a chair.

"To begin with," he said after a moment, "though I consider that you treated me rottenly about—your wife. Very well, I'm not going to say any more."

"You'd better not, and if that's all you've come for, you needn't wait, I've nothing to say to you."

Hulbert rose to his feet.

"It's not all, I've a great deal more to say. For one thing you owe me money."

"Which you'll never get, because I haven't got it," Barry broke in shortly. "You'll be paid, if I ever get the money, but you can't get blood out of a stone."

"I'm not going to try, I've come here to try and settle the thing amicably. Business is business after all, Wicklow, and if you'll just listen to me for a moment."

Barry scowled.

"Well—go on; I'm in a hurry."

Hulbert returned to his chair, he looked at Barry rather uneasily and coughed deprecatingly.

"You owe me money," he said presently. "Well, I'm willing to take *quid pro quo* for it. Do you get me?"

Barry stared.

"I'm afraid I don't. There's nothing in my possession that would be worth a quarter of the sum I owe you." He stopped; he caught his breath suddenly. "Hadn't you better explain?" he asked in a deadly quiet voice.

Hulbert half smiled.

"I don't think there's any need," he said. "I think you understand."

There was an absolute silence; Hulbert drew out his case and selected a cigarette; he thought he had put his proposal very neatly, and without a name being mentioned either.

"I haven't come here on my own initiative," he said complacently. "It's been well talked over first, and your wife . . ." He looked up at Barry and did not finish. Barry was deathly white; he was standing with both hands gripping a chair-back, his head a little craned forward.

Hulbert threw his cigarette away.

"Look here," he said, with a sudden change of tone, "it's no use beating about the bush. You're a man of the world, and so am I, and I'm going to talk to you straight. You married your wife for reasons I know nothing about, and it's no business of mine; but what is my business is just this, she doesn't care for you, she wants to be rid of you. Well, give her her freedom, and name your own price."

"My God!" said Barry hoarsely. He swayed a little where he stood; his face was livid. "And you dare to come here to me and make this proposal? I don't believe that Hazel knows, I don't believe it; you're an infernal liar!" He flung the chair away from him and swayed forward with clenched fists. "You devil, you

"

Hulbert did not move; his eyes met the other man's steadily.

"It's the truth," he said. "Your wife knows I was coming here this evening. I am here with her full consent. She wishes to be free of you, that is all." There was a tragic silence; it was impossible not to tell by Barry's face how he was suffering.

Hulbert looked at him, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry you're taking it so badly," he said; "but

you must have guessed all along what was coming. The marriage was a mistake from the very first, and she can see it now. She's got a future before her, and she's wise enough to know it. You won't be the loser if you let her go; I'll see to that. I don't bear you any ill-will; I——"

Barry moved violently, swinging the chair over with a crash. He strode to the door and flung it wide.

He could hardly speak; he ran a finger round his collar as if he were choking.

"Get out," he said in a strangled voice, and then again: "get out!"

Hulbert looked faintly alarmed.

"My dear chap, oh, all right, I'm going," and the next moment Barry was alone.

He went over to the mantel-shelf and leaned his elbows on it, staring at himself in the glass.

This was the end of it. Hazel would never come back to him.

And in answer to his letter she had sent Hulbert—Hulbert of all men—to make this infamous proposition! He supposed Hazel thought that he would do anything for money—she believed that he had married her for money—so, of course, he would be willing to let her go for money.

And it was all Norman's fault—curse him! curse him!

Someone tapped at the door, Barry roused himself with an effort.

"Come in." His housekeeper entered, she looked round the room apologetically. Then she spoke.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but have you seen the evening paper?"

Barry echoed her words vacantly.

"The evening paper? No, I haven't got one, why?"

She came a little further into the room, she had been holding a paper behind her back.

"There's something I think you ought to see, sir. I can't believe it myself, but I thought if I showed it to you."

Barry took it from her impatiently, he glanced casually at the paragraph she indicated.

"We much regret to have to state that a bad accident occurred at Guildford this morning owing to two motor-cars colliding, resulting in the death of one of the drivers, Mr. Norman Wicklow, the only son of Mr. John Wicklow, of Eresbie Hall."

Barry's big figure looked as if it had turned to stone, as he stared down at the paper in his hand.

Norman dead! Oh, it was impossible, preposterous! He could not believe it. Someone would have told him if it had been true; they would never have left him to find it out in this fashion.

Norman dead! And they had parted in anger. At the moment Barry could only remember that for years they had been like brothers. A hundred little incidents of their boyhood came back to him as he realised that he would never see his cousin again. He was big-hearted enough to forget the last weeks; to remember Norman only as he had been before either of them knew Hazel Bentley.

He was aroused by the soft shutting of the door. The housekeeper had gone away. Barry sat down with the paper still in his hand. He felt dazed and inexpressibly shocked. A moment since he had been cursing Norman in his heart, and all the time he was dead.

There would be sorrow down at Eresbie Hall. Norman's mother adored him. Barry could not bear to think of what her grief would be. If it had only been himself instead. Nobody would have cared much if he had died, and it would have been a way out for Hazel.

He wondered vaguely if she wanted to marry Hulbert.

If only he had been in a position to pay Hulbert back the money he owed him and tell him to go to the devil!

And then suddenly a thought struck him—a thought that made him catch his breath and clench his fingers hard over the paper he held. If Norman were dead! Now Norman was dead, John Wicklow's money was bound eventually to come to him.

CHAPTER XXVII

HAZEL received Barry's letter the morning of the day he came back to town. It was waiting for her on the table in the new flat when she came in to breakfast.

Hazel always got up to breakfast, which was one of the many things Delia had quarrelled with her about.

"It's absurd to get up to breakfast," Delia declared pettishly. "I hate the world early in the morning. Why ever can't you stay in bed and be comfy?"

She herself never put in an appearance before about noon, unless something very special claimed her attention.

Barry's letter was propped up against the teapot, and for a moment Hazel sat looking at it with apprehension. She knew quite well that the week was up to-day. She had wakened that morning with a little quickened heart-beat, wondering what would happen, what he would say to her, what he would expect.

Her hands shook as she opened his letter. He had never written to her since their marriage. She flushed as she read the first words.

"My darling wife."

He was taking a great deal for granted, she thought, and was surprised that she did not feel more angry. She read on eagerly:

"I am coming back to town to-morrow, and shall hope to see you immediately. Hazel, I've been very patient. I've tried to do as you wished, but a dozen times a day I've nearly thrown up the sponge and come back to you. Can't you forget all that you can't forgive about

me, and just remember that once we were very happy together? It's so difficult to say what I want to in a letter, but I love you, and that's the greatest argument I can use. Write to me, Hazel. I shall look so eagerly for a letter when I get back to town. I never was an eloquent chap, but when I see you again—but I'm afraid to count too much on that.—Barry."

Not much of a letter, perhaps; but something in its ineloquence appealed to Hazel. She sat for a long time while the breakfast grew cold, reading and rereading the few lines.

Lately she had begun to feel the loneliness of her position; she had written to Joe Daniels and had received no answer. She felt cut off from everyone she had ever known or cared for.

Barry was her husband. He was her natural protector, and if she cast him off . . . She heard voices outside in the passage, and the next moment Delia entered the room.

Hazel sprang to her feet. She could not believe her eyes. Delia here! At this time of the morning! She began to stammer her amazement, but the elder girl cut her short.

"I just had to come. Have you heard the news? Isn't it too awful? Poor Mr. Wicklow! I can't believe it's really true!"

Hazel's heart seemed to stand still; she went white to the lips. Barry! Something had happened to Barry. She felt as if every drop of blood in her body was frozen. Delia rattled on.

"It's in all the papers. Haven't you seen the papers? My goodness! I thought I should have died when I saw it. I was only having lunch with him two days ago, and I dare say you've seen him since then. Isn't it frightful? You never know whose turn it is to go next." She flung herself down in a chair. "One thing, it will be a good thing for your Barry," she said grimly.

Hazel caught her breath; then it was not Barry. She

felt so weak that she nearly fell; she groped for her chair and sat down.

She knew now how great her fear had been that something had happened to Barry! Delia was too wrapt up in her own emotions to be very observant.

"I thought you would be sure to know; Norman was such a pal of yours, wasn't he?"

Norman! So it was Norman! Hazel felt ashamed because in the sudden revulsion of feeling she had no room for any emotion but gladness. It was not Barry, and that was all that seemed to matter.

"He was dead when they picked him up," Delia said with a shiver. "I can't believe it—poor dear! I only hope he didn't suffer."

She looked pale and upset; she hated death in any form. She had felt that she must rush off and talk to someone about it, even if it were only Hazel. She sat looking round the room critically; she had not been in the flat before.

"Well, they've done you all right," she said. "No wonder you prefer this to my hole of a place."

"I liked being with you; I should have stayed with you if you had wanted me to," Hazel answered. "But about Norman . . ."

But Delia was tired of the topic already.

"You'll find it in all the papers," she said. "Let's talk about something more cheerful. Give me some coffee; my head's just splitting. I never can stand getting up early."

Hazel poured out the coffee. Her hands shook badly; she was all unnerved. She took Barry's letter up and tucked it away in her frock. It seemed to have grown very precious all at once. She wished Delia would go; she wanted to be alone, to think things out quietly.

"My darling wife . . ." The words kept echoing in her brain softly.

Delia sipped her coffee and drew her chair nearer to the fire; she had a great deal to say about everything

in the room; she said that Greaves was evidently not such a mean beast as Hulbert. She asked how many times he came to see Hazel.

"He hardly ever comes. I don't like him coming here when I am alone." Delia screamed with laughter.

"Little Miss Prude!" she said mockingly. "Why don't you get a chaperon?"

Hazel was glad when she went away. She flung the windows wide to let out the unbearably heavy perfume. Delia was always scented up to the eyes.

Then she sat down by the fire and read Barry's letter through again. He would be home that night. A few hours and he would be in London. Her cheeks burned with excitement. In the last few minutes she had learned something.

She had learned that deep down in her heart she had never ceased to care for him, that she loved him as much to-day, in spite of everything, as she had done when he first kissed her.

She had no engagements for that night, she wondered if she dared go round to his rooms. She wondered what he would say if he walked in and found her there; it gave her a little thrill to picture the delight in his eyes . . .

It would be so much easier than writing a letter; so much easier than waiting here till he came.

She lay back in the big chair and closed her eyes. She could remember every detail of Barry's rooms, though she had only been there once; she had so often thought about them since; they had a sort of masculine comfort that appealed to her; she liked them better than this new, expensive flat.

She looked out one of her prettiest frocks. She sang as she dressed herself. Barry was once more the wonderful man she had first thought him; and he was her husband, too! Her heart swelled with pride.

She was just putting on her hat when Hulbert called.

She went to see him impatiently; she did not want to be detained now; she greeted him almost coldly.

His keen eyes scanned her flushed face.

"I hope I'm not worrying you. I wanted to see you rather urgently." He stopped: "I've just seen Wicklow," he said.

"Barry!" His name rushed eagerly to her lips, her heart gave a little throb; she had wanted to see him before anyone else.

"Yes, I went round to his rooms; he'd just come back to town."

"I know; he wrote to me."

He looked at her with sharp suspicion.

"You know where he has been?"

"Yes; I know—of course, I do."

She was impatient with this cross-questioning.

Hulbert shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you know who has been staying at the same hotel with him?"

She echoed his words vaguely.

"Staying at the same hotel! What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Dudley was there. She has been there all this week. They came up to town together this afternoon."

"Mrs. Dudley!" Hazel's thoughts flew back to that night at the restaurant, to that afternoon in Barry's rooms when Norman had flung Mrs. Dudley's photograph to the floor.

She said again dully:

"Staying with him—at the same hotel!"

"Yes."

Hulbert was not looking at her; he felt a trifle ashamed of the part he was playing.

After a moment.

"He's not worth a thought, my dear child," he said gently. "Let him go; he's no use to you. As a man he's quite a decent chap, but as a husband . . ."

She let her hand lie limply in his; she felt very cold and unemotional. Barry and Mrs. Dudley.

Hulbert pressed his advantage.

"He's the sort of man who will handicap you all the way along," he said. He was clever enough to get a certain amount of sympathy into his voice. He sounded as if he were really very sorry for her.

"Let him go once and for all. . . . He never cared for you."

Hazel dragged her hand free; pain was waking again in her heart, tearing her.

"Oh, leave me alone—leave me alone!" she said.

She went back to her room, and locked the door; she paced up and down, wringing her hands.

Barry and Mrs. Dudley! She could think of nothing else.

All her happiness of the day had gone. She loved Barry, and he was just playing with her.

When she was sure that Hulbert had gone she went back to the drawing-room. She tore Barry's letter across and across, and watched the pieces burn away to grey ash. One, fluttered by the draught from the chimney, lay for a moment on the iron bar.

She looked at it with miserable eyes. "My darling wife. . . ." The words seemed to mock her. She pushed them back into the flames with the poker, and held them there till there was nothing left.

But there was still his letter to answer. She dried her tears fiercely and went over to the writing table. If she did not write now, she would never write at all, she knew. She dashed off a few lines.

"I have decided that I cannot ever live with you. Please do not try to see me again."

She did not even sign her name. She folded the paper, slipped it into an envelope, stamped and addressed it. Then she rang the bell and told the maid to take it to the post.

She stood in the centre of the pretty room till she heard the shutting of the outer door; then she fell to crying as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BARRY went down home the night he heard of Norman's death, and for a week stayed there in dur-
ance vile.

As a boy he had been fond of the old house, but now it depressed him, and got on his nerves.

Mrs. Wicklow was broken-hearted. She could hardly bear Barry out of her sight. She talked to him by the hour of Norman, recalling incidents of the days when they were boys together. She took it for granted that Barry was as cut-up at the death of his cousin as she was.

Barry did his best; he got through the first days of mourning without once showing impatience. Mrs. Wicklow told her husband that she had never realised before what a kind heart Barry had. She begged Barry to come down and see her often.

"You're the only one who can talk to me about my boy," she said over and over again. "I know you were everything to each other."

Hazel's brief dismissal was sent on to him from his London rooms; he just read it through once and burnt it. After all, it was no more than he had expected; he supposed he had been a fool to hope for anything different.

One evening he followed his uncle into the library, and asked apologetically if it would matter if he ran up to town for a few days.

The hatchet between Barry and his uncle had been buried by mutual consent. Hazel had never been mentioned between them again.

There was something pathetic in the elder man's eyes as he looked up at his nephew.

"Matter. why, of course not! We can't expect you to spend your life down here. Do as you please, my boy, of course."

"It's only for a day or two," Barry said awkwardly. "I'll be back again for the week-end."

He turned to the door, but Mr. Wicklow called him back.

"I want to speak to you."

Barry returned reluctantly and stood waiting.

A moment of silence, then Mr. Wicklow held out his hand. "Shake hands, my boy; I should like the past to be forgotten between us. Everything that I have in the world will be yours some day; I've been a bit harsh with you sometimes, Barry, I know, but now——"

"You've been thundering good," Barry interrupted eagerly. "Thundering good! I owe everything to you."

Mr. Wicklow smiled faintly.

"You owe your mistaken marriage to me, too, don't forget," he said rather sadly. "Barry, if there is anything I can do—if it's just a question of money or anything like that——"

Barry looked away.

"You can't do anything," he said rather shortly. "We've agreed to differ." He moved restlessly; he wished the interview were at an end.

"There's just one thing more," Mr. Wicklow said. "With regard to money—I've written to your bankers, Barry, and made arrangements with them about the future. You don't need to worry about any debts you may have. Any cheques you choose to draw within reason will be met. No, no—don't say anything, it's all right, my boy."

Barry hardly knew how he got out of the room; he felt as if a ton weight had been lifted off his back. When he got to London the first thing he did was to write Hulbert a cheque and send it off.

He was no longer under an obligation to the little swine, he told himself with elation. He could afford to

quarrel with him now in real earnest when they next met.

For twenty-four hours he stalked about enjoying his new feeling of independence. He paid all his debts and neatly docketed the receipts. It gave him an extraordinary sensation to know that he owed no money, and that he had a substantial bank balance into the bargain.

But, like all novelties, the sensation soon wore off, and he began to think of Hazel again.

He looked Greaves up in the evening; but Greaves was too busy to spare him more than a moment.

"Sorry to hear about your cousin's death," he said in his blunt way. "Makes a difference to you, I suppose?"

Barry said yes, it makes a slight difference. He did not want to discuss his personal affairs. After a moment he asked casually after Hazel.

Greaves laughed.

"Little Hazel! Oh, of course, she's your wife, isn't she?" He looked at Barry with a twinkle. "You fairly bowled poor old Hulbert over, my boy, when you told him that. He's very keen in that direction, you know. Pooh! don't look so angry! She'll have any amount of admirers after we once get her going. You ought to be proud of her!"

"I hate the stage," Barry said savagely.

Greaves chuckled.

"Rubbish! Wait till all London's talking about your wife; wait till you see her portrait in all the papers and her name six inches high on a bill. I tell you she's going to be the hit of the season."

Barry knew that Greaves' judgment was, as a rule, infallible, and his heart sank.

"I suppose she's all right?" he asked, after a moment.

"Right as rain! Haven't you seen her lately? Oh, I forgot that yours is a semi-detached sort of arrangement."

"And when is the great night to be?" Barry asked.

He was surprised at the indifference of his own voice; his heart had not beaten any faster at the sound of Hazel's name. He wondered if he really did not care so much for her after all that he could calmly discuss her with Greaves.

"The night! Oh, we have a trial run at Liverpool next Thursday. Coming up to see the show? Oh, you ought to come," he added, as Barry shook his head. "It would give her a little confidence to see a few faces she knows in the audience."

Barry did not think it would give Hazel much confidence to see him there, but he meant to go all the same.

Thursday was only two days off! and if Hazel did not dread it for herself, Barry began to dread it for her. He saw several paragraphs about her in the papers—a weekly illustrated produced a panel portrait of her.

He turned a page, and there was his wife's face smiling up at him. Such a changed Hazel! He sat staring at her for a long time with a strangled sort of feeling. Was there anything left to him of the little girl he had loved down at Cleave Farm.

This smiling, self-possessed young beauty met his eyes with steady coquetry, as if she knew full well what a miracle had been wrought in the past few weeks.

"My wife!" said Barry under his breath.

He could not believe it. It sent the blood rushing to his face as he read the few eulogistic lines printed beneath the portrait. He had so many times sneered at similar advertisements. It made him writhe to realise that this was really Hazel whom the papers were so willing and eager to run because the great Greaves had taken her up.

He bought all the papers he could find that contained any mention of his wife. There were several with portraits of her. It seemed strange to think that all this had been happening and that he had known nothing about it.

The old twinge of bitter jealousy stirred again in his

heart. He stirred the fire into a blaze and sat down before it, stretching his long legs wearily. Life had begun to pall once more. London was as dreary and depressing as he had found the country. He found himself wishing that someone would drop in and keep him company.

As if in answer to that wish, the telephone bell whirred suddenly. Barry got up with fresh energy. He wondered if it might perhaps be Mrs. Dudley. He had not seen her since they parted at Euston. He took down the receiver.

"Hullo!" The answer came faintly from the end of the wire. "Hullo! Who is that, please?"

Barry frowned. "Wicklow—Barry Wicklow," he answered, with a touch of impatience. "Who is speaking?"

It seemed a long time before the answer came; then it was so hesitating and nervous that Barry could hardly catch it.

"I can't hear you," he said irritably. "Do speak up! Who is it? Hazel! Good heavens!"

His heart almost seemed to stop beating. He controlled his voice with an effort.

"Hazel, is it you? How are you?"

The pretty voice answered him with a little nervous laugh.

"I'm quite well, thank you. I was just wondering——" She broke off. "I wonder if you will mind if I ask you something."

"Not in the least. Please ask me."

"Well—well—are you—are you engaged for this evening?"

"No, at least—nothing that could not be put off," he said guardedly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because, I wondered . . . will you take me out to supper?"

Barry had never been so taken aback in all his life;

he turned quite white; for a moment sheer amazement kept him dumb.

"Of course, if you'd rather not," he heard her say, nervously.

He roused himself with an effort.

"I shall be delighted," he said mechanically. "Where would you like to go?"

"I don't mind, somewhere quiet—where there won't be a crowd."

"Very well. Shall I fetch you, and what time?"

"I shall be ready in half-an-hour. Are you—are you quite sure you don't mind?"

"Quite sure," said Barry gravely. He waited a moment, then "Good-bye—I'll be round in half-an-hour."

He hung up the receiver and stood for a moment staring at it with blank eyes. For the first time it occurred to him that perhaps someone was playing a joke. He could not believe that he had heard aright.

What on earth was the meaning of it all? He ran distracted fingers through his thick hair. Was she sorry? Did she want him back again? Or was it . . . was it just that she knew now of his altered fortunes?

His excitement fell away; his agitated heart-beats died down. He went soberly into his room and began to dress.

If that was all she wanted him for! His brows met in a scowl above his eyes. He hated the thought but it would not be dismissed.

All women liked money and the things it could buy. Hazel had proved herself no exception to the rest. Was he a fool to have said he would take her out?

This was going to be a most amazing evening. Conjecture after conjecture whirled through his brain as he drove to Hazel's flat. Even after he had been admitted he quite expected to find that she would not know why he had come.

He entered the room prepared for anything; but Hazel was there, standing by the fire, drawing on her

gloves. She looked round as he entered; she smiled with nervous diffidence.

"You're very punctual," she said.

"You said in half-an-hour," Barry reminded her.

He could not understand the situation at all. One thing he was resolved, that he would not make a single overture to her. He would be friendly, attentive, anything she liked, but there should be no mention of the past.

She stood for a moment tugging at a button.

Barry moved towards her. "Let me do that for you."

He fastened the button clumsily with his big fingers.

"Are you quite ready?" he asked. "I've kept the taxi."

He helped her into her coat—an expensive looking coat with a fur collar—but he made no comment. He smiled in friendly fashion, meeting her eyes.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said, evenly. "I was quite prepared for a dull evening."

He sat opposite to her in the taxi; he talked platitudes the whole way. He noticed that she was very quiet, that she only answered him in monosyllables, till suddenly, when there was a little pause, she said nervously:

"Barry, why don't you ask why I rang you up this evening?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and she went on: "I am sure you must think it strange of me; of course, you must be wondering why I——"

Barry laughed.

"I never wonder why a woman does anything," he said, with a touch of cynicism. "But I am pleased to take you out."

There was a sort of formality in his voice; to an on-looker he would not have sounded particularly enthusiastic.

There was a little silence.

"Do you—do you know that I am going to Liverpool to-morrow?" she asked then.

"Yes—Greaves told me. He thinks you are going to be a wonderful success. I hope you are."

Hazel's heart gave a little throb of dismay. This was so different from what he had said before.

"Oh, but that's what I'm so afraid of. Mr. Greaves is sure, but I am not. Oh, you don't know how frightened I am."

"Unnecessarily, I am sure," Barry told her kindly. "Greaves is a man who never makes a mistake. He is not likely to be wrong if he predicts a success for you. He is going with you, of course?"

"Yes."

"And—Hulbert?"

"Yes." She leaned forward a little, trying to see his face. "Are you coming, too?" she asked.

There was a perceptible pause before Barry answered, but he did a great deal of rapid thinking in that second.

"I think not," he said, evenly. "Liverpool is such a deuce of a way. I'm tired of railway journeys. I only came back to town yesterday, you know—but, of course, you don't know."

Hazel had shrunk back again in her corner. She did not speak again till the taxi stopped.

"I hope you will like this place," Barry said, formally. "It's considered quite good by people who know."

He followed her into the little restaurant. It was a downstairs place, and very comfortably appointed. Most of the tables were unoccupied. Barry chose one at the end of the room.

"The last time I took you out anywhere was on our wedding day, I think, wasn't it?" he asked, casually.

She nodded, flushing a little.

"Yes; and Norman——" she broke off. "Oh, I was so sorry to hear about Norman," she said.

"Yes, it was hard luck," Barry agreed, though his voice sounded hard. "My uncle and aunt are very much cut up, of course."

He gave his order to the waiter and took a chair opposite Hazel. For the first time he really looked at her.

"Who chooses your frocks?" he asked, suddenly.

She flushed sensitively. "Mr. Greaves sent me to somebody he knows. She's quite a lady, and she has beautiful taste."

"She certainly has. I hardly recognise you."

"Perhaps I'm not really changed so much as you think," she said, almost inaudibly.

Barry forced a laugh.

"I saw a photograph of you in one of the papers to-day," he said. "If what one hears is correct you will soon be the talk of London."

She did not answer.

"I shall think about you to-morrow night," he went on lightly. "And wish you every success. May I send you some flowers?"

"If you would like to."

"I wonder they allowed you out to-night," he said, presently. "Oughtn't you to be resting, or practising, or something? I don't know what a star does the night before her debut, but I should have thought Greaves and Hulbert would have been very strict gaolers."

She looked up at him.

"That's why I asked you to take me out," she said, painfully. "Mr. Hulbert wanted to come round to see me, and, oh, I don't like him," she added, tremulously.

Barry knocked the ash from his cigarette into a tray in front of him. His hand was not quite steady.

"You've changed your opinion," he said, quietly.

"Yes . . . I thought he was so different; I thought. . . ."

"Oh, he's not such a bad chap," Barry said carelessly, though his heart was racing. "It doesn't do to take him too seriously; he was very decent to me eighteen months ago—people like him, as a rule."

He looked at her, and quickly away, but not before he

had seen how her lips trembled, and that the tears stood in her eyes. He let his cigarette go out. When he spoke next there was a different quality in his voice.

"You are not obliged to make a friend of him if you don't wish to do so, you know," he said, quietly.

"But I've told him I don't want him," she broke out impulsively. "And it isn't any good; and so—so I thought if I told you——" She stopped, only to rush on again: "I know I haven't *really* any claim on you, but I thought if . . . if you wouldn't mind. . . ."

"I shall be pleased to do anything I can," Barry said, formally. He kept his eyes averted. What was she trying to ask him, he wondered? "What do you want me to do?"

She leaned a little towards him over the table; her eyes were very pleading.

"If you would come to Liverpool; I just dread going there without—without anyone belonging to me. If you wouldn't mind coming—it would make all the difference if I knew you were there."

Barry raised his eyes slowly. Did she still think of him as "someone belonging to her"?

"You really wish me to come?"

"Oh, if you would."

For a moment he wavered. He would have given anything in the world to have been able to refuse, but somehow, with that look in her eyes, that eager note in her voice, refusal seemed impossible.

"Very well," he said. "I shall be delighted, of course. . . . Ah, here is dinner."

It was quite a merry little meal in its way. Hazel spoke no more of herself save to tell him how hard she had been working, how difficult it had all been.

"They even had to teach me how to walk on to the stage," she said. "Mr. Greaves said that very few people know how to walk on well. He has been very kind; do you like him?"

"I prefer him to Hulbert."

"So do I." Barry was leaning back in his chair. He looked rather tired, she thought. He looked somehow older, too, and there was a little worried line between his eyes.

He had been kind to her that evening, and yet—he was not the Barry she had first known and loved. He seemed so indifferent; he had spoken of Greaves and Hulbert quite casually, though once he had told her that it drove him mad to know she was going about with them.

It was quite true that a sudden inexplicable fear of Hulbert had driven her to make this overture to Barry. Something in the way Hulbert looked at her, something different in the tone of his voice, had roused a vague apprehension in her heart.

In sudden panic she realised how utterly alone she was, that there was nobody but Barry to whom she could turn. She was unstrung and nervous—it had been sheer desperation that had driven her to him that evening.

He was different to those other men—there was something about him that had already given a feeling of security.

It was quite early still when they left the restaurant.

"I don't know if you would care to go on anywhere else," Barry said, tentatively, as they drove away. "I'm quite at your service, you know."

But Hazel said she would rather go home. "I think I'm a little tired," she said. "And I've got to work hard to-morrow . . . Oh!" The taxicab, swinging round a corner, had flung her against him. She laughed nervously, and tried to raise herself, but Barry's arm was round her in a grip of steel. He did not speak, but he just held her tightly to him.

He quite expected that she would try to free herself, but her little figure seemed to yield quite willingly to his touch.

Barry half turned. In the light of a street lamp they were passing he saw her eyes. She was looking up at

him, and for a moment it seemed as if the past unhappy weeks were wiped out and forgotten. She was once more the little girl he had known and loved—the little girl who had cried so bitterly when he went away, and who had followed him to London and married him.

"Hazel!" said Barry, hoarsely. He drew her head down to his shoulder, and bending, found her lips.

There was no time for words. Hazel had barely freed herself from him when the taxicab stopped, and the driver came to the door.

"Is this the number, sir?"

Barry swore under his breath. He hardly knew if he were standing on his head or his heels. He paid the driver extravagantly, and in another moment he and Hazel stood alone on the path in the autumn night.

Barry looked at her.

"Well?" he said, huskily.

She answered in whispered confusion. "I can't talk to you here, and I've got so much to tell you . . . will you——?" she broke off.

The big door leading into the block of flats behind them opened suddenly. The porter came out. He stood for a moment against the light, whistling for a taxicab. A woman had followed him out and stood on the steps waiting impatiently. It was Delia.

She saw Hazel. She came down the steps.

"Well, I never!" She looked the girl up and down quizzically. "I've been waiting an hour for you, my dear. I quite thought I should catch you in to-night; you ought to be resting instead of gadding about. A nice sort of wreck you'll be in the morning. Hulbert hasn't half been swearing, I can tell you."

She glanced at Barry. She gave a little exclamation of amazement.

"You! Lord, what in the world will happen next?"

Hazel had moved away from him. She felt horribly nervous and self-conscious. She dreaded what Delia would say.

Barry guessed how she was feeling.

"I'll say good-night," he said, quietly. He held his wife's hand hard for a moment. He felt that he could have wrung Delia's neck for having appeared so inopportunist. "I shall see you to-morrow," he said.

There was no time for more. Hazel turned and fled into the house. A taxi came crawling up through the darkness. Delia looked at Barry. "Can I drop you anywhere?" she asked him.

"Yes, you can," Barry told her, uncompromisingly. "I want a word with you, too."

The porter shut the door, and they drove away.

Delia leaned back and drew her coat cosily round her.

"I've been waiting there an hour for Hazel," she said, disagreeably. "She's a little fool to have gone out to-night. Hulbert was mad, I can tell you. If she's not careful he'll chuck her up, and then she'll be in a nice hole."

Barry laughed. He felt that he could afford to be magnanimous.

"I fancy Hulbert will get his *congé* sooner than he expects," he said lightly. "My wife has no further use for him."

He spoke confidently, but Delia burst into shrill laughter.

"So you've nibbled the bait first time," she said, coarsely. "I thought you'd got more sense! I thought you were a match for Hazel, but apparently she's too much for you! I never thought she was so smart!"

She laughed again. "So you think she wants you back, do you?" she mocked him. "Barry Wicklow, I never thought you were so green! I'd have backed you to see through her every time. Bless your heart, it's not you she wants at all; it's your cousin's money and Eresbie Hall, and all the rest of the paraphernalia you've stepped into; she——"

She stopped. Barry had leaned over and caught her arm in a fierce grip.

"What the devil do you mean? If this is more of your infernal mischief-making——"

She shook herself free. "Bah!" she said, contemptuously. "You can't bully me any more. I never liked you, but I never hated you half as much as I hate Hazel, with her baby face, and her way of getting round everybody! . . . It's you one day and Hulbert the next, and Greaves the next.

"I thought she'd finished with you, and she would have done if that cousin of yours hadn't conveniently died. Oh, she knows what she's doing! She fancies herself as Mrs. Barry Wicklow, with Eresbie Hall in the background. Hulbert was telling her last night that you'd come into it all. He told her that you'd paid up what you owed him. She didn't say much, she's too deep to give herself away, but I knew what she meant to do, I could see it in her eyes. She's too clever to put all her eggs in one basket—she wants a saver all the time. If she's a frost with Greaves, well, she'll fall back on you, if you're fool enough to let her. What are you going to do?"

Barry had let down the window with a run, and was shouting to the driver.

"Where are you going?" Delia asked again, fearfully. But Barry did not answer; the taxi stopped and he left her without a word or a look, and strode away into the darkness.

Delia looked after him with angry eyes; then suddenly she laughed.

"I'll teach you to snub me, my boy," she said, vixenishly, under her breath. The driver came to the door; he looked at Delia suspiciously. She broke out angrily. "Oh, drive on, and don't stand there gaping. Do you want me to catch my death of cold?" She leaned over and catching the handle, slammed the door viciously, and the next moment the taxi had started away again.

CHAPTER XXIX

HAZEL lay awake half the night thinking of the wonderful change a few hours had made in her life. After all, she had reason to be grateful to Hulbert.

But for that indefinable something in his manner which had frightened her, she would never have sent for Barry—and then they would never have come home together, and then nothing of all that had happened would have happened!

There had been no need for explanations or questionings—that one impulsive kiss had straightened out the tangle. She could laugh at herself now for ever having believed she had grown tired of him.

To-morrow she would see him again; he would go up to Liverpool with her; she no longer dreaded the ordeal. With Barry there everything would be well. She hoped that she would be a success for his sake. It would be worth while to make him proud of her.

Though she hardly closed her eyes all night she was quite fresh in the morning. She sang as she dressed; she was glad the sun was shining. This was going to be a most wonderful day. She wondered how soon Barry would come. There had been no time to make any arrangements last night after Delia arrived on the scene. Hazel frowned as she thought of her cousin. It seemed as if she had been the bad fairy in her life, always turning up to spoil things when she was most happy.

She never gave a thought to Agnes Dudley or Hulbert. They had been quite wiped out of existence when Barry kissed her last night. They both had something to for-

give, he and she. She was happy to be magnanimous; she would let the past bury itself.

She ate her breakfast with one eye on the clock. It was only nine; she supposed she could not expect him to come yet.

The hardness and bitterness had fallen from her heart. When presently she looked at herself in the glass her whole expression seemed changed.

She hoped Barry would think she had improved; she remembered that he had admired her frock last night.

Another hour dragged away. With every sound now her heart raced, every step that came along the street she was sure must be him. But at twelve he had not come.

Hazel felt a little chill of disappointment. She tried to choke back the feeling; something had delayed him. He would come directly; of course he would. She could not remember whether she had told him that she had to catch the two o'clock train to Liverpool.

Greaves rang her up presently. "Was she all right?" he asked anxiously. "Not a bit nervous?"

Hazel laughed. "I'm not yet; I don't know what I shall be like to-night."

"You'll be all right," he assured her.

Another quarter of an hour passed. Hazel could bear it no longer. Barry was ill, nothing else could have kept him away, she was sure. She took down the receiver and gave his number. Her voice shook as she asked for him. Someone strange answered her.

"Mr. Wicklow is not in; he went out half-an-hour ago."

Hazel's heart beat quickly. Of course, he must be on his way to her; how silly she had been to doubt him. She had almost hung up the receiver again when the voice spoke once more.

"Is that Miss Bentley speaking?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Wicklow left a message, he asked me to tell you

if you rang up that he was sorry he would not be able to go to Liverpool to-day; that he had had to leave town on urgent business."

Hazel tried to answer, but her lips felt frozen. She echoed the words mechanically.

"Not able to go to Liverpool; oh, are you sure?"

"Quite sure, that was the message, Mr. Wicklow has left London."

Hazel could never quite remember what happened after that. She supposed she hung up the receiver. She supposed that somehow she got across the room and sat down on the sofa. She leaned her head back against the cushions, and closed her eyes. She wondered if she were going to faint.

Barry had gone! Barry was not going to Liverpool with her! Barry had left London!

She said it over and over again to herself, but the words merely sounded foolish. It was only last night that Barry had held her in his arms and kissed her; only last night that he had said he loved her—or hadn't he really said it? She could not remember—she felt as if she were drowning in a sea of bitterness and disappointment.

She never knew how long she lay there—the minutes passed away unnoticed. Presently the maid came to the door; her eyes grew anxious as she looked at Hazel.

"You ought to be getting ready, Miss. Mr. Hulbert will be here directly."

Hazel roused herself.

"I'm not going—I can't go—I can't go!" She broke down into tears.

The girl was very distressed. She supposed it was all nerves. She talked away soothingly. She brought Hazel some wine and made her eat something. She wished to goodness Hulbert would come and take the situation in hand. She thought Hazel really looked ill. She could not understand such a sudden breakdown; she had been so particularly well and cheerful that morning.

She was relieved when Hulbert arrived. When she heard his ring, Hazel started up. She clutched the girl's arm hysterically.

"Send him away; say I can't go. I won't see him; it's no use—I'm not going to see him!"

She went into her own room, and threw herself face down on the bed.

Greaves, Liverpool, and her own hoped-for success were all forgotten. The only thing that mattered at all was that Barry had thrown her over, that Barry had not meant what he said last night. He had just been playing with her—she wished she could die.

The maid came to the door.

"Mr. Hulbert says he must see you, Miss; he seems very upset."

Hazel raised her white face.

"Send him away; I can't see anybody; tell him I'm ill; tell him what you like, only send him away."

A moment passed; then she heard Hulbert's voice.

"Hazel, if you don't come and speak to me, I shall have to come in and see what is the matter."

Hazel tried to answer that nothing was wrong; that she just wanted to be let alone.

"I can't go to Liverpool. It's no good—you must tell Mr. Greaves." But she went into the sitting-room.

She looked a pitiable little object. Her eyes were red with crying, her cheeks white.

"I'm not going. It's no good. Nothing you can say will make me change my mind."

He took her hand.

"You'll be all right to-night. Come now, be brave! It's just nerves. You can't disappoint everyone like this. Greaves will be furious."

She turned her face away. "I don't care."

She didn't care. There seemed to be nobody in all the world now who mattered but Barry.

Hulbert tried every persuasion in his power. Finally he got angry.

"You'll ruin your chances," he told her. "I thought better of you. It's childish, Hazel. What has happened to make you like this?"

"Nothing has happened. I only want to be left alone. I don't care if Mr. Greaves is angry, or what he says."

Finally he left her. He went off to Greaves.

"It's not a bit of use. She'd only go to pieces if we insist on taking her."

Greaves was philosophical. It was not the first time he had had his plans upset by a bad attack of nerves. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's no use worrying," he said. "You must wire them. I'll go round and see her later. I'm not surprised. She's only a kid after all, and we've rather rushed her. She'll have plenty more chances."

He was the kind of man who never showed his feelings, no matter how perturbed he might be. It was late in the afternoon before he rang Hazel up. He asked quite casually if she felt better. He could hear the tears in her voice as she answered him.

"Are you very angry? I'm so sorry, but I really couldn't help it."

He answered that he was not angry at all, and that she was not to worry. He added that he was not really so keen on the Liverpool appearance; perhaps she should make her debut in London; he would think which would be the best thing to do.

"I shall come round and see you to-morrow, anyway," he said. "Go to bed early and sleep. Don't worry; everything is all right."

She felt slightly comforted; she did not really care in the least that her first appearance had been ruined; for the moment nothing mattered except that Barry had failed her.

She could not understand it; try as she would she could think of no reason that could have brought about such a rapid change; she felt intolerably shamed and humiliated.

She dozed fitfully that night; once she woke up crying; in the darkness and silence the whole tragic disappointment seemed to return with overwhelming force.

She dreaded lest Barry should hear that she had not gone to Liverpool and that she was grieving for him.

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all, and been to appear. He did not ask any questions; he said that the additional advertisement might prove to be a very good thing in the long run.

He left Hazel smiling; she was quite sorry when he had gone.

She worked very hard for the next day or two; she never gave herself any rest. She dreaded having nothing to do; being alone with her thoughts was a nightmare.

A week passed, and no word came from Barry. He had disappeared completely.

Hulbert took her about a great deal. His too-attentive manner no longer frightened her; she hardly noticed it.

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She tried to grow cynical and worldly as Delia was. She laughed at his love-making and blatant flattery.

"I'm going to take you for a run down in the country to-morrow," he said one evening. "You're losing your roses; London is fagging you, and you mustn't get tired before the great event."

Her eyes brightened a little at Hulbert's suggestion.

"I should love to go," she said. She thought with a sore of home-sickness of the lanes and fields round about Cleave Farm; they would all be in their autumn frocks now; there would be red berries in the hedges, and wonderful tints in the woods. She stifled a sigh. What was the use of remembering? The happiest people were assuredly those who never looked back, but always on—on.

It was a sunny morning when they started, there was just a crispness in the air that seemed to speak of winter days to come; the cool wind painted Hazel's cheeks with a faint flush.

"I feel as if I can breathe now," she said as they left London behind them. "It's quite different down here in the country."

They drove for miles and miles along smooth roads between autumn hedges. Hazel was very quiet. The fresh air made her feel drowsy; she was glad that Hulbert did not expect her to talk.

They stopped for lunch at a little old-fashioned inn, where there were sloping ceilings and uneven floors.

Old pewters shone on a dark dresser, the fireplace was wide and open, with logs burning on the hearth.

"You look better already," Hulbert told Hazel as he helped her on with her big coat before they restarted. "I wish I had thought of bringing you out like this before."

She laughed.

"Well, we can always come again," she said.

"Yes—we can always come again," he echoed.

They went on through the grey afternoon; the sun had gone in now; it was getting chilly; Hazel shivered.

"Oughtn't we to be turning back?" she asked.

He slowed down.

"I'm not quite sure of the road; we'll ask at the next inn."

It was nearly dark when the next village was reached; Hazel was very cold now and a little cross.

"We ought to have gone back after we had lunch," she said. "How far are we from London?"

A boy standing by volunteered the information:

"About sixty-four miles."

Hazel gave a little gasp of dismay.

"Oh, we shall be ever so late home."

Hulbert frowned.

"It's all rot—we're not so far."

He took her into the inn and ordered some tea, he left her while he went out to light the lamps of the car and get some more petrol, and presently he came back.

"There's something wrong with the confounded engine. I shall have to see if I can get a mechanic."

He left her again, and was away a long time; when he came back he avoided her eyes.

"I'm sorry, we shall have to put up here for to-night. There's only a youth in this one-eyed hole who knows anything about cars, and he doesn't understand this one. We must stop the night here, and go on in the morning."

Hazel rose in dismay.

"But I don't want to—can't we get a train? Oh, I'd so much rather go back to London."

"You can go up early in the morning." He took a step towards her. "Don't be silly," he said softly. "Don't you think I can look after you, Hazel." He broke off, there were voices in the narrow passage outside, someone opened the door.

"A fire—thank the Lord; I'm perished. I——" The man who had entered stopped dead, meeting Hazel's frightened eyes across the room. It was Barry Wicklow.

CHAPTER XXX

BARRY looked from Hazel to Hulbert in sheer amazement. He had noticed the big car outside in the grey evening, and had glanced at it casually as he passed, but that it should belong to Hulbert had never even remotely occurred to him.

There was a moment of awkward silence, then Barry said:

"This is a very surprising meeting."

Hulbert answered ungraciously; he was furious at this unexpected encounter. If looks could have killed, Barry would have dropped dead on the spot. But Barry was not looking at him; he had walked over to the fire and was holding chilled hands to its warmth.

"Turned cold, hasn't it?" he said. "I'm just motor-ing up from home, and I've got a puncture, so I put up here while my man mends it."

"Our car's gone wrong, too," Hazel said. She was surprised that she could speak so calmly. "Mr. Hulbert is afraid we shall have to stay the night." The words were deliberate, but Barry's face did not change at all.

"It seems a comfortable enough place," he said lightly. "I've put up here myself. What's wrong with the car? I dare say Northam could put it right. I'll ask him to have a look at it for you."

He left the room before either of them could answer. Hulbert turned to Hazel furiously.

"Did you know that fellow was coming here—is this all a put-up job?" he asked roughly.

She drew back in utter amazement.

"Did I know? Why in the world should I know? Mr.

Wicklow's movements are not of the least interest to me. I think you forgot yourself."

He apologised ungraciously.

"I'm sorry, I hate the fellow. I don't want any of his infernal interference."

Hazel turned away disdainfully.

"Anything is better than having to stay here," she said.

She stood with one foot resting on the shining curb, looking down into the fire.

It was strange how secure she felt now she knew Barry was here. The first glimpse of his big, lumbering figure blocking up the doorway had changed the aspect of everything.

Hulbert had gone out again to where the headlights of the car shone through the gathering darkness watchfully. Barry and his man stood examining the engine; Barry glanced up as Hulbert joined him.

"I'm afraid there's nothing to be done," he said, shortly. "Northam can do nothing with it."

The light from the open inn door shone full on the elder man's face, it was impossible to misread its expression—the triumph, the half-snering smile.

"Ah, thanks!" he drawled. "I knew you couldn't manage it. It's good of you to have troubled. Don't let me keep you."

"No," said Barry. "I shall be getting along."

He went back to the parlour where Hazel waited.

"I'm sorry, we can't do anything; you'll have to stay here for the night, unless——" He paused; he looked down at her with hard eyes.

"Unless you care to come back to town with me."

Hazel had turned as he entered; she was very pale.

Hulbert joined them.

"There's nothing to be done," he said. He sounded quite cheerful again. "I'm sorry—but we shall have to stay the night. I believe it's quite a comfortable inn. Don't you wait, Wicklow."

Barry did not move.

"I've just been suggesting that I take—Miss Bentley back to town in my car," he said, smoothly. "She seems anxious to return. I shall be delighted to take her if she cares about it." He paused, he looked at his wife unemotionally. "But it's just as you like, of course," he added.

There was a breathless silence; Hulbert had flushed crimson; he was no match for Barry, and he knew it.

"It is for Miss Bentley to say," he said, savagely.

Hazel looked from one to the other. Barry was so calm and indifferent; as if he cared nothing what she decided. Hulbert—she shivered as she met his eyes.

Then she made a little impulsive step towards her husband.

"I will go with you," she said.

Barry squared his shoulders.

"Very well—I am ready when you are." He went out and called to his man. Hazel would have followed him, but Hulbert barred the way.

"You know what this choice means," he said hoarsely. "You've deliberately chosen between us. Hazel. . . ."

"Please let me pass."

She joined Barry outside in the darkness; she was shivering in every limb. She stood quite close to him while he drew on his coat and gloves. He went round to the back of the car and brought a big rug for her.

"You'd better put this on; it will be cold." He wrapped her in it till only her face was visible; he tucked her up warmly beside him. It was only a small two-seater car.

"Northam will stay and come on in the morning," he said. He glanced down at her. "Are you warm enough? Then we'll be off."

They drove some way in silence; the branches of the tall trees on either side seemed to swoop down on them as they rushed by. The cool night wind brought the colour back stingingly to Hazel's cheeks.

It was Barry who spoke first.

"I suppose you know that Hulbert jiggered that car deliberately," he said.

She echoed his words, not understanding.

"Jiggered it—deliberately? What do you mean?"

"That it was a pre-arranged thing. He did not mean you to go back to town to-night. If I had not turned up you would not have gone back to-night." His voice broke angrily. "I told you what the fellow was and you wouldn't believe me. I can't understand how you can be such a little fool as to trust yourself with him. You seem worldly-wise enough in some ways."

There was something brutal in the words and the way in which he spoke them. Hazel's cheeks flamed in the darkness.

"You never liked him. You're only too willing to believe the worst of him," she said sharply.

Barry laughed grimly.

"And you believe it, too," he said.

She cried out angrily.

"I don't . . . I don't know how you dare say such things."

"Then why didn't you stay with him? You could have done if you wished. It would have made no difference to me."

His indifference stung her. She was thoroughly unnerved and miserable. She would have given anything at that moment for a kind word, a little sympathy. But Barry was in no mood to be kind.

"The sooner you stop this cursed independence the better," he went on roughly. "I shan't always turn up at the right moment to save you from your foolishness. Some day you'll remember what I told you and wish to heaven you'd followed my advice. Hulbert is a damned cad."

"It seems as if all the men of my acquaintance are the same," she interrupted bitterly. "Mr. Hulbert has not treated me any worse than you did."

"That's a woman's only argument—to rake up the past.

I'm not talking of myself; I quite recognise that I no longer enter into the question, but it wouldn't be a pleasant thing if you were to get mixed up in some scandal with a worm like Hulbert; you're my wife, in spite of everything, you know," he added grimly.

She did not answer. She would have given anything to be able to turn and speak to him as he was speaking to her, but the tears were raining down her face in the darkness; she was biting her lips hard to keep back the sobs that threatened to choke her.

She hardly knew whether she loved this man or hated him; her hands were clenched together under the big rug; she knew she would die of shame if Barry knew that she was crying—and for him!

He slowed down the engine.

"There are two roads here; I am not sure which is the one—it's so confoundedly dark."

He got out and walked a step or two away; when he came back he spoke more gently.

"Are you warm enough? I think we've taken the wrong road. I'm sorry . . . perhaps you think I'm trying to play Hulbert's little trick on you." He stopped; he tried to see her face through the darkness.

"What's the matter?" he asked in a different voice. "Are you—crying?"

A little sob escaped her.

"Yes, I am crying," she said in desperation. "I've never been spoken to like this in all my life before. I don't know how you'd dare do it."

Barry drew a long breath; his hands were deep thrust in his pockets.

"Women always cry if they are found fault with," he said at last angrily. He got back to the seat beside her and turned the car round.

"Tuck that rug up around you," he said after a moment. "It's as cold as winter." He buttoned his coat collar more tightly round his throat. He drove the car on again through the darkness.

Hazel had dried her tears; she sat silently beside him.

"I'm rather glad I ran across you to-night," Barry said presently. "I should have written to you if I hadn't

"Written to me?"

There was a little pathetic note of eagerness in her voice, but Barry did not hear it.

"Yes. I've been thinking things over, and—well—I can't see that it's any good going on as we are. It's horribly unpleasant for both of us."

"What do you mean?"

Barry moved a little in his seat.

"I mean that I've been talking things over with my uncle. He's quite a decent old chap. I've put it to him that—well, that we should be happier if things could be altered—you and I, I mean—and—there is a way out—if you'll consent, and, of course, you will."

"A way out?" she echoed his words dully. "You mean that—that—oh, what do you mean?" There was a thrill of very real anguish in her voice now, but Barry was too intent on his own emotions to heed anything else.

"I mean that we can undo this marriage," he said with a sort of rush. "It has been done—I mean it can be done. There need be no scandal. I'll just clear off abroad for a time." He waited. "Well," he said, jerkily, "what do you say?"

Hazel hardly heard him, she had closed her eyes, her little feet were hard pressed to the floor of the car; she felt incapable of speech or movement.

Once she had made this suggestion to Barry, and he had been furiously angry—now!

"I'm quite willing to do all I can to make it easy for you," he went on after a moment. "I'm not a penniless devil like I was when I married you. Of course, I shall give you an allowance. I should like you to go back to your uncle. If you were free of me he would be only too pleased to have you home, I am sure.

"It was never you he was angry with, but only me.

"You'd be happier there than you ever will be in London." He stopped, and went on again rather breathlessly. "Some day you'll meet another fellow, a man who will make you happy, a decent fellow you can trust and respect. I—I should be only too glad to know you were happy."

Hazel tried to speak, but her lips felt as if they were cut in ice. The cold rush of the night air seemed like a thousand whispering voices mocking her.

With a desperate effort she recovered herself. She opened her eyes; she sat forward a little; she even forced a laugh.

"So you've fallen in with my suggestion at last," she said, shakily. "If you remember, it was I who asked you for my freedom—weeks ago."

Barry kept his eyes straight ahead.

"Yes, I suppose it would have saved a lot of time if I'd agreed from the start," he said coolly. "However, it's not too late." He gave a quick sigh. "It seems a pity we couldn't manage to rub along together," he went on in a very matter-of-fact voice. "We started off with too much of a rush, I suppose."

"Marry in haste——" Hazel said shakily.

They were on the London road again now, the villages were closer together, there was more traffic.

Barry kept his attention on his driving. It was some little time before he spoke again.

"You didn't go to Liverpool after all?"

"No"—she forced a laugh—"I suppose they told you I was ill."

"Greaves said something about it. I was sorry." The words were a mere formality.

"Mr. Greaves was glad," she told him. "He never meant me to go to Liverpool—it was—it was just a clever way of advertising."

Her voice shook as she told her lie; she told it badly, but she felt she would die of shame if Barry suspected the truth.

He answered quite coolly.

"Is that so? Greaves is a smart man."

They had turned into the Edgware Road now, conversation was no longer possible, it took all Barry's attention to steer through the traffic; he did not speak again till he stopped the car at Hazel's flat.

He opened the door and got out.

For a moment the thoughts of both of them went back to that last time they had driven home together, to the moment before the taxi stopped, and to that one kiss that had meant nothing after all. Barry turned his head sharply away, he had said good-bye to Hazel so many times, but this was really the final.

He had said he would give her her freedom, and she had accepted gladly. He had not the least idea how to set about it; he only knew hazily that such things were done. He roused himself with an effort.

"I'll say good-bye, I expect you'll be glad to get in. It's quite cold."

She was standing beside him on the path now. She looked an odd little figure wrapped in his big rug.

"You'd better take this," she said.

She twisted herself out of it, and handed it to him. For a moment their hands met.

There was a little silence, then Barry broke out, roughly:

"And when you're rid of me, what are you going to do with yourself then?"

His voice only sounded harsh to her; she did not hear its underlying emotion; she echoed his words flippantly.

"What am I going to do? Oh, I don't know. I shall try to make a name for myself, for one thing. Mr. Greaves seems so sure that I have got a wonderful future." Her voice dragged a little; she looked up at Barry. "Thank you for bringing me home," she said.

He laughed; he threw the rug on to the seat of the car.

"Oh, not at all. I hope you will be able to persuade

Hulbert to forgive me for taking you away." He dragged off a glove and held his hand to her.

"Well, good night, and good-bye, too, I suppose."

She could not answer, but she gave him her hand, and for a moment his fingers closed round it; then he let her go, and she turned and ran into the house.

CHAPTER XXXI

IT was quite early the following morning when Hulbert turned up at the flat.

He expected that Hazel would refuse to see him, but, to his surprise, she greeted him calmly.

"You got back all right, then?"

He scowled.

"Yes, I got back. And you?"

She met his eyes steadily.

"It was only half-past nine when I got home," she smiled, faintly. "You're very angry with me?"

"Angry, wouldn't you be angry? I took you out, and you left me for that fellow." His voice changed; he caught her hand. "Hazel, it's got to come to a choice. You can't keep us both eternally dangling at your heels. You know I'm just mad about you. Do you think I should have been as patient as this if I hadn't been? Most fellows would have cleared off when they found out how you'd made a fool of them, about Wicklow, I mean! I hate Wicklow, and he knows it. I don't know if last night was a put-up job."

Hazel freed herself.

"You know quite well it wasn't, and as for—Barry——" her voice quivered a little over her husband's name. She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think you would be very jealous of him if you could have heard our conversation coming home last night."

He looked at her suspiciously.

"I don't know what you mean. You pretend that you don't care for him, and that he doesn't care for you, but I know he does. Do you think I'm a fool? Do you think I can't see by the way he looks at you?"

Hazel was crimson. She covered her ears with her hands.

"I won't listen if you're going to say such things," she said wildly. "You—don't know what you're talking about. He cares nothing for me, all he wants is to be rid of me. He told me so."

Hulbert stared blankly.

"Rid of you; Wicklow wants to be *rid* of you!"

She interrupted.

"Oh, don't talk about it. I want to forget it. It's so—so humiliating." She tried to smile. "Oh, please, please don't say any more."

She loved Barry. She had not known until last night how well she had loved him. If he had made one little overture to her that last moment when they stood together in the darkness, she would have taken him, and forgiven everything.

It had been like dying to have to turn away and leave him there. She wondered if she would ever forget the last thing he had said to her—the formality of his farewell.

"Well, good-night, and good-bye, too, I suppose."

She wondered vaguely what he meant to do—if Agnes Dudley was in any way responsible for his sudden anxiety to be free of her.

Hulbert was speaking again; his voice sounded incredulous.

"But you can't dissolve a marriage unless. . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you know there's only one thing. If there's another woman in the case." He looked at her doubtfully.

Hazel did not answer; she knelt down on the big skin rug by the fire and held her hands to the warmth.

She was so cold, so cold. She felt as if someone had laid hands of ice about her body.

Hulbert followed her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"So it wasn't really a choice between us last night," he said, softly. He felt her shrink a little beneath his touch.

She tried to laugh.

"You're so impatient; you expect everything at once. Oh, please—please don't!" He had stooped to kiss her, but she pushed him away.

He laughed; he was not really annoyed; he believed that Barry was no longer a serious rival. For the moment he was content; he pulled up a chair and sat down beside her.

"May I smoke?" He did not wait for permission. "Have you seen Greaves to-day?" he asked.

"No—no, I haven't."

"Humph! He's got something for you up his sleeve," he chuckled. "No, I'm not giving any secrets away."

Hazel turned a face momentarily flushed with eagerness.

"Oh, do tell me—what do you mean?"

He bent towards her.

"Give me a kiss, and I'll tell you."

Hazel tried to get away from him, but he held her fast; she threw her head back as far from him as she could.

"Oh, leave me alone—leave me alone!" She was sobbing with fright.

Someone rattled the door handle.

"Can I come in?"—it was Delia's voice.

Hulbert swore under his breath, but he let Hazel go. She scrambled to her feet and rushed across the room. For the first time in her life she was really delighted to see her cousin.

Delia looked from one to the other quizzically. She nodded to Hulbert, and took possession of the chair from which he had risen.

"I've got a brute of a cold," she said. "Poke up the fire, Laurie—or do you limit Hazel to coal?" She laughed disagreeably. "What have you been doing all this week?" she asked, looking at her cousin. "You never come near me, I notice; I suppose you're too much oc-

cupied. Oh, don't let me send you off"—Hulbert had muttered something about going.

"He hates me," she confided to Hazel when he had gone. "I'm sorry if I spoilt sport."

"You didn't; I am glad you came."

Delia stuck her feet up on the fender kerb, showing an unnecessary expanse of silk ankle and high heels.

"Have you seen that husband of yours lately?" she asked, suddenly.

"Yes—I saw him yesterday."

Delia looked round sharply.

"Yesterday!" her voice sounded incredulous. "Did he come here?"

"No, I met him by accident." Hazel's voice was low; she kept her head down-bent.

"Humph!" Delia dragged a cushion from beneath her head and flung it across the room. "What had he got to say for himself?" she demanded.

Hazel looked away.

"I can't remember the exact words," she said, bitterly. "But—but—well, you need not be surprised to hear that—that—I'm not married any more."

Delia brought her feet down with a crash.

"I knew it!" she said triumphantly. "What did I tell you? It's that Mrs. Dudley. I suppose he thinks she's more suited to boss it down at Eresbie Hall than you are. Well, you take my advice and get all you can out of him before you let him go. He's a rich man now, and can afford to pay up. If I were you——"

She stopped short, staring at Hazel; there was something tragic in the younger girl's face that even Delia's sharp tongue was silenced for a moment. "Good Lord!" she said then, tonelessly. "You don't mean that you're fond of him—fond of Barry Wicklow?"

Hazel covered her face with her shaking hands.

"Oh, I am, I am," she said brokenly. "But don't you ever tell him; don't you ever let him know, or I think I shall die!"

CHAPTER XXXII

DELIA looked at Hazel with a queer expression in her eyes. She had never cared for anyone seriously in all her life. She could not believe that Hazel was serious.

She supposed that Barry's change of fortune was in some way responsible for it. She stuck her feet up on the fender again and stared at the fire.

"It's no use howling about it," she said, at last, unsympathetically. "There are thousands more men in the world—better men than he is, and quite as rich. Even Hulbert, who hates the idea of marriage more than any man I know, would be only too pleased to say snap if you said snip. As for Barry Wicklow! Well, it hasn't taken long for him to make up his mind that you're not quite what he wants down at Eresbie Hall. I suppose it was different when he didn't stand an earthly of ever getting Norman's money. Don't let him down too lightly, that's all. You get every halfpenny you can."

Hazel dried her eyes. She was used to Delia's worldly wisdom by this time, but it always made her feel ashamed. She stood up, stretching her arms wearily.

"Well, there's always the future," she said, rather shakily. "And if Mr. Greaves isn't disappointed." Delia laughed dryly.

"It's nothing to do with Greaves, my dear. Hulbert's the one who's pulled all the strings, and don't you forget it. He's paid up for you. He furnished this flat."

Hazel flushed indignantly.

"I furnished it myself out of my salary. I don't know how you can say such a thing?"

"Your salary!" Delia echoed nastily. "What have you

done to earn a salary, I should like to know! It's only a matter of arrangement. Hulbert and Greaves could both tell you that if they liked. You try throwing Hulbert over and see how much interest the other man will take in you."

"I don't believe you. Mr. Greaves told me himself that he was sure I had a great future in store for me."

Delia burst into shrill laughter.

"I like that! Lord, how green you are! A great future! What as, for heaven's sake? Are you going to be a second Ellen Terry, or a Bernhardt?" She shrugged her shoulders.

Hazel stood very still; there was a burning spot of colour in her pale cheeks.

"I shall tell them both what you say," she said at last. "I shall tell Mr. Greaves, and ask him if it's true."

"Do! I should! I dare say he'll persuade you that I'm jealous and have just made it all up." She swung round in her chair and leaned her arm on its wooden back, looking at Hazel with a teasing smile. "You're not the only one they've run between them," she said more kindly.

"Bless your heart, they gave me a chance once, only I didn't turn out to be the swan they expected! If I had, I shouldn't be getting a living by my wits as I am now, you bet your life! You'll be all right if you manage to strike it lucky. Your face may pull you through; you're pretty enough. By the way, that reminds me what I came for. Are you doing anything to-night?"

"No."

"All right. Well, I'll take you along with me. Topsy St. Helier—you don't know her, by the way, do you?"

"I think so. I've heard her name, but——"

"Well, she's having a supper-party to-night. She's going on tour to-morrow, and she asked me to take you along. They've all heard of you, of course, and between you and me and the doorpost, my dear, Topsy's a bit

jealous of the way Greaves has taken you up. She was his latest swan, you see, till you came. She's not a bad sort; you'll like her."

Topsy St. Helier! Hazel tried to remember where she had heard the name, but memory eluded her. She answered with an effort that she would like to go; she was not in the least keen, really, but anything seemed better than being left to herself.

She could not believe that what she had heard about Hulbert was true, and yet the thought rankled. Supposing in his heart Greaves did not really think she had a future? Was she to have everything taken from her? She had so counted in having this to fill her life.

"It doesn't start till ten," Delia said. "What are you going to wear? I'll call for you. It's no use being shocked if it's a bit rowdy," she added, after a moment. "Topsy can put away the champagne all right." She chuckled reminiscently. "You'd better not come if you feel prudish about it."

"Of course, I shan't! I like champagne myself."

Delia chuckled; there was a vast difference between champagne as drunk by Topsy and the little taste of it which Hazel had ever permitted herself, but she had no intention of saying so.

"Well, I'll come along for you. You can bring Hulbert if you like."

"I don't want him," said Hazel, quickly.

Delia looked up.

"You looked friendly enough when I came in."

"We weren't—I—I—hate him. He was trying to kiss me!" she added, indignantly.

Delia burst into shrill laughter.

"Oh, Lord!" she said helplessly. "How awful!" There was bitter irony in her voice; Hulbert had once been her property. The way he had calmly thrown her over for Hazel had angered her more than anything.

She got up and sauntered round the room, staring at

the pictures and ornaments. Presently she said, with feigned indifference:

"I don't know if I ought to tell you that Barry Wicklow will probably be there to-night. He was rather a pal of Topsy's at one time. If you don't want to meet him you'd better not come."

Barry! Hazel caught her breath. She knew now where she had heard Topsy St. Helier's name when she first came to London.

" . . . When I went home in the small hours of the morning your Barry Wicklow was dancing an Irish jig on one of the tables with Topsy St. Helier." Delia's words came back to her memory with appalling faithfulness. She forced herself to answer calmly.

"Oh, I shan't mind. After all, I shall have to get used to meeting him, shan't I?"

Delia laughed.

"Yes, that you will. It's queer the way you always run up against the people you'd like to avoid. Gee! I wouldn't miss seeing his face to-night for worlds when he meets you at Topsy's." She laughed immoderately. "He's the sort of man who goes all over the show himself, but he'd be wild if his women-folk did the same."

"It's nothing to do with him where I go," Hazel said, stiffly, though her lips felt cold.

She hoped he would be there. She hoped he would be furiously angry at meeting her. She quite made up her mind that she would be as gay and lively as the rest. That she would smoke and drink champagne, and do what was being done by everyone else.

As the day wore on her excitement grew. Delia stared at her curiously when she came to call for her that night.

She touched Hazel's cheek with her finger.

"Rouge?" she asked, sharply.

Hazel drew back defiantly. "Well, why not? Everyone else does it. Why shouldn't I?"

Delia sniffed. "Everyone else hasn't got your skin, my dear. However, if you think it improves you, keep it on, by all means."

It did not improve her; it looked out of place and horrible, and Delia knew it. But she said nothing, and the two girls drove away together.

"We're a bit late," Delia said presently. "I meant to be, too; I like to get to a place when they've all warmed up, and someone else has taken the chill off for me. I hope there'll be something decent to eat; last time I came she gave us a rotten supper."

Hazel had heard Delia talk in this strain before, and it always made her feel disgusted. But to-night, it did not seem to matter so much. She felt as if she herself were being transported into Delia's world. She was quite prepared to take things as she found them, without comment.

"Topsy's got a ripping flat," Delia said presently. "Nearly as good as yours. Here we are." She got out before the taxi stopped and left Hazel to follow; as usual, she haggled with the driver about his fare.

"They're all thieves, those men," she said, angrily, as she followed Hazel into the house. Topsy's flat was on the ground floor, and before the door was opened they could hear the noise that was going on inside—the singing and laughter. Hazel's heart gave a little throb of apprehension.

The small hatstand in the hall was crowded with men's hats and coats. A man in evening dress, with an eye-glass, was crossing from one room to the other with a tray laden with glasses and decanters. He said, "Hullo, old thing!" to Delia and stopped for a moment to stare at Hazel. Delia introduced them.

"This is Hazel—you've heard about her, of course! Hazel, this is Jimmy Helder."

Jimmy did his best to bow, and nearly dropped the tray in his efforts. "Wait till I've put this confounded

thing down," he said. He sheered off into one of the rooms.

A maid took the girl's wraps; she, too, stared at Hazel with impertinent eyes. Hazel slipped her hand through Delia's arm; her confidence was beginning to desert her; she felt horribly nervous. Delia looked down at her and laughed.

"You're not frightened! Rubbish! Come and be introduced."

She pushed Hazel before her into the room into which Helder had vanished; it was very hot and noisy and brilliantly lit.

Someone was thumping out ragtime at the piano with the loud pedal down. The table had been pushed back anyhow into a corner; the centre floor was cleared; people were standing all round the walls clapping their hands and beating time with their feet to the jerky tune.

In the centre a man and a woman were dancing; the girl was dressed in scarlet, with purple flowers in her red hair. The whole bizarre effect of the get-up was extraordinary. She was wonderfully small and supple; her little body seemed to bend as easily as a willow in the wind.

The man who was her partner had his back turned to the door where Hazel stood. He wore ordinary evening dress, and a paper wreath was festooned round his neck. There was an absurd toy squeaker in his mouth, which he was blowing vigorously, and he flourished an empty champagne bottle in one hand.

Hazel stared at the girl with fascinated eyes; she had never seen anyone in the least like her before. She looked at the man, and suddenly she felt as if a rough hand had seized her by the throat, choking the breath from her body, for the man was Barry!

Just as she recognised him the dance ended abruptly; the girl in the scarlet frock sank to the ground in an exaggerated curtsy, her head drooping forward till her

forehead touched the floor; then suddenly she sprang up and laughed.

"You get more like a baby elephant every day," she said to Barry. She caught his arm, swinging round by it; then she saw Delia.

"Hullo, so you've come!" She danced over to her, and stood on tip-toe to kiss her. "Where's the——" She stopped. Her eyes had fallen on Hazel. "Hullo!" she said cheerily. She reached up and kissed Hazel too. "Come and have some fizz; Barry!" Barry turned at the insistent call, and across the room his eyes met his wife's.

Perhaps it was the most tragic moment of all his life as he stood there, head and shoulders above everyone else in the crowded room, the absurd wreath hanging round his shoulders, looking at Hazel. He could not believe his eyes, that she should be here of all places. It was only in a fit of desperation that he had at last yielded to Topsy's urgent voice over the 'phone, but already he was sick of the noise and laughter; a moment ago he had been wondering how soon he could make his excuses and go.

And now Hazel was here; every nerve in his big body seemed to quiver as he stood there. It was like some horrible dream—Hazel with rouge on her cheeks. Hazel in the midst of this Bohemian crowd.

Topsy pushed him aside unceremoniously.

"You're so slow. What's happened to you? Jimmy, open some more fizz; I'm just dried up."

Barry moved mechanically; he dropped the toy squeaker to the floor and tore the wreath from his shoulders.

Delia had drawn Hazel into the little crowd of her own friends; he could hear her laugh, a little nervous it sounded. He could hear her voice—her dear, pretty voice. And it came home to him with crushing force that this was all his fault—that whatever happened to Hazel

in the future, it would be through him and his own abominable selfishness.

He had tried to put her out of his life, but he knew as he stood there with the blood throbbing in his temples that, though he had promised to give her her freedom, and led her to think that he did not care, he adored the very ground she trod, and that without her he would never again know a moment's happiness.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AFTER the first moment Hazel behaved as if she did not know Barry was in the room.

Jimmy Helder attached himself to her at once. He hung over her chair most affectionately; he insisted that she had a sip from his glass before he touched it himself. Afterwards he tossed it off with exaggerated enjoyment. When, later, they went in to supper, he sat down beside her at the table and refused to move, in spite of all Topsy St. Helier could say, and she could say a great deal when she liked.

"Other people besides you want to talk to Hazel," she said. "Don't flatter yourself that you're the only pebble on the beach. Tell him to go, Hazel."

But Hazel had no intention of obeying; she looked at Helder with a smile.

"Oh, but I like him to stay," she said.

The remark was greeted with a roar of laughter. Delia looked annoyed. She had brought Hazel here this evening because she knew that Barry would be there, and because she wanted to anger him. She had not counted on Hazel getting so much attention.

"When you know him better you'll be glad not to share the same world with him," she said smartly. "He's one of those people who put all their goods in the shop window; there's nothing left to discover when you get in the shop itself."

Hazel did not mind in the least. She was quite indifferent to Helder or his attentions. All she cared about was to have someone apparently devoted for Barry to see.

She did her best to be amusing; she laughed at

every joke the man beside her made, although she did not think any of them funny. She let him whisper to her and keep his arm along the back of her chair; she had come to Rome, and she meant to do as the Romans did, or die in the attempt.

The second glass of champagne made her feel giddy.

"It was such muck, that's why," Delia said afterwards inelegantly. "Topsy's getting a mean little pig. She might have given us decent fizz, anyway."

Hazel didn't know decent fizz from inferior; she only knew that it made her head ache violently. Hitherto she had avoided looking at Barry, though he sat right opposite to her. But after a while she began to feel that it did not matter.

She was glad that he looked pale and preoccupied; she hoped he was shocked at finding her there. After supper, when they all trooped back to the other room, she slipped a hand through Topsy St. Helier's arm.

"I'm so glad to have met you," she said, deliberately. "I've heard such a lot about you." She hadn't heard a thing, except that one casual remark of Delia's, but she knew Barry was close behind them, and that he was listening.

Topsy responded with rather artificial warmth; she said she was sure they would be great pals. She seemed to become aware all at once of Barry's lumbering figure hovering near. She turned to him.

"You haven't spoken to Hazel. What's come over you? You're about as cheerful as a funeral." She pinched his arm. "This is our Barry," she said to Hazel. "I don't suppose you know him."

"Oh, yes I do; we've met several times," Hazel said. She raised defiant eyes to his face. "But he doesn't approve of me; he thinks I've had my head turned since I came to London."

"He's an old stick-in-the-mud," Topsy declared. "Nobody takes him seriously at all; but I know him, and understand him, and he's quite a dear, really."

Barry listened in helpless silence; he hated Topsy. He had never realised how common she was till he saw her standing arm in arm with Hazel.

He wondered what would happen if he picked Hazel up and carried her off then and there, out of the noise and glare, away from the popping of corks that seemed never to stop, and the suffocating fumes of cigarette smoke.

Topsy waltzed off into the middle of the room; she was never still for more than a moment together, she was so full of vitality and energy. Her whole little body looked as if it were strung together with fine wires.

For the moment Barry and Hazel were comparatively alone; she seemed to realise it, and made a movement as if to leave him, but he stopped her.

"Who brought you here?" he asked, tensely.

She raised her eyes—such bright eyes they were, shining with an unnatural excitement.

"Brought me! Nobody! I came of my own wish."

"I don't know how you dared," he said under his breath.

She laughed, shrugging a white shoulder.

"Why shouldn't I? If it's good enough for you, surely it's good enough for me?"

"It's very different—a man may do things a woman cannot; besides, it's no pleasure to me to be here."

Her lip curled scornfully.

"You seemed to be enjoying yourself when I came in."

He flushed hotly.

"Oh, that! it was just fooling! I should not have stayed to supper if you had not come in. I hate this crowd—I hate the life they lead."

"I like it; I think it's great fun," she said deliberately.

Across the room Helder was signalling to her wildly. "Come and dance—come and dance with me, little country girl."

Barry's hand closed like a vice on her wrist.

"You're not to go; I forbid it; I hate that fellow."

He's not fit for you to associate with. Let me take you home, Hazel, I beg of you."

Her eyes flashed; she darted across the room to where Helder stood against the wall as if he were not quite sure of his feet. Barry saw him clasp her round the waist and the next moment they were dancing together in the centre of the room.

"She takes to it like a duck to water—eh?" said Delia beside him; she climbed up on to a chair and sat down on the back rail, her feet resting on the seat. She blew a puff of cigarette smoke up into Barry's white face.

He looked down at her with furious eyes.

"This is your doing," he said under his breath.

"Mine?" she raised her darkened brows; she made a little grimace. "My dear boy, don't you realise that the time is past when I could teach Hazel anything? I warned her what to expect if she came here to-night, and she would come. I told her you would be here, and she said she didn't care a damn if you were."

"She never said that?"

"She did—not quite in my poetic language perhaps, but she meant the same thing," she broke off. "Look at them! Bet you didn't know Hazel could dance like that, eh?"

Barry glanced at the two in the centre of the room, and away again; it made him feel sick to see Hazel with Helder's arms round her. Helder was quite a good chap in his way, and Barry had always rather liked him till to-night, but he knew now that he would never care for any of this Bohemian crowd again.

He felt as if hitherto he had only seen them all from across the footlights, and that to-night he had been taken round behind the scene, and shown the gaudiness and tawdriness of it all, the grease-paint and the make-up, and artificiality. Helder was holding Hazel by the waist, both his hands on her slender hips, and as Barry looked, he swung her off her feet, catching her under one arm as if she had been a child.

Delia clapped her hands and stamped her high-heeled shoes on the seat of the chair.

"Go it;" she said shrilly; "you'll have them all beaten to fits with a bit of practice." She looked round to see how Barry was taking it, but he had gone. He went out of the room and across the untidy passage to the deserted supper-room.

The lights were still flaring, several chairs were overturned, the table was strewn with torn paper crackers and empty bottles. The whole room had very much of the "morning after" look about it.

Barry had seen it in a similar condition many times before, and thought nothing of it, but to-night everything was different. He kicked a chair out of his way and went across to the fireplace, leaned his elbows on the mantelshelf, and pressed his hands over his eyes.

Across the narrow passage came the din from the other room, shrill voices and laughter, and the sound of dancing feet.

Presently the piano started again, and a man's loud unmusical voice broke into song.

"Ginger—Gin-gah!—they call me Captain Gin-gah!"

The refrain was taken up by a roaring chorus.

Barry covered his ears. However had he thought it in the very least amusing, he asked himself bitterly, and yet once he had. He had bawled out choruses as loudly as any of them; he had turned night into day, and gone home in the dawnlight afterwards, having thoroughly enjoyed himself.

It made him writhe now to think that Hazel must know it, too. He had toppled from his pedestal long since, and, the worst part of it all was that he had dragged her down with him.

But for him she would never have been here to-night. She would never have known Helder, or Topsy St. Helier, or any of the others who were making such a fuss of her, and slowly, but surely, making her one of themselves.

The door he had half-closed behind him was suddenly pushed wide and Topsy entered. The purple flowers which she wore in her red hair were all disarranged and hung with untidy picturesqueness on one side. The reckless look in her eyes softened as she saw Barry. She crossed the room on tip-toe and stole her hand through his arm.

"What's up, old chap?"

Barry started and tried to laugh.

"Nothing. I've got a rotten headache. I say, what an awful row they're making."

She laughed, though there was an anxious expression in her eyes as she looked at him.

"Yes; they sound pretty lively." She slipped a hand into Barry's coat pocket and helped herself to a cigarette from his case.

"Got a match?" she held up her face invitingly, with the cigarette between her lips, but Barry did not notice the obvious invitation. He found a box, and, striking one, held it to her.

She frowned.

"You're slow to-night. What's the matter, anyway?"

"I told you; I've got a rotten head."

"Poor old boy!" she laid her hand on his arm again, and there was a little silence.

From the next room the rowdy chorus broke out afresh.

"Ginger, Gin-gah! They call me Captain Gin-gah!"

Topsy laughed; she pirouetted round the room, in and out of the chairs and tables, on the tips of her toes, keeping time to the music; she came back to where Barry stood.

"I say, what price the Hazel-nut!" she said. "Delia told me she was such a prude! She doesn't seem very prudish to-night."

Barry turned sharply away.

"Do you think she's pretty?" Topsy pursued. "I suppose she is, Hulbert raves about her; but she's a bit too

fair for my taste. I like a woman with more sparkle, don't you?"

He did not answer, and she screwed her head under his arm trying to see his face.

The roar and rollicking chorus came nearer; the door of the room opposite burst open, and the rowdy procession issued, singing and keeping time with their feet to the music.

They crossed the hall and came on to the room where Barry and Topsy stood; Barry roused himself with an effort.

Helder and another man came first; they were both very flushed and excited; they were carrying Hazel in a sedan-chair between them. They went the length of the room and round the table, followed by the rest of the party, all singing at the top of their voices; they finally came to a standstill close to Barry.

Here the two men lowered their arms for Hazel to get down, but just as her feet touched the ground Helder caught her round the waist, and bending towards her snatched a kiss.

"That's just on account," he said, excitedly. "The rest——"

He never finished his sentence. Barry had got him by the coat collar very much as a big retriever would shake a kitten; he shook him till his teeth rattled, then he let him go so violently that he fell backwards against the table, scattering plates and glasses all around him.

Hazel screamed; half-a-dozen men made a rush at Barry. Topsy St. Helier clutched his arm.

"Barry! Barry! What are you doing? You must be mad!"

He shook her off; his face was crimson; the veins stood out like cords on his forehead; he looked at Helder with blazing eyes.

"You damned little rat . . . I'll teach you . . . I'll . . ."

"Barry . . ." It was Hazel who stopped him now

—Hazel who tried to hold him back, clinging to his shoulders.

There was a moment of tragic silence; Topsy broke it with a shrill question.

"What's she got to do with you? What's she got to do with you, I say?" She was white with jealousy; her eyes blazed as she looked from Hazel to Barry Wicklow.

It was Delia who answered—Delia, who of them all was quite unconcerned and merely amused.

"She's his wife," she said calmly. "Didn't you know?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

IT made quite a melodramatic tableau, Delia thought afterwards as she looked back on the scene.

The disordered supper-table, the broken glasses, Barry standing there like some infuriated giant, with clenched fists and blazing eyes, Topsy in her bizarre dress, and Hazel—white, startling white, in spite of her rouge.

Delia was thoroughly enjoying it. Jimmy Helder was one of her pet aversions, and though she disliked Barry, she was delighted that he had set about the younger man, and in spite of herself she felt a thrill of admiration for him. Perhaps, after all, he was not the easy-going, frivolous man she had imagined; there was certainly something very primitive in his anger, very real in his agitation.

Topsy took a step towards him, she caught his arm in vixenish fingers, her brown eyes blazed.

"Is it true—is she your wife?"

Barry shook her off.

"Yes."

She promptly burst into tears, violent hysterical tears that Barry had experienced before; he turned to Hazel.

"Come home out of this place," he said roughly. He never dreamed for a moment that she would refuse; his own emotion was so deep that it seemed impossible she could be feeling nothing towards him but anger; it was like a blow in the face when she drew back from him.

"My home is not with you; I will not leave here in your company."

His hand fell to his side; he looked rather dazed, his eyes wandered round the crowded room at the flushed,

curious faces. Then he half-laughed; he shrugged his big shoulders and turned on his heel—he went out of the room and out of the flat, and they heard the door slam behind him.

The sound seemed to rouse Topsy; she stopped screaming and clenched her hands, shaking them above her head.

"Beast, beast, I hate him," she said violently. She pushed Delia away. "Oh, leave me alone; you knew all the time, and you never told me; and as for you——" She looked at Hazel as if she could have killed her. "I never want to see you again; I knew you were sly; I knew there was something deep behind that white face of yours."

Hazel was trembling from head to foot; she felt as if in the last ten minutes she had been roughly awakened out of sleep. It was impossible that she had ever been enjoying herself with this crowd, that she had ever thought there was anything attractive about Topsy St. Helier, or, indeed, any of them. Everyone in the room was antagonistic to her; nobody cared that she was terrified to death.

She looked appealingly at Delia; her lips were quivering, her eyes were full of frightened tears.

"You'd better come home," Delia said shortly. She asked one of the men to fetch a cab, she brought Hazel's coat and threw it down at her feet, she swept out of the room with her head in the air.

Though she had thoroughly enjoyed herself, she was going to make Hazel pay for it. As soon as they were safely out of the house she told her what she thought of her.

"I don't wonder Barry Wicklow was wild, letting Helder carry on with you like that. I thought you were such a prude. People with innocent eyes like you are always the worst. Of course, Barry was wild; even if he doesn't care two straws about you, you're his wife, and he's got the family name to think about. I should think to-

night's about put the tin lid on," she went on inelegantly. "He's washed his hands of you, you mark my words."

"I hope he has; I hate him."

"You were crying your eyes out for him this morning," Delia reminded her ironically. "Perhaps you're going to transfer your affections to Helder. I don't admire your taste if you are; he's an outsider, if ever there was one. I shouldn't have believed you'd got it in you, that I shouldn't; only known the man an hour, and letting him kiss you."

"I didn't; how dare you say such things! I didn't know what he was going to do. I'm glad Barry hit him; he deserved it."

Delia had snuggled closer into her wraps.

"Well, you've finished Topsy, once and for all," she said, with a sort of satisfaction. "She's dead sweet on Barry, and always has been."

"I don't need to be told that," said Hazel, fiercely. "It was quite obvious when we came in." She shivered, recalling Barry as she had seen him then. "Well, if he's disgusted with me, so am I with him, so we're quits," she added, defiantly. "And, as for Topsy St. Helier, I never want to see her again!" Her tone of scorn made Delia furious.

She leaned forward, and in the light of the taxicab, her face was red and convulsed.

"That's right! Run my friends down now you've insulted them," she stormed. "Topsy's as good as you are, and better! You go to her house and eat her supper and then end up by making a scene."

"It was not my fault. I had nothing to do with it."

"It *was* your fault. Do you think I can't see through you? Do you think I'm such a fool that I couldn't see you were trying to make Barry Wicklow jealous! Trying for all you were worth, you were! And it didn't come off—not in the way you wanted. He was furious because you're his wife, that's all, and because he was ashamed of you and the way you were going on."

"I wish I wasn't. I hate being married to him. I never want to see him again." Hazel felt utterly crushed and wretched. She was bitterly ashamed of the whole evening.

She knew there was truth in what Delia said. She had tried to make Barry jealous. She had deliberately led Helder on. But never for one moment had she dreamed that Barry would make such a scene. Her whole body seemed scorching as she recalled that moment. Topsy's hysterical tears, the crowd of curious faces and Barry.

What had driven her to answer him, as she had done? She wondered miserably if she had had too much champagne. She felt as if this evening had soiled her in a way from which she would never recover. Even Delia despised her. She wished she could die.

"It's no use upsetting yourself over what's done," Delia said, more pleasantly, after a moment. She had had her say and was feeling better. "Hulbert will be furious when he knows. He hates Topsy. You'd better not say anything about it."

"I shall tell him. I shall tell him directly I see him."

Delia let down the window with a jerk.

"Yes, you're little fool enough even for that," she said curtly. She kicked the door open. "Here we are, you'd better go to bed and try and forget it. No, I'm not coming in—good-night—drive on, cabby." Hazel stood there on the path looking after the vanishing cab with frightened eyes. She dreaded being left to her self. Delia might have stayed, she thought. After a moment she turned and, still sobbing, let herself into the flat.

It was past midnight—a clock struck the quarter as she shut the door after her.

The flat felt horribly empty and lonely, as she turned on all the lights, and went to her room.

The sight of her reflection momentarily checked her tears, she looked so woe-begone, the vivid rouge patches on her cheeks stood out in ugly contrast to the whiteness

of her face. She rubbed it off energetically, she took off her frock, and threw it down. She sat down on the side of the bed and sobbed and sobbed broken-heartedly, the tears running down her cheeks.

She hated Delia, she hated her sneering voice and hard eyes, she hated Barry. He had only asked her to leave with him because he was ashamed that his wife should be in Topsy St. Helier's flat.

He had been there many times, no doubt; and if it was good enough for him, surely it was for her, she told herself, with woeful ignorance of the world's teaching that there shall be one law for a man and another for a woman.

The window of her room was open, and outside she could hear the night air rustling in the leaves of the one tree that had managed to take root, and grow in the apology for a garden behind the block of flats.

The little soft sound reminded her of Bedmund, and the woods of Cleave Farm, and for one sickening moment she longed with all her heart and soul to be back there, and find that nothing of this delirium had ever happened.

To be back there with Barry—to meet the worshipful look of his eyes, to know that he loved her because she was so different to all the women he had known in London before he ever met her.

That had been her greatest hold on him, and she had flung it away; she had tried to kill all that he had loved in her; she had done her best to be like Delia and her friends; because in the beginning he had deceived her.

It was no excuse for what she had done. He had fallen from the pedestal to which her love had exalted him, and she had let him drag her down with him.

A faint sound out in the passage startled her, she stopped sobbing to listen. It was so late—surely nobody could be about at this time of night. She got up from the bed and tip-toed across the room to the door. The light was full on in the passage and in the sitting-room;

it must have been plainly visible through the glass panels; she held her breath.

The little sound came again, like a footstep. It was followed by a gentle knock at the room.

Hazel did not move, she did not know why she was so frightened. In the ordinary way she would have gone to the door and opened it unhesitatingly, but something seemed to tell her that it was Barry, and she dreaded him more than anyone on earth just then.

She slid her hand along the wall and put out the light, she could hear the agitated beating of her own heart in the darkness, as against the glass door panels she could see the big silhouette cast by a man's figure.

It was Barry, nobody else had quite that powerful lumbering look, nobody else had just those wide shoulders.

She stood still, hardly daring to breathe; she knew he was listening for a sound within; she wondered what he wanted with her, and why he had come.

It seemed hours instead of minutes as she stood there pressing back against the wall, and then at last she saw him move away and heard his slow step descending the stairs.

Hazel drew a long breath of relief, she almost ran down the passage to the room where her maid slept; she woke the girl urgently; she tried to make the excuse that she had thought she heard her calling, her little face looked white and scared.

The girl was good-natured; she saw the distress in Hazel's eyes and marks of recent tears.

She made hot coffee and brought it to Hazel's room; she talked away as if it were nothing unusual.

"I suppose nobody has called?" Hazel asked presently. "Not Mr. Greaves, or—or Mr. Hulbert?"

"No, Miss, nobody. Mr. Hulbert 'phoned once, but I told him you were out. He asked where you had gone, and I said with Miss Delia. He seemed rather annoyed, but he said no more."

Hazel thought of what Delia had said that morning about her future and Hulbert's influence. She quite meant to ask him how true it was when they met again.

Greaves certainly seemed to have lost interest in her during the past few days. It would be a crushing blow if, on top of everything else, the future that had been painted to her in such glowing colours suddenly faded into nothingness.

She lay awake for hours in the darkness, thinking of the evening and what had happened. It was nearly daylight when she fell asleep. When she woke the maid had just come into the room and was drawing the blinds.

"You were sleeping so soundly," she apologised. "It seemed a shame to wake you."

She brought breakfast and a bundle of letters. The top-most one of all was unstamped, and had evidently come by hand.

It was addressed in Greaves' writing, and Hazel's heart beat a little faster as she took it up.

"A boy brought it half-an-hour ago," the maid told her. "He said it was urgent."

Hazel broke open the flap. Greaves had written in a hurry, evidently; the writing was scrawly:

"Dear Hazel,—I have been thinking things over, and have finally decided to give you a trial run on Saturday night as an extra turn at the Pantheon. I hope you are feeling fit. I shall come along to see you sometime during the day. It ought to be a fine send-off for you, and hope you will like the arrangement.—Yours, H. J. Greaves."

CHAPTER XXXV

BARRY left Topsy St. Helier's flat hardly knowing what he was doing. He walked along through the darkness, carrying his hat and coat just as he had picked them up from a chair in the hall.

He was conscious only of rage—overwhelming rage—against his wife, against Jimmy Helder, against the whole world.

He who had always gone his own careless way, done as he liked, and considered nobody, was down and out at last. He felt that every hand was against him as he strode on through the darkness.

Topsy's shrill voice and Delia's unpleasant smile haunted him. He hated them both. Hazel's white face stood out against the background of all that noise and revelry with cutting disdain.

Of course, she thought the worst of him.

At a street corner he cannoned into a man—a big man, who cursed him mildly, and then stopped short with an exclamation of recognition.

"Wicklow! What the deuce——"

It was Greaves. In the light of a street lamp close at hand he could see Barry's face distinctly.

Greaves had a kindly heart somewhere amongst his other various possessions, and something in the expression of Barry's eyes touched him.

"What's up?" he asked again. "And why on earth don't you put your hat on?"

Barry roused himself with an effort; he tried to laugh. "I don't know—what's the matter—where are you going, anyway?"

Greaves heard the unnatural jerkiness of his voice. He answered promptly:

"I'm going to take you along to my place to get a drink. Oh, yes, you are coming," he added, as Barry began to refuse. He slipped a hand through the younger man's arm. "Rot!—don't tell me you're not thirsty; it's about the first time in your life, then."

Barry gave in; they were quite close to Greaves' rooms. Greaves switched on the lights and poked the fire to a blaze. He fetched whisky and soda and mixed some for Barry. As he passed it over he noticed that Barry's knuckles were torn and bleeding. He gave a low whistle.

"Whose beauty have you been spoiling?" he asked.

Barry glanced down at his hand. He laughed self-consciously.

"Half a dozen people will be telling you to-morrow, so I may as well be there first," he said. He wrapped his handkerchief clumsily round the torn knuckles. "It was round at Topsy's. I gave Helder one to go on with." He stopped, then added curtly: "He kissed my wife!"

Greaves was raising his glass to his lips, but his arm was arrested half-way.

"Your wife?" he said, blankly. "Oh, you mean little Hazel?"

"Yes; she's my wife, no matter whether we hit it or not; and if Helder or any other man think they can take liberties——" his voice had risen fiercely. He stopped. He got to his feet and shrugged his shoulders. "You don't want to hear my troubles—I'm sorry."

Greaves drained his glass and set it down.

"Humph! So it's like that, is it? he said, quietly.

"Yes, it is."

Barry went back to his chair, the elder man watching him.

"I suppose," he submitted then, whimsically, "I suppose that you'd like a chance to use your fists on me as well, eh?"

Barry did not answer.

"You've probably been cursing me to all eternity for inducing her to go on the stage, eh?"

Barry's face flamed.

"Yes, I have, since you ask," he said violently. "You're ruining her between you—you and Hulbert, and all the rest of your damned crowd. She never had a thought beyond—beyond, well, me and being happy, till she fell in with you. You've filled her head with rubbish, you've told her she's going to be a success, and I tell you that she never will be. She hasn't got enough assurance, she hasn't got anything that will make her a success, unless mere prettiness will do it. She's set her mind on going on now because you've urged her. If she fails she'll try again because you or Hulbert will tell her that everybody fails to start with.

"But that's all rot, and you know it is. Look at Topsy! She'd made her name before she'd been on the stage five minutes; she was born to it; she's got all the cheek, and—and——" He broke off, meeting the other man's eyes.

Greaves carefully cut and lit a cigar. There was a moment of silence, then he said, quietly:

"I never knew you were such a good judge of character, Wicklow."

Barry coloured. "I suppose you're pulling my leg."

"I'm not in the least. As a matter of fact, I think you're right in everything you say. I've always thought so."

Barry stared. "You mean—you mean—what the devil do you mean?" he asked, irritably.

Greaves pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Look here, my boy," he said. "I'm going to talk to you like a father. It's no business of mine whether you and your wife hit it or not, but I'm as cute as most people, and from the way you're upsetting yourself I suppose you think something of her. She's a dear little girl, I'm fond of her—oh, you needn't glare like that," he added, as Barry began to look angry. "There's no harm in my affection for her, or I shouldn't be telling you about it, you bet your life. You're right in what

you say; she'll never make a success on the stage, and I've known it all along."

Barry hardly knew if he were angry or relieved, and the other man went on.

"Hulbert introduced her to me. He wanted me to do something for her; you know his way. He thinks money can do anything. I'm an older man, and I know it can't. Hazel's pretty enough; she'd get over the footlights all right if all the audience expected her to do was to smile at them and look pretty. She hasn't got a bad little voice, either, and she dances quite nicely, but——" He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "She hasn't got the cheek! I'm using your own word. She hasn't got the 'bite,' if you understand me." He paused. "And you may congratulate yourself that she hasn't," he added, dryly.

"You've never told her this. You've led her to believe—to expect that——" Barry stopped. "I suppose you're going to give her a chance and let her fail. Is that it?" he asked again, bitterly.

Greaves did not answer.

"It's a rotten trick, anyway," Barry went on, hotly. "She ought to be told. I shall tell her myself."

"My dear boy, she won't believe you. People never do when they're stage-struck. I've given up trying to tell them. They only look sorry for me and go off to someone else. Your wife has got to learn her lesson the same as the rest; and Hulbert's got to learn it, too. It's just a case where one has to be cruel to be kind."

Barry began pacing the room. He knew that Greaves had spoken truthfully when he said that Hazel would not believe him. She was so sure in her own mind that she would make a success.

Greaves refilled Barry's glass.

"And what's she going to do when she knows the truth?" Barry asked, hoarsely. "It will break her heart. She's quarrelled with her people; she hates the sight of me."

Greaves smiled.

"Ah, well," he said smoothly. "It's not a bad thing to begin with a little aversion, and there is such a thing as affection being caught in the rebound, you know."

Barry laughed grimly. "Not for me, I'm afraid. I treated her rottenly to start with; indirectly all this is my fault."

He came back to where the elder man sat.

"Tell me what you're going to do," he urged, agitatedly. "You've got some idea in your head, I know, and if Hazel——"

But Greaves only shook his head. "You'll have to let things take their natural course, my boy; it's no use trying to force matters." He held out his hand. "'Pon my word, Wicklow, I believe I really rather like you, after all."

Barry laughed. "Well, you're about the only one of my acquaintances who does, then," he said, constrainedly. "I've made more enemies during the past month than ever in my life before."

But he felt considerably cheered. It was early morning when he left Greaves.

If Hazel were a failure! The thought gave him a pang. He did not want her to fail; it would hurt him more than anything in the world to know of her disappointment. And yet, on the other hand, if she were to succeed it meant an eternal barrier between her life and his.

Supposing Greaves were not to be trusted; supposing he was the sort of man who ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds? What was a man to believe?

He passed a wretched night. One moment he wished he had never seen Greaves, and the next moment he was sure that Greaves would prove a friend. He stayed in bed late the next morning. His head ached miserably; it made him hot all over to think of that scene at Topsy's flat. Whatever happened he would never go there any more; that part of his life was wiped out for ever.

In the afternoon he strolled round to the club. He

wondered if it were his imagination that several men he met looked at him rather quizzically. No doubt, Jimmy Helder had been talking. He stayed half-an-hour, and went back home again; he spent the rest of the day indoors.

He felt at a loose end, and yet he had the feeling that something of importance was going to happen; that soon something definite would put an end one way or the other to the torment of these past weeks.

But Friday passed, and nothing did happen, and Barry began to wonder if perhaps it would not be as well to pack a bag and go off home for the week-end. He knew that his uncle and aunt would be glad to have him, and it would be better than sticking about in London and not knowing how to kill time.

But it was only after lunch that he made up his mind. He was looking up trains when the 'phone rang sharply. It was Greaves.

"I looked for you at the club last night," he said. "What's happened to you?"

Barry scowled. "Nothing. I was there in the afternoon. What do you want? I'm just going away for the week-end."

He distinctly heard the little exclamation of surprise from the other end of the 'phone.

"Going away! Surely you'll be at the Pantheon to-night?"

"The Pantheon!" Barry echoed, irritably. "Why in the world should I? With all respects to you, I'm dead sick of music-hall shows, and—— What do you say?"

Greaves laughed. "Oh, I thought you'd be interested to-night, anyway," he said. "I'm putting your wife on as an extra turn!"

At the Pantheon! Barry Wicklow's heart seemed to give a great thump and then stand still.

He knew what the Pantheon was—knew how celebrated it was for its all-star performances—and a horrible feeling of apprehension went through him.

Supposing Hazel failed. The risk was enormous; he could not bear to think of it. He had once seen a girl hissed off the stage at a music-hall, heard the shouts of derisive laughter that followed her frightened exit, and it turned him cold to think that perhaps something like this lay in store for Hazel.

This altered everything. He threw the time-table down. After this there could be no question of going down to Eresbie Hall; he would go to the Pantheon.

He thought of Greaves' admission last night. In his heart, Greaves, too, thought she would fail. It seemed sheer cruelty to allow her to go on knowing that; surely there was some way of stopping her, or persuading her to give up the idea.

He turned his steps towards Hazel's flat. When he rang the bell and asked to see her, he saw the obvious hesitation in the maid's face. Miss Bentley was resting; she had said she was not to be disturbed.

"Just tell her I have called," Barry urged, earnestly. "I won't worry her; tell her it's very important. My name is Wicklow."

The girl knew his name right enough. She went away hesitatingly. After a moment she came back. Miss Bentley was sorry, but she could see nobody.

The hot blood beat to Barry's face.

"I'm not going till I have seen her," he said, obstinately. He passed the girl and stepped into the hall. It was quite obvious that he meant to do as he said.

The girl shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "Miss Bentley will be very angry."

"I will take all the blame," Barry said.

Hazel had heard the raised voices in the hall. She came to the door of her sitting-room; she was fully dressed, and held a book in her hand. Evidently she had made the excuse of resting so as not to see him.

"I told you I was not at home to anyone," she began. She looked at the girl angrily.

Barry stepped forward. "It's not her fault, I forced my way in."

It seemed useless to resist. She led the way back into the room silently.

Barry shut the door. He was very pale, and there was a strained look in his eyes.

"I shouldn't have come," he began, roughly, "only—Greaves tells me you are going on at the Pantheon to-night."

She coloured a little.

"I am, yes; though what it has to do with you. . . ."

"It has everything to do with me. Oh, don't think I've come here to quarrel with you, or rake up the past. It's all as completely forgotten as if it had never existed. I—I only want to speak to you for your own sake. Hazel, you don't know what you are doing, you don't know what the Pantheon audiences are, they're used to first-rate artists. Oh, don't mistake me." He rushed on, as she drew away from him offendedly. "But you're not experienced—how can you be? You've no idea what an ordeal it is. You've never walked on the stage in your life. Give it up, Hazel, before it's too late. Give it up for your own sake, if not for mine, I beg of you."

She laughed bitterly.

"Because I'm your wife, you mean. You are afraid that I shall do something that will make people talk and laugh about me." She raised her head proudly. "I'm not going to fail," she said. "I feel sure that I shall not. Mr. Greaves . . ."

"Greaves told you what he did to please you, and to please Hulbert. Greaves isn't a fool, he knows as well as I do that you're not cut out for the stage. You have to be born to it, and you're not. You'll break your heart if you fail, and all Hulbert's money can't buy success for you," he added, hoarsely.

Her eyes flashed. "Delia has been talking to you. She said just the same thing to me the other day. You're

both jealous! That's what it is. I suppose this is a conspiracy between you?"

"You know quite well that I detest your cousin. It's not at all likely that I should discuss you with her."

She turned away. "You come here and upset me just when I ought to be left alone. If I do fail to-night it will be your fault. I was feeling quite happy and confident until you came. Mr. Greaves will be furious if he knows you have been here."

"I don't care a curse for Greaves, or any of his crowd. It's my duty to prevent you ruining your life if I can."

"You've said that before; I'm tired of hearing it." Her voice shook now. She began to cry.

The maid, who had evidently not been much further than the other side of the door, came in unceremoniously. She looked at Barry with angry eyes. She had had strict instructions from Mr. Greaves that her mistress was not to be worried, she said. It was too bad for him, and would he please go away at once.

Barry looked at his wife with desperate eyes. It was useless, he knew. Nothing he could say or do would make any difference to her decision. He had got to stand helplessly by and let her go her own way.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said hoarsely. "I—I suppose I was a fool to come. I meant it for the best." He waited a moment, looking at her appealingly, but she might not have heard him for all the notice she took, and after a moment he went away.

"You should have refused to see him," Hazel's maid scolded her. "I did my best to keep him out; but there." She shrugged her shoulders. "He's so big—what could we do?" She fussed round Hazel with smelling salts. She was really very anxious about her.

Hulbert had threatened her with all manner of penalties if she allowed Hazel to be upset or excited. She was relieved when Hazel allowed herself to be persuaded

to lie down. After all, it was quite early. There were hours before she need dress.

But Hazel only consented to go to her room so that she could be alone. Barry's unexpected visit had opened a new train of thought. Supposing he were right, and she did not succeed?

She shut her eyes and tried to sleep, but it was impossible. The night had all at once become a terror to her. The hours seemed to race; it was no time at all before the maid came to rouse her again.

She busied herself about the room, laying out Hazel's new frock, a white, filmy thing of tulle, very youthful looking, with a short, full skirt, and shoulder straps made of narrow silver bands.

Hazel looked away from it. Supposing she were a failure! Supposing, before a crowded house of critical eyes, she failed and broke down! It made her hot to her finger-tips to think of it. Barry would be there, too; somewhere in the audience he would be watching her, and wondering how soon she would fail.

The thought stung her to desperation. She would not fail—she would go on and forget everything except that she meant to succeed. She would show Barry that she was not so weak and inexperienced as he thought.

All the while she was being dressed she talked away to try and disguise her nervousness. She was very fussy about her hair, and made the girl re-dress it three times. She was ready an hour before Hulbert came to fetch her, pacing up and down the little sitting-room.

A long glass at one end reflected her dainty figure. She stopped once or twice and looked at herself with critical eyes. A pretty enough picture she made, she knew, and yet somehow she did not look like herself in the very short frock and high-heeled shoes, with the elaborately dressed hair and rouged cheeks.

Barry had said she was changed; she knew that she was. There was nothing left of the girl who had first

loved him. She seemed to have been pushed out of sight and forgotten.

Her heart began to race when she heard Hulbert's voice in the hall. Once she had left the flat with him there would be no looking back; she would have to go on—on to whatever awaited her.

If only Barry had been coming. The thought was in her mind before she realised it, and she tried in vain to stifle it. If Barry had been there instead of this man she knew she would not have minded half so much. She tried to smile when Hulbert asked her how she felt. She said that she felt quite all right.

"You look like a fairy," he said. His eyes scanned her little figure admiringly. "After to-night, I suppose, you will be looking for higher game than me," he said, jealously.

She turned away from him. "I don't know what you mean. I may fail altogether."

He laughed. "You! Fail! It's not remotely possible."

His confidence cheered her; she felt happier as they drove away.

Hulbert was considerate for once in his life and let her alone; it was only when the car stopped that for a moment he touched her hand and gripped it hard.

"Now then, little girl—for all you're worth!"

Hazel nodded; she could not speak. She would have given anything in the world to have turned and run away, but she followed him into the rather dismal doorway and along a stone passage which seemed full of men who stood about talking and doing nothing in particular.

Hulbert introduced her to one or two of them. She supposed afterwards that she spoke to them and answered their questions, but the whole evening was a blank to her. She felt as if she moved and spoke in her sleep.

Then they went in a small, brilliantly-lit room that seemed crowded with odds and ends, and hung from floor to ceiling with photographs.

Greaves was there, and some other people who stared at her a great deal, but she never could remember who they were or what were their names.

There was one man with a red nose and great, baggy trousers. When presently he moved on to do his turn he was greeted with roars from the house. Hazel wondered in a panic what sort of a reception they would give to anyone as scared as she was; she looked appealingly at Greaves.

His eyes met hers, and he smiled faintly. He crossed over to where she sat.

"Not frightened?" he asked. She shook her head, she felt as if she must burst out crying. He patted her shoulder.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, come and stand in the wings—you'll see how easy it is."

She followed closely behind him, the bustle and noise behind the stage bewildered her, there seemed so many people giving orders and moving about all at once. The huge pieces of scenery looked as if they must come crashing down every time they were touched, the white limelight blinded her.

The red-nosed comedian was doing a ragtime dance and singing a chorus about his mother-in-law. The audience seemed to find it intensely funny, judging by the way they screamed with laughter.

It was a nightmare to Hazel, she never knew how long she stood there, as people passed and repassed her on their way to the stage. There were a troupe of performing dogs and tight-rope dancers, they seemed an endless stream.

Presently Greaves touched her arm.

"After this turn."

She looked up, not understanding.

"You go on after this," he said. He smiled encouragingly. "Now there's nothing to be nervous about. You're going to be a great success." But he had never felt more sure in his life that she would be a hopeless

failure. He felt bitterly ashamed of himself as he looked at her white face and twitching lips, she would fail, she must fail. He was as sure of it as he had ever been of anything in his successful career.

The curtain rang down, and there was a momentary silence. Hazel moved a step forward—someone took her cloak from her—the curtain swung up again. The band started the opening bars of the sentimental coon song which she had practised and rehearsed till it haunted her dreams.

A powdered gentleman in a heavily braided coat moved across the stage pompously and stuck a placard at the side to the effect that this was an extra turn. As he did so a big young man in the stalls rose hurriedly as if to leave the theatre, then stopped and sat down again. The band repeated the first bars of the song, and the next moment Hazel stood alone on the big stage.

Barry gave one look at her and quickly away again. He felt as if rough fingers were tearing at his heart. She looked such a child in her short, white frock. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his face hidden in his hands. For a moment he was blind and deaf to everything.

Hazel was singing now. Her small, pretty voice, filled the big hall with the sweet clearness of a bird's—a little tremulous at first, but gaining in power and confidence as she sang.

The long finger of limelight followed her dainty figure as she moved up and down the wide stage.

Greaves, from the wings, watched her with incredulous eyes. She met his gaze once as she turned, and smiled . . . smiled! He looked round for Hulbert. He gripped his arm with excited fingers.

"She's getting there, man! She's going to be a success! I never was so amazed."

Hulbert did not answer. He was very red in the face and his eyes never left Hazel.

The little song was ended now, and she began to dance.

There was nothing wonderful in her dancing, but it was pretty and graceful. She looked like a fairy, as Hulbert had told her—a smiling little fairy who was hugely enjoying herself, and who confidently expected the audience to do the same.

"There was absolutely nothing in what she did," Delia said afterwards, angrily. "Whatever on earth the people saw in her, I don't know." But that they saw something was without a doubt, for when at last the curtain swung down a roar of applause broke out through the house.

Barry raised his white face. Applause! They were actually applauding her! Some youths just behind him were shouting a vociferous "Encore!"

He looked blindly towards the stage. The big curtains were slowly swinging apart, and for a moment Hazel stood between them, a little nervous, a little uncertain what to do. But Barry did not notice that; there was only one thought in his mind—a desolating thought—that she had been a success, after all, that she had not failed, and that after to-night she would be further removed from him than ever.

CHAPTER XXXVI

AS soon as Hazel's turn was over, Barry got up and left the theatre. He was sick at heart; he could just imagine what was going on behind the scenes, how excited Hazel would be, and what a fuss they would be making of her.

What was Greaves thinking? he wondered—Greaves who had been so sure she would fail, or was that only what he had *said*? Perhaps he had never really thought so at all; perhaps even now he was metaphorically thumping himself on the back and thinking how infallible he was.

As he passed along the foyer he ran into Greaves himself; the elder man caught him by the arm.

"I was looking for you; they told me you were in front. Come along round and congratulate your wife. We're going to have a little supper to celebrate the occasion. I must admit that I never was so surprised in my life. It only shows that none of us are infallible."

He dug Barry in the ribs playfully. "I'm going to give her a contract right away. Hulbert's crowing over me properly, I can tell you. Come along, man."

But Barry did not move; he was scowling fiercely, and his face wore its most obstinate look.

"Thanks, but I don't care about it. I'm glad she's been a success." He stopped, and for a moment their eyes met, then Barry broke out again vehemently.

"I'm *not* glad. I never was so damned sick about anything in my life, and you can tell her so if you like. Good-night."

He was gone before Greaves could stop him.

Greaves turned away with a little shrug; he supposed

Barry thought he had let him down. He had really meant to try and help them both by putting Hazel on at the Pantheon. It was quite true that he *had* been sure that she was doomed to failure, and he knew that a failure at the Pantheon would have been utter and entire.

He would have been pleased to see Hazel and Barry reconciled; he had a sneaking regard for them both; but to-night things had changed; Hazel had changed, too. He no longer considered her as a pretty little girl of whom he was rather fond, but as a great money-making speculation.

One could never be sure what the public would take to its erratic heart, he told himself as he turned to go back behind the stage again. However, if they wanted the very simple talents which was all Hazel had to offer them, he was quite willing to see that they got them. In his mind he had already decided what form of contract he would offer to her.

Hazel was ready to leave when he rejoined her. Hulbert was there in devoted attendance; he looked at Greaves with triumph.

His whole attitude seemed to be shouting: "What did I tell you! What did I say? She's a success—as I knew she would be."

Hazel was very flushed, and her eyes blazed with excitement. She wondered what Barry thought now, and Delia!

"I've just been talking to that husband of yours," Greaves said as they went out to Hulbert's waiting car. "Oh, yes, he was there in the stalls—you didn't see him?—no, you wouldn't." He looked down at her indulgently. "He was about the only soul in the house who didn't approve of you, my dear," he added, deliberately.

She raised her eyes to his face.

"Didn't approve of me?" There was no quiver of disappointment or anger in her voice. "Did he tell you so?" she asked.

Greaves nodded.

"Yes, he did; he told me that he was never so sick about anything in all his life."

Hazel was very quiet during supper; she hardly ate anything. Greaves and Hulbert were both noisy and excited. They drank an unnecessary lot of champagne; they toasted her many times; they spoke a great deal about the contract she was to have.

Hazel listened silently, and Greaves put her silence down to the weariness of reaction.

"We've tired her to death," he said boisterously. "Too much excitement for one night isn't good for little girls. Never mind, I'll see you to-morrow, my dear. And there are the papers to look out for, you know. I shall be interested to hear what they say about my new protégé."

"They can't say much," Hazel said, smiling. "I don't suppose they'll even notice me."

Greaves frowned.

"They wouldn't dare leave you out," he said. "I'm a power to reckon with in Fleet Street, I assure you."

She did not understand; now the first excitement was wearing off she realised how tired she was. There was a curious home-sick kind of feeling in her heart. These men, kind and pleased as they both were, were not her own people. She would have given anything just then for her mother or even grim Joe Daniels or—or Barry! Someone of her own to look at her with proud eyes of approval, to tell her how proud they were.

She was glad when it was time to go home. Her eyes were beginning to look drowsy; she did not take much notice when Greaves bade her "Good-night."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Another little swan for my long list," he said. "May she have a long life and a successful one."

Hazel went out to the car with Hulbert. She was desperately tired; she leaned back in the corner and drew her cloak round her, closing her eyes.

The smooth gliding motion of the car was very soothing.

"Tired?" he asked presently. "There was a jerky note in his voice, but Hazel did not notice it.

"Yes, I am, very tired. It's been a wonderful night, hasn't it?" She tried to rouse herself; she knew how much she owed to this man. It seemed ungrateful to sit there and say nothing; she sat up.

"I don't know how to thank you," she said earnestly. "You've done so much for me; I'm afraid I can't ever thank you—properly."

He did not answer for a moment, then all at once he caught her in his arms.

"You can! You can thank me by loving me! You say it's been a wonderful night. But you are the most wonderful of all. I've been so patient, Hazel, but you must have known. I love you—I've loved you ever since we first met. Come away with me. Your marriage is no marriage at all. Wicklow doesn't want you . . . Hazel . . ."

He was kissing her passionately, holding her so that she could not escape.

She tried to struggle against him, but she was like a child in his arms; she was cold with fear and loathing; she struck at his face with impotent hands, trying to beat him off.

"You brute . . . you brute! If you only knew how I hate you!" she sobbed in terror. He only laughed.

"I'd rather have your hate than the love of any other woman," he said recklessly. "If this is just a little game to make more sure of me, go on playing it by all manner of means! I've been patient—I can be patient a little longer. You've cost me a pretty penny, but it's been worth it all the while. I never thought I could even care for a woman as much as I do for you. There!" He kissed her lips almost brutally, and let her go. He thought he

had conquered her; she fell away from him against the side of the car, gasping.

Hulbert laughed. He liked a woman with spirit, he told himself complacently; but he had never thought little Hazel had got it in her to be such a spitfire.

The car slowed down at a cross road; it was going little faster than walking pace. Hazel saw her opportunity; she made a desperate clutch at the handle, and the next moment had swung the door back.

"Hazel, for God's sake!" Hulbert saw what she was going to do too late; he made a grab at her to stop her, but his fingers only closed on her silk coat. She had not fastened it round her throat, and she let it go now easily. The next moment she was running like a mad woman down the street through the darkness.

She did not know in the least where she was; it had been raining, and the streets were wet and muddy. Her white shoes were ruined before she had gone half-a-dozen steps, her hair loosened and flying about her face, but she ran on—on, never stopping till she came to a taxicab at a standstill outside a house.

The cabby had just been paid; she could see him leaning forward counting the money in the light of the lamp; she went up to him, she could hardly speak.

"Are you disengaged?"

He looked at her dubiously; she was so white and terrified. "I'll pay you—pay you well," she said, hoarsely.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, all right—where to?"

She tore open the door of the cab—she only stopped for a moment to give him Barry Wicklow's address. It was her one chance for safety, she knew. If she went back to the flat Hulbert would follow her. If not to-night, then certainly to-morrow, or the next day.

There was only one man who could protect her from this man's loathesome attentions—her husband! She would go to Barry.

She leaned back in the cab, shaking and breathless; all her weariness had vanished; she had never felt more wide awake in her life.

Hulbert would never follow her to her husband's rooms; she knew that it was the last place in which he would think of looking for her. She thought of him as some beast of prey; even now he might be following through the darkness—she shuddered from head to foot.

It seemed an eternity till the cab stopped, for a moment she was afraid to get out. The driver came to the door.

"Here you are, lady."

She got out then, she felt so weak she could hardly stand; she knew that the man was looking at her curiously—at her torn frock and muddy shoes.

She realised that she had no money. She turned to him in desperation.

"Wait a moment; I shall have to ask for your fare."

He looked at her suspiciously as she went up to the doorway; she spoke to the porter tremblingly.

"Do you know if Mr. Wicklow is in?"

She could have broken down and sobbed with relief when he answered that Mr. Wicklow had come in not half-an-hour ago.

"Well—will you please pay for my cab; Mr. Wicklow will see you presently." She paused, meeting the man's dubious eyes steadily.

"I am his wife," she said proudly.

She avoided the lift; she walked up the stairs to Barry's door. She was only conscious of a great longing to be with him; even if he did not love her he would take care of her, she knew, when he saw how frightened she was.

She rang the bell and waited; it seemed a long time before anyone came. Then she heard a step in the narrow hall—a man's step—and after a moment Barry himself opened the door.

He still wore evening dress; he held a lighted cigar

in his hand. There was a breathless silence. Hazel tried to speak, but no words would come. She just put out her hands and Barry caught them in his own. "My God, Hazel, what has happened?"

He drew her in and shut the door; he half-carried her across the hall to the sitting-room and put her down in a big chair by the fire. Her hands were burning hot, but she shivered as if she were frozen.

He fetched brandy and made her drink some; he knelt down on the rug and gently took off the muddy sodden little shoes.

He asked no more questions; when he saw that the colour was stealing faintly back to her cheeks he got up and moved away.

He was very white, and his lips were set in a hard line of pain.

Presently—

"Better?" he asked cheerfully.

She nodded, she tried to smile; she put up her hands and tried to fasten back the loose waves of hair that were falling untidily about her face. Barry watched her clumsy efforts silently.

After a moment he said:

"There's a glass in my room, if you don't mind going there; my brushes are on the dressing-table."

She shook her head.

"I can manage——." But she could not, and the soft waves of hair tumbled untidily about her face again.

She pushed them back desperately; she looked up at him.

"I expect you wonder why I've come here, so late, like this. I wouldn't have done, only"—she made a helpless gesture—"I had nowhere else to go."

"There is your flat." Barry spoke hoarsely; his hands were rammed deep into his pockets, his face was painfully strained. Her eyes fell.

"I was afraid to go there. Oh, don't look at me like

that, Barry!" She dropped her face in her hands with a sob.

Barry took a stride forward; he raised her chin roughly in his hand, forcing her to look at him.

For a moment his eyes scanned her face, with its quivering lips and frightened eyes.

"Was it—Hulbert?" he asked, uncertainly.

But there was no need for her to answer.

He stood for a moment as if he did not know what to do; then he let her go, and went over to the door.

Hazel cried out.

"Where are you going—what are you going to do?"

She dragged herself up from the big chair, and, following, clung to his arm.

"Barry, Barry, what are you going to do?"

He looked down at her, and his grey eyes were almost black in their fury.

"I'm going to kill that swine!" he said, hoarsely.

She broke out in terror.

"Don't leave me here alone—oh, don't! You can see him another time—to-morrow. If I cared anything for him I shouldn't be here now—I shouldn't have come to you. You must know that! I hate him, Barry. You must—you must believe me!"

He held her at arm's length.

"And me, too, you hate me, too," he said hoarsely.

She looked up at him, the tears were running down her face, her hair tumbling about her shoulders, and in that moment she looked to him like the little girl whom he had first known and loved—the little girl who had walked with him through the woods down at Bedmund, and something seemed to snap round his heart and brain, a band of relentless iron that had held him bound for so long; his white face quivered.

"Why have you come here? You told me long ago that you hated me?" he said again.

His hands tightened their grip of her.

"Have you come here just because you are frightened—just because you have nowhere else to go? Or because you want me—because you want to stay with me?" he asked again, hoarsely.

It seemed an eternity till she answered, and then the words were so low that he could hardly catch them.

"Because I want to stay with you," she said in a whisper.

CHAPTER XXXVII

BUT even now Barry did not believe her. "You've soon changed your mind," he said with rough suspicion, and yet she did not look as if she had come there to fool him, in her soiled, torn frock, and the tears wet on her face.

Her little stockinged feet were half buried in the thick rug that stretched almost the length of the room, and she was sobbing quietly. She had lost her handkerchief, and she brushed the tears away childishly with the back of her hands.

Barry spoke again—

"It's absurd to make out that you've suddenly discovered you . . . you want to come back to me. You've made a hit—I never thought you would, but there's no doubt you have; Greaves will be offering you a contract to stay on with him, if he hasn't done so already . . ."

"He—he has!" said Hazel on the top of a sob.

Barry laughed mirthlessly.

"Well, I congratulate you, but you can't have it all your own way you know, and I'm not going to be pointed at as your husband. I always swore I would never marry a woman who was on the stage—I hate the whole beastly business."

"You didn't hate Topsy St. Helier."

Barry consigned Topsy to a warmer climate .

"I never thought of marrying her; I should sooner have thought of marrying my grandmother"—his eyes softened as he looked at her; he dragged a handkerchief from his pocket and went over to where she stood; he put his arms round her shoulders, and dried her eyes as if she had been a child.

"Don't cry," he said gently. "I'm not going to bully you any more. You're frightened and upset. You can stay here to-night, and I'll clear out. I'll settle with Hulbert to-morrow . . ." he looked at his watch.

"Do you know how late it is? You must be worn out! I'll be getting along."

She let him go without a word. She stood with her hands hanging limply against her white frock, her fingers clasping the handkerchief he had given her, listening to his steps in the hall.

She heard him take his big coat down from the rack, and heard him make a great business of brushing it; it seemed a long time till he came back.

"Well—good-night," he said, not looking at her. "I hope you'll be comfortable—there's nothing to worry about. Hulbert shall never bother you again, I promise you." He paused. "Good-night," he said again gently.

She looked up then, her cheeks were scarlet.

"Good-night—" she said in a hard voice. "And I hope you'll try to forget that I ever came here; that I ever . . . offered myself to you, and you wouldn't . . . Oh, *Barry!*"

Barry dropped his coat to the floor, shut the door with a bang; he came back and took her by the shoulders, holding her fast.

"Are you trying to make a fool of me—again?" he asked savagely. "I haven't forgotten the last time yet—when you let me drive you home—when you let me kiss you, and then . . ."

"Yes, and then—" she caught him up shrilly. "What happened then? You promised to come in the morning, and you never came; and I waited and waited, and you never came . . . never wrote . . ."

Barry let her go, and she sank down trembling into the big chair behind her.

"And why didn't I?" he demanded fiercely. "Because that damned cousin of yours said it was only the

money you wanted me for—Norman's money . . . she said . . .”

He stooped suddenly and swept her up in his arms as if she had been a child; he was trembling in every limb.

“You're not playing with me, are you?—Hazel! look at me . . . tell me it's true—tell me that you came here to-night because you want to come back to me as my wife . . . Don't let there be any more misunderstandings . . . we've wasted time enough . . . Hazel—do you . . . do you love me?”

Hazel lifted her arms and clasped them round his neck; she laid her head on his breast with a little sob of infinite content.

“Haven't I been *trying* to say it, ever since I came in?” she asked.

* * * * *

Greaves declared it was the greatest disappointment he had ever had in his life, when the following morning Barry Wicklow called upon him, and in the most lordly manner, declined the offered contract on behalf of his wife.

“She'd have made a name for herself, that girl,” he said mournfully, even as he shook hands with Barry and called him a lucky dog.

“But you tell her—” he added whimsically, “that if ever she gets tired of you, to come along here, and we'll get the thing typed out again . . .”

Barry went back to his rooms and told Hazel.

“It's like his damned impudence,” he growled.

Hazel laughed.

“He would never have said it, only he knows it will never happen,” she said happily.

Barry caught her round the waist.

“Never?” he asked jealously.

“Never,” said Hazel softly.

Barry kissed her passionately.

“And now, when I've finished with that swine Hulbert,”

he said, "I'm going to take you away on a honeymoon . . ."

"You *have* finished with him," she interrupted eagerly. "You can afford to let him go, Barry. After all, if he hadn't kissed me last night . . ." her eyes fell. "Well, I shouldn't have come here, should I?"

"And if you hadn't come here—" said Barry, "I should have been the most miserable devil on earth."

"But as it is?" she challenged him.

"As it is, my beloved—" he answered, "people will soon be saying that the only thing worth mentioning in the whole of Barry Wicklow's chequered career, was his marriage!"

THE END.

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