

THE MISSIONARY.

PROLOGUE.

"Oh—Eny!"

"Well, you needn't be angry, Vane. I kissed *you* this morning, you know."

"That's no reason why you should kiss that chap, too! You're *my* sweetheart."

"Is she? Well, she won't be much longer, because I'm going to have her."

"Are you? Shut up, or I'll punch your head."

"You can't—and, anyhow, you daren't."

Smack!

It was a good swinging blow with the open hand across the cheek, and it left a vivid flush behind it on the somewhat sallow skin.

"Oh, if you're going to fight I shall go away, and I shan't be friends with either of you."

But as the two lads closed, the blue-eyed, golden-haired little beauty only shrank back a little nearer to the after-wheelhouse of the homeward bound P. and O. liner whose deck was the scene of this first act of the tragedy of three lives. A bright flush came into her cheeks, and a new light began to dance in her eyes as the first look of fright died out of them. The breath came and [Pg 2]went more quickly between the half-opened lips with a low sibilant sound. They were pretty, well-cut lips, the upper short and exquisitely curved, and the lower full with the promise of a sensuous maturity.

She was only seven, but she was woman enough already to know that these two lads were fighting for *her*—for the favour of her smiles and the right to her kisses—and so she stayed.

She had heard in India how the tigers fought for their mates, and, with the precocity of the Anglo-Indian child, she recognised now the likeness between tigers and men—and boys. She was being fought for. These two lads, albeit they had neither of them seen their eleventh birthday, were using all their strength against each other, hammering each other's faces with their fists, wrestling and writhing, now upstanding and now on the deck at her feet, were not unlike the tigers she had heard her father tell her mother about.

She saw the hatred in their eyes, red and swollen by the impact of well-planted blows. She watched the gleam of their teeth between their cut and bleeding lips. They hated each other because they loved her—or, in their boyish way, most firmly believed they did. Their lips were cut and bleeding because she had kissed them.

The fascination of the fight grew upon her. The hot young blood began to dance in her veins. She found herself encouraging now one and then the other—always the one who was getting the worst of it for the time being—and when at last the younger and slighter but more wiry and active of them, the one who had caught the other kissing her, took adroit advantage of a roll of the ship and pitched his antagonist backwards so heavily against the wheelhouse that he dropped half-[Pg 3]stunned to the deck, she looked proudly at the panting, bleeding victor, and gasped:

"Oh, Vane, I'm so glad you've won. You haven't quite killed him, have you? I suppose the captain would hang you if you did. I'm so sorry it was all about me. I'll never let any one else but you kiss me again. Really I won't. You may kiss me now if you like. Take my handkerchief. Oh, I don't mind the cuts. You did it for me. There! It was brave of you, for he's bigger than you. Poor Reggie, let's help him up. I suppose you'll both have to go to the doctor."

"We shall both get a jolly good licking more likely. Still, I don't care as long as you won't let him kiss you again."

"No, Vane, indeed I won't, nor anyone else for ever and ever if you'll only forgive me this time."

And then, for the first time since the fight began, her big bright blue eyes filled and grew dim with tears.

[Pg 4]

CHAPTER I.

It was the evening of Boat-race day, and as usual that province of Vanity Fair whose centre is Piccadilly Circus was more or less completely given over to joyously boisterous troops of undergraduates and 'Varsity men of all academic ranks whom the great event of the year had brought together from all parts of the kingdom, and even from lands beyond the sea.

The mild saturnalia which London annually permits in honour of the historic struggle between the rival blues was at its height. The music halls were crowded to their

utmost capacity, and lusty-voiced undergraduates joined enthusiastically, if not altogether tunefully, in the choruses of the songs; but the enthusiasm was perhaps highest and the crowd the greatest at the Palace, where start and race and the magnificent finish with which the struggle had ended were being shown by the American Biograph.

As the series of pictures followed each other on the screen, the cries which a few hours before had been roaring along the two banks of the river from Putney to Mortlake burst out anew from pit and gallery, circles and stalls and boxes. Cambridge had won for once after a long series of defeats, but the Oxford boys and men were cheering just [Pg 5]as lustily and yelling themselves just as hoarse as the others, for they were all Englishmen and therefore good sportsmen.

The crush in the First Circle was terrific, but for the moment Vane Maxwell was conscious neither of the heat nor the crowding. His whole soul was in his eyes as he watched the weirdly silent and yet life-like phantoms flitting across the screen. It was only when the finish had faded into swift darkness and the thunders of applause had begun to die down that he became aware of the fact that someone was standing on one of his feet, and that just behind him someone else had got hold of his arm and was holding it with a convulsive sort of clutch.

Just then there was a lull in the applause, and he caught a faintly murmured "Oh, dear" in a feminine voice. He wrenched his foot free, and turned round just in time to slip his arm round the waist of a fainting girl and save her from falling.

The crush was loosening now, for the great attraction of the evening had passed, and a general move was being made towards the bars.

"If you please there, this young lady's fainting. Give her as much room as you can, please," he said loudly enough to be heard for some little distance round.

A number of undergraduates of both Universities managed to immediately clear a space about them, and one of his own college chums at Balliol who had come in with him said, "Take her to the bar, Maxwell, and give her a drop of brandy. Now, move up there, you fellows. Room for beauty in distress—come along!"

A couple of the stalwart attendants had also arrived on the scene by this time, and so a lane was easily made to the nearest bar. The girl opened [Pg 6]her eyes again, looked about her for a moment, and then murmured:

"Oh, thank you so much, I think I can walk. I am getting all right now. It was the crowd and the heat. Please don't trouble. It's very good of you."

"It's no trouble at all," said Maxwell. "Come and let me give you a drop of brandy. That'll put you all right."

As they went into the bar they were followed by not a few curious glances. Men and lads looked at each other and smiled, and women looked at them and each other, also smiling, but with plainer meaning, and one or two expressed themselves openly as to the neatness with which the whole affair had been managed.

Crowded as the bar was, Maxwell had no difficulty in getting a couple of brandies and a split soda for himself and his companion. Two men sitting at one of the tables had got up to let her sit down. One of them held out his hand to Maxwell and said:

"Why, Vane, old man, is it you? In luck, as usual, I see." He said this with a glance towards the girl which brought the blood to Maxwell's cheeks. Still, he took the other's hand, and said good-humouredly:

"Good evening, Garthorne. Up for the race, I suppose? Fine fight, wasn't it? I'm glad you won, it was getting a bit monotonous. Thanks for letting us have the table. This young lady is not very well, felt a bit faint in the crowd."

"I see," said Garthorne, with another look at her which Maxwell did not altogether like. "Well, good night, old man. Be as good as you can."

As the two moved away Maxwell's memory went back to a scene which had occurred behind the [Pg 7]wheelhouse of a P. and O. liner about ten years before, and, without exactly knowing why, he felt as if it would give him a certain amount of satisfaction to repeat it. Then he turned to the girl and said:

"I beg your pardon; I hope you haven't been waiting. You should have taken a drink at once."

"Oh, thanks, that's all right. I'm a lot better now," she said, taking up the tumbler and smiling over it at him. "Well, here's luck! It was awfully good of you to get me out of that crowd. I believe I should have fallen down if it hadn't been for you."

"Oh, please don't mention that," he said; "only too happy—I mean I was very glad I was there to do it. Here's to your complete recovery."

As he drank their eyes met over the glasses. Until now he had not really looked at her; things had been happening rather too rapidly for that. But now, as he put his glass down and began to scrutinize the half-saucy, half-demure, and altogether charming face on the other side of the table, it suddenly dawned upon him that it was exceedingly like his own.

The nut-brown hair was almost the same shade as his, but it had a gleam of gold in it which his lacked. The dark hazel eyes were bigger and softer, and were shaded by longer and darker lashes than his, but their colour and expression were very similar. The rest of the face, too, was very similar, only while his nose was almost perfectly straight, nearly pure Greek in fact, hers was just the merest trifle *retroussé*.

The mouths and chins were almost identical save for the fact that firmness and strength in his were replaced by softness and sweetness in hers. Not that hers were lacking in firmness, for a skilled [Pg 8]physiognomist would have put her down at the first glance as a young lady of very decided character; but the outlines were softer, the lips were more delicate and more mobile, and, young as he was, there was a gravity in his smile which was replaced in hers by a suspicion of defiant recklessness which was not without its mournful meaning for those who had eyes to see.

"That's done me a lot of good," she said, as she finished her brandy and soda. "Now, I mustn't keep you from your friends any longer. I'm very much obliged to you indeed. Good night!"

He rose as she did, and took the neatly-gloved little hand that she held out to him over the table.

"I don't see why we should say good night just yet unless you particularly wish it," he said. "I only came here with a lot of our fellows to see the Biograph, and I shan't stop now that's over. I'm getting jolly hungry, too. If you have no other engagement suppose we were to go and have a bit of supper somewhere?"

For some reason or other which she was quite unable to define, these words, although they were spoken with perfect politeness, and although she had heard them scores of times before without offence, now almost offended her. And yet there was no real reason why they should.

She had been out to supper with pretty nearly all sorts and conditions of men. Why should she not go with this well-groomed, athletic-looking young fellow who had already done her a considerable service, who was obviously a gentleman, and whose face and expression had now begun to strike her as so curiously like her own?

She really had no other engagement for the evening, and to refuse would be, to say the least [Pg 9]of it, ungracious; so, after a moment's hesitation, she took her hand away and said with a quick upward glance of her eyes:

"Very well, I was just beginning to think about supper myself when I turned up out there in that absurd way, so we may as well have it together. Where were you thinking

of going? Suppose we were to try the grill-room at the Troc. Of course everywhere will be pretty crowded to-night, but we have as good a chance of getting a table there as anywhere else. Besides, I know one or two of the waiters. I often go there to lunch."

"Very well," he said; "come along." And in a few minutes more they were rolling along in a hansom down Shaftesbury Avenue.

Vane Maxwell was in very good humour that night with himself and all the world. He had taken a double first in Mods., in History and Classics, after crowning a brilliant career at Eton with a Balliol Scholarship. He was stroke of his college boat, and had worked her four places up the river. In another year he might be in the 'Varsity Eight itself, and help to avenge the defeat which the Dark Blues had just suffered. The sweetheart he had won in that Homeric little battle behind the wheelhouse had been faithful to him ever since. He had an abundance of pocket money and the prospect of a fair fortune, and altogether the world appeared to be a very pleasant place indeed to live in.

When they got into the cab the girl half expected that he would slip his arm round her as others were wont to do when they had the chance, but he didn't, and she liked him all the better for it. He did, however, put his hand through her arm and draw her just a little closer to him. Then he leant back in the cab, and, as the light from a [Pg 10]big gin palace lamp flashed on to her face, he said:

"Well, this *is* jolly. I'm so glad you came. I feel just in the humour for a good supper in pleasant society."

"Thank you," she said, with a little toss of her head; "but how do you know my society is going to be pleasant?"

"Oh, it couldn't be anything else," he laughed. "You are far too pretty not to be nice."

"Thanks," she said gravely. "Are all the pretty girls you know nice? Don't you find some of them horribly conceited and dull? Lots of fellows I know say so."

"Lots of fellows!" he echoed. "Then you have a pretty extensive acquaintance——"

"Why, of course I have," she interrupted, cutting him short almost roughly. Then she went on with a swift change of tone, "Don't you see that a—a girl like me has *got* to know plenty of fellows? It's—well, it's business, and that's the brutal truth of it."

She turned her head away and looked out of the cab window as though she didn't want him to see the expression that came over her face as she said the last few words.

But though he did not see the change in her face, the change in her voice struck him like a jarring note in a harmony that he was beginning to find very pleasant. He felt a sort of momentary resentment. He knew, of course, that it was the "brutal truth," but just then he disliked being reminded of it—especially by her. She seemed a great deal too nice for *that* to be true of her. There was a little pause, rather an awkward one, during which he tried to think of the proper thing to say. Of course he didn't succeed, so he just blurted out:

[Pg 11]

"Oh, never mind about brutal truths just now, little girl."

There was another pause, during which she still kept her head turned away. Then he went on with a happy inconsequence:

"By the way, has it struck you yet that we're rather like each other?"

"Is that a compliment to me or to yourself?" she said, half gravely, and yet with a belying gleam of mischief in her eyes.

"Oh, a likeness like that could only be a compliment to me, of course," he replied, and before the conversation could proceed any farther the cab stopped at the entrance to the Trocadero.

By great good luck they procured one of the little side tables in the inner room just as another couple were leaving it. One of the waiters had recognised her as she came in, and, with the astute alacrity of his kind, had taken possession of them and pre-empted the table before anyone else could get near it. There were, in fact, others waiting who had a prior right, but the gentleman in the plum coat and gold buttons made it impossible for the superintendent of the room to interfere by saying to Maxwell in his blandest tone:

"Good evening, sir; it's all right, sir. This is the table you engaged."

"He's a smart youth, that Fritz," said the girl as they sat down. "These fellows here know which side their bread's buttered on, and they look after their own customers."

"Yes, he seems to know his business," said Maxwell, "and now I suppose the question is, what are we going to have?"

Fritz had come back, and was swiftly and rapidly removing the débris left behind by their predecessors. The girl looked up at him with an air of [Pg 12]familiarity which Maxwell didn't altogether like, and said:

"What's good for supper, Fritz? I am hungry."

"A few oysters, miss, grilled sole, and a nice little porterhouse steak between two. How's that, miss?"

She looked across at Maxwell and nodded, and he said, "Yes, I think that will do very nicely. Let's have the oysters at once, and some brown bread and butter."

"Yes, sir, certainly. Any wine, sir?"

The list was presented, opened, of course, at the champagne page.

"You'll have something fizzy, won't you?" he said, looking up from the list.

"I suppose we may as well," she said, "only I don't want you to think me too extravagant."

"Nonsense," he laughed, and then he told the waiter to bring a bottle of Kock Fils '89.

When the man had gone on his errand Maxwell said somewhat diffidently:

"By the way, we seem to be getting to know each other pretty well, but we've not exactly been introduced. I mean we don't know each other's names yet."

"Oh, introductions are not much in fashion in the world that I live in," she said with a little flush. "Of course you don't need telling which half of the world that is."

For the moment he felt an unreasonable resentment, either at the words or the half defiant way in which she spoke them. He was quite old enough both in years and the ways of the world to know exactly what she meant, and he was perfectly well aware that she would not have accepted his invitation to supper any more than she would have been in the promenade of a music hall unescorted [Pg 13]if she had been what is conventionally termed respectable. Yet somehow he wanted to forget the fact and treat her with the respect he would have paid to any ordinary acquaintance in his own social sphere.

This feeling was probably due both to an innate chivalry and to the fact that one of his father's favourite precepts was, "My boy, whatever company you're in, never forget that you're a gentleman." Mingled with it there may also have been a dash of masculine vanity. The more he looked at the girl the more striking did her likeness to himself appear. Really, if he had had a sister she could not have been more like him, but he knew that he was an only child, and, besides, that thought was altogether unthinkable.

After a little pause, during which their eyes met and their cheeks flushed in a somewhat boy-and-girlish fashion, he laughed a trifle awkwardly and said:

"Well, then, we shall have to introduce ourselves, I suppose. My name is Maxwell—Vane Maxwell."

"Vane!" she echoed, "how funny! My name is Vane too—Carol Vane. It's not a sham one either, such as a lot of girls like me take. It's my own—at least, I have always been called Carol, and Vane was my mother's name."

"I see," said Maxwell, after another little pause, during which the oysters came and the waiter opened the wine. When he had filled the two glasses and vanished, Maxwell lifted his and said:

"Well, Miss Carol, it is rather curious that we should both have the same names, and also, if I may say so without flattering myself too much, be so much like each other. At any rate I shall venture to hope that your little accident at the Palace [Pg 14]has enabled me to make a very charming acquaintance."

"That's very prettily put, Mr. Vane Maxwell," she said, nodding and smiling at him over her glass. "And now that we've been introduced in a sort of way, as we haven't got any more interesting subject to talk about, suppose we talk about ourselves. Which are you, Oxford or Cambridge?"

The conversation thus started rattled merrily along for over an hour. Without thinking any disloyalty to his own Enid, who was now a fair and stately maiden of eighteen, he found it quite impossible to resist the strange charm of Miss Carol's manner. She was obviously a lady by instinct, and she had also been educated after a sort. She had read widely if not altogether wisely, and she seemed just as familiar with the literature, or, at any rate, with the fiction of France and Italy as she was with that of England.

This she explained was due to the fact that until she was about twelve, that is to say some seven years ago, she had been constantly living and wandering about in these two countries with her mother and sometimes also with a gentleman who, as she put it, was pretty probably her father. She explained further that at the mature age of thirteen she had run away from a French school in which she had been placed by some unknown agency and joined a wandering English circus-troop with which she had travelled half over Europe, leading a more or less miserable existence for some five years. She had then terminated her connection with the Ring by going into housekeeping with an English art-student in Paris. Meanwhile she had lost all trace of her mother, and had come to the conclusion that she had by this time drunk herself to death.

"I scarcely ever knew her to be quite sober," [Pg 15]she said pathetically, and then she changed the subject.

It was not a very cheerful story, as story, but Miss Carol told it with such a quaint humour and such a vivacity of expression and gesture that, despite the under-note of tragedy, Maxwell thought it the most interesting story he had ever heard in his life.

As the courses disappeared and the empty bottle of wine was succeeded by a half bottle "just for the last," as Maxwell said, the conversation grew gayer and perhaps also a trifle freer, although Miss Carol never permitted herself any of those freedoms of expression with which too many of the so-called Daughters of Delight vulgarise themselves so hopelessly. When the half bottle was finished Maxwell wanted another, and to this Miss Carol promptly and firmly objected.

"If you will excuse me saying so to a new acquaintance," she said, "I wouldn't if I were you. We have both of us had enough of this stuff, nice and all as it is—at least, I have, and I think I'm more used to it than you. A coffee and liqueur if you like. That won't hurt us—in fact, it'll do us good; but I can see something in your eyes that shouldn't be there."

"What do you mean?" said Maxwell, a trifle offended. "Surely you're not going to accuse me of the unpardonable crime of getting drunk in the company of a lady."

"Thank you!" she said simply, and yet with a decided dignity. "No, I don't mean that. It's a funny thing, you know," she went on, leaning her elbows on the table and staring straight into his eyes, "but there's a queer kind of light coming into your eyes, a sort of dancing, jumping yellow flame that makes them look almost red. Well, [Pg 16]your eyes are almost exactly like mine, and mine are like my mother's, and whenever she'd got so far on with drink that she couldn't stop I used to see that light in her eyes. Of course I don't say that it means anything; still, there it is. I used to call it the danger signal, and keep away from her as much as I could till it was over, and I had to nurse her back to something like life."

"That's rather approaching the creepy," said Maxwell, with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders. He had no feeling of offence now. She looked so pretty and she spoke so earnestly that it was impossible to be offended with her. Moreover, although he was far from even getting drunk, he felt a dreamy sensation stealing over him which seemed to be sapping his self-restraint and making him utterly careless of what he did or what happened to him so long as it was only pleasant.

"Really, it is decidedly curious," he went on. "I hope I haven't got the makings of a dipsomaniac in me. But I feel quite curiously happy, and I believe I could just go on

drinking and getting happier and happier until I landed in Paradise with you standing just inside the gates to welcome me."

"Don't!" she said almost sharply. "For goodness sake don't begin to talk like that. That's just how my mother used to feel, just how she used to talk, and she did go on—of course, there was no one to stop her. You should have seen her a couple of days after—a savage, an animal, a wild beast, only wild beasts don't get drunk. It's not a nice thing to say of your mother, even such a mother as mine was, but it's true, and I'm telling you because I like you, and it may do you some good."

"Thank you, Miss Carol! After that I shall [Pg 17]certainly take your advice," he said, pouring his cognac into his coffee. "This is the last drink to-night, and that reminds me; it's getting rather late. How about going home?"

"I think it's about time," she said. "They close at twelve to-night, you know. Which way do you go?"

"Which way do *you* go?" he said, as he beckoned to the waiter for the bill. "By the way, I was going to ask you—I hope you have never seen that light, that danger signal, in your own eyes?"

She ignored his first question *in toto*, and replied:

"Yes, I saw it once when I got home after a pretty wild supper. It frightened me so that I went 'T.T.' for nearly a month, and just now I wouldn't drink another glass of that champagne if you gave me a thousand pounds to drink it."

"Well, I'm sure I shan't ask you after what you've said," he laughed, as he threw a couple of shillings on the plate which the waiter presented, and took up his bill. Then he got up and helped her on with her cloak, and as she shook her shapely shoulders into it he went on:

"But you haven't answered my question yet."

"Which question?" she said, turning sharply round.

"Which way do you go—or do you intend to stop out a bit later?" he replied rather haltingly. "I thought perhaps I might have the pleasure——"

"Of seeing me home?" she said, raising her eyes to his and flushing hotly. "I'm afraid that's impossible. But go and get your coat and hat, and let's go outside. It's horribly close in here."

He paid his bill at the pay-box near the door, and when they got out into the street he took her [Pg 18]by the arm and said, as they turned down towards the Circus:

"And may I ask why it is impossible, Miss Carol. I thought just now you said that you liked me a bit."

"So I do," she replied, with a little thrill in her voice; "and that's just why, or partly why—and besides, we're too much alike. Why, we might be brother and sister——"

"That is quite out of the question," he interrupted quickly; "I never had a sister. I am an only child, and my mother died soon after I was born. She died in India nearly twenty years ago."

"I can't help it," she said, almost passionately. "Of course we can't possibly be any relation, the idea's absurd; but still, it's no use—I couldn't, I daren't. Besides, have you forgotten what you were telling me about your fight on the steamer with that man we met at the Palace? Aren't you in love with the girl still? I quite understood you were engaged to her."

"Yes," said Maxwell frankly, "I am, and perhaps I ought to be ashamed of myself. That is two lessons you've taught me to-night, Miss Carol, and I shan't forget either them or you. Still, I don't see why we shouldn't be friends. Honestly, I like you very much, and you've said you like me—why shouldn't we?"

"Yes, that's true; I like you all right," she replied with almost embarrassing frankness; "but for all that it's something very different from love at first sight. It's funny, but do you know, Vane—I suppose if we're going to be friends I may call you Vane—although I think I could get to like you very much in one way, however different things were, I don't believe I could ever fall in love with you. But if you only mean friends, just real pals, [Pg 19]as we say in my half of the world, I am there, always supposing that the friendship of such an entirely improper young person as I am doesn't do you any harm."

"Harm, nonsense!" he said. "Why should it? Well, that's a bargain, and now perhaps you won't object to tell me where you live."

"Oh, no, not now," she said. "I live at 15, Melville Gardens, Brook Green, with a very nice girl that you may also be friends with if you're good."

"Brook Green! Why, that's off the Hammersmith Road. We, that is to say dad and myself, live in Warwick Gardens, a bit this side of Addison Bridge, so if you really mean to go home we may as well get a hansom, and you can drop me at Warwick Gardens and go on."

"Of course I mean to go home, and I think that would be a very good arrangement."

They had crossed over to the pavement in front of the Criterion as she said this. It was on the tip of Maxwell's tongue to ask her to come in and have another drink. He certainly felt a greater craving for alcohol than he had ever done in his life before, and if he had been alone he might have yielded to it; but he was ashamed to do so after what he had just said to her, so he hailed an empty cab that was just coming up to the kerb. As he was handing his companion in, the door of the buffet swung open, and Reginald Garthorne came out with two other Cambridge men. They were all a trifle fresh, and as Garthorne recognised him he called out:

"By-by, Maxwell. Don't forget to say your prayers."

Maxwell turned round angrily with his foot on the step. If he had had that other drink that he [Pg 20]wanted there would have been a row, but, as it was, a word and a gesture from Miss Carol brought him into the cab. There was an angry flush on her cheeks and a wicked light in her eyes, but she said very quietly, "Do you know, I am glad you thrashed that fellow once. He ought to be ashamed of himself shouting a thing like that out here. I suppose he thinks himself a gentleman, too."

"Oh, that's all right," said Vane. "Garthorne's a bit screwed, that's all. Everyone is to-night. But he's not at all a bad fellow. His father was a soldier in India, and did some very good service. He has a staff appointment at home. He's a baronet too—one of the old ones. His mother comes of a good stock as well. We've been very good chums since that first row. Fellows who fight as boys generally are."

"Oh, I daresay he's all right, but I didn't like it," said Miss Carol, leaning back in the cab. "And now suppose you tell me something more about yourself."

When the cab pulled up at the corner of Warwick Gardens and he said good-night, he asked her for a kiss. She blushed like a fourteen-year-old school girl as she replied:

"That's a great compliment, Vane, for I know how you mean it. But if you don't mind I really think I'd rather not, at least not just yet. You see, after all we've only known each other two or three hours. Wait until you know me at least a little better before you ask again, and then perhaps we'll see."

"Well, I daresay you're right, Miss Modesty," he laughed, as he got out. "In fact, you always seem to be right. Good-night, Carol."

"Good-night, Vane." As he stepped backwards from the cab she leant forward and smiled and [Pg 21]waved her hand. A gentleman walking quickly from the direction of the bridge looked up and saw her pretty laughing face as the light of a lamp fell upon

it. He stopped almost as suddenly as though he had run up against some invisible obstacle, and passed his hand across his eyes. Then the cab doors closed, the face vanished back into the shadow of the interior, and, to his utter amazement, Maxwell heard his father's voice say:

"God bless my soul. What a marvellous likeness!"

[Pg 22]

CHAPTER II.

"Well, Vane!"

"Well, dad!"

"May I ask who that young lady in the cab with you was?"

Vane saw at once that he was in for it, and even if he had wished for any concealment, it was impossible under the circumstances. As a matter of fact, however, he had already made up his mind to tell his father the whole story of his little adventure, and so he said very gravely and deliberately:

"That, dad, is a young lady whose acquaintance I made to-night at the Palace. She nearly fainted in the crush just after the Biograph was over. She happened to be close behind me, and so of course she held on to me. I took her into one of the bars and gave her a brandy and soda. Then we noticed mutually how curiously like each other we were, and then—well, then I asked her to supper and she came. We have just driven here from the Trocadero. She has gone on to where she lives in Melville Gardens, Brook Green. I can tell you a lot more about her afterwards, if you like."

Sir Arthur Maxwell, Bart., K.C.B., K.C.S.I., looked keenly into his son's face while he was [Pg 23]giving this rapid summary of his evening's adventure. There was and always had been the most absolute confidence between them. Ever since Vane had been old enough they had been companions and chums, rather than father and son, and so Sir Arthur had not the slightest doubt but that Vane was telling the absolute truth. He was only looking to see whether the telling of the truth embarrassed him or not, and he was well pleased to see that it did not.

"Quite an interesting experience, I must say," he said, a little gruffly. "Well, I'm glad to see, at any rate, that you didn't accompany the young lady home. I presume you were invited."

"On the contrary, dad," replied Vane, this time with a little hesitation in his tone, "to tell you the honest truth——"

"That was a needless opening, Vane. My son could not tell anything else. Go on."

"Well, the fact is, dad, it was the other way about. I suggested it, and she refused point blank. I'm afraid I'd had rather too much fizz on top of too many brandies and sodas before supper."

"That will do, Vane," said his father, a little stiffly. "At any rate, thank God you are not drunk or anything like it. But this is hardly the sort of thing to discuss in the street. We'll go into the Den and have a chat and a smoke before we go to bed. You know I'm not squeamish about these things. I know that a lad of twenty is made of flesh and blood just as a man of thirty or forty is, and although I consider what is called sowing wild oats foolish as well as a most ungentlemanly pastime, still, I equally don't believe in the innocence of ignorance, at least not for a man."

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"You seem to forget, dad," replied Vane, answering him in something very like his own tone, "just as I'm sorry to say I forgot for a minute or two to-night that I am engaged to Enid."

"Quite right, boy," said his father as they went in at the gate. "I didn't forget it though, and I'm glad you remembered it."

"Only I ought to have said that it was the girl who reminded me of it," said Vane, as he put his latch-key into the door.

When they got into the Den, which was a sort of combination room, partly a library and partly study and smoking-room with a quaint suggestion of Oriental fantasy about it, Sir Arthur, according to his wont at that time of night, unlocked the spirit case, and mixed himself a whiskey and soda. As he did so, Vane found his eyes fixed on one of the bright cut-glass bottles which contained brandy. He would have given anything to be able to mix a brandy and soda for himself and drink it without believing, or at any rate fearing, that after all there might be something in Miss Carol's warning.

As Sir Arthur lit his cigar, he said in a rather forced tone:

"I suppose after what you've said it's no use asking you to have a nightcap, Vane?"

There was a little pause, during which Vane looked hard at the spirit-case. Then, with the gesture of one under strong emotion, he got up from his chair and said in a voice whose tone made his father look quickly towards him:

"I don't think I've ever knowingly disobeyed you in my life, dad, but if you were to order me to drink a drop of spirit to-night, I shouldn't do it."

"Why not, Vane?"

[Pg 25]

"Just look into my eyes, dad, and tell me if you see anything strange about them."

"What on earth do you mean, boy—there's nothing the matter with your eyes, is there?" said Sir Arthur, looking up with a visible start, "what has put that idea into your head?"

"I'll tell you afterwards, dad, meanwhile, just have a look," replied Vane, coming and standing under the light.

He felt his father's hands tremble as he laid them on his shoulder, and as he looked into his eyes a tinge of greyness seemed to steal underneath the sun-bronze of his skin. In the clear depths of the lad's hazel eyes he saw a faint, nickering, wavering light, which gave a yellow tinge to them.

A reflection from the flames of hell itself could not have had a more awful meaning for him than that faint little yellow glimmer, but Arthur Maxwell was a strong man, a man who had fought plague and famine, storm and flood, treachery and revolt in the service of his Queen, and after a moment or two he was able to say quite quietly:

"Well, what's the matter, Vane? They look, perhaps, a little brighter than usual; but I don't suppose that's anything more than the excitement of the evening."

"Don't you see something like a little yellow flame in them?"

"Well, yes, I do," said Sir Arthur, looking away, "a reflection from the gaslight, probably. But come, Vane, what is all this about? Sit down and tell me. And, by the way, I want to hear the story of this new acquaintance of yours. Take a cigar; that won't hurt you."

Vane took a cheroot and lit it and sat down in an easy chair opposite his father, his eyes still [Pg 26]wandering as though of their own accord towards the spirit-case. Then he began somewhat inconsequentially:

"Dad, what do you think that girl's name is?"

"Naturally, I haven't the remotest notion," replied his father. "I only know that she is exceedingly good looking, and I must say that from the glimpse I had of her, she seems very like yourself."

"Is that what you meant, dad, when you said, 'Bless my soul what a likeness,' or something like that when the cab stopped?"

Sir Arthur did not reply at once. His eyes were gazing vacantly up at a wreath of blue smoke from his cigar, then he replied suddenly:

"Eh? Oh, well, probably. You see, my boy, I was just a bit startled at seeing you get out, and when I saw your two faces in the lamplight, I confess that I was decidedly struck by the likeness."

Vane did not find this reply entirely convincing, for he remembered that as he got out of the cab his back was towards his father, and that Carol's face was no longer visible when he turned round and faced him. Still, he was far too well bred to put his father through anything like a cross-examination, and so he went on.

"Well, as I told you, I met this young lady—for although she is what respectable Society in its mercy call 'an unfortunate'—I am certain she *is* a lady—at the Palace, and we went and had supper in the Grill Room at the Trocadero, and there, as we had no one to introduce us, we introduced ourselves."

"The usual thing under such circumstances, I believe," said Sir Arthur, taking a sip at his whiskey. "Well?"

"I told her that my name was Vane Maxwell, [Pg 27]and she said, 'Now that's curious, my name's Vane, too.'"

"What is that—her name!" said Sir Arthur with a start that nearly made him drop his glass. "Vane is not a girl's name."

"No, that's her surname. Her whole name is Carol Vane. Pretty, isn't it? Vane, she says, was her mother's name, and a nice sort of person she seems to have been. Poor Carol herself must have had a terrible time of it. There was no possibility of doubting a word of her story, she told it all so simply and so naturally, and yet it was tragedy all through.

"Well, we'd had a large bottle of fizz and a small one between us, and I'm afraid I was getting a bit on, for I wanted another. I wasn't drunk, you know, or anything like it. It didn't seem as though I could get drunk; only more and more gorgeously happy, and when I told Miss Carol, she put her elbows on the table and stared into my eyes and told me that they were just like her mother's, and that there was a light coming into them which she always used to see in hers when she was starting on one of her drinking bouts.

"Then she told me point blank that I'd had enough and said that she wouldn't drink another glass of fizz for a thousand pounds. We wound up with a coffee and liqueur, and afterwards when we came out I felt an almost irresistible craving for a brandy and soda, but I also felt convinced that if I took one I should go on all night.

"Still, somehow, what Miss Carol had been saying, although it hadn't exactly frightened me, certainly stopped me going into the Criterion and having one; besides, she was with me still, and I knew if I asked her she'd say 'No,' and somehow I daren't leave her and go in by myself. So as [Pg 28]she lives out Brook Green way, we got into a cab and drove home. And, would you believe it, she wouldn't even give me a kiss when we said good-night. She is a most extraordinary girl, I can quite imagine any fellow falling really and honestly in love with her."

While Vane was telling his story, his father had sat motionless, staring hard into the fireplace. He had apparently taken not the slightest interest in what he was saying. He had never once looked up, but as the story went on his face had grown greyer and greyer, and the lines in it harder and deeper, and every now and then the hand on which his cheek was leaning had trembled a little.

When Vane stopped speaking he looked up with a start, like a man waking out of an evil dream, and said in a husky, unsteady voice, which was quite strange to Vane:

"It is quite possible, my boy, that this girl, whatever else she may be, was really your guardian angel to-night. At your age, a craving for drink is a very terrible thing, and you must exert the whole strength of your nature to conquer it. You must fight against it and pray against it as you would against the worst of sins. You have a splendid career before you, but drink would ruin it and you. Still, we won't talk any more about this to-night. I am not feeling particularly well. I went round to dine with Raleigh, in Addison Gardens, to-night—by the way, Enid's coming back in a few days—and perhaps I caught a little chill walking home. I think I'd better turn in."

As he said this he took up the whiskey and soda and drained it, and Vane heard his teeth clink against the edge of the glass.

"And I think it's time I went, too," said Vane. [Pg 29]"You certainly don't look very fit to-night, dad. Hope I haven't made you uncomfortable by what I've been saying. You needn't be afraid though. I don't think I shall forget the lesson I've had to-night."

"No, no, I don't think you will, Vane. Well, good-night. Put the spirits and cigars away, will you?"

"Good-night, dad! I hope you'll be all right in the morning."

As the door closed behind his father, Vane went to the table on which the open spirit-stand stood. His father had forgotten to replace the stopper in the whiskey decanter, and the aroma of the ripe old spirit rose to his nostrils. Instantly a subtle fire seemed to spread through his veins and mount up to his brain. The mad craving that he had felt outside the Criterion came back upon him with tenfold force. He raised the decanter to his nostrils and inhaled a long breath of the subtle, vaporous poison. He looked around the room with burning eyes.

He was alone. There was no guardian angel near him now. Moved by some impulse other than his own will, he took his father's glass and poured out half a tumblerful of whiskey, filled it with soda water from the syphon, and drank it down with quick feverish gulps. Then he set the glass on the table and went and looked at himself in an Indian mirror over the mantel-piece. The pupils of his eyes seemed twice their size, and in each a yellow flame was leaping and dancing.

His face seemed transfigured. It was rather that of a handsome satyr than of an English lad of twenty. The lips were curled in a scornful sneer, the nostrils were dilated and the eyebrows arched. He laughed at himself—a laugh that [Pg 30]startled him, even then. He went back to the table and poured out more whiskey, smelt it and drank it down raw.

His blood was liquid flame by this time. He was no longer in the room. The walls and ceiling had vanished, and all round him vivid pictures were flitting, pictures of things that he had seen during the day, flickering and flashing like those of the Biograph; but Carol's face and soft brown eyes seemed somehow to be in the middle of all of them.

He dropped into a chair and felt about half blindly for the decanter. When he got hold of it he emptied it partly into the glass and partly over the table-cloth. He lifted the glass to his lips with both hands, drained it half chokingly, and then the pictures stopped moving and grew dim. A black pall of darkness seemed to come down and crush him to the earth. He lurched out of the chair on to the hearth-rug, rolled on to his back, and lay there motionless with arms outstretched.

An hour later the door opened and Sir Arthur came in in his dressing gown. A glance at the empty decanter and the prostrate figure on the hearth-rug, showed him the calamity that had fallen upon his house. He staggered forward and dropped on his knees beside Vane, crying in a weak, broken voice:

"My boy, my boy! Good God! what have I done? Why didn't I tell him at once?"

CHAPTER III.

Vane was utterly insensible either to voice or touch. His father knelt over him and loosened his tie and collar, for his breath was coming hard and irregularly. Then he rose to his feet, looked down at him for a few moments, and went away to summon Koda Bux, his old Pathan bearer, to help him to take him up to bed. He knew that he could trust him not to gossip, and he would not for worlds have had it said about the house the next day that Master Vane had been carried to bed drunk.

Koda Bux was awake the moment his master touched his shoulder. He rose at once and followed him. When they reached the library Sir Arthur pointed without a word to where Vane lay. He looked at him and then at the decanters, and said, without moving a feature save his lips:

"Truly, Huzur, the young sahib is exceeding drunk, and he must sleep. To-morrow the fires of hell will be burning in his brain and in his blood. It is a thing that no others should know of. He shall sleep in his bed, and thy servant shall watch by him until he is well, and neither man nor woman shall come near him."

"That is my wish, Koda," said Sir Arthur. "Now I will help you to take him upstairs."

"There is no need that thou, O protector of the [Pg 32]poor, shouldst trouble thyself. This is but one man's work."

With that he stooped down, got his arms under Vane's knees and shoulders, and lifted him up as easily as if he had been a lad of ten. Sir Arthur took up the candle which he had brought down with him, and went in front to his son's room.

Koda laid him on the bed, and at once went to work with the deft rapidity of a practised hand to remove his clothes. He saw that he could do no more good, so, after laying his hand for a moment on Vane's wet, cold brow, he turned away towards the door with a deep sigh, which was not lost on Koda.

"Trust him to me and sleep in peace, Huzur," he said. "I know how to fight the devil that is in him and throw him out. To-morrow Vane Sahib shall be as well as ever."

"Do your best for him, Koda. This is the first time, and I hope the last. Good-night."

"Good-night, friend of the friendless," replied the Pathan, standing up and stretching out his hands palms downwards. "Fear nothing. May your sleep be as the repose of Nirvana."

But there was neither rest nor sleep for Sir Arthur Maxwell that night. That vision of the girl's face looking out of the cab had been to him a vision half of heaven and half of hell. It was the face of the girl he had wooed and worked for and won nearly thirty years before—a girl whose hands for a brief space had opened the gates of Paradise to him. But it was also the face of a woman who had brought into his life something worse than the bitterness of death.

As he paced up and down his bedroom through the still, lonely hours of the night, he asked himself again and again what inscrutable fate had [Pg 33]brought this girl, the fresh, bright, living image of the woman who was worse than dead, and his son Vane, the idol of his heart, and the hope of his life, together.

Why had this girl, this outcast bearing the name which he both loved and hated, been the first to see in his son's eyes that fatal sign which he knew so well, a sign which he had himself seen in eyes into which he had once looked as a lad of twenty-four with anxious adoration to read his fate in them. For years that flickering, wavering light had been to him like the reflected glare from the flames of hell, and now this girl had seen it as he had seen it, mocking and devilish in the eyes of his only son.

It would have been better—he saw that now—to have braced himself to the task of telling Vane the whole of the miserable, pitiful story at once, as soon, indeed, as Vane's own story had convinced him that he had not escaped the curse which some dead and gone ancestor of his mother's had transmitted to his unborn posterity.

But it was a hard thing for a father to tell his son of his mother's shame. As hard, surely, as it had been for Jephtha to keep his rash vow and drive the steel into his daughter's breast. He had hoped that the resolves which Vane had taken, enforced by a serious and friendly talk the next day, would have been enough to avert the danger.

He did not know, as he knew now, that the demon of inherited alcoholism laughs at such poor precautions as this. Measures infinitely more drastic would be needed, and they must be employed at no matter what cost either to himself or Vane.

And yet it was an awful thing to do. Year after year he had shrunk from it, hoping that it would [Pg 34]never be necessary; but now the necessity had come at last. There could be no doubt of that. He had left his son sane and strong, with brave, wise words on his lips. An hour after he had gone back and found him a senseless thing, human only in shape. There could be no hesitation after that. It must be done.

Like many men of his kind, men whose lives have been passed in wrestling with the barbarisms, the ignorance and the superstitions of lower races, as well as with the blind forces of nature and the scourges of pestilence and famine in distant lands,

Arthur Maxwell was a man of deep though mostly silent religious convictions, and if ever there was a time when such a man could find strength and guidance in prayer surely this was such a time, and yet he had walked up and down his room, which since he had entered it had been his Gethsemane, for hours before he knelt down by his bedside and lifted up his heart, if not his voice, in prayer.

He rose from his knees with clearer sight and greater strength to see and face the terrible task which lay before him. It was quite plain to him now that the task must be faced and carried through, and he was more strongly determined than ever that before the next day was over Vane should know everything that he could tell him. Still, there was no rest for him yet, and for hours longer he walked up and down the room thinking of the past and the future; but most of the past.

About seven sheer physical fatigue compelled him to lie down on his bed, and in a few minutes he fell off into an uneasy sleep. Just about this time Vane woke—his mouth parched, his brain burning and throbbing, and every nerve in his body tingling. As soon as he opened his eyes he saw Koda Bux standing by his bedside.

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"What on earth's the matter, Koda?" he said in a voice that was half a groan. "Great Scott, what a head I've got! Ah, I remember now. It was that infernal whiskey. What the devil made me drink it?"

"You are right, Vane Sahib," said Koda sententiously; "it was the whiskey, which surely is distilled from fruits that grow only on the shores of the Sea of Sorrow. Now your head is wracked with the torments of hell, and your mouth is like a cave in the desert; but you shall be cured and sleep, and when you wake you shall be as though you had never tasted the drink that is both fire and water."

He went away to the dressing-table, shook some pink powder out of a little bottle into a glass, and came back to the bedside with the glass in one hand and the water-bottle in the other. Then he poured the water on to the powder and said:

"Drink, sahib, and sleep! When you wake you will be well."

The water seemed to turn into something like pink champagne as the powder dissolved. Vane seized the glass eagerly, and took a long, delicious drink. He had scarcely time to hand the glass back to Koda and thank him before his burning brain grew cool, his nerves ceased to thrill, a delightful languor stole over him, and he sank back on the pillow and was asleep in a moment. The Pathan looked at him half sternly

and half sorrowfully for a few moments, then he laid his brown hand upon his brow. It was already moist and cool.

He turned away, and set to work to put the room in order and get out Vane's clothes and clean linen for the day. Then he went downstairs and brewed Sir Arthur's morning coffee as usual. This was [Pg 36]always the first of his daily tasks. When he took it up he found Sir Arthur still fully dressed, lying on the bed, moving uneasily in his sleep.

"The follies of the young are the sorrows of the old!" he murmured. "He has not slept all night; still, this is a sleep which rests not nor refreshes. His coffee will do him more good, and then he can bathe and rest."

He laid his hand lightly on Sir Arthur's shoulder. He woke at once and drank his coffee. Then he asked how Vane was, and when he knew that he was sleeping again, and would not wake for some hours, he got up, undressed, and had a bath and dressed again.

Then, after a not very successful attempt at breakfast, he went out and turned into the Hammersmith Road in the direction of Brook Green. He remembered the address that Miss Carol had given Vane just as he remembered every other word of the conversation. He had determined to call upon her, and to make as sure as possible that his dreadful suspicions were correct before he told Vane the truth.

He found No. 15, Melville Gardens, one of a row of neat little detached houses; not much more than cottages, but cosy and comfortable-looking, each with a tiny little plot of ground in front and behind, and with a row of trees down each side of the road which seemed to stand in apologetic justification of the title of gardens.

The door was opened by a neatly-dressed, motherly-looking woman of about forty instead of by the dishevelled, smutty-faced maid-of-all-work that he half expected to find.

"Does Miss Carol Vane live here?" he asked, with a curious feeling of nervousness.

"Yes, sir, she and Miss Murray are just finishing [Pg 37]breakfast. Will you come in and sit down, sir? Miss Vane won't be long."

"Thank you, yes," he said, going in. "I wish to see her rather particularly."

"What name shall I say, sir?" said the woman, as she showed him into a prettily-furnished little sitting-room opening out into the back garden with French windows.

"Sir Arthur Maxwell," he replied. "If you will give my compliments to Miss Vane, and tell her that she will do me a great service by giving me about half-an-hour's conversation, I shall be much obliged to you."

The housekeeper made something like a little curtsy as she left the room. She was distinctly impressed by the stately presence and old-world courtesy of this bronzed, white-haired gentleman. He was so very different from the general run of visitors at No. 15; but she had half guessed his errand before she knocked at the door of the front room in which Miss Carol and her friend and house-mate, Dora Murray, were finishing their last cup of tea.

"Well, Mrs. Ford," said Miss Carol, looking up from the letter she was reading, "who might that be? This is pretty early for a morning call."

"The gentleman's name is Sir Arthur Maxwell, Miss."

"What!" said Miss Carol, colouring up and rising quickly from her chair. "Sir Arthur Maxwell. What on earth does *he* want?"

"He said, miss, that he'd be very much obliged to you if you could give him the pleasure of half-an-hour's conversation."

"Oh, dear, I suppose he was the gentleman who stopped at the corner last night just when my new acquaintance got out. His father, of course. I [Pg 38]suppose he's come to row me about making friends with his son and heir last night."

"One of the penalties of your fascinations, dear," said Dora, with a smile which parted a pair of eminently kissable lips and showed a very pretty set of teeth behind them.

Dora was nearly a couple of inches taller than Miss Carol, and some three years older. She had soft, lightish-brown hair, brown eyebrows, a trifle browner, perhaps, than nature had painted them, and dark blue eyes, which made a very pretty contrast.

"Well," she went on, "I suppose there's nothing for you but to go and interview the irate papa. But whatever did young hopeful want to go and tell him all about it for, and even give him your address!"

"If you'll excuse me, Miss," said the housekeeper, "I don't think that's it. The gentleman isn't at all angry. He was as polite and nice to me as ever could be. Such a *nice* gentleman."

"Dear me, Mrs. Ford, you seem quite impressed," said Miss Carol, gathering up her correspondence. "Well, I'd better go and have it over, whatever it is. I don't suppose I shall be very long. Meanwhile, Dora, you may as well make yourself useful and dust

the bikes. The old gentleman won't eat me, I suppose. In fact, if Master Vane told him everything, he ought to be very much obliged to me for my virtuous reserve."

And then, with a saucy smile at her own reflection in the glass as she passed the mantelpiece, she walked towards the door.

Carol, being a young lady of many and various experiences, did not often find herself in a situation, however awkward it might be, which gave her much cause for embarrassment. There were not [Pg 39]many circumstances under which she did not feel capable of taking perfect care of herself. Still, she confessed to Dora afterwards that when she went into the little sitting-room and faced the stately old gentleman who was waiting for her she felt distinctly nervous—in short, "in something very like a tremble," as she put it later on.

The moment she looked at his face she could see his likeness to Vane, and therefore in a measure to herself. She had, of course, nothing to be afraid of, and therefore there was no cause for fear, but for some reason or other she felt less at ease than she had done in many more difficult situations.

The same was almost equally true of Sir Arthur. In fact, when the door opened and Miss Carol, looking exquisitely neat and pretty in a dainty, grey, tailor-made cycling costume, walked into the room, he was unable to restrain a very visible start. It was, indeed, as much as he could do to keep himself from uttering an exclamation of astonishment.

As he looked at her, more than thirty years vanished in a second, and he saw himself a lad of twenty-four with his brand new Oxford degree, and his first place on the Indian Civil Service list only just published, walking down a country lane by the side of a girl, who, but for the difference in costume, might have been this very girl standing before him.

"Good morning! Our housekeeper tells me that you wish to speak to me."

Yes, the voice was the same, too, and so were the expression, the intonation, the attitude, everything. But the words brought him back to the present, and to the recollection of all that had happened since that walk in the country lane.

"Yes, Miss Vane," he heard himself saying, "I [Pg 40]have taken the liberty of calling to ask you if you would have any objection to a little conversation with me. I won't detain you more than half an hour."

"With pleasure," she said; "but won't you sit down?" she went on, seating herself on the sofa. "I suppose I am right in thinking that you are Mr. Vane Maxwell's father, and I

suppose, too, you are the gentleman who was at the corner of Warwick Gardens when he got out of the cab? I'm afraid you were a good bit shocked," she continued, smiling rather faintly.

"I was not by any means so much shocked as astonished," Sir Arthur replied gravely, "and, to avoid any misunderstanding, I had better say at once that, though I was naturally a little bit startled, I was infinitely more astonished, by the marvellous likeness——"

"What, to him!" said Miss Carol, interrupting him with a pretty little gesture of deprecation. "Yes, of course, I can quite understand that a gentleman like you would be a bit disgusted to find a likeness between your son and a girl like me, for I suppose he told you all about me? I mean, you know the sort of disreputable person that I am?"

Miss Carol said this with a distinct note of defiance in her voice. A note which seemed to say, "I know what I am, and so do you, and if you don't want to talk to me any longer you needn't." But she was considerably astonished when Sir Arthur, leaning forward in his chair and speaking very gravely, said:

"My dear child—you are younger than Vane, you know, and I may call you that without offence—I do know what you are, or perhaps it would be more just to say what circumstances have made [Pg 41]you. I don't want you to think that I have come here to preach at you. That is no business of mine. Still, I am deeply grieved, though I daresay you have no notion why—I mean no notion of the real reason. I am afraid I am expressing myself very awkwardly, but just now I don't quite seem to be able to keep my thoughts in order."

There was something in the gentle gravity of his tone and manner which inspired Miss Carol with an unaccountable desire to go away and cry. She didn't exactly know why, but she was certainly experiencing a very uncomfortable feeling which was more like apprehension than anything else. She couldn't think of anything else to say at the moment, and so she said simply:

"I don't know why you should be grieved, I mean in particular about me. There are plenty of others like me, you know, a good many thousands in London alone, I believe, and I suppose you would feel sorry for any of them. There are lots worse off than I am, I can tell you. But why should you be sorry for me particularly?"

As she said this she crossed her legs and folded her hands over her knee, leaning forward slightly and looking keenly at him.

"Because," he replied, with a little quaver in his voice, but looking steadily into her eyes, "because you are the living image of the woman who was once my wife. A little over thirty years ago—by the way, may I ask how old you are?"

"I was eighteen last September," she said, "that is to say, I am getting on for nineteen."

"And your birthday?" he said. "You will forgive me asking you so many questions, I know, when I tell you why I ask them; but of course, you needn't answer them unless you choose."

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"There is no reason why I shouldn't," she said, "as far as I know. I was born on the twentieth of September. What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say that if my wife, I mean I should rather say the woman who was my wife, could be put beside you now as she was thirty years ago, dressed as you are now, it would be almost impossible to tell the difference between you. You told my son, I think, that you take your name Vane from your mother."

"Yes," replied Miss Carol, "she told me that that was her name. I don't know whether I was ever really christened or not, but an English musician in Dresden, one of my mother's friends, called me Carol when I was quite a little mite of a thing because I was always singing, and as that was as good a name as any other, I suppose it stuck to me."

"Do you know whether your mother was ever married?"

"She had been, because she used to talk about it and about all she had lost and all that sort of thing, you know, when she was drunk," replied Miss Carol with a simple directness which went straight to Sir Arthur's heart. "Of course, that was when I was quite a little thing, about eight or nine. Then I was sent to a sort of boarding-school, half a school and half a convent, and I didn't like that, so I ran away from it, as I told your son last night."

"I went home and found the house shut up. The concierge told me that my mother had gone away in a carriage with two gentlemen—he said one looked like a police agent—nearly a month before. He didn't know where she'd gone to, and from that day to this I've never heard anything more of her. I told your son the rest of it and I [Pg 43]daresay he has told you, so there's no need for me to go over it again."

"Yes," said Sir Arthur, nodding slowly, "Vane told me, so if you please I will ask you one or two more questions, and then I won't detain you any longer."

"I am in no hurry," she replied. "Please ask me any number you like."

Her manner was now one of deep interest, for a suspicion was already forming in her mind that this bronzed, grave-faced man had once been her own mother's husband.

"Thank you," he said. "I should like to ask you first whether you happen to have any photograph of your mother?"

Miss Carol shook her head decisively, and said:

"No. I had one once in a locket, but when I went home and found she'd gone away and left me all alone in Paris—that's where we were then—I was so angry that I took it out and tore it up. I daresay it was very wrong of me, but I couldn't help it, and to tell you the honest truth, I can't say that I ever was as fond of her as a daughter should have been."

"I don't wonder at it," said Sir Arthur, with a sigh.

Miss Carol looked up wonderingly as he said this, but he took no notice and said:

"But I suppose you would recognise a photograph of her if you saw one?"

"Yes, if it was taken anywhere about the time that I knew her."

"Quite so," said Sir Arthur, taking a leather letter-case out of his pocket. "This was taken quite twenty years ago, a year or two after we were married, in short. It is, or was, my wife."

As he took out the photograph he got up, [Pg 44]crossed the room, and held it out to her. Miss Carol got up too, and as she took it she saw that his hand was trembling. She took the old-fashioned, faded photograph and looked at it. He saw that her face flushed as she did so. She gave it back to him and said simply:

"Yes, that is my mother."

As he took the photograph from her he looked at her with sad, grave eyes across the gulf of sin and shame in which the one great love of his life had been lost. She was the daughter of his wife, and yet she was not his daughter—and she was an outcast. The sting of the old shame came back very keenly. The old wound was already open and bleeding again. All the pride and hope and love of his life were centred now on his brilliant son. A few hours before he had learnt that his mother had transmitted to him the terrible, perhaps the fatal taint of inherited alcoholism; and now he had just proved beyond doubt that Vane's half-sister—for she was that in blood if not in law—was what she had just so frankly, so defiantly even, admitted herself to be.

And yet, how sweet and dainty she looked as she stood there before him, a bright flush on her cheeks and a soft, regretful expression in those big hazel eyes which were so wonderfully like *hers*! No one seeing her and Vane together could possibly take them for anything but brother and sister—and but for this marvellous likeness; but for the subtle instinct of kindred blood which had spoken in this outcast's heart the night before, would not a still deeper depth have opened in the hell of that old infamy? There was at least that to be thankful for.

"I suppose you don't know where she is now[Pg 45]—and don't care, most likely?" Carol added, raising her eyes almost timidly to his.

"I do," he replied, slowly, "To tell you the truth, I was one of the men who took her away from the house in the Rue St. Jean——"

"You were!" she exclaimed, recoiling a little from him. "Then it was really you who turned me out homeless into the streets of Paris?"

"Yes, it was, I regret to say," he replied, almost humbly, "but I need hardly tell you that I did it in complete ignorance. My —— your mother was making my name, my son's name, a scandal throughout Europe. She was a hopeless dipsomaniac. I had, believe me, I had suffered for years all that an honourable man could endure rather than blast my son's prospects in life by taking proceedings for divorce, and so proclaiming to the world that he was the son of such a woman."

"Yes," said Carol, quietly, with a little catch in her voice, "I understand—such a woman as I suppose I shall be some day. Of course, it was very hard on you and your son. And I don't suppose it made much difference to me after all. She'd have sold me to someone as soon as I was old enough; and instead of that I had to sell myself. When women take to drink like that they don't care about anything. What did you do with her?"

"The man with me," replied Sir Arthur, "was an officer of the French Courts. He had a warrant authorising her detention in a home for chronic inebriates. She is there still, little better than an imbecile, I regret to say, and with no hope of recovery. The physicians I consulted told me that she must have had the germs of alcoholic insanity in her blood from her very [Pg 46]birth. She told us that she had a daughter, and we traced you to the school, though she obstinately refused to tell us anything that would help us to find you. But we were too late; you had run away. We hunted all Paris over for you, but you were utterly lost."

"Well," said Carol, gently, "I wish I'd stopped now, or that you'd found me. Things might have been different; but, of course, it can't be helped now."

"It was a terrible pity," he began, "but still, even now perhaps, something may be done——"

"We won't talk about that now, if you please, sir," she interrupted, so decisively that he saw at once that there was no discussion of the subject possible.

"Pardon me," he said, quickly, "I fear I have annoyed you. Nothing, I assure you, could be farther from my intention. Now I have troubled you enough, and more than enough, and I am afraid I have recalled some very unpleasant memories——"

"Not anything like as bad for me as for you, sir," she said, as he paused for a moment. "If I have been of any service to you, I'm very glad, though it's a miserable business altogether."

"Yes, and worse than miserable," he replied, with a slow shake of his head. Then, glancing through the French windows he saw Dora rubbing one of two bicycles down with a cloth in the little back garden, and he went on: "But I see you are getting ready to go for a ride. I must not keep you any longer, I am deeply grateful to you, believe me, and I hope our acquaintance may not end here. And now, good-morning."

He held out his hand with the same grave [Pg 47]courtesy with which he would have offered it to the noblest dame of his acquaintance. She looked up sharply as though to say, "Do you really mean to shake hands with *me*?" Then her eyes dropped, and the next moment her hand was lying, trembling a little, in his.

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CHAPTER IV.

When he left Melville Gardens, Sir Arthur did not go straight home. He knew that Vane would not be awake for two or three hours yet, and after a few moments' hesitation he decided to go and call on his old friend, Godfrey Raleigh, with whom he had been dining the night before, and, if he found him at home, put the whole case frankly before him and ask his advice.

He had just retired with a well-earned K.C.S.I. from the Bench of the Supreme Court of Bengal, but he was one of those men on whom neither years nor climate seem to take any effect, and at sixty-five his body was as vigorous and his brain as active and clear as they had been at thirty-five. He had married rather late, and Enid, the Helen of that Iliad of the Wheelhouse, was his only child—and therefore naturally the very apple of his eye and the idol of his heart.

Her engagement to Vane had seemed to both the fathers and to her mother the most natural and the most desirable arrangement that could have been made. Vane would take a brilliant degree, he would enter the Diplomatic Service under the best of auspices, and when Enid had completed her education with a couple of years on the Continent they were to be married on her twentieth [Pg 49] birthday. That was the promise of these two bright young lives. What would the fulfilment be?

Sir Godfrey was, as he believed, the only one of his acquaintance in England who knew the truth of the tragedy of his life. They had been chums at Eton and Oxford. They had gone out to India together, Sir Godfrey with a judicial appointment, and Sir Arthur as Political Agent to one of the minor Independent States, both of them juniors with many things to learn and many steps to climb before they took a really active and responsible part in the propulsion of that huge and complicated machine which is called the Indian Government.

The Fates had thrown them a good deal together, and they had got to know each other well, not quickly, because men who are men need a great deal of knowing; but as the months had grown into years, and the years into a decade or more, they had really learnt to know each other. They had gone home together on the same ship to marry the girls who had been waiting for them since their troths had been plighted during their university days. They had come back with their brides on the same ship to India; Godfrey Raleigh had been godfather to his friend's first-born son. Three years later, after the shadow had fallen upon his own life, he had performed the same office for his friend's daughter, the successor of a baby girl who had died during the Rains.

These two children were now the youth and maiden who, within the next two or three years were to be man and wife. But after the events of the last twelve hours or so, Sir Arthur felt that it would not be either loyal to his old friend, or just to him and his daughter not to go and tell him frankly what he had learnt, and to take, not only his opinion, but also his advice on the subject.

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He found Sir Godfrey at home, and the judge quickly saw that he had not called upon any ordinary concern, so he asked him to come and smoke a pipe in his den, and there Sir Arthur, taking up the thread where it had been dropped years before, told him in a few straight, short sentences the rest of the story to the end of his interview with Miss Carol.

"Of course, you will understand, Raleigh," he said, when he had finished, "I have told you this because I thought it was only right to do so. My boy is engaged to marry your

girl. It is quite plain, I am sorry to say, that this alcoholic taint is in him, and as I have told you this Miss Carol Vane, charming and all as I must confess her to be from what I have seen of her, is after all Vane's half-sister, and she is also what I told you she was."

"Well, my dear Maxwell, I must confess that that is a very difficult problem indeed for us to decide. Very difficult indeed," Sir Godfrey had replied.

"You see, to put it quite plainly, and, if as an old lawyer I may say so, from the judicial point of view, there are two courses open to us. First, we may or, I would rather say, we *might* adopt the strictly scientific view of the matter and say that, since the unfortunate woman who was once your wife has apparently transmitted the taint of alcoholism to your son, it would therefore be improper for him to marry Enid for fear that he should further transmit this taint to his own offspring.

"That, I suppose, is the way in which a coldblooded scientist would put it; but on the other hand I think the matter should also be considered from the purely human point of view, and here, I speak again as an old judge. When you married [Pg 51] your wife you had no notion that she had inherited this taint of insanity, as we may well call it, from some unknown ancestor. Now the same thing might have happened with my wife, or in fact, with any other woman.

"It is perfectly well known that this poison, as one is obliged to call it, may lie latent for generations; may, in fact, die out altogether. On the other hand, what might have been only a vice in the grandfather or the father may develop as insanity in the grandson or the son. It is not for us to decide these things, at least, that is my view.

"You and I have more experience, more judgment; but I think that your son and my daughter will have more accurate instincts and keener intuitions. My own judgment I reserve entirely, and I advise you to do the same.

"Go home and tell Vane everything. Don't spare yourself or him, for in a case like this truth, the whole truth, is, after all, the greatest mercy. I will tell my wife the whole story this afternoon, and she will tell Enid when she gets back from Paris. Then I think the best that we can do will be to leave them to find a solution of the problem between them. Depend upon it that, whatever solution they do arrive at, it will be more accurate and will stand the test of time better than any arbitrary action which you or I might take."

And so ended the only false—utterly and hopelessly false—judgment which Sir Godfrey Raleigh had ever delivered.

Sir Arthur took it as gospel, it all seemed so clear and so logical, so fair to everybody; just the sort of judgment, in fact, which might have been expected from a man of such vast and varied experience. Both of them had the best of intentions, [Pg 52]for were not the happiness, the earthly fates of their two only children bound up in it?

Under such circumstances, though the advice might be mistaken, it was absolutely impossible that it could be anything else but honest and sincere. It was not for them to see into the future, nor yet to solve those impossibly intricate problems of human passion, of human strength and weakness, which, in defiance of all laws human and divine, break through the traditions of ages, make a mockery of all commonplace laws, and finally solve themselves with an accuracy as pitiless as it is precise.

Sir Arthur left his friend's house with the firm conviction that the only thing to be done under the circumstances was to follow his advice. When he got back to his house in Warwick Gardens, the door was opened by Koda Bux, and the first thing he said to him was:

"Is Mr. Vane awake?"

"Sahib, he is, and well. He is even as though he had never drunk of the liquor of fire. He is in the library awaiting your return."

It was then getting on for one o'clock, the lunch-time of Sir Arthur's household, and the table was already laid in what was called the breakfast-room, that is to say a room looking out upon one of the long, back gardens which are attached to the houses in Warwick Gardens.

Vane was sitting in the library waiting, something in shame and something in fear, for his father's return. He more than half-expected that his father would come in and begin at once to haul him over the coals on account of what had happened the night before. He did not feel altogether satisfied about his adventure with Miss Carol, and he was very much ashamed of himself, indeed, for [Pg 53]what had happened afterwards. But as yet, he had no suspicion of the terrible secret which in the almost immediate future was to decide his destiny in life. The dreadful fact of inherited alcoholism was yet to be revealed to him. He thought that his father was simply going to rate him for having exceeded the bounds of prudence during his night out, for coming home in a cab with such a person as Miss Carol, and then, worse than all, to tell him that he had made a beast of himself by beginning to drink whiskey when he was alone after having refused to take anything while his father was in the room. It was that that he was really afraid of.

He had no idea of what had happened since the time that he had fallen from his chair on to the hearth-rug, saving only the brief awakening in his bed with Koda Bux standing beside him, the drinking of the crimson-coloured effervescing liquid, and then the long, calm sleep which had spread itself like a gulf between the agony of the one awakening and the peace of the next.

He was sitting in one of the big arm-chairs in the library when his father came in. He got up and stood before him, something as a criminal might do before his judge, expecting to hear something like a sentence from his lips. He was very much ashamed of himself, and being so was perfectly prepared to take his punishment which would probably come in the shape of a few cold words of reproof, and a hard look in his father's eyes which he had seen before. But, instead of that, when he got up out of the arm-chair, and began somewhat falteringly:

"Dad, I'm awfully sorry——" his father stopped him, and said with a look at the clock on the mantel-piece: "I think it is about lunch time, isn't [Pg 54]it? Yes, there is the gong. How's your appetite?"

"Well, better than I thought it would be," said Vane, "better, in fact, than it deserves to be. That stuff that Koda gave me this morning has worked wonders——"

"Very well, then," said Sir Arthur, cutting him short, "I think we may as well go and have some lunch."

The meal was eaten in a somewhat awkward silence, broken by odds and ends of talk which were obviously spoken and replied to, not for the purpose of conversation, but to fill up time. Both father and son were as unhappy as men could very well be, and yet the ancient custom which forbids the Anglo-Saxon race to talk about unpleasant things at meal-times, prevented Sir Arthur from saying what he had to say, and Vane from asking what he wanted to ask.

At last, when Koda came in and said that coffee was served in the Den they got up, both of them feeling a certain sense of relief, although both knew that the worst was yet to come.

When they got into the Den, Sir Arthur said to Koda in Urdu:

"The house is empty. There is no one here. The door is bolted. No one must enter, till I say so."

He opened the door, spread the palms of his hands outwards, inclined his head, and said in the same language: "Thou art obeyed, Huzur. It is already done." Then he backed out of the door and shut it.

Sir Arthur got up out of his chair, turned the key in the lock, and said to Vane in a tone whose calmness astonished him almost as much as the words did:

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"Vane, why did you drink that whiskey last night? You know I asked you to have some, and you said that although you had never disobeyed me before, if I had ordered you to have some you would not have done it. And yet, after I had left the room you emptied the decanter. Why was that?"

Vane had expected anything but this, for his father had spoken as quietly as if he had been asking him about the most ordinary concern of their daily life. He remembered dimly those few dreadful minutes after the subtle aroma from the whiskey decanter had reached his nostrils, the swift intoxication, the brilliant series of visions which had passed before his eyes, and then the dead, black night which had fallen over his senses, and after that nothing more until he had awakened with parched mouth and burning brain, and Koda standing by his bedside.

"I'm afraid, dad, I was very drunk last night, but why, I don't know. I was sober enough when I came in, you know that yourself. But somehow, just when you had gone out of the room and told me to put the spirit case away, I took up the whiskey decanter and smelt it. There seemed to be some infernal influence in it which made me simply long to drink. I did not want to in the ordinary way, and as I had been having brandy and soda and champagne before, of course, whiskey was the very worst thing I could possibly have drunk. Yet it seemed somehow to get hold of me. I felt as though I *had* to drink. It didn't matter what it was so long as it was alcohol. It was the smell of it that intoxicated me first, and when I had once smelt it I went on, till I was dead drunk, and I suppose that is the way that you found me. That is all that I know about it. I am [Pg 56]horribly ashamed of myself, and I can only promise you that, if I can help it, it will never occur again."

"Sit down, Vane, and let us talk this over," said Sir Arthur, seating himself in the arm-chair on the other side of the fire-place. "I suppose you thought when I came back that I was going to give you the usual sort of lecture that a father would give his son under the circumstances. Well, I am not going to do that. I am sorry to say that it is a great deal more serious than that."

"What do you mean, dad?" said Vane, getting up out of the arm-chair into which he had thrown himself, as though resigned to receive his sentence. "More serious than that? Surely it is bad enough for a fellow to come home as I did last night, and then get

drunk on whiskey and have to be carried to bed. There can't be anything very much worse than that."

"There might have been," said Sir Arthur, "if you had not stopped the cab where you did. What would you say if I told you that that girl—you remember what you said to me about her likeness to yourself—what would you say if I were to tell you that that girl is your sister?"

"Good God! Dad, you don't mean that, do you? It can't be. I never had a sister. You have always told me that I am the only child. Mother died twenty years ago, didn't she? And that girl was only about nineteen. No, you can't mean it!"

"Yes," said Sir Arthur, in a tone which seemed very strange to his son. "I do mean it. When I told you that your mother had died a few months after you were born, I did not tell you the truth. She died to me and to you, but that was all. She is alive still. That girl that you drove up in the [Pg 57]cab with last night was her daughter, but not mine."

No more terrible words than these could have Vane turned white to his lips as he heard them, and for a moment he looked into his father's grey stern face with a glance that had something of hate in it. His fists even clenched and his shoulders squared as though the impulse was on him to raise his hands against him. But there was such an infinite sadness in Sir Arthur's eyes and such an expression of unspeakable suffering on his hard-set features, that as he looked at him the anger died out of Vane's eyes and his hands fell limp and open by his side.

It was some time before he was able to command his voice sufficiently to shape coherent words, but at length he managed to say in a hard, half-choking tone:

"Of course it is impossible that you could tell me anything but the truth, dad. And so I am the son of a disgraced woman, am I? Poor Eny, what will she think of me now? Of course it will be all over between us?"

His instinct had spoken, as Sir Godfrey Raleigh had said it would, and spoken truly. But Sir Arthur said quickly:

"No; my boy. It is bad enough, God knows, but it may not be as bad as that. I have been to see Miss Vane this morning, and when I had satisfied myself of the relationship between you, I went on to Raleigh and told him the whole story, as I thought it was only right to do. He said, very properly I think, that it was a matter for you and Enid to decide between yourselves, for after all it is the happiness of your lives which is in question, and therefore the decision ought to rest with you."

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"I don't see how there can be any decision but one," said Vane, who had sat down again, and, with his elbows on his knees and his face between his hands, was staring with blank eyes down at the carpet. "And so I am the son of that girl's mother, am I? Well, it couldn't be very much worse than that, and yet, God help us, she is my mother after all."

Then he threw himself back in his chair, let his hands fall limply over the arms and stared up at the ceiling.

"You may as well tell me the whole of the story, now dad," he went on, in a broken, miserable voice. "You had better tell me, and then I shall know where I am."

His father looked at him for a moment or two in silence, and then he said, with a note of reproof in his tone:

"That is a hasty judgment, Vane, but a natural one, I admit. When I have told you the story you will see what I mean. The mother who bore you was as good and pure a woman as ever lived when she became your mother, and this girl, from what I have seen of her this morning, I am perfectly certain is thoroughly good and honest in herself. I am satisfied that it is her fate that has made her what she is; not her fault."

"Yes," said Vane, "I was wrong. After all I have no right to judge my mother. I remember nothing about her, and as for Carol, she is a good girl whatever else she may be. Can't something be done for her, dad? I mean something to get her out of that horrible life. It is too awful to think of, isn't it? We must do something."

"That's just what I should have expected you to say, Vane," said his father, "and anything that I can do shall be done. But I'm afraid it won't [Pg 59]be very easy. I did suggest something of the sort, of course, but she cut me short very quickly. She simply said that she could not discuss the subject then, and there was an end of it. I am quite certain that anything which had even a suggestion of charity about it would be quite out of the question."

"Of course it would," said Vane, almost angrily. "After all, she is my sister. However, that can wait. Now tell me what you were going to tell me. How did all this begin? Do you know who the man was, because if so I want to go and see him?"

"No, I don't, Vane," his father replied, slowly. "To tell you the truth, I never even attempted to find out. We were living at Simla at the time, and Simla is, as perhaps you know, not the most moral of places. You were nearly three years old, and for about a year your mother had shown signs of what doctors call now Alcoholic Insanity. I shall never forget the first time that I found her drunk——"

"Never mind that, dad," Vane interrupted, with a sharp catch in his voice, "I don't want to hear about it, it's bad enough already. Was Carol right about that light which she used to see in her eyes and which I suppose you saw in mine last night?"

"Yes, perfectly," replied Sir Arthur. "I used to think it beautiful once, before I knew what a dreadful meaning it had. When she had had a glass or so of champagne, her eyes—and they were just like yours and Carol's—used to light up marvellously. People used to speak of them as the most beautiful eyes in the East; but afterwards, that light in them began to burn brighter, and when at last she gave way completely, it became something horrible, although, somehow, it was still beautiful—damnably beautiful."

"Well, one night," Sir Arthur went on, leaning back in his chair and staring into vacancy, "she went out to spend the evening, as she told me, with a friend; as a matter of fact it was Raleigh's sister. She had been drinking a little during the afternoon, but I felt that she would be safe there, for both Raleigh and his sister knew of this miserable failing of hers. Unfortunately, I had a lot of work to do that evening, and I was unable to go with her. I went about eleven o'clock to bring her home. I found she had not been there at all. I went back and sat up the whole night, I needn't tell you Vane what my thoughts were. She didn't come. She never came.

"A month afterwards I got a letter from her written from Bombay. She confessed that for over a year she had been deceiving me; that another man had stolen her love from me; that she could never face me or look upon you again, and that was all. She gave no address, no sign that I could trace her by. If she had done I would have forgiven her and asked her to come back for your sake. But it was over ten years before I saw her again, and then it was in a house in a wretched street in Paris.

"Then she was a drunkard, a hopeless drunkard, lost to all sense and shame. She had taken my name again and was making it infamous, and for your sake I was forced to take some decided steps. I took proceedings in the French Courts, and got authority to confine her in an asylum for inebriates, and she is there now, almost an imbecile."

"And what about Carol?" said Vane, in a hard, [Pg 61]strained voice, "doesn't she know who her father is, and couldn't you have got a divorce?"

"Carol does not know for certain who her father is," said Sir Arthur. "There was someone who went about the Continent a good deal with her mother when she was very young, and she thinks that he was. It is quite possible that he may have been the scoundrel, whoever he was, who took her away from Simla. As for the divorce, of course I could have got one, but I had no desire to marry again, and I preferred to let

the thing rest as it was, rather than drag our name through the cesspool of the Divorce Court and the newspapers. Everybody was very good to me, and in time I lived it down and it was forgotten. In fact, I suppose if it hadn't been for that chance meeting of yours last night, it might never have been heard of again."

"Then that," said Vane, "is, I suppose, the secret of my drinking the whiskey last night, and the explanation of the light which Carol saw in my eyes when I had drunk too much champagne. My blood is poisoned, and so, when I've drunk a certain amount, the smell of alcohol is irresistible. There's one thing perfectly certain, I don't like whiskey and I never have liked it, and I'm quite sure I never wanted it less than I did last night; and yet when I smelt it, the smell somehow seemed to get up into my brain and force me to drink it.

"I tried my best to resist it. Honestly I did, dad, but it was no use. I tasted it, and then I took a long drink of it, and then I took another. I didn't seem to get drunk, I went mad. I saw some magnificent visions, they seemed to be all round the room, nickering like the Biograph, then, all of a sudden, they vanished, and I don't remem[Pg 62]ber anything more until I woke and found Koda standing beside me. Now was that the sort of thing that used to happen to my mother?"

"It was," replied his father, "exactly, and when she came to her senses after one of her bouts, she used to implore me to keep the smell, even the sight, of liquor away from her. Of course I did. I gave up drinking myself, and what I had in the house for friends I kept constantly under lock and key. It seemed to be successful for a time, and then she began to get liquor from somewhere else. I never could find out how or where she did it. I had her watched, but it was no use. Weeks would pass and she would be perfectly sober. Then, without the slightest warning, she would go out for a walk or to pay some calls and come back, not drunk, but getting drunk.

"We used to have some terrible scenes then, as you may believe. I dismissed four butlers because she had either bribed or frightened them into giving her the keys of the wine cellar. I had the best medical men in India for her, and at last I got her to consent to go into a Sanitorium. That, however, was merely a blind to keep my suspicions quiet. It was only a few days before she was to have gone there that she disappeared."

"And you never had any suspicion about the scoundrel that she went away with? I expect if the truth was known, she got the liquor secretly through him after you had stopped it. I am beginning already to have a presentiment that I shall meet that man some day, and if I do, may God have mercy on him, for I won't!"

"No, no, Vane, don't say that, my boy! Remember what is written—'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' Whoever he is his sin will find him out, if it has not done so already."

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Sir Arthur spoke with the absolute conviction of a deeply religious man. He believed his own words honestly; and yet, if he could have seen how his own prophecy was to be fulfilled, he would have given his right hand, nay, he would even have shaken hands with the man who had so deeply wronged him, rather than that they should have had so terrible a fulfilment.

Indeed, even while he was speaking the wheels of Fate had already begun to revolve.

When Carol and Dora returned from their ride Dora found a letter waiting for her. She opened it, glanced quickly over the page and then said:

"Carol, how will this suit you for this evening? I think a night out would do you good after your little shake-up this morning. Listen—

"Dear Dora,

"Yesterday I became a happy bachelor for a fortnight. Encumbrances gone to Folkestone. If you have nothing better to do, meet me at the 'West End' at 7.30 this evening, and, if possible, bring Miss Vane, as I am bringing a friend, who, after my description of her—don't be jealous!—is quite anxious to meet her. He is good looking and very well off, and I think she will like him.

"Hoping you will both be able to come,

"Yours ever,

"Bernard."

"That sounds promising," said Miss Carol. "If he's that sort, and nice as well, and has plenty of the necessary, I shouldn't mind if he took me on as a sort of permanence. Somehow, after last night and this morning, I've got sick of this general knocking-about. Besides, it's no class. All right, [Pg 64]I'll come. A bit of a kick-up will do me good, I think. That talk with the old gentleman this morning gave me quite a number 25 hump, though the ride has worked a good bit of it off. Now let's feed, I'm hungry enough to dine off cold boiled black ornaments."

Mr. Bernard Falcon, the writer of the letter to Dora, was principal partner in the somewhat incongruously named firm of solicitors, Messrs. Falcon and Lambe, of Mansion House Chambers, E.C. The firm did all sorts of work, provided only that it paid; the highest class under their style, and the other sorts—the money-lending and

"speculative business"—through their own "jackals," that is to say seedy and broken-down solicitors who had made a failure of their own business, but had managed to keep on the Rolls and were not above doing "commission work" for more prosperous firms.

Mr. Lambe, away from his business, was a most excellent person; a good husband and father, a regular church-goer, and a generous supporter of all good works in and about Denmark Hill, where he lived. He was one of those strangely constituted men—of whom there are multitudes in the world—who will earn money by the most questionable, if not absolutely dishonest, methods, without a qualm of conscience, and give liberally of that same money without recognising for a moment that what they honestly believe they are giving to God, is a portion of the Wages of Sin—which, as good Christians, they ought never to have earned.

Mr. Bernard Falcon, on the other hand, in his private life, aimed at nothing more than respectability in the worst sense of the word. His wife and his two little girls went to church. He him[Pg 65]self went on Sunday mornings when he had no more pressing engagements. His name appeared regularly on the subscription lists published in connection with St. Michael's, Brondesbury, his parish church, and he also paid the rent of No. 15, Melville Gardens, Brook Green, in addition to one hundred and fifty pounds a year as what he would have called "a retainer" to Miss Dora Russell—to say nothing of certain milliner's and jeweller's bills which he liquidated, sometimes cheerfully and sometimes grudgingly, according to his humour and their amount.

When Carol and Dora got out of their cab at the door of the "West End" and went into the little vestibule-bar to the left, they found two men in evening dress waiting for them. One of them—a man of about forty, bald on the temples, of medium height, well-fed and well-groomed, and not by any means bad-looking, though of an entirely mediocre type—Carol greeted with the easy familiarity of old acquaintance, for she had known him for nearly a year as Dora's 'particular friend.' The other, tall, well-built, handsome, and with that unmistakable stamp of breeding on him which Mr. Bernard Falcon totally lacked, she instantly recognised as Reginald Garthorne, her intended companion for the evening.

The first thing he did when they had been introduced by Bernard Falcon, was to apologise for what he had said in front of the Criterion the night before. He did it with admirably calculated deference, and in such perfectly chosen words, that it was quite impossible for her not to accept his apology and "make friends."

During the evening he became completely fascinated, not only by her beauty, but far more so by the extraordinary charm of her manner. He [Pg 66]was a man who, apart

from his physical qualities and good looks, could, when he chose, make himself very pleasing to women, and, without showing a trace of effort, he did his very best to please Miss Carol, and succeeded so completely, that when, a few days later, he made a proposal of a partly domestic nature to her, she, after a brief consultation with Dora, accepted it.

At the end of the month the house in Melville Gardens was to let, and Carol and Dora were installed in a flat in Densmore Gardens, South Kensington, for the rent of which Reginald Garthorne and Mr. Bernard Falcon were jointly responsible—of course, under other names. The only condition that Carol had made with Garthorne, was that, whatever happened, he would not tell Vane of her change of address, and he, for very good reasons of his own, had promised unconditionally.

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CHAPTER V.

The next day Enid Raleigh came home.

Almost the first thing she said to her mother, who had met her at the station with the carriage, was:

"Well, and where is Master Vane, please? He is in town, isn't he? Why didn't he come to meet me? I shall have to make him do penance for this."

The words were lightly spoken, spoken in utter unconsciousness of the deep meaning which Fate had put into them. So far as Enid herself was concerned, and as, in fact, she was just thinking at the moment, all they meant was that at their next meeting she would refuse Vane his long-accustomed lover's kiss, and then, after an explanation occupying some three or four minutes at most, surrender at discretion, after which would come the luxury of playing at being offended and standing on her dignity for a few minutes more, and then enjoying the further luxury of making it up.

"Yes, dear," said her mother, "Vane is in town still. I think he doesn't go back to Oxford until the end of the week, but he hasn't been very well lately——"

"Not well!" exclaimed Enid, sitting up out of the corner of the carriage into which she had [Pg 68]leaned back with that easy abandon which comes so naturally to people accustomed to comfort all their lives. "Ill! Why, Vane's never been ill in his life. What's the matter? It isn't anything serious, is it? You don't mean that he's really ill, mother, do you?"

There was no mistaking the reality of the anxiety in her tone. Her mother recognised it instantly, but she also saw that a brougham rattling over the streets of London was not exactly the place to enter upon such explanations as it was her destiny and her duty to make to this brilliant, beautiful, spoilt darling of a daughter who was sitting beside her.

So far as she knew, every hope, every prospect of Enid's life, that bright young life which, in the fuller acceptation of the term, was only just going to begin, was connected more or less intimately with Vane Maxwell.

Ever since they had come home together from Bombay on that memorable voyage, she and Vane had been sweethearts. They were very much in love with each other, and so far their love had been a striking exception to that old proverb which comes true only too often. Saving only those lovers' quarrels which don't count because they end so much more pleasantly than they begin, there had never been a cloud in that morning-sky of life towards which they had so far walked hand in hand. It seemed as though the Fates themselves had conspired to make everything pleasant and easy for them; and of course it had never struck either of them that when the Fates do this kind of thing, they always have a more or less heavy account on the other side—to be presented in due course.

Lady Raleigh knew this, and her daughter did not. She knew that the terrible explanation had [Pg 69]to come, but she very naturally shrank from the inevitable—and so, woman-like, she temporised.

"Really, dear," she said, "I can't talk with all this jolting and rattle. When we get home I will tell you all about it. Vane himself is not ill at all. He is just as well as ever he was. It isn't that."

"Then I suppose," said Miss Enid, looking round sharply, "my lord has been getting himself into some scrape or other—something that has to be explained or talked away before he likes to meet me. Is that it?"

"No, Enid, that is not it," replied her mother gravely, "but really, dear, I must ask you to say nothing more about it just now. When we get home we'll have a cup of tea, and then I'll tell you all about it."

"Oh, very well," said Enid, a trifle petulantly. "I suppose there's some mystery about it. Of course there must be, or else he'd have come here himself, so we may as well change the subject. How do you like the new flat, and what's it like?"

As she said this she threw herself back again into the corner and stared out of the opposite window of the brougham with a look in her eyes which seemed to say that for the time being she had no further interest in any earthly affairs.

Lady Raleigh, glad of the relief even for the moment, at once began a voluble and minute description of the new flat in Addison Gardens into which they had moved during her daughter's last sojourn in Paris, and this, with certain interjections and questions from Enid, lasted until the brougham turned into the courtyard and drew up in front of the arched doorway out of which the tall, uniformed porter came with the fingers of his left hand raised to the peak of his cap, to open the carriage door.

Sir Godfrey was out, and would not be back [Pg 70]until dinner time; so, as soon as they had taken their things off, Lady Raleigh ordered tea in her own room, and there, as briefly as was consistent with the gravity of the news she had to tell, she told Enid everything that her husband had heard from Sir Arthur.

Enid, although she flushed slightly at certain portions of the narrative, listened to the story with a calmness which somewhat surprised her mother.

The little damsel for whose kisses those two boys had fought ten or eleven years ago, had now grown into a fair and stately maiden of eighteen, very dainty and desirable to look upon, and withal possessing a dignity which only comes by birth and breeding and that larger training and closer contact with the world which modern girls of her class enjoy. Young as she was, hers was not the innocence of ignorance. She had lived too late in the century, and had already been too far afield in the world for that.

"It comes to this, then," she said quietly, almost hardly, "instead of being dead, as we have believed all along, Vane's mother is alive; an imbecile who has become so through drink, and who seems to have misbehaved herself very badly when Vane was a baby. She is in an asylum, and will probably remain there till she dies. No one but ourselves and this interesting young person, Miss Carol Vane, appears to know anything about it, and I really don't see why Vane is to be held responsible for his mother's insanity—for I suppose that's what it comes to.

"And then there is Miss Carol herself. Of course she's not a particularly desirable family connection; but I don't suppose Vane would expect me to meet her, much less fall upon her neck and greet her as his long-lost sister. I suppose, too, [Pg 71]that between us we could manage to do something for her, and put her in a more respectable way of living and induce her to hold her tongue.

"As for Vane getting drunk that night, of course it's very improper and all that sort of thing from the Sunday School point of view; but I don't suppose he was the only

undergraduate who took too much to drink that night. Probably several hundreds of them did, and I daresay a good many of them were either engaged or going to be. Would they consider that a reason why they should go and break off their engagements? I'm afraid there wouldn't be many marriages nowadays if engagements were broken off on that account.

"Of course, mam, dear, what you've told me is not exactly pleasant to hear, but still, after all, I really can't see anything so very dreadful in it. Most families have a skeleton of some sort, I suppose, and this is ours, or will be when Vane and I are married. We must simply keep the cupboard door shut as closely as possible. It's only what lots of other people have to do."

"Well, my dear," said her mother, "I must say I'm very glad to see you take it so reasonably. I'm afraid I could not have done so at your age, but then girls are so different now, and, besides, you always had more of your father's way of looking at things than mine. Then, I suppose, Vane may come and see you. I think it was very nice of him not to come until you had been told everything."

"May come!" said Enid. "I should think so. If he doesn't I shall be distinctly offended. I shall expect him to come round and make his explanations in person before long, and when he does we will have a few minutes chat *à deux*—and I don't think I shall have very much difficulty in con[Pg 72]vincing him of the error of his ways, or, at any rate, of his opinions."

"What an extremely conceited speech to make, dear!" said her ladyship mildly, and yet with a glance of motherly pride at the beauty which went so far towards justifying it. "Well, perhaps you are right. Certainly, if anyone can, you can, and I sincerely hope you will. It would be dreadful if anything were to happen to break it off after all these years."

The colour went out of Enid's cheeks in an instant, and she said in quite an altered voice:

"Oh, for goodness sake, mamma, don't say anything about that! You know how fond I am of Vane. I simply couldn't give him up, whatever sort of a mother he had, and if he had a dozen half-sisters as disreputable as this Miss Carol Vane—the very idea of her having the impudence to use his name! No, I shan't think of that—I couldn't. If Vane did that it would just break my heart—it really would. It would be like taking half my life away, and it would simply kill me. I couldn't bear it."

She honestly meant what she said, not knowing that she said it in utter ignorance of the self that said it.

It was in Enid's mind, as it also was in her mother's, to send a note round to Warwick Gardens to ask both Vane and his father to come round to an informal dinner, and to discuss the matter there and then; but neither of them gave utterance to the thought. Lady Raleigh, knowing her daughter's proud and somewhat impetuous temperament, instinctively shrank from making a suggestion which she would have had very good grounds for rejecting, more especially as she had already given such a very decided opinion as to Vane's scruples.

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As for Enid herself, she honestly thought so little of these same scruples that she felt inclined to accuse Vane of a Quixotism which, from her point of view at least, was entirely unwarrantable. It was, therefore, quite impossible for her to first suggest that they should meet after a parting during which they might have unconsciously reached what was to be the crisis of both their lives.

The result was that the thought remained unspoken, and Enid, after spending the evening in vexed and anxious uncertainty, went to bed; and then, as soon as she felt that she was absolutely safe in her solitude, discussed the whole matter over again with herself, and wound the discussion up with a good hearty cry, after which she fell into the dreamless slumber of the healthy and innocent.

When she woke very early the next morning, or, rather, while she was on that borderland between sleeping and waking where the mind works with such strange rapidity, she reviewed the whole of the circumstances, and came to the conclusion that she was being very badly treated. Vane knew perfectly well that she was coming back yesterday afternoon, and therefore he had no right to let these absurd scruples of his prevent him from performing the duties of a lover and meeting her at the station. But, even granted that something else had made it impossible for him to do so, there was absolutely no excuse for his remaining away the whole afternoon and evening when he must have known how welcome a visit would have been.

Meanwhile Vane had been doing the very last thing that she would have imagined him doing.

After his fateful conversation with his father he had left the house in Warwick Gardens to wander he knew and cared not whither. His thoughts were more than sufficient companionship for him, [Pg 74]and, heeding neither time nor distance, he walked as he might have walked in a dream, along the main road through Hammersmith and Turnham Green and Kew, and so through Richmond Hill till he had climbed the hill and stopped for a brief moment of desperate debate before the door of the saloon bar of

the "Star and Garter." The better impulse conquered the worse, and he entered the park, and, seating himself on one of the chairs under the trees, he made an effort to calmly survey the question in all its bearings.

It was the most momentous of all human tasks—the choosing of his own future life-path at the parting of the ways. One of them, flower-bordered and green with the new-grown grass of life's spring-time, and the other dry, rugged and rock-strewn—the paths of inclination and duty: the one leading up to the golden gates of the Paradise of wedded love, and the other slanting down to the wide wilderness which he must cross alone, until he passed alone into the shadows which lay beyond it.

A few days before he had seen himself well on the way to everything that can make a man's life full and bright and worthy to be lived. He was, thanks to his father's industry, relieved from all care on the score of money, and, better still, he had that within him which made him independent of fortune, perfect health and great abilities, already well-proved, although he had yet to wait nearly a year for his twenty-first birthday.

He had great ambitions and the high hopes which go with them. The path to honour and distinction, even to fame itself, had lain plainly open before him—and now everything was so different. The sun which he had thought was only rising was already setting. He knew now that the fruit which [Pg 75]looked so sweet and luscious had the canker-worm feeding on the core; that the flesh which seemed so healthy was really tainted and leprous; and that, worse than all, the brightest and sweetest promise of his life, a promise infinitely sweeter and dearer than even the fulfilment of his highest material ambition, was now no longer a promise but a denial, a life-sacrifice demanded, not only by his honour as a man, but by his love as a lover.

He sat thus thinking until the buzzing of a motor-car woke him from his day-dream. He looked at his watch, and found that he had about time to get across the park to Sheen Gate; but he fell to dreaming again on the way, and when he reached the gate it was closed.

He turned back with the idea of asking a keeper to unlock the gate and let him out, but after a few strides he halted and sat down again on a seat. After all, were he to go home, he could not sleep, and it better suited his mood to keep vigil in the open air than within the four walls of his room.

And so he passed the night, walking half awake, and then sitting, half asleep, dimly reviewing this sudden crisis of his fate again and again from all possible aspects. And again and again the determination to adhere to the decision which duty had marked out so clearly seemed to beat itself deeper and deeper into his brain.

The taint of alcoholism was in his blood, and matrimony and parentage were not for him. In the morning he would go straight to Enid's father and admit that, although ties reaching back into her childhood and his had to be broken, yet it was impossible for the engagement between him and Enid to be continued.

The night passed, and the park gates were again opened, but still Vane sat on, until, noticing the suspicious glances of some of the early pedestrians, he decided to get home, have a tub, and pay his fateful visit to Sir Godfrey Raleigh.

As it happened, however, that visit was never to be paid. Enid had found her waking thoughts unpleasant, if not almost intolerable, and, being too perfectly healthy to indulge in anything of the nature of moping or sulks, she came to the conclusion that a good sharp spin on her bicycle would be the best mental tonic she could have; so she got a cup of coffee and a biscuit, took out her machine, and started away to work off, as she hoped, the presentiment of coming trouble which seemed to have fastened itself upon her.

Thus it happened that she entered Richmond Park by Sheen Gate just as Vane, physically weary yet still mentally sleepless, was coming out of it.

During his night's vigil he had nerved himself, as he thought, to meet every imaginable trial but this one—this vision of his well-beloved, not waiting for him, but coming to him fresh and radiant in her young beauty, delightful and desirable, tempting almost beyond the powers of human resistance, and his, too, his own sweetheart, pledged to him ever since that memorable afternoon when he had fought for her and won her behind the wheelhouse in the midst of the Indian Ocean.

When her wonder had given way to complete recognition Enid dismounted and waited, naturally expecting that he would greet her; but he stood silent, looking at her as though he were trying to find some words of salutation.

"Well, Vane," she said at last, "I suppose we may shake hands. I did not expect to see you here. Cannot you look a little more cheerful? What is the matter? You look as if you hadn't been home all night."

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He took her hand mechanically, and, as he held it and looked down into the sweet upturned face with a bright flush on the cheeks and the dawning of an angry light in the gentle eyes, he felt an almost irresistible desire to take her in his arms just as he had done at their last meeting and kiss into silence the tempting lips which had just shaped those almost scornfully spoken words.

It dawned upon her in the same moment that he was looking as she had never seen him look before. His face was perfectly bloodless. The features were hard-set and deep-lined. There were furrows in his forehead and shadows under his eyes. When she had last seen his face it was that of a boy of twenty, full of health and strength, and without a care on his mind. Now it was the face of a man of thirty, a man who had lived and sinned and sorrowed.

In that instant her mood and her voice changed, and she said:

"Vane, dear, what is it? Why don't you speak to me? Are you ill?"

He took her bicycle from her, and, turning, walked with her back into the park. After a few moments' silence he replied in a voice which seemed horribly strange to her:

"Yes, Enid, I am. I am ill, and I am afraid there is no cure for the disease. I have not been home. In fact, I have been in the park all night. I was shut in by accident, and I remained from choice, trying to think out my duty to you."

"Oh, nonsense!" she replied. "I know what you mean. It's about you getting drunk the other night—and—and your unfortunate mother and this newly-found half-sister of yours. Well, of course, I suppose it was exceedingly wrong of you to get so very drunk. And the rest—I mean about your [Pg 78]mother—that is very sad and terrible. But, bad as it is, I think you are taking it a great deal too seriously. I've talked it all over with mamma, and she thinks just as I do about it."

When she had said this Enid felt that she had gone quite as far as her self-respect and maidenly pride would permit her to go. As she looked up at him she saw the pallor of his face change almost to grey. His hand was resting lightly on her arm, and she felt it tremble. Then he drew it gently away and said:

"I know what you mean, Enid, and it is altogether too good and generous of you; but I don't think you quite understand—I mean, you don't seem to realise how serious it all is."

"Really, Vane, I must say that you are acting very strangely. What is the good of going all over it again? You can't tell me anything more, I suppose, than I have heard already from mamma. Surely you don't mean that you intend that everything is to be over between us—that we are only to be friends, as they say, in future?"

"I quite see what *you* mean," he said, his lips perceptibly tightening; "and that, too, in a certain sense, is what I mean also."

"What!" she exclaimed. "Do you really mean that I am not to be any more what I have been to you, and that if we meet again it must only be as ordinary acquaintances, just friends who have known each other a certain number of years? Surely, Vane, you don't mean that—dear?"

The last word escaped her lips almost involuntarily. She tried to keep it back, but it got out in spite of herself. It was only the fact that they were walking on the public highway that prevented her from giving way altogether to the sense of despair that had come over her. As his face had [Pg 79]changed a few moments before so did hers now, and as she looked at him he stopped momentarily in his walk.

But the lessons which he had learnt during the last few days, and most of all during this last night of lonely wandering and desperate questioning with himself, had ground the moral into his soul so deeply that not even the sight of her so anxiously longing for just one word from him to bring them together again, and make them once more as they had always been—almost since either of them could remember anything—was strong enough to force him to speak it.

He involuntarily wheeled the bicycle towards the middle of the road, as though he was afraid to trust himself too near her, and said, speaking as a man might speak when pronouncing his own death sentence:

"Yes, Enid, that is what I do mean. I mean that there is a great deal more, something infinitely more serious in what has happened during the last few days, in what I have learnt and you have been told, than you seem to have any idea of."

Enid made a gesture as though she would interrupt him, but he went on almost hotly:

"Listen to me, Enid, and then judge me as you please—only listen to me. Four days ago, after I had seen the Boat Race, I did as a good many other fellows from the 'Varsity do—I went West. By sheer accident I met a girl so like myself that—well, I didn't know then that I had a sister. Yesterday I learnt, then, that I have one—not my father's daughter, only my mother's—and you know what that means. We had supper together at the Trocadero——"

"Really, Vane, I do think you might spare me these little details," said Enid, with a sort of weary [Pg 80]impatience. "I have heard of this half-sister of yours already. Suppose we leave her out for the present?"

"Yes," he said, again stopping momentarily in his walk. "We *will* leave her out for the present. In fact, as far as you are concerned, Enid, she may be left out for ever."

"Why—what do you mean, Vane?" she exclaimed, stopping short.

"I mean," he said, beginning quickly and then halting for a moment. "I mean that, considering everything that has happened during the last few days, I have no intention of asking you to become her half-sister—even in law."

The real meaning of his utterance forced itself swiftly enough upon her now, and for a minute rendered her incapable of speech. She, however, like others of her blood and breed, had learned how to seem most careless when she cared most, and so she managed to reply not only steadily but even stiffly:

"Of course, after that there is very little to be said, Mr. Maxwell. I'm afraid I have not properly understood what has happened. Perhaps, though, it would have been better for you to have seen my father and talked this over with him first."

The "Mr. Maxwell" cut him to the quick. It was the first time he had ever heard it from her lips. Yet it did not affect the decision which was, as he had for the time being, at least, convinced himself, inevitable, and so miserable was he that even her scornful indignation was something like a help to him.

He was even grateful that this interview, which he had looked forward to with dread, had taken place in the open air rather than in the drawing-room of Sir Godfrey Raleigh's house, for if she [Pg 81] had simply sat down and cried, as, perhaps, nine out of ten girls in her position would have done, his task would have been infinitely more difficult, perhaps even impossible of accomplishment. Her present attitude, however, seemed to appeal to his masculine pride and stimulate it. He turned slightly towards her, and said, with a sudden change in his voice which she felt almost like a blow:

"Yes, Miss Raleigh, you are quite right. I will spare you the details; at least, those which are not essential. But there are some which are. For instance," he went on, with a note of vehemence in his tone which made it impossible for her to interrupt him, "four nights ago I was lying on the floor of the Den at home, blind, dead drunk—drunk, mind you, after this sister of mine had seen in my eyes the sign of drunkenness which she had seen in her mother's—that was my mother, too, an imbecile dipsomaniac, remember—who had sunk to unspeakable degradation before she became what she is. I was as sober as I am now when I told my father this—I mean what Carol had told me. I noticed that there was something strange about him while I was telling him, but I thought that was just a matter of circumstances, you know——"

"Yes, I think I know, or at any rate I can guess," said Miss Enid, with angry eyes and tightened lips.

"Very well, then," he went on, "and after that—after my father had asked me to have a glass of whiskey with him—after I had refused and he had gone to bed and I was

putting the spirit-case away without any idea of drinking again, one smell of the whiskey seemed to paralyse my whole mental force. It turned me from a sane man who had had a solemn warning into a madman who had only one [Pg 82]feeling—the craving for alcohol in some shape. I smelt again, and the smell of it went like fire through my veins. I tasted it, and then I drank. I drank again and again, until, as I suppose your mother has told you, I fell on the rug, no longer a man, but simply a helpless, intoxicated beast. I was utterly insensible to everything about me, I didn't care whether I lived or died. When I woke and thought about it I would a thousand times rather have been dead.

"It wasn't that I wanted the liquor. I didn't get drunk because I wanted to. I got drunk, Enid, because I *had* to; because there was a lurking devil in my blood which forced me to drink that whiskey just because it was alcohol, because it was drink, because it was the element ready to respond to that craving which I have inherited from this unhappy mother of mine.

"Do you know what that means, Enid? I don't think you do. It means that my blood has been poisoned from my very birth. Of course, you don't know this. Your parents don't know it, any more than they know that it is too late to redeem the ruin which has fallen upon me. That, at least, I can say with a clear conscience is no fault or sin of mine. Since then I have thrashed this miserable thing out in every way that I can think of. I have talked it over with my father, and he has talked it over with yours. I have been wandering about the park all night trying to find out what I ought to do—and I think I have found it."

"From which I suppose I am to understand," she replied, in a voice which was nothing like as firm as she intended it to be, "you mean, Vane—or perhaps I ought to say Mr. Maxwell now—that henceforth—I mean that we are not going to be married after all."

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"What I mean is this, Enid," he replied, "that dearly as I love you, and just because I love you so dearly, because I would give all the world if I had it to have you for my wife, I would *not* make you the wife of a man who could become the thing that was lying on the hearthrug of the Den four nights ago—a man drunk against his own will, a slave to one of the vilest of habits—no, something much worse than a habit, a disease inherited with tainted, poisoned blood!

"What would you think of your parents and my father if they allowed you to marry a lunatic? Well, with that taint in my blood I am worse, a thousand times worse, than a

lunatic, and I should be a criminal as well if I asked you or any other girl for whom I had the slightest feeling of love or respect to marry me.

"Think what the punishment of such a crime might be!" he went on even more vehemently. "Every hour of our married life I should be haunted by this horrible fear. Tempted by a devil lurking in every glass of wine or spirits that I drank, or even looked at—the same devil which had me in its grip the other night. Enid, if you could have seen me then, I think you would have understood better; but if, which God forbid, you could have gone through what I went through after I swallowed that first drink of whiskey, you would as soon think of marrying a criminal out of jail or a madman out of a lunatic asylum as you would of marrying me. I daresay all this may seem unreasonable, perhaps even heartless, to you; but, dear, if you only knew what it costs to say it——"

He broke off abruptly, for as he said this a note of tenderness stole for the first time into his voice, and found an instant echo in Enid's heart. So far she had borne herself bravely through a bitterly [Pg 84]trying ordeal, but as she noticed a change in his tone a swift conviction came to her that if she remained many more minutes in his company she would certainly break down and there would be "a scene," which, under the circumstances, was not to be thought of. So she stopped him by holding out her hand and saying in a voice which cost her a terrible effort to keep steady:

"No, Vane, we have talked quite enough. I see your mind is made up, and so there is, of course, nothing more to be said except 'good-bye.' I think we had better not meet again until we both have had more time to think about it all."

This was as far as she could get. They had by this time reached Sheen Gate again, and Enid took her bicycle from him. She did not look at him, and, indeed, could not even trust herself to say "thank you." She mounted and rode through the comparatively lonely roads in a sort of dream until the traffic at Hammersmith Bridge and Broadway mercifully compelled her to give her whole attention to the steering of her machine.

When she got home she gave her bicycle to the porter, went straight to her own room, took off her hat and gloves and jacket, and then dropped quietly on the bed and laid there, staring with tearless eyes up at the ceiling, wondering vaguely what it all meant, and if it was really true.

Vane stood and watched her until she swept round a bend in the road, and then walked on with the one thought echoing and re-echoing in the emptiness of his soul—the thought of the course which he was bound to follow by the dictates of both love and duty. He had reached the Surrey end of Hammersmith Bridge when the strong

smell of alcoholic liquor coming through the open door of a public-house caused him to stop for a moment. [Pg 85]Would a drink do him any harm after what had happened? He had passed a sleepless night in the open air, and felt almost fainting—surely a drop of brandy would do him no harm under the circumstances? Then he remembered the hearthrug in the Den, and turned towards the bridge with something between a sneer and a curse on his lips.

Was he always to be beset by temptation in this way—and would he always have strength to successfully combat the evil influence? If Fate had really marked him out for a dipsomaniac, was it any use his fighting against what must inevitably be his destiny? His thoughts were interrupted by the rumbling of a 'bus which was coming towards him, and, seeing that it was one which went through Kensington, he jumped on it and went home.

He alighted at Warwick Gardens, and on reaching the house found that his father had just come in for lunch.

"It's all right, dad," he said, anticipating his inevitable question. "I got shut in Richmond Park by accident, and did a night in the open. But I'll tell you all about it at lunch. I'm going to have a tub now."

Lunch was ready by the time Vane came downstairs, re-clothed and refreshed, and when they were alone he repeated to his father almost verbatim the conversation he had had with Enid.

"Well, my boy," he said when he had concluded. "I cannot but think that as far as you can see now you have acted rightly. It is terribly hard on you, but I will help you all I can. And perhaps, after all, the future may prove brighter than it looks now for all of us."

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CHAPTER VI.

It was the end of Term, nearly two years after that interview in Richmond Park which, as both Vane and Enid had then believed, was for them the parting of the ways. Vane was sitting in a deep-seated, Russian wicker-chair in his cosy study, and opposite him, in a similar chair, was another man with whom he had been talking somewhat earnestly for about an hour.

To-morrow would be Commemoration Day—"Commem," to use the undergraduate's abbreviation. There would be meetings from far and wide of people gathered together, not only from all over the kingdom, but from the ends of the earth as well; men and women glorying, for their own sakes and their sons', in the long traditions of the grand old University, the dearly-loved Alma Mater, nursing-mother of their fathers and fathers' fathers. Here a man who had been a tutor and then a Fellow, and was now one of His Majesty's judges; there another, who walked with sober mien in the leggings and tunic of a Bishop, and who, in his time, had dodged the Proctor and his bull-dogs as nimbly as the most irresponsible undergraduate of the moment—and so on through the whole hierarchy of the University.

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The Lists were just out. Vane had fulfilled the promise of his earlier career and had taken a brilliant double-first. He had read for Classics and History, but he had also taken up incidentally Mental Science and Moral Philosophy, and he had scored a first in all. If it had then been possible for him to have had a Treble-First, it would have been his. As it was he had won the most brilliant degree of his year—and there he was, sitting back in his chair, blowing cloud after cloud of smoke out of his mouth, and every now and then taking a sip out of a big cup of tea and looking with something more than admiration at the man opposite; a man who had only achieved a first, and who, if he had been some other kind of man, would have been very well contented with it.

It would not, however, have needed a particularly keen student of human nature to discover that this was not the kind of man who could rest contented with anything like a formal success; and, after all, even a double-first, to say nothing of a single, although a great achievement as the final triumph of an educational course, is still only the end of the beginning. That done, the student, armed *cap-à-pie* in his intellectual armour, goes forth to face something infinitely sterner and more pitiless than tutors or proctors, ay, even than Masters and Chancellors themselves—the presiding genius of that infinitely greater University called the World, where taking your degree means anything that human fortune can give you, and where being plucked may mean anything from a clerkship in an office to selling matches in the gutter.

"I *am* sorry you missed your double, old man!" said Vane, continuing the conversation after a pause that had lasted for two or three minutes. "Still, at any rate, you've got your first, and, after [Pg 88]all, a first in Classics and a second in History is not to be

sneezed at, and I don't suppose it would have mattered a hang to you whether you had come out anywhere or not."

As he said this there was a sudden contraction of his companion's jaw, which resulted in the clean biting through of the vulcanite mouthpiece of his pipe. He spat the pieces out into the fireplace, and said in a perfectly smooth voice:

"I wonder what I did that for! I suppose that is one of the circumstances in which people say that it does a man good to swear."

"I should certainly have sworn under the circumstances," said Vane, "or at least, I should have said something that one would not say in the presence of one's maiden aunt, but then, of course, you Ernshaw—you're above all that sort of thing. You have your feelings so well under control that you don't even need to swear to relieve them. However, that's not quite the subject. What am I to do? Am I to go back to her, repenting of the evil of my ways, ask her to pardon a passing madness, and lay my academic honours at her feet—as God knows I would be only too glad to do——"

"Wait a moment, Maxwell. Don't say anything more just now, and let me think a bit. We have been over this subject a good many times already, but now we have come to the crisis, to the cross-ways, in fact. You have made me your confidant in this matter. The future of your life and hers depends upon what you decide to do now, and, not only that, but there is your father and her father and mother—the completion, that is to say, of three other lives. It is very, very serious. It is more than serious, it is solemn. Wait a moment, let me think."

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Vane leant back in his chair, dropped his pipe quietly on the floor, and waited. He knew that Mark Ernshaw, his chum at Eton and his friend at Balliol—this tall, sparely-built man, with dark hair, high, somewhat narrow forehead, and big, deep-set, brown eyes, delicate features, and the somewhat too finely-moulded chin which, taken together, showed him to the eye that sees to be the enthusiast as well as the man of intellect, perhaps of genius—was not thinking in the ordinary meaning of the word. He was praying, and when he saw that this was so he folded his hands over his eyes, and for nearly ten minutes there was absolute silence, Vane was thinking and his friend was praying. Perhaps, in another sense, Vane was praying too, for the strong religious bias which he had inherited from his father had, since the great crisis of his life had been passed, and during his close intimacy with Mark Ernshaw, grown stronger than ever.

He had told him everything. They had gone over the whole of the dismal history again and again. They had thrashed out the problem in all its bearings, now arguing with and now against each other, and here was the last day. To-morrow in the Theatre they would receive the formal acknowledgment which would crown their academic careers. Vane's self-imposed probation would then be over, the crisis would be passed, and his life's course fixed for good and all.

"Well, old man," said Vane, at length, "have you settled it? Upon my word I feel almost like a man under sentence of death waiting for a reprieve. But, after all, why should I? I haven't touched a drop of alcohol for over a year. I needn't say anything about the work I have done, for you know as much about that as I do myself. [Pg 90] I am as sane and healthy as any man of my age need want to be. Of course, as I have told you, it was mutually agreed between us, or rather, between her parents and my father, that we should not meet or correspond until after I had taken my degree. I've kept the bargain both ways. I haven't written to her or had a word from her all the time. And now, what is the future to be? Shall I take up the threads of the old life and marry and live happily ever afterwards, as they say in the story-books—or shall I——? No, I don't think I could do that. Don't you think I've shown strength of mind enough to counteract the weakness of that one night? For the sake of all you've ever loved, old man, don't look so serious. You're not going to tell me that it really is all over, and that I shall have to give her up after all?"

"Yes, you must," said Ernshaw. "If you have any faith worthy of the name in God or man, it is your duty, not only as a man but as a Christian, to say good-bye to her as man to woman. It is your duty, and you must."

"No, by God, I can't!" cried Maxwell, springing to his feet and facing him with clenched teeth, set features, and hands gripped up into fists as though he were facing an enemy rather than a friend.

Ernshaw rose slowly from his seat. His face seemed to Vane to be transfigured. He looked him straight in the eyes, and said, in a voice only a little above a whisper, and yet thrilling with an intense emotion:

"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain! You have asked for my advice and my guidance, Maxwell. I have given them to you, but not before I have sought for advice and counsel from an infinitely higher Source. I believe I have [Pg 91] had my answer. As I have had it so I have given it to you. I have spent a good many hours thinking over this problem of yours—and a harder problem few men have ever had to solve—but my fixed and settled conviction is that during this last conversation

of yours with Miss Raleigh you bore yourself like a man; you did your duty; you put your hand to the plough. You are not going to look back now, are you?"

Vane dropped back into his seat and folded his hands over his eyes again, and said with a note of weariness in his voice:

"Well, yes, old man, I suppose you're right, and yet, Ernshaw, it's very hard, so hard that it seems almost impossible. They're coming up to 'Commem' to-morrow—I was obliged to ask them, you know. I should only have to hold out my hand and feel hers in it and say that—well, that I'd thought better of it, and everything would be just as it was before. We could begin again just as if *that* had never happened.

"You know it's all I've thought about, all I've worked for, ever since we came back from India together. Honestly, old man, she really is—of course, with the exception of the Governor—everything there is in the world for me now. If I have to give her up, what else is there? You know what I was going to do. Now that I've got my degree I should have a splendid opening in the Foreign Office. The way would be absolutely clear before me—a mere matter of brains and interest—and I know I've got the interest—and I should be an Ambassador, perhaps a Prime Minister some day, and she would be my wife—and yet without her it wouldn't be worth anything to me. Ernshaw, isn't it a bit too much to ask a man on the threshold of his real life to give up all [Pg 92]that for the sake of an idea—well, a scientific conviction if you like."

"Strait is the Gate, and Narrow is the Way!" exclaimed Ernshaw. He seemed to tower above him as he stood over his chair; Vane looked up and saw that his eyes were glowing and his features set. His lips and voice trembled as he spoke. His whole being seemed irradiated by the light of an almost divine enthusiasm.

"Maxwell, will you be one of the few that find it, or one of the many that miss it, and take the other way? As a good Christian, as the son of a Christian man, you know where *that* one leads to.

"After all, Maxwell," he continued, more quietly, "the trials of life are like lessons in school. You needed this experience or you would not have got it. In every fight you must win or lose. In this one you can and must be the victor. I think, nay, I know, that I am pointing out to you the way to victory, the way to final triumph over all the evils that have forced you to a choice between following your own most worthy inclinations, and what you now think an intolerable misery and an impossible sacrifice."

He held out his hand as he spoke. Vane did not know it at the time, but in reality it was a hand held out to save a drowning man. It was a moment in which the fate of two lives was to be decided for right or wrong, for good or ill, and for all time—perhaps, even for

more than Time. Vane gripped Ernshaw's hand, and, as the two grips closed, he looked straight into the deep-brown eyes, and said:

"Ernshaw, that will do. By some means you have made me feel to-night just as I did that day when I was talking with her the last time. Yes, [Pg 93]you are right. You have shewn me the right way, and, God helping me, I'll take it. I suppose if she doesn't marry me she'll marry Garthorne; but still, I see she mustn't marry me. They are coming down for 'Commem' to-morrow. I shall see her then, and I'll tell her that I have decided that there must be an end of everything except friendship between us. Yes, that is the only way after all—and, now, one other word, old man."

"And that is?" said Ernshaw, smiling, almost laughing, in the sheer joy of his great triumph, as he so honestly believed it to be, over the Powers of Evil.

"Well, it's this," said Vane, "my own life is settled now. I can't marry Enid and, of course, I'll marry no one else. I shall do as you have often advised me to do—take Orders and do the work that God puts nearest to my hand. I know that the governor will agree with me when I put it to him in that way. But then there's some one else."

"Your sister, you mean," said Ernshaw.

"My half——"

"Your sister, I said," Ernshaw interrupted, quickly. "Well, what about her?"

"It's this way," continued Vane, somewhat awkwardly, "you see—of course, as you say, she is my sister in a way, but she has absolutely refused everything that the governor and I have offered her. We even asked her to come and live with us, we offered, in short, to acknowledge her as one of the family."

"And what did she say to that?"

"She simply refused. She said that she had not made her life, but that she was ready to take it as it is. She said that she wasn't responsible for the world as it's made, she'd never owed any[Pg 94]one a shilling since she left her mother—and mine—and she never intended to. We tried everything with her, really we did, and, of course, the governor did a great deal more than I did, but it wasn't a bit of use. It's a horrible business altogether, isn't it?"

"On the contrary, it is anything but that," replied Ernshaw, slowly and deliberately as though he were considering each word as he uttered it. "Maxwell, you have just decided to take Orders. I made up my mind to do that long ago. We are both of us fairly

well off. I have eight or nine hundred a year of my own, and I daresay you have more, so we can go and do our work without troubling about the loaves and fishes."

"Yes," replied Vane, "certainly, but that's not quite answering my question, old fellow:—I mean about Carol."

"Quite so," he replied, "because I am going to ask you another. Do you think you know me and like me well enough to have me for a brother-in-law?"

"Good Heavens, you don't mean *that*, Ernshaw, do you?"

"I do," he said, "that is if she likes me well enough. Of course, I haven't seen her yet, and she might refuse me; but from all that you've told me about her, I'm half in love with her already, and—well, we needn't say anything more about that just now. Take me up to Town with you after Commem., introduce me to her and leave the rest to me and her. If ever a girl was made for the wife of such a man as I hope to be some day, that girl, Maxwell, is your sister."

"But, Ernshaw, that is impossible. It may be only your good nature that prompted you to say this, or it may be that, without intention, I have [Pg 95]somehow led you to look upon her as part of my destiny; but you forget, or perhaps, I have not told you that we have lost her utterly for the time being at least, she disappeared quite suddenly. My father and I have made every effort to trace her, but without the slightest success."

"Then try again," replied Ernshaw, "and I will help in the search. At any rate, when we do find her, as I am sure we shall some day, if she will have me, I will ask her to be my wife."

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CHAPTER VII.

It was the morning of Commemoration Day and Vane was dressing for the great ceremony in the Sheldonian Theatre, the conferring of honours and degrees, the placing of the Hall-mark of the University upon those who had passed its tests and proved themselves to be worthy metal. Over the end of the bed hung the brand-new bachelor's gown and silken hood, which, to-day, for the first time, he would be entitled to wear. They were the outward material symbols of the victory which he had won against all competitors.

He was looking far back into his school-boy days and recalling the dreams he had dreamt of the time when, if the Fates were very kind to him, he would have taken his

degree and would be able to walk about in all the glory of cap and gown and hood as the masters did on Sundays and Saints' days.

And now it had come to pass. He had taken as good a degree as the best of them. In an hour or two he would appear capped and gowned and hooded on the closing scene of his University career. On one side of him would be the Chancellor and all the great dignitaries of the University; on the other the great audience—the undergraduates in the upper galleries; graduates, [Pg 97]tutors and fellows, proud fathers and mothers, delighted sisters and other feminine relatives, including cousins and others, together with desperately envious younger brothers making the most earnest resolves to henceforth eschew all youthful dissipations, to foreswear idleness for ever, and to 'swat' day and night until they too had achieved this glorious consummation—vows, alas! to be broken ere the next school term was many days old, and yet, with not a few of them, to be renewed later on and honestly kept.

He knew that, to use a not altogether inappropriate theatrical simile, he would be playing a principal part that day. The cheers and the plaudits which would burst out from the throats of his fellow-students, and, indeed, from the whole audience, when he came on to doff his cap and kneel before the Chancellor to take from his hands the honours he had won, would be given in recognition of the most brilliant degree of the year.

And *she*, too, would be there with her father and mother, and his father, all sharing in his triumph, all glorying in his success, in this splendid fruition of the labours, which, for so many years, they had watched with such intensely sympathetic interest.

Under any other circumstances this would have meant to him even more than the mere formal triumph; for though he had worked honestly and single-heartedly for the prizes of his academic career, he had also worked for them as an athlete might have striven for his laurels in the Olympian Games, or a knight of the Age of Chivalry might have fought for his laurels to lay them at the feet of his lady-love.

Now he had won them—and after all what were they worth? This was not only to be a day of [Pg 98]triumph for him. It was to be a day of hardest trial and most bitter sacrifice as well; a trial which, as he knew even now, would strain his moral fibre very nearly to the breaking point. It was a struggle for which he had been bracing himself ever since that last conversation which he had had with Enid. From that day to this he had never clasped her hand or looked into her eyes.

That had been the agreement between them, and also between his father and her parents. They were not to meet again until he had finished his university career and

taken his degree. That, as they thought, would give them both time enough to think—to remain faithful, or to think better of it, as the case might be—and, most important of all for Vane, to determine by the help of more deliberate thought and added experience, and by converse with minds older and more deeply versed in the laws of human nature than his own, whether or not that resolve, which he had taken when he first discovered that there was a taint of poison in his blood, should be kept or not.

But now it was all over—although it ought only to have been just beginning. This day, which ought to have been the brightest of his life, was, in reality, to be the darkest. The golden gates of the Eden of Love lay open before him, but, instead of entering them, he must pass by with eyes averted, and enter instead the sombre portals of his life's Gethsemane; there to take up his cross and to bear it until the time came to lay it down by the side of the grave.

He had thought it all out long and earnestly in solitary communion with his own soul, and during many long and closely-reasoned conversations with Ernshaw, and the one of the night before had decided him—or it might be more correct to say [Pg 99]that it had completed the sum of the convictions which had been accumulating in his soul for the last two years.

The path of duty—duty to her, to himself and to Humanity—lay straight and plain before him. He had nothing to do with the world now. He had come to look upon that taint in his blood as a taint akin to that of leprosy; an inherited curse which forbade him to mix with his kind as other men did. He must stand aloof, crying "unclean" in his soul if not with his voice. Henceforth he must be in the world and not of it—and this, as he thought, he had already proved by his resolve to renounce definitely and for ever the greatest treasure which the world could give him, a treasure which had been his so long, that giving it up was like tearing a part of his own being away with his own hands.

Still, it was all very hard and very bitter. Despite his two years' preparation, the stress of that last struggle all through the long hours of the night which should have been filled with brightest dreams of the morrow, had left him, not only mentally worn out, but even physically sick. He felt as though the scene which would mark the culminating triumph of his academic career, the end of his youth and the beginning of his manhood, was really an ordeal too great, too agonising, to be faced.

His scout had brought up an ample breakfast, with, of course, many congratulations on the coming honours of the day; but he had only drunk some of the coffee and left the food untouched. As he stood in front of the glass, putting on his collar, his face looked to him more like that of a man going to execution, than to take the public

reward of many a silent hour of hard study. His [Pg 100]hands trembled so that he could hardly get his necktie into decent shape.

His coffee on the dressing-table. Would a teaspoonful of brandy in it do him any harm? For two years he had not tasted alcohol in any shape, though he had kept it in his rooms for his friends. He and Ernshaw, who was also a rigid teetotaler, had sat with them and seen them drink. He had smelt the fumes of it in the atmosphere of the room, first with temptation which he had fought against and overcome in the strength of the memory of that terrible night in Warwick Gardens. Then the subtle aroma had become merely a matter of interest to him, a thing to be studied as a physician might study the symptoms of a disease for which he has found the cure.

He had seen his friends leave his rooms somewhat the worse for liquor, and he had reasoned with them afterwards, not priggishly or sanctimoniously, but just as a man who had had the same weakness and had overcome it because he thought it necessary to do so, and they had taken it all very good-humoredly and gone away and done the same thing again a few nights afterwards, seeming none the worst for it.

But surely now he had conquered the deadly craving. Surely two years of hard mental study and healthy physical exercise—two years, during which not a drop of alcohol had passed his lips—must have worked the poison out of his blood. Henceforth he was entitled to look upon alcohol as a servant, as a minister to his wants, and not as a master of his weaknesses.

His mental struggle had so exhausted him that his physical nature craved for a stimulant, cried out for some support, some new life, new energy, if even for an hour or so, so imperiously, that his [Pg 101]enfeebled mental stamina had not strength enough left to say "no."

He had got his collar on and his tie tied, and his hands and fingers were trembling as though he were just recovering from an attack of malarial fever.

"It can't possibly do me any harm now," he said, as he moved away from the glass towards the door of his sitting-room. "I've conquered all that. I haven't the slightest desire for it as drink—I haven't had for over a year now—I only want it as medicine, as a patient has it from a doctor. I can't go on without it, I must have something or I shall faint in the Theatre or do something ridiculous of that sort, and as for meeting Enid—good heavens, how am I to do that at all! Yes, I think a couple of teaspoonsful in that coffee will do me far more good than harm."

He went towards the sideboard on which stood his spirit-case. He unlocked it and took out the brandy decanter. As he did so the memory of that other night came back

to him, and he smiled. He had conquered now, and he could afford to smile at those old fears. He took the stopper out of the decanter and deliberately raised it to his nostrils. No, it was powerless. The aroma had no more effect upon him than the scent of, say, *eau de Cologne* would have had. That night in Warwick Gardens, it had been like the touch of some evil magician's wand. Then, in an instant, it had transformed his whole nature; but now his brain remained cool and calm, and his senses absolutely unmoved. Yes, he had conquered. He needed a stimulant, merely as an invalid might need a tonic, and he could take it with just as much safety.

He took the decanter into his bedroom and [Pg 102]poured a couple of teaspoonsful into his coffee, stirred it, lifted the cup, and, after one single priceless moment's hesitation, put it to his lips and drank it off.

"Ah, that's better!" he said, as he put the cup down and felt the subtle glow run like lightning through his veins. "Hallo, who's that? Confound it, I hope it isn't Ernshaw. I don't want to begin the day with a lecture on backsliding."

He put the stopper back, went into the sitting-room, and replaced the decanter in the stand before he said in answer to a knock at his door:

"Come in! Is that you Ernshaw?"

The door opened, and Reginald Garthorne came in.

"No, it's me. That's not quite grammatical, I believe, but it's usual. Good-morning, Maxwell," he went on, holding out his hand. "I've come round early for two reasons. In the first place I want to be the first to congratulate you, and in the second place I want you to give me a brandy and soda. I got here rather late last night with one or two other Cambridge men, and one of them took us to a man's rooms in Brazenose, and we had a rather wet night of it. Not the proper thing, of course, but excusable just now."

"As for the congratulations, old man," said Maxwell, "thanks for yours and accept mine for what you've done in the Tripos, and as for the brandy and soda, well, here you are. Open that cupboard, and you'll find some soda and glasses."

As he said this, he unlocked the spirit case again, and put the brandy decanter on the table.

"I've just been having a spoonful myself in my coffee," he went on, with just a little flash of wonder why he should have said this. "The fact is, I suppose, I've been overdoing it a bit lately, and [Pg 103]that, and the anxiety of the thing, has rather knocked me up. I felt as nervous as a freshman going in for his first *viva voce*, when I got up this morning."

"I don't wonder at it," said Garthorne, helping himself. "You must have been grinding infernally hard. So have I, for the matter of that, although, I didn't aspire to a double first. You really do look quite knocked up. By the way," he continued, looking at Vane with a smile whose significance he might have seen had it not been for those two spoonsful of brandy, "I suppose you've quite got over that—well, if you'll excuse me saying so—that foolishness about inherited alcoholism and that sort of stuff, and therefore you'll lay all your laurels at the feet of the fair Enid without a scruple? Of course, you remember that juvenile hiding you gave me on the "Orient"? Quite romantic, wasn't it? Well, I must admit that you proved yourself the better boy then, and as you've taken a double first and I have only got a single, you've proved yourself the better man as well. Here's to you, Maxwell, won't you join me? You know you have quite an ordeal to go through to-day, and just one won't hurt you—do you good, in fact. You look as if you wanted a bracer."

Vane listened to the tempting words, so kindly and frankly spoken, as he might have listened to words heard in a dream. All the high resolves which had shaped themselves with such infinite labour during the past two years, seemed already to have been made by someone else—a someone else who was yet himself. He had made them and he was proud of them, and, of course, he meant to hold to them; but he had conquered that deadly fear which had held him in chains so long. [Pg 104]He was a free man now, and could do as he liked with his destiny.

His long probation was over, and he had come through it triumphant. He was to see Enid again that day for the first time for two years. He would hear her voice offering him the sweetest of all congratulations, and when it was all over, there would be a little family gathering in his rooms, just their fathers and themselves, and he would tell them everything frankly, and they should help him to choose—for after all, it was only their right, and she, surely, had the best right of all to be consulted. Meanwhile, now that he had fought and conquered that old craving for alcohol, there would be no harm, especially on such a morning as this, in joining Garthorne in just one brandy and soda.

It never struck him how strangely inverted these thoughts were; what an utter negation of his waking thoughts, as they flashed through his mind while Garthorne was speaking. They seemed perfectly reasonable to him, and—so subtle was the miracle wrought by those two spoonsful of brandy—perfectly honest.

"Well, really, I don't see why I shouldn't," he said, taking up the decanter and pulling one of the two glasses which Garthorne had put on the table towards him. "I think I have got over that little weakness now. At any rate, for the last two years I haven't

touched a drop of anything stronger than coffee, and I've sat here and in other men's rooms with fellows drinking in an atmosphere, as one might say, full of drink and tobacco smoke; and except for the smoking—of course I haven't dropped that—I've never felt the slightest inclination to join them, at least, after the first month or so—so I think I'm pretty safe now."

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"Oh, of course you are!" said Garthorne. "As a matter of fact, you know, I never thought that there was anything serious in that idea of yours that you'd inherited the taint from some ancestor of yours. You got screwed one night for the first time in your life, and it gave you a fright. But the fact that you've been able to swear off absolutely for two years, is perfectly clear proof that the craving really existed only in your own imagination. If it had been real, you couldn't possibly have done it. Well, here's to us, old man, and to someone else who shall be nameless just now!"

Vane, in the recklessness of his new confidence, had mixed himself a pretty stiff dose. As he raised his glass with Garthorne's, something seemed to drag upon his arm, and something in his soul rose in revolt; but the old lurking poison was already aflame in his blood. He nodded to Garthorne and said:

"Thanks, old man. Here's to us and her!"

A few minutes before the words would have seemed blasphemy to him, now they sounded like an ordinary commonplace. He put the glass to his lips and emptied it in quick, hungry gulps.

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CHAPTER VIII.

"By Jove, that's good," he said, as he put the empty glass down and drew a long, deep breath. "You only really appreciate that sort of thing after a long abstinence like mine."

"I should think so," laughed Garthorne, putting down his own empty glass; "although good and all as a brandy and soda is, especially after a rather hot night, I should hardly think it was worth while to be T.T. for two years just to get the full flavour of it. If you don't mind I'll have another."

"Certainly, old fellow, help yourself," said Vane, pushing the decanter towards him. "That's made a new man of me. When I got up this morning I couldn't eat a scrap of breakfast, but that's made me absolutely hungry. The bacon's cold, of course, but

there's a nice bit of tongue and some brawn, and there's some toast and brown bread and butter. Sit down and have a bite. The coffee's cold, but I can soon get up some hot if you'd like it."

"Oh, never mind about that," said Garthorne. "I'm getting a bit peckish myself, and I'll have a bite with you with pleasure; but I'm afraid hot coffee on the top of brandy and soda at this time of the morning would produce something of a conflict in the lower regions. I think another B. and S. would go ever so much better with it."

As he said this he helped himself and pushed the [Pg 107]decanter back towards Vane, saying, "and if you'll take my advice you'll do the same. It can't hurt you, especially if you're eating."

"Still, I think I'd better eat something first," said Vane, as he set out the breakfast things and began to carve. "The hot plates are cold, so there will be enough for both. By Jove, that stuff has given me an appetite!"

"Yes, I thought it would do you good," said Garthorne. "Get something solid inside you and have another drink, and you'll be able to face your most reverend Chancellor with as much confidence as though you were his father-in-law. I'll mix you another if you'll allow me while you're carving. Give me about half and half, please."

"But don't give *me* half and half," said Vane, with a laugh that sounded rather strangely in his own ears, and then, without looking round, he went on carving.

Garthorne poured a much more liberal quantity of brandy into Vane's glass than he had done into his own, and at once filled it up with soda-water from the syphon.

"I think you'll find that about right," he said, putting it down beside him.

"Thanks, old fellow," said Vane; "much obliged!" He put the knife and fork down, lifted the glass and took a sip. "Yes, that's about right, I think," he said, without even noticing the strength of the mixture. And then, with the unnatural appetite which the unaccustomed spirit had roused in him, he took up his knife and fork and began to eat ravenously, taking a gulp of the brandy and soda almost between each mouthful.

They laughed and chatted merrily over the old days as they went on eating and drinking; and as glass succeeded glass Vane became more and more [Pg 108]communicative and Garthorne more and more cordial. He quickly learnt the truth of many things which so far he had only suspected, and at last he managed to lead the conversation adroitly up to a point at which Vane said in a somewhat thick, unsteady voice:

"By the way, Garthorne, yes, that reminds me. You remember that night at the Empire when we had a bit of a row, Boat-race night, you know—that girl that I got out of the crowd—pretty girl, wasn't she?"

"Yes," replied Garthorne, repressing a desire to laugh out openly. "I remember her quite well; a very pretty girl, and, if I may say so without paying you a compliment, very like your noble self. In fact, if such a thing hadn't been utterly impossible, she might almost have been——"

"My sister!" said Vane, as he drank off the remains of his fourth brandy and soda and put the glass down with a thump on the table. "Yes, that's it, my sister, or at least not quite my sister, but—at least—well, half-sister, you understand—my mother's daughter, but not my father's—see?"

"I see, I see," said Garthorne, and then, before he could get any farther, there was a quick knock at the door. Vane looked dreamily round, and said:

"Come in."

The door opened, and Ernshaw entered, followed by Sir Arthur Maxwell.

"Good heavens, Maxwell! what on earth does this mean?" exclaimed Ernshaw, with something like a gasp in his voice, as he saw Vane sitting at the table in his shirt-sleeves—the friend with whom he had sat in this same room the night before and had that long solemn talk—the friend who had given him such solemn pledges.

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The table was littered and disordered, the coffee pot had got knocked over; there was a cup lying on its side in the saucer; a dish of bacon containing a couple of rashers and two eggs congealed in fat, and scraps of meat and broken bits of bread and butter lay about on the cloth.

This was like anything but one of the many orderly breakfasts which he had shared with Maxwell at the same table; but what startled Ernshaw more than anything else was the sight of the empty glass beside his friend's plate, the brandy decanter with less than a wine-glassful in it, and the two empty soda syphons on the table.

"Good morning, Ernshaw! Morning, dad! Jolly glad to see you. Come in and sit down and have a drink—I mean, a bit of breakfast. The coffee's cold, but I can get you some more if you wouldn't rather have brandy and soda—plenty more brandy in the cupboard, soda too. Get it out and help yourselves. Dad, you know Garthorne, of course. Ernshaw, you don't; let me introduce you—very good fellow—old rival of mine

in love—you know who with, the fellow I had a fight with on the steamer—both kids—first man to come and congratulate me this morning. Admits that I licked him then as a boy, and have licked him since as a man—took better degree than he did. Still, nice of him to come, wasn't it? Come on, Ernshaw; don't stand there staring. Come on and have a drink, too, and congratulate, you old stick. Never mind about last night, I've got that all under now; fought it for two years and beaten it. Can take a drink now without fear of consequences. Taken lots this morning, and look at me, sober as the Chancellor. Why, dad, what's the matter?"

Sir Arthur Maxwell had come up to Oxford to [Pg 110]see his own old academic triumphs repeated with added brilliance by his son. He had fully approved of all that Vane had done during the two years' probation which he had set himself, and he had firmly believed that the end of it all would be, as he had many a time said to Enid's father, that the hard study, the strenuous mental discipline, and the stress of healthy emulation, would utterly destroy the germs of that morbid feeling which, for a time at least, had poisoned the promise of his son's youth. He had only arrived from Town, bringing Enid and her father, that morning, as they had found it impossible to get rooms in Oxford over night. He had met Ernshaw in the High, and they had come together to Vane's rooms to find *this*!

Like a flash that other scene in Warwick Gardens came back to him. While his son was speaking he had looked into his eyes and seen that mocking, dancing flame which he had now a doubly terrible reason to remember, and to see it there in his eyes now on the morning of the crowning day of his youth, shining like a bale-fire of ruin through the morning sky of his new life. It was like looking down into hell itself.

As Vane came towards him he staggered back as though he hardly recognised him. Then, for the first time for nearly thirty years since a well-remembered night among the Indian Hills, the room swam round him and the light grew dark. He made a couple of staggering steps towards the sofa, tripped over the edge of a rug, and rolled over, half on and half off the sofa.

The sight sobered Vane instantaneously, though only for an instant.

"Dad, what's the matter?" he cried again. "My God, Ernshaw, what is it? Tell me, what is it[Pg 111]—what have I done? Let me go and see what's wrong with him."

Then with stumbling steps he tried to get round the table. The corner of it caught his thigh. He lurched sideways and dropped to the floor like a man shot through the brain.

Garthorne was already kneeling by the sofa on to which he had lifted Sir Arthur's head and shoulders, and had loosened his tie and collar.

"Poor Vane," he said, looking round. "I'm afraid the excitement of this morning has been a bit too much for him. If we're going to get them round in time, perhaps you'd better ring up his scout and send him for a doctor."

"Yes," said Ernshaw, looking up from where he was kneeling by Vane. "I suppose that's about the best thing to do, since the crime which you have committed is unfortunately not one which warrants me in sending for a policeman as well."

"Crime, sir, what the devil do you mean?" cried Garthorne, springing to his feet.

"I mean," said Ernshaw slowly and without moving, "exactly what I say. I feel perfectly certain from what I know of Maxwell that this could not possibly have occurred unless he had been deliberately tempted to drink. Your motives, of course, are best known to yourself and to Him who will judge them."

"So that's it, is it?" said Garthorne, with a harsh laugh. "You think I made him drunk for some purpose of my own, a man that I've been friends with ever since we punched each other's heads as boys. Well, you've been a good chum to Maxwell, so for his sake I'll pass over that idiotic remark of yours, and tell you for your information that he had been drinking before I came into the room at all."

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"It's a lie!" exclaimed Ernshaw, springing to his feet and going towards the bell.

"Nothing on earth could make me believe that." And then he rang the bell.

"I'm not accustomed to being called a liar," said Garthorne very quietly, "without resenting it in practical form; but as you don't seem to be quite yourself, and as there is so much physical difference in my favour, I'll take the trouble to convince you that I am speaking the truth."

He went into the bedroom and brought out Vane's coffee-cup.

"Smell that," he said.

Ernshaw took the cup and raised it to his nose. The strong smell of brandy rising from the dregs was unmistakable. Then there came a knock at the door, and Vane's servant came in.

"Oh, good Lord, gentlemen, whatever is the matter?" he exclaimed, looking at Sir Arthur's prostrate form on the sofa and Vane's on the floor.

"Never mind about that just now," said Garthorne curtly; "help us to carry Mr. Maxwell to his room. Then you'd better undress him and get him to bed. I suppose you can see what's the matter, and I hope also that you've learnt to hold your tongue."

"Yes, sir," said the scout. "No man ever served a better master than Mr. Maxwell, and I hope I know my duty to him."

Then the three of them picked up Vane's limp, loose-jointed form from the floor and carried him into his bedroom and laid him on the bed.

"Now," Garthorne continued, "I want you to tell Mr. Ernshaw whether I came here after or before Mr. Maxwell had his coffee."

"A good half-hour after, I should say, sir," said the scout, looking a little mystified. "You [Pg 113]see, I brought it up about a quarter past eight, and he was up then and half dressed. He must have drunk it soon after, because he never will drink coffee unless it's hot. If it had got cold he'd have had some more up, and you came a bit before nine, sir. He must have drunk it before then."

"Very well," said Garthorne. "Now, can you remember whether the decanters in the spirit-case were filled up last night?"

"No, sir," said the scout. "I filled them up the first thing this morning myself, thinking that Mr. Maxwell would have some friends come to see him on a day like this."

"Thank you," said Garthorne; "that'll do, I think. Now you'd better get Mr. Maxwell undressed."

"Yes," said Ernshaw. "But what about Sir Arthur? Surely we ought to get a doctor for him as soon as possible."

"I am going for a doctor at once," said Garthorne, "if you will tell me where I can find one. I have given him a spoonful of brandy, and I'm going to give him another. Just come in here for a moment, please. You can't do anything for Maxwell yet."

Ernshaw followed him into the sitting-room, and as he took up the decanter Garthorne went on, holding up the brandy decanter, which had only a few spoonfuls left in it:

"Look at that. You heard what his man said. Do you mean to tell me that I could have drunk even half of that since nine o'clock and be as sober as I certainly am? The idea is absurd."

Then he poured out a little into a wine-glass, put his hand under Sir Arthur's head, and let a few drops trickle between his lips. Sir Arthur, who had been gradually regaining

consciousness, drew [Pg 114]a deep breath which ended in a cough. Then he opened his eyes and said:

"What's the matter? Where am I? Where's Vane?"

"You have had a great shock, Sir Arthur," said Garthorne, in a tone so gentle and kindly that Ernshaw started at it. "Vane has been taken ill, too, and we are putting him to bed. I'm just going for a doctor."

Then he laid Sir Arthur's head back on the cushion and said, rising to his feet:

"Now, Mr. Ernshaw, I think that's about all I can do for the present. If you will tell me where I can find Maxwell's doctor I'll go and send him, and then I'll go on and tell Sir Godfrey, not what has really taken place, but that something has happened which may prevent Maxwell leaving his rooms to-day."

Ernshaw scribbled the name and address of the doctor on the back of an envelope and gave it to Garthorne, saying, rather hesitatingly:

"There it is, Mr. Garthorne. I'm afraid I've been too hasty in what I said to you, and I must confess that you've taken it as very few men would have done. But if you only knew all that Vane has been to me during the last two years, and how awful this seems to me——"

"My dear sir, don't say any more about it," Garthorne interrupted good-humouredly. "I know enough of poor Vane's story to see exactly what you mean. We'll consider it all unsaid, and now I must be off."

[Pg 115]

CHAPTER IX.

Ernshaw's first care, after Garthorne had left the room, was to see to the comfort of Sir Arthur, who had now quite recovered consciousness, but was still feeling faint and ill. He told him as much of the truth about Vane as he knew, and while he was doing so, Jepson, the scout, came in from the bedroom, and said with an air of deferential confidence:

"If you please, sir, I don't think there'll be any need for a doctor to Mr. Maxwell. He's come round a bit, and I think I know what his complaint is. Being excited, as he might well be on a morning like this, he's taken a drop too much on an empty stomach, and that led him to drink brandy and soda with his breakfast instead of sending for some

more coffee. I've often seen this sort of thing before, sir, you see, and I've found the physic that will cure him on the mantelpiece. It's this."

He held up a little stoppered bottle full of strong ammonia, which Vane had got for cleaning up the bindings of some old books.

"Twenty drops of this," he went on, "in a wine-glassful of water, and he'll be as sober as ever he was in half an hour. Then I'll make him some [Pg 116]strong coffee, and he'll be as right as a trivet. Only you mustn't let him take any more drink afterwards, or he'll just bring his boots up. I suppose I may try, sir? At any rate it won't do him any harm."

"Certainly," said Ernshaw, "I've heard of it before. Do the best you can for him, Jepson."

Jepson shut the door with a "Thank you, sir," and proceeded to treat his patient.

Before the doctor arrived Sir Arthur had almost entirely recovered, and Vane was sitting up in bed, supported by the faithful Jepson's arm, gasping and coughing, but perfectly sober, and wondering dimly what had happened during the last hour or two—or was it weeks, or months, or what? He felt horribly sick and ill, and he was trembling in every limb, but the clouds of intoxication had cleared away from his mind; memory was returning to him, and he was asking Jepson disjointed questions as to what had happened.

"Never you mind about that, sir," said Jepson. "Everything's all right now. Sir Arthur is coming round nicely, and now you've got that down, you just lay back and keep quiet, and I'll go and make your coffee, and before an hour's over you'll be ready and fit to go to the Sheldonian and face the Chancellor as though you hadn't tasted a drop."

Vane, still wondering at his apparently miraculous recovery, did as he was told and lay back upon the pillows, and Jepson went off to brew him an "extra special" pot of coffee.

"It's very unfortunate for Mr. Maxwell," he said, when he got into his own den, "very unfortunate, and on Degree Day too, but if I know anything about him and Sir Arthur, and I can get him to the Theatre dressed and *compos mentis* [Pg 117]and all that sort of thing—well, it's a fiver at least in my pocket, so it's an ill wind that blows nobody good."

The doctor arrived while he was making the coffee. Ernshaw explained quickly what had happened. He went in and looked at Vane, felt his pulse, asked him in a kindly tone why he had made such a fool of himself on such a day, then he said that he couldn't improve on Jepson's treatment under the circumstances, and went in to look at Sir Arthur, who now, thanks to Ernshaw's care, was almost himself again.

"Curious business this," he said, after he had felt Sir Arthur's pulse and found that he was practically all right. "Your son's case, I mean. I've known him nearly all the time that he's been up, and I've always considered that he was a teetotaller from principle. Of course it would be simply absurd to attempt to conceal from you what has been the matter with him this morning. He's been drunk, dead drunk, by about half-past nine in the morning. At the same time we must remember that when a man has been in hard training for a boat race, or anything of that sort, or if he has been reading hard on tea, which is almost as vicious a habit as alcoholism, he can get drunk on very little alcohol when the strain is taken off. In fact, I have known a man get drunk on a pint of bitter and a beef-steak; but there doesn't seem any reason of that sort for what happened this morning. Still, fortunately, that man of his knew what to do, and he's done it—a rather heroic remedy certainly, but one can risk that with a good constitution.

"Still, I can't quite understand it, I must confess. If there was any taint of what we now call alcoholic insanity in his blood, it would, of course, [Pg 118]be perfectly plain. However, we needn't go into that now. There can't be any idea of that, and I think when he's had his coffee, and you've had a mild brandy and soda, Sir Arthur, and kept quiet for half an hour or so, I think you will be able to go and see your son take the honours which he has won, and won very well, too. I suppose no idea of this has gone beyond these rooms?"

"I'm afraid they have," said Ernshaw. "Garthorne, a Cambridge man, the man, you know, Sir Arthur, who was here with Vane when you came in, the same man who went for you, Doctor, said that he would go on and tell Sir Godfrey that Vane had been taken ill and wouldn't be able to come out of his rooms to-day. In short, that he would have to receive his degree by proxy."

"The devil he did," said Sir Arthur, getting up from the sofa with the strength of a sudden access of anger and moving towards the bedroom door. "Look here, doctor, you have just said that Vane is getting round. Well, if he is, the old blood in him will tell, and he'll take his place and play his part with the rest of them. Mr. Ernshaw, I know your friendship for my son; I know what you have done for him, and how you have helped him. Now, will you do me another favour and take my compliments to Sir Godfrey Raleigh, and say that the matter is not anything like as serious as we thought it was, and that both Vane and myself will be ready to go through the day's programme as arranged. If you will be good enough to do that, the doctor and I will be able to arrange the rest, I think."

"I shall be only too glad," said Ernshaw, taking up his hat. "I shall just have about time to do it, and then get to my rooms and dress. *Au revoir*, then, until after the ceremony," and with [Pg 119]that, he opened the door just as Jepson knocked at it, bringing in the coffee.

Ernshaw found Garthorne already at Sir Godfrey's rooms in close conversation with Enid. He had, of course, heard much about her from Vane, but this was the first time he had seen her. She had more than fulfilled the promise of two years before, and Ernshaw, ascetic as he was, had still too strong an artistic vein in his temperament to be insensible to her beauty. In fact, as she rose to greet the closest friend of the man who had been her lover, and who, as she fondly hoped, would be so once more after to-day, he started and coloured ever so slightly. He had never seen anything like her before as she stood there with outstretched hand, gently-smiling lips, and big, soft, deep eyes, in all the pride and glory of her dawning womanhood.

It was this, then, that Vane had to give up. This was the priceless treasure which, if he kept his vow, he would have to surrender to another man. As the thought crossed his mind, he looked at Garthorne, and he saw the possibility that, after all, he might be the victor in that struggle which had begun years ago on the deck of the steamer.

Certainly, as far as physical conditions went, there could hardly be a better match; but as he looked back to Enid, a darker thought stole into his mind. Garthorne had, superficially at least, rebutted the charges he had made against him in Vane's rooms; but though he had apologised for what he had said, the conviction that he had deliberately tempted Vane to drink came back to him, now that he saw how great a temptation Garthorne had to commit such an infamy.

No doubt he knew perfectly well that Enid herself would overlook Vane's second lapse as she [Pg 120]had done his first, and would be quite content to marry him on the strength of his promise that he would never get drunk again; but he also knew that, after what had happened that morning, Vane's determination to give her up would be tenfold strengthened, and that, when once he had definitely done so, the psychological moment would have arrived for him to begin his own suit—at first, of course, from a deferential distance, from which he might hope to approach her heart through the avenue of her injured pride.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ernshaw!" she said, "I am glad to meet such an old and good friend of Vane's. I have heard a great deal about you, and, I need hardly say, nothing but good. I hope you have come to tell me that Vane is better and also that you will tell me what has really been the matter with him. Mr. Garthorne, here, has been very rude;

he has absolutely refused to say anything about it, and I am quite offended with him. I really can't see why there should be any mystery about it. What is it?"

Ralph Ershaw was one of those men who can no more tell a direct lie, or even prevaricate, than they can get outside their own skins. He held even the white lies of conventionality to be unworthy of anyone who held the truth as sacred, and yet for the life of him he could not look this lovely girl in the face and tell her that the man whom she had loved ever since she knew what love was, had been lying drunk on the floor of his room less than an hour before, and that the sight of him had shocked his father into a fainting fit.

"I think, Miss Raleigh," he said, after a little hesitation, "that Vane would rather tell you that himself. In fact, to be quite candid with you, it is not a subject upon which I should care to touch [Pg 121]even at your request, simply because I think that it is a matter which could be very much better discussed and explained between Vane and yourself; and I think Mr. Garthorne will agree with me in that view."

"Certainly I do," said Garthorne, "I think that is the most sensible way of putting it. Enid, if you'll take my advice you'll take Ershaw's, and let Vane do his own explaining after Commem."

"Really, I think it's very horrid of both of you," said Enid. "I certainly can't see why there should be all this mystery. If it's anything really serious, surely I have a right to know. However, I suppose I must control my feminine impatience, at any rate it can't be anything very bad if he'll be able to be at the Theatre and Sir Arthur can come with him. I suppose I shall hear all about it at dinner to-night."

"I have no doubt that you will, Miss Raleigh," said Ershaw, "and now, if you will excuse me, I must be off to my rooms to get ready for my own share of the proceedings. Good morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Ershaw," replied Enid, a trifle stiffly. "That reminds me how rude I have been, I've not congratulated you yet."

"Oh, I haven't done anything," said Ershaw, "at least, not in comparison with what Vane has done. You'll see the difference in the Theatre. Good morning again. Good morning, Mr. Garthorne."

"Good morning—we shall see you later, I suppose?" replied Garthorne, as the door closed, and then he turned to Enid and went on: "He's a thundering good fellow that Ershaw. Quite a character, I believe, enthusiast, and all that sort of thing, but everyone here seems to think he'll be a shining light some day."

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"Yes, he seems very nice," said Enid, "but, as a matter of fact, I can't say that I'm particularly fond of shining lights or people who are too good, and from what papa tells me, this Mr. Ernshaw has been making or trying to make Vane a great deal too good for me. I even hear that he has been trying to make Vane become a parson. Fancy Vane, with all his talents and prospects, a curate! The idea is absurd, even more absurd than this two years' probation idea."

"I quite agree with you," said Garthorne, "but still, think of the test of constancy and the delight of knowing that you have both stood it so well."

At this moment the door opened, and Sir Godfrey came in, not altogether to Garthorne's satisfaction, and so put an end to further developments of the conversation.

A couple of hours later Enid was sitting with her father, a unit of the vast audience which filled the Sheldonian Theatre. After Ernshaw's visit, neither she nor her father had received any message either from Vane or Sir Arthur. She had expected that Vane, at least, would have come to her before the beginning of the ceremonies, or that, at least, Sir Arthur would have come and told her something about him, but no, not a word; and there she sat between Garthorne and her father, angry and yet expectant, waiting for the moment of his appearance.

"Ah, here he is at last," whispered Garthorne, as his name and honours were called out in Latin.

Enid held her breath as the familiar figure, clad in the unfamiliar academic garb, walked towards the Chancellor's throne. She could see that he was deadly pale, and that his eyes were shining with an unnatural brightness. He never even once looked towards her. The wild outburst of [Pg 123]cheering which greeted his appearance seemed as utterly lost upon him as if he had been stone deaf and blind. He listened to the Chancellor's address with as little emotion as though it concerned some one else. Then he knelt down, the hood, the outward and visible sign of his intellectual triumph, was put over his shoulders; the Chancellor spoke the magic words without his hearing them. He never felt the three taps given with the New Testament on his head, and he rose from his knees and moved away from the scene of the crowning triumph of his youth as mechanically as though the proceedings had no more interest for him than if they had been taking place a thousand miles away.

All through the afternoon Enid and her father waited for them to come, but there was no sign from either of them until just before tea-time Jepson presented himself with

two letters, one addressed to Sir Godfrey and one to Enid. Both were very short. Sir Godfrey's was from Sir Arthur, and ran as follows:

"My Dear Raleigh,

"I hope that you and your daughter will forgive the apparent discourtesy of our absence from you this afternoon and evening. I find it necessary to take Vane to London at once. His letter to Enid will explain the reason.

"Faithfully yours,
"Arthur Maxwell."

"There is evidently something very serious the matter," said Sir Godfrey, as he handed the note to Enid. "Maxwell wouldn't write like that without good reason. That's from Vane, I suppose. What does he say?"

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"Say," exclaimed Enid, with a flash of anger through her fast gathering tears. "That's what he says. It's too bad, too cruel—and after leaving me alone for two years—it's miserable!" And with that, she made a swift escape out of the room and shut the door behind her with an emphatic bang.

Sir Godfrey picked the note up from the table where she had flung it. There was no form of address. It simply began:

"I was drunk this morning. Drunk without meaning to be so, after being two years without touching alcohol and without experiencing the slightest craving for it. Last night I had finally come to the conclusion that it would be a sin to ask you to keep your promise to me. Now I am convinced that it would be absolute infamy to do so. I dare not even face you to tell you this, so utterly unworthy and contemptible am I in my own sight. Whatever you hear to the contrary, remember that what has happened this morning is no fault of anyone but myself. If ever we meet again I hope I shall find you the wife of a man more worthy of you than I am now, or, with this accursed taint in my blood, ever could be. Perhaps in those days we may be friends again; but for the present we must be strangers.

"Vane."

[Pg 125]

CHAPTER X.

Yet another twelve months had passed since Vane had taken his degree; since Enid had seen him vanish like a spectre out of her life, and had waited vainly for his coming, only to receive instead that letter of farewell which, the instant she had read it, she knew to be final and irrevocable.

In such a nature as hers the tenderest spot was her pride. She had been his sweetheart since they were boy and girl together, and when the time came they had become formally engaged. For nearly four years now she had considered herself as half married to him. Other men attracted by her physical beauty and her mental charm had approached her, as they had a perfect right to do, in open and honest rivalry of Vane, but she had given them one and all very clearly to understand that she had definitely plighted her troth, and had no intention of breaking it. In other words she had been absolutely faithful even in thought.

She had never considered his feelings as to what he called his inherited alcoholism as anything else than the somewhat fine-drawn scruples of a highly-strung, and rather romantic nature. She had not troubled herself about the deadly scientific aspect of the matter. She knew perfectly well that men got drunk sometimes and [Pg 126]still made excellent husbands, and, more than all, she firmly believed that, once Vane's wife, she would speedily acquire sufficient influence over him to make anything like a recurrence of what had happened quite impossible.

Even after his second and worst breakdown on the morning of Commemoration Day she would still have received him as her lover and, after a little friendly lecture which would, of course, have ended in the usual way, she would have been perfect friends with him again on the old footing.

But that letter had ended everything between them. Moreover, it had been followed by one from Sir Arthur to her father expressing great regret at the turn which matters had taken, but saying that, after repeated conversations with Vane, he had been forced to the conclusion that his resolve to enter the Church and devote himself to a life of celibacy and mission work at home was really fixed and unalterable.

After that there was, of course, nothing more to be said or done. Enid, being a natural, simple-hearted, healthy English girl, who enjoyed life a great deal too well to worry about looking under the surface of things, therefore came to the conclusion that she had been jilted for the sake of a fine-drawn Quixotic idea. If she had been jilted for the sake of another woman it would have been quite a different matter. Then there would have been something tangible to hate bitterly for a season, and then to get revenged

on by making a much more brilliant marriage, as she could easily have done. But it was infinitely worse, and more humiliating to be thrown over like this by the man whom she had looked upon as her future husband nearly all her life, whom she had played at housekeeping with while they were children, [Pg 127]and whom she had never looked upon as anything else but a sweetheart or a lover—and yet it was true, miserably true, and now, for the sake of a mere idea, she found herself cast off, loverless and alone.

Then, after a few weeks of secret, but exceeding bitterness, she did what nineteen out of every twenty girls would have done under the circumstances. The twentieth girl would probably have considered her life blighted for ever, and vowed the remainder of it to single-blessedness, charity and good works as a Sister of something or other. But Enid belonged to the practical majority, and so when the breaking off of the engagement became an actual social fact, and Reginald Garthorne came just at the psychological moment to tell her that never since he had earned that boyish licking on the steamer by kissing her, had he been able to look with love into the eyes of any other woman, she had told him with perfect frankness that, as it was quite impossible for her to marry Vane, and as she certainly liked him next best, and had not the slightest intention of remaining single, she was perfectly content to marry him. If he chose to take her on those terms he might go and talk the matter over with Sir Godfrey, and if he and her mother said "yes," she would say "yes," too.

It was a somewhat prosaic wooing, perhaps, but Reginald Garthorne had been hungering for her in his heart for years. Outwardly he had been friends with Vane, but in his soul he had hated him consistently as boy and man ever since that scene behind the wheelhouse of the *Orient*. He was, therefore, perfectly content. He had longed for her, and he didn't care how he got her. The rest would come afterwards.

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He was rich, far richer than Vane ever would be. He had inherited a fortune of nearly two hundred thousand pounds from his mother's side of the family when he came of age. On his father's death he would succeed to the title and a fine old country house in the Midlands, with a rent-roll and mining royalties worth over thirty thousand a year. He would be able to make her life a continuous dream of pleasure, amidst which she would very soon forget the visionary who was throwing away his manhood and all the best years of his life just because he had learnt that he was the son of a drunken and abandoned woman, and had himself got drunk twice in his life.

The interview with Sir Godfrey and Lady Raleigh had been entirely satisfactory. They both considered in their hearts that their daughter had been very badly treated. From

every social point of view this was a match which left nothing to be desired, and so they said "yes," and Garthorne went back to Enid, and said, triumphantly, as he kissed her for the first time since that memorable kiss on the steamer:

"And so, you see, darling, I've won, after all!"

It was thus that it came about that, on the same day, as the Fates would have it, two ceremonies were being performed at the same hour, one in St. George's, Hanover Square, and one before the altar at Worcester Cathedral.

The Bishop, in full canonicals, surrounded by his attendant clergy, sat inside the altar rails in front of the Communion Table, and on the topmost step before the rails knelt two young men wearing surplices and the hoods of Bachelors of Arts of Oxford.

It was the Feast of St. James the Apostle, and [Pg 129]in his exhortation the Archdeacon, who was preacher for the day, had taken for his text the collect:

"Grant, O merciful God, that, as Thine holy Apostle St. James, leaving his father and all that he had without delay, was obedient unto the call of Thy Son Jesus Christ and followed Him, so we, forsaking all worldly and carnal affections, may be evermore ready to follow Thy holy commandments, through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

One of the men kneeling at the altar rails was Mark Ernshaw, and the other was Vane Maxwell.

Among the somewhat scanty congregation which had remained after the usual morning service, sat Sir Arthur Maxwell. A year ago he would have been inclined to laugh at the idea of his son sacrificing all his brilliant worldly prospects to enter the Church. He was, as has already been said, a deeply religious man himself, but still, he was a man of the world, a man who had made his own way through the world, and won by sheer hard work some of the prizes which it has to give, and, like many others of his class, he had come to look upon the clerical profession somewhat as the refuge of the intellectually destitute.

But as the time had gone on since that scene in his son's rooms at Oxford, he had come to believe that with Vane it was not a mere question, as it is with too many other men, of taking Orders to secure a profession and a position. He was entering the Church as the men of more earnest and more faithful ages had done; because he believed that he had a duty to do, a mission to perform, a sacrifice to make, and, above all, an enemy to fight which was God's enemy as well as his own.

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Therefore the words "leaving his father and all that he had," awakened no bitter echoes in his soul. True it was a sacrifice for him as well as for Vane; but for Vane's sake he had made it willingly and cheerfully, and he was able now to look forward with perfect contentment to the triumphs which, in his father's pride, he could not help believing his son would win in that higher and holier sphere of life which he had chosen.

The presentation being made and the questions as to "crime or impediment" being duly asked and answered, the Litany and Suffrages began, and every note and word of the solemn intonation, ringing through the silence of the great Cathedral, found an echo which rang true in three souls at least among the congregation:

"O God the Father of Heaven: have mercy upon us, miserable sinners.

"O God the Son, Redeemer of the world: have mercy upon us, miserable sinners.

"O God the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son: have mercy upon us, miserable sinners.

"O Holy blessed and glorious Trinity, three Persons and one God: have mercy upon us, miserable sinners.

"Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers: neither take thou vengeance on our sins: spare us, good Lord, spare thy people whom thou hast redeemed with Thy most precious blood, and be not angry with us for ever.

"From all evil and mischief: from sin, from the crafts and assaults of the devil: from Thy wrath and from everlasting damnation.

"From all blindness of heart: from pride, vain-[Pg 131]glory and hypocrisy: from envy, hatred and malice, and all uncharitableness.

"From fornication, and all other deadly sin: and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh and the devil.

"Good Lord deliver us!"

"Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers: neither take thou vengeance on our sins."

These, of all the words which he heard spoken on that fateful day, the day which marked for him the passing of the line which divides the World of the Flesh from the World of the Spirit—the frontier of the kingdom of this world separating it from that other Kingdom which, though worldwide, yet owns but a single Lord—seemed to fall

with greater weight into Vane's soul than any others of the service. As he heard them he raised his bent head, threw it back and, with wide open eyes, looked up over the Bishop's head and the reredos behind the altar to the central section of the great stained glass window containing the figure of the Godhead crucified in the flesh, with the two Marys, Mary the Mother and Mary Magdalene, kneeling at the foot of the Cross.

Like a quiver of summer lightning across the horizon of an August sky, there came to him the thought of that mother of his whom he had never known, and of that girl who was almost his sister, long ago lost in the great wilderness of London. They were not likenesses, only the faintest of suggestions, and yet the mere recollection seemed to lend an added solemnity to the vows which he was about to take.

"I will do so, the Lord being my helper!"

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As he uttered the words there was not the faintest doubt in his soul that for the rest of his life he would be able to keep both the letter and the spirit of the oath unbroken to the end of his days. Many a man and woman has rashly wished that it were possible to look into the future. Such a thought had more than once crossed Vane Maxwell's mind, but could he, in that solemn moment, have looked into the future and seen what lay before him, he would have been well content with the high destiny to which his great renunciation was to lead him.

And now the scene changes from Gloucester Cathedral, to St. George's, Hanover Square.

It was the smartest wedding of the year, and, apart from all its social brilliance, even the most rigid critics admitted that London had not seen a lovelier bride or a handsomer bridegroom than Enid Raleigh and Reginald Garthorne. The church was thronged by an audience made up of the friendly, the sympathetic, the sentimental, and the merely curious, as is usual on such occasions.

Carol Vane and Dora Russel, who had come provided with tickets indirectly supplied by the bridegroom himself, occupied seats in the left-hand gallery at the front. In consequence of the crowd, they only got into their places just as the bridal procession was moving up the central aisle. There was the bride with her attendant bridesmaids, six little maidens dressed in pure white, the bridegroom with his pages, six counterparts dressed in the style of Charles I. Then Sir Godfrey and Lady Raleigh, and

then a tall, grizzled, soldierly-looking man, and beside him a white-haired old lady, who might have stepped straight out of one of Gainsborough's pictures.

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As Carol caught sight of the man beside her, she leant half her body over the front of the gallery, and stared with straining eyes down at the slowly moving procession. Dora caught her by the arm and pulled her back, saying, in a whisper:

"Don't do that; you might fall over."

Carol turned a white face and a pair of blankly staring eyes upon her, caught her by the arm with one hand and pointing downwards with the other, said in a whisper that seemed to rattle in her throat:

"See that man, there—that tall one with the old lady on his arm? That's the man who did all the ruin! That's my father—and my mother was Vane's mother, and that's his son, going to marry Vane's sweetheart. No, by God, he shan't! I'll tell the whole church full, first."

She tore herself free from Dora's hold and struggled to her feet, her lips were opened to utter words which would have instantly turned the wedding into a tragedy; but the rush of thoughts which came surging into her brain was too much for her. The swift revelation of an almost unbelievable life-tragedy struck her like a lightning-stroke; she uttered a few incoherent sounds, and then dropped back fainting into Dora's arms.

"Another of life's little tragedies, I suppose," whispered a well-dressed matron just behind her, to a companion at her side, "a *petite maitresse*, no doubt. It's a curious thing; they always come to see their lovers married."

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CHAPTER XI.

The fainting of Carol in the gallery of the church and her being carried out just before the commencement of the ceremony, was looked upon by some of the more superstitious of the immediate spectators as a sign of evil omen to the happiness of those who, in the phrase which is so often only the echo of devils' laughter, were about "to be joined together in holy matrimony."

Still, only a few had heard the broken words which the horror-stricken girl had uttered before she fell down insensible, and those only thought what the good lady behind her

had said. To the rest of the congregation it was merely an incident, due to the crowd and the heat. The little flutter of excitement which it caused soon passed away, and the ceremony began and went on without any of the bridal party even knowing what had happened.

She was carried to the gallery stairs, and there Dora sat her down, supporting her with her arm, while one sympathetic young lady held a bottle of salts to her nostrils, and an older lady emptied a scent-bottle on to her handkerchief and held it to her forehead.

In a very few minutes she came round. She looked about her, and, recognising Dora, said:

"Oh, dear, what's happened? Where am I? Yes, I remember—at a wedding—and he—"

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Then she checked herself, and Dora said:

"Do you think you're well enough to come down and get into a cab, and then we'll get home? It was the heat and the crush that did it, I suppose."

"Yes, I think I can," said Carol. "I'm all right now. Thank you very much for being so kind," she went on to the other two with a faint smile of gratitude.

"Oh, don't mention it," they said almost together, and then the younger one put her hand under her arm and helped her up. "Let me help you down," she said. "I daresay you'll be all right when you get into the open air."

Carol looked round at her and saw that, without being exactly pretty, she had a very sweet and sympathetic expression, and big, soft brown eyes which looked out very kindly under dark level brows. It was a face which women perhaps admire more than men; but her voice was one which would have gone just as quickly to a man's heart as to a woman's. At any rate, it went straight to Carol's, and when they had got into the cab and she leant back against the cushions she said to Dora:

"I wonder who that girl was? Did you notice what a sweet face and what a lovely voice she had? I'm not very loving towards my own sex, but as soon as I got round I felt that I wanted to hug her—and I suppose if she knew the sort of person I am she wouldn't have touched me. What a difference clothes make, don't they? Now, if I'd been dressed as some of the girls are——"

"I think you're quite wrong there, Carol," said Dora, interrupting her. "I don't believe she's that sort at all, she was much too nice, I'm certain. She had the face of a really

good woman, and you know good women don't think that of us. It's only the [Pg 136]goody-goody ones who do that, and there's a lot of difference between good and goody-goody."

"Well, yes," said Miss Carol, "I daresay you're right, after all. She had a sweet face, hadn't she? But look here, Dora," she went on with a sudden change of tone, "did you ever know anything so awful? No—I can't talk about it yet. Tell him to pull up at the Monico, and we'll have a brandy and soda. I never wanted a drink so badly in my life."

The cab had meanwhile been rolling down Regent Street, and had almost reached the Circus. Dora put her hand up through the trap and told the cabman—whose opinion of his fares underwent an instantaneous change. He nodded and said, "Yes, miss," and the next minute pulled up in front of the square entrance to the café. Dora got out first and helped Carol out; then she gave the cabman a shilling and they went in.

"Goes to a wedding, does a faint, comes out, and stops 'ere when they ought to have been driven 'ome. Not much class there!" the cabman soliloquised as he flicked his whip over his horse's ears and turned across towards Piccadilly. He was, perhaps, naturally disgusted at the meagre results of a job for which he had expected three or four shillings at the very least.

The big café was almost deserted, as it usually is in the morning, and the two girls found a secluded seat at one of the corner tables.

"Dora, you must pay for these," said Carol when they had given their order, "and what's more you'll have to lend me some money to go on with, for if I was starving I wouldn't spend another shilling of that man's money."

"But, my dear child, I don't suppose he knew it," said Dora. "Of course you can have anything I've got if you want it, and I quite understand how [Pg 137]you feel. It's very dreadful, horrible, in fact, but you couldn't help it. You're not to blame, and I don't see that he is, after all's said and done."

"No, I don't say that he is," said Carol, "and of course I couldn't know, for he isn't a bit like his father. He was dark once, so I suppose the—the other one takes after his mother. At least, he would do if she was a fair woman. But just fancy me having that feeling about Vane that night—feeling that I couldn't—and yet this one is just as near. God forgive me, Dora, isn't it awful?"

"Well, never mind, dear," said Dora, as the waiter brought the drinks. "I don't see that that matters one way or the other now. What's done *is* done, and there's an end of it. Well, here's fun, and better luck next time!"

"Hope so!" said Carol somewhat bitterly, as she took a rather long pull at her brandy and soda. "Ah, that's better," she went on, as she put her glass down. "At any rate, it couldn't be much worse luck, could it?"

"But are you perfectly certain," said Dora, "that he really was the man? You know, after all, you only saw him for quite a moment or so."

"I'm as certain as I am that I'm sitting here," said Carol, "that that was the man who lived with my mother in Paris and Vienna and Nice and a lot of other places ever since I can remember. It isn't likely that I'm going to forget when I have such good reason as I have for remembering. He's the man, right enough, and if I was face to face with him for five minutes I'd prove it. The question is whether I ought to prove it or not."

"That's a thing that wants thinking about," said Dora. "But how can you prove it?"

"Easy enough," replied Carol, "if he'd just take his coat off and turn his shirt-sleeve up. He's got [Pg 138]two marks just above his right elbow, two white marks, and the one on the front is bigger than the one behind. I've seen them many a time when he's been sculling or playing tennis. He told me he got them from a spear thrust when he was fighting in the Zulu war. The spear went right in in front and the point came out behind, and if I had a thousand pounds I'd bet it that that man has got those marks on his arm.

"Besides, I know lots of other things about him. You know I'm not a bad mimic, for one thing, and I could imitate his voice and his way of talking before I heard him speak, and I know a photographer in Paris where I could get his photograph—one taken while he was with us. We went with him to have it taken; and, besides, I don't care whether that unfortunate mother of mine's mad or not, she'd recognise him. I'd bet any money he daren't go to the place where she is and face her. Well, now I'm better. Let's go home to lunch and think it over. It certainly isn't a thing to do anything hastily about."

"That's just what I think, dear," said Dora, finishing her brandy and soda.

"All right; we won't take another cab just yet. Let's walk along the 'Dilly for a bit; it'll do me good, I think; and besides, I may as well get familiar with the old place again," said Carol, rising from her seat.

"What nonsense!" said Dora. "The very idea of *you* having to go in for that sort of thing, when there are half a dozen fellows a good deal more than ready to take this man Garthorne's place."

"Well, well," said Carol, with a light laugh and a toss of her pretty head, "I don't suppose the change would be for the worse. But there's one thing certain, I shall have to snare the oof bird very [Pg 139]shortly, for the first thing I'm going to do when we get

to the flat is to send back every penny of the money that Reginald gave me when we said good-bye. Of course I didn't know anything about it, but it seems worse a good deal than if I had stolen it. Then to-night we'll go to the Empire, and you, being rather more married than I am, can chaperone me."

"All right," said Dora. "I'll send a wire to Bernard, and perhaps he'll come too and escort us."

Reginald Garthorne had behaved, as both the world and the half-world would have said, very honourably to Carol when they had said the usual good-bye before his marriage. He had paid his share of the rent of the flat for her for six months ahead, and had given her a couple of hundred pounds to go on with. Of this considerably over a hundred pounds remained. She changed the gold into notes, and even the silver into postal orders, and put the whole sum into a packet, which she registered and posted to his town address.

She gave no explanation or reason for what she was doing. In the first place she could not bring herself to tell him the dreadful truth that she had discovered; and then, again, it would only after all be a piece of needless cruelty. During her connection with him he had always treated her with kindness and courtesy, and often with generosity. She had nothing whatever against him, so why should she wreck the happiness of his honeymoon, and perhaps of his whole married life, by disclosing the secret that had been so strangely revealed to her? So she simply wrote:

"Dear Mr. Garthorne,

"You have been very kind to me, and I thoroughly appreciate your kindness. But some[Pg 140]thing has happened to-day—I daresay you can guess what it is—which makes it unnecessary to me, and, as you know I have rather curious ideas about money matters, I hope you will understand my reasons, and not be offended by my returning it to you with many thanks.

"Yours very sincerely,
"Carol Vane."

Under the circumstances the white lie was one which the Recording Angel might well have blotted out. Probably he did. But, as the Fates would have it, the words proved prophetic.

They went to the Empire that night under the escort of Mr. Bernard Falcon, and while they were having a stroll round the promenade during the interval he nodded and smiled a little awkwardly to a tall, good-looking young fellow in evening dress, whose

bronzed skin, square shoulders and easy stride gave one the idea that he was a good deal more accustomed to the free and easy costume of the Bush or the Veld or the Mining Camp than to the swallow-tails and starched linen of after-dinner Civilisation.

"What a splendid-looking fellow!" said Dora, turning her head slightly as he passed; "the sort of man, I should say, who really *is* a man. Who is he, Bernard? You seem to know him!"

"That man?" said Mr. Falcon. "Well, come down into the lower bar, and we'll have a drink, and I'll tell you."

"That looks a little bit as if you didn't want to meet him again!" said Dora, a trifle maliciously. "Does he happen to be one of your clients, or someone who only knows you as a perfectly respectable person?"

Mr. Falcon did not reply immediately, but he [Pg 141] frowned a little, as if he didn't find the remark very palatable. But when they reached the seclusion of the bar and sat down at one of the tables he said:

"Well, yes, it is something like that. The fact is we have done a little business for him, and we hope to do more. Lucky beggar, he's one of Fortune's darlings."

"That sounds interesting," said Carol. "May I ask what the good lady has done for him?"

"Well," said Mr. Falcon, folding his hands on the table and dropping his voice to a discreet monotone, "in the first place she made him the younger son of a very good family. Nothing much to begin with, of course, but then she also gave him a maiden aunt who left him five thousand pounds just after he left Cambridge in disgust after failing three times to get a pass degree. He had no special turn for anything in particular except riding and shooting and athletics of all sorts. So, like a sensible fellow, instead of stopping in England and fooling his money away, as too many younger sons do, he put four thousand pounds into my partner's hands—Lambe, I should tell you, was his aunt's solicitor—to be invested in good securities, put the other thousand into his pocket, and started out to seek his fortune.

"That's a little over five years ago, which makes him about thirty now. Of course, I suppose he went everywhere and did everything, as such fellows do, but we heard very little of him, and he never drew a penny of the four thousand pounds, and he turned up in London a week or two ago something more than a millionaire. It seems that he was one of the first to hear of the West Australian goldfields—he was out there prospecting in the desert, and a few months later he was one of [Pg 142]the pioneers

of Kalgoorlie, and pegged out a lot of the most valuable claims. He put in nearly three years there, and now he's come back to enjoy himself. He's a very fine fellow, but I must say I'd rather not have met him here to-night."

"Oh, nonsense," laughed Dora, "he'll understand. Being a man he knows perfectly well that scarcely any of you respectable married men are half as respectable as you'd like to be thought. However, why not compromise him too? Go and fetch him and introduce him."

Mr. Falcon knew Dora well enough to take this request as something like an order. So he rose, saying:

"Well, that's not a bad idea, after all, and I daresay he won't have the slightest objection to make the acquaintance of two such entirely charming young ladies."

Mr. Falcon rather prided himself upon his way of turning a compliment, albeit his action, as they say in stable parlance, was a trifle heavy. When he had gone Dora nodded to Carol and said:

"There, dear. If I'm not very much mistaken this is the reward of virtue."

"Which is its own reward, and generally doesn't get it," laughed Carol, colouring slightly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Dora, "that only to-day you made yourself penniless from the most laudable of motives, and here, this very night, comes Prince Charming from the Fortunate Isles, with all his pockets and both hands full of money, and a splendid-looking fellow as well. I think that's a bit mixed, but still it's somewhere about the fact. Ah, here they come."

"Mr. Cecil Rayburn, Miss Dora Murray; Mr. Rayburn, Miss Carol Vane. Now we know each [Pg 143]other," said Mr. Falcon. "Rayburn, what will you have?"

Rayburn had a brandy and soda, and before it was finished the conversation was running easily and even merrily. With the quick perception of the travelled man he speedily discovered that Dora was Falconer's particular friend; she always addressed him as "Bernie," while Carol always said "Mr. Falcon" or "Mr. F."

When they got up, all thoroughly well pleased with each other, Falcon said:

"Are you alone, Rayburn?"

"Yes," he replied. "I hadn't anything particular to do to-night, and as I was sick of playing billiards and swopping lies with the other fellows at the Carlton, I just put on a hard-boiled shirt and the other things and came over here to seek my fortune."

As he said this he looked straight at Carol, their eyes met for a moment, and then she coloured up swiftly and looked away.

The four wound up the evening with a sumptuous supper at Prince's, at which Rayburn played host to perfection, and within a week Carol and he had left Charing Cross by the eleven o'clock boat-train on a trip which had no particular objective, but which, as a matter of fact, extended round the world before Carol again saw her beloved London. In addition to her other rings she wore a new thick wedding ring, a compromise with conventionality which the etiquette of hotels and steamer saloons had rendered imperative, and thus it came to pass that Miss Carol, travelling as Mrs. Charles Redfern, vanished utterly for more than a year, and this, too, was why all the efforts of Vane and Ernshaw and Sir Arthur to find her had proved for the present unavailing.

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CHAPTER XII.

Enid Garthorne came back from a somewhat extended honeymoon trip to the Riviera and thence on through Northern Italy to Venice, whence she returned viâ Vienna and Paris, a very different woman from the Enid Raleigh who had cried so bitterly over that farewell letter of Vane's in her bedroom at Oxford.

She had already schooled herself to look upon her long love for Vane as, after all, only the sustained infatuation of a romantic school-girl, and upon him as a high-hearted, clean-souled but utterly impossible visionary who had sacrificed the substance for the shadow, and who, having chosen irrevocably, could only be left to work out his own destiny as he had shaped it.

Garthorne, in the first flush of his gratified love and triumph, had proved an almost ideal combination of lover and husband, and of all the brides who were honeymooning in the most luxurious resorts of the Continent that Autumn and Winter, she, with her youth and beauty, her handsome, devoted husband, and splendid fortunes, was accounted the most to be envied. As week after week went by, and the intoxication of her new life grew upon her, she gradually came to believe this herself. At the same time, something very like [Pg 145]true affection for this man, whose love was very real and who seemed to find his only happiness in making the world the most delightful of dreamlands for her, began to grow up in her heart.

Of course, she often thought of Vane; that was inevitable. It was inevitable, too, that she should look back now and then to some of the many tender scenes that had passed between them; but as time went on, these memory-pictures grew more faint. The fast-succeeding events and the new experiences of her married life crowded swiftly and thickly upon her, until she began to look upon the past more as a dream than as a reality. Vane's figure receded rapidly into the background of her life, and, as it did so, it seemed in some way to become spiritualised, lifted above and beyond the world-sphere in which it was now her destiny to move.

They got back to England a few weeks before the season began, and, after a day or two in London for some necessary shopping, they went down to Garthorne Abbey, one of the finest old seats in the Midland counties, standing on a wooded slope in the green border which fringes the Black Country, and facing the meadows and woodlands which stretch away down to the banks of the Severn, beyond which rise the broken, picturesque outlines of the Herefordshire Hills.

Here Enid Garthorne spent an entirely delightful week exploring the stately home and the splendid domain of which she would one day be mistress. Day after day in the early clear Spring morning, she would go up alone on to a sort of terrace-walk which had been made round the roof behind the stone balustrade which ran all round the house, and look out over the green, well-wooded, softly undulating country, her heart filled [Pg 146]with a delighted pride and the consciousness, or, at any rate, the belief, that after all the cloud which had come between her and Vane had had a silver, nay, a golden lining, and that, so far, at least, everything had been for the best.

As she looked to the eastward, she could see stretched along the horizon a low, dun-coloured line which was not cloud. It was the smoke of the Black Country, and underneath it hundreds and hundreds of men, ay, and if she had known it, women, too, were toiling in forge and mine and factory, earning the thousands which made life so easy and so pleasant for her. To the westward were the low-lying meadows, the rolling corn-lands, and the dark strips and patches of wood and coppice which lay for miles on three sides of the Home Park, and beyond these she caught bright gleams of the silver Severn rippling away to the distant Bristol Channel; then, beyond this again, the rising uplands which culminated in the irregular terraces of the Abberley Hills.

She knew nothing of it at the time, but far away, perched up in a leafy nook among them was a little cluster of old grey buildings; just a chapel, a guest-house, a refectory, and half a dozen cells forming a tiny quadrangle which was still called St. Mary's Chapel of Ease, but which in the old days when all the lands that Enid could see from her roof-walk had belonged to the ancient Abbey of Ganthony—of which her

husband's name was perhaps a corruption—had been known as the House of Our Lady of Rest.

Before the dissolution of the Monasteries it had been a place of rest and retreat for servants of the Church who had exhausted themselves in her service or had found reason to withdraw themselves a while from the world and its temptations; [Pg 147]and such, though creeds have changed, it has practically remained until now.

The little church was nominally St. Augustine's, the Parish Church of a little scattered hamlet which was sprinkled over the hillside beneath it. The living had been in the gift of the Garthorne family, but Sir Reginald's father had sold the advowson to one of the earliest pioneers of the High Church movement in England, and through this purchase it had passed into the keeping of a small Anglican Order calling itself the Fraternity of St. Augustine.

This little Brotherhood had not only maintained the traditions of the ancient Order of St. Augustine, Preacher, Saint and Martyr, but had done all that was possible to revive them in their ancient purity. The little monastery among the hills, though it had passed under another ecclesiastical rule, was still a place where priests and deacons might come either to rest from the labours which they had endured in the service of their Master, or to separate themselves from the din and turmoil of the world, and, amidst the peace and silence of nature, wrestle with the doubts or temptations that had beset them. The Vicar of the parish and Father Superior of the Retreat was an aged priest who had welcomed three generations of his younger brothers in Christ as temporary sojourners in this little sanctuary, and had sent them away comforted and strengthened to take their place again in the ranks of the army which wages that battle which began when the first prophecy was uttered in Eden, and which will only end when the sound of the Last Trump marshalls the hosts of men before the bar of the Last Tribunal.

Vane had been the occupant of one of the tiny little rooms, which had once been the monks' cells, [Pg 148]for a little over three months when Enid came to her future home. The rooms were on the side of the quadrangle facing the valley, and from his little window he could distinctly see the great white house, with its broad terraces standing out against the dark background formed by the trees which crowned the ridge behind it. He, of course, knew perfectly well to whom it belonged and who would one day be mistress of it, and one day he saw from the *Times*, the only secular newspaper admitted into St. Augustine's, that Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Garthorne had returned from their wedding trip on the Continent, and, after a day or two in London, would proceed for a few weeks to Garthorne Abbey to recuperate before the fatigues

of the season, of which it was generally expected Mrs. Garthorne would be one of the most brilliant ornaments.

The sight of it, the knowledge of all the splendours that it contained, of all the worldly wealth of which it was the material sign, had not affected him in the least. He had already lifted himself beyond the possibility of envying anyone the possession of such things as these. He could see over and beyond them as a man on a mountain top might look over a little spot on the plain beneath, which to those who dwelt in it was a great and splendid city.

Even the knowledge that Enid was coming to the Abbey as the wife of its future master only drew just a single quiet sigh from his lips, only caused him to give one swift look back into the world that he had left, for after all this was only what he had expected, what he knew to be almost inevitable when he had first made up his mind to sacrifice his love to what he believed to be his duty.

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She had passed out of his existence and he had passed out of hers. Henceforth their life-circles might touch, but they could never intersect each other. Of course, they would meet again in the world, but only as friends, with perhaps a warmer hand-clasp for the sake of the days that were past and gone for ever, but that was all. He had but one mistress now, the Church. He was hers body and soul to the end, for he had sworn an allegiance which could not be broken save at the risk of his own soul.

One morning, about a week after he had read the paragraph in the *Times*, he was out on the hillside, going from cottage to cottage of the hundred or so sprinkled round the high road across the hills, for it was his day to carry out the parochial duties of the fraternity. Every day one of the Fathers, as the villagers called them, made his rounds, starting soon after sunrise and sometimes not getting back till after dark, for Father Philip had no belief in the efficacy of fasting and meditation and prayer unless they were supplemented by a literal obedience to the commands of Him who went about doing good. When priest or deacon entered the Retreat, no matter what he was, rich or poor, wedded or single, he had to take the vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. When he left to go back into the world he was absolved from them, and was free to do what seemed best to his own soul.

Vane had just left a little farmhouse upon which a great shame and sorrow had fallen. As too often happens in this district, the only daughter of the house, discontented with the quiet monotony of the farm life, had gone away to Kidderminster to work in a

carpet factory. That was nearly eighteen months ago, and the night before she [Pg 150] had come back ragged, hungry, and penniless, with a nameless baby in her arms.

As he was walking along the road which led from this farmhouse to the next hamlet thinking of that vanished sister of his and of the poor imbecile in the French asylum, he turned a bend and saw a figure such as was very seldom seen among the villages approaching him about two hundred yards away. He stopped, almost as though he had received a blow on the chest. It was impossible for his eyes to mistake it, and with a swift sense, half of anger and half of disgust, he felt his heart begin to beat harder and quicker. It was Enid, Enid in the flesh.

He had read of her marriage, and of her return with her husband with hardly an emotion. Day after day he had looked upon her future home, the home in which she would live as the wife of another man and the mother of his children, without a single pang of envy or regret—and now, at the first sight of her, his heart was beating, his pulses throbbing, and his nerves thrilling.

True, every heart-beat, every pulse-throb, was a sin now, for she was a wedded wife—and meanwhile she was still coming towards him. In a few minutes more, since it was impossible for him to pass her as a stranger, her hand would be clasped in his, and he would be once more looking into those eyes which had so often looked up into his, hearing words of greeting from those lips which he had so often kissed, and whose kisses were now vowed to another man.

There was a little lane, turning off to the left a few yards away. She had never seen him in his clerical dress, so she could not have recognised him yet. She would only take him for one of the [Pg 151] clergy at the Retreat, he had only to turn down the lane—

But no, his old manhood rose in revolt at the idea. That would be a flight, a mean, unworthy flight, unworthy alike of himself and the high resolves that he had taken. It was hard, almost impossible even to think of *her* as a temptation, as an enemy to his soul, and yet, even if she were, as the leaping blood in his veins told him she might be, was it for him, the young soldier of the Cross, just buckling on his armour, to turn his back upon the first foe he met, even though that foe had once been his best beloved? He set his teeth and clenched his hands, and walked on past the entrance to the lane.

A minute or two later their eyes met. A look of astonished recognition instantly leapt into hers. She shifted the silver handled walking stick into her left hand, and held out the other, daintily gauntleted in tan.

"Why Vane!" she exclaimed, in a voice which was still as sweet and soft as ever, but which seemed to him to have a strange and somewhat discordant note in it, "you don't

mean to say that it's you. I suppose, as a matter of fact, I ought to say Mr. Maxwell now—I mean now that you're a clergyman—but after all, those little things don't matter between such very old friends as we are, and I'm sure Reggie won't mind, in fact, I shan't let him if he does. Just fancy meeting you here! I suppose you're one of the Fathers—is that it?—at the little monastery up there. I've only been home a week, and last night I heard about this place, so I drove over to see it. But you haven't told me how you are yet, and how you like your—your new life."

As a matter of fact, she had rattled all this off [Pg 152]so quickly that Vane had not had time to reply to her greeting. He had taken her hand and, somewhat tremblingly, returned the frank, firm pressure. While she was speaking, he looked into her face and saw that she had already assumed the invisible but impenetrable mask in which the society woman plays her part in the tragic comedy of *Vanity Fair*. It was the same face and yet not the same, the same voice and yet a different one, and the sight and sound acted upon him like a powerful tonic. This was not the Enid he had loved, after all, at least, so it seemed to him. He had forgotten, or had never known that every woman is a born actress, and that even the brief training which Enid had already had was quite enough to enable her to say one thing, while thinking and feeling something entirely different.

He smiled for the first time as their hands parted, and said, in a voice whose calm frankness surprised himself:

"Good morning, Mrs. Garthorne!"—he absolutely couldn't trust himself to pronounce the word "Enid"—"Thanks, I'm very well, and, as you have guessed, I am located for the present up in the Retreat yonder. I confess I was a little startled to see you coming up the road, although I saw from the *Times* the other day that you had come back from the Continent and were coming down here to the Abbey. Of course, you would hear of the Retreat sooner or later, and as it's a bit of a show place in its humble way, I had an idea that you would come over some time to see it."

"Oh, but I suppose you don't allow anything so unholy as a woman to enter the sacred precincts, do you?"

The artificial flippancy of her tone annoyed him [Pg 153]perhaps even more than it shocked him. There was a sort of scoff in it which rightly or wrongly he took to himself. It seemed to say "You, of course, have done with women now and for ever; henceforth, you must only look upon us as temptations to sin, and so I can say what I like to you."

"On the contrary," he replied, forcing a smile, "the Retreat is as open for visiting purposes to women as it is to men. It is nothing at all like a monastery, you know,

although report says it is. It is simply a place where clergymen who have need of it can go and rest and think and pray in peace, and act as curates to the Superior who is also vicar of the parish. In fact, it has been known for mothers and sisters of the men to take rooms in the villages, and they are even invited to lunch."

"Dear me," she said, "how very charming! Of course, you will come over to the Abbey and have dinner some evening, and sleep, and the next morning I shall expect you to let me drive you over here and invite me to lunch."

"Of course, I shall be delighted," he said, purposely using the most conventional terms, "but I ought to tell you that there is a condition attached to our hospitality."

"Oh, indeed, and what is that?" she said, glancing up at him with one of her old saucy looks. "I hope it isn't very stringent. Won't you turn and walk a little way with me and tell me all about it? There is my pony carriage coming up the hill after me. It will overtake us soon, and then I won't take up your time any longer, for I daresay you are going on some good work."

Again the half-veiled flippancy of her tone jarred upon him and made him clench his teeth for an instant.

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"With the greatest pleasure," he replied, turning and walking with long, slow strides beside her. His blood was quite cool now, and a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"It is this way," he went on, speaking as calmly as though he were addressing an utter stranger. "You know, or perhaps you do not know yet, that, beautiful and almost arcadian as this place is, there is, I regret to say, a great deal of poverty and sorrow, and, I am afraid, sin too, and it is part of our duty at the Retreat to seek this out and do what we can to relieve it; but there is much of that kind of work which women can do infinitely better than men, and therefore, when a woman enters our gates as our guest, we ask her to do what she can to help us."

"I see," she said, more softly and more naturally than she had spoken before. "It is a very just and a very good condition, and I shall do my best to fulfil it; indeed, as I suppose I shall some day be Lady of the Manor here, it will be my duty to do it."

"I am very glad to hear you say so," he said, with a touch of warmth in his tone, "very glad. And if you like you can begin at once. You see that little farmhouse up the road yonder. Well, there is not only sorrow, but sin and shame as well in that house. The old people are most respectable, and they were once fairly comfortably off before the

agricultural depression ruined them. They are wretchedly poor now, but they struggle on somehow. About eighteen months ago their daughter went off to Kidderminster to work in the mills. She said she would get good wages and send some of them home every week. For some months she did send them a few shillings, and then what is unfortunately only too common [Pg 155]about here happened. For a long time they lost sight of her, and last night she came back, starving, with a baby and no husband."

He said this in a perfectly passionless and impersonal tone, just as a doctor might describe the symptoms of a disease. "If you care to, you can do a great deal of good there," he went on. "I have just been there. If you like I will take you in and introduce you."

She stopped and hesitated for a moment. It struck her as such an utter reversal of their former relationships, that it seemed almost to obliterate the line which lies between the sublime and the ridiculous. Then she moved forward again, saying, in her own old natural voice:

"Thank you, Vane. I have often wondered since what sort of circumstances we should meet under again, but I never thought of anything like this. Yes, I will come, and if there is anything I can do I will do it."

"I thought you would," he said quietly, as he strode along beside her towards the farmhouse.