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THE STRONGEST OF ALL THINGS

Madame Albanesi

THE YOUNGEST MISS MOWBRAY

Mrs. B. M. Croker

THE IDES OF MARCH

Mrs. Baillie-Reynolds
(Author of "Thalassa," etc.)

A YOUNG MAN FROM THE COUNTRY

Madame Albanesi

HER OWN PEOPLE

Mrs. B. M. Croker

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"Here is your ink," she said — "Our time grows short." / 50.



THE TURNSTILE
OF NIGHT

By

Mrs. C. N. Williamson

Author of

"Papa," "The Barn Stormers," "The
Adventure of Princess Sylvia," "The
Woman in Grey," etc., etc.

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TO THE MARCHESE

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THE TURNSTILE OF NIGHT

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH THERE IS TALK OF AN UNDERGROUND TEMPLE

IN a long, low-ceilinged room, where hung a brown curtain of opium smoke, three men sat by a small brazier of red-smouldering charcoal. Two were on a divan, bending forward, their elbows on their knees, their heads close together. These were Englishmen, one extraordinarily handsome, though his rippling bronze hair was streaked with silver; the other stout, white-headed, of the type that the Eastern sun burns red, with a mouth that seemed ready to smile, eyes on the point of twinkling, even in moments of seriousness.

The third member of the party was Chinese. He sat on the clay floor with knees embraced between both arms, when his hands were not busy with gesture. His almond-shaped eyes were bright, the features of his round, yellow face intelligent and thoughtful. It was he who talked, in his native tongue, stopping sometimes while the bronze-haired Englishman translated to his older companion. They spoke almost in whispers, yet often their eyes shot hasty glances here and there, striving to pierce the dusk, and see whether any of the faces (half hidden in the narrow wooden berths that made this Calcutta opium-den like the forecabin of an emigrant ship) were peering towards their end of the room.

But all seemed sunk fathoms deep in the dreams they came to seek. Red sparks glowed like rubies out of the gloom, each one meaning a portion of opium in the bowl

of a metal pipe. Shadowy bodies, twisted into fantastic positions, loomed dark in lesser darkness. Slumbrous murmurs stirred the silence, and saved the whispers of the three men, who had never been more awake in their lives, from being remarked, if any listened. But none seemed to listen. The man who was nearest the group lay with his head thrown back, his bare throat and upturned chin glimmering like marble in the gloom, his pipe falling from an inert hand, while stertorous sounds proceeded from his parted lips. He alone might have been a possible eavesdropper, but all three had made sure that there was nothing to fear from him.

"Jove, a glorious adventure!" chuckled the elder Englishman. "I'm older than you by twenty years, Brooke, and yet I'm keen for it."

"I've had many disappointments," answered Brooke. "I'm more weary than I used to be. This last affair out here has nearly finished me. I meant to go home and settle down with my little girl. Something says she needs me. We've been separated too long."

"But think, if this goes through, you could make her an heiress. Why, she'd be the most sought-after girl in England."

"That isn't the fate I want for her—to be sought for her money. Poor child, she's had little enough chance of it so far!" Brooke laughed faintly.

"No, not for her money, but for what she is—and money helps women to happiness. You say she looks like you, and a young woman who looks like you, my dear chap, must be a beauty——"

"Honour gave promise of beauty when I saw her last," said Brooke, "but that's four years ago. She was only fifteen. Well, you put heart into me, Charteris. One more try for my little girl's luck, if it can be managed. But what if we escape the dangers—and there's no counting them, we both know—what if we escape, to find that Lal Singh's story is a legend?"

"Don't you trust him?" asked the older man, Colonel

Ronald Charteris, with a glance at the Chinaman squatting still and stolid now, for Lal Singh could understand but a few words of English.

“ Yes, I trust him. I saved his life, and he has vowed devotion since. I believe him sincere and honest. But he may be mistaken. What a story for the twentieth century ! Jewels worth a king’s ransom hidden for centuries in an underground temple beneath a Buddhist monastery in Thibet ! Even if they ever existed, and were concealed in a place so strange as Lal Singh describes, wouldn’t they have been unearthed long ago ? ”

“ Who can tell ? ” murmured Charteris. “ There’s nothing too strange to be true. I wish I could rattle off the Chinese jargon as you do, but you tell me Lal Singh says that superstition kept the jewels sacred. He says it has been believed, since that time when the breastplate was hung on some beastly idol in a temple, that the Grand Lhama’s power would decline if it were removed, and moreover, that the man who stole the jewels, or lifted them from the idol’s breast, would lose his hope of future existence. You know more about these Johnnies than I do, for you once got into Thibet in disguise——”

“ That was years ago, and I didn’t get near Lhassa. ”

“ What I mean is, you understand the fellows better than I can. They like mysteries ? ”

“ They live upon mystery, breathe mystery, eat and drink mystery. ”

“ Well, then, the thought of such a den underground, with reptiles for guardians of their sacred jewels, would appeal to them. Now, it seems to me that the thing’s wasted where it is, eh ? doing nobody any good. Whereas, in our circumstances—you down on your luck because the speculation you counted on has failed ; I, because my savings have gone in a bank smash, and retired Colonel’s pay doesn’t suit my book—we would know how to use that ‘ king’s ransom. ’ You want money for your daughter. I want it for myself while I live, and for my namesake, my dead brother’s son, when I die. ” Colonel Charteris

began to chuckle again. "Jove, I promised Ronny to leave him a fortune one day—when he was a jolly little boy sitting astride my knee, pretending his uncle-godfather was his horse. It would be a joke to keep my promise after all, and a surprise to him. He hasn't heard from me, except indirectly, for years, nor I from him, but I've thought of the boy nearly every day of my life. You see, I was in love with his mother, but she married my elder brother, because her people made her do it, though she cared for me. It didn't break my heart, but I never was quite the same; and when Ronny came I used to say to myself that if he'd been mine I couldn't have loved him better. We've both got someone to strive for, Brooke. Let's go in for this adventure."

"You don't seem to realise," said the other, "that it would take more money than we can scrape together. We'd have to equip an expedition, you and Lal Singh and I; and then, though he has been accustomed to going from China into Thibet with his caravan, he could not guide us as far as the neighbourhood of Lhasa, even if we hadn't lost our ears and our eyelids or our lives long before. He couldn't take us inside the Monastery of the Moon, as he calls the convent where he believes this diamond breastplate to be hidden. We should have to bribe somebody, and the bribe must be a big one, or it would be worse than useless."

"But I thought you said Lal Singh knew the man who would do the trick."

"He has met an inmate of the monastery whom he believes to be treacherous and mercenary—a dangerous fellow to deal with; besides, for all that Lal Singh can tell, he knows nothing of the underground temple or the Breastplate of the Seven Stars."

"The Breastplate of the Seven Stars!" repeated Charteris, with unctiousness. "What a beautiful idea, eh? when you think that each star, unless Lal Singh is romancing, must be a diamond of priceless value, worth risking one's life for a dozen times over."

“A dozen times over!” laughed Brooke. “If we go in for this we shall risk our lives a thousand times over before we see it half through. But as for me, I’m a soldier of fortune. If it weren’t for my little girl, and one other consideration, I shouldn’t care a rap if my time came to-morrow, and, thank Heaven, a man can die but once.”

A far-away look put out the twinkling light in the elder man’s eyes. “I’m with you there. Only—I should grudge dying on the eve of a success that might turn an emperor’s brain. A pity we haven’t got money. It’s a beastly shame to be held up for a few hundreds. If it hadn’t been for that bank smash I might have laid my hands on a thousand. As it is, I haven’t a penny beyond my pay.”

“If my irrigation scheme hadn’t gone wrong, I needn’t go adventuring to Thibet,” retorted Brooke. “I’ve been an unlucky beggar; but it’s a long lane that has no turning. Who knows but here’s a turn at last? I might get eight hundred pounds—if I liked to risk a little nest-egg invested for Honour with my solicitor in London. She doesn’t know of it. The money was to be hers on her marriage—if she should marry—and she’d be the first to say, ‘Dad, take it,’ for she’s a good plucked one. But, anyhow, eight hundred pounds wouldn’t be enough to start with, for, once started, we shouldn’t dare to be stopped for lack of money.”

“Hasn’t Lal Singh got any hoard to put into the fund?” queried Charteris.

“He may have something, though the money he made on his last expedition as a caravan merchant was stolen at the time I saved his life. But he’s a canny Chinaman, and naturally he would think supplying information and acting as guide equivalent to putting in a large sum. No, we couldn’t count on anything from him.”

“Seven priceless diamonds among us three!” muttered Colonel Charteris. “We’d be kings! And to lose all for a few miserly hundreds. It’s maddening. Let’s risk it on your—or rather your daughter’s—eight hundred.”

"Perhaps you are not aware," breathed a voice so low it might have been a spirit-whisper, "that expeditions into Thibet are forbidden by Government?"

With a great start the two Englishmen turned their heads. Only the Chinaman did not start. He never started or showed emotion in any violent way. But a wicked gleam lit up in his slanting black eyes. It was like the cold glitter on the sharp edge of a steel knife, as his gaze fixed itself upon the face of a man who had crawled towards the group, inch by inch, serpent-like, along the earthen floor.

"So you were not asleep?" said Brooke, his handsome mouth hard set.

"No, I never sleep in these places. I am an observer. I come for what I can see and hear—strange things often. But you have not answered my question. Are you aware of the regulation against trespassing in Thibet?"

"Whether we are or not is our affair, not yours, Mr. Stranger," sharply said Colonel Charteris.

"Mr. St. Leger, if you please——"

"You're no Englishman!" exclaimed the retired officer, peering through the dusk at the other's pale, high-cheek-boned face, which a short time ago had lain with its chin turned up in feigned slumber. "I'm hanged if you're not as Russian in feature as in accent."

"My father was an Englishman, my mother a Russian," coolly remarked the eavesdropper. "We are likely to know more of each other later on, for your expedition doesn't start without me. That is the reason your knowledge of the law is my affair as well as your affair."

"Lucky for you that there are two Englishmen here and only one Chinaman," said Brooke, "for if it were the other way round you might know little more of anything in this world, Mr. St. Leger."

"Ah, I took my chances," replied the other, drawling, though his light eyes were bright and catlike in his long, dark face. "Besides, it is known that I am here to-night; I come often. I have been doing some special writing for

a Calcutta paper in a—er—an interval of leisure. But I am tired of writing. I tire of most things. This adventure you propose would suit me, and if you take me along I can help you.”

“We don’t want your help,” growled Charteris.

“There you are mistaken. You do want it. You need money, and I can get it. You can’t go without money; you can’t go without me—the latter for the simple reason that, if you attempt to rid yourselves of me, I will at once lay information against you and stop the whole scheme.”

“You talk as if you were going out for a morning walk,” sneered Brooke, “instead of undertaking an expedition in which each man engaged will carry his life in his hand. I lived in China as a young man; I speak Chinese—that is, one or two dialects, well enough to pass for a native in a good disguise, at which sort of thing I am rather an expert, my life having depended upon it more than once. My friend would have to pass for a dumb fakir; our guide, as you see, is himself a Chinaman. You——”

“I have also lived in China. I understood every word that passed between you in Chinese, and it is a tribute to Lal Singh’s eloquence that I was not only deeply interested in, but convinced by, his story. I assure you that as far as the language and disguise go, I shall be a help, not a hindrance. For money, I can get anything you want up to two thousand pounds—not my own money, but that of a relative in your country. He will lend—though he will expect to be repaid.”

“You can have little pride to force yourself upon strangers in this way, after spying upon them while feigning sleep that you might overhear their conversation.”

“The more fools they to converse here.”

“It was necessity that drove us to meet our Chinese friend here,” cut in Brooke.

“And now it is again necessity, not choice, that constrains you in accepting me as your partner—for you do accept me, don’t you?”

Brooke shrugged his shoulders. “It may be that we

shall take you as our Old Man of the Sea. But what guarantee can we have that you don't mean to betray us ? ”

“ The guarantee of my self-interest. You need me, but I need you also. I know enough about your plans to stop your carrying them out, but I did not hear enough to enable me to carry out your plans without you. That is your protection. And by wiring my uncle in London, who will trust to my judgment, I can get the money within the next few days. ”

“ I think we had better have a further talk before we decide upon a plan of action, ” said Brooke. “ We should like to know something about you. ”

“ Anything you please. I'm a citizen of the world ; I have lived in China and in Russia ; I have lived in England, and of the three I like England least, though I can count upon a warm welcome there from persons of importance when I choose. My name is Loris St. Leger. I am thirty-one years old ; mother and father dead. I have always wanted more money than I had, and I have a relish for adventures. Now you know as much about me as anyone knows, save four persons, one of whom is myself. ”

As the man finished, he bowed with ironic courtesy, first to the two Englishmen, then to Lal Singh. And the eyes of Lal Singh were daggers.

Within the next week the adventure to be undertaken had mapped itself out somewhat on the lines of a Tontine.

Two cipher cablegrams had been sent to London from Calcutta ; one to Nevill Brooke's solicitor, Harvey Kane ; the other to Loris St. Leger's uncle whom he spoke of, secretively smiling, as Mr. John Smith.

Harvey Kane had answered to the effect that owing to a financial “ slump ” his client's African mining shares were unsaleable, except at a ruinous loss. But that, rather than see his client lose a brilliant opportunity, he—Harvey Kane—would risk eight hundred pounds of his own, stipulating only that in case of success, he should have an equal share with the others engaged in the profits of the expedition.

Mr. John Smith—who was said by his nephew to be “in the City”—made much the same stipulation. It had been agreed that he was to be asked for eight hundred pounds, and this sum he promised to send, provided that he were considered an equal partner in the transaction.

Lal Singh contributed his knowledge of the treasure and its whereabouts—a secret which had come down to him through two or three generations of his ancestors, one of whom had been a renegade Buddhist priest from Thibet. He contributed also his skill as a guide and his experience in fitting out and conducting an expedition.

Colonel Charteris and Nevill Brooke gave themselves and all that two brave men could do, Harvey Kane, the lawyer in London, furnishing money, without which the expedition could not start. Loris St. Leger contributed himself as a blackmailer; and his uncle, who retired behind the unassuming name of “John Smith,” was an equal contributor with Harvey Kane.

If the adventurers succeeded in penetrating into the heart of forbidden Thibet, and acquired the sacred Breast-plate of the Seven Stars, which was said to maintain the supremacy of the Grand Lhama, they would divide the treasure equally among themselves and such others (if any) with whom they were finally obliged to share the secret for the sake of obtaining assistance. Each of the six men already concerned would name an heir, and an agreement with the terms of the mutual understanding should be in possession of each, signed by all the names, save those of Kane and Smith, which must be written by their proxies, Brooke and St. Leger.

The diamonds, if obtained, would be converted into money, and the proceeds divided on a certain date and at a place to be named, among the survivors of the expedition, their backers, or the appointed heirs.

The funds from Harvey Kane, the solicitor, and Mr. Smith, the convenient relation of Loris St. Leger, duly arrived.

Certain of enough money to see them through, barring

accidents, the adventurers thought it prudent to separate into two parties as far as Kashmir, to avoid attracting the attention of the Indian Government. No disguise would be necessary up to that period of their expedition, and in Kashmir they would buy their mules, horses, provisions, and merchandise to sell, before joining forces at the appointed rendezvous.

They were to set forth from Leh, in Kashmir, in the guise of Buddhist pilgrims, travelling with a merchant caravan, in order to worship at Lhasa, the "Ground of God." St. Leger's and Brooke's fluent Chinese would materially assist their disguise; Lal Singh, as a Buddhist, was safe in his own character, though in his secret heart he had leanings towards Christianity; while Colonel Charteris was to pass, according to Brooke's suggestion, as a dumb fakir—a pose calculated to cover ignorance and mistakes. If they had the luck not to be found out they had merely the almost incredible hardships of such a journey as they contemplated to endure; the privations when food was giving out and no human habitations near; the bitter, intolerable cold, the anguish of long, forced marches with hunger gnawing their vitals, thirst parching their throats and maddening their brains; the danger of meeting bands of brigands, and encountering savage beasts of prey, which are the only denizens of the greater part of barren Thibet; the peril of their own death or their animals' from cold or exhaustion.

All this, if they were luckier than ninety-nine out of a hundred other expeditions, which had started and turned back before coming near to the sacred city that only one European had ever been known to enter and leave again.

But if they were not lucky—if their disguise should be penetrated, even without their real motive being suspected, from that instant the two Englishmen and the Russian were as dead men. For Lal Singh, if he could successfully plead ignorance in leading the expedition, there might be escape; but for the others none from torture excruciating and from a death of nameless horror.

Of these facts they were aware ; yet the Seven Stars of the Sacred Breastplate dazzled their eyes waking and sleeping ; and when the day of starting came there was not one man who would have turned his face towards safety.

CHAPTER II

THE COST OF THE STARS

MONTHS later three of the men who had talked in an opium den of Calcutta were huddled into a little clay-walled room in a pilgrims' rest-house in Lhasa, the Rome of Thibet. There was no door, but they had hung blankets over the archway of unbaked brick, ornamented with cows' horns, which divided the squalid sleeping apartment from the larger and less expensive lodging which adjoined, and they spoke in cautious whispers. A word overheard, and they would be hacked to pieces by savage fanatics, who would regard them as carrion.

From a small, unglazed window they could have looked down upon a street crowded with Buddhist pilgrims from all parts of Asia ; students, " fire-breathers," practisers of witchcraft, long-robed men on foot and on donkeys ; men laden with praying-wheels and other sacred relics which they had bought to carry to their distant homes ; fanatics selling " lightning bones " to cure all ailments, or holy rosaries blessed by the Grand Lhama, the Pope of Buddhism. But they had looked their fill, these men who had passed together through a separate danger for every one of the thousand odd miles they had travelled. They were sickened with the smells which came up from the filthy street, and deafened by the howls of the Buddhist priests who danced among the rotting bodies of dead animals, under the red light of flaming torches. But in the saturnalia outside the rest-house lay the hope of

safety, because the New Year festivities were in progress ; the people were half beside themselves over the cruel pastimes of the season, approved and witnessed by the Grand Lhama ; and few of the mad, religious pleasure-seekers had thought to spare for their neighbours.

The three men who whispered were Brooke, Charteris, and St. Leger, haggard and travel-worn under their disguise ; and as they talked Lal Singh entered, having murmured a word which gained him instant admittance.

"I have the permission," he announced in Chinese. "When I had described our sacrifices, our sufferings in devotion to the cause, and pledged in our names the offering of five hundred taels to the silver Buddha of the Moon, we were granted the boon for which we crave ; permission to enter the gates of the monastery at midnight, and remain in the temple till daybreak, until the four-hours' prayer be concluded and the moon set."

At this news the breath of those who heard came quickly. The walls surrounding the Monastery of the Moon, which stood on a bleak eminence overlooking the city of Lhasa, were insurmountable, the great green bronze gates impregnable ; but they read between the lines of Lal Singh's announcement, guessing that the thing on which they had pinned their one hope had come to pass. The priest Nain Khala, of whom Lal Singh had spoken many times, had proved venal. In accepting an offering for the shrine of the silver god, he had in reality taken a huge bribe for himself, as nobody else in the monastery would know—if he could help it—that the shrine had been visited, or an offering laid upon it.

The silver Buddha squatted in his temple in the centre of the clustering white buildings which covered the Eminence of the Moon. What they had risked their lives to reach was not there. Where it might be found, precisely, they did not yet know, or even whether it existed, save in the stories handed down from generation to generation ; but they pressed close to discovery—dazzling success or crushing disappointment ; and they

would have, thanks to Lal Singh's manœuvre, four hours in which to solve the secret—those four mystic hours between midnight and the setting of the moon over its votive hill.

In the temple of Buddha of the Moon, worship was perpetual. There was always one sentinel priest who prayed to the silver god; every four hours he was relieved from his vigil by another; this was the rule of the monastery. At twelve on this night chosen for the venture, the vigil of Nain Khala would begin, and half an hour earlier the four pilgrims who were to pay for the privilege would be admitted. At any other time of the year it would have been more difficult to obtain the favour, even for a price, for it was against the law of the monastery to admit pilgrims farther than the outer courts, where they were occasionally fed. But at this sacred season all who could be in town witnessing the religious pastimes were there. Nain Khala's self-respect was saved by accepting from the pilgrims a generous offering "for Buddha," which he doubtless intended to keep for himself, smuggling the pilgrims into the monastery unseen. Once they were in the temple with him, he need not fear that the long prayer they wished to make would be broken in upon before the four hours' vigil was ended. And before that he hoped to have them safely out of the way.

This was the understanding; but, oddly enough, Nain Khala's conception of the last clause was different from that which he had wished to leave in the mind of the pilgrims' spokesman, his own old acquaintance Lal Singh.

At the time of the New Year feasts, it was comparatively easy for the priest to bring three or four strangers inside the monastery gates before midnight. Previous to that time he was free from duty, and the cell where he intended to secrete the pilgrims, close to the temple of the silver god, was temporarily in his possession. A priest awaiting vigil was supposed to rest or pray there for an hour previous to entering the temple. But after the setting of the moon

—that was a different story, though Nain Khala had been careful not to explain the difficulties of the situation to Lal Singh.

The pilgrims could not pass out of the temple without being seen by the waiting priest in the cell, which was practically a sentry-box; and if they were seen, not only would Nain Khala lose the money he coveted, but his position in the monastery, perhaps his life.

Lal Singh had never entertained a high opinion of Nain Khala's character, otherwise he would not have ventured to make the offer he had made, for most of the priests of Buddha were absolutely incorruptible. But Lal Singh had not sounded the soul of his appointed guide to its depths, and even if he had guessed the treachery of which the man was capable, he could not know the magnificent facilities Nain Khala had at hand for concealing crime if he committed it.

This being the case, it was with comparative confidence that the four men left the pilgrims' rest-house, and started by way of dark and deserted by-paths to leave the town for the height where the monastery stood.

The scene was weirdly picturesque under the light of the Eastern moon, which cut out every shadow, sharply outlined as serrated lines of ebony on ivory; but if the adventurers felt the magic of the night, they said nothing of their emotions to one another. Even up to the gates of the monastery, which were silently pushed ajar for them at their knock, they scarcely spoke; and once inside they were dumb as statues, the long robes they wore melting into the shadow under the walls, as they let the darkness hide them, swallowing them up.

So they stole beneath an archway, on through a series of winding passages, coming out at last close to the temple that had one entrance from a small, square courtyard, into which the cell where they were to wait opened with a grated window and a door.

They flitted batlike across the white square of moonlit courtyard, and inside the cell they were again in darkness.

A chime of silvery bells in the temple adjoining announced the hour when Nain Khala should relieve the praying priest. A door gave communication between the cell and the temple, not directly, but by crawling on the knees through a short passage, which mode of progression was supposed to signify the humility of the priest.

Nain Khala opened this door, dropped on his knees, and, mumbling a prayer, shuffled along the passage. The others were instructed to remain where they were, until a certain word signalled the fact that Nain Khala's predecessor had gone, leaving him alone in the temple.

Nevill Brooke, who was to be the first to follow, knelt at the entrance to the passage, and a pale light, less bright than that of the moon at the little barred window, filtered out from the lamps on the other side. It was his quick ears that listened for the cue, and received it. A touch on the hand of Charteris, close behind, told that the procession was to move; and five minutes later Brooke, Charteris, St. Leger, and Lal Singh stood in the temple of Buddha of the Moon.

To Nain Khala they were genuine pilgrims, Asiatics like himself. Had he guessed that they were not as simple as they seemed, he might have feared to pit his subtlety against theirs, for even as it was, the priest's heart was knocking against his side with such irregular hammerings that he feared lest the sound, so loud in his own ears, might be heard by others.

He waited, while the four pilgrims looked reverently (as it seemed to him) about the octagon-shaped temple, their eyes dwelling on the windowless walls of white stone, the slender pillars of silver supporting the domed roof; the globe-lamps, imitating moons, set at the juncture of wall and ceiling, in the midst of a band of silver-starred blue enamel; and above all upon the great silver idol, standing on a carved ivory pedestal in the centre of the temple. The dome above the god had a round aperture open to the sky, as in the Pantheon at Rome, and the moon at this moment being at its zenith, the effect of the

one straight beam of light falling upon the silver image and deadening the feeble, artificial illumination of the distant lamps was extraordinary, even thrilling.

"Before your devotions are begun, the offering must be laid upon the altar," said Nain Khala, in the same monotonous, sing-song voice with which he chanted his prayer.

Lal Singh had the money agreed upon, in gold, which he took from a bag carried in his breast, and laid upon the altar, kneeling. This done under the glittering eyes of the priest, the other three were allowed to kneel, closely grouped about their leader. They began ostensibly to pray, in voices so low that the words they said could not be audible even to Nain Khala, who knelt, also seemingly in deep devotion, on the other side of the great altar, at a distance of twelve or fourteen feet.

They dared not speak in any language save Chinese, lest Nain Khala, catching some strange inflection, should give the alarm, bringing in his brothers like a swarm of venomous ants. But, had they ventured, the priest would have been more oblivious than they dared to hope. While he mechanically gabbled the familiar words of the four-hours' prayer, his thoughts were busy with the details of the thing he meant to do; and his eyes were on the gold.

He would have four hours for the deed and the hiding of it; but he knew that he could not long bear the strain of suspense. He must act soon, and have the work over. Success was almost sure, but though his mind was made up, the physical part of him rebelled with trembling and nausea.

"Have you the chloroform?" whispered St. Leger to Lal Singh.

"Yes," returned the Chinaman, stolidly.

"We must put him to sleep as soon as possible," St. Leger went on. "A pity that the others were so squeamish. though after all, perhaps it will be safer for our skins to leave a living man who will think he has had a bad dream,

and will dare say nothing, rather than a dead one whose blood would speak."

"If, as you were told, there is a way from this temple to the underground holy of holies," murmured Nevill Brooke to the Chinaman, "my opinion is that there might easily be a secret way down under the——"

"Hush!" aspirated Nain Khala, springing to his feet with such suddenness as to break the other's words short. "I hear sounds. I fear it may mean that something unusual is on foot. It may even be that you were seen entering the courtyard, and if you are found here we are lost. Quick! I must hide you, and if it be a false alarm, I will come soon to release you again."

As he spoke, his dark face like yellow wax in the pale light of the moon and lamps, he pushed the pedestal which formed the altar of the god.

The great idol, which looked so ponderous, moved on its carved block of ivory with strange ease and noiselessness. Nain Khala pointed downwards, with a shaking hand, and the four others, crowding close, saw a square black hole, with a steep flight of stone steps descending into utter darkness.

Their pulses throbbed, and the blood sang in their ears. It seemed that Destiny was playing into their hands. They had dared hope for nothing so marvellous as this.

Without an instant's hesitation (since an instant missed might lose all) Lal Singh and Loris St. Leger, who were nearest, plunged one after the other down the secret stairway. Brooke coming next followed, but Charteris, with his foot on the first step, chanced to catch such a gleam in Nain Khala's snaky eyes that he paused.

Having taken up the *rôle* of a man afflicted with dumbness, he spoke no word, but caught Nain Khala by the arm, and pulled him down the stairway also. That sinister gleam had told him at a glance that the priest meant treachery. Charteris was sure in a second that Nain Khala had in reality heard no noise, feared no intrusion upon the sacred hours of prayer; and whatever danger

might lurk behind this hidden stair, the hot-headed old colonel resolved that the would-be traitor should share it.

It was the priest's left arm which fell into the grip of Charteris, and he could not help but obey. The savage jerk of his flabby muscles, which threw him forward down step after step, despite himself, well-nigh drew a shriek of pain, but he clenched his teeth lest, turning to see what happened above, those below should rush back to the aid of their comrade.

Nain Khala was a physical coward, but he had not been unprepared for emergencies, and he knew that his moment had come. Quick as light, with his free hand he snatched from his bosom a knife and plunged it up to the hilt in his captor's back.

The blow sent the breath out of the old man's lungs with a gasp, and a spurt of blood from the parted lips. He fell forward, down the steps, his grasp on Nain Khala's wrist relaxed, his arms instinctively outstretched, and the priest, leaving the knife in the wound, fled with wild leaps and animal pantings up the steps down which he had been dragged.

His one hope was to reach the top and push the great idol back into its place before the others could be upon him. From below there was no escape, though the idol was easily moved from above, and the deadened sounds which might ascend would be considered miraculous by those who heard. As for the bodies which would presently lie rotting underground, he need not fear that he would be connected with them in the minds of their discoverers, for the hidden temple would not be visited until a certain feast day two months later.

Breathless, Nain Khala bounded from the last step on to the inlaid floor of the temple, and had seized the corner of the idol, when a hand reaching out up of darkness seized his priestly robe and pulled him down.

It was the hand of Nevill Brooke which caught the traitor ; but it was the hand of Lal Singh which, grasping the dagger withdrawn from Charteris' back stabbed the

murderer in the throat, once and again, till his blood stained the secret stairway crimson.

* * * * *

Down at the foot of the stone steps lay Charteris, his head on Nevill Brooke's knee, the sands of his life running out.

In a corner, crumpled out of sight in shadow black as his treachery, was a dead man; but the glazing eyes of the old soldier saw only his friend.

Blood, bubbling from his lungs, choked his utterance, rendering his words inaudible, yet he would speak, and Brooke bent down to listen, while Loris St. Leger, drunk with lust for the treasure, stamped his foot in impatience. For him, while each moment was precious, Charteris took too long to bid the world farewell.

"If you find it," gurgled the dying man, "my share—don't forget—*it's for Ronny*. The paper—my will—you've got it. I trust you, Brooke. If you succeed, and—live, you'll see he has his rights. I'll not keep you. Find the jewels—though I can't be there. Leave me. Ronny——"

"No, dear old man," answered Brooke, his beautiful eyes, so like his daughter's, shining behind tears. "It's all right about your nephew. My solicitor has had the details of our Tontine, and the date of the division. We couldn't cheat you if we would. But you shan't die here, after all we've gone through together."

"He is dead already," said St. Leger.

It was true. The light of life had gone out of the eyes still staring up at his friend's face. Colonel Charteris' last thought had been of his namesake—the son of the one woman he had ever loved.

Brooke laid the white head down, and closed the wide, sightless eyes. It was the old soldier's wish that the others should go on, and for his sake as well as their own there must be no more delays. Already St. Leger had lighted a folding lantern and was urging Lal Singh and Brooke to come on.

From the level space at the foot of the thirty steps down which they had come a rough, dark passage hewn out of the rock that formed a foundation for the monastery led away. The roof was too low for a man to walk upright. They had to bend almost double as they groped their way along, St. Leger now going first with the lantern.

The passage sloped steeply downward, and the rocky floor was so irregular that, with the fantastic lights and shadows cast by the swinging lantern, they stumbled and more than once fell to their knees. But they staggered up again and plunged blindly on, though the thought weighed on their hearts that they might not be on the way to the underground temple after all.

Presently they reached a place where the sloping passage abruptly widened, and St. Leger started back with a cry. "A trap!" he stammered. "Good heavens! another second, and I should have broken my neck."

Here the path was wide enough for the others to join the leader, and looking over his shoulder they saw by the lantern's light that he had just stepped back in time to avoid falling headlong into a well, of which the bottom could not be seen. He had been saved by one chance in a hundred, for the way cut in the dark rock was so black that there was scarcely, at a first casual glance, a difference between solid stone and solid darkness.

On either side of the hole was a narrow ledge, along which it was possible for a man with a steady head to walk, by planting one foot before the other and pressing against the wall.

Here Brooke went first, and his companions followed, each with a hand on another's shoulder.

Beyond, the passage continued as before, until suddenly Brooke called out for caution. They had reached a rough flight of stairs cut in the rock. Counting as they went, they descended fifteen steps only to find themselves confronted with a gate made of iron bars, and fastened with a quaint padlock.

"By heaven, this is the way to the temple!" exclaimed

St. Leger, "or they would not have taken all these precautions to keep out the sacrilegious amateur!" So saying, he snatched from his breast a revolver, and, firing, blew the lock to pieces, the shot causing a strange, almost deafening detonation, and filling the ill-ventilated passage with smoke.

The gate, however, was no longer a barrier. They passed on, not down a sloping path as before, but walking upon a level pavement of mosaic, which showed colour in the rays of the lantern, while a bricked roof arched at a good height above their heads. Darkness curtained the distance, but a few steps farther on this black veil resolved itself into a pair of low bronze doors.

Brooke set his strong shoulder against them, and they opened. All three men passed through.

For a moment they saw nothing, save that they were in a large, open space, where shadows loomed gigantic; the lantern held high in the hand of Brooke, sent a revealing ray to the right, striking out a gleam that was like a flash of brilliant eyes in the gloom, or a shower of meteors down the steps of night.

"The Breastplate of the Seven Stars!" faltered St. Leger.

Fate and Nain Khala had sent them to the place of their dreams. And as the poor illumination which was all they had, showed to their dazzled eyes a great golden idol, smiling an unchanging smile and wearing on his bosom a constellation of stars, the blood rushed to their heads, turning them giddy.

Each of the seven stars was a blazing crest of diamonds, while the centre of each was formed of one great white stone as big as the Koh-i-noor.

They had come from very far off, with a siren-song ringing in their ears, but the siren had not sung falsely. The treasure was theirs to take for the putting out of their hands.

"Look, what is that, like a bright drop of blood in the idol's hand?" said Brooke. He held the lantern

closer, and in the outstretched palm of the golden god sat a dull bronze toad, scarcely two inches in length, the top of its head filled in with a fiery stone which appeared not unlike a common carbuncle.

"A toad with a jewel in its head!" he said, while St. Leger scarcely heard or looked. But Lal Singh had eyes and ears for Brooke's discovery also.

"Do not touch it!" he cried. "I have heard of that, but purposely never mentioned it to you. It is a great fetish—a thing of small intrinsic worth, yet of immeasurable value to the worshippers in this hidden temple. I implore you to leave the toad. It can bring nothing but evil upon you so long as you may live."

"I am not superstitious," said Brooke, "and if neither you nor St. Leger make any claim upon this strange little beast, I shall certainly take it to keep in memory of this night. The diamonds we will convert into money and divide according to arrangement, but this toad one need not part with, and if I get home alive I should like to show it to my daughter."

"I confess I am superstitious, and wouldn't care to touch that thing," answered St. Leger, rousing himself. "All I want is my share of the jewels to show for this night's work."

The Breastplate of the Seven Stars was suspended round the short throat of the idol by a chain of gold. Climbing eagerly up on the pedestal, St. Leger attempted to detach it, but the chain was stronger than he had thought, and something held it tightly in place at the back. Balancing himself with difficulty, and holding on to the idol's great shoulder by the left hand, he passed his right round the neck of the god. In this way he discovered that the clasp of the chain fitted into a groove, as if into a tight box without a cover. Impatiently he jerked it free, and then sprang back with a loud yell of fear and pain, for something had darted at him, stabbing him deeply in the hand.

Brooke, who had just pocketed the bronze toad, caught

St. Leger and saved him from a fall, while Lal Singh, with horrified eyes, pointed upward.

Out of the aperture from which the clasp of the chain had been torn had sprung a golden snake, which twisted round the idol's throat, and was still vibrating, a delicate metallic tongue protruding from its open jaws.

"The Guardian of the Stars!" faltered the Chinaman. "A terrible piece of mechanism. The snake has stung the hand of the robber with its poisoned tongue, and I fear that the sting means death."

Groaning with horror, St. Leger stared at his hand. In the fleshy part of the palm was a small puncture, from which no blood oozed; but a purplish tinge which coloured the wound spread and deepened as he looked.

Without a word, Nevill Brooke took the hand, and pressing his lips to the blue mark, sucked the wound until the bitter blood flowed freely into his mouth. Then he spat, and coolly wiped his lips with a handkerchief. "I hope that will stop the mischief," he said.

"It may be that you have saved my life," stammered St. Leger, pale and faint as he had not been when, half an hour ago, he saw two men die.

"I assure you, if I have, I did not do it for love," answered Brooke, "therefore you owe me no gratitude. Come, let us not waste time."

CHAPTER III

THE MOMENT AND THE MAN

THE full moon was rising like a silver shield out of the Mediterranean, and flooding the Casino gardens at Monte Carlo with pale, mysterious light.

Hardly could there have been a more striking contrast than between the shadow-flecked peace of the garden

overhanging the sapphire sea, and the gaudy gaiety inside the Casino whose windows jewelled the darkness. Out from the noise and glitter hurried a man, who had turned his back upon the gambling rooms ; upon the gorgeously dressed women, flashing with diamonds, real or false ; upon the hard, eager faces of men absorbed in one all-engrossing thought ; upon the yellow gleam of gold on the long tables, upon the heated atmosphere make up of mingling scents and crowding humanity.

He was a young man, and an hour ago he had been full of the joy of life. So quick was he of observation that at most times such a marked contrast would have struck him with a thrill ; but now the shadow of ruin rose grimly before his eyes, and there was no peace for him in the moonlit garden.

He had not come there for peace, but with the proud instinct of hiding his haggard face, and to collect his thoughts before trying to decide what he should do next.

Last night he had pitied certain reckless ones who had lost heavily, and shown despair in haggard faces ; women who had cried in the gardens ; and men who had not left themselves enough for a consoling cigar. Now, he hoped that nobody would see or dare to pity him.

As he walked down one of the paths that led to the terrace over the sea, the moonlight found his face and showed it young, handsome—the sort of face that women turn to look after, and even men admire. At this moment to anyone who loved him it would have been pathetic in its rebellious pain and shamed humiliation.

He stopped and stood staring out over the dark water that had a wide band of silver across it now—the moon's pathway ; but he saw none of the beauty of the night.

“What a fool I've been !” he said to himself, half aloud. “It's unbelievable that I should have made such a mess of my life. Good heavens, if I could wake up and find that I'd been dreaming ! But it's real enough. The bad things always are. The question is, what to do now that this hour can't be undone. What intolerable insults

I shall have to submit to—I, who can't even pay my hotel bill, much less get away from this hell that masquerades as Paradise. I've a mind to end it all. There isn't a soul who would care, and it would save a lot of bother."

From behind, a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and with a start and an impulse of irritable resentment he turned, shaking off the touch. But the one who had approached him quietly stood his ground.

Now the face of the newcomer was in the full light of the moon, and the young man who had been silently accosted had a strange impression of it, or rather two impressions which contradicted each other as rapidly as a flash of lightning cutting the night contradicts darkness.

"What a horrible, white old face—like a vampire's, with its loose red lips!" was the first thought that leaped into his mind; then, an instant later, he wondered that he could have had such an idea. He was gazing at an elderly, white-haired man, with a long beard, turned to a fall of silver by the moonlight. On the head was a low, broad-leaved hat of black felt, and the dress was that of an English clergyman.

"I beg your pardon, I hope you won't be angry with me for speaking to you," said the newcomer, in a winning tone, yet with an underlying peculiarity in his voice—a certain throaty hoarseness. "I really couldn't help it. You seemed to be in trouble, and the one business of my life is striving to help those who are in trouble. Won't you let me help you?"

"Thank you, you're very good," replied the younger man, stiffly. "But I assure you it isn't as bad as that with me. I don't need help from strangers, however kind."

"We're not strangers," pleaded the old man in clerical dress. "Nobody is a stranger to me who is suffering, and it is useless to disguise that you are suffering."

"I'm not very strong just at present," said the other. "It isn't long since I came back from South Africa, somewhat the worse for wear. I suppose my face shows that

I'm not quite up to the mark—even by moonlight." And he laughed bitterly.

"Ah—ah! South Africa!" echoed the clergyman; "that draws us the nearer together. Instead of being strangers, as you called us, we shall, I hope, soon be friends. I had relatives fighting there. Perhaps we may have acquaintances in common."

"I was only a Volunteer," said the young man, but unconsciously his tone warmed a little. It was good after all to be spoken to in a friendly way by an Englishman. "I was sent to the Riviera to pick up my health again, and instead of that I've——" His sentence broke off short, and he bit his lip, annoyed that he should have been "drawn."

"Instead of that," the old man caught him up, "you've dropped something you're afraid it won't be so easy to regain. Look here, won't you have a talk with me? We might be of assistance to one another."

"There's nothing that I can do for a fellow-being, except take myself out of his way!" exclaimed the younger.

"Allow me to be the judge. As a matter of fact, there is a service which you could do for me, if you were willing to undertake it. It is not much—technically—but it would be of value to me. And if you found that you were able to perform it, it would be only fair that you should accept an equal service in return."

"You are trying to sugar the pill of charity."

"I assure you I am doing nothing of the sort. I can easily convince you of that. Let us get away from this place. It is past eleven o'clock, and I am hungry. I dine early, and sup when I have finished—my work. But my work is over for to-night, and if you will come to my house we will have supper together."

The young man hesitated. He was lonely and desperate. He had lost every penny, and the shame of being turned out of his hotel, thrust into the street without resources unless he chose to appeal to a quarter to which he would

rather die than apply for help was unbearable. Here was an hour's respite. He did not understand this philanthropical old man's interest in him, but it was possible that good might come of it.

"Why are you so kind?" he asked abruptly.

"Kind? I am not kind. I give up my life to serving those in distress, and I'm sure there's no merit in that. I have spent this and other winters and springs at Monte Carlo, not for the reasons which bring most men here, but to help those who have lost everything (including courage and the wish to live) to regain hope. Every night I walk in the gardens of the Casino, and seldom does it fail that I find someone who needs friendship. But to you, I am strangely drawn. Yours is no common case, I feel. Will you tell me your name? Mine is Willoughby; the Reverend Jasper Willoughby."

"And mine is Ronald Charteris," the other answered quickly; but again, for an instant, the impression of something hidden behind the white mask of the old face with its half-concealed eyes sparkling behind gold-rimmed spectacles, stabbed him with a pang of surprise and distaste. But it was gone as soon as it had come, and Ronald Charteris was telling himself that it was a mere fleeting effect of the moonlight. The face was benevolent in feature—the face of a dreamer, a philanthropist.

"Thank you for answering," the clergyman was saying in his sweet, slightly hoarse voice. "And you will sup with me to-night?"

"Frankly, though I thank you, I'm in no mood for company," answered Charteris.

"I promise you that you shall meet no one but me. You need not even see a servant. I live in a flat. Everything will be ready on the table—even to a second plate. I often bring home a guest or two. I want a talk with you, and it will be better there. Every moment we are liable to be disturbed in these gardens."

"Very well, I will go with you," said Ronald Charteris. They walked away, turning their backs upon other

human shadows that flung themselves like lost souls out of the gay Casino into the engulfing night.

Charteris had not been in Monte Carlo for many days, and he soon found himself with his new friend in a street that he did not know. They followed to the end, reaching a neighbourhood of villas set among gardens with thickly-growing trees. Presently the clergyman opened a gate and made Charteris enter. "My flat is here," he explained. "The people on the first floor attend to—to me." There was a break in this sentence as if he had intended a different conclusion, but scarcely had Charteris had time to notice it before his companion began talking of something else.

The door was opened with a latch-key, and the Reverend Jasper Willoughby showed his guest the way upstairs. In the square hall on the ground floor a dim light was burning, and as Charteris glanced up he thought that he saw a faint illumination there also; but either he was mistaken, or else it was suddenly put out, for as the two men reached the top of the stairs it was to find the landing in darkness.

"Very careless of them to have left the place unlighted," exclaimed the clergyman. "I'm afraid I've no matches, so we must grope our way to the nearest door."

"I have matches," said Charteris, putting his hand into his pocket. As he spoke he was conscious of a slight rustling near at hand.

"Don't trouble. Here is the door of the dining-room," hastily said the old man, rattling the handle of the door as an accompaniment to his words. "Ah, here we have a light; the gas turned down. Pray, come in, Mr. Charteris."

Ronald obeyed, and as he crossed the threshold of the room was greeted by the fragrance of heliotrope. He happened to hate the scent, which strongly affected his nerves; and he recalled now that he had detected it very faintly in the hall outside as well.

By this time his host had turned up the gas and closed the door.

The room was more luxurious than Charteris had been

led to expect from the outer appearance of the villa or the furnishing of the hall. There was a suggestion of the East about this dining-room, with its polished floor strewn with Chinese and Indian rugs, its Oriental hangings and Chinese ornaments, its cushioned divan running round the wall, on one side of which was a map of India, China, and Thibet, marked here and there with a red cross. It was as little as possible the sort of room one would expect to find in the house of a clergyman of the English Church ; but Charteris reminded himself that the flat had been taken furnished.

The table was laid with an embroidered cloth, handsome china, a little good silver, and on it was spread a supper of cold fowl, salad, wine, and sweets. In the centre was a vase containing several sprays of the heliotrope which had charged the air with fragrance.

It was long since Charteris had eaten he remembered now, and he would have been hungry had it not been for the heliotrope ; but he made pretence of eating, and his host, looking at him with interest, put the first question which was to inaugurate the proposed talk.

“ Now, won't you show your confidence in me by telling me something about yourself ? Such things, at least, as led up to our meeting ? ”

“ Doesn't every step of one's life lead up to some other step, if one knew ? ” asked Charteris. “ Well, I went out to South Africa as a Volunteer, thinking I had plenty of money. Not that I was rich, but my mother had left me something, which I thought was well invested, and I could afford to amuse myself. In South Africa I saved a civilian chap's life one day, and he gave me a diamond to remember him by. I didn't think much about it, but meant to have it set in some form or other when I got home—if I ever did. Then I was wounded, and had fever as well. They advised the Riviera instead of England in March, and I didn't mind, for there was nothing to call me home.

“ I’ve travelled a lot, but somehow I’d never been to Monte Carlo, so, like a fool, I came to this place. I hadn’t been here more than seven or eight days, stopping at one of the best hotels and running up a big bill, when I got news from home that staggered me. Every penny was gone in a big bank smash.

“ The news bowled me over at first, for, as I told you, I’m not very fit yet, but I thought of the diamond, and took it to a man to see how much he would give for it. He asked for a few hours to think it over, and this afternoon, to my surprise, he offered me eighty pounds for the thing. What is more, he paid the money down. If I’d kept my senses I should, by this stroke of luck, have got enough to last until I could look round. I could have gone to England, and found something to do, but being stark, staring mad, I decided to try my luck at the tables. I thought the money for the diamond would be a sort of ‘fetish,’ and I was sure I should come out of the rooms with a thousand pounds for my eighty. Instead, I haven’t got eighty centimes left. I’m dead broke. But after all, I’ve been in pretty bad scrapes before now, and got out of them somehow, and I shall again. If I were in normal health and strength I shouldn’t have gone to bits as I did there in the gardens. Now I come to think of it, too, I believe I’ve heard that the authorities here are ready to pay your hotel bill and pack you off with your railway ticket, rather than you should get them into bad odour by complaining or blowing your brains out. Perhaps I shall have to stoop——”

“ No, no,” broke in the clergyman. “ Why submit to humiliate yourself when you can have a loan from me, and pay the money back at your leisure ? I am rich, yet I call myself but a steward of the money which in the world’s eyes is mine. To some men in your place I give it ; but you are not of their kind. I will lend you two hundred pounds, to be repaid as you can. Fifty pounds, or more if necessary, you can have to-night. The rest——”

“ But I have no security to offer, no references, or at

least none that I choose to refer anyone to," broke in Charteris, astonished. He had been led to expect an offer of a loan, but he had not dreamed of its being more than twenty pounds, nor had he made up his mind to accept.

"I ask for no security, no references but your face and your manner—the fact that you are a gentleman and a fellow-countryman. And I make only one condition."

"What is that?" asked Charteris.

"It is the question we raised before—the question of a return service. I lend you two hundred pounds. For that accommodation perhaps you will think I have the right to ask a small favour of you in return. If you are of an adventurous disposition you will not, I think, be displeased at the slight air of mystery with which the circumstances (concerning another than myself) oblige me to surround the affair."

Charteris' interest grew. At this hint, for a moment he forgot his folly and misfortunes and gave all his attention to the words of the clergyman.

"In any event, it would be your choice, would it not," went on the latter, "to go to England as soon as possible, now that your future outlook is changed by your money losses?"

"Certainly it would," replied Charteris.

"Well, then, I would ask you to leave here to-morrow, travelling by easy stages on account of your health, and going to London. I would ask that you took with you a companion."

"You wish to go also?" Ronald asked.

"No. It is—a lady I should expect you to escort, and see her safely home at the end of the journey. That is my condition."

"Why, that is nothing—nothing at all!" ejaculated the young man.

"Wait, I haven't finished. The lady would have to travel as your sister."

"Oh!" observed Charteris. His eyes fixed themselves on the white face of the clergyman, which was so opaquely

colourless, its features so hard and clearly cut (save for the red, loosely-hanging lips which he seemed always anxious to draw in) that it resembled a plaster cast—a death mask. Charteris' gaze searched it now, but it remained expressionless, and the bright eyes behind the slightly convex glasses met his fearlessly.

"Yes," the elder man said. "That would be essential. You would stop in Marseilles, and at the hotel where you and the lady put up, her name would have to go into the visitors' book as 'Miss Charteris.' And the same in Paris. I deprecate anything resembling deceit, but for a woman's sake——"

"Why need we stop in Marseilles and Paris?" asked Charteris. "If we went straight on the difficulty would be obviated."

"Your health would suffer."

"No, I assure you I can stand the journey straight through to London."

"There are other reasons why it is advisable to stop on the way. As it is the affair of a lady, you will understand that it may be impossible to explain everything. Do you consent to the arrangement? It will be a great service to me, and to another."

"Very well, I consent," said Charteris. "It was on the lady's account I hesitated."

"Thank you. You will not see her face during the journey. She will travel thickly veiled, and will take her meals in her own room. I can promise that you will not be bored by much conversation. The lady will not talk except when it is necessary."

"Is there anything more?" went on Charteris, whose curiosity was beginning to be piqued.

"One thing. When you arrive in London, I would ask that you drive with your companion to the house where she is to stop. You will go in with her, and remain at her service for a short time—perhaps no more than an hour. If you see that she requires assistance you would, of course, give it to her."

"Of course," echoed Ronald.

"Of *any* kind ? "

"Naturally, for a lady ; even though I hadn't seen her face," said the young man, smiling. Ronald Charteris had a delightful smile, which made him look oddly boyish, though he was twenty-eight, and had seen things to age a man in South Africa. He had blue-grey eyes, with thick, black lashes, and his hair was of so dark a brown that it looked black also.

"Then," said the clergyman, having gazed for a moment in silence at Charteris, as if taking in every feature, every trick of expression, "then I think that I may trust the last of the instructions to the lady herself. It is even more important for her to leave Monte Carlo at once than for you, and I am glad, in giving you a little help, to forward her cause also. One must do what one can for others in this short life, you know. Everything being made straight for you here, could you leave to-morrow afternoon ? "

"In the morning, if you like." Ronald found himself now in an odd position. Tacitly he had accepted Mr. Jasper Willoughby's bounty, and he could not go back and refuse at this late moment without appearing anxious to rid himself of responsibility in regard to the mysterious lady.

"Well, then, that is settled between us," said the old man, passing a large, beautifully shaped hand across his mouth, as if to hide some sudden change of expression. Charteris' eyes rested mechanically upon the hand, and he noticed that the top joint of the little finger was missing.

"I suppose you would prefer to give me your I O U for the fifty pounds I shall advance to-night," Mr. Willoughby continued. "To me, it does not matter, but if it would make you more comfortable——"

"It would, indeed," Charteris filled up the pause.

"The remainder of the sum will be paid in instalments, if that will suit you. On your arrival in Paris, fifty pounds. On your arrival in London, the remaining hundred ; and the bearer in both cases will be empowered to take your

I O U, if you choose to give it. As for the hotel in Paris, select whichever you choose, only—for the lady's sake—I would advise a quiet one.²³

“The Hôtel de Noailles ?” suggested Charteris.

“Very good. The money shall be sent you there. You may depend upon it. And now for the first fifty pounds. I think—though I don't keep large sums in hand—I can manage it in gold and notes. A cheque would hardly serve your purpose. If you will excuse me for five minutes, I will bring you the money.²⁴”

With old-fashioned ceremoniousness, he left the room. For a moment or two, when he found himself alone, Ronald sat at the table, sending his thoughts back to the beginning of this night's events. As he sat thus, it seemed to him that he heard whispering voices in the hall outside, so close to the door as to suggest that someone must have been caught by Mr. Willoughby listening at the keyhole. Then the sound ceased ; all was quiet, save for the far-away beating of the sea against the rocks ; but suddenly so strange a noise began that Charteris started from his reverie.

It was an extraordinary chattering, a shrill, continuous scolding which had a thrill of the uncanny in it. Words were apparently uttered, yet none were distinguishable ; it seemed to Charteris that, as they were shrieked out, in a high-keyed voice, it must be the fault of his own ears that he could not understand. But, as the chattering went on, and he could separate no one word from another, he began to wonder if the jabbering creature were not scolding in some foreign tongue which he had never heard before.

He had risen, expecting the room to be invaded, and instead of sitting down again at the table, he walked across the room to look at the map which covered a large space on one side of the wall.

It was at this moment that, the chattering having ceased, Mr. Willoughby came back, offering no explanation, either of the sound or his prolonged absence. Charteris did not

feel that there was any reason for hiding the fact that he had been engaged examining the map ; but had he caught the gleam which lit up behind the convex glasses as the old clergyman saw his occupation, he would have received an electric shock of surprise.

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE JOURNEY

“BY JOVE !” exclaimed Charteris. “I wonder if they’re not coming.”

It was the afternoon of the next day, and he was at the railway station of Monte Carlo, where he had come early to keep the appointment with Mr. Willoughby and the unknown lady whom he had sworn to adopt—temporarily—as his sister.

Already he was a different man from the desperate half-mad fellow minded to end his folly by ending his life. Some day he would be able to pay back the loan for which he began to feel passionately grateful. Meanwhile it was a renewal of self-respect to have settled his account at the hotel, and to walk out a free man ; and as for the journey which represented his “service” to his benefactor, he was young and of a reckless spirit which had carried him into some strange places, and he could not help regarding this in the light of an adventure.

Had he been expected to meet Mr. Willoughby again to-day at the villa where he had supped and completed his queer bargain last night, he would have been obliged to make inquiries how to reach it ; for the clergyman had escorted him almost as far as his hotel last night, therefore he had not been compelled to keep his eyes alert for landmarks. He did not know the name of the street where the villa (which had a close resemblance to

dozens of other Riviera villas, so far as he had been able to judge in the moonlight) was situated, and, so keen had been his state of exaltation, that he had scarcely noted the direction in which his guide had conducted him.

Fortunately, however, Mr. Willoughby had emphatically negatived his question as to whether they should meet at the villa before going to the train. The clergyman had named the railway station as the rendezvous; and as he had particularly stipulated that Charteris should be early, his own tardiness in keeping the appointment was the more remarkable.

Ronald had been walking up and down for nearly half an hour, his box labelled, and his ticket to Victoria in his pocket. At last, as the time grew short, he began to fear he might have been careless and made a mistake. Perhaps, instead of leaving it settled that they should meet on the departure platform, Mr. Willoughby might have reconsidered and suggested something else.

Charteris looked in the waiting-rooms and the café; he even went to the lift which takes passengers up to the garden of the Casino, but nowhere could he see the commanding figure of the old clergyman, accompanied by a veiled lady.

The situation was beginning to be awkward. He had made all his arrangements, as agreed, to travel by the train nearly due, and his luggage would certainly go in it. But, though he had kept his word, through some misunderstanding Mr. Willoughby might at this very moment be accusing him of bad faith. Nevertheless, he could do nothing, for the reason that he had no idea where to find the clergyman and the lady who was to be his fellow-traveller. He was pledged to take her with him, and whatever happened, no matter how long the delay, he must wait for her.

The crowd on the platform increased; the train was signalled. It was exactly on time. Still no white-bearded old man with a veiled woman. Then the train came thundering into the station. People hurried to take their

places. Ronald moved a few steps back. He had given up hope of going. Suddenly a voice spoke in his ear. "You are Mr. Ronald Charteris?" The words were almost whispered.

Charteris turned quickly. A tall, slender woman dressed in black, with an extraordinarily thick veil tied round a close-fitting hat, had come so near to him that as he turned his arm touched her shoulder.

"Yes, I am Ronald Charteris," he answered abruptly. "And you?"

"I am—*your sister*. Mr. Willoughby could not be with me. Come—if we don't make haste, we shall miss the train."

Without another word Charteris helped her into the nearest first-class compartment, and followed closely after. Already the train had begun slowly to move out of the station, and thirty seconds more would have made them too late. As it was, a guard would have prevented Charteris from attempting to board the train while in motion, but before the man could reach him he was inside, and shutting the door of the carriage.

There were only two vacant seats in the compartment, and these side by side. The veiled lady took the one by the window, and when Charteris had sat down by her, he was suddenly aware of a curious, self-conscious constraint. He was also aware of a faint fragrance of tuberoses. He would have felt it incumbent upon him to say something to his companion, even if there had not been questions he wished to ask, concerning Mr. Willoughby; but for his life he did not know how to begin.

At last, however, he made an awkward effort. "I was afraid you were not coming," he said. "But, of course, if you hadn't I should have waited."

She made no answer, and Ronald glanced at her face, which was half turned from him. Scarcely the dimmest suggestion of the outline of her profile could be traced under the heavy black veil, which was thickly embroidered with a close pattern. Charteris thought its wearer must

have difficulty in seeing through it. It was more like a mask than a veil, and he decided that instead of one there must be several thicknesses of lace.

At least, her silence gave him a clue to the lady's wishes. She evidently did not want to engage in a conventional conversation, and Ronald's rebuff reminded him of Mr. Willoughby's warning that his veiled companion would speak little during the journey. All that she had said so far had been said in a whisper. If he were to hear her speak aloud he would not be able to recognise her voice. This he told himself, wondering if that intention had been in the lady's mind, and if she supposed that it would be possible to make a long journey together, stopping for two nights on the way, according to instructions, without exchanging any words except in a whisper.

But hours passed, and silence reigned between the two, so strangely thrown together. Ronald did not know whether the veiled woman were young or old, beautiful or ugly. He could hardly judge even of the graces of her figure, for she wore a loose travelling cloak, and he had merely been able to assure himself that she was tall, and apparently slender. Beyond this, he only knew that she spoke English, as far as he could tell from those few whispered sentences, without a trace of foreign accent.

The train brought them to Marseilles, and they got out, Ronald offering to relieve his companion of a handbag she was carrying. At first she hesitated, then surrendered the bag.

"She's got valuable jewellery in that," Ronald said to himself, "and she's half afraid to trust me."

"We came off in such a hurry that I forgot to ask you if you had other luggage," he remarked aloud as they stepped to the platform.

For answer, she shook her head. Ronald began to be piqued. Such a silent woman was an anomaly to him.

Still in silence they drove to the hotel which Mr. Willoughby had recommended, and Charteris engaged rooms. The veiled lady remained with him, looking over his

shoulder as he wrote in the visitors' book : " R. Charteris ; Miss Charteris ; England."

" Mr. Willoughby said, I believe, that you would prefer to dine in your room ? " he remarked, rather stiffly.

" Yes," she murmured. " Thank you—for everything."

Again the whisper. Ronald wondered, if, after all, it was only because she had a violent cold, or a defect in her voice.

He went with her to the door of her room, because he considered that this would be the duty of a brother. Then, with a reminder of the hour at which their train would go in the morning, and a " good-night," to which came no audible response, they parted.

The second day was like the first, only longer. The veiled lady refused to go to the dining-car for luncheon, but Ronald humanely hoped that the mask was raised for the purpose of eating during his absence.

In Paris at last, they drove to the Hôtel de Noailles, and in the cab which took them to the Boulevard des Italiens—all in darkness, save for the lights of the rain-swept streets—the woman found her voice. But her tone was still low—only just raised above a whisper, that it might be heard over the noise of traffic.

" After you have dined, will you come to the door of my room for a moment ? I shall have something to give you."

Ronald formally assured her that he would do so, with pleasure ; and he was prompt in keeping his promise.

He knocked at the door, half hoping to be granted a glimpse of the face unveiled ; but only a hand came out to him, holding a sealed, unaddressed envelope. As he was about to take it, the fingers opened too soon, and the envelope fell to the floor.

There was a faint exclamation on the other side of the panels, and the hand descended as if the woman were impulsively stooping to pick up what she had dropped. Ronald could see the folds of her trailing dress on the carpet of the room within, as the door opened a few inches wider

and somehow the fallen envelope had insinuated itself partly under those black folds.

The young man stooped also, and was quicker than the woman, for he had the envelope in his grasp before she had reached it. Quickly the door was closed again with a stifled murmur that sounded like thanks; and it was not until Ronald was alone in the corridor, with the noise of a sliding bolt in his ears, that he made a discovery.

CHAPTER V

A HALF-SHEET OF PAPER

BESIDES the sealed envelope, doubtless intended for him, he had in his hand a torn half-sheet of paper.

At first, he supposed that it had been given to him intentionally, and the moment he was in his own room, before breaking the seal of the letter, he began to examine the loose sheet of paper.

To his surprise, it appeared to be the end of a letter, the first half having been torn off. The words at the top of the page commenced in the middle of a sentence. "Of the Tontine," Ronald read. "On April the fourth, at River House, as near as possible to eight o'clock.—L. S. L."

That was all, and Ronald could make no sense of it, except that the date mentioned was that of the following day. He opened the envelope, having puzzled for a few minutes over the lines, hoping to find an explanation which would tell him why the torn sheet of paper had been given him.

But he was disappointed. The envelope contained English notes to the value of fifty pounds, and a kindly-worded note from Mr. Willoughby, saying that he had been taken ill, and found himself obliged to upset one or two of the minor arrangements made in Monte Carlo. Mr. Charteris would receive the promised money from the

hands of the lady, and could give her a receipt and I O U. Mr. Willoughby added his regrets that indisposition had prevented him from seeing his friend again. He hoped for a meeting in the future, however; and meanwhile once more recommended Mr. Charteris' travelling companion to his chivalric care. She needed protection, and was worthy of it. At the end of the journey she might need it even more than before.

There was nothing else save the signature; not a word of reference to the torn bit of paper; and Ronald began to suspect uncomfortably that after all it had not been meant to fall into his possession. Either it had been laid under the envelope and handed to him by mistake, or else it had been swept along the floor by the trailing draperies of the lady. Brought thus close to the door, in his haste to obtain the envelope and thus save the lady from stooping, he had caught up the two together.

There was something attractive to Ronald about the word "Tontine." It vaguely suggested treasure, and mystery, and adventure, all on a grand scale. His eyes dwelt on the word at the top of the page, with a sense of fascination. The date, too, might be of importance to the veiled lady. Doubtless it concerned an engagement for the next day, which could only be in London, as they would not arrive at Victoria Station until very late in the afternoon. Still, the paper being torn, and allowed to fall on the floor, permitted the inference that it was no longer valued. Probably it would be just as well if Ronald kept it in his possession till next morning, when they were leaving Paris by the early boat-train. This, in fact, he decided to do, rather than disturb the veiled lady again that night.

Ronald Charteris was of too healthy a nature to tolerate superstition which he would have scorned in others; nevertheless, he waked on the following morning with a vague weight of depression upon him. For a few moments he lay drowsily, not sure what had caused the feeling; then he remembered with a disagreeable thrill

a dream he had had in the night. He had dreamed the same dream before on several occasions, and it had always been followed, almost immediately, by misfortune of some sort. Therefore, had he been inclined to such weakness, he would have been superstitious about that one dream, which was singularly vivid.

He had dreamed that all the strong, white teeth which added so much to the charm of his handsome face when he smiled, were loosened, and that one by one they dropped out.

“Of course it’s all rot,” he said to himself as he hastened with his bath and dressing, to be in time for the train. “Of course, it’s all rot. The same things that have happened to me in my life after such a dream would have happened just the same if I hadn’t had it. And perhaps I’ve dreamed it lots of times and forgotten all about it, when nothing disagreeable has followed to mark it in my memory.”

This argument had common sense to back it; still, Ronald could not quite forget the dream, and every once in awhile during the journey that day he stopped himself scornfully in the midst of wondering when the misfortune prophesied would befall him. This made him rather absent-minded early in the day, and he did not remember to speak of the torn paper until just before taking the boat at Calais. As he gave the veiled lady his I O U for Mr. Willoughby, he said: “By the way, there was a paper with the envelope you handed me last night. I thought it was meant for me, and read it. Something about a Tontine——”

For the first time his companion spoke out, apparently in a natural tone. “About a Tontine!” she echoed quickly.

“Yes, only that word at the top of a page, and then a date. I fancied it was of no further importance to you, or I should have knocked again at your door and risked displeasing you last night.”

Now she had controlled herself once more, and was

speaking low. "You are right. The paper was—of no importance. But I should be glad if you would throw it away. Why did you think it would displease me if you came to my door again?"

"Only that—well, you have not seemed to wish to talk very much, and so——"

"Perhaps I did wish it, however," was the whispered answer. "You must not always trust to appearances. But here we are at the boat. Will you please secure a private cabin for me?"

Ronald saw no more of her until it was time to take the train. That veil of hers had begun to get upon his nerves. It was like trying to strain one's eyes to see in pitchy darkness, even to glance at the concealed face.

Once or twice, as they came into London, Ronald heard her sigh heavily.

"Are you tired?" he questioned.

This time she answered him, "To the heart."

He did not know how to reply, and wished that he had not spoken.

At Victoria he left his luggage in the cloak-room, and was ready for his last service to the veiled lady, which was to see her to her destination and await her orders there. At her request he engaged a four-wheeled cab, and then he asked her for the direction.

"The 'Hand and Key,' Hammersmith," she said.

Civilised London—as he would have called it—Ronald knew well, but the "Hand and Key," Hammersmith, suggested nothing to him. He put no more questions, however, for the cabman refrained from comment on the instructions given him, and drove promptly out of the station, with the air of knowing exactly where to go.

Out to the end of all things they appeared to drive, and at last cabby, whose assumed knowledge had been partly a pretence, resorted to making inquiries of chance passers-by. Various directions were shouted to him, and presently he drew up in front of a small and ancient public-house, facing a dreary green. On a weather-beaten

sign, which creaked in a melancholy, wet wind blowing up from the not far distant river, could be read the illustrated legend, "The Hand and Key."

"Please pay the cabman, and see that he drives away," said the veiled lady.

Ronald did as he was requested, only fulfilling the last command by largely over-paying the man, who had cherished visions of remaining to drink a glass of beer.

"Is this the end of our journey?" asked Ronald, marvelling inwardly what business could bring the veiled lady all across London to a poor and insignificant public-house, apparently of a low class.

"No," she said, "we must go farther. But it was better to let the cab leave us here. Do you mind walking a short distance?"

"Certainly I don't mind," returned Ronald.

"But it is not really very short; you may think it rather a long distance. More than a mile, I fancy. And there is my bag to be carried."

"The bag is nothing. Neither is the distance. Shall we go? And which way?"

"I know the way," said the veiled lady. "All you have to do for the present is to come with me."

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST CHANCE

DARKNESS was falling—a darkness thick with a raw mist that turned the street lights beginning to gleam out here and there into yellowish blurs. Ronald remembered the moonlight and soft warmth and the flower-scents in the Casino gardens at Monte Carlo; but even so, he preferred London, and his spirits were sustained by the feeling that he was in the midst of an adventure. No one could tell what might be about to happen next.

The woman moved away from the "Hand and Key," crossing the green diagonally. It was now getting on towards seven o'clock.

They walked on together for a few moments in silence, and, leaving the open space of the green, went down a street with a few scattered new houses. Suddenly the veiled woman turned to Ronald, and laid her hand upon the travelling bag which he was carrying.

"Give it to me!" she exclaimed imperiously.

"Why?" he argued, quietly resisting her efforts. "Don't you trust me?"

"It isn't that. I trust you—almost too much. But I want you to go—to leave me—at once."

"I'm sorry you want that," said Ronald. "It's a poor compliment to your guardian."

"It is the best compliment in the world—if you knew." There was a note of restrained passion in the voice. "I beg you to do what I say—for your own sake."

"I can't," returned Ronald, "even if I would. I gave my word to Mr. Willoughby that I would take you to the house where you wished to go, and stop there until I could no longer serve you. If it is only for my sake that you want to send me away you must let me carry out the programme laid down to the end."

"To the end!" the veiled woman repeated. "Oh, why are you so different from what I thought you would be?"

"How am I different?" urged Ronald, walking by her side, as—after a slight pause—she began to hurry on again. It was a relief that the stifling silence, maintained so long with so few intervals, should be broken, even in this unexpected fashion.

"You are different in every way! I had thought you would be like—the others, a man of no importance. But you—oh! You know what you are. Many women must have told you."

Ronald laughed. "I don't know many women; and those I do never committed themselves to any opinion."

"I am not jesting. It's no time for that," said the veiled woman. "Will you take me at my word, and be a little grateful to me afterwards, if you can, for sending you away? We might meet again, if you went now. Otherwise——"

"I must keep my promise to Mr. Willoughby," Ronald broke in. "Nevertheless, I thank you for wishing to spare me something which you think may give me trouble——"

"Yes, something which may give you trouble," she echoed, almost sullenly. "You have been good to me, in these days we have spent together, and—I don't like putting you to—trouble."

"I don't mind, I assure you," Ronald answered cheerfully. "And I think we both owe a debt to Mr. Willoughby. We must pay it."

"Very well," said the veiled lady. "Remember, I offered you this chance, though by doing so I should have brought myself into danger which it would have been impossible to escape. Remember that when you think of me—if you ever do."

"I'm not likely to forget," he replied. "And I'm glad that I did not take the chance, since you admit that it would have involved you in suffering."

He heard her draw in her breath sharply, but she did not answer; and Ronald, excited and thoughtful, was glad to walk on in silence.

It seemed to him that they had gone much further than a mile after leaving the "Hand and Key" before his guide stopped at a gate in a high brick wall, evidently surrounding a large garden. It was so dark now that objects even at a short distance were curtained with mist and blurred into indistinctness. But Ronald could see a network of bare tree-branches above the garden wall, and in the background the roof of a big house, suggesting Queen Anne outlines as it was silhouetted against the sky. Over the brick wall hung disordered trails of ivy, and the gate at which they had paused had lost almost all traces of the bright green

paint with which it had once been adorned. Even in the darkness, an air of dilapidation was perceptible about the place.

"Yet one more chance!" said the veiled woman, as Ronald laid his hand upon the latch of the gate, seeing that it was here she intended to enter—here, the journey's end. "Once and for all, will you leave me?"

"Once and for all, no," responded Ronald. "Are you expected? I don't see any lights in the house."

"Yes, I am expected," she repeated. "There will probably be some lighted rooms on the ground floor. Come, then, if you are determined."

Ronald opened the gate and shut it again when his companion had passed in. A smell of dampness came up from the earth; the path, which wound round a lawn thickly planted with trees, on its way to the house, was spongy and wet under feet. At first, the low hanging branches of beech trees laced over their heads; but the last approach to the house was under an arbour built across the path, and covered with creepers which had scarcely yet felt the warm touch of spring. It was only as they stepped from under the arched doorway of the arbour that the house was fully in sight, and then they were within a few yards of it.

CHAPTER VII

THE ROOM WITH THE GLASS DOOR

THE house was early Queen Anne, and the door on which Ronald rapped with a huge brass knocker was beautiful with richly-carved old woodwork.

Two lighted windows seemed to watch the lawn like the yellow eyes of a cat waiting for prey; and when three or four long minutes of utter silence had followed Ronald's knock, a door was slammed somewhere inside the house.

A moment more, and there was a sound as of a bolt being slid back, and the front door was thrown open. A tall man in dark livery stood with his back to the light of a large old-fashioned lamp, with a great cut-glass globe, which stood on a marble bracket underneath a mirror opposite the door, across a square hall of no great size.

By the light of this lamp Ronald could dimly see his own face and figure, and the black shadow of the woman's form, as they entered the house, and the thought flashed into his mind that they both looked like ghosts. Why, the house, shut away in its tangled garden like the palace of the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, seemed more habitable for ghosts than for human beings.

"Good evening, Parsons," said the veiled lady, as the servant relieved Ronald of the bag he was carrying. "Has anyone come inquiring for me?"

"Not yet, my lady," answered the man, in a voice so deeply bass as to be almost startling. "Nobody has called."

"Good!" she exclaimed. "Are there lights in the Blue Room? And a fire?"

"Yes, my lady. You will find everything ready there, and in the dining-room."

"Very well. Then I shall not want you again for the present. When I do, I will ring."

The man bowed and disappeared. As he went Ronald's eyes followed him to the turn of a stairway, with shallow oak steps. Close to this stairway, at the left, was a corridor which led away into darkness. In the hall the only furniture consisted of two very handsome carved seats, apparently attached to the wall.

"You are thinking that this is a strange house," said the woman whom the liveried servant had addressed as "my lady." "And you are right. There are queer stories about it. It is supposed to be haunted. There are noises sometimes in the night that I—but you will not have to spend a night here."

"I don't think I believe in ghosts," replied Ronald.

“I wonder if you will say that to-morrow?” The words seemed to break from her. Then, with a quick, nervous step, she went across the hall, and would have caught up the lamp, had not Ronald been before her.

“The corridors aren’t lighted,” she explained. “This house is far too large for us who live in it. We keep only certain parts habitable, now we are so few. And even those parts are not very cheery.”

They passed to the end, went up three steps, and round a sharp turn into a second corridor.

The light of the lamp held so close to his eyes was confusing, and Ronald could see only that the dark wood of the floor was neither carpeted nor carefully polished, and that numerous doors were set deeply into wainscoted walls. So far, except for the presence of the servant and the lighted lamp, there had been absolutely no sign that the house was tenanted.

The young man and his veiled companion left the corridors, and passed through several small, unfurnished, communicating rooms. After a suite of three, the woman opened a door which had shown a knife-blade of light at the side, and as she did so a glow of firelight came out.

It was a room of fair size, having walls covered with faded tapestry of a predominating azure tint, which no doubt suggested the name—“The Blue Room.”

On a beautifully-carved mantel there were silver candlesticks, each of which held four wax candles; and these, with the wavering red firelight, gave the only illumination. Before the hearth lay a white fur rug. A small sofa, with several silk cushions piled upon it, two or three chairs, and an old-fashioned card-table appeared to be the only furniture; but Ronald’s eyes, after roaming for a few seconds, were attracted by a door at the opposite end of the room.

It was of glass, with many small panes; and half drawn back from it was a curtain of flimsy blue Chinese silk; but enough of the glass was visible to show that there was a light on the other side of the door.

The veiled lady went straight to the fireplace, and shivering, held out both black-gloved hands to the blaze.

"Are you hungry or thirsty?" she asked, turning her concealed face towards Ronald, who, having placed the lamp on the card-table, drew near to the fire also.

"Thank you, no. I am excited, I think," he frankly replied. "I could not eat or drink."

"Yet you look tired; your face is white under the tan, and your eyes have dark circles."

"I'm posing as an invalid still," he answered laughing. "But I wonder you can see all this through your veil. And I—am I never to see your face?"

"Why do you suppose I have hidden it so carefully?"

"I have tried to remember that that was your affair, not mine."

"It was because—well, no doubt you have guessed that I had reasons for not wishing to be recognised. Even my voice—but that's past. You will see my face soon enough. You have played your part nobly through the first acts. Now, only the last remains. Will you promise me something, and may I trust you to keep your promise, whatever happens?"

"I don't think I have ever broken a promise," said Ronald, simply.

He was looking very handsome, as he stood there in the light of the wax candles and the fire that was already beginning to die down, for the big lamp was at his back; and the hidden face of the woman was never for an instant turned from him.

"It is this. You serve Mr. Willoughby by serving me also. I must leave you alone now, for a short time, after I have told you what I shall expect you to do." She spoke stiffly, as if she were repeating a lesson, though sometimes her voice quivered. "You see that glass door? Before I go I will draw the curtain entirely across. But the blue silk is thin—not much thicker than heavy gauze—or this veil. When the lamp has been taken away—as it will be—and the candles are put out, and the fire has died down a

little more, a man standing in the dark on this side the door can see everything that goes on in the lighted room beyond. As soon as you hear voices speaking on the other side, will you go to the door and watch all that happens through the curtain ? ”

“ I will,” answered Ronald, gravely. For otherwise than gravely he could not have answered those hardly-controlled, agitated tones.

“ You will not move, you will not turn your eyes away for a second ? ”

“ No.”

“ If anything unexpected occurs—if you see me in need of help, will you instantly throw open the door and—and do all that—that a chivalrous gentleman such as you’ve shown yourself to be would think right to do for a woman alone and in danger ? ”

“ You may depend upon me,” responded Ronald to the woman whose face he had never seen.

“ I thank you ; and I believe you,” she answered. There was no more hint of dissuasion now. “ Had you forgotten, Mr. Charteris, that another payment was to be made to-night of the money Mr. Willoughby owes you ? ”

“ He owes me nothing ; it is the other way round,” said Ronald. “ As a matter of fact, I *had* forgotten. You see, there’s been a good deal to occupy my attention. But you know my name. Am I to hear yours ? ”

She shook the veiled head. “ No, I think not.” Then, turning away, she drew from the bosom of her dress an envelope. “ Here are notes for the remaining hundred pounds ; and I *prefer* to put it that Mr. Willoughby owes you the money.”

Ronald could not choose but take the envelope, though it jarred upon him even more than before to do so. “ I must give you my I O U,” he said, looking vaguely about for paper. But nothing of the sort could be seen in the sparsely-furnished room.

“ Take the envelope,” the veiled lady suggested.

“But my stylographic pen, which I carried with me everywhere in South Africa, has run out of ink, and——”

Quick as lightning she snatched a large hat-pin with a tiger's head on it from her hat, and pushing up her sleeve so that a white zone showed between the black cloth and the black suède of her glove, she scored a deep scratch across the skin. A streak of bright red answered the stroke of the pin, and with blood running over her arm she held it out to Ronald. “Here is your ink,” she said. “Our time grows short.”

“How could you do that?” he exclaimed. “How foolish! How unnecessary! Do you think I could write my name with your blood?”

“It is that which I want you to do!” she cried. “I want to remember it. If you will not, I shall believe it is because you hate me. Write! write! Don't refuse me, I beg.”

Ronald set his lips together, and drew his stylographic pen from his pocket. He had seen horrors in South Africa, and after the first few weeks had not even dreamed of them; but qualms of sickness came over him as he dipped the point of his pen in the red ink of this woman's blood.

When he had written with the stylographic pen he always carried she took back the envelope and hid it again in her breast.

“Now I must go,” she said. “Good-bye.” And the young man took the hand she held out in a close grasp.

“Why do you say good-bye?” he asked. “I'm to see you again in a few minutes, am I not?”

“Of course. I—only mean good-bye till we meet again.”

“Is it necessary that you risk danger of any sort?” Ronald went on. “Can't I go with you into that other room behind the glass door?”

“You can do exactly what you have promised—mind, exactly. No more and no less.”

She went to the blue curtain and pulled it across the door,

which still showed an etherealised azure light. Then she put out all the candles.

Only a red heap of wood ashes was left in the big fire-place now; and when the veiled woman had reached the door of the entrance with the lamp in her hand, the darkness was relieved but by a faint, ruddy glow, which turned the glass behind the blue curtain into a pale oblong of sapphire light.

Ronald held open the door. On the threshold the woman turned, and said "good-bye" again. For the first time he caught through the veil a jewelled glitter of eyes, as the lamp flashed a ray through the thickness of the embroidered lace. Then, she was gone.

Ronald stood watching the vanishing form until it was out of sight, but at last, with a sigh of mingled weariness and excitement, he closed the door, shutting himself up alone in the red dusk.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM BEHIND THE BLUE CURTAIN

THE silence of the house was so deep that it seemed to embody a sound of its own. The air was filled, to the strained ears of Ronald Charteris, with a soft purring, as of an unseen cat.

There was enough fire-glow to guide his steps without risk of stumbling in a room so empty of furniture, and he walked to the mantel, where he stood looking down unseeingly into the red ashes, till his eyes were dazzled.

He had remained thus for five minutes, perhaps, thinking—as his youth and the warm blood in his veins decreed—more of the veiled woman than the work that might be ahead of him, when suddenly the dead stillness seemed to start into life with the clear striking of a clock in the next room—that room on the other side of the curtain.

It announced the hour of eight.

“On April the fourth, at River House, as near as possible to eight.”

With the striking of the clock those words spoke themselves in Ronald's brain.

It was April the fourth. And it was eight o'clock. Was this River House? If so, what was the appointment which had been written on that torn half-sheet of paper; and would it presently be kept?

As he asked himself these questions there came the distant sound of a door opening, then voices in the adjoining room.

Ronald's heart began to beat faster. Quickly and noiselessly he crossed the room. Not even a board creaked under his feet. In a moment more he stood looking through the thin blue haze of curtain that veiled the glass door.

He had been asked to obey instructions with exactness, and soldier-fashion he had not varied a hair's-breadth. He had been told to go to the glass door when he heard voices, therefore he had not approached or attempted to glance through before. Now, he was surprised to find how clearly he could see, without danger of being seen.

His room was in darkness; that on the other side of the door must have been brilliantly lighted, for not a detail of its furnishing, not a feature on the faces of the two men who stood at some distance, but could be plainly discerned.

The room was apparently a dining-room. Ronald could see two darkly-curtained windows with heavy folds of drapery that lay on the bare oak floor. In the middle of the room stood a round table, covered with a white cloth. In the centre was a vase containing flowers.

An elaborate meal was spread out, which resembled supper rather than dinner, for there was a garnished boar's head, cold game, salad, ornate-looking sweets, and fruit, all of which appeared curiously unreal through the blue curtain, like a feast in a scene on the stage.

The walls of the room were wainscoted, and into one a quaint sideboard was built. Upon it were bottles of

champagne, and a cut-glass jug nearly full of a red liquid.

Near this sideboard stood the two men whose voices had brought Ronald in haste to the glass door. One was the servant whom he had seen in the hall, but, as his face had been in obscurity then, he was now recognisable only by his height and his livery. Here his features were lighted up, and Ronald thought them of a strange cast. His eyebrows were abnormally thick and black, making a bridge across the nose. The long upper lip was clean shaven, but on the chin grew a short black imperial, brushed up in so queer a manner as almost to hide the lower lip, which appeared to be sucked into the mouth, under protruding upper teeth. The black hair was combed over the forehead, and then cut squarely into a short, stiff fringe; on his hands were badly-fitting white gloves.

The other was a very different order of being. He also was tall, but as alertly graceful as the servant was awkward. Though he was in travelling clothes neither fashionable nor new, he had an air of distinction. His age might have been something over forty, and he was darkly bronzed, yet his face was beautiful as a woman's. Not that he was effeminate, for there was strength in the cleft chin, and a fiery daring in the dark gipsy eyes that Ronald could almost fancy were piercing the curtain and gazing into his. But the nose was pure Greek; if the gracious arch of the eyebrows had been pencilled by an artist it could not have been more perfect. The mouth was rather small and full; and in speaking a dimple dented the left cheek. A grey felt hat was in the new-comer's hand—a nervous hand—and the bright brown hair touched with silver, rippled back from the forehead in burnished curves, as if the head had been carved in bronze.

“Heavens! how lovely a woman who looked like him would be!” was the thought in Ronald's mind.

“Only the lady?” the stranger was asking the servant.

“Only the lady, as yet, sir. But she expects you.”

“Tell her, then, that I have arrived.”

Ronald could not hear the words distinctly, but he believed these to have been the ones uttered. The servant disappeared, and the man who was left almost instantly afterwards took some small object from his pocket. Whatever it was, it lay hidden from Ronald's sight in the hollow of his hand, where he held it as he stared down, frowning.

"Pah!" he exclaimed aloud. "Loathsome little beast, how I hate you!"

With an impulsive stride, he was at the nearest window; and pulling back the curtain, he flung wide the sashes, which opened outward from the middle. Whether or no he threw something into the garden Ronald could not tell, but when he turned away and closed the window his hands were empty. He had just pulled the curtain into place, when the door opened and a woman came into the room.

At sight of her the blood rushed to Ronald's head. At last he saw the face of his veiled travelling companion—for that it was she who had entered he could not doubt.

Curiosity regarding that face had pricked him keenly, and he had speculated many times, as his eyes were thwarted by the impenetrable mask of thick lace, as to what it would be like, whether fair or plain, middle-aged or young. But he had scarcely dreamed of such gorgeous beauty as this.

She was dressed still in the gown in which she had travelled, and the black cloth set off the whiteness of her skin, the scarlet of her lips, and the copper-red of the hair which was waved and brought down on either side of the face, so as to cover the ears. The features were aquiline, and not remarkable; it was the colouring which was so superb as to strike at the eyes of a man.

As she came in Ronald thought that he saw her throw a quick glance at the dark, blue-curtained door. Then she walked to meet the new-comer, with whom she shook hands. Some words she murmured which Ronald could not hear; but he caught the answer: "Yes; I have brought everything. All are safe."

For a few moments they talked in low voices, standing ; but presently the woman made a gesture towards the table.

" Very good. I am hungry and thirsty, too," exclaimed the man. " Better get the business of feeding over before he comes." So saying he drew out a chair for his companion, and she sat down, saying something which sent the stranger to pull an old-fashioned bell-rope dangling near the fire-place. When he had jerked the rope he also sat down at the table ; and barely were both seated when the servant appeared, beginning at once to serve " my lady " and her guest.

Ronald's excitement gradually cooled. He was ashamed of the disappointment which crept in with the conviction that there would, after all, be no need for his help. Thus far, nothing could be more amicable than the relations between the two sitting at the table, and when the servant had supplied their wants and was gone, they leaned towards each other, talking more intimately. The woman hardly touched her food, but the man ate with good appetite, and drank often of the red liquid in the glass jug which had been placed near his elbow.

At last the woman rose slowly. Resting one hand on the back of her chair, she answered some low-spoken words of her companion's—answered almost in a whisper, for Ronald could scarcely hear the murmur of her voice. Her attitude expressed humility, even supplication, yet with a loud, inarticulate cry of fierce emotion, the man jumped up so suddenly that his chair fell on the bare floor with a crash.

" Great Heavens, you she-devil ! " he shouted ; and so quickly that Ronald only half realised what was happening, he had leaped at the woman, seizing her round the white throat with both hands.

One shriek she uttered which died in a gurgling moan as the breath was choked from her lungs ; but Ronald had not waited for her cry.

His moment had come ; and flinging the glass door open, he sprang into the adjoining room. But the room was

large, and the table was between him and the two figures locked together in a struggle of life or death. The fraction of a moment passed before he could reach them. Through it all, the woman's gaze appealed to him, dark and agonised. The bands of burnished copper hair framing the pallor of her face were disordered, pushed out of place, and the disarrangement revealed a secret so ghastly that—his eyes finding it—Ronald's blood chilled in his veins.

Both ears had been cut off.

At sight of this terrible disfigurement, a wave of sickness rushed over him, but he fought against it, and springing forward, struck the handsome stranger a "knock-out" blow under the chin.

Instantly the grip of the brown hands on the woman's white throat relaxed, and the man dropped as if shot, striking the back of his head with a great crash on the floor.

As he fell, it seemed to Ronald that the beautiful dark eyes reproached him with one awful look of accusation, burning with the pent anguish of a lifetime. Suddenly all his thought was for the man. He had forgotten the woman, her mutilated loveliness, and the unprovoked attack upon her. Without even glancing in her direction, he flung himself on his knees beside the fallen man, the expression of whose face denoted intense pain. His eyes, half open, showed only the whites. The lips, drawn and colourless, were flecked with a slight froth. There was not the sigh of an indrawn breath, the flicker of nostril or eyelid, no faintest movement of the chest.

Ronald, over whom crept the cold numbness of nightmare, laid his hand upon the still breast, and kept it there for a long moment of suspense. The heart had ceased to beat.

"God help me, I have killed him!" was the cry wrung from his soul.

"God help you indeed!" echoed a voice behind him.

Mechanically Ronald turned his head and saw—not the woman who was the cause of all—but the old clergyman of Monte Carlo.

CHAPTER IX

WHILE RONALD SLEPT

“ You here ! ” exclaimed Ronald. And for the first time his eyes sought the woman ; but she had gone. Save for Mr. Willoughby, himself, and the dead man, the room was empty.

“ Yes, I am here, ” repeated the old clergyman. “ I was telegraphed for, on business of my own ; but it seemed as if an influence irresistibly hurried me to this house. Now, I believe that it must have been so. I was sent here to your help. ”

As he spoke he came to Ronald and knelt beside him, placing his hand, as Ronald had, on the breast of the dead man.

“ Life has fled, ” he pronounced solemnly. “ My poor boy, I witnessed the whole terrible scene, though the actors in it were too absorbed to observe me, or to hear my cry of protest when I entered. ”

“ I heard nothing, ” said Ronald. “ God knows, I had no thought of killing this man. You tell me that you saw all. You must have seen why I struck him. ”

“ Yes, it was in the chivalrous desire to protect a woman. Nevertheless, we must face facts. This man is dead, and you have killed him. In the eyes of the law you are a murderer. But I thank Heaven, in whose eyes you are innocent, that I came at this moment. You shall not, if I can save you, be allowed to suffer, except in your own soul, for the calamity which has befallen you. ”

“ You will bear witness that he—— ” began Ronald ; but Mr. Willoughby cut him short.

“ I will bear no witness ! I shall not lie. I shall keep silence, and so will you.”

“ No ! ” ejaculated Ronald. “ I shall give myself up and stand my trial.”

The face of the old man changed. “ You must be mad ! ” he exclaimed.

“ I should be mad to think of anything else,” Ronald retorted. “ If by misfortune I’ve killed a man, at least I’m not a coward to sneak away and try to hide what I’ve done. I’ll tell the truth and——”

“ Ruin a woman’s life ! ” broke in the clergyman.

Ronald was silent, gazing at the white old face aghast, slowly taking in the meaning of those four words.

Still, the two men were kneeling beside the motionless figure on the floor. There was no sound in the room save their quick breathing, and the soft fall of an ash now and then in the fireplace.

So they remained, holding each other’s eyes, until at last Mr. Willoughby spoke again.

“ I do not believe that you are a selfish man. If for your own sake you do not see the wisdom of keeping this secret, if you have no loved one whom you would wish to shield, you see that for the sake of a woman who trusted herself to your care—an innocent woman in danger and trouble, with none to aid if you fail—you see that for her sake you cannot give yourself up.”

“ Oh, God ! What a burden you would have me bear—to my grave ! ” Ronald gasped.

“ It must be borne, for another’s sake. Is it beyond your strength ? ”

“ No. But——”

“ There are no ‘ buts.’ It was not the woman’s fault that, in trying to protect her, you killed a man, any more than it was yours. Neither could foresee what has happened ; and since time immemorial men have been ready to suffer that a woman might be saved. You are such a man, unless I have failed to read your character aright.”

“ I hope I am such a man. But is it better for her that

I should conceal a thing, which is almost certain sooner or later to come out, when the truth may sound like lies behind which guilt has tried to hide ? ”

“ Humanly speaking, the truth cannot come out if you and I agree to conceal it. Who knows of this—accident, save you, a woman whose fate hangs upon the secret, and myself ? ”

“ There is at least one servant in the house,” Ronald answered, rising at last to his feet. “ He may have heard or seen——”

“ Nothing. When I came into the house, he went out. I sent him upon a mission, which cannot be finished until after midnight. There is no other servant, and at this moment the house has no living occupant save you and myself.”

“ Where is—*she* ? ”

“ That I cannot tell, for I do not know, though I shall know later. I can only say that she has gone.”

“ Gone ! ”

“ Yes. Would it not have been unbearable for her to remain in the house with—*this* ? ” Mr. Willoughby pointed to the dead man, from whose face the look of pain was being slowly smoothed by the hand of death.

The thought passed through Ronald’s head that she might have stayed to speak a word of kindness—to say that she did not think of him as a murderer. But he put it out of his mind with the image of her as he had seen her last—the copper hair dishevelled, the secret of her disfigurement betrayed.

“ You will hear from her,” went on the clergyman. “ She will send you thanks for your devotion. But she must not occupy us now. I have told you that there are only three persons in the world who know, or need know, what has taken place in this house, to-night.”

“ Surely others must know that the man was to call here.”

“ None. I was not acquainted with him, but I have, through the woman to whom I have given aid and counsel,

enough knowledge of him and the circumstances which brought him here to-night, to be certain that he would hide his destination—hide it from his nearest friend, if he had a friend.”

“ He will be missed. Inquiries will be made, and the police——”

“ Will never be called into the affair, unless through you. The man had been absent from England for years, and had returned without announcing his arrival to anyone. It may seem strange that I should know so much, and tell so little ; but all my information came from the woman whose name, even, it is my duty to keep from you unless she chooses to reveal it, as one day she may. The man who is dead robbed her, did her a great injury——”

Ronald started at these words, which brought vividly back the sight revealed by the disordered hair. Could it be possible, he asked himself, glancing at the dead, that a man with a face so fine, a bearing so noble, could be the wretch Mr. Willoughby described ? Could it be possible that the woman whose throat he had seized owed her mutilation to those brown hands, now so helpless ?

At Ronald's quick start and glance, the old clergyman had paused, his eyes watchful behind the convex glasses. “ I think I read what is in your thoughts,” he said. “ Well, I must not betray her secret ; form your own conclusions when I say that the man who came to his death through you had many strange sins to repent. I pray for his guilty soul, but I wish to aid the innocent ; and a plan has matured in my mind. You and I must bury this body—put it out of sight for ever. You see how far I, despite my cloth, am ready to carry my devotion to an injured woman's cause, to say nothing of anxiety for you, whom I indirectly brought into this situation. Surely you have strength of soul enough to follow the lead of an old man, whose sands are nearly run ? ”

“ Tell me how to act, and I will obey—as best I can,” answered Ronald, half beside himself with horror of what had been done, of what was yet to do.

"Listen, then. This is not the first time I have been in this house. I came more than once before going to Monte Carlo this year, to talk with her whom you have seen. It is a rambling old building, and underneath there are certain to be vast cellars. There the grave must be dug, and we have three hours for the work, before we can be disturbed. Will you go with me and reconnoitre?"

"Yes," said Ronald, dully.

Mr. Willoughby looked at him. "My poor boy," he exclaimed, "you have gone through an ordeal which would try the nerve of a strong man while you are still an invalid, and have had days of anxiety and travel. I am a friend of temperance, but I know when stimulant is needed. Sit down and remain quiet, until I have found brandy and given you a stiff drink."

"I'd rather not, thank you," said Ronald, to whom the thought of swallowing anything was abhorrent.

"But you must! Why, man, you look like death! And presently I shall need your help. I want you to be in a condition to give it to me, for what must be done I cannot do alone in the time at my command."

Ronald offered no more objections. It was true that he had been subjected to a terrible ordeal, almost beyond the strength hardly yet recovered since his illness in South Africa. Besides, though he was far from realising it, he was faint for want of food. He threw himself into a chair near the table, where the woman and her guest had sat, and, resting his elbow on the back, covered his eyes with his hand. It was good, even for a moment, to shut out of sight the room, grown hateful to him, and the still form stretched along the floor. It made the irrevocable horror seem like a dream—made him forget that all his life was to be different after this night of April the fourth.

Once Mr. Willoughby glanced over his shoulder as he stood at the sideboard, pouring something from a tiny bottle, hidden in his hand, into a glass which he had half-filled with brandy. But Ronald did not heed his move-

ments, which on this fact being ascertained, became more leisurely.

A moment later the old man was standing beside the young one, with a hand laid on his shoulder.

Ronald looked up, as if brought back to realities from some haven of peace. Mr. Willoughby almost forced the glass into his hand, but he drank without waiting to be urged. It was easier to yield than to argue.

When he had drunk the brandy the old clergyman took the glass, and stopped him when he would have risen. "Sit still a minute," he insisted, "or you may be giddy. Meanwhile, I had better have something myself. I begin to feel the reaction after the nervous strain, for I'm not as young as I was."

He walked towards the sideboard again, and this time Ronald's eyes followed him. Mr. Willoughby had been right. Already the liquor was mounting to his head. The receding figure swam before his eyes, fading into vagueness, and at last disappearing into a mist. Ronald had never been a hard drinker, but he could boast a steady head, and never had he been so affected by liquor. He told himself it must be because he had not eaten for long.

The memory of what had happened began to grow blessedly dim. Wheels were going round in his head. Bells were ringing—he found himself trying to find a tune in their chiming. After the mental torture which he had endured, this blurring of realities was a relief. He was inclined to believe now that he had been dreaming. Between sleeping and waking, he began to say to himself, "Thank God it isn't true."

"Isn't true—isn't true!" The words repeated themselves until they lost all meaning.

His chin dropped forward; he slipped farther down in the arm-chair.

By this time Mr. Willoughby was beside him, shaking his shoulder. "Charteris!" he exclaimed. "Wake up, man—what ails you?"

But Ronald did not answer or stir. He was meshed in sleep, as if he had fallen under a spell.

Instead of making further efforts to rouse him, Mr. Willoughby regarded the young man with what seemed like a quiet smile of satisfaction. He stood looking into the unconscious face for a few moments, then turned to move towards that other sleeper, who would never waken, when a sound at the glass door brought him to a standstill.

CHAPTER X

TOOL OR LOVER ?

RONALD had left the glass door open, but—though he had been in no condition to notice such details—somehow it had been closed again later. Now it opened until the blue curtain on the other side was visible, and the woman for whose sake Ronald had sacrificed himself came swiftly into the room.

Her hair had been pulled into place once more, but her face appeared aged and hollowed, and there were black circles round her dilated eyes.

The old man motioned her away with an angry gesture, but she did not heed it.

“What do you want here ?” he demanded, in a low, but sibilant voice. “Your work is done.”

“Oh, Heaven!—it is ! it is !” she cried, with a choked sob, and, going to Ronald where he half-lay, half-sat in the arm-chair, she stooped, lifted one of his strong, but now inert hands, and kissed it.

“You fool !” sneered the old man, with an expression on his face that would have surprised the sleeper.

But the woman seemed neither to see nor hear. She had raised her auburn head, and was looking at Ronald. “Poor boy !” she murmured. “It is I who have brought

you to this. But I did not know what you would be like, or never would I have begun it. How long your eye-lashes are! And how sad your poor, brave face is! Will it always be sad after this? Will you believe in ghosts to-morrow?"

"I suppose all women are fools," said the old man; "but I had flattered myself that your brains were of a higher order than the average. I was mistaken. You spent the time on your journey in falling in love, did you?"

"I would give my life now that it's too late, to undo this night's work," the woman answered.

"And undo everything else with it? Well, fortunately it *is* too late. The thing is done. I had meant to congratulate you on the way all had been managed, but now I see what a fool you really are, I am inclined to think it has been more luck than skill on your part."

"I told him to leave me," she said, defiantly, "but he would not. He would keep faith with you, for his promise and the 'debt' he owed. Great Heaven—the *debt*!"

"So, you let your passion carry you as far as that, did you?" demanded the old man, icily. "Did you stop to think what would happen to you if he had taken you at your word?"

"I did not care!" the woman flung at him.

"You wished to turn a tool into a lover, at all hazards," said Mr. Willoughby. "But, if he should wake now, and you should tell him all——"

"Tell him the fraud that has been practised upon him—that he had *no* hand in this man's murder!" she broke in, fiercely. "That is what you mean!"

"Yes, that is what I mean, if you choose—since the chloral in the brandy has done its work so well he would not hear if I shouted the truth in his ears. I was going to say that, if you told him all, and begged his forgiveness on your knees, your tears and kisses falling on his hand, he could never love you. Your beauty is poisoned for him. He would shrink from you in horror, because—he knows the secret you hide under your hair."

With a groan, she covered her eyes with her hands, shrinking from Ronald as if he could see or hear.

"Perhaps you do not know," went on Mr. Willoughby, exulting in her pain, "that in the struggle your hair was so disordered, no one could help learning the truth. I saw, as I stood at the other door, which I opened at your scream. And that he saw also I know by the look in his eyes when I spoke of an injury you had received. It was a look of disgust."

"You are cruel as the grave," the woman ejaculated.

"Speaking of the grave reminds me of the work that must be done," the old man said, with a horrible coolness. "Fortunately we have all night before us, and all to-morrow, too, if we choose, though I told Charteris, when he enquired about the servant he had seen, that the man might be back by midnight. His curiosity on the subject was a compliment to the disguise. Has Loris finished what he had to do in the cellar?"

"I don't know," answered the woman. "Since I left this room I have not stirred from the glass door. I waited until I saw that you had put *him* to sleep, and then—I came back."

"And why did you come back, when I had ordered you to go elsewhere?"

"I have obeyed you so far," she retorted. "At last I acted for myself, and on my own impulse. I can't tell why I came back, for I don't know, except that I felt I should die, if I did not."

"Now that you have looked on your love, and seen that he is in no danger, but only in a sleep which will save his reason, perhaps you will leave us—unless you are ready to help me in my search—over there?" And he indicated the form of the dead man, with a double gesture of head and hand.

The woman shuddered. "No!" she ejaculated. "Even I am not hard enough for that."

"I did not expect your help, nor do I want it, as a matter of fact. Go to Loris; tell him that the chloral

works, and that while this fellow lies in his deepest sleep I will do that for reason of which I drugged him."

"Loris will wish to be present," she said, "and will be furious if you don't wait for him. Do you dream that he trusts you?"

"As much as I trust him; But in this case it would be difficult for one to deceive the other—the plans of both have been too well laid. Tell Loris that, if he chooses, he may come. But he must be out of the way again before I wake Charteris. Go, Olga. Don't undo all your work of the past by useless disobedience now."

His eyes, behind the convex glasses, dived into hers: She had felt their power before, and slowly yielded to it now, as in her heart she had always known she would: With one long, backward gaze at Ronald Charteris sleeping in his chair, she left the room, not by the glass door, but by the one through which she had come scarcely two hours ago, to greet the man now lying dead.

Apparently without a qualm of the flesh, the white-haired man in clergyman's dress stooped over the body, and passed his hands inside the coat. What he wanted was not there, and deftly he opened the waistcoat, feeling for a belt. As he did so, something round and bright dropped out from one of the waistcoat pockets, and rolled away across the floor, until it was stopped by the edge of a rug. Mr. Willoughby rose, with singular alertness for a man of his years, pursued the object, and picked it up. When he saw what he held in his hand, he uttered half-aloud a most unclerical ejaculation. The thing was an old-fashioned, open-faced locket, set with pearls, and contained an ivory miniature of a young girl.

For a moment he hesitated, seemingly undecided whether to toss the locket—which was of little intrinsic value—into the dying fire towards which his eyes turned, or to replace it on the body of the dead man, or to secrete it upon his own person.

As he stood with the pearl-circled gold disc in his hand the door opened and the woman returned:

“Loris is coming,” she said, speaking to Mr. Willoughby, but with her eyes on Ronald’s face. Then, turning to the clergyman, she saw the locket. “Whose is that?” she asked, sharply. “Does it belong to Mr. Charteris, or——”

By the time her sentence broke off she was at Mr. Willoughby’s side, an eager gaze fastened on the miniature.

“If you are afraid that you behold a rival,” sneered the old man, “I can relieve your mind; though, for *you*, handicapped as you are, such a girl as this would be a formidable one. But the locket is not the property of Mr. Charteris, who has probably never seen the original of the portrait, never will see her. Don’t you notice a likeness between the face on the ivory and another face you will henceforth have good cause to remember?”

The beautiful woman shuddered. “Yes,” she said, “I see what you mean. I know now where you got the locket. Will you give it to me?”

“Why do you want it?”

“For a woman’s reason. I want it because I want it.”

“Well, you deserve a souvenir of this night of April the fourth.” Mr. Willoughby laughed a laugh that was not good to hear. “Take the thing—which is of no importance to me.”

She took it, her sole reason being the jealous wish to guard against an accident by which Ronald Charteris, on waking, might see the fair, pure face that smiled in the bewitching loveliness of early girlhood, from the ivory; and seeing, hold the memory in his heart, where her own gorgeous beauty could have no place.

This was her one motive in keeping the locket; but upon such trifles hang sometimes the gravest issues of destiny.

CHAPTER XI

APRIL THE FOURTH IN PARK LANE

"I'LL bet that Honour was the prettiest girl who kissed Queen Alexandra's hand last night. *Wasn't* she, Lady St. Leger?"

"My dear child, when I was your age, young women didn't 'bet.'"

"Dear me, I wonder if life wasn't dull when you were my age, Lady St. Leger? But, there! Honour's glaring at me, too. I *will* be good. Only please remember that I'm nothing but a naughty play-actress, who can't show my poor little turned-up nose at Court, and who doesn't know how to behave, and doesn't want to know. And, please, you're ducks, both of you, to let me bring my dolls and play with you to-day."

With this, a tiny young woman, with fluffy light hair, and a quaint little piquant face under a big black hat, sprang from her chair, and dropped two such deep curtseys that she looked on both occasions as if she were going to sit down on the floor. One curtsey was for a tall, handsome, thin-lipped, fretful-eyed woman in pansy-purple velvet embroidered with jet; the second was for a tall, radiant girl in white.

In the Academy would be shown next month a picture by a famous artist, called "Life's Morning," and Honour Brooke had been so earnestly implored to lend her face for the realisation of the painter's ideal that, after persuasion on the part of Lady St. Leger, who was her friend and guardian, she had consented. Somehow, one did think of dawn, and lilies sparkling with early morning dew, when one saw this girl for the first time.

She had great, long-lashed brown eyes that were like mountain tarns catching a glint of the sun between shadowy reeds. Her hair was deep bronze in the shade, and gilded bronze in the light, which struck the crests of its heavy waves. Her brows were dark, and long, and graciously arched. Her skin was cream-white, like ivory, and the mouth, not small, but charmingly shaped, was full and red, while in the left cheek, when she smiled, a deep dimple flashed into sight.

Honour's smile was famed among those who admired her, and sometimes it was ready enough, for she was "sweet and twenty," with warm young blood, and a love for all the beautiful things in the world with which youth gave her kinship; but to-day, though she had been presented last night, and had had a great many delightful things said to her; though to-day she wore as pretty a frock as any *débutante* could wish for; though she was heroine of the "At Home" which Lady St. Leger was giving this afternoon to celebrate Honour's birthday—that dimple of hers had scarcely been seen.

It was early still. Kitty Carlin (who happened to be the fashionable fancy of the moment in a certain set, or she would never have gained welcome from Lady St. Leger) was the first arrival.

She was a queer, audacious, warm-hearted little creature, who managed to make people think she was pretty, and who loved to keep them on tenterhooks as to what she might do or say next. She also loved Honour Brooke, who was, she said, the first girl she had ever seen who "wouldn't know how to be a cat if she tried," and the only girl on earth worth another woman's bothering about.

This being the state of her mind, Kitty Carlin's big blue eyes, that could be so impudently daring when she liked, dwelt keenly on the wistful face of Honour Brooke. When Lady St. Leger's maid came in hurriedly, to mend a torn trail of frilling before anyone else should appear, the little actress drew Honour aside.

"What's up, Beauty?" she demanded abruptly,

abbreviating the pet name she had bestowed upon her friend, whom she had christened "The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood," because she had discovered that "the Prince" had never yet come.

"Nothing's up, Miss Mouse," retorted Honour, evasively, though she knew what Kitty meant, as women do know most things, by instinct. "Nothing's 'up,' that I know of, except the pavements."

"Don't try to turn the subject, as if it were a piece of bread to be toasted! I won't have it! There's something wrong. Have you had a row?"

"Lady St. Leger and I never have rows."

"Oh, please don't do the 'igh and 'aughty Lydy Imogen act, or I shall be crushed—and as I'm not 'truth,' I shouldn't be able to rise again. If you won't tell me what's the matter, when you know how fond of you I am, I shall believe you're in love at last. Come—that's it! You've gone and fallen in love with a Royal Prince, and you're miserable because you can never be Mrs. Prince."

"You are a ridiculous child!" exclaimed Honour. "If you know me, you know that the only man who ever troubles my thoughts is my dear, precious dad."

"Have you had bad news?" asked Kitty.

"No—o, I haven't had any news."

"But no news is good news. We've had *that* drummed into our heads often enough."

"I suppose so. Still, there are things that make me worry horribly, and it seems sad to have been presented, without *his* being here to see me, to call me his 'little girl,' and take an interest in my frock, and my success and everything, as he would—my darling!" Honour's voice broke. She turned away, but Kitty's sharp eyes saw a sparkle of tears on the curve of her lashes.

"Well, it's better to have a father at the other end of the world," the little actress said, consolingly, "than not to know whether you ever had one at all, like me."

"If I only were quite sure he *was* in the world!" sighed Honour. "If I were sure he was well, and as happy as

he could ever be, parted from me, then I think I shouldn't mind—*much*. But it's awful not to know. And I have terrible thoughts sometimes. To-day has been one of my bad days—the more because I ought to have been happy. But *he* has never been out of my mind. I remembered how we used to talk of the future, and he told me funny stories about how I should be presented, and all the unmarried dukes in England would promptly fall in love with me, just as if I were the heroine of a penny novelette. Oh, we used to be so merry together, my handsome dad and I! When he was at home—though that couldn't be half often or long enough, because he had the fever of travel in his veins, and, besides, he had to make money because we were poor—but when he was at home, he was father and mother both. I worshipped him—I worship him still."

"He would like you to be happy to-day," said Kitty.

"I know. Yet how can I, parted from him? I'm tired of it! I don't care for anything, away from dad—the savour is gone from life. I didn't want to be presented this year. I wanted to wait till next, when dad had written that perhaps he would really be at home for good, and have me to live with him again. But then Lady St. Leger said I was too old to wait. I'm twenty to-day, you know, and she wanted it so much, and one of the last things I remember dad saying when he left me in her charge five years ago, was that I was to obey her in everything. She has been very kind, and, of course, it's only for my pleasure that she wants me to be out in society, instead of——"

"Just *leaking* out, by degrees," broke in Kitty, comprehendingly. "I think she was 'jolly well right,' dear, as the only duke I know says. But, speaking of dukes, I hear the rustling of their strawberry leaves, or whatever they've got—if I'm not mixing them up with mere marquises or such things."

"Their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Exbury," announced Lady St. Leger's one footman—a youth who

was driven by the ardour of self-esteem to assist Nature in the matter of calves, and on great occasions endured torture lest the additions should by some untoward accident suffer dislocation.

After this moment Honour had little more time for thought. She had to smile and give fair change for the gold of many compliments, and altogether acquit herself in a way to do her chaperon and hostess credit. Kitty Carlin was swept away by a tidal wave of chatter, and she was surrounded by men and the sort of women who make a point of being "nice" to pretty *debutantes*, because "you never can tell whom they may marry," when Lady St. Leger came up to her with a man she had never seen before. Of this Honour was sure, for his was not a personality to let itself be easily forgotten.

He might have been of any age between twenty-eight and thirty-five. What his complexion had once been it was hard to say, for his eyes were light blue, with violet rims round the pale iris, and his thick, straight hair was black. But at present his skin was tanned to such a swarthy shade as to aid the high cheek-bones and the marked features of the sombre, beardless face, in making up a superficial resemblance to an American Indian.

But this bronzed tint was a recommendation to Honour Brooke. When she saw a man who looked as if his skin were darkened by travel in warmer lands than England, she was at once inclined to be interested in him, for might he not have known the experiences which her father had known?—might he not have met her father?—since, after all, the earth was a small planet.

Lady St. Leger was not a woman to be easily excited, but as she advanced with this new man by her side, her handsome, discontented face was unusually animated.

"Honour," she said, "you have heard me speak a thousand times of my husband's cousin, Loris St. Leger? Well, here he actually is in the flesh—unless he has managed to develop an astral body in his strange travels—and he wants to know you."

Honour's eyes, always bright, became stars.

"Oh, you've been in Russia, and India, and China, and all the places where my father has been!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand.

A curious expression was born on the face of Mr. St. Leger as he took the girlish hand. There was a certain ironical delight in it, the sort of delight which a *blasé* man can derive from a new situation. He retained the hand as long as he could without violating conventionality, looking with his light eyes into Honour's great soft brown ones. During the second or two which passed in this way, there was time for the idea to flash through the girl's mind that she could imagine a beast-tamer having such eyes as these.

Suddenly, she did not like him as well as she had at first. Perhaps this was because he did not shake hands in a nice way, and his fingers were disagreeably cold.

"If you have heard of me from my cousin Florence," he said, "you know that I am half Russian. My mother was one of the most beautiful Russian women of her day, I'm told, though I can't remember her, and as some property in her country has come to me, naturally I've seen something of Russia. As for the other countries, however, I've visited them through sheer love of adventure."

"He's very interested in himself," reflected Honour. Somehow, she resented his fancying that she could care for details of his past, unless there were any stray ones connected with her father. But she took herself to task, as she knew that Lady St. Leger entertained a romantic admiration for this adventurer.

"And did you ever see my father?" she asked.

St. Leger was slow in answering, and if Honour had been better equipped by experience for the reading of thought and character in faces, she might have wondered if he were waiting to learn by hers what she expected him to say—whether she were only "drawing" him, although in reality supplied with knowledge from another source, or whether her curiosity were genuine.

"Yes, I have met Nevill Brooke," St. Leger answered. "He never wrote you about the circumstances of our meeting?"

"There is his conceit again!" thought Honour. "No," she answered, aloud, blushing a little because her letters had not been so frequent or full as her heart wished. "He never mentioned meeting you. But he meets so many people, and I suppose you didn't know each other well?"

"I could hardly claim him as a friend," admitted St. Leger, a spark lighting his eyes. "I only asked because, as my surname and Florence's are the same, Mr. Brooke might have coupled us in his mind, and questioned you."

"Dad had not known Lady St. Leger long when he left me with her," explained Honour. "He is a careless man in some ways, and I don't suppose he'd remember her relations if she told him. You see, Lady St. Leger wrote to him about me, when she came back to England after a long absence, reminding him that she and my mother—who died when I was a little girl—had been intimate friends, and suggesting a meeting. So they did meet, and finally it was arranged, as dad was on the eve of going away, and didn't want to put me at boarding-school, that I should live with Lady St. Leger."

"Florence and I haven't met for six or seven years," said the traveller, "and I never write letters, so it was news to me to-day when I walked in and surprised her, to hear that she had a young lady living with her. But I was interested to learn that you were your father's daughter."

People had drifted away, leaving the two together, when sentences regarding India and China and Nevill Brooke reached them. From a distance Lady St. Leger glanced at the pair, and a charming contingency arose in her mind. She had adored her husband, and Loris St. Leger, though Russian in many of his characteristics, reminded her of him. Even whispers of gossip regarding his career which had wandered, like stray breezes from other lands, to her ears, had added to the atmosphere of

romance surrounding this man so much younger than herself. He was a fascinating hero for any girl's life story, to her mind, and she did not see why Honour Brooke should not be the girl.

What a splendid couple they would make! Not that Loris was actually handsome—no; some people might even consider him ugly; but none could help glancing at him twice. In his way, he was as remarkable-looking as Honour, and how delightful it would be if by a marriage the only two persons for whom she really cared should be drawn nearer to her. Honour might always be counted upon for devotion, though the girl had no idea how much she *really* owed to Lady St. Leger. If she ever did come to know, she would be the more anxious to please her benefactress, for Honour was of a passionately grateful nature. In any case, it would require no persuasion to keep the girl near her guardian, and if Loris fell in love with Honour, he would be happy in gratifying her wishes.

"I'll sound him about his impressions of the child," she resolved, and she was pleased because for once no ambitious element entered into her plans for Honour's future.

She had never thought of the girl for St. Leger, because for years he had vanished out of her life, and she had no more been able to calculate the date of his reappearance than she could count upon the flashing of a meteor down the blue steeps of night. Being a woman of the world, she had wanted Honour to be successful in the market of Society, and to make a brilliant match worthy of such beauty, and of her own skill as chaperon—for Honour's face and heart and mind were her sole fortune, and Lady St. Leger herself was not a rich woman.

Honour's mother had been the daughter of an impoverished earl, and had made a *mésalliance* in marrying handsome, devil-may-care Nevill Brooke, who had been only a war correspondent, of no family or fortune. Lady St. Leger had wished a better fate for her *protégée*, but now that this new idea had seized her, in a moment she threw

to the winds ambitious scheming. Honour would be a divine wife to the man she loved ; and even if the strange, vague stories about St. Leger's adventurous life were true, he would but make the better husband because he knew the world, and had tired of it. He was exactly the man, she told herself, for an innocent girl.

When she saw that some other man had interrupted the *tête-à-tête*, she summoned the traveller with a look. Absorbed, she did not notice that Kitty Carlin stood close by, talking to the young Duke of Exbury, who liked popular actresses almost as well as he liked dogs, and cherished visions of restoring his fortunes by going on the stage. Even if Lady St. Leger had observed Kitty's nearness, it would not have affected her to caution, for Miss Carlin was a doll in her eyes—an amusing doll, who danced and did funny things when you pulled a string.

“ Well, what do you think of my *débutante* ? ” asked Lady St. Leger.

“ She's the prettiest girl I ever saw,” responded her cousin by marriage.

“ I'm so glad. And she's as good as she's pretty.”

“ Good girls are usually dull, but I shouldn't say that Miss Brooke was dull.”

“ Quite the contrary. She's witty in some moods, and she has great pluck and spirit. You should see her on a horse ! She's tremendously admired, I assure you, though she has not been really ' out ' till now. If she were an heiress, she could marry anybody.” As Lady St. Leger said this, she glanced at her companion, but she could not understand the expression on the man's face. She would have liked to read his thoughts, but sometimes it is well for our happiness that our desires are not granted.

“ Miss Brooke is attractive enough to succeed without money,” he remarked.

“ Men are so selfish and mercenary nowadays—that is, the men in our set, who wouldn't sacrifice one luxury for Helen of Troy. I shouldn't be sorry to see her give herself to a different sort of man. But you'll dine with us

to-night, of course—we shall be quite alone—and learn to know her better.”

“Thank you, I should like it of all things,” said St. Leger, “but, unfortunately, I was just going to tell you that I must say *au revoir*. I have a pressing engagement for the evening.” His smile was more cryptic than ever.

“An engagement!” echoed Lady St. Leger. “Why, you told me that you’d only just arrived in England, after your six years’ absence!”

“That is true,” admitted the traveller. “Nevertheless, I have an engagement of a pressing nature.”

“That sounds as if there were a woman in the case!” exclaimed his cousin.

“Then it sounds deceiving. There’s a man in the case, and it’s on his account that I came to-day to England.”

“You are not flattering to me.”

“But I came to you first. It was pleasure before business. My engagement this evening is business.”

“I hope not disagreeable business.”

St. Leger’s eyes narrowed. “To some men it would be. To me, I cannot say it is. Now I must go, or I shall be too late to—do all I have to do. But I shall come again soon.”

“When—to-morrow?”

“If I can. It must depend on how my affair goes to-night. Will you wish me luck?”

“With all my heart,” responded his cousin. “And so will Honour.”

Again, a whimsical enjoyment of a strange situation showed itself on St. Leger’s face. “Really, I think I will ask her,” he said.

At this instant he had the sensation that a pair of eyes regarded him intently. He searched, and met the gaze of Kitty Carlin.

They measured glances as fencers measure foils, and St. Leger knew that he was looking into the eyes of an enemy.

"Little cat!" he said to himself. "How have I stroked her the wrong way?"

"Brute!" said Kitty to herself. "So he's to have Honour? Well, not if *this* child has got anything to say."

A few minutes later St. Leger was bidding good-bye to the heroine of the day.

"I was asked to stay to dinner, and am desolated because I have business for to-night which will take me away," he announced. "Will you wish me success in my undertaking?"

Honour looked up, prepared to say something conventional, but she met his eyes, and a shock ran through her nerves.

"Oh, I—I——" she faltered, and suddenly her lips turned pale. "Do excuse me," she said. "I suppose it's because I've been standing so long, but I feel rather faint."

Somehow, Kitty had reached her side, and it was she who gave Honour support, not St. Leger.

He took the girl's attack in a somewhat unusual way, seeming to study it as an extraordinary phenomenon, instead of expressing solicitude. Still, the change in her manner had impressed him, and not pleasantly. As soon as Miss Brooke was better, he went away.

"Did you notice," asked Honour, "that Mr. St. Leger had heliotrope in his buttonhole? I wonder if the scent could have made me feel faint? Already I'm better."

"So am I, because *he's* gone," snapped Kitty. "Don't blame the heliotrope—the only innocent thing about him, I'll bet. It's the man himself. I'm not much on nerves, but his eyes made me feel as if I had caterpillars walking in my spine. There's something appalling about him."

"Did *you* feel that?" ejaculated Honour. "Why, so did—but we're both idiotic, dear. Mr. St. Leger's an interesting man, and Lady St. Leger's Admirable Crichton. You'll often see him here, and you must learn to like him."

“ Did he speak to you of his engagement for to-night ? ”

“ Yes,” said Honour. “ He asked me to wish him success, and then—I began to feel faint.”

“ He was talking about it to Lady St. Leger, and his face looked like—like a mummy come to life with seven evil spirits inside. Mark my words, that man’s engagement’s a queer one. Let me see, what day of the month is it, so that, if one ever hears anything, one can remember and say, ‘ I told you so ! ’ ”

“ It is April the fourth,” answered Honour.

CHAPTER XII

THE HORROR OF A DREAM

HONOUR BROOKE went up to her room early that night, for she had had another attack of faintness—a thing unheard of until that day—and on the second occasion there had not even been a spray of heliotrope to account for it. Lady St. Leger and she had sat down to dinner at eight o’clock. Then Honour had been well, though slightly pale and languid, but after several courses had come and gone, scarcely touched by her, she had experienced a bewildering sensation. It was, when she tried to describe it afterwards, as if she had received a shock from an electric battery.

She half sprang up in her chair with a stifled cry, her eyes dilated. Lady St. Leger, startled, echoed the exclamation, and the butler and footman—the only other persons present—had all they could do to preserve the statuesque demeanour which was their servants’ hallmark.

“ What *is* the matter ? ” ejaculated Lady St. Leger.

“ I don’t know,” stammered Honour, sinking back into her chair. “ A—a sort of wrench of the heart. I can’t describe it.”

“ Are you better ? ”

“ I shall—be quite right in a minute,” answered the girl. But in truth she was astonished at the continuance of her suffering. She was trembling, and so unnerved that she could hardly help bursting into tears. She was ashamed of herself for the “ exhibition ” she had made, and, with a shaking hand, lifted a glass of water (Honour never drank wine) to her lips. She felt as if she were a telegraph wire, vibrating with the passing of a message which she could not read.

It was only by a strong effort that she sat through the remaining half-hour of dinner, and pretended to sip coffee afterwards in the drawing-room. As early as she could she said good-night, kissed Lady St. Leger, and dragged herself, with a languor very different from her usual springing step, up to her own room.

Lady St. Leger shared her maid with Honour, but the girl could not have endured the ministrations of that soft-stepping woman to-night. Josephine had put her into a simple white tea-gown for dinner, and Honour made herself ready for bed without help. A great oppression of sleep was upon her. She felt as if she had swallowed a decoction of poppies, and it seemed to her high-keyed fancy that strange dreams were crowding near, eagerly pressing her eyelids down with invisible fingers, that they might materialise in sleep.

Then, almost at once, sleep came. The girl plunged fathoms deep in it, as if she had fallen with a great landslip over a precipice.

It is said that if, when we dream of falling, we dreamed also the shock of striking the bottom of that sleep-abys, we should die. Honour did not dream the end of her fall, but she had the sensation of waking suddenly, to find herself stumbling through dark passages in a house which, though she groped her way through black night, she knew was strange to her.

Vaguely she wondered how she had come there, and whether she were trespassing ; but even as the question

asked itself in the confusion of her mind, its answer came. She realised, as if a voice had spoken in her ear, that she was in the house because there was something or someone there whom she must find, or die searching. Something, or someone—yes, yes, it was *someone*. Oh, her father! Where was he? How should she find him in the darkness? The darkness was there to keep her from him—to separate them for ever, if it could—to prevent her from knowing what was happening. Ah, that was it! A horrible something that was happening out of sight.

Blindly, desperately, with death in her heart, she groped through the dark, from passage to passage—a network of passages, a maze of them, that led nowhere, and brought her back again and again to the same spot.

What agony! Would it never end?

“Oh, God!” she moaned, in a slow, stifled voice, for, as if she were being choked, she could not cry out. “Oh, God, help me!—help me find my father!”

What was that light in the distance—a thin, knife-blade of light? Why could she come no nearer to it, though she went on and on, always seeing the bright streak flitting before her like a will-o'-the-wisp?

At last her hand touched a door. The yellow gleam was behind it. She pushed, and half fell into a room full of blinding light. For an instant, there stood her father, tall, handsome, with beautiful bright eyes, and rippling bronze hair touched with silver, exactly as he had looked when she saw him years ago, only differently dressed.

“Honour!” he called, holding out his arms. But, as he took a step towards her, looking into her face, a black, shapeless form sprang upon him, crushing him down, grinding his life out before her eyes, while she could do nothing. And she knew that the form was the incarnation of Murder.

“Murder! Murder!” she shrieked aloud, and tore herself from sleep to waking by the agony which bathed her body in a cold dew.

The shock of being flung from that scene of horror, with its blinding light of revelation, to darkness and the springy,

familiar softness of her own bed, was so sudden that Honour could not believe she had been sleeping. She was sure that she had been in that lighted room, and that she should know it again, though the house, with its labyrinth of passages, had been strange.

She thought that someone must have put her out of the room where her father was being killed, and locked the door. Therefore she did not try to stop her anguished cries of "Murder! Help!—help!"

Staggering from her bed, she began groping about in the dark, with the impression that the dream, or whatever it had been, was beginning again, and that, if she could go on, she would find herself presently in the house with the lighted room where the murder was being done.

With the confusion of her own screams mingled other noises. There were hurrying footfalls, broken exclamations, and then her door was burst open, showing faces and moving lights. She flew towards it, her brain still prisoned in the dream, which seemed to break like a bubble at the sound of Lady St. Leger's voice, calling :

"Honour!—Honour, darling, for Heaven's sake, what has happened?"

The elder woman was in her dressing-gown, with hanging hair, and her maid and several other servants clustered behind, candles flickering into strange lights and shadows on white faces.

With a heart-broken sob Honour fell into the extended arms, and lay there, panting, speechless.

"Thank God, there's nothing dreadful here!" exclaimed Lady St. Leger. "I feared—I don't know what! My child, you must have had some terrible dream. But don't be frightened any more. It isn't true—it isn't true."

"It is true!" answered Honour, releasing herself from the haven of clasping arms. Her eyes were glowing with prophetic light. In her long white nightdress, with her beautiful hair streaming in shadowy masses, she looked more like a sybil of strange past days of superstition, when the world was young, than a girl of the present. "Call it

a dream, if you will," she said, " but I know that my father is dead—murdered, and that he was given this way of showing it to me. I have seen him die, and I dedicate my life to seeking out his murderer ! "

CHAPTER XIII

THE COMING OF A LETTER

HONOUR slept no more that night. Her veins ran fire. Her dream was more real than reality, and she strove, in her helplessness, to penetrate the mystery which sleep had shown, as if her soul were a wave beating against rocks, never resting, never gaining by its rebellious tumult.

Lady St. Leger had offered to stay with her through the night, but Honour wished to be alone.

The hours between dawn and the time when the household began to stir seemed endless. Honour was half inclined to rise at some unwonted hour, but common sense laid a cold touch on the pulse of excitement, counselling the wisdom of composing her nerves till it should be time to act.

She lay still, therefore, until a tap came at her door at half-past eight. This tap invariably meant a cup of tea, the bringing of letters, and bath. This morning it was like the assertion of the commonplace, which has always its petty triumph after great crises.

Josephine brought in Miss Brooke's tea, and kind inquiries from Lady St. Leger.

Refreshed after her vigil by the hot tea, as soon as the maid was gone she sprang out of bed, having forgotten the letters which had been laid on the counterpane. The quick movement threw them on the floor, reminding her of their existence, and uppermost lay an envelope with an Indian stamp upon it. Honour's heart leaped as she saw her father's handwriting.

It was months since she had heard from him, and in the last letter, which she had re-read every day since it came, her father had told her not to expect another for a long time, as he was on the point of journeying into a country where he would be unable either to send news or receive it. He was going to "try his luck" in an adventure which might bring him fortune, but the expedition was to be kept a secret, and, beside herself, only two persons not in the party were informed that it was setting out. Honour must not speak of the matter, even to Lady St. Leger, for it was impossible to say what harm might not be done by an indiscreet word. Still, the girl need not be anxious. He was going into no greater danger than a hundred times before, when he had come out unscathed—no greater danger than Stanley or any other explorer had encountered. He would write when he could—Honour might be sure of that. Yet, if a year passed without a letter, she must not be surprised, but remind herself that no news was indeed good news, for evil tidings travelled fast.

So Honour had waited, and counted the days, and now the longed-for letter had come, as if in answer to the bitter cry of her spirit.

The girl snatched the envelope from the floor, where it had fallen, leaving the others unregarded, and, before opening it, glanced at the post-mark. She could not make out the name of the place from which it had been sent, but the date was only four weeks old.

With fingers that trembled she broke the envelope. So near this letter seemed to bring her father, that she was almost ready to hope her dream had been a deceiving one—that her dear one was still in the world, perhaps on his way to her.

Seldom as she heard from her father, at least when letters did come they were usually long, and this was one of Honour's consolations. But hope died when she had pulled the one sheet of thin paper from its envelope, to see that even the second page was scarcely covered with the small, firm writing which she knew and loved so well:

“My sweetheart daughter,” Nevill Brooke had begun his letter. “At last I can write to you again, and, thank Heaven, I’ve good news to tell, for I shall be following this to England, and within a few days after it has reached you I hope to hold you in my arms. The months since we have been able to communicate have been adventurous ones to me. There were hours when I thought that I had seen your dear, beautiful face for the last time this side the grave; but though brain and body both had constant work, never a moment has passed that hasn’t held its thought of my sweet girl, its hope that what I was striving to do would be for her happiness.

“What my adventures have been would make far too long a letter. You shall hear all—all that it would be well for you to hear—from my own lips, if I live to meet you, as I see no reason now to fear I shall not. No, I see no reason at all, and yet I’m oddly depressed to-night. I trust that nothing is wrong at home. But, of course, presentiments are nonsense. I’ve gone through a good deal, and shall need petting from you before I’m as strong as I was, or I shouldn’t be yielding to foolish fancies now.

“I ought to be with you on the fourth or fifth of April, at latest, only a day or two after you have received this letter—so you see it’s useless making it a long one, or I shall have no news left in my budget for you when we meet. If you don’t hear from me or see me by the fifth, go on the sixth of April to my solicitor, Harvey Kane, King’s Bench Walk, Temple, and ask for news. If he has none, drive to River House, Mortlake Road, Hammer-smith, and inquire for ‘Mr. Smith,’ who will tell you what you want to know. Or, if not, that will be time enough for anxiety; for if Mr. Smith, of River House, has not heard from me before the sixth of April it will be a sign that some serious obstacle has prevented my communicating with him. However, it’s hardly worth while to frighten you. We are almost certain to be together, darling, on the night of April the fourth, before ten o’clock. That

is what I am aiming for, and I can hardly wait, but don't make inquiries until the sixth, for to do so might cause trouble which I can't explain, and don't mention even to Lady St. Leger that I am coming. Till death and after, dear one,

“YOUR LOVING DAD.”

“Till death and after!” Honour repeated. He had been “aiming” to come to her on April the fourth. Had he come to her then? Must she believe that the dream was no dream, but a warning? That—her father's last thought being of her and for her—he had been able to *keep his appointment* at the moment when soul and body were parting?

His letter had been delayed a few days longer, evidently, than he had expected, for to-day was the latest date named: Dared she still expect him, after what she had seen in her sleep? Might she not go to the solicitor in the Temple, or to the house in Hammersmith, without dragging through twenty-four hours of suspense?

She asked herself these questions, yet she knew that she would obey her father. He had said that she must be patient until the sixth. She must simply suffer to the end.

Still, she was thankful for the letter. It was like a beloved voice speaking out of the night, and with it lying warm over her heart, strength would come to her to live through the hours.

When Josephine thought that mademoiselle had had time to doze a little more, and then to finish her bath, she came knocking at the door again, but, to her surprise, Honour was dressed, and ready to go to her guardian almost immediately. Lady St. Leger, lying still among laced and embroidered pillows, was shocked at the girl's pallor.

“Poor child!” she exclaimed. “You haven't got over the effects of that dreadful dream! But dreams go by contraries. This was a sign that you'll hear from your father. When you do, you will laugh at your fears.”

"I have heard from him," Honour answered, "yet I don't laugh."

Then she told of the letter that had come, but, obedient to the instructions received, was silent as to its news. She could not understand why her father wished his impending arrival in England to be kept secret, but he did wish it, and that was enough.

There were several engagements for the day, but Honour's white face, as well as arguments, pleaded for her release, and Lady St. Leger went reluctantly out to make excuses for the pretty girl whose companionship ensured her a double welcome everywhere.

Honour was left to get through the day as best she could. She felt weak and shattered, but she would not stop in bed, lest her father should arrive. At each ring of the bell her nerves quivered, but the hours wore on, and he did not come.

In the afternoon, as she sat trying to read in Lady St. Leger's boudoir, to her surprise Loris St. Leger was shown in. This was against orders, for Honour had said that she was not at home to anyone, unless some intimate friend should call. She had inserted this phrase lest her father should be turned away with the information that "the ladies were out." St. Leger could not be classified as an "intimate friend," but he had contrived to make his cause good with the footman, and Honour found herself cut off from escape.

The girl did not understand the feelings which St. Leger excited. She wanted, for her guardian's sake, to like him, and she was sure that she ought to be attracted towards a man who had travelled so much in the countries which her father knew best. Besides, he was interesting in himself. Any woman would look at him twice, even if she did not think him handsome. Still, Honour felt the impulse to snatch her hand away when he took it. Again he wore heliotrope in his buttonhole, and Honour wondered, as she had wondered yesterday, whether her distaste for the flower might not be enough to account for the nervous

agitation (it almost amounted to that) which seized her once more in St. Leger's presence.

As he talked, he hardly removed his eyes from her face, and at last he remarked that she was like Nevill Brooke. "Some day," he said, "I want to tell you about our acquaintance, your father's and mine. I think you would be interested."

"Of course I should," returned Honour. "Tell me now."

"No," said St. Leger. "I must know you better first. Will you give me leave to try and win your friendship, as I had your father's?"

"I thought you told me yesterday that you and he had been acquaintances, not friends," Honour caught him up.

But if St. Leger considered himself caught, he had perfect control over his features. They did not change, and his eyes did not flinch from hers, as he answered that "that depended upon what one called friendship." He never cared to claim even that to which he had a right, and he had not wanted to begin his acquaintance with Nevill Brooke's daughter on the strength of her father's opinion. Still, now they had gone so far, he might admit that Nevill Brooke and he had been comrades. "I had the luck to save his life on one occasion," he finished, watching to see how Honour would take the statement.

She took it with a blush—a guilty rush of colour, because she could not call up passionate gratitude. Somehow St. Leger's words did not carry conviction, though she was bound to believe him. "How was that?" she asked, eagerly. But St. Leger had not been leading up to a story: He rose to go.

"That is part of the tale I am saving for you when you have let me learn to know you better," he said. "But you are tired. Tell my cousin Florence I was sorry to miss her. I will come again—perhaps to-morrow, and take her advice on the subject of where to settle down in town for a few months."

St. Leger was not sorry to have missed his cousin's widow. On the contrary, he considered himself lucky, for he had wanted to see Honour Brooke alone.

The situation struck him as piquant. Knowing certain things that he knew—things known only to two other persons in the world—it seemed to him that the circumstances surrounding him and this girl were unique.

He would have been glad to prolong his call, but he had seen that Honour was ill at ease, and he thought it wiser, at this early stage, not to risk irritating her.

When he had left Lady St. Leger's house he turned into the Park, and as he had no curiosity to see the afternoon parade of "Society" he found a secluded path. His wish was to think quietly, and make up his mind on matters where at present he wavered.

St. Leger was a man of quick decisions, but yesterday he had come face to face with a new development, and his time had been so occupied since that he had had no leisure for mental adjustment. The fact was, Nevill Brooke's daughter had surprised him.

St. Leger told the truth when it happened to be more to his advantage than a falsehood, or when he had not been given time for invention, and he had told the truth yesterday in assuring Honour of his ignorance that she was living with Lady St. Leger. He had called in Park Lane, not because of impatience to see his cousin by marriage, but because he wanted to borrow money. He expected shortly to be rich—very rich, but at the moment he was pressed, and he had thought that Lady St. Leger would lend.

When he had seen Honour, he had changed his mind about the request, resolving, rather than ask Lady St. Leger, to get what he needed in another way. He never had borrowed money of his cousin, and though, before meeting her ward, he had been willing to risk losing her good opinion, he thought differently when he learned that Honour Brooke was an inmate of her house. He knew that he would need to be backed by Lady St. Leger if he

were to win favour in the girl's eyes, and he was afraid that, if he asked for money on his first day in England, his dear Florence might not regard him as a desirable lover for Miss Brooke.

That was the light in which, after the first moment or two in the girl's society, he wished to be regarded, and for several reasons.

For one thing, though there were obstacles in the way of marriage for him—obstacles which a certain person, powerful in moulding his destiny, might make well-nigh insurmountable—there was a strong money inducement. If late news from India had unfortunately reached Harvey Kane, a solicitor in the Temple, it would be difficult to keep Honour Brooke ignorant of a fact important for her to know. As an outsider, she was dangerous to interests precious to him and his. As the girl who had promised to become his wife, it did not matter much what she was told by the officious Harvey Kane.

Before seeing Honour, or knowing where she was, St. Leger had thought (with his business partner and superior) that, if Nevill Brooke's daughter were likely to become too wise, she must be cleared out of the way before the road could be safe. But St. Leger had some few feelings in common with better men, and he had taken a fancy to Honour.

The reasons which should have prevented him from thinking of the girl made his desire for her more keen. It would be sweet to know what he knew, and to have her for his wife; to kiss her, to hold her in his arms, certain that she would never suspect, or that, if she did, it would be impossible for her to free herself from him. He was angry with his tactlessness in stating to Honour that he and her father had been acquaintances, not friends. He must contradict that inadvertent admission of the truth; and he had a splendid story to relate by and by. When they had known each other a few days longer he could plead impetuosity, and say that he loved her, urging that, when he had saved her father's life, Nevill Brooke had

said he would ask no better gift of Fate than to have Loris St. Leger as a son-in-law.

Before this should be ventured, however, there were details to be thought out.

If Harvey Kane, the solicitor, were armed with news lately sent from India, Honour might be told that St. Leger had been one of Nevill Brooke's companions during a certain eventful expedition, and that he was a sharer in the Tontine which would bring her fortune. Now, if she knew this, it would be better that she should first hear something of it from his lips—something in the form of a thrilling narrative, which he could embellish for his own advantage, almost as he pleased, becoming virtually the hero of the tale. But if the solicitor had nothing to tell—that is, nothing newer than his first knowledge of the expedition at its start—Honour need never hear that her father's last great adventure had been undertaken in St. Leger's company. She need never know that she had any right in the fortune which would come to her with her husband; and, thinking thus, St. Leger almost regarded himself as a rather high-minded, unmercenary fellow, who had fallen in love with a penniless girl, and would marry her in spite of threatening danger.

It had been arranged between him and his partner that they would see the solicitor together; but St. Leger's sudden fancy for Honour Brooke gave him an interest separate from—even opposed to—that of his uncle; while, as for Lady St. Leger, she would know what Honour knew—no more and no less—and she would be proud to call herself his ally. She had (thanks, perhaps, to his moral strength in doing without the loan) already shown him this.

Having come so far, St. Leger began to see where he stood. Evidently the next thing was to call on Harvey Kane. He could "cook up" some excuse to his uncle for having done so. He left the Park, and hailed a hansom, for it was nearly five o'clock, and the solicitor might be leaving his office.

“King’s Bench Walk,” he said to the cabman, and, twenty minutes later, in the quiet precincts of the Temple, he was mounting the steps of an old-fashioned house, with the name of Harvey Kane, among others, on the doorpost.

The solicitor’s office was on the second floor, and St. Leger walked into a dim, wainscoted room, to find one pallid clerk sitting on a stool before a high desk.

“Is Mr. Kane in?” briskly asked the new-comer.

The clerk shook his head, and answered, wearily, as if he had gone through the same routine often: “No, sir; Mr. Kane’s ill, and has been ordered abroad,” said the youth; and St. Leger’s pale gaze fastened upon him so sharply that, for some reason, the thin face coloured up to its eyebrows.

“How long has he been gone?” asked St. Leger.

“About a fortnight, sir.”

“When is he expected back?”

“I can’t say, exactly. Perhaps in a few weeks’ time.”

“Has he left no one to attend to his business?”

“Only me, sir. Mr. Kane has no partner. The other clerks have been given a holiday.”

“Oh, indeed!” St. Leger began to be thoughtful. “You forward Mr. Kane’s letters?”

As he asked this question he looked into the eyes of the clerk, which flinched slightly. He replied, very quietly, however: “Yes, I forward letters.”

“Could you give me Mr. Kane’s present address?”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t do that, sir. He wires from time to time where to send, as he is travelling with his family. At the moment I don’t know where he is.”

“Indeed?” St. Leger commented again. He had no other questions to ask, and, having nodded to the clerk, with a mutter of thanks and a “Good day,” he took himself off.

The youth closed the door after the departing caller, and then sank down, not on his own high stool, but into an easy chair intended for waiting clients. As he did so, he heaved a sigh which was a groan, and, standing just

outside the door, St. Leger heard it. Having heard it, he proceeded downstairs.

“Something fishy there!” he said to himself, “and that furtive-looking chap is more or less in his master’s confidence. I wonder whether anything could be got out of him, and whether Harvey Kane’s disappearance has anything to do with our Tontine?”

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOUSE WITH THE CLOSED SHUTTERS

THE fifth of April passed without any sign from Nevill Brooke. Again that night Honour did not sleep, and, when morning came, she had decided to call at the Temple; then, if need were, at the house in Hammersmith named in yesterday’s letter, without confiding her intention to Lady St. Leger.

Honour was an outspoken girl, and hated the concealments and beatings about the bush which make life dramatic for many women; but obedience to her father’s wishes was almost a religion. She did not see how she could *half* explain her expedition; therefore she determined to keep it secret.

A letter from Kitty Carlin gave her an inspiration, just as she was seeking a pretext which would not necessitate a fib. Kitty’s new costumes for a forthcoming play had arrived from Paris, and would “Beauty” lunch with her, and criticise them?

Lady St. Leger was surprised that Honour, who had begged to have her engagements cancelled, should pronounce herself well enough to spend hours with insignificant little Kitty Carlin. But she was thankful to see Honour more like herself. Besides, she had received a note from Loris, asking if they might have a talk that afternoon, and so she consented to Honour’s plan.

At twelve o'clock Lady St. Leger dropped Honour at Queen Anne's Mansions, where Kitty Carlin lived in a flat with an elderly and dictatorial maid, and permission had been grudgingly granted for the girl to drive home alone in a cab when she felt inclined.

Even from Kitty it was difficult to get away. Honour was obliged to hold to the programme, see the dresses, and stop to lunch, then to wait for a thunder-shower before she could escape from the actress.

It was after two when finally she escaped, only reconciled to the delay by telling herself that solicitors must lunch also, and probably Mr. Harvey Kane would be absent from his office in the middle of the day. She arrived at the Temple a little before three, was received by the same youth who had flinched under St. Leger's piercing eyes, received similar replies to her questions, and presently went away again, bitterly disappointed, but too inexperienced to be suspicious, as St. Leger had been.

There was now nothing left but to go out to Hammer-smith, and she gave the driver of her four-wheeled cab the address in her father's letter.

Never had a drive appeared so long to Honour. Over and over again she looked out of the window into the rain, meaning to ask the cabman if he were sure he knew the way, then lacking courage to put such a question. She felt lonely and miserable as the rain beat against the cab windows, and the sky darkened for another thunder storm.

When the cab stopped at last before the closed gate of a large, high-walled garden, the rain had stopped. The wind, which had been blowing the drops against the panes, had suddenly died down; there was a brooding silence, save for an occasional rumble of thunder, which seemed to come from mysterious regions underground; the low-hanging clouds were of a tawny, ominous copper colour, which gave an effect of unnatural twilight; and Nature seemed waiting breathless, for something to happen.

Honour felt the influence of the hour, and glanced about

her, fearful of she scarce knew what, as the driver opened the cab door for her to step out.

"Here you are, miss—River House, Mortlake Road," he said, pointing to a name so faded that it was only just visible on the gate of the high-walled garden. "A job I had to find the place, too! Nobody couldn't tell me where it was till just lately, and I hadn't no idea. It's most out o' the world, and if I'd known 'twas such a distance, I couldn't 'a driven you. It's time I was back at the stables now, and I'd be obliged if you could give me my fare and let me go, miss, if you expect to be long indoors."

Honour's heart sank. This seemed more like a lonely country road to her eyes than a street in London. She felt as if the shabby four-wheeled cab which had rattled her over so many miles was her only link between this desolate place and her far-away home. Still, she could not detain the man against his will.

"I can't tell how long I shall be inside," she said, with a glance at the roof of a low-built house showing among trees. "Perhaps I may be half-an-hour, or an hour. But—can I get another cab when I want it?"

"You'll only have to walk a short way, miss, to do that," replied the driver, with encouraging optimism. "You turn round that corner"—pointing—"then the first to the right, the second to the left, the third to the right again, and you'll come to a public-'ouse where there's sure to be a 'ansom, if not a growler. And I must ask you twelve bob, miss, for this job—Queen Anne's Mansions to the Temple, a long wait, then from the Temple 'ere."

Honour paid the money without question. She had scarcely ever been alone in a cab, or paid a cab-fare. Lady St. Leger's carriage took her everywhere, or, if a cab were needed, she was accompanied by her guardian or Josephine.

Hardly had the man got his money when he was off, thinking himself in luck, and, having watched him away, with a lost and deserted feeling in her heart, Honour tried the gate. It stuck, and she had to exert all her strength,

but, just as she had begun to be afraid that she would not be able to get in, it yielded. She saw before her a winding path, in the midst of a neglected lawn, where grass and weeds grew rankly under crowding trees and laurel bushes, and a smell of damp earth and rotting vegetation came to her nostrils. A curious effect was that, the nearer she drew to the house, the less she could see of it. Trees and laurels shut it out of her sight, and it was not until she had passed under a forlorn arbour and out again that suddenly she found herself in front of a beautiful old mansion, evidently dating from the reign of Queen Anne.

Yes, beautiful was the word for it at first glance, but the second impression, quickly following, was melancholy in the extreme. The "moated grange" in which Mariana wore out her passionate life could not have been more desolate than this old Hammersmith house behind its dark screen of trees and its high wall of faded bricks. It was half-covered with ivy, veiling many of the windows—ancient, rope-stemmed ivy, twisted in gnarled agony, so old that much of it was dead, the bare stems threading grimly through the living masses of a newer growth.

Not a flower bloomed before the house, though ancient rose bushes had grown boldly past all appointed limits, until they reached half-way up the windows, presumably of a drawing-room, mingling their leaves with the darker ivy. Inside these windows (and all others which the girl could see as she swept a wistful gaze over the front of the house) dusty white shutters were fastened together. The place appeared asleep; its eyes were shut; and the idea of trying to wake it by knocking at the door seemed almost hopeless. Still, there was nothing else to do. "Mr. Smith," to whom she had been sent, might be an eccentric person, who liked to shut himself up from the world and live the life of a hermit. If he were not away, he must occupy rooms at the back of the house, for the front windows were fast shuttered; or, if he were absent, there must be a caretaker left on the premises, who could give Mr. Smith's address.

There was a huge knocker on the door, and Honour lifted it, letting it fall several times. Then she stood listening in tense expectation, but after the echo of the knocking had died away into hollow silence there was not a sound within.

CHAPTER XV

“ MY NAME IS JACK HARNED ”

As Honour stood anxiously waiting, she noticed how dust lay thick on the panels of the door, and even on the knocker, except in the spot where a hand must grasp it for use. There it was almost clean. She looked at her little glove of pale grey suède, but the fingers were unsoiled, and it struck her that the knocker must have been used lately before she had touched it.

When two or three minutes had passed, Honour rapped more loudly than before, but again only the echo answered, as if mockingly. Twice and thrice more she tried, breaking her glove across the back at last, and then, with an impatient exclamation, she sprang down the two or three stone steps before the door, beginning to walk hastily round the house towards the back.

A wind was rising once more, moaning through the tops of the great Lebanon cedars, towering high above other trees on the lawn. As Honour looked up at the darkened sky a few drops of rain splashed into her face. There was no path across the lawn, and the girl had to push her way through the rank grass and weeds. Thus she had turned the corner, and was glancing at the windows in the vain hope of seeing at least one unshuttered, when her foot struck against some small object, and sent it bounding ahead. Involuntarily Honour glanced down in time to catch a red gleam, which was like the flash of an eye peering out of the grass. She stooped, and saw a toad, less than life-size, beautifully carved in a curious dull bronze, the

top of its head filled in with a fiery red stone, somewhat lighter than, but not unlike, a common carbuncle.

Honour bent over it, fascinated. A toad with a jewel in its head! That ought to bring luck, if there could be such a thing as a luck-bringer. No doubt it had been fashioned for a fetish, and perhaps carried about as such by a superstitious person who believed in the toad's magic power. The girl picked it up, and turned it in her hand, so that the jewel in the slender bronze head sent out fiery shafts of light.

Someone had lost the fetish, and if she had not happened to stumble upon it, it might have lain hidden in the unmown grass for years. Perhaps it might already have been there a long time.

Honour regarded the toad thoughtfully, not knowing what to do with it. She did not like to throw so curious a thing back again where she had found it. If she could make herself heard, she might give the toad into someone's charge; but if not, and she were obliged to go away without learning anything of or from Mr. Smith, it occurred to the girl that she would do well to keep it. By advertising for the owner, she might obtain knowledge of Mr. Smith, and through him of her father. With this idea in her mind, she slipped the toad into the pocket of her grey cloth jacket, and no thrill warned her of what would come from that insignificant act.

Her pause had allowed the storm time to gather, and as she reached the back of the house, a flash of lightning and simultaneous clap of thunder seemed to give the signal for which the rain had waited. Down it came, as if the doors of Heaven had been opened to let out the deluge. A torrent of water swept over the girl, and, gathering up her skirts, she ran for shelter, which—of a sort—was to be found under the roof of a modern porch built over a door.

There had not been time to scan all the windows for a sign of life here at the back of the house, where her one hope lay, but Honour, still sprayed upon by the rain which

drove towards her on the wind, rapped on the knockerless door with her hand.

She had hardly dared expect an answer after all her vain efforts at the front ; yet her heart sank at the silence which was the only response. Her nerves were unstrung by the experiences of the past two nights and days, and, dripping wet, shivering in the cold wind, which was more like March than April, desolate, almost despairing, she was ready to break into tears, when suddenly she started at a curious sound.

It came apparently from a distance, yet it seemed to Honour that it proceeded from the house. Even when she had heard it, she hardly knew whether to believe her own ears, and listened again, her heart beating fast. Yes, there it was again—an extraordinary noise, as if someone were chattering inarticulately.

A chill ran through Honour's veins. Here, alone, in the unnatural twilight, the air electrical, the veil of rain shutting her away from the world, that was not a pleasant sound for a girl to hear coming out of a lonely house she had begun to believe deserted. There was something unhuman, terrifying, in it, and she was seized with a desire to run away. She had even taken a step, when she remembered that Nevill Brooke's daughter must not be a coward.

Pressing her lips together, she turned, and knocked again. All was still in the house for a moment ; then came a sound like a far-away echo of her knocking. Once more she beat with her hand on the door-panel, and presently the distant pounding could be heard as before.

Honour was puzzled as well as alarmed. She could only suppose that, after all, there *was* someone in this shuttered house—someone who not only had no intention of answering her summons, but even mocked at her efforts.

What was she to do next ? She could not break into the house, yet how was she to bear to go away thwarted, with that faint, chattering laughter ringing in her ears, and no other means of reaching the Mr. Smith who alone possessed information about her father ?

It seemed to the girl that, if she acknowledged herself beaten, if she went away now from this old house, she would lose her sole hope of communicating with the one she loved best on earth ; and obstinately, almost fiercely, she determined that, come what might, she would stay until that malicious, hidden creature should be forced by curiosity to peep out and see whether she had gone.

On each side of the wooden porch (which could not have been more than forty years old, and looked out of place in contrast with the dignity of the ancient house it deformed) ran a narrow seat. Honour sat down, resolved to make no more disturbance, but to await events. The rain dripped upon her through the creepers, just in bud, but she no longer cared. She was so wet now that a little more rain would not matter. There was even satisfaction to be found in physical discomfort.

For a short time all was still again save the wind and rain and the thunder, which, after its first terrifying burst, had grumbled away into distance. But Honour had hardly resigned herself to inaction for more than five minutes when she heard footsteps, not inside the house, but coming along the way that she had taken. She sprang up, her eyes watchful, a bright colour burning in her cheeks.

An instant later, a man had come into sight round the corner of the house. He was young and slender, rather short than tall, almost boyish in figure, and with a quick, alert step. He, too, had been drenched by the rain. The travelling cap that he wore dripped water, and the collar of his tweed coat, which was dark with wet, was turned up.

The moment that their gaze met, the eyes of the girl and the man brightened with surprised interest. Within a few yards of the porch he stopped short, snatching off his cap.

A curious sensation took Honour captive. She knew that she had never seen this young man before, and yet he did not seem to be a stranger. She felt at once at home with him, and glad that he was here. It was as if a new

friend had come into her life, yet there was no apparent reason for the feeling. The man, who might be of any age between twenty and twenty-six, was not a prince of romance as far as appearance was concerned. Only a pair of fine, bold, dark eyes, with a sense of humour as well as audacity lurking in them, redeemed the pale, clear-featured face from comparative insignificance. Yet, somehow, it was a face not to be forgotten. A student of character might have hesitated to pass a favourable verdict upon it at first; might have pronounced it reckless, suggestive of a life which had been lived hard—lived every moment—short as it must have been; might have counselled a girl not to trust its owner. But Honour did not analyse the face of the young man, nor her own impression. She knew only that his coming seemed to mean something.

“I beg your pardon!” he said, in a pleasant voice, which sounded more like that of a Colonial than a native-born Englishman. “I’ve been knocking at the front door, and as nobody answered, I thought I’d make a tour of exploration. You live here, perhaps?”

“No,” said Honour, conscious that a pair of black eyes were looking very hard at her, taking in her beauty. “No; I, too, knocked at the front door, and came here, thinking there might be a caretaker. But there seems to be nobody. At least, nobody comes, though I did hear sounds——”

The young man’s eyes gave a flash. “Did you hear something like a laugh—a queer sort of chattering?”

“Yes!” cried Honour. “You heard it, too, then? I wondered if I could have fancied it. But now I know that couldn’t have been. And there was a pounding——”

“I heard that, too,” said the young man. “Since I’ve seen you here, though, I’m inclined to think you heard *me*, and I heard *you*. You were knocking on this door; I was making an infer—an awful row in front.”

“Oh, perhaps!” Honour answered, disappointed. “But the chattering—is there any way of explaining that?”

“If there is, I’m too muddle-headed to think of it.”

replied the other, who could hardly take his eyes from Honour's face. "But there's, anyhow, a way of finding out."

"What way?"

"Trying once more to make somebody come. If they can chatter, they can answer a knock. And then, if they won't do that, getting into the house."

"I shouldn't like to break in," said Honour, smiling despite her anxiety at the young fellow's nonchalant coolness. "Still, I much want to see a Mr. Smith who lives here."

"That's the man I came to see," added the young man.

"Indeed?" queried Honour. "I've come a long way."

"So have I—all the way from Tangier, as it happens. And you?"

"Oh, I," returned Honour, "have only come from Park Lane."

"You *look* as if you came from Park Lane," the young man retorted.

Honour blushed, and yet she was not vexed, though she was sure that this audacious-eyed stranger meant to express appreciation of her face, dress, and manner combined.

"And I look as if I had come from Tangier?" he went on.

"I don't know," Honour smiled. "My father has been in Tangier, but that is since I have seen him." Her smile died at the thought these last words called up. The tears sprang to her eyes again, for her nerves were highly strung. "I came here to ask where he is now—from Mr. Smith."

The young man's face changed, losing its reckless nonchalance. "That's queer," he said. "I came to ask Mr. Smith where my best friend on earth is. And I don't mean to go without finding out *something*, if I can help it. I shall knock again."

"Knock" was a mild word for the assault he made upon the old, locked door, which rattled and trembled under the blows of the slender fist, that must have been strong as steel. When for a time he had pounded continuously,

suddenly he stopped and listened. He and Honour held their breath, their eyes on each other's, as if they had known and had confidence in one another for months instead of moments.

From far away came a faint, whimpering, chattering noise.

"There it is again!" exclaimed Honour. "Only it doesn't sound like laughing now. It's more like crying. It *must* be somebody's voice. And yet—somehow, it's not *human*."

"That's just what I was thinking," said the young man. "Perhaps it's one of the family ghosts. I believe this house has several."

"Oh, you know the place, then?" asked the girl. "I never heard of it till yesterday."

"All I know is what was told me in a public-house where I stopped to enquire my way, about a mile and a half from here. Nobody could be got to live at River House, they said, on account of the ghosts."

"But Mr. Smith?" questioned Honour, eagerly. "We have both been told that he lived here."

"Yes. He's the owner, or lessee, I suppose. As he can't get tenants to take the place off his hands, he comes sometimes, so they said at the 'Hand and Key.' But they thought he didn't live here."

"What shall we do, then?" asked Honour, her voice faltering. "It's so terribly hard to wait another day for news, and if Mr. Smith isn't here now, and we can't find out about him, how can we reach him with a letter?"

The young man seemed to be touched at her pretty, unconscious identification of their interests. His eyes softened.

"We'll see if that chattering ghost won't tell us something," said he. "I'm going to have a try at getting in through a window. Wait here for me, if you like, and——"

"I would rather go with you," broke in Honour. It did not occur to her that she was on the eve of doing an extraordinarily unconventional—perhaps even dangerous—thing; she only thought of her impatience to learn what

she had come to learn—her rebellion against being thwarted by a blank wall of mystery:

The big black eyes scanned her keenly. "You care a lot about your father, don't you?" the young man exclaimed, with a certain wistfulness.

"More than for anyone in the world. If he were dead, I should not want to live—unless he had died a death to be avenged. *Then* I would wish to live!"

"By Jove!" ejaculated the stranger. "That's the way I feel about the man whose letter sent me here to find out what's become of him—the only human being who was ever good to me, or understood me. But I don't believe any fellow ever loved a father as I love this friend—the finest, bravest chap God ever made—Nevill Brooke!"

"Nevill Brooke!" repeated Honour. All the colour fled from her face, and she fell back a step or two, catching at one of the wooden posts supporting the porch. "*Nevill Brooke is my father!*"

The man also blanched, and his eyes lit up with a strange glow, as if a lamp had been lighted behind them.

"You—*his* daughter?" he exclaimed. "You are—Honour?"

"Yes."

"And we have come here, you and I—you, his child; I, who owe him everything I am, every impulse of good in me—we have come to this place on the same day, at the same hour, to seek tidings of him?"

"Yes," the girl whispered again.

"Will you let me take your hand?"

She held it out to him, trembling. He pressed it tightly, and then, raising it to his lips, kissed the little suède glove, spotted with rain.

"My name is Jack Harned," he said, looking up. "I'm a wastrel, but I can be a staunch friend, and henceforth what I would do for Nevill Brooke I'll do for you. It seems to me that Fate means something by bringing us together on this errand. Doesn't it seem that way to you?"

Honour bowed her head in assent, her hand still in the tight, nervous grasp—a grasp which was, if she could only have known, prophetic.

“You are anxious about your father?” Jack Harned asked, when at last he released the little grey glove.

The girl answered without hesitation. She believed and trusted him. Whether she liked this pale-faced, slim young fellow, with something of a tiger in his eyes, something of the born law-breaker in the hard, premature lines round his mouth, she did not know; but he fascinated her; she felt his influence.

“I am desperately anxious,” she said. “Two nights ago I dreamed that I saw him murdered. It was no common dream. The more I think of it, the more I believe that he actually came to me as his soul and body parted. I have fought against the belief. I wish—oh! *how* I wish to put it aside—to think of him as living. To you I can say this—you loved him. You will understand.”

“I do understand,” said the other, gravely. “I am anxious, too. If he’s been hurt—if he’s been done to death—his murderers will find me a bloodhound, tracking them down. You and I, Miss Brooke, will work for the same end. But we won’t give up hope yet—there’s no reason why we should. He wrote me, as I suppose he did you, to make enquiries here, if he weren’t heard from by a certain date. And now I’m going to *make* those enquiries. We’ll see if we can’t find that mysterious chatterer inside, and get him to speak!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE SOUNDS IN THE CELLAR

So saying, Jack Harned took out his handkerchief, wrapped it round his hand, and then deliberately smashed several panes of the nearest window. When that was done, and he had unlocked and raised the sash, he attempted to

push open the shutters. The inside fastening refused to yield to his hands, or the thrust of his shoulders ; but this young man was evidently not one to be easily thwarted. He set his mouth doggedly, and did not rest until a dozen vicious kicks of his foot had so weakened the inside lock that at last he was able to push the shutters apart. Then he stepped inside the window, which was scarcely two feet above the level of the grass, and helped Honour to follow.

They were in a room bare of furniture, dim, smelling of mustiness and rotting wood. In the grey light which shone in through the open window motes of dust could be seen floating in a cloud, stirred up by their entrance. Evidently the room, which was large and low-ceilinged, with many cupboards, had once been a kitchen ; but the red rust on the great old-fashioned range was alone enough to tell that it had been unused for long.

From the kitchen they passed on to other rooms, one after another. All were alike dark, unaired, musty, destitute of furniture or trace of occupation. There was not a sound except for their own faintly echoing footfalls. Not a door was locked ; they were free to go where they would. Only in one room was there any furniture. They looked into it from another, through a glass door, and saw a few chairs, a sideboard, and two or three old-fashioned tables pushed into a corner of the room, just visible as scarcely defined shapes in the shuttered dusk.

They did not go into every room, but peeped into all, to see that no one could be hiding. Even upstairs they went, looking into empty room after empty room, going on to the attic, which extended over the length and breadth of the house. The cellars they left for the last.

A chill struck into Honour's veins as they went down the narrow stairs. She would have been afraid—actually afraid—if Jack Harned had not been with her, and she knew it. Even as it was, though out-of-doors the spring afternoon still lingered, the brooding mystery that seems to haunt every very old, deserted house sharpened her

imagination so that each faint sound—the rustling of a rat in the walls, the creaking of a loose board under her foot or her companion's—caused her to start and peer through the dimness as if she expected something to spring out at her from concealment.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs and stood upon the damp floor of the vast, dark cellar—these two, so strangely brought together on one quest—the same inexplicable chattering sound that had lured them to force an entrance into the house broke on their ears again.

“Hark!” whispered Honour, laying a hand that throbbed in all its fingers on her companion's arm. “There it is—just as it was before, only louder. Where *can* it come from?”

Jack Harned stood still, listening, but the sound had already ceased. It was impossible for him to place it, try as he might. He had heard it as plainly as Honour had; yet, though it still seemed to linger in his ears, to save his life he could not have told whether it had proceeded from the right or left, from above or below.

The chattering had broken off as abruptly as it had begun, but down here in the cellar the dead silence of the house overhead, which had only been accentuated by its few occasional rustlings and squeakings, did not exist. There was a strange, continuous murmur, a subterranean rushing, like the sound of hidden water; a gurgling, a watery knocking, like wet knuckles tapping on wet wood; a far-off, indistinct bubbling, and the “gluck, gluck,” that liquid makes as it runs out from the neck of a bottle.

Involuntarily Honour drew nearer to the man of whose very existence she had an hour ago been ignorant. “What is it? What is it?” she asked, sharply. “It's as if one were down in the hold of a ship.”

“Wait a minute—I must think,” Harned answered. For a moment neither spoke, but stood close together, listening acutely. Honour was conscious of a strange, thrilling feeling that if she listened long enough, and in the right way, she would learn a secret which was just on

the brink of revealing itself. But then, of course, she knew very well in her heart that the feeling must surely be born of overwrought nerves. "I'll tell you what it is," said Harned, reflectively. "The river's close to us. There's a stream running under this cellar. That's what we hear, and I shouldn't wonder if that's what has given this old house the reputation of being haunted. In the night one might even hear these noises upstairs, and if one didn't set one's common sense to work, thinking what they were, they would sound weird enough."

"But the chattering?" asked Honour. "Surely the river could have nothing to do with that?"

"One would think not," said Harned. "But it's queer about that, anyhow, with me. When I don't hear it, I can hardly remember what it was like. It's unreal in one's memory—or that's the only way I can explain its effect on my mind."

"It is much the same with me," Honour returned. "Yet we *must* have heard the sound. We couldn't both have imagined it, and not only once, but several times over."

"Well, we've searched the whole house, except the cellars, and we've heard it since we've been down here; so the chattering Thing—if there *is* a Thing—can't have got away while we were looking somewhere else. We'll make the round here, and see what we can find. I've got a few matches that will help us out in the dark corners."

He took from his pocket a silver match-box, and lit a wax vesta. By the little wavering ray of light Honour saw the box, and with a quickened beating of the heart instantly recognised it as one that long ago had been her father's property.

Jack Harned seemed to feel her eyes upon it. "Mr. Brooke gave me this," he said. "It was one of his first presents to me after I grew up and took to wandering over the earth—I knew him, though, when I was a child. I can hardly remember the time when I didn't know him,

and I'll tell you all about our wonderful friendship some time, if you'll let me. I wouldn't part with this match-box for anything in the world."

They went on together, and searched the cellars, finding nothing to excite surprise or interest. There was a wine cellar, empty save for a few broken bottles, covered with dust, and a pile of old boxes heaped in a corner. There were dark, cavernous spaces behind bricked archways, and pillars or doorways without doors, and in some parts of the cellar the subterranean gurglings and sighings were more distinctly audible than in others; but not again did they hear the unhuman chattering that had disturbed their nerves, nor did they find a locked door to rouse their curiosity. There was nothing for it but to go into the upper air again, confessing that the quest had failed.

Honour had scarcely thought of herself or her own discomfort, but as she stepped out of the window which Jack Harned had broken open, and found herself standing in the wet grass again, the rain still falling from a dull grey sky, she realised that she was thoroughly chilled, her soaked dress clinging coldly to her arms and shoulders.

Jack Harned looked at her remorsefully.

"What a brute I am not to have noticed the plight you were in!" he exclaimed. "I go swaggering about, making promises of what I'd be ready to do for you if need be, and then I deliberately let you get your death of cold. You've got to be warmed and dried as soon as you can, Miss Brooke, or you'll be ill—and your father wouldn't like that."

"Ah, my *father!*" Honour exclaimed, poignantly.

"I know what's in your thoughts. But if he's alive, you must live for him, and if—your dream was true, you've still just as strong an incentive to live. You can't drive back to Park Lane—where your home is, I suppose—all dripping wet like that. You've been so long enough. You're as pale as death, and you can't keep from shivering. Look here, are your people expecting you—will they be

worried if you stop away a little longer? It's only half-past five."

"I haven't any people, except Lady St. Leger, who is my guardian," said Honour. "She won't be very anxious, because she thinks I'm spending the whole day with a friend, and we don't dine till eight at home. But, of course, I must tell her everything sooner or later, and—I ought to go now. I don't believe I shall take cold. It won't matter very much if I do."

"It will matter tremendously," Harned insisted, in his pleasant voice, with its Colonial accent that Honour could not quite place. He was hardly a gentleman in the sense that she had been taught to mean when she spoke the word; at least, he had a certain crude abruptness of manner, a haphazard way of choosing his expressions, and his clothing was not like that of the men she knew. Still, she felt herself absolutely disarmed from all criticism, and the odd fascination which he exercised over her was growing rather than diminishing.

"Mr. Brooke wrote that I was to come to London, and wait for him to arrive, after which there would be certain things he wanted me to do," Harned explained hurriedly. "Then, if he didn't turn up by the fifth of April, I was to come here, to this house, and ask Mr. Smith for news of him. Well, when I arrived in London, three days ago, I took lodgings in Hammersmith, about a mile and a half from this place, though I didn't know then exactly where I was to find River House. My landlady's a decent body, and she'd dry your clothes and get you tea in half an hour, if you'd trust me as your friend and come along with me. Will you? There's no use trying to find a cab, but we can walk fast and get you warm again."

Honour hesitated only an instant. This was a curious adventure in which she was engaged—she, whose life for the past few years, ever since she had come to Lady St. Leger, had been shaped to placid conventionality. Only a day or two ago, if anyone had told her that she would entertain the idea of going to be dried after a wetting,

and comforted with tea, in the lodgings of a young man who was practically an absolute stranger, she would have scoffed at the suggestion. Now, however, she consented without hesitation.

Nobody was near when they went out together from the gate of the great desolate garden which surrounded River House. Nobody knew that the old deserted mansion had been broken open and ransacked from attic to cellars—nobody, unless the Thing that chattered had ears as well as a tongue.

CHAPTER XVII

A MAN'S VOICE

JACK HARNED'S prophecy proved right; they passed no cabs; but the rain was now no more than a drizzle; and though neither he nor Honour Brooke had an umbrella, the rapid walk did the girl good, driving the chill out of her veins, and bringing colour to her cheeks. As Harned marched at her side, almost forcing her to keep pace with his long, quick steps, he glanced often at her face, which—as Honour was a tall young woman and he was not a tall man—was nearly on a level with his own. Never had he seen and spoken with such a girl. To him she was a princess. He thought her the most perfect being he had ever dreamed of, and it would have been a joy to throw himself down and let her walk over him, only to keep her feet from the mud, if in these days it were possible for men to do such extravagant deeds for great ladies.

He had had a strange life, with no real love except that which he had felt for Nevill Brooke, and there had been things in it—many things—which he could not tell to any good woman, above all to Honour Brooke; but he was impatient to tell her all he could, and to make the best of his eccentric, adventurous self for her hearing. He could hardly believe in his own luck that she should

be treating him, after an hour's acquaintance, like a trusted friend ; that she was going home with him ; that she would drink his tea, warm her radiant self at his fire, and listen, with those star-eyes bright with interest, while he talked about himself. He knew that he did not deserve such luck ; but then, he meant to deserve it in future. *She* should never have any cause to regret trusting him.

River House was almost as isolated as if it had been actually in the country ; but before they had walked for fifteen minutes, these two strangely-met companions found themselves in a more populous though still suburban neighbourhood. They passed through streets where large, old-fashioned mansions and new villas and glaring little shops shouldered each other, or gazed at one another disapprovingly from across the way ; then to more uniformly modern regions, where æsthetic houses of red brick imitated the designs of older days ; and having crossed a green where children played, despite the rain, they entered a short street built up with semi-detached houses of a gloomily respectable appearance. Before one of these, which had more tasteful curtains in the front windows than its fellows, Harned paused, opening a creaky gate.

"My landlady, Mrs. Oates, has both these houses," he said, as if anxious to represent that dame as a person worthy of Miss Brooke's confidence. "There are doors cut between the two, but the other's let now to one family, and I'm the only lodger in this. She's a nice old thing, and she *can* make tea. She'll have you comfortable inside five minutes."

So speaking, Harned opened the door with a latch-key. As Honour went in, beginning to realise what an extraordinary thing she was doing, he tapped at the first door in a neat passage. "This is Mrs. Oates's sitting-room," he said. "I'll see if she's here—but she's sure to be in, anyhow."

He had hardly spoken when the door opened, and a plump, smiling dame looked out. Her eyes, behind their

spectacles, flew admiringly to Honour's face, under the pretty, drenched hat ; and by the time that Miss Brooke's presence had been accounted for with unblushing mendacity by Harned, Mrs. Oates would have been able, with her eyes shut, to describe every detail of the young lady's dress.

"Yes, indeed, miss," she said, in a soft voice, "it will be a pleasure to do what I can for you. Would you condescend to come into my room upstairs and take off your things, so that they can be dried?"

"I should be thankful," said Honour, with the smile that always won hearts for her in a class below her own.

"And if I *might* make so bold as to offer the loan of a clean white dressing-gown, miss," went on Mrs. Oates. "Quite a clean one, with fluted ruffles. You might make it do while you wait for your frock to be dried and ironed out a bit."

Again Honour expressed gratitude, and Mrs. Oates, with the air of one who entertains royalty, led the way upstairs. Her room was at the back, on the second floor, which was really the top of the house, and the moment that the door was thrown open, Honour heard a voice talking rapidly—the voice of a man, which sounded so close at hand that involuntarily the girl looked round, expecting to see the speaker. But the plainly-furnished little room was unoccupied.

"Would to Heaven I could die, and it were over and done with for ever!" cried the voice.

Honour started and drew back, upon the threshold. Her eyes fixed themselves on a door at the head of the high white bed, then turned to Mrs. Oates, who nodded reassuringly.

"Don't be frightened, miss," she whispered. "It's a young man—a lodger in the next house—who's ill and delirious. It's congestion of the brain," the doctor says, "so 't isn't as if it was anything contagious. He's well looked after. There ain't nothing we can do that ain't being done."

"How can I bear it—all the rest of my life?" groaned the voice on the other side of the door.

It was a young voice, unmistakably that of a gentleman. Broken with suffering as it was, there were deep, sweet notes in it, that touched Honour's heart with the pathos of a man's strength crushed to weakness. Instinctively she felt that the unseen sufferer on the other side of that door would have known how to hide his emotions if his brain had controlled his body, and the fact that his soul, drugged by delirium, was using the tongue like a mesmerised subject to betray its own secrets, seemed to her terrible. Never before had she heard such delirious ravings, and the blood rushed up to her face as if she had been eavesdropping.

"How sad!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I can't bear to listen! Couldn't I go somewhere else?"

"It's more comfortable here," said Mrs. Oates. "You see, I'm house cleanin', as Mr. Harned is the only lodger in Number 15, and most of the rooms is a good deal upset. Don't you mind. He'll never know, poor dear, as anyone heard him. Now let me help you undo your bodice, miss."

"Is he dangerously ill?" asked Honour, submitting to be assisted. She could hardly take her eyes from the door which communicated with the next room, and sympathetic shivers ran through her as the voice begged "Mother, darling mother," to lay a cool hand on the head which had a "fire lighted inside."

"Oh, I do hope not, miss," said Harned's landlady. "It would be a pity that such a splendid young fellow should be cut off before his prime. You never *saw* such a handsome young man! I know *I* never did. Mr. Harned's got a taking way, and a dashing sort of young gentleman he is, and you feel as if you'd known him all your life when you've met him two hours ago. But this other one's different. He's my idea of a young duke, or I'll tell you what he *is* like, miss—the engravin' in my sittin'-room of Lord Byron. I *couldn't* 'ave took 'im

into my house, if it had been let the same as usual ; but there's an old clergyman, quite a saint, miss, has had the whole house for the last few months—Number 16, I mean, not Number 15, which you and me is in now. He makes it his 'eadquarters when he is in England, which ain't always, though he pays reg'lar as the month comes round. The dear old gentleman is *that* charitable, and often, when he's in London and comes across anybody in trouble, wanting a night's shelter, he brings or sends 'em here. That was the way this time. Mr. Willoughby, he'd telegraphed me to expect him in a day or two, and the second day after he arrived, if he didn't drive up about six in the morning with this poor ill young gentleman in a four-wheeled cab. It's *my* belief Mr. Willoughby spends half 'is nights among the pore and unfortn'it, doin' good ; not that he ever makes a boast of it. But, says he, when I'd come down in my wrapper and unlocked the door, ' Mrs. Oates,' says he, ' here's a pore fellow I found lyin' ill in the street. The perlice would 'ave it he was under the hinfluence of liquor, and would 'ave taken 'im hoff to the station ; but I'm a bit of a doctor, and I knew better. After an argyment, they let me 'ave him, seein' my cloth, and I'm goin' out again now to engage a nurse to take care of him.' With that, the blessed saint was off—or he was when we'd got the young gentleman upstairs and into bed ; and in an hour he was back with a nurse, one of them in uniform, you know."

" Is the nurse with him still ? " asked Honour, who by this time had been put into the promised dressing-gown. Through Mrs. Oates's chatter, she heard the ravings from the next room. The delirious man believed himself to be at Monte Carlo now. He was talking about the faces—the terrible face there.

" Well, she's in the house," said the landlady, in her unctuously confidential tones ; " but the queer part is, miss, the young gentleman couldn't seem to abide 'avin' her near him. This door here—in my room—it's fastened up now, and hasn't been used for months, though I had it

cut through for accommodation to some lodgers when I first took on both the 'ouses. But, anyhow, I can hear things *that* plain in the next room, as you can judge, miss, and I mostly talks in sort of whisper when anyone's with me here. I 'appened to be in this room when Mr. Willoughby brought in the nurse, or I come up to change me dress a few minutes after; and though the young gentleman was out of 'is mind with the fever, just as he is now ('twas only yesterday morning—April the fifth—miss), he seemed to take a sort of 'error for the nurse. He kep' on sayin' things about 'er *ears*—I couldn't quite understand what—and raved so that she couldn't stay in the room—though a handsomer young woman than she is, with such wonderful hauburn 'air, you'd 'ave to go a long way to see, miss. But perhaps she reminded 'im of someone he'd known. Anyhow, although Mr. Willoughby explained to me that, as she was engaged, it wouldn't be honourable to discharge her at an hour's notice, and he'd keep her on in the 'ouse, another nurse had to be fetched as well—an elderly person, recommended by the doctor. The new nurse waits on the patient, and the other does what she can outside the room, so the illness makes no hextra work for me or my servant; but that's just like Mr. Willoughby, dear old gentleman—always thinkin' for others. I bless the day he 'appened to see my hadvertisement, and come to look 'ere for lodgings."

"Dead—dead! Can it be that he is dead?" groaned the voice in the next house.

"Maybe the poor young gentleman has lost his father or someone he was fond of," suggested Mrs. Oates, seeing her guest start and glance at the door again.

"Lost his father!" Honour echoed, in a half whisper. Her heart went out to the sufferer, longing to do something for him. Of course there was nothing, yet she wished that she could help and she knew that, though only a strange chance had brought her for a few moments near to this shadowed life—like a passing of ships in the night—she would not be able to shut the sound of that voice out

of her ears, would not be satisfied unless she might learn in days to come whether the young man who "looked like Lord Byron," and had perhaps "lost his father," lived or died of his fever.

The girl had been impatient to begin her talk with Jack Harned, but now she went down with a divided mind, half of herself seeming to have lingered in the room with the closed door.

Mrs. Oates, holding over her arm the dress, jacket, and hat which were to be dried, threw open the door for Honour to go out into the passage, and so downstairs; but on the threshold the girl turned. The voice in the next house was speaking again. "For honour—for honour!" it cried. And Honour Brooke had an impression that the call was for *her*.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT JACK HARNED HAD TO TELL

IN Mrs. Oates's sitting-room Jack Harned was waiting. He had thought her the most beautiful girl he had ever seen from the first moment of their meeting; but he had scarcely realised how lovely she was until he saw her bronze hair uncovered; while as for Mrs. Oates's dressing-gown, which Honour had fastened round her slim waist, with her own gold belt, it was more exquisite than any Worth "confection" in the eyes of Jack Harned.

The girl smiled in an embarrassed way, for the situation was a curious one, and then her gaze, straying round the sitting-room, with its cheap furniture and tasteless ornaments, was suddenly arrested by the picture of Lord Byron of which the landlady had spoken.

The handsome face, with the dark, passionate eyes, the splendid forehead, beautiful mouth, and determined chin set haughtily on the strong throat were familiar to her; yet now she saw them with new eyes. The man who lay raving upstairs—dying, it might be—looked like that.

She could scarcely concentrate her attention upon her companion's first words, for thinking of the portrait and the resemblance.

Harned was begging her to come closer to the fire, which, while she had been changing her things, he had lighted in the grate.

"Tea will be here in a minute," he said, all eagerness to entertain his guest in an adequate manner—a manner which would not cause her to despise him and secretly think him an alien.

As he spoke, Mrs. Oates's maid of all work appeared. In her red hands she carried a napkin-covered tray, set out with a brown teapot, a plate of thick bread and butter, a cake, and two cups painted with very small birds and very large roses.

It was as exciting as a strain of music to Jack Harned to watch Honour pour out tea, to hear her ask if he liked cream and sugar. What a princess she was! Could it be true that she was here alone with him, or was he dreaming? He had just enough presence of mind to strive after effectiveness, to try and make the story he had to tell as dramatic, as picturesque as possible, so that he might hold her breathless, her great brown eyes fixed upon him as he talked.

He told her how his first recollections had been of Spain, and a beautiful, dark-eyed woman, who had alternately petted and scolded him. Then came a blank; the woman disappeared out of his life. He was at school in a monastery, with brown-robed, bare-footed monks as teachers; he was called "Juan," and he knew that his destiny was to be a priest. But one day a tall, handsome man came to the monastery, and took him on his knee, talking to him kindly and stroking his hair. There was much discussion between the monks and this man, to which the boy listened with a beating heart, for somehow, though he did not understand or even hear much that was said, he was aware that his whole future depended on the decision. At last the man asked if he wished to spend his life at the

monastery until he grew up, or if he would like to go out into the world and see other countries. The boy had, with emotional exceptions, been resigned to his fate; but suddenly he knew that he could not bear to stop when the tall, handsome stranger went away, and he begged that he might go with him.

He was only four years old then, but he remembered a long journey with the man, who was very kind, and said his name was Nevill Brooke, but that he was to be called "Guardy." By and by the boy was told that Nevill Brooke had been a friend of his father and of his mother, whom he would never see any more—such a friend that he meant to undertake the charge of the boy's future. Perhaps they might not see each other often; but Jack (the boy was "Jack" now, no longer "Juan") must always remember that Guardy was thinking of him, doing the best he could for his welfare.

They went to Australia together, and there, at Melbourne, Jack had grown up. After parting with Nevill Brooke, they never met again until Jack was nineteen, but letters had always been exchanged, and the boy was told by the people with whom he lived that to Mr. Brooke he owed everything—his education, the very bread he ate, and the clothes he wore.

"I didn't see your father in Melbourne the next time," said Jack Harned. "I knew he was in South Africa, because of his letters, and I ran away from home, and worked my way there, to meet him. I had some queer experiences on the way, partly as a common sailor, partly as a tramp, partly as an actor in a 'barn-storming' company, when I had to ride a 'bucking-horse' on to the stage, and speak three lines.

"I hadn't let Mr. Brooke know I was coming, for I was sure he'd tell me to stay at home, where I'd just gone into a solicitor's office, and had a chance to get on. But I hated the law. I was born to be a vagabond—it was in my blood.

"Well, I found your father in Kimberley, and he

shrugged his shoulders and laughed when he heard the story. After that, there are lots of things that I can't tell you about. I'm afraid I was a disappointment to your father, but he never failed in his kindness, and, in spite of some awful scrapes I got into in South Africa, he wouldn't give me up. Wherever he went—that was nearly six years ago—he always wrote to me; and I believe he trusted me, in a way, though I don't think I gave him much cause.

“I made money in South Africa, out of some he lent, and I've been half over the world since. The last time I saw my best friend, your father, was in Calcutta, nearly two years ago. From there I went to Japan, from Japan to Egypt, from Egypt to Tangier; and this is the first time I've been in England, though the little I know about myself is that my father was an Englishman, a sort of rolling stone, whose tendencies I've inherited, and my mother a Spanish woman, with whom he fell in love in Madrid.”

“And my father wished you to come to England?” asked Honour. “He wrote to you to meet him here?”

“Yes. His last letter said that he had very important information to give me, something which he ought to have told me long ago, something which——” The young man checked himself, stammering, and flushing all over his pale, reckless face, from forehead to chin.

“Why don't you finish?” questioned the girl, gravely. “Please tell me his words. I know he would be willing.”

“Well, his words were that he had something to tell which had 'been on his conscience for a long time, and now he wanted to get it off'—that's all. But, of course, it couldn't have really been anything that need have troubled his conscience, for I'd stake my soul that Nevill Brooke never did a dishonourable action in his life. Anyhow, in England I was to hear something to my advantage, and meet him at a place he appointed, at about midnight, on the night of April the fourth. If he didn't come then or at the same time the next night, I was to

apply to Mr. Smith, at a place called River House, in Hammersmith."

"And he did *not* come?" breathed Honour.

"No, he did not come."

"And don't you feel that I—that we—have great cause to be anxious?"

"Yes," said Jack, slowly. "I'm afraid I do."

Honour looked him in the face, and spoke out sharply: "You have some special reason for feeling so—something more than I know. *What is it?*"

Jack could not meet her eyes. "Only that Nevill Brooke was the sort of man to keep his word if he had to move heaven and earth to do it; and, besides——"

"Besides—what?"

"Well, he gave me to understand in his letter that—that it would have gone hard with him if he didn't turn up on the night of the fourth or fifth at latest."

"He said that you were to take it for granted that evil had befallen him if he did not come?"

"Well, something of that sort."

"Will you—show me the letter?"

"I'd—rather not, if you don't mind, Miss Brooke."

"That means, if you let me see it, I should be more anxious than I am?"

"Partly. And there's no use in your worrying till we're *sure*. Lots of things may have delayed him—things he couldn't have counted on. We'll wait and——"

"Wait!" Honour echoed him with astonished indignation.

"Oh, I don't mean to wait in idleness. I've done a lot of things in my life, and turned my hand to queer trades, but I've never tried being a detective. I wish I had—it might make things easier. However, I shall have a shy at it. I'm going to find out where and when Nevill Brooke was last seen, and whether he came to London."

"What clues have you?" Honour asked, eagerly.

"We've got River House, and the name of Smith, though Smith himself we *don't* seem to have got yet."

“Did my father say anything to you about his solicitor in the Temple—Mr. Harvey Kane?”

Jack shook his head, and Honour wondered why she had been told to go first to the Temple, while Jack Harned's instructions had only sent him to Hammersmith.

“How can I bear the waiting?” she sighed. And, as she spoke, her thoughts flew again to the man whose voice she had heard. Some trouble was eating his heart out, too, a trouble which he thought that he would have to bear “all the rest of his life.” She wondered if it could be as hard to bear as hers.

“I hope you won't have to wait long,” said Jack. “I want to stay in England, and find out what I can. But I shall employ some one to go out to India, if we don't get hold of an unmistakable clue here, in the course of a day or two.”

“It will cost a great deal, won't it, to hire a detective?” Honour asked, diffidently. “I ought to be the one to bear the expense, for I am his daughter. I don't know whether I have much money or not, for Lady St. Leger will never talk to me about it—she says business discussions are not for me until I am of age. But I always have everything I want—more, indeed—so I suppose dad must have arranged a good income for me, which Lady St. Leger spends for my dress, and so on, giving me what is left for my pocket-money. If dad hadn't said I wasn't even to tell her that he meant to come to England, I could get something from her to put into your hands; but if I can't explain what I want money for, it may be difficult——”

“Look here, Miss Brooke,” broke in Jack Harned, “it hurts me for you to talk that way. If Mr. Brooke had been my father I couldn't love him better than I do, or owe him more. His money supported me till I could earn my own living, and it wasn't his fault that I haven't earned it in a better way. He saved me from being a Catholic priest—the sort of life I was least fitted for, and should have disgraced myself in, sure as fate, besides being mad with despair, too late, if I'd been forced into it. I've got

money enough, and though you might think it hadn't been honestly come by, anyhow, it's mine, which is the same as his; and if anything could wipe off the stain—what *you'd* call the stain—it would be spending it in a good cause. You let me undertake the expenses, such as they may be, of this campaign, if you don't want to make me the most miserable fellow alive. You will do this for me, won't you?"

Jack Harned, despite his roughness and crudeness of manner, had a winning way of asking a favour.

"I'll think about it," said Honour, with a sad little smile. "Thank you for being so good to—my father's daughter. I'm glad you are going to stop in England: I can't do much, but I shall feel we are working together. And you will come every day, won't you, to tell me all you have done?"

Jack flushed. "That's the thing I'd like best," he said, "but—I'm not of the Park Lane cut, and your guardian might want to show me the door."

"Now you hurt *me*," exclaimed Honour. "Lady St. Leger isn't like that. I mustn't tell her yet how we met, since I can't let her know that my father was expected, and I found you while trying to get news of him. But you are to call, and say that you were my father's friend. He did speak to you of me?"

"Yes, he said he had a dear daughter, whose name was Honour, and that he loved her better than the whole world. But—he never told me he wanted us to meet. I—in fact, I'm not sure he did want it."

"He loved you, too, and Fate has brought us together," Honour answered, not guessing how Jack Harned's heart thumped at the words, which might be thought to mean so much. "You must come and see me," she went on, "and tell me everything. It will be enough for Lady St. Leger that you were my father's friend. And I—will welcome you for yourself, too." She could not help adding that, for his face looked so wistful. It lighted up, then clouded over again.

“ There are things you ought to know about me, before I take you at your word,” he said, almost sullenly. “ I’m not the sort of fellow you’re used to. Why, the very way I’ve made my money, since I was old enough to refuse to live on your father, is enough to set you against me. I’m a born gambler. I believe I’d gamble on my death-bed. The first ‘scoop’ I ever made, if you know what a scoop means, was to buy land in Kimberley without having a penny to pay for it. A fellow trusted me, because I was a sort of pal of your father’s, and I knew I could sell the land for a lot more than I should have to pay, and I did. I got the money from the buyer twenty-four hours before I was obliged to pay, and I made two hundred pounds. I was a kid, you know—only eighteen; and pulling it off like that seemed to go to my head. I went in for poker after that, with a lot of older chaps, and we played for big stakes. Luck was with me, and I made something. My next deal was to go in with a fellow who wanted to build a town. We hadn’t a penny between us, but we promised shares to the builders instead of money down, and somehow or other we worked it through, though we were pretty near being arrested for swindlers once or twice. You can imagine Mr. Brooke read me lectures, for he thought I’d come to a bad end; but even his influence wasn’t enough to keep me out of mischief. I’ve done almost everything, from being *croupier* in what you’d call ‘gambling dens’ to shipping lions over from Africa to circus people, and making money on the job. I’ve been on my uppers one day, and given a dinner to an Indian maharajah the next. And there are lots of other queer transactions, shadier than any I’ve confessed to you; *Now* don’t you want to reconsider your invitation to Lady St. Leger’s house in Park Lane? You know, if you do, I can send you all the news I get by letter.”

“ No, I don’t want to reconsider,” said Honour. “ I think that you and I are going to be friends.”

Jack Harned’s eyes flashed, but, instead of speaking, he held out his hand for Honour’s. She gave it to him, and

just managed not to utter a little cry of pain when he crushed her rings into her fingers.

"I'd die for you, Miss Brooke!" he exclaimed, boyishly.

"Don't talk of dying," the girl answered. "We have too much to do—together."

With this, the door of Mrs. Oates's sitting-room opened. Half an hour had been spent in drying and pressing Miss Brooke's dress and jacket, and they were ready for her to put on. Honour sprang up at once, for it was half-past six, and if she were not at home to dress for the eight o'clock dinner, Lady St. Leger would be anxious, and send to inquire at Queen Anne's Mansions.

In fifteen minutes Honour was clothed in her own garments again, only the hat and gloves the worse for their drenching. When she had thanked Mrs. Oates for the third time, and was going out with Harned to the cab which had been called by the little servant, a woman, attracted by the unwonted sound of wheels in the quiet street, peeped between the half-drawn curtains of an upper window.

She saw the slender figure of the girl in the grey frock passing out of the gate; she saw the coils of bronze hair under the drooping hat; and at that instant, as if drawn by the eyes fixed upon her, Honour turned, glancing up at the house. She caught the gleam of a pair of eyes between the curtains, without being able to distinguish the features; but her face, turned over her shoulder, the great brown eyes gazing up, made a picture on the retina of the watcher.

The woman started back, drawing the curtains close together.

"The girl in the locket!" she said, aloud. "*Here! What can have brought her here?*"

CHAPTER XIX

A FOLDED NEWSPAPER

RONALD CHARTERIS was ill with congestion of the brain for a fortnight. For several days of that fortnight he raved constantly, and even when he came to himself, in an unfamiliar room, with a kindly-faced, middle-aged nurse in a grey uniform attending upon his wants, he could not at first believe that the strange and dreadful things which crept back into his memory were real. He prayed that they might be only dreams among other dreams; but, as he grew better, and youth and a splendid constitution began to triumph over that fever of the brain produced by shock and an overdose of a powerful drug, he could no longer put the truth away from him. He had to face it, and he had to live on with the belief in his heart that he had killed a man.

The picture of the dead face, as it had lain on the floor of that bare, lighted room in the old house at Hammer-smith, was always before his eyes when consciousness had fully come back, or else another thought, still more horrible—the awful memory of what had been done afterwards in the cellar.

He could see the tall form of the dead man wrapped in one of the rugs which had lain on the floor, near the place where he had first fallen. He could feel the heavy weight as he and Mr. Willoughby together had carried the body through dim passage after dim passage, then with great difficulty down a narrow stairway to the vast, vaulted cellar where a gurgling murmur of unseen water was like an accusing spirit whisper in his ears. He could hear Mr. Willoughby checking his surprise at finding a long, narrow

hole like a grave, already dug, with the explanation that the work had been done while he slept after drinking the brandy which had been given him. He could hear, also, the soft fall of the loose earth as, with a great spade and a shovel, which Mr. Willoughby said had been found in an outhouse, they covered the body wrapped in the Indian rug.

Suddenly, as they had worked, into the murmur of the water had broken another sound—a curious chattering, which carried with it a startling impression of something unhuman. It was the same sound that Ronald had heard in the villa at Monte Carlo; and though, down in the mysterious darkness of that Hammersmith cellar, engaged in the grim work of concealing a crime which he believed to be his own, he had felt amazement only for a moment, in recollecting the thing was astonishing, even horrifying.

When he was strong enough to talk, the nurse asked him if he would like to see the kind old clergyman who had given him hospitality during his illness. Mr. Willoughby asked after his health very often, said Sister Mostyn, and would be glad to come into the sick-room for a chat whenever he might be wanted. Indeed, the nurse had the highest opinion of Mr. Willoughby's nobility of character. She had been given to understand that her patient was practically a stranger to his host, who had taken him in entirely out of charity; yet if the young man had been a beloved son, he could not have been better looked after. A first-rate doctor had been called in, her own and another nurse's services had been engaged, and she had been told that whatever was desirable should be provided, regardless of expense. All these things were repeated to Ronald by Sister Mostyn, and it was from her that he learned whose guest he had been through his illness.

He hated the thought of having to see Mr. Willoughby, for to do so would mean that there must be reference to what had happened in the old house in Hammersmith. But he told himself that this reluctance to speak of the past was cowardly, and must be overcome. As soon as he

felt able to bear the strain, he said to Sister Mostyn that he would see his host, and Mr. Willoughby promptly availed himself of the invitation.

The sight of the white face, framed with still whiter hair and beard, the full, moist, red lips, and the half-hidden gleam of eyes behind their concealing spectacles, was abhorrent to Ronald now, for it was a reminder of the tragedy which must wreck his whole future; but he reproached himself for the feeling of repulsion which seemed so heartlessly ungrateful after all Mr. Willoughby's goodness to him: He had every reason to think of the old clergyman as a marvellously kind and charitable person, and he tried to stammer thanks, but Mr. Willoughby waved them away with a mild, denying gesture.

"Don't thank me, my dear young friend," he said, gently. "In a way I feel myself responsible for the terrible misfortune which has overtaken you, and what little I have done and am doing is no more than my duty. You have been continually in my mind since that dreadful night a fortnight ago, and at last I think I have hit upon a plan for your benefit. But tell me, first, have you thought much lately of your future?"

"I have looked at it," said Ronald, bitterly, "as one looks at a building which has been struck by lightning in the night and brought to ruin. I'm next door to being penniless, and I've scarcely heart to set to work and earn my livelihood when life seems so little worth living. Still, I've got to brace myself up to it, and I shall somehow, for I don't want to be coward enough to follow one crime by another, and take my own life."

Mr. Willoughby drew a folded newspaper from his pocket, his eyes bright and shifty, with an unpleasant humorousness behind his spectacles. But Ronald did not see. "There's something here I have been waiting to show you," he said, in his softest voice. "Something which may concern you, and even be of the greatest importance."

CHAPTER XX

RONALD'S WORK

THE old man's hand, which looked singularly young and firm for his age, glided down the paper—unfolded now—until the pointing index finger stopped at a paragraph in the personal column.

“ ‘If Sir Ronald Charteris, last heard of as a Volunteer in the Imperial Yeomanry in South Africa, will apply to Messrs Everett and Johnston, solicitors, Savoy Mansions, he may learn something to his advantage,’ ” Mr. Willoughby read aloud. “ Now, the question is,” he remarked, looking up sharply, “ are you *Sir* Ronald Charteris, or has this advertisement been inserted to attract the attention of some namesake of yours ? ”

Ronald laughed rather bitterly.

“ Oh, the title's mine, fast enough ! It's about my only possession—not a very solid one.”

“ You have been letting me address you as Mr. Charteris,” said the other.

“ What did it matter ? Wouldn't you have thought me even more of a fool than you did if I had asked you not to ‘ Mister ’ me, because my poor father had left me his title—the one thing remaining to him which wasn't gone in the big smash ? ”

“ Well, it is of no consequence,” replied Mr. Willoughby, soothingly. “ Only, of course, I didn't know. You told me you had lost your money——”

“ Yes, I thought when I got to the Riviera a few weeks ago—Heavens ! it seems years !—that I should have enough to rub along with, though the small estate which had been home to me as a boy was not entailed, and had

been sold years ago when my father was in a tight place. My mother's money had come to me, however, on my father's death, what there was left of it, but as I told you, the bank which had everything went to bits, and I only heard of my loss when I had come from South Africa to the Riviera to recruit. Then, with the little I had in hand, I made a fool of myself, as you know, in the mad hope of turning that little into much. Penniless and humiliated, ready to throw myself in the sea—was that the time to assert my paltry right to be called 'Sir,' by the man who saved my almost worthless life ? "

" Perhaps it is no wonder that your title seemed of small importance to you," said the old man. " Nevertheless, you *are* Sir Ronald, and so I must call you in future, unless, indeed, you intend to hide yourself from the world and take another name ? "

" Since I must go on living, or be a coward, would to Heaven I could hide myself from the world ! " exclaimed Ronald.

" Would it not be nobler to try and do it all the good you could accomplish, by way of atonement for—your great misfortune ? And doesn't it strike you that this paragraph may open the way towards such an end ? "

" You mean that I may have come into some more money, which, if I chose, I might use for the benefit of others as unhappy as myself ? "

" You have exactly guessed my meaning," said Mr. Willoughby. " How does the idea strike you ? "

Ronald was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he answered :

" I am to 'learn something which may be to my advantage.' That's what the advertisement says. It may be money. If it is, it can only come from one source, I should think—a source to which I would never have applied, no matter how low an ebb my fortunes had reached. I have a cousin, an elderly lady, who was very good to me when I was a boy at school, and who used to tell me then, very injudiciously, that when she died I was to have

everything that was hers. But she was a dear old Puritan, and I had the misfortune to shock and grieve her as I grew older. She wrote to me once—a long time ago now—in answer to a letter of mine, to say that, after the way I had conducted myself, she was so disappointed in me she did not wish ever to see or hear from me again. I'm afraid that some of my ways had been rather too reckless to commend themselves to a dear old maiden lady who had lived all her life in one small village. Still, I had nothing very serious on my conscience, and naturally I was hurt, and took her at her word. I'd always a sneaking idea that, if I chose to write a penitent sort of letter, she wouldn't bear a grudge against me, but I could never have brought myself to do it, especially for the sake of getting anything out of my poor little old cousin. Now, she may have died and left me something, after all, though it hardly seems probable——”

“To me it seems the most probable thing in the world,” broke in Mr. Willoughby, “and I should certainly advise you, as soon as you are strong enough, to call upon the solicitors who have inserted this paragraph. You must have money, if you are to live, and here it may be waiting for you. Besides, I have a plan by which, if it commends itself to you, you would be able to do a good work in the world. We should labour side by side in the vineyard, where the grapes are men's souls.”

Ronald felt again that there was something brutal in his own callousness. He strove again to be grateful, and could not. He did not wish to spend the rest of his life near this man; but because he believed the man to be good, and because he believed also that he owed him much, he forced himself to answer cordially, asking to hear the plan.

“I am old, and need a helper,” said Mr. Willoughby. “I spend my money freely in my work, which is no credit to me, for I have few personal needs. But what I have is a mere drop in the bucket—the deep, deep bucket of misery, which it is my object to relieve. Your money—if

you become possessed of any—will be a drop in the bucket, too. Yet we can but do our best. Would it not comfort you, my poor boy, to feel that you were doing something for others even more unhappy than yourself? Would not such a life-work be a suitable atonement for your sin—if sin it may be called? ”

“ If I am fit to engage in such a work,” Ronald answered wearily. “ Tell me what you propose that I should do.”

“ I propose that you take, furnish, and preside over one or two houses which can be homes for penniless wretches until they can find their lost footing again. What if they are not ‘deserving’? Would *we* be deserving if we had been overwhelmed by the black tidal wave of misfortune which has swept so many once well-meaning men off their feet? No! The charity which opens its arms only to the ‘deserving’ does not merit the name of charity. I propose to appeal to the black sheep, and that our effort shall be, with the help of a Higher Power, to whiten them. Your part would be the hardest, perhaps, according to my plan, for I have already more work than I can well attend to, and can scarcely take up another heavy burden. You would take houses in the poorer parts of London—as many as you could afford afterwards to keep up. You would furnish them very simply, after the manner of lodging-houses. You would cause it to become known that if a man were out of work, friendless, hopeless, you would invite him in and aid him to get honest employment. It would be there that *my* part would come in. I have resources for finding work for industrious men. I am particularly interested in those who have just been released from serving a term in prison. No doubt, in your sad circumstances, my poor friend, that class of unfortunate would appeal to you also. But for the fact that your secret will be kept, and despite the real innocence of your heart, even a worse fate would await *you*.”

A chill ran through the young man’s veins, and he felt that he hated the soft, insinuating voice. But it

was wickedly ungrateful to hate it ; and, as a matter of fact, the plan roughly mapped out by Mr. Willoughby was one well calculated to interest him in his present mood. He felt himself a pariah. His heart might be innocent ; nevertheless, his hands were stained with blood, and nothing—save, possibly, a long atonement—could wash the stain away. He had killed a man, and with that knowledge corroding his brain, though it might remain a secret from all the world, he could not mix with men or with women, as of old. Life as he had known it was over for him, and there was left out of the wreck but one thing in which he could truly rejoice. He was glad that he had fought for his country in her time of trouble ; and some day he would be glad if, through this old clergyman, he could do good among the poor who were always near him.

He promised that, as soon as he was able to walk out unassisted, he would go to the solicitors who had advertised for him, and learn what they had to tell that was to his “ advantage.”

At the end of three days he kept the promise, and a beautiful, auburn-haired woman watched him leave the house, as she had watched Honour Brooke leave it, more than a fortnight ago.

It was as he had half-expected. His cousin, Miss Fox-Strangeways, had died and left him forty thousand pounds. This was scarcely a fortune, but, if he had never gone to the terrible house in Hammersmith, he would have considered himself very lucky to have come into such a sum. As it was, he hardly thought of himself in connection with the money, for, by this time, Mr. Willoughby's idea had been more fully elaborated, and he was possessed with it. He felt that the hope of doing some good in the world was the one thing to preserve him from a melancholy madness worse than death. Almost he forgot his unreasoning dislike of his old benefactor when he came home to tell what he had learned, and to plan how the money should be disposed of. Mr. Willoughby was greatly interested,

and efficient in advice. He fired Ronald with his own enthusiasm, until the young man could scarcely wait to get affairs in train.

Messrs. Everett and Johnston, the solicitors, were deferentially curious as to Sir Ronald Charteris' intentions ; but the young man did not satisfy their curiosity. He was courteous, thanked them for all they had done, and removed his legacy from their charge. Mr. Willoughby mildly suggested investing the forty thousand pounds to the best advantage for his young friend, but on that point Ronald took his own way. He did not distrust the old clergyman's good faith, but he had his own ideas concerning investments. After his late experience, the somewhat speculative plans put forward by Mr. Willoughby for this money, which Ronald now regarded as a trust, did not appeal to him as they would a short time ago. As soon as the elder man saw, however, that his suggestions were not favourably received, he ceased to make them, and did not even inquire how the forty thousand pounds were to be managed. He brought his attention to bear upon helping the young man to choose the house in which the good work was to be begun. Already, it seemed, he had one in his mind—a fair-sized house in a street lying between Whitechapel and Islington. He took Ronald to see it, dwelt upon its advantages of situation and size, and the same day it was decided upon. Three days later the furnishing had been rushed through, and Ronald was tired out, but with a healthier fatigue than he had known for weeks. Sometimes, for a few moments, he forgot, and was almost happy, in helping to put up blinds, paint floors, and choose the books which were to form his guests' library. He even bought a few engravings for the walls, because he wanted to make the place look home-like for the poor wretches who had never known a home, or had missed it for long.

The plan was not only to visit prison-gates in the early morning, but to haunt the embankments and the parks, at hours when the sleepers on the seats were ordered to

“move on.” Men who had “done time,” and felt that the hand of their fellow-man was against them ; men who had sinned ; men who were weak ; men who were discouraged—all were to be fish for the net of Ronald Charteris and Mr. Willoughby ; and when the first house was full, and successful according to this plan, Ronald had calculated that, with an income of about two thousand pounds a year, he could afford to support two or three more places of the kind, carefully and economically run.

His was the work of going forth into the by-ways and hedges—such work as Mr. Willoughby professed to have done for years in Monte Carlo and nearer home ; and the mingled suspicion and gratitude of the men to whom he made his offer struck at his heart. Disinterested kindness seemed the one thing that they could not understand ; but they never refused to accept his generosity. Sulkily, humorously, cynically, or stupidly, they invariably followed him. They were fed and housed for a day, and then sent to Mr. Willoughby, who guaranteed to find them work. Strangely enough, though many of Ronald’s recruits seemed to be the very off-scouring of the earth, they appeared as ready to accommodate themselves to the kind old clergyman’s ideas of honest toil as to their first friend’s arrangement for their comfort. Ronald was surprised at this, for he had supposed that the difficulty in the scheme would be to make lazy men industrious. He was also surprised at the indefinable change in the manner of his *protégés* to him after they had been interviewed and provided for by Mr. Willoughby.

At first, on seeing the temporary home provided for them, their suspicion usually changed into something like wondering gratitude. They apparently regarded Ronald as an unknown creature of another sphere, who was not to be comprehended, but might be admired—in fact a philanthropist pure and simple, whose sympathy it would be politic to win. But, after a call on Mr. Willoughby at the house where Ronald had lain ill, all was changed. The meanest sycophant no longer whined to Ronald,

telling tales of his own misunderstood virtue in the past. The men said little, but there was a curious new boldness in their eyes when regarding their young benefactor. Ronald did not fail to see the change, but was unable to account for it, and it was too indefinable to admit of questioning.

If a man were without family or home, he was allowed to use the place in Oswell Road as a lodging-house if he chose, even when he had obtained work, in such a case paying a small weekly sum, in accordance with the wages he said that he was getting. But most of Ronald's strange guests departed when they had got what they wanted; and Mr. Willoughby's facilities for obtaining all kinds of employment for all kinds of persons seemed marvellous to the younger man. The old clergyman, however, explained it humbly by saying that he knew everybody in London who was interested in charitable or industrial associations, and, as he had given up many years to this sort of thing, it would be far more strange if by this time he had not thoroughly mastered his work.

So Ronald was satisfied, and the weeks went on. But his heart was heavy. His very youth, and natural longings for life as it had been in brighter days, made life as it was now harder to bear. If even one or two of the men whom he brought under his roof had continued to show real gratitude or affection for him there would have been balm for his wounds. But always, as soon as they were provided for—which generally happened almost immediately—that strange and subtle change set in. It was well-nigh as if the pensioners upon his bounty had been inoculated with a sneering, half-amused contempt for him, which they dared not put into words.

Sir Ronald Charteris began to be known, and talked of here and there, as a young man who had chosen an extremely original mode of life for one of his class and record. Perhaps the solicitors through whom he had received his legacy were the ones to set the ball rolling; but—be that as it might—a garbled version of his story was dis-

cussed and gossiped over in more sets than one as the summer went on. He was remarkably handsome; he was young and well-born; he was brave, for he had fought through the war, been honourably mentioned in despatches and invalided home. Now, he had had a fortune left him—the amount was wildly exaggerated—and, instead of spending it on his own pleasure, had gone to live in a slum and devoted himself to helping the poor.

By and by, Lady St. Leger heard the tale, and seized upon it with interest for she had known both Ronald's father and uncle, and the girl both men had fallen in love with had been at school with her and Honour Brooke's mother.

“Your mother and Gladys Wray were our two beauties,” she said to Honour, hoping to rouse the girl, who had been drooping of late. “They had their photographs taken together, and we all clamoured to have one. We three—your mother, Gladys Wray, and I—kept up our friendship for several years after we all left school. Poor Gladys loved one brother, and married the other to please her parents. She died when her child was born, and I lost sight of the Charterises, who went more or less down in the world, owing to extravagance and bad management of their property. But I should like to see this son of Gladys. I believe I'll write to him, and ask him to dinner. He's chosen such an original way of becoming a celebrity that he must get lots of letters from strangers, and I'm not quite that to him.”

So Lady St. Leger wrote; but she did not take Loris St. Leger, whom she saw often now, into her confidence. She was inclined to fancy that he was jealous of other men who came to the house, and she thought she knew why, and was pleased. Still, she did not see why she should deny her curiosity the gratification of meeting Ronald Charteris. Presently came an answer—a pleasant and grateful answer. Ronald would have liked much to meet his mother's friend, and sent her thanks for remembering him. But—he could not get away from his work. He

went nowhere any more. He was, he said, scarcely civilised. Lady St. Leger, who was not used to having her invitations treated with indifference, was hurt and piqued, despite the grateful tone of the letter. But Honour—to whom it was given to read—was touched by the note of suppressed sadness which Lady St. Leger had not found there. "That man is very unhappy, and dreadfully lonely," the girl said to herself.

Somehow of late, she knew, by a quick, sympathetic instinct, when people hid sorrow or anxiety under a smile. It was, she thought, as if she were a receiver for messages of sadness, carried by wireless telegraphy from all those who came near her in her daily life; and the reason was not hard to guess. Because her own soul was troubled, its door was open to thought-waves which a little while ago would have passed on elsewhere. She began to think rather often of this Ronald Charteris, who had given up his youth to such a brave work in the world, and she envied him because he was of use. She could do nothing—nothing—not even help Jack Harned to find out what had become of her father.

Jack had been introduced to Lady St. Leger now, as a *protégé* of Nevill Brooke's. He was not "her sort," although he had been to a Bond Street tailor and had had his outer man made to resemble that of other visitors to the little house in Park Lane. But she was kind to him for Honour's sake, and the girl and the young man were allowed many long half-hours together, talking over the one subject which occupied Honour's heart and mind. There was no danger, Lady St. Leger was sure, that the beautiful, fastidious girl whom she had brought up would fall in love with such a rough, crude-mannered young fellow. Besides, she had been told something of the bond of interest which drew the two together. Jack Harned and Honour had decided to respect Nevill Brooke's injunction to secrecy regarding his movements, so far, at least, as Lady St. Leger and his other old friends were concerned. Lady St. Leger had not been informed that he had started

for England, and ought to have arrived long ago. But Honour confessed that she was more than anxious. Those promised letters had not arrived; and Lady St. Leger knew that, by Honour's wish, the young barbarian, Jack Harned, was endeavouring to find out where Nevill Brooke now was. This fact she confided to Loris St. Leger, who heard her words in silence, only shrugging his shoulders lightly when he learned of the mission undertaken by Harned. He had been disposed towards an uneasy jealousy of the somewhat remarkable young stranger when Jack Harned made his first sudden appearance in the household. But he had his own reasons for sneering at the thought of such a detective on the track of the man who had vanished, and if Harned were not to be feared as a rival, he was not to be feared at all. He was so young, so insignificant, so rough, so altogether undesirable, that Loris St. Leger was inclined to agree with his cousin that Honour would never think of him as a lover. Still, Jack was often near the girl. She seemed to find comfort in his presence. She talked with him confidentially, and looked at him with a gentle kindness in her lovely eyes which was never there when circumstances obliged her to turn them on St. Leger. Her continued shrinking from him, her preference for another man, her proudly hidden grief and anxiety, for which he so well knew the cause, all piqued St. Leger's fancy for her into a passion. A marriage with her was necessary as a business transaction. He would have wished to marry her even if she had been without attraction for him; but, as it was, this girl who instinctively feared him was becoming for St. Leger the one woman in the world—the woman he was determined to have.

When Loris St. Leger was determined to have a thing he usually got it, not always by fair means; but it was borne in upon him that Honour Brooke would be more difficult to win than anything else he had ever tried for in his life.

Other things were going exceedingly well with him. He had succeeded in obtaining a great fortune which he

had risked his life—and more than his life—to gain. To be sure, he was obliged to share it with others whose help had been, and still was, necessary to him ; but the partnership was not, for particular reasons, as irksome to him as he had feared it would be. For instance, a certain woman concerned in a difficult business connected with the fortune might have made it impossible for him to marry Honour Brooke. But, instead of being his enemy in this affair of the heart, she was eagerly his ally, anxious to hurry on a marriage. Thanks to one of his partners—this woman's father—matters were shaping themselves practically and plausibly for Loris St. Leger. He had told his cousin, and she had told many others, that he owned a diamond mine in South Africa, and that it was, after long working, "turning up trumps." He had taken a huge house in Park Lane, which had come into the market through the sensational suicide of a reputed millionaire, and Honour Brooke and Lady St. Leger were aiding him with advice as to its decoration. He could not help seeing that Honour could not bring herself to care in the least whether the library was red or green, the biggest drawing-room Louis Quatorze or Louis Quinze. But at least the discussions gave him an excuse to be near her ; and Honour, ashamed of her dislike, always tried to be gracious, affecting an interest she did not feel. She promised, also, to "be nice" to a beautiful cousin who was coming with her father, to visit, when the grand new house should be in order ; and, really, almost everything seemed to be going as St. Leger would have it.

But it was at this time that Honour heard of Sir Ronald Charteris' work in the slums, and began to wish that she, too, could do a little good in the world. She thought of him almost as a saint, and wished that she might ask his advice as to what a girl who had no money of her own might do for the poor.

Sometimes Lady St. Leger mentioned the young man's name rather resentfully, and one day Honour ventured, half-shyly, to give her opinion.

"I'm sure he would have liked to come and see you," she said. "Something very *real* must have prevented him, I think. But the life he leads makes him quite different from the men we know. One can't put him in the same category at all. Why shouldn't you go to see him, some time, for his mother's sake? He would be grateful and appreciative, I know; and maybe you could help him in his work."

Lady St. Leger caught with some interest at the idea.

"Perhaps you're right, dear," she said. "You usually are. I'll go to see the man and his flock, if you'll go with me."

"Let us go to-day," exclaimed Honour.

Lady St. Leger laughed.

"Why not this moment, then?"

"Why not?" echoed the girl. And in a few minutes Fate had arranged that they should start.

It was the end of July, and as London was full of foreign visitors, it did not seem strange to them, as they came out into the street to take their carriage, that two men who looked like Indians should be sauntering slowly past the house.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIRST APPEARANCE OF TWO BROWN MEN.

"Those Indians seem very much interested in us, dear," Lady St. Leger remarked to Honour. "In you particularly. Well"—and she laughed without bitterness, for she had no middle-aged jealousy of the girl's beauty—"one can't be surprised at that."

The footman opened the door of the brougham, and they got in. Still the Indians were watching from a distance, and one was talking eagerly to the other.

"I think they are interested in this—not in me," said Honour, touching an ornament which she wore at her throat. It was the little bronze toad with the fiery jewel

in its head which she had found on the weed-grown lawn of the deserted house in Hammersmith. She had shown it to Jack Harned, and during several weeks he had advertised it for her in the London daily papers, hoping that "Mr. Smith," or someone who knew that mysterious person, might come forward to claim it. But there had been no answer, and at last the advertisement had been discontinued. Then Jack Harned had, with Honour's permission, taken the strange little fetish to a jeweller, and had a stout gold pin placed underneath the toad's squatting body, so that it could be worn "for luck" as a brooch. Just because Honour had found it on the day when her father should have come home, and at the house where he had sent her to search for him, the thing seemed to the girl like a link between her and the one she had loved and lost, and she had grown so fond of the toad that she wore it every day.

Though she and Jack had kept the secret of Nevill Brooke's intended return from his old friends, Harned had confided the whole story, as he and Honour knew it, to a detective named Richard Otway, who had lately gained some fame in his profession, and now they were told that "something was being done." Nor was Jack idle in the matter. He wrote many letters to men he knew in other countries, and offered money for information, and sometimes he thought that he had come upon a clue; but, oddly enough, he had always had a queer impression about the bronze toad. "If that thing could speak," he had said to Honour once, "I believe—though I suppose it's nonsense to believe—that it would tell us something about your father." Honour had not been able to forget that impulsive speech, and she set an almost superstitious value upon the fetish. The eager look in the two dark faces, attracted by the red light of the jewel, impressed the girl, and if she had not been assured by the man who had made the toad into a brooch that, intrinsically, the stone was worth only a few sovereigns, she might have been half frightened in remembering the look. But why

should anyone wish to steal the bronze toad? As they drove on, the impression faded away, and Honour began to think of other things.

Lady St. Leger, who could never keep names or numbers in her head, had written Ronald Charteris' address on a piece of paper before leaving the house, and had read it out to the coachman—"28, Oswell Road."

Oswell Road was not a neighbourhood of which he could approve, and the expression of his highly respectable face (as he penetrated with his well-groomed horse and the neat brougham containing his mistress deeper and deeper into the grey, grim London slums) would have amused Lady St. Leger and Honour if they had seen it.

At last they arrived in Oswell Road, and stopped before No. 28, the smart turn-out creating quite a sensation in the street. Children looked up from sailing paper boats in the gutters, and slovenly mothers appeared in low, narrow doorways, with weary-eyed babies in their arms. It was seldom that even a tradesman's cart stopped in Oswell Road, for people brought home their own modest purchases; but here was a handsome carriage, with a coachman and footman in livery; and at the end of the street was a four-wheeled cab, from which a dark face under a turban peeped furtively out and disappeared again. This was excitement indeed for Oswell Road, and even a few men with clay pipes in their mouths strolled to doors or windows, to peep out at the unwonted attraction.

"It's all the mission baronite," they murmured explanatorily to one another. Save for a few wife-beatings, child-tortures, and murders, the establishment of Sir Ronald Charteris and his "mission" had been the first sensation Oswell Road had ever had. But that had been a nine days' wonder, and the road was used to Ronald and his pensioners now.

The footman got down from the box, with his aristocratic nose in the air, and knocked at No. 28, which was freshly painted, and had tiny window-boxes of marguerites and red geraniums. In a moment the door was opened by a

decent-looking man of middle age. He believed that the "Guv'nor" was in. Would the ladies step inside ?

Honour's heart was beating quite fast. She had looked forward to meeting this "mission baronite," who would not allow himself to be addressed here in Oswell Road as "Sir Ronald." She wondered if she were going to be disappointed in her saint or the reverse.

Lady St. Leger alighted, and she followed. They were shown through a narrow passage, newly and tastefully papered, to a room which was evidently dining-room and sitting-room in one. For so poor a place it was wonderfully pretty. The floor was stained and polished. At door and fireplace there were cheap white fur rugs. The paint was olive green, and the wall a cheerful primrose yellow, with a large, roughly-made bookcase on one side, and here and there an engraving in a dark green frame. Honour and Lady St. Leger were telling each other how pleasant it was, and what a delightful home the place must seem to the unfortunate ones who were welcomed there, when the man who had opened the door came back. After all, the "Guv'nor" was not in, but must be at No. 22, another house lately acquired, where one of the inmates had been ill.

"Shall I go and fetch him ?" he asked, "or would you ladies care to walk down to 22 ? It's but a step, on the same side of the street."

Honour sprang up. "Let us go," she said. "Maybe it will be inconvenient for him to come back."

When Lady St. Leger had been assured that the illness in the other house was not contagious, she consented to transfer herself there. The coachman had obeyed his mistress's directions, and was driving up and down. The street was narrow for constant turning ; therefore he had gone round the corner, meaning to come back in a few minutes. For the moment the carriage was out of sight, but, as Lady St. Leger and Honour stood hesitating for an instant before the door of No. 28, a four-wheeled cab approached slowly, keeping close to the pavement. They

had not taken half a dozen steps in the direction of No. 22, when a picturesquely dressed figure jumped out from the vehicle, without waiting for it to stop, and landed immediately in front of the two women.

"Why, it is surely one of the Indians who were looking at our house in Park Lane!" Honour said to herself, in extreme surprise. She had hardly time to form the thought, or to wonder what significance there could be in the brown man's presence here, when he had addressed her.

"Want that," he said, pointing imperatively at the bronze toad, with its glowing jewel.

Honour's colour rose. "No," she answered, firmly, attempting to pass with Lady St. Leger, who gave a little frightened cry. "You cannot have it. That is mine."

"Mine—*mine!*" returned the dark man, whom she took for an Indian, keeping obstinately in her path. "Must have. Money—plenty money." His air, though eager and hurried, was full of dignity and controlled passion. To illustrate his broken words, he held out, in his lean brown hand, a netted crimson purse, with slip-rings of gold. Through the open silk meshes the gleam of yellow coins could be seen; and apparently it was his intention to barter the purse and its entire contents for the coveted ornament.

Honour motioned the purse away. "No," she said again. "I will not sell the toad. Please let us pass."

The brown man's eyes sent out a sudden knife-like gleam. He uttered an exclamation, and his companion who had been with him in Park Lane sprang, light and swift as a panther, from the cab. Dimly Honour was conscious that the cabman called out some protest, and then, whipping up his horse, drove rapidly off, as if he were willing to lose a fare rather than be mixed up in a disreputable proceeding. But all this the girl remembered afterwards, rather than realised it at the time, for her thoughts were fully occupied with the matter in hand. Lady St. Leger, greatly terrified, was calling the name of her coachman;

but the brougham was by this time in the next street, and her cries were in vain. None of the two or three slouching men with pipes in their mouths seemed inclined to interfere, though a shrill gabble went up from the watching women, and ragged children, who had been playing dangerously near, ran screaming to their mothers.

One of the turbaned men, grimly silent now, seized Honour's arms from behind, holding them tightly, while the other attempted to possess himself of the bronze toad. But the pin with which it was fastened was peculiarly strong, and was, moreover, protected by a safety hook invented by the jeweller. It was embedded deeply in a silk crêpe cravat which Honour wore, tied at her throat, and in his fiercely impatient efforts to wrest the fetish away at any cost, so that it were done quickly, the man twisted the cravat and choked the girl. All her blood seemed to rush to her head. Sparks floated before her eyes. She gasped for breath, unable to utter a sound, though she bravely struggled still to release her arms. A purple haze shut out the ugly street from her sight. She was fast losing consciousness, when suddenly a man's voice, which sounded familiar, broke into the dull humming of her blood in her ears.

"You cowards! You cowards!" it cried out twice. There was a sound of blows, an exclamation in some foreign tongue, and the pressure on her throat was relaxed. Her arms also were free; there was a patter of racing feet, ejaculations in the rough, Cockney voices of the street, and she felt herself falling. Someone caught and held her firmly, giving an impression of strength and trustworthiness which it was good to feel after those wild moments of terror and confusion.

For an instant she remained quite still, without opening her eyes, her aching throat expanding with deep, full breaths which seemed to renew her life. There was a sensation of weight upon her eyelids, but, resisting the inclination to slip away into unconsciousness, by an effort of the will she raised them, to look straight up into the face

of a man, who was bending over her, holding her in his arms.

It was a strikingly handsome face, though pale and somewhat worn. Honour knew that she had never seen it before, or any other man's resembling it, and yet—and yet—why, yes, it was like the picture of Lord Byron, in Jack Harned's lodgings; and this voice which sounded so familiar was the voice of the man who had raved in delirium in the next house.

CHAPTER XXII

A DEAD MAN'S PORTRAIT

"You are better? I hope you are not much hurt?" he asked.

It was so strange to Honour that accident should have thrown her literally into the arms of the man who had been so often in her thoughts that she almost forgot to answer. But, with a sudden bright blush, she released herself. "Oh, yes, thank you," she said, rather unsteadily. "I am better, and—and not really hurt at all."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Lady St. Leger. "I was never so terrified in my life. Those wretches! How I wish we could have caught them."

"I am very much afraid they have got away," said the man who had come to the rescue. "But the police can be notified, and their description given. They were remarkable figures, both, and ought to be easily identified."

"I would rather not do anything," said Honour, quickly. "They tried to steal my brooch, but they didn't succeed, and it would be horrid to be obliged to appear in a police court. My brooch is safe. That is all I want. And I can hardly thank you enough for what you did. I thought that man was choking me to death."

“Probably he would have choked you if this gentleman hadn’t come just in time,” broke in Lady St. Leger. “We came to this place to find Sir Ronald Charteris——”

“I am Ronald Charteris,” said the young man.

Somehow Honour was not surprised. She felt as if she had known him from the first; and again a deep blush stained her cheeks, for she remembered the confessions of his delirium, his agony of mind, which she had pitied and been unable to forget. It was as if she had been eaves-dropping, and had come into possession of his secrets unknown to him. A painful self-consciousness rendered her uneasy in his presence; yet her heart went out to him in sympathy. How strange it was, she told herself, that she should have guessed at a hidden sadness from the short letter he had written to Lady St. Leger. Now, even if she had known nothing of him, she would have seen in his eyes that he was not happy. For a moment after he had spoken his own name it would have been impossible for Honour to utter a word. But, fortunately, Lady St. Leger had no suspicion of what was passing in the girl’s mind, and she answered with agreeable conventionalities. She was so glad that it was to him they owed their debt of thanks, for he was not really like a stranger. Since Mahomet had refused to come to the mountain, the mountain had come to Mahomet. She had wanted to know him, because he was his mother’s son, Lady St. Leger went on, pleasantly, and because of his work. They both hoped—she and Miss Brooke—that he would tell them all about it, and perhaps let them help in some way—a woman’s way, if that could be.

Ronald glanced rather wistfully once or twice at Honour as Lady St. Leger spoke, and his handsome, haggard young face touched her strangely. “He would like to have us help him, because he is starving with loneliness, and is homesick for his own sort of people,” the girl said to herself. “And yet he is trying to find an excuse to send us away from him quickly, because for some queer reason he thinks it his duty.”

It was true. After his long martyrdom, his isolation from his own kind, it seemed to Ronald that all the sweetness and light in the world were concentrated in this beautiful girl who was smiling at him in frank friendliness. He could not bear to let her go, and the brief gleam of sunlight with her, but—he had no right to such sweetness and light as girls could bring into men's lives. "I am a murderer" he had to remind himself, that the grim truth might give him a strength equally grim.

"You are very good," he said, almost stiffly, to Lady St. Leger. "But my work isn't woman's work, and it wouldn't be fair to let you in for helping. It's all among men, you know—rough fellows, most of them, with whom the world has dealt hardly. But I hope you will come in, nevertheless, and rest. No. 22 is scarcely finished yet. We have only just got in, but perhaps it is all the better for that. You will not be disturbed."

Lady St. Leger was so vexed at what she took for ungraciousness that she almost forgot what he had done for Honour, and—as the brougham at this minute appeared round the corner—she would have refused Ronald's hospitality had it not been for an appealing look from the girl. It was that which induced her to go in through the door of No. 22, Oswell Road, when Ronald held it open.

He showed them into a combination of sitting-room and dining-room, much like the one they had seen in the other house, and when they were seated, he remained standing. "I should like you to have tea," he said, simply, "but we have no servants here. We do our own work, and the men are all out now; but if you will forgive our clumsy arrangements, I will soon have some tea ready. I have learned to make rather good tea."

Honour sprang up. "Oh, do let me make it!" she exclaimed. "It would be fun. I should like it so much. I see there, on the sideboard, you have a gipsy kettle, and there are cups and—oh, yes! a tea-caddy. If you will get the water, I'll have everything ready."

Ronald smiled more brightly than he had for a long

time. To be sure, if this girl knew that he was a murderer, the lovely light would die out of her eyes and she would shrink from him in horror ; but she did not know ; and, without being actually rude, he could not refuse her kindly little offices. No, he would not refuse. He would be happy for once, only for these few moments, and then she would go out of his life, and be none the worse for having shed upon it the light of her presence for—perhaps—one half-hour.

He went to the kitchen, and brought back water in the tea-kettle, a large cottage loaf of bread, and some butter. The bread he would have cut, but Honour liked cutting bread very, very thin, she said, and begged to do it. Ronald brought milk, and together they set out cups and saucers, and he entirely forgot that he was an outcast. So different was he in manner and expression that Honour was more sorry for him than ever, and wished that he might always be as he was now. When she had made him actually laugh more than once, and had induced him to tell stories, grave and gay, of his work and the men he worked among, she said, gently :

“ Do you think it’s quite fair to the men to refuse our help, Sir Ronald ? You say they are ill sometimes, and that their time passes heavily. Lady St. Leger and I could come and bring them books, and write letters for them to their friends, or read to them. I have often done that at hospitals. Oh, I’m sure there are lots of things we could do, if you would let us.”

He looked at her in silence for a moment. Then he said :

“ The truth is, I don’t think either the men or I are worthy to have you come here among us. Some of them have been criminals, you know, and—and I am not very proud of my life. It is a temptation to accept an offer of such kindness, but—for your sake, I——”

“ If it is for *our* sakes that you would refuse, we will come sometimes, won’t we, Lady St. Leger ?” exclaimed Honour. “ What does it matter to us how bad the men

who come here may have been? Perhaps they are trying to do better. Anyway, you are helping them to try. How dreadful it would be if, because people had sinned or made mistakes in the past, others who hadn't happened to do the same turned their backs on them!"

"Ah, but women—ladies!" protested Ronald. "It is different with them. And, besides, don't you think when people have sinned, as you say, they ought to keep away from others who haven't—anyway, from sweet, pure women—not to contaminate them with their touch?"

"No, indeed, I think nothing of the kind!" cried Honour. "The very fact that they could have such scruples would show they weren't all bad. You will let us come and help, won't you?"

"Then—yes," Ronald almost stammered, the blood rushing to his forehead. "It would be a great happiness—far more than I—than any of us deserve. But—if you would——"

"That is settled, then," said Lady St. Leger, mollified by the change in him. "We will bring you lots of books, and we will try to collect among our friends clothing suitable for the poor men you've told us of, to wear instead of their rags, when they go out to find work. But now, about yourself. You are your mother's son. I want to hear about *you*."

If she had been in a critical mood, Lady St. Leger might have noticed that, in obeying her, Ronald went far back into his past, giving no details of his own personal life for the last few months. But she was not in such a mood; besides, what he did tell interested her. She began to like him, and to think that it would be amusing to secure him as a guest. He was original, and extraordinarily good-looking—the sort of new, unusual person whom people in Society, *blasé* of each other, liked to meet. But, when she forgot past grievances far enough to invite him once more to her house, the light died out of his face. "I can't come, Lady St. Leger," he said in a constrained voice. "Don't think it's because I don't want to. It's far from

being that, and I thank you. But all that sort of pleasant thing is over for me. I have turned my back on the world I used to know, and I can't—I mustn't go back to it."

His eyes were so grieved and wistful that she could not be angry, even at a second refusal. "I mustn't urge you, then, I suppose," she said, putting down her empty teacup on the table, and rising. "But—forgive me—I can't help looking on you as a mystery."

Ronald flushed once more at the word, and Honour wished that Lady St. Leger had not used it. Five minutes later they had gone, with a promise to come again, bringing contributions for the men. Their host went out to the carriage with them, and stood with bare head, watching the brougham drive away, until it had passed out of sight round the corner.

"How beautiful she is!" he said to himself, as he turned slowly to go back into the house, mentally taking up the burden that he had laid down for a little while. "Of course, it is only a coincidence that her face is like *his*—the eyes especially, and the way her hair ripples away from her forehead. Or perhaps it isn't really like at all. Perhaps, because I am always seeing that other face—because it haunts me like a ghost—I only imagine a resemblance that doesn't exist."

So he satisfied his own curiosity. Yet he remembered how he had thought on the terrible night when the ship of his future had been wrecked, that, if the man at whom he gazed from behind the blue-curtained door had a daughter who looked like him, she would be a girl of extreme beauty and charm.

This girl had extreme beauty and charm, but he did not associate the two together, save in the passing thought which he hastily put from him, because he could not bear to recall the man whose life he had taken. When, after recovering from his illness, he had made up his mind to ask Mr. Willoughby the name of the murdered stranger, the old clergyman had said: "Do not ask. It is a foreign

name. It would have no meaning, no association for you. It is far better that you should know nothing whatever of the man, or every time you look at a newspaper, you will have a shock of the nerves for fear of seeing his name or something about him. Let the dead past bury its dead. Do not think of the man whose death you caused; do not think of the woman for whose sake you struck the blow."

Then Ronald had been silent—weakly, perhaps, because it was anguish to talk of that night and what had passed. And never had he brought up the subject again. He had given his word to keep the dreadful secret of the old house in Hammersmith—the secret which was the woman's as well as his; and he would not break the promise. Therefore no good could be accomplished by continually looking into the closet where the skeleton secret lay hid.

In a few days Lady St. Leger and Honour had collected a pile of novels and other books for the men of the "mission," as they called it. They had also asked their friends for cast-off clothing, and had been given a boxful. It was arranged that they should drive down to Oswell Road again on the fourth day after their last visit, and a note, written by Lady St. Leger, telling Ronald to expect them, was written and sent. Then, on the appointed afternoon, she was ill with a headache. It seemed a pity to disappoint Ronald, when the visit and—more especially—the things had been promised. Therefore, Lady St. Leger thought it might do if Honour drove down with her maid.

"You might leave the books and the clothes," she said, "and then, when you come back, do—like a good child—drop in at poor Loris's big, splendid barrack, and call on the new cousin. I forgot to tell you—my head was so frightfully bad this morning—that I got a letter from the dear boy by the first post, saying that the cousin and her old father, Mr. Kazan, would arrive to-day. Poor Loris was called away last night on the most important business—something legal, that couldn't wait—but

wouldn't put them off; and, as they are there all alone till to-morrow, you must drop in, explain why I couldn't be with you, and ask if they won't dine with us here to-night. It would be so gloomy for them in that great house, on their very first night in England, without Loris."

"Oh, very well, dear, I'll call with pleasure," answered Honour, the more cordially because of the assurance that Loris St. Leger was absent. "I shall be interested to see Miss Kazan, if she is so charming and such a beauty as Mr. St. Leger describes her. But I wish she could speak English. I didn't get on as well as I ought with Russian, which I studied to please my dear father, and I'm a little afraid of my French accent when it comes to talking with a girl who probably speaks as well as a Parisienne."

But Lady St. Leger assured Honour that her French was all that could be desired, and sent her off with the maid.

The first thing to do was to rid herself of the heap of clothing and books which filled all available space in the brougham. But it was not the thought of getting rid of a tiresome burden which made Honour glad that she was going at once to Oswell Road. She did not define her own eagerness for the visit, but it would have been a sharp disappointment to her if she had been obliged to give up making it to-day on account of Lady St. Leger's headache. She longed to see Ronald Charteris and talk with him again—about his work, of course; and, besides, he needed a cheering word and smile sometimes. She was sure of that.

Josephine shrugged her shoulders and made a little *moue* of disgust at Oswell Road.

"Ah, mademoiselle!" she exclaimed. "Is it possible that we are to stop in such a street, and such a house? What a house! It is probable that we shall get some disease."

"If you are afraid of that, you needn't come in with me," said Honour, not without an impulse of joy, for

critical, purring, narrow-minded Josephine would be a drag on her conversation with Sir Ronald about the mission. "We will send in the things, and I will follow, but I don't suppose I shall be more than five minutes."

They had stopped at No. 22, where Lady St. Leger and Honour had had tea with Ronald Charteris a few days before. The footman knocked, and when the door had been answered by a thin little man with the eyes and face of a fox, he began carrying in relays of books and clothes: In a moment Ronald appeared; and while he expressed polite regret for Lady St. Leger's absence and the cause of it, his blood quickened. Was it possible that this dear and beautiful young girl was coming into the house alone? But the question answered itself. She must tell him something about the clothes and the books, she said, and if they could be laid on a table in the sitting-room, she would be able to explain everything that was necessary in a few minutes.

Not daring to realise how happy he was in seeing this girl whom he scarcely knew—a girl he was meeting now only for the second time in his life—he took her into the house, and, as she was alone with him, he ignored the poor little preparations for tea which he had hopefully made for the entertainment of the two ladies. But Honour's eyes fell upon the bowl of sweet peas, the pretty tray cloth, the delicate china, so much finer than that they had had the other day—the jug of cream, the cakes—all bravely set forth on a corner of the table now usurped by a leaning tower of books. She waved her hand at the humble array, with a lovely smile.

"Was that to have been for us?" she asked.

"Yes," Ronald admitted. "I hoped that you and Lady St. Leger might——"

"And so we would; and—and so I *will*. Only, I mustn't be long," broke in Honour, feeling adventurous, and more like her old self than she had felt since that memorable night of April the fourth.

“Will you—really?” Ronald could hardly believe she was in earnest.

“Yes, really. And, what is more, I will make the tea again. If you have water boiling, it will take only a few minutes.”

He had water boiling. Nevertheless, Honour did not go away in five minutes. She said what she had to say about the contributions she had brought, and Ronald thanked her many times, even more times than necessary; and they drank tea together, and Honour praised the bread and butter and the cakes. Then, somehow, they began talking of themselves, and of each other. Honour could not talk for long of herself without speaking of her father. Ronald had mentioned his uncle's fondness for roaming over the world, and Honour wondered aloud if the elder Ronald Charteris and her father, Nevill Brooke, had ever met.

“I only wish I knew that or anything else about the dear old chap,” Ronald answered with a sigh. “I was named after him, and the happiest days of my childhood were spent in his society, but it's years since he wrote to any of us. I tried to communicate with him when my father died, but failed, and I don't know where he is. I only hope that he's still somewhere on the face of the earth. I can't bear to think of him as being dead—that I may never see the kind old boy again.”

Honour's eyes filled with tears.

“If it were your *father!*” she said, brokenly. “Your father, who was everything to you—everything in the whole world. Think what that suffering would be, and pity me, Sir Ronald. Oh, I didn't mean to speak about it—I hardly ever do speak of it, even to Lady St. Leger. But it's killing me—the suspense and horror—the terrible uncertainty.”

Looking into her paling face, her tear-bright eyes that met his as if with an appeal for help—it was all that Ronald Charteris could do not to fall on his knees at her feet and cry out that he loved her, and longed to comfort her

sorrow. For it was true. He did love her. He knew now that he had loved her since that first moment of their meeting, when he had held her in his arms, and felt the throbbing of her heart. She was the one woman in the world for him, and though he had no right to love her, and she must never know, there was a strange joy in his secret worship. The man's whole being seemed a shrine for the dear goddess, and his adoration of her was like incense. His voice trembled with the supreme effort he made to answer calmly, showing nothing of what he felt, save kindly sympathy. "I am so sorry," he said, simply. "I didn't know."

"You couldn't have known," faltered Honour. "No one has known, except Lady St. Leger, a man who loved my father as if he had been his son, and detectives whom that man has told of our fears concerning him. You have suffered; you know what suspense is, though hardly as I know it, I think. You can imagine what I have lived through, when I tell you that, after hearing months ago that I must expect him within two days, I have never since had a line from my father. Now, it is the first of August, and he should have come to me on the fourth of April."

Ronald Charteris quivered with a sudden fierce shock of the nerves.

"April the fourth!" he mechanically repeated, white-lipped.

Honour scarcely heard the murmured echo of her words. She was conscious only of an extraordinary sympathy, so keen as to be well-nigh painful, which this man gave her. It was as if their souls held each other by the hand, and she clung to his in spirit.

"I believe my father *did* come to me on that night," she went on. "It was in a dream—a horrible dream. I saw him, in a great lighted room—oh, so plainly! It was his very self, his splendid brown eyes, his handsome face, turned fully towards me, his hair, like bronze and silver, in short, crisp waves. Then, a dark, vague Some-

thing sprang upon him, and he fell. I knew he was being murdered, and I could not reach him—I could not help. All these weeks have passed since, and life goes on. I talk and smile—sometimes I even laugh. But that is a kind of *outer* self going through an inevitable routine. My real self only lives to find out the truth—to discover his murderer, if he was murdered, to give the wretch up to justice. Oh, I don't think I am cruel at heart, yet I want that man to suffer—to suffer all that human nature can suffer, as a punishment. You look at me as if such words from a girl's lips filled you with horror. Perhaps I deserve that from you. I can't help it. You don't know what my father was to me—my handsome, noble father! See—was there ever a man so worthy of love? Look at his picture; then you may partly understand."

Carried away on the tide of impulse, the girl tore a bracelet from her wrist, and, pressing a spring, caused a square stone-cameo to lift like the cover of a locket. Underneath was a small photograph. Ronald's eyes fastened upon it, and dwelt with a ghastly fascination on the face of the man whose death he was expiating in daily torture.

"My God!" he ejaculated, the words torn from him by mortal pain. "Your father!"

"Yes, it is his very self," Honour answered, her eyes drawn from the photograph to Ronald. "Why do you speak so strangely?"

"I—was thinking of the man who robbed you of your father," he answered. "You are right. He should suffer—all of which human nature is capable. And he will. Have no fear. He will!"

CHAPTER XXIII

BETWEEN FATHER AND DAUGHTER

WHEN Honour left Ronald Charteris, it was to drive back to Park Lane. But she was not yet ready to go home, for Lady St. Leger's bidding must first be done. She must call at the big house, which was a magnificent advertisement of Loris St. Leger as the newest millionaire; she must make the acquaintance of his cousin, Miss Kazan, and deliver Lady St. Leger's invitation asking Loris's two Russian relatives to dinner.

An unusually gorgeous footman opened the door. He was over six feet high, and looked down from a magnificent height of self-satisfaction on Lady St. Leger's man, who was consumed with jealousy.

Miss Kazan had arrived some hours earlier, it appeared, and Honour Brooke was shown into the Louis Quinze drawing-room, in the decoration of which she had manifested such scanty interest. She was kept waiting for a few moments, and her thoughts had gone back to the little room in Oswell Road, where she and Ronald Charteris had had tea and some strange talk together, when instinct, rather than her sense of hearing, told her that she was no longer alone. She had not heard a footstep or a rustle of drapery, but suddenly she felt that someone was looking intently at her. Raising her head quickly, her eyes met those of a tall and beautiful woman who stood not thirty feet away—one of the most beautiful women whom Honour had ever seen.

There was no colour about her anywhere, save the red of her lips and the intense black of hair and eyes and brows. The long oval of her face was of a peculiar ivory whiteness,

scarcely warmer than the rich cream-white of the quaintly-made, picturesque tea-gown of soft woollen stuff which hung in straight, heavy folds about the slim, yet stately, figure. Her throat was uncovered, and rose like a lily out of the plainly-fashioned white bodice. Her black hair was parted in the middle, and folded over the ears, like a raven's wing on either side of the pale, passionate face.

"What a wonderful creature!" Honour said to herself, as she rose. "Who would have thought that Loris St. Leger would have such a glorious girl for a cousin? But why does she stare at me so gloomily?"

Even as she wondered at the repellant look in the great black eyes, it faded into a serene, conventional smile, so that the girl was half inclined to fancy that she had imagined it. Still, as the two approached each other, and touched hands, with greetings in French, Honour could not but be aware that Miss Kazan continued to look at her with marked intentness, even curiosity. "I suppose her cousin has told her things about me, and now I am turning out to be quite different from what she had expected," the girl told herself.

The obligation to speak in French—as she had been warned that St. Leger's Russian relatives knew no other tongue save their own—made Honour somewhat self-conscious. She felt insignificant and unformed—almost awkward—compared to this splendid creature, who seemed to her more like the superlatively handsome heroine of a French novel than a real, ordinary woman. Her surprise would have been intense if she could have read the mind of her companion, and seen the passion of jealousy, the reluctant appreciation of her radiant youth, her exquisite girlish charm, which, contrasted with the personality of the other, was like a budding blush rose beside a fully-blown waxen magnolia. "She is even lovelier than the miniature in the locket," the woman was thinking. "And pure—oh! pure as the morning! What must it feel to be as she is? I hate her! I hate her for everything! And I am glad that *he* will never see her. Why should he?"

No, of course, it cannot happen. I may be at ease as to that."

Honour said kind and pleasant things in French, hesitating a little now and then for a word, and stabbing the other's jealous heart with a sight of her lovely dimples as she smiled at her own slight mistakes. She delivered Lady St. Leger's message, asking if Miss Kazan would forgive such an unconventional invitation, and come to dinner that evening, rather than dine alone, the first night in a strange house.

"It is a strange town and a strange country to you, also, is it not, mademoiselle?" asked Honour. "You and your father have never been in England before, I think Mr. St. Leger told us."

"No, we have never been in England before," echoed Miss Kazan, with rather an odd light in her handsome eyes. "We are quite strangers. This is our first day; and I should be delighted to go to you for dinner. It would indeed be dull for us here without Loris. But, since you and Lady St. Leger have asked us, we need no longer regret his absence for this one night. I will ring and have my father sent for. I know that he will be as grateful as I."

She touched an electric bell near the sofa on which she had seated herself, and a footman, who seemed to have been cut out from the same pattern as the other whom Honour had seen, appeared. As he stood waiting for the order, Miss Kazan opened her lips as if to speak, then turned to Honour with a smile and a shrug of her shoulders.

"I forgot that this man cannot understand French," she said. "Pray be so good as to tell him what I want to say."

Honour obeyed, when she had received a few words of instruction, and presently Mr. Kazan came into the room. He was a surprise to the girl who admired his daughter. Quickly her imagination had painted a picture of a dignified, distinguished man, with a long dark beard, perhaps streaked with silver, and hair growing back from a high,

intellectual forehead. But Miss Kazan's father was clean-shaven, and looked like a foreign actor, Honour could not help thinking. He was almost destitute of eyebrows, which gave him an odd, unfinished, somewhat astonished expression. His dead-black hair was cut unusually short; his head was of a bullet shape; and his beard was so strong that his chin and cheeks were of a bluish tint. The grey eyes had the faintest suspicion of a cast, which showed itself only occasionally; the forehead was low, and the mouth was rather unpleasant, with thick, loose-hanging lips, which were pale and bloodless, the chin being remarkably square and heavy. The only particular in which Mr. Kazan resembled Honour's imaginary portrait of him was his height. He was tall, and held himself with dignity. He was well dressed too, with great attention to perfection of detail, and greeted Honour with impressive compliments, which displeased her. She decided, after the man had spoken only a few words, that she liked him no better than she did his nephew, Loris St. Leger, whose mother, she remembered hearing, had been Mr. Kazan's sister.

After her father came into the room, Miss Kazan (whom he called Nadege) seemed to feel that the responsibility of being agreeable to the visitor had been shifted from her shoulders. She leaned back among the pink and blue silk cushions on the sofa, which threw out the whiteness of her gracious figure, and sat almost in silence while her father talked, asking Honour a great many questions. But the great sombre eyes scarcely ever left the girl's face.

Mr. Kazan began by speaking of life in London during the season, and then deftly drew the conversation to Miss Brooke's own life with Lady St. Leger. Without letting it appear that any special motive underlay his questions, he contrived to find out how often the two ladies saw Loris St. Leger, and how Loris had applied to them for advice concerning the new house.

"I am glad for him that he has such kind friends," said

the Russian, "and glad for myself and my daughter too, because I hope that we shall have you for our friends also. We expect to make our home with Loris for some time to come. He was the only child of my poor dead sister, and is, indeed, our only near relative living. It is fit that we should be near each other, but I had feared loneliness for my daughter, the one woman in this great house, in a strange country. But you—you will be good to her, I know. Nothing could be happier for Nadege than to have a charming English girl so near her own age, as a friend. You will help her to make pleasant acquaintances, to find congenial occupation and deserving charities. The sooner she has these, the more glad I shall be."

"I can tell her now of a deserving charity," said Honour, blushing, but unable to resist the temptation to bring up a subject that occupied all the thoughts she could spare from her constant longing for her father, or good news of him. "Lady St. Leger and I have just found out about it, and we are so interested. A young man whose people she used to know is spending all his fortune in giving homes to very poor men, whom he finds in the streets or at prison doors, and helping them to get work which otherwise they would never be able to obtain. All that he does must take a great deal of money; it would be good to be able to help, if one were rich. It is a splendid work. I have just come from one of the houses, in, oh! *such* a slummy street, but he has made the place quite pretty and home-like. It is wonderful! Lady St. Leger and I might take you there, if you liked, Miss Kazan, and you could give books and lots of things that the mission needs."

A curiously magnetic silence fell as the girl's enthusiastic words ceased. Father and daughter looked at each other.

"What is this man's name?" inquired Miss Kazan, in a voice which Honour would have thought strained if there could have been any reason why it should be so.

"Sir Ronald Charteris," Honour answered.

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Kazan, hastily, with a com-

pling glance at his daughter. "We must keep that name in mind. It sounds a good work that is being done. You often go to this street that you call a slum?"

"I have been once with Lady St. Leger, and to-day alone, as we had promised some things, and she was not well," said Honour, flushing so deeply under the two pairs of eyes that she was surprised and vexed with herself.

"And this Sir Ronald Charteris—he is interesting, as well as his work?"

"Very interesting. Nobody could help thinking him so," replied the girl, honestly, though her cheeks kept their carmine stain. It was very stupid of her to blush, she told herself, and she could not at all understand why she did it. But the more she tried not to, the deeper grew the rose-tint, so that even her little ears grew pink, and the tears were forced to her eyes. It was horribly embarrassing, and she would have given almost anything in the world to be at home. "You must see him, and talk with him of his work," she said, turning to Miss Kazan. Then, rising, she added that she had been too long away from Lady St. Leger, and must go back.

Mr. Kazan went to the door with her, paying florid compliments on the way. Then, when she had driven off in the waiting brougham, he returned to his daughter.

"Well?" he remarked, in English, with no trace of foreign accent, "that news was unexpected."

The tall white figure was standing now at one of the windows, looking out on the street, but wheeled swiftly round at the words.

"Unexpected to you, perhaps," the beautiful woman answered, "but not to me. Something told me always, from the very first, that it would happen. I knew—I knew that Fate would bring those two together."

"After all," said the man, "it is a matter of no great importance. I flatter myself that, though he sees Mr. Willoughby every day, or nearly every day, he would see no likeness to that reverend gentleman in Mr. Kazan. I have at least three disguises of which I am absolutely

sure. Possibly my features might not lend themselves to more, but those are enough. When I am Alexander Kazan, I am myself; that makes a fourth personality; and it is, I assure you, something of a relief. As for you, I hardly think that you realise what a tremendous change dyeing your hair black has made in you. You are absolutely another person. To be sure, a man who had known you well with other colouring would notice a distinct resemblance, but it would be impossible for him to declare that you were the same woman. Besides, it is not necessary, so far as I can foresee, that Mademoiselle Nadege Kazan need ever meet the man she led to a certain old house in Hammersmith one night four months ago." As the man added the last words he looked intently at the woman, his clean-shaven lips drooping a little at the corners in a faintly contemptuous smile.

She saw the smile, and knew what it meant.

"Since *she* sees him, I shall see him, too," she answered, obstinately.

"That is still your state of mind? I should have thought some of those ravings of his when he was ill, and you had set out to play the part of nurse, would have put you off, my poor Nadege. Even in his delirium he hated you and—*remembered*." So speaking, the man let his eyes fall evilly upon the raven wings of dusky hair that were folded over her ears, and she shrank from the look as if he had struck her.

"If you talk to me in this way, and torture me deliberately for the sheer pleasure of it," she said, "you will have to do without my help in future. I will go away and live my own life. Anything would be better than the hell that you make for me."

"I am not afraid of your keeping such a threat," replied her father; yet perhaps he covered a real fear with defiance, for his tone changed. He was anxious that peace should be restored.

"I spoke for your own good," he said, coaxingly. "I hoped that you were forgetting a brief madness, which, if

you encouraged instead of crushing it, might spoil your whole future. At last we have reached the pinnacle for which we have been striving. Such *coups* as we have made before in our career were paltry compared to this one. In a way we owe our good luck largely to Loris; but he could not have brought off the affair without my money and both our brains. Therefore we share an immense fortune, just about to be actually realised, together—we three. This binds him to you. There have been times when he appeared restive, but now you can do with him as you choose, despite this girl who seems to see so much of him. He feared at first, or pretended to fear, that she might learn the details of the Tontine, and that she was one of the heirs; but months have passed, and no word has reached her. It never will now. To-morrow, when Loris comes back with news that the solicitor, Harvey Kane, who ran away, is dead, knowing nothing of the success of the expedition to Thibet, there will be no longer an excuse to delay the marriage. As his wife, and with almost unlimited money, your future will be of unparalleled brilliance. This cousin of his by marriage, Lady St. Leger, apparently knows everybody who is worth knowing in London. You can become one of the leaders of Society. Even I, when I tire of the genuine amusement and interest of my double life, can settle down if I please, and even marry for the second time. Why not choose Miss Honour Brooke for a wife? You could not object to her as a stepmother. Loris could urge nothing against my choice, since it was originally he who suggested that, separated from our interests, she might become a danger. Ah! I can see an ideal existence arranging itself for us all! You have only to forget that midsummer madness."

"It is the one true feeling which I have ever known," answered the woman whom he called Nadege. "I will never marry Loris. He is a hateful reminder of the past which it is a supreme agony not to be able to forget."

"So is Charteris a reminder of the past," retorted her father.

"The only tolerable one, despite the sadness, and the knowledge of my sin against him. I have not tried to hide my feeling for him from you. It would have been useless. I shall not try now. I love him—I am eating my heart out every day, every hour, in hopeless love for him."

"It is indeed hopeless. I am glad that, at least, you realise that," said Kazan. "It is well that you see how utterly impossible it would be for you two, of all people on earth, to be anything to one another."

"There is a still greater obstacle between him and Nevill Brooke's daughter; at all events, Ronald Charteris believes in it. By this time perhaps he knows *whose daughter that girl is*. Oh, I hope he knows! He shall know, even if he does not now. If he and I can be nothing to each other, at least he shall never be anything to her. I would kill her first, or—give her to Loris!"

"Strange girl!—strange girl!" murmured her father. "You would throw over your whole future—such a future as you used to dream of with bounding ambition, and work for with all the energy and courage you had—you would throw it all over for a passing folly?"

"Folly it may be, but it will never pass, because it has become an essential part of myself. All the dreams were before I knew what a power love could be—a power for good and—for evil."

The man came close to her, and took her by the shoulders, looking down keenly into her white face.

"You startle me by your vehemence," he said. "I do not know you, since that work last April. All the old trust and pride in your ability, your singular, almost unfeminine astuteness, is gone. I am afraid for you and of you, Nadege. Swear to me that, for all our sakes, I may still trust you—that you will do nothing rash and irrevocable."

"I do not know what I shall do!" she cried, desperately. Then, after a pause, she added, in a low voice: "Now that he and that girl have met."

CHAPTER XXIV

A NEW PARTNERSHIP

HONOUR had not been gone long from home, on her charitable mission to Oswell Road, when little Kitty Carlin called at Lady St. Leger's house, and asked for Miss Brooke. When told that she was out, Kitty gave an exclamation of disappointment.

"Oh, dear, how annoying! I *did* want to see her," she ejaculated. "Will she be gone long?"

The footman's understudy, a somewhat blighted youth in buttons, informed the young lady that he thought Miss Brooke would return soon, as Lady St. Leger was not well, and that a gentleman was awaiting her return.

Kitty remained silently reflective for a moment. She had left town about the first of July to go on tour with the company from the London theatre where she had been playing for some months. This was the first time since going away that she had been near enough to town to run home, even for part of a day; but now she had rushed up to London from Manchester, to do some shopping and be fitted for several important new frocks, and she could not bear to go off again (as she must in an hour) without a glimpse of her beloved "Beauty." She wondered who the gentleman could be who was waiting for Honour. "Perhaps," she thought, "it's that horrid, mongrel, half-Russian person. Or—what if it should be her *father* come home all right after all, and waiting to give her a big surprise? I can't think of any other man who would have the cheek to ask for Beauty, without Lady St. Leger, and sit calmly waiting for her to come home, unless—well, it might be that *protégé* of her father's she's told me about. I'd rather like to see what sort of fellow he is. He must be

an odd fish. Anyhow, there's no harm in my waiting for Beauty, too." Aloud she remarked with dignity that she would come in, and hoped that Miss Brooke really would not be long.

Now, Kitty knew very well that in this pretty doll's-house of Lady St. Leger's there were only two rooms in which it was at all likely that a friend of Honour's would be put to wait. One of these possible places was a tiny reception-room on the ground floor ; the other the drawing-room. To be sure, Lady St. Leger had a boudoir behind that, but it was sacred to her own intimate cronies, and Kitty was sure that the mysterious waiting gentleman was not there. The youth in buttons was showing the way upstairs, but, before obeying his lead, the little actress slyly pushed the door of the reception-room a few inches further ajar than it was, and peeped in. Nobody was there, and so she was safe to go upstairs.

As the drawing-room door was opened for her to enter, and she stepped briskly over the threshold, somebody who had been sitting in the shallow bow-window at the back sprang up, eagerly, with the book he had been reading to pass the time open in his hand.

"Miss Brooke!" he exclaimed. Then, before the word was quite out, a quick drawing in of the breath told that he was already aware of his mistake.

Kitty laughed, taking in the young man's slight figure with one of her quick, comprehensive glances. "I am complimented!" she said. "No one ever took me for Miss Brooke before."

"I was hoping she had come," returned Jack Harned ; and then, in his ignorance of the subtleties of social life, wondered if his frankness would be considered rude by the quaint little Dresden-china girl who was gazing straight up at him with large, bright blue eyes.

But Kitty did not consider him rude. She saw his embarrassment, of which she was the cause, and liked it. A man who did not flatter himself that he knew all about women, and exactly how to treat them, was refreshing to

her. Besides, she thought his reckless young face extremely interesting, quite different from any other she had ever seen. Kitty had never happened to meet Jack Harned, though Honour had talked of him, and she knew that he came quite often to the little house in Park Lane. But she was sure, from the description given of Nevill Brooke's *protégé* by Nevill Brooke's daughter, that this must be Jack Harned. She bestowed on him the smile which she reserved for those people of whom she thoroughly approved, and sank calmly into the most comfortable chair in the room.

"I am hoping she will come, too," remarked Miss Carlin. "Do you know, I can guess who you are. You are the young man from everywhere, who has done everything."

It was Jack's turn to laugh, and the reckless face was at its pleasantest in laughter. "That is a large order," said he. "Now, I should like to guess who you are, but I don't know whether that would be the correct thing—I never do know the correct thing, though Miss Brooke is kind enough to try and teach me."

"What a pity! She may spoil you in the process. If I know the correct thing, I generally refrain from doing it, on principle—at least, so my dearest enemies say. But hasn't Beauty ever mentioned to you a girl whose description I might answer?"

Again Jack showed embarrassment, for, in truth, there was but one girl in the world for him, and her name was Honour Brooke. If she had ever wasted a few moments of their scanty time together in describing irrelevant girls, the words had gone in at one ear and out at the other, while he watched her eyes or her lips as she talked. But this would scarcely be a polite confession to one of the irrelevant girls; and, as he paused to think of an appropriate answer, Kitty broke in:

"I quite see how it is," she said, "and I don't blame you a bit. Honour told me that you were just like a character that we both like in Bret Harte's books—a namesake of yours as far as the 'Jack' goes, so, you see, I couldn't

help recognising you on sight. As for me, I'm a play-actress, and if you were Jack Hamlin instead of Harned, I daresay you would be very nice to me. But, as it is, probably you are quite superior, and despise the theatre, and never heard the name of Kitty Carlin."

"I've been a play-actor myself," said Jack, "and, now that I have heard your name, I shall never forget it."

"Well, then, I suppose we are introduced," remarked Kitty. "And it is quite time, too, for I am one of Honour's best friends, and I shouldn't wonder if you are the other. I'm really quite glad to have met you. Ugh! What *should* I have done if I had come bouncing in here, and found the Loathsome Reptile, instead of you?"

"May I ask who he is—or she?"

"The L. R. is known to the public as Mr. Loris St. Leger. Possibly you've met him. If you have, I should like to know your opinion of the gentleman."

Jack Harned, who had been standing until now, ventured to draw up a chair within reasonable distance of the Dresden-china girl, and sit down upon it. An eager, interested expression lit up his face. "No, I have never really met Mr. St. Leger," he said. "But I have seen him. I came to call once, just as he was going away, and since then I've seen him in the street, and riding in the Park. He is rather remarkable-looking—one doesn't forget him."

"No, I wish one could," said Kitty.

"How you seem to dislike him!"

"I do. But I don't know why. That's the worst kind of dislike. It worries you so, and you lie awake nights trying to find excuses for it."

"It's rather curious," remarked Jack, thoughtfully. "That is a good deal the way I feel towards Mr. St. Leger."

"Good! I'm glad. I like you all the better for it. Makes me feel sure you and I have something in common. There must be some *real* reason for such an instinct, you know, for it *is* an instinct—just as when a cat or dog avoid or attacks a person. Bless you, *they* never take dislikes at sight to really nice, good-hearted people like

us. No, more do we. There's something *terrible* about that Loris St. Leger. I felt it creeping all through me the first minute I set eyes on him, on the fourth of last April."

"The fourth of April!" repeated Jack Harned, still thoughtfully. "He must have made a strong impression upon you, that you should have remembered the date of your first meeting all this time."

"He did. I felt as if he was bringing an evil influence into my dear Beauty's life—'Beauty' is my pet name for Honour, of course. But that wasn't the only reason I remembered the date. It was something else—a mysterious sort of something else, that I always keep half-way expecting to find out more about, though I don't suppose I ever really shall."

"That sounds interesting," said Jack, who was bitterly jealous of Loris St. Leger, because of the opportunities given him by his intimate footing in the household.

"Perhaps you wouldn't think so, if I told you how little there really was in the thing, except a perfectly *creepy* impression," replied Kitty. "It was like this. Beauty had been presented the night before, and Lady St. Leger was giving an 'At Home' 'in honour of Honour,' as I said. Poor child! it was her birthday, and she ought to have been radiantly happy, but she wasn't. She had been expecting news of her father, and hadn't heard for ages. She was dreadfully worried and 'down,' though she was being such a success. Just as she was saying 'How-do-you-do?' to shoals of dukes and earls, and receiving lots of compliments from everyone, who should appear on the scene but the L. R., just back from the North Pole or somewhere, and fancying himself tremendously. He fixed his eyes on Beauty from afar, just like another kind of reptile on a beautiful, innocent white dove, that it means to bolt. And I believe that was just what *this* Loathsome Reptile was making up his mind to do. He looked at her as if he could eat her."

"Brute!" involuntarily exclaimed Jack, clenching his hands, completely carried away by the narrative.

“ You may well say so. But wait! After he had talked to Honour for a long time, keeping everyone else away with that kind of basilisk glare of his, Lady St. Leger got him to herself. You know *she* adores him. I happened to be close by, and couldn't help overhearing their conversation. They talked about Honour. It was easy to see that Lady St. Leger wanted to make a match between them, and I kept saying to myself, ‘ No, you don't, my lady! No, you don't if *I* can help it!’ Then she begged the L. R. to stay to dinner, but he said he couldn't; he had a most important engagement. When he said that—oh, if you could have seen his face! I can't describe it, except to tell you I once saw a beast of a little boy in the street torturing a poor lame cat, and he had exactly the same expression—a nasty, sly, concealed sort of gloating grin. I'm delighted to say that I slapped the little boy and knocked him over, so the cat got away, and my fingers just itched to do the same to the man, though, so far as I could see, there wasn't any cat. He turned, with the same look—only worse—and asked Honour to wish him luck in the engagement he had for that night. Wasn't it queer?—she began to do it, out of politeness, but she turned suddenly faint, and couldn't. I thought she would have fallen, and her dear, lovely face was as white as a lily. She said afterwards to me that she supposed it might have been the scent of a big sprig of heliotrope which the L. R. was wearing in his horrid button-hole which made her feel so odd, as the perfume of heliotrope does, it seems, have a strange effect on her nerves sometimes—it's so powerful. But *I* told her it was no such thing—that it was the man himself who caused it, and the impression of some sly, wicked purpose he had in his head to carry out that night. Said I, ‘ Let me see, what's the date? so if we ever hear of any horrid thing being done, we'll know how to put two and two together.’ ‘ It's April the fourth,’ Honour answered, and I never forgot, though, so far, I've waited and watched in vain to be able to say ‘ I told you so!’ ”

Again Jack Harned repeated the words—"April the fourth." That date he also had good reason to remember. It was the day when the best friend he ever had—Nevill Brooke—should have returned to England and come to him in London. A curious sensation of deadly cold stole over him, though the day was warm. He seemed to see the dark face of Loris St. Leger, with its strange light eyes, obliquely set above high cheek-bones, wearing the expression which Kitty Carlin described. An extraordinary desire suddenly overwhelmed him to know what the man's engagement had been for the night of April the fourth, just as if it might be an affair of great importance to him—Jack Harned. Yet how could it be so? What could an engagement of Loris St. Leger's for that date have to do with him? It could only be through the disappearance of Nevill Brooke, but—of course, there was a tremendous "but," an abyssmal chasm of a "but." Nevertheless, in an instant, Jack Harned's mind flung a bridge across it, and his spirit was on that bridge, when Kitty Carlin's voice stopped him half-way.

"Honour doesn't come, and I must go, as I have to catch my quick train, and play to-night in Manchester," she said. "But I'm very glad to have met you and—to have had this talk. We are Honour's friends. Where her father is, and whether he will ever come home, who can tell? Lady St. Leger worships that horrible man. If she could, she would have Honour marry him. My dear girl needs all the help and protection she can get. I am afraid of the Reptile for her. It amounts to a presentiment, though usually I scorn such things. Let us make a compact. We will stand by her, and we will stand together in trying to find out Loris St. Leger's wickedness, so as to save her from him, now that he has blossomed out into a millionaire. What do you say, Mr. Jack Harned?"

"I say 'Done!'" cried Jack.

She put out a tiny hand, and he almost crushed it in the pressure which cemented partnership.

CHAPTER XXV

" SHE LOVES HIM ! "

JACK HARNED had been away in Paris, where he had gone to meet the detective, Richard Otway, who thought that he had come upon traces of Nevill Brooke's presence there as late as the third of April. He had been back in London only for a few hours when he called upon Honour to tell her such news as he had, and was surprised, while waiting, by Kitty Carlin. Next to Honour, he thought Kitty the nicest girl he had ever seen; nevertheless, the distance between them in his mind was immense. Honour was a goddess; Kitty was merely a charming and piquant young woman.

When she had gone, he remained, for he was determined not to leave the house without seeing Honour. But he gave more thought to Kitty than he had to any other human being except Nevill Brooke and Nevill Brooke's daughter since he had arrived in England last April. He liked her for her enthusiasm and her impulsiveness; he liked her because of her quaint prettiness, and because she had called Loris St. Leger a loathsome reptile; but, above all, he liked her because of her loyal love for Honour Brooke, and the thought of their newly-cemented partnership warmed his heart. The co-operation of such a clever little lady was not to be despised, and some day he might be glad of it.

Jack had waited a long time when Honour came at last, and when he had finished telling her how Otway, the detective, had learned that Nevill Brooke had spent the night of April the third at a quiet, out-of-the-way little hotel in Paris; how a lady wearing a thick veil and a long travelling

cloak had called to inquire if he were there, and had left a note, but had not asked to see him ; how nothing was known of the lady at the hotel, except that she was very tall and graceful, with a sheen of copper hair showing beneath her veil—when these details and a few others had been given and discussed at length in all their bearings by Jack and Honour, it was nearly time for the girl to dress for dinner.

“ Won't you dine with us, if Lady St. Leger invites you ? ” she said at last. “ There are such lots of things I have to say to you still ; and if the Kazans should go early we might be able to talk them over to-night. You would just have time if you took a cab at once to drive back to your lodgings and change.”

Jack hesitated. He had never dined at the house in Park Lane ; had only once been asked, and had been obliged to trump up an excuse to decline the invitation, as he had not then possessed any evening clothes. Now, however, he had provided himself with the best to be obtained, and he had a boyish desire to show Honour how well he could bear himself among what he called “ her kind of people.” Besides, an extra hour or two with the girl he worshipped was a boon worth paying dearly for. But he would have to pay, for he knew that Lady St. Leger regarded him as a sort of wild man of the woods, and tolerated him entirely for Honour's sake. Jack was sensitive and proud, and was ill at ease under scornful toleration, which was all that he could expect from Loris St. Leger's cousins, the Kazans. He decided, however, that he would put up with all possible humiliations for the joy of sitting at the same table with Honour Brooke, and perhaps having a few words with her afterwards, alone.

“ If Lady St. Leger will have me, I'll be glad,” he said, quite meekly, and the girl ran off to beg the wished-for invitation. It was more easily obtained than she had thought, for Lady St. Leger's headache was still very bad, and she was beginning to fear that she should not be able

to sit through dinner. In case she had to give up, it would be convenient for Honour to have somebody to help her out, "and perhaps even Mr. Harned would be a little better than no one at all." As he was a *protégé* of her father's, in a way he was almost like a relative; and the Kazans being foreigners, they might not see how very peculiar he was according to English ideas.

Obliged to make the best of this, Honour went back to Jack Harned with the invitation. He hurried off in a cab, and as the lodgings which Honour had once so unexpectedly visited were a long distance away, Mr. and Miss Kazan had arrived, Lady St. Leger had come down—looking white and ill—and dinner had just been announced when Jack reappeared, to be published at the drawing-room door by the footman as "Mr. Arned."

Already Lady St. Leger had explained him away to the Kazans, lest they should wonder at his presence in so small and informal a party; and, having learned that they were to expect a "sort of ward" of Nevill Brooke's, father and daughter glanced up, on his entrance, with veiled interest. Instantly they recognised him as the young man who lodged in the house next to one very familiar to them both. The old woman who was their landlady and his had been questioned with apparent carelessness concerning him, after the day when Honour Brooke had been seen with him, by Nadege. But she had pronounced the name so that it had sounded like "Arnold," and had said, in all good faith, that Mr. Arnold had happened to meet the beautiful young lady, drenched with rain, when she was looking for a cab, had shared his umbrella with her, and offered her shelter. This had sufficiently accounted for Honour Brooke's presence and her acquaintance with the young man named "Arnold" who lodged in the next house—that next house which Mrs. Oates was allowed to let as she pleased, in order that there might never be the slightest suspicion regarding the tenant of No. 16. When Loris St. Leger had spoken to his uncle and cousin of Jack Harned, a *protégé* of Nevill Brooke's, who had undertaken

to play the detective, it had not, therefore, occurred to them to associate the two.

As for Kazan, there was no fear of recognition. If the lodger in No. 16 had ever happened to see the old clergyman next door, whose kind deeds Mrs. Oates praised so often, he could not dream that he was looking at him now. No two men could be more different in type than the smooth-shaven, blue-chinned, actor-like Russian gentleman of middle age, and the venerable, white-bearded spectacled Mr. Willoughby. He could fearlessly look Jack Harned in the face with his slightly squinting grey eyes; but he was not quite so confident in regard to Nadege. Fortunately, as he had insisted when trying to reassure her concerning Sir Ronald Charteris, it would be impossible for anyone seeing her now to be certain of her identity with the copper-haired woman of the past. Still, there was a keen alertness in Harned's face which suggested the faculty of observation developed to an unusual extent, and if he had ever seen the nurse in the grey uniform who had lived for several weeks in the adjoining house, he might now be struck with the resemblance; and the curiosity of such an exceedingly wide-awake young man, an intimate friend of Nevill Brooke's, might lead to undesirable issues. But, so far as Kazan could see, the long look which Jack Harned gave to Nadege expressed nothing more dangerous than rather bold admiration.

French was one of several languages with which Jack's wandering life had made him proficient, and he talked to Miss Kazan a good deal at dinner, his eyes always upon her beautiful face, with its frame of dead-black hair. He told several amusing adventures which shocked Lady St. Leger, but entertained Honour and the Kazans, and finally, when the father and daughter rose to go, the former invited Jack to come and see them. He promptly accepted the invitation, somewhat to the surprise of Honour, who thought she knew that he did not care for society.

"Why did you ask him to call?" enquired Nadege, on the way home.

"Couldn't you guess?" retorted Kazan. "I wanted to have that young man under my hand, so that if at any moment it became necessary I could close it upon him."

"You are afraid of him!" exclaimed Nadege. "You whom they call the 'Master'; you who, under another name, pull what strings you please and make London dance! You are afraid of that pale, thin boy, with the burning eyes!"

Kazan laughed. "You misunderstand me," he said. "I am as little afraid of him as I am of the wind that blows across London to-night. But I wish to win his confidence. I want to know what he is doing in those investigations Loris spoke of so scornfully. I think Loris makes too little of him because he is young and crude, that is all. The nearer he is to us the less likely will his suspicions be to point our way. Not that, in any event, there is the slightest chance they should. As soon expect the sun to stand still in mid-heaven."

"Some day you will make a mistake," said Nadege, as they arrived at the big new palace which was to be their home and Loris St. Leger's.

Meanwhile, having been told by Honour that Jack Harned had something to say to her about her father, Lady St. Leger left the two alone, with a warning look which meant that Jack must not be allowed to stop long.

"Now, aren't you very, very glad that you dined here to-night?" asked the girl, smiling.

"Of course. But why especially?" Jack asked.

"Because of Miss Kazan. You admired her so tremendously. And they asked you to call."

"She looks exactly like someone I have seen," said Jack, "except for her hair."

"Is there anyone else as beautiful as she?"

"There is one whom I think incomparably more beautiful. Nobody could have two opinions about that. Anyhow, no man could. But that's not the person I'm talking about. The woman Miss Kazan looks like was a nurse in the next house to mine. She had red hair, and

wore a grey uniform. I saw her go in and out two or three times some months ago. She was employed, Mrs. Oates told me, to nurse a fellow who was ill next door with congestion of the brain, or something of the sort. An old parson had taken the chap in, out of charity, and engaged a couple of nurses to look after him. The woman I speak of was one."

"Oh!" exclaimed Honour, "the woman who nursed Sir Ronald Charteris!"

The instant the words had left her lips she regretted them. She had not told Jack Harned of the agonised ravings she had heard on the day of her odd visit to him. To speak, even to her friend, of what she had been forced to hear would somehow have seemed almost dishonourable, as if she were betraying a sad secret confided to her. But now, with Jack's words, there came a quick rush of memories. She recalled the landlady's gossip, and what had been said of the beautiful, auburn-haired nurse against whom the delirious man appeared to feel such an unaccountable aversion. It seemed such a queer coincidence that a striking resemblance should exist between the nurse and the gorgeous Russian, Miss Kazan, who could scarcely, by any possibility, be related to her, that Honour had uttered the impulsive exclamation.

Jack caught her up quickly. "Sir Ronald Charteris!" he echoed. "Who is he?"

"A man Lady St. Leger and I have met lately," answered Honour, frankly; but again she flushed, as she had at Loris St. Leger's house. She felt the hot blood spring to her cheeks, and could have cried with vexation. Was she always going to blush like a silly schoolgirl after this, whenever she or anyone else mentioned Sir Ronald Charteris? "It's a wonder you haven't heard of him," she went on, hurriedly. "His name is quite well known in connection with a splendid charity, helping poor men to find work, and housing and feeding them till they can get it. He's spending everything he has, and living in the slums. We—go and see him—that is, to try and help

a little if we can—sometimes, Lady St. Leger and I. You see, she was an intimate friend of his mother's, in old days."

"I see," echoed Jack, a horrible pain wringing his heart. Never had he known a pain so sharp, so insidious. It was not caused by Honour's words, but by her blush, which to him spoke far more loudly than any words. He loved her. Nadege Kazan loved Ronald Charteris. The instinct of love was not to be deceived, and each had guessed from the girl's face something that she did not yet know herself. "Is Sir Ronald Charteris the man who was ill next door to my place?"

"I—I don't quite know," stammered Honour. "I think he may have been, but I only think so because he looks like that man."

Jack Harned's bold black eyes opened wide. "You saw him—that day you came? I can't think how you——"

"Oh, no!" Honour hastened to explain, more angry with herself than ever for getting into such a hopeless tangle. "I heard that—someone was ill. He was—talking a little to himself on the other side of the wall when I went upstairs with your landlady to change my dress. She said he looked exactly like a picture of Lord Byron which was hanging up in your sitting-room. Then, afterwards, when I met Sir Ronald, I thought the voice was the same; and—and he *is* like that picture. So it seemed as if it might be he—but, of course, I'm not sure. Only, when you mentioned the nurse reminding you of Miss Kazan, I was surprised, and spoke out before I stopped to realise how stupid it would be—that's all."

"I know that Byron picture," said Jack, miserably. "Your Sir Ronald Charteris must be a very handsome fellow."

"He is!" exclaimed Honour. "But you needn't call him *my* Sir Ronald. I've only seen him twice—one afternoon with Lady St. Leger, and now again to-day, when I went to take him some books and things for his poor men."

Jack made no comment, but he knew that, since Honour had met the man to-day she must have been alone, for

Lady St. Leger had been at home ill during the whole afternoon, as he had heard repeated more than once. Never before had Jack experienced to the full the sickening pain of jealousy. He had fancied himself jealous of Loris St. Leger, because Loris could come whenever he liked to the house, and was the favourite of Honour's guardian ; because he was said to be a millionaire, and could give the woman he married all that a woman's heart could desire ; because he was a man of Honour Brooke's own world. But Honour had never changed colour or stammered at the mention of St. Leger's name. She had even appeared rather bored sometimes when his admiring cousin sang his praises in Jack Harned's presence ; and the unhappy young man wondered how he could ever have imagined real cause for jealousy where St. Leger was concerned. Now—now, he knew what the real thing meant. He hated Ronald Charteris, and felt as if the only relief for the agony he suffered would be to grapple with this man, whom he had never seen, in a fight for life or death.

“ She loves him,” Jack said to himself, with a sensation as if his heart were being pinched by a hand in a glove of steel. “ He's *Sir* Ronald, a baronet, I suppose, therefore he's in her own set. *He'd* never be at a loss for the right word, or the right thing to do. He wouldn't feel like a fish out of water when he walked into a lady's drawing-room ; but I bet he wouldn't be quicker to lay down his life for her than I would, though he does look like Lord Byron. Great on charity, is he, and lives in the slums ? Two to one he's a pious fraud. What wouldn't I give to show him up ? And the beautiful nurse with the red hair ? What's become of her, and what is *she* in this charity business, I wonder ? ”

Jack was in no fit mood for talk with sweet Honour Brooke now. The wild strain in his nature was uppermost. Wicked thoughts were in his mind ; wicked words burned his tongue. He excused himself to Honour, saying that, after all, he had told her something that he had to

tell, earlier in the evening. He hoped for further news to-morrow from Otway, the detective, who was still pursuing his investigations in Paris, and the moment he had any information he would come or send to her.

In some moods the touch of her soft little hand, which his wiry fingers could so easily crush, would instantly calm him, as balm soothes the fierce throbbing of a wound. But to-night, to have it tingling in his sent the blood like a torrent of fire to his brain. He felt as if he were going mad as he ran down the steps, and began striding along the dark street. He had almost flung himself from the house, to the surprise of the highly-decorous footman who opened the door, and so suddenly had he sprung into the street that he nearly knocked down two men who were standing close together talking, near the steps. He was the aggressor, and it should have been he who begged pardon for rudeness ; but he was in no mood for graciousness. He was thinking that some day the little, soft, satin-smooth hand, which had been his for a brief moment, and could only be his for brief moments as long as he lived, might belong for ever to the man who had power to make Honour Brooke blush at the sound of his name. And for the sake of his sudden hatred for Ronald Charteris he hated all men, among them these two who dared to stand under Honour Brooke's window. It seemed to him that, as he brushed them roughly aside, they drew stealthily towards him again to peer into his face ; and, instead of honest outspoken anger at his rudeness, they kept silence. Jack glared from under frowning brows, first at one face and then at another. The men he had nearly knocked down in his unnecessary haste were not English, though, save for their head-covering, they were in European dress. They had yellow-brown faces, and oblique, dark eyes. Jack's impression was that they were Indians.

"What do you want here ?" he demanded, savagely. "What are you lurking about people's doors for, at this time of night ? Move on, or I'll call a policeman to have you arrested."

Jack would have liked nothing better than an angry blow in answer to his insolence ; but, whether the two brown men understood the meaning of the roughly-spoken words or not, they made no protest. Still in silence, and as if with one accord, they turned away and " moved on," as he had commanded.

CHAPTER XXVI

JACK HARNED PAYS CALLS

WHEN Jack reached his lodgings, his first thought was to look at the picture of Lord Byron, which hung on the wall of his sitting-room. Byron was the one poet he had ever cared in the least about. Something in the man's story, his banishment, his strange life and reckless bravery, appealed to Jack Harned, and he had often sat smoking his pipe and gazing meditatively at the handsome portrait. But now he saw it with different eyes. It was no longer a presentment of Lord Byron, whose passionate heart had been dust for many a long year. It was the likeness of Sir Ronald Charteris, the man whom Honour Brooke loved, who therefore, of course, loved her. Miserably Jack studied every line of the face, and said to himself that, if Charteris really was like it, he should know the man at sight. And he meant to see him. He made up his mind that, if there were anything to be found out to Ronald Charteris's prejudice, he would find it out. Such jealousy and yearning for a spiteful revenge against a man he had never met was mean, and Jack knew it well ; but he told himself that he did not care. No man who was not worthy should ever have Honour Brooke. In a way, he felt that he had a right to think of himself as her guardian in the absence of her father, and at least he would be a faithful watchdog, since he was not grand enough or fine enough to be anything more.

He heard nothing from the detective in Paris next

morning. Therefore, he had no pretext for calling again upon Honour, or even writing to her. But he did not, according to his point of view, waste the time which he would so joyously have given to his goddess. He inquired of his landlady if she had ever known the name of the man who had been so ill in the house next door, a few months ago. Mrs. Oates thought for a moment, and then committed herself to the opinion that the name of the handsome young gentleman who looked like Lord Byron had been Mr. Chatters, or something of that sort—she really couldn't be quite sure. His having come to the house when ill and out of his mind made a difference; a body hadn't thought of him by any name; he had just been the poor ill young gentleman. As for the handsome nurse, with the red hair parted over her ears, she had not been allowed by the doctor to attend on the patient after the first few days, as only to see her excited him, and made him say the strangest things. But Mr. Willoughby, the dear, good man, said that she had been engaged for several weeks, and she should not be sent away because of a sick man's whim; so she had stayed in the house till her time was up, and sometimes, when the young gentleman was asleep, she would steal in and look at him. Once Mrs. Oates had met her coming out of the sick room, crying as if her heart would break. Oh, yes! it had gone hard with the poor thing not to be permitted to take her proper place. At last she had gone away, Mrs. Oates did not know where, but probably to find some other engagement. Her name? Well, it was not a pretty one—not something to remember, because it was different from other people's, like her handsome face. It was Miss Smith—plain Miss Smith. Mrs. Oates had seen little enough of her. She wasn't a talkative young woman, and had kept herself *to* herself, as you might say. But when she did speak, she had a nice voice, like a lady born, but just a bit of an accent that wasn't quite English—yet it wasn't *un*-English either. Perhaps Miss Smith was a Colonial of some kind—Mrs. Oates couldn't exactly say *what*.

When he had heard all that his somewhat garrulous landlady had to tell about "Mr. Chatters" and the beautiful nurse who had gone away and left no sign, Jack Harned went to the secretary of a well-known charitable organisation and asked for some particulars about Sir Ronald Charteris and his work. The important gentleman shrugged his shoulders with an air of good-natured toleration. No doubt Sir Ronald was quite sincere, and it was even possible that he accomplished some good. But he was a faddist, distinctly a faddist, and absolutely an amateur. His principle was wrong—all wrong from beginning to end. This taking men in without reference, and doing as much for the notoriously undeserving as the deserving, was an unworkable theory; Sir Ronald would find it out in time. If anyone had money to give to a charity, it was far better to bestow it upon a well-recognised organisation with established principles. Jack Harned, having learned the address of Ronald Charteris, which was really what he most wanted to know, rewarded his informant with a sovereign for his own "well-recognised" organisation, and promptly took his way to Oswell Road. There he made some inquiries with widely differing results, and at last called on Ronald himself, pretending to be interested in what he alluded to as the "great work," until Ronald looked him full, gravely, and inquiringly in the eyes. Then Jack Harned realised that, whatever else Sir Ronald Charteris might be, he was a brave man, and no hypocrite.

The last thing that Jack wanted in Oswell Road was to learn to respect the "mission baronite," as already he had heard him called, but somehow—though hatred grew with growing jealousy—all the cynicism which Jack Harned called to the rescue could not laugh down respect for his unconscious rival.

"Some things which Miss Brooke told me about your work interested me so much that I came here," he could not resist saying, his eyes on Ronald's face as he spoke. "I was dining with her and Lady St. Leger last night,"

he added, with elaborate nonchalance ; “ and, after hearing her account of what was being done here, I decided that I must look you up.”

At this he was rewarded by the sight of a deep flush which spread to the roots of Ronald's short dark hair. He hated the other all the more for it, and was plunged further into abyssmal depths of gloom than ever ; for to him Ronald's change of colour at the girl's name meant what Honour's had meant at mention of his. But if he could have read Ronald Charteris's heart, and seen there the hopeless yearning, the desperate resignation to a bitter fate, and the brave struggle not to envy the man who could come nearer Honour Brooke than he—the man who could “ dine with her ” and speak almost lightly of it afterwards as if it were quite a matter of course—perhaps the throbbing pain of Jack Harned's jealousy might have been allayed.

Instinctively, Charteris felt that there was something underneath Harned's visit to him. He felt the younger man's dislike, and, though the iron had entered too deeply into his soul to leave it free for such boyish spite as a return of that dislike, his mental attitude towards the reckless-faced young fellow who dined with Miss Brooke was one of armed neutrality. He would have been glad to refuse the five-pound note which Jack almost flung at him as a contribution towards the “ success of the mission,” but he told himself that he had no right to let his personal feelings interfere with the work he had undertaken, and therefore he quietly accepted the money. Jack knew by instinct, on his part, that Ronald Charteris had hated to take it, and this knowledge brought the one ray of pleasure afforded by his call. Otherwise, it had been only an aggravation, for Charteris was handsomer, more of a gentleman, and altogether a finer fellow, he had grudgingly to admit, than he had expected before seeing him.

In the afternoon, Jack determined to pay his first call at the house of Loris St. Leger. It was Mr. Kazan's house,

too, he had been given to understand ; but, even if it had not been so, he would not much have cared, now that he had transferred his jealousy of St. Leger to another man. He disliked St. Leger as heartily as before, and distrusted him a great deal more, since his interview yesterday with Kitty Carlin ; but the man's existence did not mean as much to him as it had twenty-four hours ago. Besides, he would not have to eat St. Leger's food. If Miss Kazan ordered tea to be brought to the drawing-room while he was there, he determined that he would refuse it.

Jack congratulated himself on not having shown surprise or emotion of any kind last night, when he had first seen Miss Kazan, and noticed her extraordinary resemblance to the grey-clad nurse who used to flit into the house adjoining his lodgings. He did not like what he called "giving himself away" under any circumstances, and though probably there was no connection of kinship between the young Russian beauty and the vanished nurse, he wanted to find out as much as he could about the antecedents of the Kazans without their guessing why.

He was glad to hear that Mr. and Miss Kazan were both at home when he called, having only that moment returned from a drive in the Park. He was taken into the drawing-room where Honour had been received the day before, and was left alone to wait for a few moments. He sat looking about, half-admiring, half-contemptuous of luxury beyond any that he had ever seen, when suddenly a sound, coming from a distance, reached his ears and caused him to straighten himself into alertness, with every muscle tense.

It was the same curious, unhuman chattering which he and Honour Brooke had heard months ago in the old deserted house at Hammersmith.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ADVICE OF NADEGE

As Jack sat listening, surprised and half incredulous, Miss Kazan came into the room, and he sprang up, apologising boyishly for having called so soon after his invitation. "I wanted to come," he said, in French, "and when I want to do a thing it is always hard for me to wait. I suppose it's very 'backwoodsian' to feel like that, or—anyway—to say so, isn't it? And probably it will be still worse if I ask you the meaning of that strange sound. But it is a curiosity-exciting sound."

Miss Kazan smiled indulgently, as most women did smile on Jack Harned. "It is a compliment that you have come to see us so soon after making our acquaintance," she replied. "As for that sound, no wonder it excites your curiosity, since it would be hard to guess what it is on first hearing it. It is because of the sound—or, rather, because of the thing which is making it—that my father is not here at this moment. But he will come. The fact is, that my cousin Loris has just arrived, and has brought with him a very queer pet, of which he is tremendously fond. My father and I generally keep and take care of it for him, when he is wandering about the world, but it had to be shipped from home, and knowing that it was due to reach London to-day, Loris claimed it and picked it up on his way home. He and my father are at this moment introducing it to its new quarters, which, I am thankful to say, are in such a distant part of this big house that we shall not, in future, be troubled with its chattering. Listen! Already it has gone so far away

that you can scarcely hear it: Now—it has ceased altogether.”

“ Since you have told me so much, and given me a clue,” said Jack, “ I think I may safely guess that this strange, chattering pet of Mr. St. Leger’s is some sort of monkey.”

“ It is a very large and very clever chimpanzee, which my cousin caught himself when it was a tiny thing, and its mother had been shot. He is not particularly fond of animals, I think, and I never knew him to have any other pet ; but he is quite superstitious about this creature. He actually believes that it is a ‘ mascot ’—that it brings him luck—and that if it were to die or escape, he would at once be unfortunate in all his undertakings. The chimpanzee’s name is Mephistopheles ; but, really, it is a well-behaved, quiet beast when it is not excited by any sudden change in its daily routine, or by a noise which it doesn’t understand. Poor old Mephistopheles is extraordinarily sensitive to sound.”

“ I suppose, when it hears any noise that surprises or annoys it, it chatters its protest, as it did just now when it was being introduced to a new home,” said Jack. He spoke in a tone of merely polite interest, but his eyes were very bright as he looked at beautiful Miss Kazan.

“ Yes,” she answered. “ It is rather a talkative animal, and its voice isn’t musical, is it ? But we have had the poor thing with us so much that I scarcely notice its chattering now. Loris would not feel that he could settle down and be at home in this house unless his queer ‘ mascot ’ were here.”

At this moment Mr. Kazan came in. Nothing more was said about the chimpanzee, and the subject was changed. There was a question, it seemed, of at once engaging a teacher of English for Nadege, who confessed to a book-knowledge of the language, without the confidence to speak.

“ I must have someone come every day for an hour,” she said ; “ someone who will make me talk. It is really very stupid of me to be too shy, for I know the grammar,

and can read English books quite well. All I want is courage to pronounce the words, and I know that is only to be gained by constant conversation. It is much the same with my father ; but he talks with my cousin Loris: I have not even the confidence to do that, for he teases me when I make mistakes. Do you know of anyone whom I could get, Mr. Harned ? But I am forgetting what I heard last night. You, too, are a new-comer in London."

"Would you prefer to have a man or a woman as your teacher ?" asked Jack.

"A man, I think. I should make better progress with a man. With a woman I should always have the vague feeling that it was not necessary to take pains."

"Well," said Jack, "I hardly like to offer myself for the post, but I have taught languages in my various knockings about, and I believe I have some gift for imparting what I know. If you and Mr. Kazan thought that my French and English were good enough, why——"

"But that would be perfect !" exclaimed Miss Kazan ; "far better than anything I had hoped for. You are not a stranger any more, and as you are a friend of our friends, it would altogether be most agreeable. Yet think of the trouble for yourself !"

"It would be a great privilege," returned Jack. "I've more time than anything else at present ; and I can fancy nothing more agreeable than a chance of spending an hour here whenever you wanted a lesson."

"You would have to come every day till I could speak properly," said Miss Kazan, laughing. "Don't you think it would be a good arrangement, father, if Mr. Harned will really be so kind ?"

"Excellent, from our point of view," replied Kazan.

Each was satisfied, for, secretly, each was playing into the other's hands. Jack was groping still in the dim twilight of vague speculations ; but he had an excited feeling that the dusk would presently brighten into daylight, and that he should suddenly see a definite end to the labyrinth. He wanted to keep in close touch with

the inmates of this splendid new house in Park Lane, and the chance of teaching Miss Kazan English would give him precisely the excuse he needed. He had seized upon her first word, and worked up to his offer, considering himself rather clever to obtain it. In spite of that cleverness, however, he had not suspected that Miss Kazan had reasons which she considered as strong as his for wishing the same thing. And her reasons were partly—not wholly—her father's. He wanted to keep Jack Harned under his hand ; to study the young man ; if necessary, to watch him ; to make sure that he was not a wolf in sheep's clothing ; and finally to deal with him according to the conclusions reached. Nadege had heard and remembered this explanation of her father's desire for Jack Harned's society ; and on her own part she said to herself : " He is a great friend of Honour Brooke's. He will know what she is doing, and where she goes ; he will know how matters stand between her and Ronald Charteris. If I questioned her for a hundred years she would tell me nothing, except, perhaps, by schoolgirl blushes, for she is on her guard with me now ; but a woman can always manage a man, and get what she likes out of him, without his suspecting that she has a particular interest in the subject."

Loris St. Leger did not deign to show himself to Jack Harned during that first call, though it appeared that he had come home. In truth, he was not in a mood for hospitality. For days and weeks he had been on the track of Harvey Kane, the man who had financed Nevill Brooke for the expedition to Thibet, had thus become a member of the Tontine which had been formed, and had eventually disappeared, taking with him the secret of how much he really knew about the adventure.

When St. Leger had called at Harvey Kane's chambers in April, and learned that he had gone away " on a holiday," vanishing into space as far as an address was concerned, he had not by any means given up the quest. It was essentially necessary to find Harvey Kane, and to

discover whether Nevill Brooke had written to him of the success of the expedition. If the solicitor knew only that the party had started, and that if the object with which it set out were accomplished, he would be repaid with a fortune for his few hundreds, no danger need be feared. Proofs could be given, if needful, that the adventure had ended in death and dismal disaster; that the party had never reached their goal; that the story of the diamonds had probably been a mere will-o'-the-wisp. If, on the contrary, Kane had heard from Nevill Brooke, he might at any time pounce down upon the survivors and demand not only his share, but blurt out the whole history, and claim to represent Nevill Brooke's daughter and Sir Ronald Charteris.

Naturally, Loris St. Leger and his uncle felt keen interest in the fate and whereabouts of Nevill Brooke's vanished solicitor, Harvey Kane. Loris had taken it upon himself to run the quarry to earth, and had begun the campaign by calling a second time at the chambers in King's Bench Walk. After cautious beating about the bush with the melancholy youth whom he had interviewed before, he had first hinted at, then boldly offered, an extremely tempting bribe for real information regarding the solicitor. When the bait had fattened to the bulk of a hundred pounds, the fish had bitten. He confessed that he knew more about Mr. Kane than he had been willing to admit at first. Mr. Kane had been in difficulties, and had hired his clerk to "hold the fort" and answer inquiries with the view of allaying suspicion until he could get well beyond the reach of angry clients whose money he had invested rather for his advantage than theirs. In fact, Mr. Kane did not intend to return to King's Bench Walk, and it was probable that London, and even England, would know him no more. The last time that the clerk had sent his employer's letters had been to Madrid; since then he had heard nothing, and did not know where to send again. Mr. Kane had been almost ill with worry when he went away, and the clerk confided to St. Leger that he would

not be surprised if he had died somewhere abroad. As to his "family," with whom he was supposed to be travelling, there was only an old maid sister. The story was that Mr. Kane had had a wife, who had run away from him and gone on the stage, many years ago, and then died. Whether that were true or not, the clerk did not know; but, at all events, the solicitor had no wife at present.

The melancholy youth told St. Leger various details of his employer's affairs, which had evidently been in a chaotic condition, so far as his clients' interests were concerned, for months, if not for years. From what he heard, Loris was inclined to think that the money which had purported to be Harvey Kane's, and had been subscribed by him towards the Thibet expedition, had in reality belonged to one of the unfortunate clients. Remembering how Nevill Brooke had asked him to send some hundreds of pounds belonging to Honour, and how Kane had answered that, owing to the state of the market, her shares could not be sold out, St. Leger thought the money sent had probably been Honour's own. Kane, wishing to reap the fruits of their success, had wished it to appear that the sum was subscribed by him. In this case, if the fraud could be proved, Kane would have no right to share in the Tontine; but the difficulty would be to prove it.

All this information, together with the solicitor's late home address in Sydenham, St. Leger had obtained from the clerk in April, not many days after his first visit to King's Bench Walk. He had gone out to Sydenham and made inquiries, and he had also paid a flying visit to Madrid. There he had come on traces of the solicitor, who had taken another name, and seemed to have plenty of money; but the trail was soon lost, and St. Leger employed a private detective, which he had not dared to do in England, lest certain secrets of his own should accidentally be raked up. He had then come home, and had appeared to take no particular interest in the affair, when the frauds committed by Harvey Kane could no longer be kept dark, but

filled columns in the daily papers, and created a popular sensation. Meanwhile, the occupation of the clerkly watchdog was gone. He posed as a much-injured young man, absolutely innocent of his employer's proceedings; and as there was nothing against him, he was allowed finally to subside into obscurity, in comfortable possession of Loris St. Leger's hundred pounds. As he knew nothing more which was of interest to St. Leger, the latter had now practically forgotten all about him, as he did with most people whom he had used and found no longer necessary.

St. Leger's latest journey had been undertaken on the strength of news received from the Spanish detective. English detectives were also employed in trying to unearth the solicitor who had disappeared with thousands of pounds belonging to his clients; but Loris did not concern himself with their manœuvres, except that, if they had found out anything, he would have been quick to profit by it. His man thought that he had tracked Harvey Kane to Belgium, and that he was to be found in Brussels, lying very ill in lodgings. To be sure, he was alone; there was no sister; but the name was the same as that by which the man had been known in Madrid; the description was the same; and the person who was ill in Brussels appeared to be somewhat mysterious—an Englishman whom nobody knew anything about.

This news had seemed important enough to take St. Leger immediately to Brussels, whither he had gone with all haste. But the mysterious man, who called himself Hodgkinson, and answered the description of Harvey Kane, turned out to be an American; and Loris St. Leger, very angry with his Spanish detective and circumstances in general, returned to England in no happy mood.

He was not pleased to hear of Jack Harned's call, and the view that Kazan took of the advantage to be gained from cultivating the young barbarian's acquaintance.

"It's bad enough that he should be continually hanging round Honour Brooke," he said, crossly, to Nadege,

when Kazan had left them alone, "without being for ever in my house as well. I tell you I don't like it."

"This house wouldn't be yours if it weren't for my father and me—remember that!" retorted the beautiful woman. "It is ours as well as yours, and we have a right to see whom we choose here. The boy seems to fancy himself dazzled by me. You should be glad that it is so, since you object to his friendship for Miss Brooke, for he cannot be in both places at once, and I may succeed in taking him away from her. I would do that, if at all, for your sake, not my own, for he is not of the type which appeals to me, though I find him distinctly amusing. However, I must play at learning English, since we planned that it would be best for my father and me to be strangers both to country and language. An ordinary teacher might be surprised at the extraordinary proficiency which I intend to show, and my great quickness, although I have confessed knowledge enough to read simple books. But Mr. Jack Harned will not be surprised. I shall look into his eyes, which are really very nice, and tell him that it is all owing to my friendship for him, and his splendid method as a teacher, that I get on so well."

"You have some other motive for troubling yourself with this young man, Nadege," said St. Leger.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps. But do not concern yourself with him. Whatever my father may think, I don't believe that he is dangerous to *any* of your interests."

"What do you mean by that peculiar emphasis?" St. Leger demanded, sharply. "And a moment ago you spoke as if you thought I had some strong reason for wishing to keep the fellow away from Miss Brooke. What is in your mind?"

"I am not blind, my dear Loris! And as you have brought up the subject, I don't see why I should not speak frankly. There has been for a long time a more or less vague understanding between us that some day my father's and my interests should be irrevocably blended with yours

by a marriage between you and me. Of late, you and I haven't referred to it, but——"

"And why should we refer to it now, Nadege? The understanding remains where it was. As soon as possible we——"

"I know what you are going to say. But it never will be possible. You cannot look me in the face, Loris, and tell me that you really intend to carry out the old arrangement."

"I don't see why not. I——"

"Neither does my father. But I do. We must be friends and allies, because of the past. We dare not betray each other, even if we would. Our interests are knitted too inextricably together for that. And as you and my father naturally desire to keep all this money, which you have both risked so much to obtain, in as few hands as possible, it would not do for either you or me to think of marrying an outsider. But I do not want to marry you. You no longer wish me to be your wife?"

"I have never said so."

"No—you would prefer to spring a surprise upon us later, if you could bring it off, knowing that we should be, to say the least, unwise to sue you for breach of promise or anything sensational and vulgar of that sort. But, since I do not want you for a husband, any more than you want me for a wife, the secret and the surprise are not necessary. You began by saying to yourself, I think, that if without too much discomfort you could get out of your bargain with my father about me, it would be a prudent thing for you to marry—Nevill Brooke's daughter. Some men would tell themselves that such a marriage would be horrible; but you are a very bold man. You are never embarrassed by moral scruples. No matter to you how the girl's father died, since she is his heiress, and all danger of discoveries on her part would be at an end if she once became your wife. That is what you felt at first, I am sure. Then the piquancy of the situation struck you: It was like a new dish to a

jaded appetite. You found her young, fresh, beautiful, innocent. You wanted her for her own sake, as well as for the sake of cold, dull prudence. Now you are mad about her ; and though you may not fear this Jack Harned as a serious rival, you are at least afraid that if he is near her much he may prejudice her against you. She does not like you, Loris. I never saw you together. But I guessed that from the way she spoke of you last night at dinner, the way she looked when Lady St. Leger spoke of you. Not that she was impolite. The thing was that she was *too* polite. She does not like you—she does like this wild boy, Jack Harned. Therefore you cannot tolerate him, and would whistle him down the wind. But I tell you, Loris, if you have really set your heart on marrying Honour Brooke, your peril lies in a different direction. Did you know that she has met Ronald Charteris ? ”

For an instant Loris St. Leger was confused, and thought of the elder Charteris, whom he had seen die on the steps of a Buddhist temple in Thibet. Then, quick as a flash of light, his mind turned to the man who, by a masterly *coup*, had been given, body and soul, into the power of a certain white-haired clergyman.

“ What ! She has met him ? ” St. Leger ejaculated. “ How did that happen ? What was your father about to let it happen ? ”

“ My father cannot regulate every hour of Ronald Charteris’s day. His ‘ charity ’ is getting known. Lady St. Leger heard of it——”

“ Curse her ! The woman is a fool ! ”

“ Perhaps. She adores you. It seems she knew Sir Ronald’s people ; and, anyway, she took Honour Brooke to see him and his ‘ mission.’ The dear girl has been since by herself ; and, to make a long story short, she is in love with him. She may not know it yet herself—but she is. And if you don’t get her promise to marry you before she *does* know it surely, she will never, never say yes.”

“ How can you possibly tell that this is true ? Was the man there, at the house, with her ? ”

“ No ; but trust one woman to make no mistake about another when it’s an affair of the heart; I want to help, not hinder you, with Honour Brooke, Loris, though it may be hard for you to believe that till I’ve proved it. I tell you as a friend, get her—somehow—to promise *soon* that she will be your wife. After that, the more quickly you make the girl redeem her promise, the better for you.”

Loris St. Leger looked at Nadege long and keenly. Then he said : “ Your father hinted to me some time ago that you were rather taken with Charteris, and that if I didn’t want you to make a fool of yourself, the best thing I could possibly do would be to marry you at once. But, you see, I trusted you then.”

“ Trust me now. You had already another game to play, even at that time, and you thought it necessary to hide it from my father and me, or perhaps you would not have ‘ trusted ’ me, as you call it. Now, you see that you needn’t have hidden your secret from me, at least ; but I advise you still to keep your plans concerning Miss Brooke from my father, or he will do his best to upset them somehow. He is as fully awake as you are to the necessity of having the girl in the family, but he is ready to sacrifice himself on the altar.”

“ What—*he* would marry Honour ? ”

“ He was discussing the wisdom of such a course with me last night, and did not consider you in the running at all. Now, you are warned from every side, and I advise you not to irritate me by asking impertinent questions which you have no right to expect that I shall answer. You can’t help me in any way. I *can* help you. There is the difference. Don’t delay: Propose to the girl. Don’t give her time to think of Ronald Charteris.”

“ He would never dare speak to her of love if—he knew the name of a certain man.”

“ Perhaps he has guessed. Oh ! I wish I could find out ! She is as like that man as a woman can be. But even if he never spoke, that would not prevent her from loving

him more and more—so much that she could never give herself to anyone else.”

St. Leger's heavy brows were drawn together in a sullen frown. “You said just now that the girl disliked me. Well, it is true!” he exclaimed. “I'm not sure that isn't one reason why I want her so much. Her soft but obstinate resistance makes me long to crush her. How am I to get over her dislike, and force her, as you advise, to be my wife?”

Nadege looked him full in the eyes. “Can you think of no way in which you could bribe her to consent?” she asked, meaningly.

St. Leger answered the look, and caught her meaning. “It is possible that I can,” he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN JACK'S NOTE BOOK

JACK HARNED did not know what to make of his own discovery. He did not even feel sure that it was a discovery. He was like a boy who has picked up in the street some strange and glittering object of which he does not know the use and value, but is convinced that it must be a wonderful thing if he could only find out just what to do with it.

He was too much excited to concentrate his thoughts when he left the big house in Park Lane, and his mind was constantly distracted by street sights and sounds, and the necessity to turn out for people on the pavement, or to stop at crossings for traffic. He could not even decide how much the thing might mean while driving to his lodgings; but, once in his quiet little sitting-room, he sat down at an ink-stained writing-table, and began jotting down notes on paper, numbering each one as he wrote.

No. 1.—Nevill Brooke sends me to River House, Mortlake Road, on the sixth of April, to make inquiries concerning him of a Mr. Smith whom I should find there. I go. The house is shuttered and apparently deserted. I break in. I find the rooms practically bare of furniture. I hear a curious chattering noise. Miss Brooke hears it also. We search, but cannot discover the creature which makes the noise.

No. 2.—Nothing is heard of Nevill Brooke from April to August. Mr. Smith, of River House, makes no sign, in spite of advertisements in "personal" columns of daily papers. Without saying anything to Miss Brooke, I go

several times to River House. It is always the same—shuttered, deserted. The place where I broke in has not been mended. I linger about, but never again hear the chattering noise.

No. 3.—Next door to my lodgings, in a house kept by the same landlady, a man called Charteris is ill. A Reverend Mr. Willoughby has brought him there, and engaged a nurse who is very beautiful, and has auburn hair parted over her ears. Charteris, who is delirious, takes such an extraordinary dislike to this beautiful person that she is finally kept away from him, but not immediately sent out of the house.

No. 4.—Loris St. Leger, half-Russian, half-English, a great traveller, tells Nevill Brooke's daughter that he knew her father very well, but does not give details of their acquaintance. Loris St. Leger comes into a great deal of money, though he seems at one time not to have been rich. He takes a fine house in Park Lane, and brings to it two Russian cousins, named Kazan. Miss Kazan is very beautiful, and if she were not dark, would be as like as a twin sister to the nurse who looked after the delirious Charteris.

No. 5.—I go to call on Mr. and Miss Kazan. I hear a chattering voice exactly like what I heard on April the sixth at the house with the closed shutters in Hammersmith. Miss Kazan explains the chattering by saying it is uttered by a chimpanzee, a pet of her cousin, Loris St. Leger. She adds that the animal has only just arrived in England to-day. I am then asked to give her lessons in English, and I accept. Last night, at Lady St. Leger's, she appeared to have no knowledge of English. Now it seems that she is grounded with grammar, and can read.

No. 6.—Is there, or is there not, a chain linking these persons, events, and coincidences together ?

Jack studied the notes which he had set down in black and white, and, after much ruffling of his short black hair, and biting the end of his pen, he began scribbling on another page something which he labelled "Memoranda."

"It was on April the sixth that Miss Brooke and I were both told to go to River House unless Nevill Brooke had come home between April the fourth and that date.

"It was on April the sixth that Miss Brooke came to my lodgings and heard Charteris talking in his delirium; but it was on the morning of the day before that he was brought to the house by the Reverend Willoughby. I am certain my landlady confirmed my impression as to the date, when I talked to her to-day on the subject of Charteris.

"It is possible that the chimpanzee, 'Mephistopheles,' did not really arrive in England to-day. He may have been hidden in some secret place in the old Hammersmith house on April the sixth, and have been kept somewhere else since then, till he could be conveniently brought to Park Lane. If he is really the property of St. Leger, does that mean that St. Leger has anything to do with River House and the mysterious Mr. Smith? Where does Ronald Charteris come into the story? Is the beautiful Miss Kazan a sister or near connection of the nurse who was engaged to take care of Charteris by Willoughby? Who is the Reverend Willoughby? What had caused Charteris to fall ill with congestion of the brain, presumably on the fourth or fifth of April last?"

Seeing all these statements and questions set down in order was like pigeon-holing the confused ideas in Jack Harned's brain. He dwelt particularly upon the thought of Ronald Charteris's illness having coincided with the date of Nevill Brooke's disappearance, and could almost have prayed for some connection between the two events. Eager to go along the line he had laid down for himself,

he rang for his landlady, and made an excuse of a request for tea (late as it was) to get her upon her favourite subject of the good Mr. Willoughby. Jack determined to make inquiries regarding this reverend person from other sources. Meanwhile, he contented himself by questioning the garrulous little woman as to the kind old man's relationship to Sir Ronald Charteris.

"Indeed, there was no relationship at all, sir," she protested. "I am sure I've told you that before. It was just Mr. Willoughby's charity and pity for the poor young gentleman, Mr. Chatters."

"And Mr. Chatters," went on Jack, indulgently. "He was delirious, wasn't he?"

"Oh, out of his head, something awful, sir!"

"It must be queer to hear people talk in delirium. I never did. I suppose they say queer things?"

"Stranger than if it was a story-book. I used to lie in my bed at night, with just a wall and a door between me and that poor young gentleman, and creep right through to my marrow at the things he would rave about."

"Tell me some of them," said Jack, sipping his tea.

CHAPTER XXIX

A SPRING TO A CONCLUSION

MRS. OATES was fond of telling anecdotes, and she was nothing loth to grant her lodger's wish. "Poor young gentleman," she reflected aloud, "he was always fancying himself in a queer old house that had a garden with a high wall round it. There never could be a real house as queer as that one. He thought he saw beautiful ladies in it, without any ears; and there were blue curtains over glass doors you could look through and see all sorts of strange things happening. He imagined that he went through such a door, and struck a man, who fell down dead. He used to talk, too, about burying the man afterwards in a cellar where there was a sound like water running underground. It is wonderful, sir, the ideas folks get when they're out of their 'eads. Why, my poor husband's aunt, when she 'ad a fever, used to think she'd turned into a teapot, with one arm held straight out for the spout, and the other akimbo for the handle; and she was that afraid of bein' broken into bits, it was all we could do to manage 'er."

Jack listened to the story of Mrs. Oates's husband's aunt apparently with the same interest he gave to the first anecdote; and he questioned his landlady alternately about the two. But of "Mr. Chatters'" delusion she had no more new details to give. The delirious man, according to her, had gone on ringing the changes upon the imaginary scene in a house with a walled garden.

In the midst of a new narrative concerning her relative, the little maid of all work knocked at the door and called her away to attend to some pressing household matter;

and when she had gone, Jack Harned ceased to sip his tea. His reckless young face was even paler than usual, and his eyes were very bright. "So," he said to himself, "Sir Ronald Charteris murdered Nevill Brooke at River House, on the fourth of April, and afterwards he had brain fever. Some people would laugh at me for springing to conclusions like that, but things are shaping themselves now, and it's my experience that, in delirium, there's generally some method in the madness. What could have been the motive for such a murder, though? Was it money? By Jove! Charteris *has* money—he's supposed to have come into it lately, through a legacy. Perhaps the legacy is only a blind—or partly so. Loris St. Leger's sudden riches, too. Could they have been partners in this awful business? Could Mr. Brooke have been coming home with money, and they—good Heavens! and the woman who called for him at the Paris hotel, too! Otway found out that *she* had had red hair—like the nurse who took care of Charteris. Strange how the links are all fitting in together! Yet it is as if I were in dead darkness, seeing nothing, only feeling the broken chain with my fingers."¹¹

Jack sprang from his chair, and began walking up and down the room. He was not sure whether or no he ought to put Otway, the detective, into possession of the few facts and many vague surmises among which he was groping, but his inclination was strongly in favour of keeping everything to himself—at least for the present. He realised that he was animated by the wish to find Ronald Charteris a guilty man, and he did not want to be discouraged by the detective, or even advised to adopt a course of action different to the one towards which he was drawn. He felt as if he had discovered secret treasure, and was unwilling to share it even with his own *employé*. Not only was he eager to prove that Ronald Charteris was the one man on earth whom Honour Brooke was bound in duty to hate, but he longed for the right to say to her,

"It is I who have unravelled the tangled thread of this mystery—I, and no other." So at last he decided that he would say nothing to Richard Otway. The detective should be allowed to go on upon his own lines, and he—Jack Harned—would do the same.

During his short but eventful life he had invariably succeeded best by surprising his opponents. Astonishing boldness had been his favoured method, and after thinking over several plans of action which suggested themselves, he determined to accuse Charteris, feigning to know what he merely suspected, and, by a *coup de main*, getting the whole truth from the murderer, not only concerning himself, but those who had shared in the crime and the plunder. He imagined the scene between himself and Charteris, and exulted in the luridly coloured pictures which his fancy painted.

"If Honour could overhear his confession!" Jack thought. "And if it implicated St. Leger, they would both be disposed of from that day forth and for ever." He began trying to think out some combination by which this brilliant scheme could be worked. As he did so, he did not cease to feel the prick of self-reproach, for he knew that the part he was setting out to play was at least open to question; but he would not stop for that; he would not let himself care. "I believe the man killed Nevill Brooke," he said, "and he deserves all that he will get through me, and more."

He wrote to Honour, since he did not feel that it would be easy to look her in the eyes and say what would be simple enough to put in black and white.

"Dear Miss Brooke," he began. "You have borne with me patiently, though I have had little progress to report in the matter which absorbs both our thoughts. Please be patient still, and bear with me yet, when I beg you to do something to forward our common end, and to do it unquestioningly. Will you write to Sir Ronald Charteris, and ask him to go, as a favour to you,

to River House, Mortlake Road, at five o'clock in the afternoon, to-morrow—that is, if you are free to be there at that hour? If not, name your own time to him, and let me know what it is, and what he says in reply. Tell Sir Ronald Charteris that you will be there, and add that you have a reason for proposing a visit to this house, which he shall hear without fail if he complies with your request. You will wonder what that reason can possibly be; but I think it can be explained so entirely to your satisfaction that you will not regret humouring me.—Your faithful and devoted friend, JACK HARNED."

Jack sent this letter to Honour by a messenger boy from the nearest post-office, and in an hour he had her answer.

She would write to Ronald Charteris, and she would be at River House—if he consented—at five o'clock in the afternoon of the next day.

CHAPTER XXX

HOW LORIS ST. LEGER PROPOSED

HONOUR was addressing her answer to Jack Harned, while the messenger was waiting, when a servant came with the news that Mr. St. Leger was below, asking to see her. Lady St. Leger was out, and would not be back for some time, so that there was no hope of speedy relief from the pain of a *tête-à-tête* with the man whose presence invariably affected her nerves like an electrical storm. But the message was urgent, and Honour went down to Lady St. Leger's boudoir, where Loris, as a relative and favourite, had the privilege of being received.

St. Leger did not bore Honour; he merely made her vaguely miserable. She could never think of anything to say to him, and his strange, pale blue eyes fixed upon her face sent little creeping shivers through her nerves. Sometimes, when she knew he was coming to the house, she spent many moments in devising elaborate plans how to escape shaking hands with him. To-day she went down with her hands full of flowers, which she took out of a vase in her own room, with the view of transferring them to one in her guardian's boudoir. But St. Leger, coming straight to meet her as the door opened, defeated her object by masterfully taking the flowers from her before she knew what he meant to do.

"You don't like to shake hands with me. Why?" he said, grasping the fingers which would have escaped if they could without conspicuous discourtesy.

"It's a stupid custom, I think," said Honour. "Oh! you're crushing my poor flowers. Please ring, Mr. St. Leger. I want some water, and then I shall put them

in that Dresden bowl over there. They will look charming."

"I will ring, if you still wish it, when I have told you what I came to say, Miss Brooke," returned St. Leger, with an obstinacy which might have been attractive in some men, but was not so in him—at least to Honour. She did not insist, however. She merely froze, and sat down to hear what he might have to say with an air of cold resignation which she made little attempt to disguise.

St. Leger brought a chair nearer to the somewhat isolated one which she had deliberately selected. The girl kept her face half turned from him, as if she were indifferent to his movements, and for a moment the man sat, leaning forward a little, watching her profile in silence. "I have come to talk to you about your father," he said.

He had chosen his beginning well. She started, and looked round at him questioningly, as he had known she would; but she waited for him to speak again.

"Nevill Brooke and I were friends," he went on. "I have told you that. But I never told you why. Now I will tell you. I saved his life once, and Brooke was a grateful man. I never told you, either, that he and I, when we were together in a strange adventure which united our fortunes for a while, used often to speak of you—by night, sometimes, under Eastern stars. I think, if there had been news of him for you—news which might take courage to hear—I would have been the man chosen by him to give it to you."

Honour suddenly went very pale. "Is there such news?" she asked, in a strained voice, obviously fighting for self-control.

"Have you supposed that I have been idle all this time?" he returned, answering her question by a question. "I have seen that you suffered, though I kept my own counsel, aware that you did not like me, though God knows I would cut off my right hand to serve you, not alone for your father's sake, but for your own. What I

did, I did unknown to anyone, even my cousin Florence, who does not realise the intense anxiety you have been suffering these past few months. But I realised—I guessed—that you expected news of your father, and because it did not come, you have been eating your heart out. I wanted to help you, though I dared not say so. I have tried to get upon your father's track, and find out what has become of him. Now I believe that I am in a fair way to do so. I have traced him as far as Paris. I know whom he met there, and what he did. I know that one of two things has befallen him."

"Well?" breathed Honour.

"To put it rather brutally, since I am sure you will not thank me for sparing you—he has either been kidnapped and imprisoned by certain enemies of his, who would have a motive for so doing, or—he has been murdered by the same people."

"You—know who they are?" faltered the girl, white as death.

"I know who they are. But until I can be absolutely sure that there has been foul play, I can do nothing to punish them and avenge Nevill Brooke's injuries or—murder."

"For the love of Heaven, make sure, then!" cried Honour, flinging out her hands to him in a passionate gesture.

"For the love of you, I will do it," said St. Leger. "Not for any other love in heaven or earth!"

"Oh!" broke out the girl in horror. "You speak of love—at such a moment?"

"I must, to make you understand. This moment is my moment. It has come at last. This mission that you send me upon will absorb my whole life till it is finished. Perhaps it may require the sacrifice of my life itself. With you as a reward to hope for, to work for, the risk would be nothing. But human nature is so constituted that it cannot run a race with no prospect of a prize if it wins. It wearies half-way; it lags behind; while if the prize

be worth striving for, no hill is too high, no path too difficult. I loved your father, but I did not love him enough, I tell you frankly, to give up everything in his interest. His gratitude, if he lives, the joy of revenging him if he be dead, would not be reward enough to pay me for all that I should have to sacrifice and risk. Yourself is the only prize worth my having, and for that there is nothing I could not and would not accomplish."

Honour listened in amazement and fear. "I cannot—cannot love you!" she stammered. "Gratitude I would give in fullest measure, but never love."

"If I had yourself I would be satisfied, hoping that my love for you would be great enough to win yours in time. Promise that, if I give you back your father, living or dead, and the name of the man who killed him, you will be my wife."

"I can't," the girl panted. "It would be a sin to marry you, feeling as I do. If my father could speak for me, he would forbid it. Someone else will find him—someone who loved him so well that he will neither ask for nor want any reward at all."

"I know whom you mean," said St. Leger. "And I know also that he will never succeed. What has he done in all these weeks? Virtually nothing; while I have the clue in my hand. No one else can possibly do for you what I can, for I have learned what I already know in a way so strange, so intricate, that no other human being could find it. It remains for me to go on along the path I have opened, or to stop where I am now. And it is for you to choose. That is what I came to say to you to-day, for there are reasons why long delays would be dangerous. Now I have finished. Do you still wish me to ring for a servant to bring water, so that you may arrange your roses?"

"No—no!" exclaimed Honour. "Wait! Let me think. How can I be sure that you really have a clue to the mystery of my father's disappearance?"

"How can you be sure?" echoed St. Leger. "Do

you expect me to *give* you the secret for which I have just told you what a price you must pay? Yet there is one proof which you shall have for nothing. To show you that I know where to lay my hand upon those who are connected with your father's disappearance, I will tell you what you may do. You have met a man named Ronald Charteris?"

"Yes," answered Honour, astonished, and betraying, by the slightest quivering of her nerves, that she could not hear that name without emotion.

"Go to him. Make some excuse to lead the conversation into such a channel that you can seem to ask casually what he was doing on the night of the fourth of April. If he answers without any sign of distress, believe that I have been deceiving you. If the contrary, take it as one small proof that I have not been boasting idly, or lying to you for the purpose of obtaining something for which I can give no return."

"Do you mean me to believe that Sir Ronald Charteris had any connection with my father's disappearance?" Honour demanded, with a deep fire in her eyes.

"I ask you to believe nothing until you have made that test. But you speak as if Charteris were a saint on so high a pedestal that it would be impossible for him to step down and do wrong like other men. Is that really the way you think of him?"

"I think that he has undertaken an unselfish and noble work," said Honour, bravely. "Only a man of high character would care to do what Sir Ronald Charteris does. I do not know him very well, but even so, nothing that you or anyone else could say would make me believe evil of him."

Loris St. Leger laughed—a peculiarly disagreeable, suggestive laugh that made Honour's cheeks tingle. He had not meant, when he came, to say so much as he had said. Yet now he was tempted to say still more. He had taken a very bold step in advising Honour to mention the night of April the fourth to Ronald Charteris, because he

and his were far too intimately connected with the events of that night to make the smallest allusion to it safe. But he was certain that, though Charteris must change colour and blush at such words as Honour had been advised to speak, he would not further betray himself to her, or incriminate anyone else. Even if he did (which was next to impossible) there was no connection in Charteris's mind between the Reverend Mr. Willoughby or his veiled companion and Mr. and Miss Kazan, Loris St. Leger's Russian relatives who had come to live in Park Lane. The veiled woman had already disappeared—for ever—and Mr. Willoughby would soon do likewise, since there was now plenty of money for a life of leisure for all three, and no further need, therefore, that the Reverend Mr. Willoughby, or the "Master" should continue to exist. In fact, the sooner these two vanished from the world where they had been known the better for everyone concerned, and Loris did not regret the hint he had given to Honour. He did not even see that harm could follow if he said a little more, and planted in the girl's heart the seeds of suspicion which, like quick-growing weeds, would choke out the life of any newly-sprung blossoms of love.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Brooke," said St. Leger. "I'm not laughing at you, but at your innocent ideas of Charteris's 'great work.' It is an open secret that his so-called 'mission' is self-supporting, and much more than self-supporting, in a very queer way. Of course, if I explain to you what I mean, you will not draw my name into the affair, for I am not ready for that yet?"

"I do not wish you to explain," replied Honour. "But if I should ever hear from anyone some cruel slander against Sir Ronald Charteris and his work, do you suppose I would repeat it? I should be ashamed to soil my lips with it."

This was precisely what Loris St. Leger wanted to know, though he thought that he had known already; and now that his opinion of the girl's discretion was confirmed, he was determined that the seed should be sown.

She might not believe what he was about to tell her, but she would not be able to forget, and—protest as she might—she would never be *quite* sure that there was not a grain of truth in the story. People never did forget evil tales against their friends; besides, the story was true, with the one exception that Charteris himself was innocent—therefore, it would be more than difficult to disprove.

“Charteris’s ‘mission’ is a sort of school for criminals,” St. Leger said quickly, in haste to get out the words, lest Honour should check them. “Thieves, forgers, coiners, all sorts of experts are made out of his ‘boarders,’ and he, as the manager of the institution, turns a pretty penny. It is a smart idea, and, as carried out by him, really quite original. Forgive me! I didn’t know you felt so strongly, or I wouldn’t have spoken.” He added these last words in a changed tone, in answer to an indignant gesture which commanded silence. Rising, he looked at the girl appealingly.

“I am very unfortunate,” he said. “All that I am and have is yours. The world would not be worth living in if you were not in it; yet I constantly offend you. I am rough and uncouth and impulsive. A man like your father could overlook my faults and understand, and value what was good in me; but I only shock a girl brought up as you have been. I ask your pardon. In my anxiety to justify myself and give you the proof you asked for, I have gone too far. For that I beg you to pardon me; but I can’t take back what I’ve said. Will you see Charteris, and put to him that question I suggested?”

“Yes, I will do that—to-morrow if I can,” said Honour, who had already written to Ronald, as Jack Harned had desired her to do. “But I will only ask the question to prove to you that there is nothing in the hateful suspicion you seem to have of him—not to prove to myself that you are right.”

“Yet, if I am right, after all, will you then promise to be my wife, provided I give you back your father, living or dead?”

"After to-morrow I will decide and tell you," returned the girl, distressfully.

"So much time I grant you," said St. Leger. "But before I leave, there is just one more thing I wish to say, As I have told you, I am only too well aware that you dislike me. I deserve better of you than you are willing to give. Your father said to me once that he would die happy if I were to be the guardian of his daughter's life. In myself I am not much. But I have what most women desire—I am rich. As my wife, instead of living, as you do now, on the generosity of a woman who can ill afford——"

"Mr. St. Leger!" the girl broke in, springing to her feet, "you do not know what you are saying! Is it possible you think that my father would leave me dependent upon charity—even dear Lady St. Leger's? He was never rich, I know; but, of course, he left money with her to spend for me——"

"All that he was able to leave was eaten up long ago," cut in St. Leger. "For years, my poor child, my cousin Florence has given you every dress you wore; not a penny you have had in your little purse has not come out of hers. If you married me I would pay back to her all that she has spent, with interest, and——"

"I can't believe it—I *will* not believe it!" cried the girl. "Oh! I think I should die of shame and grief if it were true!"

"It is true, and it is best that you should know it now, though my cousin will be angry with me for speaking. She told me herself how it was, though, to do her justice, not until I had catechised her, and given her to understand that the secret of her generosity was safe with me. You may tell her that I have betrayed her because to do so was one more inducement to you to become my wife. Then, perhaps, as she, at least, loves me, she will be kind and forgive."

"Please go now, Mr. St. Leger," faltered the girl. "I want to be alone."

This time he did not try to take her hand. In silence he walked to the door, and, bowing gravely, left her.

After he had gone, Honour sat for many minutes with her face hidden between her hands. Half an hour passed, and Lady St. Leger, who had been to her dressmaker's, came home, and went straight to her boudoir. As the door opened, Honour started, as if frightened, and showed her face, blurred with weeping.

"My dear—what is it?" exclaimed Lady St. Leger, hurrying towards her with outstretched hands. "Bad news of your father?"

"Is it true," the girl demanded, "that I have no money—that I haven't had any for years, and that you have had to support me and give me everything?"

Lady St. Leger flushed deeply, and her eyes sparkled with anger.

"Who has dared to tell you such a thing?" she cried.

"Mr. St. Leger," Honour answered, simply.

The elder woman's lips, which had already opened for a denial, closed again abruptly, with a little gasp. She had been ready to burden her conscience with a direct falsehood, for the sake of Honour's peace of mind; but she could not accuse Loris St. Leger of falsehood. She was indignant with him for having let out the truth; nevertheless, she wanted the girl to marry him, and to say that he had lied was a poor way of impressing Honour in his favour. "How did he happen to say such a thing?" she enquired, weakly.

"He asked me to be his wife, and attempted to show me all the advantages he could offer, against the disadvantages of my present position. Dearest Lady St. Leger, I beg of you, don't deceive me for the sake of sparing my feelings. I must know—now. Did he tell me the truth?"

"I would almost have cut off a finger sooner than this should have happened," exclaimed her guardian, bursting into tears. "But—yes, he did tell you the truth."

As she confessed the deception of years, Lady St. Leger

held out her arms, and the girl gave herself to the loving embrace. For a moment she could not speak, but clung to the kindly woman in silence. And as the two stood thus, with tear-wet eyes, the footman brought a letter on a little silver tray. Lady St. Leger and Honour started apart, and the elder woman put out her hand to take the square white envelope, but, before she had touched it, her eyes fell upon the address. "It is for you, dear," she said.

The letter, which had come back by the messenger Honour had sent out, was an answer from Ronald Charteris. It was very brief, and merely said that he would be at River House, Mortlake Road, Hammersmith, at five o'clock on the following afternoon.

CHAPTER XXXI

HOW HONOUR'S LETTER CAME

RONALD CHARTERIS knew Honour's handwriting, which he had seen in several of the books she had sent him for the men of his mission. It was a pretty and individual hand, not easy to mistake. The way of forming the letters seemed to belong as entirely to Honour as did the faint fragrance which hung about her hair and everything she wore, and Ronald was happy when he saw the writing on a letter addressed to him, brought by a messenger boy. He had no right to be happy because the unattainable girl wrote to him, or thought of him, and he knew it well; but he was young. All the joy of life had not been crushed out of him yet by Destiny's iron hoof; and the blood in his veins was no colder than Jack Harned's.

She wanted him to meet her, "for a particular reason," at River House, Mortlake Road, Hammersmith, at five o'clock next day.

As he read that name, his heart contracted, and all youthful pleasure in the possession of a letter from the one woman in his world vanished suddenly like the rainbow colours of a bursting bubble.

Instantly he saw himself in Paris, reading certain words on a slip of paper: "On April the fourth, at River House, as near as possible to eight."

He had never known positively whether the house in which his life had been wrecked was River House or no. He had arrived at dusk, and had seen no name on the gate in the high wall. But it had been April the fourth, and at eight

o'clock a man had come to the lonely house—a man who had never gone out again. Often Ronald had wondered whether the words on that slip of paper had been written by that man, making the appointment which he had kept, and paid for keeping.

Ronald had not forgotten that he and the veiled woman with whom he had made his strange journey from Monte Carlo had stopped in a cab at the "Hand and Key," in Hammersmith. They had then given up the cab, and walked on across a green, and it had seemed to him that they had gone on foot for a long distance, nearer to two miles than the one which his companion had called it. The way had been intricate, and though once since he had recovered his health, and taken up the burden of life again, he had—prompted by a morbid and curious fascination—attempted to find the house, he had failed to identify it. A question asked of Mr. Willoughby had been answered in the same way as the other, concerning the name of the man who was dead; and Ronald had not repeated it. Now, it would be strange, and even horrible, if he should discover the truth through Honour Brooke, as he had in the latter case.

He did not know that the house where her father had been murdered was River House; he did not know, surely, that the house was in Hammersmith, though the "Hand and Key" was there. But there was a cold fear in his heart that the girl was appointing a meeting at the place where he had taken her father's life.

His blood chilled at the thought. If it were so, he asked himself, was she doing it purposely, to catch him in some trap? He could not believe it of her, even if she had somehow learned the truth; and yet her request, and the way in which it was made, seemed altogether strange. Only the theory that she had at least hit upon some suspicion, and wished to turn it into certainty, could satisfactorily account for it to his mind. He was struck with horror at being called upon to stand face to face with the girl on the scene where her father had fallen by his hand;

nevertheless, he determined to obey her summons; Not to do so, he considered, would be cowardly; and, come what might, he would not be a coward.

On the night of the murder his one wish had been to go out and, having told the whole truth, take the consequences of his own act. But Mr. Willoughby had persuaded him that a confession of his part in the affair would implicate a defenceless woman who must suffer more than he; and to save her he had consented to keep silence.

Since he had met Honour Brooke, however, he had been thankful for his own sake that the secret had been kept. It seemed to him that to see hatred against her father's murderer in those sweet brown eyes would be worse a thousand times than death by torture. He had believed that it would be the one thing unbearable, and he thanked God that he had not proclaimed his own guilt when the impulse was upon him. He had suffered almost all a man can suffer and go on living; but while he was spared that one agonising degradation, he could, he had said in his own heart sometimes, carry his burden till the end.

Now he saw himself compelled, perhaps, to meet the horror which had haunted his worst dreams—the horror of hearing Honour Brooke call him “Murderer!”

The terrible word, as if cried out by the girl's clear voice, rang in his ears as he sat down to write an answer to her letter. He had made up his mind what to say. Yet, with the pen in his hand, he was tempted to write differently after all—to tell Miss Brooke that, unfortunately, he would not be able to meet her next day. But he did not yield to the temptation. Instead, he wrote that he would go to River House at the hour she had named.

When he had sent off his reply by the waiting messenger, an overpowering melancholy took him in its grip, a presentiment of misery unspeakable for the future, and a profound despair for the present. He was debating whether or no it would be well to go to-day to the address named in Honour's letter, and see whether he recognised

the house behind the high garden wall, when the man who usually answered the front-door bell came to him in the little room which was bedchamber and study in one—the sole retreat Charteris had now when he wanted privacy.

“A lady has called to see you, sir,” said the man, one of the few in the “mission” who did not speak sourly to their host, and eye him askance.

“Didn’t she give you her name?” inquired Ronald.

“No, sir. She said that she was a friend of yours, and that it was very important you should see her for a few minutes. She is a tall lady, handsomely dressed, and young, I should say; but she is wearing such a thick veil I couldn’t make out her features.”

Ronald’s pulses quickened. The man’s description called up a memory all unwelcome; but he could not believe that the veiled lady of to-day and the veiled lady of the past could be one and the same. She of the past certainly had every motive for avoiding him, and it would be strange indeed, after all these months of silence, if she sought him out. Still, who else could it be? When he had first settled down in Oswell Road, and his work had begun to be talked about a little, a few women had been moved by curiosity to come and see him; but he had not been encouraging in his manner, and their visits had soon ceased. It was a long time since anyone save Lady St. Leger, his mother’s old schoolmate, and Honour Brooke, had come; but—what if it should be Honour, who wished to add something by word of mouth to her letter? If she had for any reason been obliged to come, and to come alone, she might have chosen to wear a heavy veil, for the sake of avoiding observation.

“Where is the lady waiting?” he asked.

“In the sitting-room,” was the answer. “There was no one there, nor likely to be for an hour or so, sir.”

“Very well, I will go to her,” said Ronald.

He went down. The door of the sitting-room was closed, and, opening it, he stood still for a moment on the threshold. A woman stood opposite him, in an alert, nervous attitude

of waiting. She was dressed in grey, with a long, loose cloak of steel-coloured silk, which disguised the lines of her figure. Round her close-fitting toque a grey tissue veil was tied—a veil which was like a silvery cloud floating before her face, and effectually concealing the features. Yet Ronald knew, at the first glance he gave, that the woman who had come to him was not Honour Brooke. He could not have explained how he recognised her, since dress and hat were different, and the figure was almost indistinguishable save for its height; but he was sure that the companion of his journey from Monte Carlo to London stood before him.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE ONE IMPOSSIBLE THING

SHE saw by the look in his eyes that he knew her, and was glad, for the quick flash of recognition, despite the veil and cloak, showed that her personality had made an impression upon him not easy to obliterate. If she removed the veil he would see the changes made in her appearance; the slight darkening of the dead-white skin, to accord with the dyed hair, the blackened brows and lashes; but she did not mean to let her face be seen. There was too much at stake for that. She had not been able to fight against the impulse to come, but she did not intend that he should see her as Nadege Kazan.

"Do you know me?" she asked, in a low voice, which she did not attempt to disguise.

"Yes," he said, "I know you."

"I hoped you would. Will you not come in and close the door?"

Without speaking, Ronald obeyed, and for a moment the two stood facing each other in silence. But at last, when that silence grew strained, he broke it.

"You wished to see me for some special reason?"

"Yes. I—wished to see you because—because I wished to see you. That is really all. Except—this. I would do you a good turn if I could, even at my own expense. It was so—once before. You would not let me save you then, though I tried."

"I thank you for trying," said Ronald, steadily.

"Oh, you can thank me—for anything!" Her voice broke. "But you hate me—I know you hate me!"

"You are mistaken," Ronald answered.

“ You told it in your delirium—when you were very ill. You would not have me come near you.”

“ You were never there.”

“ I was there always, till the doctor sent me away, because you could not bear my presence. My—Mr. Willoughby did not wish me to come, but I would not be denied, because—all that you had done had been for my sake. I wanted to help you—to prove that, at least, I was grateful. But you would not have me. You said the most cruel things, which almost broke my heart.”

“ I was not myself—you must remember that,” said Ronald, kindly, for there was sharp pain in her voice, and—she was a woman. “ I have not even any recollection of seeing you after—I was ill.”

“ Yet, in your delirium, you must have spoken out what was really in your mind ? ” Nadege said, questioning appealingly rather than asserting. “ If you had not hated me, you would not——”

“ I did not and do not hate you,” Ronald broke in. “ What your part was in the events of that awful night I don’t know, and don’t ask to know. But I shall not forget that you tried to save me. You gave me a chance to—escape the obligations I had taken on myself.”

“ Ah ! if only you had taken that chance ! ”

“ ‘ If ’ is a terrible word sometimes.”

“ Yes, it is—it is ! If I thought you could ever forgive me ! Oh, I know you have suffered, but I have suffered too—for you and for myself ! I have died a hundred deaths because of what I brought upon you. Your life is ruined.” There were tears in her voice, and Ronald knew that she was weeping, though he could not see her face. He pitied her, and it was the natural impulse of a strong man to give an unhappy woman—unhappy for him—such comfort as he could.

“ I am trying to make the best of it,” he said, “ and I have never thought of blaming you.”

“ Have you thought of me at all ? ”

“ Often. It would have been strange if I had not.”

A slight shudder ran through her. "You have thought—oh! it kills me to say it! But—I can guess only too well what you must have thought of most. He—Mr. Willoughby—said that you—saw. You know my—my dreadful misfortune—my disfigurement."

Ronald could feel the hidden eyes searching his, and a dark flush stained his face. "I can't deny that I understand what you mean," he said. "But I have not thought of that as you seem to fancy. I have remembered—your face."

"You are kind to say that!" Nadege exclaimed; "kind and chivalrous. It is like you. Others have told me that my face was beautiful. I should be a little comforted if I could feel that, in spite of all, it had not been hideous for you."

"I thought it one of the most beautiful I had ever seen," answered Ronald, not warmly, as a man speaks when he admires or wishes to flatter a woman, but kindly and honestly, in an impersonal way, as if he spoke of a picture.

"Thank you—thank you a thousand times!" she stammered, her voice still broken. "Would you—shake hands with me, Sir Ronald?"

In answer, he held out his hand for hers, and when it came quickly out to meet his, he pressed it as if it had been the hand of a friend. Then he would have freed it; but she would not have it so. She clasped his hand with both hers, and laid her veiled forehead down on it. "For the first time in years I am almost happy now," she said. "You are the one good, true man I ever knew, and to think that I have brought ruin upon you! Even now I could give you back happiness again if you would have it so!"

"That is impossible," Ronald answered, gently drawing his hand from her clasping fingers.

"You don't know. I could. It would cost me—everything that has made my life, so far. Yet that would be nothing, if you would give me one thing in return."

"What would you have me give?"

“What *would* you give if you could win back your innocence of—the guilt which has made your burden all these weary months?”

“For that I would gladly give my life. But it is the one thing I can never hope to have. Nothing can buy it back for me on this earth.”

“Would you give your life to me, to do with as I choose, if—through that gift you could receive the one thing you think impossible?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean—oh! do you need to ask me what I mean? I have told you you are the one true man I ever knew. Is it strange that my heart turned to you? You said that I was beautiful? Well, I love you—love you as no other woman ever can or will. I am not all wicked. If you would take me out of my present life I would be all good, through love of you, and for your sake. I swear to you, Ronald Charteris, if you are strong enough, brave and noble enough, to do that, you will be saving yourself as well as me.”

“Don’t!” he exclaimed. “You are making things hard for us both. Let us not talk of what is impossible.”

“Why is it impossible? Because of—my misfortune? That came through an act of hideous cruelty. I was suspected of betraying secrets. Before I could prove that I had not, horrible men punished me with disfigurement which was worse than death. Yet such is the instinct of self-preservation that I did not wish to die, and I was thankful to be saved. But that was years ago, when I was little more than a child. Often since I have wished that they had finished me then—at least I should have been at rest. Because I suffered unjustly at the hands of those who should have been my protectors, do you say that I am beyond the pale of human love—man’s love?”

“No, I do not say that,” answered Ronald; but, despite his pity for her, his voice was cold. “I only say that I have no love to give; and, for both our sakes, let us not——”

“ You love another woman ! ” cried Nadege. “ The one woman among all others of whom you must not even think.”

“ Who says that of me ? ” Ronald demanded, sharply.

“ I say it. And I say it because I know. The daughter of the man you ——”

“ Don't speak the words ! ” he broke in. “ Spare me that, if indeed you have any kindness for me in your heart. I have no right to care for any woman, and, believe me, if that misfortune ever comes, I shall bear it in silence.”

“ But why—why should you fix your thoughts upon that one girl ? She is not for you. You acknowledge that. Why not console yourself, and be as happy as you can ? You don't care for me. But would you not, at least, have kindness and gratitude for me, in your heart, if I gave you back everything that makes life worth living ? ”

“ I have said before, that is the one impossible thing.”

“ Yet I can and will do it, on the day that you say you will take me for your wife.”

Ronald sighed with a passionate impatience. “ Let us not talk of this.”

“ You are of the same mind still ? ”

“ And must remain so always.”

“ Then—good-bye. I have come in vain. You must go on suffering until the end.”

“ Until the end ! ” echoed Ronald, heavily.

His thoughts turned to Honour Brooke ; but no strange telepathic wave of sympathy told him how she, too, at this very moment, was being tempted by a bribe.

If he would promise to give his life and himself to this woman, she would do for him the impossible. Had there been no Honour Brooke in the world he might have hesitated, for she was beautiful, and she loved him, and he was drowning in the sea of his own despair.

He did not dream that he was of the smallest importance in Honour's scheme of existence, though she was everything to him. Yet if Honour had never seen Ronald Charteris she might have given Loris St. Leger the pro-

mise he demanded in return for a great bribe. Each, unknown to the other, was strong for the other's sake.

* * * * *

Jack Harned wrote again to Honour, and asked that she would be at River House half an hour before the time appointed for Sir Ronald Charteris to come. It was always difficult for her to get away without telling Lady St. Leger where she was going and what she meant to do ; but during a call from a person whom she did not need to see, the girl contrived to slip out, trusting to obtain pardon afterwards for her fault.

She had never been to River House since that stormy April afternoon when she went in quest of " Mr. Smith," the man who could explain the mystery of her father's absence. She knew that Jack had returned several times, and had found the house always as it had been then—shuttered and deserted ; she knew that he had made many inquiries as to the tenant, and had only learned that he was supposed to be abroad. She knew that Jack had had the place watched, but that no one had ever been seen to enter or go out. Still, she could not put away the feeling that, at River House, if anywhere, she would hear news of her father. Only, to-day, the conviction was not welcome, for she hated the thought of any mysterious connection between Ronald Charteris and her father's disappearance. She did not and would not believe, she had told herself many times since yesterday, that there could be such a connection, at all events to Ronald's discredit, as Jack seemed vaguely to hint, and St. Leger viciously asserted. Still, she was uneasy, and excited to the verge of nervous breakdown, as she drove in a cab to Hammersmith.

Jack met her outside the gate of the dreary walled garden, and rather hastily took her inside ; for it was not part of his plan that Ronald Charteris should arrive at the same time and see Honour prematurely.

" You want to talk to me, I suppose, before Sir Ronald

comes?" said the girl. "You promised in your first letter to explain why you asked me to propose that he should meet me here. He must have thought it very strange. I didn't like doing it at all."

"It is a thing that will explain itself presently," Jack replied, "if you will be very good to me, and be patient to wait a little."

"I think I have been very good to you in coming without knowing why," said Honour, smiling faintly, and touching the queer little bronze toad brooch at her throat; for she and Jack were in the weed-grown lawn now, standing where she had been when she found the fetish in the grass, months ago. "I can't be patient, I'm afraid, much longer."

"You have indeed been good, and I won't try your patience longer than necessary, I promise," answered Jack. "But do trust me yet for a little while, won't you? or everything will have been in vain."

"What do you want me to do?" asked the girl, fixing upon him the great, clear brown eyes which he worshipped and feared.

"I want you to go into a certain room in this house, and, no matter how much you may be tempted to do something different, not to speak or come out until you hear me call your name.

"You are very mysterious," said Honour.

"I know. But I can't help it. Please forgive me if I do things which you don't like. It is for a great end—the end that we are working for together; and I assure you I don't see any other way."

"But Sir Ronald?" asked Honour. "He will come soon. I asked him to meet me, and if I am to be hidden away in some room, out of sight——"

"I will receive him, and apologise for you," said Jack. "I have already met him, and he knows that I am a friend of yours, and—and Lady St. Leger's."

"Very well," Honour assented, reluctantly. "I will do what you ask."

They came to the window which Jack Harned had broken so long ago. In appearance it was exactly as it had been in April. Bits of glass still lay scattered underneath the window and on the sill. Jack stepped into the room on the other side, and, leaving Honour waiting in the little back porch, went round to open the door for her.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FROM BEHIND THE TAPESTRY

DURING the months which had passed since Honour's dream of her father's death, the first vivid impression had somewhat faded; but sometimes at night the remembrance of the horror came back to her, and she lay trembling, fearing to dream it again. Now, as she entered the old deserted house, with its dim and intricate passages, its creakings and echoings that haunted the footsteps, she shivered with a chill of recollection. The house of her dream had been such a house as this. Through such a labyrinth of passages as these she had hurried, groping and stumbling, in her terrible vision. She had thought that night when she waked that, if the dream had indeed been a vision, some day she might find the house where her father had been murdered, and that then she would surely recognise it. But it was to this house his last letter had sent her for news of him, and it might be here that he had died—in such a room as one of these through which Jack Harned was guiding her, only brilliantly lighted, instead of dark, as they all were now. Yet this was the second visit she had made to River House, and, beyond the feeling of suppressed excitement and vague dread of something unknown, which might happen, she had no clairvoyant instinct. "Oh, surely it could not have been here, or I should know," she said to herself. Still, her nerves were on edge, and when Jack spoke suddenly, as

they entered a large room with a little furniture piled in one corner, she started, and was conscious of a sensation of deadly cold. Out of doors it was a warm August day, but this room seemed to the girl like a tomb. It was as if a gust of icy air blew towards her as she entered the door.

"Do you remember this room?" Jack Harned was asking. "We didn't come into it the other time when we were here, but we looked in from another room, through that glass door over there. It was because I hadn't forgotten that glass door that I've brought you back here. I will bring Sir Ronald Charteris, if you will wait in that little room beyond the glass door. We'll leave it a trifle ajar, and then you can hear anything that we say. I won't open the shutters. Enough light comes in, with the sun shining on the windows as it does, and pouring through every chink and cranny, to make a sort of twilight. We shall need no other light for our conversation, he and I. Once there was evidently a blue silk curtain across this glass door. See, there's a bit of the silk caught on this nail at the top, as if someone had torn the curtain down in a hurry; but it's being gone doesn't matter. Even if you stand close to the door, on the other side, anyone a dozen feet away on this side couldn't see you, and I'll take care that neither of us comes any nearer than that."

"I didn't understand before," said Honour, "that you wanted me to play eavesdropper."

"Don't call it that!" exclaimed Jack. "I did say I'd have to do things which you wouldn't like. This is one of them. But it is the most necessary of all. There is nothing dishonourable about it. It isn't as if you were taking us both unawares. I shall know, and if Sir Ronald Charteris is an honourable man, with nothing to conceal, to be overheard can matter to him no more than to me."

"I can't do it! It is too hateful!" ejaculated Honour.

"Then we have come here to-day for nothing!" retorted Jack. "This is the only way. I have told you

so before, 'or I would not take it. But you don't trust me. I'll give up my task, then. It is useless for me to try any longer to help, since I am not to be trusted. I hoped that we were nearing the end ; but it isn't for me to go on. The affair must be put into other hands."

The words brought the image of Loris St. Leger to the girl's mind, and she had a quick revulsion of feeling. If only Jack could find out the truth, there would be no need to accept Mr. St. Leger's costly services. She must not misunderstand this young knight who was fighting for her and asking for no reward.

"What do you expect me to hear?" she demanded. "You speak so strangely. What is it that you think Sir Ronald Charteris has done?"

"I stipulated that you shouldn't put any premature questions, Miss Brooke," said Jack. "But I will tell you this. What I expect Sir Ronald to say will answer your questions better than I could. I mean to ask him some straight out. If he doesn't choose to reply, he need not ; and I'll ask him nothing I couldn't ask before your face, if it wasn't to spare his feelings. Now, are my inquiries to stop where they are now, or will you keep the promise that you made to go into a certain room, and neither leave it nor make any sound till I call your name?"

"I—suppose I must keep the promise," faltered Honour, "though when I made it, I didn't know at all what it would involve."

Without waiting for further argument, Jack took her at her word. He opened the glass door, and led her into the room beyond—the room in which Ronald Charteris had stood looking through the blue curtain. It was darker than the other, for there were no cracks in the heavy shutters. There was not a perceptible chink through which the strong August sunshine could find its way, and this was well for the plan which Jack had elaborated. As he had said, even though she stood close to the glass door, in the dark grey canvas dress she wore she could not be seen from the farther side, at all events from a little

distance. Jack insisted upon bringing her a chair from among the pile of furniture in the larger room, and placing it for her near the door, which he set ajar. Then he announced that it was almost time to expect Sir Ronald Charteris.

"He may arrive at any moment now," said Jack. "Of course, he will come to the front door and knock——"

"Oh! go and meet him," cried Honour. "Be waiting at the door, won't you, and explain things as well as you can. I feel horribly wicked and treacherous. I shall be thankful when it is all over. Whatever evil you or anyone else may think of him, I believe that you are mistaken. He will prove that, even to your satisfaction, perhaps within the next hour."

"We shall see," answered Jack, grimly. "Are you sure you are not afraid to be left here alone, perhaps for a quarter of an hour, perhaps even more?"

"I should prefer it," the girl said, quickly.

"Very well, I will go. When I come back, it will be with him," returned Jack Harned, "and I rely on you to remember your promise."

When the sound of his footsteps on the bare floor of the next room had died away, and a door had closed after him, the stillness of the dark house throbbed in Honour's ears, with the beating of her heart. Never before had she *heard* silence; but the silence of this place it seemed that she could hear. She wanted to think. It was for that reason, partly, that she had bidden Jack leave her. But the throbbing stillness would not let her think. She found herself cutting short the thread of each newly-started thought to listen. Presently, into the midst of the dull throbbing which held her attention so strangely, broke a sound more real—a sound suggestive of life, not death. Jack must already be coming back, and bringing Sir Ronald, she supposed, for there were voices and footsteps in the distance. Still, it was rather odd that they did not appear to come from the right direction. Instead of reaching her ears by way of the room beyond the half-

open glass door, it was as if she heard two men talking and walking at the opposite side of the room in which she sat, although they remained invisible. She strained her eyes in the gloom to see if there were another door on that side of the room, the walls of which were hung with faded blue tapestry. There was a door there, and while she gazed at it in surprise that, in spite of what he had said, Jack should have brought Sir Ronald Charteris this way, a flap of the tapestry was pushed abruptly aside. Two figures, looking shadowy at that distance as seen through the semi-darkness, appeared to step out of the wall itself, while the door at which Honour had been looking remained closed. She was sitting in the chair which Harned had placed for her, close to the glass door, her back against the wall; and, supposing that the figures were those of Jack and Ronald Charteris, she remained perfectly still, in accordance with her promise. Jack had said: "I want you to go into a certain room, and, no matter how much you may be tempted to do something different, not to speak or make a sound."

This move of his was unexpected, but she saw no reason to break her promise. She hoped, however, that the two men would pass into the adjoining room without Sir Ronald having seen her, for it was particularly trying to have them so near, and yet to sit still, like a spy:

The dark figures had paused for a moment, with their backs to her, and one was apparently doing something to the wall, while the other held the tapestry out of the way, as if it had been a curtain. Honour's eyes were so used to the darkness now that she could see them with comparative plainness, though, if she had just come in out of the light, the room would have seemed almost as black as a cellar. Suddenly one of the men spoke, and now that the voice was so near, it was easily recognisable, not as that of Jack Harned or Ronald Charteris, but as Loris St. Leger's.

"I hope," he said, "that this is not only my last visit to River House, but yours. We are both very rich men

now, thanks to my exertion, and there's no more need to soil our fingers or run our necks into danger."

"Your '*exertion*' is good!" returned another voice, which Honour recognised also, with a second thrill of almost incredulous amazement. When she had heard it before, it was speaking French, and disclaiming all knowledge of English; but now it answered Loris St. Leger in the language it had denied, and with no trace of foreign accent, save, perhaps, a slight harshness in the pronunciation of the letter "r." "Of what avail would your '*exertion*' have been without my money? and that money I should not have possessed if it had not been for the business which you object to."

"As to that, neither your money nor my deeds would have been of much use without Lal Singh and Nevill Brooke," returned St. Leger. "But as neither of them are here to speak for themselves, I can claim what credit I deserve."

"How about Nadege and Charteris?" inquired the man whom Honour knew as Mr. Kazan. "Don't you think that they deserve a little credit too?"

"Pooh! I'm not talking of catspaws," said St. Leger. "To us the credit of the scheme is due, and mine is the larger share; yet I have consented to divide the money as if yours had been equal with mine."

"You have consented, as you call it, because you were obliged. You are absolutely in my power."

"And you are as absolutely in mine. Either one could hang the other. But what's the good of recriminations? All I want is for you to keep your word, and let the '*Master*' and the Reverend Jasper Willoughby cease to exist—to be as dead as Nevill Brooke, and Lal Singh, and the elder Charteris, and one or two others I could name."

"As dead as you hope Harvey Kane is, eh?"

"And as *you* hope he is. Yes—as dead as that. You have left the Master's business in good hands, and as for Charteris's precious '*mission*,' let him carry it on for himself after this. It will be so much the better for him, and

the safer for you. I shall not trouble to look you up after this, as I did to-day. If you break your word again, I shall think you are like a drunkard, who promises reform, and——”

“Don't attempt to take that line with me, Loris. It won't pay you,” exclaimed the other, sharply.

They had turned now, and were crossing the room towards the half-open glass door. They were drawing nearer to Honour with every step, and she saw that the man with the voice of Mr. Kazan was white-haired and white-bearded. His eyes were concealed with curious spectacles, which caught a faint gleam of light in the semi-darkness, and his dress was that of a clergyman. He was entirely unlike Mr. Kazan in appearance, but she was sure of the voice, which, in talking to Loris, he had made no effort to disguise.

Stricken dumb by what she had heard, and wondering, in a frozen way, if Jack knew, and had planned that she should overhear these men, Honour sat motionless, scarcely breathing. The pair came closer, sauntering carelessly, entirely at ease and unsuspecting that in this dim room were other eyes and ears besides their own. When they were so near that Honour could have put out her hand and touched the clerical coat, there came a sound from a distance—the closing of a door. Loris St. Leger was in the act of pushing the glass door wider open, so that he and his companion might pass through. He stopped, started back, and—saw the girl sitting in her chair not three feet away, against the wall.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AT RIVER HOUSE AGAIN

RONALD CHARTERIS was as much surprised as Honour had fancied he would be to see Jack Harned standing in the doorway at River House. He had recognised the place, and knew now that River House, Mortlake Road, Hammersmith, was the one for which he had searched, and failed to find. It was to him as if he were deliberately walking into a chamber of torture ; for here he had killed Honour Brooke's father, and here she had come, he believed, to accuse him of his crime. How she had discovered the truth he could not guess ; but he told himself that he should know that soon—and more, much more.

Ronald had seen Jack Harned only once, and in some circumstances might have forgotten the face of one stranger among the many he was constantly meeting. But Harned had claimed friendship with Honour Brooke and Lady St. Leger, and that alone had been enough to fix his features for ever in Charteris's memory.

As he met Jack face to face on the threshold of the shuttered house, he looked at him gravely and questioningly, waiting for him to speak first. Jack did speak, promptly :

"I am Miss Brooke's messenger to you," he said. "When I called on you the other day, I told you, you may remember, that I was fortunate enough to be her friend ?"

"I remember very well, Mr. Harned," replied Ronald, with the dignity of manner which, because of its very nobility, irritated Jack.

"I hope you will come in," he remarked, somewhat stiffly. "Miss Brooke will see you a little later." So

saying, he stood aside to let Charteris enter, his keen black eyes fastened on the pale, tense face of the other. There was a hope of coming triumph in his heart; yet for the present he was not happy. He felt that he himself, beside this man whom he wished to torture and disgrace, was not only insignificant, but mean.

Ronald crossed the threshold, and then waited for Harned to lead him. He pressed his lips tightly together at sight of the square hall, with its dim mirror and two stately seats of carved oak. It was like a dream to see them again, and the corridor leading away into darkness. If he had been a woman, suffering as he did, he might have fainted; but he was a man, and strong to endure what he was sure now he must endure. Without any sign of pain, he unhesitatingly followed Jack Harned along the way he knew so well. Presently they left it, for, avoiding the three communicating rooms he remembered, he was taken up two or three steps into a short passage, and at the end, instead of finding himself in the blue room where he had stood at his post by the curtained glass door, he was ushered directly into the room where Nevill Brooke had come to sup and which he had never left, alive.

Here, if he had been a woman, he must have shrieked, and fought his way out, even though Harned had tried to detain him. But still his man's strength and pride upheld him; and if he was paler and more haggard of face than before, the change was not visible in the dim twilight of the shuttered room.

A moment passed in silence. Then Ronald spoke in a cold, controlled voice.

"You say you are Miss Brooke's messenger to me," he began. "Am I, then, to expect from you an explanation of my summons here?"

"Do you really need an explanation?" demanded Jack.

"I have asked for one."

"Then I will give it, though Miss Brooke has not authorised it. She wrote to you on my advice, asking you to meet her here."

"I have kept the appointment. Miss Brooke has not."

"She will keep it, Sir Ronald Charteris. Meanwhile, I have something to say to you. I told you I was her friend. I did not tell you how our friendship began. But I will do so now. In the early days of last April Miss Brooke received a letter from her father, saying that he was on the point of coming home. If he did not arrive by a certain date she was to call at River House, Mortlake Road, Hammersmith, and make inquiries. He did not arrive, and she came here, to this house. On the same day, and at the same hour, came a man to whom Nevill Brooke had been as a father. That man was I. We found the house deserted, and shut up as it is now. Time passed on, and Nevill Brooke did not come; but his daughter and I—who loved him as if I had been his son—devoted our whole lives to solving the mystery of his absence. For a long time we worked in vain. But at last a clue came into our hands. We followed it up, never once letting go. That is why, Sir Ronald Charteris, I called upon you the other day. That is why Miss Brooke wrote and begged you to meet her here."

"And now that I am here?" asked Ronald, shortly.

"I will ask you a question. What did you do on the night of April the fourth?"

"I do not acknowledge your right to ask me that or any other question. If Miss Brooke questions me, I will answer, not otherwise."

"Then, if you refuse to answer, I will answer for you: On the night of April the fourth, here in this house, you murdered her father, Nevill Brooke—murdered him basely, with or without accomplices, for money which he was bringing home for the daughter he loved better than his life. On that money you are living now, and parading as a sort of amateur missionary."

Charteris was utterly amazed, not at the first accusation—for that he had expected from the moment he recognised River House as the scene of the murder—but at the motive alleged.

"What! She believes that of me?" he exclaimed, in astonishment, so evidently genuine that for an instant Jack Harned was staggered. "She believes that I killed her father for his money? My God! What a loathsome thing!"

Jack caught at the loose end of an admission which he saw floating.

"You do not deny that you killed him?" he said; "That, at least, is well, for it would be useless, I know, and by this time she knows too."

"She is here now, listening to what we say?" ejaculated Ronald, hurt reproach in his voice, which must have struck at Honour's heart, though it merely angered Jack.

"She is here, and listening, because I insisted that she should do so," he admitted, hotly. "Murderers have not usually such nice feelings. We have played detectives, she and I, and successfully. We have you where we want you now. Your face, your voice, have confessed, even if your words have been cautious. If you go on—if you will make a clean breast of it—we may allow you to go free, for you must carry your punishment for ever in your soul, even though your body is permitted to escape. This is your one chance. Take it or leave it. What we want most of all is to have the mystery explained. But attempt to brazen it out, and you pronounce your own death-warrant. We know enough now to have you arrested if you are obstinate, and force you to stand your trial for the murder of Nevill Brooke."

"She is there?" asked Charteris, pointing through the glass door.

"Yes—Miss Brooke is there."

"Then I speak to her, not to you. I am sorry if my voice reproached her. She was right to use any means within her power in the hope of learning the truth about her father. I confess to her now that he died by my hand in this house, in this room, on the night of April the fourth. If you had not told me that she believed I killed him for his money nothing could have forced me to tell before

you the story which now I will tell. I am, it seems, less guilty than she believes me. I never saw Nevill Brooke until a few minutes before his death, nor did I even know of his existence. Until I afterwards met Miss Brooke, and she talked to me one afternoon at my house in Oswell Road, I did not so much as know the name of the man I had killed. It was from what she said then that I learned whose life I had taken. The money I have—literally every penny of it—was left me by a cousin. Go yourself, and take Miss Brooke, if you will, to Somerset House, where a copy of the will can be seen. So much she must believe, because her own eyes will bear witness for me. I do not attempt to justify myself in any way. How should I? I am a murderer. I robbed her of all that was most dear, but I cannot bear to have her think I robbed *him* of his money. I did not know what he had, or was. Why I killed him I shall never tell, but I did not do it for lust of blood or gold. I struck him down, and afterwards I saw that he was dead. That is no excuse, I know. I don't offer it as an excuse. But, at least, instead of enriching myself, as you say she thinks, I ruined my whole future—ruined it in a single instant. If I could, I would have given myself up to justice. It was the one thing, it seemed then, to save my reason, when I found out what I had done. I wanted to die. But there were reasons why I could not yield to the impulse. I decided to keep silence, and after a long illness which followed immediately, I came to myself to find that silence was still incumbent upon me. Such atonement as I could make I have made. That is nothing. If Miss Brooke desires my life for her father's life, it is hers. I have no wish to 'escape.' When death is in the soul, existence is not worth having. Tell what I have confessed here to the police if you will. I shall make no effort to avoid arrest or conviction. But more than I have said to you I will never say."

"You mean," said Harned, "that you will not give up your accomplices?"

"I killed Nevill Brooke with my own hands, and unprompted. I had no accomplices. Afterwards I buried him. His body lies in the cellars underneath this house. It was that, coming after what had gone before, that turned my brain, I think."

"You shall show me where you buried him."

"It is not for you to say 'you shall' do this or that. I do not intend to go with you and show you that place. But, for his daughter's sake, I will tell you where to find the body of the man I killed. There are three cellars, each one opening into another. I remember passing through them all. In the third under a coating of clay, well stamped down—if it is as it was then—is a trap-door. This leads into a small sub-cellar, ventilated from a grating in the garden. Down there is the grave. I need say no more."

"No, you need say no more—for the present," Jack flung at him. "Miss Brooke, I beg that you will come here, and tell me what is to be done with your father's murderer."

There was no answer, no sound from the next room:

Jack's conscience gave him a sharp twinge. The ordeal had been too much for her. He might have known that it would be so.

"She must have fainted," he exclaimed, and, hurrying to the glass door, looked anxiously into the adjoining room. The chair which he had placed against the wall was unoccupied. Peering into the darkness, he could see nothing; and, with a loud knocking of the heart against his side, he rushed to one of the windows and unbarred the heavy shutters. As he threw them violently open, a flood of afternoon sunlight streamed in, illuminating the room, and turning the floating motes of dust to glittering gold.

Honour was not there!

CHAPTER XXXV

THE MAN WHO HAD NO FEAR

JACK was deeply chagrined and disappointed to find Honour gone, but he was not alarmed. It would have been easy for her to leave the house by the back way which they had used to come in, without being seen or heard by him. He stood for a moment in the empty room, telling himself that the girl's dread of the expected scene with Charteris had got the better of her, and, rather than "play the eavesdropper," as she had called it, she had broken her promise and run away before he had returned from the front door, bringing his companion. The dramatic effect on which he had counted so much was ruined, and for him to inform her of Charteris's confession would not be at all the same as hearing it from the murderer's own lips. He felt that Honour had humiliated him before the man over whom he had hoped to triumph; but suddenly it occurred to him that he might yet save himself. Charteris need not know that the girl was gone.

Harned turned away and walked back into the next room, where Ronald was waiting for him. He shut the glass door, and then said, slowly: "Miss Brooke has not fainted, but she does not wish to see or speak to you. Later she will let you know, through me, what she has decided to do."

"Miss Brooke need not fear that I shall try to escape the consequences of the confession which I have made—not to you, but to her," said Ronald. "She will know where to find me when I am wanted. Are there any other questions which she wishes you to ask? There are some which I should have to refuse to answer, but if there are any which concern me alone, I—will answer if I can."

“There is one question,” returned Jack. “How did you kill her father?”

“I struck him under the chin, knocking him down. He fell on the back of his head, and was dead on the instant.”

“You had no grudge against him?”

“None.”

“Did you strike in self-defence?”

“No.”

“In defence of someone else, or someone else’s interests, perhaps?”

“That is one of the questions which I do not choose to answer, even to Miss Brooke. I have made my confession. I killed a man, and I am willing to die for it. But there is no power on earth which can force from me details which, for certain reasons, I am determined never to give.”

“Very well,” replied Harned. “Let it rest there for the time being. I must have a talk with Miss Brooke, and after that you will hear from us. Though you have committed a great crime, I do not believe that you are dead to all sense of honour. I accept your word that you will not try to escape the consequences of your sin. I will write or send to you at Oswell Road. That, I suppose, is the place you meant when you said that Miss Brooke would know where to find you?”

“Yes, that is the place I meant,” answered Ronald.

“We do not wish to keep you any longer, then,” said Jack.

The two men bowed to each other, and with one involuntarily glance at the glass door behind which he believed Honour to be waiting, Ronald went out.

In a way, he had broken his promise to Mr. Willoughby; but it seemed to him that any other course than the one he had just chosen would have been impossible, and as he had taken all the blame upon himself, and would always do so, whatever happened, there was no danger for others beside himself. Honour had somehow come

to suspect him, even if she had not more than suspicion to act upon, and he could not lie to her. Now that she knew, instead of being crushed under the weight of her hatred and horror, as he had believed he would be should she learn the truth, his heart was lighter, though very cold. He felt curiously calm and numb to all sensation as he left River House, where his youth had been murdered with Nevill Brooke.

It was unlike his ideal of Honour that she should have sent for him to come there, and have had him put to the torture, while she watched as a Roman lady of old might have held her thumb down for the death of a wounded gladiator in the arena. But she had had the right, he said to himself, dully, to extort the truth from him in any way she could, and it would be monstrously unjust for him to blame her for what she had done. At least she would understand now why he had seemed unappreciative of all her sweet kindness in the past. She would give him credit, perhaps, for what he had suffered in trying to repulse and finally in accepting her friendly advances. But then, in all probability, she would not think of his sufferings. What room could there be in her heart for pity of the man who had killed her father? So Ronald went back to Oswell Road, which he thought of desolately as "home."

He had forgotten his latch-key, and was obliged to ring. The one man in the "mission" who had ever shown any signs of gratitude opened the door for him, and gazed sidelong at his pale, drawn face with curiosity that was not unsympathetic. The man's name was George Effingham, or so, at least, he chose to be called in Oswell Road.

"You do look bad, sir," he remarked. "Is there anything I can get for you? A drop of brandy, perhaps."

"No, I thank you," answered Ronald, absent-mindedly; but the man followed him into the little sitting-room—empty at this hour—where he wandered mechanically.

"You may think, sir, there isn't any in the house," went on Effingham. "But, bless you, there's plenty. I

know you don't drink, anyhow where we can see you, and spirits are forbidden ; but, of course, you know perfectly well that all the chaps who are in good work have it on hand. They know *you* don't object, and it's only to throw wool in the eyes of the public. But you look to need something now, sir."

Ronald listened at first, scarcely taking in the meaning of the words ; but as the man talked on, it was as if an impatient hand, shaking him by the shoulder, waked him from a heavy doze. "Throw wool in the eyes of the public ?" he repeated, in surprise and disgust. "Do you know what you are saying, Effingham ?"

"Oh, I know well enough !" retorted the other, lapsing into sulkiness. "I never said nothing before, but you looked so queer, it struck me you might have had bad news, and we'd been blown on."

"Really, I don't know what you are talking about," exclaimed Charteris, wearily. "I've always liked you, Effingham. You seemed to be almost the only one who, among all the men, had any friendly feeling for me, but——"

"That's it, sir ! It's just because I have friendly feeling that the look of you worried me, and I wanted to do something if I could. I didn't see how a bit of frankness could hurt for once, when I said that about the drink. Of course"—and he lowered his voice mysteriously—"if the public got wind that we weren't a set of angels, the police would be down on us like a shot. We have to play the game for what it's worth, and a nice little game it is, for all of us ; just like the Master and his wonderful dodges. We have to keep true to him, or where would we be, from you down to the lowest of the lot, sir ? And it was part of the agreement none of us should ever say a bloomin' word to you that the bobby at the end of the street mightn't hear. But if you're in any trouble, sir, either with the Master himself or outside, if I could help you I would—that's all."

Ronald heard the man to the end, his eyes fixed sternly

upon him at first, then questioningly, then blankly, at last with a quick, flashing light of comprehension. But it was not a pleasant light.

“ ‘ A bit of frankness ! ’ ” he quoted. “ I should like a bit more, now we’re on the subject, if you please, Effingham. How would you, between ourselves, define the ‘ game ’ that we’re all playing here ? ”

Effingham, who was standing near the door, which he had closed, tiptoed over to it, and peeped out into the passage before he answered.

“ I don’t know as it’s hardly safe, sir, to put it into words, ” he said. “ Walls have ears, and if the Master knew that I was talking him over with you—— ” The man paused, and drew one finger across his throat at the same time making a grim sound with the tongue between the teeth, as if imitating a death-gurgle. “ Why, ” he went on at last, in an ominous whisper, “ anything might happen. There are plenty to do it. ”

“ I have been under the impression, ” said Ronald, “ that if there were a Master here at all, I was master. ”

“ Under the man himself, sir, none of us doubts that you are, ” replied Effingham, gravely. “ Some of the men say you’re paid a big salary, but I’ve taken the liberty of studying you a bit more than the others has, and I’ve come to a certain opinion. ”

“ What is that ? I want you to tell me, Effingham. ”

“ Well, if you give me leave to speak frankly, sir, what I think is this : It struck me from the first you wasn’t the man to go in for a business like this for a mere matter o’ money. Says I to myself, the gov’nor is in the Master’s power somehow, and he’s forced to the work. He ain’t the kind of chap to dirty his hands with it otherwise; But they’re tied ; that’s what it is—they’re tied by the Master. ”

“ You think I’d be an honest man, then, if I could ? ” asked Ronald, even paler than before. And he could be very pale now, for he was fast losing his South African tan;

"I do think so, sir," insisted Effingham, earnestly, "and so would I be. I was on with the Master before, for another job, and I got a year's hard for it. But I never peached. Bless you, nobody ever does peach on the Master. His life wouldn't be worth an instant's purchase if he did; you must know that as well as I do. Why, even the police, if they think they've got a finger in one of his pies, take it out again quicker than it went in. Every man who ever got seriously on his track, in the last ten years, disappeared and was never heard of again; or else something queer happened to him, and he was the victim of an accident. A lot of the force are in his pay, so that he can count on having certain streets safe. Nobody he ever got in his web crawled out again; and yet, sir, if you're tired of this sort of work, and want to break free, I'm with you if I die for it."

"You consider the work unworthy of an honest man, then?" said Ronald, still very quietly.

"Why, of course, no honest man could do it, sir, because the very doing of it would make him dishonest, if he hadn't been before, begging your pardon. I don't wish to hurt your feelings, sir, but you asked me the question."

"Yes, and I wanted a frank answer. Let us have a talk about this, Effingham, while we're alone here together. It's getting late, and presently some of the men will be dropping in. Tell me what, in your opinion, is the worst thing about this business of mine—about which, by the way, you were right in one particular—I am not working for pay."

"I was somehow sure of that. Well, sir, what do I think the worst part? Why, if it comes to that, I suppose it's bringing in the chaps who might have stayed straight if it hadn't been for you."

Ronald forgot himself at that—forgot that he was endeavouring to get information without giving any in return. "Good heavens! What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Mean, sir? There's a few chaps, you know, that have either been sentenced unjustly, or, anyhow, for a first

offence, and have, perhaps, been making up their minds while they were in prison that they wouldn't do nothing likely to shut them up again. Well, then, sir, you got hold of 'em. You offer them a home till they can shift for themselves, and you send them to the old parson, who, some of us think—though nobody knows for certain—to be the Master himself. He could give the devil lessons in slyness, sir, and he knows, does the parson, the minute he claps eyes on a fellow, whether he's the sort for his money or not. He plays with the fish a bit, and if he's worth landing, lands him; if not, he sends him off on some wild-goose chase or other; or perhaps spends a few shillings to get rid of him entirely. Now, with me, when you come across me, sir, I'd been trying for honest work; the old ways had sickened me. But it had got out that I was a prison bird; nobody would give me anything to do, and the charitable associations I'd applied to at last wouldn't look at me. I'd been sleepin' out for a week, and starved for three days, when I fell in with you. I'm hanged if I didn't believe in you for the genuine article at first, sir. Says I to myself, 'This gentleman's about as near the angels as a man can be,' and I was ready to worship you. I came here, and, thinks I, 'It's heaven!' Then you sent me packing to the parson; and—I knew. I tell you, it was a blow, sir! But I saw that Fate, as they say, was too strong for me. The Master had put out his hand, and drawn me in. I didn't make any more bones about it, and, as you know, I have night work, and help you here at the house in the daytime, when I've had my morning nap."

"I have never asked what your work was," said Ronald. "I have never asked any of the men. That has been part of my understanding with the 'parson,' as you call him. But I should like to know now what yours is, if you will tell me."

Without speaking, Effingham took a handful of coins from his pocket. There was gold, mixed with silver, and the sight of it would have surprised Ronald if anything

could have surprised him now. With clever-looking taper fingers Effingham separated certain of the coins from the others. He pushed one sovereign out of four, one half-crown, and two shillings away from among the others which he left lying in the hollow of his palm. "That's what I do," he said, almost sullenly, and yet with a certain queer pride. "There's only two others in England that can touch me at it, and they're both working for the Master now."

"I'm not quite sure that I understand," answered Ronald. "This money——"

"Look close, sir." Effingham broke into the slight pause. "Do you see any difference?"

Ronald did look close, and shook his head. "I see nothing remarkable about any of the coins, except that several of the gold pieces and most of the silver seem fresh from the Mint."

Effingham chuckled. "Only those three"—he pointed to the coins he had pushed up towards his fingers—"ever saw the Mint. Now you understand? I work well, but I don't work fast. Cribbs and Arnold pass most of the stuff. Some the Master takes for himself, but that's not often. If anything went wrong, he could easily pretend to have been deceived. If you had been drawing a salary from him, for instance, sir, it would have been as well to be careful. It would have been like him to play you a trick. I don't go in for making paper, but there's others that do."

"The Master has various kinds of employment to offer?"

"I should think he had, sir. All's fish that comes to his net. Why, in his way, he owns London. It's a kind of Crime Trust, his business. There aren't many things going he doesn't work, from schools for pickpockets to spiritualistic mediums. You can't help respecting such a man, and yet I'd bless the day when I could get clear of him if there was any chance of decent work. This sort

of life's too wearing. Not but what you don't do your best to make us comfortable, and a good best it is. Only you can't give a man a mind at ease. This is a good place from the men's point of view, though, of course, most of the fellows are always coming and going, never with you for long. But as for the Master, it's better still for him. He ought to value your services. There's some men you've brought in—some of the most valuable, like me, for instance, though I do say it as shouldn't—he would never have got if it hadn't been for you."

"Is it so, indeed?" asked Ronald, sadly. "There are, then, men who would not be criminals if it had not been for me. And this is what I have called my atonement! I think the best thing I can do is to go and kill myself. Yet"—and he finished his sentence under his breath—"I can't do that, since now my life no longer belongs to me. It is Miss Brooke's, to do with as she pleases, and I have no right to rob her of a living revenge."

It was Effingham's turn not to understand. He stared blankly at Charteris. "I don't know what you mean by an atonement, sir," he said, "unless you're talking about being in the Master's power. I can well believe that. You're not the first gentleman, I should say, that he's tried to ruin—and succeeded, too."

"It is you who have shown me how far I am in his power," answered Ronald. "But it shall go no farther. Effingham, I am grateful to you for what you have told me to-day, and I owe you something, not only in return, but to atone for the harm I have unwittingly done you. My God, if you were the only one!"

"If you hadn't taken on this job, I daresay somebody else would, and things might have been worse," said Effingham, remorsefully.

"Now I know," went on Ronald, scarcely hearing the other's words, "why all the men in my houses have treated me so strangely. I looked—conceited fool that I was!—for a little gratitude. I found myself despised. No wonder. I am only astonished that some of them didn't

kill me when—as they thought—they found me out: Heaven knows I wish they had—for my own sake.¹¹

“You’ll make me sorry I talked to you, sir,” said Effingham.

“Don’t be sorry. If it were in me to be glad of anything, I should be glad of that beyond all other things. Effingham, let us get out of this together! But, no! What am I thinking of?—selfish brute that I am! I’ve drawn the others in, and I can’t go out without giving every poor fellow a chance. Look here, my man. I don’t see why you should believe me, but I’m innocent, and somehow I want you to know it. I swear that I did not know I was playing into the hands of a criminal. I have believed in Mr. Willoughby, the ‘parson,’ as you say you believed in me at first. I thought I was doing a little good in the world. All the money I had I staked on that belief. Instead, if you have been telling the truth, and before Heaven I believe you have, I have been giving my whole time, my whole income, my whole self, to the service of the most infamous wretch living.¹²

“You didn’t know, sir? You swear you didn’t know?”

“I swear I didn’t know. I thought the man a saint, and blamed myself because I could not like him.¹³

“Then, sir, you and I must put our heads together and outwit him if we can, though I don’t see how it’s to be done, and I daren’t have much hope. As for the other men, we must let them drown—we must let them drown.¹⁴

“I shall not let them drown,” said Ronald, “if my arm can pull them out.¹⁵

“I tell you,” cried Effingham, “it’s no good. Worse than no good. He’ll kill you.¹⁶

“Personally, I should thank him for that,” Ronald answered. “When a man has nothing to live for, he has nothing either to fear.¹⁷

* * * * *

Jack Harned had no doubt whatever that Honour had gone home, and he was hurt and angry. It was to him as

if she had struck him in the face, or flung him an insult in words. For her secret departure, in spite of her promise, was like saying, "Your plan is really too dishonourable for me. On second thoughts, I can have nothing to do with it; and as evidently you are not fitted to understand what is in my mind, I will simply go away, and save the trouble of arguing with a person of inferior moral sense."

Jack was very young, and his worship of Honour Brooke was the first real love he had ever known for a woman. He had been proud of his detective cleverness and the dramatic scene he had arranged, although he knew, deep down in his heart, that his wits had been stimulated more by jealousy of Ronald Charteris than genuine zeal to convict Nevill Brooke's murderer. Now all was spoiled, for he was sure that Honour's passionate desire to avenge her father's fate would not burn fiercely enough to deliberately destroy Charteris in its flames. His one consolation was that, whatever might now be his goddess's opinion of himself, she could not let herself love Ronald Charteris—at least they were separated for ever. But that advantage was for the future; and at the present moment Jack Harned was in a boyish fit of sulkiness—all the blacker because of his wild love for the girl he believed ungrateful.

His impulse was to follow her home, find out how much she had stopped to hear, and supply all details which were lacking. But he was sullenly determined not to yield to the impulse. Honour had thrown him over, and she deserved to suffer for it—she *should* suffer for it. At all events, he would not go near her until she sent for him, and begged to be told everything. Then, of course, he would grant her request, but she should see that he was hurt, and that it was her place, not his, to ask for pardon.

Jack was in a strange mood, a kind of exaltation, such as some drunkards feel. After the scene with Ronald Charteris, to go tamely home seemed too flat an anticlimax. A grim thought came to him, and caught his

wild fancy. He could hear Charteris's voice making confession. He seemed again to hear him tell how he had killed Nevill Brooke, and buried the body in one of the cellars under the old house. What if, after all, the story were not true, and Charteris were shielding someone else? Jack's experience of life had been wide and very varied. He knew men who had confessed crimes which they had never committed. They had done so either for the sake of others, or to make themselves the central figures in a great sensation.

"I must know whether or no his story is true," Jack said, grimly, to himself, standing alone in the shuttered room. "If the body is really there, in the place he described to me, that would prove, anyhow, that he wasn't trying to put me off, and gain time for someone he wanted to warn. By Jove! it will be a terrible task, but I'll do it—and I'll do it alone. I'll find out if Nevill Brooke's murdered body does lie here in the cellar of this house, and if he died from a blow on his head."

Having decided, Harned stood still for a few moments, thinking. Then he raised his head alertly, as if his mind were thoroughly made up; and, going back to the adjoining room, he closed the shutters which he had opened a little while ago, to let in the daylight. He fastened them again exactly as they had been before, and, threading his way through the many rooms and intricate passages, he locked and barred the front door which had admitted Ronald Charteris.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE MAN IN THE STAGE-BOX

LITTLE Kitty Carlin did not forget her interview with Jack Harned, "the young man from everywhere, who had done everything," and was pleased with the compact they had made to work together as "partners" for Honour Brooke and against Loris St. Leger. She had never seen anyone who had interested her so much as Jack did, and she found herself thinking of him a great deal. There was, she told herself, something haunting about his face and strong, magnetic personality.

Before they parted on the day of their meeting at Lady St. Leger's house, they had exchanged addresses. Jack had told Kitty where he lived, and the little actress had told him what towns were to be her next "stands" on tour. In case anything worth communicating turned up, they had agreed they would write to each other.

In the company with which she was playing was an actor who professed to have known Loris St. Leger years ago in England, and told queer stories of him. These stories Kitty promptly repeated in black and white to Jack Harned, ostensibly because he was to judge whether it would or would not be best to pass the tales on to Honour, but really (as the odd little creature knew in her own heart) because it piqued her imagination to establish a correspondence with him.

Hardly had she been five minutes in Jack's society when she had made up her mind that he was certainly in love with Honour, and she was sorry for him, because she did not believe that Honour would ever care for him in the same way. Nevertheless, Kitty was dimly con-

scious that she did not really want Honour to care. There was a kind of fascination in pitying a man like Harned.

She was surprised at herself because her heart beat quite fast when she found an answer from him at the theatre as soon as an answer could come. Kitty Carlin was not used to having her pulses quicken because a man had written her a letter. She received many letters from men, some of whom she had never seen, telling her that she was the most charming creature on earth, and laying their hearts at her feet, which was, perhaps, partly the reason why Kitty affected to despise men. Nevertheless, she thrilled at sight of Jack Harned's name at the end of a short but characteristic letter. She liked the handwriting, and she liked the faint fragrance of smoke which (she probably imagined) still hung about the paper. Several times as she "made up," and dressed for her part, she re-read what Jack had to say, and when she had been warned by the call-boy that the time was coming for her first scene, she ran back from the door, caught up the letter, which she had left in a handkerchief-case on her dressing-table, and slipped it inside the low bodice of her stage gown.

Never, the girl thought, had she played her part so well, and she told herself, almost superstitiously, that Jack Harned's letter was the inspiration. Far back in the stage-box sat a man who looked at her continually, and in her electric mood she felt her eyes like magnets. It was against Kitty's principles to look out into the audience, for she was a little artist, and made it a rule to think of the region beyond the foot-lights as if it were a wall of the house in which she was living. Nevertheless, she could not cease to be conscious of the man in the stage-box. "How he looks at me!" she thought. "His eyes are sharp as Röntgen rays. I hope he can't tell that I'm idiot enough to have a man's—almost a strange man's—letter over my heart, for the first time in my life."

There were four acts in the play, and at the end of the third a note was brought to Kitty's dressing-room by the stage-door keeper. The bearer had said that he was a

very old friend of Miss Carlin's, and was anxious for an answer at once. Kitty guessed that a goodly tip had been placed in the man's hand at the same time as the letter, otherwise the stage-door keeper might have found it difficult to leave his post. The handwriting was unfamiliar, and she was not surprised when the very first words she read contradicted the sender's verbal statement.

“ Dear Madame,—I suppose I must call myself a stranger, but do not fear that this is to be a vulgar letter of ordinary compliments, such as you must often receive from strangers. I am not a theatre-goer; indeed, there are reasons why I should refrain from going to public places of amusement. I came here to-night because I saw a large framed photograph of you in front of this house to-day. Even so, it was not the beauty of your face which drew me—I confess that frankly. It was the resemblance to a friend of many years ago. She was also an actress, but I lost sight of her, and though I did all that a man could do to find her again, I failed. Now, twenty years later, I happen by chance upon her counterpart. I beg that you will let me meet you, and discover whether there is any connection beyond a chance resemblance between you and this long-lost friend of mine. May I call upon you, wherever you are staying, at any time convenient to you? But I beg that you will make an appointment soon. I have been very ill, and am still far from well. My doctor gives me little hope that I ever shall be well again, and I don't want to leave this world without knowing what you may be able to tell me. Lest you should still have any fear—having read so far—that I am attempting to impose upon you with a trumped-up story for the sake of making your acquaintance, I will tell you that I have passed the evening in the stage-box. You saw me there, I think—nay, I am sure, for more than once I was conscious of drawing your eyes to mine. Now you know that I am not a young man; and, if you are a judge of character, you will not think me one who would delight in playing a trick upon a pretty actress. If you

will spare me a few minutes for a talk, send back a line by the bearer. You need not even sign it if you do not choose. I will understand.—Yours faithfully,

“ H. KENNEDY.”

Kitty Carlin was pricked with curiosity. Luckily, she had not to “ go on ” for her next scene for some time, and she could take a moment or two for reflection. It was true that the man in the stage-box did not look like an ordinary “ masher.” He was of middle-age, and his statement concerning his health was borne out by what the girl remembered of his appearance. Never, she thought, had she seen so thin a man. His face was drawn and hollow, thin-lipped, high-cheek-boned—“ a tortured face,” Kitty had said to herself once, as she furtively glanced at it, seeing it dim and white in the shadow of the darkened box. His black hair, long, and inclined to curl, was powdered with white, as if he had stood bare-headed in a snowstorm. Pain and weariness looked out from the narrow grey eyes, set rather close together, under heavy brows ; and the absence of beard and moustache, instead of taking off several years from the man’s apparent age, made him seem older, more worn and haggard. Certainly he had not the appearance of a person who would frequent a theatre for the sake of an amusing play, or a pretty actress, Kitty decided ; and at the same moment, with her usual impulsiveness, she also decided to grant his request.

The girl was, she admitted to herself, “ dying to know ” what the man had to say to her, and the mystery surrounding her own past gave an added incentive to curiosity. What if she should find out something of which, through all these years, she had been ignorant ?

Hurriedly she wrote with pencil on the envelope which had contained the letter, merely giving her address, and the hour of noon next day as a time which would be convenient for a meeting.

Once during the next act she glanced at the stage-box.

The man was still there, his eyes fixed upon her, as before. As their eyes met, his face lighted up, and before the end of the play he was gone.

Kitty thought more than once of "H. Kennedy" when she had returned to the quiet little hotel where she was staying, and sat alone in her small private sitting-room, eating the bread and milk which invariably made up her repast on tour after the theatre. She often laughed when she heard people speak of the luxurious habits of actresses, and their midnight "champagne suppers," thinking of her jug of hot milk and plate of bread.

Again next morning, though her first thought happened to be of Jack Harned—whose letter had rested all night under her pillow, her second was of the man in the stage-box. Kitty seldom lay in bed very late, and to-day she was dressed by ten o'clock, and ready for her "constitutional," which, with the nightly bread and milk, helped to retain for her the complexion of a child. She had reached the door of the hotel, when the manager politely intercepted her, holding out a letter which had just arrived by hand. He had been on the point of sending it up to her room, when he saw her going out. As he gave the letter he indicated with a gesture the messenger who had brought it, and who was waiting for an answer.

Instantly Kitty recognised the handwriting, though she had seen it last night for the first time in her life. It was that of the man in the stage-box; but it looked curiously scrawling and unsteady, as if the pen had been held with trembling fingers. "Forgive me," began the short note inside. "I am very ill. I cannot come to you, but I cannot bear to give up the chance of seeing you. You are a young girl; I am an old man, and I may be dying. Will you trust me, and come to see me here at this hotel, the address of which you will see on the paper? The conversation I want to have with you may have an important bearing upon your life, past, present, and future. If you will come, let it be quickly.—Faithfully yours,

"H. KENNEDY."

Without stopping to think, Kitty walked across the square hall of the hotel to the messenger. "Tell the gentleman who sent you with this that I will be with him almost as soon as you are."²¹

The boy, who had on his cap, in gold letters, the name of the hotel which was on the letter, bowed, murmured thanks for a sixpenny-piece which Kitty had slipped into his hand, and went out with long strides that showed his sense of the errand's importance. The girl followed more slowly. She had heard of the hotel, which, though quiet, was one of the best in Manchester, and much more expensive than the one which her somewhat economical ideas of life had led her to select. She let the messenger arrive at his destination while she still remained at a distance. Then she walked on a little further, returned slowly, and five or ten minutes after the boy had gone in to deliver her message, she, too, entered the hotel, and asked for Mr. Kennedy, sending up her name—"Miss Carlin."²²

There was scarcely any delay before she was shown into a large private sitting-room on the first floor. On a sofa, propped up with cushions, reclined the man she had seen at the theatre last night. In the dark, Oriental dressing-gown which was wrapped round his thin figure, and with the strong morning sunlight shining full upon his face, he looked older and more haggard even than before. As the door was thrown open for Kitty, and her name announced, he attempted to rise, but fell back again with an expression of extreme pain on his worn features.

"You come!"²³ he exclaimed, in a voice which at once prepossessed the girl in his favour. "How very, very good of you to trust me!"²⁴

"It was not so much that, perhaps,"²⁵ answered Kitty, in her decided, birdlike way, "as that I have great confidence in my own capability to take care of myself. I was, besides, very curious. But I am sorry you are so ill."²⁶

"I had a sharp attack of rheumatic fever early in the spring,"²⁷ said the man. "It has left my heart weak, to put it mildly, and to-day I am rather worse than usual."

But don't be frightened, Miss Carlin. I do not intend to entertain you with a realistic death-scene this morning. You say you are curious, and that I have your curiosity largely to thank for your presence here. I, too, am curious. I want to know who you are."

As he uttered these words, leaning on his elbow among the soft cushions, he gazed up into Kitty's face with so strange, so intent a look that she felt herself magnetised by it:

"I don't know myself who I am," she stammered, "except that I'm Kitty Carlin, the actress."

"May I tell you who I begin to think you are?" he asked:

"Yes," the girl murmured, almost in a whisper.

"I think you are my daughter."

CHAPTER XXXVII

" A TRAVELLER NAMED NEVILL BROOKE "

IT was difficult to take Kitty Carlin by surprise. She was usually prepared for anything, or was, at least, able to appear so, and hide her real feelings if she chose. But now she lost self-mastery completely, and gazed wide-eyed at the speaker, with her lips apart, her colour gone.

" You—my father ? " she faltered. " Who—are you, then ? "

For a moment the man looked at her in silence, and his eyes were wistful. " I can't pretend that I'm a father to be proud of," he said. " If I tell you my real name I put myself absolutely in your power. You will know why when you hear it, for it has been enough before the public lately. I am Harvey Kane."

The blood sprang to Kitty's face, and with a little gasp she stifled the words which rose to her lips, for to have blurted them out to this pale-faced, suffering wretch would have been cruel, no matter what he might have deserved.

" You can—trust me," she stammered, instead.

" I'm sure of that. Now that I've put myself in your hands, perhaps I have the right to ask a few questions. It will be the best and quickest way of coming to an understanding. Will you tell me something about your mother—and your childhood ? "

" I hardly know anything to tell," said the girl. " I was an adopted child. Perhaps you've heard of Nelly Warren, who was the favourite burlesque actress of her day, about thirty years ago ? Well, she was past her prime, and had to go to Australia to make money, when

I first came into her life, ten years later. She was playing in Melbourne twenty years ago, when a girl who had once been her friend came to her lodgings with a little baby one night. When Nelly got back from the theatre she found them there, waiting. The girl was very ill. She had come over from England, hoping to get an engagement, and had failed, because she was unknown, and so unhappy that she was losing her beauty. She had taken a frightful cold, had exerted herself too soon after an attack of pneumonia, and—to make a long story short—she died that very night, at Nelly's lodgings, leaving the baby, and nothing beside. She had begun to tell Nelly how she had been secretly married and left the stage. She and her husband didn't get on, and after a quarrel she ran away from him, taking her little girl, only a few months old. She had engaged her passage to Australia on a certain ship, but at the last moment missed it. That ship was burned at sea, and as the girl's name—her old stage name—was on the passenger list, it was supposed that she, and probably her child, were burned with everybody else on board. Because she felt revengeful against her husband, she had let the mistake pass, and had sailed later under an assumed name. While she lay dying she repented, however, and tried to tell Nelly who her husband was, so that he might some day know the baby was alive. But death came before she could finish the story, and as Nelly Warren thought, from some things her friend said, that the husband must be a cruel man, not fit to be trusted with a little girl-child to bring up, she kept the baby herself, and never advertised or tried to find out who the man was. She was wrong, of course ; but it isn't for me to blame her, because I was that baby, and she was the only mother I ever knew. She brought me up as well as she could, used her influence for my advancement when I was old enough to go on the stage, and when she died, left me five thousand pounds—all the money she had saved up. I never knew the truth till she was on her death-bed ; then, poor dear, she asked me to 'forgive her,' as if it was not gratitude I owed her.

That was only three years ago, and it seemed too late for me to take any steps to find my father, so I just let things go as they had always gone. My mother's name was Katherine Clare, but till now I never knew my father.⁴⁴

"She told you the truth," said Harvey Kane. "Katherine Clare was my wife, and I loved her dearly. If she had stayed with me my whole life would have been different. I should have been a different man, and a better one. You will not believe that, perhaps; but, remember, you know only one side of the story. Oh, I am not going to blame her—far from that! We did quarrel. I was cruel to her, but it was not all my fault. My sister made trouble between us when she found out that I had made Katherine Clare, the actress, my wife. Our marriage had to be secret, on account of money which was coming to me from my father. He hated the stage, and would have cut me off with the traditional shilling if he had known the truth. Our secret was to have been kept till after his death. My sister found out, and went to Katherine, pretending that she had come from me. She thought the poor child an *intriguante* who had schemed to entangle a young man in good position who would be rich. There must have been a terrible scene, and immediately afterwards Katherine disappeared. For years I refused to forgive my sister; but afterwards, when my blood cooled, I relented, more for convenience sake than affection, and she became my housekeeper. Katherine was the one good influence in my life. She would have given me a home interest, and kept down my passion for speculation. It is to that I owe my ruin. Heaven knows, I had no intention at first of being dishonest. I woke up to find myself so one day, and in the hope of getting out of the mire, I waded deeper in. People thought, when I vanished last spring, that I had made myself rich, but I hadn't. I had only a few thousand pounds left out of the wreck. I went abroad, and hid myself successfully. My sister was never with me, though it was supposed that she was my companion. At first I disguised myself elaborately, but after that terrible seizure

with rheumatic fever, of which I just told you, I was so changed all that seemed necessary was to shave my beard and moustache, and let my hair grow long: I wanted to try the experiment of coming back to England, for I hated the thought of dying abroad; besides, I suspected, from some news I had had, that I might be missing a fortune, which I wanted, if possible, without too great danger, to get hold of. The one man I dared trust was in Manchester; therefore I came here, only to find that he had gone to America. Two days ago I arrived. No one has recognised or even suspected me. Walking back to this hotel yesterday, after discovering at my friend's office that he was absent, I saw your photograph in front of the theatre. Then I felt that some power stronger than myself had sent me to this place. I could not believe the marvellous likeness to Katherine Clare was a mere coincidence. I hoped for what I now know to be a fact—for though she was supposed to have been drowned on the way to Australia twenty years ago, it was not known whether or no she had sailed alone. There was a possibility, therefore, that the baby had not been with her, and though none of my efforts to solve that mystery ever succeeded, the idea that some day I might find my child has always been before me—a kind of *ignis fatuus*. Now I feel that the impression was a presentiment. I have found you, and I am glad. You have no cause to love me—I know that very well—still less to be proud of me. Yet I may be able to give you something which will compensate for many deficiencies in a father. I am going to die, but, unless I am mistaken, I can die leaving my daughter an heiress."

Kitty was silent. Harvey Kane watched her hungrily for a moment, and, when she did not speak, began again:

"Perhaps you are thinking that, if such a dishonest wretch as I left any money to his daughter, it would be her bounden duty to give it all up to his defrauded creditors; but wait until I have told you the story, and then you will see that perhaps you might conscientiously keep at least enough to be worth having. The difficulty is not so

much in making up your mind as to that, at present, however, as it is to lay hands on the money. Did you ever hear of a man—rather celebrated at one time—as a traveller—named Nevill Brooke ? ”

“ Yes,” answered Kitty, slowly, and her training as an actress stood her in good stead. Only a slight quiver of the nerves betrayed that she had ever heard the name before—so slight that it passed unobserved by the man’s keen eyes.

“ He was a client of mine,” Kane went on ; “ not a particularly profitable one, but a curious coincidence drew us together many years ago. It was a startling resemblance between an important chapter in his life story and mine ; and as you may need all the details concerning him and his past that you can possibly have, I will tell you Nevill Brooke’s secret. It was because of it, and for help in averting its evil consequences, that he first came to me for my advice as a solicitor. About two or three and twenty years ago he married a beautiful Spanish peasant girl whom he had met in his travels. She was an artist’s model, but a good girl, worthy enough of love. But the feeling he had for her was not love ; it was pity, and, perhaps, a passing fancy for her beauty. He was even at that time passionately attached to an English girl, above him in station, but he believed that she cared nothing for him—that his love was hopeless. So he married the Spanish girl in haste, and repented at leisure. He found her a bore ; she found him cold and, as she no doubt thought, cruel. Before they had been man and wife for three months, she left him ; and evidence was brought that she had committed suicide—drowned herself, in fact. She had left a letter for him, and though her body was not recovered, a hat and a shawl known to be hers were discovered by the bank of the river which she had indicated in her letter as the place she meant to choose for her death.

“ Very soon after, Brooke returned to England, learned that the girl he loved loved him also, and was ready to

sacrifice all ambition for the sake of being his wife. They became engaged, and the date of the marriage was announced, when the Spanish woman wrote to say she had read the news in the papers, and, for her boy's sake, would warn her husband against committing bigamy. This was a terrible situation for Brooke, but, like a sensible man, he told his fiancée the truth. He also tried to discover the whereabouts of his child, of whose existence he now heard for the first time, but failed to do so until, some months later, he heard through a Spanish priest of his wife's death. This time the news was reliable, and soon after he married the girl he loved. Needing legal advice, he was introduced to me by a mutual acquaintance. You can imagine, after my sad experience, how his story interested me. I did what I could to help him. We became friends, and remained so for years. Not long ago he engaged in a difficult and dangerous enterprise, in which I assisted him with money. If it succeeded, I was to have a share of what might prove a vast fortune. The thing was arranged as a sort of Tontine, and I had all details. Well, I supposed that it had failed. But, though I have not heard from or of him for many a month, I saw in an English paper not long ago, while I was still abroad, a paragraph which interested me. It concerned a man who had been a partner of my client's in the enterprise I spoke of. His name is Loris St. Leger."

This time Kitty did not try to hide her emotion. She gave a little eager cry, which brought the man's eyes to her face in surprised curiosity.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE MAN WHO KNEW

IT was dark when Jack Harned came out from the shuttered house behind the high wall. He felt ill, and worn, and utterly broken. Even the great draughts of fresh air which he drew greedily into his lungs did not give him back his strength and youth. It seemed to him that he could never feel young again. "Some men would have been driven mad—mad!" he muttered to himself, because of the sheer need to speak. And as he walked on, he made that last word keep time with his footsteps, repeating it over and over again, till it lost all sense for him—"Mad—mad—mad!"

For a long time—an hour, perhaps—he walked on thus, without any definite aim. He had missed his way, and knew not at all where he was, but he did not care. Hateful thoughts, without sequence, drifted through his clouded mind, like wan ghosts that turned terrible faces to stare at him as they passed. He lived through the afternoon once more, and did again the thing which he had had to do. Not yet was his task over. There was something else. He had made up his mind that it must be done to-night—by him, and alone. It was chemist's work. But one of the most intimate friends he had ever had was a chemist—an expert in such matters as this which Jack wished to prove for his own satisfaction. He had watched his friend's experiments; he had listened eagerly while each detail was explained. He had even helped; and once, to his great triumph, he had successfully carried out an experiment himself. He had liked that; not a qualm of sickness had come over him. But this was

different—God alone knew how different, and what it was going to cost him, after all that he had already suffered, in the awful search he had made. Remembering accurately the directions given by Ronald Charteris, he had found that for which he had searched. Down there, in the sub-cellar, he had come upon the hidden grave. It was there, too, he knew now, that the chattering baboon must have been concealed on the day when he and Honour Brooke had first met outside this strange house, and wondered at the elusive sounds. There was a ring in the wall, with a chain, and there were scattered remains of food. But it was not of this smaller discovery that Jack was thinking now—he had, in fact, well-nigh forgotten it.

He was asking himself if he could ever put away from before his eyes the sight of the poor body which that secret grave had yielded up to him—the body of the man he had loved best on earth, in whose place he would gladly have died.

Strangely enough, his dead friend's features were scarcely changed. This was hardly natural after such a lapse of time. The fact that it was so set him wondering—greatly wondering. Then he remembered how his chemist-friend had told him of a certain poison which, if administered before death, preserved the body almost as if it had been embalmed. The name of this poison was granil, and it was made from the root of an Indian plant greatly resembling tobacco in appearance. Its use had been known in India for many years, but it was comparatively lately that the knowledge had been brought to Europe. Jack had seen the poison in liquid form in a bottle in his old friend's possession. It was milky, slightly opalescent in strong lights, and semi-transparent. A dozen drops in a glass of wine would cause certain death within a few moments, half-an-hour at most—death with only one fierce pang of suffering as the poison stopped the heart. Tests to discover its presence in a corpse were easily made by an expert, even months after death. All this Jack Harned recalled when he knelt over the body of his dead protector, which

looked as if it had been turned to wax. Just such another waxen effigy had he seen once, in company with the expert in poisons. A doctor in Colorado had committed suicide by taking a large dose of granil, which was well known in the medical profession, though scarcely heard of yet outside.

He could not understand the strange resemblance between the dead man he had seen in Denver and the dead man who lay in the cellar of River House. He examined the head. There was no sign of an injury caused by a fall severe enough to kill; nor was the neck broken: Either Ronald Charteris must have deceived him, or was himself deceived. At the latter thought Jack Harned's nerves felt as if they had been jerked by a communicating wire. Charteris deceived! What if someone else had done the murder, and in some mysterious way made Charteris believe that he had killed Nevill Brooke? Because he hated to think that this might be true, Jack could not push the insistent idea from his mind. He had no wish to release Charteris from a burden of guilt, even though unjustly borne; far from that. Yet he was anxious to learn the truth without leaving a grain of remaining doubt.

There was a way in which he could learn it, thanks to those old experiments. He knew what to do. He had only to go and buy certain chemicals, and rub them into the waxen skin of the dead man. If the flesh turned bluish, and shrivelled into wrinkles, death had been caused by poisoning with granil.

This was the task which Jack had still before him when he came out from the shuttered house. He had determined on performing it that night, but now that he had left the dark and musty cellar, now that he was in God's air, all that was physical in him rebelled against going back. He felt that he would rather die than make the experiment which would prove the truth. Yet he would make it, if he went mad in doing it, there alone with the horror of the sight. Only, he must cool his spirit with

the calmness of the night before he immured himself again. And so he walked aimlessly, and lost the way, and did not care. At the end of an hour he was more himself. He came to a cab-stand, and took a hansom, telling the driver to go to the best chemist's in the neighbourhood. There he bought what he needed, showing nothing in his face of what he had suffered, save by a grey pallor which might have been partly the effect of the electric light in the shop. The right ingredients secured, he ordered the cabman to drop him at the "Hand and Key." There he fortified himself with a glass of cognac, and walked briskly to the River House.

By this time it was nearly midnight, but the lateness of the hour did not matter to Jack. He had found a lantern in the cellar where his grim task had been done, with a candle in it, only half burned out. He could guess who had used it last, and when. Mortlake Road was absolutely deserted. He walked on to the end, where River House was the only building. Unseen, he passed like a shadow, and, like a shadow noiseless, through the gate; so he padded across the unkempt lawn, through the long grass, and went in at the broken window.

When, an hour later, he came out again, he knew what he wished to know. Nevill Brooke had died by the Indian poison, granil.

* * * * *

How he got home, and let himself into his lodgings, he could not have told. He knew only that he was there, and that his hands had laid Nevill Brooke's body in its grave again. There it should lie, until Honour deigned to summon him, and to give him orders concerning Ronald Charteris. When those orders should come, what would he do? Jack asked himself. Yet, why trouble, since that was in the future? Besides, it was all too improbable that Honour would have turned against Charteris with

such severity as to wish him punished for her father's murder. He would say, perhaps, that what he had done, had been in self-defence. His words this afternoon had hinted that, though he had refused to tell more. In any event, Honour would elect to spare him. Let her think him guilty, then. So much the better. Perhaps, after all, he was guilty, even more so than he had confessed in that the crime had been premeditated. There was only that strange, vivid impression that the guilt of murder lay elsewhere. Impressions were nonsensical. No one but superstitious fools paid any attention to them, even when they were their own. If he—Jack—told that impression of his to Honour, she would snatch at it, and would go much farther than he had gone. She would be sure that Ronald Charteris was innocent, and because he had been misjudged, she would give him her heart in recompense. No, Jack said to himself; even if he knew that Charteris had not taken Nevill Brooke's life, he would still keep silence. He would speak only to save him from the gallows; and there was no danger for Charteris of such an end.

Towards morning Harned slept—the deep, dreamless sleep of physical fatigue and mental exhaustion. He slept on and on; and the church clock not far away had chimed out the quarter before noon, when a loud and long-continued knocking at his bedroom door wrenched him at last into waking.

“Mr. 'Arned! Mr. 'Arned!” his landlady's voice was distractedly calling. “Oh! do wake up! I'm so worried!”

Jack managed to answer in a thick voice, unlike his own: “What's the matter? What are you worried about? I'm all right, only—very tired.”

“I know, sir. It isn't that. I said you'd been out late, and were sleeping to make up for lost time. But the lady won't go away without seeing you. It seems there's something she wants you to tell her. The name I was to say was Lady St. Leger.”

Hardly was the name uttered, outside the closed door, when Lady St. Leger's voice spoke also.

"Mr. Harned, Honour is lost! She has not been back all night. I am half frantic. At last I thought of you, and came here. For Heaven's sake, tell me if you know anything about her!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE QUESTION BETWEEN HONOUR AND ST. LEGER

IN natures such as Loris St. Leger's decisions are formed quickly, when upon them may depend life or death. It was he who first saw Honour Brooke sitting in a chair against the wall, close to the glass door, in the shuttered room at River House. Instantly he had mentally reviewed all that he and his uncle had said to each other since they entered the room. He was certain that Honour could not have failed to hear all, and that, having heard, their fate lay in her hands should she go out of this house to freedom. From his point of view there was but one thing to be done, and, without the hesitation of a single second, he did it. With a touch on the arm of Kazan, he warned him to alertness. Then, before Honour had had time to be sure that she was discovered, St. Leger had pressed his right hand tightly over her mouth to prevent her from uttering a sound, and with the left arm slipped round her waist, had lifted her from the chair in which she sat.

With all her strength the girl fought to be free—to tear away the hand from her mouth and scream to Jack Harned for help. But the hand lay firm as a band of iron over her lips, and she was like a child in the grasp of Loris St. Leger.

“Quick!” he whispered to Kazan. “You heard that door shut? She’s not alone in the house. Somebody’s coming to her. We must go back by the way we came.”

His directions were not needed. Kazan understood the situation almost as soon as Loris did. Without a word, and without a sound, he crossed the room, touched a spring which slid back one of the panels in the wainscoting, and, without waiting for St. Leger to pass with his burden, darted through the narrow door which had opened in the wall. Three seconds later Loris had followed, with Honour Brooke in his arms. On the other side of the opening was a dark passage between two walls, and when St. Leger had moved a little to the left, Kazan, who had stood waiting at the right, keeping himself out of the way of the other on entering, slid the panel back into place. A slight “click” told him that it had fitted into its groove, and was fastened as firmly as if it had been one of the solid panels of the wall, which it exactly resembled.

This done, Kazan struck a match and lighted a small folding lantern which hung from a nail on the wall of the hidden passage. When the flame rose and burned clearly, he held the lantern high, so that Loris, who was now going slowly on ahead, could see to move without stumbling.

There was not far to go. The passage went straight on for a dozen feet; then—no doubt where the wainscotted room on the other side ended—it turned to the right. Here was the well of a stairway, ladder-like in its steepness and narrowness. This was a difficult bit for Loris to manœuvre, with the girl in his arms, for if he slipped, or the pressure of his hand over her mouth relaxed for an instant, she would take advantage of his awkwardness, no matter at what risk of a perilous fall. If she screamed, her voice could still be plainly heard in the room she had left, and though it would be difficult for those who heard a cry to tell whence it came, or to follow if they guessed, the alarm would be given, the hunt would be up; and that was a danger not to be defied. St. Leger

braced himself for success, and set his foot steadily on the first round of the steeply-descending staircase. Somehow, as he went plodding down, step by step, he thought of the underground temple, and the man who had been stabbed by the treacherous priest on the stairway. Lal Singh had avenged that man's death; soon afterwards Lal Singh also had died—by accident, it had appeared. Even Nevill Brooke had believed it an accident, and—like a fool—had been sad, instead of congratulating himself that there was one less in the great Tontine. St. Leger wondered why he thought of this now, and why the thought was so grim. He had an ugly sensation that at any instant a knife might enter his back, and though he trusted his uncle as much as he trusted anyone, because their interests were the same, he was glad for more than one reason when he had safely reached the foot of the ladder-like stairs. Here there was space for the other man to pass him. Kazan did so, and opened a door, which admitted them into a small, oblong cellar, reeking with damp, and smelling like a vault. It was unlighted and unventilated, save for a grating, not twelve inches square, in the low ceiling, through which stole a greenish ray of twilight, that evidently penetrated a pent-roof of tangled grass. This place was below the level of the cellars, and precisely resembled the subterranean room which Jack Harned was to visit an hour or two later; but it was not the same.

“Now, what do you mean to do with her?” asked Kazan.

“That depends upon herself,” was St. Leger's answer, meant for Honour as well as for his uncle. “In any case, it's not safe to discuss things with her here. Whoever her companions may be, they will wonder where and why she has gone away, and that grating there would let sounds be heard up in the garden. Some queer story might get round, and we don't want that.”

“I don't believe that anything could be heard distinctly enough to give a clue,” said Kazan.

“ I know it can, for when I left poor old Mephistopheles in the other room which you know, to wait till his place could be ready elsewhere, I distinctly heard his chattering as I went away from the house. But nobody was in it then, or likely to come even inside the gate, so it didn't much matter. Now, you must remember, someone is on the look-out, and we must run no unnecessary risks.”

“ It's because I think we ought to find out, while we can, who the 'someone' is, that I would suggest your staying here with the girl, while I go back and listen at the panel.”

“ Whatever happens, far safer not to go back. They will find nothing. We must get her out of this, for I want a talk with her as soon as possible. How about Warehouse No. 4 ? Is it free and available ? ”

“ Free till to-morrow night, and safe enough. But it will take half-an-hour to get there as we shall have to go.”

“ No matter. I am equal to it. Let us start now.”

Kazan opened another door—a common door, roughly knocked together, as if by the hand of an amateur. It led into a dark, tunnel-like passage, such as can be found, half blocked up, under more than one very old house in Hammersmith, Canonbury, or the neighbourhood of Hampstead Heath. Kazan went first, with the lantern, and St. Leger followed close on his heels, his head bent to avoid knocking against the arched brick ceiling, which was slimy with dampness, and had thin streaks of dark green moss to outline each ancient brick. The floor, too, was slippery, and Loris's feet nearly slid from under him once or twice. But he steadied himself without a fall, and went always doggedly on. At last, when they had left the cellar under River House thirty or forty yards behind them, he removed the hand which had sealed Honour's lips. Long ago the girl had ceased to struggle for freedom, made certain by experience that her strength was nothing against his. Now she drew a long breath, and turned her neck

from side to side with a sense of relief, for it had been forced back by the savage pressure of the man's hand, and the muscles ached.

"You may scream as much as you choose now, my darling," said St. Leger. "No one can hear you. I am going to set you down on your own feet, and let you walk the rest of the way. I am very sorry to coerce you, but you will have to come, you know. It will only be undignified to resist us."

"Where are you taking me?" asked Honour.

"To a place of mine where we can talk freely, without any fear of being disturbed. You need not be frightened. I have told you already how valuable you are to me, and if you are at all amenable to reason, no harm shall touch you. I am sure you *will* make up your mind to be reasonable."

Honour was silent. She was on her own feet now, but St. Leger had slipped his hand through her arm. Once she tried to surprise him by twisting her arm from his grasp. If she had succeeded, she would have darted back, trusting to find her way to River House, where she hoped that already Jack Harned was searching for her; but instantly the man's fingers closed on her tender flesh like a steel vice. She did not repeat the attempt, and in not much more than half the time prophesied by Kazan, they reached the end of the passage and a ladder.

Kazan was still in advance; and St. Leger pushed the girl between them, so that, in mounting, she would have a man in front and behind. At the top of the ladder was a trap-door, which Kazan, with some difficulty raised, and stepping out of the narrow well to a level space above, stood ready to assist Honour, whether she wished to accept his help or not. He took her by the shoulders as she reached the fourth or fifth round below the top of the ladder, and lifted her, not too gently, to the floor on which he was standing, and on which he had set down his lantern.

She looked hastily about, and saw that she was in

another cellar, in which numerous large wooden packing cases were ranged against the walls. In the middle of the room, standing alone, was the largest packing-case of all—almost big enough, she thought, vaguely, to hold a small billiard-table. Kazan kept his hand cautiously upon her arm until St. Leger had shut down the trap-door again. Then, when the latter was free to look after her, he went to one of the packing-cases which stood against the wall, pulled off the cover, which had apparently been held in place with an innocent-seeming nail or two, and switched on an electric light concealed inside the big box. The darkness was chased away by the clear illumination, and Honour saw everything distinctly. High in the cellar wall she perceived two small apertures, originally intended, no doubt, for light and ventilation, but into each one some dark, solid substance had been fitted, which might have been a sheet of iron or slate. Evidently it was essential that what took place in this cellar should be neither overheard nor spied upon by outsiders; and Honour was sure that the electric light would not have been turned on if a single ray could penetrate beyond those two dark screens.

“I should be glad, uncle, if you would now leave us alone together,” suggested St. Leger.

Kazan laughed in the white beard of his disguise, and shrugged his shoulders. He crossed the cellar, opened a door, and vanished behind it.

“Now,” said Loris, with a gentleness which struck the girl ominously—just as she had shuddered sometimes at sight of a great crouching cat, patiently waiting the right moment to spring—“now, I must ask you to tell me how much you overheard of our conversation in that room at River House.”

“I heard everything that was said,” Honour answered. “You must know that, without my telling.”

“I should hardly have believed you if you had told me you did not hear. But I cannot imagine your telling an untruth, any more than I could have fancied your

father being a coward. What impression did you gather from what you heard there ? ”

“ I gathered that you and your uncle—if he is your uncle—were both criminals. You said that either one could hang the other. I believe, from what you said, that one or both of you murdered my father, and stole for yourselves a fortune which he was bringing home to me.”

“ So, that is your ‘impression ? ’ You are brave to speak it out to me—here. But your father’s daughter could not be otherwise than brave. I can’t deny, after what you heard, that we know certain details of your father’s fate. I hinted as much to you before, in an indirect way, hoping to gain something to my own advantage for information I could give. But there is a wide difference between the man who has knowledge of, and the man who commits a crime. It was your hero, Sir Ronald Charteris, who struck the blow.”

Honour gave a cry of horror and incredulity. “ That is not true ! ” she exclaimed. “ I would never believe it. Is it you who told Jack Harned some horrible story of the sort ? ”

“ Ah ! ” ejaculated St. Leger. “ It was Harned who was with you at River House just now.”

“ Yes,” said Honour. “ It was he.”

“ Why did he bring you there ? ”

“ Because we had both been warned by my father to enquire for him at River House if he did not come home at the close of the first week in April. Mr. Harned believed that we might learn something at that house concerning the mystery of my dear father’s disappearance. He had asked Sir Ronald Charteris to meet us there. That is why I think you must have tried to deceive him, as you would deceive me. But it is monstrous. Who could believe Sir Ronald Charteris a murderer ? ”

“ You are prejudiced in his favour. There is only one thing which can blind a woman’s eyes. But we will not talk of him. The question is between you and me. You

see now that, to secure my safety, I must have you for my wife. Prudence and love go hand in hand for once. You gave me no decision the other day when I offered to serve you—for a price. Now, we can have no more delays. As my wife, our interests will be one. As my wife, I can trust you. To put it bluntly, you must marry me."

"I will not."

"Then all my love cannot save you. Next to myself, I care for you. But even more than I love you, I love myself. You must take me for your husband, Honour Brooke, or you have done with this world, and must make ready for the next."

CHAPTER XL

THE WATCHERS

IF Jack Harned had been asked, he would have said that no human being save Ronald Charteris knew that he had taken Honour Brooke to River House, unless it were the rather stupid cabman who had put the girl down in Mortlake Road in time for the appointment. Even this last person, if found and questioned, could not have stated positively that his fare's destination had been River House, for she had seen Jack waiting, walking up and down the lonely road, and had stopped the cab and got out before reaching the gate in the high wall that surrounded the old garden.

But in making such a statement Jack would have been mistaken. There were two men in London who knew almost as much about Honour Brooke's movements as she knew herself. Patient as the god at the mill which grinds "exceeding small," cautious, persistent, quietly determined, they waited, watched, and followed the girl day by day. To do this was part of the business which had brought them to England, from a country very far off. They had been chosen for the mission because their knowledge of French and smattering of English fitted them for the accomplishment of an errand in which they had less personal concern than certain others, unfortunately not so well equipped. Great honour and great reward would be theirs if they succeeded in doing what they had been sent to do; and they had no doubt of ultimate success, though during the few weeks since their arrival in London they had met with rebuff and failure. They could take no one into their confidence—all their work must be done alone.

In a land very far off, the order to which they belonged, as novices, had been robbed of jewels of great price and a fetish which even all the lost jewels could not have bought from those to whom it had belonged for almost countless generations. The loss had not been discovered immediately, and when it had been, owing to the strange attendant circumstances, it was difficult to trace the robbers. After a time, however, a glimmer of light had penetrated the darkness. Certain travellers had been followed. One, a Chinese trader, had died, perhaps naturally, perhaps by poison, and the man who for some days or weeks had journeyed with him had contrived to disappear so cleverly that he had not again been tracked by those who followed. There was, however, another man upon whom suspicion had fallen. Once or twice he was on the point of capture, but escaped, and having found his way out of the sacred country of Thibet to India, he had reached Europe, and it had been ascertained that he had gone from France to England; but, beyond that one fact, nothing more was known of him save that his name was Nevill Brooke and that he had a daughter living with a lady of some position, in London.

The man himself, and all trace of him, had vanished. But it was simple to watch the daughter, and reasonable to suppose that, if he were in hiding anywhere, some day he would be found—through her. Meanwhile, one thing was certain—a thing of importance beyond all others to those who watched and waited. She had in her possession, and wore flauntingly, the sacred emblem whose absence brought down a curse upon the order to which, as novices, the two dark-faced, patient strangers belonged.

If it had been possible, one or both of these men would have stolen into the house where the girl lived, in the night, and taken from her the fetish, even if they had to take her life with it. But the house was in a much frequented and important street, well lighted, and well guarded in the dark hours. Several attempts had been

thwarted ; and one, made in desperation, which aimed at seizing the jewel from its wearer's throat in broad daylight, had also ended disastrously. After this last affair, it had been thought well to lie quiet for a time, lest suspicion should have been aroused ; and, according to the theory on which these men acted (less for their own sakes than for others), precaution must always be held the better part of valour.

Nevertheless, they had not been idle. Honour Brooke had not once left home, either alone or attended, that the Watchers did not know. They hoped that, sooner or later, their chance to take from her the fetish would come, and, when it came, she should not go without telling them where her father was hidden.

But Honour Brooke's comings and goings had never favoured the Watchers' plans, until the afternoon when she went out to meet Jack Harned at River House. They had taken a couple of rooms in a house leading off Park Lane, and close to Lady St. Leger's. Their presence there, and their wanderings in street or Park, passed unquestioned, for the sight of dark-skinned foreigners is familiar in London streets. They had followed, in a four-wheeled cab, the hansom which took Honour to Mortlake Road. They saw her descend ; they saw her met by a man ; they saw the cab drive past theirs, which waited at the junction of Mortlake Road with another ; they saw the girl and her companion go in at a gate in a high wall. Then they dismissed their own vehicle, which they had kept standing under the pretence of a difficulty in making the proper change to pay their fare.

Seeing that the road was empty, and that there was apparently no fear of prying eyes, the two who watched had gone to the gate, and cautiously peeped in. From behind a thick screen of low-lying larches, grouped together so that it was possible to penetrate into the midst and stand inside a kind of thicket, the pair waited: From their shelter they saw Ronald Charteris arrive, and go away again: They expected to see Honour Brooke and

the man who was with her also go out, but time passed on, and they remained within. The impatience of even these Watchers was exhausted. Dusk was falling. The house and garden were silent: Not even a bird sang his good-night in the melancholy trees.

The Watchers came out from their hiding-place. They had talked together, and decided what to do. Now, one stationed himself behind another clump of bushes, closer to the front door; the other moved, lightly and noiselessly as the shadow he resembled in the deepening twilight, round the house. At the back he found the broken window, and through it went in. He was well used to lonely places and hidden ways. Soon he had visited every room, and last of all he found his way to the cellars. There, sounds which might not have reached ears less quick warned him that some discovery was his to make.

Jack Harned, working at his dreadful task, believed that God's eyes alone beheld him wrestling with it. But there was a Watcher who saw all. Standing in the darkness, the man who looked on believed at first that the man who worked was a murderer; that he had killed the girl he had brought to this house, and was burying her body. Afterwards, he knew that this was not true. When Jack rushed out into the streets, half-maddened by what he had done and seen, yet intent on returning for the experiment he meant to make, the Watcher stole from his spying-place, where he had crouched staring into the sub-cellar, and descended. Later, he went to find his comrade in the garden, and they talked for many minutes, discussing the events of the afternoon and evening, which they did not yet understand. Even when they both stood looking at the dead body of Nevill Brooke, which lay beside its open grave, they did not know what to think. If a crime had been done in this shuttered house, it was nothing to them, unless it should be proved that it was in any way connected with their secret interests. Their curiosity was excited—even their awe; but they were more concerned for the extraordinary disappearance of the girl who had

arrived this afternoon and had not gone out again—yet was to be found nowhere—than they were for the unknown dead man who for some mysterious reason had been taken from his hidden grave.

If there was one such sub-cellar under the strange old house, they argued, there might be others. With their characteristic patience and obstinacy, they determined not to go away until they knew what had been done with the girl—and the fetish.

They dared not steal the lantern Jack Harned had been using, lest he should return and miss it at a time inconvenient to them. Therefore, one remained to watch, and the other went out, walking nearly a mile before he reached the region of shops, and, by offering double money to a tradesman, who lived over his business place—closed for the night—he obtained a small lamp, with paraffin enough to burn for some hours.

Before Jack Harned returned to River House with the ingredients for making his experiments, the Watchers were on their way to a discovery for which he would have given all that he had on earth.

CHAPTER XLI

ST. LEGER'S MOVE

RONALD CHARTERIS had been a soldier, and his methods were the simple, straightforward methods of the soldier. He would have gone direct to Scotland Yard with the information he had received from Effingham, no matter what might be the consequences for himself, had it not been for the men who would be incriminated by such a course. Though some among them might have been innocent, or comparatively so, before they came to live in Oswell Road, they were certainly guilty now (if Effingham were to be believed), and as it was indirectly through him that they had fallen, he did not wish to deliver them over to the police. He decided to make an attempt to capture Willoughby—who was supposed to be the redoubtable "Master" of crime in London—without the interference of the police. If he succeeded, he would then call a meeting of the men at one of his houses in Oswell Road, tell them that the "Master" would need their services no longer, strive earnestly to work upon their better feelings, and offer them a chance to be honest. When the result of this move were known, it would then be time enough to hand Willoughby over to the police.

Ronald had not been to the house where he had lain ill with congestion of the brain since he had left it on his recovery. When he went to see Mr. Willoughby, it was at another place in the neighbourhood of Oswell Road, where the latter had taken a couple of rooms in which to interview the men on the subject of finding them "employment." It was not the hour when Mr. Willoughby was accustomed

to be at home to those who wished to consult him, but, when Ronald had talked with Effingham, and then thought the matter over, he resolved to call, without delay, on the chance of catching him.

He was not surprised to find the "offices," as Mr. Willoughby called them, shut; but he was disappointed, especially as, after this hour, they were not likely to be opened again till next day. The only thing to do, if Ronald were determined not to wait, was to drive to the lodgings where, some months ago, he had lived.

The thought of going there was repellent to Ronald, because of the hateful memories the house must bring up—the house where he had waked after the "dream" which had spoiled his life. Perhaps, too, the "veiled woman" (as he had always called her in his mind, knowing no other name) might be there, and he did not want to meet her again. She had given no address, and he had asked for none, the day she had come so unexpectedly to him in Oswell Road; but he hoped, whatever her mysterious connection with the pretended clergyman might be, that she might not be involved in the man's ruin. Sinner she was, perhaps—decoy she had been; yet there was something fine, something magnetic about the woman, and though Ronald hoped never to look upon her beautiful face any more in this world, he wished her well in spite of all.

Mrs. Oates opened the door of "No. 16," where he had lain ill, and was greatly surprised and delighted to see "Mr. Chatters" again. She was sorry that Mr. Willoughby was not at home; indeed, she did not know if he were in London, for he had not been seen for several days. But, if he were in England, as she thought he must be—as he had not taken much luggage away—he would probably return next day. She had often noticed, in these frequent absences of his, that he would be away for three days, and then come back, say about the middle of the afternoon, write a great many letters, remain over night, and perhaps be off again next morning. Such a

busy man was good Mr. Willoughby, and his business was always for the benefit of other people! Hesitatingly, Ronald asked if any friend or relative of Mr. Willoughby's were staying in the house—someone who might know something of his movements. Mrs. Oates shook her head. No, there was nobody at all in No. 16, which was still Mr. Willoughby's; no one ever even came to see him there. There had been a time when the good man was always bringing in people for a meal or to stop the night; but since "Mr. Chatters'" illness, and the two nurses (the plain one, and the handsome one with red hair, that "Mr. Chatters" had taken such a dislike to) had lived there for a while, No. 16 had stood empty except during Mr. Willoughby's short visits. "But there!" added the landlady, comfortably, "I get my money regular, and good money it is. All the better for me if I don't have to pay for it with any trouble. The place is always ready, and, thank goodness, No. 15 lets well! I've still the young man who was there when you was so bad next door, sir—Mr. 'Arned; and then in the dining-room——"

"Is the name Harned?" broke in Ronald, quickly.

"Yes—Mr. Jack 'Arned, sir; a nice, 'andsome young gent, though odd in his ways, and a great interest he took in all I could tell him about your illness—both being young, I suppose, and the same thing might 'appen to him at any time. He's out now—been out all the afternoon, or I should 'ave liked you two to meet, if I might make so free as to suggest it, sir. I shouldn't wonder if he's with his young lady. Not that I'm sure he's got one, though I'm certain he would *like* to 'ave. A beautiful young lady—'er picture is on his mantelpiece, with 'Your friend, Honour Brooke,' written in 'er own 'and underneath. How he does look at it, if he thinks no one's noticin'! And she was 'ere, too! Sure enough, 'twas when you was so bad, and out of your 'ead, sir. I took her up to my room to change her things—she 'aving been out in a storm—and we could 'ear every word you said. Sorrowful words they was, too, and the poor young lady went as

white as snow, listenin'. She was *that* interested in you, too, Mr. Chatters, especially when I'd told her you was the livin' image of Lord Byron in the picture in Mr. 'Arned's room downstairs."

So! Honour had heard his ravings! Now—since this day, never to be forgotten—she knew why he had raved.

"I will come again to-morrow, and hope to find Mr. Willoughby," he said, quietly, but his voice was dull and lifeless. Mrs. Oates thought that he was handsomer than ever, but he was looking almost as ill as when he had been at her house, with two nurses to care for him; and she noticed that his dark hair was already powdered with silver at the temples.

Ronald could almost have wished now that he had asked the veiled woman for her address, which, as she had only too much kindness in her heart for him, apparently, she might have given. He could then have written to her, and requested information concerning Mr. Willoughby; for Effingham, aghast at Charteris' proposal to go alone to find the "Master," had professed to be in complete ignorance of his various secret haunts. He felt that it would be unwise to speak to any of the men that night, as there was not one save Effingham whom he could trust, and to put them on their guard before the "Master" was in the trap would probably prevent the capture being carried out.

It did not occur to Lady St. Leger, when she began to be alarmed about Honour, that Ronald Charteris could possibly know anything of her whereabouts; therefore, she did not send a message to him, and he passed the night in ignorance that there was cause for anxiety concerning the girl. But he thought of her much, in a mood that was bitter-sweet, asking himself what she would elect to do now she knew the truth, and he was at her mercy. Life was not dear to Ronald; nevertheless, it would cut him to the quick if Honour Brooke decided to give him up to justice as a common murderer. Yet she might do that;

she had the right to do it. He did not want her pity ; still, her hate was hard to bear, and her trust would have been a gift beyond gratitude—trust in spite of his confession. But how could he expect the daughter of Nevill Brooke, whom he had struck and killed, to argue the difference between guilt in intention and guilt in deed ?

It was a "white night" for him. He did not sleep at all, nor did he even go to his bed, for there were many things to think of, and he knew that, whatever happened, he was still pledged to keep the secret of the veiled woman, whom he believed to be no more guilty at heart than he. She had tried to save him, and, come what might, he must spare her.

It was a "white night" also for Lady St. Leg r. If Honour Brooke had been her daughter she could not have loved the girl more. Honour had gone out in the afternoon, and left no word, which meant that she expected to come back soon, but she had not come back ; and Lady St. Leger was sure that harm—dreadful, mysterious harm—must have befallen her.

Until after dinner she was not desperately alarmed, though she was very uneasy. But when ten o'clock came, and there was no news of Honour, she grew hysterical. Her first thought was to send for Loris St. Leger, and her maid was despatched to the grand new house with a note. A verbal answer came from Miss Kazan. Her father and cousin were both out, but she thought it probable they would be in soon. Back went the maid again, with a request from Lady St. Leger that Miss Kazan would, if possible, come to her. Meanwhile, before the latter could arrive, she wired to Kitty Carlin, of whom Honour had been speaking only that morning, remarking, over a letter from the little actress read at breakfast, that Kitty begged her to come to Manchester and spend a day or two—she had interesting things to tell. Now Lady St. Leger wired to the theatre, knowing that at this hour the play would still be going on. She had opposed the suggestion of such a visit. Honour had seemed disappointed, and, among many im-

probabilities at which her mind caught, the idea occurred to her that Honour might have gone to Manchester, despairing of her permission.

Hardly had the telegram been sent to a central office, open all night, when Nadege Kazan arrived, a long black evening cloak over her white dinner dress. She listened very gravely to the news of Honour's disappearance, and urged Lady St. Leger not to apply to the police, as she was beginning to think it might be wise to do, until after Loris had come. Then, in the midst of their conversation, Loris did come, accompanied by Mr. Kazan; and Nadege kept her great dark eyes fastened searchingly upon Loris St. Leger's face, as he acquiesced in the suggestion of informing the police. He himself, he said, would go to Scotland Yard, while his uncle took Nadege home. Probably they would find out that all was well with Honour, and that she had written a letter, which had failed to arrive. Still, it was best to be on the safe side, and every moment of delay in such a case was a moment too much.

So, presently, Lady St. Leger was left alone. As soon as it could come, she received an answer from Kitty Carlin. "Heard nothing of Honour," it said, "but will arrive London early to-morrow morning and call on you."

The actress kept her word, and it was she who suggested applying to Jack Harned. When Lady St. Leger went to his lodgings, Kitty was with her; but of certain things which had happened at Manchester, and threatened to change the whole future of more than one person, Kitty said nothing. The two talked only of Honour—dear "Beauty"—whom they both so dearly loved, and for once the "little doll" was the most congenial companion Lady St. Leger could have had.

Jack was utterly amazed, utterly dumbfounded at the news that Honour had not gone home from River House. The theory which he had built up broke like a bubble; his resentment against her was burnt up in a withering flame

of remorse. Roused suddenly from his heavy sleep by the startling announcement that the girl he worshipped had vanished, he could not at first think consecutively: He hurried on his clothes, and went out, unshaven and haggard, to Lady St. Leger and Kitty Carlin, who had been asked to wait for a few minutes in his sitting-room. But when Lady St. Leger began to tell how she had called in Loris St. Leger, and what advice he had given her, an electric shock ran through his nerves. He did not see, yet, how Loris could have had a hand in Honour's disappearance, but he felt that, if his intelligence were not dulled by all he had done and suffered the night before, he should be able to see, as if by a blinding flash of light. So thinking, he looked into Kitty Carlin's eyes, which had been waiting for his, and it seemed to him that, while she read his thought, he read a kindred one in her mind—a thought which she was trying to telegraph to him.

It was as if she had said in his ear: "Partner, we can't speak out what we think before Lady St. Leger, for she believes in him; but the Loathsome Reptile you and I talked about has had a hand in this." There was something more, too—a strange look, a half-shy, half-pitying look, as if this little childish thing were sorry for him: Was it only, he wondered, vaguely, because he was perhaps rather haggard and odd, and because she guessed how desperately anxious he must be for Honour, realising that he loved her? Or was it something even more than that which he read in her blue eyes?

Jack told Lady St. Leger how he had asked Miss Brooke to meet him at River House, on business connected with the mystery concerning her father's long, unexplained absence; how she had kept the appointment, and how, when he had left the room where she was for a few moments, he had returned to find her gone. "I was in the front part of the house," he explained. "She could easily have slipped out at the back and gone round the garden to the gate, while I was on the way—as I thought—to her. I believed that she was angry with me for a theory I had

about her father's absence, and I was sure that was why she went away without waiting to see me again. I do think so, still. She must have left the house while I was in the next room; but the question is—where did she go? Since you have informed Scotland Yard—by Mr. St. Leger's advice—I had better go there and tell what I have told to you." As Jack spoke these words aloud, other words spoke themselves in his mind: "Since St. Leger advised applying to the police, he must be very sure—if he is in this—of not being found out. In that case, it's a clever move, since the police will have reason to suppose he's helping them, not hindering."

Jack scarcely heard what Lady St. Leger answered, so intently was he listening to his own thoughts. He recalled his impression that others were behind Ronald Charteris in the guilt of Nevill Brooke's tragic death. If others, why not St. Leger as the leader, and some mysterious subordinate person or persons? There were Nadege Kazan and her father. Jack remembered the notes he had taken; and it was as if he saw a web—a great, glittering spider-web—in which Nevill Brooke and Charteris had first been enmeshed, and now—Honour. There was nothing tangible to go on; the strands of the web might break at a touch, and yet—if it were true that Charteris was the victim of a plot, and that Loris St. Leger was one who had planned it—one of those who, for some unknown reason, Charteris was shielding, so to speak, with his own body—no one in the world could be of greater help now than Charteris himself. The more passionately he loved Honour Brooke—and he did surely love her—the more ready he would be to sacrifice any other interest to that of finding her.

"Selfish, stupid brute that I am!" Jack cried to himself, though his lips were silent. "I thought only of myself and my love for her. I wanted to put barriers of fire between those two. But what does it matter now? To know that she was safe, I could even, almost, I think, give her up to him. I will go to Charteris. I will tell him

about last night, and give him his chance to prove that he is innocent."

"We are going," Kitty Carlin was saying, softly, still looking at him with that strange, wistful look. "Lady St. Leger is feeling ill. You will help, I know. You will do all you can. Good-bye."

She held out her hand. Jack took it, and found, as it slipped away, that it had left something behind—a small, tightly-folded piece of paper.

CHAPTER XLII

A HAND IN THE GAME

JACK unfolded the paper which Kitty Carlin had given him.

“Partner,” she had written, “there is something I have just found out which I think you ought to know without delay. You told me you had loved Honour Brooke’s father as if he were your father too. Well, he was your father. Honour is your half-sister. Perhaps this will make you unhappy at first, but after a while you will be glad; for, you see, she can always belong to you, and nobody can take her away. This I can prove, when you have time for a talk. In finding it out I found my father when he was dying. That is strange, isn’t it? But I begin to think that most true things are strange. There is more to tell—things about money, and a Tontine; but that can wait. You know now what is most important.—YOUR PARTNER.”

Jack did not doubt from the first instant of reading that Kitty told the truth, and that she could by and by prove all she said. The revelation struck him as a blow; and by his very pain he knew that the thing was true. Honour was his sister—his sister!

If she had been safe at home, and he could have gone to her, he would have suffered even more keenly in the knowledge; but there was no time to dwell upon his own feelings now. Some evil had befallen the girl. What he had to do was to save her; afterwards he would have

leisure enough to realise all that Kitty Carlin's letter meant.

Dimly he was glad that, before he read what she had to say, he had made up his mind to see Ronald Charteris and give him a chance, not only to clear himself, but to help find Honour. "All the rest of my life I should have felt mean," Jack thought, "if I had waited to decide until after I knew that Honour and I were children of the same father. I will go now."

He was at the front door when the man he was on the way to see was mounting the two or three steps to the door of No. 16. Before Charteris could touch the knocker, Jack spoke.

"I was going to you," he said, abruptly. "Have you heard that Hon—that Miss Brooke has disappeared? She did not go home yesterday after leaving River House: She hasn't been seen since. I—was going to tell you that and—something else. You have called to see me, perhaps? Will you come to my room?"

"I called to see a man known here under the name of Willoughby," said Ronald. "But I can't think of him now. I must hear what you have to say of Miss Brooke."

Three minutes later they were shut up in Jack Harned's sitting-room. Such particulars as Jack had heard from Lady St. Leger he gave; and—without meaning to do so when he began—he found himself confiding his strange, vague suspicions to the other.

"Look here," he said, almost harshly, "I have been jealous of you. I—saw that you cared for Miss Brooke, and I was glad that there was no hope for you with her: I wanted her to know that you killed her father: All along it was as much jealousy that impelled me to do what I did as it was my vow that I would track down Nevill Brooke's murderer. Last night, long after you had gone, I found out a thing which may change the whole face of affairs for you. I believe you are shielding someone, and taking the guilt on yourself. Nevill Brooke died of poison, not of a blow. That can be proved. And, though this other

thing *can't* be proved—yet—unless you can help me, I am as sure as I'm alive that the people in that affair with you have something to do with Honour's disappearance. If you will make a clean breast of everything to me, we may be able to serve each other."

"I would give my life to serve Miss Brooke," said Ronald, "but—I can't do what you say. I can't make a clean breast of everything. Great Heaven! if only I could! And if only I knew where to find a certain woman, who might be the one to tell us what has become of Miss Brooke! But I don't know. I let her slip out of my hands—fool that I was!"

"A woman!" echoed Jack. "It is a man I am thinking of—a man named Loris St. Leger." As he spoke the name, he looked keenly at Charteris, but the other's face did not change. "Can it be that he doesn't know St. Leger—that St. Leger wasn't and isn't in the game?" Jack asked himself. "Or is it possible that he knows him by another name? I'll try a description."

Hastily he described St. Leger. Still Ronald's face was blank. Then Kazan. But the eyes of the listener told nothing until Jack mentioned that the top of the Russian millionaire's little finger on the right hand was missing. At this Ronald uttered an exclamation.

"You *do* know the man?" exclaimed Harned.

"Not by such a description. But—to my sorrow—I know a man who has lost a part of the little finger of his right hand. It is the man I came here to look for to-day; and if, as you say, Nevill Brooke was poisoned, on his head the guilt must lie."

"The man you called Willoughby? I have heard of him from my landlady here—I have even seen him passing in and out; but not near enough to see what his hands were like. Jove! If it could be Kazan in disguise! The very fact that he must disguise himself confesses a secret. And his daughter—Nadege Kazan. Who is she? What is she in this terrible business?"

"Describe her."

"A beautiful woman—once seen never to be forgotten. Tall, a perfect figure, great almond-shaped dark eyes with long black lashes; pale, olive skin, like ivory; black hair, parted on the forehead, entirely covering the ears."

Ronald started. "I wish that I might see this Nadege Kazan," he said.

"You think she may be the woman who could tell you something of Honour Brooke? Come, you may as well admit it. Your face says yes; and, before you spoke, I felt she was in the secret. You see, she is Loris St. Leger's cousin. They have all three suddenly grown very rich, and have taken a house in Park Lane. They live together, with a monkey that chatters. If Willoughby and Kazan are one, you may find him there."

"If they are one, at the sight of me in his house Kazan will suspect, and escape," said Ronald, remembering the strange chattering at the Monte Carlo villa. "He is the more valuable, if there is any chance that he is concerned in Miss Brooke's disappearance. We must not run risks by which he might slip out of our hands. If he is the man I begin to take him for, he is the king of London criminals. But as for his daughter, it may be she is innocent. At all events, she must be kept out of this. I think—under another name—she once tried to do me a service, and it was not her fault that she failed."

"Disguise yourself, and go to the house with me as my friend," Jack suggested. "I have taken pains to gain myself a footing there. They will not be surprised to see me. I'll take you to a place where, inside half an hour, they will make you into a different man. An actor chap I know told me all about it."

"Let us go now," said Ronald.

CHAPTER XLIII]

"MY LIFE FOR HERS"

NADEGE KAZAN was at home. As Jack Harned had said, she was not surprised to see him. No definite arrangements had been made about the English lessons yet, for Jack was supposed to have been selecting some books suitable for them to read together during the "English hours." She fancied, when his name was brought to her, either that he had come to settle something about the lessons, or that—possibly—Lady St. Leger had sent him with a message concerning Honour Brooke's disappearance.

Ronald Charteris, the "friend" whom Jack had taken the liberty to bring, she looked at keenly, with her great, melancholy black eyes, but did not recognise him behind his grey wig, drooping moustache, and blue glasses. Still, though the room was shaded with green awnings, and only a cool twilight filtered in, she saw that there was something odd in his appearance, and as Jack talked to her in French, she looked at the silent stranger from time to time.

"I'm disappointed not to find Mr. Kazan or Mr. St. Leger," said Jack, "for, as a matter of fact, I want their help and advice for Lady St. Leger about Miss Brooke. This friend of mine is a—a sort of detective, and I told him that you were all very intimate at Lady St. Leger's house: You might, any of you, be able to give him some little hint which would assist him in trying to work up the case."

"I should like," Ronald said, also in French, "to speak to Miss Kazan for a few minutes alone, if I may be permitted." He had disguised himself with a view to deceiv-

ing Mr. Willoughby, in case the latter were in the house, and, finding that he was not there, Ronald now made little or no effort to change his tones. He had not spoken before, except to murmur something indistinct and polite as a greeting, but, at the sound of his voice, Nadege quivered, and looked him full in the face.

"Yes, I will see you alone," she replied, "if Mr. Harned will not object to going into the next room for a few moments."

Harned rose, and exchanged a quick glance with Charteris. They had had an extraordinarily frank talk in the cab which had brought them together all the way from Hammersmith to Park Lane. Jack had told Ronald of the letter which Kitty Carlin had slipped into his hand; Ronald had told Jack something of the "Master," his belief that the king of London criminals and Mr. Willoughby, the pretended clergyman, were one, and his desire to trap the arch-villain. Now, as Jack went into the library which adjoined Nadege Kazan's boudoir, he was saying to himself, "If the fellow should come, I wonder if I could do anything?"

It was a difficult question, for, if Willoughby, Kazan, and the redoubtable "Master" were actually one and the same man, to give the wretch into the hands of the police might be to close his lips upon the secret of Honour Brooke's disappearance. Jack cared a thousand times more that Honour Brooke should be rescued than that the worst criminal in England should be delivered to justice. Still, it seemed a pity to let such a scoundrel escape, especially if the real guilt of Nevill Brooke's murder were on his head. Jack listened for sounds in the house, and tried to sharpen his wits, which would go wool-gathering now that he needed them most.

* * * * *

"You are Ronald Charteris!" exclaimed Nadege in English, as the door closed.

"Yes," he answered. "We have both recognised each other, in spite of disguise, it seems."

"What do you mean to do? You have found me out. You have come here under false pretences. Are you going to betray my secret? It would not matter much to me, for myself, if you did. I am very miserable. All these beautiful things round me cannot make me anything else. I do not care what happens."

"I do not wish or intend to do you harm. But I warn you, you must leave the man you call your father if you would not be broken in his fall. It is close at hand. If you are connected in any way with his affairs, and can be injured by the discovery of his secrets——"

"I cannot be injured—except that I should lose these things," waving her hand with a contemptuous gesture which seemed to indicate the luxurious decorations of the room. "You seem to know a great deal—far more than I thought; and you have chosen an acquaintance of ours as your confidant. That does not concern me, as I told you. The one thing which might be brought up against me I did at Monte Carlo. I will tell it to you, to show you that I am not afraid. I staked counterfeit money the night before you and I started for England together, and—I broke the bank. I was testing a system. It was very successful, but I happened to have nothing about me at that time except a lot of 'queer' French money—notes. They were splendidly done, and the fraud wasn't discovered that night, but it was sure to be later, and the police are very clever there. It was thought best that I should go away veiled, under your protection, and as your sister, for it would be harder to track me so. Well, I happen to know that I was only just in time. Do you mean to make any use of this frank confession of mine, Sir Ronald?"

"No—you must know I do not."

"Then why have you come? Surely not—surely not to tell me, now you have found me out, that—you have changed your mind about—our conversation in Oswell Street that day, when you did not know I was called Nadege

Kazan ? Oh, if you have, I can make you so happy ! I can tell you a thing which will change your whole life. I can save you from a terrible plot——”

“ I have come to ask if you know anything about Miss Honour Brooke ? ” Ronald said, simply.

The colour rushed over Nadege Kazan's face, under the delicate olive stain which brought her complexion into keeping with the dyed hair. “ How you love her ! ” she exclaimed.

Ronald was silent, and, for a moment, Nadege was silent too. Then she spoke sharply. “ You would not bargain with me for your own sake. Will you do it for hers ? ”

“ Tell me exactly what you mean by that question. ”

“ I mean this. If I can help you to find Honour Brooke, will you give up all thoughts of her, and take me away with you—somewhere, anywhere, out of England and away from those with whom I live now—as your wife ? ”

Ronald looked at her steadily. “ Did you poison Nevill Brooke ? ” he asked.

The beautiful woman started as if he had struck her with a whip ; but she answered, with scarcely an instant's hesitation.

“ No, ” she said, “ I did not. If you married me, your wife would not be a murderess. How you know that he was poisoned I can't guess ; maybe you will tell me one day. But since you do know it—perhaps much more—I can speak to you freely. I knew the poison was there, in the wine he would drink. I knew that he must die, and soon. If I had warned him, worse than death would have come to me. Once, because I threatened to go to the police and give my own father up to justice, to prevent his being guilty of a new and ghastly crime which I had heard him speaking of with two accomplices, he—stood by while those other men mutilated me—in the terrible way of which you know. I would not promise silence at first. I was half mad with rage and pain. Then they threatened—to cut the flesh from my face and tear from me such

beauty as they had left, making me a horror to all who looked upon me—loathsome as a leper. Then—I yielded; I have been reckless since. I grew not to care what came or went, so that I kept my beauty, until—I met you. Then everything was different. I would have saved you if I could, even if I lost my life for saving you—more than life. But Nevill Brooke was nothing to me. I did not want him to die, yet I was not ready to sacrifice myself for him. Everything was planned, and you were in the plan. They wanted you in their power, and they got you. You were the catspaw. You did not kill Nevill Brooke.”

“ Thank God !—thank God ! ”

“ He drank the poison. Then it was part of the programme that, when it was too late for him to hope for life, I should tell him. I whispered, so that, as you stood waiting behind the glass door to give me help if I needed it, you could not possibly hear. I said, ‘ They want your part of the jewels you have brought home, and your daughter’s—and those your dead friend left to his nephew. So they have given you poison. You have just drunk it in that wine. It is quite true. You will be dead inside ten minutes.’ When he heard that, in his rage, he sprang up and caught me round my throat. You rushed in to my rescue, as I screamed, and knocked him down. You thought that he had died by your hand. But now you know the truth, and I have given it to you for nothing—for nothing. Sinner I am, but I did not kill Nevill Brooke. I only let him die to save my own life. And I can save his daughter, if you will swear not to betray my father, and if you will do the thing that I have asked. It would be my soul’s salvation.”

“ I will not betray your father, and I will do the thing that you have asked,” said Charteris.

“ You will take me away—you will marry me ? ”

“ Yes ; from the day that Honour Brooke is safe again with her guardian, I will give myself and my life to you.”

When, at the end of their conversation, Nadege Kazan and Ronald Charteris opened the door of the next room to look for Jack Harned, who was to be taken into their counsel, he was not there. They supposed that he had grown weary of waiting, and, as his errand had been to bring Ronald to the house, there had been no pressing reason why he should remain. They did not search for him long, and in a few moments he had been forgotten by them both. Ronald had even lost sight of the errand on which he had been eagerly bent, when he left Oswell Road, two hours ago—the finding of Mr. Willoughby. There was little doubt in his mind as to the identity of the man, though Nadege had spoken guardedly; but the one thing in the world which could not be delayed was the finding of Honour Brooke. All else was secondary now, and must be, until she was safe. After that, for Ronald Charteris—the deluge.

Nadege had admitted that she did not know where Honour was; that she did not even actually know that her father or cousin had had a hand in her disappearance. But she knew that Loris St. Leger wanted to marry the girl, because of money which ought to be hers, and because, also, he had a passion for her. She knew that, since yesterday, there had been a secret; she had read a hidden knowledge of the girl's whereabouts in her cousin's eyes last night, when he answered Lady St. Leger's questions. Nothing could force him to tell what he knew. If he had not been sure that the secret, whatever it might be, was well hidden, he would never have suggested informing the police. But Nadege was aware of certain hiding-places, in any one of which Honour might be at this moment. Her theory (formed in ignorance of what had happened at River House) was that Loris St. Leger meant to keep the girl a prisoner until she was ready to promise to marry him. Honour Brooke was a girl of spirit. She would hold out for several days, at least—for ever, if she could only guess the truth about her father's death: If they two (Nadege and Charteris) could find

the house where she was kept, they could release her before she had suffered anything save, perhaps, hunger and great fear.

Ronald felt no surprise at hearing of these different hiding-places, scattered apparently in various districts of London, for he had heard Effingham's strange story of the "Master" and his habits. Once, Nadege said, she had come across a paper which had been dropped. It was a map of London, with certain houses and business buildings marked. A cypher, which she understood, jotted on the back of this map, explained all, even the existence, in some cases, of communicating underground passages which established a safe connection between several of these places. If a man found himself in danger of arrest in one, he could disappear, without risk of being caught, and come out in another part of London:

Of this map Nadege had made a rough copy. She knew from hints which had been dropped from time to time, or confidences which for one purpose or another had been made to her, that several of the haunts in question were used by people employed there, on secret work, only at night—sometimes not on every night; and her idea was that Honour would be found in one of these houses.

"You could not find her without me," she said, "and if it were not for me, she would sooner or later be forced to marry Loris, so that—even though you know now that you are innocent of her father's death, there would always be another barrier between you, just as impossible to beat down. And you will keep your promise to me?"

"You know that I will keep it," answered Ronald.

To him there was a certain joy—cold and remote as the fixed stars on a night of frost; still, a joy—in the thought of giving himself to save Honour.

Nadege went away, and returned with the copy of the map of which she had spoken. "If I am right in what I think," she said, "that is where Loris has taken the girl." She pointed to a spot indicating a row of warehouses, in a street close to the river. "There is a way

to reach the place, you see, from River House; that is why I am so sure, for it seems she went there; and this would explain her disappearance. Can you bear to go back with me to that house where you suffered so much?"

"I could bear anything for Honour Brooke," was the answer in Ronald's mind, but he did not speak it aloud; "I went there yesterday," he said. "It will be easier now."

"How did you know the way? Why did you go?" she asked, quickly.

"I was told the way. And I went—to be accused of Nevill Brooke's murder."

"Honour Brooke has heard something, then? She believes that—you killed her father?"

"She must have heard me confess it, even if she did not believe it before. But let us not talk of that. You are going to help me, and I thank you. Will you lend me that map?"

"I will take it. I am going with you. Oh, do not object! I must go. You would not find the way to the secret passage in River House without me. I suppose you don't carry a revolver?"

"No."

"Then you must do so. I know where to find one. We have plenty of arms in this house. There is no telling, you see, when they might be useful. If—anything were found out, and escape, by ill-luck, were cut off, Loris St. Leger and my father would never let themselves be taken here alive."

So speaking, Nadege was at the door. In five minutes she had returned, ready for the street, and carrying, hidden under a fluffy feather boa, the weapon for Ronald. He took it, since she insisted, and they started. To anyone who saw the man and the lovely woman leaving the house in Park Lane, on a beautiful sunny afternoon, their expedition must have seemed ordinary enough. They took a four-wheeled cab, and drove off together, as if they were going to a Bond Street tea-shop or an exhibition of pic-

tures. Their destination was River House, but, lest some unforeseen incident should occur, they stopped the cab before reaching Mortlake Road, and told the man to wait, even if they should be gone more than an hour. Nadege left a handsome wrap in the vehicle, so that the driver might not suspect his fares of an intention to play him false. Ronald promised, also, that the payment should be generous. They were sure now that their man would not fail them, in case, by and by, they should need his services for a companion whom they hoped to bring.

River House, which Kazan had taken many years ago, had no secrets from Nadege. She went straight to the panel in the wainscoting and led the way down the passage, snatching the hanging lantern from its hook.

Hampered with their prisoner, Kazan and Loris St. Leger had been slow in opening the trap-door, in descending the ladder, in walking the length of the low, arched passage underground which led to the cellar under the warehouse they had spoken of as "No. 4." But Ronald Charteris and Nadege were not slow. In the cab they had talked of the Reverend Mr. Willoughby and the "mission" in Oswell Road. When Nadege learned that Ronald was already aware of the truth, she spoke openly, admitting that, among his strange army of subordinates, her father was known as the Master. Ronald was sacrificing justice for the sake of Honour Brooke, as he was sacrificing himself. She could talk of the "Master's" secrets without fear—since Ronald had promised—that they would be betrayed to the police. If she succeeded in helping him to free Honour, his interests and her own were henceforth one; they would go away together, and she would also make him forget that he had loved another woman. But, meanwhile, she spoke frankly of things as they existed, as if Ronald had been a confederate. All this row of warehouses, she said, had been leased by "Mr. Smith," who was the owner of River House—Mr. Smith, alias Willoughby, alias the "Master," alias Kazan, the Russian millionaire who spoke little or no English. It was believed that these warehouses by the

river-side were to be pulled down ; people had almost forgotten their existence, they had stood apparently empty so long ; but strange things were done in the great bare rooms, supposed to be tenanted by no creatures more formidable than rats. In the cellar under No. 4 was a " plant " for making counterfeit money, everything hidden in great packing-cases, so that, if there were ever a " raid," the place might be made, within five minutes, to look innocent enough.

The trap-door at the top of the ladder, which led into the cellar, had a curious spring lock, which Kazan himself had designed. It could be worked either from above or below, if one were initiated (a very necessary arrangement), and though it had never been given to her, Nadege had the secret. After finding the map, with the cypher, and making her copy, curiosity had led her to explore the passages between River House and Warehouse No. 4. She had worked at the ingenious spring until she had discovered the mechanism, and it was she who touched it now. But she was not strong enough to lift the trap—that was Ronald's part. He pushed it up, while she held the lantern ; but before she could follow, and step out from the top round of the ladder to the floor of the cellar, she heard Honour Brooke's voice cry out Ronald's name. Then came revolver shots—three in quick succession. By this time Nadege, holding the lantern high, set one foot on the floor. Straining her eyes, she looked out into the cellar, but, before her confused impressions were focussed upon any one object in the gloom, two dark figures—only blacker and more solid than the shadows—sprang towards her. Her lantern was snatched from her hand—a savage push threw her backward. She lost her balance and fell—down into darkness at the foot of the ladder.

CHAPTER XLIV

BRIDAL FLOWERS

As she fell, the one thought in the mind of Nadege was—"Now I am going to be killed. After all, I shall lose Ronald!" But she was not killed. Her left arm was broken, and her whole body bruised and strained. Nevertheless, she was not seriously injured. At first she was unconscious; yet in the very instant of waking she remembered everything, exactly as it had happened, and was bewildered at finding herself in her own bed in the great new house in Park Lane. It was night, and the beautiful room was lit with flower-shaded electric lamps. As she moved, and sighed, her own French maid rose from a chair out of sight, and came to her.

"You have had a severe accident—in a cab, I think it was, mademoiselle," said the woman, as Nadege questioned her, dreamily. "Your head was hurt, and your arm. You were brought home unconscious. But the doctor has set your arm, and said it was not necessary for you to have a trained nurse unless you liked; I could do everything. Sir Ronald Charteris, the gentleman who was with you and Miss Brooke when you were hurt, is waiting in the boudoir, in case you come to yourself. He is very anxious to speak to you, if you are well enough."

"Let him in, and I will talk to him alone," said Nadege.

* * * * *

"Tell me everything—quickly," she said, when Ronald had come to her, and the maid was gone.

"Can you bear it? There are some things—I wish you need not hear."

“I must know. It is uncertainty which I cannot bear.”

“Then—first of all, I must tell you that your father has been taken. I did not break my promise—do me so much justice. It was Harned’s work. When he was here, your father came in, and talked with him. Harned, who had been putting clues together for some time, and learned certain things from me—before I had given you my word not to speak—concocted a plausible story, and induced Mr. Kazan to go with him to his lodgings. There he called in the police, who arrested your father as the notorious ‘Master.’ It is not known yet that he has passed under the name of Kazan, or has lived in this house. Harned wished to spare you, until you could get away, and it is practically certain that this other alias will be our secret until to-morrow. As for your cousin, Loris St. Leger, I have inquired and found out that he has not been here since this morning. I have an idea that he suspects something wrong, and will not return. Though I swore to you, for Miss Brooke’s sake, to be silent, I tell you frankly that I hope he will not escape. By to-morrow they will be looking for him at this house; but early in the morning, if you are able to travel, I will take you away.”

“And Honour Brooke?” asked Nadege, in a low, strained voice. “It was not Loris or my father who were there, and who ran past me. It was only a second, but I saw them. They had dark faces, like Indians.”

“They were men from Thibet. It is a strange story. They had come from their own country to recover a fetish which had been taken from their monastery by Miss Brooke’s father. She found it at River House, in the garden. I saw him throw something out of the window. Perhaps it was the fetish—a bronze toad, with a red jewel in its head. The two men I had seen before, I think, when they followed Hon—Miss Brooke—to Oswell Road. Now, they must have watched, and seen her carried from River House, through the underground passages to the warehouse, un-

suspected by your father or St. Leger, who had left the poor girl bound with ropes to one of the brick pillars supporting the floor above the cellar—left her without food—alone. She was to be starved into consenting to a marriage with St. Leger, and in twenty-four hours after leaving her he was to return for her decision. Perhaps he arrived soon after we three escaped—you unconscious. Finding her gone, he would have guessed that the game was up. The two men from Thibet were torturing Miss Brooke with threats of a terrible death if she did not tell them what had become of certain diamonds that disappeared from their monastery at the same time with the bronze toad, which they had torn from her dress. As she knew nothing, she could naturally tell nothing. For hours they had been persecuting her. They were coldly, hideously patient, but—she says—they were showing signs of exasperation at last, and would probably have killed her in some one of the ghastly ways they threatened if we had not come in time. Just as we arrived, one of the men was bending back her hand against her wrist, to the breaking point, demanding that she should tell him who had the diamonds. I shot him in the arm, but they both escaped, almost killing you.”

“Did the men tell her the name of their monastery, or where it was in Thibet?” asked Nadege, languidly.

“No. They told her very little, and what they did tell she scarcely understood, in their strange, broken French and English.”

“Then, even if she had the diamonds, and wished to give them back, she could not?”

“No, she could not. You knew of their existence?”

“Yes. If they had not existed, Nevill Brooke would be alive to-day. But I do not know from where they came. My father never told me more than he could help. I had a letter from Loris to meet Nevill Brooke at River House. I dropped a torn bit of it in the Paris hotel where you and I stopped. I always thought you might have found it. They were obliged to explain some things to me, then.

Part of the diamonds, or the money for them (they've nearly all been turned into money now) should be Honour Brooke's—her father's share. And part should be yours."

"Mine? But I——"

"Through your uncle, after whom you were named. He was of the party who went to Thibet, suffering terrible privations and perils. He was killed, and Nevill Brooke was charged to bring his share to you. It was to be a sort of Tontine, and all the surviving members were supposed to meet on April the fourth, at River House. If Honour Brooke had her rights, she would be a rich woman.' She is rich enough already, in your love. But you she shall not have. You are mine. I have bought you, and paid. Tell me, if I live a good life, if I worship you, and 'serve you hand and foot, is it possible that one day you might learn to care—only a little?"

"I will be loyal always to my promise—and you."

"But your heart will be Honour Brooke's, and because you love her, and can never love me, your life will be hateful. Oh, I shall be wretched, too—the most wretched woman in the world. Yet you are my one hope of salvation. I cannot live, and give you up."

"I shall try to make you forget the past."

"You will hate me, and I shall see it. You think me capable of no nobility, no sublime self-sacrifice, as you are. And yet—and yet—I am not all bad. I could die for you, though I could not live without you now."

"Do not talk of dying. I will come for you early in the morning, and I will try to get a special licence for our marriage. It will be better that—you should be my wife soon."

"Yes, come early," Nadege said, in the same strange voice. "Come for me at eight o'clock. I will—be ready. Tell me—is it too late at night for you to find some flowers, and send them to me? White, bridal flowers."

"It is not too late. I will find the flowers somewhere, and send them."

"Thank you. You are good—so different, oh! so

different from other men I have known. Will you—kiss me once ? ”

He bent and kissed her forehead.

* * * * *

At eight in the morning the maid knocked at her mistress's door. Ronald had come, and was waiting. There was no answer. Many times the woman knocked, and at last other servants were called and the door was broken open.

Nadege lay as if asleep among the flowers for which she had asked. Under her folded hands was a sheet of paper, on which she had written :

“ Ronald, I have done the one thing I could for the happiness which I owed you—I have died. Think of me kindly sometimes when you and she are man and wife. It is all I ask, and more than I deserve.”

THE END.

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